

Allianz Arena
sold out

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich may have gone without any silverware in the past two seasons but can be proud of their huge support base after selling out all 17 home games for the coming Bundesliga season, a month and a half before the start.

Season tickets sales were stopped at 39,500 for their 69,000-Allianz Arena in what looks set to be another profit-making season, the 20th in a row, for Bayern, who lost to Chelsea in the Champions League final in May.

"I want to thank the fans for this magnificent interest," said Bayern Munich CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge on Wednesday. "This shows how attractive and well supported Bayern are."

The club, also beaten in the league and the German Cup final by Borussia Dortmund last season, pride themselves on having made a profit for 19 years in a row.

They posted a 1.3 million euro profit for the 2010/2011 season with a turnover of 290.9 million euros compared to 312 million in 2009/2010 and a merchandising revenues jump more than 10 per cent to 43.9 million, up from 38.9 million.

Maradona sacked!

Football

REUTERS, Dubai

Former Argentina World Cup-winning captain Diego Maradona has been sacked as coach of United Arab Emirates club Al Wasl.

The 51-year-old, who agreed a two-year contract with Al Wasl in May 2011, was dismissed following a meeting of the club's board on Tuesday.

"Following a meeting held by the board of directors of Al Wasl Football Company to evaluate the technical staff of Al Wasl under the leadership of coach Diego Maradona, it was decided to terminate the services of coach Diego Maradona and his technical staff," a club statement said.

Speculation had been rife that Maradona's days as coach were numbered following the resignation of the club's board in June and its replacement with a new one.

That change brought about the departure of chairman Marwan bin Bayat, a man who had supported Maradona.

However, after the first meeting of the new board last month, its chairman Dr Mohammed Ahmad bin Fahad, was quoted in the UAE newspaper The National saying: "Maradona is the head coach of the Al Wasl team and he will continue for the next season. He will have complete authority over the programme for the next season. There is no change in his position."

Al Wasl failed to win any silverware under Maradona during his season at the helm, slipping to eighth in the 12-team UAE Pro League from sixth the previous season.

They also lost in the final of the Gulf Champions League to Bahrain side Al Muharraq and enjoyed little success in domestic cup competitions.

Under Maradona, Al Wasl were knocked out of the UAE league cup at the semifinal stage by Al Ahli, the eventual winners, and failed to progress past the second round of the President's Cup.

Maradona's sacking continued his modest record as a coach, in complete contrast to his playing career.

Maradona led his country to the 1986 World Cup and enjoyed domestic title successes in Argentina, Italy and Spain but as a coach he has yet to achieve any such highs.

He had brief spells with Mandiyu and Racing Club in his home country in 1994 and 1995 respectively but neither proved fruitful, and although he led Argentina to the World Cup finals in 2010 his side, including Lionel Messi, lost 4-0 to Germany in the quarterfinals.

Maradona's judgment at Al Wasl had been questioned through his decision to select goalkeeper Majid Naser for matches in the Gulf Champions League despite the player being in the middle of a 17-match domestic ban for slapping Al Ahli coach Quique Sanchez Flores after a match between the two sides.

Majid's inclusion in the side that faced Al Muharraq proved disastrous as he was sent off for head-butting an opponent and Al Wasl went on the lose the tie despite holding a 3-1 lead after the first leg in Bahrain.

A club spokesman could not confirm Maradona's whereabouts and whether or not he had been contacted with the news of his sacking.

"There is nothing to be added at the moment," he said.

Media reports said Maradona was on holiday in Argentina.



'Clasicos' set for October and March

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid and Barcelona will meet in the opening La Liga "Clasico" of the season on the weekend of Oct. 6-7 at Barca's Nou Camp stadium, according to the draw held at the Spanish soccer federation (RFEF) headquarters in Madrid on Tuesday.

Champions Real will host Barca, who finished second last season, on the weekend of March 2-3, the RFEF said.

The great rivals also meet over two legs next month in the Spanish Super Cup, the traditional season opener that pits the league champions (Real) against the King's Cup winners (Barca).

The first leg will be played at the Nou Camp on Aug. 23, with the return at the Bernabeu on Aug. 30, the RFEF said.

Real begin the defence of their La Liga title at home to Valencia, third last term, on the weekend of Aug. 18-19, while Barca are at home to Real Sociedad.

"It's going to be a tough season, like the last one, and we will try to respond to expectations with the support of our fans," Real director Emilio Butragueno said during the draw.

Mourinho exonerated

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona have protested angrily against the Spanish football federation's decision to lift a two-match ban given to Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho for poking Barca assistant Tito Vilanova in the eye last season.

With more than a month to go until the start of the 2012-13 La Liga campaign, bad blood has already boiled up between the bitter rivals.

Barca spokesman Toni Freixa said Mourinho's exoneration, part of a general amnesty for sanctioned players and coaches, damaged the image of Spanish football and would only encourage further aggression.

The volatile Portuguese was punished after attacking Vilanova, who has since taken over as first-team coach from Pep Guardiola, from behind during a Super Cup match.

However, the ban was rescinded by football federation (RFEF) president Angel Maria Villar, who traditionally exonerates some players and coaches after sealing re-election.

He was voted in unopposed for a seventh four-year term in February and his latest amnesty was announced at the RFEF's general assembly in Madrid earlier on Tuesday.

Freixa said Barca president Sandro Rosell had expressed the club's displeasure at the prospect of Mourinho's ban being lifted at a federation board meeting on Monday.

"As we understand it, an aggression towards a coach deserves punishment," Freixa said on Barca's website

(www.fcbarcelona.com).

"This decision does not mean the aggressor is innocent, but leads them to believe that they can continue to attack people without fear of punishment," he added.

"It's a bad example for Spanish football that this aggression is going unpunished."

The federation's decision meant Vilanova's one-match ban for reacting to the aggression was also lifted, as were bans given to Real pair Mesut Ozil and Marcelo and Barca's David Villa, who were all red-carded during the match.

All five are now clear to take part when La Liga champions Real and King's Cup winners Barca meet next month in the 2012 Super Cup, the two-legged curtain-raiser to the season.

Real director Emilio Butragueno said Barca had benefited from Villar's amnesties in the past without Real commenting or taking any action.

"The federation president has the power to do it and we are respectful of that," the former Real and Spain striker said on Real's website (www.realmadrid.com).

"We won't mention things that are in the past, but everyone is familiar with them and Barca was the protagonist and Madrid never said anything," he added.

One player who did not benefit from Villar's generosity was Granada's Dani Benitez, who was banned for three months after throwing a plastic bottle at the referee after his side lost to Real last season.

"I wasn't expecting to have my ban lifted," Benitez was quoted as saying by Marca sports daily.

Toure vows future to City

AFP, London

Manchester City midfielder Yaya Toure has promised to follow boss Roberto Mancini's example by dedicating his future to the Premier League champions.

Toure was delighted to see Mancini sign a new five-year contract on Tuesday and the Ivory Coast international responded by shrugging off links with a move back to Barcelona.

The 29-year-old left the Camp Nou to join City in 2010 and recent reports have claimed he could be tempted to return to Spain.

But Toure, who played a key role in City winning their first English league title for 44 years, told the club's website: "I was very happy to hear the news that our manager has signed a new five year deal."

"It is important for this club to have stability at all levels, especially after we have just won the title and the FA Cup the season before."

"It means there will be no changes or disruption to what has proved a winning formula and, for the long term, that can only be good for Manchester City."

Terry 'angry, upset'

Football

AFP, London

Former England football captain John Terry took the witness stand Tuesday and told his trial that he was "very angry and upset" when he thought an opponent had accused him of making racist remarks.

Terry, standing trial at Westminster Magistrates Court in London, told the court he was sarcastically repeating words he thought Ferdinand had said to him.

The central defender, who denies committing a racially aggravated public order offence, said: "I thought he was accusing me" of calling him those words.

"I was very angry and I was upset. I replied, 'A black c***? You f*****g k***head.'"

Terry said the pair began trading insults when he did not return the ball to QPR.

The Chelsea captain then ran back to his position and turned round to face Ferdinand.

"He was doing a pumping action" and referring to Terry's alleged affair with the mother of a former teammate's child, the married father of twins said.

Speaking quietly, Terry said he was taunted about the allegations "more or less every game" and had "heard it all before".

"It's part and parcel of the game; you just get on with the game, basically," he said, and try to "laugh it off".

Terry said that after the match, he asked Ferdinand if he had accused him of using the racist obscenity.

"His reply to that was 'no, no, no. We all said things we shouldn't have said, that's the end of it'."

"I asked him twice and he said no. I thought that was the end of it."

The prosecution asked Terry why he repeated the slur rather than simply asking, "What?"

Terry replied: "Hindsight's a wonderful thing. At the time I was shocked, I was angry; you can't control your emotions."

The 31-year-old denied that he had "snapped".

The England defender said he had not considered apologising to Ferdinand.

"Why would I apologise to Anton when he is the one who accused me? What I said was in response to what Anton said to me," he said.

Terry said he had co-operated fully with inquiries by the police and the Football Association (FA), the sport's governing body in England.

The 2012 Champions League winner gave evidence after his lawyer had asked for the case to be dismissed.

George Carter-Stephenson said Ferdinand was an unreliable witness and lip-reading experts agreed it was impossible to clarify what was said at

the key moment from the footage.

The case was "so weak and tenuous it does not warrant it going any further," he said.

However, judge Howard Riddle ruled that there was a case to answer.

Earlier on the second day of the trial, the court was played a recording of an interview conducted a week after the incident between Terry and FA investigator Jennifer Kennedy.

"I have been called a lot of things in my football career, and off the pitch, but being called a racist I am not prepared to take," the court heard Terry saying on the tape.

"I am not having Anton thinking that about me or anyone else," he said.

"I was hurt by it, taken aback and really surprised," Terry said. "It's something I took and didn't like it at all."

Terry said he was aware of how a video of the incident looked to those who did not know the context and acknowledged that the footage "did not look good."

But he added: "I know I have nothing to hide."

If it was the case, a player would not be "projecting it" in front of a packed stadium and dozens of television cameras, he said.

It emerged in court that the only person who initially complained to police about Terry was an off-duty police officer.

If found guilty, Terry could be fined up to £2,500 (\$3,850, 3,150 euros).



PHOTO: AFP

Guangzhou R&F's latest signing former Blackburn Rovers striker Yakubu Ayegbeni (C) holds his new team shirt in Guangzhou yesterday.

Yakubu joins Guangzhou

Football

AFP, Beijing

Nigerian striker Ayegbeni Yakubu insisted on Wednesday his move to China was made out of a fierce desire to help his ambitious new club, rather than the huge money on offer.

The former Blackburn Rovers striker is the latest in a series of Premier League footballers to join the Chinese Super League for reportedly enormous salaries, with Nicholas Anelka and Didier Drogba among other recent signings.

British media have reported Yakubu will be paid six million euros (\$7.3 million) a year to play for Guangzhou R&F, although the club has not commented on his salary and he said it was irrelevant.

"After hearing the club's plans, I realised I had to join. Money wasn't a factor," Yakubu said at a press conference to mark the official completion of his transfer, in remarks quoted by Chinese sports website 21cn.

Yakubu, 29, who signed a three-year contract with Guangzhou R&F, said Anelka's decision to join Shanghai Shenhua in January had sparked a lot of interest among other top players overseas in coming to China.

"Since Anelka arrived, more and more top-flight players are coming to China, and our arrival can help improve the quality of the nation's football," Yakubu said.

Anelka joined Shenhua on a two-year contract reportedly paying 234,000 euros (\$307,000) a week, however his presence has failed to lift his club from near the bottom of the table.

Yakubu suggested that any potential culture shock would be eased by the large Nigerian population in Guangzhou, China's third-largest city in the south that is home to thousands of African traders.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Is Roger Federer the greatest tennis player of all-time?

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TEN Cricket

Sri Lanka v Pakistan

Third Test, Day 5

Live from 10:30am

ESPN

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Sports News

DAY'S EVENT



Premier Div Hockey

Azad SC v Wari

Time: 2:30pm

Abahani v Ajax

Time: 4:15pm

Venue: Maulana Bhasani National