



Argentine legend Diego Maradona (C) calls for the crowd not to whistle the Brazilian anthem prior to the friendly "Showbol" match between Argentina and Brazil at the Luna Park Stadium in Buenos Aires on Friday.

'Saha filling Ruud role'

AFP, Manchester



replacing the prolific former Manchester United striker Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Saha, 28, was handed the job of partnering Wayne Rooney in the United attack when Ferguson took the shock decision to off-load van Nistelrooy to Real Madrid before the start of this season.

United manager Ferguson's action in off-loading the Dutchman who scored 150 goals in 201 appearances for the Old Trafford club was viewed as a high-risk strategy -- especially as Saha's two-year spell with the Red Devils has been marked by a succession of serious injuries.

But the French striker, who cost 12.8 million pounds when he arrived from Fulham in August 2004, has finally managed to shake off his fitness problems and has so far scored eight goals in 15 league

starts this season.

With Ole Gunnar Solksjaer and Alan Smith also recovering from long-term lay-offs, Saha's efforts have been crucial to United's rise to the head of the Premiership table where they lie two ahead of Chelsea heading into the Christmas programme of four games in 10 days.

The forward's contribution was recognised this week when he was offered an improved four-year deal that will keep him at the club until 2010 and Ferguson believes that is a just reward for Saha's emergence after a tough two years.

"It was a great test for him given Ruud's departure and the injuries to Ole and Alan (Smith), and with Giuseppe Rossi going out on loan to Newcastle," Ferguson said here Friday.

"We had Wayne and Louis playing all the time. We had to depend on them staying fit, and they have."

"Louis's record speaks for itself. Since he came back last November, his goalscoring ratio is really good. He's a good team player, quick and aggressive, two

great feet, brave and good in the air.

"There are a lot of good things about him which any club would like. That's why we bought him. He's realising that ability because he's staying fit. If he stays fit, he's a real hand."

"We offered him a new contract because strikers are very difficult to get so, when you've got a good one, you want to keep him."

The complexion of the title race changed last weekend when Ferguson's distress at his side's defeat at West Ham United was compounded by champions Chelsea's victory at Everton.

Ferguson remains confident of his side's chances, insisting the destination of this season's championship will not be determined by one weekend, although he knows his side must return to winning ways at Aston Villa this Saturday.

"You've got to accept that, in any championship race, there'll be disappointments and set-backs along the way," the Scot said.

"That's the making of your team, recovering from these things. Aston Villa is a real challenge for us.

"We're here for the long-haul this season in the league, and that's the good things. We've got youth and strength in our side and, historically, we do okay in the second half of the season. We should be pleased that we find ourselves where we do at this stage of the season.

"You could be over-critical and say we threw three points away at West Ham, but that doesn't get you anywhere. We need to say: 'What's going to be our target now?' The obvious one is winning the next game, but the main one is winning the league. We are capable of doing that."

Ferguson, who rejected reports Smith will be on his way to Everton next month, also criticised the growing trend of managers and players to demand opponents are booked after Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho courted controversy by gesturing for a yellow card during the Londoners' midweek clash with Newcastle.

"That's definitely a European thing, no question, and it's wrong," Ferguson said. "We all know it's wrong."

Appeal halts WC sponsor ruling

REUTERS, New York

A U.S. judge has ruled that soccer's governing body does not have to immediately comply with a court order requiring it to grant MasterCard Inc. an eight-year World Cup sponsorship deal, pending the outcome of an appeal.

U.S. District Judge Loretta Preska said in her ruling on Thursday, however, that FIFA, could not proceed with a prior deal to switch sponsorship of the tournament to Visa International while the case was under appeal.

In April FIFA, or the Federation Internationale de Football Association, handed Visa the rights for the 2010 and 2014 World Cups. MasterCard, which had been the tournament's official credit-card sponsor for the past 16 years, sued FIFA for breach of contract, arguing that it should have had first refusal for future tournaments.

The judge ruled in early December that FIFA improperly awarded sponsorship of the World Cup to Visa. She ordered FIFA to grant MasterCard advertising and sponsorship rights to the tournament for the period from 2007 to 2014.

MasterCard and FIFA have agreed to temporarily halt sponsorship activities that were to begin in January, the judge said in her latest ruling.

Wycombe set for Chelsea tie

REUTERS, London

Fourth division Wycombe Wanderers earned a semifinal tie against English champions and 2005 winners Chelsea in the League Cup draw made on Saturday.

The other tie pits Tottenham Hotspur against seven-times winners Liverpool or north London rivals Arsenal, who still have their quarter-final game to play.

Wycombe, who reached the FA Cup semi-finals in 2001, have already knocked Premier League sides Fulham and Charlton out of the tournament this season.

They are scheduled to play the first leg against Jose Mourinho's multi-national side at their home ground north west of London in the week beginning Jan. 8 and the lucrative return leg at Stamford Bridge two weeks later.

Liverpool, who have won the trophy more times than any other side, meet Arsenal on Jan. 9 after their quarter-final was postponed because of fog.

The winners will travel to Spurs the following week and play the home semi-final leg in the week of Jan. 22.

The final will be held at Cardiff's Millennium stadium on Feb. 25.

Celta prepare Carew bid

INTERNET, undated

Celta Vigo are plotting a January move for out-of-favour Lyon striker John Carew. The Norwegian has scored just one Ligue 1 goal this season, falling behind Fred and Karim Benzema in the pecking order.

Galician club Celta currently lie in mid-table and are keen to add a target man to their attacking armoury, a role the giant Carew would fulfil perfectly.

However, sporting director Felix Carro said the club were also on the lookout for reinforcements at the back.

"(A move for Carew) would defend on the financial capabilities of the club. The priorities are a left back and a goalscorer."

Carew made a blistering start to his Lyon career, but has found the net only sporadically over the last year.

As one of Lyon's highest-paid players, the club are reportedly prepared to let him go for a relatively small fee to reduce their wage bill.

Fernandez tipped for Betis job

AFP, Madrid

Frenchman Luis Fernandez is the favourite to take over at relegation threatened Real Betis, Spanish radio station Cadena Ser said Saturday.

It said former France coach Jacques Santini and Bosnian Faruk Hadzibegic, a former Betis player who now coaches Denizlispor in Turkey, are also in the running to succeed Javier Irureta.

Betis, who played in the Champions League last season, currently sit third from bottom of the 20-team Spanish first division.

Fernandez is no stranger to the basement dogfight having saved Espanyol from the dreaded drop in 2003-04.

The 47-year-old has also coached Atletico Bilbao in the top flight from 1996 to 2000.

The lost spirit

INTERNET, undated



Repeating perfection was never going to be easy for Barcelona and their task has proved to be near impossible without the talents of striker supreme,

Samuel Eto'o.

While Ronaldinho may be promoted as the talisman of the side that dominated European football in 2006, Eto'o's absence with the knee injury he sustained in the Champions League draw against Werder Bremen back in September has exposed a major flaw in Barca's make-up.

They may have been classy enough to make it through to the knock-out stages of the Champions League and remain a leader in Spain's championship race, but the aura developed by Frank Rijkaard's side last season has been lost in Eto'o's absence.

Defeat in FIFA's World Cup Championships and a couple of humbling results against Premiership champions Chelsea led many a pundit to suggest the Barca magic has been lost, but those theories may soon be banished with the return of the striker who did so much to put them on top.

Eto'o has targeted a return to the Barcelona first team early in the New Year and he is clearly desperate to end what has been a painful wait on the sidelines. "I've been like a lost spirit on match days," lamented the Cameroon striker. "I've really missed the big crowds at the Nou Camp, the adrenaline and, naturally, the goals. I'll be raring to go in the New Year. I'll be fresh, enthusiastic and nothing will stop me."

"A setback like this makes you tougher mentally. You have to show discipline and resilience to recover properly. It's been a tough time but you can't allow yourself to be full of self-pity. I accepted the lay-off with philosophy. A bad injury is one of

the risks of this profession and I comforted myself with the thought that it was better to be injured at the start of the season rather than in the spring, the time when trophies are won.

"My recovery has gone perfectly and I'm not afraid to set the bar high for the remainder of the season. I want to be part of a Barca side that defends its Spanish and European titles. It's not out of the question that I could finish as top scorer in the Liga. I'm coming back feeling very confident."

An injection of such unbreakable self-belief may be just what Barcelona require after a shaky start to the season that has included high profile defeats against key rivals in La Liga and the Champions League. At their flowing best, the Catalan giants remain the most thrilling team to behold, but they have stuttered more often than not this season and if Eto'o's return was not imminent, the clamour to land a major striker in the January transfer window would be overwhelming.

However, Rijkaard knows he has their ideal man coming back into his team as Eto'o has all the attributes required to provide the finishing touches to the Barca master plan. His movement and energy sets him apart from the rest and while Eidur Gudjohnsen has done his best to step into the shoes of Africa's most gifted footballer, he could never offer quite so much.

As if to confirm the respect Eto'o commands in the game, none other than Zinedine Zidane has gone on record to suggest he should have been receiving the top prize in the World Player of the Year awards ahead of Italy's World Cup winning skipper, Fabio Cannavaro.

Quite how Zidane's comments have gone down in his native France is open to question as many there have been promoting the claims of Thierry Henry to land such awards for years, yet the disgraced former Real Madrid player has been outspoken in his support of a former Barcelona rival.

"Of course I'm very honoured by Zidane's comments," states Eto'o. "It's always nice to be respected by your peers and as one of the greats of the game, Zidane's opinion carries a lot of clout. It was nice to come sixth in the ballot, but at the end of the day, the results of your team are much more important than individual prizes. I wouldn't want to pour scorn on the Golden Ball. If I'd won, I'd be so happy and proud, but it's not the be all and end all."

"There can only be one winner and it's worth noting that even a superstar like my friend Thierry Henry has never won it. He is a wonderful player. If God decides I'm worthy, I'll win it one day, maybe next season."

Turning his attentions to the La Liga title battle he is about to re-enter, Eto'o suggests Barcelona's main challengers may not merely be the age-old rival from the Spanish capital.

"Sevilla are a much-improved side and I think they will stay the course to the end and so should Real Madrid," he continues. "Real's coach, Fabio Capello, has given them greater organisation and mental toughness. They might not be so pretty to watch but they are a very effective unit. Still, I don't see them having enough to take the league title away from us."

He is equally clear in his belief that the giants of the Premiership provide the most serious threat to his side's title as European champions this season. "Any one of the Premiership teams are a danger in the Champions League," he believes. "I know Chelsea have the hunger to be the European Champions for the first time, Liverpool are fantastic at home, Manchester United are flying high at the moment, playing some great attacking football."

"I also think Arsenal can be a threat. As long as they have Thierry (Henry) in their team, they must have a chance. He's been having some physical problems, but as soon as he's 100 per cent, he will be back to his best. I'd never write Thierry off. As outsiders I'd go for Lyon or Roma."

He may be happy to hand respect to Barcelona's rivals, but Eto'o is certain he will still playing for the best team in Europe when he makes his comeback and his convictions are heartfelt.

"It doesn't get any better than this," he adds. "Barca are my dream team. They are most fans dream team."

"I'm spoilt to be surrounded by so many creative players, guys with extraordinary levels of technique, awareness and invention. With the likes of Ronaldinho, Deco, Iniesta, Xavi and Giuly by your side, it's hard to go wrong."

When Eto'o puts it like that, talk of a decline in Barcelona's fortunes seems more than a little futile.



SAMUEL ETO'O

Geremi wants longer stay at Chelsea

AFP, London



talks with the English Premiership champions in a bid to extend his stay with the Londoners.

Geremi has one more year left on his current deal but would like to secure his Stamford Bridge future beyond 2007 after displacing Paulo Ferreira this season as the Blues' first-choice right-back while Glen Johnson has been loaned to Premiership rivals Portsmouth.

Cameroon international Geremi, who celebrated his 28th birthday on Wednesday, said: "I am delighted to be playing more this season."

"As a player you want to be involved all the time. My job is to be

there and try to make the manager's life difficult by playing well and helping the team.

"I always expect to play -- that's what I am here for. I still have one year left on my contract and I hope I will fully commit to Chelsea."

"They have not yet spoken to me about another one. But of course I want to stay, I am happy here."

And such is Geremi's present confidence, he is not overawed by the prospect of Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho signing another defender during January's transfer window.

"If Chelsea buy more players, it would be great for the team because we are involved in a lot of competitions."

Second-placed Chelsea head into Saturday's late kick-off match away to Wigan knowing they could kick-off five points behind Manchester United if the leaders

beat Aston Villa.

Geremi said it was always awkward for Chelsea when United were involved in an early kick-off game.

"The difference is that we are chasing them this time. There is pressure on us all the time because we don't want to drop points, especially when Manchester United play before us."

"It is very difficult for us when they play and win. There is a big difference from last year because we were playing and seven or nine points in front. It was easier for us."

"But this year it is very difficult and the pressure is there all the time. This is a tough period but beating Everton when Manchester United lost to West Ham was a great step for us."

"We were five points behind them at the start and so to get it down to two points was good, especially as were losing. Now we

are in a good place behind them," he added.

Meanwhile Geremi said he hoped Chelsea striker Didier Drogba could maintain the form that has seen the Ivory Coast international score 17 goals in all competitions so far this season.

"Didier is on fire. But it is not only Didier it is the whole of the team and the bench, which is important."

"After each game I shake Didier's hand because when he first came here he was struggling. Now I think he has really adapted to the English league and does what he knows -- scoring. He is very strong now."

"It is not a surprise for me because I know him. I know he is a really great player and strong guy. He has really adapted to the Premiership. Chelsea bought him for a lot of money because the manager knew him and what he can do."

Carlo's relief

INTERNET, undated

Milan boss Carlo Ancelotti admits he will be glad to see the back of 2006 as they look ahead to the final game of the year against Udinese.

Even without the eight point deduction Milan received for their part in the match-fixing scandal they would still be significantly behind local rivals and Serie A leaders Internazionale -- the deficit currently stands at 28 points.

"The game with Udinese is another story, it's the last game of the year -- a year which, especially the second half, has been a difficult one," Ancelotti told the club's official website.

"We want to round it off in the best way possible not only because we have so many injuries but also because the team wants to react in the best way possible."

"Udinese are a strong team, they have good players and are strong in every department and have a good solid base."



Real Madrid's Nieto (C) vies with Atletico's Mista (L) and Antonio Lopez (R) during 'Memorial Jesus Gil Match' at Vicente Calderon Stadium in Madrid on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP