

Henry hails rising stars

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal captain Thierry Henry has hailed France's new generation of talent.

Henry has singled out young stars Franck Ribery and Karim Benzema as he believes both players can make history if they remain focused on their football.

"Ribery is a super player, he is also my friend," Henry told AFP.

"I love his way of playing, he looks like Lionel Messi.

"He doesn't think, he dares, dribbles, tempts things. Just like Messi, he is a very rare player.

"When I see a player like him emerging, I take him under my wing. Then, if he can fly that is good. I hope he will fly for a long time.

"There is no danger if Karim Benzema plays for Lyon and if Raymond Domenech has called him up for France.

"If he stays focused, if he keeps that envy and that coolness, this child can be great."

Charlton sign China captain

AFP, London

China's national team captain Zheng Zhi has been signed by Charlton on loan from Shandong Luneng with a view to a permanent deal.

The 26-year-old, who can play either in defence or midfield, had a brief trial at The Valley under former head coach Les Reed last month before leaving to play for China's under-23s as an average player in the Asian Games in Qatar.

Zheng, his country's footballer of the year in 2003 and 2006, will be the first Chinese player to represent the Addicks and is new manager Alan Pardew's first signing.

The player scored 21 goals for Shandong Luneng as they won the national league title earlier this year. The length of the loan deal was not immediately revealed.

Sevilla rope in Russian forward

AFP, Madrid

Spanish league leaders Sevilla on Thursday boosted their title push by signing Russian international striker Alexandre Kerzhakov on a five and a half year deal from Zenith Saint Petersburg.

The 24-year-old, who will be unveiled on Saturday, cost Sevilla five million euros, according to sports newspaper AS.

Kerzhakov will supplement a potent Sevilla strike force which already includes the league's top scorer Frederic Kanoute who has already hit 14 goals.

Roeder's Crouch surprise

INTERNET, undated

Newcastle United manager Glenn Roeder says he will be surprised if Peter Crouch joins the Magpies in January.

Newspaper reports on Friday claimed Liverpool will do business at £12 million if they can find a suitable replacement.

With Roeder a fan of the England international, and in need of a new striker, there has been persistent speculation that the former Southampton centre forward will head north.

"Someone knows more than I do because, as far as I'm concerned there has not been a deal even spoken about," he told a press conference.

"Secondly, I really hate other managers talking about other managers' players.

"Peter Crouch is a Liverpool player and I don't think Rafa Benitez would appreciate me talking about Crouch when he's not a Newcastle player.

"At this moment in time, it's pure speculation and I'd be surprised if he became a Newcastle player.

"I said a month ago he's very talented and deserves a place in the England team. I think it's fair for me to say.

"Anything outside that would be unfair to Liverpool and the manager there."

Wanchope joins FC Tokyo

REUTERS, Tokyo

Former Manchester City striker Paulo Wanchope has joined Japan's FC Tokyo, the J-League club said on Friday.

The 30-year-old former Costa Rica international, who has scored a record 45 goals for his country, has also had spells at English club Derby County and Spain's Malaga.



PHOTO: AFP

Villarreal's new signing Matias Fernandez entertains the crowd during his official presentation at the Madrigal Stadium in Villarreal on Thursday.

Pompey celebrate 'crazy' year

INTERNET, undated



Portsmouth may have their sights set on qualifying for Europe this season but manager Harry Redknapp claims their first priority will be getting the win which he believes will guarantee them Premiership safety.

Redknapp takes his fifth-placed team to the Reebok Stadium to face Bolton, the only side who have beaten Pompey at Fratton Park so far this season.

And the Portsmouth boss claims his players just need one more win to ensure survival for another season, and that possible UEFA Cup qualification can wait until after the New Year.

This time last year Pompey were struggling on 14 points and stuck near the foot of the table; 12 months on they boast a mammoth haul of 35.

Redknapp said: "It has been a crazy year really to walk back 12 months ago where we were, and now to be sitting on 35 points it is amazing.

"We cannot get relegated now can we? Another three points and we will

be definitely safe and it is nice to be where we are.

"Bolton is another important game and another chance to pick up three points. Once we have got those points we want to stay as close to the top as possible.

"I see one bookmaker has given us odds of 400-1 for the title! We should be four million to one really, things are not going to change up there.

"Bolton beat us down at Fratton Park a couple of months ago and they played really well but there will be no need for any revenge.

"Sam (Alardyce) has done fantastic up there and it will be a tough game I am sure."

Pompey have scored five goals from defence their last three games, all from set-pieces, and Redknapp admits it was about time other players started weighing in with goals to take the pressure off nine-goal Kanu.

The Nigerian will miss the trip to Bolton in order to stay fit for the match against Tottenham on Monday and Redknapp has called for his midfielders to start finding the net.

Redknapp added: "It is important everybody weighs in with a few goals.

We need our midfielders to start scoring.

"I can stand here and say we planned this and we planned that for the set-pieces but really we just get people in the box and make sure the delivery is good.

"The two against Sheffield United were unplayable really and at West Ham Linvoy Primus did great in getting two headers. Bolton are one of those teams who are also strong in that area."

Assistant boss Tony Adams admits the team have been spending extra hours on the training pitch honing their ability from dead-ball situations.

Adams said: "A third of all goals come from set-plays but we have not had our quota this season.

"Now we have scored from set-plays in our past two games, if you can do that you can play very average and sometimes win games.

"Harry was telling me last season the team never looked like scoring from set-plays and it was my job to lay the foundations in pre-season and now it is beginning to work."

Carvalho has little doubt

AFP, London



Chelsea's Ricardo Carvalho has told English Premiership leaders Manchester United that the Blues will still overtake them in the title race - despite talismanic captain John Terry being sidelined.

The Portugal defender insisted the reigning champions could cope without his fellow centre-half as they attempt to overhaul United's four-point lead - starting in the London Premiership derby at home to Fulham on Saturday.

England captain Terry, a back injury victim, has not played in the last three league matches, in which the Blues have looked shaky and conceded six goals, missing the last-ditch 3-2 away wins at Everton and Wigan and a shock 2-2 draw at home to Reading.

"John Terry is a great player, but so am I," boasted Carvalho. "I've had good partners and John Terry's at the top. He's got the same experience as me and we learnt each other's characteristics.

"That's why we have a good understanding. But in football, it's not just one player who makes a team, it's the unit. And we have a strong unit,"

he insisted. "Manchester United are consistent, they've secured good results, but we have the best squad in England.

"We've already played against Arsenal, Manchester United and Liverpool. There were phases in the game when we were not so strong, but generally we showed that we're the best."

And he said he felt everyone wanted the Blues to fail in their bid to win a third consecutive Premiership crown.

"All of England wants a champion other than Chelsea," he grumbled.

Terry underwent surgery in France to remove a damaged disc, Chelsea said Thursday. He is likely to be out of action for at least a month.

Manchester United face Reading on Saturday, looking for a victory to rub salt into the wounds of Chelsea's humbling draw against the Premiership debutants.

So Jose Mourinho's men must secure a win against Fulham to back up Carvalho's words with three points and avoid finishing the year on a low.

Fulham earned a point at struggling Charlton on Wednesday with a disputed last-ditch goal by Frank Queudrue to salvage a 2-2 draw. They stayed 12th in the table and have earned five points in their last three matches.

Chelsea beat Fulham 2-0 in the

reverse fixture at Craven Cottage in September thanks to two goals from England midfielder Frank Lampard.

Fulham, who last won at Stamford Bridge came in 1979, make the two-mile (one kilometre) journey up the Fulham Road without several top players.

They include towering England-cap defender Zat Knight, who broke his jaw in two places in bizarre circumstances - after unexplained pre-Christmas "fooling around" with his brother.

Fulham boss Chris Coleman is using the words of Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson to fire up his troops.

"Ferguson has come out and said that both United and Chelsea will drop more points - and they will," the Welshman said.

"It is possible they could drop points to us in this game, we know that."

He added: "Their home record is as good as any of the top sides in Europe. "We know it is going to be tough, but this season we have beaten Arsenal, although we have lost to some of the bottom sides as well.

Heinze's WC woe

AFP, London

Manchester United's Argentinian defender Gabriel Heinze believes he has paid a heavy price for pushing himself to make his country's World Cup squad.

The 28-year-old ruptured cruciate ligaments in September 2005, but he still forced his way into Argentina's squad for the finals in Germany last summer and appeared in four of his country's five games as they went out at the quarterfinals.

But when he returned to Old Trafford for the new Premiership season he had to undergo a personal fitness programme.

"I am not far off getting my full form back," Heinze told MUTV.

"There is nothing more important in a footballer's life than the chance to represent your country in such an important competition.

"But when I decided to represent my country at the World Cup, I didn't just do it with my heart. I gave it a lot of thought and used my head.

"It is normal to push yourself. I thought I was fine and when I came back I thought the injury had gone away. I suppose you tend to learn from these things."

Rummenigge urges realism

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge has warned fans and players against getting carried away with expectations of future transfers.

Rummenigge insisted in September that the Bavarian giants were ready to shell out up to 30 million euros to bring in a world class player next summer, though showed his displeasure at defender Willy Sagnol's publicly-stated wish to bring Brazilian playmaker Kaka to the club.

"Our players would do well not to say these things in public," he told the club's official website.

"Of course Kaka is a superb player, but does anybody in the world believe that Milan would sell Kaka? One look at the table in Italy shows that they have huge problems.

"We know what we need and what is possible. Of course we're ready to do something, but you have to remain realistic. Then we can move things along quietly."

Bayern currently lie three points behind leaders Werder Bremen and Schalke, after a largely disappointing autumn campaign, though Rummenigge insisted he was optimistic his side would still go on to capture their third successive Bundesliga title.

"I think our team has the potential to make back the three points on Werder Bremen, but we'll have to play better than in the first half of the season," he added.

Real recruit another Argentine

INTERNET, undated

Real Sociedad have snapped up central defender Victor Lopez from Argentine club Arsenal.

The 28-year-old will move to the Liga strugglers for a fee of 455,000 euros and has signed a contract until the summer of 2009.

Sociedad currently lie second bottom of La Liga, and are keen to bring in some players during the January transfer window to help bolster their survival bid.

Certainly, the Basque club will be looking to improve in attack, they are currently the league's lowest scorers with just 10 goals, and coach Miguel Angel Lotina is said to have demanded that at least two attacking players be brought into the club in January.

No Rovers return for Beattie

AFP, London

Blackburn Rovers will not be making a bid for Everton striker James Beattie in the January transfer window, the club said Friday.

The 28-year-old Beattie, a former Blackburn player, has been linked with a move to Ewood Park with Everton reportedly wanting the cash to finance a deal to sign Preston's David Nugent.

But Rovers chairman John Williams told the Lancashire Evening Telegraph: "He is someone else's player - we have not made any approaches."

Williams added that the club have no intention of selling Norwegian midfielder Morten Gamst Pedersen following reports linking him with Tottenham.

He said: "Morten was linked with them back in the summer, but there are absolutely no plans to sell him."

Blues face defensive worries



THE GUARDIAN

The team that has it all has unexpectedly been found wanting. Chelsea, the double Premiership champions, have been struck with an injury crisis in defence that looks like undermining their campaign for a third successive title.

Chelsea's security has been debilitated by John Terry's absence. The England captain possibly faces time out with a back injury and year-on-year comparisons show Terry's absence has already begun to affect results.

The two goals Fulham scored in their defeat at Stamford Bridge on Boxing Day last year were the seventh and eighth Chelsea had conceded in the Premiership all season. The champions go into this year's equivalent fixture on Saturday having shipped 15. Six of those goals against have come in the three matches Terry has recently missed through injury.

The effect on Chelsea's points tally has been similarly damaging. This time last year they had dropped only five points; this year 10 have gone missing. And with Manchester United setting a searing pace in the title race, Chelsea will be trailing the leaders at the turn of the year. The situation is unprecedented in Jose Mourinho's career as the Stamford Bridge manager.

David Speedie, the former Chelsea striker, acknowledges how big the blow has been. "John Terry is a major part of everything Chelsea do," Speedie said yesterday. "That's why they are conceding goals like they are at the moment. It's because he's absent and he's not organising things at the back. One player doesn't make a team but John Terry is a very big miss."

Mourinho may be forced to recruit a replacement. But after lavishing 350 million pounds on new players since July 2003 it could be that Chelsea's transfer-market record will, paradoxically, prove an obstacle.

All season Manchester City have been expecting to fight off Chelsea's interest in Micah Richards during next month's transfer window. The 18-year-old England defender would lend versatility to a defence shorn of William Gallas's flexibility after his summer move to Arsenal.

But Richards's ability to play

with equal alacrity at right-back - where he won his England cap against Holland last month - and in central defence carries a steep price. City's manager Stuart Pearce said it would take a "ridiculously big offer" to sell him.

Chelsea would have to commit a sum similar to the 21 million pounds they paid the same club for Shaun Wright-Phillips 18 months ago. Ironically, it is that capacity for extravagance which empowers City to resist Chelsea's latest advances.

"The offer they made us for Shaun had to be in that region to get him out of here and the financial situation was such that we had to accept that offer," Pearce has said. "Things have changed at the club since then. The Shaun money is in the bank and things are on an even keel."

Chelsea might find they are restricted by other aspects of their transfer-market philosophies if they look to bolster their defensive options. Mourinho has dogmatically held there should be no more than 22 outfield players in his squad - a first choice and a deputy in each position. Mourinho reinforced this with his reference to eight "untouchables". Even if Chelsea now return to Tottenham with the 30 million pound bid for Ledley King that would be the minimum Spurs' board would countenance, it may not be enough to seal the deal.

King might have joined them a year and a half ago but he is unlikely to consider swapping a strong Premiership team where he is captain for a club where he would not be a guaranteed starter as a significant career advancement.

That might force Chelsea to cast their net beyond the Premiership. Luisao, Benfica's 25-year-old Brazil centre-half, is an imposing presence in defence and at attacking set-plays. He would be available for an affordable £8m and as a Portuguese speaker would seemingly communicate well with Ricardo Carvalho. There is the chance Chelsea might reignite interest in Alex, PSV Eindhoven's right-back-cum-centre-half.

Vincent Kompany, Hamburg's 20-year-old Belgian centre-back, is another monitored by Chelsea. But all three players are cup-tied in the Champions League.

Mourinho paid 7 million pounds for Khalid Boulahrouz, who is 25 today, but it is unlikely the manager considers he has had a valid return on the investment in the centre-

half. Having joined in late August and missed Chelsea's pre-season schedule when most clubs' tactical work is laid down, Boulahrouz has failed to live up to the potential that made him one of Martin Jol's top transfer targets at Tottenham.

But Speedie believes the Dutch defender - and Chelsea's title challenge - will ultimately prosper without reference to the market. "Chelsea have enough quality players as it is," said Speedie. "With the size of the squad that he has, the manager knows what he is doing; he has quality players around him and they'll come good."

"Against Reading an unlucky own-goal cost them dearly. They can absolutely come from behind in the title race. They'll dig in and they always look as though they will score going forward."

Yet, unless Chelsea have success in the market next month, attack may become their best form of defence.

Giants in for wonderkid

INTERNET, undated

Liverpool and Manchester United will battle it out to sign 16-year-old Scottish prospect James McCarthy.

The Hamilton Academicals midfielder spent a week on trial at Liverpool's Melwood training ground last week where he impressed manager Rafa Benitez, who is now keen to draw up a deal as soon as possible.

Liverpool have already opened talks with the player's club, who agreed to the trial period, but most now act swiftly to make the move permanent with other top clubs believed to be interested.

Sir Alex Ferguson is also targeting the youngster, and some reports in Scotland claim United are favourites to complete the transfer.

Because of his age, McCarthy would only cost clubs around 100,000 pounds in compensation even though he's one of the hottest talents in Scotland.

As an attacking midfielder, he made his first team debut for Hamilton earlier this season aged just 15, and has also been offered trials by some of La Liga's top teams including Barcelona, Deportivo La Coruna and Valencia.

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