

Catania appoint Mihajlovic

AFP, Rome

Serbian Sinisa Mihajlovic has been appointed the new coach of Catania after Gianluca Atzori became the ninth Serie A coaching casualty this season.

Mihajlovic has signed a contract until June 2011, according to the Sicilian club.

A former international defender, Mihajlovic played for Roma, Sampdoria, Lazio and Inter Milan during his career, winning two league titles while he also lifted the European Cup with Red Star Belgrade in 1991.

Following his playing career he was Roberto Mancini's assistant at Inter for two years before taking up his first head coaching role at Bologna last season, although he lasted only five months.

Atzori replaced Walter Zenga at Catania at the beginning of the season for his first Serie A job after only one season of coaching Ravenna in the third tier of Italian football.

However Catania sit second bottom in the table and on Sunday lost 3-2 at rock bottom Siena, leaving them three points from safety and resulting in the end of Atzori's Serie A career after just 15 matches.

He thus became the eighth Serie A coach to be sacked this season while Luciano Spalletti also walked out on AS Roma.

Fergie denies Dzeko speculation

AFP, Berlin

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has poured cold water on speculation the English giants are set to bid for Wolfsburg's Edin Dzeko on the eve of the sides' Champions League clash.

The 23-year-old hit 26 goals in 32 Bundesliga games last season to attract the attention of Europe's top sides, but Ferguson says United are not interested ahead of Tuesday's clash at Wolfsburg's Volkswagen Arena.

"Whenever someone plays well against us, we are supposedly ready to buy him the next day, but at the moment we have no interest in Dzeko," said the 67-year-old Scot.

Bosnia and Herzegovina star Dzeko scored the opening goal last September when United had to come from behind to beat the German champions 2-1 at Old Trafford on their way to leading Group B.

Wolfsburg are currently second in the table and must win to be sure of reaching the Champions League's last 16 with Manchester leading the group on 10 points while the Germans are on seven.

Russian side CSKA Moscow are also on seven ahead of their clash with Turkish club Besiktas, who have four points, in Istanbul on Tuesday.

Cantona calls identity debate stupid

AFP, Paris

French soccer hero Eric Cantona stuck his boot into the sensitive debate on national identity on Tuesday, deriding what he called the "stupid" nationalist approaches to the issue.

"Being French, does that mean having to speak French, sing the Marseillaise? That's just stupid," the retired France and Manchester United striker told reporters.

"I'm not saying that singing the Marseillaise is stupid, but building the whole debate on that is," added Cantona, who is a son of Spanish and Italian immigrants.

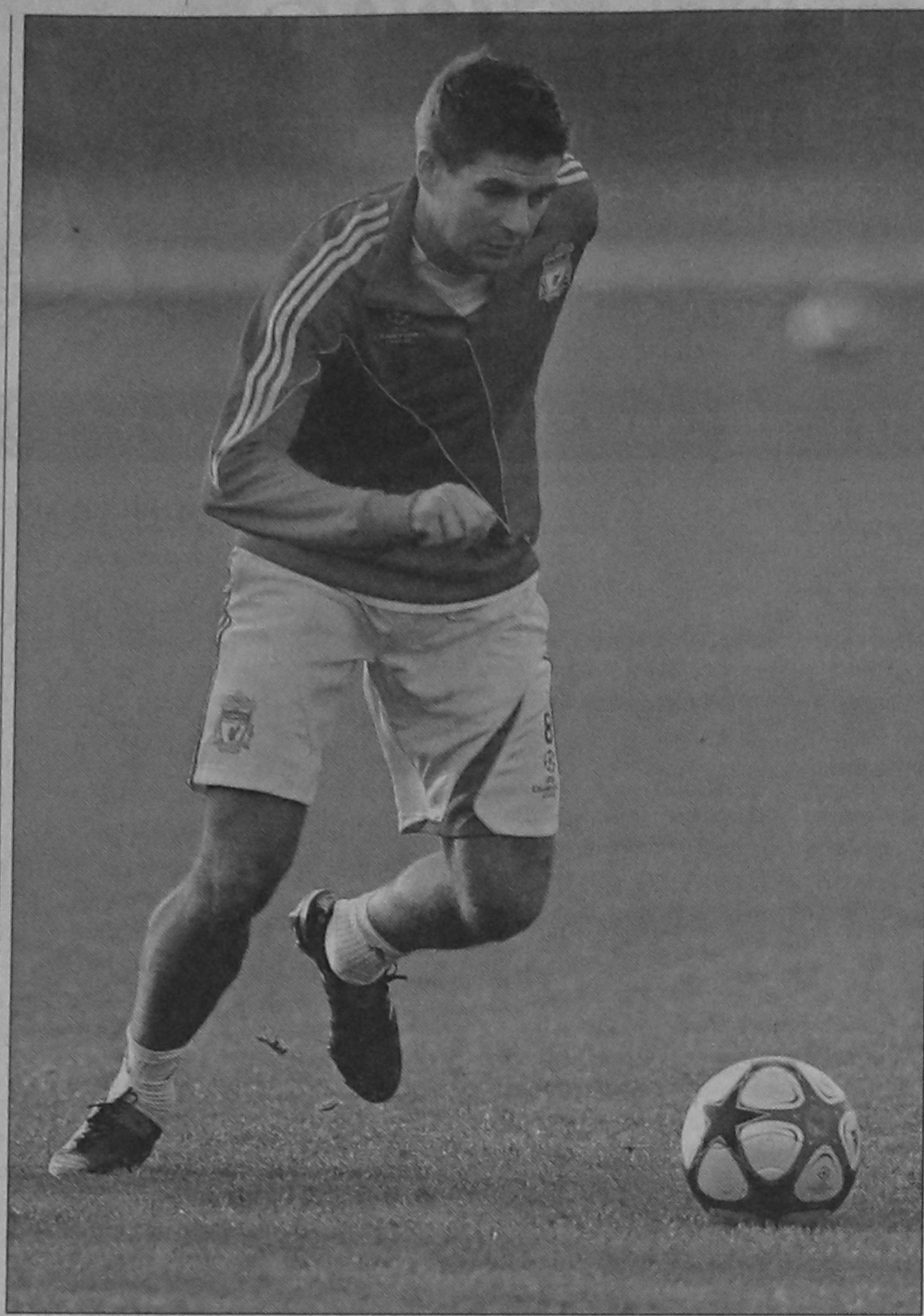
The singing of the national anthem has become a hot topic in France, after several incidents when football fans of North African origin booed while it was sung at international football matches.

Immigration Minister Eric Besson has called for it to be sung in schools.

Speaking at the launch of a book of photographs he has taken of homeless people and poverty in France for a Catholic charity, Cantona urged the French to stand up for the deprived.

"Being French means being revolutionary... We cannot accept everything that's happening," he said, criticising what he sees as his compatriots' current passivity in the face of France's social problems.

"We are getting used to this system, to there being people living in the street," he said.



Liverpool star Steven Gerrard runs with the ball during a training session at their Melwood training ground on Tuesday ahead of their Champions League match against Fiorentina tonight.

Ancelotti backs duo

AFP, London



Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti has backed goalkeeper Petr Cech and Frank Lampard to bounce back from being blamed for the club's defeat to Manchester City at the weekend.

Cech was criticised for allowing Carlos Tevez to score City's winner from a 25-yard free-kick while Lampard has been under the spotlight for having an 83rd-minute spot-kick saved by Shay Given.

But Ancelotti shrugged off both incidents as minor blips and insisted Chelsea had played reasonably well at Eastlands.

"This season, I think Cech did very well," the Italian said. "I like him. He takes the responsibility and likes to come out and catch the ball in the box."

"He could do better if you ask me about the free-kick on Saturday. I think the goalkeeper has to stay on his post and, if the player puts the ball over the wall and in, we have to congratulate him."

"Even a good goalkeeper can make a mistake sometimes but this season Petr has been doing very well."

Ancelotti added: "I can say that, at our

training ground, Lampard is the player who practices penalties more than any other player."

With Chelsea having already won their group in the Champions League, Ancelotti has the option of resting key players for Tuesday's clash with Apoel Nicosia.

Captain John Terry could be allowed to rest a sore knee while Michael Ballack and Ashley Cole are struggling with ankle and knee problems respectively.

APOEL have yet to win a match in group D but their coach, Ivan Jovanovic, insisted they have learned from their experience amongst Europe's elite this season.

"Chelsea are the best team in this group," said Jovanovic. "They are certainly one of the teams capable of winning the tournament."

"We will try our best as we have done in every game we have played this season."

"My team has exceeded itself. We will try and do the same tomorrow and hope for the best possible result. Our progress in the last six months is what we will take out of this Champions League experience."

"We will try to do everything to be here again next year. It is the greatest recognition we have had."

Juve punished again

AFP, Rome



Juventus were on Monday fined for the second time this season for chanting their fans directed against Inter Milan's black striker Mario Balotelli.

Juve were hit with a 25,000-euro penalty just a couple of weeks after they were fined 20,000 euros following a match against Udinese.

Both times it was the Italian under-21 striker of Ghanaian origin who bore the brunt of the fans' wrath.

Italy's sporting judge deemed the chants to have constituted "racial discrimination" and said they had been directed against two Inter players, presumably meaning the other one was

either Cameroon's Samuel Eto'o or Muntari Sulley of Ghana.

AFP's reporter at the game was not aware, however, of any chants of a racial nature or of anyone other than Balotelli being targeted.

Some sections of Juve fans sang: 'if you jump up and down Balotelli will die' and 'you're nothing but a piece of shit'.

However, many more fans tried to drown out those chants with boos and jeers, although at times it was difficult to fathom whether Balotelli himself was being jeered or if it was those chanting.

The sporting judge said the level of fine had been reduced "because the club took concrete measures to help the forces of order and to prevent such deplorable behaviour".

He added that other fans had "demonstrated their disapproval of that behaviour".

Last year Juventus were forced to play a match behind closed doors after chants of "a black man can't be Italian" were heard during the corresponding fixture against Inter.

Juve midfielder Felipe Melo, who was sent off on Saturday after a clash with Balotelli, and Inter coach Jose Mourinho, dismissed for protesting Juve's first goal, both received one-match suspensions.

Meanwhile, Roma and Lazio were both hit with 40,000-euro fines after their fans set off flares and bangers during Sunday's Rome derby, forcing the match at the Stadio Olimpico to be suspended for several minutes just after the start.

Serb president fined 400 euros

AFP, Belgrade



A Serbian court fined President Boris Tadic 400 euros (593 dollars) for drinking champagne, in contravention of an alcohol ban in football stadiums, to toast Serbia's World Cup qualification.

Tadic pleaded guilty to uncorking the champagne in a VIP lounge at the Red Star Belgrade stadium after Serbia's October 10 victory

over Romania which qualified them for the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa.

Before the fine was handed down on Monday, Tadic told the court that he was unaware that drinking alcohol had been banned at football games.

"I did not know that consumption of alcohol, even if only for a toast, has been forbidden so I fully take responsibility for the violation," Tadic told the court.

"I take over responsibility and believe that, as every citizen, I should pay a fine or

serve a sentence, whatever is the verdict."

Along with Tadic, other officials including Serbia's Football Association chief Tomislav Karadzic were fined 400 euros for violating a law aimed at preventing violence at sports events.

The law prohibits the sale or consumption of alcohol in stadiums and arenas during and 90 minutes after a match.

In past months, Serbia has seen a surge in extremist violence, notably by ultranationalist extremist groups and football hooligans.

Barca can secure passage

AFP, Paris



Holders Barcelona can secure a place in the Champions League knockout stage even if they lose at Dynamo Kiev on Wednesday, but Inter Milan face a winner-takes-all home encounter with Rubin Kazan.

All four teams in Group F will go into their final group games with hopes of going through, but it is pool leaders Barcelona who hold the strongest hand.

Pep Guardiola's side have slipped into top gear in recent weeks, defeating Inter 2-0 in their last Champions League assignment and edging domestic rivals Real in the first 'Clasico' of the season.

"This is the biggest game of our season so far and it will define the rest of our season," said Guardiola after his side's 3-1 win at Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday evening.

"I'm confident that we will perform well. We cannot go out of Europe and we have to finish top of our group."

Barca can afford to lose by any two-goal scoreline other than 2-0 in Kiev, due to their 2-0

victory over the Ukrainians in the reverse fixture, while a 0-0 or 1-1 draw will be enough for Inter at home to freshly crowned Russian champions Kazan as long as Dynamo do not win.

Inter's lead at the top of Serie A was cut to four points when they lost 2-1 at Juventus on Saturday but they will be bolstered by the return to fitness of Dutch midfielder Wesley Sneijder.

"We are disappointed because we wanted to win the big game against Juventus," said Inter's Brazilian international goalkeeper Julio Cesar.

"However, we still have a four-point advantage in the league and now we have to think about the UEFA Champions League game on Wednesday. It's like a final for us and we are ready for it."

Liverpool's catastrophic exit from the competition made the headlines in Group E, with Fiorentina travelling to Anfield on Wednesday knowing that victory will secure top spot in the group ahead of Lyon.

With Liverpool already assured of a place in the Europa League, coach Rafael Benitez is likely to use the visit of the Viola to test the fitness of Fernando Torres and hand a first start to Italian summer signing Alberto

Aquilani.

"Hopefully Torres will be ready this week - I don't know if he will play or be on the bench," said Benitez.

"Aquilani will maybe start the game, we are considering this."

Should Fiorentina fail to beat Liverpool, Lyon must win by two goals at home to the group's bottom side Debrecen to snatch top spot and secure a potentially favourable draw in the last 16.

Romanians Unirea Urziceni will qualify for the knockout phase in their first ever

FIXTURES

Wednesday

(all matches 1945GMT)

Group E
Liverpool (ENG) v Fiorentina (ITA), Lyon (FRA) v Debrecen (HUN)

Group F
Dynamo Kiev (UKR) v Barcelona (ESP), Inter Milan (ITA) v Rubin Kazan (RUS)

Group G
Sevilla (ESP) v Rangers (SCO), VfB Stuttgart (GER) v Unirea Urziceni (ROM)

Group H
Olympiakos (GRE) v Arsenal (ENG), Standard Liege (BEL) v AZ Alkmaar (NED)

Champions League season if they draw at Stuttgart in Group G.

The German side sacked coach Markus Babel over the weekend after a 1-1 draw at home to fellow strugglers Bochum left them third from bottom in the Bundesliga.

Babel was swiftly replaced by Swiss coach Christian Gross, who must inspire his charges to victory over Dan Petrescu's side if they are to reach the next stage.

"I am here to save what is left to save," Gross said at his introductory press conference. "I want to take the team back onto the path of success."

Group leaders Sevilla will seal top spot with a point at home to Rangers, who were knocked out of European competition altogether when they lost 2-0 at home to Stuttgart in their last game.

Arsenal sewed up Group H with a 2-0 win at home to Standard Liege last time out and Arsene Wenger's men travel to an Olympiakos side that needs a point to progress.

Dutch champions AZ Alkmaar, who sacked coach Ronald Koeman at the weekend, cannot make the next round but will take the Europa League qualifying spot with victory at Standard Liege.

IN BRIEF

Real, Barca sweep FIFA nominees

AFP, Paris

Spanish giants Barcelona and Real Madrid have swept the list of five nominees for the 2009 FIFA World Player of the Year award.

Barcelona are represented by Spanish midfielders Andres Iniesta and Xavi along with Argentine playmaker Lionel Messi, the strong favourite for the award to be handed out on December 21.

Real Madrid are present thanks to the inclusion of Brazilian Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo, the Portugal international who won the award last year when in Manchester United colours.

The quintet have emerged from an initial 23-strong shortlist with voting restricted to the coaches and captains of national selections.

WC village for German fans

AFP, Berlin

The German Football Federation (DFB) is offering fans their own World Cup village for next June's tournament in South Africa.

The DFB has completely booked a university campus in Pretoria and for 55 euros per night (81 US dollars) members of the DFB's fan club will have a base for the tournament which runs from June 11 to July 11.

Germany will open their 2010 World Cup campaign in Group D against Australia on June 13 in Durban.

The DFB are also offering flights from Munich and Frankfurt to South Africa for 1200 euros (1780 US dollars) and the German World Cup village will have a large public viewing area for fans without tickets to watch the games.

Toni to return to Italy

Football

AFP, Rome

Bayern Munich's Italian striker Luca Toni has claimed he will be returning to Italy while his coach insisted he would not try to stop him.

Toni moved to the Bavarian giants in 2006 after winning the World Cup with Italy in Germany.

But after three successful seasons he has found himself left out in the cold by new coach Louis van Gaal for most of this campaign and his repeated outbursts against his coach have seen him left in limbo.

But in an interview to be published on Wednesday in Chi magazine, Toni affirmed that he is coming home, presumably during January's transfer window.

"I miss everything about my country: the fans, my friends, my mum. I don't yet know which team I will play for but I'm sure I'll be coming back to Italy," he said.

"I've made some mistakes here in Germany and I regret them. Those mistakes have cost me my place at the World Cup in South Africa, even if I still hold some hope that (Italy coach Marcello) Lippi will call me."

"But whatever happens, I won't let myself be beaten down, my desire to play is still strong."

"I'll only stop playing when I no longer feel any emotion on the pitch, which is not yet the case."

Toni, who was the top scorer in the German Bundesliga in 2007-08, admitted to having problems with his coach -- he has already been hit with a 25,000-euro fine for one outburst.

Van Gaal, for his part said ahead of Bayern's clash with Juventus on Tuesday that he has nothing against seeing the back of Toni.

"I've already said it a couple of weeks ago and I'll repeat it so you can all hear it directly from my mouth, I think a player should respond according to the club's needs," said the Dutchman.

"Hence when you are part of a club you should act in that club's interests but when a player doesn't want to do so, I'll do nothing to convince him to stay."

Domenech bonus claims resurface

AFP, Paris



Raymond Domenech was in line to receive 826,222 euros in bonuses as a result of France's successful World Cup qualifying campaign, according to a report to be published in Le Monde on Tuesday.

Figures from the French Football Federation (FFF) showed that the France coach should receive 198,000 euros for the 2008-09 season and 328,222 for the current 2009-10 season, with a further 300,000 euros in image rights for both campaigns.

A player who participated in all of the France international matches that took place during the same period stood to receive 563,111 euros.

"Every qualifying match gives rises to a guaranteed minimum of 10,000 euros for each player called up, no matter what the result is," said Le Monde.

"To this fixed amount is added an additional bonus, as an incentive to qualification, of between 100,000 and 240,000 euros depending on the number of appearances the player has made."

"Another format applies for friendly matches: the bonus is unique but depends on the FIFA ranking of the opponent and the result of the match (18,000 euros for a victory over a team ranked among the top 10 in the world, 9,000 euros for a draw)."

"The coach benefits from a double share due to an existing arrangement in place since the 1998 World Cup."

The bi-weekly magazine France Football claimed on November 20 that Domenech would receive 862,000 - a figure the coach himself described as "completely astounding".

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

"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."

Advocaat joins Alkmaar

AFP, The Hague

Belgium coach Dick Advocaat has been given the green light by the Belgian football federation to take the reins at Dutch champions AZ Alkmaar "for some months".

Advocaat will replace Ronald Koeman as coach of Alkmaar and will likely start work with the club on Thursday, a day after its Champions League match against Standard Liege.

Koeman was sacked on Saturday just six months after his appointment as successor to Louis van Gaal, now with Bayern Munich.

Advocaat, who counts stints at PSV Eindhoven, Rangers, Borussia Moenchengladbach, Zenit Saint-Petersburg and the Dutch national team on his CV, was named Belgium coach in August and is under contract until 2012.

He will now combine both coaching roles, something that has caused a stink in the Belgian media.

But the Belgian federation said it will ask for financial compensation from Alkmaar.



Sevilla players run during a training session in Sevilla on Tuesday on the eve of their Champions League encounter against Glasgow Rangers.