

Argentina call up Rodriguez

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Universidad de Chile winger Matias Rodriguez has earned his first Argentina call-up for their World Cup qualifier against Ecuador next month.

There was no place, however, for Carlos Tevez among the forwards which include his Manchester City team mate Sergio Aguero, Spanish-based Lionel Messi and Gonzalo Higuain and Napoli's Ezequiel Lavezzi.

Coach Alejandro Sabella named 18 foreign-based players on Friday night and is expected to boost the numbers with some from the domestic league in a squad to face Ecuador at River Plate stadium in Buenos Aires on June 2.

Rodriguez has had a brilliant six months helping "La U win the Copa Sudamericana, South America's equivalent to the Europe League, in December and reach the Libertadores Cup quarter-finals this month.

The 26-year-old, who has also played as a right back, has scored some key goals for the 2011 Chilean champions.



(Inset) London 2012 Olympic Games ambassador David Beckham lights the Olympic torch with a cauldron in Cornwall on Friday after (top) a British Airways special flight from Greece landed at the Culdrose naval air station. PHOTO: REUTERS

Ready for impact

AFP, The Hague



Having shaken off his injury woes to emerge as one of Europe's deadliest strikers, Robin van Persie's next challenge is to make an impact at a major international tournament with the Netherlands.

The 2011-12 season was without doubt the finest of the Dutchman's career, as he scored 30 goals for Arsenal to finish as top scorer in the Premier League, earning himself multiple recognition at the end-of-season award ceremonies.

After making only 25 league appearances in the previous season, van Persie played in every game of Arsenal's most recent campaign, suggesting that the injuries that stunted his progress in the past are now behind him.

With 37 goals in all competitions, the 28-year-old placed himself in the company of Europe's most prolific goalscorers.

His next assignment is to leave a mark at Euro 2012.

Van Persie was a member of the Dutch side that reached the final at the last World Cup in 2010 but he scored just one goal en route and failed to make a lasting impression on the tournament.

His agitation was, at times, plain to see, such as when he reacted angrily to being substituted by coach Bert van Marwijk after another goalless showing in the last-16 success against Slovakia.

He was a member of the Dutch squad at both the 2006 World Cup and Euro 2008 but

in both tournaments he was used mainly as an impact player.

Now, though, he is one of the most feared forwards in the game and will spearhead the 4-2-3-1 formation introduced by Marco van Basten and kept in place by his successor van Marwijk.

With his intuitive movement, deft footwork and precise shooting, van Persie is an untypical striker but Arsenal's third-place Premier League finish owed much to the club captain's unerring eye for goal.

"He is like Lionel Messi in the positional sense," says Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger. "He doesn't play like a real centre-forward but if you look at his movement, he is very intelligent because of his diagonal runs.

"And his first touch is so good that in tight spaces he can make a difference, also because he has a very short back-lift for a big guy."

For all his fine form, van Persie's place in the Dutch starting XI is not as secure as it might appear.

He may have bagged six goals in qualifying but Klaas-Jan Huntelaar scored 12 and the Schalke striker also netted 29 goals in the Bundesliga to claim Germany's version of the golden boot.

The two players were occasionally deployed alongside each other in qualifying but that obliged van Persie to play in a right-wing or support-striker position that he has not adopted for Arsenal for some years.

Given the strength of Holland's group, however, van Persie is likely to err on the side of caution, which should mean van Persie starting on his own up front against Denmark, Germany and Portugal in Group B.

Flame arrives in Britain

REUTERS, Culdrose



The flame for the London Olympics burned brightly on British soil on Friday after David Beckham stepped off a special flight from the Games birthplace of Greece to light a cauldron with a golden torch.

The British Airways 'Firefly' Flight 2012 from Athens landed on time at the Culdrose naval air station with Britain's Princess Anne, Games chairman Seb Coe and the former England soccer captain among the delegation.

The flame will start a 70-day torch relay around Britain on Saturday, with triple Olympic gold medallist sailor Ben Ainslie carrying it on the first leg from Land's End on the south-west tip of England.

The Games start on July 27. London mayor Boris Johnson, his mane of unruly blond hair trimmed for the occasion, declared the moment to be "a big accelerator of the heartbeat".

"We've got 70 days to go," he told reporters before heading back to London on the golden-liveried plane.

"For someone in my position this is the final furlong for us and that's when the horses start to change places and so this is going to make the difference now between a good Games and a great Games."

British Deputy Prime Minister

Nick Clegg welcomed the Olympic torch on behalf of the British government on a clear evening in marked contrast to the torrential rain left behind in Athens.

"It is a fantastic moment for us, particularly at a time when there is so much anxiety and concern about the economy and other things, to be uplifted by this whole experience and to be able to showcase ourselves to the world as an open-hearted, generous, dynamic, positive country," he told the BBC.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for the country as a whole."

The arrival of the flame, with Princess Anne carrying it in a special lantern down the steps from the plane, was covered live on Britain's main BBC station with the plane circling overhead before landing to fit in with the schedules.

"It's only when the torch comes into your possession that you realise," the Princess said as she handed the lantern to one of the special security team who will guard it.

Beckham soon lit the Olympic torch and ignited a cauldron with the flame, which was then due to be transferred to Lands End for Saturday's relay start.

Johnson said the manner of the flame's arrival bodes well.

"The plane landed bang on time, in fact it was early," he declared enthusiastically.

"We circled over Cornwall like a custard-coloured comet and that is a metaphor in my view for everything that has happened so far in the London Olympics. It's been either on time or ahead of time and it's under budget."

On Thursday, the flame had been handed over at a damp ceremony in the Athens marble stadium that hosted the first modern Games in 1896.

The flame, lit from the sun's rays at the home of the ancient Games in Olympia a week ago, was presented under grey and rainy skies to former Olympian Princess Anne by the president of the Hellenic Olympic Committee Spyros Capralos.

Coe, who will head off to Munich on Saturday to watch his beloved Chelsea play Bayern Munich in the Champions League final, was confident the torch relay would light the fire for anyone still ambivalent about the Games.

"It does have a big impact," he said.

"I saw the test event the other day with a cardboard torch going from Leicester to Peterborough and they (the spectators) were three and four deep on the pavement, in the little villages.

"And every week I get letters from people who are talking about the things they are doing to mark the fact the torch is coming through. There's an emotional connect with this that I'm not sure all torch relays have got."

Rafael takes Alves's place

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

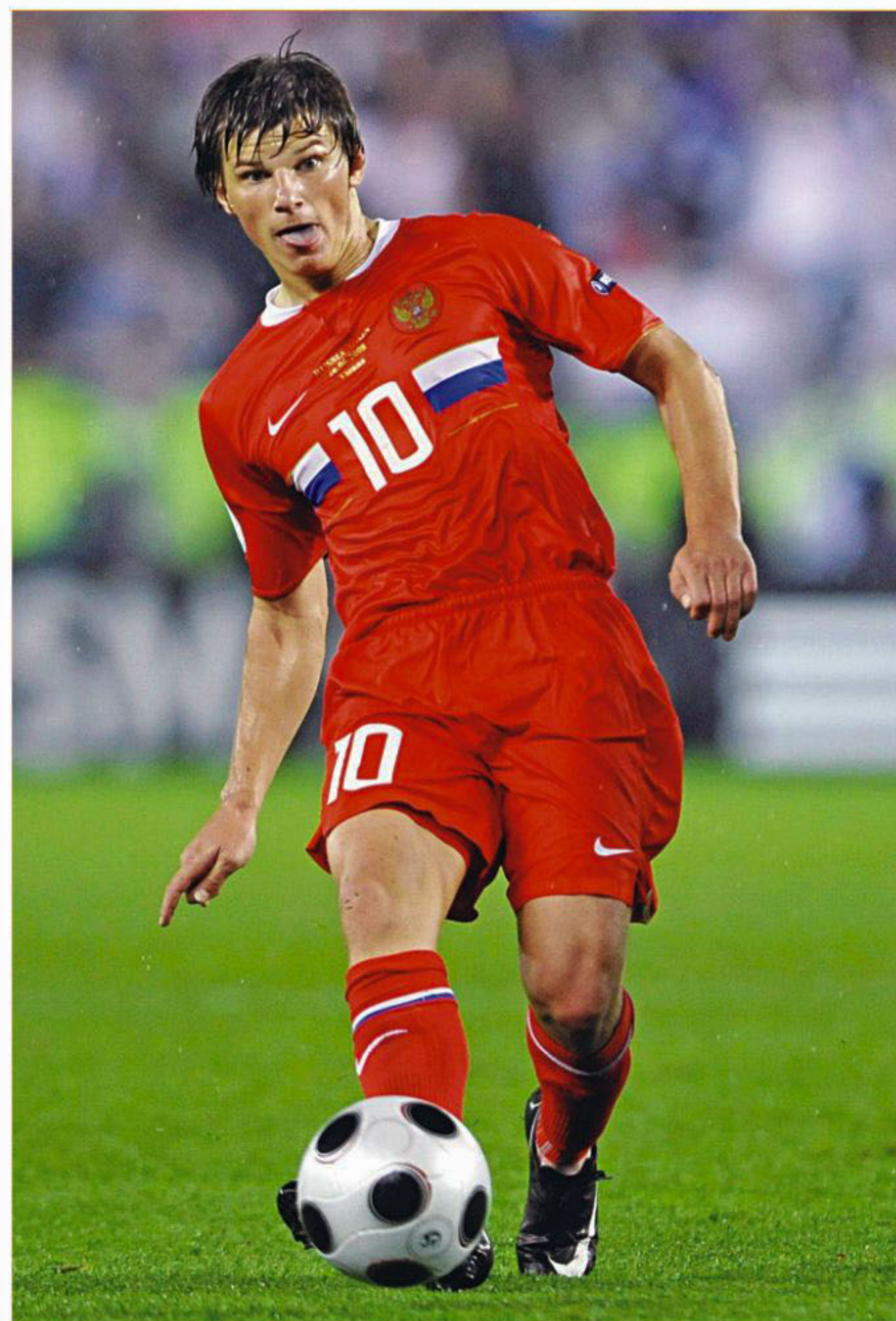
Manchester United right back Rafael was called up by Brazil on Friday to take the place of injured Barcelona defender Daniel Alves.

Rafael was included in coach Mano Menezes' squad for four friendlies taking place this month and next, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said.

His inclusion brings to 18 the number of players in the 23-man squad within the under-23 age limit for the London Olympic Games, where Brazil will attempt to win the soccer gold medal for the first time.

Daniel Alves fractured his right collar bone during training with Barcelona on Wednesday and will be out of action for eight weeks.

The CBF said Menezes would be in Munich on Saturday for the Champions League final.



ANDREI ARSHAVIN

Russia's biggest star

AFP, Moscow



Russia's captain and star striker Andrei Arshavin is hoping at Euro 2012 to show the blazing inspiration that set the last tournament alight after his insipid stint with English Premier League giants Arsenal.

Arshavin comes into the Euro tournament hosted by Poland and Ukraine again as a winner, after helping guide his boyhood team Zenit Saint Petersburg to a storming victory in the Russian Premier League.

The 30-year-old -- who has only ever played for two clubs -- rejoined Zenit in February on a loan deal from Arsenal and will stay at the Russian club until July.

He was instrumental in helping the Saint Petersburgers see off the final challenge from the Moscow giants, scoring in a key April clash with CSKA that all but earned Zenit the title.

"I feel joy and satisfaction from the work that has been done. We've seen this thing through," Arshavin said. In Russia as "Shava", said on his website after Zenit clinched the title.

His move back to Zenit seems to have brought back some of the old spark in Arshavin, whose much-heralded move to Arsenal in 2009 started promisingly but became marked by injuries and time on the bench.

Arshavin's dashing runs and flashing strikes at goal were one of the highlights of Euro 2008 and a memorable goal by him against the Netherlands took Russia to the semi-finals where they lost to eventual winners Spain.

It was that performance, as well as Zenit's stunning UEFA Cup win in 2008 that earned interest from big European clubs, including

Arsenal but Arshavin never seemed at ease in the Arsene Wenger set-up in north London.

Born in Saint Petersburg while the city was still known as Leningrad in the former Soviet Union, Arshavin has always been loyal to his beloved home city team.

It was there that he launched his career, making his debut for the reserves in 1999 and then moving to the first team in 2000 before winning his first international cap for Russia in 2002.

For the last half decade, Arshavin -- Russia's biggest footballing name and a heart-on-sleeve patriot -- helped Russia win the right to host the 2018 World Cup and travelled with the government delegation for the voting.

It was the need to ensure a first-team place for Euro 2012 that encouraged Arshavin to move back to Russia and he scored his first international goal in several encounters during a friendly with Denmark in February.

Clearly relieved after scoring, he ran towards Russian team coach and his former Zenit mentor Dick Advocaat who -- in a much discussed moment -- kissed Arshavin on the forehead.

But a cloud was cast ahead of the Euro when Advocaat -- a presence in Arshavin's career since he took charge of Zenit in 2006 -- announced he would be leaving the national team after the championships.

"Speaking frankly I'm upset with his decision," Arshavin said. "There was good chemistry in our team and we achieved good results. I expected to be playing the next qualifying campaign under Advocaat," he told Sport Express newspaper.

But he added that Advocaat was a "professional" and he and the team would be working together to achieve a good result.

City want stolen ball back

AFP, London

Manchester City turned to the police to force a teenage fan to return the match ball used in their dramatic Premier League title-clinching victory over QPR.

City ended their 44-year wait to win the English league crown in remarkable fashion last weekend as stoppage-time goals from Edin Dzeko and then Sergio Aguero sealed a 3-2 triumph on the final day of the season.

Hundreds of City supporters spilled onto the Eastlands pitch to celebrate a result which saw their team finish above bitter rivals Manchester United on goal difference.

In the chaos that ensued one young fan made off with the ball, but his hopes of holding onto the prized souvenir came to an end as City officials wanted it back.

They viewed CCTV footage which identified a 17-year-old youth picking up the ball and it was then decided the matter should be brought to the attention of Greater Manchester Police who arrested him on suspicion of theft.

Shortly after his arrest he was "de-arrested" when City opted not to press charges and instead arranged a meeting with him to ask for their ball back.

A spokesman for Greater Manchester Police said: "On Thursday, police were contacted by staff at Manchester City FC who said they wanted to report the theft of a match football.

"Acting on information provided, the following day officers arrested a 17-year-old boy on suspicion of theft but de-arrested him shortly after.

"It was decided the most appropriate cause of action was to use Restorative Justice, so the boy was taken to the Etihad Stadium where he met with security staff and resolved the matter."

Drogba denies Barca move

AFP, Munich

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba denied reports linking him with Barcelona on Friday as he prepared for the Champions League final showdown with Bayern Munich.

The 34-year-old Ivory Coast forward could make his final appearance for Chelsea on Saturday after failing to agree an extension to his current contract which expires this summer.

The possibility of Drogba being available as a free agent is likely to arouse interest across Europe, but the former African Player of the Year denied reports suggesting Barcelona were poised to secure his services.

"I want to make it clear there's a lot of rumours about me being offered to Barcelona. It's not true," Drogba said.

"The excitement of a big Champions League final game is more important than Barcelona approaching me now."



STAR Cricket
England v West Indies
First Test, Day 4
Live from 4:00pm

SET Max
Indian Premier League
Deccan Chargers v Bangalore
Live from 4:30pm
Rajasthan v Mumbai



Day's Event
Bangladesh Premier League
Muktijoddha v Rahmatganj
Time: 6:00pm

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