

Fergie targets EPL title

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson wants the English Premier League trophy back at Old Trafford next season.

He told a media conference Tuesday in this Indian Ocean city that regaining the symbol of English football supremacy was "priority number one" after being pipped at the post by neighbours Manchester City last season.

Expensively assembled City scored twice in stoppage time to defeat QPR 3-2 at home on the final day of the season and win the title in goal difference from United, who won 1-0 at Sunderland in a match played simultaneously.

"I want to recover the title after the disappointment of last season," said Ferguson ahead of the first of six pre-season matches here Wednesday against mid-table South African Premier-ship outfit AmaZulu FC.

"We either win the title or come second -- it is an important part of the history of our club over the past 20 years," he stressed on a warm mid-winter day in a city that attracts millions of tourists annually.

"United have to recover as the club have done so many times in the past. That is our target this year. Priority number one is to win the English Premier League title back."

Amid rumours that Manchester City are preparing to woo prolific Dutch scorer Robin van Persie from Arsenal, Ferguson gave a brief Premier League history lesson to illustrate the resilience of his Red Devils.

"When Arsenal won the title from us in 1998, we won the treble the following year. Then Chelsea came along and got off to a flier in the league for the first two years so we changed our pre-season a little to ensure quick starts."

With stars like Wayne Rooney resting after Euro 2012 commitments, others like Ryan Giggs competing at the London Olympics and captain Nemanja Vidic among those injured, United have brought a severely depleted squad to South Africa.

However, Ferguson once again went back in time to demonstrate that AmaZulu should be wary of his Red Babes when they clash before a sell-out 50,000 crowd at Moses Mabhida Stadium.

"When I started picking young players, we played Port Vale in a League Cup game and an MP protested to the government, saying we were cheating the public and they wanted their money back."



Paris Saint-Germain's latest recruit Swedish superstar Zlatan Ibrahimovic (C) poses with his new jersey next to club chairman Nasser Al-Khelaifi (L) and sporting director Leonardo during a press conference at the Parc des Princes yesterday.

Paris has a new attraction

Football

AFP, Paris

Ambitious French club Paris Saint-Germain moved into a new dimension on Wednesday as they presented Swedish superstar Zlatan Ibrahimovic to the media as their latest signing.

Ibrahimovic joins the big-spending Ligue 1 side on a three-year contract from AC Milan for a reported fee of around 20 million euros (\$24.5m), and stands to earn a salary worth 14m euros a year.

"I want to thank Paris Saint-Germain and (sporting director) Leonardo for the great work they've done," Ibrahimovic told reporters at Parc des Princes.

"I think they've made something that looked impossible, possible. I'm very happy to be sitting here. After lots of talks, I'm finally a PSG player. It's a big step in my career, another dream come true."

"I think this is a very interesting project and I had no doubts. In my mind I was very clear, and I knew what I wanted."

"I want to be part of this club's history and I'm pretty sure we will make history. I came here to win, not for anything else, and I'm pretty sure we'll win some trophies."

He added: "I'm joining a dream team. They'll do everything to win and I want to be part of it. They already have some great players."

"And they've bought the best defender in the world, Thiago Silva. As long as I have him behind me, I don't need to look back."

"They're bringing together the very best. Who wouldn't want to be here?"

The 30-year-old follows in the footsteps of former Milan colleague Thiago Silva, who completed a 42m-euro move to Paris last week that made the Brazil centre-back the most expensive player in French football history.

The departures of Thiago Silva and Ibrahimovic have robbed Milan of their two brightest stars, but Ibrahimovic said he had not been encouraged to leave the cash-strapped San Siro club, with whom he won the 2011 Italian title.

"No-one at Milan influenced me," he said. "It was my choice and my choice alone."

He added: "I was very happy to be at Milan. They gave me my smile back (after a disappointing season at Barcelona in 2009-10)."

"It's a club that will stay in my heart. They helped me and my family, and I don't want to put a shadow over my time there."

"They made it easy for me to come to PSG so I thank them and I wish them all the best."

Having seen their side pipped to the Ligue 1 title by Montpellier last season, PSG's owners, Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), have doubled their efforts

to turn the team into one of Europe's leading sides.

Ibrahimovic is the fourth player to have joined the club from Serie A this summer, after Thiago Silva, Argentine forward Ezequiel Lavezzi, and 19-year-old midfielder Marco Verratti, who was also presented to the press on Wednesday.

The signings of Ibrahimovic and Verratti take PSG's spending on transfers alone to around 100m euros this summer, and over 200m euros since QSI bought the club a year ago.

Leonardo said that the acquisition of Ibrahimovic represented the end of the club's summer spending.

"The market is closed for new arrivals," he said. "With Zlatan we've finished in the transfer window this year."

Around a 100 journalists from around the world attended the press conference at which Ibrahimovic was presented, with a significant crowd of supporters waiting outside the stadium for a glimpse of their new star.

Leonardo announced on Tuesday evening that the club had agreed to sign the Sweden captain, who subsequently underwent a medical examination at a Paris hospital on Wednesday morning.

Formerly of Malmo, Ajax, Juventus, Inter Milan, Barcelona and Milan, Ibrahimovic has won league titles in three different countries and finished as the top scorer in Serie A last season.

Tickets left unsold

AFP, London

The organisers of the London Olympics conceded defeat Wednesday in selling all the tickets for the football tournament as they revealed plans to slash the capacity of some stadiums.

Organisers LOCOG said more than one million tickets were left unsold, but that figure has been cut in half by reducing capacity at venues including the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff.

The changes mean that for the football tournament, 250,000 tickets are currently available.

In addition to this, a further 200,000 football tickets are due to go on sale after being returned by Olympics committees from around the world.

The top tiers of stadiums will be curtained off to hide the empty seats.

A spokesman for LOCOG said: "We are planning to reduce capacity across the venues by up to 500,000 tickets across the tournament."

"This will involve possibly not using a tier, or an area of a ground, in some of the venues."

"This can apply to men's and women's football, if necessary."

A total of 700,000 Olympics tickets are yet to be sold, with 50,000 available for other sports as well as a soon-to-be returned set of 200,000.

Chief organiser Sebastian Coe insisted on Tuesday that ticket sales were "not in bad shape" despite LOCOG being forced to cut the size of stadiums.

Coe said: "They are in reduced-size venues, of course. We have scaled down the size of those venues."

"We've sold more football tickets than we've sold for anything else."

"We're not in bad shape on tickets. It was always going to be that football tickets were the challenge but I think we'll do pretty well."

Coe admitted though that the heavy rain in recent weeks in Britain was proving "quite a challenge" as the Games edge nearer.

Messi focuses on trophies

REUTERS, Barcelona

Lionel Messi preferred to focus on winning trophies rather than attempting to better the 73 goals he scored for Barcelona last season, when he spoke at a news conference on Wednesday.

The world player of the year rattled in an unprecedented tally in all competitions in the last campaign, helping Pep Guardiola end his four-year tenure as coach with another four trophies to add to the 10 he had already won.

"I'm not looking to beat my tally of goals, that is not my objective," Messi said.

"I want to try and develop as a player and to give more to the team. I hope I still have margin to continue improving. My objective is to win more titles."

Real Madrid and Chelsea denied Barca the major prizes last year, Jose Mourinho's side winning La Liga and Chelsea knocking them out of the Champions League in the semi-finals on their way to a final victory over Bayern Munich.

"I hope we can get back to winning everything again," he added.

"We know it is very difficult to do, but I am still hurting from losing the semifinal against Chelsea with the penalty I missed, and La Liga with the defeat to Madrid at the Nou Camp."

Guardiola's number two over the last four years, Tito Vilanova, has stepped up to take the reins this season and Messi gave him his backing, having already worked with him in the club's youth academy a decade ago.

"Tito helped me improve a great deal when I was younger," he said. "I never imagined I would run into him again in the first division, but I am very pleased to have him here."

"The squad is very tight here and everyone knows what they need to do."

'Blatter's position weakened'

AFP, Berlin

FIFA president Sepp Blatter's position at the head of world football's governing body has been further weakened by fresh corruption allegations, Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness said on Wednesday.

"The air is getting thinner and thinner for Mr Blatter," Hoeness told reporters in Unterschleissheim in southern Germany.

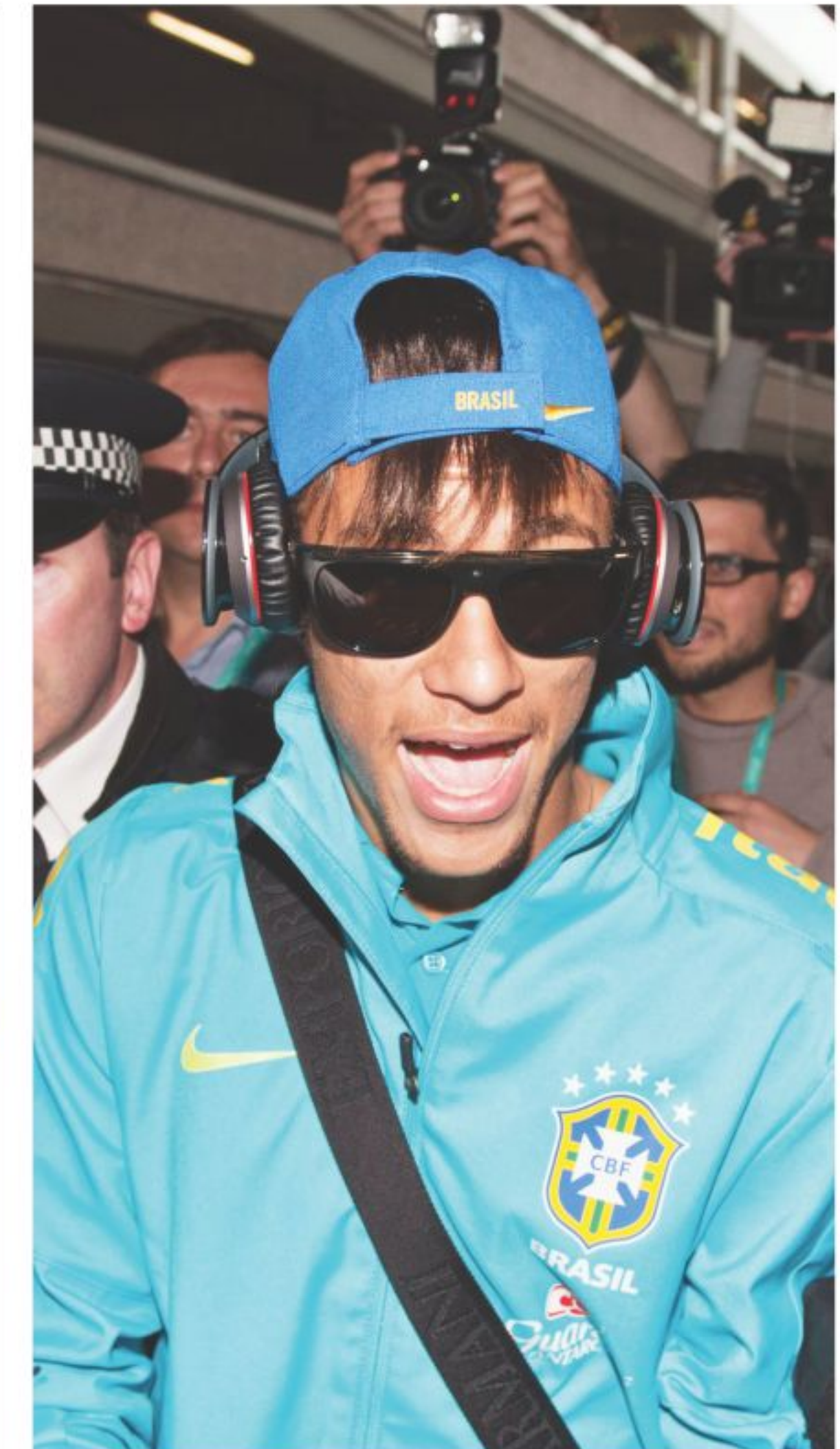
"I can't imagine that he could remain in office, let alone stand for president again."

Hoeness claimed that Blatter looked defeated during a press briefing at FIFA's Zurich headquarters on Tuesday.

"At last, people are daring to attack him -- even international journalists," Hoeness added.

Blatter declared on Tuesday that he had no reason to resign, despite revelations that his predecessor, Joao Havelange, received huge kickbacks during his time in charge of the organisation.

A Swiss court revealed that Havelange, FIFA president for a 24-year spell up to Blatter's election in 1998, pocketed at least 1.5 million Swiss francs (£986,000, 820,000 euros) from FIFA's discredited Swiss-based marketing partner ISL.



Brazil star Neymar arrives at the Heathrow Airport ahead of the London Olympics on Tuesday.

African quartet eyes medals

AFP, Johannesburg

Egypt, Gabon, Morocco and Senegal can draw strength from African football achievements at recent Olympics when they set off this month in search of medals.

Nigeria won gold and silver, Cameroon gold and Ghana bronze since the football tournament was revamped ahead of the 1992 Barcelona Games with three over-age players allowed in under-23 squads.

The make-up of the African quartet is a surprise with no Nigeria, Cameroon or Ghana, who were eliminated during a lengthy elimination process that included three knockout rounds and an inaugural eight-nation CAF championship.

Gabon emerged shock winners of the first African under-23 tournament and runners-up Morocco and third-place Egypt also gained automatic entry to the Olympics.

Senegal came fourth and had to overcome Oman 2-0 in a Coventry play-off to seal their place with substitute Abdoulaye Sane scoring a late second goal after Ibrahima Balde had given the West Africans the lead after just 90 seconds.

With foreign-based footballers who were unavailable for qualifiers now eligible as only over-age stars need permission from clubs to compete, some of the African squads have been overhauled.

France-based Sane only made the list of four stand-by players and did not win promotion when Danish club FC Copenhagen refused to release over-

age striker Dame Ndoye.

Senegal appear long shots to reach the quarter-finals having been drawn in Group A with Ryan Giggs-captained hosts Great Britain, a Uruguay squad including star strikers Luis Suarez and Edinson Cavani and the United Arab Emirates.

After hopes of including Newcastle United goal poachers Papiss Cisse and Demba Ba were dashed, coach Karim Diouf opted for new West Ham United midfielder signing Mohamed Diame as one of his over-age trio.

Egypt are back at the Olympics after a 20-year absence and tackle tournament co-favourites Brazil, Belarus and New Zealand in Group C with a squad led by 33-year-old national team midfielder star Mohamed Aboutrika.

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
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Abahani v Mariner Youngs
Time: 4:15pm
Venue: Maulana Bhasani Hockey

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