

# Chelsea snap up starlet

Football

AFP, Bangkok

The new manager of English football club Chelsea on Saturday announced a deal with Barcelona to sign teenager Oriol Romeu, as the London team prepared for a game in Thailand on their Asia tour.

Blues boss Andre Villas-Boas confirmed agreement had been reached with the Spanish giants but said the 19-year-old defensive midfielder had yet to finalise personal terms or pass a medical. The fee was not disclosed.

"I wouldn't like to share a lot because he is not (yet) our player," Villas-Boas said, describing Romeu as "one of the most interesting, bright young players in the number six position".

Romeu is currently with the Spain Under-20 squad, which is soon to compete in the World Cup for that age level in Columbia, Villas-Boas said at a press conference ahead of Chelsea's match with Thailand All Stars on Sunday.

"You know that it is a fact that we are struggling with numbers, not only after Michael's injury, but we wanted to bring in players in those positions," he added, referring to Michael Essien, who suffered knee damage in training earlier this month.

"Oriol is a player, of course, with a bright future. He still has to evolve," said Villas-Boas, adding that Romeu's Barcelona B team had "a magnificent year".

He is described on Barcelona's website as "one of the strongest players around" and "indispensable".



Chelsea striker Didier Drogba (R) picks up a young girl as he poses with Thai children from the slums of Bangkok during a ceremony to donate mosquito nets yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Heinze joins Roma

REUTERS, Milan

Argentine defender Gabriel Heinze has become AS Roma's latest recruit, the Serie A team said on Saturday.

The 33-year-old former Manchester United and Real Madrid player was officially presented on Saturday after his move from Olympique Marseille where he spent the previous two seasons.

Heinze played for Argentina at the last two World Cups, although his omission from the squad for this year's Copa America suggested his international career may have ended.

AS Roma, who finished sixth last season to qualify for the Europa League, last month appointed former Barcelona and Spain player Luis Enrique as coach.

On Friday, Barcelona announced they had agreed to sell 20-year-old Bojan Krkic to Roma for 12 million euros in an unusual deal that includes a commitment to buy the Spain under-21 forward back in two years.

# China smash lowly Laos

AFP, Hong Kong

China smashed six second-half goals past Laos on Saturday to put one foot in the third round of Asian qualifying for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Lowly Laos gave the home team some nerve moments at Kunming's Tuodong Stadium when strikes from Soukaphone Vongchiengkham and Visay Phaphouvanin put the visitors two-up after 31 minutes.

But substitute Yang Xu hit back on the stroke of half-time, and it set off an avalanche of goals in the second period as he added two more, with Chen Tao scoring a double off the bench and two late strikes from midfielder Hao Junmin.

China will now be confident of progressing after Thursday's second leg to the penultimate stage of Asian qualifying, when big guns Japan, Australia and South Korea enter the competition, along with Bahrain and North Korea.

Singapore host Malaysia in a Southeast Asian grudge match later Saturday, while Saudi Arabia and Iran are expected to continue their march to the 2014 finals when they entertain Hong Kong and Maldives respectively.

Improving India, who have never played in football's showpiece, are quietly confident of causing problems to the United Arab Emirates and Vietnam will face Qatar.

# URUGUAY V PARAGUAY

## A surprise finale

AFP, Buenos Aires



American football fans expected a battle of the giants in the final of the Copa America.

Instead, they can look forward to a duel between two nations whose populations barely reach the ten million of Bolivia between them, never mind the 190 million of Brazil alone.

Uruguay will be overwhelming favourites to see off Paraguay and clinch a record 15th continental crown, their first since 1995, to break their tie with Argentina.

But Uruguay coach Oscar Tabarez is keen to play down the favourites' mantle.

"We have a lot of potential but Uruguay need not think it would be a disaster to come second. However, of course we believe we can win it - we have faith in ourselves and we are well prepared," said the coach.

Argentina had expected to land a 15th Copa for themselves but instead the hosts fell to Uruguay in a quarterfinal shootout to leave coach

Sergio Batista fighting for his job.

Brazil likewise made a quarterfinal exit to Paraguay after failing to convert any of their kicks and Paraguay were at it again in defeating Venezuela to reach their first final since their second triumph in 1979.

Paraguay, who will likely pin their hopes on Lucas Barrios and Nelson Haedo Valdez in attack with Roque Santa Cruz still not fully fit, also won the event in 1953 and were runners-up on five occasions.

Yet here, the talk is of how they have reached Sunday's showdown at River Plate's Estadio Monumental by drawing all their matches.

But it is Uruguay, despite having only a 3.5 million population to draw on, who have shaped the history of the world's oldest international football tournament with their 14 wins and six final losses in 42 previous editions.

They will be looking to Diego Forlan, the top scorer at the 2010 World Cup, to find the target for the first time at the tournament.

Paraguayan midfielder Edgar Barreto insists his team do not deserve to have a negative label pinned on them.

"Everyone says how we have not won any of our games, but we didn't

lose any either," said Barreto in looking back at the shootout successes over first Brazil and then Venezuela.

Three of their games ended goalless though they were entertaining enough in a 2-2 group draw with the Brazilians and a 3-3 draw with Venezuela thereafter, when they let slip a 3-1 lead in the dying minutes.

On Uruguay, Barreto said: "They are a balanced side with a lot of quality and we have to pick away at their weak points to hurt them."

Defender Ivan Piris says reaching the final is not enough now they are there.

"We want more now. We want to be the champions for the first time in 32 years and make history."

Uruguay's Lazio midfielder Alvaro Gonzalez expects a tight contest.

"Paraguay play the way they play - we know how this team works. They play it very tight and it's very difficult to get into their box. They deserve to be in the final. They played Brazil, one of the big favourites, twice and didn't lose."

The winner of Sunday's game will go forward to represent South America's CONMEBOL association in the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup hosted by Brazil.

# Webber takes pole

AFP, Nurburgring



Mark Webber secured pole position for Sunday's German Grand Prix with a blistering performance in Saturday's tense and competitive qualifying session.

Driving his Red Bull car with great poise and assurance, the 34-year-old Australian demonstrated his liking for the Nurburgring circuit by delivering his second pole in succession, his third this year and the ninth of his career.

Webber clocked a fastest lap of one minute and 30.079 seconds to take the prime starting position ahead of Briton Lewis Hamilton who produced a brilliant effort to take second less than one-tenth of a second behind him in his McLaren.

"That was a wicked lap," said Hamilton after relegating defending champion and runaway leader Sebastian Vettel in the second Red Bull to third - and off the front row of the grid for the first time this year.

Vettel was only able to take third place ahead of two-times champion Spaniard Fernando Alonso and his Ferrari team-mate Felipe Massa who was fifth after a dramatic finale to qualifying.

German Nico Rosberg took sixth for Mercedes ahead of Briton Jenson Button in the second Mercedes, German Adrian Sutil of Force India, Russian Vitaly Petrov of Renault and seven-times champion local

hero Michael Schumacher, 42, in the second Mercedes.

'Schumi' was 2.4 seconds off pole. On a cold, but dry day in the Eifel mountains the air temperature was only 14 degrees Celsius and the track temperature was just 22 degrees - the coldest conditions for qualifying this year.

The low temperatures meant that it was more difficult for many teams to warm up their tyres.

After a tense opening mini-session in Q1, Massa wound up fastest having used a set of soft tyres, but out went Japanese Kamui Kobayashi of Sauber, Finn Heikki Kovalainen of Lotus, Timo Glock of Virgin and Indian Karun Chandhok in the second Lotus.

They filled places 18 to 21 on the grid ahead of 22nd placed Belgian Jerome D'Ambrosio of Virgin and the two Hispanias of Italian veteran Vitantonio Liuzzi and Australian rookie Daniel Ricciardo.

Liuzzi, given a five places grid penalty because of a replaced gearbox, will start from 24th. Glock was congratulated by his team for taking 20th, ahead of Chandhok, but responded testily: "You make my life difficult in the last two races - the car is just so difficult to drive at the moment."

The Q2 session saw Mexican Sergio Perez out early for Sauber followed by the hungry-looking Massa whose fastest time was soon overhauled by Alonso and then Hamilton.

# Martino aims for a win

AFP, Buenos Aires



Having reached their first Copa America final in 32 years, Paraguay coach Gerardo Martino wants his men to achieve another first at this year's trophy match against Uruguay on Sunday. A win.

That's because the Albirroja, champions in 1953 and 1979, have made it this far by drawing all five of their games over 90 minutes, first in the group stage and then over 120 minutes against Brazil, then Venezuela, both squeezed out only on penalties.

Martino, who is banned from the dugout after being suspended for an altercation with the fourth official in the Venezuela semi and then indulging in some over-enthusiastic verbal jousting with counterpart Cesar Farias, insisted his side did not go out with the intention of drawing games.

"If a game ends all-square maybe we should go back to the dressing room and not bother with penalties," he asked rhetorically in a pre-final press conference on Friday.

He prefers to see that the teams who have got to the final "have proved to be the most consistent ones."

Martino, who was cagey on Sunday's line-up - though striker Roque Santa Cruz is out with injury - praised a Uruguayan side which has confirmed its renaissance under Oscar Tabarez, who led them to the World Cup semi-final last summer.

"They are a very versatile side and work hard for each other."

Martino has been mooted as a successor for Sergio Batista with Argentina should the latter be sacked next week, as appeared increasingly likely with his Federation to meet Monday amid media reports he has lost the support of several officials.

Earlier in the week, he said it was not for him to comment on the issue.

On his banning from the bench, Martino, said regretfully: "I acknowledge I made a mistake."



Venezuela defender Gabriel Cichero controls the ball during a training session at the Jose Amalfitani Stadium in Buenos Aires on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Lugano backs leniency

AFP, Buenos Aires



Uruguay skipper Diego Lugano on Friday praised Copa America organisers for electing not to suspend players from final rivals Paraguay for their role in a post semifinal flare-up with Venezuela.

"It's well and good they are not to be suspended. I agree with that decision. I am a footballer and will always support footballers," Lugano told a news conference in Buenos Aires.

On Sunday, Uruguay will be going for a 15th crown in the continental final against twice champions Paraguay, who just crept past Venezuela on penalties.

That match ended with fisticuffs and organisers CONMEBOL has fined both nations involved \$10,000.

CONMEBOL, the South American football confederation, is headed by Paraguayan Nicolas Leoz, but Lugano said he could not say if the latter had had any say in the decision not to suspend of his countrymen from the final.

"I don't know if Paraguay has any political power - and that does not interest me," he said.

But Venezuela coach Cesar Farias said that organisers "should have punished those who sparked it off."

Farias, speaking in Buenos Aires ahead of Saturday's third place playoff against Peru at nearby La Plata, said the "lack of sanctions surprises me... I wonder if the same thing would have happened had Venezuela got to the final."

"We are ten members of the South American Confederation and everyone should be dealt with even-handedly. These images went around the world and they were disgraceful," said Farias, in respect of the post-match altercation.

Paraguay coach Gerardo Martino is suspended from the bench after organisers studied the match report of Mexican referee Francisco Chacon, who dismissed him from the dugout for arguing with the fourth official and clashing with Farias.

"I acknowledge I made a mistake," said Martino, who had already served one ban after Colombian match official Roldan Wilmar sent him off in the group game with Brazil.

The organisers have opted for leniency on the post-match scuffle.

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