



Brazil defender Lucio (R) and teammate Gilberto Silva sign autographs as they leave a gym in Johannesburg on Tuesday. Brazil take on South Africa in the Confederation Cup semifinal tonight.

Benzema latest Real target

AFP, Madrid

Lyon striker Karim Benzema is the latest object of desire for moneybags Real Madrid as opposed to Valencia forward David Villa, Marca sports daily reported on Wednesday.

"Nothing is impossible and if we receive a good offer we will not close the door to anyone," Bernard Lacombe, adviser to Lyon chairman Jean-Michel Aulas, told Marca.

The daily said Real had been mulling signing Benzema, of whom Manchester United are also admirers, in a year's time, but changed tack given the reluctance of Valencia's new chairman Manuel Llorente to sell them Spain striker Villa.

Real chairman Florentino Perez, who has already landed Cristiano Ronaldo and Kaka this summer for huge fees, has twice met with Benzema's agent Karim Djaziri, first in Madrid then Geneva, according to Marca.

Benzema would cost around 40 million euros or less if the deal were to include a part-exchange in the shape of either Real's Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar or his compatriot, winger Arjen Robben.

"We take Valencia at their word and we respect their decision (not to sell Villa) and so that is why we are changing target," Real director general Jorge Valdano said Tuesday, without naming Benzema.

Marca indicated Real also have made a combined 35 million euros offer for Liverpool's Spanish pair Xabi Alonso and Alvaro Arbeloa.

And the paper added that Real are additionally ready to swoop for Valencia defender Raul Albiol.

City loan Hart to Birmingham

AFP, Paris

Promoted Birmingham City have signed goalkeeper Joe Hart on a season loan from Manchester City, City said Wednesday.

Hart, 22, has one England cap to his name earned a year ago against Trinidad and Tobago but lost his place at City after making some 50 English Premiership appearances after Irish standout Shay Given arrived from Newcastle United midway through last season.

City boss Mark Hughes allowed Hart to move on after signing Aston Villa keeper Stuart Taylor as cover for Given despite last season describing Hart as "one of the most promising keepers in the country".

Hughes told City's official website: "I have always said that Joe is a really good young keeper, and his talent was obvious to our goalkeeping coach Kevin Hitchcock and I from the outset.

"His contribution to the team prior to Shay Given's arrival was fantastic, but by loaning him to Birmingham, he will add invaluable experience to that already gained here at City.

Vuvuzela to take WC by storm

AFP, Bloemfontein



You either love them or you hate them but whichever way you lean it seems certain that the vuvuzela is going to take the World Cup by storm.

The long plastic trumpet is as essential an item to South African fans as getting decked out in the national colours or painting one's face.

Forty thousand of them being blown at full volume sounds like a swarm of angry bees buzzing in your ear, or, as one newspaper put it, an elephant in distress.

It is a tuneless din that takes getting used to, but that's exactly what anyone planning to be here next year will have to do.

Be prepared, because no one in South Africa will take your football credentials seriously if you turn up at the stadium without one.

Whereas European supporters sing, chant and wave, South Africans blow vuvuzelas and, as a rule, make as much noise as possible.

But it has hurt the sensibilities of some, with one suggestion that they should only be allowed when South Africa plays.

Spain midfielder Xabi Alonso is the highest profile player to criticise the instrument.

"I think they should be banned," he said. "We're used to when people shout but not to this trumpet noise which doesn't allow you to concentrate and is unbearable."

Dutch coach Bert van Marwijk, who was in South Africa on a fact finding mission, was another to take offence.

"At home watching TV it really was annoying, but in the stadiums you get used to it but it is still unpleasant," he said.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has given them his blessing, blasting the detractors by telling them Africa is about dance and music and moaning about the instrument bordered on

discrimination.

"We have brought the World Cup to Africa where the atmosphere and the culture are different," he said.

"What message would we be sending out if we said, 'We are going to prohibit the instrument you use to express your joy'? That would be discrimination, pure and simple.

"I always said that when we go to South Africa, it is Africa. It's not western Europe."

The whining by players, as well as some journalists who complain that they can't work properly with so much noise, has sparked a lively debate in newspaper letter pages and led to opinion pieces in its defence.

"The Confed Cup and its big mama, the World Cup, will come and go but the vuvuzela will stay," said the Business Times defiantly.

"Those in search of tranquillity are free to watch on TV and make sure they press the mute button on their remotes."

The Sowetan called the ubiquitous instrument's sound "a loud and beautiful noise."

"If you can't handle the heat, then get out of the kitchen," it said.

"The vuvuzela is part of our culture and it's here to stay. The Europeans sing all game long and we blow our vuvuzelas."

Another distinct phenomenon that will confront travelling fans in South Africa is the makaraba -- a neatly decorated hand-made helmet sporting the team's colours.

"It is part of our history, it's something we can be very proud of," said fan Brendan Mokone.

"I think many other countries will adopt makaraba in 2010, because from what I have seen people like it a lot."

Blatter worked hard to bring the World Cup to Africa for the first time ever and as one commentator put it: "What would be the point of taking the World Cup to Africa, and then trying to give it a European feel?"

Messi tops C'Ron

AFP, Madrid

Cristiano Ronaldo may be the world's most expensive footballer, but Barcelona star Lionel Messi outshines him in terms of media value, at least according to a team of Spanish researchers.

The team from the University of Navarra said the Argentine had ousted the Portuguese striker as the player with the highest profile last season.

However, Ronaldo remains the most expensive player, with the researchers valuing him at 82 million euros, less than the world record 93 million Real Madrid paid Manchester United for him this month.

Messi was next at 80 million, followed by Liverpool's Spanish striker Fernando Torres at 67 million.

The study cited Barcelona's European Champions League victory, and Messi's goal in the final, for his leap to number one in the media rankings over last year's winner Ronaldo.

It forecast "an exciting media fight between these two brilliant players" next season.

In team rankings, it recorded a "technical tie" between Barcelona (86.2 points) and Manchester United (86.0 points).

But the manager with the most media pulling power was United's Alex Ferguson, ahead of Barca's Pep Guardiola.

Malouda extends with Chelsea

AFP, London

Chelsea's French international midfielder Florent Malouda signed on Tuesday a four-year contract extension with the FA Cup winners.

The 29-year-old, who had two years remaining on his current contract, had been linked with a move to Italian Serie A giants AC Milan despite a generally hugely disappointing spell at Chelsea since joining for 13.5 million pounds from French champions Lyon in 2007.

"I am staying. I have four years left on my contract," commented Malouda, whose performances improved once Guus Hiddink replaced Luis Felipe Scolari at the club earlier this year.

"Every time the transfer window opens there are rumours and I hope in this one people will know what happened," added Malouda, who was part of the France team that reached the 2006 World Cup final.

Malouda had been widely expected to move on after Chelsea were linked earlier this year with a move for Russia's far more impressive attacking midfielder Yuri Zhirkov, who plays for CSKA Moscow.

But Malouda found his form under Hiddink and eventually started 31 games for the Blues last season, scoring nine goals.

SOUTH AFRICA V BRAZIL

Pupil meets Master

AFP, Johannesburg



Former coach Carlos Alberto Parreira promised to introduce South Africa to 'samba football', a mission pursued by his successor, Joel Santana.

Well at Ellis Park on Thursday the willing pupil will have the chance to test precisely how much they've learned when they take on the country who invented the concept.

The smart and not so smart money is on Brazil overpowering South Africa in this Confederations Cup semi-final to set up a dream final Sunday with Spain, favourites to beat the United States on Wednesday.

But this 2009 Confed Cup has been nothing if not unpredictable - witness the USA's advance to the last four at the expense of world champions and African champions Italy and Egypt.

South Africa owe their presence here to having narrowly shaded Iraq on goal difference to emerge as Group A runners-up after goalless draws against the Asian champions, a 2-0 win over New Zealand and a 2-0 loss to Spain.

Brazil strode imperiously through Group B, following up the last minute 4-3 victory over Egypt with 3-0 drubbings of the USA and then astonishingly Italy.

That has left Kaka and company in prime shape to defend the title they collected in

Germany four years ago, but South Africa are counting on their vibrant and colourful support and some class acts like Everton's Steven Pienaar, Bernard Parker and Teko Modise to help them dethrone the five-time world champions.

The last time the hosts and holders met was back in 1996 in Joburg when South Africa, with Lucas Radebe and Doctor Khumalo on board, were leading a Brazil side captained by Dunga two nil at half time only to go down 3-2.

Santana, constantly criticised in the local media for his defensive tactics, is talking a big game ahead of what promises to be an electric encounter at a sold-out Ellis Park.

"We deserve to be in the semi-finals, we got four points," said the Brazilian.

"We outplayed New Zealand. We beat them 2-0, but could have scored six while Iraq were totally negative.

"I am happy to be in the semi-finals, I could have been heading home. But now I am looking forward to a major semi-final of a big FIFA event."

Dunga rates his compatriot highly as a manager and is wary of the threat presented by his team.

"South Africa are an emerging team, but we know they will give us a difficult test.

"They're strong, quick and they will have the crowd behind them. But we'll be well prepared. Brazil have a very strong squad, which helps in a tournament like this. Every player in the squad is a first-teamer."

'It's not easy in Europe'

Football

AFP, Bloemfontein

Trying to get a break in Europe is not easy for American footballers and the hard work needed to earn respect has toughened up the national team, says Fulham's Clint Dempsey.

The United States are unexpected Confederations Cup semi-finalists and Dempsey, one of 13 players in the squad who ply their trade in Europe, said the fighting spirit has been evident during the tournament.

"A lot of people don't believe in this team, we don't get much respect," he said.

"A lot of guys in this team fight and scratch to get contracts overseas and they grind through it trying to get respect and some playing time.

"It's not easy. So here, like this, when we're together, we fight together and we all believe we can do big things."

Along with Dempsey, the USA's most high-profile European-based players include Everton goalkeeper Tim Howard, West Ham

defender Jonathan Spector, and Rangers midfielder DeMarcus Beasley.

Dempsey moved to Fulham in 2006 for a then record transfer fee for someone from the American league and he is symptomatic of many players in the USA team, battling for every ball and never giving up on a lost cause.

He scored the winning goal against Egypt that took his side through to a semi-final here against European champions Spain but credits his teammates.

"I may have scored the winning goal against Egypt, but my teammates created the opportunity for me to be in the position to get it. Everybody worked so hard to earn us place in the semi-finals," he told FIFA.com.

"I can't say that it was the biggest goal of my international career, but it is definitely a close second.

"The goal I scored against Ghana in the World Cup (a 2-1 loss) is still the biggest for me.

"Scoring in a World Cup was always my dream, but the goal here against Egypt is something I will remember with a smile for the rest of my life."



Germany striker Lukas Podolski (R) poses with FC Cologne manager Michael Meier holding his new shirt during his presentation at the Rheinenergiestadion in Cologne on Wednesday.

Cannavaro lashes out

AFP, Rome



Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro has hit back at recent criticism of the reigning World Cup champions, which has focused on the team's largely veteran status in the wake of their Confederations Cup flop.

Marcello Lippi's side beat the United States 3-1 but were then shocked by Egypt 1-0 before Brazil hammered the final nail in their coffin with a comprehensive 3-0 thrashing on Sunday.

Italy missed the semi-final stages on goal difference, and have been widely labelled as underachievers.

In Italy that criticism has mainly focused on the fact that seven of Lippi's starting 11 against Brazil were aged 30 or more, with captain Cannavaro almost 36.

However central defender Cannavaro said it was time for the criticism to stop.

"Let's bring an end to this theory that we're all too old," said Cannavaro, according to the Ansa news agency.

"I'm getting tired of it. Personally, I'm available to play and it's up to (coach, Marcello) Lippi to decide."

Lippi has been criticised at home for persisting with his "old men" rather than handing a chance to the plethora of young talent he has

on hand, but he defended his tactics.

"You speak so much about young people - what young people," said the 61-year-old, back in charge since Roberto Donadoni's departure after Euro 2008.

"You don't throw youngsters into these matches, you have to put them in gradually.

"We have youngsters but they need to mature. The best players in Italy you have seen right here on the pitch."

Media reports suggest several players in their 30s risk losing their places in the run-up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, for which Italy have still to qualify, with defenders Gianluca Zambrotta and Fabio Grosso, and striker Luca Toni among the names cited.

But Cannavaro, for one, isn't worried.

"I'm not just here because I happen to have lifted the World Cup trophy (in 2006)," said Cannavaro, who has recently signed for Juventus from Real Madrid.

"Everyone remembers the seven matches we played at the World Cup, and, compared to those, apparently I'm still playing badly."

"But like Lippi, I think that the players who are in the team are the best players that Italy can offer right now."

Italy sit top of qualifying Group B but Ireland are keeping the World Cup winners in their sights. Only the group winners qualify automatically for the tournament, with the second place finishers proceeding to the play-offs.