

Fulham eyeing Petit

LONDON, Dec 22: Ambitious English League club Fulham are ready to make an 8million pounds (£11.84million dollars) move for Barcelona's French international midfielder Emmanuel Petit according to the London club's official website, reports AFP.

Fulham, owned by multi-millionaire Mohammed Al-Fayed, who also has famous department store Harrods in his portfolio, are currently top of the English First Division and seem certain to gain promotion to the Premiership.

But with competition from the likes of Real Madrid, Chelsea, Middlesbrough and Paris St Germain for the Frenchman's signature, Fulham could have their work cut out to lure the former-Arsenal man to Craven Cottage.

Petit recently complained of his lack of involvement in Barcelona's line-up, however after being put in at left back on Wednesday night's league win over Alaves, Petit told L'Equipe he would be happy to bide his time at Barcelona.

"I want to play and help my team win. But I know that I have little chance of featuring in midfield where Barca have a host of talent."

"But if I have to play at left back, then all I ask for is a bit of time to adapt. At my age (30), it's not always easy to change long-held habits, but I'm willing to give it a go."

Fulham do have an advantage however, with manager Jean Tigana having already worked with Petit when they were both at Monaco.

According to the website: "Insiders at Barca have revealed that Petit would be willing to move to West London once Fulham have reached the Premiership, although sources close to Petit say that he may be prepared to make a move now."

One major obstacle to Petit joining the ambitious London side are his reported wages of 65,000 pounds (£95,200 dollars) per week. However, Al-Fayed has shown that he is prepared to spend money on Fulham and Petit could yet be returning to London.

Players' rep slams intransigence

PARIS, Dec 22: The continued failure of FIFA and UEFA to agree on changes in European football could tear the game apart, International Professional Footballers' Federation (FIFPro) vice-president Philippe Plat claimed Thursday, reports AFP.

Plat's outburst comes after EU Competition Commissioner Mario Monti said that he was "reasonably optimistic" that agreement will be reached soon on European football transfers.

The FIFPro vice-president admitted that he fears the worst as a result of the failure to come to an agreement and accused world and European football governing bodies FIFA and UEFA of being uncompromising and self-interested.

"With all interested parties failing to come to agreement, we are going to be faced with the worst case scenario," said Plat. For the past two years the EC has attempted to bring European football into line with EU employment laws, which has clear guidelines concerning the free movement of workers, goods and services.

St Etienne president admits being tricked

LYON, France, Dec 22: Saint Etienne president Alain Bompard has claimed that he did not knowingly play a part in the false passport affair which has seen two of his players suspended until January 9, reports AFP.

Bompard also says he himself has been tricked in the affair surrounding the club's Brazilian forward Alex and Ukrainian goalkeeper Maxym Levytsky.

"The club have acted in good faith in this affair," Bompard told Lyon Figaro.

"Anybody can fall victim to a trick like this. We are not customs officials or police officers. So yes, I admit that in this affair we've been tricked. But let's stop trying to discredit the club."

After playing for the club last season as a Brazilian, Alex obtained a Portuguese passport on May 30, meaning he could be discounted as one of the teams permitted three non-European Union players.

However during a league match against Toulouse in November Alex appeared to have renounced his Portuguese nationality and was down on the team sheet as Brazilian again.

Levytsky, who formerly played as a Ukrainian, was noted on the same team sheet as Greek.

Toulouse management demanded that an inquiry be held into the authenticity of Alex and Levytsky's documents, a perhaps natural step in the wake of revelations that Strasbourg's former Argentinian forward Diego Garay played for the Alsatian side last season with a false Italian passport.

A court hearing into the affair was held on December 14 in Saint Etienne, where the club also issued a legal complaint in a bid to rid themselves of any blame in the affair.

On December 19 the judicial commission of the French league (LNF) decided to suspend both players in question until further information is sought during the winter break.



Pauleta (R), the Bordeaux forward, trying to go past a host of Nantes defenders during their French First Division fixture at Bordeaux on December 21.

French First Division

Nantes break Bordeaux jinx



PARIS, Dec 22: Nantes regained top spot in the French league going in to the winter break Thursday by beating Bordeaux for the first time in 18 years at Parc Lesieur, reports AFP.

The win was revenge for Nantes following their 5-0 hammering at home to Bordeaux early in the season with goals in either half from Violel Moldovan and Eric Carriere sealing victory.

It was a valuable three points for the Canaries, who now have 39 points after 22 games, giving them a two-point lead on Lille, who jumped to second from fourth after their 1-0 home win over Corsican Bastia.

The only goal coming from Lille midfielder Jean-Louis Valois in the 70th minute.

Meanwhile Strasbourg's worries continued when their match against fellow relegation strugglers Metz was abandoned in the 68th minute after a lineswoman was stunned by a firecracker thrown from the stands.

The official was shocked but not seriously injured after the firecracker exploded near her ear after being thrown three minutes after Danijel Ljubija opened the scoring for the home side.

Previous leaders Sedan are now in third place after they were defeated 2-0 away to Rennes.

But Nantes win puts them in a commanding position going into the winter break after a match in which they were clearly the dominant side.

The visitors lead the first half against a clumsy and lifeless Bordeaux and gained a foothold in the game with a goal in the 26th minute from Moldovan.

van. The strike seemed to wake up a sleepy Bordeaux, but a series of attacks by Elie Baup's side were disorganised and lacked inspiration with Portuguese striker Pauleta missing a header which rebounded off the crossbar in the 38th minute.

Carriere gained the decisive shot for the visitors in the 90th minute.

Meanwhile Sedan faded during their trip to Brittany after getting off to an attacking start in the opening fifteen minutes.

Rennes keeper Bernard Lama, who was saved by the crossbar following a strike from Sedan striker Cedric Monnet in the 15th minute, didn't have much cause for worry for the remainder of the match.

Midfielder Jocelyn Gourvenec opened the scoring for the home side from a long shot by Makhtar N'Diaye in the 33rd, with the second coming in the 61st when Stephane Gregoire passed to Severino Lucas.

And Rennes could have made the score 3-0 had midfielder Christophe Le Roux not missed a penalty. The win lifts the Brittany side three spots to seventh position seven points behind the leaders.

Lyon moved into fifth position after a difficult and undeserved 2-1 win at home over neighbours St Etienne.

The home side got off to a flying start when Sonny Anderson opened the scoring after just four minutes from a right corner from Vikash Dhorasoo headed by Steve Marlet.

St Etienne created several opportunities with almost blundering an own goal following a move by Alex in the 14th minute, but Lyon goalkeeper Gregory Coupet did well to keep

it out. "Les Verts" dominated the second half with Alex scoring the equaliser in the 71st from a shot diverted by Lyon's David Linhares which fooled keeper Gregory Coupet.

St Etienne keeper Jeremie Janot did well to keep out two headers from Anderson on 73 and 86, but it was Delmotte who sealed victory for Lyon with a header from Violan.

Paris Saint Germain got their festivities off to a poor start as Troyes came, and left with a point, after enforcing an atmosphere of frustration with a 0-0 draw that is sure to give PSG coach Luis Fernandez and star forward Nicolas Anelka a dose of the winter blues.

Paris, who were gifted a bagful of chances, failed to take the initiative on a cold night in Paris where players had trouble controlling the ball on a bobbly pitch.

But when it came to clear-cut chances, Paris could have no excuses.

PSG captain Frederic Dehu summed up the night: "We couldn't impose our game tonight despite all our efforts, and after the chances that we had - quite simply because Troyes came here and succeeded in shutting us down."

Meanwhile, former FIFA world footballer of the year George Weah scored both goals in Marseille's 2-1 victory over Monaco in Wednesday's French league match.

The Liberian international scored in both halves to give some cheer to the home side, moving them up on place to fifth from bottom, a place above Monaco.

While Toulouse maintained their unbeaten home record this season when they held Guingamp to a 1-1 draw at home Thursday.

Beckham for a Christmas boost

MANCHESTER (Reuters/Internet): David Beckham says Manchester United must avoid their customary

Christmas slump when they play Ipswich Town on Saturday. The champions lost their first home league game for two years when they were beaten 1-0 by Liverpool

on Sunday. The defeat cut their lead over Arsenal at the top to five points.

Beckham told the Manchester Evening News: "It is important we get back to winning ways."

"We didn't play as well as we should have done against Liverpool but... Ipswich is another big game for us at home, a game we have got to win."

Manchester United have not enjoyed their best form over the festive period, Alex Ferguson's side could

only draw with Sunderland last season before letting off to Brazil for the World Club Championship where they won one of their three games.

In the 1998-99 season United took just seven points from six games in December and they have not won all their Christmas games since 1996.

"We don't usually have a good spell over Christmas so it is up to us to get through these games and get good results this time," Beckham said.

It is a demanding time. Playing four matches in nine days is an important period for any team. As

players we get used to it but it is a tough programme.

"If we get through these first three Christmas games with good performances and good results then that will put us in good stead for going into the new year."

But even if United complete a Christmas clean sweep, the England captain is refusing to listen to talk

about United's chances of a 14th league title.

"We've played some great football all season and we've started to play well in Europe. With us being

five points clear in the league and two European wins, it is going well for us."

But we are not getting carried away and listening to those people who are saying that Man United have

already won it. We just carry on with our jobs."

Madar Strasbourg bound

STRASBOURG, France, Dec 22: Former France international Michael Madar is poised to sign a six-month deal with struggling French First Division side Strasbourg, club president Patrick Proisy said Thursday, reports AFP.

The 32-year-old Madar resumed training with Paris Saint-Germain earlier this week six months after the striker was released by the club.

Match abandoned after lineswoman felled

STRASBOURG, France, Dec 21 (Reuters/Internet): The French First Division match between Racing Strasbourg and Metz was abandoned on Thursday after a lineswoman was hit by a firecracker thrown by a fan.

Assistant referee Nelly Vienot, the only woman to officiate in the French League, was struck by the missile midway through the second half of the game in Strasbourg and was carried from the touchline clutching the side of her head.

Referee Eric Poulat took the teams to the dressing rooms.

After a 15-minute break doctors decided Vienot was not fit to return to running the line and the game was later abandoned.

Vienot was taken to hospital for routine checks. Bottom-placed Strasbourg were leading 1-0 when the match was halted.

The club could forfeit the game and incur a heavy fine should they be found to be at fault.

The one and only Romario



RIO DE JANEIRO, Dec 22 (Reuters/Internet): Barely a month from his 35th birthday Romario

has shown he is still one of the world's deadliest marksmen.

Romario's hat-trick for Vasco da Gama in Wednesday's 4-3 Copa Mercosur final win over Palmeiras took his tally this year to a remarkable 71.

It was also an ideal reply to soccer's world governing body FIFA who failed to include him when it nominated its top three for the player of the year award.

"I dedicate this win to all the children in Brazil," said Romario who captained his team to victory on Wednesday after they had trailed 3-0.

Age seems to have changed little in Romario's playing style. He often "disappears" for long periods of games only to pop up seemingly from nowhere to deal the killer punch.

Wednesday's display was typical, Romario, the hero of Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning team but axed on the eve

of the 1998 tournament because of a nagging calf injury, touched the ball only three times in the first 35 minutes.

Yet in the second half he coolly converted two penalties and then tapped the winner into an open goal from point-blank range after Juninho Paulista's shot had rebounded to him three minutes into injury time.

Sixty-four of Romario's goals this year have been for Vasco da Gama, breaking the club record set by Roberto in 1981.

The remaining seven have been scored in only two games for Brazil - a hat-trick against Bolivia followed by four against Venezuela - and have made him leading scorer in the South American World Cup qualifying competition.

A big debate is now raging over whether Romario should play for his country in the next World Cup when he will be 36.

Romario's performance helped get another former Brazil World Cup player, Junior Baiano, out of jail following yet another nightmare display. Junior Baiano gifted Palmeiras

the lead when he gave away a penalty by inexplicably punching at a cross in the 35th minute and was then sent off in the second half for a reckless lunge at an opponent.

The first incident revived memories of the needless penalty he gave away during Brazil's 2-1 defeat by Norway during the last World Cup.

Junior Baiano was an ever-present for his country in France but his erratic displays came in for heavy criticism and he has not played for his country since.

After returning to Brazil he was jibed with the chants of "Junior Baiano sank the national team" during away matches for his club Palmeiras.

He joined Vasco da Gama at the start of this year but his troubles have continued. In one of his first games for Vasco he was sent off for punching an opponent during celebrations for a goal scored by his own team.

Wednesday's dismissal was his third in eight months and his second in December.



TOP CLASS: Romario in an exultant mood following his winner for Vasco da Gama against Palmeiras in the final of the Copa Mercosur on December 20 at Sao Paulo.

Premiership preview

Dream tie at Anfield



LONDON, Dec 22: Two would-be claimants of Manchester United's Premiership crown meet at

Anfield on Saturday when fifth-placed Liverpool host Arsenal, the current occupiers of the runners-up spot, reports AFP.

A hard-fought north London derby 1-1 draw against Tottenham on Monday moved Arsenal to within five points of United but it was Liverpool who really ignited the title race last weekend.

They ended United's near two-year unbeaten home run with a 1-0 victory at Old Trafford. Gerard Houllier's men are still 10 points behind United but this result will have done wonders for their self-belief.

Matches over the Christmas period traditionally draw big crowds and their passion can in turn lead to players losing their cool on the pitch.

Liverpool star Vladimir Smicer hopes the example set by West Ham's Paolo Di Canio, who caught the ball to allow Everton goalkeeper Paul Gerrard to receive treatment, will prevail rather than that of some Tottenham fans.

TV viewers clearly saw fans hurl the ball back at Arsenal's Robert Pires during Monday's 1-1 draw, and saw the Frenchman react angrily before being dragged away from the confrontation by referee Jeff Winter.

Smicer said: "In doing what he did, Di Canio showed he has respect for his opponents, which is an important thing to have."

"Contrast that with the Tottenham fans who twice threw the ball in the face of Robert Pires in Monday night's match. There was no respect for the player on that occasion."

"I think Di Canio's action should serve as an example to younger players."

Liverpool have been boosted by the return to training of France World Cup winner Bernard Dionede, who after a six-week lay off due to a knee injury could make a comeback in January.

Coach Houllier said: "It is just a matter of time for Bernard. He is back in training and it's simply a question of match fitness when he can play again."

"All things being well he will start the next reserve match, against Leeds United on January 2."

"It is good news for us because we have had a shortage of left-sided players recently."

Liverpool will be without German pair Christian Ziege and Dieter Hamann through injury on Saturday.

Norwegian Vegard Heggem, who has suffered from hamstring troubles all season, is aiming to avoid another operation as he steps up his comeback bid.

Meanwhile, Arsenal striker Thierry Henry has insisted United can be caught, especially as this season they will

Soccer fanatics take care

LONDON, Dec 22 (Reuters/Internet): For all those passionate male soccer fans, a word of warning.

Scientists in the Netherlands found that 50 percent more men died from heart attack or stroke on the day of the country's dramatic exit from the 1996 European championship than on a normal day. No corresponding increase occurred in women.

The findings, published in the British Medical Journal, show that about 14 additional deaths from those causes occurred on June 22 compared with the five days before and after the match.

To make sure it wasn't a seasonal rise, Diederik Grobbee, professor at the University Medical Centre in Utrecht, also compared the deaths with the same period in 1995 and 1997.

"What happened was that one match in particular showed a particular increase in fatalities, and that was this quarter-final," Grobbee told Reuters. "It was a dramatic match."

It was nil-nil and was decided by penalties. France won the shootout 5-4 after Clarence Seedorf saw his

spot kick saved and France kept a 100 percent record.

As well as the increased mental and emotional stress, factors such as higher alcohol intake, overeating and excessive smoking were believed to have contributed to the rise in deaths.

have no winter break in Brazil for the World Club Championship.

"They were fresh when they came back so I want to see if they are going to be fresh this time as well," said Henry.

In the same period that United were in Brazil last season, facing Necaxa and Vasco da Gama before playing South Melbourne, they now face five domestic games.

After a trip to Newcastle on January 30, they take on West Ham at home, Fulham away in the FA Cup, Bradford away and Aston Villa at Old Trafford.

Henry added: "When we play away from home, some teams really like to beat Arsenal, they are almost crazy to get to the ball."

"Sometimes I think that when Manchester United play away, they are allowed to play."

"Not even from the start do some teams try like Charlton recently did (the Londoners got a 3-3 draw after being 3-1 down with 12 minutes to go). They didn't give up and showed everyone what is possible."

Henry did his best to annoy United even more by saying Liverpool's win had come as no surprise to him.

Manchester United do sometimes drop points against big teams. It's the same - Liverpool drew there last season, Chelsea drew there this season and we always get points there. So it's not a surprise," he said.

is the master of mind games and is unlikely to let Henry's word distract him. One of United's great strengths has been the ability of their youth system to produce first-team players.

Now United, who face high-flying new boys Ipswich, who sit third, on Saturday, have more talent coming off their production line.

"We are unfortunately having one of those spells with injuries and the striking department is a bit of a problem," Ferguson told the British press.

"Either Ryan Giggs or Paul Scholes can play up front but I have now got to think about young David Healy (21) and Jonathan Greening."

"I have to maybe consider giving the natural strikers a chance, the ones who play up there on a more regular basis."

Ferguson said that Healy was a "natural striker", while Greening's ability to play in a forward role had opened up new options.

Andy Cole, Dwight Yorke and Teddy Sheringham will all miss the Ipswich game.

FIXTURES

(kick-off 1500GMT unless stated): Friday: Coventry v Southampton (1945GMT)

Saturday: Charlton v Everton; Chelsea v Bradford; Derby v Newcastle; Leeds v Aston Villa; Leicester v Ham; Liverpool v Arsenal (1130GMT); Manchester United v Ipswich; Sunderland v Manchester City; Tottenham v Middlesbrough

Sugar sells stake to ENIC



LONDON, Dec 21 (Reuters/Internet): Tottenham Hotspur chairman Alan Sugar, vilified by fans this

season, sold over half of his 40.2 percent stake in the English Premier League club to sport and media group ENIC on Thursday.

Sugar sold 26.9 percent stake of Spurs for 21.9 million pounds (\$32.14 million) or 80 pence per share. The purchase price values the club at about 80 million pounds.

The Spurs chairman, in charge for nine turbulent years which have seen six managers pass through White Hart Lane, will step down from the board on completion of the deal early next year.

"This is an exciting development for Tottenham," Sugar said in a joint statement announcing the sale.

"ENIC has a wealth of experience both of European football clubs and the exploitation of media and other commercial rights."

"I believe that ENIC is committed to the long term prosperity of the club and has the right business skills to take it forward from here."

Sugar also granted ENIC an option to buy the rest of his stake within 18 months of completion of the sale, expected in February.

Tottenham's share price, which last touched 80p in March 1999, was down seven pence or 11.5 percent at 54p in afternoon trade. The deal takes ENIC's total Tottenham stake to 29.9 percent - the maximum that can be held without triggering an offer for the whole company.

ENIC also holds 96.7 percent of Slavia Prague, 99.9 percent of Italy's Vicenza Calcio, 50 percent of Switzerland's FC Basel, an effective 47 percent interest in AEK Athens and 20.2 percent of Glasgow Rangers, which plans to float on the London market.

ENIC's said the Spurs deal would enhance its sports, gaming and media activities and also announced it was in talks to buy UK spread-betting firm Sporting Index.

"Tottenham is one of the last remaining FA Premier League clubs not to have signed a major multi-media deal," said ENIC, which is developing a global gaming operation in parallel with its growing network of holdings in football clubs.

Daniel Levy, ENIC's managing director, said the company would employ headhunters to find a new chairman at Tottenham. "We are firmly committed to improving Tottenham's commercial viability as one of this country's top football clubs," Levy said. "We believe it can regain its position as a significant contender in both domestic and European competitions."

Sugar rescued Spurs from severe financial problems in 1991 when he joined forces with Terry Venables, later England manager. But the two men soon fell out and Spurs have won only trophy since Sugar's arrival - the League Cup in

1999.

Spurs regard themselves as one of the country's top clubs, a team synonymous with style and entertainment, but they have been left behind by the likes of champions Manchester United and north London rivals Arsenal.

In Sugar's time in charge they have never finished higher than seventh in the league.

George Graham is the latest manager to take on one of the toughest jobs in English soccer - an appointment in October 1998 that caused upset among the Tottenham faithful because of his long and successful spell as manager of Arsenal.

Sugar was selected following a survey carried out by the Russian Football weekly newspaper among 216 of the country's top football journalists.

Another Russia international midfielder Vagiz Karpin, currently at Spanish side Celta Vigo, took second spot, while Lokomotiv Moscow's Dmitry Loskov, who became the league's top striker this year, was third.

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