

No fresh Gunners

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is not planning to buy any new players in the January transfer window, despite revealing that Chelsea's spending spree upped the pressure on his team to regain the premier league title.

The Londoners, double winners in 2001-02, added only German keeper Jens Lehmann to their squad in the close season while Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich splashed out over 100 million pounds (\$176.5 million) on fresh talent from around Europe.

Wenger told a news conference on Tuesday he could see no immediate need to bolster an Arsenal squad already well placed in joint second with Chelsea, a point behind leaders Manchester United, before the December 26 premier league programme.

"At the moment, I'm not in the market. I don't see any reasonable target," he said.

"Money is available. If I change my mind, I'll let you know but we don't want to buy for the sake of buying."

"The fact that Chelsea and Manchester United bought so many players pushed us to think, come on, if we want to be up there we really have to go for it, and that's maybe why we are still there," he added.

"We have big confidence and the players feel they've worked very hard to be in an ideal situation, but they know as well that Man United and

Chelsea are there and don't lose any ground.

"The hunger from not winning (the league title) last year is there."

Chelsea have indicated their Russian billionaire owner may curb his spending during the month-long January transfer window, one of only two periods in the season when Europe's top-flight clubs can buy and sell players.

Wenger, whose team play bottom club Wolverhampton Wanderers at Highbury on Friday, believes Arsenal's extra experience as a unit gives them an edge over the Chelsea big names who have only been playing together as a team for this season.

Alex Ferguson's United, though, may be in the market for a replacement for defender Rio Ferdinand, who was banned for eight months by the Football Association last week for missing a drug test.

The Arsenal manager, meanwhile, is delighted with Lehmann's success following his move in July from Bundesliga side Borussia Dortmund to replace former England keeper David Seaman, who transferred to Manchester City.

Lehmann, 34, arrived at Highbury with a reputation for being outspoken and temperamental but has delivered a series of outstanding league performances and mastered his temper, according to Wenger.

"I respect him a lot because he is a 100 percent winner," said the Frenchman. "He is a wonderful guy, very professional. Everyday he wants to be a better player than the day before."

"When I speak to him, I can see there is a true ambition in him."



CHRISTMAS SAMBA! Brazil superstar Ronaldo is amused by the dance of a child at Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro on December 24. Ronaldo, went to the stadium to watch an informal match with friends, while on holiday in Rio.

Premiership preview

That's the Xmas spirit!

Football

AFP, London

Christmas is supposed to be the season of good will to all men -- it is just that nobody bothered to inform Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger.

The managers of Manchester United and Arsenal normally manage to hold off until around mid-March before firing their first shots in the psychological warfare that has become such a traditional part of an English Premiership title run-in.

This year however the mind games have kicked off with less than half the season gone, both Ferguson and Wenger seeking to extract maximum benefit from the mid-season stutter that has cast doubt on Chelsea's ability to push their more experienced rivals all the way to the wire.

"The decisive period is in March or April and we have experience of the pressure of that time," Wenger remarked ahead of Friday's visit of Wolves to Highbury.

"United as well, but Chelsea, they don't. They have that experience as a group of players but not as a team."

Ferguson, who will also enjoy home advantage for the visit of Everton, meanwhile has been busy ramming home the importance of his side sitting at the top of the table at Christmas given their past record of changing gears in the closing stages of the season.

"Historically we have always shown great determination in the second half of the season," Ferguson said. "I hope we can keep that up."

The underlying message was not lost on Wenger, who believes his side's unbeaten start to the season has been testimony to the lessons painfully absorbed last year when the Gunners effectively blew the title by allowing United to overcome a nine-point deficit.

"Alex Ferguson says his team get stronger in the second half of the season but you could say the same of Arsenal," was Wenger's response to Ferguson's jibe.

"In 1998 we were 11 points behind United in January and we went on to win the double."

Chelsea bounced back from two successive defeats with their win over Fulham at the weekend.

But the three points came at the price of losing Ireland winger Damien Duff for up to six weeks with a dislocated shoulder and the Blues face another exacting examination of their title credentials when they make the short trip to Charlton.

Arsenal in contrast should be able to run off any Christmas Day excesses with ease when they entertain bottom side Wolves at Highbury while Manchester United rarely give anything away against Everton.

The corresponding fixture last season was one in which Wayne Rooney gave one of the first glimpses of the prodigious talent that was to make him England's youngest international and scorer within a year.

But despite his undeniable progress, the 18-year-old is likely to once more start the game from the bench as Everton boss David Moyes continues to use his most prized asset sparingly.

It is a strategy that seems to be working. Rooney has come off the bench to score in his last two

matches and Everton appear to be on the road to recovery after a disappointing start to their campaign.

For under-fire Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier, the visit of Bolton to Anfield represents a no-win situation.

Victory will do little to ease the pressure on the Frenchman. Anything less is bound to trigger a fresh round of questioning of Liverpool's ability to secure the return to the Champions League on which Houllier's future now depends.

Liverpool are hopeful Harry Kewell will be fit to return to the forward line alongside Emile Heskey.

The highlight of the day's other games is provided by the return of former Leeds boss David O'Leary to Elland Road for the first time since he took over at Aston Villa in the summer.

O'Leary is sure of a warm welcome at a ground where he is remembered more for taking Leeds to the Champions League semi-finals three years ago than for contributing to the spending splurge that ultimately forced the club to dismantle that team and left it on the brink of bankruptcy.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Friday: Arsenal v Wolves (1230 GMT), Birmingham v Manchester City, Blackburn v Middlesbrough, Charlton v Chelsea (1230 GMT), Fulham v Southampton (1200 GMT), Leeds Utd v Aston Villa, Leicester City v Newcastle Utd, Liverpool v Bolton, Manchester United v Everton, Portsmouth v Tottenham

Chelsea keen on Ayala

Football

SUN

Chelsea are expected to make a third offer for Valencia defender Roberto Ayala after a £9.3million bid was rejected, according to reports in Spain.

Ayala, capped 75 times by Argentina, is one of the most highly-rated defenders in the world and if Chelsea are successful in capturing the 30-year-old the club will have spent around £125m on transfers since Roman Abramovich took control in the summer.

Manchester United are believed to be interested in luring Ayala to Old Trafford during the January transfer window and the Blues have brought in top agent Pini Zahavi to spearhead their bid.

Ayala signed a long-term contract with Valencia in the summer but Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri regards the Argentine as an ideal replacement for 35-year-old Marcel Desailly and hopes the Spanish club can't resist an improved offer.

Chelsea would ideally be looking for players who are not cup-tied in Europe but Ayala is not eligible to play in their Champions League campaign, having already played in the UEFA Cup

Becks still bitter

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham has again expressed surprise about the way in which he was forced out of Old Trafford before his highly-publicised move to Spanish giants Real Madrid last summer.

The celebrity superstar, 28, joined Real for 25 million pounds on July 2 after United, whom he had joined as a fresh-faced schoolboy, had originally accepted a similar bid from Barcelona.

Beckham's four-year contract with the nine-times European champions is worth an estimated six million euros a year before bonuses.

But despite the frills of playing with one of the biggest clubs in the world, Beckham admitted in an ITV documentary he was stunned to learn that United had accepted an offer for him in the first place.

"I didn't think for one moment it would happen."

"I was more upset than anything because I had put so much into the club. I felt I had given 120 percent every time I performed," Beckham said in the documentary entitled *The Real Beckhams*.

Beckham also revealed his regret that he and Sir Alex Ferguson had hardly spoken since he left the club.

"He hasn't spoken to me still," said Beckham. "We spoke for five minutes at a funeral. He hasn't rung me ... I really would have thought that would have happened to be honest."

"I just expected a bit more respect when I had been at the club



DAVID BECKHAM

for that many years."

Beckham admitted that his move to Spain, along with wife Victoria and sons Brooklyn and Romeo, had been stressful.

"Things have been difficult

moving to Spain," he said. "It's just been very difficult and it has been very stressful."

But he added: "I think we've come out of it alright... We've got over a lot worse than this."

Nakata loaned to Bologna

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata will play for Italian side Bologna in the first half of 2004

on loan from Serie A's cash-strapped Parma, a press report here said Thursday.

The six-month deal was agreed upon by the two Italian clubs on Tuesday while Nakata, who has been twice named the Asian footballer of the year, was vacationing during the Christmas season, the Nikkan

Sports daily reported.

"The two clubs held talks and reached the agreement," Parma team manager Lorenzo Minotti was quoted by the daily as saying. "Nakata will return on the 30th and it will be over in two minutes if he says okay."

Nakata, 26, who has been given only a few chances to play at Parma, and Bologna have already reached a basic agreement on remuneration and other terms, the daily said.

He will be paid an estimated 92 million yen (842,500 dollars) for the stint, 30 percent down from what he would have earned at Parma, it added.

But Nakata's agent in Tokyo, Sunny Side Up Inc., said the report was premature.

"There has been no agreement whatsoever," Mina Fujita, a Sunny Side Up official, told AFP. "We have learned through press reports that Bologna is interested in Nakata. But press reports always tend to go too far."

Nakata has been rated the most successful of the growing band of Asian footballers to have pursued a career in Europe.

He moved to Perugia after the 1998 World Cup finals for his first overseas contract. He also played for AS Roma before he was sold to Parma in 2001.

In the middle of this year, he was reported to be sought after by other European clubs such as English Premiership Chelsea as well as Italy's AC Milan and Lazio.

Houllier wants fit 2004

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Gerard Houllier may be the book-makers' favourite to be the first managerial casualty in the Premiership in 2004 but the Frenchman has at least maintained his sense of humour.

"I only ever see my name these days with the words 'under fire' in front of it but I have grown used to that now," the under-fire Liverpool boss said ahead of Friday's visit of Bolton to Anfield.

The Reds are hoping Australian striker Harry Kewell will be able to start the match after recovering from his recent ankle injury.

But Houllier will still have to do without Michael Owen, Milan Baros, Salif Diao, Jamie Carragher and Steve Finnan.

"My new year's wish would be to



GERARD HOULLIER

have no more injuries and to get back to fourth spot," Houllier said. "I know some people are not happy with that as a target but we have to be realistic. The top three are battling in a league of their own."

"I know that when we get our personnel back we will be okay. That's what I am waiting for."

Nedved's Real regret

SKY SPORTS

Ballon d'Or winner Pavel Nedved admits he does not think he is the best player in the world, and rues not playing for Real Madrid.

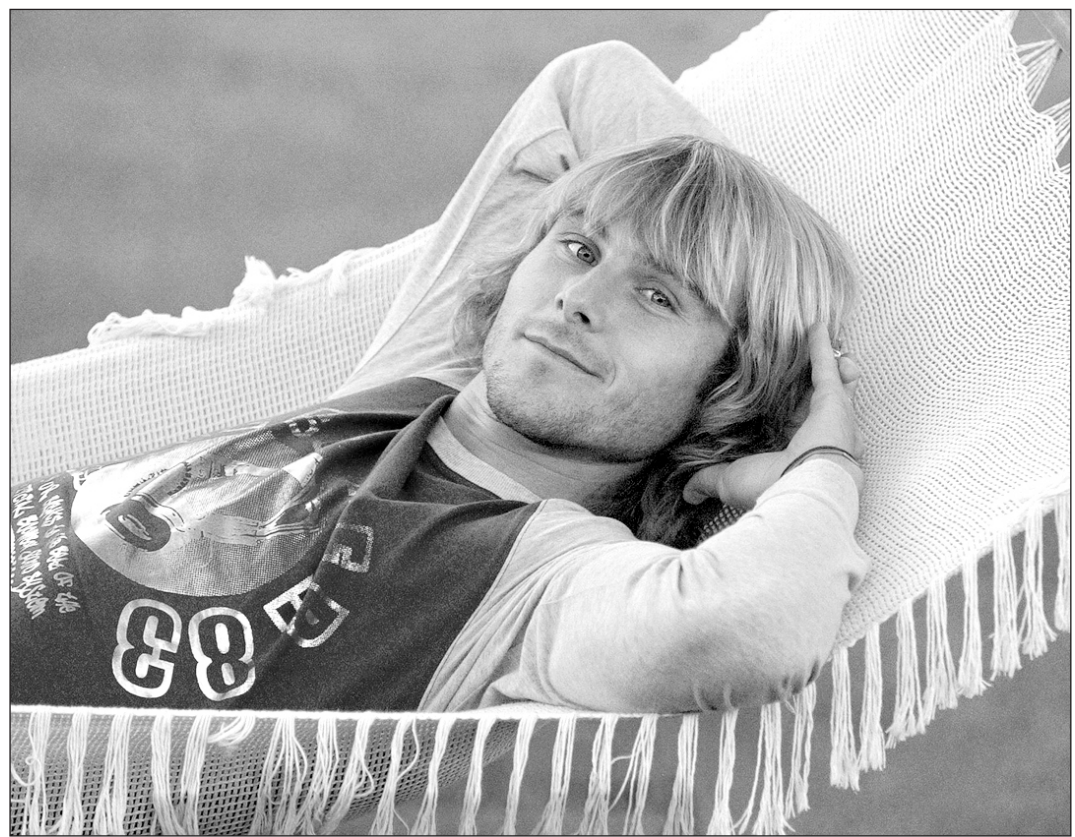
The Juventus midfielder instead feels Real Madrid star Zinedine Zidane is the top man, with Thierry Henry the classiest striker on the planet.

"I don't consider myself to be the best player in the world," stated the Czech Republic international. "The best is Zidane. Henry is the best forward in the world. I can tell you (Paolo) Maldini is also a great defender. (Andrei) Shevchenko and Zidane had great seasons."

Nedved admits it is a shame he will never get to play for Real.

"I have a contract with Juventus until 2006 and I want to end my career at that time," he explained. "I would like to stay at Juventus until the end, but the club can decide something else. At Real? It is out of the question. It is too late."

"It's a shame as I would so much love to play with Zidane."



PAVEL NEDVED

Rio was wrong!

Football

ESPN

Sir Alex Ferguson has admitted Rio Ferdinand was wrong not to turn up for his drug test.

The Manchester United boss said: "He was wrong not to go he knows that but we have to keep supporting him. He knows he is innocent."

But the Old Trafford chief is adamant the FA banned Ferdinand for eight months without any evidence to justify their harsh punishment.

United defender Ferdinand, 25, was hit with the record rap when he failed to take the drugs test at the club's Carrington training ground.

He insists he simply forgot after being told he was one of a number of players who was required and went to Manchester city centre instead.

Ferguson added: "There is no evidence at all. We will get a lot of criticism but we are fully entitled to support someone who is innocent."

United have until January 12 to appeal against the sentence which will also force Ferdinand out of England's Euro 2004 campaign.

Ferguson decided to play his shell-shocked centre-half at Tottenham on Sunday just two days after the FA disciplinary committee hearing. Ferdinand responded with one of his best performances of the season.

Ferguson said: "It's not easy. As I keep saying, no one is unbreakable."

"You wonder what's going on underneath the surface of the guy."

"Is he ready to break with the strain put on him? How is he feeling in himself?"

"It's very difficult to assess the situation accurately."

"I spoke to him before the Spurs game and said, 'Do you really want

to play'.

"He said, 'I want to play, I must play' and I admire that in a way because it took the decision away from me!"

"It wasn't an easy one, I could have got it wrong but he showed character and the right temperament to get on with it."

Fergie also revealed the rest of the United squad have put a pro-

ductive arm around Ferdinand and helped him through his trouble times.

He revealed: "The players have been great with him."

"There's been a lot of mickey-taking as you would expect."

"But in the main, they really feel for him. He knows he has plenty of support."



RIO FERDINAND