

Zizou lauds Mourinho

Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho, who Real Madrid poached from Inter Milan at the end of last season, is just what the Spanish giants needed, the club's former French midfielder Zinedine Zidane said in an interview published Wednesday.

"The team needed a change, of a coach with personality, a firm hand, and I think he fits that profile," he told sports daily Marca in South Africa where he is sponsoring a youth competition.

"For me Jose Mourinho was what Real Madrid needed," he added. "I have much trust in Mourinho, as well as in the players which we have because the majority are young and they have much quality."

Zidane, 38, has been a special adviser to the chairman of Real, Florentino Perez, since June 2009. He retired from football after his fifth season with Real in 2006 and the World Cup that year.

Mourinho in May replaced Chile's Manuel Pellegrini to become Real's 11th coach in the past seven years.

The 47-year-old won the Champions League with Porto in 2004 and Inter Milan last season. He also won two domestic titles with Porto, two with Chelsea and two with Inter.

Big-spending Real Madrid won the last of its 31 La Liga crowns in 2008.

The club was eliminated from the Champions League in the first knockout round for the sixth year last year.

Turan out of Germany clash

Turkey will be without playmaker Arda Turan for Friday night's key Euro 2012 qualifier against Germany at Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

The 23-year-old left winger pulled up with the injury training with the Guus Hiddink-coached Turks in Potsdam, near Berlin, and is expected to be out for up to eight weeks.

Turkey fly to face Azerbaijan in Baku next Tuesday, which Turan will also miss.

Both Germany and Turkey have won both of their opening Euro 2012 qualifiers ahead of Friday's clash at Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

Jose bitter at not coaching Portugal

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho admitted on Tuesday that he still felt "bitter" at not being able to take up the offer of coaching his native Portugal for two Euro 2012 qualifying games.

Portugal had asked if Mourinho could take the reins for the next two Euro 2012 qualifiers, following the dismissal of previous coach Carlos Queiroz, only for his club Real Madrid to block the move.

Mourinho, 47, said that while he could understand Real's position he would have liked to help his national team.

"For two days I felt and I thought like the Portugal coach. And I liked it," he wrote in an article published on the website of the Association of Football Coaches.

"But I have to admit that Real Madrid is a giant institution, which 'bought' me from Inter (Milan), who pay me, and who cannot run the risk faced with their shareholders and followers."

"In retrospect, it's an easy decision to understand," said Mourinho, adding that he "still had a bitter taste at not being able to help the Selecao".

Former Inter boss Mourinho, who last year won the second Champions League title of his career, wished new Portugal coach Paulo Bento the best.

"Portugal now have a coach and he should be recognised by everyone as 'our coach' and 'the best'," added Mourinho.



Argentina star Lionel Messi (2nd from L) signs autographs for Japanese fans after his arrival at the Narita International Airport in Tokyo yesterday. Argentina will play Japan in an international friendly on Friday.

Messi lands in Japan

Football

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi arrived in Japan on Wednesday, two days before Argentina's friendly against the Blue Samurai, on a trip which reportedly earned the South American side a 200,000 dollar bonus.

Some 100 fans surrounded the diminutive 23-year-old striker, casually dressed in a white T-shirt and black jeans, at the arrivals lounge of Tokyo's Narita airport as he signed autographs but did not talk to reporters.

Japanese media had speculated he might miss the trip after injuring his right ankle in Barcelona's 2-1 away win over Atletico Madrid in La Liga on September 19.

But the reigning FIFA World Player of the Year recovered in time, scoring the opener in a 1-1 La Liga draw against Real Mallorca at home on Sunday.

Japan Football Association president Junji Ogura has told Japanese media that his organisation was due to pay 200,000 dollars more for the tie if the Argentina squad included Messi.

Friday's friendly in Saitama, north of Tokyo, will be former AC Milan boss Alberto Zaccheroni's debut match as Japan coach.

The 57-year-old Italian signed with Japan in late August after the former Asian champions

reached the last-16 at the World Cup in South Africa.

But he watched from the stands as his side won their two friendlies at home against Paraguay and Guatemala in early September, as he had yet to obtain a work visa.

The 22-strong Argentine squad, coached by Sergio Batista, also features Manchester City striker Carlos Tevez, Real Madrid forward Gonzalo Higuain and Barcelona midfielder Javier Mascherano.

Batista and most of the squad arrived ahead of Messi and trained in Tokyo on Tuesday but refused to talk to reporters.

The coach shut reporters out of training on Wednesday and was reportedly planning to hold Thursday's official session behind tall tarpaulin sheets dubbed "Messi's curtain" by local media.

Such official practice is customarily held at the match venue.

Batista, who took over from Diego Maradona as Argentina coach after the South Americans lost to Germany 4-0 in the World Cup quarterfinals, is taking the Japan match seriously as his reputation is on the line, Japanese media said.

He was signed on a short-term contract and is apparently keen to extend his deal, which is due to expire at the end of the year.

His side beat Ireland 1-0 away on August 12 and crushed world champions Spain 4-1 at home on September 7.

Ballack out for year

Football

Germany captain Michael Ballack is not expected to play football again in 2010 after it was revealed on Wednesday his knee injury is worse than first thought.

The 34-year-old fractured the tibia just below his left knee in a Bundesliga match against Hanover last month, but a further examination has revealed more bad news.

The defensive midfielder now needs to wear a protective cast for the next four to six weeks to allow the injury to heal.

"The injury is more serious than thought and as a result Michael will be unavailable until the end of the year," said his club Bayer Leverkusen in a statement.

Ballack picked up the injury on only his third game back after damaging ligaments in his right ankle last May which kept him out of the World Cup finals.

Having spent four years at Chelsea, Ballack

returned to the German league this season with Leverkusen, but the latest set-back is a blow to both his club coach Jupp Heynckes and national trainer Joachim Loew.

"This development is very unfortunate. But I hope that Michael Ballack will return stronger after his rehab and we can focus on his return for the second half of the season," said Heynckes.

With 98 caps to his name, Ballack has already missed Germany's first two Euro 2012 qualifiers and sits out Friday's game against Turkey in Berlin and next Tuesday's match against Kazakhstan in Astana.

Ballack will also miss Germany's friendly against Sweden in Gothenburg on November 17, but Germany team manager Oliver Bierhoff urged the captain 'not to worry' about his latest set back and says he will come back stronger.

"Of course, it is another setback both for Michael and especially for Bayer Leverkusen," said Bierhoff at a press conference in Berlin.

"He will get a longer break now that will be good for him. Then he can attack again with renewed energy."

Zambrotta targets 100 caps

Football

Veteran full-back Gianluca Zambrotta has set his sights on reaching 100 Italy caps after being recalled to coach Cesare Prandelli's squad.

The 33-year-old AC Milan stalwart's international career had seemed over after he was overlooked by Prandelli for the coach's first two squads since taking over from Marcello Lippi following Italy's World Cup disaster in South Africa.

But ahead of Euro 2012 qualifiers against Northern Ireland in Belfast and Serbia in Genoa, Zambrotta, who has 97 caps, has set himself a new target.

"At the World Cup I said that I didn't feel finished. Last Thursday when Prandelli rang me to ask if I was available, I didn't think about any sort of revenge (for being dropped)," he said Tuesday from Italy's Covciano training base.

"I simply said yes. I'm not here to take anyone's place, I didn't say I'm returning and expecting to play."

"But I'm close to 100 appearances and I want to reach it."

Lippi was previously heavily criticised for his over-reliance on veteran stars such as Zambrotta who were part of the 2006 World Cup-winning squad.

But Prandelli initially rang the changes and blooded several new faces into the Italy set-up.

He also brought back players like Antonio Cassano from the international wilderness.

While Zambrotta has been recalled, so too has Lazio midfielder Stefano Mauri, who had not made a squad for three years.

Prandelli described him as the most in-form midfielder in Serie A.

"My return is all thanks to Lazio," said the 30-year-old Mauri, who has six caps to his name, of the club whose shirt he has donned since 2006.

Turks feel at home

Football

He may have been born and raised in Germany, but Turkey midfielder Nuri Sahin says he will have no problem wearing the red shirt on Friday and taking on the country of his birth here in a Euro 2012 qualifier.

Around 30,000 Turkey supporters are expected at the 74,244-capacity Olympic Stadium in Berlin for the Group A clash.

With 1.66 million Turks and 700,000 Germans of Turkish origin currently living in Germany, the qualifier between the group's top two sides will almost have the air of a home match for Guus Hiddink-coached Turkey.

The game has long since been sold out with German chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan set to attend. German police are tightening up security for what will be a hotly anticipated affair.

Having played for Turkey since 2005, Sahin had no problems choosing to play for the country of his ancestors and says it was a matter of personal choice.

"Our third generation of Turks are very well integrated now," said the 22-year-old.

"And, who knows, perhaps the next German Chancellor can come from the fourth generation."

"The German national football team has set the example, they are a multicultural team, and the whole country cheers when Mesut Ozil scores."

In the wake of the labour shortage caused by World War II, Germany recruited guest workers from overseas and a flood of immigrants from Turkey mean the country still has a strong Turkish community today.

Just like Real Madrid's Ozil, one of the stars of the World Cup, Sahin was born in Germany to Turkish parents.

The pair have opted to play for the different national sides, despite both developing their careers with German league clubs.

"Although I am a Turk, I am also more than a little German. This is a very special game for me," says Sahin, who was born in central Germany.

Germany coach Joachim Loew regrets Sahin's decision to play for Turkey and the German Football Federation (DFB) are working hard to make sure few other German-born players here slip through the net to play for other countries.

Villa backs Krkic

Football

Bojan Krkic's goalless streak comes to an end, his teammate David Villa warned on Tuesday.

"Having a run without scoring is something that happens to every striker,"

said Villa. "Bojan is very young and has great quality and I am sure that his luck will change. He will go on to score a lot of goals this season."

Krkic, 20, netted eight goals in the Spanish league last season but has so far failed to score this season.

Spanish champions Barcelona are in fourth place with 13 points, three fewer than Villa's former club Valencia who are on top after six matches.

"They are the strongest team at the moment. But there is still a long way to go," said Villa.

"There is no other team that creates as many chances as we do. We've not converted as many as we should and this has cost us. But it is not that we have not created them, it is just that we have not taken advantage of them."

Barcelona signed 28-year-old Villa from Valencia in May on a four-year deal worth 40 million euros (55 million dollars).

He scored 21 league goals last season with Valencia to finish his fifth consecutive campaign as the club's top scorer.



Spain striker David Villa kicks the ball during a training session in Las Rozas on Tuesday.

NESV to buy L'pool

Football

Liverpool's board of directors agreed Wednesday to sell the English football giants to the owner of the Boston Red Sox baseball team, despite fierce opposition from the side's current American owners.

The deal with New England Sports Ventures (NESV) is subject to approval by the Premier League and a legal battle with Tom Hicks and George Gillett, who bought the club three years ago and tried to scupper the latest bid.

"I am delighted that we have been able to successfully conclude the sale process which has been thorough and extensive," Liverpool chairman Martin Broughton said in a statement on the club's website.

"The board decided to accept NESV's proposal on the basis that it best met the criteria we set out originally for a suitable new owner. NESV's philosophy is all about winning and they have fully demonstrated that at the Red Sox."

Americans Hicks and Gillett were under pressure to sell the five-times European champions with an October 15 deadline for the repayment of their 282-million-pound (448-million-dollar) loans from the Royal Bank of Scotland and Wachovia.

Liverpool were put up for sale by the unpopular duo in April, who initially sought an asking price of around 800 million pounds, a figure that they subsequently dropped to 600 million.

The pair on Tuesday night attempted to remove two senior figures from the club's board of directors before a meeting to review two offers, one from NESV and the other reportedly from Asia.

Broughton hit out at the pair, saying: "I am only disappointed that the owners have tried everything to prevent the deal from happening and that we need to go through legal proceedings in order to complete the sale."

He said the board had met NESV in Boston, London and Liverpool in recent weeks and he was "immensely impressed with what they have achieved and with their vision for Liverpool Football Club."

"By removing the burden of acquisition debt, this offer allows us to focus on investment in the team," he added.

The statement said, however, that the sale was "conditional on Premier League approval, resolution of the dispute concerning board membership and other matters".

New England Sports Ventures is a group headed by John William Henry II and Tom Werner.

Broughton was appointed as independent chairman as part of the sale process in April, meaning Gillett and Hicks no longer had a majority vote and could not prevent any sale that the board viewed as being in the club's best interests.

The American pair have become increasingly unpopular on Merseyside with supporters blaming the duo for Liverpool's fall from grace, as the 18-time champions languish in the Premier League relegation zone.

In a dramatic twist late Tuesday, Liverpool released an unusual statement saying that Hicks and Gillett had tried to oust managing director Christian Purslow and commercial director Ian Ayre from the board.

Hicks wanted to replace them with his son, Mack Hickey, and a close associate Lori Kay McCutcheon.

Liverpool, Champions League winners in 2005, have not topped the English league since 1990 and the disappointment of last season's seventh-place finish has intensified this season.

Manager Rafa Benitez's replacement by Roy Hodgson has failed to lift the team.

The Reds exited the League Cup at home to League Two Northampton on penalties before going down 2-1 to newly-promoted Blackpool at Anfield on Sunday amid protests against Hicks and Gillett.

C'Ron getting better

Football

Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo boasted Wednesday that he is getting better as a footballer and is ready to put his skills to help Portugal in the next two Euro 2012 qualifiers.

The Portugal striker scored a double at the weekend which helped his club to a 6-1 La Liga win over Deportivo La Coruna.

"I feel better and better. I feel confident and ready to help the Selecao," the Portugal captain said during a press conference at Obidos where the national side are training ahead of Friday's clash with Denmark which will be followed by a trip to Iceland four days later.

"Goals always give you confidence. You score, you play well and the confidence soars,"

said Ronaldo.

Portugal are second last in their Group H after a draw at home to Cyprus and losing to Norway.

"We're not where we should be," conceded Ronaldo, who missed both ties because of injury. "Now there isn't much room for error - we have to win."

Ronaldo said he was satisfied with his performance for Real Madrid.

"Madrid is getting better and better, we're growing and the team is improving on several fronts," he said.

"We have to continue like that to go after La Liga," said Ronaldo, adding: "we mustn't just worry about Barcelona because there are other teams doing very well, like Valencia."

Valencia are leading La Liga with 16 points after six games, two points ahead of third-placed Real Madrid with Barcelona a further point back in fourth.



Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo (R) executes a side-volley during a training session at Praia d'El Rey on Tuesday.