

Sorry Ballack: Ghanian Fed

AFP, Berlin
The Ghanian football federation on Wednesday apologised to Germany skipper Michael



Germany captain Michael Ballack walks on crutches as he attends a training session in Sicily on Tuesday. Ballack has been forced out of the World Cup due to an ankle injury.

Ballack for the tackle which ended his World Cup dreams. Chelsea star Ballack was ruled out of the finals after a scan revealed torn ligaments in his ankle following a heavy tackle by Portsmouth's Germany-born Ghanaian Kevin-Prince Boateng during Sunday's FA Cup final win.

"We're sorry that Michael Ballack cannot take part in the World Cup. He is well known in Ghana. We wish him all the best and hope that he can play again as soon as possible," Ghanaian team director Anthony Baffoe told the German newspaper Kolner Express on behalf of his federation.

Ghana play Germany in their final group match at the World Cup and Baffoe said Boateng's participation in this game was yet to be decided.

Analyst picks England

AFP, London

England will win the World Cup this summer after overcoming their traditional Achilles heel to beat Spain on penalties in the final, according to "lighthearted" analysis by JP Morgan on Wednesday.

The US bank's number crunchers have applied complex quantitative analysis -- more normally used to assess investment opportunities -- to the 32 teams in the tournament in South Africa, which kicks off on June 11.

JP Morgan says Brazil are the strongest team but predicts they will crash out to the Netherlands after a penalty shootout in the quarterfinals.

The model sees Wayne Rooney's England knocking out the Dutch in the semi-finals before conquering Spain in the final, winning in a penalty shootout -- the method which has so often been their downfall.

While England's predicted victory may not be too far-fetched, even the most ardent fans of minnows Slovenia will have trouble believing JP Morgan's prediction that they will reach the semifinals before losing to Spain.

The model, set out in a 69-page report, uses the straightforward bookmakers' odds and FIFA rankings and measures factors such as price trends and investors' sentiment.

The two analysts who came up with the model, Matthew Burgess and Marco Dion, said it was just "an ideal opportunity to lightheartedly explain quantitative techniques".

But Spain, the bookmakers' favourites, can probably take the findings with a pinch of salt -- quantitative analysis was widely criticised for failing to predict the financial crisis.

Arsenal vow to keep Cesc

AFP, London

Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood has told Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas to forget about joining Barcelona during the close-season.

Reports in England on Wednesday claim Fabregas has told Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger that he wants to leave the Premier League club and return to Spanish champions Barca.

Fabregas, who began his career in Barca's youth academy before joining Arsenal aged 16, is believed to have met with Wenger at Arsenal's training ground on Tuesday to inform him of his desire to move to the Nou Camp.

It is thought the Spain midfielder has grown tired of Arsenal's failure to win a single major trophy over the last five seasons and would relish the opportunity to link up with the likes of Lionel Messi, Xavi and Andres Iniesta at Barcelona.

Josep Guardiola's team are ready to make an offer of around 30 million pounds for Fabregas, with The Sun reporting that a friend of Fabregas said: "Cesc has demanded of Arsenal that they accept the sale if Barcelona present a formal offer."

Fabregas, 23, recently admitted it was his dream to play for the club he supported as a boy and he has made it clear he wanted his future resolved before next month's World Cup.

But Arsenal will be loath to lose their prize asset after another season of underachievement and Hill-Wood insists the Catalan club would be wasting their time if they do make a bid for Fabregas.

He told The Daily Star: "We are not remotely interested in selling him."

CORRECTION

In Wednesday's issue of the World Cup Quiz Round 1, there was a printing mistake in one of the three answers of the No 4 question. We have changed it accordingly. We regret the error. We would also like to announce that the entries of Wednesday's issue will be valid as long as the correct answer is marked or written down.

'I get no respect'

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho refused to speculate on his future but did explain on Tuesday why he is unhappy in Italy.

Inter are preparing for their biggest match in 38 years as they face Bayern Munich in the Champions League final in Madrid on Saturday - their first final in this competition since 1972.

But all anyone seems to want to know in the build up is who the Portuguese will be coaching next year, with Real Madrid the big favourites to sign him.

But without revealing what he will do, Mourinho said the only thing pushing him away from Italy is a lack of respect.

"It's not a problem with my contract or money, in fact I'm a bit ashamed about how much I earn given there's a crisis," he said.

"It's a problem with personal satisfaction, feeling respected or not in a football country in which I have had many problems.

"I won't change what I've said a few days ago: it's not true that I'm the Real coach.

"After the final I want to take two or three days to think calmly about my future.

"Obviously Inter could not do any more to make me feel happy and valued. The players are fantastic, I have empathy with the fans, everyone

at the club is fantastic."

His players have said they want to win the Champions League to try to convince Mourinho to stay but the former Chelsea and Porto boss said that won't make any difference.

"Saturday's result won't count for anything, it won't change my knowledge that I've done everything possible.

"Inter don't owe me anything and I don't owe them anything either because I've given everything."

"I'm calm, the result won't influence the decision I'll take on my future.

"As for my successor, the club chose me and it was a good choice and when the time comes to make a new choice, they'll do that well too.

"After the final I will think about my future. I have to think about it but I've not yet done so.

"Right now I'm the Inter coach and I have a contract until 2012 or 2013, I don't remember which (2012).

"I don't want to talk about my successor because it might be me.

"The human dimensions of the players help a lot in constructing the strength of the coach.

"The people who play in this team have made me a better coach and they will do so again with someone else."

Mourinho also revealed that Inter have brought forward their travel plans to Madrid by two days due to the volcano erupting in Iceland.

Instead of flying out on Friday, they will do so on Wednesday.

Plain sailing for Italians

AFP, Rome



World Cup holders Italy will be expecting nothing less than plain sailing in South Africa next month in a Group F where they are the clear favourites.

A pairing with New Zealand, Paraguay and debutants Slovakia makes comfortable viewing for a team that has been anything but brilliant since lifting the world crown for a fourth time in Germany four years ago.

Slovakia will be making their first ever appearance and New Zealand only their second, their first being back in 1982 when they lost all three matches.

The toughest prospect will undoubtedly be Paraguay, who battled through tough South American qualifiers to reach the World Cup for the fourth time in a row and eighth time in total, but have never been beyond the second round.

But while Italy will be the undoubted favourites to win the group, all three of their opponents will fancy their chances of reaching the next round.

For all three there were much tougher prospects out there and the likelihood is that there will be quite a battle for the runners-up spot in the group.

As for Italy, they come into this with a 100 per cent record against their three opponents.

However, that constitutes only four matches in total and little should be read into it.

Their only previous meeting with Slovakia was back in 1998 and a 3-0 win in a home friendly in Catania but Slovakia have come on in leaps and bounds since then.

There are few surprises in the provisional 30-man squad named by Italy coach Marcello Lippi last week as he included ten players from their triumph in Germany with Villarreal striker Giuseppe Rossi the only new name.

The Azzurri are scheduled to arrive in South Africa on June 9 ahead of their Group F opener with Paraguay in Cape Town on June 14.

Paraguay have been beaten twice by Italy but one of those was back in 1950 at the World Cup in Brazil and the other one also in 1998, a 3-1 friendly victory in Parma.

However, this Paraguay team is another heading in the right direction and led the South American qualifying group from beginning almost to the end when Brazil finally overtook them.

As for New Zealand, Italy have already had their fingers almost burned once by the Antipodeans having had to come back

from a goal down three times in a pre-Confederations Cup friendly in Pretoria last June before two Vincenzo Iaquinta goals in the last 22 minutes earned the world champions a narrow 4-3 win.

Midfielder Aaron Clapham (Canterbury United) was the main surprise when New Zealand named their 23-man squad as coach Ricki Herbert said there were some tough choices made ahead of the All Whites' first appearance in the World Cup finals since 1982.

"I'm not one to usually have sleepless nights but this has been a very difficult job settling on the final pieces of the jigsaw," said Herbert, who played in the 1982 World Cup for New Zealand.

The core of the team includes six other Europe-based professionals in Rory Fallon of Plymouth, Chris Killen (Middlesbrough), Michael McGlinchey (Motherwell), Winston Reid (FC Midtjylland), Tommy Smith (Ipswich Town) and Chris Wood (West Bromwich Albion).

The squad will travel to Melbourne for a match against Australia on May 24 before going to Europe for warm-up matches against Serbia and Slovenia.

It may look easy on paper, but as Italy coach Marcello Lippi warned: "The more you think a group will be easy the more difficult it becomes."

Fergie backing Henry's MLS chances

AFP, New York

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson says he thinks Thierry Henry and America's Major League Soccer would be a good fit.

Henry's agent, Darren Dein, said this week "speculation is premature" that the 32-year-old French captain Henry would join the New York Red Bulls after the World Cup.

Henry has one season remaining in his contract with Barcelona, but he started just 15 league games in the season.

Speaking at a news conference Tuesday, Ferguson said Henry would be a success in America's professional league.

"He's not a deteriorated player by any manner or means," Ferguson said. "He's still a very, very competent player. Maybe he doesn't have the blinding pace he had five years ago, but he's still quick. And he's experienced."

Barca seal Villa deal

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona have reached a deal to sign Spanish international striker David Villa for four years from cash-strapped Valencia for 40 million euros (49.4 million dollars), the two clubs said Wednesday.

The 28-year-old, Valencia's top scorer in La Liga with 21 goals in the campaign just ended, will be officially unveiled on Friday at the Camp Nou after undergoing a medical, Barcelona said in a statement.

Villa was the fourth best scorer in the Spanish league in the 2009-10 season behind Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Real Madrid's Gonzalo Higuain and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Under the deal Barcelona, who won their second consecutive league title on Sunday, will have the option of keeping Villa for a fifth season.

"We think it is a good sale and necessary given the economic situation of the club," Valencia president Manuel Llorente told a news conference at Valencia's Mestalla stadium.

"As everyone knows we could have done this deal last year but we thought at that moment it was best to keep our squad together to try and get into the Champions League. We have achieved that aim and finished third in the league."

Valencia are saddled with debts of over 500 million euros. The club put off plans to build a new stadium after failing to find a buyer for their existing stadium due to the collapse of Spain's once-booming property sector.

Villa had been coveted last year by both Barcelona and arch-rivals Real Madrid but the Catalan club finally secured the services of Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic from Inter Milan in a deal which saw Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o move to the Italian side.

The striker joined Valencia from Zaragoza for 12 million euros in 2005. During his five seasons at Valencia he scored a total of 107 goals in 166 league matches.

Villa was the top scorer at Euro 2008 with four goals despite missing Spain's 1-0 victor over Germany in the final due to injury.

He is a regular in Spain's national team, having scored 36 times in 55 appearances, and is expected to make a big impact at the World Cup in South Africa next month.

Burglary hit Paraguayans

AFP, Grenoble

The Paraguayan World Cup finals squad had 110,000 dollars in cash stolen from a hotel room in Evian-les-Bains where they are holding a preparatory camp ahead of next month's finals in South Africa according to a source close to the investigation.

The theft took place on Monday according to the source when the thief - said to be of Paraguayan appearance and dressed in sports attire - pretended to be a member of the Paraguayan delegation.

The man had a key to one of the rooms which he showed at the reception desk and claimed he was having trouble with the safe in that room - the staff helped him gain access, and he subsequently fled the scene after taking the money.

The investigators want to know how the thief came by the key to the room and how come he was so well-informed about what rooms the Paraguayans were staying in.

Spain start favourites

AFP, Paris



Spanish football is riding the crest of a wave following Spain's Euro 2008 victory and the record-breaking achievements of Barcelona in 2009, and La Roja are among the favourites for the World Cup.

Having been drawn alongside Honduras, Chile and Switzerland in Group H, they look well placed to make the last 16, where Brazil, Portugal and Ivory Coast are all potential opponents if they top their group.

Their best previous performance was a fourth-place finish in 1950 but in players like goalkeeper Iker Casillas, midfield magicians Xavi and Andres Iniesta and lethal strikers David Villa and Fernando Torres they possess the kind of quality that emerges only once in a generation.

Spain qualified with a flawless record, winning all 10 matches in their European qualifying group, but coach Vicente Del Bosque feels that will count for nothing when the tournament gets underway.

"We don't know, destiny is impossible to predict," he said in March.

"The key will be to prepare as well as we possibly can for the battle ahead, because we'll come up against very, very strong opponents. This includes those teams who aren't going into the finals among the favourites."

Rafael Callejas, head of the Honduran football federation, said much preparation lay ahead for his team, ranked 40th in the world and set for only their second World Cup participation after

their 1982 appearance, when they went out in the first round.

"We face very high-level teams in Spain, Switzerland and Chile," he said. "Honduras must prepare itself very well."

Fellow Hispanophones Chile, ranked 15th by FIFA, make a return to the World Cup after a 12-year absence.

Coached by enigmatic Argentine Marcelo Bielsa, Chile qualified behind Brazil in the South American zone and boast an exciting young generation of stars headed by Udinese forward Alexis Sanchez, Boca Juniors defender Gary Medel and Sporting Lisbon playmaker Matias Fernandez.

"I think that Spain are the toughest team in the group, no disrespect to the other sides," said Chile winger Mark Gonzales.

"To be honest, it's going to be very hard to compete for first place but we'll be looking to finish at least second and qualify for the next round. Obviously the games against Honduras and Switzerland will be crucial."

Making up Group H are Switzerland, who reached the last 16 in 2006 before falling on penalties to Ukraine.

They overcame a shocking 2-1 defeat to minnows Luxembourg to top their pool in European qualification.

The team, now coached by German Ottmar Hitzfeld, features a healthy blend of youth and experience, combining talented younger players such as Eren Derdiyok, Tranquillo Barnetta and goalkeeper Diego Benaglio with seasoned campaigners like striker Alexander Frei and veteran Congo-born striker Blaise N'Kufo.

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