



OLD FIRM COUNTDOWN

4 DAYS TO GO

I won't be back in Nik of time

» EUAN McLEAN

NIKO KRANJCAR has dashed Rangers' hopes of returning to action before the end of the season. The Croat international has written off talk of a quick comeback after caretaker boss Graeme Murty revealed last week he has resumed light training.

The 32-year-old has been out since October when he ruptured his cruciate knee ligament – and despite his recent return to the training pitch Kranjcar insists he still has a long road ahead.

Kranjcar – speaking in his homeland in his new role as an ambassador for this summer's European Under17s Championship – said: "I will be ready for next season. I was honoured to be given a chance to play for such a big club as Rangers.

"It took me a while to adjust but I was satisfied with my performances, especially just before I suffered my injury.

"My next goal is to get



CROCK BLOW Niko Kranjcar back to the level where I was before the injury. I am aware it will be difficult.

"It'll mean a lot of sacrifice and a lot of work in the gym.

"My recovery has gone well, everyone is happy with it. The doctors, the physios at the club and everything has gone to plan."

Kranjcar is putting in the hard hours in the gym just now because he is determined to come back even stronger to help Rangers regain their strength as a Scottish football superpower.

And if he can do that he believes his case for a recall to the Croat national team will be hard for boss Ante Cacic to ignore.

He added: "It is a privilege to play for a club like Rangers. We're well on the way to restoring the former glories of the club.

"My target is to one day play for Croatia again. But my priority is just to get fit again and get back playing."



TAILOR MADE Morais has been a buddy of Pedro Caixinha since they were 10 years old and insists the Rangers target is the bravest man he has met.

PED'S GOT THE FANS TALKING

PEDRO CAIXINHA has already got Rangers fans talking – over how to pronounce his surname.

The Portuguese bullfighting fanatic is expected to arrive in Scotland at the end of the week.

And if he leads Rangers to victory in Sunday's Old Firm clash at Parkhead there will be only one name in town for the Ibrox hordes to shout – KAI-SHEEN-YA.



TIPPING CELTS Burchill

Burch: Gers' only plan will be to avoid a doing

MARK BURCHILL reckons Rangers' No.1 priority going into Sunday's showdown will be to avoid being humiliated.

The former Scotland striker played for Celtic the last time they hit Gers for

» **JOHN DOCHERTY** six, crushing them 6-2 in a Premiership rout at Parkhead in August, 2000.

Now Burchill believes the Ibrox side will be desperate to make sure they are not on the

receiving end of another hammering.

The 36-year-old said: "Rangers and whoever is in charge will be going into it trying to keep the score down because they know Celtic are on fire with so

much pace and power. If Rangers are being clever they will probably look at what St Mirren did against Celtic when they played fantastically well.

"They need to try to stop Celtic and try to contain

ARLINDO MORAIS has no fears about his best pal walking into the lion's den at Parkhead after watching him tackle a bull for a dare when he was just a kid.

Foolhardy or full of guts? Morais has been a buddy of Pedro Caixinha since they were 10 years old and insists the Rangers target is the bravest man he has met.

Caixinha is finally expected in Glasgow at the end of the week to accept the challenge of restoring the Ibrox club to a position of power – and Morais is adamant he will not flinch from a fight for which he is tailor made.

He even moved to clear up the confusion of reports that claimed Caixinha was previously employed as a scout for the Hoops and denied it was true.

A baptism against the Bhoys, runaway league leaders on their way to six in a row, would faze most football bosses on their debut outing, but not the Portuguese gaffer who knows all about facing a formidable foe head on.

Morais played with Caixinha at their lowly local club Beja before they moved into coaching kids for the team. As their stars ascended the duo even moved to become numbers one and two at UD Leiria in the Portuguese top flight.

Morais took a step back from football and is now a teacher in Beja, in southern Portugal, while his boyhood pal moved on to forge a career in Europe, the Middle East and Mexico.

He said: "Pedro is not afraid of anything and that includes the challenge of facing Celtic on Sunday. You have to put faith in yourself and Pedro is full of desire.

"It's possible for him to prepare the team and lead them out, he'll not walk away – I've never known him to turn his back on anything since we were kids.

"We've known each other since we were 10 and I remember, as 16-year-olds, we went to a local bullfight in the town of Beringel, just west of Beja.

"His father was a bullfighter but Pedro had never stepped in the ring although his fighting genes were clearly passed to his boy.

"Some of our other friends laid down the challenge to Pedro, 'Come down the front and catch the bull or are you too afraid?'"

"He did not break stride as he walked down there into the arena and confronted the animal.

"At one point our friends moved to help him but it was just at the moment Pedro caught the bull by the horns. It was the first time he had stepped in the ring. There was

Celts will hold no fears for my pal Pedro. He is so brave he even grabbed bull by horns at just 16

SAYS LIFELONG MATE ARLINDO MORAIS



» **GARY RALSTON** g.ralston@dailyrecord.co.uk

no trophy, only honour. Everyone was so happy for him because it was a very dangerous task for a kid to take on.

"But he was more proud to accept the challenge. It was a defining moment in his life, perhaps even the moment he became a man. He's scared of nothing."

Caixinha has visited Ibrox as a coach before when he was No.2 to Jose Peseiro at Panathinaikos and they were knocked out of the UEFA Cup by Walter Smith's side in 2008 en route to the Final.

But Morais revealed they had visited the stadium before when they attended an SFA coaching course at Largs with players such as Colin Hendry and Alan Shearer.

He also explained Caixinha did not scout for Celtic, despite reports

he'd worked for the Hoops for two years as a star spotter in Europe.

Morais said: "No, that was me. Pedro was offered the job but had already committed to a position in Saudi Arabia with Jose so instead he recommended me.

"I worked for Celtic for two years, taking in games in Portugal and Spain, Madrid and Seville, but the club didn't follow up on my recommendations.

"I encouraged them to look closely at Brazilian central defender Maicon for example, who was with Porto, but it didn't happen. Many of the players I recommended to Celtic – there was a long list – were perhaps too technical as they seemed to prefer other attributes, such as good fitness.

"I knew Scottish football too as

Pedro and I attended a course at Largs with your Braveheart Hendry and Shearer. Pedro and I watched Rangers play a few games at Ibrox.

"We enjoyed Glasgow, its culture, history and people especially, not to mention bars and restaurants. Rangers are the perfect team for Pedro and Glasgow is the perfect city. This is the most important moment of his career.

"He's part of the new age of coaches in Portugal, such as Jose Mourinho and Mario Silva. This is the job in Europe for which Pedro's has been waiting.

"Rangers are the right fit. It's a great challenge to return the club to their position among

PERFECT TEST Best pal Morais



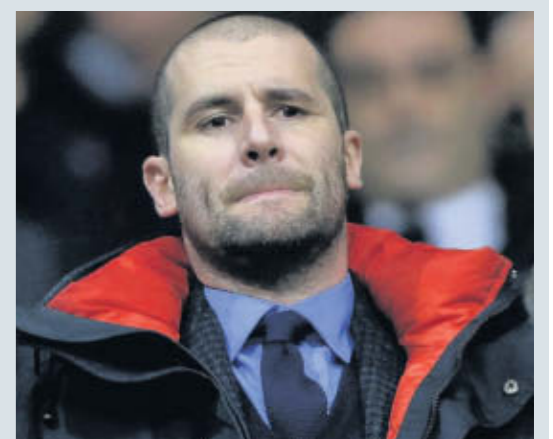
the great clubs of Europe again. Celtic are stronger financially but he can make Rangers big again.

"Everything is there for him. We know of their brilliant training ground, academy, stadium and fans who will follow their team anywhere. There's a great foundation to build a side to compete in Scotland and Europe again."

Morais revealed his pal likes to play 4-4-2 with a defensive midfielder and two wide men leading a high pressing and attack-minded style.

He said: "He'll bring his own ideas but also give respect to Scottish culture and the Rangers way of playing."

"He likes his players to be in command. Rangers fans will enjoy watching their team."



NEW LEADING MAN Gers now hope to get Paul Mitchell

Wilson snubs Ibrox switch

From Back Page was staying put at St Mary's.

It's understood Wilson had prepared Robertson for the decision as early as last week but the club kept the door open for a change of heart until the last minute, while they continued their pursuit of Portuguese boss Pedro Caixinha as their head coach.

Record Sport believes Wilson, who was linked with a move with former Saints boss Ronald Koeman to Everton last summer, gave serious consideration to the blank-canvas role offered to him at Ibrox.

But ultimately the former Falkirk, Watford and Huddersfield man felt he had too much to give up at Saints.

Rangers are expected to now turn their attention to Paul Mitchell, Wilson's predecessor at Southampton, whose deal with Spurs was ended yesterday.

Meanwhile, Caixinha will be stuck in the desert taking charge of Al-Gharafa's second-string today instead of flying to Glasgow to prepare for Sunday's Old Firm showdown.

Record Sport revealed yesterday the 46-year-old had put his travel plans on hold for at least 24 hours after the bid to appoint him as

the 16th manager in Rangers' history stalled unexpectedly.

It's understood the delay centres around the size of the compensation package which would be due to the Qatari club and also to Caixinha who is prepared to rip up the remainder of his £2million-a-year contract in order to get to Glasgow.

The Portuguese coach had originally hoped to arrive in Scotland no later than yesterday to give him enough time to get his ideas across to the players at the club's Auchenhowie HQ.

But he was still holed up on the Persian Gulf last night having agreed to take charge of today's Al-Gharafa's reserves for a game against league rivals Umm Salal.

Caixinha's next move will depend on whether or not Rangers can finalise a package for him.

Our source said: "After the second-team game on Wednesday the season in Qatar stops for a month. Pedro had already booked flights to return to Portugal for a holiday but this arrangement was made several weeks ago.

"But the talks about moving to Rangers have been continuing over the past few days. It's still possible he will be in Glasgow for the weekend but we'll have to just see."

Old Firm v EPL again

THE Celtic v Rangers Scottish Cup semi-final will kick off at noon on Sunday, April 23.

That means the tie, which will be televised live on Sky, will be in direct competition with the Leicester v Spurs Premier League clash which is also being beamed out by the broadcaster.

The Old Firm meeting will take place at Hampden 24 hours after the other semi between Hibs and Aberdeen.

That tie will get underway at 12.15pm on Saturday, April 22 and will be shown live on BBC Scotland.

The fixture will be the second Old Firm derby this term that has been put up against a big English game, with Celtic's 5-1 win over Rangers in September clashing with the Manchester derby.



BOSS PRAISE Stewart Milne

Milne: I'll talk to Del if he's wanted

ABERDEEN chairman Stewart Milne has refused to say he will KO any approach from Rangers for Derek McInnes.

Pedro Caixinha is set to take over from Mark Warburton at the end of

» **FRASER WILSON** the week but if there's a hitch some, such as former boss Walter Smith, would prefer if McInnes is given a chance.

That's a prospect Aberdeen chief Milne

would not welcome but asked if he would refuse Rangers permission to speak with McInnes he said: "We would have to discuss it with Derek but we wouldn't give any encouragement for

Rangers to be speaking to Derek.

"Derek is an integral part of everything we have set out to do. He is on the same page as the rest of us and is making fantastic progress."