

Cesc focused on Cup

AFP, Washington



A transfer of Cesc Fabregas from Barcelona to English club Chelsea will be "a pity" for his current club, his Barcelona and Spain team mate Pedro Rodriguez said Thursday. "I've not talked with Cesc as yet. He's a very good player for us. If he leaves it would be a shame for Barca," Pedro said as Spain prepared for a World Cup warm-up friendly in the US capital against El Salvador on Saturday. Barcelona defender Gerard Pique had let the cat out of the bag over a supposed 33 million-euro (\$45 million) move by Fabregas while chatting with Spain manager Vicente del Bosque at a press conference in Washington. His remark was picked up by a Spanish public television microphone. No club was mentioned, but Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has confirmed his side's interest. It's an unwelcome distraction as Spain prepare for their World Cup title defence, but Pedro said he didn't think any tension

would linger between Fabregas and Pique. "They are calm about it," he said. "It was an awkward situation, I don't know if it will affect them. Although Pedro thought it would have been better "if the comments hadn't been made," he said Pique and Fabregas had turned their attention to Brazil. "Now they are dealing with what they need to deal with," he said. Spain and Chelsea defender Cesar Azpilicueta said he'd heard nothing official about a move. "But Cesc is a great player and has a lot of Premier League experience," he said. "I think great players are always welcome at great clubs." Fabregas left Barcelona's academy to join English club Arsenal at the age of 16 in 2003 and quickly became the youngest player and goal-scorer in the North London club's history. He won the FA Cup in 2005 and was named captain in November 2008, but returned to Barcelona three years ago. "He is a special player with great vision," Azpilicueta said. "And he can play in various positions. At Chelsea we don't have a player with these characteristics."



Spain forward Cesc Fabregas (C) duels for the ball with teammate Pedro Rodriguez during a training session at the Robert F Kennedy Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Belgium fret over Hazard

AFP, Brussels



Belgian playmaker Eden Hazard's form ahead of the World Cup has sparked a feverish debate in his home country where one former international has called for the Chelsea star to be dropped. Belgium have been tipped as a team who could upset the favourites at the World Cup. But two-time World Cup veteran Marc Degryse says the 23-year-old Hazard looked worryingly distracted during two warm up games for their Group H campaign against Russia, South Korea and Algeria. Belgian coach Marc Wilmots should have a sharp word with Hazard, despite in his goal in Belgium's 2-0 win over Sweden last Sunday, said Degryse, who played with Wilmots in the national side. His criticism echoed Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho after Chelsea lost 3-1 at home to Spanish side Atletico Madrid in the Champions League semi-finals. "He has to work harder defensively," said the 48-year-old Degryse, who scored 23 times in 63 appearances for Belgium. "Against Sweden he switched off several times, just like he did in the Champions League for Chelsea against Atletico Madrid. "If that doesn't change Wilmots will have to resolve it by dropping him." Hazard moved to the English Premier League in 2012 for a reported 32 million pounds (\$54 million) after inspiring Lille to the 2011 French title. Degryse, who scored twice in seven appearances at the 1990 and 1994 World Cups, said Hazard needs a wake up call from time to time to be shaken out of complacency. "Hazard is the type of player that sometimes needs a kick up the arse!" said Degryse.

"It is time for him to produce a good performance, on which he leaves his imprint. "We have been waiting a long time for this. We have the right to expect this of a lad who is as talented as he is. If he doesn't feel concerned about this he has to give way to somebody else." While Wilmots has dismissed the concerns of Degryse and others, saying that he expected Hazard to be on top form for Saturday's friendly with

transfer to French champions Paris Saint Germain, who have already bought his Chelsea team-mate David Luiz. Wilmots, though, is having none of that. "I can tell you that the players are focused on anything but possible transfers," said the 45-year-old, who played at four World Cup finals. "If I was still a player, I would put everything else to bed and wait for the



Tunisia. He did add though that he would drop the player if he does not perform. "He (Hazard) has my full support," said Wilmots, who guided Belgium to their first World Cup finals since 2002. "He needs matches to get into the rhythm. However, there can be no doubt about his ability or form when one reflects on how he played for Chelsea last season. "That said if he plays badly I will not hesitate to replace him." One theory being mooted is that Hazard has been distracted by talk of a

end of the World Cup. "In any case there are people (agents) paid to look after such matters." Hazard's father and business manager, Thierry, supported Wilmots. "I read every day things that are not true. Eden asked of me one thing: that he be allowed to concentrate solely on the World Cup. "As regards his future, there will be nothing about that during the tournament. Eden is ready to have an outstanding World Cup." Belgium's first outing at the finals will be against Algeria on June 17.

WORLD CUP BRIEFS

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

A poll in Spain suggests pretty much everybody in the country can name Vicente del Bosque as coach of the reigning World Cup champions. Of those questioned, 97% correctly identified the former Real Madrid coach as the man leading the Furia Roja, giving him an average mark of 7.8 out of 10.

ROOM FOR ONE MORE?

British comedian Simon Brodtkin, aka Lee Nelson, tried to slip in to the England team photo before they headed for their preparations Stateide.

Wearing the same suit as the squad, Brodtkin briefly joined the throng at Luton airport before skipper Steven Gerrard spotted the extra man.

Police said afterwards he was "rapidly apprehended."

HEAD FOR HEIGHTS

A British travel agent has hit the heights in Brazil --by climbing atop Rio's Christ the Redeemer statue.

"When I popped my head out of the top it took my breath away," said Lee Thompson, 31, after climbing up the iconic landmark, 98 feet (30m) tall.

"It was really quite scary," the Daily Mail quoted him as saying after he persuaded the Brazilian tourist board to allow him to make the ascent.

BELGIANS WIN BY A DISTANCE

Belgium will travel less than any other nation in the opening three match round of the World Cup, the Red Devils having only 1,984 kilometers (1,232 miles) with Argentina next best off at 3,590km, according to a calculation by French sports daily l'Equipe.

At the other end of the scale, the United States, Italy and Mexico all have to fly more than 14,000km.

Van Persie fit for WC

REUTERS

Netherlands captain Robin van Persie has declared himself 100 percent fit for the World Cup as the Dutch national side arrived in Rio de Janeiro on Friday for the June 12-July 13 tournament.

The Manchester United striker was withdrawn at half-time of his country's final warm-up game against Wales in Amsterdam on Wednesday with a groin issue but insisted it was only as a precautionary measure after he felt some discomfort.

Van Persie added that he had also fully recovered from the knee injury which kept him out of action for two months towards the end of the Premier League season.

"Against Wales, I stayed behind in the changing room for the second half just to be careful because the match against Spain is much more important," he said of the opening game for the Dutch at the World Cup in Salvador on Friday - a repeat of the 2010 final.

"My groin was progressively a little irritated. It had been a sudden pain I would be concerned but you can't really even call it an injury."

As far as his knee was concerned, Van Persie said in an interview in Friday's edition of the Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf, conducted on the flight to Rio, that he continued to work daily on strengthening the muscles.

"I've had no twinges from the knee since the injury healed and that's several weeks now. Obviously, I've had to make an effort to get my fitness back and that I've built up perfectly in training over the last weeks."

Ox suffers knee injury

AFP, Miami

England winger Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain has a "medial knee ligament" injury, the Football Association said in a statement on Thursday which leaves the player's participation in the World Cup in doubt.

Oxlade-Chamberlain picked up the injury during Wednesday's 2-2 draw with Ecuador in Miami and the FA said the England medical team were "continuing to monitor and treat the injury".

Media reports said the recovery time for the Arsenal winger could be anything from 10 days to three weeks which would leave England manager Roy Hodgson with a tricky decision to make.

Benzema has no regrets

AFP, Madrid



France striker Karim Benzema said Friday he has no regrets risking his World Cup place by playing for Real Madrid in their Champions League final triumph.

"It was not a mistake to play and I would do it again," Benzema, who only attended his first full team training with France on Wednesday, told Madrid daily Marca.

He insisted that he is ready for the World Cup where France start in Group E against Switzerland, Ecuador and Honduras.

The 26-year-old striker aggravated a groin strain playing in Real's 4-1 victory over city rivals Atletico Madrid on May 24. "I was injured but the main thing is that I took part and helped the team," he told Marca.

Benzema said he feels the "pressure" of being France's lead striker. "I am going to work to be the best. I feel good physically and mentally."

Benzema named Spain, World Cup hosts Brazil and Germany among the favourites to win the final on July 13.

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