

Kaka wasn't fit

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid star Kaka, who has been ruled out through injury for three to four months, said he had a problem with his left knee even before the World Cup.

"This knee has been bothering me for quite some time. But I didn't know that it was so serious. I was the first to be surprised..." the Brazilian playmaker told the Spanish sports newspaper AS published Saturday.

"I was always being treated for a groin strain and I was told that it could cause muscular imbalance in other parts, but I didn't know it was so serious."

Real Madrid announced on Thursday that the 28-year-old had undergone a successful operation on his knee in Antwerp, Belgium and would be out of action for three to four months. He returned to Madrid on Friday.

He told AS he had felt the pain in the knee "even before the World Cup. I always told them in Madrid that it was bothering me a bit but as I was being treated for the groin strain it seemed that it was just a muscle imbalance that was not becoming as serious as it now appears to be."

Kaka, signed from AC Milan for 65 million euros in the summer of 2009, told AS he was devastated by the injury.

"I have to say that I'm not the bad guy. I need people to believe in me. For me it's a nightmare to be out for another four months."

Brazil were eliminated by the Netherlands in the quarterfinals of the World Cup, in which Kaka failed to shine.

Brazil team doctor Jose Luiz Runcio admitted last month that Kaka was not properly fit for the tournament and wouldn't have played at a lesser event.



ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY: Brazil and Real Madrid star Kaka walks with the help of crutches, after undergoing a successful knee operation, as he leaves the Monica Hospital in Antwerp on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Mancini plans Robinho talks

AFP, London

Manchester City boss Roberto Mancini plans a face-to-face showdown with rebel Brazilian star Robinho before the new Premier League season begins.

Robinho has been on loan with Santos since January and has insisted he wants to stay in Brazil after failing to make an impression at Eastlands since City paid Real Madrid 32.5million pounds for his services two years ago.

After Robinho has played in Brazil's friendly against the United States in New Jersey on Tuesday, Mancini will talk to the 26-year-old.

"Robinho will stay in Brazil until the international game and then he will come back here because I need to speak with him," said Mancini.

"I worked with him for one month, then he decided to go back to Brazil. He said he wanted to stay at home so he could prepare to play for Brazil at the World Cup."

"There was no pressure from me but now I must speak with him because it is very difficult for him to stay at Santos."

Milan win in shootout

AFP, Pontiac

Italian defender Daniele Bonera scored the deciding goal in a penalty-kick shootout for AC Milan after playing a goalless draw Friday with Greek side Panathinaikos in a football friendly.

The shootout was deadlocked until the fourth Panathinaikos shooter, Antonios Petropoulos, fired wide of the goal, setting the stage for Bonera to net the winner.

A goal controversy came in the 55th minute when Sidney Govou's shot for the Greek champions deflected off the crossbar and flirted with crossing the goal line before being cleared by Bonera. No goal was awarded.

The exhibition match was played on a temporary grass field similar to the one used in the Pontiac Silverdome for matches in the 1994 World Cup. The crowd of 30,514 left the domed venue less than half-filled for the match.

US defender Oguchi Onyewu did not play for AC Milan.

L'pool in transition

AFP, Paris



Twelve months on from what was supposed to be the start of their most concerted Premier League title challenge in years, Liverpool are facing a season in transition under new manager Roy Hodgson.

The anticipated title bid failed to materialise last season, as injuries, Rafael Benitez's tactical conservatism and loss of form affecting key players meant the 18-time English champions crashed to defeat after demoralising defeat.

The result was Liverpool's worst season in recent memory.

Eliminated from the Champions League in the group phase, they managed to reach the semifinals of the Europa League but were knocked out early in both domestic cup competitions and finished a distant seventh in the league.

Benitez had guided Liverpool to a second-place finish in 2008-09 but last season's calamity was a false dawn too far and in June he parted company with the club he had memorably led to the 2005 Champions League title.

Hodgson, inspirational manager of Fulham over the past two and a half seasons, is the man who must reverse the downward trajectory of England's most successful club.

The 62-year-old's first priority was to persuade stars Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres to stay at Anfield.

"We are working very hard on making certain the players we have at the club who you would call the 'good players' are going to be with us for next season," Hodgson said in July.

"The board are working very hard in that area. Some players are a bit disenchanted after what happened last season and we want to make sure we get that enchantment back."

Hodgson secured a major coup by capturing Joe Cole on a free transfer, having convinced the England winger that Liverpool was the right club for him to resurrect his career after he fell out of favour at Chelsea.

Gerrard reacted by pledging his immediate future to the club and Torres followed suit when firm talk of a takeover began to emerge in August, but defensive midfielder Javier Mascherano is reportedly keen to follow Benitez to Inter Milan.

Steps have nonetheless been taken to remedy the club's lack of home-grown players, with Premier League sides now obliged to name eight players who have been domestically trained between the ages of 16 and 21 in their squads.

Liverpool's foreign contingent accounted for 90 percent of their squad last season -- the highest in the division -- but the signings of English midfielder Jonjo Shelvey from Charlton and Scottish centre-back Danny Wilson from Rangers, both of whom are 18, reflect a change in the club's priorities.

"The fact that Stevie is staying will be a great help and players like Joe Cole, Milan Jovanovic, Jonjo Shelvey and Danny Wilson means there is buying for present and the future," said former Liverpool great Kenny Dalglish.

Deeply unpopular American owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett continue to attract the supporters' ire, while Hodgson will quickly have to prove he can handle what he calls "the biggest job in club football".

Milner on verge of City move

AFP, London

Aston Villa manager Martin O'Neill admits James Milner could be on the verge of joining Manchester City after leaving the England midfielder out of his club's latest friendly.

Milner was absent from Villa's squad for Friday's goalless draw against Valencia and O'Neill hinted the protracted transfer was close to being concluded.

Villa rejected a 20 million pounds bid from City for Milner in May and put a 30 million pounds price tag on the former Leeds and Newcastle star, who has made it clear he would like to move to Eastlands.

"We didn't play him primarily because there could be something happening in terms of the transfer," O'Neill said.

"I thought it would be the best thing to do not to play him in case something develops over the weekend or Monday or Tuesday."

"I think there's been fresh contact. I couldn't tell you whether there's been a renewed offer."

"I think there is something in that now, yes (getting it concluded quickly). I agree."

"I think that's for everyone's benefit really, it's probably time to get something done if it's at all possible."

"I think that was the aim anyway when the teams were talking. But I'm unable to furnish you with further details at this moment."

Valencia hold Villa

AFP, London

Aston Villa were held to a drab 0-0 draw by Spanish side Valencia at home on Friday in their final pre-season friendly.

Martin O'Neill's Premier League team had the best of the few openings that were created with Stewart Downing crashing a free-kick off the crossbar in the dying moments.

Bolton made it three friendly matches without defeat as they eased to a 2-0 win against another Spanish side Osasuna at the Reebok Stadium.

Johann Elmander opened the scoring before South Korea international Lee Chung-yong added the second before the interval.

Stoke's final warm-up match ended in disappointment as they had striker Ricardo Fuller sent off in a 0-0 stalemate at Wrexham.

Mensah stays at Sunderland

AFP, Lyon

French side Lyon on Friday agreed to allow Ghana international defender John Mensah to renew his loan period with English Premier League club Sunderland.

The deal includes an option to buy the 27-year-old, who skipped his country at the World Cup, with a transfer fee of around 5.5 million euros if he plays a minimum of 25 games for the English side.

Mensah joined Lyon from Rennes in 2008 for 8.5 million euros, but was never a regular in the first team as he battled a succession of injuries.

He played 18 times for Sunderland last season.

Blues aim Shield glory

Football

AFP, London

Carlo Ancelotti wants Chelsea to claim an early psychological advantage over Manchester United by defeating their title rivals in Sunday's Community Shield clash at Wembley.

The last three winners of this prestigious pre-season friendly have gone on to lift the Premier League trophy, with Ancelotti's side beating United on penalties last season, and the Chelsea boss believes it is important to seize the momentum ahead of the new season, which kicks off on August 14.

With Chelsea pipping United to the league last season, as well as winning the FA Cup, and United securing the League Cup, the two teams will walk out at Wembley as holders of all three English domestic trophies.

It would be little surprise if Ancelotti and United manager Sir Alex Ferguson are duelling for all the major honours again this season, giving the friendly fixture an added edge.

"I think that for both teams it is an important game because it is a very important check for the season and we want to look how our condition is, and also because against Manchester United is never an easy game," Ancelotti said.

"We want to do our best because Manchester United could be the most important opponent this season, like they were last season."

"I think we need to win because we have lost too many friendly games (in pre-season)."

"We are not happy to lose. We have to come back to win and start well."

Ancelotti named his team well in advance of Sunday's match and Didier Drogba will be on the bench as he returns to fitness after the World Cup.

Nicolas Anelka replaces Drogba, while Hilario is in goal in the absence of the injured Petr Cech.

England trio John Terry, Frank Lampard and Ashley Cole will all feature.

"I think the players that came back from the World Cup are not fit 100 per cent but they need to play. I will put them on the pitch on Sunday," Ancelotti added.

Tigana raring to go

AFP, Paris



New Bordeaux coach Jean Tigana is relishing being back at the helm of a French side 11 years after leaving Monaco and having a spell in England with Fulham, the former France star said Friday.

"Certainly I shall be a little emotional," the Euro 2004 winner admitted as he prepared for Sunday's trip to Montpellier.

"Preparations have gone well - there have been no major problems," said Tigana, who has to raise the bar for a Bordeaux side which won the league in 2009 to break a seven-year streak by Lyon but which last year fell away to miss out on European qualification altogether.

The club then lost coach Laurent Blanc to the French national side after the controversial reign of Raymond Domenech came to an igno-

Even without Drogba and Cech, it is a formidable unit and Ferguson is well aware Chelsea will pose the main danger to his side's hopes of regaining the title.

A year ago Ferguson was drawing attention to the number of aging players in the Blues' squad rather than singing their praises, but the Scot has no intention of underestimating them this time.

"With the experience Chelsea have got, you have to look at them being the biggest threat," Ferguson said.

"They won the league and the cup last year and I do think you have to see the team that won the league as the ones you look at."

"I don't see why anyone should think any different. Chelsea have the experience. You can't dismiss them."

If United are to win a record 19th English league title, Ferguson's faith in his young players needs to be vindicated in a big way.

United's lack of high-profile signings during the close-season has been blamed on the vast debts amassed by owners the Glazer family, but Ferguson insists he preferred to nurture the talented prodigies in his squad rather than splash out on big names.

With Rio Ferdinand, Michael Carrick, Patrice Evra, Anderson and Owen Hargreaves all set to miss the start of the season, there should be plenty of chances for Ferguson's young guns to shine.

Even Wayne Rooney and Nemanja Vidic may play only a restricted role on Sunday as Ferguson eases them back after the World Cup, giving Javier Hernandez, Chris Smalling and Darron Gibson more playing time.

"We always take the long view," Ferguson said. "There is no point pushing players too early, so I don't think we will get the benefit of these players until the third week of the season."

Probable starting line-ups for Sunday's Community Shield fixture between Chelsea and Manchester United at Wembley (1300 GMT):

Chelsea: Hilario; Ferreira, Ivanovic, Terry, Cole; Mikel, Essien, Lampard; Kalou, Anelka, Malouda.

Man Utd: Van der Sar; Brown, Vidic, Evans, O'Shea; Valencia, Fletcher, Gibson, Giggs; Berbatov, Owen.

minious close at the World Cup in South Africa.

But with Tigana raring to go the Girondins feel the good times are set to roll once more.

"The players have performed well over the past couple of years - though for the time being I have not found the right defensive recipe as not everybody is either available or match fit," he explained.

Tigana, who won the 1997 league title with Monaco, insisted he would encourage the players not to look to their 2009 laurels or to their hugely disappointing end to last term but start with a psychological clean slate.

"How they were before does not concern me. We have to be lucid and competitive. You don't eradicate bad habits in a couple of months - it takes time and work."

Tigana, who coached Turkey's Besiktas in his last job from 2005 to 2007, said that when he arrived he found "plenty of good things (but) I'll try to change the bad ones."

'Hernandez could partner Rooney'

Football

SOCCERNET

Sir Alex Ferguson has revealed Javier Hernandez could form part of a front two with Wayne Rooney this season.

Rooney excelled as a lone frontman last year and it had been expected that Manchester United would operate with a similar formation for the coming campaign.

However, with Hernandez joining Dimitar Berbatov, Michael Owen and Federico Macheda at Old Trafford, Ferguson is set to revert to a 4-4-2 formation when he deems it appropriate.

"We have not tried anything like it yet but we have played two strikers in the past," he said. "It doesn't mean it will happen every week but it will happen on some occasions."

"Hernandez has had a good start. He is an intelligent player with tremendous pace and penetration. The Mexican league is tough, so

bringing players to England from there is not going to be a problem."

He added: "We are pleased with the young strikers we have. (Danny) Welbeck and (Mame) Biram Diouf will go on loan, which leaves us with five: Berbatov, Rooney and Owen along with Macheda and Hernandez. That is sufficient."

Ferguson reiterated that he has no plans to go into the market this summer despite chief executive David Gill having said that funds are available.

"I don't see the value in adding to our squad," he said. "I am happy with what we already have and I don't see any reason to add to that just because people want me to buy someone."

"Supporters want you to buy players. They like to see a big signing every year. Sometimes the players like to see a big signing, but we have to be sensible about it. We look at our own squad and ask what do we need? I look at the players everyone says are available and they don't excite me."

Italy recall Cassano

Football

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli called up newcomers Mario Balotelli and Brazilian-born Amauri on Friday for a friendly against Ivory Coast, the team's first match since their disastrous World Cup campaign.

Sampdoria striker Antonio Cassano also returns to the squad for the first time since Euro 2008.

Prandelli's predecessor Marcello Lippi snubbed Inter's Balotelli as well as Cassano for the World Cup in South Africa and many observers blamed the dismal showing on his decision to stick with experienced but ageing players.

Juventus striker Amauri - who only recently obtained an Italian passport - is one of seven new names for the friendly against Ivory Coast

next Monday in London. Prandelli has named only nine of the players called up

by Lippi, including goalkeeper Federico Marchetti, midfielders Riccardo Montolivo and Daniele De Rossi and forward Fabio Quagliarella.

Reigning champions Italy were embarrassingly bundled out of the World Cup in the first round following a shock 3-2 defeat to Slovakia that left them at the bottom of what had looked like a fairly easy group, including Paraguay and rank outsiders New Zealand.

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

Formerly a Juventus midfielder, Prandelli spent five years coaching Fiorentina, twice taking them into the Champions League, having previously coached Parma and AS Roma.



Real Madrid forward Cristiano Ronaldo (L) and defender Pepe (R) pose with a fan during a training session at the UCLA campus in Los Angeles on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP