



Argentina coach Diego Maradona makes a gesture during a press conference in Glasgow on Tuesday.

Maradona eyes World Cup

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Diego Maradona has set his sights on claiming football's ultimate prize for a second time as he embarks on an unexpected career as the coach of Argentina.

The little genius who, as a player, almost single-handedly guided his country to glory in Mexico in 1986 now believes he can repeat that triumph in South Africa in 2010 with a squad of players that might not have one individual as outstanding as himself, but is undeniably packed with world class talent.

Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Juan Roman Riquelme were excused international duty for Maradona's first game in charge, a friendly against Scotland here on Wednesday evening.

But after his first training sessions with the likes of Liverpool's Javier Mascherano and Manchester United's Carlos Tevez, Maradona was brimming with confidence about his prospect of emulating Franz Beckenbauer's achievement by captaining then coaching his country to World Cup glory.

"First and foremost, I only have one objective and that is to win the World Cup," Maradona said.

"There is no point thinking about

making it into the last four. With the players that we have that has to be our goal and that is what I will be striving to achieve.

"It has been great for me to work with the players here. My time has come now and I am really enjoying the moment. I will work on the tactics and how we approach the games but it is very important that I get into the players' hearts.

"I think they need someone to guide them and I can do that. I want to make the players happy and proud to wear the shirt. I hope I will be good for them and they will be good for me."

While no-one would ever question the footballing skills that earned him a standing ovation on his last visit to Hampden, Maradona has yet to manage at the highest level and his appointment has raised eyebrows throughout the football world.

But his first steps have been taken confidently with questions from the media handled with the kind of deft touch he used to employ to get the better of defenders.

Quizzed about Terry Butcher's assertion that he could never forgive him for the 'Hand of God' goal that helped knock England out of the 1986 World Cup, Argentina's new coach replied with a combination of good grace (he said he would be happy to kiss and make up) with a hint of a 'Terry who?' attitude.

"I don't know why Butcher is taking this attitude," Maradona said of the former England defender who is now assistant manager of Scotland. "If people are fine with me, I'll greet them."

"Let Butcher get on with his life and I'll get on with my life. I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. If Butcher doesn't shake my hand, I'll still be alive tomorrow."

Maradona further thrilled his hosts by taking a swipe at all of his English critics by pointing out that England's 1966 World Cup final victory over the then West Germany came with the help of a Geoff Hurst goal that may not have crossed the goal line.

"England won the World Cup in 1966 with a goal that didn't cross the line so I don't think it's fair that anyone should judge me when stuff like that went on," he said.

The 'Hand of God' goal refers to Argentina's first in their 2-1 win in the 1986 quarterfinal, in which Maradona used his hand to beat England goalkeeper Peter Shilton to the ball and deflect it into the net.

Butcher's lingering bitterness over the match may however be more to do with memories of Argentina's second goal. Butcher twice failed with attempts to stop Maradona as he waltzed past five English players before finally going past Shilton to claim one of the greatest ever goals.

Zlatan exit improved Del Piero

SOCCERNET

Juventus president Giovanni Cobolli Gigli claims Zlatan Ibrahimovic's move to Inter Milan two years ago has led to Alessandro Del Piero's upturn in form.

Juve take on Serie A leaders Inter on Saturday in the Derby of Italy at the San Siro with Ibrahimovic and Del Piero now regarded as the best two strikers in the country.

Veteran Del Piero finished last season as the top scorer in Italy's top flight and has continued that blistering form into the 2008/09 campaign. But Cobolli Gigli believes the 34-year-old would struggle to replicate those achievements in tandem with Ibrahimovic.

"I sometimes wonder what would have happened had he (Zlatan) stayed," he said. "Del Piero is proving to be better now than two years ago. It was an impossible attacking duo. I think by being away from each other they give the best of themselves."

"Now we have other strikers like Amauri and Vincenzo Iaquinta in the team and life goes on without regrets."

Ibrahimovic's transfer in August 2006 created waves at the time - the player opting to leave Juve shortly after the Bianconeri were demoted to Serie B for their part in the match-fixing scandal - but Cobolli Gigli believes the Turin club no longer have any issues with the Sweden international.

"Zlatan is a world-class player but in the end his departure has been for the best," Cobolli Gigli added. "It was Ibrahimovic that decided to leave Juve."

"Our club administrator met with his agent for a whole night to try to convince Zlatan to stay. But it was a separation wanted by the player."

Juve, third in the standings, are three points behind Inter going into this weekend's encounter.

Malaysia won't meet AFC demands

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia on Wednesday ruled out meeting "unreasonable demands" made by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in return for keeping its headquarters in the country, a report said.

Malaysia, which has been home to the football governing body since 1965, previously said it will not bid to keep the AFC in Kuala Lumpur, blaming "excessive demands" from AFC President Mohamed bin Hammam.

These reportedly include diplomatic status for the AFC chief and its top officers.

"I wish to stress, we will not entertain any unreasonable demands from the AFC like diplomatic status for the AFC president, Mohamed Hammam," Malaysian Sports Minister Ismail Sabri was quoted as saying by state Bernama news agency.

"If they change their mind and remain here, we accept the decision with an open mind as we have never raised the matter," Ismail reportedly said.

Bin Hammam has asked AFC's 46 member nations to table bids to host AFC House, and Qatar and United Arab Emirates are said to be keen.

Bin Hammam said Tuesday he had nothing against Malaysia and would be happy to keep the governing body's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur but said there needs to be a more formal relationship between the AFC and the Malaysian government.

Beckham in Milan for 3 months

INTERNET, undated

Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani has reiterated David Beckham will only stay at the club for three months before returning to the Los Angeles Galaxy.

Beckham is to join the Italian outfit on loan on January 7 and Rossoneri fans - including the son of club owner Silvio Berlusconi, Pier Silvio - have expressed the hope that the 33-year-old might remain for a longer spell.

But Galliani said: "I want to make clear that the club does not have any future projects for him (Beckham)."

"All we know is that he will come to Dubai (winter break) and then he will return to Galaxy in March, besides that nothing else."

Ronaldo may retire

Football

IHT, Milan

Ronaldo is still unsure whether he will return to professional football, and his 22-minute appearance in a charity match this week hasn't helped him decide.

The three-time FIFA player of the year ruptured a tendon in his left knee in a Serie A game with AC Milan in February the third major knee injury of his career and is still in rehab.

After a brief appearance in the Match Against Poverty, a charity game sponsored by the United Nations on Monday in Fez, Morocco, Ronaldo said he felt "very tired."

"I only played 22 minutes because I had a muscle problem recently," the Brazilian striker said in Wednesday's

Gazzetta dello Sport. "I'm tired because the rehab work I've done is tough and my legs are heavy. Football is my life,



RONALDO

but 22 minutes at that pace is not much more than an exhibition. Real professionalism is completely different."

Ronaldo recently turned

down an offer from Siena president Giovanni Stronati to play in Serie A again.

"I thank him, but I really don't know what the future holds for me," Ronaldo said. "I don't know whether to continue playing or retire. I haven't taken a decision yet."

"There's no rush. I want to finish my rehab, and then you know how these things go. I could decide tomorrow or a month from now. I really don't know."

The Gazzetta speculated that if he retires, Ronaldo could be offered a position by FIFA as a missionary ambassador to developing countries.

Ronaldo is already a good-will ambassador for the UN Development Program.

"I consider myself a lucky man, and to be able to give back in some way seems the least I can do," he said.

Harry sacks assistant

AFP, London



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FA punishes Ferguson

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson was given a two-match touchline ban and fined 10,000 pounds (15,000 dollars) by a Football Association regulatory commission here Tuesday.

The Scot admitted a charge of improper conduct in relation to his behaviour towards referee Mike Dean following United's match against Hull City on November 1, which saw the English champions hold on for a 4-3 win against the top-flight newcomers after being 4-1 up at Old Trafford.

In reaching its decision, the commission said it took into account Ferguson's admission of the charge and his previous disciplinary record.

Ferguson had to be restrained by United captain Gary Neville after a furious rant at Dean shortly after the final whistle.

He accused the referee of failing to give United's players adequate protection from what he said were over-zealous Hull challenges.

In particular, he was angry that Dean did not show a second yellow card to Michael Turner, the Hull defender, for a foul on Michael Carrick.

His ban comes into effect on December 2, which means he won't be pitchside for the League Cup match against Premier League rivals Blackburn Rovers the following day.

FOOTBALL SUPERSTITIONS

From booze to bonking...

INTERNET, undated

A new study has revealed that almost two million adult football fans have pre-match rituals designed to bring their teams luck.

While some fans put themselves through anything to help their heroes, a reassuringly large number of the rituals concern comforting habits such as food, booze... and sex.

In the study, commissioned by bankers MBNA (who are presumably crossing their fingers themselves in the current recession), more than a third of fans say they go for a "lucky" drink before the game, perhaps in a particular pub or even drinking left-handed. If their team loses, it doesn't seem to deter them from trying it again next week.

Many fans have a 'lucky'

item of clothing: 21% wear the same scarves, socks or underpants that once brought the team good fortune. One in 10 fans eat a particular meal before the match, which may well be from a specific burger van. And one in 11 will ensure they take the same route to every game.

Others have more personal rituals. Of the 2,000 respondents, 3% claim they have sex before the game to bring the team luck. Extrapolated across the 20 million adult football fans in the UK, that's 60,000 fans getting jiggy pre-match a figure which presumably rises above 100,000 when you include non-fanatical partners.

It's not just fans who have pre-match superstitions. England captain John Terry has lucky shinpads and listens to a particular CD before the game,

Rio Ferdinand pours water down his face in the tunnel, and David Beckham wears some gleaming new boots every game.

It's not a new thing, either. Commenting on the survey, Matt Le Tissier explains that he had his own superstition. "Some years ago I was given a pair of Mr Blobby socks for Christmas," says Le Tissier. "I wore them the next day under my kit socks thinking they might bring me luck and sure enough, I scored! So then I wore the lucky Mr Blobby socks during every match for the next few months. I only stopped wearing them after we lost four games on the trot as I figured they had lost their magical Blobby powers."

"As a player I saw all sorts of things in the dressing room, including people getting really stressed because they had lost their lucky shin pads. The rituals tend to get more intense when it's a big game so I expect there will be a few odd things going on tonight in Munich just before they come on the pitch. It comes from a passion to support the team by any means possible."

Top 10 rituals:

1. Lucky drink before or during the game (35 per cent)
2. Lucky clothing, from scarves to pants (21 per cent)
3. Eating a particular meal or visiting a lucky burger van (10 per cent)
4. Taking the same route to every game (9 per cent)
5. Placing a bet before kick-off (4 per cent)
6. Having sex before the game (3 per cent)
7. Using the same parking spot on match day (3 per cent)
8. Using a lucky toilet before the game starts (3 per cent)
9. Praying (3 per cent)
10. Listening to a particular piece of music (2 per cent)



PHOTO: AFP FILE

A group of Argentina fans celebrate during a match of the Albiceleste. Football fans, male and female alike suffer from a variety of superstitions that range from lucky clothing to lucky TV channels. It is these quirks that bring fans and players alike as many of the latter group admit to fancying a pair of boot or the same socks for certain games.

Aguero flies back to Spain

AFP, Glasgow

Highly-rated Argentinian forward Sergio Aguero flew back to Spain on Tuesday after his girlfriend Giannina Maradona, daughter of legend Diego Maradona, developed problems with her pregnancy.

The Atletico Madrid star, who was set to feature in Maradona's first match as coach of the national side against Scotland on Wednesday, dedicated one of his two goals in the Olympic Games semifinal against Brazil (a 3-0 victory) to the fact that Giannina was pregnant.

Giannina's mother Claudia Villafane confirmed from Madrid to Argentine television that her daughter had gone to hospital as a precaution but that the baby was fine.

Atletico Madrid president Enrique Cerezo also told Spanish radio that both mother and baby were doing well.

Maradona did not appear to know about his daughter's problem at the time of his Tuesday press conference in Glasgow and a delegation source said Maradona would have later been affected by the news and would have locked himself in his room.

Argentina Football Association (AFA) spokesman Future Andres, commenting on Maradona's mood, said: "It's not good."

Hull manager fined

AFP, Hull

Hull manager Phil Brown has been fined 1,000 pounds (1,190 euros) and warned over his future conduct by the English Football Association after admitting a charge of improper conduct.

The charge related to Brown's behaviour on the touchline during Hull's 5-0 Premier League defeat against Wigan at the KC Stadium on August 30.

The 49-year-old reportedly kicked a water bottle in frustration at one point but made his way to the stands before referee Michael Jones had chance to punish him.



Brazil players Diego (L) and Robinho warm up during a training session in Brasilia on Tuesday ahead of their friendly match against Portugal on Wednesday.

Drogba given 3-match ban

AFP, London



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