

No easy way out for Owen

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich said they will not bow to persistent pleas by England midfielder Owen Hargreaves, who wants to leave the German champions for Manchester United.

The 25-year-old Canadian-born Hargreaves pleaded in The Times of London Wednesday to be allowed to leave for Old Trafford so that he could be near his Bolton-based family.

However Bayern, who have already stood firm on the issue, appear unflinching.

"Our stance is the same -- nothing will happen in the winter break," general manager Uli Hoeness said Thursday in bi-weekly magazine Kicker.

Manchester United tried to sign Hargreaves earlier this season but Bayern rebuffed the approach, pointing out that the midfielder had recently signed a contract extension until June 2010.

Hargreaves has tried to put pressure on Bayern to let him go in the January transfer window but the German champions are refusing to budge.

Hargreaves has not played since September 16 when he broke his leg in Bayern's 2-1 defeat to Arminia Bielefeld.

The leg has yet to heal properly and the 2001 Champions League winner admits he will have to wait until next year before resuming first team action.

Russian complex for Abramovich

AFP, Moscow

Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich is to fund construction of a new sports complex for Russia's national side, the Kommersant daily reported Wednesday.

The sports complex, to be built at Zvenigorod, 45 kilometres (28 miles) west of the Russian capital, will cost between 30 and 40 million dollars (23 and 30 million euros) and be completed by 2008, the daily said.

The project will be overseen by the Kremlin and Russia's National Football Academy, which is also financed by Abramovich, a Russian tycoon with close links to the Kremlin.

Toffees stuck on Reo-Coker

AFP, London

Everton manager David Moyes is reported to be preparing a bid for unsettled West Ham captain Nigel Reo-Coker.

New life was breathed into the struggling London club on Wednesday when former Charlton manager Alan Curbishley was appointed to lead the revival at Upton Park.

But as well as trying to keep the Hammers above the relegation zone, Curbishley may have a job on his hands convincing Reo-Coker to stay.

According to reports in The Sun and The Daily Mail, Moyes is hoping to lure the 10 million pounds-rated Reo-Coker to Merseyside in the January transfer window.

Everton have been hit by injuries, especially those of Mikel Arteta and Phil Neville, and Moyes sees Reo-Coker as the man to provide much-needed firepower.

Midfielder Reo-Coker, an England fringe player, is believed to have been annoyed at not being informed by West Ham that Manchester United and Arsenal had asked about his availability during the summer.

Reo-Coker has also been made a scapegoat for the sacking of Alan Pardew by West Ham, forcing the player to make a public statement after Pardew's sacking on Monday.

He said: "Now Pardew has gone it's only going to get worse for me with people pointing the finger. It will be down to the new boss whether I am here next year."

Zaragoza reject Milito bid

AFP, Madrid

Spanish first division side Real Zaragoza have rejected a bid from French champions Lyon for Argentine striker Diego Milito, according to reports here on Thursday.

Sports daily Marca claimed that Lyon had offered 20 million euros (26 million dollars) for Milito -- the joint scorer in the Primera Liga -- as well as their strikers Fred of Brazil and Norway's John Carew.

Milito, 27, whose brother Gabriel also plays at Zaragoza, is a key member of the team, who are currently fourth in the league standings. He holds the top spot in the scorers standings with Sevilla's Frederic Kanoute and Barcelona's Ronaldinho after scoring 11 goals this season.

Zaragoza have just exercised their right to buy Milito, who had been on loan from Italian Serie A side Genoa, for five million euros (6.5 million dollars), Marca added.



PHOTO: AFP
Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (R) awards French legend Zinedine Zidane (L) with the Al-Athir medal, Algeria's highest distinction at a ceremony held at the Presidential Palace in Algiers on Wednesday.

Duck proves his worth

Football

AFP, Tokyo

He may be only 17, but two goals in two games show the hype may have been justified for Internacional's Brazilian prodigy Alexandre 'The Duck' Pato.

Quick, technically gifted and strong in the air, Pato did not take long to make an impression on the Club World Cup, having a goal disallowed after nine minutes and scoring the opener against Al Ahly on 23.

"He's a phenomenon," observed Internacional president Fernando Carvalho.

That 19-year-old roommate Luiz Adriano came off the bench to head the winner, taking Inter into the final, only confirmed the depth of young talent at Brazil's disposal.

"Our two youngest players scored the goals and decided the game," said coach Abel Braga.

"The Brazilian association has today submitted an official bid to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup,

which is why young players are so important for our country.

"For example, Adriano has already appeared a number of times for the national B-team, as has Alex Pato. Internacional have a very good youth development programme."

Pato, whose surname means 'duck' in Portuguese, was playing only his second professional match after last month's fairytale debut when he scored with his first touch, set up two more and hit the post in less than an hour.

Interest from abroad, including reportedly from Arsenal, prompted Inter to give him a new three-year contract at five times his previous wages with a 20 million dollar buy-out clause.

The club are treating their new asset with care, urging the media not to put him under too much pressure.

"He's got the ability and he answers in a positive way every time we ask him to do something," said Braga.

"But it's not good to put all the pressure on him. We don't want

him to have all the responsibility."

However Pato did not play like a man under pressure, juggling the ball on his shoulder and heel as he ran down the touchline.

He said words of advice from his family had helped him keep his head.

"I spoke with my family through the Internet and they told me to be calm. And I was," Pato said.

Pato and Luiz Adriano, the possible future of Brazilian football, have now earned a likely match-up with its present, Barcelona's brilliant Ronaldinho who was nurtured by Inter's city rivals Gremio.

The two will encourage each other as they relax by playing the pandereta, a tambourine-style drum which is also Ronaldinho's favourite.

"Every night before we went to sleep, we dreamed and said we were both going to score," said Pato.

Barcelona play their semi-final against Mexico's Club America later on Thursday.

Zidane given Algeria's top award

AFP, Algiers

French football star Zinedine Zidane was honoured with Algeria's highest distinction on Wednesday as the country's native son continued a visit fit for a head of state.

Zidane, on his first visit home since he was 15, was awarded the Al-Athir medal, the country's highest, by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

In a dark blue suit and lighter tie, the former captain of Les Bleus, flanked by his mother Malika and father Smail, were given a private audience by the head of state and Zidane seated in the chair usually reserved for visiting VIPs.

"It was a symbolic audience, for me as well as for my parents, and I'm specially happy to have come to Algeria because I'm Bouteflika's guest," he said.

Zidane, 34, arrived on Monday at the invitation of Bouteflika, who has laid on a programme of events, including an appearance at an Algiers stadium on Thursday when he will kick-off a local match before a 60,000-strong crowd.

His arrival at the city's airport triggered a scrum as photographers jostled to capture the moment Zidane walked onto the tarmac accompanied by his parents, who come from the country's Kabylie region.

Some of the visiting dignitaries were nearly squashed in the stampede, and Labour and Solidarity Minister Djamel Ould Abbas was heard shouting out "Let him through, let him through."

Security services finally managed to hustle Zidane through the melee and into the lounge, not giving him time to make any comment, while the official welcoming ceremony was cancelled.

Zidane, who last visited Algeria when he was 15, inaugurated several charitable projects, notably in the Boumerdes region, which was hit by a huge earthquake in May 2003.

On Friday he will visit Bejaia, east of the capital, the birthplace of his parents, which is to host a lunch in his honour.

Voronin not happy at Leverkusen

AFP, Leverkusen

Ukraine international forward Andrei Voronin says he wants to leave Bayer Leverkusen in January after finding himself relegated to the substitutes bench.

"No-one at Bayer has spoken with me and I have no idea what the coach or the club plan to do with me," Voronin said in Bild daily.

"I don't want to decide my future in the summer, and want to leave."

"I am unhappy to be left out of the team even though I have scored and created goals in the Bundesliga and the UEFA Cup."

The 27-year-old Voronin is a free agent when his contract expires at the end of the season.

Scottish giants Celtic have been linked to the Ukrainian.

La Volpe to step down

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Boca Juniors coach Ricardo La Volpe said he would resign after they lost 2-1 to Estudiantes in a playoff for the Argentine championship on Wednesday.

"I have to present my resignation because we didn't achieve our target," La Volpe told Argentine television as soon as the match finished.

La Volpe, who coached Mexico at this year's World Cup, took over in September, inheriting a team that had won the previous two titles under Alfio Basile.

But his side missed out on a third successive title in dramatic circumstances.

Leading the table by four points with two games to go, they lost to modest Belgrano and Lanus and allowed Estudiantes to pull level on 44 points from 19 games.

This sent the title race to Wednesday's playoff, where Boca lost despite taking a fourth-minute lead.

As he left the stadium, the gruff La Volpe told reporters: "The coach always has to win and when that doesn't happen, he has to go."

Boca Juniors president Mauricio Macri, who had previously backed the coach, said he had not been officially informed of La Volpe's decision.

"I still haven't spoken to Ricardo, nor have I seen him," said Macri.

"We didn't win the title but we congratulate Estudiantes because they have done a great job."

Terry cautions United

AFP, London



Chelsea captain John Terry has warned Premiership leaders Manchester

United that the Blues have still to get fully into their stride this season.

A second-half matchwinner from substitute Didier Drogba allowed Chelsea to overcome a dogged Newcastle side on Wednesday and cut United's lead at the top of the table to five points.

Now Terry insists that Chelsea, who dropped two precious points in a draw with Arsenal last weekend, are still capable of going up to another level as they begin the chase to catch Sir Alex Ferguson's men.

"Manchester United are probably playing the best football they can play at the moment. They've had very few injuries so far," said the England skipper.

"Whereas we know as a team we've got another level to go to. We need to take the game to teams and then no-one can live with us. We must go on a run of games and keep winning."

"We must keep the pressure up. Christmas is a difficult period. United have got tough games. We must just keep winning and keep on like we know we're capable of."

Chelsea struggled to break down Glenn Roeder's makeshift

side until Drogba, a half-time replacement for the injured Ricardo Carvalho, slid the ball home after Andriy Shevchenko had miscued his shot.

Drogba, nursing a hamstring injury, was left on the bench along with Shevchenko at the start.

But unlike Drogba, the

we decided to make some changes and Shevchenko was out.

"I think (Shevchenko) took it as a professional. He was not happy but behaved properly. He came on when I decided and did well for the team."

Mourinho left Drogba in the dugout until half-time because of his injury problem.

He added: "Drogba was injured. A normal player, with a normal attitude would not have played."

"So I was trying to explain to him the best decision was to save him. If the result was positive at half-time we would not have played him."

"But I felt we needed him at half-time. His attitude in the game and the way he worked for the team meant he was very important for us. He is one of the top players at the moment."

Roeder, already without 12 first team players, now looks set to lose Charles N'Zogbia for a lengthy period if scans on his knee show up severe ligament damage.

N'Zogbia was stretched out after a collision with Frank Lampard, leaving Roeder lamenting his worsening situation.

"We had 12 injuries, that's not an excuse, it's a fact. Now N'Zogbia has ligament damage. We don't know how long he will be out or how bad it is at the moment. We will know more today (Thursday)."



JOHN TERRY

Ukrainian striker had been dropped by Mourinho who felt he wanted different qualities against United and selected Salomon Kalou, Arjen Robben and Shaun Wright-Phillips ahead of him.

Mourinho added: "I make decisions from my analysis. I took him out of the team because I felt the team needed different qualities."

"With Salomon Kalou and Arjen Robben, I get different qualities. So

SPANISH CUP

Atletico reach last 16

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Atletico Madrid striker Sergio Aguero scored the decisive penalty in a shootout against Levante as they reached the last 16 of the King's Cup on Wednesday.

The 18-year-old Argentine had levelled the tie at 1-1 on aggregate with a superb 92nd minute goal that cancelled out Levante's lead from the first leg in Madrid back in October.

Levante were stronger in extra time, and had a goal ruled out for handball, but were unable to see off

the visitors.

Atletico, nine-times Cup winners, meet 2005 finalists Osasuna in the next round over two legs on Jan 10 and 17.

Atletico spent more than 50 million euros (66.37 million dollars) on players in the close season, but although they are fifth in the Primera Liga they have been dogged by inconsistency.

Having to chase the game they lacked invention and were restricted to long-range efforts from midfielder Gabi before a sense of urgency took over in the second half.

Levante, who hit the post after only 14 minutes through striker Riga, were pressed back as the

pressure grew.

Atletico's Fernando Torres blasted against the post with three minutes to go and in time added on Aguero engineered an opening, cutting back inside his marker and firing left-footed just inside the far post to bring the aggregate score level.

The home side showed more purpose in extra time, but it was to no avail as penalties loomed.

With the spot kick tally at 3-2 in Atletico's favour, after misses from Torres and Levante's Olivier Kapo and Ze Maria, Aguero showed few nerves in slotting his effort past compatriot Pablo Cavallero to put Atletico through to the next round.

Gerrard excited about takeover

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard believes the future is bright for Liverpool, having spoken to one of the men spearheading an anticipated 450 million pounds takeover of the club.

Dubai International Capital, the investment arm of Dubai's billionaire ruler Sheikh Mohammed, is set to make a formal offer for the club in the coming weeks.

The move would help assure Liverpool's long-held ambition of building a new 60,000-seat stadium, and there has been much keen anticipation among fans about the prospects of the Reds rivaling Chelsea in the transfer

market.

After meeting DIC chief executive Sameer al-Ansari, who is likely to become the club's new chairman, after Saturday's 4-0 win over Fulham Gerrard said the Reds' fans can look forward with optimism.

Gerrard told the club's official website: "I think the future is bright. "I've been fortunate enough to meet with the people who are going to be taking over the club."

"I'm very excited. They assured me and the rest of the players that the club is going to be in safe hands and that the future is going to be really bright."

"The fans have been reading the same things as I've been reading and so they have got every right to be excited."

"Having met them, I'm even

more excited now because I've heard their thoughts face to face."

Although Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has deeper pockets than even Chelsea's billionaire owner, Roman Abramovich, Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry insisted the club is focused on a long-term strategy.

Parry told the Liverpool FC magazine: "We are focused on success but we want a club that will not be ludicrously profligate. It is not just about throwing money at a challenge, that is not a sound long-term strategy."

"It is definitely not about being a rich man's plaything. It is about taking Liverpool FC to the next level and securing the future of the club for the next hundred years."

Estudiantes dethrone Boca

AFP, Buenos Aires

Estudiantes beat defending champions Boca Juniors 2-1 in a play-off match on Wednesday night to win the Argentine championship title for the first time in 23 years.

Striker Mariano Pavone headed the winner nine minutes from time on front of 50,000 spectators at the neutral venue of Velez Sarsfield.

It is the fourth national title for Estudiantes, whose team included Argentine international midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron, following 1967, 1982 and 1983.

On a continental level, Estudiantes won the Libertadores Cup in 1968, 1969 and 1970 and the Intercontinental Cup in 1968.

Boca, bidding for their third successive title, had taken the lead after four minutes through Martin Palermo but sat back allowing Jose Sosa to grab the equaliser after 65th minutes.

Both teams finished with 10 men after Boca striker Pablo Ledesma and Estudiantes defender Pablo Alvarez were sent off in the first half.

The game went to a play-off after the two teams finished the regular campaign in the Apertura championship with 44 points from 19 games.

This year's championship has been hit by crowd trouble.



PHOTO: AFP
Estudiantes captain Juan Veron (C) lifts the trophy of Argentine Apertura Championship with his teammates after beating Boca Juniors in the final at Jose Amalfitani Stadium in Buenos Aires on Wednesday.