

Bremen agree Hunt deal

INTERNET, undated

Aaron Hunt has agreed to a three-year contract extension with Werder Bremen through the 2010 season.

Hunt, who has been with Bremen since 2001, has played in 13 games this season for a club total of 30 and has six goals.

"This is confirmation for me, that after a difficult season last season with a long-term injury, that I have worked well." Hunt told the club's official website.

The development of the Germany Under-21 international has impressed Bremen general manager Klaus Allofs.

"Aaron has once again proven his exceptional abilities on the pitch this season and is an essential element of our team," Allofs said.

"We are particularly proud that, once again, a young player from our own ranks has made his way through to become a full-time professional at the club."



Asian Player of the Year nominees (R-L) Kuwait's Badr al-Mutawa, Qatar's Khalfan Ibrahim and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed al-Shalhoub pose at the AFC Annual Awards 2006 in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday.

United plan Defoe bid

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United are plotting a £12million bid for Tottenham frontman Jermain Defoe in the January transfer window, according to the Daily Mirror.

With Giuseppe Rossi out on loan, Alan Smith well short of match fitness and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer injured, Red Devils boss Sir Alex Ferguson fears a striker shortage could derail his side's Premiership title bid.

Wayne Rooney and Louis Saha have formed a powerful partnership up front so far this season but with the latter notoriously prone to injuries, strength in depth is vital if United are to prevent Chelsea from wrapping up a title hat-trick.

Ferguson was first interested in signing Defoe when he was leaving West Ham in January 2004, however the Scot decided to sign Saha from Fulham and the England striker, now 24, joined Spurs for £7million.

But the Mirror now claims he has rocketed back to the top of Ferguson's wanted list, ahead of the likes of Fernando Torres, Darren Bent and Klaas Jan Huntelaar.

Magpies seek to qualify

AFP, Paris



Injury-ravaged Newcastle are in Germany this week aiming to wrap up their UEFA Cup group campaign unblemished with a fourth straight win against Eintracht Frankfurt.

In contrast to their form in Europe's second club competition where they have already qualified for the last 32 Glenn Roeder's side are struggling back home but they go into Thursday's last Group H tie with a morale-boosting Premiership win under their belt.

Under pressure manager Guy Lacombe will be praying for a result here to boost his side's fortunes with one game remaining and elimination staring the team in the face and save his job.

Lacombe's position as coach is decidedly uncertain with club president Alain Cayzac only prepared to say after Sunday's 1-1 league draw at Nantes: "Guy Lacombe will be in his job for the UEFA game on Thursday."

Mlada Boleslav are looking for their second Gallic scalp after knocking Marseille out in the first round.

A win for UEFA champions Sevilla against Grasshoppers in Zurich will guarantee the Spaniards a place in the last 32 with a match to spare from Group C where they trail leaders AZ.

otherwise excellent week. "The biggest concern at the moment is keeping enough players fit. There won't be another Premiership squad operating with just 10 or 11 players."

Newcastle's smooth passage to the knockout stages has featured wins against Fenerbahce, Serie A highfliers Palermo and last week Celta Vigo.

Paris Saint Germain, in crisis on and off the pitch, are also on the road at Mlada Boleslav of the Czech Republic one week after their home defeat to Hapoel Tel Aviv.

That 4-2 loss at the Parc des Princes which was scarred by the racist violence after the game which resulted in the shooting dead by a police officer of a PSG fan left the fallen French giants plumbasted in Group G.

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Alkmaar by two points. Sevilla's midfield duo Antonio Puerta and Duda joined Jesus Navas and Enzo Maresca will miss the match after picking up injuries in Sunday's win at Athletic Bilbao. Spanish international Puerta pulled his left abductor muscle while his Portuguese teammate has a left thigh problem.

WEDNESDAY'S FIXTURE

- Group A: Partizan Belgrade (SER) v Auxerre (FRA), Livorno (ITA) v Maccabi Haifa (ISR)
Group B: Dinamo Bucharest (ROM) v Bayer Leverkusen (GER), Besiktas (TUR) v Bruges (BEL)
Group C: Grasshopper (SUI) v Sevilla (ESP), AZ Alkmaar (NED) v Slovan Liberec (CZE)
Group D: Lens (FRA) v Parma (ITA), Osasuna (ESP) v Odense (DEN)
Thursday
Group E: Nancy (FRA) v Feyenoord (NED), Wisla Krakow (POL) v FC Basel (SUI)
Group F: Ajax (NED) v Espanyol (ESP), Austria Vienna (AUT) v Sparta Prague (CZE)
Group G: Mlada Boleslav (CZE) v Paris Saint Germain (FRA), Panathinaikos (GRE) v Rapid Bucharest (ROM)
Group H: Celta Vigo (ESP) v Fenerbahce (TUR), Eintracht Frankfurt (GER) v Newcastle (ENG)

Aussies stealing S Africa's WC?

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

Long-time rivals on the rugby and cricket pitch, South Africa is now crying foul over what it sees as a bid by Australia to snatch away the biggest sporting event of all - the football World Cup.

When South Africa won the contest to host the next World Cup by football's world governing body Fifa in May 2004, joy and relief abounded in equal measure in a country which narrowly lost out on hosting this year's event to Germany.

So Danny Jordaan, the chief World Cup 2010 organiser who masterminded the failed bid for 2006, is not about to allow Australian suggestions that South Africa is not getting its act together this time around to go unanswered.

"I don't know what is wrong with these people (the Australians)," Jordaan told AFP.

"Mr Sepp Blatter (Fifa's chief executive) has said many times before that Plan A is to host the World Cup in South Africa, Plan B is South Africa, and Plan C is still South Africa."

"There is no other person who can come and say that the event is going somewhere else," added Jordaan, who is chief executive of the 2010 local organising committee (LOC).

A number of Australian officials have not only publicly doubted South Africa's ability to host the tournament for the first time ever in Africa but have then followed their aspersions with offers to host the event themselves.

Football Federation Australia chief John O'Neill, who is planning an official bid for the tournament in 2018, said recently that Australia should be "absolutely opportunistic."

"There's all sorts of question marks about infrastructure or requirements in South Africa. Australia doesn't have those problems," he said.

The premier of New South Wales, Morris Iemma, has also infuriated officials here after stating that Australia has "the capacity to step into the breach at a moment's notice" thanks to its hosting of the 2000 Olympics in Sydney.

"If it can't come off with South Africa, and there are doubts that it can, then we are by far the best alternative," he was quoted as saying by Australia's Daily Telegraph newspaper.

The 2010 local organising committee has now written to the Australian foreign ministry to protest at what it suspects may be part of an official project to hijack the tournament.

"Fifa has consistently stated that the World Cup is coming to SA in 2010 and we need to know whether these reports that seem to be (fighting) this are the Australian government's position," LOC chairman Irvin Khoza told the Business Day newspaper.

While the South African government has called the recent comments from Australia "totally unacceptable", the very suggestion that the World Cup could be relocated has infuriated South African sporting heroes.

Theophilus (Doctor) Khumalo, a former captain of the Bafana Bafana national team and ex-coach of Soweto's Kaizer Chiefs, said the

Australians should accept the tournament is coming to South Africa and stop trying to "steal" it.

"What we know is that we are hosting the World Cup in South Africa and it has been confirmed by Fifa itself this week. For me it is just an illusion on the side of Australia and it won't succeed," he told AFP.

Kepler Wessels, the first captain of the South African cricket team after its apartheid era ban was lifted and who also played Tests for Australia, said any attempt to snatch the tournament away would be unsportsmanlike.

"South Africa has been given an opportunity to host the World Cup and should be given a chance to prove itself," Wessels told AFP.

"It is disappointing to hear those reports. If they are true, it's wrong and...unsporty."

After expressing some concerns about preparations several months back, a Fifa delegation which visited South Africa last week expressed broad satisfaction with the rate of progress being made.

"They cleared the air and told everybody this week that they were satisfied with the preparations so far," said Jordaan.

"In fact, they said we are not only on track but ahead of schedule, better than the Germans," added Jordaan.

Jane Lambert, deputy high commissioner at the Australian embassy in Pretoria, played down suggestions of a plot to grab the tournament.

Inter in for Buffon

INTERNET, undated

Inter Milan have offered cash, plus striker Adriano, to Juventus for goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

Tuttosport says a formal bid has been tabled for the Italy No1, which would see Adriano move to Juve along with a cool 15 million Euro.

However, Juve have rejected the offer, insisting Buffon's future won't be considered until they discuss his contract at the end of this season.

Lyon a class apart

REUTERS, Lyon



Olympique Lyon look far too strong for the rest of Ligue 1 and have no intention of slowing down.

"We will continue to increase our lead," France midfielder Florent Malouda warned after scoring the winner in a 1-0 victory over Auxerre on Sunday that sent the five-times champions 14 points clear.

"We want to win everything this season and we want our lead in the league to be as huge as possible. That will boost our confidence for the other competitions," he added.

In a class of their own in France for years, Lyon are trying to become the first side from a major European league to win six titles in succession.

Sunday's win means they are already certain of reaching the halfway stage of the league season in the lead whatever happens in the four games left before the winter break.

Lyon, who have 40 points from a maximum 45 after 15 games, are 14 points ahead Lille, Racing Lens and Sochaux.

What Lyon really want, however, is to make an impact in Europe after exiting the Champions League in the quarter-finals the last three seasons.

They have suggested they could do that as well, making sure with a 2-2 draw with Real Madrid at the Bernabeu on Tuesday that they will win their Champions League group.

As far as the league is concerned, they have already won it, says Auxerre coach Jean Fernandez.

"Lyon will be champions," Fernandez told reporters. "They are in a league of their own. You have Lyon on one side and on the other side you

have seven to eight clubs fighting to finish second or third.

"The difference with last season is that now, they even win when they are not that well. There's always a free kick or a flash of individual brilliance to put them ahead."

Another difference is their in-depth strength. Such valued players as France defender Eric Abidal, Portugal midfielder Tiago and Brazil forward Fred were all sidelined on Sunday but that did not stop Lyon from winning.

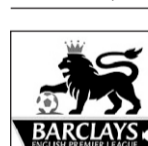
"We have a group of exceptional competitors," said Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas.

Coach Gerard Houllier remains cautious and keeps reminding everyone that Lyon have won nothing yet, but he can only be confident.

"One thing for sure, if we play as well in the second half of the season as we did in the first, we will win the title," he said.

Chelsea invoke happy memories

REUTERS, London



Chelsea's stay in north-west England continues on Wednesday when the champions look to re-ignite some happy memories at Bolton Wanderers after their 1-1 draw at Manchester United.

The Reebok stadium, where Bolton beat Arsenal 3-1 on Saturday, was the scene last year of Chelsea's first league title under Jose Mourinho, delivered on a rainswept evening by two fine goals from Frank Lampard.

Though there would be none of the emotional celebrations which marked Chelsea's first league title for 50 years this time around, Mourinho's men need a prompt return to winning ways after drawing at Old Trafford. Second in the table and trailing United by three points, much of Sunday's hard work could be lost if they dropped points on a night when United will expect to beat Everton at home.

However, the Reebok is a notoriously tough venue in the Premier League and Sam Allardyce's men, buoyed by a victory over Arsenal that hoisted them to third in the table, will be up for the fight.

Tactically, Mourinho must decide whether to try again with Andriy Shevchenko after the Ukraine striker's toothless first-half performance on Sunday in a 4-4-2 formation with Ivorian Didier Drogba.

The second-half alternative of a 4-3-3 with Drogba flanked by wingers Joe Cole and Arjen Robben certainly packed a bigger punch and there could be an extra incentive on

Wednesday. Both of Bolton's full-backs, South African Quinton Fortune and Nicky Hunt, suffered injuries against Arsenal and are struggling to be fit.

United are in much better shape to face an Everton side who could only draw at bottom club Charlton Athletic and who are sorely missing injured Australia midfielder Tim Cahill. England striker Wayne Rooney, who can still expect a hard time from the visiting fans after leaving Everton to join United in 2004, is on form and unlikely to show any mercy on his old club.

He linked up well with Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo and French goalscorer Louis Saha on Sunday and it is difficult to see Everton coping with the pressure of a team with a point to prove.

Fourth-placed Portsmouth face the unenviable task of going to Anfield, where Liverpool have won six and drawn one of their seven league games this season, while Aston Villa host Manchester City.

Sixth-placed Arsenal, whose title challenge looks to be over but whose bid for a Champions League place is just beginning, face a London derby at Fulham's Craven Cottage.

The midweek action gets underway on Tuesday with a relegation dogfight between Watford and Sheffield United at Vicarage Road.

WEDNESDAY'S FIXTURE

- (all times in GMT)
Aston Villa v Manchester City (1945), Fulham v Arsenal (1945) Bolton Wanderers v Chelsea (2000), Liverpool v Portsmouth (2000), Manchester United v Everton (2000)

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with letters and numbers.

CRYPTOQUIP
P V N B T L Z N T F H Y K K O S L B D
S Y D N S V N T O F N U B
O B Z N T C U F F , L P Y O W Z H U W W
S V U S U H U T C Y Y W S O B B N W .
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF YOU'RE BUYING CERTAIN EATING UTENSILS, I GUESS YOU'LL HAVE TO FORK OVER THE BUCKS.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: S equals T
The Cryptoquip 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.