

Italian talent impresses MU

BARI, Italy, Jan 5: English Premiership champions Manchester United have joined a host of Italian clubs in the race to sign Bari's teenage prodigy Antonio Cassano, Corriere dello Sport reported Friday, reports AFP.

Cassano, 18, is seen as one of the hottest prospects in Italian football and Bari president Vincenzo Matarrese conceded he would eventually have to let his prize asset go, although he vowed he would hang onto the youngster until the summer.

But Matarrese also told the newspaper that United and other foreign clubs had joined Serie A giants AS Roma, Juventus, AC and Inter Milan in the race for the youngster's signature.

Matarrese said: "I am very good friends with (Roma chairman Franco) Sensi but also with (Juventus director Antonio) Girardo and the Agnelli family."

"It is difficult to know what will happen because Manchester United and other foreign teams are also interested in Cassano. Bari will choose the most advantageous option economically for the club."

Inter are also known to be interested in Cassano. The Milan club's coach Marco Tardelli worked closely with the youngster when in charge of the Italian under-21 side while AC Milan have also been monitoring the player.

England to have more talks with Eriksson

LONDON, Jan 5: The Football Association (FA) are to have another round of talks with Sweden's coach-in-waiting Sven-Goran Eriksson in a fortnight, reports AFP.

Chief executive Adam Crozier will head the governing body's delegation to Italy, where they will also meet representatives from Eriksson's club Lazio.

Swedish coach Eriksson is scheduled to take up his duties in the summer after signing a five-year contract.

Leicester manager Peter Taylor and Manchester United number two Steve McClaren will again be caretaker coaches for the friendly against Spain on February 28 at Villa Park.

But the FA have made no secret of the fact they would like Eriksson in place if at all possible for the next World Cup qualifier against Finland on March 24.

His role at Lazio has continually been subject to speculation as they have endured an indifferent season.

However, the Rome club are still involved in the Champions League though a home defeat by Leeds United has placed their progress in the competition in considerable doubt.

FA chief executive Adam Crozier told the Press Association on Thursday: "We will be going to Italy in two weeks to take the discussions forward. We want to know exactly where we stand."

"It is only proper we talk to people at Lazio as well as Sven. We have to go through the proper channels. What we have to remember is that he, Peter and Steve are a team."

"Everyone knows that Sven is one of the top three coaches in the world."

"His track record is phenomenal and he is a terrific coach. Sir Alex Ferguson said at Christmas how highly he rates him."

Villa still optimistic about Angel

LONDON, Jan 5: Aston Villa said Friday they were confident that the signing of Colombian international striker Juan Pablo Angel for a club record 9.5 million pounds (12.4 million dollars) would go ahead, reports AFP.

Reports claim that the deal is being held up because Angel's agent Gustavo Muscardi - who owns half of the contract of the River Plate player - is asking for commission of 1.2 million dollars.

It was suggested that Angel was being prevented from boarding a plane to Birmingham until Villa guaranteed to pay Muscardi.

There are also rumours that Villa manager John Gregory might have to resurrect a deal for Celta Vigo striker Benni McCarthy because the Angel deal was in danger of collapsing.

But the club remains confident that Angel will link up with the club next week - providing he passes a medical - in time to make his debut against Liverpool on January 13.

Aston Villa spokesman Phil Mepham said: "There is no hitch. The plan is still to bring Angel over here well in time to prepare for the game with Liverpool."

Maradona's father in hospital

BUENOS AIRES, Jan 5: The father of Argentinian football legend Diego Maradona was taken to hospital here Thursday suffering from fluid on the lung, doctors said, reports AFP.

The 72-year-old - known here simply as 'Don Diego' - was in a stable condition, doctors said.



JARI LITMANEN

Litmanen now a Liverpool man



LONDON, Jan 5: Gerard Houllier insisted the arrival of Finnish international striker Jari Litmanen on Thursday does not mean Robbie Fowler's departure from Anfield is imminent, reports AFP.

The Liverpool manager tied up the final details of the free transfer signing of Litmanen, who was a member of the Ajax side that won the 1995 European Cup and reached the final in 1996, from Spanish giants Barcelona on Thursday, and the 29-year-old trained with his new team-mates.

Despite speculation that yet another late-night incident involving Fowler in Liverpool city centre could hasten his departure, Houllier clearly sees Litmanen as an addition rather than a replacement.

Houllier, who has been chasing Litmanen for two years, said that he needed another striker with the recent departures of Erik Meijer and Titi Camara.

"I remember when we didn't have enough strikers because of injuries so it is vital for us to have at least four here. This is something we have always stressed," the former French national coach said.

With Liverpool's packed New Year schedule, which will include vital games in three cup competitions, Houllier does not want to sell his former captain, despite Fowler's indifferent form.

Fowler, who did not exactly endorse Houllier's suggestion that he would be staying on when he said on Sunday he was happy at Liverpool 'for the minute', will instead compete with Emile Heskey, Michael Owen and now Litmanen for a place in the starting line-up.

Liverpool are aware of Chelsea's continued interest in Fowler. Chief executive Colin Hutchinson has reiterated his view that the Londoners would be interested in signing the player if Liverpool gave the go ahead.

But with a schedule that could include matches in the FA Cup, UEFA Cup and League Cup in an 11-day period in February, Houllier wants all of his best players available.

The arrival of Litmanen, a player Houllier wanted to sign when the forward was with Ajax, has excited the French coach.

"He's one of the most exciting signings we have made. We have signed a world class player. He comes with a reputation that needs no improvement," Houllier said.

Litmanen, a close friend of Liverpool defender and countyman Sami Hyypia, was exceptional in recent international matches against England and Wales.

A deep-lying forward who plays well in the hole behind the strikers, he is qualified to play in all four competitions Liverpool are contesting, as he has not played for Barcelona in either the Champions League or UEFA Cup this season.

"It has always been my dream to play for Liverpool," said Litmanen, regarded as Finland's best ever player.

"I have supported them since I was a child and there has been talk about me joining them before."

"I seem to have been linked with every club in Europe but it's no secret that Liverpool have always been very special to me."

They also tried and failed to lure their former player Paolo Di Canio from English Premiership club West Ham United.

Lazio are hoping Poborsky will be available for selection for Sunday's home match at the Olympic Stadium with Napoli although he is likely to start on the bench.

Poborsky first came to prominence as a member of the Czech Republic team that reached the Euro 96 final, losing 2-1 to Germany at Wembley.

The blond-haired midfielder was an integral part of that highly-regarded Czech side and scored an outstanding goal past revered Portuguese keeper Victor Baia, leading to interest from a number of top clubs.

He moved to English Premiership giants Manchester United for season 1996/1997 but was eclipsed by the emergence of David Beckham on the right side of midfield and moved on to Benfica.

Recoba signs fresh contract MILAN, Jan 5: Inter Milan's Uruguayan striker Alvaro Recoba Thursday signed a two-and-a-half year contract with the San Siro side, the club's website reported, reports AFP.

Recoba, whose agent Paco Casal agreed the deal with Inter negotiator Rinaldo Ghelli before Christmas, put pen to paper on the deal that expires on June 20, 2006.

German channels to buy WC 2002 rights

MUNICH, Germany, Jan 5: The German public television channels ARD and ZDF plan to buy some of the broadcasting rights for the football 2002 World Cup from media giant Kirch for a record 225 million marks (115 million euros, 109 million dollars), the daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung reported on Friday, reports AFP.

"We can confirm that we've reached agreement in principle with ARD and ZDF. We will release a statement about the details of the deal soon," a Kirch spokesman told AFP.

He declined to comment further, on either the amount of money changing hands or the date when the deal would be announced.

The newspaper report, quoting an executive from ARD, said that ARD and ZDF would buy the rights for 24 of the 64 matches, to be held in Japan and South Korea, for a record 10 million marks per match.

The purchase would include the rights for the opening game, the semi-finals and the final, it added.

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Caniggia staying at Dundee

GLASGOW, Jan 5: Former Argentinian World Cup star Claudio Caniggia delighted Dundee by signing a contract on Thursday to stay a further two-and-a-half years at Dens Park, reports AFP.

Dundee player-manager Ivano Bonetti believes Caniggia's commitment to the team can spur the rest of the team on to a top six place in the Scottish Premier League.

Caniggia, 33, signed a longer contract after originally only agreeing to a six-month deal.

Caniggia was offered the opportunity to resurrect his career at Dens Park in October and has scored five times since his arrival.

Bonetti insisted the longer contract proves the ambition of the club under chairman Jimmy Marr and chief executive Peter Marr.

"I think Claudio has shown that he still has the qualities that make him an exceptional player but, just as important, he still has a big appetite for the game and for success," said Bonetti.

"There is no doubt that his quality and mentality have had a positive effect on the squad."

"His attitude and manner make him as popular with his team-mates as he is with the fans and we are all delighted that he will be with us for a longer time."

"I am pleased for Claudio, the club, Dundee's fans and myself that he will be staying with us," Bonetti said.

But Peter Marr admitted that he thought Bonetti had been joking when he originally said Caniggia would come to Dundee.

"I have to admit that when Ivano Bonetti first mentioned the possibility of Claudio Caniggia coming to Dens Park, I thought he was pulling my leg," said Marr.

"But he is happy here and, for the foreseeable future at least, here to stay."

"I am delighted that Claudio has chosen to extend his stay at Dundee."

"There is no doubt that he has set the Premier League alight since his arrival and has proven that he is an undoubted world class talent."

"His commitment to the club over the last three months has been outstanding - both on and off the field."

Caniggia is out of the country for the start of the winter break.

Kohler extends Dortmund contract

DORTMUND, Germany, Jan 5: German World Cup winning defender Jurgen Kohler extended his contract for a year-and-a-half with German league highfliers Borussia Dortmund it was revealed on Thursday, reports AFP.

The 35-year-old, who was capped 105 times and was a member of the 1990 World Cup winning side and the Dortmund team which beat Juventus 3-1 in the 1997 European Cup, will play up till June 2002 and is likely to move into scouting and marketing with the club after his contract ends.

Poborsky arrives in Rome

ROME, Jan 5: Benfica's Czech international midfielder Karel Poborsky arrived at Rome's Fiumicino airport Friday to sign an 18-month contract with Italian champions Lazio, reports AFP.

A deal had been struck by the player's representatives and the Italian club in Prague on Thursday and all that remains is for the player to put pen to paper and undergo a medical.

However, it is now thought that he will not be available for Sunday's match at the Olympic Stadium with Napoli and is more likely to take his bow against Udinese a week later.

The fee is a modest 3.5 million dollars, according to the ANSA agency, and the 29-year-old will fill the berth on the right side of midfield vacated by Portuguese international Sergio Conceicao who joined Parma in the close season.

Poborsky was the third person Lazio had sought to fill the problem position.

Initially club president Sergio Cragnotti sought to persuade Udinese to allow Italian international Stefano Fiore to move to Rome earlier than expected - Fiore is expected to join the Italian champions in the summer.

MILAN, Jan 5: The Milan derby showdown between AC and Inter takes centre stage this week.

The San Siro clash where AC Milan are nominally the home team and Inter visitors therefore seems a somewhat paradoxical affair with only city pride and the chance to gain the momentum needed to challenge for a Champions League spot the main incentive.

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Serie A preview

Battle for Milan supremacy



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