

Saha wants to be a Red Devil

SKY SPORTS, London

Fulham striker Louis Saha has called on Manchester United to make a move for him when the transfer window reopens.

United have been strongly linked with the Frenchman as they seek a new striker in the transfer window.

The 25-year-old has revealed it would be a 'dream' to join United and he is ready to turn down a new deal at Loftus Road to win a move next month.

Fulham boss Chris Coleman was hoping to tie down the former Newcastle United ace to a new long-term deal like some of his other teammates. But Saha believes the opportunity to move to Old Trafford is too good to turn down.

"I understand the position of the manager - but this is an opportunity I cannot let go by," Saha told The Sun.

"I cannot say no. United is my dream and I want to go there. It's now Sir Alex Ferguson needs a striker.

"In six months, the facts of the matter will have changed perhaps."

United could now test Fulham's resolve to hang onto the tricky striker with a big-money bid in the New Year, as they look to take some of the goalscoring burden off the shoulders of Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Eriksson won't be rushed

AFP, London

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson said here Sunday he was in "no rush" to sign the new contract put before him by the Football Association (FA).

The Swede, whose present deal takes him up to the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany has been offered an extension until 2008, including that year's European Championships in Austria and Switzerland.

Eriksson told Sky Sports he would resume negotiations with the FA early next year. "We have talked about it once and we are going to sit down and talk again after the New Year," he said.

"We will discuss it then. Of course I am thinking about it but it is a long commitment until 2008. We will see what is happening in January and February. There is no rush. I still have a long contract."

Eriksson said he was unhappy that details of the new contract had been made public but added that it was good of the FA to ask him to stay on.

"It is very nice of them, especially when I already have a contract that goes until the next World Cup."



AIR RONALDO: An airborne Ronaldo jumps over Mallorca's Federico Lussenhoff during a Spanish first division match. PHOTO: AFP

Primera Liga A royal show

Football

AFP, Madrid

It was their goals that were the precious gifts from Real Madrid's Three Kings of Raul Gonzalez, Ronaldo and Luis Figo as the reigning Spanish champions ran out 3-1 winners at Real Mallorca on Sunday.

The victory helped Real retain their two-point lead at the top of the Spanish first division and be crowned the unofficial 'winter champions' ahead of the two-week Christmas break.

"This was three important points, the players worked hard for them. I think we are entitled to feel happy because we played well and could have scored at almost any moment," beamed Real coach Carlos Queiroz.

Real have 39 points from 17 games, with Valencia second on 37 points after their 1-0 win over Sevilla on Saturday.

The visitors were rocked after 11 minutes when a mix up between defenders Ivan Helguera and Michel Salgado left Fernando Correa with a clear shot on goal and the Uruguayan didn't fluff his chance to give Mallorca the lead.

However, Real always looked likely to score and had several chances during an entertaining first half before Raul equalised in

injury time.

Ronaldo then put Real ahead after 55 minutes with a typical individual effort for his 14th goal of the season.

Luis Figo got Real's third goal from the spot on 68 minutes, after the former Spanish international Miguel Angel Nadal had tripped Ronaldo in the area.

Real's hero though was goalkeeper Iker Casillas, who stopped everything that came his way after Correa's early strike.

Casillas had plenty of work to do as well, as Mallorca's Samuel Eto'o ran the Real back four ragged and was a constant threat.

"Like us, they had plenty of scoring chances," admitted Queiroz.

Chances were little consolation to Mallorca coach Luis Aragones. "Today the best team didn't win. I still don't understand how we could lose this game," fumed Aragones, although few observers are likely to agree with him.

Aragones also raged against the referee Luis Medina Cantelejo, "because he didn't know how to control the game."

At the other end of the table, there will be little Christmas cheer at Espanyol and Murcia after the bottom two clubs both lost on Sunday to sink them deeper into relegation trouble.

Bottom club Espanyol went

down 2-1 at Deportivo La Coruna while Murcia, one place above the Barcelona-based side, lost by a similar score at home to Malaga.

Espanyol have now gone five games without a win while Murcia's sorry streak is even worse and stands at 11 games.

Jordi Cruyff opened the scoring for Espanyol after 16 minutes before Albert Luque equalised for Deportivo, scoring from a free kick two minutes into injury time.

Luque then had a hand in the winner when his cross was turned into his own net by Espanyol's Moreno Torricelli just after the hour.

Deportivo's three points means that, despite their shaky form, they

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TOP SIX					
Spanish league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):					
Real	17	12	3	2	36 18 39
Valencia	17	11	4	2	31 12 37
Deportivo	17	10	3	4	26 14 33
Osasuna	17	7	6	4	18 13 27
Villarreal	17	7	6	4	20 17 27
Atletico	17	8	3	6	23 22 27

Sino booter banned

AFP, Beijing

A Chinese footballer has twice tested positive for the banned substance ephedrine and been banned for three months by his club in the first case of doping in China's professional football league.

Beijing defender Zhang Shuai tested positive in a random test last week and was required to undergo a second screening for confirmation, which was also positive, the China Football Association (CFA) said Monday.

"We have received the result of the B sample test on Zhang Shuai and it is positive," a CFA spokesman said.

"We hope all Chinese football clubs, coaches and players can learn from this painful lesson.

"We have not made any decision on what action to take."

The Xinhua news agency however said his club had swiftly banned him for three months and fined him 6,000 dollars.

It also fined his coach, team manager and doctor.

The 22-year-old, who was a prospect for China's Olympic team, had protested his innocence, claiming he accidentally ingested the substance in a cold remedy.

"I feel extremely repentant now. I should have asked the doctor before taking the pills. But I never thought of the result after I took the drug test," he said in a statement to the CFA.

His punishment from the CFA is expected to be more severe with State Sports Administration guidelines saying players who test positive for drugs will be suspended for two to four years.

Regulations also stipulate that the club can be banned for one year and chief manager, team doctors and head coach fined 1,200 dollars each.

The news came after FIFA president Sepp Blatter said last week that world football's governing body might consider imposing permanent bans on any player caught taking performance-enhancing drugs.

On Friday, Manchester United and England defender Rio Ferdinand was banned for eight months and fined 50,000 pounds after being found guilty of missing a drugs test.

Ephedrine gained notoriety when Argentina football legend Diego Maradona tested positive for the substance at the 1994 World Cup. It is a common additive to weight-loss pills and cold remedies.

Ferdinand in shock

AFP, London

Manchester United and England defender Rio Ferdinand says he was "shocked and devastated" with the eight-month ban he received for failing to show for a drugs test.

In his first reaction to Friday's sanction imposed by the English Football Association, the 25-year-old Ferdinand told The Sun newspaper that the decision "hit me like a thunderbolt."

"I was shocked and devastated when I heard the verdict," said Ferdinand who is to appeal the ban which is due to start on January 12.

Ferdinand played in the Manchester United side which defeated Tottenham Hotspur 2-1 Sunday in the Premiership at White Hart Lane and his manager Alex Ferguson sung his praises afterwards.

"I am very pleased with Rio," said Ferguson after seeing goals from John O'Shea and Ruud van Nistelrooy give his side the three points which took them back into the lead in the race for the league title.

But instead United took the lead through an unlikely scorer when, direct from Fletcher's corner,

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It's got to be Maradona!

Football

SKY NEWS, undated

Argentine police are searching for a fake penis used by Diego Maradona to beat drug tests while playing for Napoli in Italy.

The fake plastic manhood was filled with 'clean' urine to make sure the footballer's sample was acceptable.

The plastic piece was given to a museum in Buenos Aires but disappeared on a countryside tour.

A police source told the Daily Star Sunday: "It's quite an unusual theft but I suppose it is valuable because of its former owner."

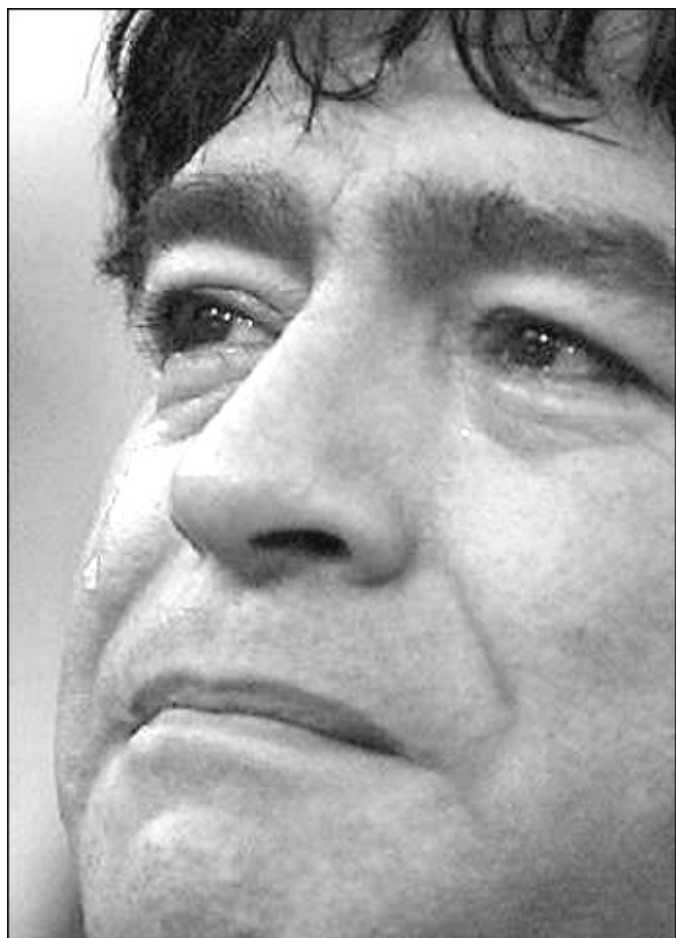
"We're confident we can sniff it out."

Maradona, 42, tested positively for cocaine in Italy in 1991 and failed another test during the 1994 World Cup.

The paper says that if it had not been for his fake manhood, he would have been caught out more often.

Former Napoli president Corrado Ferlaino said: "If he was still at risk, he was given it containing someone else's urine, which he slipped into his track-suit."

"Then in the testing room he would fill the specimen jar."



DIEGO MARADONA

Serie A

Milan's first slip

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan were beaten 2-1 by Udinese in the Italian league on Sunday, the European champion's first loss of the season.

Milan's defeat, in a match where they missed a penalty and finished with ten men, and Juventus' 1-1 draw with Lecce leaves AS Roma heading into the winter break enjoying a six point lead at the top of Serie A.

Captain Francesco Totti struck both goals in Roma's 2-0 win at struggling Empoli Saturday to maintain his side's unbeaten record.

AC Milan, missing flu-struck Andriy Shevchenko, lost their slip from second to third after being found out by a Udinese side that had made the best possible start with a goal inside 90 seconds from Dino Fava.

Milan should have levelled after being awarded a 19th minute penalty when Pippo Inzaghi clashed with goalkeeper Morgan De Sanctis in the box.

But Andrea Pirlo's spot-kick hit the near post to follow up his miss in the Intercontinental Cup shoot-out against Boca Juniors last week.

Perhaps it was divine justice as replays suggested De Sanctis had in fact safely beaten Inzaghi to the

TOP SIX					
Italian football league table Sunday (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):					
Roma	14	11	3	0	31 4 36
Juventus	14	9	3	2	31 15 30
Milan	13	9	3	1	22 6 30
Inter	14	8	4	2	25 9 28
Lazio	14	9	1	4	23 17 28
Parma	14	7	3	4	22 18 24

ball. Marcos Cafu gave AC Milan some hope with a well struck volley n e a r

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Lazio forward Dejan Stankovic (above) and Bernardo Corradi celebrate after beating Inter Milan 2-1 at Olympic stadium in Rome on December 21

Premiership

MU reclaim top spot

Football

AFP, London

Champions Manchester United did their best to put the Rio Ferdinand controversy on the back burner by returning to the top of the English Premiership with a 2-1 win over Tottenham at White Hart Lane on Sunday.

First-half goals from John O'Shea and ace marksman Ruud van Nistelrooy put United ahead at the interval before Spurs substitute Gus Poyet's 63rd minute strike re-ignited the game as a contest.

The result left United a point clear of London challengers Arsenal and Chelsea with Tottenham still just two points outside the relegation zone.

Bolton took the edge off Arsenal's festive celebrations Saturday when a Henrik Pedersen equaliser seven minutes from time cancelled out Robert Pires' 57th minute goal, while a Hernan Crespo header was enough to ensure Chelsea took full advantage of the Gunners' slip up with a 1-0 win at Fulham.

The two London giants both have 39 points, and a goal difference of +19 with 31 goals scored and 12 conceded.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson ensured there would be fresh attention on Ferdinand by including the England centre-back in his starting line-up just 48 hours after the defender was given an eight-month ban for missing a drugs test.

Ferdinand, 25, is currently appealing against the ban imposed upon him by a Football Association

hearing on Friday which is not due to take effect until January 12.

But afterwards Ferguson praised Ferdinand, who played the whole match, saying he intended to keep the former Leeds and West Ham favourite in his side for as long as he could.

"I'm very pleased. Maybe it was the best thing to play him and get the other things out of his mind," Ferguson said.

"He acquitted himself very well in the circumstances. Since it all happened (when Ferdinand missed his dope test on September 23) he's got better and better so

why should I change it?"

Reflecting on the match as a whole the Scot added: "I felt we were in control in the first half. But credit to Spurs they upped their tempo and at the end there we were struggling to get three points."

Ferguson made just one change to the United team that beat Manchester City last weekend with Darren Fletcher in midfield instead of Kleberson.

United might have taken the lead inside two minutes when Ryan Giggs flicked Gary Neville's cross just past the far post.

Tottenham were penned inside their own half, strikers Robbie Keane and Frederic Kanoute having to live off scraps.

Van Nistelrooy almost got on the scoresheet when he latched on Paul Scholes' through ball only to be forced wide and see his shot blocked by Spurs' Kasey Keller.

But instead United took the lead through an unlikely scorer when, direct from Fletcher's corner,

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Manchester United's Dutch international Ruud van Nistelrooy prepares to shoot during the Premiership match against Spurs on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP

TOP SIX					
English Premiership table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):					
Man Utd	17	13	3	3	34 11 40
Arsenal	17	11	6	0	31 12 39
Chelsea	17	12	3	2	31 12 39
Southampton	17	7	5	5	18 12 26
Fulham	17	7	4	6	28 23 25
Newcastle	17	6	7	4	25 20 25