



Portugal captain Cristiano Ronaldo (R) fights for the ball with teammate Pepe during a training session at the Obidos Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Drogba leaving Chelsea

Football

AFP, Paris

Ivory Coast great Didier Drogba has told his Chelsea team-mates he is leaving the newly-crowned Champions League winners because he doesn't fancy spending time on the substitutes bench, France Football said Monday.

The 34-year-old - who scored the late equaliser and the decisive penalty in the shootout win over German side Bayern Munich on Saturday - is quoted by the magazine as saying he burst into tears when he told the rest of the squad during their open top bus parade with the trophy on Sunday.

"We (he and his team-mates) will not be together next season," the magazine cited Drogba as saying.

"As I have decided to leave, I wanted to tell them to their faces.

"Only that I couldn't do it. They made me break down. Even if it has been three years that I have said I wanted to leave, I found it hard to admit that it was finished with me and the club.

"Especially that I had no great desire for this end. But I don't envisage sitting on the bench watching others play at a time when the club is looking at putting together a new team.

"So there we go, I am readying myself for a great leap into the unknown.

"It will be another adventure," added Drogba, who is out of contract having been at the club since 2004 after joining from Marseille.

English media have linked the Ivorian target man - scorer of 55 goals in his 84 international appearances - with Chinese side Shanghai Shenhua.

Paradise for training

AFP, Vienna



to train, relax and face off with potential future opponents.

Ahead of Euro 2012 next month, half a dozen participants -- including world champions Spain, host Poland and the Czech Republic -- plus a dozen more nations that did not qualify, are touching down in Austria for a week of training and a few friendly matches.

At other times, clubs like Real Madrid, Arsenal or Lazio grace the alpine country's remote training pitches.

The quiet setting, modern infrastructure, good food and agreeable climate make it an ideal place for teams

to recharge their batteries between seasons and ahead of big events.

"The entire package is right in Austria," says Hannes Empl, who's SLFC agency has been organising football training camps for about 10 years.

Proof: Iker Casillas, Fernando Torres & Co will be back in Schruns-Tschagguns this week, after a first visit in 2010 paved their way to World Cup glory in South Africa.

They are not the only regulars: Arsenal trained in Austria nine times, AS Roma eight, Real Madrid five.

What teams look for when they come here is "a very good training site, combined with a good hotel, and the third and often very decisive criteria is good opponents for exhibition matches," says Nikolaus Pichler of the IFCS agency.

Years of experience attracting top clubs -- IFCS has organised some 240

training camps for teams from 33 countries since 1996 -- mean Austria can offer up plenty of sparring partners.

In the run-up to the Euro, Poland will play Latvia and Slovakia, co-host Ukraine will meet Austria and Estonia, and Czech Republic will face Israel.

Co-hosting the 2008 European championships with Switzerland certainly raised Austria's profile -- a country ranked 73rd in the world by FIFA -- in terms of sporting infrastructure.

Croatia, for instance, will be back this month in Bad Tatzmannsdorf where it had its base camp in 2008.

Key is also top-notch accommodation close to FIFA-compliant training grounds and to medical facilities, in case of injuries.

Organisers also cater to every demand: from PlayStations and dietary requirements -- counting calories for Euro 2012 competitors.

Doctors give Abidal green light

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona's French defender Eric Abidal was on Monday given the green light by doctors to leave hospital following his liver transplant last month, the Catalan team said Monday.

The France international defender, 32, underwent the operation on April 10 just over a year after having a tumour removed from his liver in March 2011.

"Given the particular nature of this recuperation process, Abidal should have to undergo regular hospital checks," the club said in a statement.

Jose extends Real stay

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho has extended his contract for four more years, after taking the Spanish giants to victory in La Liga, the team said Tuesday.

"Real Madrid and Jose Mourinho have reached an agreement to extend the

latter's contract with the club until 30 June, 2016," the club said in a statement published online.

The 49-year-old self-appointed "Special One" took Real Madrid to their 32nd league title last month, ending a run of three successive league crowns for bitter rivals Barcelona.

That made him only the fourth coach to have won four different league titles after taking the English, Italian and Portuguese crowns, along with Austria's Ernst Happel, the late Croat Tomislav Ivic and Italian veteran Giovanni Trapattoni.

Mourinho, who joined Real in May 2010 on a four-year deal, said early in May he had no ambition to coach in new countries. Media reports had speculated on his returning to England.

During his first season at the club, critics said the Portuguese coach's approach was too aggressive both on the field and in comments at press conferences about rivals and referees.

In one infamous incident in August last year when Barcelona won the domestic Super Cup against Real, a brawl broke out after Marcelo was red carded for a reckless challenge on Cesc Fabregas.

During the melee, Mourinho was shown on public television poking his finger into the eye of Barca assistant coach Tito Vilanova -- who has since been promoted to the top to replace departing Pep Guardiola.

Asked about the incident at the time, which earned him a two-match ban, Mourinho famously asked journalists at a post-match news conference: "Pito Vilanova? I don't know who this Pito is."

FIFA appoints first woman executive

AFP, Paris

FIFA has appointed the first woman to its executive committee on Tuesday, as world football's governing body bids to restore its image after a series of corruption scandals.

Lydia Nsekera, president of the Burundi Football Association, has been co-opted onto the executive committee and will be formally installed at the FIFA Congress in Budapest on Friday, FIFA said in a statement.

Nsekera is already a member of FIFA committees for women's football, the women's World Cup and the organising committee for the Olympic football tournaments.

As part of the effort to tackle corruption in football, Domenico Scala has also been appointed as the independent chairman of the Audit and Compliance Committee.

Ibra divides opinion

AFP, Rome



Few footballers divide opinion quite like the mercurially talented Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic and until the AC Milan star delivers on the international stage, that is unlikely to change.

In some quarters Ibrahimovic's obvious footballing gifts are almost worshipped but those who view him mostly from afar often accuse him of failing to step up when the going is at its toughest.

The pro-brigade insist that a player who has won titles with Ajax, Juventus (although both were later revoked), Inter Milan, Barcelona and AC Milan and commanded huge transfer fees to pass from one to another is one of the main reasons his teams have enjoyed such success.

But others claim that he only displays his talent against minnows and say his failure to win the Champions League or shine on the international stage proves he has his limits.

The statistics hardly clear up the debate. Even Ronaldo, perhaps the greatest striker of them all, never won the Champions League and he played for Real Madrid, Barcelona, AC Milan and Inter Milan, as well as PSV Eindhoven, during a glittering career.

However, he won the World Cup twice, finishing top scorer in one of those, and was World Player of the Year three times.

Sweden are not Brazil though and there can be no doubt Ronaldo benefited from playing with far better players than Ibrahimovic does when he turns out for his country. Other great players such as Ryan Giggs and George Best never even played at an international tournament and Andriy Shevchenko has only played at one, the 2006 World Cup.

But Ibrahimovic has had plenty of opportunities to shine having played in two World Cups and two European Championships while he has played Champions League football in 10 straight seasons.

He has had positive moments in both, notably scoring a late equaliser against Italy at the 2004 Euros and a brace for Barcelona in a 2-2 draw away to Arsenal in the Champions League.

But too often he has failed to find his best form when the glare of the watching world was upon him.

While his league scoring record is just over one in two, in Europe he scores less than one in three games.

He has only once been in a team that reached the Champions League semifinals and his best performance with Sweden is the Euro quarter-finals in 2004.

His critics claim that when his teams need him to produce a spark on the big stage, he comes up short.

Yet, as Sir Alex Ferguson always says, the hardest thing to win is the league and Ibrahimovic has consistently performed in teams fighting for the title.

He has won seven league titles in three different countries with four different teams and was also part of the Juve side stripped of two more Serie A crowns.

He has finished top scorer in Italy in two of the last four seasons, once each with Inter and Milan.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Chelsea winger Juan Mata (C) poses with a group of children during the opening of a public park that bears his name in Oviedo yesterday.

Balotelli on probation

AFP, Rome



Italy coach Cesare Prandelli said on Monday he wanted to see headlines only about what volatile Italian striker Mario Balotelli did on the pitch and not off it during next

month's European Championship.

The 21-year-old Manchester City star has been included in Prandelli's squad despite several moments of injudicious behaviour on and off the pitch last season.

However, Prandelli, who is desperately light of striking options, made it clear that Balotelli was on probation.

"In my opinion, he has to see it as an extraordinary occasion for him as it is for the national side," said Prandelli.

"It is a time for him to be written about for what he does on the pitch and not what he

has done off it."

Prandelli added that in the bigger picture he did not see Italy winning the tournament - they last reached the final in 2000 - but certainly restoring some of the lustre lost when they became the first defending champions to go out in the World Cup finals group stages in 2010.

"We are not going to win Euro, but I like to say that the Italians know how to surprise," said the 54-year-old, who replaced Marcello Lippi after the 2010 World Cup debacle.

"I would like to show that the team has at least worked well and which is arriving at this Euro knowing it is experiencing a unique moment with a smile on its lips."

Italy have been drawn in Group C alongside defending champions Spain, 2008 quarter-finalists Croatia and the Republic of Ireland and get their campaign off on June 10 against the Spaniards.

Shenhua plan Batista swoop

Football

REUTERS, Beijing

Former Argentina coach Sergio Batista is close to signing a contract with big-spending Chinese club Shanghai Shenhua, who are on the lookout to replace sacked manager Jean Tigana.

A successful swoop for Batista would come after 2006 World Cup-winning Italian coach Marcello Lippi took charge of rivals Guangzhou Evergrande last week.

"(The contract) has not been signed so far. The two sides (Batista and the Shenhua Club) are still in negotiation," Ma Yue, the club's spokesperson, told Reuters by telephone.

Shanghai fired Frenchman Tigana in April after a poor start to the season, replacing him with interim coach Jean-Florent Ibenge.

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
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