

The Cesc ultimatum

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal midfielder Cesc Fabregas has hinted he is interested in a move to Real Madrid, but poured cold water on the idea he could move to the Bernabeu this summer.

Reports in Spain suggest Madrid president Ramon Calderon, resigned to missing out on Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo, has prepared a big-money offer for the 21-year-old.

But while Fabregas, a product of the Barcelona youth academy, revealed he could move to Madrid in the future, he insists he wants to stay at the Emirates Stadium for the time being.

"I didn't tell Ramon Calderon no," he told Spanish sports daily Marca. "I told him that now wasn't the time to go to Madrid. That you

are wanted by Madrid, one of the biggest teams in history, is important."

Fabregas enjoyed a great summer as he helped Spain end their



CESC FABREGAS

44-year wait for a trophy at Euro 2008.

Domestically, however, for the third year on the trot, the

midfielder ended yet another season empty-handed.

And the young star, who feels he would be certain to lift a trophy should he opt for the Spanish champions, admits another season without any silverware could see him head for the exit door.

"To be four seasons without winning any titles would be too much for me," Fabregas added. "Real Madrid are the favourites to win La Liga this year."

Arsenal's trophyless season was made even more painful as rivals Manchester United swept all before them at home and in Europe.

Fabregas is in no doubt that the man who made the difference for United would be a big success at the Bernabeu.

"The league and the Champions League that United won this season was because of Cristiano," he continued. "At Madrid he would help them win titles."

Dutch seek tune-up

AFP, Hong Kong

The Netherlands aim to use a four-team tournament in Hong Kong to fine-tune their game for the Olympics and demonstrate why they are

major contenders to take football gold in Beijing.

The Dutch, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and USA play here on July 30 and August 2 in the ING Cup, which will help them get acclimatised to the heat and humidity before they head north for the full Olympic tournament.

The Games begin August 8, but the men's 16-team football starts a day earlier, with the Dutch among the favourites along with Argentina, Brazil and Italy. Ivory Coast are tipped to be the strongest of the three African sides.

The 18-man under-23 squads can include three overage players, and Dutch coach Foppe de Haan will be hoping he has got the balance just right, with two of the senior members of the contingent paired up front.

But a batch of the young Dutch players, notably Liverpool's flying winger Ryan Babel and Real Madrid's Royston Drenthe, are expected to light up the Beijing Games football, where Brazilian star Ronaldinho will also play.

Babel, 21, is fast recovering from

an ankle injury that forced him to miss last month's European Championships with the full national team. He played 45 minutes in a laboured 1-0 friendly victory over Belgium on July 23.

"It's exciting to be in Hong Kong as we're getting closer to the Olympics and I expect to be fully match fit by then," said Babel, who Liverpool splashed out 11.5 million pounds (22 million dollars) on last summer.

"I think it will be quite open, as every team playing there has a good chance," he added on the team's arrival in sweltering Hong Kong on Sunday to prepare for The Netherlands' first Olympics in football in 56 years.

The Dutch play Nigeria, Japan and USA in Beijing in what looks a reasonably comfortable group before the knock-out stages, and de Haan hopes matches against Cameroon and Ivory Coast here will provide the perfect preparation.

The 65-year-old, who previously identified Nigeria as the toughest team in the Olympic group, said Monday at a press conference in Hong Kong that the smog in China was "awful" but hoped it would not overly impact his side.

"I heard today if you are trying to look at the Olympic stadium (in Beijing), you can't see it from 500 metres (1,600 feet). It's awful, I think."

But de Haan said their team doctor had told him the players

would adapt.

"The doctor told us if you spend five days there it will no longer be a problem because you get used to it."

"The doctor also said even if you don't have asthma there in Holland you can have it here. But that's no problem and we can handle it."

Cameroon, who won gold in Sydney in 2000, are not expected to do nearly so well this time, so Ivory Coast look likely to provide the Dutch with their stiffest test here, particularly as they will be more comfortable in the heat, with temperatures around 33 Celsius (91 Fahrenheit).

In Chelsea striker Salomon Kalou they have a player of genuine ability, albeit one who has yet to set the English Premier League alight, but they were disappointing on Sunday in a 2-1 friendly loss to Olympic hopefuls South Korea.

"At the Olympics, our objective is to reach the quarterfinals. The team have been playing good, attacking football and the players are finding each other very well when pushing forward," said coach Gerard Gili.

USA are rated among the weaker teams in Beijing, but one-time prodigy Freddy Adu will be eager to prove on the international stage -- and in the transfer shop window -- that he can live up to the hype of his early years.

The ING Cup kicks off on Wednesday with Ivory Coast taking on USA while Cameroon play The Netherlands.

Barton released from prison

AFP, London

Joey Barton, the troubled Newcastle United midfielder, was released from prison Monday after serving 74 days of a six-month sentence for assault.

The 25-year-old, who was capped once by England, left jail in Manchester, northwest England, where he was sent after pleading guilty on May 20 to assault and affray in a late-night incident in his native Liverpool last December.

He has also been given a four-month jail sentence, suspended for two years, on June 30 for attacking his former Manchester City teammate Ousmane Dabo at the club's training ground.

Newcastle United boss Kevin Keegan on Sunday gave his full support to Barton, insisting he deserves another chance at re-establishing his credentials both on the field and as a person.

"People have opinions, and you must respect those, but mine is to give him another chance and back him," Keegan, who also managed Barton at Manchester City, told BBC radio.

"There are a lot of things he needs to put right -- but I think he can do it."

Newcastle were back in action in a pre-season friendly Saturday, but lost away to second-tier Championship side Doncaster Rovers 1-0.

The Magpies finished 12th in the English Premier League last season.

Depor close to Coloccini sale

INTERNET, undated

Galician giants Deportivo Coruna are very close to selling defender Fabricio Coloccini, according to Spanish media reports on Monday. Deportivo have turned down several offers to sell the Argentine international over the past three years, but now seem resigned to selling him because of their heavy debts.

According to sports daily AS, English clubs Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur are both negotiating the purchase of Coloccini with Deportivo president Augusto Cesar Lendoiro.

In anticipation of his sale, Coloccini will not take part in Venezuela's pre-season tour of Deportivo, which commences on Monday.

Coloccini has been the cornerstone of the Deportivo defence in the past few seasons.

On Saturday he helped the Coruna club to qualify for the UEFA Cup with a 1-0 defeat of Israeli side Bnei Sakhin in the preliminary round, a win which puts Deportivo back in Europe after a three-year absence.

After Saturday's win, Deportivo coach Miguel Angel Lotina said that "the sale of Coloccini would be the big upset of summer...He is a tremendous footballer, because of what he does on the field and in the dressing-room."

Eto'o not going to Lyon

INTERNET, undated

Samuel Eto'o's agent has rubbished reports suggesting that his client is set for a move to Lyon.

The Barcelona striker has been linked with a host of clubs this summer, having been told by the Catalan giants that he no longer figures in their long-term plans.

Ligue 1 champions Lyon were believed to be among those leading the race for the Cameroon international, but the French side are yet to make an official approach for the player.

"No-one from Barca has said anything about this to us and neither have Lyon got in contact with me about this," Joep Maria Mesalles told El Mundo Deportivo.

"To talk now about this is to speculate, we have not received an interesting offer."

Despite Barca's desire to implement wholesale changes this summer, Mesalles refused to rule out the possibility of Eto'o remaining at Camp Nou next season.

"He doesn't have to do anything," he added.

"He only has to work as he has been doing and if it is the club who don't want him they should have already taken care of looking for a move for him."

"They haven't given us any deadline to look for a team and we are in no rush."

Reports in Spain suggest that Barca are keen to use Eto'o as a bargaining tool in their attempts to lure Karim Benzema from Lyon.

However, the France international's agent claims the 20-year-old is going nowhere - at least for another year.

"Benzema will not move from Lyon this summer. That is sure," said Karim Djaziri.

"Next year it could happen, but this season he will remain at Lyon."

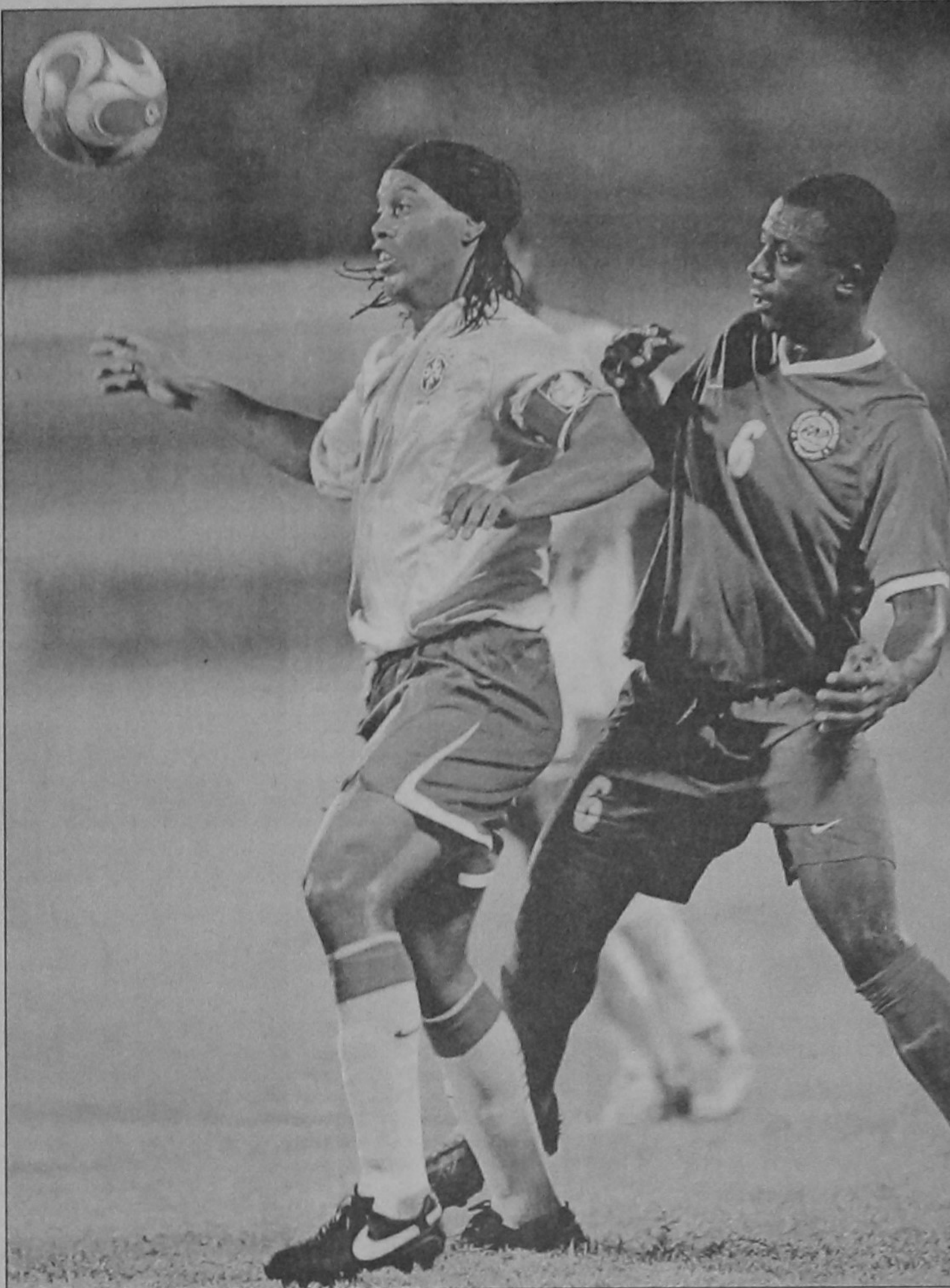


PHOTO: AFP

Brazil stalwart Ronaldinho (L) shields the ball from a Singapore player during their friendly match at Singapore on Monday. Brazil beat the hosts 3-0.

Hleb sets record straight

Football

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona new boy Alexander Hleb has denied calling former Arsenal teammate Cesc Fabregas selfish and insisted the Spain midfielder is a good friend.

Hleb moved to set the record straight over a newspaper article which quoted him lambasting Fabregas, as well as Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger.

"I don't know where they got all this from," Hleb told Spain's Sport newspaper. "There's a certain type of English press that is worth nothing, that only invents things and this is one of those cases."

"They did it with Cesc and Arsene, inventing things that I didn't say or taking my words and

using them out of context."

"I'll explain what happened in both cases so that it is clear for once."

"With Wenger they said we argued and that I was leaving Arsenal because I thought that the team would never win anything with him as a manager and that is absolutely false."

"Arsene knows it because the first thing he told me when I signed for Arsenal was that he didn't pay attention to what the press wrote, that he never read it."

"Arsene is like a father to me and the coach that gave me the opportunity to play for Arsenal and then to sign for Barcelona, I owe him everything."

Hleb continued: "Cesc is my best friend at Arsenal and he knows that everything I have to say I'll say it to his face as I have always done."

"I only said that when Cesc had the ball you didn't know where he was going to put it because he is so good that he can pass it to the left or to the right and the English journalists changed that sentence into a criticism of his way of playing."

Hleb, who would like nothing more than to link up again with Fabregas at Barcelona, believes the time the pair spent together will stand him in good stead at the Catalan giants.

Fabregas was trained at the famous Barca academy before moving to Arsenal in 2003, and Hleb claims he is better prepared to fit in at the Nou Camp having spent three years with the Spain midfielder.

"Barca's way of playing is a style that I like a lot," added Hleb. "I still have to adapt myself but I don't think there will be a problem."

Inter need to trim squad

Football

AFP, Appiano Gentile

Despite Inter Milan's pursuit of top class midfielders such as Chelsea's Frank Lampard and Ghana's Sulley Muntari, coach Jose Mourinho said Monday that he needs to trim his squad.

With the arrival of Muntari, who was due to be unveiled to the media on Monday, Inter's first team squad has ballooned to 28 bodies.

"We have too many (players) and it's not an easy situation, we need to reduce the squad to 25 players," said Mourinho from Inter's base here near Milan, where the Italian champions beat Bari 2-0 in a friendly on Sunday night.

"For the moment, we have too many forwards and we can't give them all as much playing time as we would like."

Inter currently have six strikers and 10 midfielders on their books which means a large number of established internationals will find themselves regularly warming the bench and promising young players such as teenage Italian forward Mario Balotelli could struggle to even make the match-daysquad.

However, despite Inter's large squad, they have problems in central defence with three players injured.

"The thing that I'm not happy about up until now is the absence of three players in the same position, that's to say (Cristian) Chivu, (Ivan) Cordoba and (Walter

Samuel," said Mourinho.

Despite his complaints about the large squad, Mourinho still wants to add some players but he seems resigned to missing out on his primary target, England midfielder Lampard.

"I'm not disappointed in him, the important thing for a player is to do what's best for him," he added.

"If his choice is to stay at Chelsea because he is happier, that's ok with me."

Inter have not given up hope of signing Portugal winger Ricardo Quaresma from Porto, though, with technical director Marco Branca telling Portuguese newspaper Correio da Manha that he believes the player will soon sign for the Milan giants.

Muntari happy at move

AFP, Appiano Gentile

Inter Milan on Monday unveiled their second major summer signing with the arrival of Ghana midfielder Sulley Muntari.

The former Portsmouth man, who previously played five seasons at Udinese, has joined for a fee believed to be in the region of 14 million euros (22 million dollars) and he will wear the number 20 shirt next season.

He joins Brazil winger Alessandro Mancini, who arrived from AS Roma, as the first signings made by new Inter boss Jose Mourinho.

It is a swift return to Italy for the 23-year-old after just one season at Portsmouth.

The Ghana international said he was looking forward to working with Mourinho.

"I came up against one of his teams once and I saw how they played. I lost 1-0 and Chelsea played really well, hence I'm happy to be here to work for him," said Muntari, who believes he improved during his season in the Premier League.

"They play a different style of football to the Italians there. I matured as a player and as a man."

"When I was at Udinese I was very young and hadn't mastered my position, that's why I got booked too much."

"But I'm not a fool and now I've developed and matured. Now I know how to deal with situations on the pitch, the coach won't have any problems."

Muntari said he was glad to have finally joined one of the continent's biggest teams.

"It was a dream to play for a big team. I didn't even need to think about it for one second when I came to Inter."

"I really wanted to wear this jersey, the shirt of a big club. I want to help this team achieve its objectives."

Muntari dismissed suggestions that he was a clone of another Mourinho signing, from his Chelsea days, his international midfield team-mate Michael Essien.

"We're friends, almost brothers, we share the same coloured skin," said Muntari.

Kenyon's sympathy with MU

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon Monday backed Manchester United in the Cristiano Ronaldo dispute, saying players should not be allowed to walk away from a contract when they wanted.

The 23-year-old Portuguese star still has four years remaining on his contract with United but has made clear he would like to play for Real Madrid, infuriating the Red Devils.

"I really don't want to comment on Ronaldo but I think the contract stability issue is very important for football," said Kenyon.

"Clubs should not have the ability to not honour a contract, and so we should expect the same from our players."

"If a player is injured and doesn't play for 12 months we fulfill our obligations."

"From a coach's point of view, you need to be able to think this is not just my team for this season, but these lads are here for two or three seasons -- because you have to plan."

"And then there's the fans. A large part of football is connecting with the fans, and the fans connecting with the players."

"If fans felt there would be another 23 players at a club next season, then football will lose something."

"Football needs to look at this issue seriously because it's all about passions and relationships. You can't start with a fresh bit of paper every year."

Real Madrid are reportedly willing to pay a world record fee to land Ronaldo, although United boss Sir Alex Ferguson insists he will definitely be at Old Trafford next season.

Toni, Borowski ruled out

AFP, Munich

Defending Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich will fly to Japan to face Urawa Red Diamonds on Thursday without injured internationals Luca Toni and Tim Borowski.

Italian World Cup winner Toni has damaged a calf muscle while Germany midfielder Borowski picked up a knee injury in training on Friday and the pair missed Bayern's 0-0 pre-season friendly draw with Cologne on Saturday.

They will report for rehabilitation training in Munich on Monday while their Bayern teammates depart on Tuesday to face the J-League's 2007 runners-up in a one-off friendly on Thursday before flying straight back to Munich on Friday.

The defending champions open their Bundesliga campaign against Hamburg at Munich's Allianz Arena on August 15.

Big Phil targets all four

'Drog, Lamps to stay'

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Chelsea coach Luiz Felipe Scolari is targeting an unprecedented four trophies in his first season and is close to finalising the starting 11 he hopes will achieve the feat.

The newly-installed Brazilian has seen his team score 11 goals in his first two games in charge, and he gave a bullish message on what he wants from his players.

"They arrived last year in three finals, that's very good for me," he said as the club prepared to play a Malaysian XI on Tuesday.

"We have four competitions and I will try to win four competitions, and the players are the same," he said, referring to the Premier League, the Champions League, the FA Cup and the League Cup.

"It will be very difficult but we have the team and the players for this. Chelsea have given me everything I want."

Since taking over at the beginning of the month, Scolari has identified the core of the side that he hopes will save him from the sort of unceremonious dumping that befell former coach Avram Grant.

"I now have some idea but I need to be with them for more training, to finish this tour and then I will have my ideas for the team to play Portsmouth (on August 17)," he said.

"I have a minimum of 75 percent of the team in my mind."

Chelsea romped past Chengdu Blades 7-0 on Saturday after thrashing Guangzhou Pharmaceutical last week. After their game here on Tuesday they head to Moscow for the Railways Cup.

Scolari admits the opposition has yet to give them a stern test but knows playing in Russia will be a different ball game.

"Eleven goals in two games is a stepping stone and I think the match on Tuesday will be more difficult than the last. And then the Russian team knows everything about us," he said.

"It is then that I will know whether this team is ready. But my team is growing up and they are more free in the field now."

Without naming names, he added that he had identified a small group of players who stand above the rest and who will form the backbone of his side.

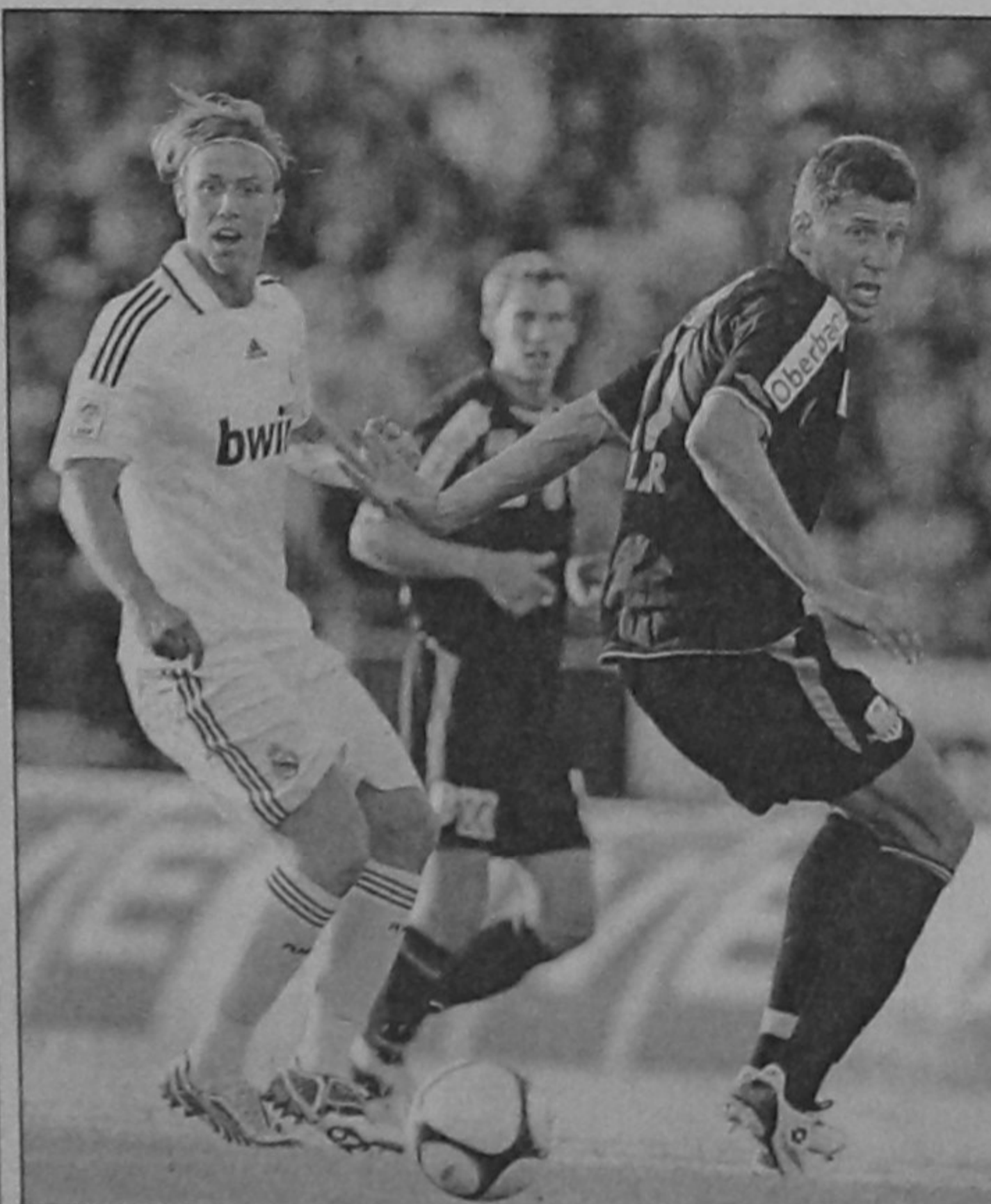


PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid midfielder Jose Maria Guti (L) threads a pass between two Lask Linz players during their friendly match at Linz on Sunday. Real won 3-2.