

# Kaka ambiguous

Football

AFP, Rome

Brazilian superstar Kaka pledged his future to AC Milan in an interview published in the Gazzetta dello Sport on Thursday but left the door open to a possible departure.

Asked if he would stay at Milan for life, Kaka's reply was ambiguous: "For the fifth time, I would think so, but I have more lives than a cat."

Kaka was responding to the recent speculation in both the Spanish and Italian press claiming that a deal has been struck to take him to Real Madrid at the end of the season.

It's a situation the 27-year-old is more than used to having been linked with Chelsea a year ago and been the subject of a bid from Manchester City during the January transfer window.

But the former World Player of the Year insists there is no truth in any of the rumours.

"I think over the last few days more people have been talking, now it's my turn," he said.

"I have not had contact with Real, no-one has come in for me and I think I've already expressed my happiness and my desire to stay here."

"More than anything this is starting to become a boring story, also for the public."

"Even so, I think I have built up enough credit with the fans and shown them that I want to stay."

"There was that moment of doubt with Manchester City when I didn't know what would happen."

"But then I decided (to stay) and I'll repeat it again, I have had no contact or agreement with anyone."

Speculation is not just swirling around Kaka's head at Milan but also that of coach Carlo Ancelotti who has been linked with both Real and Chelsea.

However Kaka believes Ancelotti will con-

tinue his seven-year stint in the San Siro hotseat.

"He's very attached to this team. For sure after a certain number of years he could want a change but if he stays he will beat the record number of matches (on the Milan bench) set by (Nereo) Rocco."

"Being a part of the club's history like that would be no small thing."

While the attacking midfielder is still one of the most sought-after talents on the planet, this season has been far from one of his best.

Kaka has spent some time on the sidelines with injuries while he has also struggled to find his best form on the pitch.

Earlier in the season he complained he was not playing his best because the arrival of Ronaldinho in the summer had forced him to play deeper, but with his compatriot no longer in the starting XI, when Kaka has been fit, he has played off either one or two forwards.

He believes his problems have mostly stemmed from injuries.

"I have had many problems, my knee, my groin, my foot," he said. "I've not managed to find any consistency and I'm not at 100 per cent, not even now."

"I hope to get there before the end of the season, I hope to be able to give us an extra push to assure a place in next season's Champions League."

Milan, who trail leaders and bitter city rivals Inter Milan by 14 points, sit third in Serie A and need to maintain that position to qualify directly for the group stages of Europe's premier club competition.

However, should Milan make it, Kaka believes they need to introduce some fresher blood into the side.

"When I arrived in 2003, Milan had the perfect mix of youth and experience," he added.

"Some players are a bit old. We need to refresh the mix and lower the average age of the squad."

## Guardiola delighted

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Barcelona

Pep Guardiola may have been banished to the stands but he could not hide his delight after his Barca side crushed Bayern Munich 4-0 at Camp Nou on Wednesday to all but book their place in the Champions League semifinals.

A brace from Lionel Messi and further strikes from Samuel Eto'o and Thierry Henry demolished Bayern in a first half goal blitz to put Barca in a commanding position for the return leg in Munich on April 14.

"Obviously 4-0 in the first leg of a Champions League quarterfinal match is incredible," said Guardiola. "We did almost everything right. Bayern have great players so it is difficult to beat them. The talent made the difference tonight."

"(Jurgen) Klinsmann is right to say that 4-0 is a great result but Bayern are a great team so we have to keep our feet on the ground."

"The way we will do that is to focus on the next three points in the league and maintaining our six point gap at the summit."

Deportivo La Coruna famously came from 4-1 down in the first leg to beat AC Milan 4-0 in the 2004 quarterfinals and Barca's Mexican centre-back Rafael Marquez, suspended for the return leg in Munich, issued a word of caution.

"The confidence we have at the moment is a real bonus," said Marquez. "We have the quality, a good coach and the right attitude."

"Our will to win and mentality are battling with any fatigue that may be setting in at this stage of the season."

"However, the tie is not over as Bayern are a

team with a lot of quality and we need to score in Munich to relax a bit."

Guardiola was ordered to watch the game in the stands after furiously protesting a yellow card handed out to Messi in the 17th minute for diving.

The Barca coach, normally the paragon of coolness, was adamant that it was a penalty and could not control his anger - something he apologised for.

"I am not happy with myself," said Guardiola. "A coach can't do those sort of things."

"However, the penalty was so clear and the referee had to give it. Then he books Messi which is unbelievable."

Messi was also less than impressed: "It was so fast but as far as I am concerned it was a penalty. I can't believe I got a yellow card."

Messi's brace means he now has eight goals in the Champions League making him the competition's top-scorer.

Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann, once a world class striker with Bayern and Germany, heaped more praise on Messi after watching the Argentine tear his team apart.

"Messi is simply a wonderful player," said Klinsmann.

"It is a big disappointment but Barca played very well and you have to congratulate them."

For Barca a historic league, Kings Cup and Champions League treble looks a genuine possibility and it is all the more impressive as Guardiola is in his maiden season as a coach after being promoted from the youth team to take over from Frank Rijkaard.

As a player he won the 1992 European Cup with Barca and has the chance to join the illustrious club of people to have lifted the trophy as a player and manager.

## Klinsmann under-fire

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Munich

Jurgen Klinsmann came out fighting on Thursday, 24 hours after overseeing Bayern Munich's chastening Champions League loss to Barcelona.

The under-fire Bayern manager insisted he had not lost control of his players in the wake of Wednesday's 4-0 rout in Barcelona which followed last weekend's 5-1 drubbing by Wolfsburg.

"I think my word still goes down very well with the team," Klinsmann told German agency SID.

"It's normal that a manager

must take the flak after such defeats. It's not pleasant but it comes with the territory to be criticised," he added.

"Time is beginning to count but I'm a fighter and I tell myself that I have to lead from the front."

"Now we have to regroup and concentrate fully on the league. It's not going to be easy to digest this result, but we must do everything to catch up these three points (that separate Bayern from leaders Wolfsburg) and become champions."

Local media speculated that Bayern's Nou Camp defeat had pushed Klinsmann closer to the sack.

"Klinsi close to the exit door," was the headline in Bild who described Wednesday's

loss as "a night of shame at which Klinsmann was a powerless spectator".

The paper added: "If the directors don't fire him straight away it's obvious that his job will be on the line for each league game."

Bayern president Franz Beckenbauer condemned the German giants' rout as the worst moment in the club's history.

Bayern conceded all four goals in the first half of their quarterfinal first leg tie, leaving them virtually eliminated from the tournament.

"What I saw in the first half was without doubt the worst football in the history of Bayern Munich," said German legend Beckenbauer.

"It was a demonstration, almost a humiliation. Barcelona gave us a lesson in football."

Club chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said: "The question to know is whether to be angry or sad at what took place. It was undoubtedly an enormous humiliation which was hard for everyone."

"In the first half we were given a lesson in football, we were like rabbits up against a snake."

He admitted that Bayern's Champions League hopes were over, but refused to discuss his under-fire coach's future.

"I am not going to discuss Jurgen Klinsmann after every match," said Rummenigge.

"What I want to say is that we must now concentrate on our next match against Frankfurt on Saturday. We have to react after this second heavy defeat in a row."



Chelsea defender Branislav Ivanovic (R) heads in his second goal against Liverpool during their Champions League quarterfinal first-leg encounter at Anfield on Wednesday.

## L'pool sweat on Gerrard

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool boss Rafa Benitez is sweating over the fitness of captain Steven Gerrard after the England midfielder finished the Champions League defeat against Chelsea hampered by a groin injury.

Gerrard arrived at Liverpool's training ground on Thursday for fitness tests on the problem and Benitez is praying he is given the all-clear as Liverpool head into the final weeks of the season.

The 29-year-old has suffered groin and hamstring injuries already this season and a decision has not been made over whether he needs a scan on that previous groin problem.

Before last night's Champions League loss to Chelsea there had also been fears that Gerrard was still struggling from the ankle injury which forced to come off during Saturday's win at Fulham.

If Gerrard can't recover quickly, he is in danger of missing Liverpool's crucial Premier League game with Blackburn as well as the second leg of the European tie at Stamford Bridge next Tuesday.

Speaking after Wednesday's defeat, Benitez confirmed that Gerrard has been struggling with injuries. "Steven was not 100 per cent - you could see that. It was the same for Fernando Torres, you could see that they were a little tired, not as sharp as before," he said.

"Steve was not as mobile as normally, Chelsea made it very difficult for him."

"The injury he had on Saturday was not the problem, his ankle was okay. But we do not know how he is, we will see on Thursday."

## Terry fumes over booking

AFP, London

John Terry insists he should never have been given the booking that rules him out of Chelsea's Champions League quarterfinal second leg against Liverpool.

Terry was booked in the second-half of Wednesday's 3-1 win at Anfield for a challenge on Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina and will be suspended for the return leg at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday.

But the Chelsea and England captain claimed that even Reina did not think his challenge warranted a yellow card from Danish referee Claus Bo Larsen.

"I felt as though I went for the ball, that's all I ever do as a player," Terry said.

"I've spoke to Reina again and he said it wasn't a yellow card. He already knew I was on a yellow card and he was honest with me."

"It reminds me of when Liverpool's Xabi Alonso was booked in a similar situation with Eidur Gudjohnsen (in the semifinals) a couple of years ago. He was crying after that game. I'm obviously very disappointed."

## Guus exposes Rafa

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Liverpool

Guus Hiddink believes Chelsea are on course for the Champions League semifinals because they have found a way to expose the flaws in Liverpool's gameplan.

Hiddink made a mockery of Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez's reputation as European football's master tactician by pinpointing the Reds' weaknesses in defence and attack and exploiting them ruthlessly.

Despite falling behind to an early Fernando Torres goal in Wednesday's quarterfinal first leg at Anfield, Chelsea hit back through two Branislav Ivanovic headers and a Didier Drogba strike to claim a stunning 3-1 victory.

Ivanovic's goals - the Serbian defender's first for Chelsea - underlined Hiddink's superior planning.

Benitez asks Liverpool's defenders to use a zonal marking system at set-pieces which means they have to mark space instead of opponents. That gave Ivanovic a free run at every corner and he took full advantage with two thumping headers past Jose Reina.

Just as importantly, Hiddink deployed Michael Essien in deep-lying midfield role to stop Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard. Essien performed the job to perfection and, with Gerrard stifled, Liverpool's supply line to Torres was cut off.

"If you feel that the opponent can be hurt in some parts of their team it would be stupid not to go for that," Hiddink said. "They have zonal defence at corners and there is no marking. We talked about that."

"We have players who are tall and are very brave going into the area. It was true we got a lot

of benefit in the air from set pieces."

"You have to analyse where the weapons are with Liverpool and it is not so difficult to see it is Gerrard and Torres. You have to disarm them and Essien was the man who was key for this."

Hiddink's plays have surely made next Tuesday's second leg at Stamford Bridge a formality and Liverpool, for so long Chelsea's bogey team in Europe, look set to bow out against the Blues for the second successive season.

Although John Terry will be suspended for the return after being booked for a foul on Jose Reina, it seems certain that last season's beaten finalists are in line for a semifinal showdown with Barcelona, 4-0 winners over Bayern Munich in their first leg. Hiddink insists Liverpool cannot be underestimated but even he was forced to admit the result has put Chelsea in pole position.

"To be honest to play Liverpool at Anfield is always a hard job, so at the end we were very happy with this result. It is unexpected to be honest but I think well deserved," he said.

After storming back into the Premier League title race, Liverpool were expecting to continue their impressive European record under Benitez. Instead they were handed their biggest defeat at Anfield since Arsenal won 6-3 in January 2007.

Benitez cut a forlorn figure as he conceded that Liverpool had only themselves to blame for a result that leaves them on the verge of elimination.

"We made a mistake for their first goal. We had three players around and we didn't stop him. It was a free header. Clearly when you have people in there we have to control all the spaces," he said.

"There are still 90 minutes to play but the second game will be very difficult now because we have to score three goals."

## MU paid 1.5m to Macheda's family

AFP, Rome

Lazio president Claudio Lotito on Wednesday claimed that Manchester United paid Federico Macheda's family 1.5 million euros to prise the star striker away from the Italian capital.

Macheda announced his arrival on the senior football stage in stunning fashion on Sunday, scoring a dramatic injury time winner as United returned to the top of the Premier League with a last gasp 3-2 win over Aston Villa.

The news made big waves in Italy where disgruntled voices immediately started emanating from Lazio, where Macheda was a trainee, crying foul about the way United had signed the 17-year-old.

And now Lotito told a Lazio supporters website that he could do nothing to hold onto the highly rated forward.

"Manchester United gave Macheda's father 1.5 million euros," said Lotito. "The boy only got 80,000 euros of that but they managed to convince the parents by offering a huge figure for a 14-year-old boy."

"I've been criticised for not having held onto Macheda but that was a huge amount of money and thankfully UEFA president (Michel) Platini is writing a rule to ban this kind of move."

"Our youth system is not a waste of time given how many players make it through to the first team."

Macheda left Rome for Manchester when he was only 16 and is considered a hot prospect by the English, European and world champions.

However, Platini is trying to push through a ruling that would stop Europe's richest clubs from pinching the best teenage talent from around the world without compensating the teams that develop them.

## Romania sack Piturca

AFP, Bucharest

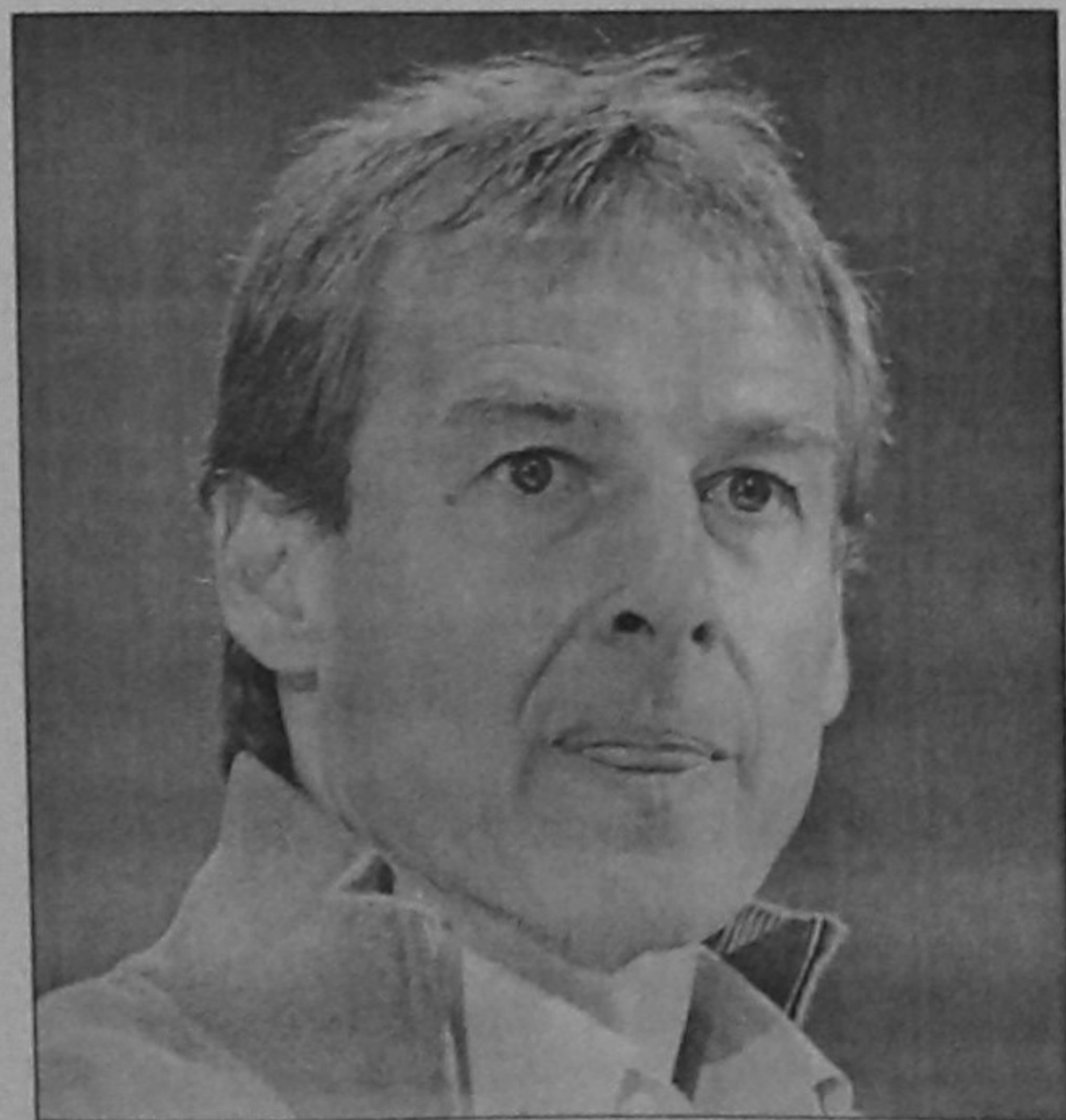
Victor Piturca was on Thursday sacked as Romania coach after a disappointing run of results that looks to have derailed the country's bid to appear at next year's World Cup.

"Piturca has been relieved of his post," said Dumitru Dragomir, head of the Romanian professional football league.

"We haven't decided on his replacement that will be made later on."

Romania's most recent defeat, a 2-1 loss against Austria on April 1, dropped them to fifth place in group seven, with only four points from five matches - effectively ending any hopes they had of qualifying for next year's showpiece.

Group seven is currently being led by Serbia, on 12 points, with France on 10, Lithuania on nine and Austria on seven.



JURGEN KLINSMANN