

England cool on Thailand

AFP, Bangkok
The English FA reacted coolly Wednesday to claims by Football Association of Thailand boss Worawi Makudi that England will play Thailand next year.

Worawi was quoted by Thai newspapers this week as saying he met FA vice chairman Sir David Richards and was told that the star-studded team wanted to play in Bangkok in 2009.

"Further to comments made by the president of the Thailand Football Association Worawi Makudi, the FA stressed that they do not expect to play Thailand in a fixture next year," the FA said in a statement.

It acknowledged that Richards and Worawi had met and a game between the two teams was discussed.

"(But) he made it clear that any fixture requests would have to be discussed by the appropriate departments within the FA and Fabio Capello before any fixtures can be agreed," the statement said.

"Sir David wishes to make clear that he did not agree to the fixture."

The England team's fixtures for 2009 are already arranged in principle and the only dates that could become available are in November 2009 - if England win their World Cup qualifying group and avoid the play-off fixtures.

"If England do find themselves as group winners, it is not expected we will play Thailand in November," the statement said.

England Premier League football is massively popular in Thailand and the national team is now coached by former Sunderland boss Peter Reid.

'Nakamura going nowhere'

AFP, Glasgow
Celtic manager Gordon Strachan is adamant that midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura is not on the brink of a return home to Japan.

Reports from Japan have suggested that Yokohama Marinos, for whom Nakamura made his professional debut in 1997, are keen to bring the 30-year-old playmaker back in January ahead of the start of the 2009 J-League season.

But Strachan, speaking in the build-up to Celtic's Scottish League Cup quarter-final tie away to Kilmarnock on Wednesday, said: "It is the same statement as on Friday, the same position."

"Nobody has mentioned anything to me and unless anyone tells me anything different to my face then I will refer you to Friday's statement."

"I had a long conversation with Naka on Thursday and he never said a thing about that."

"I can only deal with reality, I will leave it up to the rest to deal with the nonsense that goes with it."

Nakamura's contract expires at the end of the current Scottish season and last week Strachan told Scotland's Daily Record newspaper: "Knowing Shunsuke, he would not upset anyone at this club one way or another."

"He wouldn't upset his teammates, manager or coaches and I'd think he'd put the club before himself."

Andreas Hinkel, Celtic's German international defender, added Wednesday he hoped Nakamura would, at the very least, see out his contract.

"He would leave a big gap if he went but we hope that he stays. He is very good and technically one of the best, he is very confident with the ball and plays almost always the right pass."

"He has a lot of experience and is very important for us."

Boro blast foreign ownership

AFP, London
Middlesbrough chief executive Keith Lamb has blasted foreign ownership of English Premier League sides and vowed to keep the northeast outfit locally run.

Both Manchester clubs, Chelsea and Liverpool are among those who have been taken over by foreign buyers and that is wrong according to Lamb.

"I can never envisage a time when this club is owned by somebody whose roots are outside the area," he said.

"It is important that people realise how much Middlesbrough Football Club is part of the community."

"We are only here because of the people of Middlesbrough and this community is so vital."

Lamb said he is convinced that the sale of foreign takeovers in England will damage the long-term future of the game in this country if they are allowed to continue.



PHOTO: AFP
Bayer Leverkusen defender Manuel Friedrich (2nd from L) celebrates with teammates after scoring the second goal against Werder Bremen during their Bundesliga encounter in Bremen on Tuesday.

Leverkusen go top

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen's defence leaked two late goals in quick succession to hand Bayer Leverkusen a 2-0 victory and three points to put them top of the Bundesliga on Tuesday night.

The game was heading for a 0-0 draw until Bayer's Brazilian midfielder Renato Augusto put in a cross and a mix-up in the Bremen defence allowed midfielder Arturo Vidal a simple tap-in.

And after the Chilean's goal on 71 minutes, another mistake in the Bremen defence allowed Germany defender Manuel Friedrich to lob Bremen goalkeeper Christian Vander

just nine minutes later to leave Bremen red-faced.

"It was great the way the game worked out for us," said Leverkusen coach Bruno Labbadia.

"We were very good in defence and barely allowed them any chances."

"We showed a lot of patience and took our chances when they came our way."

"Up until now, we have played very well this season, but we are not getting euphoric just yet, there is still a long way to go this season."

Hoffenheim have the chance to reclaim top spot providing they beat VfL Bochum on Wednesday night, but Bayer are now two points clear of the rest of the table.

Schalke are now up to third after their impressive 3-0 win at ten-man Karlsruhe.

The Royal Blues were untroubled

as they raced into a 2-0 lead thanks to a shot from Brazilian captain Marcelo Bordon after 15 minutes and a Kevin Kuranyi header four minutes later.

Karlsruhe were reduced to ten men when defender Maik Franz was shown a second yellow card on 56 minutes for storming to the Schalke bench and gesturing from the pitch, kicking over a chair and pushing away teammates on the way.

Kuranyi then turned goal provider when he put in a cross for Peru striker Jefferson Farfan to head home on 67 minutes.

Having been beaten 4-2 at Bayern Munich on Saturday, Wolfsburg were back to winning ways as they grabbed a 3-0 win at home to Borussia Moenchengladbach.

And bottom club Energie Cottbus gained a valuable point at Arminie Bielefeld thanks to a 1-1 draw.

Diego's highs and lows

AFP, Buenos Aires

The highs and lows of Argentinian football legend Diego Maradona after he was appointed national team coach on Tuesday:

30/10/1960: Born in Lanus, the third of six sons of Diego Maradona and Dalma Franca.

05/12/1970: Joins Argentinos Juniors youth system.

20/10/1976: Makes Argentinian First Division debut.

27/02/1977: International debut.

28/06/1977: Marries Claudia Villafane.

07/09/1977: Argentina win World Under-19 championships in Japan.

02/1981: Boca Juniors debut.

06/1982: Plays in first of four World Cup tournaments in Spain - gets sent off in second round match with eventual winners Italy.

09/1982: Barcelona debut.

07/1983: Spanish Cup victory.

06/1984: Signs for sleeping Italian giants Napoli.

06/1986: Highlight of his career as he lifts World Cup in a tournament that reflected all the contrasting aspects of his character. Cheating in scoring his first goal against England in the quarter-final with his impishly self-declared 'Hand of God' goal, but on the other hand he did almost single-handedly drive Argentina to the trophy.

05/1987: Wins Italian league title with Napoli.

02/04/1987: Birth of first daughter Dalma Nerea.

16/05/1989: Birth of second daughter Giannina Dimorah.

07/11/1989: Divorces Villafane.

07/1990: Loses in World Cup final 1-0 to West Germany where not even his fading powers could help a pretty brutal Argentinian side - they had two players sent off alone in the final and had several already suspended.

08/04/1991: Fails dope test for cocaine in Naples.

18/09/1991: A Naples court sentences him to 14 months in prison for possession of cocaine, though he never did serve any of it.

09/1992: Signs for Spanish side Sevilla.

06/1994: Plays in last World Cup finals for Argentina in the United States.

27/06/1994: Fails dope test during the World Cup for ephedrine and never plays for national side again.

12/1994: Becomes coach of fashionable side Deportivo Mandiyu de Corrientes.

01/01/1995: France Football magazine awards him the Ballon d'Or. Becomes technical director of Racing Club.

06/11/1995: Receives honorific title from Oxford University of 'Inspirational Maestro'.

12/08/1996: Goes to live in Switzerland to undergo treatment for his addiction to drugs.

08/09/1997: Fails another dope test during the domestic Argentinian championship, though, he is not suspended after he successfully appeals to an Argentine court.

10/1997: Announces official retirement from football.

01/2000: Suffers serious hypertension because of a return to his cocaine addiction while on holiday at the Uruguayan resort of Punta del Este.

28/09/2000: Releases his autobiography in Buenos Aires.

From 2001 to 2004: Underwent intermittent treatment for his drug habit in Cuba at the invitation of his close friend and then dictator Fidel Castro.

04/2004: Suffers a serious heart attack which leaves him fighting for his life. In intensive care for 12 days kept alive by an artificial respirator but astonishingly recovers.

Messi has no problems with Maradona

AFP, Rome

Argentina striker Lionel Messi has insisted he can work with new national coach Diego Maradona, despite his recent criticisms of the Barcelona star, Italian media reported Wednesday.

Messi told sports daily La Gazzetta dello Sport he had "no problems" with Tuesday's news that Maradona had been appointed coach, adding: "It's great, I admire him for what he has given Argentinian football."

Maradona openly criticised Messi in September, saying the 21-year-old was selfish and arrogant.

"Sometimes Messi plays for Messi. He feels so superior that he forgets his teammates. It's Deportivo Messi (a one-man team). If he played with (Sergio) Aguero or (Juan Roman) Riquelme it would be better for him."

But Messi insisted that Maradona's attack was now in the past and forgotten about.

"These were things said in the moment. I know that Diego appreciates me," Messi told La Gazzetta dello Sport.

Heinze attacks Ferguson

INTERNET, undated

Former Manchester United defender and current Real Madrid ace Gabriel Heinze has hit back at Red Devils boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

Ferguson was quoted this week claiming Real Madrid only signed Heinze as a means of luring Cristiano Ronaldo to the Bernabeu.

The Argentinian, who moved to Spain last year after United refused to let him join Liverpool, said: "This theory of Ferguson about me going to Real in order to persuade Cristiano to come the following summer is a work of absolute fiction."

"I am a very good friend of Cristiano Ronaldo. This is true, but he always decides his own future. Cristiano is a clever person and he decides himself what is best for his own life."

"If he asks me a question about Real, then, of course, I will answer, but I'm not a bad influence on him."

Ferguson has spoken about me in the last months and I don't understand this. I thought he had forgotten me."

"He's the boss at United and any person who protests about anything is marginalised. This was my problem at times when I was there. Ferguson cannot stop my quotes because I'm not now at United."

He added: "I'm actually convinced Cristiano would offer Madrid even bigger performances than he has at United. That is my opinion and it is normal that I have wanted him to come and play with us here in La Liga."

Gilardino appeal turned down

AFP, Rome

An appeal by Fiorentina over a two match ban for striker Alberto Gilardino, who scored with his arm during a match with Palermo at the weekend, was turned down by an Italian court on Tuesday.

Fiorentina had earlier launched an appeal relating to the Italian international's infraction during Sunday's 3-1 victory.

Gilardino, the leading scorer in Serie A with seven goals, scored the goal in the 20th minute of their match, however, the referee did not see the infringement but television images did show him using his forearm.

According to a sports judge Gilardino intentionally touched the ball with his hand in what was a 'seriously unsporting gesture'.

Fiorentina officials see the incident differently and have decided to launch an appeal.

As it stands Gilardino, a member of the Italy side that won the 2006 World Cup, will miss Fiorentina's next two Serie A matches against Inter Milan and Siena.

Roma back Spalletti

AFP, Rome

AS Roma's under-fire boss Luciano Spalletti was given the backing of the club's president Rosella Sensi on Tuesday, after a series of poor results has left the capital club 15th in Serie A.

The two met earlier to discuss the club's faltering performances that have seen them lose three consecutive league matches and a Champions League tie against Chelsea last week, their second of the three matches so far having gone down to Romanian side Cluj in their opening clash.

"As always (Sensi) was very nice and she was looking to give me her vote of confidence so we can get out of this bad situation. That makes me happy," said Spalletti, who has guided Roma to second place in the last two seasons.

Roma face fellow strugglers Sampdoria on Wednesday with an extensive injury list that includes Marco Cassetti and Brazilian international Julio Baptista.

A controversial genius

AFP, Paris

Diego Maradona, who was on Tuesday named the new coach of Argentina, is a gifted yet controversial figure whose off-field antics could never overshadow his brilliance on the pitch.

The pint-sized midfielder is widely regarded as the greatest footballer of all time. He shared FIFA's Player of the Century award with Brazilian legend Pele.

A glittering career at national level brought him a World Cup winners medal in Mexico in 1986 - the same tournament as the infamous 'Hand of God' incident against England in the quarter-finals.

He was also part of the team that came runners-up four years later in Italy after a shameful 1-0 defeat against West Germany which saw two of their players sent-off.

At club level he played for Boca Juniors, before moving to

Barcelona for two seasons in 1982.

After Spain he moved to Napoli, his bustling play and talismanic presence driving the Neapolitans to two Serie A titles in 1987 and 1990 and a UEFA Cup triumph in 1989.

He finished his career at Boca in 1997, having retired from the national team three years earlier.

But controversy was never far from the dark-haired maestro.

He was twice banned for drug infringements, he was linked to the Mafia and was not fond of paparazzi intrusion into his private life. However, it is the illegal goal against England that towers above all else.

The 'Hand of God' came during Argentina's 2-1 win over England, when he rose above keeper Peter Shilton to punch the ball into the net. Despite English protests the referee never spotted the incident and the goal stood.

Later in the match saw Maradona at his most sublimely skilful when he weaved through the England team from the halfway

line, taking on Terry Butcher and Terry Fenwick to slot the ball home.

Michel Platini, the former French captain and present UEFA president, once remarked: "The things I could do with a ball, he could do with an orange".

Balance, vision, and a powerful left foot marked him out from a very early age. At 17 he made his debut for the national side - the same age Pele was when he made his.

The spectre of drug abuse surfaced in 1991 when he tested positive for cocaine and was slapped with a 15-month ban.

Health problems followed his retirement and in 2000 he suffered a heart attack in Uruguay, reportedly brought on by a cocaine overdose. His convalescence involved a spell in Cuba at the request of Fidel Castro.

Maradona, who still enjoys the adulation of millions in his homeland despite his well-publicised battles with drink and drugs, was in Beijing to see the Argentina side win gold this summer.

'I couldn't have been fatter'

AFP, Paris

Brazilian striker Ronaldo put on so much weight while he was injured this year that he was running out of clothes that fit him, he said on Tuesday.

The 32-year-old free agent has almost fully recovered from a career-threatening knee injury suffered in February and said he had been working hard to get back in shape and still dreamed of a national team recall.

"I couldn't have got any fatter, I was running out of clothes," Ronaldo said in an interview with the Sportv cable television station.

"Everything on the table is nice but it makes you put on weight. Losing weight is the most difficult part."

Ronaldo has been on a rehabilitation programme at Brazilian club Flamengo since August and training with the team.

"I'm making great sacrifices and, yes, I still dream about the national team," said Ronaldo, who has not played for Brazil since the 2006 World Cup where he scored three goals.

"The national team is part of my life, I have an incredible history, of many conquests and also many defeats."

"But to play for Brazil, I have to have a club and play well. I'm not going to be picked on my past or because of my sponsor, as many have said."

Ronaldo ruptured a tendon in his left knee during a Serie A game for AC Milan against Livorno in February and was initially expected to be out for at least nine months.

The striker, who came under fire for appearing to be overweight at the 2006 World Cup, went on to criticise his team's preparations for the tournament in Germany.

"Every day, in the morning and in the afternoon, we had 15,000 people shouting in our ears. But I didn't hear anyone say that the preparation sucked. There was no way it could have worked."

Former Germany captain Lothar Matthaus on Wednesday questioned the apology of Chelsea star Michael Ballack to national coach Joachim Loew after criticising the trainer for a lack of respect.

In a press release issued last weekend, Ballack apologised to Loew for comments made in a German newspaper last week claiming the national coach should show his senior players more respect and loyalty.

Matthaus, who captained Germany to their 1990 World Cup win, says an apology in a press statement is not enough and thinks Ballack's statement was motivated by money and a desire to protect his place in the Mannschaft.

"A press release is no apology," Matthaus told German tabloid Bild.

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Magpies beat West Brom

AFP, Newcastle

West Brom substitute striker James Park here on Tuesday.

West Brom substitute striker Ishmael Miller pulled a goal back in the 65th minute to fray the nerves of Newcastle's fans but the home side hung on for a first league win since August.

Victory took United out of the relegation zone and into 15th place, a point behind the Baggies, although all the other teams around them at the bottom of the table are in action on Wednesday.

"I know it's an old cliché but nobody wants to be in the bottom three," Kinnear told Sky Sports.

"Nobody likes being in that position but if we can carry on now and

get a second win then that would be great.

"If we can get a second victory back to back then it would be a completely different picture."

Reflecting on a fraught display after half-time, Kinnear added: "We started the second-half too cautiously."

"We kept defending deeper and deeper because we were trying to protect what we had but we sat back instead of going for it and we caused ourselves some problems."

Barton returned last weekend in the north-east derby against Sunderland after a six-game ban imposed by the Football Association (FA), following the 74 days he served in prison for assault on a 16-year-old boy, and also a training ground assault on former Manchester City teammate Ousmane Dabo which earned him a suspended sentence.

The midfielder was only on the pitch for the final few minutes of the defeat but was pelted with coins and bottles as he warmed-up on the touchline.

His response was to kiss the badge on his Newcastle shirt, a move that many saw as inflammatory and a contributory factor to the violence which broke out after the final whistle between rival fans at the Stadium of Light.

Kinnear insisted, however, the midfielder would be picked on the same basis as any other player and Barton, eager for responsibility, showed no sign of being under pressure when he slotted home a penalty after Shola Ameobi had gone down in the box under a challenge from Ryan Donk.

Nigeria striker Martins, 24 on Tuesday, doubled United's lead, when his powerful header was deflected in off West Brom defender Jonas Olsson.

By that stage, Newcastle goalkeeper Shay Given had preserved the home side's lead with a fine save when one-on-one with James Morrison.

Miller, a 54th minute replacement for Chris Brunt, did get the goal the Baggies' pressure deserved when, after Robert Koren's precise pass had opened up United's defence, he calmly rounded Given and shot into the unguarded net.



Joey Barton justified the faith of Newcastle United manager Joe Kinnear by scoring the opening goal as the Magpies beat West Brom 2-0 for only their second Premier League win this season.

Barton, making his first start since being released from prison, struck from the penalty spot in the 10th minute before birthday boy Obafemi Martins added a second three minutes before half-time at St

James Park.

West Brom substitute striker Ishmael Miller pulled a goal back in the 65th minute to fray the nerves of Newcastle's fans but the home side hung on for a first league win since August.

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