

Celebrity birthday for Ballack

INTERNET, undated

In yet further proof that the lines between Premiership footballer and celebrity are becoming increasingly blurred, Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack celebrated his 30th birthday with some help from singer Sarah Harding this weekend.

The Germany captain was apparently invited over to the Girls Aloud member's table as she herself partied with friends to mark turning 24 at a fashionable Soho nightclub, incidentally also called 24.

Ballack has no reason to fear Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho's wrath however, currently being in the middle of a three-game ban after being sent off two weeks ago.

The Mirror reports that Ballack helped Harding with the three bottles of vintage champagne she had ordered.

Supported by her friends, including bandmate Nadine Coyle and her beau Jesse Metcalfe, Harding also managed to later reach the Movida nightclub, with the total drinks bill for the night apparently coming to 7,000 pounds the Sun claims.

Earlier in the evening Harding had made a guest appearance on cheeky Georgie duo Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway on ITV1.

Benfica unaware of racist chants

AFP, Lisbon

Benfica coach Fernando Santos said on Monday he has no knowledge that racist abuse and monkey chants were directed at some Manchester United players last week during a Champions League match in Lisbon.

Manchester United have written a letter of protest about the incidents to the Lisbon-based side and have called on European football governing body UEFA to take action, Britain's Sun newspaper reported Saturday citing a club source.

Defender Patrice Evra and striker Louis Saha as well as midfielder Kieran Richardson and defender Wes Brown were all targeted by the Portuguese club's supporters in the Group F 1-0 win, the paper reported.

"I didn't notice anything in the place where I was and I don't recall Benfica fans being accused of such acts," said Santos in comments published Monday in daily Portuguese newspaper A Bola.

"Will we be punished? These things have to be proven. We'll see if this is true. It doesn't worry me," he added.

UEFA were waiting for reports from the match delegate and the referee before deciding whether to follow up on the complaint, the British newspaper report said.

If found guilty Benfica could be hit with a heavy fine or ordered to play one or more games behind closed doors.

Abraham and Pospesch get Czech call

AFP, Prague

Czech manager Karel Bruckner on Tuesday called up midfielder Martin Abraham and defender Zdenek Pospesch to his squad to fill injury gaps for upcoming Euro-2008 qualification matches against San Marino and the Republic of Ireland.

Abraham, 28, one of the architects of Czech first division club Mlada Boleslav's surprise success in reaching the group stages of the UEFA cup, is called up to the national squad for the first time. Pospesch, the 27-year-old Sparta Prague player, has been selected twice before.

Bruckner has been forced to fill gaps left by injuries to recent star player, Glasgow Rangers' Libor Sionko, and Tomas Galasek.

The Czechs play San Marino at home on October 7 and travel to Ireland on October 11 with maximum points so far after victories against Wales and Slovakia.

"The versatile style of Pospesch will help us to cancel out on the right side the Irish game, which is quite strong on the left flank. Abraham, has been in my sights for six months already," Bruckner explained.

Nuremberg's Galasek has a knee injury and Sionko a thigh strain.

Bruckner will also be unable to call on Sparta Prague midfielder Tomas Sivok, who hobbled off the pitch Monday in the derby game against Slavia Prague and now faces a stomach operation.



Watford's two-goal hero Ashley Young (C) looks on as Marlon King (L) and Hameur Bouazza celebrate during their Premiership clash against Fulham at Vicarage Road on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Fulham sting Hornets

AFP, Watford



Premiership new boys Watford saw their hopes of taking their first win of the season slip away on Monday as having led 2-0 they ended up drawing 3-3 with Fulham.

Marion King and Ashley Young had given the Hornets a 2-0 lead only for American international Brian McBride and Heidar Helguson - who used to play for Watford scoring 63 goals in five seasons - bringing the visitors level.

Fulham actually took the lead five minutes from time through a Damien Francis own goal but Watford salvaged a point as Young scored his second of the match - the draw leaves them second from bottom with four points after seven matches.

It left Watford manager Watford boss Adrian Boothroyd rather deflated.

"We're that keen to get it (a win) that that we get on the back foot rather than on the front foot," he said.

"At 2-0 up, we had a great start to the second half and I would fully

expect us to go and win that game comfortably.

"But full credit to Fulham for coming back - and full credit to us for coming back. But I am disappointed."

Fulham boss Chris Coleman praised the character his players had shown in fighting back.

"I'm sure both sets of players are disappointed, but our character after the break was great," said the Welshman.

"We clawed our way back into it and for long periods there was only us in it.

"It's difficult coming here, they play long balls and we did well to stand up to it. I thought we were fantastic and the boys who came on did really well."

Watford took the lead in the 23rd minute as King prodded home past Antii Niemi from close range having been set up by Ashley Young.

Fulham had little to offer in attack and it was no surprise when the hosts doubled their lead through Young, who scored from close range after fine work by Hameur Bouazza.

Almost the first time that Watford's highly-rated 'keeper Ben Foster had to make a save was on the hour mark from

Icelandic striker Heidar Helguson, who had only on Monday received a vote of confidence from Coleman.

The lively Bouazza, who had a fierce shot parried by Niemi in the first-half, then went close with a header which drifted past Niemi's post.

However the visitors did at last get themselves on the scoresheet with 20 minutes remaining as McBride shot past Foster having taken the knockdown by Helguson from Wayne Routledge's cross.

Helguson completed their fightback as he headed home eight minutes from time from Tomasz Radzinski's cross.

Three minutes later they were ahead as Francis put into his own net - trying to clear a Helguson header - from a corner by French defender Franck Queudre but Watford had their own reply.

Young was the hero again as his smart volley two minutes from time gave Niemi no chance and allowed the hosts at least to save their honour if not nthe three points they looked to have earned earlier in the match.

be monitored in a lot closer way."

Harry Redknapp, the Portsmouth manager who was featured in BBC Panorama's recent probe into transfers, said of the Lord Stevens-led inquiry: "It has needed to all come out in the open - and that is not a problem. "Whatever happens, we'll wait and see but for me it is not a problem."

Torino stand by Zaccheroni

AFP, Rome

Torino president Urbano Cairo said Tuesday he was not considering sacking Alberto Zaccheroni as coach, despite the club's poor start to the Serie A season.

Newly-promoted to Italy's top division, Torino are without a win in their five matches played having drawn twice and been beaten three times.

Zaccheroni came under fire from the Torino fans following last Saturday's crushing 4-0 home defeat to Lazio, but Cairo insists his coach is staying put.

"Zaccheroni's position is not at risk," Cairo said. "He has all my confidence."

"There have been many changes with lots of new players coming in, and they need time to settle. All that is needed is a little patience."

Zaccheroni was hired just three days before the new campaign to replace Gianni De Biasi, who had a falling-out with Cairo over the club's future.

Zaccheroni was coach of AC Milan when they won the league title in the 1998-99 season. He has also been in charge of Udinese, Lazio and Inter Milan.

Torres to Theatre of Dreams?

AFP, London

Atletico Madrid's Fernando Torres is set for a summer move to Manchester United, according to a report here Tuesday.

The Daily Star newspaper said United have virtually captured the talented Spain striker by agreeing to pay Atletico a down payment of five million pounds (9.4 million dollars).

That would then pave the way for a move, worth 26 million pounds (49 million dollars), to the Premiership ahead of next season.

United have long been linked with the highly-rated Torres, although so have their Premiership rivals Chelsea.

Torres has so far resisted the temptation to play in England, but speculation of a move to Old Trafford intensified in the summer after Ruud van Nistelrooy left to join Atletico's city rivals Real.

The 22-year-old Spaniard, who scored four goals in the World Cup, recently signed a one-year contract extension with Atletico.

The striker, nicknamed 'El Nino', had a buy-out clause worth 41 million pounds (77.4 million dollars) in his contract however Atletico have reportedly dropped the price because of United's 'show of faith' and his apparent desire to move to Old Trafford.

WC snub still hurts Coupet

REUTERS, Paris

France goalkeeper Gregory Coupet has said he still feels bitter about being a reserve at the World Cup and would not spend an evening out with coach Raymond Domenech.

"Mr. Domenech and Mr. (goalkeeping coach Bruno) Martini, I always said 'hello' to them, even during the World Cup, that's a question of education. But don't ask me to spend an evening out with them," Coupet told French daily Le Parisien in an interview on Tuesday.

The Olympique Lyon keeper had said before the World Cup in Germany that he felt he should be the number one. Domenech preferred Fabien Barthez, with whom France went all the way to the final, which they lost on penalties to Italy.

"All I can say is that last year I was the number one," said Coupet, who deputised for Barthez during qualifying, while the 1998 World Cup winner was suspended for spitting at a referee.

"After that, there was a terrible disappointment", added Coupet, who has become France's number one since the World Cup. "It was like being kicked in the face."

Coupet stirred controversy shortly before the finals when he left France's training camp with family and luggage before deciding to return.

"I was being myself when I cracked," he said. "At that moment it was like I couldn't breathe. I had to do it."

"If it had been possible, I would have gone all the way and I wouldn't have come back, but that would have meant offering them my career and I didn't want that."

Court between Bellamy and captaincy

AFP, Cardiff

Craig Bellamy has been named as stand-in Wales captain for their upcoming Euro 2008 qualifiers, despite having to appear in court on assault charges between the matches against Slovakia and Cyprus.

Wales boss John Toshack announced his surprise decision to appoint the Liverpool striker as a temporary replacement for the injured Ryan Giggs on Tuesday, even though he has admitted Bellamy could have difficulty concentrating on football.

Wales play Slovakia on Saturday and Cyprus the following Wednesday. Bellamy is due at Cardiff Magistrates court on the Monday to face a charge of assaulting two women in a nightclub in the city in February.

He denies the charge, which could result in a prison sentence if he were to be found guilty.

Toshack said last month: "It will be no problem in the week leading up to Slovakia on the Saturday, although I know he must be concerned about what is going to happen."

"But in the days before we play Cyprus on the Wednesday, we know he will be in court."

"That must be playing on his mind. I would hope and expect him to play in both matches, knowing him as I do. But it is something we will have to think about. I am not sure how we will handle the training situation with Craig. He will be in court while we are working. I will look into how we manage that."

Racism will hurt Germany: Asamoah

Football

AFP, Berlin

Germany international striker Gerald Asamoah, born in Ghana, admits he was deeply hurt by the racist monkey chants directed at him in a recent cup match and warned that Germany's image abroad could be harmed if there are any more incidents.

Asamoah, who in 2001 became the first black to represent Germany, was subjected to racist taunts by fans of Hansa Rostock's second team in Schalke's first round cup win on September 9.

Hansa were fined 20,000 euros for the conduct of their fans but Asamoah said the abusive supporters faced ruining all the

good public relations work from this summer's World Cup.

"A lot of people abroad associate Germany with xenophobia. But at this summer's World Cup everyone was astonished that Germans could be so different," Asamoah said in an interview with Kicker magazine.

"In Ghana the people were thrilled and maybe a bit relieved. But what happened to me in Rostock was broadcast throughout Ghana on the radio. It also reached other countries and the people were horrified."

"The ape noises have changed how people look at Germany in some parts of Africa. Those idiots are responsible for that."

The 27-year-old Asamoah, who will miss most of the season after suffering a horrific double leg fracture, also said he

had experienced racism off the field.

"I have had problems in Gelsenkirchen too. I wanted to go to a disco with my brother and another African. Three Africans? We did not get in," Asamoah explained.

Asamoah revealed that the people responsible were then willing to let him in when they recognised that he was a famous footballer.

Asamoah has not encountered any racism while playing for his adopted homeland Germany but admits he would consider retiring if that changed.

"I would have to ask myself whether it makes sense to play for Germany," he said.

Sheva shrugs off form

Football

INTERNET, undated

Andriy Shevchenko has shrugged off his slow start to life at Chelsea and insisted he is happy with his decision to swap AC Milan for the Premiership champions.

The striker has scored just one league goal in seven games since his £30million summer transfer from Milan.

He will lead out Ukraine against Italy at the Stadio Olimpico for their Euro 2008 qualifier on Saturday hoping to rediscover his goal touch in the country where he was a prolific scorer.

"Players go through difficult times and it happens to everyone," said Shevchenko, who turned 30 last week. "But I feel young and full of energy."

The frontman is determined to

make a success of his move to England.

He said: "I chose Chelsea and I will continue on this path. Nothing can change my choice. Life goes beyond football."

"I feel more free here (London) than in Italy. The life of a footballer in London is more simple, football is a show that finishes once the game is over."

"I understand the foreigners who speak English and then (Frank) Lampard and (John) Terry help me out."

Much has been said about Shevchenko and Roman Abramovich's relationship, but the striker says he receives no special treatment from Chelsea's Russian owner.

"I am not Abramovich's golden boy," Shevchenko told Gazzetta dello Sport. "I am just a player and he is my president, he takes care of all his players."

Shevchenko is still idolised by the red-and-black half of Milan after scoring 173 goals in seven seasons.

He helped Milan to the Serie A title in 2004 and the Champions League the year before, and Carlo Ancelotti's men have struggled for goals without him so far this season.

But the former Dynamo Kiev man was happy to have avoided his old Milan team-mates in the Champions League group stages.

"Chelsea is a very strong team, who fight to win everything just like Milan," he added.

"The only thing that I wanted in the Champions League is to avoid meeting Milan. To have played against my former team-mates immediately after my move would have been a drama."



PHOTO: AFP

Belgian defender Daniel van Buyten (R) stretches during a training session of the Belgium national team in Kraainem on Monday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP
G T K O C U P R R M U C R
X L G T M H C U P X U K G C D L K G G K
Y M M O G M Y K W X Z Z K A " G T K
F H C U W K X U A G T K F H M F K H."
Yesterday's Cryptquip: WHEN SOMEONE
INSTALLS STEREO'S IN AUTOMOBILES, WOULD
HE BE CALLED A CAR-TUNE CHARACTER?
Today's Cryptquip Clue: G equals T

The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.