

Chelsea want Hiddink

Football

AFP, London

Guus Hiddink will talk to Chelsea's billionaire owner Roman Abramovich over the managerial vacancy at the club following the sacking of Luiz Felipe Scolari, his agent said Tuesday.

Hiddink already knows Abramovich through his role as Russia coach, a job on which he remains "focused", his representative Cees van Nieuwenhuizen said.

But while Hiddink and former manager Avram Grant are, according to Sky Sports, the only candidates on Chelsea's list, Britain's Sun tabloid said that AC Milan manager Carlo Ancelotti remained a long-term target for the Londoners.

Russian businessman Abramovich has reportedly dipped into his own pocket to the tune of five million dollars to fund Hiddink's salary as Russia manager.

And while Hiddink is determined to see through the task of leading Russia to the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa, the well-travelled Dutchman would take a call from the Chelsea owner.

"I think because of the personal relationship he has with Mr Abramovich he will definitely talk to him and listen to him but I think Mr Abramovich realises he also has not finished his job (with Russia)," van Nieuwenhuizen told BBC radio.

Scolari, who guided Brazil to World Cup glory in 2002, was sacked Monday after Chelsea had slipped down the table to fourth place in the Premier League and seven points behind

leaders Manchester United.

Assistant manager Ray Wilkins, a former Chelsea captain, was then placed in caretaker charge of the Blues and whether anyone else if, as the Sun suggested, Abramovich really is set on bringing in Ancelotti at the end of the season, will want to be in temporary control remains to be seen.

Chelsea, who have had one Dutch manager in their recent past in Ruud Gullit, could have another in his old international teammate Frank Rijkaard.

Former Barcelona coach Rijkaard has been out of work since leaving the Nou Camp, where he twice won La Liga and led Barca to the Champions League in 2006, since last year and so has the merit of being able to be appointed quickly.

However, his agent stressed Rijkaard would not be interested in any kind of temporary role.

"(Frank) is obviously a big fan of the game and a big fan of the Premier League so he can be interested in working in the Premier League," Perry Overeem told Sky Sports News.

"He would consider every serious job offer from one of the major teams in Europe and obviously Chelsea and the Premier League is one of those.

"It all depends on the plans (Chelsea have). It would be a fairly long-term plan, not just for one or one-and-a-half seasons."

Press reports have also linked former Inter Milan boss Roberto Mancini with the job.

Meanwhile Grant, who also has a good relationship with Abramovich, is reportedly in contention to return as a caretaker boss until the end of the season after being dismissed by the Blues last year.

Toni is selfish, says Kaiser

Soccernet

Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer labelled his club's star striker Luca Toni "selfish" after he failed to score in his side's 3-1 win over Borussia Dortmund on Sunday.

The Italy international missed several chances and was hauled off by coach Jurgen Klinsmann, who sprung to his defence, claiming a striker "always looks for goal when you have a 50/50 chance".

He added: "It is only normal for a striker to be a touch selfish."

But Beckenbauer was still unhappy with the number nine.

"Toni only sees himself, the ball and the goal" he said on Premier television. "That is selfishness which is typical of an Italian striker."

Toni left the field in the 72nd minute to be replaced by Landon Donovan and looked far from happy to be removed early.

However, Klinsmann said that was the reaction he expected and wanted from the Italy international.

"I am completely fine about Toni's annoyance," he said. "It is fine for him to be angry. He is sure of his place in the team and we don't want any discussions about Luca."

Scolari sacking to prove costly

AFP, London

Chelsea's decision to sack Luiz Felipe Scolari as their manager could cost the Premier League side up to 15 million pounds (22 million dollars) in compensation.

Scolari, who guided his native Brazil to World Cup glory, was booted out of Stamford Bridge here on Monday just eight months into a three-year deal worth an estimated annual six million pounds.

Getting rid of Jose Mourinho as manager in 2007 and then firing his successor Avram Grant, a matter of months after the Israeli signed a new four-year deal, would not have come cheap, even to a club bankrolled by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich.

The total cost of sacking these three managers could be as much as 40 million pounds, a sum which threatens to make a mockery of Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon's oft-repeated assertion that the London club will become "operationally independent" by 2010.

In the meantime Abramovich's money, never mind the current squad, should still make Chelsea an enticing prospect for their would-be managers.

However, Abramovich's impatience may cause some candidates to think twice about the job.

Huntelaar wants Real stay

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar denied on Monday Spanish media reports that he wants to leave the club because he was given few chances to play by new coach Juande Ramos.

"There are rumours in some papers that are not true. I am at, and I want to stay at, Real Madrid. It is my goal to win prizes with this beautiful club. I certainly am not thinking of leaving," he said in a message posted on his official website.

The 25-year-old signed a four-year contract with the defending Spanish champions on December 2 from Dutch side Ajax in a deal worth 27 million euros (35 million dollars).

But he has played only one game as a starter since Ramos took over from German coach Bernd Schuster later that month and Spanish sports daily AS reported earlier on Monday that he wanted to leave.

"Juande has no confidence in me. I want to leave Real Madrid. I cannot take it anymore," AS quoted the striker as having told those close to him.

FRANCE V ARGENTINA

Diego focused on task

Football

AFP, Marseille

Bringing his unique blend of feisty bullishness and a combative nature to the table Diego Maradona will mark 100 days in charge of Argentina with Wednesday's friendly away to France.

The surprise choice to take the helm in place of Alfio Basile has a 100 per cent record to date, thanks to Maxi Rodriguez's match-clincher against Scotland at Hampden Park in November.

Maradona scored his first international goal at the same venue as a precocious teen - but despite the general fan adulation the 1986 World Cup winner has not found things all plain sailing to date, as he admitted to reporters in Marseille on Monday.

"I thought they (the federation) gave you everything when you take over the reins. But you come in and ask for a coach and they don't give him to you, you ask for kit and they give you Sweden's, you ask for a player and (instead) they arrange you a match in Cochabamba (Bolivia) at eight at night - and the plane leaves Argentina at half past eight," Maradona colourfully complained.

Clearly, little love is lost between Maradona and the Argentine hierarchy despite his appointment.

He arrived insisting he wanted close friend and former teammate Oscar Ruggeri on his technical staff - but Federation chairman Julio Grondona vetoed the move.

Maradona also wanted playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme in the squad to face France but the Boca Juniors star has a rearranged Argentine league date pending. The same reason saw the coach unable to select San Lorenzo midfielder Cristian Ledesma.

"I thought the national team was the important thing," Maradona moaned.

On the plus side, the man whose "Hand of God" goal in the 1986 World Cup final against England will always go



Argentina coach Diego Maradona arrives to attend a training session in Gemenos on Monday.

before him, can select the man who he sees as being in his own image when it comes to sheer talent.

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi.

As well as Messi, Maradona can call on Atletico Madrid's great hope Sergio Aguero - and the pair of them together will strike fear into the best of teams.

Since Maradona wore the number ten shirt the likes of Javier Saviola and Riquelme have tried to fill the huge void but Maradona has personally anointed Messi as the man who can truly do so.

Maradona's close-confidant and 1986 teammate Jorge Valdano puts it succinctly.

"Messi wins matches on his own. He's like (former Brazil hero) Garrincha. He does everything quicker and better

than anyone. And Aguero has something of Romario about him - a capacity for invention in the tightest spots."

Maradona is determined not to put too much pressure on Messi, despite regular fulsome praise.

"They compared me with loads of players all through my career and I just wanted to be me. I told Leo (Messi) once - you have to be Messi."

Turning to the French, Maradona said he believed the key was to "ensure the ball doesn't get through to (Franck) Ribery or (Thierry) Henry."

Summing up the significance of Wednesday's test, Maradona said: "This match is important as it is against the world vice-champions. I'll be telling the lads the French have a strong team."

Ribery remains ambiguous

Soccernet

Bayern Munich winger Franck Ribery is refusing to commit himself to the club beyond the end of this season but insists he is happy at the Bundesliga club.

The France international has a deal till 2011 but could be a transfer target for many next summer, after recently admitting he did not know whether he would complete his contracted stay.

"There are lots of clubs in Europe who I dream of (playing for)," Ribery told Munich's Tz newspaper. "Nobody knows what will happen next season. It is far too early to talk about it."

"At the moment, I am not even considering a transfer. I feel very happy in Munich - the people love me, and I love the fans."

"There is a great atmosphere in the team, and everything is fantastic."

Despite suggestions of interest from Real Madrid, Bayern's general manager Uli Hoernes recently said the 25-year-old is not for sale at any price.

But Bayern president Franz Beckenbauer knows it may be hard to keep hold of Ribery if a serious offer did arrive.

"Clubs cannot hold on to players against their will," he told Premiere television. "In the end, the player always wins if there is a battle - so if he really wants to move to Real Madrid, then why not?"

"Bayern will do everything to keep him. But he does only have a contract until 2011 - and could move before then."

Player breaks referee's arm

AFP, Zagreb

A Croatian footballer broke the arm of a referee after attacking him for being red-carded during a minor league match at the weekend, a daily reported on Tuesday.

"When I showed him the red card, he attacked me," referee Alen Jaksic, 21, told the Slobodna Dalmacija newspaper.

"He hit me twice in the neck with his fist. After his teammates tried to separate us, he kicked me in the forearm," he was quoted as saying.

After the incident, which occurred on Sunday during a match between two local clubs - NK Mladost and NK Poskok - on the central island of Hvar, the referee sought medical help and an X-ray showed his left arm was broken.

However, the father of the player, 22-year-old Juraj Petricevic, downplayed the incident.

"From the very beginning, the ref's decisions were not correct and when my son got the red card, he got so angry that he went after him... They were pushing each other a bit and that was all," the father said.

Theo closing in on return

Soccernet

England winger Theo Walcott hopes to be back in action for Arsenal by the end of the month.

The 19-year-old has been sidelined since suffering a shoulder injury while on international duty in November, which required surgery.

The attack-minded youngster - who netted a hat-trick for England in the World Cup qualifying win over Croatia - has been sorely missed by Arsenal, whose title challenge has faded as they currently sit six points outside the top four of the Premier League. Walcott, though, feels he could soon be back in contention, perhaps even in time to feature in the Champions League last-16 clash against Roma, which is split over two legs on February 24 and March 11.

"I am nearly there, and hopefully (will be back) by the end of this month," Walcott told Arsenal's official website.

"I am doing a lot of rehab work now with the shoulder, landing on it, and also in the gym with a lot of weights to build the muscle strength back."

The England winger continued: "I just feel it will be when I am ready. Obviously I do not want to do it again, so I have got to be 100% fit."

Walcott revealed the shoulder problem was something of an inherited condition, but believes the latest operation will see him return stronger.



German strikers Mesut Ozil (L), Andreas Beck (C) and Marko Marin warm up during a training session in Duesseldorf on Monday.

GERMANY V NORWAY

Germans target victory

Football

AFP, Berlin

After his public spat with coach Joachim Loew last October, Germany captain Michael Ballack will win his 90th cap in Wednesday's friendly against Norway with the issue forgiven - but clearly not forgotten.

Ballack and Loew became the main talking point in the German media for a fortnight last October after the captain accused the national coach of failing to show his senior players enough loyalty.

Ballack went on the attack after veteran Torsten Frings was left on the bench for the World Cup qualifiers and the issue rumbled on until Ballack apologised with Loew retaining the Chelsea star as captain.

Both Frings and Ballack are in the squad to face Norway and Loew says the issue is resolved as Germany look to bounce back from their 2-1 defeat at the hands of England last November with a convinc-

ing display against Norway.

"The subject is checked off totally, the problem has been cleared for a long time," said Loew ahead of Wednesday night's clash in Dusseldorf.

But when quizzed about the issue on Monday, Ballack showed little sign of regretting his words.

"I do not regret what I said.... it was constructive criticism," said Ballack.

"The team is sturdy, everyone knows each other, we all want to continue to pull in the same direction, to win matches and to be criticised when we don't achieve that."

Ballack has never been afraid to speak his mind and having locked horns with team manager Oliver Bierhoff before the spat with Loew, there are no guarantees the Chelsea midfielder will hold his tongue if he sees fit in the future.

Loew has said he welcomes questioning - to a certain degree - from his senior players who must guide the team's younger members on the pitch.

"These senior players need to live up to their status, espe-

cially to guide the younger players through difficult situations."

But Ballack did at least refrain from re-igniting the Frings issue when he was asked who he wanted alongside him in Germany's midfield against Norway.

"I have no particular wish that is up to the coach to decide," he said.

It is likely Hamburg wing Piotr Trochowski and Bayer Leverkusen's Simon Rolfes will be alongside him with Bayern Munich's Bastian Schweinsteiger in the middle, with Frings starting on the bench.

But with World Cup qualifiers beckoning against Liechtenstein and Wales later this spring, Loew has said he wants to look at some talent including debutants midfielder Mesut Ozil and defender Andreas Beck.

In attack, Loew looks likely to select Stuttgart striker Mario Gomez alongside Bayern Munich's Miroslav Klose as both forwards scored two goals for their respective clubs last weekend.

Dunga backs Scolari

Football

AFP, London

Brazil national coach Dunga spoke out in support of Luiz Felipe Scolari following his dismissal by English Premier League side Chelsea on Monday.

Scolari was relieved of his managerial duties with the West London club following a record of 20 victories from 36 matches in charge this season.

The Brazilian is highly regarded back in his homeland, and indeed led the national side to success in the 2002 World Cup.

Dunga, currently preparing the side for an international

friendly in London against World Champions Italy, took time to reflect on Scolari's reputation and is confident he will soon return to the game.

"There is no doubt about Scolari being an established coach despite the fact he was sacked today (Monday)," he said.

"Scolari is a world champion. Manchester United manager (Sir Alex) Ferguson is a very strange case here, he is the only one in charge of one club for many years."

"European and Brazilian trainers do not have time with the team to get to know each other."

"It's difficult, a question of time. There is no doubt he (Scolari) will find a new

job. He won titles with Palmeiras and national teams. There is no doubt about his quality."

"Every job has its difficulties and pressure. Football is under scrutiny all the time and the coach has to get to know the players to get the best out of them."

Midfielder Gilberto Silva spoke moments before Scolari's exit was made public, and felt the Brazilian needed more time to make an impact on Chelsea's side.

Italy coach Marcello Lippi also has sympathy for the Brazilian.

"It's a surprise," he said. "I feel sorry for him. He is a good person, very funny. But this is a part of the job that happens."

SPAIN V ENGLAND

Spotlight on Beckham

Football

AFP, Watford

David Beckham will steal the headlines if he wins a record-equalling 108th cap for England in Wednesday's friendly against Spain, but Rio Ferdinand hopes the match proves far more significant for the long-term development of Fabio Capello's team.

Ferdinand believes England's meeting with the European champions at Seville's Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium offers the perfect opportunity to develop the winning mentality needed finally to lift a major trophy.

Ferdinand has been impressed with the way Capello has restored England's equilibrium in his

first year in charge, but the Manchester United defender is convinced their psychological approach to big matches needs to improve.

A World Cup qualifying victory in Croatia and a friendly success over Germany has given Capello cause for optimism that England are starting to rectify the problem.

Now Ferdinand hopes the team can lay down another marker by claiming a positive result against Spain in their own backyard.

"We are playing against a team that are one of the best two in the world," he said. "We have to make sure we put on a performance and acquit ourselves in the right way."

"It will be a good yardstick to how far we have come under the new manager."

Beckham's renaissance at AC Milan has persuaded Capello that the midfielder can still cut it at the highest level and Ferdinand revealed Beckham has a new spring in his step since moving to Italy.

He claimed critics who insist Beckham doesn't deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as Moore, who captained England's 1966 World Cup winning team, are wide of the mark.

"It seems to have rejuvenated him. Speaking to him in training there seems to be that bounce in him again," Ferdinand said.

"Someone like Becks doesn't play for Manchester United, Real Madrid and then go to AC Milan and become an integral part of that team after a few weeks through being someone on the catwalk."

"He's got inner determination that people who don't really know him wouldn't expect to be there."

Aside from Beckham's likely landmark, the focus will be on the behaviour of the crowd in Seville.

England's last visit to Spain in November 2004 was marred by racist chants directed at the team's black players, including Ferdinand and Shaun Wright-Phillips, by the fans at Madrid's Bernabeu stadium.

The Spanish FA were fined just 45,000 pounds by UEFA and any repeat would lead to calls for far stronger action.

Spain's chances of repeating their 1-0 win over England in that fixture are boosted by the return to fitness of Fernando Torres, although defender Carlos Puyol is out with a thigh problem.

Torres has been troubled by hamstring injury but he is keen to make Vicente del Bosque's starting line-up.

"When the time comes for the team being named, everyone wants to play," he said.

"It's special, for the opponents, and fundamental - more so after winning the European Championships, which means this team has the obligation to win every game."



Spanish players Fernando Torres (R) and Sergio Ramos practice during a training session in Sevilla on Monday.