

Real unveil Kaka

Football

AP, Madrid

With the crowd chanting his name, Kaka received a roaring welcome Tuesday when he was introduced at his new home of Real Madrid before at least 50,000 fans.

The 27-year-old Brazilian playmaker, acquired from AC Milan for \$92 million, was presented by team president Florentino Perez at Santiago Bernabeu. Kaka shook his head in delight at the response by the fans.

"I'm very happy about this new step in my career at Real Madrid," said Kaka, who will wear jersey No. 8. "Viva Madrid!"

Kaka, who passed his medical earlier Tuesday, and Cristiano Ronaldo are Perez's major summer signings as the team tries to make up for a season without a trophy.

"There are no words for today, it's an unforgettable day," Kaka said through a translator. "All of this is a great honour and responsibility, and not a negative responsibility but a positive one. I hope we can win titles and many victories."

Kaka agreed to a six-year

contract with Madrid and will team with Cristiano Ronaldo, the world player of the year who was acquired by Madrid for a record transfer of \$131 million.

"We're compatible players and I think we'll be able to play alongside without a problem," said Kaka, who helped his country to victory at the Confederations Cup in South Africa, where he was honoured as the tournament's best player.

Kaka took the stage before a backdrop featuring photos of iconic Madrid players Alfredo di Stefano, Raul Gonzalez, Juanito and Zinedine Zidane. Accompanied by a young fan donning the first Kaka jersey, he toured half the 80,000-capacity stadium to sign autographs and salute the pumped-up crowd.

Madrid failed to get past the first knockout stage of Europe's top-tier competition for the fifth straight season and lost the league to bitter rival Barcelona. Barcelona won the Champions League, Spanish league and Spanish Copa del Rey all in one year, the first Spanish team to capture all three titles in a season.

Kaka believes Madrid is in a great position to compete after finishing runner-up last year.

"Madrid has everything in terms of a fascinating team. And it's always been a reference for great players," Kaka said. "The project is very good. I can't wait to play."

Kaka, whose full name is Ricardo Izecson Dos Santos, won a Champions League, Serie A, Club World Cup and two European Supercups in his six seasons at Milan, which he joined from Sao Paulo in 2003. Kaka was also a member of Brazil's World Cup-winning team in 2002.

Perez has splashed out \$333 million this summer, including Valencia defender Raul Albiol, in a bid to turn the page on a season marred by former president Ramon Calderon's resignation over a vote-rigging scandal.

Even Perez was given an ovation when he took the stage, with chants of "Florentino" ringing out for the first time since his initial reign from 2000-06.

"We believe that this club can become the best club in the world, again," Perez said. "He is a unique player... and Kaka is with us."



Real Madrid's 65 million euros new recruit Brazilian midfielder Kaka waves to 50,000 supporters during his official presentation at the Santiago Bernabeu on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Soccer unites SA

AFP, Johannesburg



South Africans rallied behind football in a rare show of unity at the Confederations Cup, a year ahead of the 2010 World Cup, in a country trying to shake off decades of race segregation.

The 14-day tournament -- won by Brazil in a nailbiting 3-2 finale -- saw supporters of different races cheering in stands in what is regarded as a black's man game in South Africa.

While some cautioned that the stadium goodwill has to seep into normal life, Frans Cronje of the South African Institute of Race Relations told AFP that the event had brought people together.

"I think the unifying effect has been underrated," he told AFP.

"The pictures in the stadiums, the TV footage, of black and white South Africans suddenly together were perhaps the image of what a future South Africa might become. It's a visual representation."

The power of sport on the country's bitter race divisions was seen in 1995 when former president Nelson Mandela lifted the rugby World Cup for South Africa, wearing a Springbok jersey, for decades a white preserve.

Apartheid's legacy of separation left South Africans with little in common apart from a record crime rate and passion for sport, said Cronje.

"You certainly started to see some of that 1995 Rugby World Cup sentiment coming through again," he said.

But independent analyst Somadoda Fikeni warned that the unifying role has been overplayed and still had to be seen outside stadiums.

"In 1995, post-Springbok

victory, South Africans united behind the sports but that didn't translate into unity in terms of the national agenda and other broader issues," he said.

"The dominant feature of sports is still very much racialised but these little achievements will push us inch by inch in some direction."

Organisers have hailed the tournament for bringing the "Rainbow Nation" together around sport which -- like housing, buses, and schools -- was strictly segregated under white minority rule.

A rallying point was local team Bafana Bafana's (The

Boys) fourth placing, with unexpectedly strong showings against Spain and Brazil, despite one win in five outings after years of mixed fortunes.

"It was natural that South Africans would support the national team because people like to support winners. We have to keep producing results to maintain the level of support," former Bafana captain Neil Tovey, who led The Boys to Africa Cup of Nations glory in 1996.

Praise for Bafana found its way onto rugby forums, amid match scenes of dancing supporters wearing traditional soccer garb of oversized sunglasses and miners helmets and first-time blowers of the noisy plastic vuvuzela trumpets.

Kick Off magazine's Ryan Cooper said seeing white men dressed in Bafana shirts and carrying vuvuzelas into a stadium was a "reality check" -- with the country's 4.5 million whites a rare sight at local matches.

"Most of the people who went to the stadiums went there for the big names but I think the Confeds did convert a certain percentage of white people to be interested in the game locally," he said.

"Most people although they followed Bafana they didn't know who the players were because they don't follow local soccer but I think from now they would follow the game."

The fact that sports attract the different races of South Africa's 48.7-million population does not necessarily mean racism," said Cronje, as South Africa prepares to host the Africa's first World Cup in 2010.

"It's a completely alien area to them. It's a question of the unknown and being afraid of that. Perhaps what we might start to see is a slow breaking the ice on the soccer side after this tournament."

MU confirm C'Ron deal done

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United on Wednesday confirmed that Cristiano Ronaldo's world-record 93 million euros transfer to Real Madrid has been completed.

An "unconditional 80million pounds" fee was agreed between the clubs last month and then last Friday the Spanish giants announced that the signing of the world player of the year was official.

A statement on the Manchester United club website on Wednesday confirmed that the transfer fee had been paid.

Manager Sir Alex Ferguson used the occasion to pay tribute to the Portuguese winger despite friction between him and the player last season as the Real transfer loomed.

"Cristiano has been a marvellous player for Manchester United. His six years at Old Trafford have seen him develop into the best footballer in the world," he said.

"His contribution has been a major factor in the club's success in that time and his talent, his ability to entertain and his infectious personality have enthralled fans the world over."

"Everyone here wishes him well in his future career."

Simunic joins Hoffenheim

AFP, Berlin

Veteran Croatian international defender Josip Simunic signed for Hoffenheim on Tuesday from fellow Bundesliga rivals Hertha Berlin.

The 31-year-old Australian-born star will cost Hoffenheim 7million euros and is to sign a three year contract.

Simunic, capped 70 times and a member of the Croatia side that reached the Euro 2008 quarter-finals, has played in the Bundesliga for over 12 years with aside from Hertha a previous stint with Hamburg.

Rovers snap up French starlet

AFP, London

Promising young French midfielder Steven N'Zonzi became English Premier League side Blackburn Rovers fourth signing of the close season on Tuesday.

The 20-year-old signed from Amiens on a four year deal - no transfer fee was revealed.

His signing comes just 24 hours after veteran Danish international defender Lars Jacobsen signed with them - French defender Gael Givet and midfielder Elrio van Heerden are the other new arrivals this summer.

Dunga brings back belief

Football

INTERNET, undated

Another final, another trophy. They make it look simple. Brazil, though, is fully aware its selecao still has work to do. Whilst the world looked on in disbelief as the United States of America took a 2-0 lead into half-time of the Confederations Cup final, the knives were already being sharpened for Dunga across the nation's sports websites. What a difference forty-five minutes makes.

What a difference nine months makes, for that matter. Only last September one was wondering whether Dunga would be sacked before then - Argentina manager Alfio Basile. Brazil's faith in Dunga has been repaid with the discovery of some consistency after a dreadful start to the year (a World Cup qualifier away to Ecuador which they were fortunate to come away from with a 1-1 draw). Brazil now sit in a position they're well accustomed to: top of the South American World Cup qualifying group, and flying back to Rio de Janeiro with a shiny gold trophy.

Criticism of Dunga is based on what the Brazilian press want from their team.

The 2007 Copa America saw the team barely turn up - until they dismantled Argentina in the final - and until 2009 arrived, performances in World Cup qualification were mixed - but they were

still on course, and have now all but assured their participation in South Africa next year.

The language of the press has changed to an extent. The desire for more attractive football is still present but they're talking too about the positives Dunga has brought: discipline and a certain determination, and above all, unity.

"The proof [of that unity] is the trophy," midfielder Ramires declared when the squad landed in Rio on Monday.

"There's nothing more - the rest is just talk. We've won the title because we're all united." And as Sunday's celebrations demonstrated, they're certainly united.

How the World Cup's longer format will pan out - the Confederations Cup is, after all, only two rounds after the group stage - is anyone's guess, but forget 2006; Brazil could be a good bet this time.

The years when they were the great entertainers are gone but the unity Ramires talks about is very real. It's also allied to the trophy-winning know-how and experience which Brazil, more than any other nation in world football, has in spades.

Unity was something distinctly lacking in the shambles of the 2006 World Cup, and it's now clear Dunga was right in deciding that rather than trying to fit Ronaldinho, Kaka, Adriano and Ronaldo (the infamous 'Magic Quartet') into one team, he'd drop two of them and tell one of the others to get his act together. That took guts at the helm of a country which

still wants a large element of fantasy in its football, but the man who captained the 'ugliest' Brazil team in living memory to the 1994 World Cup has more authority than anyone else to point out that all the backheels and tricks in the world will still get him sacked if he doesn't deliver trophies.

In spite of the optimistic majority, the Brazilian press aren't all happy with Dunga. One complaint - that no team has yet won the Confederations Cup and followed it with the World Cup trophy twelve months later - seems a little daft.

What did they want him to do with the last couple of weeks? They nicely avoid the fact that, had Brazil failed to get out of the group stage, or lost either of their knockout matches against South Africa and the United States, Dunga would have been hounded out of his job.

That superstitious stat has been quoted because there are sections of the Brazilian media who (though they'll never admit it) would like to see the boss fail, to get another chance to stick the knife into a manager who's always denied their right to pick the team and dictate the tactics.

After all, apart from the 2007 Copa America, the 2009 Confederations Cup and comfortable qualification for the World Cup, apart from making a side who were a fiasco in Germany 2006 come together as a winning team at last, what has Dunga ever done for Brazil?

'Reds must keep stars'

Football

SOCCERNET

Liverpool striker Fernando Torres believes the club have to hang on to the likes of Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano if they are to depose Manchester United as Premier League champions.

The two midfielders are major targets for Real Madrid and Barcelona respectively but Torres is in agreement with manager Rafael Benitez that neither should be sold - despite potential offers in excess of £25m each.

On Monday, Alonso failed to pledge his full commitment to the Merseysiders while Barca president Joan Laporta again hinted they were willing to use Mascherano's international team-mate Lionel Messi to lure the Argentina captain away from Anfield.

The increasing speculation about the two is a concern for Torres, who himself signed an improved contract with the club towards the end of last season.

"I worry about losing my team-mates but if we can keep our best players and bring in some more, we'll be even stronger for next season," he said. "The important thing is we're getting closer to the title. It's been frustrating for me because three years without a trophy for Liverpool is too long."

"The next one is coming, though - I'm sure of it. Man United have been the strongest team in Europe but they've lost an important player (Real Madrid-bound Cristiano Ronaldo), so maybe it's our time now."

"My ambition is to win

trophies with Liverpool. We must win something next season. And then, with Spain, it's obvious that the 2010 World Cup is our big challenge. I hope 2009-10 will be a

great season for me."

Torres accepts the club's lack of financial muscle means they are unlikely to be able to compete for star signings like international team-mate David Villa - valued at £40m - but he believes that will not affect their chances of winning trophies.

Man Utd sign Valencia

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United said on Tuesday they have signed Wigan winger Antonio Valencia on a four-year contract for a fee believed to be in the region of 16 million pounds (22 million dollars).

"Joining Manchester United is a dream come true for me," the 23-year-old Ecuadorian told the club website www.manutd.com.

"I have enjoyed my time at Wigan, but I am thrilled to have the chance to challenge for the biggest honours in club football here," he added.

"Playing in front of 76,000 fans alongside players like Wayne Rooney, Rio Ferdinand and Ryan Giggs will be an amazing experience. I can't wait to get started."

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has been a fan of Valencia, who spent two seasons with Wigan and helped turn the club into an established top flight side.

"Antonio is a player we have admired for some time now, having spent the last two years in the Premier League with Wigan," Ferguson said.

"I am sure his pace and ability will make a significant contribution to the team."

Valencia should fill the gap left by Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo, who signed for Real Madrid for 80million pounds earlier this month.

Marseille in record bid for Lucho

AFP, Marseille

French giants Marseille are set to break their transfer record with a 17.5million euros fee for Porto's Argentinian captain Lucho Gonzalez, the buying club announced on Tuesday.

The 28-year-old will sign a four year contract with the French club subject to a medical. Gonzalez, who joined Porto from River Plate during the 2005/06 season, was Marseille coach Didier Deschamps main target.

Gonzalez is the second new recruit since Deschamps replaced Eric Gerets as coach - having signed 20-year-old Cameroon left back Charley Fomen.

The former France World Cup and Euro winning captain - who won the 1993 European Cup with Marseille - also wants to buy a central defender with Bordeaux' Souleymane Diawara or Galatasaray's Turkish international Servet Cetin top of his list.

Wolves land Doyle

AFP, London

Republic of Ireland international striker Kevin Doyle became newly-promoted English Premier League side Wolves record signing on Tuesday as they paid 6.5million pounds to Reading for him.

The 25-year-old has been a prolific scorer for Reading in the Championship but even his 18 goals were not enough to gain them promotion to the Premier League last season.



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester City's new signing Paraguay striker Roque Santa Cruz (R) poses with team manager Mark Hughes during a photocall in Manchester on Wednesday.