



ROBBEN'S CHRISTMAS GIFT: Chelsea's Dutch forward Arjen Robben (L) runs in ecstasy past teammate Salomon Kalou after scoring his injury-time winner against Premier League rivals Wigan Athletic at the JJB Stadium on Saturday.

Lippi shuts EPL door

INTERNET, undated

World Cup winning boss Marcello Lippi has revealed that he is unlikely to start his coaching career in England.

Lippi has been strongly linked with the Manchester United job once Sir Alex Ferguson steps down, but the former Italy tactician can't see himself in the Premiership.

"It would be hard for me to work in England," he admitted. "I like to have a very direct approach with my players and this would be hard to achieve if I had to use a translator."

"I confess that I have received some proposals from abroad, but I didn't even bother to go and talk about them. I'll look at my situation in two or three months from now."

Lippi has been out of work since he left the Azzurri position following Germany 2006 and while he's keen to resume his career in Serie A, he admits that may be problematic.

"It's not certain that I will work in Italy and I have no idea what will happen to me in the future," he continued.

"All I will say is that I want to coach for another three or four years as I am only 59 and therefore quite young."

"I want to still experience some great emotions. If someone approaches me in May then I will sit down and think about it."

"Everyone is linking me to this side or that one, but that can only cause problems to the Coaches who are sitting in those hot-seats right now," he added.

"I can only reveal that I have been tracked in Greece, Russia and Turkey."

Pacesetters keep the pace

REUTERS, London



Leaders Manchester United began their holiday fixtures with a resounding 3-0 victory at Aston Villa as the goals flowed in the Premier League on Saturday.

A double from an inspired Cristiano Ronaldo and a thumping Paul Scholes volley, all in the second half, briefly gave United a five-point lead before champions Chelsea responded with a last-gasp 3-2 win at Wigan Athletic to slice it to two again.

At the halfway point of the season United have 47 points from 19 games while Chelsea have 45.

Liverpool remained a distant third at the halfway stage, 13 points behind United after Craig Bellamy and Xabi Alonso sealed a 2-0 home win over bottom club Watford.

Arsenal stayed in the last Champions League qualifying spot with a 6-2 thrashing of free-falling Blackburn Rovers.

Arsenal were shocked into action after three minutes when Shabani Nonda scored a penalty, but the rampant Gunners replied three times before halftime with Gilberto Silva, Alexandr Hleb and Emmanuel Adebayor's penalty.

Nonda scored again after the break as Rovers threatened a comeback only for Robin van Persie

to score a late double before Matthieu Flamini completed the rout in added time.

Wayne Rooney was left on the bench for United's trip to Villa Park having missed training due to a family bereavement, but his sidekick Cristiano Ronaldo took centre stage.

The Portuguese cut through the Villa defence to break the deadlock after 59 minutes and then grabbed the killer third goal either side of Scholes' thumping volley that went in off the underside of the crossbar.

"After 11 games in a row it was a good time to give (Rooney) a rest," United manager Alex Ferguson told Sky Sports.

"But Ronaldo was fantastic, he's having a great season for us," added Ferguson who celebrated the 2,000th United goal under his command when Ronaldo scored the opener.

"Maybe I'll give him a bottle of wine," he joked.

Chelsea's victory took the day's goal tally to 32, but they looked to have blown victory when Emile

Heskey's brace cancelled out goals from Frank Lampard and Salomon Kalou.

However, in the third minute of stoppage time Robben cut in from the right to fire the winner that keeps Chelsea breathing down United's neck.

Earlier at St James' Park, Newcastle United won 3-1 against a Tottenham Hotspur side looking for a sixth straight victory in all competitions.

Keiron Dyer and in-form striker Obafemi Martins gave the hosts a two-goal lead, Danny Murphy pulled one back for Spurs before Scott Parker struck again all before halftime.

Nicolas Anelka scored both goals for Bolton Wanderers as they consolidated fifth place with a 2-0 victory at Manchester City, who had Joey Barton sent off late on.

Portsmouth, who are also flying high, came from behind to beat Sheffield United 3-1 and stay sixth.

Everton striker Andy Johnson, accused of diving by Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho last week, responded with a goal in Everton's 2-0 win at Reading.

Charlton Athletic completed a miserable week to increase the pressure on manager Les Reed.

Thrashed by Liverpool last Saturday and beaten by fourth division Wycombe Wanderers in the League Cup on Tuesday, second-bottom Charlton lost 2-0 at

Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Man Utd	19	15	2	2	41	10	47
Chelsea	19	14	3	2	33	13	45
Liverpool	19	10	4	5	28	15	34
Arsenal	19	9	6	4	35	17	33
Bolton	19	10	3	6	22	15	33
Portsmouth	19	9	5	5	28	17	32

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Roman bares his soul

Football

INTERNET, undated

Roman Abramovich, the billionaire owner of Chelsea, has signalled an end to his extravagant spending on new signings but insisted that his passion for English football is stronger than ever. Speaking exclusively to The Observer, the Russian also denied that he ever interferes in team selection and characterised his relationship with manager Jose Mourinho as 'warm enough'.

Abramovich has been accused of distorting the transfer market by lavishing tens of millions of pounds on overpriced players who then languish in Chelsea's reserves. But he claimed the policy would not go on indefinitely. "Our strategy is to bring up our own players through the academy, which we have invested a lot in, and we hope that will give results," he said in Moscow last week. "We will be spending less in the transfer market in future years."

Chelsea's conduct under Abramovich has also been clouded by a series of 'tapping up' allegations. The

club was found guilty of making an illegal approach for Ashley Cole after it met the left-back without Arsenal's permission at a London hotel last year. Asked if his business methods were too aggressive, there was a silence before Abramovich replied: "I don't think so."

Shrugging off the club's unpopularity, he continued: "Everyone likes the situation where the leader loses. We don't have financial problems - that's probably also a factor. But you need to give credit: the number of Chelsea fans has increased substantially. There are two groups: ones who love the team and those who don't like it."

Mourinho said recently that if he was forced by Abramovich to pick certain players he might as well leave the club. The Russian claimed that he keeps his opinions to himself - almost. "I'm not involved in team selection. I cannot say I'm completely not involved in buying players, but my role would be significantly lower than that of the manager's. You cannot compare them. To give an example, this would be an impossible situation when a manager does not want a player to be bought and I try to impose ideas. It would not work."

Does that apply to Andrei Shevchenko, a friend of Abramovich and grave disappointment since his 30-million-pound signing last summer? "Any player, Shevchenko included." The charismatic Mourinho, noted for his sartorial elegance and flamboyant touchline celebrations, is a very different personality from the understated and dressed-down Abramovich, who admitted: "We do not have friendly relations but they are warm enough. Generally speaking, I treat him with great respect and not only because of his football achievements."

The former oil magnate, who with a personal fortune estimated at 10.8 billion pounds is ranked as Britain's second-richest man, denied that his ambitions for Chelsea extend to a European 'Super League'. "I don't see the risk of that," he said. "Money plays an important role in football but it is not the dominating factor. Everything that happens now - the Premiership, the Champions

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Capello has title hopes

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello has insisted his struggling galacticos can still win the Spanish title.

Madrid are sitting in third place, five points behind leaders Sevilla and two behind champions Barcelona, who have a game in hand.

But they have lost two of their last three league games and their last outing was a dismal 3-0 home defeat to tiny Recreativo Huelva.

That sequence began with a crucial 2-1 defeat at Sevilla before Real edged Espanyol 1-0 away.

But Capello is still happy and confident his team can deliver their first championship crown in four

years. "We are having a good season even if we are short of a few points," he said in an interview published in Sunday's edition of Marca.

"After playing Barcelona, Valencia and Sevilla, I realised we are a good team that can win the title."

Real beat Barca 2-0 at home before triumphing 1-0 at Valencia earlier in the season. Both were expected to be their main title rivals although injury-ravaged Valencia have since slipped well off the pace with UEFA Cup holders Sevilla the surprising pace-setters.

Despite their recent blips Madrid, who finished second last season, are much better placed than they were a year ago.

When the league broke for the winter break last year, Madrid were fifth and 11 points off the top.

And the Italian coach has already boosted his squad ahead of

the January transfer window with three promising new signings from South America.

That will give him even more of a selection headache as he already admitted after the Recreativo game that he did not know what his best side was.

"I didn't know what to do from the bench," he said. "For the moment I have no idea who should start."

Having added Brazilian fullback Marcelo, Argentine midfielder Fernando Gago and Franco-Argentine forward Gonzalo Higuain - all highly-rated young players - Capello's selection headache will hardly improve.

Although that is a problem he is relishing.

"They are three important signings; they're coming to play in the first team; they are good and have the future ahead of them."



SANTA'S NEW JOB? A cameraman, dressed like Santa Claus, films the Serie A match between AC Milan and Udinese at the Friuli Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Inter halfway home

AFP, Rome



Italian league leaders Inter Milan equalled the Serie A record of 11 consecutive wins after fighting back from a goal

down to beat Atalanta 2-1. A hard-fought victory at the San Siro in the final round of games before the winter break saw Inter match Roma's winning streak of last season and maintain their seven-point cushion at the top of the table.

Cristiano Doni gave Atalanta a deserved half-time lead before Adriano equalised with his first goal in an Inter shirt for nine months.

Atalanta defender Simone Loria headed into his own net 15 minutes from time to gift Roberto Mancini's side three crucial points.

Mancini saluted his side, which was missing several key players because of injuries and suspensions, for their second half recovery.

"We knew it was going to be a very tough match and Atalanta played very well in the first half," he said.

"But after the break we came out fighting to get the three points."

Mancini said he hoped Adriano's confidence would be restored after the Brazil international ended his lengthy goal drought.

"The goal was very important for him and let's hope he can start the new year by playing the way that we know he can," he said.

Inter have 48 points from their 18 matches played, seven more than Roma who won 2-0 at home to Cagliari.

Rodrigo Taddei's spectacular overhead kick set the 2001 champions on their way before his fellow Brazilian Mancini found the net with a crisp shot.

Palermo remain third but dropped further off the pace after being held 1-1 at Siena, while Gionatha Spinesi scored a hat-trick as Catania beat Sampdoria 4-2, propelling the Sicilian dark horses up to fourth place.

Lazio moved up to fifth after coming back from a goal down to beat Parma 3-1. The win was even more remarkable given the fact that Lazio had defender Sebastiano Seviglia sent off in the 15th minute.

AC Milan, who were forced to start on minus eight points for their

part in the Italian match-fixing scandal, continued their push for a Champions League place with a comfortable 3-0 win at Udinese.

Kaka opened the scoring with a penalty before Alberto Gilardino and Ricardo Oliveira ended Udinese's resistance.

Florentina hammered Messina 4-0 and Reggina thrashed Empoli 4-1, while Livorno drew 1-1 at home to Torino. Bottom club Ascoli defeated fellow strugglers Chievo 3-0 for their first win of the season.

Inter, who finished third last season but were awarded the title after Juventus and AC Milan were found guilty of match-fixing, fell behind in the 16th minute against a spirited Atalanta.

Luca Ariatti slipped a clever ball in between two Inter defenders for Doni to run onto, and he drilled a right-footed shot into the top corner from the edge of the 18-yard box for his seventh goal of the season.

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Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Inter Milan	18	15	3	0	38	15	48
Roma	18	13	2	3	40	15	41
Palermo	18	11	2	5	35	23	35
Catania	17	7	5	5	25	31	26
Lazio	18	8	4	6	29	17	25
Sampdoria	18	6	5	7	28	23	23



AC Milan's in-form striker Alberto Gilardino (C) celebrates with Marek Jankuloski (L) after scoring against Udinese during their Serie A match at the Friuli Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

LEADING SCORERS

12	Totti (Roma)
11	Spinesi (Catania)
10	Mutu (Florentina)
9	Bianchi (Reggina)
	Quagliarella (Sampdoria)
	Rigano (Messina)
	Toni (Fiorentina)