

Cesc going nowhere

REUTERS, London

Arsenal have no intention of selling captain Cesc Fabregas manager Arsene Wenger said on Wednesday dismissing Barcelona's repeated approaches for the Spain midfielder as "transfer noise".

Barcelona have openly courted the 23-year-old and according to media reports in Britain and Spain made 29 million pounds (\$45.17 million) bid last month to take the World Cup winner back to the Nou Camp where he played as a youth.

After Spain were crowned world champions earlier this month, Fabregas's celebrating team mates forced a Barcelona shirt over his shoulders on their return home but that looks to be as close as he will get to wearing one in the foreseeable future.

"It is only noise. In our job we have to deal with what we can master. What we cannot influence is not to worry about," Wenger told Arsenal's website (www.arsenal.com).

"He is a very important player for us, he is our captain and we have worked very hard (for him) to be the future of our team and that is why we are always adamant about not letting him go."

Fabregas has five years left on his contract and Arsenal have refused to open any negotiations with Barca over a sale.

He joined the Premier League club as a 16-year-old in 2003 and has made a total of 267 appearances scoring 48 goals.



Liverpool players do warm up exercises during a training session at the national arena in Skopje on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Khedira close to Real move

AFP, Berlin

Stuttgart's German international midfielder Sami Khedira is closing in on a move to Spanish club Real Madrid, the club's sporting director Fredi Bobic confirmed on Thursday.

"It's not often we receive such an offer from Real Madrid," Bobic told the daily Bild. "It's up to Real and us now to reach agreement."

The player's agent Jorg Neubauer added: "It's true he wants to go to Real. He's talking now with Stuttgart."

Khedira was one of the revelations of the 2010 World Cup where Germany finished third, and is under contract with Stuttgart until 2011.

According to media reports Stuttgart are ready to let the 23-year-old leave for 15 million euro, while Real Madrid are ready to pay between 8 million and 10 million euro.

Inter to face Roma, Juve early

REUTERS, Milan

Italian champions Inter Milan will visit last season's runners-up AS Roma and host traditional rivals Juventus in their fifth and sixth Serie A matches next season the draw was made on Wednesday.

The European champions, who also won the domestic cup last season to seal an unprecedented Italian treble, open their campaign at perennial strugglers Bologna but the game may be shifted from the Aug. 29 date given they face Atletico Madrid in the European Super Cup on Aug. 27.

"We play the European Super Cup just a few days earlier so we feared a long trip. Bologna is OK," Inter chief executive Ernesto Paolillo told the club website (www.inter.it).

After the games at Roma and at home to Juve, Inter play AC Milan on Nov. 14 and again on April 3 with Juve facing Roma on the same dates.

Inter, who have brought in youngster Coutinho as they seek a sixth straight scudetto and look poised to sell Maicon and Mario Balotelli, finish the season at home to Catania.

The draw was made on live television in front of a star-studded audience in Milan.

Before the ceremony, Milan chief executive Adriano Galliani told reporters that midfielder Gennaro Gattuso would be staying at the club after being linked with a move.

Roma start their season at home to promoted Cesena.

Hughes set for Fulham

AFP, London

Former Manchester City manager Mark Hughes is set to be appointed as Fulham boss within the next 48 hours, according to reports in England on Thursday.

Hughes was said to have been contacted by Fulham after the west London club were unable to lure Ajax coach Martin Jol to Craven Cottage.

With the new Premier League season starting in just over two weeks, Fulham officials have been desperate to find a replacement for Roy Hodgson, who left earlier in pre-season to take over at Liverpool.

Hughes is understood to have reached an agreement over a three-year contract worth two million pounds (2.4 million euro) a year after talks with Fulham and his family, who are currently based in the north of England.

An announcement is expected soon and the 46-year-old will bring in his own backroom staff that includes Mark Bowen, Kevin Hitchcock and Eddie Niedzwiecki.

Hughes is likely to be given around 15 million pounds to spend by Fulham chairman Mohamed Al-Fayed and he will link-up again with chief executive Alistair Mackintosh, who he worked closely with during his time at Manchester City.

One of his first jobs will be to consider a mooted deal for Steve Sidwell from Aston Villa as well as attempting to persuade goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer to stay at the club if Arsenal decide to increase their bid for the Australian.

The former Manchester United and Chelsea striker first came into management with the Wales national team and was close to guiding them to Euro 2004 but lost out in a play-off to Russia.

Maradona 'betrayed'

Football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona accused Argentine soccer chiefs of betraying him on Wednesday, a day after they voted unanimously to end his tenure as national team coach.

The Argentine Football Association (AFA) decided not to renew Maradona's contract following the team's 4-0 drubbing by Germany in the World Cup quarterfinals.

In his first public comments since the defeat, Maradona took aim at AFA President Julio Grondona and the technical director of national teams, Carlos Bilardo.

"Grondona lied to me, Bilardo betrayed me," a sombre Maradona told a news conference at a restaurant, reading from a prepared statement.

"Grondona told me in the changing room after we were eliminated in South Africa ... that he was very pleased with the work I'd done and he wanted me to stay on," he said. "When we were in mourning, Bilardo worked in the shadows to kick me out."

Maradona, who led Argentina to World Cup victory as captain in 1986, was appointed as coach in 2008 despite having very little coaching experience.

During his tumultuous spell in charge, Maradona was banned for two months for a foul-mouthed outburst at a news conference and the squad barely scraped through the qualifiers.

After convincing wins in their opening World Cup games, Argentina became one of the tournament's favourites, but Maradona's dreams of lifting soccer's most-coveted prize as coach were dashed by the Germans.

Dressed in a navy suit and blue shirt, Maradona appeared in a reflective mood, occasionally appearing to fight back tears as he

read from the statement.

He said he was still recovering from the loss to Germany but put some of the blame for the patchy World Cup campaign on AFA.

"They called me to put out a fire and then when I did, this happens," he said, adding that he had taken over the team during a time of crisis and had been dropped before being able to finish the job.

He said he wanted to continue as coach but that during a meeting with Grondona, the AFA head had asked him to replace seven members of his coaching staff.

"He knows it's impossible for me to continue without my coaching staff, Maradona said.

"I defend everyone from the masseuse to the assistant because I have values and I'm not going to change."

"I've given my all for the Argentine soccer shirt ... to wear this shirt again... And I'm convinced that the players felt this again ... maybe that was my job."

Grondona said he had asked Maradona to stay, but said changes had to be made among the coach's staff team.

"I can't see how there was a betrayal of any kind," Grondona told reporters.

"Perhaps he sees betrayal as trying to make things better. ... the only thing I was looking for was to make a change, not to get rid of Maradona."

President Cristina Fernandez, who has backed Maradona's tenure since the World Cup exit, said she was sad he had been dropped.

"He took over the national team when it was a hot potato and lots of people predicted we wouldn't even qualify for South Africa," Fernandez said at the presidential palace.

"I'm really sad about Diego, I think the team put on a very dignified performance," she said. "I don't know what happened (with Grondona) but it saddens me, they should come together and fix things."

Red Devils rout MLS All-Stars

AFP, Houston

English Premier league giants Manchester United capped off their North American exhibition tour by routing the MLS All-Stars 5-2 on Wednesday.

Federico Macheda had two early goals, Javier Hernandez, of Mexico, scored in his debut for the Red Devils.

Darron Gibson and Tom Cleverley added goals for Manchester United who are gearing up for the start of the Premier League season next month.

Macheda scored twice in the first 13 minutes, quickly dashing the MLS team's spirit and silencing the crowd of 70,728.

The MLS team was fortunate as the score could have been worse because the Red Devils played without several top players.

Houston Dynamo player Brian Ching had a goal and an assist for the overmatched MLS squad.

The sellout crowd was the largest for an MLS All-Star game since the first one in 1996 drew 78,416 to Giants Stadium.

Diego sacking upsets president

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina President Cristina Kirchner has expressed her sadness at Diego Maradona's sacking as national football coach, saying the star did not deserve his treatment.

Kirchner personally phoned Maradona after his press conference on Wednesday evening during which he lashed out at Argentine Football Federation president Julio Grondona and team manager Carlos Bilardo.

The 49-year-old Maradona has accused Grondona of lying and Bilardo of treason in a bitter attack on the two men he insisted plotted his downfall.

"I'm very saddened by his departure. I thought he was very dignified with the team," said Kirchner. "He always defended the colours of his country with a lot of heart."

The captain of the 1986 World Cup winners read from a prepared statement and refused to answer questions at the press conference.

"Grondona lied to me. Bilardo betrayed me," said an emotional Maradona, whose colourful and controversial reign as Argentina coach came to an abrupt end on Tuesday.

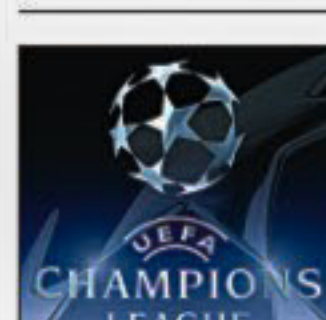
"They asked me to put out the fire and we did it. I have given everything. Treason is everywhere. There are people who do not want the best for Argentine football."

"They only have their own personal interests at heart."

Maradona, who took charge in October 2008, has been replaced for the time being by under-20 coach Sergio Batista who will lead the team for the August 11 friendly against the Republic of Ireland in Dublin.

PAOK hold Ajax

REUTERS, Berne



Uruguay striker Luis Suarez, in the headlines at the World Cup for the handball incident against Ghana, was on target for Ajax Amsterdam in the Champions League on Wednesday but they were

held 1-1 at home by PAOK Salonika.

Fenerbahce clung on for a 2-2 draw away to Young Boys Berne despite playing the entire second half with 10 men and Portugal's Braga beat Celtic 3-0 in other third qualifying round, first leg ties.

Suarez, who scored 35 league goals for Ajax last season, needed only 13 minutes to make his mark when he gave the four-times European champions an early lead against the Greeks.

Ajax failed to capitalise on their early breakthrough, however and Vladimir Ivic levelled 18 minutes from time to put PAOK in the driving seat for the second leg next week.

Suarez scored three goals at the World Cup where he helped Uruguay reach the semi-finals but was also involved in the controversial handball incident in the quarter-final against Ghana when he stopped a goal-bound shot on the line and was sent off in the last

minute of extra-time.

Suarez was seen celebrating as Ghana missed the resulting penalty -- which would have given them a 2-1 win -- and Uruguay went on to win the penalty shootout.

Group stage regulars Fenerbahce twice led in Switzerland but were denied victory by a late penalty.

Emre Belozoglu gave the Turks a fifth minute lead but Argentine defender Emiliano Dudar headed Young Boys level in the 18th minute.

The hosts then took control, Moreno Costanzo hitting the post, but were stunned were Fenerbahce regained the lead just before halftime with a long-range effort by Miroslav Stoch.

Immediately after the goal, however, Fenerbahce midfielder Colin Kazim-Richards was sent off, receiving a second yellow card for petulantly throwing the ball away after conceding a free kick.

Fenerbahce survived a second-half bombardment, Young Boys again hitting the woodwork, until conceding an 89th minute penalty, converted by the Costanzo.

Swiss champions Basel won 2-0 away to Hungary's Debrecen while Kazak champions Aktobe Lento pulled off the evening's shock result with a 1-0 win over Hapoel Tel Aviv thanks a second-half Samat Smakov penalty.

Laudrup frustrated

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Real Mallorca coach Michael Laudrup and his players and staff have written to UEFA president Michel Platini expressing "great frustration" with the decision to exclude the club from European competition this season.

Financially-troubled Mallorca finished fifth in Spain's La Liga last campaign and qualified for the Europa League but UEFA ruled last week the Balearic Islands club, who are in administration, had not fulfilled the admission criteria.

UEFA did not publish the reasons behind the decision, which Mallorca, who are part-owned by tennis world number one and island native Rafa Nadal, have appealed.

"It's very true that our club has problems, in this day and age, who doesn't," read the letter, which was obtained by Reuters and sent to Platini on Wednesday.

"Do you think that (Real Mallorca) is in a worst situation than other clubs that today have been accepted in to European competi-

tion? We are reluctant to believe that it's easier (for UEFA) to exclude a modest-sized club."

The letter concludes by arguing that the club deserve their place in the Europa League after winning qualification on the pitch and urges UEFA to play fair.

Mallorca, like many Spanish clubs, have been slipping further into the red due to rising wage and transfer costs and a recent University of Barcelona study indicated they had debts of around 85 million euros (\$111 million).

Nadal became a shareholder in the club this month and his uncle, former soccer professional Miguel Angel Nadal, is Laudrup's assistant.

Rafa Nadal hit out at UEFA on Tuesday, saying it was "a hell of a blow".

Mallorca's place in the Europa League has provisionally been taken by Villarreal.

Mallorca said on their website (www.rcdmallorca.es) on Wednesday a Socialist deputy in Spain's national parliament sympathetic to the club had demanded the release of data on Villarreal's debts with the tax and social security authorities.

New challenge for Raul

TELEGRAPH



The club presented the 33-year-old striker at its stadium in Gelsenkirchen, giving him No. 7 shirt.

"I'm looking forward to starting on a new challenge," Raul said. "It's an important challenge for me."

Coach Felix Magath, who secured Raul's agreement on Tuesday evening, said it was "great news for Schalke."

"I'm glad that we succeeded in enthralling such an exceptional footballer and world-class goalscorer about a move to the Bundesliga and to Schalke," Magath said.

"His signing is a decisive step in our efforts to strengthen and restructure the squad."

Raul is Schalke's second signing from Real

Madrid in the close season, joining former Germany defender Christoph Metzelder who spent three injury-plagued seasons at Madrid and saw little playing time.

Raul announced his departure from Real Madrid on Monday.

"I want to experience another type of football, a different culture -- that's an important challenge in life," he said at the time. "German or English football -- those are the only two places I would go ... my motivation is to keep playing football."

Raul found himself mostly relegated to the bench at Madrid following a spending spree by the club last summer.

He made his Madrid debut as a 17-year-old in 1994 and stayed with the club since then -- a span that includes three Champions League triumphs, six Spanish league titles and two Intercontinental Cups.

He leaves with 228 league goals for Madrid, and a record 44 goals in 102 appearances for Spain, though he hasn't played for the national team since 2006.

Raul is also the leading scorer in Uefa competitions with 66 goals, including 64 in the Champions League.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Argentina coach Diego Maradona addresses a press conference in Ezeiza on Wednesday.