

Webb has no regrets

AFP, London



World Cup final referee Howard Webb arrived home in England on Tuesday insisting he had done a tough job in difficult circumstances to the best of his ability. The English official has come in for criticism from some quarters, notably from some Dutch players, over his handling of Sunday's final, one of the dirtiest in the history of the World Cup. He handed out a record 14 yellow cards and sent off Holland's Everton defender John Heitinga during Spain's fractious 1-0 win.

The Yorkshireman arrived home from South Africa with his assistants Darren Cann and Michael Mullarkey to a barrage of media interest in their performance at Soccer City in Johannesburg.

In a statement released through the Premier League he said: "Whatever the match, you always hope that the officials won't need to be heavily involved. However, we had to raise our profile in order to keep control.

"We don't feel that we had much choice except to manage the game in the way we did. We came away feeling satisfied that we'd done a tough job in difficult circumstances to the best of our abilities.

"It was an extremely challenging match to handle, but it would have been so for any referee. It is one of the toughest games we will ever be involved in and we feel that we worked hard to keep the focus on the football as much as possible."

The Dutch players have been widely criticised for their behaviour during the final, dur-

ing which Bert van Marwijk's side committed a rash of heavy-handed challenges, including by former Holland legend Johann Cruyff.

Holland were fortunate not to lose midfielder Nigel de Jong to a straight red card in the first half for a high challenge on Xabi Alonso. But, despite Webb's leniency on that occasion, his performance nevertheless incensed the Dutch, and he was confronted by several players after the final whistle.

"From early on in the match we had to make decisions that were clear yellow cards," Webb continued.

"We tried to apply some common sense officiating given the magnitude of the occasion for both sides - advising players early on for some of their tackling, sending players away when they were surrounding the officials, and speaking to their senior colleagues to try to calm them down."

Despite the furore that has followed Sunday's final, Webb insists he has come away from South Africa harbouring "amazing memories".

"It was a marvellous honour to have been selected for the tournament and we had a wonderful six weeks in South Africa," he said.

"The people made us feel really welcome and we've hugely enjoyed the experience of being involved in such an incredible and unique event.

"We left the 2010 World Cup with amazing memories.

"We have been overwhelmed by the support of the public, the media, friends, colleagues, players and managers before and after the final.

"It was a massive honour and a privilege to take charge of the World Cup final. It is something every referee dreams of and to fulfil that dream was a remarkable feeling."

Cole set for Real?

AFP, London



Chelsea defender Ashley Cole could be set to join Real Madrid, according to the Spanish club's goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

Cole has been linked with a 30 million pounds (36 million euros) move to Real since his former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho took over at the Bernabeu Stadium in May.

The England left-back is reported to be unhappy with life in England following his separation from popstar wife Cheryl in the aftermath of tabloid newspaper stories alleging he had affairs with several women.

Mourinho is believed to be keen to reunite with Cole and Casillas, who captained Spain to World Cup glory, claims he has been told a deal

to sign the 29-year-old is in the pipeline. "From what I am hearing, the signs look good," Casillas told The Sun.

"I have only briefly spoken to people at the club, but I am confident that he can be a Real Madrid player next year.

"I think it will be the right move for him both professionally and personally. A clean break from England is hopefully something he is very interested in.

"It will be his last big contract and who better to sign for than his old coach Mourinho at Real? He will know better than anybody this club will be successful under Jose.

"Jose has proved he buys players and makes them the very best in the world in their position.

"With Ashley he doesn't need to do that because he's already the best left-back in the world. Jose knows all about him and it comes as no surprise to me he is very much on Madrid's radar."

Henry joins Red Bulls

AFP, New York

French football star Thierry Henry has signed for New York Red Bulls on a long-term deal, the US club announced on Wednesday.

The striker is expected to make his debut for the Red Bulls in a home friendly on July 22 against English Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur.

"It is without question that Thierry Henry is one of the most successful and recognisable soccer players over the past 15 years," said Dietmar Beiersdorfer, head of Red Bull global soccer.

Henry, who signed the "multi-year" contract after leaving Spanish champions Barcelona, added: "This marks an exciting new chapter in my career and life. It is an honour to play for the New York Red Bulls.

Iniesta thought he was offside

REUTERS, Barcelona



Spain's Andres Iniesta thought he was offside when he collected the ball and scored the winning goal in the World Cup final, the midfielder said on Tuesday.

"I was only waiting for the pass from Cesc Fabregas and he delivered in a perfect way. He was very quick and for a moment I was alone and I really thought I was offside but I controlled it well and when I hit the ball I knew it had to go in," Iniesta told a news conference.

The extra-time strike on Sunday was the only goal in a bad-tempered final against the Netherlands and secured Spain's first World Cup victory.

Iniesta was asked how he felt afterwards. "It is difficult to explain," he said. "I can only say that I feel very happy. Very happy...playing my football and doing my job and scoring such an important goal for all.

"To be able to make millions of people happy is something priceless. This is what gratifies my job -- to be able to make so many people happy who follow us and suffer with the team. People's happiness has no price."

The Barcelona player went to South Africa after a difficult season plagued with injuries.

"It was a difficult season and that's it. But then came the World Cup and I got into it with a lot of desire and ambition. I was hoping that everything finished well and despite losing the first match (1-0 to Switzerland) we came back from that, the team recovered well and everything ended as we know."

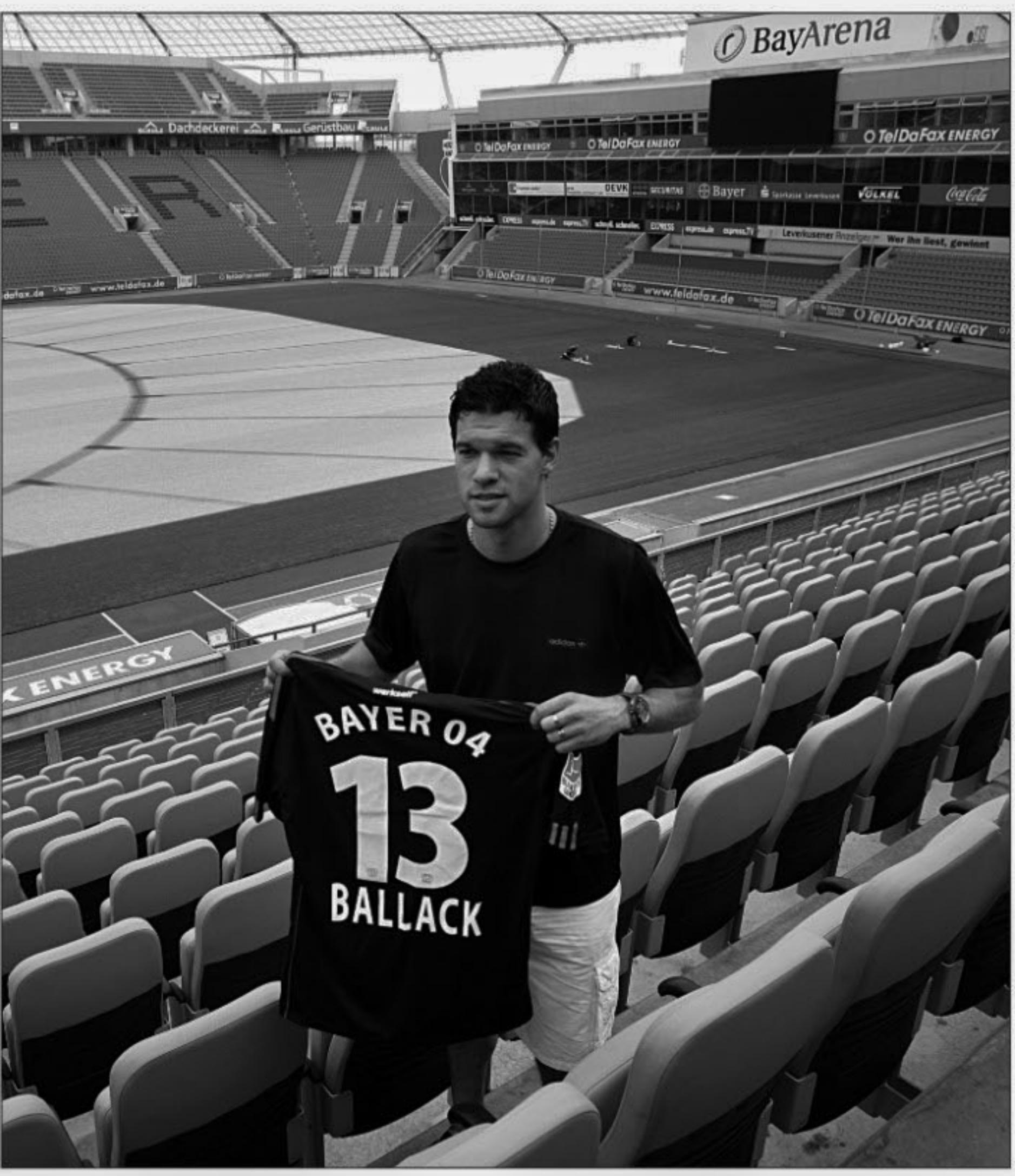


PHOTO: AFP

Bayer Leverkusen's new recruit German midfielder Michael Ballack poses with his new jersey during his official presentation at the BayArena stadium yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Germany captain Philipp Lahm (L) and his wife Claudia take a ride in a carriage after their marriage in the church of Kleinhefendorf yesterday.

Lahm ties the knot

AP, Berlin

Germany captain Philipp Lahm has married his girlfriend in a traditional Bavarian wedding, just days after his team secured third place at the World Cup.

German news agency DAPD reports the 26-year-old Bayern Munich defender and 25-year-old Claudia Schattenberg were married Wednesday in Aying, a small town south of Munich.

Aying mayor Johann Eichler, who conducted the civil ceremony, said "tears were flowing."

A ceremony was planned at a nearby church later in the day.

Lahm was named Germany's captain after an ankle injury ruled Michael Ballack, the team's long-time leader, out of the World Cup.

Ballack still captain in his eyes

INTERNET

Michael Ballack said on Wednesday that he is the captain of the German national team, dismissing ambitions from Philipp Lahm who stood in for him at the World Cup.

Lahm, who was made captain at the tournament in South Africa due to Ballack's injury-related absence, had said last week that he would not voluntarily hand back the armband.

But Ballack dismissed this idea at his formal presentation as Bayer Leverkusen player.

"This is no issue for me. I am the captain," said Ballack. "A player can't request on what position he wants to play - and it is the same with the captaincy. One should respect this, there are hierarchies."

Ballack added that Lahm's comments were "untimely." He said "the situation is clear. I was injured, but I am still captain," and added he will talk with Lahm when they meet again at the national team.

"It is not really serious, but we will touch the subject and then look ahead," he said. Germany finished an impressive third at the World Cup. Lahm's comments sparked a debate about the future of Ballack as captain and whether he should return at all into the young and successful team. Ballack, 33, has said he wants to continue until Euro 2012.

Ballack also congratulated Lahm to his wedding which took place in Bavaria at the same time as his presentation in Leverkusen.

"I congratulate him and wish him all the best," said Ballack.

Essien, Mikel on course

AFP, London



Chelsea midfielders Michael Essien and John Obi Mikel are on course to be fit for the start of the new Premier League season.

Ghana star Essien and Nigeria international Mikel both missed the World Cup due to knee injuries.

Essien hasn't played for Chelsea since being injured at the Africa Cup of Nations in January, while Mikel underwent knee surgery towards the end of the season.

But the pair have now recovered sufficiently to take part in pre-season training with the English champions and Blues assistant manager Ray Wilkins is confident they will be ready for Chelsea's opening league game against West Bromwich Albion on August 14.

"John Obi is slightly in advance of Michael Essien but they are both working very well indeed," Wilkins told Chelsea's website.

"They have been working double sessions for the last week and we will get them really

firing before the season starts."

Although Blues captain John Terry has seen joining in training this week, Wilkins is well aware that many of Chelsea's stars are likely to be drained following their efforts at the World Cup.

Wilkins said boss Carlo Ancelotti is keen to ensure the likes of Frank Lampard, Florent Malouda and Ricardo Carvalho don't suffer from burn-out later in the season.

"Normally after a World Cup you find those players who come back from it, it is about December when they seem to hit a wall," Wilkins said.

"It is very important we manage them in the correct manner and we get them to a level where they won't be as fit as we want them to be, but as they creep into the new year their fitness will come back.

"The players we have got here now, we have to get them into the right fitness condition so that they are prepared to play, because we might not be able to use the guys coming back from the World Cup for the first couple of games."

Spain replace Brazil at top

AFP, Paris

World Cup winners Spain replaced Brazil at the top of the most recent FIFA World Ranking released on Wednesday.

Vicente Del Bosque's side climbed one place to the top of the ranking after beating the Netherlands 1-0 after extra time in Sunday's final in Johannesburg.

The beaten finalists moved up one place to second, with quarterfinalists Brazil falling to third.

Uruguay were the biggest climbers in the top 10, rising 10 places to sixth -- their highest ever ranking -- after their unexpected run to the semi-finals.

Fellow South Americans Paraguay climbed 15 places to 16th, while Japan's success in reaching the last 16 took them up 13 places to 32nd.

New Zealand enjoyed the most significant rise, going up 24 places to 54th after finishing their World Cup campaign unbeaten in spite of the fact they were knocked out at the group stage.

England rose one place to seventh despite crashing out to Germany in the second round, but there was no such good fortune for fellow under-achievers Italy and France.

Defending champions Italy dropped six places to 11th after they were eliminated in the group phase, while France plunged 12 places to 21st following their disastrous campaign.

FIFA world rankings

1. Spain (+1)
2. Netherlands (+2)
3. Brazil (-3)
4. Germany (+2)
5. Argentina (+2)
6. Uruguay (+10)
7. England (+1)
8. Portugal (-5)
9. Egypt (+3)
10. Chile (+8)

Harry signs new deal

AFP, London

Harry Redknapp on Tuesday signed a new contract with Tottenham tying him to the London club until 2013.

Redknapp took over at Tottenham in October 2008, steering the side clear of relegation before guiding them to their best Premier League finish of fourth last season.

That performance not only earned the 63-year-old the Premier League's manager of the year award, but also secured his club a place in the Champions League for the first time.

Redknapp's deal was due to expire next year, but Spurs have now exercised the option of lengthening his stay at White Hart Lane by a further two seasons.

"The club is delighted to announce we have extended the contract of manager Harry Redknapp until 2013," read a statement on the club's website.

Messi backs Maradona

Football

INTERNET

FIFA World Player of the Year Lionel Messi has pledged his support to Argentina coach Diego Maradona, saying he hopes the former World Cup winner stays on as Los Albiceleste boss.

"For me, yes, Diego should continue (as coach)," Messi told a press conference in Panama. "But it is Diego who has to decide. He has time, he knows what to do."

"We expected more, but hey, it was not to be," he continued, referring to Argentina's World Cup campaign.

"There's nothing we can do, the World Cup has ended and there is already a champion.

"Congratulations to Spain, they played very well. It makes you feel a little envious."

AFA President Julio Grondona will conduct a meeting to discuss Maradona's future at the



PHOTO: AFP

Argentina star Lionel Messi addresses a press conference in Panama City on Tuesday.

association's Ezeiza Headquarters today, is it not clear whether or not Diego himself will be in attendance. Grondona, who is also

President of Conmebol, arrived back in Ezeiza yesterday and told the media: "Maradona is the only one who can do what he wants."

Lyon to keep duo

AFP, Lyon



French first division side Lyon are to offer new contracts to Brazilian defender Cris and France midfielder Jeremy Toulalan, club president Jean-Michel Aulas announced on Tuesday.

"Cris is going to, I hope, sign a new contract. We are going to offer him an extension of at least a year and a half, maybe two," said Aulas.

"He will stay with us, I am sure. He still has a year (of his current contract) to run. He is the symbol of our strength, ambition and professionalism."

"There will be a certain amount of discussion about the financial and performance elements to determine the length of his contract. The result will be positive. No other club in Europe can offer him what he has at Lyon today."

S Africans positive on future

AFP, Johannesburg

The successful staging of the World Cup has made South Africans more positive about their nation's future, according to a poll released Wednesday.

About 85 per cent of the 400 people surveyed by telephone on Monday and Tuesday said after the World Cup they have more hope than before for a happy future for all South Africans.

The figure was about 20 points higher than in earlier surveys asking about opinions on the nation's future, the Ipsos pollsters said.

About 98 per cent of people said they were proud to be South Africans, while 98 per cent also said they had watched at least one game on television.