



Real Madrid's French striker Karim Benzema (R) runs with teammates during a training session at the Valdebebas training camp in Madrid on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Transtvestite in Ronaldo sex scandal dies

AFP, Sao Paulo

A transvestite at the center of a sex scandal last year involving Brazil's football star Ronaldo has died of AIDS, media here reported Friday.

Andre Albertini, a 22-year-old cross-dressing man known as "Andreia", was buried Friday after passing away on Thursday in a hospital in the Sao Paulo suburb of Maua, the news website G1 and other Brazilian outlets reported.

The cause of death was given as neurotoxoplasmosis, a brain infection that arises from acquired immune deficiency syndrome, according to the death certificate.

Albertini was one of three transvestite prostitutes invited into a hotel room by Ronaldo -- full name Ronaldo Luis Nazario de Lima -- on April 28 last year.

He accused the footballer of refusing to pay the agreed price for sex.

But Ronaldo denied that account, saying he had mistaken the transvestites for women and decided to not pay for their services when he found out they were men. He said they had threatened him with blackmail over the encounter.

Albertini's mother said her son contracted HIV in 2006, in Rio de Janeiro. She said he slipped into a coma on Tuesday and she took him to the hospital.

Ronaldo, who was a star player for AC Milan at the time of the incident, is making a comeback with Brazil's Corinthians team after a year off because of injury.

Flu outbreak hits Monaco

AFP, Vichy

Five players with French top flight side AS Monaco have the flu and are undergoing tests to determine if they might have swine flu, officials said Friday, saying the cases were "suspect."

Municipal officials at Allier, in eastern France where the squad are in pre-season training, said the exact nature of the players' illness was unclear.

"They are taking Tamiflu and paracetamol as a precaution," a source said, saying the swine flu virus A (H1N1) could not necessarily be ruled out.

But he added that the players did not appear to show any symptoms of serious illness.

As a precaution the club cancelled a Saturday friendly with local side Clermont.

"There is no cause for alarm," insisted club doctor Philippe Kuentz.

Phelps pulls out

Swimming

AFP, Indianapolis

Olympic swimming star Michael Phelps pulled out of the 100m freestyle at America's World Championship trials on Friday with a sore neck.

Phelps said he received treatment, but "when I hopped in the water and could literally barely turn my head to breathe, we thought it was better not to risk anything the next two weeks."

World Championship swimming competition starts in Rome on July 26, and Phelps had already booked three individual events - the 100m and 200m butterfly and the 200m freestyle.

All three were among his unprecedented eight-gold haul at the Beijing Olympics last August.

Phelps said he actually woke with a stiff neck on Thursday - from "sleeping wrong" - but swam through it to seize the 100m butterfly world record with a time of 50.22sec in the evening's final.

"It wasn't fun swimming the 100 fly with that," he said. "I could barely move my neck to breathe. I definitely didn't feel 100 per cent."

While much attention has been focused on his bid to revamp his freestyle to challenge the world's best in the 100m free, Phelps admitted the decision to withdraw was made easier by the knowledge that he wouldn't have swum the event in Rome.

"To be quite frank, Michael was not going to swim the 100m free in Rome because it conflicts with the 200m fly, and the 200m fly is going so well," Phelps's coach, Bob Bowman, said.

Phelps has indicated he feels he has unfinished business in the 200m butterfly. Although he won the event in world-record time in Beijing, he didn't hit the goal time he had set for himself.

He was clearly frustrated when he couldn't improve the record in the final here on Wednesday, a fact that fuels his ambitions for the event at the Worlds, where the 200m fly final and 100m free semifinals are both scheduled on July 29.

"I'm disappointed not to be swimming (the 100 free) here," he said. But the 200 fly is a big race. That's a race I do not want to give up."

Phelps will almost certainly swim three relays in Rome, Bowman noting that anyone on the team can be selected for the 4x100m free relay, regardless of whether he swam it at trials.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Feillu wins in Pyrenees

Cycling

AFP, Arcalis

Italian Rinaldo Nocentini took over the Tour de France yellow jersey as Spaniard Alberto Contador dramatically replaced Astana teammate Lance Armstrong in second place overall on Friday.

On the first of three consecutive days in the Pyrenees mountains Frenchman Brice Feillu upset the form book to claim an impressive victory after 224km of racing from Barcelona.

However, it was Contador's attack of a small group containing all the main favourites inside the final two kilometres

of the 10.1km climb to Arcalis which provided the most drama.

The Spaniard's effort moved him up from third to second place overall at only six seconds behind Nocentini, and well within sight of the race lead.

Astana team manager Johan Bruyneel said their principal strategy had been to allow an early breakaway to go all the way to the finish.

But he played down suggestions that Contador's attack was designed to rubber stamp his status as the team's official leader.

"No one had specific instructions to attack," said Bruyneel, who added that he would have been happier if

Nocentini had more of an advantage on Contador.

"Six seconds is not a lot. We'd hoped for a bit more."

"Our second strategy was just to set the tempo and wait for the attacks. I thought a rider like (Carlos) Sastre, (Cadel) Evans or (Andy) Schleck might attack."

"But I think the wind was a factor. In the end it was good for us because it allowed us to keep the team more or less together."

Feillu, racing at the Tour for the first time and the brother of Agritubel teammate Romain, attacked a small group of frontrunners 5.8km from the finish of the 10.1km climb to the race's first summit finish.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2

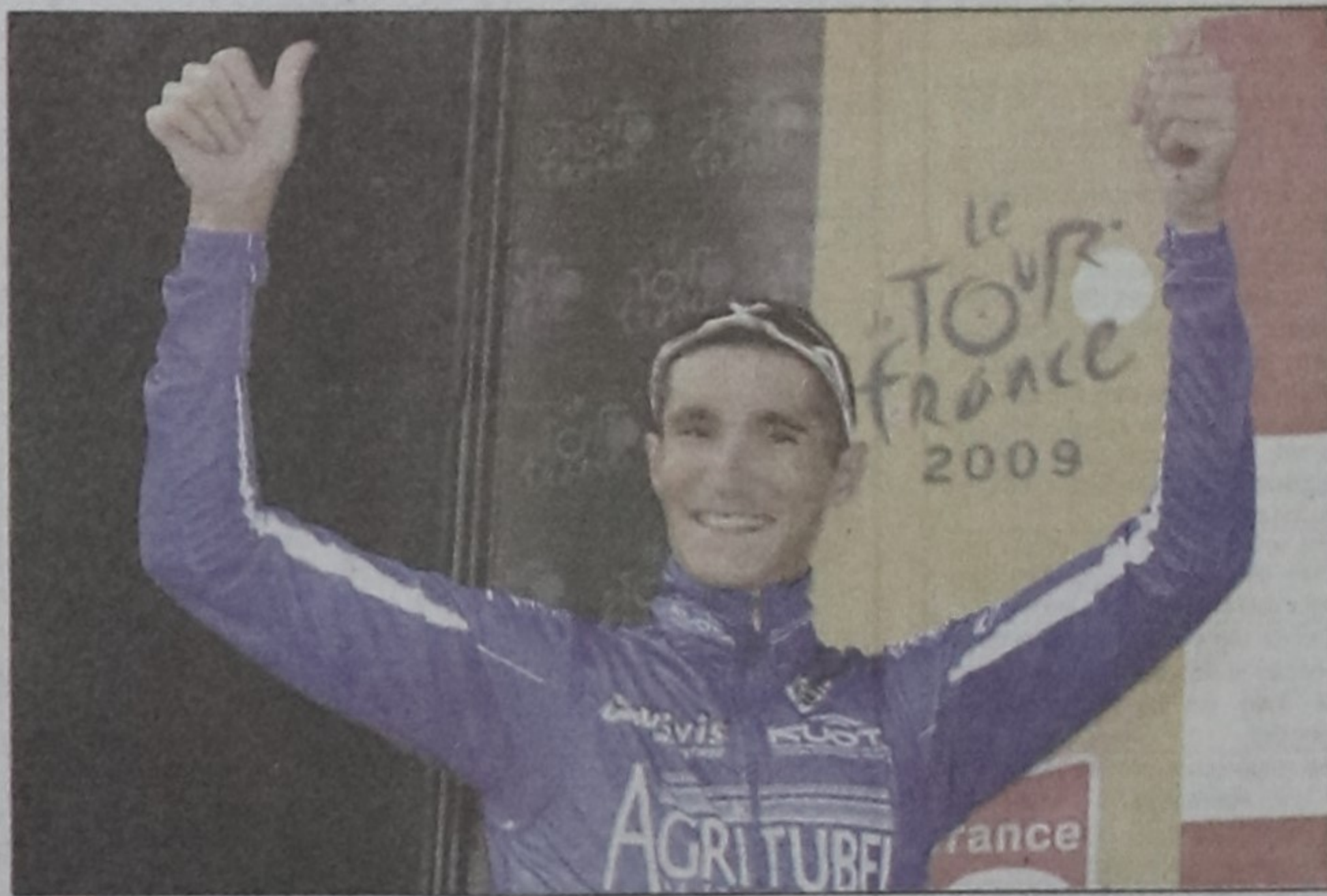


PHOTO: AFP

French cycling team Agritubel's Brice Feillu celebrates on the podium after winning the 224 km seventh stage of the Tour de France cycling race run between Barcelona and Andorre Arcalis on Thursday.

City call off Eto'o move

AFP, Manchester

English Premier League club Manchester City have given up on a potential move for Barcelona's Cameroun striker Samuel Eto'o.

Barcelona had last week appeared to accept Eto'o was on his way to Eastlands, but a contractual hitch emerged between the forward, who scored in the Champions League final win over Manchester United.

City said they have now called off any move for the 28-year-old, who is set to see out the final year of his Barcelona contract.

"Samuel Eto'o is undoubtedly a fine footballer but the circumstances surrounding him were such that the deal could not be completed," City chief executive Gary Cook told club website www.mcfc.co.uk.

"We now feel the time is right to pursue other avenues. We have a clear strategic transfer plan, which we continue to follow."

Last month Barcelona said they had received a "stratospheric" offer for Eto'o, believed to be from City, but the Catalan club's chairman Joan Laporta said he wanted the star to stay put.

Spanish media have indicated wage demands of some ten million euros a year were frightening off top clubs.

Zhar extends Reds stay

AFP, Liverpool

Moroccan international winger Nabil El Zhar has signed an extension to his Liverpool contract that will keep him at Anfield until 2012, the English club confirmed on Saturday.

Liverpool have also completed the signing of French left-back Chris Mavinga from Paris St Germain.

The 22-year-old El Zhar, who made 19 appearances for the Reds' first-team last season, follows Steven Gerrard, Fernando Torres, Dirk Kuyt, Yossi Benayoun and Daniel Agger in committing his long-term future to the club.

The French-born player joined Liverpool from Saint Etienne in October 2006.

Last season manager Rafa Benitez described the winger as a 'lucky charm' after he played a prominent role in some of the team's dramatic early season comebacks.

Meanwhile, 18-year-old Mavinga, who can also play at centre-back and represented his country at under-18 level, follows in the footsteps of striker David Ngog, who joined Liverpool from PSG last summer.

Publishers deny wrongdoing

Football

AFP, London

The publishers of Britain's biggest-selling newspapers insisted Friday that their journalists had not paid private detectives to hack into the mobile phones of thousands of celebrities.

Following an internal investigation, media baron Rupert Murdoch's News International publishers said they were confident there were no fresh cases of their reporters illegally accessing the voicemails of high-profile figures.

It was News International's first detailed statement on the affair which flared up on Thursday.

The Guardian newspaper alleged that reporters at the News of the World tabloid, Britain's biggest-selling weekly paper, hired private investigators to hack into the phones and private data of government ministers, actors, singers, football stars, models and novelists.

The Guardian said the Sunday newspaper's publishers had paid more than one million pounds (1.6 million dollars, 1.16 million euros) out of court to suppress three legal cases involving phone tapping, which would have revealed evidence about the scale of the practice at the paper.

Once case involved Gordon Taylor, the chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association union, who it said received 400,000 pounds in compensation.

Clive Goodman, News of the World's royal editor, was jailed in 2007 along with a private investigator after the phone messages of aides to Prince William, second in line to the throne, were illegally accessed.

News International said the only other evidence connecting News of the World to accessing voicemails emerged during a case brought by Taylor. It did not elaborate on what emerged during the litigation.

It said: "From our own investigation, but more importantly that of the police, we can state with confidence that, apart from the

matters referred to above, there is not and never has been evidence to support allegations that:

-- News of the World journalists have accessed the voicemails of any individual.

-- News of the World or its journalists have instructed private investigators or other third parties to access the voicemails of any individuals.

-- There was systemic corporate illegality by News International to suppress evidence."

The allegations against News of the World deepened after The Guardian said Friday that Manchester United Football Club manager Alex Ferguson and former England football captain Alan Shearer had their phones tapped by investigators for the tabloid.

The Guardian said Thursday that actress Gwyneth Paltrow, singer George Michael, ex-England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson and former deputy prime minister John Prescott were among other celebrities targeted.

London's Metropolitan Police said they had begun contacting people whose phones had, or may have been, hacked by Goodman and his private investigator, to ensure they had been informed.

News International insisted it was "untrue that News of the World executives knowingly sanctioned payments for illegal phone intercepts" or that its reporters "hacked into the telephone voicemail services of various footballers, politicians and celebrities named in reports".

The police has refused to re-open its original investigation, saying no new evidence had come to light, but the director of public prosecutions has ordered a review of evidence the police gave the Crown Prosecution Service.

A media lawyer said at least two public figures had contacted him seeking advice about taking action against News of the World, which sells 2.9 million copies each Sunday.

Mark Stephens, of London law firm Finers Stephens Innocent, said other lawyers had also been approached.

"At the moment it's fair to say that people are looking at their options, they want to see what is going on," he said.

Ribery hopes still alive

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's hopes of signing Bayern Munich's French dynamo Franck Ribery are still alive, according to one of the Spanish club's directors.

"Many weeks remain before the beginning of the season and we need to be patient in all our operations," Emilio Butragueno, known as "El Buitre" (the vulture) said at a Spanish soccer federation meeting in the capital.

Earlier this week, Real's Jorge Valdano said he accepted they would not be able to recruit the French international from Bayern this season due to the German club's intransigence.

German daily tabloid Bild reported on Tuesday that Bayern had set a price tag of 80 million euros on the 26-year-old midfielder and had given Real until July 16 to decide if they are ready to stump up the cash or not.

Meanwhile, Real Madrid are preparing to let Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar go to Stuttgart, another Real Madrid executive, Miguel Pardeza, said on Friday.

Negotiations about the transfer of the 25-year-old Netherlands international are at an advanced stage, Pardeza added.

According to Marca sports newspaper, Huntelaar's transfer to Germany will add 20 million euros to Real Madrid's balance sheet, in the red following the club's recruitment campaign which includes the multi-million euro purchases of Cristiano Ronaldo as well as Kaka and Karim Benzema.

Elsewhere in the Spanish league, Barcelona still believe they can lure striker David Villa from Valencia, Barca president Joan Laporta claimed at the soccer federation meeting.

The European and Spanish champions have already been rebuffed by Valencia on the subject. However, Laporta observed: "It seems the player has an agreement with his club to leave for a certain figure, so we have made an offer and we are awaiting so see if they change their mind."

Spain's football season will officially kick off on August 30, the federation announced on Friday.

Barcelona will face Sporting Gijon in their first fixture but the match will take place on Monday August 31 because of the European Super Cup clash against Shakhtar Donetsk on August 28.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian tennis star Sania Mirza (R) and Mohammed Sohrab Mirza are pictured during their engagement ceremony in Hyderabad on Thursday.