

Man Utd seal Rojo deal

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United completed the 20 million euro signing of Argentina World Cup defender Marcos Rojo from Sporting Lisbon on Wednesday with Old Trafford boss Louis van Gaal hailing the 24-year-old as a "gifted" player.

Rojo signed a five-year contract after impressing during the World Cup where he helped Argentina to reach the final.

Winger Nani has gone in the other direction, rejoining Sporting on a season-long loan, seven years after he left the Portuguese club.

"It is such an honour to say that I now play for Manchester United. The Premier League is the most exciting league in the world and to have the chance to play in it for the world's biggest club is a dream for me," said Rojo.

"I am young and am very keen to continue to learn the game, so playing for such an experienced technical coach as Louis van Gaal is a fantastic opportunity for me. I have joined United to work hard with my teammates to win trophies and I know that the manager shares that ambition."

Rojo spent the past two seasons at Sporting having joined from Spartak Moscow in July 2012.

"Marcos is a very gifted defender. He has played at the highest level in world football and can play either as a central defender or left-back," said Van Gaal.



Mario on brink of joining L'pool

AFP, Rome



Mario Balotelli is on the brink of a shock move to Liverpool, media in England and Italy reported Thursday, two weeks after Reds boss Brendan Rodgers ruled out a bid for the controversial striker.

According to sports channel Sky Italia, AC Milan have agreed to let the 24-year-old move to Anfield and a transfer worth 20 million euros (16 million pounds, \$27 million) is being wrapped up.

A Milan spokesman said he could not confirm any talks.

The reported move is being seen as a sign of Liverpool's frustration at being unable to land a top quality replacement for Luis Suarez following the Uruguayan's

World Cup biting disgrace and subsequent departure for Barcelona.

During Liverpool's tour of the United States earlier this month, Rodgers had appeared to close the door on a move for Balotelli, saying: "I can categorically tell you that he will not be coming to Liverpool."

The striker's three years (2010-13) with Manchester City were overshadowed by his off-pitch antics, which included car crashes, setting fireworks off in his bathroom and an incident in which he threw a dart at a youth-team player.

He was regularly at loggerheads with then City boss Roberto Mancini and clashed with some teammates while producing only intermittent flashes of his undoubted star quality.

Liverpool have reportedly targeted Monaco's Radamel Falcao

as their first-choice replacement for Suarez but appear to have made little headway in their attempts to secure the Colombian, who missed the second half of last season and the World Cup with a serious knee injury.

A return to England and a fresh start could suit Balotelli. The striker has been subjected to criticism in his home country for a perceived poor attitude during Italy's World Cup campaign, which ended with the Azzurri flying home at the end of the group stage.

As the most prominent black player in Italy and the first to represent the country at a major tournament, Balotelli has also had to endure regular racist abuse of a kind which is now rare in English stadiums.

Balotelli was always a high-

profile figure during his time in England, where he won both the Premier League and the FA Cup but also became a fixture in the gossip pages of the national press.

What Balotelli perceived as his unjust treatment led to a well-known goal celebration where, after scoring against local rivals Manchester United, he lifted his shirt to reveal a slogan saying "Why Always Me?"

Balotelli eventually left for Milan when Mancini decided the time was right to cash in on his erratic forward.

Rodgers may feel he can do a better job of managing the striker, given the praise he received for the way he handled another 'awkward' character in Suarez.

Suarez's caused Rodgers plenty of problems but the Northern Irishman was lauded for the way

he was able to get the best out of his star striker, who scored 31 goals as the Reds narrowly missed out on the Premier League title last season.

Suarez left Liverpool for Barcelona in a £75 million (\$125 million) move following his four-month ban for biting Italy's Giorgio Chiellini during the World Cup in Brazil.

Although Rodgers has already re-invested some of that money in signing a clutch of new players, he needs to strengthen a forward line that includes the England duo of Daniel Sturridge and Rickie Lambert, neither of whom can match Balotelli in terms of power and pace.

Balotelli scored 16 goals for Milan last season, as well as the winner in Italy's World Cup opener against England in Manaus.

Dzeko signs new deal

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City striker Edin Dzeko on Wednesday signed a new four-year contract which will keep him at the Premier League champions until at least 2018.

The Bosnian international's current deal had only 10 months to run and manager Manuel Pellegrini's determination to keep the striker was fully justified by his performance as City beat Newcastle 2-0 on Sunday.

"I'm really happy here at City -- it's a second home to me so it was an easy decision to stay for the long-term," Dzeko told the City website.

"I knew from the beginning when I started here that I wanted to stay for a long time -- I can't see any place better than here."

Pellegrini had been full of praise for the 28-year-old -- who joined City from Bundesliga side VfL Wolfsburg in 2011 -- after his crucial role at St James' Park at the weekend.

Dzeko created the opening goal for David Silva and the second came in stoppage time from one of his rivals for a place in the City forward line, substitute Sergio Aguero.

"It's not strange for me to see him play like that because he finished last season playing very well. He has grown. He's a team player," said Pellegrini.

"I'm very happy for him. That's why he is renewing his contract here -- he has a very important duty in our team."

Benaglio quits int'l football

REUTERS, Zurich

Switzerland goalkeeper Diego Benaglio announced his retirement from international football on Wednesday, three weeks short of his 31st birthday and with 61 caps to his name.

Although not considered old in goalkeeping terms, Benaglio said he was "not the youngest" and wanted to concentrate on his career with VfL Wolfsburg.

Benaglio impressed at the World Cup, helping Switzerland to the round of 16 where they lost in heart-breaking style to Argentina who scored their only goal deep into injury-time.

He appeared well capable of carrying on until at least Euro 2016 and possibly the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

"I'm not the youngest any more, and I would like to focus more strongly on my work at club level," Benaglio told the Swiss federation's website.

"I'm still in good shape but I need more time to recover than before."

"This decision has not been easy for me. The Swiss team has developed in exemplary manner, we have a great squad with a great atmosphere."

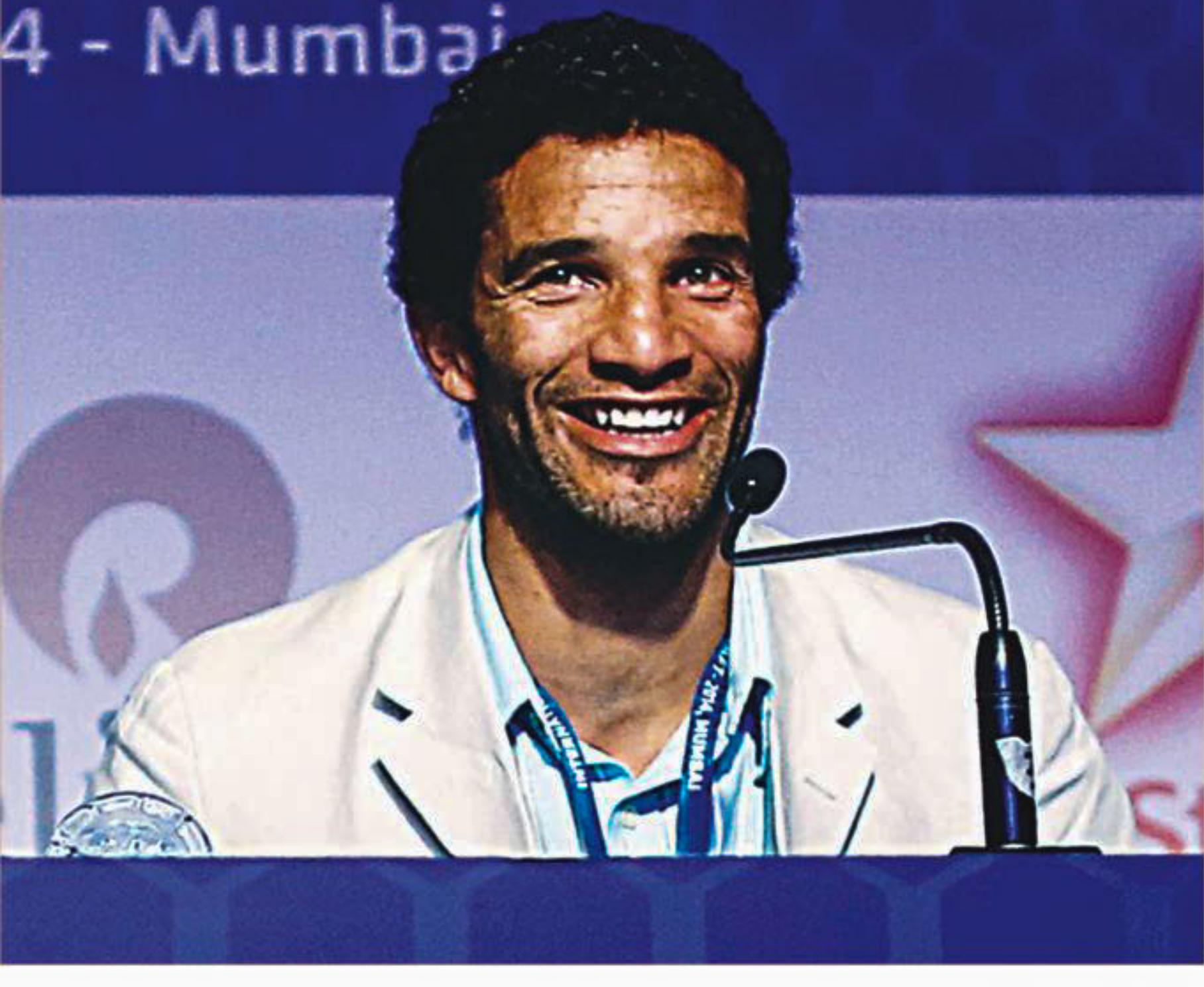


PHOTO: REUTERS
Kerala Blasters' marquee player David James attends a press conference during the international player draft for the upcoming Indian Super League in Mumbai yesterday.

INDIAN SUPER LEAGUE SET TO KICK OFF Mendy, Chopra star picks

AFP, Mumbai

Former French defender Bernard Mendy emerged the top attraction at Thursday's draft for the troubled new franchised-based Indian Super League set to kick off in October.

The ex-Paris Saint-Germain star will be paid \$80,000 per season to play for last-minute entrants Team Chennai following the draft held in financial hub Mumbai.

Mendy's fee was the highest forked out by franchisees for the 49 retired foreign players who will play in the tournament running from October 12 to December 20.

The ISL, which hopes to popularise football in the cricket-obsessed country, is the brainchild of Reliance Industries, headed by India's richest man Mukesh Ambani, sports management giant IMG, and Rupert Murdoch's Star TV.

But no current world star has signed up for the league, which was postponed three times before organisers announced new dates during Thursday's draft ceremony.

The league, which features eight city teams, suffered a setback this week when the Bangalore franchise withdrew for unspecified reasons and was replaced by Team Chennai.

Organisers declined to reveal the identity of the Team Chennai owner, but emphasised the franchise was being backed by Italian club Inter Milan.

Among co-owners of various teams are cricket star Sachin Tendulkar, who retired last year as the leading batsman in both Test and one-day cricket, former cricket captain Sourav Ganguly, Spanish club Atletico Madrid, and Hindi movie stars Salman Khan, Ranbir Kapoor and John Abraham.

The list of 'marquee' players exempted from the draft but whom organisers expect to play include retired stars like Manchester United's Dwight Yorke and Bojan Djordjic, Arsenal's Thierry Henry, Argentina striker Hernan Crespo, Sweden's Fredrik Ljungberg and Juventus striker David Trezeguet.

The eight teams in the fray are Chennai, Delhi, Goa, Guwahati, Kochi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Pune.

Former Newcastle United striker Michael Chopra, commanding a price of \$58,185, went to the Kerala team co-owned by Tendulkar.

Among other major signings were Sweden's Djordjic for Chennai for \$58,185 and Spanish mid-fielder Jofre Mateu for Kolkata, also for the same amount.

The league has run into fierce opposition from India's top football clubs, who say it will threaten their existence and ruin the existing national I-League domestic competition.

India, ranked a lowly 150th in the world, has seen a surge in football's popularity due to live television coverage of matches played around the globe.

Di Maria wants out

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti has confirmed that midfielder Angel di Maria has asked to leave the European champions before the end of the transfer window.

The 26-year-old Argentine -- who missed the World Cup final defeat by Germany because of injury -- was a star performer as Real claimed their 10th European crown last season, but has fallen down the pecking order at the Bernabeu due to the arrivals of James Rodriguez and Toni Kroos.

Premier League giants Manchester United and French champions Paris Saint-Germain are reportedly interested in signing him.

"I am surprised to read that there is a disagreement between myself and the club," Ancelotti said on Thursday.

"There is no disagreement and we both think the same way. The situation is clear. The player asked to leave in the summer and rejected an offer from the club."

"Therefore we have tried to look for other players. It is a situation that the player himself has to resolve."

"If he doesn't find a solution for his future, then, come the end of the market, we will make up and he will work for us like he did last season. There won't be any problem."

Ancelotti also hinted that World Cup winner Sami Khedira could also be set to leave the Spanish capital in the coming weeks.

The German midfielder, who missed the 1-0 win over Argentina because of an injury he suffered warming-up for the final, has been linked with a return to his homeland with Bayern Munich and has rejected an offer of a new contract, with his current deal set to expire in 2015.

"Khedira's situation is different because he has just a year left on his contract and has rejected a new one."

Masche backs Messi

REUTERS, Barcelona

Javier Mascherano has backed his Argentina teammate Lionel Messi to respond to his World Cup disappointment on the pitch for Barcelona in the new season.

Messi was named the best player at the World Cup after Argentina lost the final to Germany, a decision that was widely questioned after the forward's often lacklustre displays.

The former world player of the year returned early to Barcelona to concentrate on pre-season training before the La Liga kick-off this weekend when Barcelona, who failed to win a trophy last season, play host to Elche.

"First of all I think Leo is in good spirits, and with drive and ambition to start the new season, knowing as we all do that it will be a demanding campaign," Mascherano told a news conference in Barcelona.

"In terms of the criticism that he received, then it is obviously unjust. I said in my country, Argentina, that we got to the World Cup final thanks to him, we wouldn't have played in it without him."

"It annoys me when they give out an award and they criticise him when it is a decision that he didn't take. He is not responsible -- it is the people who voted and he was the main player of the team, the best."

It is a new-look Barcelona under Luis Enrique after an overhaul that followed their first barren season in six years.

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