

Ribery's wife contracts swine flu

AFP, Munich

French midfielder Franck Ribery has been quarantined and is training alone at German giants Bayern Munich after it was revealed Tuesday his wife has contracted swine flu.

Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal told a press conference here the 26-year-old Bayern star, who is currently recovering from a knee injury, is training alone after his wife contracted the H1N1 virus.

Ribery is the second Bayern player to be quarantined recently after Germany striker Miroslav Klose was kept in isolation with his wife Sylwia after their four-year-old twin sons Noah and Luan contracted the virus earlier this month.

Bayern Munich play Maccabi Haifa in a Champions League group stage game on Wednesday night, but Ribery is not in the squad as he works on his fitness after suffering with an inflamed knee.

C'Ron ready to return

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid have been dreaming of winning this season's Champions League final at their Santiago Bernabeu stadium but first they need to get out of the group stage and there is still some work to be done going into Wednesday's home match against FC Zurich.

Real lie joint top of Group C alongside AC Milan but Marseille are just a point behind the duo meaning Real need to defeat bottom side Zurich to put one foot in the knockout phase of this season's competition.

Real have moved to the top of the Spanish league table with their best start since the 1991/92 season and have a vital match this Sunday in 'El Clasico' against Barcelona at Camp Nou but for now Europe is the focus.

"The Barcelona game is coming up but before that we have a key match against Zurich and if we win we can put one foot in the next stage of the Champions League," explained Dutchman Royston Drenthe.

Real have lost some of their aura at home in Europe in recent seasons losing 3-2 to AC Milan in this season's competition while Juventus and Liverpool both won at the Bernabeu last season.

Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo is on the recovery road after ten games out with ankle trouble and coach Manuel Pellegrini must decide whether to risk the forward, who is the top-scorer in this season's Champions League with four goals, ahead of the Barcelona match or limit him to a brief run out against Zurich.

"We must go slowly as Cristiano (Ronaldo) has had many days without training," said former legendary Real striker Emilio Butragueno, now working behind the scenes at the club. "It's not enough that the ankle is good it must have the necessary reinforcement to compete."

"Cristiano Ronaldo is a great professional, he is a winner and has a commitment to the club and does everything possible to return, but when he returns he cannot have a relapse."

Despite the absence of Ronaldo, Real have won nine games in 11 games to top the league but coach Pellegrini has still not won over the unforgiving Real crowd who have not been enthralled by the pragmatic winning football which was again on show in Saturday's 1-0 win over Racing Santander.

"We have to improve the football we are playing," admitted Pellegrini. "It was difficult against Racing because we had a two-week break and were coming off the back of the Kings Cup defeat (to Alcorcon)."

Pellegrini has shown he is not afraid to make big decisions, leaving captain Raul - the club's all-time leading goalscorer - on the substitutes' bench for the last three league matches with Gonzalo Higuain and Karim Benzema favoured in attack.

Raul, now 32, will hope to make an impact against Zurich to stake a claim for a place in the starting line-up against Barcelona.

Swiss side FC Zurich caused a few problems for Real in the away game and need to record a historic win in Madrid to have any chance of reaching the knockout phase as they are four points behind the leaders.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo warms up during a training session in Madrid on Tuesday on the eve of their Champions League match against Zurich.

Wigan players offer refund to fans

AFP, Wigan

Wigan's shell-shocked players on Monday offered to refund supporters who travelled to London to watch their side being thrashed 9-1 by Tottenham.

The Latics crashed to the second worst defeat in Premier League history as they conceded eight second-half goals at White Hart Lane on Sunday.

Defender Mario Melchiot admitted the result was embarrassing and, along with the rest of his team-mates, will pay away fans the cost of their tickets.

Melchiot told the club's website, www.wiganlatics.co.uk: "We feel that as a group of players we badly let down our supporters yesterday, and this is a gesture we have to make and pay them back for their tremendous loyalty."

"There is not a lot else to say, just that as a group of professionals we were embarrassed by the way we performed, we feel it was below our standards and this is something we feel we owe to the fans."

"Now we have to draw a line under the game, focus completely on training this week and bounce back on Saturday."

"We are professionals, we will take it on the chin and move on but it's important that we do not take our supporters for granted."

Wigan return to action when they host Sunderland this weekend and the club's owner, Dave Whelan, has insisted that manager Roberto Martinez's job is safe, despite the humiliation at Spurs.

"9-1 is a serious, serious defeat and we have got to get our heads up and I am sure Roberto will be working on the lads now to get them going again and get their heads back in the air and get some pride back in Wigan Athletic," Whelan said.

"He is Wigan's manager and I have complete faith in him and I know the supporters have."

"I am absolutely 100 per cent behind Roberto, he's a great manager and he will pull this team around."

Ref considered quitting

THE GUARDIAN

Martin Hansson, the referee at the centre of the Thierry Henry handball furore, has spoken at length for the first time about his "turbulent" ordeal and admitted he considered retiring during the fallout from the affair.

The 38-year-old Swede failed to see Henry's double-paddle of the ball with his hand, which allowed the forward to then cross for William Gallas to head the extra-time equaliser which sent France to next summer's World Cup finals at Ireland's expense.

Speaking to his local newspaper, Sydstran, Hansson said he hopes to return to high-profile officiating during the final round of Champions League group games next month.

"It has been a turbulent week. I cannot really comment anything about the match, and I'm not the one who decides that. That is FIFA regulations to protect the referees until the investigations are done," he said. "I asked myself if this job is worth all the humiliation I had to face."

"Thoughts like, 'Is this really what I want?' also came up in my head. But now I realise, after all the support I've got, that it wasn't my fault. It was an unlucky situation with big consequences for Ireland. But it wasn't our referee team's fault."

Of his return to refereeing in the Champions League on either 8 or 9 December, he added: "It is good to get a match so soon after all this [France v Ireland flak]."

Hansson also said that directly after the second leg of the playoff in Paris last Wednesday he and his Swedish assistants returned and were offered support. "[On] Thursday we went to Enköping where all Swedish referees had a meeting. There we were offered support. We talked a lot, which felt good. The group got to know what had happened."

Milan, Real on brink

AFP, Paris



Real Madrid and AC Milan have 16 Champions League titles between them but both have work to do on Wednesday if they are to book their places in the next round of this season's competition.

The teams are neck-and-neck on seven points in Group C and will both go through if Real overcome Swiss champions FC Zurich at the Bernabeu and Milan defeat Marseille at the San Siro.

Neither side can afford any slip-ups, though, as Marseille are just a point back in third place with two games remaining.

"This game against Marseille on Wednesday will be very difficult, against a team that plays a bit like us," said Milan's Brazilian boss Leonardo.

"I'm not going to start talking about tactical analysis as that's something we keep to ourselves, but I know everything about Marseille."

Fate drew Real and Milan together at a time when both clubs were reeling from disappointing showings last season, when they were each forced to stand aside as their fiercest rivals swept all before them.

Real, nine-time champions, could only look on aghast as Barcelona romped to a glorious and unprecedented treble, while seven-time winners Milan saw city neigh-

bours Inter cruise to their fourth straight Serie A title.

A summer of soul searching saw new coaches pitch up at both clubs, while new Real manager Manuel Pellegrini was also granted a multi-million euro squad makeover thanks to the chequebook of returning president Florentino Perez.

Three months into the season both sides appear to be back on track, with Milan having bounced up to third place in Serie A after a stuttering start and Real leading La Liga by one point from Barcelona ahead of next weekend's first 'Clasico' of the season at Camp Nou.

Unlike Milan and Real, four-time champions Bayern Munich are staring down the barrel of early elimination as they lie four points behind

Juventus in the battle to nail down the final qualifying place in Group A.

Bayern will be confident of closing the gap at home to winless Israeli outfit Maccabi Haifa on Wednesday, but Juventus visit already-qualified group leaders Bordeaux knowing that victory will take them into the next round.

Juve returned to second place in Serie A by beating Udinese 1-0 on Sunday, but Bayern were held to a 1-1 draw at home to Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen that left them six points off the top in seventh place.

Last season's runners-up Manchester United welcome Turkish champions Besiktas to Old Trafford in Group B, having already guaranteed a place in the knockout phase with a thrilling 3-3 draw at home to CSKA Moscow last time out.

German champions Wolfsburg are three points clear of CSKA in the race for the second qualifying place and travel to the Russian capital needing just a draw to go through.

Chelsea and Porto have already secured their progress from Group D, but the Premier League leaders can secure top spot in the group if they win when the sides meet at the Estadio do Dragao in north-west Portugal.

Atletico Madrid have endured a wretched start to the season and currently lie third-bottom in La Liga but they will make sure of a consolation berth in the Europa League if they win in Cyprus against APOEL Nicosia.

FIXTURES

Wednesday (1945 GMT unless stated)
Group A
Bordeaux (FRA) v Juventus (ITA)
Bayern Munich (GER) v Maccabi Haifa (ISR)
Group B
CSKA Moscow (RUS) v VfL Wolfsburg (GER) (1730)
Manchester United (ENG) v Besiktas (TUR)
Group C
Real Madrid (ESP) v FC Zurich (SUI)
AC Milan (ITA) v Marseille (FRA)
Group D
FC Porto (POR) v Chelsea (ENG)
Apoel Nicosia (CYP) v Atletico Madrid (ESP)



PHOTO: AFP

Porto striker Hulk (L) reaches for the ball during a training session at the Dragao Stadium on Tuesday on the eve of their Champions League tie against Chelsea.

\$1b boost for AFC

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Asian Football Confederation on Tuesday extended its agreement with marketing partner World Sport Group until 2020, delivering an expected one billion dollars in revenue to the AFC.

The new agreement covers the AFC's marquee competitions, which include the Asian Cup in 2015 and 2019, the newly revamped AFC Champions League, and the Asian qualifying rounds for the 2014 and 2018 World Cups.

Other key events include Asian qualifying for the 2016 and 2020 Olympics, as well as the women's Asian Cup, and youth competitions.

"Asian football is scaling new heights and it is AFC's pleasure to renew our tight relationship with WSG, who were the first ones to recognise

the incredible potential of the Asian game," said AFC president Mohamed bin Hammam.

"This is a landmark deal and shows what Asian football is capable of achieving."

"WSG have been steadfast in their commitment to AFC and have played a significant role in popularising the Asian game worldwide. This has been a very productive partnership for both sides."

The Singapore-based WSG has been the exclusive commercial partner of the AFC since 1993 and has helped popularise Asian football through its television distribution network and other media platforms.

Chairman and chief executive Seamus O'Brien said billions of fans were now following Asian football.

"Today, in just over a decade and a half, the value of Asian football has grown ten-fold and it has earned its rightful place on the international stage."

IN BRIEF

Domenech dismisses bonus claims

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech on Monday dismissed claims that he had received a bonus of 862,000 euros for successfully guiding the side to next year's World Cup finals.

The combative 57-year-old - whose team reached the finals in controversial circumstances last Wednesday as Thierry Henry's double handball set up the decisive goal in the 2-1 aggregate victory over the Republic of Ireland - told France Bleu that France Football's claims over his bonus were way over the mark.

"The figure they cite is totally astounding," said Domenech, who has never won over the French fans despite taking the team to the 2006 World Cup final.

"If it really was that, I would be as happy as anything."

"But it is way over the mark. I won't even try and contradict the information because it is their usual editorial line. It is a lie. Money is not my motivation."

"If I was coach of a club, I would be earning 10-times the amount I am at the moment."

"It is not a question of money. It was Roger Lemerre (France coach from 1998-2002) who said that 'We have one function, one real role, to be coach of France, that is enough'. I would do it for free, it is an honour to have such a post."

Toni slams van Gaal

AFP, Berlin

Italian striker Luca Toni on Tuesday revealed his relationship with Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal is at breaking point and admitted he wants to return to Italy to secure his World Cup place.

"For four months, I have had a problem with van Gaal," Toni told Italian television station RAI 3.

Siena sack Baroni, hire Malesani

AFP, Rome

The number of coaching changes in Serie A this season rose to eight on Monday after rock-bottom Siena fired Marco Baroni and hired Alberto Malesani.

Baroni had only been appointed on October 29 after Marco Giampaolo was fired and his tenure lasted just three weeks and three games, two of which were defeats.

The Siena job was his first as a Serie A coach and prior to being given the opportunity he was the club's youth team coach, a role he will probably go back to.

Malesani enjoyed success earlier in his coaching career when at Parma, guiding them to an Italian Cup and UEFA Cup triumph from 1998-2001.

Football

AFP, Paris

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has called an extraordinary general meeting for December 2 following the Thierry Henry handball incident and an ongoing investigation into match-fixing in Europe.

A FIFA statement released by world football's ruling body said Monday: "Due to recent events in the world of football, namely incidents at the play-offs for the 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa, match control (refereeing) and irregularities in the football betting market, the FIFA President has called an extraordinary meeting of the Executive Committee."

The meeting will take place in Cape Town, two days before the draw for the World Cup.

The Henry handball incident left football's reputation - at least as regards the standards of refereeing - in tatters after it effectively cheated Ireland out of a possible place at the World Cup.

France beat the Irish 2-1 on aggregate over two legs of a qualifying playoff last Wednesday however Henry's blatant double handball, which led to their equaliser on the night, proved decisive for France.

Since then the use of video technology at football matches, which FIFA is fundamentally against, is an issue which appears to be gaining support throughout the game.

FIFA last week however ruled they would not bow to the Football Association of Ireland (FAI)'s formal request for a replay of the second leg.

Reacting to the announcement of the extraordinary FIFA meeting, the FAI did not appear to hold out any hope of the idea of a replay being resurrected.

"Should we be asked to make any contribution, the FAI would be happy to do so for the improvement of the game," a statement read.

The cash-rich world of European football meanwhile is reportedly harbouring an organised criminal gang that has made millions of euros by betting in Asian markets on the outcomes of matches they helped to decide.

On Thursday, police raided addresses across

Europe, smashing what they believe is a 200-strong band that has bribed players, referees and coaches in nine countries.

The German Football Federation (DFB) and the German Football League (DFL) announced on Monday the creation of a task force to probe the betting scandal, which has rocked European football.

European football's governing body UEFA called a crisis meeting at their base in Nyon, Switzerland, for this Wednesday and the DFB and DFL will join forces to probe 32 German games out of some 200 which are under suspicion.

Around 200 games played this season in Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Croatia, Slovenia, Turkey, Hungary, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Austria are now under suspicion.

None of the 200 suspected matches were in top flight European leagues like England's Premier League, Italy's Serie A, Spain's La Liga or Germany's Bundesliga.

In Italy on Monday police said they had arrested nine people whom they suspect of illegal betting in Italian football.

Amongst those arrested was the president of third division team Potenza, Giuseppe Postiglione and Pro Vastese sports director Luca Evangelista.

They are accused of being involved in organised crime and of sporting fraud relating to a number of bets placed on matches in the second and third divisions from 2007 to 2009.

One match under investigation is the Serie B encounter between Ravenna and Lecce on April 26, 2008, won 3-1 by the away side, on which Postiglione allegedly placed a bet that won him 86,000 euros.

Giovanni Colangelo, the public prosecutor in Potenza, claimed match-fixing had been taking place.

The 2006 'Calciopoli' match-fixing scandal involved high-profile Serie A teams and resulted in Juventus being relegated to Serie B and stripped of their last two league titles.

AC Milan, Lazio, Fiorentina and Reggina were also punished for their roles in the match-fixing.

Asia split on video tech

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Asian stars and officials are split over the use of video technology in football with one ex-top Saudi player Tuesday expressing fears that it will "kill fan enthusiasm."

Seung-Ryun Woo, a senior official at the Korea Football Association, told AFP he favours the use of video technology in important matches.

"I would prefer an electronic eye. I think referees have too much power," he said.

Ireland failed to qualify because Thierry Henry used his hand to set up the goal. A referee is not God," he added, referring to Henry's handball that put France into the World Cup finals at the expense of Ireland.

The controversy the incident kicked up, along with a probe into match-fixing, has forced FIFA president Sepp Blatter to call a crisis meeting on December 2 ahead of the World Cup draw.

Since the Henry handball, the use of video technology, which FIFA is fundamentally against, has become a hot potato issue that appears to be gaining traction.

Syria captain Firas Al

Khatib said he backed the use of new technology to help referees make decisions.

"Video can be used to help

Tunisia fire coach

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia have sacked coach Umberto Coelho after their failure to qualify for the 2010 World Cup, the Tunisian Football Federation (FTF) announced on Monday.

Faouzi Benzarti was named as Coelho's replacement with the 59-year-old Tunisian taking charge of the country's African Nations Cup campaign in January.

Benzarti is currently coach of Tunis club Esperance and he will combine both club and national duties until his contract with Esperance runs out next June.

Coelho took over from Roger Lemerre, the Frenchman who was himself sacked for lack of results, in 2008. His sacking comes after Tunisia's 1-0 loss to Mozambique eight days ago which shut the World Cup door for the north African country.

Tunisia are in Group D in the January 10-31 African Nations Cup with Cameroon, Gabon and Zambia.

them make the right decision," he said.

Al Khatib, who has been shortlisted for the Asian Football Confederation's Player of the Year award, however said that the use of such equipment should not delay the match as it will hurt players concentration.

Another in favour is Japan's Yasuhiro Endo, who is also in the running for the player of the award, although he admitted it would be difficult to implement.

"We can have video but stoppage time has to be short ... 30 seconds or one minute. If it is too long it could jeopardize the players rhythm," he said.

Against it was former Saudi football star Sami Al Jaber, who warned the introduction of video technology would "kill fan enthusiasm," and may keep them away from stadiums.

"I don't think we should use technology to help the referee as it will remove the natural flow of the game," he said.

"We have to let the natural flow of the sport. This is what the fans want. I want the match to be interesting."

"I believe referees being human beings are doing their best," he said.