



Manchester United midfielder Darron Gibson (R) is about to score one of his two goals against Tottenham Hotspur during their English League Cup encounter at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Diego banned from draw

AFP, Cape Town

Argentina coach Diego Maradona will be thrown out if he tries to attend the World Cup draw here this week, with FIFA Wednesday making clear he was banned.

The foul-mouthed, former great was slapped with a two-month suspension from all football activities last month for his sexually-explicit rant after losing his cool with journalists following Argentina's qualification.

The 49-year-old sporting icon, who skippered the 1986 World Cup-winning team, told journalists to "suck it and keep sucking it".

Virtually all coaches from the 32 qualified teams are expected in Cape Town for Friday's draw and there have been rumours that Maradona may try to be part of Argentina's delegation.

But FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke said he would not be allowed to enter if he turned up.

"There is no way if he asks for accreditation," he said.

"Maradona has been banned from football activities, not just matches, for two months and the draw is in that period of two months. We have been very clear."

"There have been rumours that he could join the Argentinean delegation and I sent a letter to them to say 'be aware he is banned'."

"If Maradona arrives as a journalist for a media company his accreditation will not be issued by FIFA."

"We cannot stop him flying to South Africa but he will not attend the draw."

Maradona's outburst came after Argentina's 1-0 win over Uruguay in October, which allowed the two-time world champions to squeeze narrowly into next year's finals after a low-key and tense qualifying campaign.

Ribery in doubt for Juve clash

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich's France star Franck Ribery said Wednesday although his troublesome left knee is back to full fitness, he is doubtful to face Juventus in next week's crucial Champions League match.

Ribery is facing a fitness race ahead of the December 8 game at Juventus in Turin which Bayern must win to make the knock-out stages of the Champions League.

The 26-year-old has been repeatedly plagued by a knee infection since the season began and while he can now run without pain, he admits he is struggling for the match at Turin's Olympic Stadium.

"I don't have any pain and the knee is good," Ribery told German daily Bild after his first training session with a ball on Tuesday.

"This has been the first time for two months I have trained intensively with a ball."

"But I am pessimistic of my chances of facing Juventus, the last (Bundesliga) game before Christmas against Hertha Berlin is my goal."

Tendinitis in his knee cap means Ribery has not played since October 3, but he expects to be ready to face Hertha on December 19 at Munich's Allianz Arena.

Messi delighted

AFP, Barcelona

Argentina international Lionel Messi said Tuesday he was delighted with the emphatic nature of his Ballon d'Or win.

The Barcelona striker received the biggest percentage of votes since the award for the European player of the year was created in 1956.

"I'm happy to have won the prize and on top of it all by a wide majority. It is really important and beautiful to win it this way," he told a news conference after a morning training session here.

The 22-year-old, whom Cristiano Ronaldo beat into second place last season for the accolade, easily saw off the Portuguese striker this year by 473 points to 233. His Barca teammate Xavi Hernandez finished third with 170.

He also becomes the first Argentine winner of the award decided by a panel of journalists and soccer officials in a vote organised by France Football magazine.

"I'm really happy as well to be the first Argentine player to win the prize. But I have to say that if the existing rules were in place years ago, Maradona would have won it," he added.

The prize was restricted to European footballers until 1995 when the rules were changed to allow players from the rest of the world to be eligible if they played for a European club.

Argentina-born Alfredo Di Stefano won in 1957 and 1959 while at Real Madrid but he had acquired Spanish citizenship by that time while Argentine-born Omar Sivori took the prize in 1961 after he acquired Italian citizenship.

"This prize is a gift for him as well as for the

rest of the team. He is a fair winner. He is a player with another level," said Barcelona coach Josep Guardiola, adding Messi was "resistant, fast, a scorer".

Messi helped Barcelona win the treble of Champions League, the Spanish championship and Spanish Cup last season with his trademark scampering runs off the wing and surges across the area.

He was the top scorer in last year's Champions League with nine goals, including a header in the 2-0 final defeat of Manchester United in Rome.

Messi said he hoped he hoped his form would not dip as has happened with several past winners of the Ballon d'Or after they won the prestigious prize.

"I hope that that does not happen to me and I am confident of maintaining my level and that Barcelona will maintain its form, which is the most important of all," he said.

In September he signed a two-year contract extension which will keep him at the club until 2016. The deal increased his buy-out clause to 250 million euros from 150 million euros.

Spanish media have reported that Messi will earn over 10 million euros a year after tax under the new deal, making him the club's highest-paid player.

Messi joined the Catalan giants as a youth team player from Newell's Old Boys which is based in Rosario, Argentina at the age of 13.

"I've never seen anyone with such humility and good taste for playing football who accepts to play where he's told without ever protesting and with such happiness and love for the club," the current coordinator of Barcelona's youth football, Albert Benaiges, told the club's television station.

'Henry didn't cheat'

AFP, London



France captain Thierry Henry was not behaving immorally when he deliberately handled the ball twice to set up the goal that eliminated the Republic of Ireland from the 2010 World Cup finals said former French coach Gerard Houllier on Tuesday.

The 62-year-old - a failure as national coach seeing France miss out on the 1994 World Cup finals losing their last two matches both at home to lowly Israel and then Bulgaria in the last minute - said that Henry's action during last month's play-off second leg match was not cheating.

"He didn't cheat. It was instinctive," Houllier told BBC radio.

"A lot of the former players in France have condemned what Thierry has done but, at the same time, they said they would have done the same."

"He didn't cross the ball with his hand, he put the ball in on his foot. It's the referee's error," added Houllier, who is now technical director for

the French Football Federation.

Houllier, who has enjoyed more success at club level first with Liverpool where he won five trophies and then at Lyon, said the Henry he knew would not do something like that deliberately and in any case the Irish would not have qualified even if the match had stayed at 1-0 in their favour as it would have gone to penalties.

"Thierry is too honest a person to have done this immorally. It was not premeditated," said Houllier.

"I don't think he'll be punished and even if the goal had not been allowed, they (the Irish) would not have qualified. It would have gone to penalties."

The sport's governing body FIFA's executive committee will meet on Wednesday in Cape Town, South Africa, to consider the incident as part of a disciplinary crackdown.

FIFA could put also more assistant referees on the fields during the World Cup, their president Sepp Blatter said.

"We'll make a decision to have additional officials for the World Cup or not. This is open," he said.

Hertha battle to stay up

AFP, Berlin



Hertha Berlin's general manager Michael Preetz has admitted the Bundesliga's capital club are facing their biggest crisis of the last 12 years as they battle to stay up.

Despite having challenged for the league title last season, Hertha are currently six points adrift at the foot of the Bundesliga table with just one win which came on the opening day of the season.

Since then they have lost 11 of their 14 games with two draws and even before the season's halfway stage, they look set to be relegation candidates at the end of the season next May.

But Preetz, 42, told the club's annual general meeting on Monday night they can survive again having won promotion to the Bundesliga in 1997.

"Hertha are living through probably the biggest sporting crisis since being promoted to

the Bundesliga," said Preetz.

"Many have already written us off. But for me, giving up is taboo."

"We have to stick together."

"We at Hertha rise again and again. And we will do it this time as well. Seven points need to be made up, but we can still do it."

But Preetz faced hostility throughout Monday's meeting from disillusioned Hertha fans and there is little optimism Hertha can avoid relegation from the top flight for the fifth time in the club's history.

The signing of Polish striker Artur Wichniarek from Bielefeld has not been a success with the forward yet to score a goal this season, but Preetz said there will be three million euros (4.5m US dollars) available to sign more players.

Liverpool's Ukraine striker Andrei Voronin has been constantly linked to Hertha since he spent last season on loan in Berlin.

He has failed to fire for the English giants this term and was dropped from the squad for last week's Champions League clash with Hungarian side Debrecen.

Gibson fires champs

AFP, London

Darron Gibson scored twice as reigning champions Manchester United beat Tottenham Hotspur 2-0 at Old Trafford on Tuesday to secure their place in the semifinals of the English League Cup.

In what was a repeat of last season's final, which United won on penalties, Republic of Ireland midfielder Gibson struck twice from the edge of the box in the first-half to put United in control.

Anderson's aggressive run in the 16th minute ended with him laying the ball into the path of Gibson, whose shot into the far corner past Heurelho Gomes gave him his fourth goal of the season.

The 22-year-old Gibson produced an even better finish seven minutes from half-time when, after playing a neat one-two with Danny Welbeck, he curled the ball past Gomes's despairing dive.

Spurs created several chances but lacked a cutting edge up front.

Afterwards United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said he would keep faith with a largely youthful side for the semifinals.

"We're two games away from Wembley, that's good," he told Sky Sports. "We'll enjoy the semi-final and these lads will play again."

Ferguson praised Gibson's performance, saying: "He did well. The second goal particularly, the movement and working off the ball was good and a terrific finish."

"Gibson and Anderson did very well in the middle of the park."

Ferguson had been criticised for fielding a young side last week when United lost to Turkish club Besiktas in the Champions League.

"It was a good team performance following last week," said Gibson.

"We bounced back and the young lads did well. We didn't go out to try and prove anything."

IN BRIEF

MU after Neuer

AFP, Berlin

Schalke 04's German goal keeper Manuel Neuer is being courted by Manchester United as they look to eventually replace Edwin van der Sar, according to a report citing the player's agent Wednesday.

German weekly Sport Bild quoted Neuer's agent, Thomas Kroth, as saying: "We know Manchester United are interested in Neuer."

"Manuel would also like to play with a team that has a better international level."

The 23-year-old Neuer, who has played twice for Germany, has been Schalke's number one keeper since the autumn of 2007 and his current deal with the Bundesliga side expires in 2012.

Although Schalke rebuffed previous offers to sell him, notably one emanating from Bayern Munich, the club are currently in the financial doldrums.

Neuer is said to be valued at 13 million euros, and his transfer would go part way to alleviating their current crisis.

Carlos agrees Corinthians deal

AFP, Sao Paulo

Former Real Madrid and Brazil defender Roberto Carlos has agreed a two-year deal with Sao Paulo-based giants Corinthians, according to radio reports here Wednesday.

Roberto Carlos's contract with Turkish side Fenerbahce ends on December 20 and according to Radio Record the 36-year-old has already agreed to join the Brazilian first division side.

If confirmed, the defender would be playing alongside former Brazil and Real Madrid teammate Ronaldo.

"I'll be able to play in the same team as him (Ronaldo)," Roberto Carlos is quoted as saying.

"I want to be part of the squad that competes in the Copa Libertadores."

Bastian escapes million euro lawsuit

AFP, Munich

Germany midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger has had a claim against him for damages worth nearly a million euros thrown out by a court here on Tuesday.

The 25-year-old Bayern Munich star, who has won 72 caps for his country and scored 19 goals, was facing a claim for 833,000 euros (1.25m US dollars) in damages plus interest for lost commissions from a German lawyer.

The lawyer, who is also the manager of a player advisory firm, claimed that in November 2005 a five-year contract between him and Schweinsteiger to represent the Germany star had been verbally agreed by a handshake.

But the court threw out the claim and the ruling is expected to be confirmed at a later date.

Duo defend payouts

AFP, London



Manchester City and Chelsea defended on Tuesday their combined spending on agents' fees of more than 20 million pounds (33.25 million dollars) in just over a year.

Figures released by the English Premier League on Monday covering the period October 1, 2008 to September 30 2009, showed City, backed by the wealth of UAE-based owner Sheikh Mansour, led the top flight in agent fees spending with an outlay of 12,874,283 pounds (21,411,165 dollars).

Meanwhile Chelsea were second in the agent fees table with 9,562,223 pounds (15,903,690 dollars).

Sheikh Mansour has invested huge sums in City, sanctioning a British record 32.5-million-pound (54.05 million dollars) capture of Robinho and spending in excess of 120 million pounds (199,584,000 dollars) on new players during the pre-season.

But whereas Chelsea, backed by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, lead the Premier League table by five points from champions Manchester United, City are seventh and 14 points off top spot.

City manager Mark Hughes said the amount his club had spent on agents' fees had to be seen in the context of the volume of transfer

activity at Eastlands.

"If you do a lot of deals - and overall something like 35 were included - given the expenditure and the turnover of players involved, you would expect a figure like that," he said.

Many have questioned whether agents are worth the money paid to them but former United striker Hughes said: "There is a role that has to be met and, at the moment, agents fill it."

"Do they provide value for money? You have to base every deal on its merits."

"Sometimes you feel the agent has really done his job, on others you feel he is getting money for nothing."

"At times they can muddy the waters. Some deals can seem quite straightforward and then they become complicated at the end."

"On other occasions the deal goes through very quickly."

Chelsea assistant manager Ray Wilkins added: "I think they are something that are in the game and have been for a long while and we have to deal with it."

"The players obviously feel they are well worth having otherwise they wouldn't have them. Therefore it's something that's there and it's something that we have to get on with."

"I didn't have an agent but they are in our game and we will just cope with that situation," the former Chelsea, United and England midfielder added.

Jurgen rules out return

AFP, Berlin



Former Germany coach Jurgen Klinsmann has ruled out coaching a Bundesliga side again and has brushed off reports that linked him to Rafael Benitez's job at Premier League side Liverpool.

Klinsmann was sacked as coach of Bayern Munich earlier this year after just ten months in charge of the Bundesliga giants.

And while his name is often cited in the German press whenever a coach comes under pressure, the 45-year-old has made it clear he has no interest in coaching a Bundesliga club - now or in the future.

"No, I will not take on a coaching role here," Klinsmann, whose name has been linked to Liverpool in the British media, told German daily Bild.

"And I can't imagine that changing."

"For us it is relatively clear."

"We will not embark on another adventure in the Bundesliga."

Liverpool have admitted that their

American owners made an approach to Klinsmann behind Benitez's back last year, but the German dismissed any talk of a role on Merseyside by adding: "There are always rumours."

Klinsmann will be a pundit for German television channel RTL during next summer's World Cup, but has said he has little interest in returning to domestic football after his dismissal from Bayern Munich last April.

A poor string of results saw him dismissed from his first domestic coaching role having guided Germany to third at the 2006 World Cup, but his replacement in Munich, Louis van Gaal, is faring little better.

Klinsmann said he has spent time thinking about his time in charge of Bayern.

"I learnt a lot. I have thought about my time at Bayern and worked out what happened there," said the former striker.

Klinsmann took over at Munich in the summer of 2008, but was sacked as his side lay three points off the league lead, while van Gaal's Bayern are currently six points behind leaders Bayer Leverkusen.

Munich must win at Juventus next Tuesday to guarantee their place in the Champions League's knock-out stages.

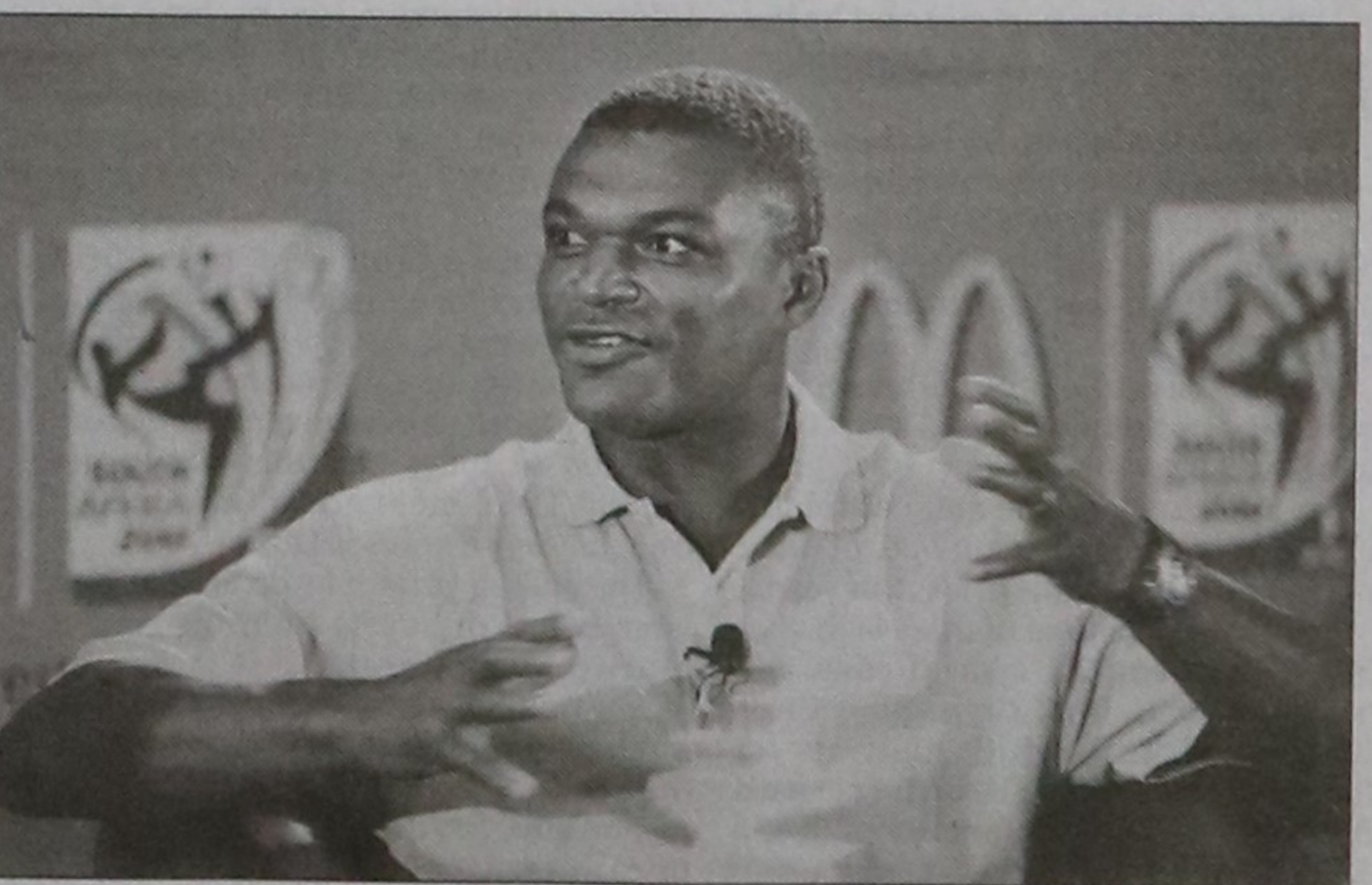


PHOTO: AFP

Former French player Marcel Desailly takes part in a promotional event for US burger chain McDonald's to announce a global sponsorship partnership with the FIFA World Cup in Cape Town on Wednesday.