

MESSAGING THRU' BOOTS!

Germany's Bastian Schweinsteiger enjoys using his football boots to pass messages about his love. The midfielder was seen wearing boots in training with 'Sarah' written on the side in Qatar earlier this month, but later put a black marker over his former partner's name to indicate the end of the relationship. Yesterday Schweinsteiger was spotted with a Serbian flag on his boots together with a stitched "31/7 duso". The Serbian flag is thought to be a dedication to his newest love -- tennis star Ana Ivanovic



Klopp sets his priority

AFP, Berlin

Jürgen Klopp says his priority for the second half of the season is keeping struggling Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga, not qualifying for next season's Champions League.

Dortmund face Juventus home and away in the last 16 of Europe next month after winning their Champions League group, but a disastrous start to the league season has left them second from bottom in the German league.

The 2013 Champions League finalists have qualified for Europe for the last four seasons, but with his team currently 12 points away from the European places and near the foot of the Bundesliga table, Dortmund's head coach Klopp says simply avoiding relegation is his priority.

"I'm currently not interested at all in qualifying for the Champions League next season," Klopp told German magazine Sport Bild with Dortmund away to fellow Champions League side Bayer Leverkusen on January 31 in their first league match of 2015.

"As of today, I have no problem with keeping us in the league and spending next year putting in a lot of training."

The loss of star players Mario Goetze and Robert Lewandowski in the last two seasons has taken their toll on the 2011 and 2012 German champions who have struggled badly for form this season despite finishing as runners-up to Bayern Munich for the last two seasons.

With ten defeats in 17 matches, Dortmund have the worst losing record in the Bundesliga and Klopp admits he has made mistakes.



Rafael Nadal of Spain celebrates his victory against Tim Smyczek of USA during the men's singles first round match of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

C'Ron splits with Shayk

AFP, Lisbon

World footballer of the year Cristiano Ronaldo and the Russian supermodel Iriya Shayk have split up after a five year relationship, the Real Madrid star's management group told AFP on Tuesday.

Rumours had been rife about the state of the relationship since Shayk missed the Ballon D'Or ceremony last week and they were fuelled further when a representative of Shayk told the American press the couple had split.

Shayk, 29, made her name as a lingerie and swimwear model and starred in her first Hollywood movie 'Hercules' last year.

Ronaldo's third Ballon d'Or came in a year in which the 29-year-old Portuguese Real Madrid superstar scored 61 goals and helped the Spanish giants win their 10th Champions League trophy.

Chelsea after Cuadrado

AFP, Milan

Chelsea are preparing a bid for Fiorentina winger Juan Cuadrado although La Viola would not sell the Colombian for less than 35m euros (\$40million), reports in Italy said Wednesday.

Cuadrado, a reported summer transfer target for Manchester United and Barcelona, has eclipsed his shaky start to the season with a string of solid performances to help the Serie A side up to sixth place.

Reports claim Chelsea are set to offer 27m euros (\$31million) for the Colombian international, although Gazzetta dello Sport said Fiorentina club president Andrea Della Valle would not sell for less than the value of his buy-out clause, 35m.

Fiorentina host Atalanta on Wednesday looking to seal their place in the quarter-finals of the Italian Cup, having lost last year's final to Napoli.

In Italy's top flight Fiorentina are 16 points behind leaders and champions Juventus but are firmly in contention for the third and last Champions League qualifying spot at three points behind Napoli.

Cuadrado, who moved to Fiorentina from Udinese in the summer of 2012, has scored five goals this season including four in Serie A.

Sterling denies Chelsea

AFP, Liverpool

Raheem Sterling's magnificent second-half solo goal earned Liverpool a 1-1 draw with Chelsea in the first leg of their League Cup semifinal at a snow-speckled Anfield on Tuesday.

With Chelsea leading through Eden Hazard's 18th-minute penalty, Jose Mourinho's side were poised to pull off a classic smash-and-grab when Sterling surged through their defence to equalise in the 59th minute.

The goal, Sterling's seventh of the season, was a demonstration of the 20-year-old England forward's quicksilver brilliance and was the reward for a committed and industrious display by Brendan Rodgers's men.

It also prevented Premier League leaders Chelsea from recording a third successive victory at Anfield, where they famously derailed Liverpool's title challenge last season.

Liverpool appear to have belatedly digested that disappointment, having now lost only once on their last 15 outings in all competitions.

But Chelsea's away goal means that Mourinho -- seeking to win the trophy for a third time -- will feel he holds the upper hand ahead of next week's return leg.

The winners will face either Tottenham Hotspur or third-tier Sheffield United in the English season's first major final on March 1.

Predictably, Mourinho's plea for Chelsea's fans not to sing their song about Steven Gerrard fell on deaf ears, with the visiting supporters quick to remind the Liverpool captain about his notorious slip in the London club's 2-0 win at Anfield last April.

But Gerrard almost silenced them in the

16th minute, letting fly with the kind of dipping 30-yard shot that was once his trademark, only for the recalled Thibaut Courtois to palm it over the bar.

It came after a spell of Liverpool pressure that briefly ignited the freezing crowd, but within two minutes, the hosts were behind.

After Cesc Fabregas darted past him, Emre Can stuck out a leg, and Hazard fell over it. Referee Martin Atkinson deemed it a penalty and Hazard sent his Belgium teammate Simon Mignolet the wrong way from the spot.

It was the precursor to some meaty challenges in midfield, but Liverpool were initially unable to lay a glove on Chelsea where it mattered.

The ball appeared to strike Diego Costa's arm after he went to ground inside the Chelsea box in first-half stoppage time, but the hosts' animated penalty appeals were waved away.

Chelsea continued to resist early in the second half, Gary Cahill blocking from Sterling, but just before the hour Liverpool drew level with a goal of shimmering quality.

Receiving a pass from Jordan Henderson with his back to goal 40 yards out, Sterling span away from Nemanja Matic and then glided past Cahill before drilling home with his left foot.

Liverpool had their tails up and a second goal seemed imminent, with Gerrard curling a left-foot shot against the post and Courtois plunging to his right to thwart Philippe Coutinho.

Gerrard made way for Adam Lallana with 20 minutes to play, but the home side continued to pepper Courtois's goal with shots, obliging the giant Belgian to save from Henderson, Sterling and Lallana.

Trezeguet hangs up his boots

AFP, Buenos Aires

France's 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 winning striker David Trezeguet, who enjoyed a decade leading the Juventus attack, has retired, Argentine daily Clarin reported Tuesday.

The 37-year-old's agent had confirmed the news of his retirement on Tuesday according to Clarin and he was now set to rejoin Italian champions Juventus' management team where he scored 149 goals in 245 games between 2000-2010.

Despite a goal at the 1998 World Cup finals which France ultimately won, the striker's most memorable goal remains the extra-time golden-goal (sudden death) that saw France beat Italy in the Euro 2000 final.

However, he was to be the only player to miss a penalty in the 2006 World Cup final which saw Italy this time prevail in the penalty shootout -- rarely used after that by unpopular coach Raymond Domenech he decided to call it a day at international level in 2008.

Rafa, Maria survive

AFP, Melbourne



Rafael Nadal and Maria Sharapova survived huge scares after being pushed to the limit at the Australian Open on Wednesday, but Roger Federer had an easier workout in the grueling Melbourne conditions.

World number three Nadal battled stomach cramps to come out on top of a mammoth five-setter with American qualifier Tim Smyczek, with the 14-time Grand Slam champion prevailing 6-2, 3-6, 6-7 (2/7), 6-3, 7-5 in a 4hr 12min epic.

The Spaniard is returning from injury and with little match practice and said he found it tough going in the humid night conditions, at one point being sick on court.

"For me after a tough period of time out of competition in the last seven months and just playing a few matches, today was a little bit humid and I felt very tired after the first set and for the whole match," he said.

The second seeded Sharapova also struggled, melting down as the afternoon heat was turned up.

She needed to draw on all her experience to save two match points before staging a gritty comeback to beat courageous compatriot Alexandra Panova 6-1, 4-6, 7-5.

World number two Federer also had a wobble, dropping the first set before bouncing back to trounce Italian Simone Bolelli 3-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 and move into the third round.

British sixth seed Andy Murray joined him with a 6-1, 6-3, 6-2 drubbing of local hope Marinko Matosevic.

Other seeds progressing included men's and women's seventh seeds Tomas Berdych

and Eugenie Bouchard, and 10th seeds Grigor Dimitrov and Ekaterina Makarova.

World number ones Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic play their second round matches on Thursday.

While the searing 42 Celsius heat of last year has yet to materialise in Melbourne, temperatures topped 33C and players, including Sharapova and Nadal, draped ice towels around their shoulders at the changeovers.

Sharapova, who can unseat Williams as world number one if she wins the title, wilted badly after winning the opening set, firing a slew of unforced errors that almost had her on an early plane home.

"I didn't actually want to be out here for two-and-a-half hours but that's sometimes the way it goes on days when you're not playing your best -- sometimes it's good enough just to get through," she said.

"I was one point away from being out of this tournament twice today and not playing my best tennis so I'm just happy I was able to win that last point."

The five-time Grand Slam champion, red-faced from the heat, trailed 4-1 in the deciding set and looked out for the count, but rallied to save two match points when down 4-5 before hanging on for an unlikely victory.

Federer, chasing his fifth Australian Open title, enjoyed slightly cooler, but still humid conditions, later in the day and steadied after losing the first set to sweep past Bolelli, despite a mystery swollen finger.

"Simone played really well in the first set, I wasn't playing badly, and I had to fight in the middle of the third set and go up a break to enable me to relax a little bit and play a touch better because of less pressure," Federer said.



Liverpool winger Raheem Sterling (C) scores the equalising goal against Chelsea during their English League Cup semifinal at Anfield on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Is expansion good or bad?

REUTERS, Singapore



The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has lauded the record lack of draws at the ongoing Asian Cup in Australia, but the absence of tied matches raises questions about the competitiveness of future 24-team expanded editions. Five of the quarter-finalists at the 16-team tournament in Australia qualified with a group game to spare, with six of the first 20 matches being won by at least a three-goal margin.

There were no draws in any of the 24 group stage games, surpassing the previous mark at a major soccer event of 18 set at the 1930 World Cup in Uruguay, the AFC said.

Remarkable, as the regional body described it?

Or simply predictable, such is the gulf in class between the continent's haves and have nots?

The prospect of Lebanon, Malaysia or Hong Kong joining the 24-team fray in four years' time would likely dilute the group phase even further, weaken the tournament's spectacle and only add to its length.

That, though, is a short-term view, according to the experienced English coach Steve Darby, who has worked extensively throughout the continent.

"By opening up the Asian Cup draw to 24, at least eight more countries have the chance to gain international tournament experience, which is so vital to development both on and off the field," he told Reuters this week.

"When I coached Thailand we lost out on goal difference and the qualification would

have been a massive boost for the country's football."

Palestine were fortunate to ship only 11 goals in Australia, with the more established 10-times Gulf champions Kuwait leaking eight in their first two before exiting.

Darby, who has also worked in Bahrain, Singapore, Vietnam and most recently in the new Indian Super League with Mumbai, said thumping defeats were inevitable and trying to protect sides against them was pointless.

"Big scores will always happen in tournaments, even Brazil lost by six to Germany," he said of the 2014 World Cup hosts' 7-1 hammering in July.

"There will always be a block of great teams and the weaker group, but teams such as Jordan, Iraq and Bahrain are starting to create a middle tier and China is at last looking like they should be."

China only scrapped through to the finals on goal difference after a woeful qualifying campaign, but Alain Perrin's young side have won three out of three to set up a quarter-final against the hosts on Thursday in Brisbane.

The Chinese are reaping the benefits of clearing corruption and investing in their youth teams and domestic league.

Darby said strong, corruption-free domestic leagues should be the priority for developing countries, rather than chirping for extra Asian Cup slots.

"Professionalisation of administration at all levels. The countries, and in turn clubs, have to get away from presidents picking teams or politicians getting involved using the game as a vote gathering vehicle."