

FORGET PIZZA, NOW IT'S LOBSTER

Leicester City's Italian manager Claudio Ranieri on Wednesday joked that it was time for him to boost the culinary incentives from pizza to lobster for his players to keep clean sheets. The genial Italian, 64, has said he rewarded each match without conceding a goal during the Foxes' stunning English Premier League title win with pizza for the whole team paid out of his own pocket. Speaking in Bangkok at the start of a two-day tour of the homeland of the club's billionaire owner, Ranieri said the implausible title victory meant he now has to up the ante. Asked how he will reward a clean sheet next season as Leicester defend their title and take a bow in the European Champions League, Ranieri said "maybe a lunch or dinner, we have to increase or something. Lobster maybe".

-AFP



Thai fans mob Foxes

AFP, Bangkok

Thai fans mobbed newly crowned English Premier League champions Leicester City Wednesday as they began a global publicity blitz after their fairytale title triumph.

They also hoped to banish the memory of a sex tape scandal that marred a visit a year ago to the homeland of their billionaire owner.

Scores of Thai fans -- dubbed the "Siamese Foxes" -- and a frenzied local media pack swarmed the champions at Bangkok's main airport on Wednesday morning, greeting them with requests for selfies and chants of "Leicester City, Leicester City!"

Manager Claudio Ranieri, captain Wes Morgan and goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel led the team, beaming as they made a choreographed Thai bow -- or "wai" -- with garlands of jasmine around their necks.

But star players Riyad Mahrez, Jamie Vardy and Danny Drinkwater were not among the Wednesday morning arrivals, with the two English players called up this week for international duty.

Football-mad Thailand has fallen for Leicester after the astonishing success story of a club with deep links to the kingdom.

The Foxes are owned by well-connected but publicity-shy Thai billionaire Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha.

His duty-free King Power brand is embla-

zoned across the shirts of the team, whose home ground in the English Midlands is named the King Power Stadium.

Speaking at a press conference later Vichai's son, Aiyawatt -- or 'Top' -- vowed to spend on "amazing" new summer signings.

But "we're not going to spend crazy money and ruin everything we have created," said Top, who is the club's vice-chairman.

His family's shrewd investment in players and club facilities has already brought a massive return on their \$57 million initial outlay.

Now they can look forward to global visibility for a duty-free brand little-known outside of Thailand.

Most Thais knew little about the one-time minnows before Vichai bought the club in 2010.

But Thais are readily changing -- or at least doubling-up -- their allegiances from perennial English favourites Manchester United and Liverpool.

"Now I'm half Liverpool, half Leicester," Max Akkhapracha, a 20-year-old student dressed in Foxes' kit, told AFP.

"It was a very exciting season, winning the premier league was just amazing."

Ahead of the tour, Top warned his players to be on their best behaviour in a kingdom whose wild nightlife belies a deep-seated social conservatism.

A tour last summer ended in a public relations disaster for the King Power family.



Leicester City captain Wes Morgan (C) lifts the English Premier League trophy during a presentation at the King Power duty-free headquarters in downtown Bangkok yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Chinese group buys Aston Villa for \$86m

AFP, London

Aston Villa have been sold to a Chinese group owned by Dr Tony Jiantong Xia, the Championship club announced on Wednesday, in a deal worth a reported \$86 million.

Villa crashed out of the Premier League after a miserable season that saw the Midlands team win just three of their 38 matches, but that hasn't stopped Dr Xia making his move.

US-based owner Randy Lerner had been trying to sell Villa for two years and has finally found a buyer after significantly lowering his asking price to a reported £60 million (\$86 million, 76 million euros).

"Aston Villa Football Club is pleased to announce that an agreement has been signed today for the sale of 100 percent ownership by Randy Lerner to Recon Group owned by Dr Tony Jiantong Xia subject to the approval of the Premier League and the Football League," a Villa statement read.

"Once those approvals have been granted and the new board members approved under the fit and proper rules of both leagues, Dr Xia will become Chairman of Aston Villa."

LVG upbeat on future

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Louis van Gaal expressed confidence that he will still be at Old Trafford next season despite his team crawling to an underwhelming fifth-place finish in the Premier League.

United beat Bournemouth 3-1 in their final fixture on Tuesday -- a game held over from Sunday due to a bomb scare -- but it was not enough to take them into the Champions League places as they finished below fourth-place Manchester City on goal difference.

United must now beat Crystal Palace in Saturday's FA Cup final to salvage something from their season and there were ripples of dissent towards Van Gaal in the form of boos as he began a post-match address to a thin home crowd.

But despite persistent speculation linking Jose Mourinho with his job, when asked if he would still be in place on the first day of next season, Van Gaal, who took over at United in 2014, replied: "Yes. Because I have signed a three-year contract."

Fears that supporters would stay away following Sunday's postponement, which followed the discovery of a fake bomb left by accident in a toilet cubicle during a training exercise, were realised.

While United did not officially announce the attendance, the stadium appeared around two-thirds full.

Van Gaal, however, used his post-game speech to praise United's fans for their "unconditional" support and claimed

afterwards that the stadium was only not full because overseas supporters had been unable to make the trip.

Referring to his speech, he said: "I have said that also with very much conscience. In spite of the fact we have not always played very well, they have supported the players on the pitch always."

"However things have gone on the pitch, they never let us down and they always have come, 75,000, always. Not today, but why do you think?"

"We have a lot of fans out of Asia. They are coming, 24 hours flying, and back. They couldn't see the match and that's why."

Van Gaal conceded that United's fifth-place finish represented a "step back", but said that Leicester City's title triumph proved that anyone could win the title next season.

Needing a 19-goal win to pip City to fourth place, United had to wait until the 43rd minute to go ahead as Marcus Rashford dummied Anthony Martial's pass for skipper Wayne Rooney to tuck away his 100th league goal at Old Trafford.

Rashford, named in England's provisional Euro 2016 squad on Monday, made it 2-0 by thrashing home from Antonio Valencia's knockdown and Rooney then freed substitute Ashley Young to add a third.

But in stoppage time Chris Smalling sliced Max Gradel's shot into his own net to gift Bournemouth a goal that prevented David de Gea from earning a share of the Golden Glove -- awarded to the goalkeeper with the most clean sheets -- with Arsenal's Petr Cech.

Van Gaal described the goal as "an irritation".

Demichelis fined over betting

AFP, London

Manchester City defender Martin Demichelis has been fined £22,058 (\$32,088, 28,473 euros) and warned about his future conduct after accepting a Football Association charge in relation to betting on matches.

Argentina international Demichelis placed 29 bets on football matches between January 22 and February 15 earlier this year.

The 35-year-old, who joined City in 2013 from Atletico Madrid, was punished under rules which were introduced in 2014-15 to prevent players and managers from betting on any football activity.

But he escaped being suspended by the FA because it is understood the offences did not relate to any matches over which Demichelis could have had an influence.

"The Manchester City defender breached FA Rule E8 in respect of 29 bets placed on football matches between 22 January 2016 and 15 February 2016," an FA statement read.

Demichelis is not the first Premier League star to be charged with breaking betting rules.

Concerns over final pitch

AFP, Doha



A senior UEFA executive on Wednesday raised concerns about the quality of the Champions League final pitch just 10 days ahead of Europe's biggest club match of the season.

Keith Dalton, senior match operations manager with UEFA, said organisers face "a lot of challenges" in getting the surface ready at Milan's San Siro stadium for the game on May 28 between Spanish rivals Real and Atletico Madrid.

"We are facing a lot of challenges to get this pitch up to the level it needs to be for the Champions League final," Dalton said in a speech at the World Stadium Congress conference being held in Doha.

"The grounds keeper, with all due respect to him, is very junior and he is the only one with the technical expertise operating that stadium."

"The rest of the guys can just hold a fork." Afterwards, Dalton, whose speech outlined UEFA's requirements for Champions League matches and also European Championship games, added that he was sure the pitch would be ready but UEFA wanted it to be perfect for the final.

The Champions League final is the high point of the European club season, arguably the most high-profile annual football game in the world and is expected to draw in a crowd of some 300 million television viewers.

Previous concerns about a pitch prior to a Champions League final included worries surrounding the 2008 final in Moscow between English sides Manchester United and Chelsea, which was played on a new grass surface laid on top of an artificial playing area. However, there were no repercussions after the final which United won on penalties.

The game later this month between the two Spanish clubs is the fourth Champions League or European Cup final to be held at the 80,000-capacity San Siro.

The last final to be played at the famous Italian venue was between Bayern Munich and Valencia, in 2001, which the German side won on penalties 5-4 after the sides played out a 1-1 draw.

Barca's Qatar friendly scrapped

AFP, Barcelona

Spanish champions Barcelona's scheduled friendly against Saudi Arabian side Al-Ahli Saudi in Doha, Qatar, has been cancelled by the club's Qatari sponsors just six days before the game was due to take place.

"Qatar Airways, the host and sponsor of the friendly match between FC Barcelona and Al-Ahli Saudi FC, which was scheduled to be played on May 24 in Doha, has opted to postpone the game," Barcelona said in a statement on Wednesday.

"That same week, the region is also hosting the prestigious Emir Cup Final, as well as games being played in the AFC League."

"The coincidence of the match with these major sporting events means that the game will now be postponed to a later date (to be announced shortly) in order to encourage the best possible attendance."

The news comes as talks over extending Qatar Airways' shirt sponsorship of the five-time European champions continues to stall.

Barca signed a 150 million euro (\$170m) five-year deal with the Qatar Foundation in 2010 which runs out at the end of this season.



France forward Hatem Ben Arfa (R) plays with children at the Aguilera Stadium yesterday as part of the team's preparation for the upcoming Euro 2016.

PHOTO: AFP

Terry signs new deal

AFP, London



Chelsea captain John Terry signed a new one-year contract with the Premier League club on Wednesday to end speculation he would be forced out of Stamford Bridge.

Terry sparked fears he was on the verge of leaving Chelsea against his will when he claimed in January he hadn't been offered an extension to his contract, which was due to expire in June.

With Italy coach Antonio Conte due to take charge at Stamford Bridge once his Euro 2016 commitments are over, it had been reported Terry could be eased out by the new boss.

But the 35-year-old former England defender was offered the new deal last week and, after speaking to Conte and Blues owner Roman Abramovich, he agreed to extend his 21-year stay with Chelsea by at least another season.

"I am delighted to sign a new contract with the club. Everyone knows I'm Chelsea through and through," Terry told Chelsea's website.

"I am looking forward to next season under the new manager and hopefully we can make it a successful one."

"Also, a special mention to the fans for their continued support. You're the best in the world."

Terry, who missed the last two games of the season following his red card at

Sunderland, gave an emotional post-match speech to Chelsea fans on the pitch following Sunday's match against Leicester.

But when the centre-back cancelled a party due to be held at Stamford Bridge on Monday as part of his presumed farewell, it was clear he was set to stay after all.

Terry opted to remain with Chelsea after reportedly considering offers from Chinese clubs Shanghai and Jiangsu Suning, with both said to be offering lucrative two-year contracts.

Terry signed for Chelsea at the age of 14 and has made 703 first-team appearances, the third-highest in the club's history, with a club-record 570 of those as captain.

He has won a glittering array of silverware with Chelsea, establishing himself as one of the club's all-time greats with four Premier League titles, five FA Cups, three League Cups, a Europa League and the Champions League, although he was suspended for that final triumph against Bayern Munich.

Terry also won 78 England caps before his retirement from international football in 2012.

"We are delighted John will spend another year at the club," Chelsea chairman Bruce Buck said.

"He has been the leader of the Chelsea squad throughout the most successful period in our history."

"He recently reached the 700-appearance mark, which is testament to his professionalism and dedication as well as his undoubted talent."