

Crespo close to a reality

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan's Argentine striker Hernan Crespo is close to completing a move to Chelsea, Italian media reported on Friday, prompting a furious response from his team mate Christian Vieri.

Crespo trained at Inter's Appiano Gentile complex on Friday morning and Inter denied that there were any negotiations underway with big-spending Chelsea but Italian media insisted a deal was imminent.

Sky Sports also reported that the Italian championship runners-up had representatives in London on Friday negotiating a possible 25.7 million euro (28 million dollar) fee with the free-spending English Premiership title contenders.

The 28-year-old has struck 19 goals in 36 international appearances and more than 100 goals in the Italian championship. He also

lifted the UEFA Cup while at Parma in 1999.

Sky suggested a contract could be signed in the next 24 hours.

If it goes ahead Crespo will link up with Romanian forward Adrian Mutu, a 24 million euro (27m dollar) capture from Parma who is set for his Chelsea debut against Leicester at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

Roman Abramovich has lavished 74 million pounds (100m dollars) on new signings since buying Chelsea in July.

Should Crespo move to Chelsea he would team up with his compatriot and ex-Lazio team mate Juan Sebastian Veron, one of several big-name signings the club have made since Abramovich took over the London side.

Crespo joined Inter from Lazio just a year ago in a deal in which Inter paid 26 million euros (\$28.38 million) plus Italy international striker Bernardo Corradi.

Crespo's exit would be a major surprise for Inter fans who have

grown used to their club bringing in big-name players rather than selling them.

Meanwhile, striker Vieri, who himself had been linked with Chelsea, told the daily Gazzetta dello Sport that he would rather Inter released him if they were in the business of selling.

"If the club have to sell Crespo I would prefer they sell me, it would be better if they sold me," said the Italy international.

"What am I doing here, staying at Inter to finish another time in second or third or fourth place? What are we doing? Instead of reinforcing we are weakening.

"Inter sold Ronaldo and in his place bought Crespo and now they are selling him. It is better to sell me, really, once and for all," said Vieri.

"Certain (Inter) directors need to stay far away from me because if I lost it for five minutes I'd have them all nailed to a wall," he added.



HERNAN CRESPO

Premiership preview Sweet-talking Keane!

Tennis

AFP, London

Manchester United captain Roy Keane is backing rivals Arsenal to run them close for the Premiership title but Gunners skipper Patrick Vieira reckons the English authorities are out to get them.

Keane's United face a tough test at Newcastle on Saturday before Arsenal travel to Middlesbrough the following day.

Newcastle finished third last season but Keane insisted only Arsenal can threaten their title defence.

"Arsenal are still our main rivals. They have an excellent manager and some top players," the Irishman told his club's official website in a rare respite from the usual war of words between the clubs.

"We saw again in the Community Shield that there is not a lot between us so obviously they are going to be our biggest threat.

"They have probably had a stronger squad than us over the last year or two and getting Robert Pires

only the Gunners defender will face charges.

"If it had been a player at another club, I don't think this would have happened," club captain Vieira told the Evening Standard.

"It is no surprise to me that they have charged him, but the club and everyone will be with him. For me, this has happened because he is an Arsenal player.

"I have been where Sol is now and I know how he is feeling. As a squad of players, we're already close. Now, if it is possible, we will be even closer."

A lack of defensive cover cost Arsenal the title last season and manager Arsene Wenger could do without his best centre-half being suspended. Campbell is already struggling to be fit for Middlesbrough.

"Now the only thing we can do is to defend him as much and as strongly as we can," Wenger told Arsenal.com.

"At the moment it looks 50-50 for the Middlesbrough game and, if there is any doubt, we will leave him out."

Newcastle fought back from a goal down to salvage a 2-2 draw at

and it's also a massive game for the fans."

Liverpool travel to Aston Villa on Sunday looking to recover from last weekend's home defeat by Chelsea. If Gerard Houllier's side are to mount a serious title challenge, Villa Park is the sort of place they will need to get points from.

Emile Heskey limped out of England's 3-1 win over Croatia on Wednesday and Australian new signing Harry Kewell is hoping to overcome an achilles knock in time to feature for the Reds.

"I don't know how I picked it up, but I am having treatment to be right for Sunday," Kewell said on Liverpool's website.

The new-look Chelsea make their first competitive appearance at Stamford Bridge against newly promoted Leicester, and Romanian striker Adrian Mutu is set for his debut in Chelsea colours.

Teenage forward Carlton Cole was loaned out midweek to Charlton Athletic for the season after falling down the pecking order and more may hit the out door if manager Claudio Ranieri manages to sign Inter Milan's Argentine hitman Hernan Crespo.

"We are negotiating with

Super Cup opening in Spain

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

After a long, and very hot, summer the Spanish football season finally kicks into life as league champions Real Madrid and Cup winners Real Mallorca compete for first silverware of the year, the Super Cup.

Normally an understated affair, the first leg at Mallorca's Son Moix stadium on Sunday (kickoff 2045 GMT) will attract more attention than usual as it will mark David Beckham's first appearance for Real Madrid in a competitive match.

After admitting that his first game on Spanish soil against Valencia in a pre-season friendly "could hardly have been worse", the England captain will be hoping to turn in a more convincing performance against the islanders.

An anxious-looking Beckham never got into his stride during last week's game against Rafa Benitez's well-oiled Valencia and, like the rest of his team, he still looked to be suffering the after-effects of the club's three-week tour to Asia.

The return from the Far East should have given the team time to fine tune its preparations for the forthcoming season, but in fact it has been overshadowed by midfielder Claude Makelele's confrontation with the club.

The French international refused to train last week because of the club's refusal to grant him a pay rise or to consider his request to leave



PHOTO: AFP

England football captain David Beckham plays with a rugby ball as he and England rugby star Jonny Wilkinson (not in the photo) appeared in a television advertisement for a maker of sporting goods, at an undisclosed location. Emphasising the kicking skills possessed by two English sportsmen, the advert shows Wilkinson teaching Beckham how to kick with a rugby ball and Beckham giving Wilkinson the inside track on his trademark free-kicks.

and join big-spending premier league side Chelsea.

He finally resumed training on Thursday, but the dispute is set to rumble on and it is unlikely that the influential midfielder will feature in either leg of the Super Cup.

There is added spice to this year's final against Mallorca because of the humiliating defeats the islanders inflicted on Real during the course of last season.

Real fell victim to Mallorca when they lost 5-1 on aggregate in the quarter-finals of the King's Cup and were then handed their first home defeat in the league in over two years when they were thrashed by the same scoreline at the Bernabeu in May.

But after a flood of close season departures and the arrival of former Boavista coach Jaime Pacheco, Mallorca are now a very different side.

Highly-rated midfielders Alvaro Novo and Albert Riera, prolific centre forward Walter Pandiani and combative defender Federico Lussenhoff have all gone as has much respected coach Gregorio Manzano.

Mallorca do still have the live-wire Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o, who will be joined up front by new signing Arnold Bruggink, but it will be a major upset if the islanders manage to deprive Real of their first trophy of the season.

Sierra Leone gone!

AFP, Helsinki

Fourteen members of the Sierra Leone under-17 team have disappeared after they were knocked out of the world championships here Thursday.

The group should have left Finland on Thursday but there was no sign of them at the airport, world football's governing body FIFA said.

Police in the town of Lahti where the team were based have opened an inquiry, FIFA revealed.

Of the 14 missing, 12 are players and two officials.

Sierra Leone were knocked out before the quarter-final stage which takes place this weekend.

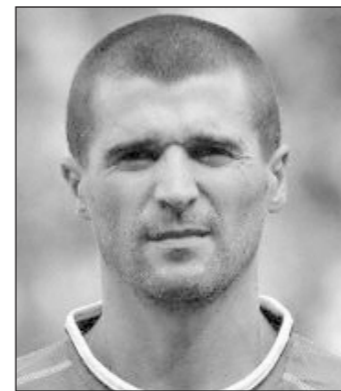
Dubai to get Becks

AFP, Dubai

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is bracing itself for the possible arrival of football sensation David Beckham who could be playing in a friendly here early next year, a newspaper reported Friday.

Gulf News said Beckham had been contacted by a top club in the UAE to play in a charity match in January.

"The match is a United Nations initiative and we are almost certain of having Beckham coming down for it," Gulf News said, quoting an organiser.

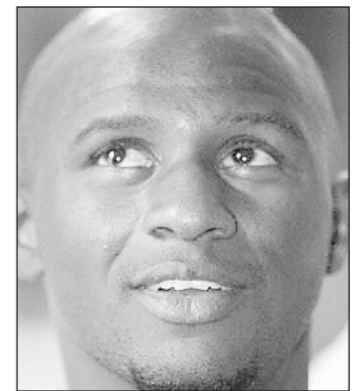


ROY KEANE

and Patrick Vieira to sign new contracts was probably more important than buying new players as far as Arsenal are concerned."

But Arsenal captain Vieira thinks the Football Association have it in for the Gunners after Sol Campbell's red card last weekend against Everton added to his violent conduct charge picked up against United.

Campbell kicked out after Eric Djemba-Djemba lunged at him in the Community Shield match, but



PATRICK VIEIRA

Leeds last Sunday and are looking forward to taking on the Red Devils before a 52,000 sell-out at St James' Park.

"The atmosphere in this game is always electric, and I'm sure it will be even more so for the first game of the season," Magpies forward Lomana LuaLua told the club's website.

"This is a game the players look forward to because we all want to compete against the best players,

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Bolton v Blackburn, Chelsea v Leicester, Everton v Fulham, Manchester City v Portsmouth, Newcastle v Manchester Utd (1100 GMT), Southampton v Birmingham, Tottenham v Leeds, Wolverhampton v Charlton
Sunday: Aston Villa v Liverpool (1300 GMT), Middlesbrough v Arsenal (1505 GMT)

Chelsea," Inter general director Massimo Moretti revealed.

Crespo's agent Fernando Hidalgo added: "Obviously the clubs must first reach an agreement before the player takes a decision. But there is still nothing concrete."

Blackburn Rovers travel to Bolton for what is sure to be a hotly-contested Lancashire derby.

Though Blackburn hammered Wolves 5-1 and Wanderers slumped 4-0 at Old Trafford last weekend, form will go out the window for the clash at the Reebok.

FIXTURES

Saturday: VfL Bochum v Bayer Leverkusen, 1860 Munich v VfL Wolfsburg, Cologne v Borussia Dortmund, VfB Stuttgart v Kaiserslautern, SC Freiburg v Borussia Monchengladbach, Eintracht Frankfurt v Hertha Berlin, Werder Bremen v Schalke 04
Sunday: SV Hamburg v Bayern Munich

the team turned up for practice to find out that wild boars had dug up the field, once again.

The practice field near Berlin's Olympic stadium has been the target of wild boar attacks before and the club has erected a fence around the ground, but to no avail. The latest visit left the pitch full of craters.

Berlin, considered possible title contenders, has had a poor start in the new season and are still without a win after three rounds.

Berlin boss Huub Stevens is under pressure in the German capital with his side still searching for their first Bundesliga goal and their first three points of the season.

"He can not score the goals himself," said a supportive Dieter Hoeness, Hertha general manager.

The UEFA Cup hopefuls face bottom side Eintracht Frankfurt who have lost all three games on their return to the Bundesliga.

Mutu falling in love!

Football

SUN, London

Adrian Mutu on Thursday declared his love for Chelsea and admitted he "adores" his new team-mates.

The Blues' Romanian striker has finally received international clearance after his £15.8million move from Parma.

And Mutu, 24, is now ready to make his Chelsea debut at home to Leicester on Saturday having been prevented from playing in Sunday's 2-1 win at Liverpool because of the hold-up.

He said: "I already adore my team-mates. Some of them have immediately shown what good guys they are and also that they are really funny."

"I was bitterly disappointed that my clearance did not arrive in time to play against Liverpool.

"But, after the game, Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink burst into the dressing room, jumped straight into my arms and shouted 'Adrian, next time it will be you who scores the winner.'"

Mutu, overjoyed at joining Roman Abramovich's Stamford Bridge revolution, intends to mark his start with a goal.

He said: "Our stadium is abso-

lutely sensational. Everybody tells me it is easily the best stadium in London.

"And, as I'm looking forward to my first game for my new club, I have to praise what I saw of the pitch."

"It is very impressive, like a snooker table and I think it's going to be a pleasure to play on. Victory at Anfield has given us massive self-belief."

"We have a team which has big chances to win important trophies. I would say this team is definitely good enough to battle Manchester United and Arsenal for the title."

"I heard that Claudio Ranieri said anyone who thinks we will win the title is crazy."

"But I think the boss had it on his mind that it is tough to make a smooth-running team with so many newcomers."

Mutu who scored both goals in Romania's 2-0 win over Ukraine on Wednesday said: "I also like the fans in England. Our relationship with them is much calmer than in Italy."

"There, you could never avoid them they were always pestering you."

"In England, they seem to stay politely behind the gates and stare at what you are doing."

El Loco moves to Betis

REUTERS, Madrid

Argentine striker Martin Palermo joined Spanish first division side Real Betis on Thursday, just 24 hours after being released from his contract by Villarreal.

The 29-year-old former international, popularly known as El Loco (the crazy one) for his eccentricity, has signed a one-year contract with his new club and said he was looking forward to the chance to reignite his career after a disappointing spell at Villarreal.

"Betis are a big club and will be up there competing to get in to the European Cup," he told a news conference. "I will be trying to score as many goals as possible as that's what's I'm here to do."

Betis coach Victor Fernandez said he was delighted with the forward's arrival.

"Betis don't have a player with his characteristics," Fernandez told reporters. "He is a constant presence in the area, is great in the air, he's aggressive and doesn't shy away from contact."

Palermo joined Villarreal for \$8.5 million from Boca Juniors midway through the 2000-01 season after hitting the headlines by scoring both goals in his side's 2-1 win over Real Madrid in the World Club Cup final.

He scored six goals over the remainder of the campaign but his progress was hampered the following season when he broke his ankle in a freak incident when a wall collapsed on his foot during a King's Cup match against Levante.

He was sidelined for four months as a result of the injury and was limited to five league goals in the season.

Last term he failed to find his best form and the signings of Spanish forward Jose Mari and Brazilian striker Sonny Anderson effectively forced him to leave the club.

Betis have been on the lookout for a new striker since young forward Dani tore his ankle ligaments in a pre-season friendly at the beginning of August.

Theirs is the only defence that

Makelele through with Real

Football

AFP, Madrid

France midfielder Claude Makelele has told his Real Madrid teammates he no longer wants to play for the Spanish champions.

Makelele was back in the fold Thursday having refused to train due to a salary dispute for the past week.

He announced his decision after the session, according to dailies Marca and El Pais on Friday.

The 30-year-old told his team-mates and boss Carlos Queiroz in the dressing room that his return to training didn't mean he wanted to stay at the Bernabeu.

Makelele even offered to change in another dressing room so as not

to upset team spirit but club captain Raul refused.

The Frenchman's agent Marc Roger is in Palma de Mallorca trying to reach Real president Florentino Perez who is on holiday in the Balearics, Marca reported.

According to the daily ABC, Madrid do not want to lose the midfielder at any price one week into the Spanish championship.

If Makelele keeps up his attitude, Real's directors are ready to sign a pact letting him leave at the end of the season, two years before his contract ends, for a fixed price.

Makelele defied his club by joining up with the France team which played Switzerland in a friendly in Zurich on Wednesday, although France coach Jacques Santini diplomatically declined to pick him.

Ligue 1 preview

Metz test for Lille

Tennis

AFP, Paris

Unscripted French first division leaders Lille put their unbeaten record on the line with a home tie against Metz on Saturday.

Lille's history is littered with trophies, but by now all the silverware is coated in thick layers of dust.

The northern French club, which only gained promotion back into the top flight three seasons ago, last captured the championship in 1954, but they now find themselves in the happy position of being the only side with a perfect three wins out of three. And there is no fluke about their climb to the summit - they upset champions Lyon on the opening day, following it up with victory against Paris Saint Germain and a 3-0 drubbing of Toulouse.

Theirs is the only defence that

boasts a clean sheet.

With confidence sky high they will be looking for another three points against 14th placed Metz at their Grimonprez-Jooris stadium although they are missing keeper Gregory Malicki; Chilean attacker Hector Tapia, out injured last week, returns.

Lyon, in fourth, host third-from bottom Toulouse without striker Sidney Govou, who is nursing an ankle problem and is unavailable until September, and midfielder Christophe Delmotte.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Bordeaux v Auxerre, Lille v Metz, Lyon v Toulouse, Nantes v Le Mans, Nice v Ajaccio, Rennes v Guingamp, Strasbourg v Lens, Marseille v Sochaux, Bastia v Montpellier
Sunday: Paris Saint Germain v Monaco

Bundesliga preview

Mighty Bayern for Hamburg

Football

AFP, Berlin

SV Hamburg coach Kurt Jara is counting on a change of fortune when his side take on reigning champions Bayern Munich at the AOL-Arena on Sunday with his team searching for their first win of the 2003/04 Bundesliga campaign.

Bayern crushed Hamburg 3-0 at the same venue last season but under pressure coach Jara is looking for a reaction from his team after a torrid start to the new season.

"What we built up in eight weeks has been broken down in 21 days," raged Jara after the 5-1 thrashing by VfL Wolfsburg last Sunday.

Hamburg will take heart from their win on penalty kicks in the semi-final of the League Cup, a competition they won with a 4-2 triumph against Borussia Dortmund.

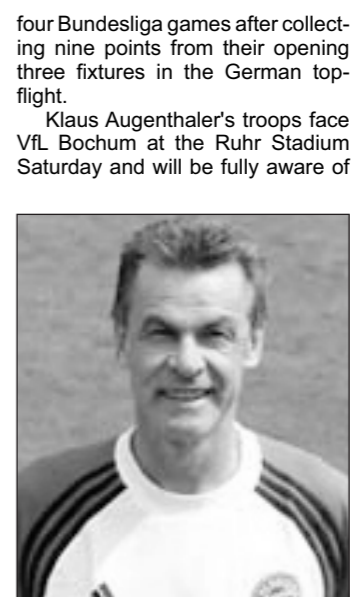
Bayern have yet to lose in the Bundesliga and could be boosted by the return of talisman midfielder Michael Ballack.

The German international missed the friendly with Italy due to a calf complaint but has an outside chance of travelling to Hamburg.

"If he can train with the team we will consider playing him at the weekend," coach Ottmar Hitzfeld told German newspaper Bild.

Hitzfeld also confirmed that Dutch international striker Roy Makaay would be handed another chance to notch his first Bundesliga goal after failing to find the net in the 2-0 win over VfL Bochum last Saturday.

Bayern Leverkusen hope to extend their 100 percent record to



HITZFELD

four Bundesliga games after collecting nine points from their opening three fixtures in the German top-flight.

Klaus Augenthaler's troops face VfL Bochum at the Ruhr Stadium Saturday and will be fully aware of

the potential stumbling block against a side that garnered six points from their last season.

Peter Neururer's side won 2-1 in Bochum last time around and the 48-year-old manager is confident of ending the winning streak of Bayer with their first victory of the new season.

"We will beat Leverkusen," vowed Neururer. "We managed it twice last season."

Eight points separate pace-setters Bayer from 14th placed Bochum.

Jupp Heynckes will look to build on Schalke 04's 2-1 win over Cologne last Sunday with another three points against Werder Bremen at the Weserstadion.

The former Bayern coach claims his side have been feeling tired after

Kaiser wants less foreigners

Football

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer has backed suggestions by Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder, president of the German Football Federation (DFB), to restrict the influx of foreigners into the Bundesliga.

Since the 1994/95 season, the final year before the Bosman ruling, the number of foreigners

following their trade in the Bundesliga has almost trebled, jumping from 21.1 percent to 60 percent at the start of the 2003/04 campaign.

"It can not continue," stated Mayer-Vorfelder. "The percentage of foreigners in the Bundesliga is close to 60 percent meaning German talent is unable to break through."

"This is of course counter productive for the German national team."

Beckenbauer, known as the 'Kaiser', believes Germany should

follow the example of Italy where Serie A and Serie B clubs can only recruit one non-European player per season.

"Italy already has a restriction on non-Europeans and that would certainly be a good step for us," he said.

Kaiserslautern currently have players of 17 different nationalities in their squad while Borussia Dortmund have six Brazilians on their books.

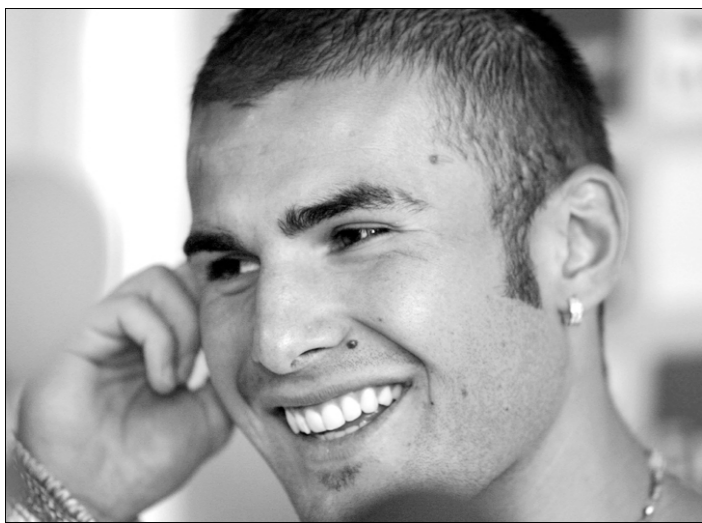


PHOTO: AFP

Adrian Mutu (L) smiles while he attends a press conference in London yesterday.