

## Cannavaro closes in on Maldini

AFP, Rome

Italian skipper Fabio Cannavaro said Wednesday that the international appearances record of Paolo Maldini, who played 126 times for the world champions, is coming into reach.

"I've not really thought about it, to be honest - but records are there to be broken," said 35-year-old defender Cannavaro who is eight games away from levelling Maldini's mark.

"The years go by but I've no intention of packing it in yet," said the Real Madrid star in the national squad's get together at Florence ahead of Saturday's World Cup qualifier with Bulgaria in Sofia.

"As long as I am called up I'll always arrive full of enthusiasm. For me it is an honour to pull on the Italian shirt."

Maldini, five years Cannavaro's senior, is still in action with AC Milan.

But Cannavaro says that the punishing schedule of today's game means he is looking after himself and conscious of the need not to overdo things.

"I am managing things better this season. I have played in five of seven matches for Real and that's good."

"It's better to play 40 matches on form than 60 on average form."

## Rio could lead England

Football

INTERNET, undated

England captain John Terry is a major doubt for England's World Cup qualifier with Kazakhstan on Saturday - meaning Rio Ferdinand could get the chance to lead his country once again.

The skipper is a doubt with a back complaint.

Terry has been troubled by a back complaint since a recurrence against CFR Cluj last week and was only able to play a partial role in training on Wednesday.

If called upon to lead the side, Ferdinand will be hoping to oversee two wins and help push England closer to a competition he is desperate to win.

The Manchester United defender has always said he will assess his success in the game by the number of trophies in his cabinet when he finally decides to retire and admits a lack of success with the national team is a real bugbear.

"With England I have been very disappointed," said the 29-year-old. "It's not just that I have never

won anything with England, I have not even been in a position to win something by getting to a major final.

"I regard that as disappointing and the hunger to achieve something is only enhanced by the trophies I have won with Manchester United."

Many pundits felt he was unlucky not to get the captaincy from Fabio Capello in preference to Terry on the basis that if either man's place was to come under threat, it would be the Chelsea skipper.

Injury troubles for Jonathan Woodgate and Ledley King have effectively ended their chances of muscling in, few seriously consider Upson as a like-for-like replacement, while emerging Middlesbrough youngster David Wheeler still has a lot of developing to do.

While the Football Association have yet to officially rule Terry out of the match, reports suggest the likes of Matthew Upson and Joleon Lescott are already being readied to start on Saturday, and could even be required for the match with Belarus next week.



EYES FIXED ON THE BALL: Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo heads the ball during a training session in Obidos on Wednesday ahead of their 2010 World Cup qualifier against Sweden on Saturday.

## Torres close to best

INTERNET, undated

Liverpool striker Fernando Torres has warned the rest of the Premier League he is edging closer to his top form.

Torres, who enjoyed a fantastic debut season at Anfield last term scoring 33 goals in all competitions, had a slow start to this term by his own high expectations, scoring only once in the club's opening five Premier League games.

The 24-year-old has shown he is almost back to his brilliant best with a brace in each of his side's last two games at Everton and Manchester City and says there is more to come.

Torres believes he has been playing catch-up due to Spain's involvement at Euro 2008 where he helped them win the tournament with the only goal against Germany in the final.

"Me and the other players from the Euros started back in pre-season later than everyone else,

and as a result weren't in the best physical shape," said Torres.

"Last year was very long for me. I played nearly 50 games with Liverpool and then went straight to the Euros. But I'm getting better each day and I'll soon be 100 per cent again."

Torres is also hoping to build on his success with Spain by helping Liverpool win some silverware this season.

He added: "It was a great experience and the first big honour I've won. Now I know how it feels to win something like that, it makes me even hungrier to win trophies with Liverpool."

"I came here for that reason and hope this season will be better than last year."

"I believe we can win the Premier League or the Champions League. If we did that, it would be fantastic. We have started well, so there is optimism."

"But I'd be happy with just 20 goals if we won the Premier League or Champions League."

Torres also revealed he dreams

of scoring against Manchester United in the UEFA Champions League final.

The former Atletico Madrid man has yet to find the net against Liverpool's biggest rivals and he knows scoring against them would further endear him to the Anfield faithful.

Torres missed Liverpool's win over United last month and he is determined to get one over on the Old Trafford outfit.

"Every player wants to score against their biggest rivals. It matters so much to the fans and I know it would mean even more to ours if I scored against Manchester United," he said.

"Unfortunately I didn't get the chance this season. But I'm hoping I'll have an opportunity to do so at Old Trafford after Christmas, or maybe in the cup - or best of all the Champions League final."

"It was a little unusual for me watching the recent game against United but we won, and the most important thing was the fact we proved how strong the squad is."

## Germany lose Enke

AFP, Berlin

Germany number-one goalkeeper Robert Enke is out of Saturday's World Cup qualifier against Russia and next Wednesday's match against Wales with a hand injury, it was announced on Thursday.

The 31-year-old, who succeeded Jens Lehmann as die Mannschaft's goalkeeper after Euro 2008, broke the scaphoid bone in his hand in training on Wednesday afternoon with the national team and the injury was confirmed on Thursday.

The Hanover shot-stopper will be out for several weeks and will miss Saturday's Group Four game in Dortmund against Russia as well as the match with Wales in Borussia Moenchengladbach next Wednesday.

It means either Werder Bremen's Tim Wiese or Bayer Leverkusen's Rene Adler will make their debut on Saturday.

## Walcott reminiscent of Owen

Football

AFP, London

Theo Walcott has been giving his England teammate Rio Ferdinand a sense of deja-vu ahead of Saturday's World Cup qualifier against Kazakhstan and the Manchester United defender has only just worked out why.

Walcott has an inner confidence that seems eerily familiar and Ferdinand traces it back to the World Cup Finals in 1998 when Michael Owen first burst onto the international scene as a raw and exciting 18-year-old.

Now he believes the 19-year-old Arsenal winger has the potential to follow in Owen's footsteps and become a major name in world football.

"The self confidence Theo has got is amazing," Ferdinand said. "He knows what he's good at and I remember Michael was exactly the same. I was with him the whole time at the 1998 World Cup in France and he just knew he was a good player and he knew what he

was good at, even then.

"That's the thing that Michael had, at that time especially. He knew what he was good at and that's what he made his game around."

"He was quick, direct and he could score a goal and you can see that in Theo. Different players but the same mentality."

Owen, of course, announced himself to the world by scoring one of the most iconic World Cup goals of all time in England's last 16 tie against Argentina that year and now it is down to Walcott to carry on the tradition.

Ten years later Owen's illustrious England career could well be nearing an end after being left out of the most recent squad by manager Fabio Capello despite remaining his country's current top scorer with 40 goals. But there is a new teenage hero in town.

Walcott's hat-trick in last month's 4-1 win over Croatia confirmed his potential and Ferdinand expects him to continue his progress over the next two games against Kazakhstan at Wembley and Belarus in Minsk four days

later.

"As a young player it's difficult to come in front of the media or a room full of senior internationals and start holding court. But he can do it," Ferdinand said.

"I think he's two or three years of it in the background and now he's coming into the foreground a little bit more and taken it in his stride."

"Going to the 2006 World Cup was good experience for him. I think more than anything you learn how people are around the hotel, how they're relaxing, what they eat, how they train and how they prepare themselves for a game. And then how they come down after a game in a tournament situation."

"That was an invaluable experience for me at Euro 96 when I got to see the likes of Gazza, Paul Ince, Tony Adams, Shearer, Sheringham and those kind of experienced players. To see them first hand and how they reacted in team situations was good for me. And it's the same for Theo."

"Going to a tournament you can see what others have done and take things from that to deal with your own situation."

## 'Spurs are a laughing stock'

INTERNET, undated

Tottenham midfielder David Bentley admits the Premier League's bottom club have become a laughing stock.

Spurs have claimed just two points from their first seven matches - their worst start to a season since 1912.

Manager Juande Ramos, having been in the job for just under a year, is under increasing pressure while questions are being asked of sporting director Damien Comolli's activity in the transfer market, allowing experienced strikers Dimitar Berbatov, Robbie Keane and Jermain Defoe to leave without finding suitable replacements.

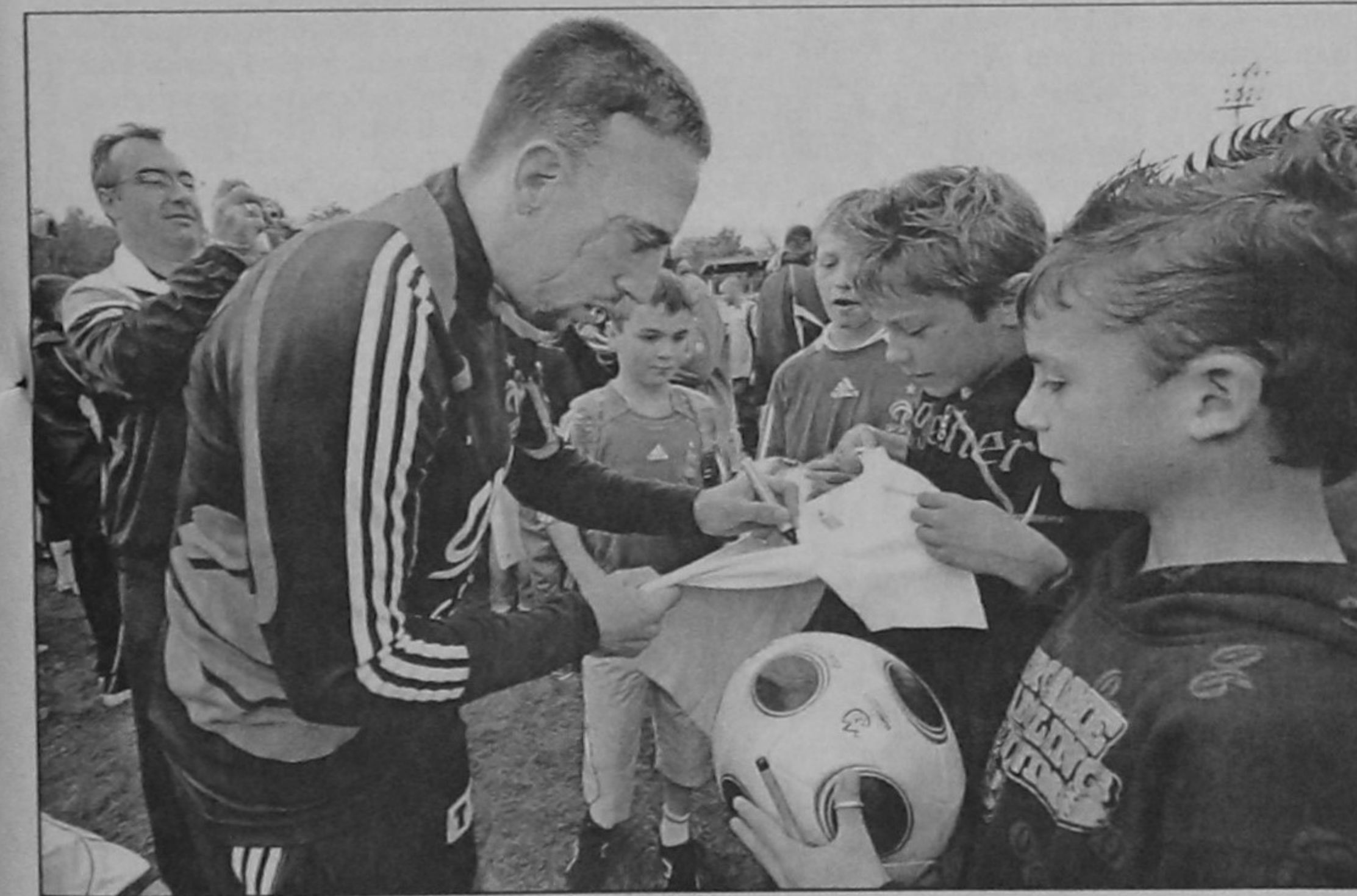
"I know people are having a laugh at the fact we are bottom of the league at the moment but it's up to everyone at the club to stop the jokes," said Bentley.

"We're not happy with what has been happening. You cannot hide from the situation but what we need are a team of leaders who take responsibility. We have to grow as people."

"We have more than enough good players at Tottenham to get us out of this situation and I give my word that we will."

Bentley, who moved to White Hart Lane from Blackburn in the summer for £15million, does not regret the switch to north London and is backing Ramos to turn things around.

"I'm fully behind him, 100 per cent," the 24-year-old told The Sun. "I still love being at Spurs and I don't regret joining the club for one second."



France midfielder Franck Ribery (L) signs autographs before a training session in Clairefontaine on Wednesday. France play Romania in a 2010 World Cup qualifying match on Saturday.

## Wright-Phillips fired up

Football

AFP, London

Being dropped from the England squad can be a soul-destroying experience but if any player is equipped to return stronger than ever then it's Shaun Wright-Phillips.

When the winger, fresh from his move back to Manchester City, discovered that England coach Fabio Capello had left him out of the squad for September's World Cup qualifiers against Andorra and Croatia, he could have been forgiven for feeling slighted.

After all, he scored in Fabio Capello's first match in charge against Switzerland last season and looked set to become a regular member of the Italian's squad.

But three years being treated like a spare part at Chelsea had given Wright-Phillips a steely approach to dealing with the dent to confidence and pride that comes with international exile.

The 26-year-old used the disappointment as an incentive to recapture the verve that first made him a Premier League sensation at City before his ill-fated move to

Stamford Bridge. Liberated by regular football with Mark Hughes' side and fired up to prove Capello wrong, Wright-Phillips has been in scintillating form over the last month.

Capello has taken notice and restored Wright-Phillips to the squad for Saturday's qualifier against Kazakhstan at Wembley and the trip to Belarus the following Wednesday.

"It gave me a kick up the arse to be honest, because I knew I had to get myself into gear and get back to what I used to be; exciting to watch and full of confidence," Wright-Phillips said.

"I've gone back to City a lot wiser and a lot more mature on and off the field. Giving in is not part of my nature. The mental side of things has helped me a lot."

"I've just become wiser on the pitch with my decisions. I put it down to every manager and coach I played under while I was there. They all played a part because everyone gives you something different and it's up to you whether you want to take it on board."

Now Wright-Phillips wants to show England fans the same form that has dazzled City regulars - even if it means playing out of

position. With Theo Walcott certain to start on the right-wing after his hat-trick in Croatia last month, Wright-Phillips knows he might have to shift to the left flank to get a place.

"I could most probably play there. I've played everywhere at City. There's a lot of movement so a lot of the time I'm on the left, a lot of the time I'm on the right and I'm down the middle as well," he said. "It doesn't change my game plan either way."

"I just want to get back to being positive and helping the team. As long as I'm in a position to help the team, whether I set someone up or I score or clear something off the line, that makes me happy."

Wright-Phillips readily admits to knowing nothing about Kazakhstan apart from the country's starring role in the Sasha Baron Cohen film 'Borat'. But he has no intention of underestimating the team from the former Soviet Union.

"I know as much as everybody else. I just learned how to pronounce the name," he said.

"We know it's going to be a really hard game no matter what people say. But as long as we set out with the same attitude that the lads did against Croatia, we'll be ok."

## Benzema turned down Barca

AFP, Paris

Barcelona director of football Txiki Begiristain on Wednesday revealed that French starlet Karim Benzema turned down a summer move to the Spanish giants.

"We've tried to sign him several times but it's never been possible," Begiristain told www.frenchleague.com. "We tried this summer, but he wanted to stay at Lyon."

Benzema, at 20, is one of France's biggest hopes for the future. He was top goalscorer last year in the French first division, and heads the scoring chart so far this season with six.

Benzema has become a regular fixture in Raymond Domenech's national team, making 16 appearances and netting four times.

Begiristain insisted that he intended to keep tabs on the striker, despite growing interest from other top clubs such as Manchester United and Inter.

"In the end it will be his decision. We have excellent relations with both him and his club and we'll definitely keep in contact so that he knows we want him, and that he wants to come to us," he said.

## Alonso was too slow: Ranieri

INTERNET, undated

Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri has revealed he pulled out of a move for Xabi Alonso this summer because he felt the Liverpool midfielder was "too slow".

Juve held talks with Liverpool over the Spain international - a winner of Euro 2008 - but Alonso ultimately remained at Anfield.

"He was a player we wanted," Ranieri said of Alonso.

"But he is a player, who even though he is an extraordinary man and a great professional, left me perplexed by the slowness of his movement in midfield."

"In the midfield of Rafa Benitez's Liverpool, where all of them are little soldiers, he finds himself in a fantastic position. But in our midfield, he would have found it hard to support the midfield line seeing as (Juve wingers) Mauro Camoranesi and Pavel Nedved are not players that come back to give support like Liverpool's wingers."

## Vidmar's feet on ground

Football

AFP, Sydney

Coach Aurelio Vidmar Thursday warned his Adelaide United players to keep a lid on their expectations as they take a 3-0 lead into their AFC Champions' League

semifinal return leg with Uzbekistan's Kuruvchi later this month. Adelaide are on the cusp of becoming the first Australian club to reach the ACL final after taking a three-goal buffer from their home first leg on Wednesday.

The Reds travel to Tashkent for the return semifinal leg against Kuruvchi on October 22 to decide

who goes through to face one of the two Japanese teams - Urawa Red Diamonds and Gamba Osaka -- in next month's two-leg final.

"It's going to be difficult because most people would think with this scoreline we have got a foot in the door," Vidmar said Thursday.

"And that is what the danger is. We are going to really rely on the whole squad's maturity."

Vidmar warned his players and Reds' fans of the uncertainty facing the team ahead of the clash with the Uzbeki championship league leaders in Tashkent.

"We are going into the unknown, we are going into Tashkent, we have got absolutely no idea what to expect," Vidmar said.

"And I'm sure there will be a fair bit of gamesmanship going on because they want to do everything they possibly can to reverse the result."

"Over the last couple of weeks we have spoken to just about everyone at the FFA (Football Federation Australia) because the Socceroos played there (Tashkent) recently."

"So in terms of the hotel we are going to, the food, and all of those sorts of things - the Socceroos and the Joeys (under-17s), who are there at the moment, had some problems with food poisoning so that is something we really need to have a good look at," he said.

Vidmar said Adelaide would not be relying solely on defence to secure the first ACL final appearance by an Australian club.

"It's certainly a game where they are going to have to come at us and we are certainly going to have our backs to the wall," he said.

"If you go there thinking you are going to hold a 3-0 lead, your mindset becomes very defensive and if they do get a goal or two early, it's very hard to change that mindset and to try and get forward."

"This game has a funny way of slapping you in the face and if you think that everything is going to be sweet, it generally goes pear-shaped, so we have really got to be smart about this."

## Malaysia losing AFC HQ

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia faces losing the headquarters of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) which it has hosted for nearly half a century, after relations with the sporting body soured.

AFC president Mohamed Bin Hammam has proposed shifting its base from the impressive eight-year-old facility on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, and invited applications from the body's 46 member nations.

"It is not about problems with anyone. Simply, we are an international organization and we want headquarters in a country that can cater to our functions as a governing body," he told AFP in a statement.

"The bidding is open to all 46 member associations, including Malaysia, Singapore and Bangkok," he added.

Bin Hammam's plan, unveiled during a July meeting of the AFC's governing body, has come under fire from Malaysian officials including former AFC general secretary Peter Velappan.

He has described the proposal as "a total disrespect to all Malaysian leaders and staff who have worked very hard to develop and promote football in Asia".

The Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) said Thursday it will not attempt to convince the AFC to stay.

"They have decided to move out and Malaysia will not bid to host the AFC headquarters," FAM general secretary Azzuddin Ahmad told AFP.

"The AFC is an independent entity. We will not stop them if they want to move out."

Ties between the two bodies took a turn for the worse last year when Malaysia decided to invite the glamour English Premier League side Manchester United for a friendly during the Asian Cup tournament.

The AFC strongly criticised Malaysia's plan which it saw as drawing attention away from its premier event, and subsequently the Red Devils dropped their tour plans.



Italy legend Roberto Baggio (back) applauds as he stands behind the wheelchair of former Fiorentina teammate Stefano Borgonovo who suffers of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) prior to a charity game at the Franchi Stadium in Florence on Wednesday.