



PHOTO: INTERNET

Australia opener Matthew Hayden engages in a game with his two-year-old son Josh on the pitch of the MCG during a Christmas Day training session on Monday.

It's Ashes time again

Cricket

REUTERS, Sydney

The emotion and hype surrounding Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath's pending farewells is threatening to distract Australia in the build-up to the fourth Ashes Test against England at the Melbourne Cricket Ground from Tuesday.

With the series already decided, Australia's players could be forgiven for taking it easy in the final two Tests but coach John Buchanan and captain Ricky Ponting have warned the team not to lose sight of the big picture.

Motivated by the taunts of English fans after losing their 16-year grip on the Ashes last year, Australia are determined to reinforce their domination over their rivals with a 5-0 series clean sweep, emulating the feat of Warwick Armstrong's 1920-21 Australians.

"Our mission here is not only to win the Ashes but also establish a huge gap between us and England," Buchanan told reporters.

"We really want to finish these next two Test matches on a high note."

Australia regained the Ashes in record time with two matches to spare after winning the first three matches of the series, but say they will not be satisfied with anything less than English humiliation.

Ponting said the Australians had to be careful not to get caught up in the inevitable hype surrounding the pending retirements of Warne and McGrath but could think of no better way to send

them off than with a series wash.

"There is a strong feeling in the team that the job is only half finished and I'd be very disappointed if we lost a game from here," Ponting said.

"We want to win the next two games and it would be a fitting end for Shane and Glenn."

"We can actually use that as some sort of motivation to make sure we send off two of the all-time greats of the game on the right note."

Warne ended the third Test tantalisingly perched on 699 career wickets and is poised to become the first player to crack the once-unimaginable 700 milestone at his home ground.

With tickets for the match sold out in the 100,000-capacity stadium, Cricket Australia officials are expecting a world record attendance of over 400,000 if the match goes the full distance.

The MCG is Australia's grandest and most famous sporting stadium and was the centrepiece for the 1956 Olympics and this year's Commonwealth Games.

The match has been given added significance because it will be the 100th Test at the ground.

"I don't think the script could have been written any better," said Warne.

England's players have vowed to spoil the party but after failing to put up much of a fight in the first three Tests, the Australians will have little to fear from a team that has been reduced to playing for lost pride.

Coach Duncan Fletcher faces almost daily calls to be sacked and there have been unconfirmed reports of a split in the camp over

the merits of Andrew Flintoff's captaincy.

Marcus Trescothick walked out on the team before the first Test with depression and Ashley Giles left midway through the third Test to return home after his wife was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

Erratic fast bowler Steve Harmison announced this week he was quitting one-day cricket three months ahead of the World Cup, while struggling wicketkeeper Geraint Jones is under pressure to keep his job and Flintoff has needed painkillers just to get through training while trying to rally his troops.

"There's been a few things happening in the world of cricket over the past week, but it can't affect our preparations," Flintoff said.

"We want to show we can win out here, we want to show we can win two Test matches, it's a big occasion for us."

"There's a lot of character and a lot of pride in the dressing room and they will be keen to go out and show what good cricketers and what a good team we are."

SQUADS

ENGLAND (from): Andrew Flintoff (captain), James Anderson, Ian Bell, Paul Collingwood, Alastair Cook, Steve Harmison, Matthew Hoggard, Geraint Jones, Sajid Mahmood, Monty Panesar, Kevin Pietersen, Chris Read.

AUSTRALIA (from): Ricky Ponting (captain), Stuart Clark, Michael Clarke, Adam Gilchrist, Matthew Hayden, Mike Hussey, Mitchell Johnson, Justin Langer, Brett Lee, Glenn McGrath, Andrew Symonds, Shane Warne.

Hahnemann plots Chelsea upset

AFP, London

Reading goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann believes his team can stun champions Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday.

Chelsea have not lost a home game in the league since Jose Mourinho arrived as manager, but Hahnemann insists that will count for nothing when the Premiership newcomers travel to west London.

"We want to win the game," said the American keeper.

"They've been 50-odd games unbeaten at home, and it would be nice to be the first one to go there and win."

Reading then face Manchester United on Saturday at Old Trafford, and Hahnemann added: "Anything is possible. My wife has stayed with me for 11 years so six points from these two games is definitely possible!"

Royals skipper Graeme Murty agrees that his team-mates should keep faith with the tactics that have put them in the top half of the table at the halfway point.

"The manager has challenged us to have the mentality to go there and win, or will we just put our backs to the wall and get it out?" he said on official website.

www.readingfc.co.uk

Mourinho sets his sights

AFP, London



Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has insisted the reigning champions will be "much stronger" in the second-half of the season.

The Londoners have reached the midway point of the current Premiership campaign two points behind leaders Manchester United, having been in front at this stage during the previous two seasons.

And it needed a last-gasp winner from Arjen Robben in a 3-2 win away to Wigan to keep the Blues within touching distance of the top ahead of Tuesday's Boxing Day programme which sees Chelsea at home to Reading.

"We're in a great position," said Mourinho. "The first half of the season is over, nine at home, we've played at Old Trafford and the difference is two points. For the second half of the season we will have some important people back in the team."

"When John Terry, Joe Cole and Petr Cech are back in the team, this is more important than spending money on new players."

"So for the second part of the season, I feel we can be much stronger."

After United's 3-0 win over Aston

Villa at the weekend Ferguson said Mourinho - who apologised for saying Everton striker Andy Johnson dived - should say sorry for suggesting Chelsea would be top at Christmas.

Unsurprisingly, the Portuguese was anything but contrite.

"The only thing is the reality and the distance now is two points. They (United) have no problems. Everybody is playing, and they play every game with the same team."

"We have suspensions, red cards, sometimes bad decisions go against us, but the distance is only two points. So for the second part of the season let's see what happens."

Mourinho said he was uncertain if Chelsea captain Terry, who has been out with a back injury would be fit to face Reading.

"Maybe he will be able to play

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)
Tuesday
Blackburn v Liverpool, Bolton v Newcastle, Chelsea v Reading (1300 GMT), Everton v Middlesbrough, Manchester United v Wigan, Sheffield United v Manchester City, Tottenham v Aston Villa (1300 GMT), Watford v Arsenal (1730 GMT), West Ham v Portsmouth (1300 GMT)
Wednesday
Charlton v Fulham (2000 GMT)

Gago lives the dream

INTERNET, undated

Fernando Gago claimed he had joined "the club of my dreams" after committing himself to Real Madrid until 2013 on Friday.

The 20-year-old signed from Boca Juniors in a deal reportedly worth £13.4million to the Buenos Aires-based outfit.

"I am delighted to be at the club of my dreams," said Gago as he was unveiled shortly after signing his contract. "I want to deliver as much success as possible to Real Madrid."

Real president Ramon Calderon confirmed that the signing of Gago - combined with the recent acquisitions of 19-year-old Gonzalo Higuain and 18-year-old Brazilian Marcelo - proves that the club has changed its policy of signing 'galacticos' (already established superstars).

That policy, pioneered by former president Florentino Perez, had mixed success.

"The arrival of Fernando, with the acquisitions of Higuain and Marcelo, gives the team three aces which will permit us, little by little, to create a new generation of footballers within our club."

Donadoni wants Totti back

INTERNET, undated

Italy boss Roberto Donadoni is considering a March international recall for Roma captain Francesco Totti.

The Giallorossi symbol had suggested that he wouldn't return to the Azzurri fold until after the metal plates in his ankle, inserted following his fracture in February, were removed in September.

But with Totti on fire domestically, Donadoni has admitted that the No 10 may be selected for the Scotland European Championship qualifier.

"If he continues to play like he has been then I will certainly include him in the squad for March," the former winger highlighted.

"If he plays with this sort of consistency and offers these kind of performances then he will inevitably be included."

However, Donadoni did suggest that Totti would not necessarily respond to his call should it arrive.

"If he decides that he doesn't want to play anymore then that is different," continued the man who replaced Marcello Lippi after the Germany 2006 success.

"But this is a matter between himself and myself. I have a relationship with all of my players, I listen to them and I do the same with their Coaches."

"In this aspect, (Roma boss Luciano) Spalletti is giving me a big helping hand."

Donadoni was also asked to comment on the futures of Alessandro Nesta and enigma Antonio Cassano.

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Teenage kicks

Football

INTERNET, undated

For Europe's hottest prospects 2006 will be a year to remember. Whether they have just burst on to the scene or are confirming their precocious talent, this is a pick of some of the continent's most exciting teenagers.

THEO WALCOTT, 17, ARSENAL FC

The promise that persuaded Arsenal to sign the then 16-year-old forward from Southampton FC last January for a fee that could rise to 17.5 million Euro showed signs of fulfilling its potential this autumn. Used out on the wing for his club, a shiver of excitement runs through the lightning-quick teenager comes on. His match-winning performances for England Under-21s have ensured Peter Taylor's side will be among the favourites in the Netherlands next summer.

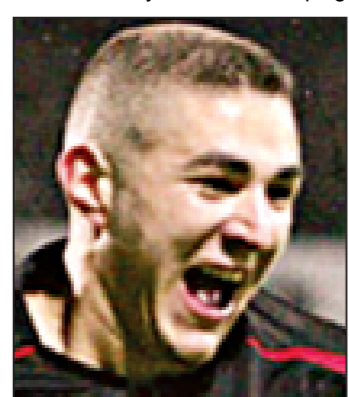
STEVEN DEFOUR, 18, R. STANDARD DE LIEGE

Defour has already established himself in Rene Vandereycken's Belgium side and even supplanted Vincent Kompany as the brightest young star of a very golden generation. He came close to signing for AFC Ajax in the summer, but a move to R. Standard de Liege has

perhaps proved more beneficial as it has ensured him regular first-team football. With his burst of pace, vision and passing range he could be his nation's playmaker for a decade to come.

KARIM BENZEMA, 19, OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS

The Rhone club boast one of the strongest squads ever seen in French football but worryingly for their rivals they are also developing



KARIM BENZEMA

some exceptional young players. There is no better example than Karim Benzema who, despite only turning 19 on 17 December, has already scored three times in the Champions League. A complete striker, capable of holding up play, winning headers and scoring from a variety of positions, Benzema has been tipped by Thierry Henry to clinch the Ballon d'Or one day. Only a

thigh injury prevented him from making his France debut in November.

ALEANDRO ROSI, 19, AS ROMA

Rosi is an exciting winger and the latest product of the prestigious Roma academy. Capable of playing on either flank, Rosi set up Simone Perrotta's winner against Olympiacos on his Champions League debut and also scored his first Serie A goal this season. As



THEO WALCOTT

well as winning fans over with his exciting pace and dribbling skills, he says all the right things. He was on Lazio's books until the age of eleven but jumped at the chance to join Roma in 1998. "My heart has always been giallorosso. I used to sing the Roma anthem inside the Lazio changing room." Francesco Totti couldn't have said it better.

Charlton turn to Pardew

AFP, London



Former West Ham manager Alan Pardew was on Sunday named as the new manager of struggling Premiership side Charlton replacing Les Reed who had only been in charge since November.

Pardew, who was sacked by West Ham earlier this month, signed a three-and-a-half-year deal and becomes the south London club's third manager this season.

Reed was promoted from the role of assistant manager in mid-November when Iain Dowie lost his job with the Addicks bottom of the Premiership but has failed to turn their fortunes around during his month at the helm.

Dowie had taken over from Alan Curbishley who has since replaced Pardew at West Ham.

"Les Reed has left his position as Charlton's head coach by mutual consent," the club announced in a statement.

"Alan Pardew will take charge of the Addicks, and has signed a three-and-a-half year contract."

"The club is making no further comment at this time, but will be

holding a press conference at its Sparrows Lane training ground at 1.30pm on Boxing Day (Tuesday)."

Reed, a former Football Association technical director, watched his side slip to a 2-0 home defeat at the hands of fellow strugglers Middlesbrough on Saturday and that was the final straw for the Charlton board.

The loss left the club second from bottom of the table and seven points from safety.

Reed said after Saturday's defeat, their fourth home defeat this season, that he was determined to restore the club's fortunes.

"We have just got to be determined and we will be straight back on the training ground on Sunday morning. We have got to put this one to bed then move on," he said.

"There is time left and there are others under pressure as well so I am sure things will change around. I am aware each time I say that there is another game gone - but we just have to keep believing."

Reed managed just one win from his eight games in charge and presided over last week's League Cup quarter-final defeat at home to League Two Wycombe.

Pardew will take charge of his first match at The Valley on Wednesday against Fulham.



ALAN PARDEW