

Drogba out of season opener

AFP, London

Didier Drogba will miss the start of Chelsea's season, manager Luiz Felipe Scolari said Monday.

Scolari said the 30-year-old, who has spent the summer recuperating from a knee injury, is unlikely to feature until the very end of August.

He will miss the Blues' opening Premier League games against Portsmouth, on August 17, and Wigan a week later.

"Didier will not play in our first game against Portsmouth and will probably miss the second against Wigan. If there are no more problems he should be ready for the game after that," said Scolari.

Scolari has pencilled in the London derby against Tottenham on August 31 for a possible return but admits he will not rush the Ivory Coast star.

"But when you have a knee injury, you just never know," said the Brazilian.

"I have been getting a progress report from the doctor every day."

"He's getting better and is working with a fitness coach back at the training ground. I hope he will be ready to start training next week. But he will not play until he is in good condition."

The new Chelsea boss will have to rely on Nicolas Anelka as his only frontman for the first two games as Salomon Kalou is away at the Olympics.

Messi to inherit number 10

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Argentine striker Lionel Messi will take over the number 10 shirt that was last worn by Brazil's Ronaldinho, who was transferred to AC Milan, the club said Sunday.

The number 10 shirt is usually the privilege of the club's star player.

Messi, 21, has until now worn the number 19, which has not been assigned to any other player for next season.

Brazilian Daniel Alves, a pre-season signing, was given the number 20, formerly worn by Portugal's Deco, who has gone to Chelsea.

Messi has joined the Argentina national squad for the Olympics in Beijing and will miss the Catalan club's US tour.

The Argentina international has been at the centre of a tug of war between club and country with Barcelona trying to retain him for their Champions League qualifier tie in August.

Leto not given work permit

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool winger Sebastian Leto will be forced to leave Anfield on loan after the Argentine winger was refused a work permit, team manager Rafael Benitez said Monday.

Leto, 21, made four appearances for Liverpool last season while on an Italian passport but that was later revoked by the Italian Government.

Liverpool then applied for a work permit and Benitez insisted he would select Leto on a more regular basis.

But the British Government has turned down Leto's application and he will have to go on loan to continue playing, with Olympiakos a likely destination.

Benitez is unhappy with the decision and he said: "The system needs to change, clearly."

"I cannot understand how an Argentine player who has been in pre-selection for the Olympic squad and has played in the Champions League and at a club like Liverpool is not good enough."

"Now we have to look for a solution, maybe find a team for him on loan, but we have maybe eight or 10 teams in Spain, Italy and Greece asking about him."

"When you have eight or 10 teams asking about a player and he's not playing, it means that he is good. But maybe there is another vision of football."

Reliance deny Newcastle bid

REUTERS, New Delhi

Reliance Communications, India's No. 2 mobile operator, on Monday denied reports that it was in talks with English Premier League soccer club Newcastle United.

Media reports in the U.K. said the club's owner Mike Ashley was in talks with Reliance Communications Chairman Anil Ambani about a 260 million-pound (\$513.5 million) takeover by the Indian billionaire.

The news report is completely false and baseless. There are no such plans, Reliance Communications said in a statement.

Ashley, also a billionaire, controls about 70 percent of British biggest sporting goods retailer Sports Direct.



Arsenal star Emmanuel Adebayor places his penalty beyond the despairing reach of Real Madrid goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek to score the only goal of the game during the pre-season Emirates Cup at the Emirates Stadium in London on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Real may fire up chase

AFP, London

Real Madrid's quest to sign Manchester United star striker Cristiano Ronaldo could gain impetus because of Wesley Sneijder's injury, Madrid defender Michel Salgado said on Sunday.

Sneijder suffered serious knee ligament damage in Real's Emirates Cup friendly defeat to Arsenal which could sideline him for up to six months, meaning the Bernabeu outfit will miss his creativity in midfield.

Madrid have been continually linked with the Portugal winger since the end of last season, despite the European Champions' insistence that he is not for sale and their complaint to FIFA over Real's pursuit of the player.

The Holland international left the field on a stretcher after an hour following a heavy challenge by Arsenal midfielder Abou Diaby as Madrid went down 1-0, a result which handed the trophy to Hamburg, who beat Juventus 3-0 earlier in the day.

Salgado insists he does not know anything about the progress

of the transfer but believes the club could now attempt to force the issue with United.

"We (the players) don't know anything about it," he said. "It's a problem for the club - for (sporting director) Pedja Mijatovic and the coach. 'We are players, we only think about football."

"But now Wesley Sneijder is injured and he's an important player for us. Maybe tomorrow there will be a meeting with the people in the club and maybe then there's going to be news about this."

Salgado also claims the players and the fans would welcome Ronaldo to the Bernabeu with open arms.

"We know Cristiano Ronaldo is an incredible player and we don't have any problem with him joining us," he added.

"Real Madrid making an offer is normal. Manchester United and (coach Sir Alex) Ferguson don't want this because he is a very important player at United and that's normal too."

"I think they're going to have to talk about this and if Cristiano Ronaldo is coming to Real Madrid the dressing room is waiting for him."

"If he came of course the players and the fans would be excited. The supporters are used to watching the best players in the world at the Bernabeu and Cristiano Ronaldo is one of the best players in the world."

While Salgado admits the Portugal international would be a great addition to the team, he also claims the Primera Liga champions would cope well without his services.

"We have a very important group now," he added. "I feel the best of Real Madrid is the squad and the dressing room and if Cristiano is coming here we don't have room for him in the team."

"But, as I said before maybe with the injury, to Wesley Sneijder maybe we need someone else."

Salgado is well qualified to judge the needs of Madrid having been at the Bernabeu since 1999.

The Spain veteran claims he cannot see himself leaving anytime soon, but revealed he would consider a move to England if he ever does move on.

"I've been 10 years in Real Madrid," said Salgado. "It would be very difficult to move. But if I move from Real Madrid I'd love to go to the Premier League or Dubai."

Sneijder suffers serious injury

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Dutch international Wesley Sneijder suffered serious knee damage during a heavy tackle by Arsenal's Abou Diaby in Sunday's match in London, the Spanish club said.

Midfielder Sneijder was stretched off in the second half of the Emirates Cup match which Arsenal won 1-0.

"Initial tests show serious damage to his knee ligaments, but the player will undergo complementary exams including an MRI on Monday to determine the full extent of the injury," Real said on their website.

Coach Bernd Schuster said he was "very worried" and that Sneijder "will be out for a while."

"It's really tough. He is in a lot of pain and we predict the worst," the club quoted him as saying.

The 24-year-old was about to start his second season with Real after joining the club from Ajax last year.

The absence of the key player would be a hard blow for the Spanish champions.

But Real Madrid have set their sights on another Dutch midfielder, Rafael van der Vaart of Hamburg, and have made a nine million-euro (14 million-dollar) swoop for the player.

Hammers retire Moore's shirt

REUTERS, London

West Ham United will retire the number six shirt worn by former Upton Park and England great Bobby Moore, the Premier League club said on their website (www.whufc.co.uk) on Monday.

Moore, who died in 1993, is one of the most celebrated names in English football, having lifted the Jules Rimet trophy in 1966 as captain of England's World Cup-winning team.

A ball-playing central defender, he was one of three West Ham players in Alf Ramsey's victorious England team, alongside striker Geoff Hurst and midfielder Martin Peters.

A statue of the three stands outside the club's stadium. Moore, who was at West Ham from 1958-74, was the club's most successful captain, lifting the FA Cup in 1964 and European Cup Winners' Cup the following year.

He died from bowel cancer at the age of 51. West Ham chief executive officer Scott Duxbury told the club's website: "When we were talking about ways to mark 50 years since Bobby Moore's debut, there was only one true gesture that would do him justice - retiring the number six shirt he made his own."

Moore made his first appearance for the club aged 17 against Manchester United in Sept. 1958 and to mark the anniversary West Ham will play Spanish club Villarreal in a pre-season friendly on Saturday for the inaugural Bobby Moore Cup.

After leaving West Ham, Moore won 108 caps for England and played for Fulham and American clubs San Antonio Thunder and Seattle Sounders. Matthew Upson, the England defender who has been wearing the number six for West Ham, will take the number 15 shirt.

Rafa remains cautious

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez has never needed much encouragement to bemoan Liverpool's relative lack of resources compared to Manchester United and Chelsea.

But even after the Reds spent 20 million pounds on Robbie Keane, Reds fans are far from optimistic about the new campaign.

When he was unveiling Keane last week, Benitez was careful to avoid describing the Republic of Ireland striker as the missing piece in the jigsaw.

As Benitez prepares for a fifth season in charge at Anfield, the Spaniard knows better than to utter anything that might increase expectation that the Reds might finally deliver a first title since 1990.

His highest finish in the Premier League so far was third place in 2005/06, with Liverpool finishing nine points behind the winners Chelsea.

But the Reds have not been genuine contenders for the title in the final weeks of the season since 1997, when they managed to slip to fourth.

Benitez has a point when he explains that he is attempting to catch two clubs, Manchester United and Chelsea, who regularly out-spend him after starting from a stronger position.

So while it may not always

appeal to a fan's basic sense of optimism, Benitez, who has won the Champions League and FA Cup in his spell in England, continues to sound a cautionary note when speaking publicly about his team's prospects for this season.

"We try to improve the squad every year, we try to reduce the gap, we try to be closer and we want to win every trophy," he said.

"We are improving the squad every year, we are trying to be contenders in the Premier League, we are trying to progress in the Champions League and in other competitions."

"I was surprised when people were talking about us not having won anything in the last two years but to finish third or fourth in the Premier League and to reach the final and the semi-final in the Champions League, I think it's good, it's important."

"We want medals and trophies but we're talking about United and Chelsea playing in the final of the Champions League and they're at the top of the Premier League so this is maybe the most difficult league. But we will try to improve again."

Keane's signing is the most significant and if, as is expected, Aston Villa's Gareth Barry also arrives, Liverpool will have the spine of a team that could challenge for the Premier League.

In signing another striker - and not a top-class winger that has for so long been on his wish-list - Benitez is also putting a tremen-

dous amount of faith in two other less-heralded additions, the attack-minded full-backs Philipp Degen and Andrea Dossena, who have arrived from Borussia Dortmund and Udinese respectively.

Those changes herald a shift in philosophy from Benitez. Liverpool will operate differently this season with a 4-2-3-1 system that will see Degen on the right and Dossena on the left, providing the width for the team, with two holding midfielders giving the defenders scope to bomb forward.

It is a formation that brought Liverpool a decent run of form at the end of last season and the Spaniard has decided this is the way to get the best out of Keane, Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard.

Benitez has also taken the opportunity to trim his squad, with Peter Crouch leaving for Portsmouth and John Arne Riise and Harry Kewell moving to Roma and Galatasaray.

The off-field turmoil between owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett seems to have calmed, publicly at least, but uncertainty about the new stadium continues and there is a sense that another outbreak of civil war is never too far away.

On the pitch, fans acknowledge that breaking into the top two will be tough but if Benitez can finally get through to April with a genuine shot at the title, it will be seen as progress.

VDV seals Real deal

AFP, Madrid

Dutch international midfielder Rafael van der Vaart has agreed a move from Hamburg SV to Real Madrid on a five-year contract, the player and officials from the Bundesliga club said on Monday.

Horst Becker, chairman of Hamburg's supervisory board, said the club would receive more than 15 million euros (\$23.4 million) in the deal, which ends the 25-year-old's three-year spell in the Bundesliga.

"Last night everything came together and I am now moving to Real Madrid," Van der Vaart, whose mother is Spanish, said on his website (www.vandervartofficial.com).

"I have always wanted to move

to Spain because I have a strong bond with that country," he added.

"Now I'm going to play for Real



VAN DER VAART

Madrid it's a dream come true. Tomorrow afternoon I will be presented."

However, a Real spokeswoman would not confirm the deal.

The former Ajax player would become the fifth Dutchman in the Real Madrid squad, joining Ruud van Nistelrooy, Arjen Robben, Royston Drenth and Wesley Sneijder at the Bernabeu.

Van der Vaart's statement came just hours after Sneijder suffered a knee injury in Real's 1-0 friendly defeat by Arsenal on Sunday that will sideline him for around three months.

Van der Vaart has been a long-time target of Real Madrid and was reported to have been sought at the specific request of coach Bernd Schuster.

His move to Real would increase speculation that the club are beginning to lose hope of luring Cristiano Ronaldo away from Manchester United.

Spurs look at Villa deal

AFP, London

Tottenham hope to make three more major signings before the season starts and take their summer spending closer to £100 million.

Head coach Juande Ramos is not satisfied with his squad despite having already seen around £46m worth of talent arrive in the form of Luka Modric, David Bentley, Heuresh Gomes, Giovanni dos Santos and John Bostock.

He is determined to buy another striker, especially with Dimitar Berbatov expected to follow Robbie Keane out of White Hart Lane.

The deal to sign Andrei Arshavin from Zenit St Petersburg is proving difficult and it seems the club are considering making a last-ditch bid to buy David Villa from Valencia instead.

Spurs have admired Villa for some time, but Valencia's asking price of more than £30m had scared them off.

However, no club has made a move for the Spain star so far and they haven't given up hope, particularly as money is available having recouped £37m in player sales in recent weeks.

Ramos is desperate to sign a centre half as captain Ledley King is not expected to be able to play regularly due to his old knee injuries while Younes Kaboul is set to leave.

That leaves only Jonathan Woodgate and Michael Dawson to start most games with little cover in the squad.

The manager's plans for the defence haven't been helped by an ankle injury to right-back Alan Hutton, who could miss the start of

the season.

Ramos is also looking at buying a defensive midfielder and is interested in Sporting Lisbon star Miguel Veloso.

But at least Darren Bent is showing the kind of form that convinced Spurs to sign him for £16.5m from Charlton last summer.

Bent scored his 10th goal of the pre-season in the 3-0 win over Borussia Dortmund yesterday and is favourite to start up front against Middlesbrough in a fortnight.

Assistant manager Gus Poyet said: "Darren has been on fire recently. We keep saying to him, 'Don't spend all the goals in pre-season, keep a few for the season.'"

"But it is good. Strikers need to score goals. He didn't play a lot last year, but he is playing week in, week out now. He has been the best striker in pre-season. He has got a chance."

Gunners eye Alonso

AFP, London

approach for Liverpool midfielder Xabi Alonso, according to British media reports Monday. Manager Arsene Wenger is keen to pair the 26-year-old with his Spanish com-

patriot Cesc Fabregas and is believed to be prepared to offer around 10.5 million pounds (20.7 million dollars), the fee Liverpool paid to bring him from Real Sociedad four years ago.

With Liverpool hopeful of landing Aston Villa midfielder Gareth Barry this week, Alonso has been told he can leave Anfield, although Liverpool have set a price tag of 18 million pounds.

"The value of Alonso in the market will be really high," said Benitez.

"We are really pleased with him and we don't want him to go unless we get a very good price."

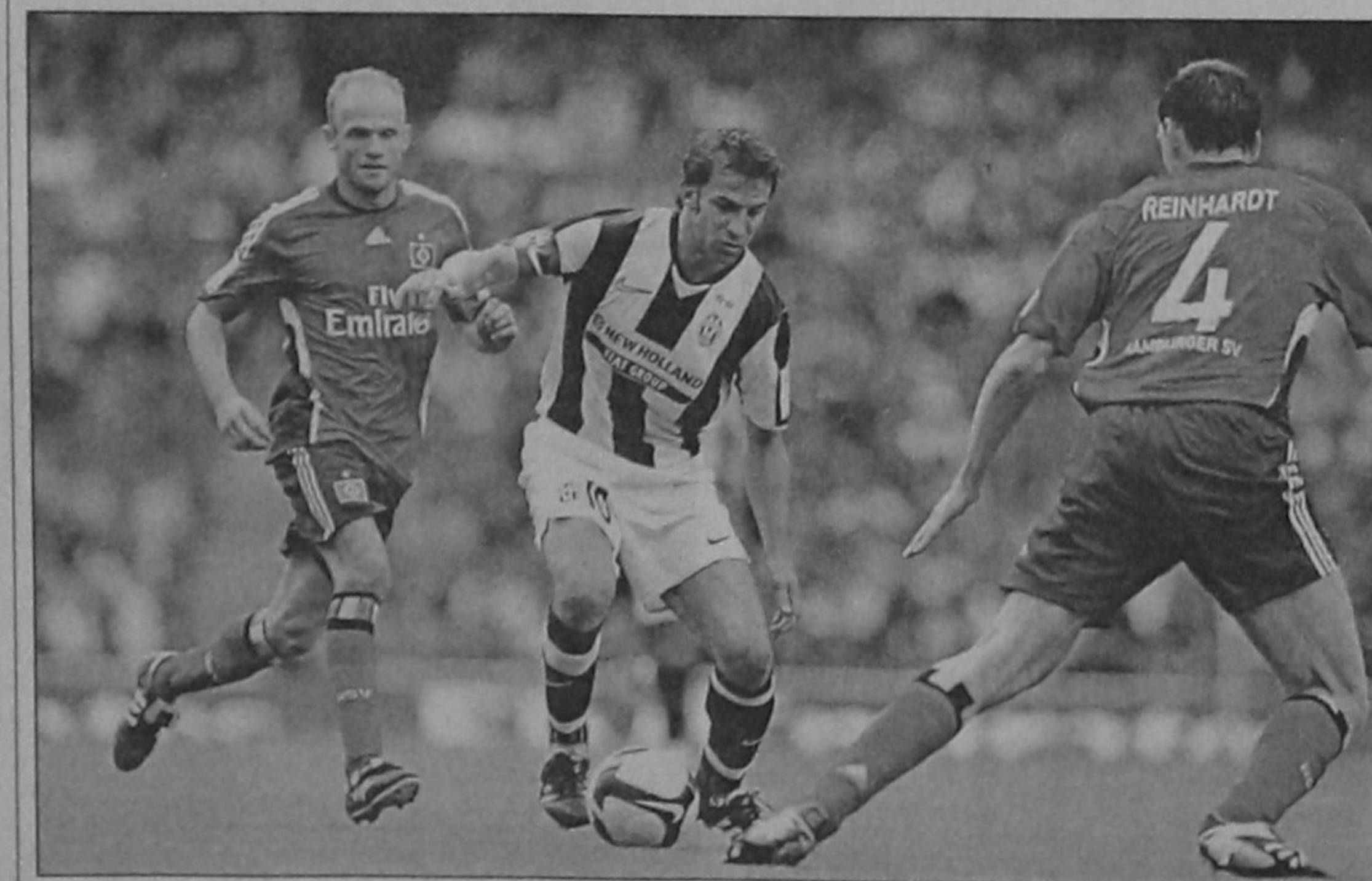
Barry's move had seemed to have fallen through after Liverpool missed a deadline to come up with the 18 million pounds Villa were demanding.

But Villa boss Martin O'Neill has now reconsidered.

"I gave it some thought and realised there is little point in pretending," O'Neill said.

"Gareth would want to join Liverpool and therefore there would be no deadline. I have agreed with Gareth now."

"That's it, no problem: Liverpool have all the time in the world to do it if they want to raise the money."



Juventus captain Alessandro del Piero (C) finds himself blocked by Hamburg defender Bastian Reinhardt during their Emirates Cup tie at the Emirates Stadium in London. Hamburg beat Juventus 3-0 to lift the Emirates Cup trophy.

PHOTO: AFP