



Real Madrid winger Cristiano Ronaldo (L) skips a challenge from Club America's Enrique Esqueda during their exhibition match at Candlestick Park in San Francisco on Wednesday. Real won 3-2.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Spain call up Bruno

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain coach Vicente del Bosque has handed Villarreal midfielder Bruno Soriano his first call-up to the national squad for the world champions' friendly against Mexico in Mexico City on Wednesday.

Del Bosque included the left-sided 26-year-old, who is known as Bruno, and also recalled his club mate Santi Cazorla, an attacking midfielder, and Osasuna defender Nacho Monreal, neither of whom were selected for the World Cup.

Midfielder Andres Iniesta, who scored the dramatic extra-time winner in the final against the Netherlands, is being rested. Injured trio Fernando Torres, Pepe Reina and Raul Albiol will also not travel and midfielder Javi Martinez is on duty with the under-21 side, Del Bosque added.

He said the team had to make sure they did not let their triumph in South Africa go to their heads and they should now fully focus on qualifying for Euro 2012, which begins away to Liechtenstein on Sept. 3.

"We can't let this success hinder us in the future," the coach said at a news conference at the Spanish soccer federation (RFEF) base outside Madrid.

"We have to look forward, maintain our confidence and continue doing things well."

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Iker Casillas (Real Madrid), Victor Valdes (Barcelona).

Defenders: Alvaro Arbeloa (Real Madrid), Joan Capdevila (Villarreal), Carlos Marchena (Villarreal), Gerard Pique (Barcelona), Carles Puyol (Barcelona), Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid), Nacho Monreal (Osasuna).

Midfielders: Xabi Alonso (Real Madrid), Sergio Busquets (Barcelona), Cesc Fabregas (Arsenal), David Silva (Manchester City), Xavi (Barcelona), Pedro (Barcelona), Jesus Navas (Sevilla), Juan Mata (Valencia), Santi Cazorla (Villarreal), Bruno Soriano (Villarreal).

Forwards: Fernando Llorente (Athletic Bilbao), David Villa (Barcelona).

Chelsea agree Ramires fee

REUTERS, Lisbon

Chelsea have agreed to sign Brazil midfielder Ramires from Benfica for a fee of 22 million euros (\$29.10 million), the Portuguese club said on Wednesday.

The deal is subject to the 23-year-old passing a medical at the English Premier League club.

Ramires joined Benfica from Cruzeiro in May 2009 and a month later he earned his first senior cap for Brazil.

He played a key part in the Benfica team which lifted the Portuguese title in May for the first time in five years, making 26 appearances and scoring four goals.

China funding Reds bid

Football

AFP, London

China is funding a bid to buy Liverpool Football Club, as Beijing seeks to extend its rapidly growing global influence into the world of British sport, reports said Thursday.

China's overseas investment arm China Investment Corp (CIC) is providing funds for the bid fronted by businessman Kenny Huang to acquire the top sporting brand, reported Britain's The Times and Guardian newspapers.

The news is a dramatic twist in the saga of troubled Liverpool, whose American owners put the Premier League club up for sale in April, weighed down by more than 200 million pounds (318 million dollars) of debt.

CIC's emergence as a bidder for Liverpool sets up a takeover battle, with the Chinese pitted against a private equity group and a wealthy Kuwaiti family for control of the club, according to The Times.

The Chinese sovereign wealth fund's bid values the club at between 300 million and 350 million pounds, said The Times, citing insiders.

If the takeover attempt succeeded, CIC

would end up owning the majority of the club.

The fund would expect to make money by building a bigger stadium and developing the club's Asian fan base, said The Times.

A CIC executive in Beijing, who asked not to be named, said: "I just read the report. I'm not aware of this matter."

Speculation has been mounting about Chinese sports tycoon Huang's interest in the club, and he was forced to issue a statement Wednesday denying reports he had made a formal bid.

"Mr. Huang would like to emphasize that he has registered interest in investing in Liverpool FC but has made no formal bid," said a statement from his representatives, Hill & Knowlton.

Huang, the head of Hong Kong-based investment company QSL Sports Ltd, is believed to want to secure an early agreement to give manager Roy Hodgson time to bring in reinforcements before the end of the transfer window.

He is believed to have spoken to senior figures at Anfield to express his seriousness about a buy-out, in the hope that it will help persuade top stars like Fernando Torres that the club does have a better future.

Robinho keen on Santos stay

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil forward Robinho finished his six-month loan stint with Santos on a high note by helping the side win the Copa Brasil on Wednesday and hoped he could extend his stay after settling down in his native country.

Despite losing 2-1 to Vitoria on the night, Santos won the two-leg tie 3-2 on aggregate to lift the nationwide knockout competition for the first time and qualify for next year's Libertadores Cup.

In the last match of his loan spell from Manchester City, Robinho said he would love to stay in Brazil rather than return to the English Premier League side, where he has fallen out of favour with coach Roberto Mancini.

"I hope to continue. My heart is here and I want to stay but I have to talk to my team," he told reporters. "Santos have brought me happiness and good things."

They also won the Paulista championship, a season-opening regional tournament, during Robinho's six months with the club.

Anelka sues L'Equipe

AFP, Paris

Nicolas Anelka is taking legal action against L'Equipe over a report it ran during the World Cup about the France striker's half-time outburst against the team coach, the French sports daily confirmed on Thursday.

Anelka's verbal tirade against Raymond Domenech at half-time of their match against Mexico was splashed across the front page of L'Equipe's June 19 edition.

However Anelka disputes that he used the same words and is suing the paper for defamation.

"He is challenging the quote used in one of our editions. He has issued a writ claiming defamation," the newspaper wrote on Thursday. "L'Equipe stands by its version and will keep its reasons for the court."

The outburst occurred at the break in the Mexico game -- when the game was still goalless -- when Domenech asked the Chelsea striker to change the way he was playing.

"When the coach in the dressing room against Mexico told me to stay up front, it went straight to my brain," Anelka told France Soir on Wednesday.

"I told myself that he was doing this on purpose, that he was looking for a guy to take the fall instead of him."

"I muttered in my corner some things that will remain in the secrecy of the dressing room. And which ought to stay there. But in no way are these the words that I read in L'Equipe."

France went on to lose the match 2-0.

When the news of the dressing room bust-up broke two days after the game, Anelka was sent home from South Africa by the French federation, prompting a one-day strike by the remainder of the squad.

Baggio joins Italy

Football

AFP, Rome

Italian football legend Roberto Baggio as expected joined the Italian Football Federation Technical Direction (FIGC) on Wednesday as Italy rebuilds after a disastrous World Cup which saw the 2006 champions exit in the first round.

The 43-year-old - known as the 'divine ponytail' in his playing days because of his hairstyle and his conversion to Buddhism - was joined by two other greats of the game.

Former national coach Arrigo Sacchi - under whom Baggio reached the 1994 World Cup final where they lost on penalties to Brazil - has been appointed co-ordinator of the youth teams up to Under-21 level and Gianni Rivera, the first Italian to be named European player of the year, will be in charge of teaching and youth sector.

Baggio, who was also a member of the Italy side that reached the 1990 World Cup semi-finals, had earlier expressed his hope that Italy would focus on bringing on young talent.

"I dream of Italy being able to begin to culti-

vate great talent," he told Rai Uno.

"But to achieve this we have to believe in the young players that are the future," added Baggio, who retired in 2004 after a stellar career which saw him play for Fiorentina, Juventus and AC Milan.

Chief among the young talent Baggio believes in is Mario Balotelli, who much to the former star's chagrin is set to join bigspending English Premier League side Manchester City from Italian champions and Champions League holders Inter Milan.

Italian football is still in shock after their side put up a limp defence of their world title, under the same coach Marcello Lippi, and finished bottom of their group with just two draws including with minnows New Zealand, who even finished above them.

Cesare Prandelli replaced Lippi in the hot seat and has already indicated he could bring in Balotelli and troublesome talent Antonio Cassano for next Monday's friendly with Ivory Coast.

After the Ivory Coast game, Italy will play Estonia on September 3 and the Faroe Islands on September 7 in qualifying matches for the UEFA Euro 2012 championships in Poland and Ukraine.

Diego U-turn?

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona, sacked as coach of Argentina only last week, is in the frame to succeed himself, it emerged here on Wednesday in the latest twist in the saga involving the footballing icon.

According to Ernesto Cherquis Bialo, Argentina Football Association (AFA) spokesman, Maradona's name is among the list of candidates to fill the vacant coaching position.

"Diego has never gone away and he is still arriving," Bialo told radio station Ten, paraphrasing the lyrics of a famous tango dance.

Bialo said that the identity of the new manager would be revealed in October.

He added: "Nobody's name is forbidden, nor the support for anyone assured."

The possibility of Maradona being reappointed to the job he held for 18 months comes as an unexpected development following his dismissal in the wake of Argentina's 4-0 defeat to Germany in the World Cup quarterfinals.

His sacking prompted a backlash of bitter recriminations from the 1986 World Cup winner who claimed that he had been "lied" to by AFA president Julio Grondona and "betrayed" by team manager Carlos Bilardo.

He blamed the pair for plotting his downfall, claiming that they had gone back on their word after telling him his job was safe after the Germany rout in South Africa.

"Grondona lied to me. Bilardo betrayed me," Maradona claimed after his colourful and controversial reign as Argentina coach came to



Santos star Robinho celebrates with the Copa do Brasil after their victory over Vitoria in the final in Salvador on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Blanc rings the changes

Football

AFP, Paris

France coach Laurent Blanc has kept a promise to leave 23 World Cup upstarts at home as he recalled Karim Benzema, Samir Nasri and Philippe Mexes to a 22-man squad in time for a friendly against Norway.

Blanc took over from Raymond Domenech after France's controversial World Cup campaign, which ended in a premature first round exit following the players' controversial decision to strike.

All 23 players faced sporting sanctions for their actions and former Bordeaux coach Blanc has, as expected, left the entire squad at home.

Benzema, Nasri and Mexes were left out of Domenech's squad for the ill-fated trip to South Africa in June, but return to headline a squad brimming with fresh faces and relatively unknown names on the international stage.

Lassana Diarra of Real Madrid was a regular under Domenech but was ruled out of the World Cup at the last minute with illness.

Diarra makes his return to midfield alongside the likes of Arsenal's Nasri and Charles Nzogbia, who plays for Wigan.

Marseille striker Hatem Ben Arfa, who narrowly missed out on selection for the World Cup, also returns alongside Real Madrid's Benzema.

Other than the return of Benzema, Nasri and Roma defender Mexes, the squad contains 13 players who could make their France debut. Seven of that 13 have never before been called up.

The seven entirely new France faces are

defenders Mathieu Debuchy, Mamadou Sakho, and Benoit Tremoulinas, midfielders Yohan Cabaye, Blaise Matuidi, and Nzogbia and striker Jeremy Menez.

France came under fire during and after the World Cup after the players agreed, en masse, to strike during a training session to protest Domenech's decision to send Chelsea striker Nicolas Anelka home.

France play Norway in a friendly away on Wednesday August 11, after which Blanc will be expected to gradually reinstall at least some of the squad whose disastrous World Cup campaign caused huge uproar in France.

Blanc's first real challenge as coach will be to steer France successfully through qualifying for the 2012 European Championships. The first match is against Belarus on September 3.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Nicolas Douchez (Rennes), Stephane Ruffier (Monaco)

Defenders: Aly Cissokho (Lyon), Mathieu Debuchy (Lille), Rod Fanni (Rennes), Philippe Mexes (Roma/ITA), Adil Rami (Lille), Mamadou Sakho (Paris St Germain), Benoit Tremoulinas (Bordeaux)

Midfielders: Yohan Cabaye (Lille), Lassana Diarra (Real Madrid/ESP), Blaise Matuidi (Saint-Etienne), Yann Mvila (Rennes), Samir Nasri (Arsenal/ENG), Charles Nzogbia (Wigan/ENG), Moussa Sissoko (Toulouse)

Strikers: Hatem Ben Arfa (Marseille), Karim Benzema (Real Madrid/ESP), Jimmy Briand (Lyon), Guillaume Hoarau (Paris St Germain), Jeremy Menez (Roma/ITA), Loic Remy (Nice)



Barcelona star Lionel Messi balances the ball on his left foot during a light training session at the Worker's Stadium in Beijing yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP