

## Sevilla chase Ujfalusi

AFP, Prague

Fiorentina's Czech international defender Tomas Ujfalusi is a transfer target for Spanish league leaders Sevilla, Czech newspaper Dnes said Saturday.

Dnes also claims Italian giants AC Milan are tracking the 29-year-old but said that the UEFA Cup holders' interest was more advanced.

Ujfalusi joined Fiorentina in 2004 having spent four seasons at Hamburg in Germany.

## Barca's Palacio bid rejected

INTERNET, undated

Boca Juniors president Mauricio Macri claims he has rejected an offer from Barcelona for striker Rodrigo Palacio.

"The most important thing for us is that he stays," Macri said. "If he leaves, the situation will be very negative for the club."

Macri confessed that the offer arrived this week while he was in Spain to complete the transfer of Fernando Gago to Real Madrid.

"We have received offers for Palacio from all over the world because, for me, he is the best forward in Argentinean football."

Barca are rumoured to have offered 19 million euros for Palacio, 25, who has a contract with Boca Juniors until 2010.

## Roig lays into Riquelme

INTERNET, undated

Villarreal president Fernando Roig has criticised the attitude of star player Juan Roman Riquelme, saying the Argentinian international was not giving enough for the club. Riquelme has had a disappointing season by his high standards, and was dropped after a dismal outing against Osasuna on Sunday.

Roig said: "He should fulfil his obligations to the club. If he doesn't he is going to have problems with the president."

"Those who get paid by Villarreal should give their all for Villarreal."

The eastern Spanish team lie in mid-table, and have suffered a decline since reaching the semifinals of the Champions League last season.

They have been derailed by a number of serious injuries, such as the cruciate knee ligament damage sustained by Nihat Kahveci, Gonzalo Rodriguez and Robert Pires.

## Theo gets Arsene's vote

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger says teenage winger Theo Walcott has matured and is ready to earn an England recall next year.

The 17-year-old has made only three starts for the Premier League side since a 12 million pound move from Southampton in January but has impressed when coming off the bench.

Walcott was a surprise inclusion in Sven-Goran Eriksson's World Cup squad but played no part in the tournament and has since dropped down to the Under-21s.

"I feel 2007 is a big year for Theo," Wenger told reporters on Friday. "He has made big steps forward. What I like about him is he is decisive in every game."

"He has played a few games and done well, but even more in training he looks a different player to what he was six months ago."

"His power and personality in the game has improved. Before it was only with pace, but now he forces the decision and shrugs people off."

"I must say he will be a candidate for England now. He will play more and more for us now."

## Enke stays with Hannover

INTERNET, undated

Goalkeeper Robert Enke has put an end to rumours linking him with a move to Stuttgart in the summer, by signing a new deal with Hannover.

After two days of negotiations, the 29-year-old accepted an improved deal that will see him remain at the AWD-Arena until 2010.

Enke had been mooted as a possible replacement at Stuttgart for Timo Hildebrand, after the club announced contract negotiations between the two parties had stalled earlier this week.

Enke has made 83 appearances for Hannover since moving to the club from Barcelona in 2004.



Fulham's Carlos Bocanegra (L) tussles with West Ham United's Bobby Zamora during their Premier League match at Craven Cottage on Saturday.

## Hammers claim Cottage draw

INTERNET, undated

Fulham and West Ham United played out an entertaining goalless draw in the noon-hour kick-off at Craven Cottage.

The London derby saw plenty of quality chances at both ends, but both sides had to settle for a share of the spoils to start the busy holiday fixture spell.

The Hammers will be happy with the point after Paul Konchesky was harshly sent off for an alleged professional foul on Wayne Routledge in the dying stages.

Cottagers boss Chris Coleman replaced Zlat Knight with American Carlos Bocanegra in his starting XI. A packed Craven Cottage saw an entertaining opening half of football, with quality chances at both ends.

Within seconds of the kick-off, Marlon Harewood saw a quick turn

and shot sail wide of the target after he latched on to a Konchesky ball forward before Bobby Zamora also failed to test Fulham goalkeeper Antti Niemi with a close-range effort.

The Cottagers had early chances of their own, with West Ham defender Jonathan Spector making a timely intervention on Fulham striker Tomasz Radzinski in front of Robert Green's goal.

Konchesky then needed to cut out a low Radzinski cross from the left that nearly found Routledge in front of goal.

The game then descended into a scrappy spell, where both sides failed to claim control of the contest, despite plenty of endeavour.

The visitors then created a couple of chances, with Matthew Etherington hitting the underside of Niemi's crossbar after the former Southampton keeper failed to deal with Lee Bowyer's corner.

With three Fulham players on the goaline, the ball struck Liam

Resenior before findings its way to Hayden Mullins, who struck his volley wide of goal from close range.

Hammers captain Nigel Reo-Coker caused more concern in the Fulham back-line when he instinctively redirected Harewood's errant rasping strike over Niemi's crossbar.

At the other end, American defender Spector had his hands full with Canadian striker Radzinski, with the right-back earning a yellow card for bringing down the former Everton hit-man near of the edge of West Ham's box.

Brian McBride took charge of the free kick, but Green was equal to his set-piece effort on goal before Zamora tested Niemi in the Fulham goal seconds later.

Anton Ferdinand was then called on to make timely block and clearance to Heidar Helguson's close-range chance.

Harewood then had West Ham's

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## El Gordo grows slimmer

AFP, Sao Paulo

Ronaldo's famous waistline has come under scrutiny again but this time for diminishing.

Brazilian newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo reported Saturday that the former world player of the year is looking slimmer.

Ronaldo was in Sao Paulo for a party in honour of Formula One racer Felipe Massa and Folha said he is looking a lot slimmer than six months ago.

"The pink shirt proved it: Ronaldo is slimmer, he doesn't have the stomach he had before the World Cup," it said.

Ronaldo is known to some in Spain as 'El Gordo' (Fatty) and has been roundly criticised for failing to control his weight.

Earlier this season Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello praised him for losing some weight but said he still had further to go.

Ronaldo himself was not impressed with these reports, however positive.

"You people are unbearable," he said to the press.

The 30-year-old also moaned recently about his treatment by press and fans.

"When I score I'm great and when I don't I'm fat," he said.

He began the season injured and has since been forced to wait patiently on the bench as Capello favoured Ruud van Nistelrooy in attack, although the Italian has used the pair together in some games.

SERIE B

## Arezzo amaze Juventus

AFP, Rome

Promotion hopefuls Juventus blew the chance to claim the outright leadership of Serie B on Friday after they threw away a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 at home to Arezzo.

France international David Trezeguet broke the deadlock in the 58th minute with a fierce right-footed shot before Raffaele Palladino's low drive increased Juve's advantage.

But Daniele Martinetti scored twice for the visitors in a dramatic final 10 minutes -- a coolly-struck penalty followed by a superb diving header -- as Arezzo fought back bravely to end Juve's 100 per cent home record.

A draw left Juventus on 32 points, one behind joint leaders Piacenza and Rimini.

Juventus coach Didier Deschamps was bitterly disappointed to see his side pegged back.

"We had the points in the bag, but we allowed Arezzo to come back into it," said the Frenchman, who guided France to the 1998 World Cup title and then the Euro 2000 crown.

"We missed too many chances and gave away possession cheaply in the last quarter."

Napoli, Genoa and Bologna, who all started the day level on points with Juve, also ended up drawing. Napoli were held 0-0 at Modena, Genoa against Bari was also goalless and Bologna drew 1-1 at Brescia.

Juventus were relegated to the second division and given a nine-point penalty for their role in the Italian match-fixing scandal.

## Wenger calls on spirit of '98

THE GUARDIAN



Arsene Wenger is defiant in his belief that his side can win the Premiership and has drawn on Arsenal's dramatic comeback in the 1998 title race as evidence to suggest that people "will be surprised at the end of the season".

Few managers would cling to a 3-1 home defeat against Blackburn Rovers as cause for optimism, but it was what happened after such a result nine years ago that has Wenger, perhaps alone, entertaining the notion of overcoming Manchester United's 14-point advantage to claim the championship.

At the end of the December weekend during Wenger's first full season in London when Roy Hodgson's Blackburn came from behind to win at Highbury, Arsenal were 10 points behind United. Largely without their captain, Tony Adams, who was receiving treatment for personal problems in

France, Arsenal then went on an 18-game unbeaten run to overturn what at one stage was a 12-point deficit and win their first Premiership crown.

"The situation is comparable to 1998," said Wenger. "I have the same feeling now. That year the team gelled together, grew in confidence and belief and suddenly the results became natural. But we had our ups and downs even more in 1998 than we have now. I feel the situation is comparable so let's make sure the end is comparable."

Wenger recalls the Blackburn defeat that year as "very low. On that night even I would not have told you we would have won the double, so it shows how low it was. But maybe Blackburn can be the start that can make us compare with '98."

Unlike in 1998, the Gunners now also have Liverpool and, more prominently, Chelsea to contend with. Despite agreeing that the table doesn't lie, Wenger maintains Arsenal are every bit as good as the top two and is confident they will

slip up.

"At the moment I feel that everybody can drop points against everybody. We have shown them the way," he joked. "All I can say is that when we play against Manchester United or against Chelsea we do not feel (inferior), you have an impression when you come out of a game. For a neutral observer you could not say there was a huge difference between the two teams."

The Arsenal manager reiterated that the FA's decision to charge him with improper conduct for criticism levelled at Steve Bennett during Arsenal's 2-2 draw with Portsmouth last week was "scandalous". "Generally you want to be completely controlled but you have the right to understand why it was a free-kick or not," he said. "You can put a robot on the bench or a computer then people will behave how you want them to."

"I am inspired only by the beauty and love of the game, I am not an example. Sometimes I do not behave well enough and I am big enough to acknowledge that."

## Like winning the lottery

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon said the signing of Argentine midfielder Fernando Gago was like winning the lottery.

The 20-year-old passed a medical and completed his 27-million-dollar move from Boca Juniors to

Real, putting pen to paper on a six-and-a-half year contract.

"Today is the draw for the (Spain's famous Christmas) lottery, yet we have already won. Our prize is right here," Calderon said on Friday as Gago was presented to the media.

"It hasn't been easy to bring him here. But I would like to thank him for giving up a large amount of money to choose us, when so many others

wanted his services."

Gago joins teenage Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain, and Brazilian fullback Marcelo as the club's recent new signings, as the nine-times European champions look to rejuvenate their squad.

"This trio of aces, along with the players emerging from the youth teams, allow us to take a step towards a new generation of players who will bring freshness and new hope to the fans," Calderon added.

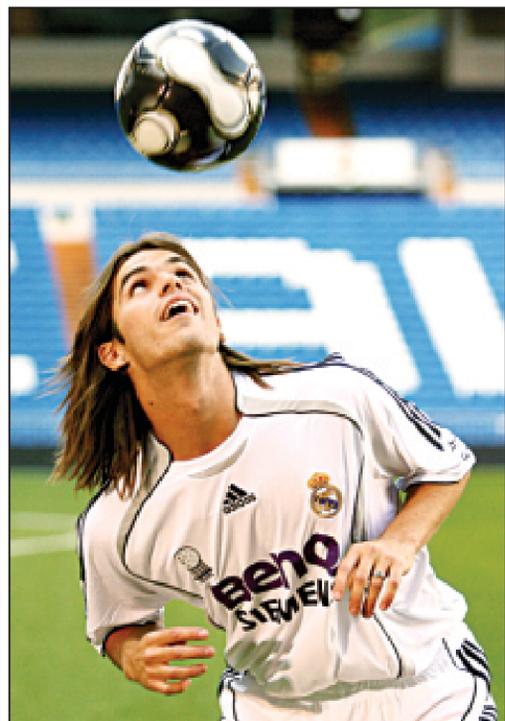
"By combining veterans with youth we will put this club back on the road to success."

Gago has been likened to Argentine midfielder Fernando Redondo who played with Real between 1994 and 2000, but the youngster wanted to distance himself from these comparisons.

"I don't feel under any pressure being likened to Redondo. He is my idol and has been since I was young, but we are very different players," said a softly-spoken Gago.

"I know I will have to adapt to a different style of play here but I will do it calmly and patiently like I did at Boca."

"This is the club of my dreams and I want to achieve great things here and to be a success in European football."



Argentine prodigy Fernando Gago heads a ball during his presentation at Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu on Friday.

## Ferguson calls for end to card-waving

THE GUARDIAN

Sir Alex Ferguson has urged referees to sanction players and managers who attempt to have opponents booked by brandishing imaginary cards, an issue which has re-emerged after Jose Mourinho's reaction to incidents on the touchline in the last week.

The Chelsea manager had signalled his desire for both Everton's Andrew Johnson and Newcastle's Nicky Butt to be booked in recent games. The League Managers' Association intend to meet with Mourinho in the next fortnight to discuss his behaviour, though Ferguson considers such reactions to be a trait of the continental game.

"That's definitely a European thing, no question, and it's wrong," said the Manchester United manager, whose side will attempt to retain their lead at the top of the Premiership by winning at Aston Villa today. "We all know it's wrong. If they're doing it right in front of the referee, I don't think there's any option other than for the officials to do something about it. Sometimes the referee may not be in a position to see that. For some players, it's a natural thing if they or one of their teammates is fouled. You see it a lot in Europe."

Ferguson insisted his squad boasts the staying power to reclaim the Premiership title. "We missed some good chances and that cost us the result, but like every good team you have to recover," he said. "You've got to accept that, in any championship race, there'll be disappointments along the way. That's the making of your team, recovering from these things."

"We're here for the long-haul, and we've got youth and strength in our side and, historically, we do OK in the second half of the season," he said. "We should be pleased that we find ourselves where we do at this stage. 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 our target now?' The main one is winning the league. We are capable of that."



Marseille forward Djibril Cisse (L) goes past Saint-Etienne defender Zoumana Camara during their Ligue 1 match at the Velodrome Stadium in Marseille on Friday.

## Marseille fire with Cisse

INTERNET, undated



Loan star Djibril Cisse opened his Marseille account on Friday to help the south coast club to a 2-1

win over St Etienne. In front of a packed, and vociferous, crowd at the Stade Velodrome, Cisse's opener got the biggest cheer of the night as the Liverpool-owned marksman got back to scoring ways after a lengthy period on the sidelines with a broken leg.

Czech striker Marek Heinz equalised on the stroke of half time for the visitors, but Mickael Pagis sealed all three points with Marseille's winner on 65 minutes.

The win sees the former European champions move up to fifth in Ligue 1, just a point behind St Etienne, with the winter break now starting for both sides.

The remainder of this year's final round of matches will be played on Saturday.

The hosts opened the scoring as early as the ninth minute as Cisse netted his first goal in sky blue and

white since his move from Merseyside last summer.

Defender Ronald Zubar flicked on a corner with his head, and Cisse had the easy task of sliding the ball home after les Verts midfielder Christophe Landrin was caught ball-watching.

St Etienne's equaliser came with virtually the last kick of the first half, Heinz proving to be more decisive than his teammates, after first Pascal Feindouno and then Frederic Piquionne had seen efforts repelled by Cedric Carrasso in the Marseille net.

After the impressive double save, the ball fell to Geoffrey Dervis, who turned inside beautifully before laying off to Heinz, and the Czech forward made no mistake with a precise shot which bulged the back of the net.

The winner arrived with 25 minutes remaining and from the boot of Pagis, who had moments earlier been denied by a brilliant save. St Etienne failed to clear their lines when given the opportunity and second time round, Pagis left Jeremie Janot no chance.

It was Lorik Cana who won the ball back for Marseille and fed Taye

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