

Real welcome the Mourinho years

Football

AFP, Madrid

The Mourinho Years began for Real Madrid on Thursday as Jose Mourinho met his players for the first time, with one new player arriving amid rumours of possible exits.

The Spanish giants announced the signing of winger Pedro Leon on a six-year deal from Getafe.

The player, who turns 24 in November, will undergo medical tests on Friday before being unveiled at Real's Santiago Bernabeu stadium at 12:30 pm (10:30 GMT), the club said in a statement posted on their website.

The club gave no financial details but public television TVE said the deal was worth 10 million euros.

Leon helped Getafe to their best-ever finish of sixth place in the Spanish league last season.

Thursday marked Portuguese coach Mourinho's first encounter with his new charges, but with the bulk of the Real Madrid squad still on leave after the World Cup, he was greeted by just 10 players.

They underwent medical examinations before the proper start to training on Friday.

That did not stop the rumour mill, though, which is working overtime on

suggestions striker Raul and midfielder Guti, both absent on Thursday, will be gone by the time Real begin their quest to unseat champions Barcelona in the Spanish league at the end of next month.

The 33-year-old Raul, who has played his entire professional career at Real, having made 550 appearances since his debut in 1994, has been linked with a move to German club Schalke and has also been associated with English clubs Manchester United and Blackburn Rovers.

The fact he spent time on holiday in New York this summer has also seen talk that he may be about to follow former France captain Thierry Henry to the New York Red Bulls.

Guti, another Real lifer having made his pro debut in 1995, is also reported to have had offers from Turkey and Greece as well as Blackburn and Zenit St Petersburg.

French midfielder Lassana Diarra is also likely, according to the Spanish media, to leave the club after meeting Mourinho on Wednesday to discuss his future.

Mourinho has arrived in a blaze of glory after leading Inter Milan last season to the treble of domestic league and cup in Italy as well as the Champions League.

He has been given a four-year contract and the brief of winning the

Champions League within the next two years.

The former Porto and Chelsea boss wants to reinforce the defence and midfield of a Real side that already boasts a number of superstars, players of the calibre of Cristiano Ronaldo, Kaka, Iker Casillas, Sergio Ramos, Xabi Alonso and Gonzalo Higuain.

Argentinean international Angel Di Maria has already signed, as has the teenage former Santander starlet Sergio Canales.

Real are also trying to use their muscle to lure German midfielder Sami Khedira and Brazilian full-back Maicon but their clubs -- Stuttgart and Inter respectively -- are resisting the overtures.

Other names mentioned in dispatches are defenders Ashley Cole of Chelsea, Benfica's David Luiz and Porto's Bruno Alves, as well as Bayern Munich midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger.

Ten Real players, including Dutch midfielder Royston Drenthe, French striker Karim Benzema and Malian midfielder Mahamadou Diarra, underwent medical tests on Thursday at the club's Bernabeu stadium to test their fitness levels after the summer break.

"Everyone is in perfect health," said Real doctor Luis Serratos.

"Every player has returned eager to work. They spoke to the coach and I saw that they are all very motivated."



New Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho waves to the press before conducting his first training session for his new club in Madrid yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Remy on EPL radar

AFP, Nice

English heavyweights Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur have joined West Ham United in the race to sign Nice striker Loic Remy, the French club's CEO Patrick Governatori revealed on Thursday.

Governatori revealed that Nice were in talks with both Liverpool and Spurs and said they had submitted bids of "between 14.5 million and 15.5 million euros" for the 23-year-old former Lyon player.

Remy, who has one international cap for France, spoke about his future after a training session here and said he had "never hidden (his) desire to play in England".

"It will be a choice between two clubs with big futures," he said.

"I have a slight preference for a prestige club like Liverpool, even though Tottenham are also very, very interesting."

"Nothing has been decided. Wherever I play, I'll have to fight and work hard to win my place."

Remy came through the youth ranks at Lyon but joined Nice in 2008 for a club record eight million euros after a five-month loan spell at Lens.

The rangy frontman scored 11 league goals in his first season at Nice and finished the 2009-10 campaign with 14 goals from 34 Ligue 1 appearances.

He made his France debut in a 1-0 friendly defeat by Nigeria in June 2009.

Kolarov all set for City

SOCCERNET

Manchester City are on the verge of signing Serbia left back Aleksandar Kolarov after Lazio accepted a £17 million bid for the 24-year-old free-kick specialist.

Kolarov started two of Serbia's World Cup matches in South Africa and is one of the most highly sought-after defenders in Europe this summer, with Real Madrid in particular linked with a big-money move for the player.

City have already secured David Silva, Yaya Toure and Jerome Boateng in their latest spending spree and have been heavily linked with James Milner and Edin Dzeko as well, meaning their summer spending will almost certainly break through the £100 million barrier.

Kolarov would likely take the place of Wayne Bridge in City's starting XI as manager Roberto Mancini seeks to build a team capable of challenging for the Premier League title.

Lazio coach Edy Reja said: "Kolarov at Manchester City? His transfer is in the finishing straight. We are very careful about what happens around us. Some players will leave and they will be replaced by much stronger players."

Cesc to Barca unlikely

Football

SOCCERNET

Barcelona president Sandro Rosell believes it is far from certain that Cesc Fabregas will arrive at Camp Nou this summer as Arsenal feel "hurt" by the conduct of Barcelona, who are adamant they will not pay more than the market price for the midfielder.

After stating at the start of the summer that he wished to leave Arsenal, Fabregas has been the subject of a sustained transfer campaign by the Spanish champions, who have seen an offer of £35 million rejected but retain a strong interest in their academy product.

A succession of Barca players have also praised Fabregas and spoken of their desire to see him arrive in Catalunya, most notably Gerard Pique and Carles Puyol who forced a Barca shirt over the head of their international team-mate when celebrating Spain's World Cup triumph.

But it appears as though Barca's public courtship of the Arsenal captain has not worked in their favour. President Rosell also says that Barcelona will not be pressured into

making an excessive offer for Fabregas.

"Arsenal feels very hurt by Barca," said Rosell to Catalan TV3. "They don't want to listen to offers or sell and they are not putting the player on the market. There was a strong dispute a few months ago and they have not forgotten it."

"He will arrive, even if it is not now, it will be next year. We will see. One thing that is certain is that we will not go mad trying to sign him."

"No shareholder would pay £60 or £70 million for him. We will not go all out for him. We would only pay his value in the transfer market."

Fabregas said during the World Cup that he will not definitely leave Arsenal, but the Gunners captain has now reiterated that his wish is to return to the club he left as a 16-year-old in 2003.

"I have not spoken to anybody in the last few days and I want to ignore anything regarding my future for now," Fabregas said. "I want to enjoy my holidays and I don't want to talk about Barcelona at this moment."

"I make no apologies for the comments I have made in the past. I have expressed my interest in returning and I stand by that, as that is my personal wish."

Zlatan back for Sweden

INTERNET

Barcelona forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic confirmed Friday he was ready to play for Sweden again, ending a long break.

The 28-year-old took a break in November, saying he lacked motivation to play for Sweden after it failed to qualify for the 2010 World Cup and there were no other important matches.

"You have to be motivated," Ibrahimovic said at a joint news conference in his hometown Malmo with Sweden coach Erik Hamren.

"This decision is completely my own," the Sweden striker said, adding he "wanted to win" and that sentiment was required by "everyone" involved in the national team including the players, management and others.

Ibrahimovic said he was prepared to play "every match" if the coach needed him while Hamren said it might be necessary to rest Ibrahimovic on occasion.

Hamren said Ibrahimovic could play in several positions, depending on the other players available for Sweden.

Ibrahimovic said it was "not an easy task" but if the team was "focused" he believed Sweden could qualify for the Euro 2012 championships.

Hamren was named successor to Lars Lagerback who stepped down in October after Sweden's failed qualifying campaign.

S.Africa appoint Mosimane

REUTERS, Johannesburg

Pitso Mosimane signed a four-year contract on Thursday to be South Africa's new coach, tasked with ensuring the 2010 World Cup hosts qualify for the next edition in Brazil.

The 45-year-old replaces Brazilian Carlos Alberto Parreira, under whom he worked as an assistant over the last four years. His appointment was announced at a news conference by the South African Football Association.

Ronaldinho stays, says Milan

REUTERS, Milan

Ronaldinho is set to stay at AC Milan next season despite media reports in Brazil saying he is trying to engineer a move to Flamengo, the Serie A side's chief executive said on Thursday.

"Up to now there has been no request from the player to leave and no offer," Adriano Galliani told reporters.

"I repeat, Dinho is a Milan player and next season he will play for Milan."

Galliani also said Milan were close to signing Genoa's Greek defender Sokratis Papastathopoulos on loan but played down reports the club was again trying to sign Wolfsburg striker Edin Dzeko.

Capello going English

Football

AFP, London

Fabio Capello plans to add another English coach to his back-room staff as the England manager looks to the future after his team's woeful performance at the World Cup.

Capello revealed the move at a meeting with the Club England board on Thursday, when the Italian also vowed to carry out a review into England's second round exit in South Africa.

England won just one of their four matches at the World Cup and were thrashed 4-1 by Germany in the last 16, but Capello has signalled his determination to learn from that chastening experience.

With qualifying for Euro 2012 starting in September, Capello is keen to be seen to move on from the World Cup debacle and he will work with Sir Trevor Brooking, a member of the Club England board, to identify suitable candidates who could be fast-tracked onto his coaching staff.

Although it had been claimed Capello was unhappy with the performances of Stuart Pearce and Ray Clemence, the two Englishmen currently working with him, the former AC Milan boss is reported to have expressed confi-

dence in both.

The new coach will work alongside Pearce as well as Capello and will provide support for the Italian while Pearce performs his other role as England Under-21 boss.

The plan is seen as a chance to begin grooming an English coach as a possible successor to Capello.

None of Capello's Italian assistants will be leaving despite claims that Franco Baldini, the England general manager, was considering offers to return to Italy.

Brooking is taking on an increased role in the England set-up and will work with Capello to improve the skills and development of English coaches.

Brooking will also provide recommendations in relation to international player development and coach education set-up.

Capello has been backed by the FA despite England's poor showing in South Africa and is expected to focus on youth for the friendly against Hungary on August 11.

The Italian is set to bring Manchester City goalkeeper Joe Hart and his club colleague Adam Johnson, the former Middlesbrough winger, into his team.

There could also be call-ups for teenage Arsenal winger Jack Wilshire and Everton midfielder Jack Rodwell in the near future.

Henry in it to win it

Football

REUTERS, New Jersey

Following in the footsteps of Pele and David Beckham, Thierry Henry has arrived in the United States as a soccer missionary and scoffed at the notion Major League Soccer is a retirement fund for players in the twilight of their careers.

Like his famous predecessors, the Frenchman has become an instant poster boy for the sport after joining the New York Red Bulls on a four-and-a-half season deal.

The 32-year-old French striker said this would be his final contract as a player, but the former World Cup winner said his motives were clear.

"I can assure you that I came here to try to win," he told a news conference on Thursday. "That is the most important thing. I'm a competitor, and I'm sure the boss will put a team out there to be sure that we can do it."

Henry was taken on a whirlwind trip around New York's major television networks before receiving his number 14 Red Bulls soccer jersey at his new home ground in Harrison, New Jersey.

Flanked by club officials and MLS commissioner Don Garber, Henry arrived at a packed news conference to the backing vocals of The Beatles and the endorsement of his new organization.

The Red Bulls' Swedish coach Hans Backe said he expected great things from Henry, who

spent the past decade plying his trade with Arsenal and Barcelona.

"I would rate him ... in the top 10 ever in the (English) premiership as a striker," Backe said. "He's very hungry to give Red Bulls their first premiership."

While Henry has achieved almost every imaginable honour in the game, winning a World Cup and European championship with France as well medals and plaudits with his clubs, he arrives in the United States after a lean past 12 months.

Injuries restricted his appearances for Barcelona and he was also relegated to the substitutes' bench during France's ill-fated World Cup in South Africa where they failed to make it past the group phase.

"I actually would like to know myself what went wrong," he said of France's World Cup display. "We didn't perform. As simple as that ... it was a sad one for the fans and for the country, but I think we should move on now."

Henry, who also announced his retirement from international soccer on Thursday, said his decision to move to New York was unrelated to France's World Cup showing and that he had been in talks about the transfer for months.

The Red Bulls are hoping Henry will not only help lead the team to a first MLS title but also attract new fans, something that could be tough given New York's large Irish community and Henry's double-handball that allowed France to qualify ahead of Ireland for this year's World Cup in South Africa.

"I've already talked about that," he said.

"There's nothing else I can say."



Sweden star Zlatan Ibrahimovic (L) and coach Erik Hamren speak to the press in Malmo yesterday. Ibrahimovic yesterday revoked his decision to retire from international football. PHOTO: AFP

Man Utd's jersey boom

Football

REUTERS, Toronto

For much of the soccer world a Manchester United jersey is the equivalent of the little black dress, something every fan's wardrobe must have.

So when United begin their four-game North American Tour in Toronto against Celtic on Friday wearing the new kit, their legions of supporters will likely rush to buy the shirt that the teams says has already set a record for demand.

"It's a massive business," the club's commercial director, Richard Arnold, told Reuters. "A lot of work goes into that, it's a year-round activity. We are already planning what future shirt designs will look like two, three years out."

Designed by Nike and adorned with the logo of their new sponsor Aon, the world's largest insurance brokerage believes the four-year sponsorship deal -- which reports have valued at \$120 million to \$130 million -- can help the company build its global brand name and boost business.

The sponsorship is viewed as one of the most prestigious in sports due to United's massive popularity and a global fan base that is estimated at 333 million worldwide.

At \$1.84 billion, Forbes magazine valued United, owned by the Glazer family that also owns the National Football League's Tampa Bay Buccaneers, as the most valuable sports franchise in the world.

world," Aon Chief Executive Greg Case said in a telephone interview after remotely ringing the opening bell on the New York Stock Exchange from Chicago.

Aon has been preparing for the start of the United deal for over a year and Case said the return on the sponsorship has already been noticeable and that the company is confident it will see "multiples of return off the investment."

"We have multiple ways we're looking at measuring impact and I must tell you we're already well ahead of where we thought we'd be at this point in time," he said. "We're seeing it in client response and client interest in Aon."

The Red Devils, who arrived in Toronto just four days after the World Cup final, kickoff their first North American tour since 2004 against the Scottish Premier League runners-up and wrap up their visit in Houston on July 28 when they provide the opposition for the Major League Soccer All-Star Game.

In-between, United will take on the Philadelphia Union (July 21) and Kansas City Wizards (July 25). They will also go to Mexico and help Guadalajara open their new stadium on July 30 as part of a deal to sign Mexican striker Javier Hernandez.

The club said the games in the coming weeks are presenting a challenge to have enough jerseys available for their fans in North America, where the team estimates its fan base is closing in on 10 million.

"One of the things we are struggling with is satisfying that demand (for shirts)," said Arnold. "One of the challenges we are facing over the coming weeks is making sure that we can get all of the stock where it needs to be all over the world."



French legend Thierry Henry is the toast of the photographers as he walks on to the field ahead of a press conference at Red Bull Arena in Harrison, New Jersey on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP