



Boca Juniors players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Argentine football league's Apertura Championship at the President Juan Domingo Peron Stadium in Buenos Aires on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Door still open for Raul

AFP, Madrid

Spain coach Vicente del Bosque has assured out of favour striker Raul that his international exile could end "at any time".

The Real Madrid star has not played for the European champions since 2006 after being controversially overlooked by former coach Luis Aragones.

But in an interview with Marca on Wednesday Aragones' successor said: "Raul's in the starting line-up for his club, he's playing well and can return, if I reckon that's the right thing to do, at any time."

Del Bosque, who coached Raul when he was manager of Real Madrid between 1999 and 2003, added: "I've said several times that the doors to the national team were never closed for Raul."

"What's more he's the footballer who has scored the most goals for the national team."

Raul, with 44 goals from 102 caps, has not played for La Furia Roja since September 6, 2006, the 3-2 loss to Northern Ireland in a Euro 2008 qualifier.

Since the start of the season he's scored six times for Real Madrid.

Spain lead their 2010 World Cup qualifying group with four wins from their first four qualifiers.

After a friendly against England in Seville on February 11 they face Turkey on March 28 in their next Group 5 qualifier en route to South Africa in 2010.

Spain ended a 44 year trophy drought with a 1-0 win over Germany in the Euro 2008 final in Vienna this summer.

Bird's Nest to host Italian Super Cup

AFP, Rome

The Italian Super Cup, which traditionally raises the curtain on the Serie A season, will be staged at Beijing's Olympic stadium in 2009, the Italian league announced Tuesday.

The Bird's Nest is the fourth international venue chosen for the Super Cup after Washington (1993), Tripoli (2002) and New York (2003). The game between the winners of the League and Cup is scheduled for August 8 next year with the 2009-2010 Serie A season getting underway on August 23.

The start of next season's Italian league was brought forward by one week to give the clubs' Italy internationals the chance to have played two matches before September's batch of 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

The season will close on May 16, 2010, enabling players sufficient time to prepare for the World Cup in South Africa, qualification permitting.

Scolari defends Terry

SOCCERNET



Luiz Felipe Scolari has described John Terry as "a very good captain" and condemned the red card shown to the defender in Chelsea's draw with Everton on Monday as "not normal".

England skipper Terry was sent off for a high challenge on Leon Osman in the first half of the goalless stalemate and must now serve a three-match ban, starting with the Boxing Day clash against West Brom.

Manager Scolari, who did not attend the post-match press conference, told Chelsea TV: "Maybe I look at the game and I change my mind, but I don't change my mind about (Monday)."

"I looked at the game again

and I don't change. It's the same as I thought (then). For me, it's not normal. I don't very well understand the decision."

"But he's the referee. After (the red card), John, he goes to his friend (Osman) to apologise, he goes off like normal. He's a very good captain, he accepts the decision from the referee."

Scolari confirmed he declined to comment after the match because he was angered by the decision from referee Phil Dowd and feared saying something that would get him into trouble with the Football Association.

"If I go to say something (straight after the game) maybe I say something wrong and I need more time to look at everything," he continued.

"I have to look at the game again, if something happened in the game. I need to be sure

about this or that. I said no (to the press) at that time because maybe I'd have problems in the future - in that time I am not calm."

"If I go then I answer some questions and I'm angry."

There was good news for Scolari and his Chelsea side on the training pitch, though, with Ricardo Carvalho back in full training and close to a first-team return following a knee injury.

Scolari added: "It's the first time Ricardo has trained with us normally and I think after seven days -- 10 days maximum -- he'll start to play."

Meanwhile, fellow central defender Alex will be free to feature against West Brom after the Football Association confirmed the player would not face disciplinary action over an alleged stamp on Everton's Tim Cahill.

Totti in doubt for Gunners encounter

AFP, Rome

AS Roma skipper Francesco Totti could be sidelined for the Champions League clash with Arsenal in February after picking up a right thigh injury at the weekend.

Initially the striker was said to be facing a four week layoff but new tests Tuesday suggested he would need two months to recover from the injury suffered in the league game against Catania on Sunday.

Roma meet Arsenal in the first leg of the Champions League last 16 tie at the Emirates Stadium on February 24.

Essien best in Ghana

AFP, Accra

Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien has been named Ghana Footballer of the Year after a media poll here.

A couple of other midfielders in the national 'Black Stars' team, Sulley Muntari of Inter Milan and Laryea Kingston of Hearts, came second and third respectively, reports said.

Essien, a regular African Footballer of the Year finalist, has been sidelined since mid-year after suffering an injury playing for Ghana against Libya in a 2010 World Cup African Nations Cup qualifier.

Ivory Coast, Ghana top seeds

AFP, Cairo

Hosts Ivory Coast and Ghana will be the top seeds for the first African Nations Championship, the organisers said here Tuesday.

Zambia and Zimbabwe will also be kept apart at the draw in Abidjan Friday because they come from the same region and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Senegal and Tanzania complete the lineup.

Abidjan and Bouake will host matches between February 22 and March 8 in a tournament restricted to footballers playing in the national championship of their country.

Dante leaves Belgium

AFP, Brussels

Standard Liege's Brazil defender Dante Bonfim has signed a four and a half year contract with German side Monchengladbach, according to reports here Wednesday.

The 25-year-old back won the Belgian league title with Standard Liege last year and this season has helped his club finish top of their UEFA Cup group in front of Stuttgart, Sampdoria and Sevilla.

Boca clinch Apertura

Football

INTERNET, undated

Boca clinched the Argentine Apertura Championship in unimaginable circumstances, after suffering an unexpected 1-0 defeat to Tigre at the Cilindro de Avellaneda on Tuesday night. It was the 23rd time Boca won the local championship.

Carlos Ischia's side, who beat San Lorenzo 3-1 on Saturday, won the title on goal difference, to Tigre and San Lorenzo, after each of the three teams ended with three points.

Boca played the better football during the match, but it was evident that they were missing the inspiration of key playmaker and team captain Juan Roman Riquelme, who was suspended for the match.

The only goal of the match was scored by Tigre striker Leandro Lazzaro in the 67th minute, after a terrible mistake from Boca goalkeeper Javier Garcia.

Despite all of Boca's pressure during the first half, they couldn't break through the resilient Tigre defence that stood extremely firm.

Boca had a few decent attempts on goal, but

they were kept out by fine saves from Tigre goalkeeper Luis Ardenite, who was making his debut in the First Division, with the absence of the suspended Daniel Islas.

In the second period Boca continued to be the stronger of the two teams, but as was the case in the first half, they lacked authority when moving forward.

Boca created a couple of good opportunities to go ahead, with efforts from Sebastian Battaglia and Lucas Viatri, but they couldn't find the back of the net.

It was outsiders Tigre who finally broke the deadlock in the 67th minute, when Leandro Lazzaro headed home a far left wing cross from Matias Gimenez, beating Boca goalkeeper Javier Garcia, who defended the ball weakly.

After the goal, Ischia replaced Garcia with Josue Ayala. Garcia was also to blame for San Lorenzo's equalizing goal last Saturday.

Tigre knew that one more goal would win them a first title, and in the final 25 minutes they pushed forward in large numbers searching for this much-needed goal.

Diego Cagna's side threw everything at Boca in the final instances of the match, but a determined Boca held on, claiming their 23rd national championship.

Rafa close to return

AFP, Liverpool



Rafael Benitez is close to a return to the Liverpool dugout for

Friday's clash against Bolton, while star striker Fernando Torres should also be back in action soon.

Liverpool manager Benitez missed Sunday's 1-1 draw at Arsenal while he recovered from a kidney stones operation, but he is expected to be back on the bench for Bolton's Boxing Day visit to Anfield.

Benitez's assistant Sammy Lee hopes his imminent return can provide the perfect boost for Liverpool to finish the year on a high.

"Rafa is a lot better, he's on the mend. He has been in a lot of pain but he is improving," Leesaid.

"His presence is always

missed, but the organisation he has put in place is such that even though he has not been here this week, the battle plan is still there."

"We know what we have to do, the game plan is there, it is business as usual."

"He is missed and hopefully he will be back with us for the Bolton game."

"He is a hands-on manager, it is hurting him more being away from the training ground really, but he will be back soon."

The Bolton game may be too soon for Torres to return from a hamstring injury that has forced the 24-year-old to miss five matches, but Lee expects him back soon.

"Fernando's progress has markedly improved. He is getting better. He improves with every training session and he has worked very hard on his rehabilitation," Leesaid.

"We will put him in when

we see fit, that's not evasive but I don't want to start revealing our lineup."

Liverpool go into the first of their Christmas fixtures on top of the Premier League and protecting an unbeaten home league record in 2008.

It is the first time Liverpool have been top at this stage since 1996, and two wins over the holiday period against Bolton first and then at Newcastle on Sunday will give them their best points tally in a calendar year for 19 years.

"The lads will be in training on Christmas Day, we have two very important games in three days coming up and they are very professional and accept that they have to have their Christmas at a different time to everyone else," Lee added.

"They know the job in hand, they know what preparation is needed to stay at the top of the Premier League."

Sam, Santa make peace

Football

AFP, Blackburn

Blackburn manager Sam Allardyce has buried the hatchet with unsettled striker Roque Santa Cruz in time for Christmas.

Paraguay international Santa Cruz admitted last week he would be keen to leave the struggling Premier League team if a "better or an ambitious club" came in for him during the January transfer window.

Allardyce responded by calling the former Bayern Munich star in for showdown talks, which sparked reports he was ready to sell the forward to Manchester City.

But Allardyce now claims he is still keen to keep Santa Cruz.

"We've had the discussion and I just said the timing I thought was very poor," Allardyce said.

"He should have not done that interview. It was not certainly set up by this football club, which was disappointing."

"Obviously I felt it was slightly sinister, the timing of it, but we have resolved that and I have told him I don't want him to leave and that is probably the end of it."

"You can never be 100 per cent about anything in this game but I haven't come here to sell my best players."

Santa Cruz missed Allardyce's first match in

charge -- Saturday's 3-0 victory at home to Stoke -- with a calf injury and he is also likely to be sidelined for the Boxing Day trip to Sunderland.

But Rovers midfielder David Dunn believes some of the criticism levelled at Santa Cruz has been unfair.

"Roque is such a good genuine lad. He has been playing with injuries which he shouldn't have been doing," Dunn said.

"He wanted to help the cause and help us get out of the mess. He is one of those guys who is a top lad, always tries his best and is not a bad egg around the place."

"He is 100 per cent committed to the cause. I had a chat with him last night about this and this will be fine with it."

Arshavin leaving Zenit

Football

AFP, London

Highly-rated Russian forward Andrei Arshavin could finally be on his way to Europe after his agent said the Zenit St Petersburg player was almost certain to be sold in the trans-

fer window.

Arshavin has been linked to Arsenal, Tottenham and Real Madrid and, according to a BBC website report Tuesday his agent, Dennis Lachter, said Arshavin and Zenit had agreed that he should find a new club in January.

"He will definitely move in January or the player and club

will lose money," Lachter said.

"Zenit and Andrei understand that it is time for them to part from each other."

Arshavin, 27, was linked with Tottenham last summer following his impressive performances at Euro 2008, and this week Zenit general director Maxim Mitrofanov was quoted as saying his price tag was 20 million pounds and they hoped Arsenal would make an offer.

But Lachter denied reports that the player had visited both teams' training grounds on a recent trip to London.

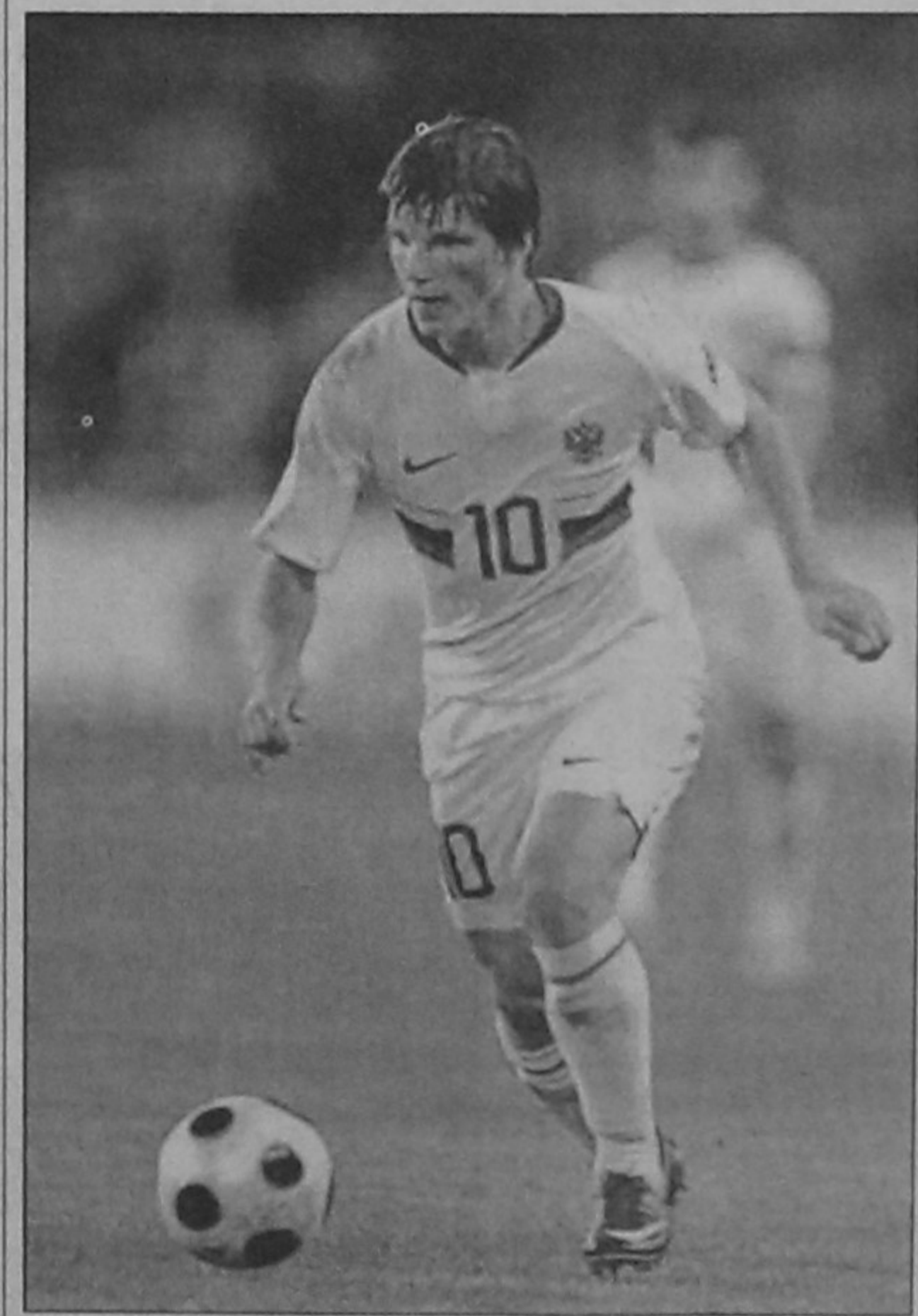
"That is not true," he said. "I was in London and he was there too, but the only reason he was there was to shoot an advert for a company he has a contract with."

"I was at the Tottenham training ground, but it looks like someone saw me there and made the connection -- he's never been there, either to Arsenal or Tottenham."

Lachter also denied reports that the player had said he was only interested in playing for Barcelona and was uninterested in England.

"Arshavin never said he wanted only to play in Spain. Once again I believe a lot of things in the media just came from nowhere," he said.

"If I were following a dream life, I could be out of this job two or three months ago as due to the explanation of the newspapers, he should already be the player of Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester United, Inter Milan -- whatever."



ANDREI ARSHAVIN

Cesc doesn't need surgery

Football

INTERNET, undated

Injured Arsenal midfielder Cesc Fabregas has confirmed he will not be undergoing an operation on his damaged knee.

Fabregas travelled to Barcelona on Tuesday to consult specialist doctor Ramon Cugat about the problem he picked up during Sunday's Premier League draw with Liverpool when he was tackled by Xabi Alonso.

The injury is set to keep the Gunners' captain sidelined for around four months, but it will not require the Spain international to go under the knife.

"After consulting with the best doctor possible, we've decided not to operate. If it would have been necessary it would have been the first thing I would have done, but the doctor recommended to me not to do it because I'm young and the meniscus is not damaged," Fabregas was quoted as saying in Marca.

"Although we cannot be certain because the injury only happened a few days ago, but I will be out for more or less four months. My intention is to return as soon as possible to help my teammates."

"I will endeavour to return as soon as possible to do what I like most, to play football."

Fabregas did not come out for the second half of Sunday's 1-1 draw against Liverpool at the Emirates Stadium after sustaining the knee problem following a tackle by his Spanish Euro 2008-winning teammate Alonso.

The 21-year-old Fabregas said of Alonso: "He was very concerned about me. He called me after the game, he has been sending messages and also called me before I saw the doctor. These are things that happen, it's football and Xabi is a great friend of mine. It's the first serious injury that I've had in my career. Everybody gets injured and now it's my turn. I will have to wait, undertake my recovery and return as soon as possible."

Ronaldinho's villa burgled

AFP, Rome

Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho's Italian home was burgled this week with thieves making off with jewellery estimated at tens of thousands of euros, police and media reported here Wednesday.

Two burglars broke into the 28-year-old AC Milan player's villa in Galliate Lombardo on Monday night, police in Varese, north of Milan, told AFP.

Caretakers disturbed the robbers and fired into the air but the duo escaped, according to a report in the Corriere della Sera.

Ronaldinho, twice footballer of the year, was not at home, having left for his Christmas break in Brazil.

Corriere della Sera valued the haul of jewellery and watches at several thousand euros but they overlooked his trophy medals which were left untouched in a cabinet.

Riccardo Sogliano, a former player who used to live in the house, was himself the victim of a robbery there in 2002, the paper noted.