

Real seal Higuain signature

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid have agreed to sign 19-year-old Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain from River Plate on a six-and-a-half year deal.

"The player will join on Jan. 1 and remain at Real until June 2013," the Primera Liga club said on their Web site on Thursday.

Spanish media reported the highly-rated youngster had signed for the nine-times European champions for a fee in the region of 13 million euros (17.17 million dollars).

Higuain shot to prominence last May when he scored twice as River Plate beat Corinthians 3-1 to knock the Brazilian champions out of the Libertadores Cup.

He struck twice more in a 3-1 win over arch-rivals Boca Juniors in October and notched a spectacular goal in a 1-1 draw at Velez Sarsfield at the weekend to end the Apertura championship as his club's top scorer with nine goals.

Higuain, whose nickname is "Pipita", was named as "Revelation of the Year" by Argentine daily Clarin last week.



PHOTO: AFP

Australian opening batsman Matthew Hayden sweeps the ball to bring up his half-century off England spinner Monty Panesar (not in picture) on the second day of the third Ashes Test at the WACA ground in Perth on Friday.

MU extend Van der Sar deal

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has billed Edwin van der Sar as Manchester United's best goalkeeper since Peter Schmeichel after handing the Dutch keeper a new contract at Old Trafford.

Van der Sar, 36, is set to sign a new 12-month deal next week after agreeing terms on the deal with Ferguson.

United, who will bid to maintain their five-point lead over Chelsea with victory at West Ham on Sunday, narrowly missed out on Van der Sar's signature when he quit Ajax for Juventus in 1999.

But after making a huge impact since his arrival from Fulham in the summer of 2005, Ferguson admits that Van der Sar has finally done what the likes of Fabien Barthez, Mark Bosnich, Tim Howard and others have failed to do since Schmeichel left in 1999 by solving United's goalkeeping woes.

Ferguson said: "We have given Edwin another year, which is in keeping with our policy of giving players in their thirties one year contracts."

"He has been a fantastic signing and he deserves another year because his personality and experience have helped us tremendously since he signed for us."

"We have had to find the right keeper to overcome the Schmeichel effect and I have to say that Edwin has been our best since Peter."

"Goalkeeping is an area where you need experience and Edwin has that. Despite his age, he looks after himself well and there is no reason why he cannot play until he is 40 like some other keepers have done. We are very strong in our goalkeeping department now."

"It's no secret that we tried to sign him after Schmeichel left us, but we couldn't change the direction of his transfer to Juventus. I wish I had been able to because it would have been fantastic for us."

Van der Sar said he was confident that the rest of his time at Old Trafford would allow him to add to the League Cup winners medal he earned last season.

Australia take control

Cricket

AFP, Perth

Australia edged closer to regaining the Ashes after another spectacular English batting collapse on the second day of the third cricket Test at the WACA Ground here Friday.

At stumps Australia were 119 for one in their second innings, an overall lead of 148 over a despondent England, who were bowled out for 215 in the last over before tea.

Australia already lead the five-Test series 2-0 and can wrap up the Ashes and a fifth successive home series victory over England with a win here.

Eager to atone for the 2005 defeat in England, captain Ricky Ponting seemed to have the scent of Ashes success and was 57 not out at the close. Opener Matthew Hayden, who emerged from a

recent form slump Friday, was also on 57.

The pair had steadied the Australian innings with a century partnership after Justin Langer was bowled for a first ball duck by a perfect Matthew Hoggard inswinger on the first ball of the innings.

The English appeared to wilt in the field late in a day that had held so much early promise for the tourists.

Australian seamer Stuart Clark, who was the pick of the home side's bowlers with 3-49, dismissed suggestions the Australians had broken the spirit of the English and that the Ashes were within reach.

"We're trying not to focus on that, but we are in a good position in the game," he said.

"There is a lot of excitement about getting ourselves in a good position to win the Test match."

"We played some good cricket

today (on Friday) and put England under pressure."

Kevin Pietersen, who top-scored for England with 70, was not ready to raise the white flag and predicted the wicket would only get better for batting.

Pietersen said he would not be concerned by chasing 300-plus for victory in the fourth innings.

"The stats and scoreboard don't look too bright for us," he admitted. "It is a situation we have to try to claw back tomorrow (Saturday)."

"If we make Australia battle for every single run tomorrow and our batters bat well, who knows?"

England resumed at 51 for two on Friday, having dismissed the home side for just 244.

But things went awry for the tourists almost from the start, with Paul Collingwood falling in the fourth over of the day to spark

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Another feather in Cannavaro's cap

REUTERS, London

Fabio Cannavaro, who skipped Italy to victory at the World Cup, was named World Soccer's World Player of the Year on Friday — only the second defender to win the honour in the awards' 25-year history.

The last defender to do so was compatriot Paolo Maldini in 1994. Cannavaro's victory was one of the most comprehensive in the poll's history as he collected 40 percent of the readers' vote conducted annually by the influential British-based magazine.

He got three times as many votes as Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o of Cameroon and Frenchman Thierry Henry of Arsenal, who finished second and third respectively.

Cannavaro, who was named European Footballer of the Year last month, is one of three candidates for the FIFA World Player of the Year which will be announced on Monday.

Other award winners were Marcello Lippi of Italy, who was named coach of the year while European champions Barcelona were named World Team of the Year. Lionel Messi of Barcelona and Argentina was named Young Player of the Year.

Terry denies FA charge

AFP, London

Chelsea captain John Terry denied an English Football Association (FA) charge of improper conduct over his comments about referee Graham Poll.

Terry, who has requested a personal hearing, was charged after he criticised Poll in an interview on Chelsea TV.

The England defender was sent off by Poll during his club's 2-1 defeat at Tottenham on November 5 after clashing with Hossam Ghaly and Ledley King and he claimed the official told him two different reasons for his dismissal to cover for getting the decision wrong.

A statement on the FA's website said: "John Terry has denied a charge of improper conduct and requested a hearing."

"The charge relates to comments made about referee Graham Poll following Chelsea's match at Tottenham Hotspur on 5 November."

Nantes dismiss Blanc approach

REUTERS, Paris

Struggling Ligue 1 side Nantes dismissed on Friday media reports they had asked former France defender Laurent Blanc to become their coach.

"The club categorically denies having contacted Laurent Blanc," the eight-times French champions said in a statement.

French sports daily L'Equipe reported on Friday that Blanc, a prominent figure in France's 1998 World Cup-winning squad, could replace Georges Eo as Nantes coach during the winter break.

Nantes did not deny, however, reports that former France goalkeeper Fabien Barthez could help them in their bid to escape relegation.

Barthez, 35, was expected to come out of retirement by signing a six-month deal with the club later on Friday, a source close to the player said.

Nantes are second from bottom in Ligue 1.

REAL FACE BAYERN

Barca meet L'pool

REUTERS, Nyon



Barcelona and Liverpool, the last two winners of the Champions League, will face each other in the first knockout round of this season's competition following the draw made on Friday.

The first leg will be at the Nou Camp where Barcelona have never beaten, or even scored against Liverpool in three European matches going back to 1976.

"We are the last two European champions and it will be an extraordinary tie between the two teams," Barca president Joan Laporta told Antena 3 television. "They will be very tough rivals and play a physical style of football."

"They also have players that we

know very well like Luis Garcia, who played with us, and Xabi Alonso. But we are the team to beat."

Another intriguing tie pits Porto, who won the competition under coach Jose Mourinho in 2004, against Chelsea, where Mourinho is now coach.

The sides met in the competition shortly after Mourinho went to Chelsea in the summer of 2004, with Chelsea winning 3-1 at home in a group match in September 2004 and Porto winning the return 2-1 three months later.

"It will all be about Jose obviously and the two sides know each other inside out," Chelsea club secretary David Barnard told Reuters following the draw in Nyon.

"We'll be glad to go back there and I think Jose is still appreciated there for everything he did for the club."

Porto meanwhile looked to

deflect attention away from Mourinho's return with general manager Antero Henrique insisting his club would "play to win both legs."

"Mourinho is the manager of Chelsea now and we have our own manager," he said. "We have good memories of beating them the last time we played and both sets of fans can look forward to two fantastic matches in two fantastic, sold-out stadiums."

Arsenal, runners-up to Barcelona in last season's final, travel to PSV Eindhoven where Gilberto of Arsenal scored the fastest goal in Champions League history after 20.07 seconds in Arsenal's 4-0 win in a group match in September 2002.

Scottish champions and 1967 European Cup winners Celtic were meanwhile relishing an attractive draw against Italian six-time European Champions AC Milan.

"We're absolutely delighted especially because there is such a great connection between the two clubs," Celtic CEO Peter Lawwell said in Nyon.

"Historically you're probably looking at the two best European club sides of the 1960s and 1970s and there is a lot of respect between the two clubs."

"It's true that they're struggling a bit in Serie A at the moment but they have had a lot of injury problems which should have cleared up by February, and it probably means that they're even more focused on doing well in Europe."

In other ties, Lille face Manchester United, old rivals Real Madrid will play Bayern Munich for the 17th time in European competition, Inter Milan are up against Valencia, and AS Roma will meet Olympique Lyon.

The first legs will be staged on Feb. 20-21 next year with the return legs on March 6-7. The final is in Athens in May.

| Champions League | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 2nd round | |
| 1st leg February 20, 21 | 2nd leg, March 6, 7 |
| FC Porto | Chelsea |
| Glasgow Celtic | AC Milan |
| PSV Eindhoven | Arsenal |
| Lille | Manchester Utd. |
| AS Roma | Lyon |
| FC Barcelona | Liverpool |
| Real Madrid | Bayern Munich |
| Inter Milan | Valencia |

Chelsea not jittery

AFP, London



Chelsea winger Arjen Robben has warned Manchester United that his teammates won't crack under the pressure of trying to overhaul the Premiership leaders.

For the first time in three seasons the chase for the Premiership is more than a one-horse race with United threatening to break Chelsea's stranglehold on the title.

Since Jose Mourinho took charge at Stamford Bridge in 2004, Chelsea have held the English league in a vice-like grip.

They led from the front to win the title for the first time in 50 years in 2005 and were rarely troubled again last season as they coasted to a second consecutive championship.

But this time Chelsea aren't having things all their own way. Sir Alex Ferguson's side have won 11 of their last 12 league matches to establish a five-point lead over their London rivals.

Chelsea showed signs of nervousness during a hard-fought 1-0 win against Newcastle on Wednesday and they play at Everton on Sunday knowing a win would reduce the gap to two points as Ferguson's side face West Ham later the same day.

Dutch international Robben is confident Chelsea have the

strength of character to last the pace and he said: "The last two years were different because we were first quite early and kept it."

"Now we are five points behind so we have to make our way up and chase Manchester United. Five points for us is not a problem."

"There is a long way to go and we are still very confident about winning the title. We have to concentrate on our own game, focus and keep winning."

"United have to play a lot of difficult games as well, so we just have to keep winning, game by game. That's all we can do."

"Since I've come here the mentality has been brilliant. I think that's one of our biggest qualities."

"I love playing with players that always want to win and who will always fight for their team."

United travel to West Ham with Ferguson hoping his advice to new

Hammers boss Alan Curbishley doesn't come back to haunt him.

Ferguson urged Curbishley to accept West Ham's offer to succeed Alan Pardew this week, but he will be desperate to give his friend a miserable debut as Upton Park manager.

Sol Campbell returns to Arsenal on Saturday for the first time since leaving the club in August. Portsmouth defender Campbell spent five years at Arsenal and helped the north London team win the Premiership in 2002 and 2004 but he opted to leave in pre-season.

He has played a key role in Portsmouth's impressive form this season and a win for his new club at the Emirates Stadium would lift Harry Redknapp's team above Arsenal into third place.

Campbell is focused on helping Portsmouth clinch a European place and he told Sky Sports: "At the moment I've got to look at the bigger picture and, in that sense, for me and for Portsmouth definitely getting into Europe is on our minds."

"A European journey is fantastic for any footballer to be involved in and that's kind of pushing me really."

Johan Djourou, who is earmarked as a long-term replacement for Campbell, is convinced Arsenal can still win the Premiership despite trailing leaders United by 15 points.

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FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday
 Arsenal v Portsmouth, Aston Villa v Bolton (1715), Charlton v Liverpool (1245), Newcastle v Watford, Reading v Blackburn, Wigan v Sheffield United
Sunday
 Everton v Chelsea (1345), Manchester City v Tottenham (1500), West Ham v Manchester United (1600)
Monday
 Fulham v Middlesbrough (2000)