

Calciopoli scandal adjourned

AFP, Rome

A hearing into the infamous Calciopoli match-rigging scandal in Italian football was adjourned on Tuesday until March 24 because many of the accused weren't notified about the need for their presence.

The main defendant is former Juventus director-general Luciano Moggi, who has already been found guilty before sporting authorities and banned from all sporting functions for a period of five years.

Napolitan prosecutors are now trying him and 24 others, among them Paolo Bergoma and Pierluigi Pairetto, the officials charged with picking referees for Serie A matches from 1999-2005, in the civil courts for sporting fraud.

Among the interested parties in the process are the Italian Football Federation and teams such as AS Roma, Brescia, Bologna, Atalanta, Lecce and the now bankrupt Salernitana.

They are claiming financial losses resulting from the match-fixing perpetrated by Juventus, AC Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio and Reggina - all of whom were punished on the playing field with points deductions and in Juve's case relegation to Serie B.

Among them Bologna are claiming 10 million euros in compensation from Juve and 32 million euros from Fiorentina.

The Calciopoli scandal broke during 2006 after telephone records were published demonstrating contact between Moggi and the referee selectors amongst other conversations.

Italy went on to win the World Cup during that summer but didn't save Juve and the others from the sporting authorities and Moggi's team were stripped of their league titles from 2005 and 2006.

Other than Moggi, brothers Diego and Andrea Della Valle, the owners of Fiorentina, Lazio president Claudio Lotito and former AC Milan director Leonardo Meani all face charges of sporting fraud.

Back in November, Italian reports suggested Moggi was facing six years in prison for his role in the scandal.

Ibra best in Italy

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic gained some consolation for missing out on the World Player of the Year prize and Ballon D'Or by scooping the Italian Player of the Year award on Monday.

The Swede was the star performer as Inter romped to a third consecutive title and as well as picking up the top award at the Italian football Oscars, as they are known, he was also named best foreign player.

Veteran Italy and Juventus forward Alessandro Del Piero, who topped the scoring charts last season, picked up the best Italian award while Fiorentina boss Cesare Prandelli was named best coach after steering his side into the Champions League at the expense of AC Milan.

Gianluigi Buffon of Juventus was named best goalkeeper, his teammate Giorgio Chiellini best defender, Napoli's Marek Hamsik best young player and Roberto Rosetti best referee.



Liverpool star Steven Gerrard (L) shoots to score the opening goal against Everton during their Premier League encounter at Anfield on Monday.

Cahill denies L'pool

AFP, Liverpool



Tim Cahill denied Liverpool top spot in the Premier League after the Everton player pounced four minutes from time as a thrilling Merseyside derby ended 1-1 at Anfield on Monday.

Steven Gerrard, captaining his club for the 250th time in his career, thought he had sent Rafa Benitez's side back to the summit after breaking the deadlock with a superb long-range finish in the 68th minute, the England international's 14th goal of the season.

But Australian international Cahill had the last say as he pounced in the 86th minute after the Liverpool defence had failed to deal properly with a set-piece.

Everton's success this season has been built on a backs-to-the-wall, hard-to-beat mentality which has served them well in the absence of injured strikers Yakubu and Louis Saha.

They arrived at Anfield boasting one of the best away records in the top-tier and, despite their lack of firepower, it took just 35 seconds for Moyes's side to show they were not at Anfield to make up the numbers as Victor Anichebe forced a full-stretch save from Jose Reina.

Benitez had outlined his intentions on the team sheet by naming one of his most attacking sides of the season, Torres starting for the first time since November 26 alongside the recalled Robbie Keane.

Yet it was Reina who continued to be the busier of the two keepers, the Spaniard kept on his toes by Cahill's 26th minute header following a dangerous cross by the industrious Anichebe.

Torres, with his injury problems behind him, was looking to become the first Reds player in the history of the club to net four in a row against Everton having scored his side's last three in Merseyside derbies.

The Spanish striker went agonisingly close to achieving that feat after Sami Hyypia had carved open the visitors defence in the 28th minute soon after Torres had been felled by Steven Pienaar which earned Everton's South

African midfielder a booking.

Perhaps Torres was feeling rusty after his recent lay-off but his effort, to Everton's relief, shaved the outside of the post and the home side's best chance of the opening 45 minutes was gone.

Having started the half confidently, Everton were relieved to hear the half time whistle as Albert Riera dispatched a ferocious long-range effort narrowly wide of Tim Howard's post two minutes before the break.

Liverpool continued to probe the visitors defence at the break, Howard spilling Gerrard's 55th minute effort only for Sami Hyypia to smash the rebound high into the Kop.

As Everton visibly began to tire, Benitez's side won a string of corner yet they were unable to hurt their neighbours from the set-pieces.

Torres went close again from just outside the area but Liverpool appeared to be heading for another night of frustration before Gerrard had the last say.

Soon after Webb had waved away Everton claims for a penalty when Anichebe went down under a challenge by Martin Skrtel, Liverpool's second half pressure paid off when Gerrard let fly from 25-yards, Howard beaten by the ferocity of the effort.

But Liverpool's celebrations were cut short as Cahill pounced to give Everton a deserved point.

Real to take case to CAS

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will take their bid to have their new signings Lassana Diarra and Klaas-Jan Huntelaar eligible for Champions League action to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), the Spanish club's new president Vicente Boluda has said.

Boluda told radio Cadena Ser late on Monday that the club would appeal UEFA's rejection of their request to use the players to the Switzerland-based court "because any member is going to demand that we do everything possible for Madrid until the end."

Under UEFA rules, clubs can register up to three new players for the knockout stages by February 1 but only one who has already played this season in Europe with his previous club.

French midfielder Diarra has already played for Portsmouth while Dutch striker Huntelaar has already played for Ajax this season in the UEFA Cup so only one of them would be eligible to play against Liverpool in the first knockout stage of the Champions League on February 25 and March 10.

Earlier this month UEFA rejected Real's original request to use the two players as well as an appeal of that decision.

Boluda took over as Real president following the resignation on Friday of Ramon Calderon over allegations that he rigged voting at the club's last annual general assembly, which approved its financial accounts.

Kaka wants to play at Real: Becks

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian midfielder Kaka, who rejected a record-breaking transfer from Manchester City, wants to play at Real Madrid next season, his AC Milan teammate David Beckham was quoted as saying Tuesday.

"Kaka wants to go to Real Madrid and not to City. I think he will become a Real player in June. I think someone has called him and that Kaka has made his decision," the former England captain told a friend recently, according to Spanish sports daily AS.

The paper said last week Kaka asked Beckham, who played for Real between 2003 and 2007, for information about the defending Spanish giants, the paper added.

Former Real president Ramon Calderon, who stepped down on Friday over allegations that he rigged voting at the club's last annual general assembly, promised to sign Kaka during his successful campaign to lead the club.

Real remains interested in signing the 26-year-old, according to AS.

"This is the best moment to recruit Kaka, he is the player who would benefit the team the most," an unnamed Real source told the newspaper.

Kaka chooses to stay

Football

AFP, Milan

Brazilian superstar Kaka has revealed that he followed his heart in choosing to stay at AC Milan rather than take up an offer of a reported 15 million euros a season to join Manchester City.

Milan president and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi announced the news late on Monday to end one of the most dramatic transfer sagas of all time.

Moneybags City, owned by the Abu Dhabi Group, had bid a reported world record 100 million euros for the former World Player of the Year and Milan gave the 26-year-old permission to talk to the English Premier League club.

But Kaka has told Milan's official TV channel that the Italian giants' fans had played a significant role in convincing him to stay.

"All the messages I received convinced me to choose with my heart and I think in the end that's what I did. It was definitely not a financial decision," he said.

"There were bits of information, claims, a lot of speculation which over these last few days even created a bad impression of my father."

"That's not the case, I've never argued with my father. I always make decisions within the family, my wife has also been wonderful, she helped me a lot and has always supported me in my decisions."

"My family have been great and never tried to push me one way or another. In the end it is my history which has been decisive, where my legacy is and where in reality my heart is."

Kaka denied that he was using the interest from City to try to get a pay rise at Milan, where he is already supposedly the second highest paid player in Italy behind Inter Milan's Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

"There have also been claims made that every time offers are made for me it's because I want to renew my contract," he added.

"That's not true. Every time a team has come and proposed something to me it's Milan who have tried to please me."

"For this I have to thank everyone who works at Milan."

Kaka, somewhat diplomatically, described Berlusconi and Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani as incredible people and thanked Milan's technical director and his compatriot

Leonardo, a former player at the club.

"He is more than a friend, someone who is always close by," he said. "Right now I don't want to change anything, I want some peace and quiet."

A devout evangelical Christian who removes his jersey to display a T-shirt bearing the message 'I Belong to Jesus' whenever Milan win something, Kaka revealed he had prayed a lot over these last few days.

"It was an emotional and unforgettable night," he said about Monday. "My teammates have been great, they supported me, they touched me."

Fans who on Monday had protested against the proposed sale outside Kaka's home and Milan's headquarters on Monday quickly began celebrating.

"He's staying with us, he's staying with us," went up the cheer after news broke that the Brazilian had rejected City.

Berlusconi, who had previously said Milan could not stand in Kaka's way with such a sum of money on the table, praised the attacking midfielder for rejecting financial riches.

"We're all delighted," he said. "But he didn't want to leave even for a perfect offer from Manchester (City) and he said no without even knowing what the offer was."

"Hence, he is staying with us and we can't be anything but delighted because money is important but there are other things more important than money."

And the Italian prime minister insisted Milan had never accepted City's bid.

"No, we told Kaka to think about it, as we did with (Andrei) Shevchenko (when he joined Chelsea), we said we didn't want to prohibit someone from considering an offer that was double what Milan could pay, also because it was clear we could not make a counter offer because had we, we would have had to do likewise with all the other players and that wouldn't have been logical or in our budget."

"Kaka never expected us to make an offer and as a fan I have to say I'm delighted."

Galliani for his part said Milan's fans had to thank Berlusconi for not taking the money on offer.

"Once more the fans should thank president Berlusconi for his economic strength," he said.

"Because there was a strong temptation in front of us and a number that was a stratospheric world record."

Australian Open SECRETS

AFP, Melbourne

In a move that may startle some Melbourne motorists, tennis star Venus Williams has revealed she has taken to driving on what she regards as the wrong side of the road in Australia.

Venus said she was initially hesitant about driving on the left -- the opposite to her native America -- but had become used to it after years of visiting Melbourne for the season-opening Grand Slam.

Now she says there's no stopping her from cruising the Australian city's streets, with a drive-through restaurant her next destination.

"I've driven downtown. I make that wide turn. I get lost. I take detours. I double back and I succeed," she said.

"I want to try a drive-through. That's next."

She said the adjustment to the left was not easy.

"It's taken me about 10 years, suddenly I was ready," she said. "I have a lot of confidence now."

"It's much more fun driving here than at home because there it's a chore and here it's like a luxury, kind of like an adventure, because you might not know the way, but you still get there."

Obama inspires apolitical Serena

She may be a Jehovah's Witness and determinedly apolitical, but Serena Williams says she can't help but be inspired by the impending

inauguration of Barack Obama.

Williams said she saw some parallels between the careers of her and sister Venus and Obama's.

"I definitely think myself and Venus have opened up a lot of doors, being the first African-Americans to do so much in tennis," she said.

While she won't set the alarm and get up early to watch Tuesday's swearing in ceremony, which will be the early hours of Wednesday morning Australian time, she said she would be recording it so she can watch it later.

"This is an amazing moment for American history," she said.

"Even yesterday, (in) the United States it being Martin Luther King's birthday."

"To have his birthday and Obama's presidency fall so close to each other ... this morning I was watching on the TV before I went out to play, I looked at my arm and I literally had chill bumps."

"I'm a big fan of African-American history, learning my roots so I can be a better person."

"You just look at all the things that we've come through. Now to have this opportunity in less than 24 hours is amazing."

The two Williams sisters were brought up as Jehovah's Witnesses, a religion which does not allow its adherents to follow secular politics or cast votes in elections.

But Serena said that did not mean she hadn't followed

Obama's political ascendency.

"I didn't vote (in the US election) because I am a Jehovah's Witness -- I try to stay politically neutral, don't get involved in worldly matters," she said.

"It's easy for me because I was born and raised a Jehovah's Witness."

"For me, because I am black, seeing that (Obama) happen, I would be blind if I didn't take interest in it or I would be lying if I said I wasn't interested in what was going on."

"Obviously I am. Obviously I was listening to a lot of points that Obama was giving for his election."

"Some of the things that he said in order to get elected was interesting."

"But it (being apolitical) is not a hard position for me to take."

"I mean, hopefully the right thing will happen but, you know, I think it's an important position for me to take in my faith."

Lose cap play better

Britain's Andy Murray reached the top of world tennis with intensive training, working year-round with his team of coaches and physios.

And he's taken off his cap. Since losing the ever-present white headgear, the world number four says he's in the form of his life.

"I don't know, it's just something that I changed. Since I stopped wearing a cap, I've played much better," he mused after making the Australian Open second round on Tuesday without a hat despite blinding sun.

Murray has remained hatless in recent months as he became tennis's hottest property, beating Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer and being named the bookies' favourite for the Australian Open title.

"I used to always wear a cap for matches, and didn't used to practice with one really at all. I wanted to get a bit more sort of continuity in what I was doing," he said.

"I just felt like when I was playing, if I had really long hair I would still wear a cap because it would obviously get in my eyes."

"But when I'd keep my hair short, I don't think it doesn't make a huge difference. Even when the sun's there, the cap doesn't really protect you that much."

Novak Djokovic is the only top-four player who regularly wears a cap, with Federer and Nadal usually staying bareheaded.

Cap-wearing Andy Roddick's last Grand Slam win came in 2003, while Lleyton Hewitt, who famously prefers his hat backwards, has slid down the rankings to 70.



Fans do the Mexican wave during the Australian Open match between James Blake of the US and Frank Dancevic of Canada in Melbourne on Tuesday. Blake won the game 6-4, 6-3, 7-5.