

# Laporta lands Deco to bring Barça puzzle a step nearer to completion

*We have to wait to see what the football is like but Barcelona are proving adept at musical chairs*

## MICHAEL BUNN

Now that Euro 2004 has lumbered to an ungainly halt, the focus of the football world turns to that annual last-minute game of musical chairs by which the clubs try and sort out next season's squads before they break for holidays. However, at Barcelona the situation is more comparable to a fast-spinning revolving door that is pulling in the new (Belletti, Giuly, Deco and Larsson) and flinging out the old (Cocu, Reiziger, Mario, Kluivert and Overmars).

But Joan Laporta, the president, is not just throwing his money around. Together with coach Frank Rijkaard he appears to be buying wisely. Even so, there are still a number of vacancies, such as a left-footed central defender who would free up Carles Puyol to play a deeper role. Moving up into midfield, Barça has to fill the gap left by the outgoing tough guy Edgar Davids.

The Deco-Ronaldinho pairing is something that everyone is looking forward to; it is expected to be a fluid partnership which, backed up by the solid midfield base of Xavi and Iniesta, will both play freely in attack and create chances for the forwards. The only problem is, what forwards? The rumour is that Javier Saviola might be tempted to Valencia in its first year under Claudio Ranieri, which would mean that Barça's sole striker would be Henrik Larsson, who at 32 is not as agile as he was. Larsson is going to find that defenders in La Liga are quite a bit nimbler



Milan Baros of the Czech Republic and joint top scorer at Euro 2004, may be the solution to Barça's lack of striking power

than their counterparts in Scotland.

At the moment it is Liverpool that looks like being the solution to Barça's lack of a reliable goal scorer. Since Liverpool's new coach Rafa Benítez is known to prefer a lone striker, this means his new team

suddenly has a surplus of attackers - Michael Owen, Milan Baros and Djibril Cissé. But given Owen's age and his poor form, either the Czech Baros (the joint top goal scorer at Euro 2004) or Cissé would be preferable. Even better would be the

Spaniard Mista, who is apparently unhappy with the contract that Valencia have offered him for this year. What does seem clear, at least, is that next year's Barcelona will not be comprised of Ronaldinho plus assorted human luggage.

# Armstrong takes advantage as Spanish rival loses time after crash on the cobblestones

## REUTERS

France celebrated a home success as sprinter Jean-Patrick Nazon snatched the third stage of the Tour de France yesterday but race favorite Lance Armstrong had as much to celebrate. The American, who ended the day in fifth overall, not only survived his first major obstacle of the event - two treacherous stretches of cobblestones during the 130-mile stage between Waterloo and Wasquehal - but also saw one of his most serious rivals run into trouble.

Spain's Iban Mayo, who humbled the five-time Tour winner in the Dauphine Libère race two weeks before the Tour, crashed about two

miles before the first of the cobbles and lost nearly four minutes. The Euskaltel team leader was able to make it back on his bike with a cut on his left thigh, but his crash in the 89th mile could not have taken place at a worse time. Armstrong's teammates Viaceslav Ekimov and George Hincapie took command at a furious pace, splitting the bunch wide open. Jan Ullrich's T-Mobile team and Tyler Hamilton's Phonak joined forces with Armstrong's US Postal and Mayo reached Wasquehal three minutes and 53 seconds adrift. With a 40-mile team time trial today, which should cost him even more time, Mayo's chances are now seriously hampered.



Iban Mayo's Euskaltel team strikes out before his crash near Wasquehal yesterday

## REAL MADRID

### Florentino to sell off Figo?

Luis Figo might not be going back to Madrid after his holidays. Club sources say that president Florentino Pérez is looking for a buyer for his first "galactico", who he signed on coming to the presidency in 2000. Though Pérez cannot announce this officially until after the presidential elections on 11 July, Figo is on the list of players that do not enter into the plans of the next Madrid coach, José Antonio Camacho, and who he wants to sell off. Obviously he will be trying to get as much as possible for Figo before he passes his sell-by date. Though the Portuguese had his moments during Euro 2004, the final against Greece showed he is losing pace and his ability to lose his marker. Ideally, Pérez would like to use Figo to finance the signing of Portuguese defender Ricardo Carvalho whose estimated price is close on 50 million euros. Figo has always said that he wanted to play in the English Premier League before he retires, and Chelsea might be his next port of call.

## EVERTON

### Rooney too expensive

Chelsea coach José Mourinho has announced that the club will not be bidding for England sensation Wayne Rooney, as Chelsea cannot meet Everton's asking price of 50 million pounds. However, the Portuguese coach said it was not only a financial decision. "It's not just the money, Rooney is a wonderful attacking player, but we already have players with these qualities." Even so, a gap in the Chelsea attack has appeared since it was reported that Hernán Crespo will probably be going to Milan on free transfer next season. Meanwhile, despite recent rumours in Barcelona about Edgar Davids going to Chelsea, Mourinho is not keen on the idea. "I would not like him here", said Mourinho, "he's a good player, but he would be playing with Claude Makelele, and in English football you can't have two midfield players who both measure only 170cm."

## COACH CLASH

### Germany want Rehhagel

Otto Rehhagel, the German coach who took Greece to their extraordinary victory in Euro 2004, has become the centre of a struggle between Germany and the Greek national side. In the last two days, Vassilis Galatsis, the head of the Greek FA, said he would not let the German coach go under any circumstances, and that Rehhagel would be leading Greece into the 2006 World Cup. However, there has been increasing speculation in Germany that Rehhagel is the preferred choice to succeed Rudi Völler, who resigned a fortnight ago after the German team's embarrassing defeat against a team made up of Czech substitutes.