

Sunderland rope in Reyna

AFP, London

English Premiership side Sunderland completed the signing of Glasgow Rangers midfielder Claudio Reyna on Friday.

The 28-year-old USA captain sealed his 4-million-pound (5.7-million-dollar) switch to the Stadium of Light after undergoing a medical and finalising personal terms.

A work permit has also been granted, leaving Reyna clear to make his debut for the Wearersiders in Sunday's Premiership clash at home to Chelsea.

Reyna, who has signed a five-year deal, was relieved to finalise the deal after weeks of negotiations.

"I'm just glad to finally complete the move because it has been ongoing for a while," said Reyna, who played for Rangers in Thursday's UEFA Cup win over Paris St Germain.

"I'm still a bit out of it because it's been a long night but it was a great way to leave Rangers.

"I said my goodbyes to all the lads and it was pretty emotional - they were great with me. This is a fantastic opportunity and challenge for me.

"I'm ambitious to play in the Premiership and I've joined a club with great support and capable of going places.

"I really pushed for this move to happen but Rangers wanted me to play in Paris last night. I'm just glad it is all sorted."

Reyna, who is set to captain the USA at next year's World Cup finals, is desperate to feature against Chelsea.

"It's a fantastic game and I'd love to be involved," he said. "I haven't spoken to the manager about it so we'll have to wait and see."

Colombian soccer boss in trouble

AFP, Bogota

The president of Colombia's Football Federation (FCF), Alvaro Fina, has been summoned to appear next week before an anti-corruption tribunal tracking how the millions of dollars which went into the hosting of last summer's Copa America were spent.

One of the tribunal officials told local media in Bogota on Friday that Fina had to appear within five days to give evidence after he failed to appear as scheduled last Thursday and also called for nine charges to be scrapped.

The sports tribunal of the FCF is trying to determine whether Fina acted improperly when he signed various commercial contracts linked to the marketing of the continental showpiece which the Colombians won, beating Mexico in the final.

Fina has strongly denied any wrongdoing.



ARSENE WENGER

Wenger's warning

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has warned his side not to allow the high points of the last few days to divert them from their day-to-day task -- winning matches.

The Gunners capped back-to-back Premiership wins over Manchester United and Ipswich with a magnificent Champions League triumph over Juventus just 48 hours before manager Wenger confirmed he had signed a new four-year contract.

And on Monday, the club's plans for the new 60,000-capacity stadium, which they want to build just half-a-mile (0.7km) from their traditional Highbury home, goes before the local council for approval.

There is also an open offer for Wenger to join the Arsenal board as technical director once his stint as manager - now set to stretch to nine years - is over.

But all that will be relegated to the back of his mind and he said: "When you are a manager you get used to living from game to game.

"Whatever happens in the future, I'm still in the business of winning matches and that is always the bottom line.

"There are so many ups and downs in what could happen over four years and it can change so quickly.

"So all you can do is go from one match to the next and let the years roll on and take care of themselves."

Meanwhile Wenger fended off suggestions that 20-year-old striker Francis Jeffers, who cost eight million pounds (11 million dollars), will eventually need an operation

that could keep him out for the rest of the season.

This is one of the few dark clouds hovering over Highbury at the moment after another glorious chapter in the club's history and will seem a mere speck if Islington Council give them the go-ahead at a meeting on Monday night for the 400-million-pound (568-million-dollar) plus project of building a new ground just down the road at Ashburton Grove.

That is still far from a formality, however, with a determined band of residents and local businessmen opposing the scheme.

Already 10 months behind schedule, it has so far cost Arsenal 10 million pounds in preparation for what is one of the biggest area-regeneration plans in the country and could yet be delayed further if subjected to a public inquiry by Secretary of State Stephen Byers.

Judge says study evidence

Football

AFP, Hull

The judge in the case of the Leeds United footballers accused of attacking an Asian student told the jury Friday to scrutinise the defendants' police interviews.

Mr Justice Henriques reviewed the prosecution's case highlighting the differences between the police interviews and court evidence offered by Leeds footballers Jonathan Woodgate, Lee Bowyer and two other men.

Continuing his summing up, the judge told the jury at Hull Crown Court to "act" if they believed the discrepancies were a "desire to

conceal guilt".

Defender Woodgate, 21, of Middlesbrough, midfielder Bowyer, 24, of Leeds, and Paul Clifford and Neale Caveney, both 22, from Middlesbrough, are charged with affray and causing grievous bodily harm with intent to Sarfraz Najeib.

They deny all the charges. Najeib, 21, from Rotherham, South Yorkshire, was bitten on the face and suffered a broken leg, nose and cheekbone in the attack in Leeds city centre in January last year.

Referring to the four's responses to police questioning, Henriques said: "The prosecution will put this: it is inconceivable that any of these defendants could be innocent and answer these questions in these ways.

"You're going to have to scrutinise their interviews."

The court heard that Woodgate would not initially tell police who had been with him that night.

The judge said: "The prosecution say this was not to protect his friends. It was to protect himself.

"You may think it was vital from Mr Woodgate's point of view to not disclose who was with him that night."

The court heard Woodgate's police statement said he ran along Boar Lane because he saw Bowyer running, but in the witness box he had denied he had seen Bowyer in the chasing group.

Henriques said: "The prosecution say he saw Lee Bowyer run but when he comes and gives evidence he says something diametrically opposed. How does that affect his credibility?"

Describing Bowyer's statements to police, the judge recounted how he had failed to identify Woodgate's friends, who included Caveney and Clifford.

The judge said: "The prosecution say that was a deliberate lie to avoid naming Jonathan Woodgate's friends."

Bowyer had explained that when quizzed by detectives as to who were Woodgate's friends, he had believed the police were only interested in the footballers.

The judge said: "You are going to have to decide whether that was Lee Bowyer deliberately misleading police.

"If you decide he was misleading police you are going to have to ask yourselves why.

"Members of the jury, if there is an innocent explanation for any lies and that innocent explanation may be a true and accurate explanation for the lie, then you don't, of course, act upon it.

"If you conclude that the only explanation for the lie is a desire to conceal guilt then you can (act upon it)."

The trial was adjourned until Monday.

Sven can't wait to start

2002 FIFA WORLD CUP KOREA JAPAN

AFP, London

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson said Friday he was looking forward to pitting his wits against Argentina during next year's World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea.

England were paired with Argentina, Sweden and Nigeria at last weekend's draw but Eriksson tried to downplay talk of a 'group of death'.

"When I thought about taking this job I dreamed about playing against teams like Argentina in the World Cup finals," he told the Football Association's official website, www.the-fa.org.

"I had maybe not envisaged playing them in our second game and I think we can say we were not lucky in our group.

"But, while we have a difficult task, it is certainly not an impossible one.

"When I was at Lazio, I had Diego Simeone, Claudio Lopez, Hernan Crespo, Juan Sebastian Veron, Roberto Sensini and Matias Almeyda.

"So yes, I do know some of their players. Veron was the last I spoke

to, but I have not spoken to any of them since the draw."

Eriksson added that England's friendly against Holland in Amsterdam in February would give him the chance to try uncapped players.

"I think we might bring in perhaps one or two of the players I have yet to see for the game against Holland, but I prefer not to talk about names at the moment," he said.

Spurs not to blame

AFP, London

The Football Association (FA) cleared Tottenham Friday of any blame for the actions of their supporters in last month's highly charged north London derby with Arsenal.

The usual fiery encounter was made all the more volatile by the return of Arsenal's Sol Campbell to his former club for the November 17 clash, which ended in a 1-1 draw.

England central defender Campbell was abused throughout the match, missiles were thrown on the pitch and supporters pelted the Arsenal coach with bottles and cans as it left the ground after the match.

Cameroon's lions will roar

REUTERS, Yaounde

Cameroon's German coach Winfried Schafer has vowed to "break the curse" of German supremacy when the two teams meet in the first round of next year's World Cup.

Cameroon's Indomitable Lions, who won the Olympic title in Sydney last year, were drawn in the tournament's Group E along with the Germans, three times World Cup winners, Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Ireland.

"I want Cameroon to finish on top of the group at all costs," Schafer said in an interview with the official daily Cameroon Tribune, adding that he was not daunted by the prospect of taking on his compatriots.

"I am going to break the curse of Germany's reputation in the World Cup," he said. "Cameroon is in a good group. We have the opportunity to go far in this World Cup."

It will be the fifth time the Central African country, which has a population of 15 million people, have reached the World Cup finals.

Cameroon's best performance was in 1990 in Italy, when they became the first African side to reach the quarter-finals.

Schafer, 51, was appointed coach in September.

The secretary-general of Cameroon's soccer federation said Schafer's nationality was not significant.

"He is a professional," Jean-Rene Atangana Mballa said.

An open WC!

REUTERS, Bonn

FIFA president Sepp Blatter is convinced the 2002 World Cup will be open and entertaining as none of the favourites will have home advantage.

"We will experience an attractive tournament in South Korea and Japan," Blatter said on Thursday.

"All the big teams will be playing only away games, which will make this World Cup so exciting," he added. "There will be a very special atmosphere in the stadiums."

Blatter, in Bonn to sign a partnership deal with Deutsche Telekom for the 2006 World Cup in Germany, is confident security will not be an issue at next summer's event.

"There will be no problem as far as security is concerned," he said. "I fully trust both governments."

Blatter will meet officials of the German organising committee next week and is equally confident of the success of the 2006 World Cup.

"Germany will be great hosts," he said. "There will not be a single problem."

The FIFA chief welcomed Germany's qualification for the next year's tournament, the team surviving a playoff against Ukraine after finishing second to England in their group.

"I am happy that the 2006 organisers will be there this time around," he said. "We know that the Germany team are very good at tournaments."

Blatter also reiterated that he would almost certainly seek re-election at the FIFA congress next May in Seoul.

"The tendency is that I will stand for another term," he said, adding he would make a final decision after consulting FIFA's executive committee early next year.

Kanu versus Arsenal

Football

AFP, Lagos

Nigeria star Nwankwo Kanu is on a club vs country collision course with Arsenal after the English side indicated they would refuse to release him for next month's African Nations Cup in Mali.

Kanu, who has clashed with his employers at Highbury before over his international commitments, said he is prepared to defy the Gunners and play for Nigeria regardless of manager Arsene Wenger's wishes.

"Arsenal or coach Wenger cannot stop Kanu from going to the Nations Cup," Kanu was quoted as saying by local daily sports paper Complete Sports Friday.

"The rules are very clear and they can't be changed overnight.

"It's quite unfortunate that Arsenal will miss both Lauren (Etame Mayer of Cameroon) and myself for more than a month during the Nations Cup but they didn't just know about that today."

"Kanu is always happy to represent Nigeria...I love my country and

I've been representing my fatherland since I was 17 years old and my position has not changed," he added.

Arsenal boss Wenger has reportedly said both Kanu and Etame

The Nations Cup is scheduled from January 19 to February 13 in Mali with Nigeria and defending champions Cameroon top tournament favourites.

Kanu, a two-time African Footballer of the Year, said he would be ready to battle his way back into Arsenal's side after Mali 2002.

"Arsenal know my worth or why do you think they have refused to let me go," he said.

"I don't have any fears coming back into the team after the Nations Cup. If I could work my way into the team after the trouble I've had at the beginning of this season then I shouldn't have problems regaining my place."

Kanu has struggled to play regular first-team football, as competition for places has become more intense with the arrival at Highbury of more forwards this season.

Nigerian authorities and the English Premiership side have often clashed over the release of the player for international engagements.

Last year Arsenal refused to release Kanu for Nigeria's campaign in the football tournament at the Sydney Olympics.



NWANKWO KANU

Mayer risk losing their places in his team if they choose to stay away with their national teams for as long as six weeks for the Nations Cup.



PHOTO: INTERNET

American national footballers and staff listen to briefings from a U.S. lieutenant colonel (R), during their tour at the truce village of Panmunjom, 50km (31 miles) north of Seoul on December 7.

Sepp for players' union

Football

AFP, Marnes La Vallee

Sepp Blatter, the president of world football's governing body FIFA on Friday said professional players union FIFpro should play an increasingly important role as a member of the "football family".

"You have to give the players a voice, and listen to them ... FIFpro should be recognised as an integral member of the football family and should have access to all FIFA organisations including the confederations and national federations," Blatter said here at EuroDisney near Paris.

Blatter added that FIFpro, with

whom he wished to "work in an atmosphere of solidarity and unity", would have more freedom to do so come 2004 when FIFA celebrated its centenary.

"In 2004, with the voting on new statutes in FIFA's centenary year FIFpro will be represented on our executive the same as referees, coaches and (representatives from) women's football.

"Football has no limit, no race, religion or sex," declared Blatter.

The fact that Blatter was even present at the meeting was a symbol of change in itself according to French football legend Michel Platini, who is also Blatter's adviser in FIFA.

That sentiment was also given the nod by outgoing FIFpro president Gordon Taylor of England. "Your presence is a significant gesture in itself which has more value than words," said Taylor.

Taylor is bidding to be re-elected president of the player's union when voting begins on Friday night (Dec 7).

FIFA's officials recognition of FIFpro, which was established in 1965 to represent professional players, as a viable organisation came shortly after the blueprint drafted by the European Commission and FIFA following FIFpro's lodging of a complaint to

the EC about new transfer rulings which came into place on September 1.

The drafted ruling, according to a source close to FIFA, is a compromise aimed to please both FIFpro and the management of professional clubs.

Blatter also highlighted the impending date of January 1, 2002 as the beginning of the "harmonised international (football) calendar" which he hopes will "put an end to the numerous conflicts of interest between national teams and clubs ... because it is the players more than anyone who are concerned."

Barca bid for Boca star

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona are to step up their hunt for the Spanish league title by signing Boca Juniors star striker Juan Roman Riquelme, El Mundo Deportivo reported Friday.

According to the paper's website, the two clubs have reached agreement on a 20 million-dollar deal - even though Barca vice-president Joan Castells said recently that the Catalan club would not be making any mid-season signings.



PHOTO: INTERNET

A file photo of French midfielder Patrick Vieira who has ended speculation about a move to Real Madrid by promising to stay at Arsenal for the foreseeable future.