

Zidane reveals Ribery talks

AFP, Lyon

France great Zinedine Zidane lauded Real Madrid's record-breaking acquisition of Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo, in an interview with French daily *Le Dauphine Libere* published on Sunday.

Zidane, a World Cup winner in 1998 and three-time FIFA World Player of the Year, held the record for the world's highest transfer fee after his 75 million-euro move from Juventus to Real in 2001, only for Ronaldo's 94 million-euro switch from Manchester United earlier this week to eclipse him.

"I finally lose this record, which was pretty heavy to bear," said Zidane, who was named as an advisor to Florentino Perez when the 62-year-old Spaniard returned to his role as Real president last week.

Ronaldo's capture followed hot on the heels of that of Brazilian playmaker Kaka, who arrived from AC Milan for a reported 65 million euros, but Zidane said he did not think the Spanish giants' recruitment policy was unethical.

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PHOTO: AFP

Brazil star Kaka (C) controls the ball surrounded by teammates as they take part in a training session at the Saisa Ramabudu Stadium in Bloemfontein on Saturday.

Aussies launch WC bid

Football

AFP, Sydney

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd Sunday officially launched Australia's bid to host the football World Cup in 2018 or 2022, saying the challenge was great but the prize was even greater.

Rudd told an official ceremony at Parliament House in the national capital Canberra that Football Federation Australia (FFA) had the full backing of his government to bid for the showpiece event.

"The sheer odds are tough against Australia, eight other countries, but the reason the government has got behind the bid is that we as a nation can rise behind this great bid," Rudd said.

The prime minister said the chance to host a World Cup was a great opportunity for the nation.

"The challenges are great, but the prize is much greater," he said.

"I salute those who have had the courage, initiative and creativity to bring forth this idea."

Cahill ejected from nightclub

AFP, Sydney

Australian international midfielder Tim Cahill was kicked out of a Sydney nightclub after a drunken fracas with bouncers, reports said here Sunday.

Sunday newspapers said the Everton player, who was celebrating winning the inaugural Australian football players' union player of the year award early Friday, was told to leave the nightspot because of his drunken state.

Several witnesses told The Sunday Telegraph Cahill, 29, got into an altercation at the King's Cross nightclub when he was advised to leave because he was "so drunk he couldn't even stand up."

But Football Federation Australia said it investigated the allegations and found them untrue and cleared the star Socceroo.

"FFA has made inquiries of Tim, the other players and their partners who were present and venue management," an FFA statement said Sunday. "FFA is satisfied that the allegation is untrue. FFA understands that Tim left the premises when asked to do so when it was closing, along with all other patrons."

According to newspaper accounts, Cahill became angry when he was refused service by bar staff and became involved in an argument which escalated into a physical "push and shove" with club security before he was shown the door.

"He then got outside where it was about 10 of them, including other players and about five security," one witness told the Sunday Telegraph.

"They were fired up and looked like they wanted to go on with it, but then they jumped in a car and got out of there."

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Helmes vows to be fit for WC

AFP, Leverkusen

Injured Germany striker Patrick Helmes vowed Sunday to be fit for next year's World Cup in South Africa despite damaging knee ligaments which threatens to sideline him for six months.

The 25-year-old had an operation in Cologne on Friday to fix his cruciate ligaments after damaging his knee playing football with friends during his summer holiday.

The Bayer Leverkusen forward is not expected to play again until the end of the year and will miss the rest of Germany's World Cup qualification campaign, but Helmes says his goal remains to play in the Rainbow Nation next June.

"Next year's World Cup remains my target," Helmes told Bild am Sonntag.

"Of course, this injury makes things difficult."

"But I still believe in it and I am determined to make it happen."

Helmes will miss Germany's three remaining World Cup qualifiers against Finland, Azerbaijan and main group rivals Russia in Moscow this October.

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USA v ITALY

Building brick for Lippi

AFP, Pretoria

Marcelo Lippi has identified the Confederations Cup as a building brick upon which Italy can construct solid foundations ahead of their World Cup title defence back in South Africa next year.

And the man who crafted the Azzurri's 2006 World Cup win will be anxious to see the first stone safely laid along the path to 2010 against the United States in the country's state capital on Monday.

In what is their debut appearance in this traditional World Cup dress rehearsal, the Italians limbered up for their Group B opener with a 4-3 reverse to Group A competitors New Zealand on Wednesday.

Lippi may have picked an experimental side for that encounter in Pretoria, yet the leaking of three goals for a country where defence is considered an art form and against one of the self-proclaimed dark horses of the competition was hardly ideal.

The 61-year-old, back in charge since Roberto Donadoni's departure after the Euro, had been in sanguine mood before the mid-week win over the Kiwis.

"The last time I had the players together for a long period we did not do too badly," he joked with reporters after a training session, making reference, of course, to Italy's triumphant campaign in Germany three years ago culminating in the penalty shoot-out win over France.

He has stressed the impor-



PHOTO: AFP

Italy midfielder Gennaro Gattuso plays with the ball during a training session at the Southdowns college in Centurion on Saturday.

tance of his team getting their Confed Cup campaign off on a winning note as they seek to draw a line under what was for a disappointing quarter-final exit at Euro 2008.

"The most important thing is the first one," he told *fifa.com*.

"We need to make sure that

we beat our first opponents. If the first game goes well, then logically the others will follow suit. If it goes badly, it will be more difficult for us to regain our momentum."

Their opposition Monday are Confed Cup veterans fully capable of giving them a run

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BRAZIL V EGYPT

Awkward test for Dunga

AFP, Bloemfontein

Five-time world champions Brazil open their Confederations Cup defence against Egypt on Monday, aware that any slip-up could cost them dear.

Judging by recent form, Dunga's men are hot favourites although the African champions are renowned for their defensive prowess and have enough depth in their squad to cause some problems.

Brazil faced a gruelling trip here after beating Paraguay 2-1 in World Cup qualifying on Wednesday and have had little time to overcome their fatigue and acclimatise to the chilly South African winter.

In a wake-up call, Dunga reminded his star-studded squad that their season was not yet over and they must retain their focus.

"Brazil must always play to win," he said.

"Even if we're at the end of the season, the players' spirit and mentality out on the pitch must always be focused on winning."

Brazil, who won the last tournament in 2005 by beating Argentina in the final,

are without out-of-form Ronaldinho and are also missing Manchester United midfielder Anderson and Chelsea centre-back Alex, who are both injured.

But Dunga still has plenty of talent to choose from with Manchester City's Robinho leading the frontline along with Sevilla's Luis Fabiano and AC Milan's Alexandre Pato, while Real Madrid's Kaka will anchor the midfield.

Barcelona's Daniel Alves and Bayern Munich's Lucio are their defensive lynchpins.

Lucio, the captain, said their recent World Cup qualifying wins over Paraguay and Uruguay, which cemented their place at the top of the South American table, boded well for their chances here.

"We are not in South Africa for fun."

Shehata will be looking to the key members of his squad, such as goalkeeper Essam al-Hadary, defender Wael Gomaa, midfielder Mohamed Aboutrika and striker Mohamed Zidan, to lead the way.

"We are aware Brazil and Italy are considered favourites in the group while Egypt and the United States are looked upon as outsiders."

"But we are also a big team now and should not be afraid of our opponents. We have managed to win the African Nations Cup six times, including the last two in a row."

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After Brazil on Monday, they meet Italy in Johannesburg three days later and the United States in Rustenburg a further 72 hours into the tournament.

English debt-laden

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United may be receiving a world-record fee of 80 million pounds (94 million euros, 130 million dollars) for the sale of Cristiano Ronaldo, but the amount is dwarfed by the club's huge debt.

"It's no wonder they're getting this sort of money" from Real Madrid for arguably the world's best player, said Philip Long, football industry specialist at British accountancy firm PKE, recalling that United's parent company spent almost 69 million pounds on interest repayments in 2007/08.

Debt has become an increasing problem in recent years for England's elite football clubs, while the situation has worsened as the global economy suffers the worst downturn since the 1930s.

"Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea are all in massive debt and the rest of the Premier League is in debt," Wigan chairman Dave Whelan said on Thursday as United looked to seal the sale of Ronaldo to Real Madrid.

"There is only one (Premier League) club that is debt-free and that is Birmingham. Everyone else is carrying too much debt," added Whelan, whose club is a small player in the top tier of English football.

Manchester United's parent company, Red Football Joint Venture, made a pre-tax loss of 44.8 million pounds during the 2007/08 season, largely owing to interest payments on its debt.

Helmes will miss Germany's three remaining World Cup qualifiers against Finland, Azerbaijan and main group rivals Russia in Moscow this October.

According to latest accounts, Red Football's debt stands at just under 650 million pounds after US tycoon Malcolm Glazer borrowed

heavily to buy Manchester United in 2005.

Meanwhile, fans of football titan Liverpool are extremely worried about the club's future after auditors recently claimed that its parent company was in danger of collapse because of unsustainable loan repayments.

Liverpool's American owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, face a July 24 deadline to refinance 350 million pounds of debt which they have been servicing at punitive rates of interest, according to company accounts.

"The recession has an impact and we've seen it at clubs like Liverpool where the owners can't refinance," said Geoff Walters, an expert in football finance at the Birkbeck Sport Business Centre consultancy in London.

"But by and large football is a different industry to a conventional industry. You've got the fan loyalty," he told AFP.

Fans of Premier League side West Ham United have no doubt been buoyed by the sale of the London outfit last week to an asset management group for a reported 100 million pounds.

The sale came after previous owner Bjorgolfur Gudmundsson saw much of his personal fortune wiped out as a result of the Icelandic banking crisis caused by the global credit crunch.

Last Thursday meanwhile, a Singapore-based group confirmed interest in buying Newcastle United following the club's surprise relegation from the Premier League, whose live games are partly screened by troubled broadcast giant Satsanta.

The Irish satellite station is attempting to secure an

emergency cash injection to prevent it defaulting on payments it owes to the English Premier League.

"The (20) clubs in the Premier League are a bit more recession-proof given the huge TV deal and the guaranteed TV money they get" from British pay-TV operator BSkyB, which shows the bulk of live matches, said football finance analyst Walters.

The survival of England's top-tier clubs is also being aided by the financial backing of wealthy tycoons -- Roman Abramovich at Chelsea and Abu Dhabi-based owners at big-spending Manchester City.

Abu Dhabi-based property billionaire Sulaiman al-Fahim is meanwhile reportedly close to a takeover of Portsmouth.

According to the annual review of football finances from accountancy group Deloitte, published earlier this month, England's top-flight clubs will buck the global economic downturn by continuing to increase revenues next season.

However this does not mean all is well and good for the country's elite sides, which also include Arsenal, Aston Villa, Everton and Tottenham.

The accountancy group's report -- based on figures from the 2007/08 season -- reveals that total debt among the 20 Premier League clubs hit 3.1 billion pounds in 2007/08 while wage costs reached 23 percent to reach 1.2 billion pounds.

Deloitte's Alan Switzer warned that clubs could not afford to be complacent about the long-term sustainability of their debt levels given the possibility of failure on the pitch, an issue highlighted by Newcastle's relegation.

"Seventy thousand-plus people have bought tickets for the Japan match," Schwarzer said.

"It's imperative that we go out there on Wednesday night and play well and continue the run of form that we've shown."

Nakazawa in doubt

AFP, Sydney

Captain Yuji Nakazawa is running a high temperature and may not lead Japan in Wednesday's World Cup qualifier against Australia in Melbourne, coach Takeshi Okada said Sunday.

Okada, who is already without Celtic star Shunsuke Nakamura and four other regulars, said Nakazawa had taken ill since the squad arrived on Saturday.

"He is sick," Okada told reporters after training.

"He has a temperature of 37 (Celsius) degrees and is not in good condition."

"He has not trained for three days, so it will be difficult for him to play."

Okada confirmed that Nakazawa did not have swine flu despite the Japanese media concerns over the potential for contracting the illness in Melbourne.

The squad arrived wearing face masks and several of the Japanese media contingent were wearing the masks on Sunday.

Okada said goalkeeper Seigo Narazaki could lead the side if Nakazawa did not play.

The Aussies are favourites to claim Group A with a two-point lead over Japan and need only a draw to finish top of the group, while the under strength Japanese must win.

Australian goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer said his teammates were looking to beat Japan and possibly go through to the final phase of qualifying without conceding a goal.

"Seventy thousand-plus people have bought tickets for the Japan match," Schwarzer said.

"It's imperative that we go out there on Wednesday night and play well and continue the run of form that we've shown."