

Chelsea duo bans reduced

AFP, Nyon

European football's governing body UEFA on Wednesday agreed to reduce bans handed down to Chelsea striker Didier Drogba and defender Jose Bosingwa for their angry outbursts which followed the club's Champions League exit to Barcelona in May.

Drogba was originally given a fixed four-match ban and Bosingwa a three-match ban after they made controversial comments following Chelsea's 1-1 second leg semifinal draw with eventual champions Barcelona at Stamford Bridge.

UEFA decided to reduce both players' suspension by one game after Chelsea appealed.

A UEFA statement on the body's website read: "Under the UEFA Appeals Body's verdicts, Drogba will be suspended for five UEFA club competition matches - the last two of which will be deferred for a probationary period of three years - and (he) has been fined 15,000 euros.

"Bosingwa will be suspended for three UEFA club competition matches, the last of which is deferred for a probationary period of three years, and fined 10,000 euros."

UEFA's initial fine of 100,000 euros for the improper conduct of their players and the throwing of missiles by their fans stands, however.

In full earshot of the television cameras Drogba ranted at Norwegian referee Tom Henning Ovrebo after Chelsea conceded a last-gasp equaliser to exit the tournament on away goals.

The Blues also felt that Ovrebo should have awarded them several penalties.

Bosingwa then described Ovrebo as a "thief" in an interview on Portuguese television.

Both players later apologised and Bosingwa withdrew his comments.

Chelsea appealed the bans in the belief that the punishments "were unnecessarily harsh given the circumstances."

Terry not for sale

AFP, London

Chelsea warned big-spending Manchester City once again on Wednesday that captain John Terry is not for sale.

Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon told Sky News: "I don't know what they are offering but I am confident John is going to remain with us."

"John is the heart of Chelsea, he is our captain and has also become captain of England while he has been here. We are not going to sell John, so it is irrelevant what another club will offer."

"We are very confident he will be leading us in the years to come."

City have reportedly offered the 28-year-old, who still has three years on his Stamford Bridge contract, a staggering 200,000 pounds a week to sign a deal which would see him join Gareth Barry, Roque Santa Cruz and Carlos Tevez who have cost City 50 million pounds in total this summer.

C'Ron move disappoints Bolt

AFP, Paris

Cristiano Ronaldo's high-profile transfer from Manchester United to Real Madrid left the world's fastest man, an avid fan of the English giants, "disappointed".

But Jamaican Usain Bolt, who won Olympic gold in the 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay in record times in Beijing last summer, insisted he had faith in United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

"I'm a bit disappointed he left the club because he's definitely a great player," Bolt said of Ronaldo, the Portuguese international winger who joined Real for 94 million euros.

"I like watching him play because he's very skilful. But I'm not worried. We have a great side still at Manchester United and I think we'll do well this season."

"We had a solid team last season and we just lost two players. As long as our midfield is strong, I'm not worried."

Bolt added: "Alex Ferguson is a very good manager so I am looking forward to this season. Go, Manchester!"

LIBERTADORES CUP

Estudiantes upset Cruzeiro

Football

INTERNET, Rio De Janeiro

Juan Sebastian Veron led Estudiantes to their fourth Libertadores Cup and first since 1970 when they upset Brazil's Cruzeiro 2-1 in the second leg of the final at the Mineirao in Belo Horizonte on Wednesday.

The Argentine club, who had lifted the trophy three times in a row from 1968, triumphed 2-1 on aggregate after a 0-0 draw at home in La Plata last week.

It was a special achievement for Veron, emulating his father Juan Ramon, the outstanding player of the Estudiantes side that won the club's three previous titles.

"Let them enjoy this - it's for the fans. It's unique," former Lazio and Manchester United midfielder Veron told Fox Sports.

"We have to raise a monument to all the players," said coach Alex Sabella. "Veron is the greatest ever Estudiantes player."

Cruzeiro took the lead seven minutes into the second half when Henrique unleashed a drive from 25 metres that took a deflection off defender Leandro Desabato and went in at the near post, out of reach of the diving Mariano Andujar.

But Estudiantes replied within five minutes. Right-back Cristian Cellay whipped in a cross, keeper Fabio failed to cut the ball out and Gaston Fernandez tapped in from two metres.

Mauro Boselli headed the winner in the 73rd minute from Veron's corner, boosting his tally as the tournament's top scorer to eight goals.

"This is what one dreams of," said Boselli. "It was our objective and we achieved it."

Cruzeiro coach Adilson Baptista told a news conference: "We played better in the second half, went 1-0 up and could have got a second. Then we conceded goals through a loss of concentration in defence and a dead ball play."

"We're not going to feel sorry for ourselves," added Adilson, whose side became the second Brazilian team in a row to lose the final in the second leg at home.

Last year Fluminense lost on penalties to LDU Quito of Ecuador.

Cruzeiro substitute Thiago twice came close to pulling the Brazilians level in the final three minutes, first with a long-range effort that hit the angle of post and bar and then when he blasted over from close range.

Estudiantes had marginally the better of a tight first half in which neither goalkeeper had a save to make, although both sides had chances. The first fell to Estudiantes when Fernandez crossed from the left to Boselli who mis-kicked in front of an open goal after 23 minutes.

Two minutes later Cruzeiro's Wellington was sent through on goal by Wagner but Andujar came out smartly to smother the ball.

Close to the half hour, Desabato cleared a dangerous low cross into the box from Cruzeiro dangerman Kleber with Wellington again slow to pounce.

Real want early games

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez wants to bring forward the club's matches, which are usually played at night, to the afternoon to boost its international television audience, especially in Asia, sports daily AS reported Thursday.

Perez will try to convince Spanish league officials and television stations to allow Real matches to be staged at 3 pm (1300 GMT) in winter and an hour later in the spring, a move which would likely lead to a drop in ratings for matches in Spain.

But the paper said the change would boost the live global audience for Real matches to 1.8 billion from the current 800 million, due largely to a jump in the number of viewers in Asia who would now be able to watch matches in the evenings.

Real has spent over 200 million euros (280 million dollars) on new recruits, including Kaka

and Cristiano Ronaldo, since Perez returned to the helm of the club last month and he sees the match timetable change as a way to make more profits off of the club's star signings, it added.

Real, like its main rivals Barcelona, have stepped up their marketing efforts in recent years to develop their brand in Asia and repeat the success with English Premier League teams, which play in the afternoon, have had in the region with sales of jerseys and advertising revenues.

Ronaldo and Kaka are very popular throughout Asia. Barcelona's cross-town rivals Espanyol, meanwhile, have signed Japanese international midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura from Celtic in a move seen as an attempt to boost its Asian appeal.

Earlier this month the Tourism Panel, a trade body which groups about 30 major Spanish tourism-related companies, predicted that Real's recruitment of stars like Ronaldo and Kaka would lead a rise in the number of visitors from Asia to Spain.



Real Madrid's Chilean coach Manuel Pellegrini (C) smiles as he looks at his players during their second training session at the Carlton House Hotel in Maynooth on Wednesday.

United touring Asia

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Manchester United warm-up for another assault on the Premier League title with a tour of Asia this week, where Michael Owen is expected to make his debut.

Sir Alex Ferguson's men head for Kuala Lumpur Thursday on a trip that will see them play a Malaysian XI on Saturday before travelling to Jakarta to take on Indonesia on Monday.

They move to South Korea for a match against FC Seoul on July 24 then to Hangzhou in China two days later.

Despite banking 80 million pounds for selling Cristiano Ronaldo to Real Madrid, Ferguson has restricted his summer buying spree to Owen, on a free transfer, Wigan's Antonio Valencia and Bordeaux's Gabriel Obertan.

All three are set to be showcased in a region where Premier League football has a huge following, with an estimated 50,000 fans alone due to watch the team train here on Friday.

For the club it is as much a business trip as pre-season preparations, with significant television revenues earned from Premier League games shown in Asia.

"Our fans in Asia generate money for the club, there are no two ways about it," said United chief executive David Gill, adding that their fanatical Asian support was like nowhere else.

"The reception United get in Asia is unlike anywhere else on earth. You can't leave your hotel room without security because of the sheer number of fans waiting in all parts of the hotel."

For this reason, he said it was worth the long trip.

"It's very important that we give our fans the ability to see the team live every so often," he said.

"The English game is very well followed across Asia, and we have phenomenal support out there, so I think it's only fair and right that we can give something back to these fans."

As well as watching Wayne Rooney, Ryan Giggs and the rest, the fans will want to see Owen in a United shirt after his shock move from Newcastle.

After a sensational start to his career for both Liverpool and England, Owen's form has been in gradual decline due to a succession of serious injuries in recent times.

But Ferguson has shown faith and Owen is keen to prove the doubters wrong.

"I feel like I belong at a top club and I am delighted to be here. I am hungry to do well and put a spring in your step and a smile on your face then nothing will," he said.

After their summer break and in Asia's hot and humid conditions, United are likely to take it easy, although Ferguson insists they will put on a show.

"The players are really looking forward to our Asia tour. For some, the Club World Cup in Japan (last December) was the first time they had experienced the passion generated by the club in Asia and they enjoyed it immensely," he said.

"We know we will get terrific support in each of the locations and we will be going to put on a show for our millions of fans over there."

United last toured Asia in 2007 when they visited China, South Korea, Japan and Macau.

It will be their first time in Malaysia since 2001 and their maiden foray to Indonesia, where the 100,000-seat Bung Karno Stadium is already sold out.



Estudiantes de La Plata captain Veron (R) fights for the ball with Cruzeiro's Bernardo during their Libertadores Cup final at the Mineirao Stadium in Belo Horizonte on Wednesday.

MU reward Gibson

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Manchester United have handed promising Republic of Ireland international Darron Gibson a three-year contract extension, keeping him at the club until 2012.

"I am very happy to commit my future to United," the 21-year-old told the club website, ahead of their arrival in Malaysia for a pre-season tour of Asia that also includes matches in Indonesia, South Korea and China.

"Last season I enjoyed every opportunity and when I got my chance I wanted to prove what I could do. I hope to continue that this season."

Gibson, highly regarded by manager Sir Alex Ferguson, made 14 appearances last season, playing an integral part in United's Carling Cup triumph.

He also scored three goals and Ferguson expects even more this season from the central midfielder, who will be pushing for a regular first team place.

Cole out of US tour

AFP, London

England midfielder Joe Cole will not take part in Chelsea's pre-season tour of the United States after undergoing minor surgery, the Premier League club confirmed on Thursday.

Cole required the operation to correct a small tear to his meniscus in his knee and is expected back in full training in one month.

The midfielder had recently recovered from cruciate ligament damage sustained in January, which ruled him out of the rest of the 2008-09 season.

Chelsea travel to the US on Thursday and will play the opening match of their tour against Seattle Sounders on Saturday.

Lyon agree Bastos fee

AFP, Lyon

Deposed French champions Lyon on Wednesday agreed to pay rivals Lille 18 million euros for Brazilian midfielder Michel Bastos.

The 26-year-old, who will undergo a medical on Thursday, is expected to sign a four-year deal.

Bastos scored 14 goals last season and with his accuracy with free-kicks will be seen as the ideal replacement for fellow Brazilian Juninho who has left for Qatari club Al Gharafa.

Bastos is Lyon's second major recruit of the summer following Argentine striker Lisandro Lopez who arrived from FC Porto for 24 million euros.

Lucio deal not done

Football

AFP, Rome

Bayern Munich's Brazilian international defender Lucio's proposed move to Serie A champions Inter Milan has not been completed, the Italians said on Thursday.

The rebuke from Inter's transfer consultant Gabriele Oriali came after the German club had earlier announced the deal.

"We're negotiating but we don't yet have an agreement," Oriali told Italian news agency Ansa before adding: "Although it could be finalised in a matter of days."

Oriali's claim shot down Bayern's earlier assertion that an agreement has been reached.

"Lucio is moving immediately to Inter Milan," said club president Uli Hoeness, adding

that the hugely experienced defender was set to sign a three-year contract with the Italian outfit.

The fee involved has not been revealed but is believed to be around 10 million euros (14 million dollars), German sports media said.

The 31-year-old captained Brazil to the Confederations Cup title in South Africa earlier this month.

Lucio's departure could herald several more departures from the south German club, Bayern coach Louis Van Gaal suggested.

"I have always said I work with 22 players and three juniors. It is very important for the players to have the chance of taking part in matches and that sometimes does not happen when the team is too big, it is not good for motivation," the Dutchman said. Bayern's first-team squad currently comprises 27 players, so the implication would be that up to five could go before the start of the season.

Eto'o's future uncertain

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona have given their Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o, whose future at the club is uncertain, an extra week of holidays to buy time to negotiate his departure, Spanish media reported Thursday.

The club resume training on Monday but the player will only join up with the team on July 27 along with the six Spanish internationals who took part in the Confederations Cup -- Xavi, Gerard Pique, Sergi Busquets, Carles Puyol and Dani Alves -- as well as Andres Iniesta and Lionel Messi.

Coach Josep Guardiola no longer wants Eto'o in his team and the move is an attempt by the European and Spanish champions to "buy time" to offload the striker who has one year left on his contract, daily La Vanguardia reported.

Guardiola wants to replace the 28-year-old with another striker such as Valencia's David Villa or Atletico Madrid's Diego Forlan, it added.

When he took over as Barcelona coach from Frank Rijkaard last year, he made it clear that he wanted Eto'o, Ronaldinho and Deco to leave, reportedly because of problems that the striker had caused in the dressing room.

Ronaldinho was sold to AC Milan, Deco went to Chelsea but Eto'o stayed at the club because Barcelona did not receive any con-

vincing offers for him -- and history risks repeating itself.

Barcelona reportedly wanted Eto'o, who scored in the Champions League final win over Manchester United, to accept an offer from Manchester City but the player refused and the English club eventually gave up on recruiting him.

Spanish media have indicated wage demands of some ten million euros (14 million dollars) a year were frightening off top clubs.

Barcelona's efforts to recruit Villa have hit a roadblock over money with financially-troubled Valencia refusing to sell the player for less than 50 million euros while the Spanish champions are offering 42 million euros.

The 27-year-old, who has made it clear that he wants to leave Valencia, has offered to pay the difference out of his own pocket, several Spanish newspapers reported Thursday.

Meanwhile, Pablo Forlan, the father of Uruguayan international Diego Forlan has said that his son would like the chance to play at Barcelona.

"Diego is at Atletico, very happy there because he has been treated wonderfully, but without a doubt playing in a team like Barca would interest any player," he told COM radio.

But Atletico president Enrique Cerezo has refused to let the top scorer in the Spanish league last season go.

Barcelona announced Wednesday that it had signed Brazilian left-back Maxwell from Italian side Inter Milan for 4.5 million euros, its first recruitment of this current period.



Lyon's new signing Argentine striker Lisandro Lopez poses with his new jersey in Lyon on Wednesday.