

What to WATCH

ESPN
Wimbledon C'ships
Third Round
Live from 6:00pm
TEN Cricket
West Indies v Sri Lanka
Tri-Series, First ODI
Live from 8:30pm

Isco finally signs for Madrid

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid have agreed to buy Malaga's highly-rated Spain Under-21 playmaker Isco on a five-year contract, their first signing since the arrival of new coach Carlo Ancelotti.

The 21-year-old midfielder, who was also a target for English Premier League club Manchester City, will have a medical and be presented at the Bernabeu stadium on Wednesday, Real said on their website (www.realmadrid.com) on Thursday.

Malaga-born Isco helped the south-coast club to the Champions League quarter-finals last season and caught the eye with a series of scintillating performances at this month's Under-21 European Championship in Israel.

He scored a penalty in Spain's 4-2 victory over Italy in the final and was voted player of the tournament.

Italian Ancelotti took the reins at Real on Wednesday, replacing Portuguese Jose Mourinho who returned to former club Chelsea after failing to win major silverware last season.

Isco, who typically plays as a roving attacking midfielder and is on the fringes of the senior Spain squad, will compete for a place in the Real side with the likes of Mesut Ozil, Kaka and Luka Modric.

Casillas happy again

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid captain Iker Casillas has said he is happy once again after enduring a difficult spell in the second-half of last season when he was frozen out of the Real side by Jose Mourinho.

Mourinho relegated Casillas to the bench in favour of Diego Lopez after he returned from three months out with a hand injury.

Casillas admitted he found the situation difficult to cope with after achieving so much in the game.

But he told fifa.com: "I dealt with it by thinking of the team and wanting what is best for Real Madrid."

"I cried, suffered, felt bad and had nights where I slept little, if at all. I'm a Madrid fan through and through, and before everyone else -- myself, coaches, presidents, directors of football -- the club always comes first."

New Real boss Carlo Ancelotti confirmed on Wednesday that Casillas would certainly be in his plans, although he will need to earn his place in the side like any other player.

The 32-year-old goalkeeper added in the interview that he planned to end his playing career at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"I would love to finish my career at Real Madrid. But I would not cause a scene if, one day, a coach were to come along and decide he doesn't need me," he added.

"Only then would I look elsewhere, but I repeat: Real is my priority. This club has given me everything, and it's thanks to them that I'm wearing this Spain shirt today."

Despite his lack of competitive action towards the end of the campaign though, Casillas was still called upon by Spain manager Vicente del Bosque in his squad for the Confederations Cup.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Brazilian striker Fred (2nd from L) sweeps home their opening goal in the Confederations Cup semifinal against Uruguay at Belo Horizonte on Wednesday.

Paulinho edges slug-fest

AFP, Belo Horizonte

 A towering Paulinho header saw Brazil edge Uruguay 2-1 on Wednesday in an ill-tempered Confederations Cup semi-final in Belo Horizonte to set up a final with either world champions Spain or Italy.

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Edinson Cavani levelled three minutes after the restart and thereafter the hosts were rocking before Paulinho rose high to plant a firm close-range header past Fernando Muslera in the Uruguay goal to pull off a barely deserved victory. Julio Cesar, said he knew Forlan would fire his penalty to his left. "I played with him at Inter Milan - but it was a good stop."

Cavani said the penalty miss was "a shame as we were playing well but we have to take it on the chin."

Matches between the South American neighbours have long been tense affairs - not least since the Uruguayans shocked the Brazilians in the 1950 World Cup final in Rio to deny their hosts a first title.

But what gave this meeting added spice were pre-match comments by Uruguayan skipper Diego Lugano labelling Brazilian striker Neymar a diver.

Brazil made a sluggish start and Lugano was to the fore as he won a penalty for the Uruguayans after 16 minutes.

The veteran defender tussled with Chelsea centreback David Luiz in the box and went down - but Chilean referee Enrique Osses quickly spotted that Luiz had tugged on his rival's shirt and gave the spotkick.

Uruguay's record goalscorer Forlan stepped forward but placed his low kick too

close to Julio Cesar, the Brazilian keeper diving away to his left to push the ball round the post and elicit a deafening cheer from a 60,000 crowd at the Estadio Mineirao.

Neymar chased a long punt down the left and stretched to flick the ball across goal for Fred to poke home a scissor kick finish from the edge of the six yard box, sparking pandemonium in the crowd.

By then, Neymar had certainly spent some time on his back - yet the Barcelona-bound 21-year-old was a marked man as Cavani earned a booking for yanking him back.

Yet Brazil were still nowhere near to finding the flowing form which had brought three wins and nine goals in the group stage and three minutes after the restart Uruguay were level through Cavani, the Napoli man threading a left-foot strike past Cesar.

Some dreadful defending saw the hosts fail to clear their lines as Luiz, Thiago Silva and Luiz Gustavo lost their bearings and Cavani drilled in hard and low to stun the home support.

Forlan then had a half-chance to atone for his earlier faux pas but fired straight at Cesar.

Scolari reacted to an increasingly leaden showing taking off Hulk, replacing him with local favourite Bernard.

Scolari also took off Oscar and sent on Hernanes in an attempt to inject some fresh drive.

Yet it was Uruguay who were turning the screw with first Luis Suarez heading fractionally over from a Forlan cross on 73 minutes before Cavani turned Hernanes inside out and slid an effort just wide as the Uruguayans attacking trident almost embarrassed a shaky home back four.

But with four minutes remaining Neymar whipped over a corner from the left and Paulinho outjumped Martin Caceres and seal their place in the final.

Blanc, whose club coaching experience is limited to a three-year spell at Girondins Bordeaux, has a number of challenges, not least how to follow Ancelotti who led the Qatari-backed club to their first domestic league title since 1994.

There have also been questions over his ability to handle big-name players.

But he said he was confident his playing experiences at Barcelona and Manchester United would help him, as well as the players, including Sweden striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

Blanc lays down marker

REUTERS, Paris

New Paris St Germain coach Laurent Blanc shrugged off concerns on Thursday that he may not have been the French champions' first choice to replace Carlo Ancelotti.

"It's a late appointment but the important thing is that it is done," the 47-year-old former France defender told his first news conference at Parc des Princes:

"Not to be the first choice is no big deal," the former France coach added. "I had not been the first choice often during my player career. The most important (thing) is to be chosen...and to prepare for the future."

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'We are on right road'

AFP, Belo Horizonte

Brazil coach Luiz Felipe conceded his team cannot yet start dreaming of a sixth World Cup title next year - but they are now just one match away from a third straight Confederations Cup success after edging out Uruguay.

Pretty it was not, and Scolari admitted as much after an oddly uninspired Selacao dug out a 2-1 success over the Celeste, who have haunted them ever since a World Cup final success over the Samba stars in Rio 63 years ago.

"I think we are on the right road," said 'Big Phil' after a Paulinho header saw them drag themselves over the line when it seemed Uruguay, having levelled Fred's bundled opener shortly before the break with a fine Edinson Cavani finish, looked as if they might repeat their 1950 exploits.

"We are putting together a group which is on the right track," said Scolari, who has been tasked for a second time with turning Brazil into world champions and who now must plot a way past either world champions Spain or Italy in Sunday's final in Rio.

After some patchy form going into the event, Brazil looked to have found something of their traditional samba rhythm with entertaining wins over Japan, Mexico and Italy in the group stage.

But by their exalted standards Wednesday was all about winning ugly - which did not unduly concern Gene Hackman lookalike Scolari.

"We have to grow as a team and mature. We need games to do so," he told reporters.

Star man Neymar admitted Brazil had to fight "but we showed a lot of class to get past a really tough rival."

Midfielder Oscar said the Brazilians knew Uruguay would be a hard nut to crack.

"They have three of the world's best strikers (but) what was important was we knew how to respond."

Scolari meanwhile thanked the fans for acting as 12th man.

"It was the fans who pulled us to the winning post. They kept the players strong when the going got tough. We will now prepare for the final and do the best we can."

Uruguayan counterpart Oscar Tabarez saw his team denied taking his winless streak over Brazil to five matches, Zenit said.

Thousands turn up for Pep training

AFP, Berlin

Around 10,000 fans watched Bayern Munich's new head coach Pep Guardiola give his first training session on Wednesday as he put the Champions League winners through their paces.

Captain Philipp Lahm, France wing Franck Ribery and Germany stars Toni Kroos and Mario Gomez, who has been linked to Fiorentina, took part as 16 first-team players were joined by seven members of the youth team at Munich's Allianz Arena.

Having become the first German team to win the treble of European, cup and league titles under predecessor Jupp Heynckes, Bayern took the unusual step of switching Guardiola's first training session from their Saebener Strasse complex.

Several members of the squad were missing including Brazil pair Dante and Luiz Gustavo, plus Spain's Javi Martinez, who are all on Confederations Cup duty.

Germany midfielders Mario Goetze, newly-signed from Borussia Dortmund, Bastian Schweinsteiger and Holger Badstuber were also absent as they recover from injury.

Guardiola takes his squad to Trentino, north Italy, on July 4 and the German league champions kick-off the new Bundesliga season at home to Borussia Moenchengladbach on August 9.

Arshavin heads back home

AFP, Moscow

Russia's former international captain Andrei Arshavin has agreed a two-year deal to return to his native club Zenit St Petersburg after a frustrating half-decade at London's Arsenal, Zenit announced Thursday.

The return of Arshavin, 32, to Zenit had been rumoured in the Russian press for several days but the final signing of the deal had apparently been delayed by wrangling over the small print.

"One of the best footballers in Russia of the last decade is returning to his home city," Zenit said in a statement, confirming that the contract was for two years.

He will formally join Zenit from July 1 once his Arsenal contract expires, Zenit said.

Juventus snap up Tevez

AFP, London

 Manchester City and Juventus on Thursday confirmed that Carlos Tevez had signed for the Italian club, bringing an end to his four-year stay in northwest England.

"After 148 appearances and 73 goals for City, Tevez has agreed a three-year deal with the reigning Serie A champions," City said on their website, mcfc.co.uk.

"Everyone at Manchester City wishes Carlos the best of luck in Italy and thanks him for his important contributions."

No further details were disclosed but the 29-year-old Argentine striker was reported on Tuesday to have signed for Juve in a deal that could cost the Turin club up to £13.5 million (16 million euros, \$21 million).

Juventus said on juventus.com that Tevez will wear the number 10 shirt and had signed with the club until June 30, 2016.

A news conference was due to be held at 0930 GMT, they added.

Tevez began his spell in England in 2006/07 at West Ham United, scoring the goal that kept the east London club in the English Premier League.

He moved to Manchester United the following season but headed to City in 2009 amid reports of disagreements with then-manager Alex Ferguson.

At City, he captained the club to victory in the FA Cup and was part of the side that won the Sky Blues' first league title since 1968.