

Premiership preview Magpies shoot for six

Football

AFP, London

Surprise Premiership leaders Newcastle United will be looking for their sixth league win on the trot when they host fellow title-chasers Chelsea at St James's Park on Saturday.

The Magpies continue to defy their long odds with successive wins against Blackburn, Ipswich, Leeds, Arsenal and Middlesbrough propelling them to the summit.

But with Chelsea to come, followed by a trip to reigning champions Manchester United on January 2, Newcastle manager Bobby Robson refuses to get carried away with his team's success.

"We're looking to be in the top six," he said. "If we get there we'll be delighted with the season."

Robson continues to play down his team's chances of winning their first-ever league title but with exciting midfielder Kieron Dyer back in action, odds of 14-1 are starting to look very attractive.

The 23-year-old England international, who spent most of the year recovering from a troublesome shin injury, was outstanding in Newcastle's 3-0 derby win over Middlesbrough on Wednesday.

"We know Kieron's a top player and we missed him last year obviously - but when you see his form after 10 months out with very little preparation it's amazing," Robson added.

"He's had a long clinical rehabilitation but he's not had a long playing rehabilitation. He's gone from nowhere into playing top-flight football like that - and he's terrific."

"He's quick, and people can't stick with him. He's got marvellous energy, and we're delighted with him."

Welsh international striker Craig Bellamy, a key figure in Newcastle's climb to the top, agreed with his manager.

"Kieron has made a massive difference," Bellamy said. "We were playing very well without him, but he



BOBBY ROBSON

bury this weekend.

Gunners coach Arsene Wenger was delighted to win a fiercely-contested Boxing Day derby after trailing 1-0 at half-time.

"That (win) was more of a triumph for our physical and mental strength than our technical ability," said the Frenchman.

"We were a bit tired having played the last two games against Newcastle and Liverpool, so to come back like that against Chelsea shows tremendous spirit."

Liverpool, who ended a miserable run of form with a 2-1 victory at Aston Villa in midweek, visit Upton Park on Saturday to face Londoners West Ham.

The Merseysiders, who before Wednesday's win had taken just one point from a possible nine, have slipped back to third having been six points clear at the top of the table at the start of the month.

Wayward striker Nicolas Anelka,

on loan from French club Paris St Germain, could make his first start having played 22 minutes as a second-half substitute at Villa Park on Boxing Day.

Resurgent Manchester United could make it five wins on the spin with victory over Fulham at Craven Cottage on Sunday.

Despite their rich vein of form, United manager Sir Alex Ferguson believes his side still face an uphill battle to retain their championship crown.

"We still have a mountain to climb," he said after United's 2-0 win at Everton on Wednesday.

"All the other teams at the top won - Arsenal, Newcastle, Liverpool - so the results mean we haven't really changed much. We could still find ourselves running out of games."

"It will take a run of momentous proportions for us to win the title."

United will fancy their chances against Fulham's blunt attack which has produced just 17 goals in 18 league games.

"Our problem is that we need to score more goals," said Fulham assistant manager Christian Damiano.

"We have midfielders and other players who can score but luck has not been on our side."

Defender Dominic Matteo and midfielder Eirik Bakke could miss Leeds' clash at Southampton after suffering injuries in Wednesday's 3-0 win at Bolton in which Robbie Fowler netted a hat-trick and missed a penalty.

Leeds manager David O'Leary is already without long-term injury victims Olivier Dacourt, Lucas Radebe and Michael Bridges although Danny Mills is available again after serving a suspension.

Fixtures (1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday: Arsenal v Middlesbrough, Aston Villa v Tottenham, Blackburn v Derby, Bolton v Leicester, Everton v Charlton, Ipswich v Sunderland, Newcastle v Chelsea, Southampton v Leeds, West Ham v Liverpool

Sunday: Fulham v Manchester United (1400GMT)

Hyypia the finest Finn

REUTERS, Helsinki

Liverpool defender Sami Hyypia has been voted Finland's sportsman of the year by the country's sports media.

Hyypia collected 277 first-place votes and a total of 3,418 points, daily Helsingin Sanomat said, leaving him well ahead of the other nominees.

Hyypia was part of the Liverpool team which won the UEFA, FA and League cups last season. The team's website described the 28-year-old as "a tower of strength at centre-half and dominant in the air".

Liverpool teammate Jari Litmanen won the award in 1995 when playing for Ajax.

Napoli deny Romario deal

AFP, Naples

Napoli on Thursday denied claims by Brazilian striker Romario that he had been offered a contract by the Italian second division club.

Romario, in dispute with his club Vasco da Gama because of unpaid wages, had said Wednesday that Napoli, themselves with cash-flow problems because of crippling debts, were interested in signing him.

But Napoli's director of sport Gigi Pavarese gave short shrift to the claim Thursday, saying: "There is no offer or negotiation in progress from Napoli regarding Romario."

"Perhaps he was joking because I don't know where this story came from but I can say for certain that Napoli has nothing to do with it and that certainly there is neither an offer or any negotiations."

Romario, voted player of the tournament for his role in Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning team, has been linked with a number of Italian clubs since falling out with the Rio de Janeiro outfit.

Carraro Italy's football chief

AFP, Rome

Franco Carraro was Friday elected as president of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) at a meeting of the body's general assembly.

Carraro's election ends a search for a new president that has lasted almost a year.

Real elevate Pavon

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid's 21-year-old defender Francisco Pavon has signed a new seven-year contract, the club announced on their website.

Pavon was promoted from Real's second team in October, following an injury to regular centre back Aitor Karanka.

He has played in every league game since, forming a dependable partnership with Fernando Hierro, and Real moved quickly to recognise his new first team status.

"I can't ask for any more than this," Pavon said. "All I've ever wanted is to play for Real Madrid."

Real president Florentino Perez said earlier this year that the club would only move into the transfer market in the future to sign the world's best players and would otherwise rely on home grown talent.

During Perez's time in charge, Real have broken the world transfer record twice to bring in Luis Figo and Zinedine Zidane but second and third team players such as Pavon, Ruben Gonzalez, Raul Bravo and Oscar Minambres have all been given chances.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Racing club players Adrian Bastia (L), Maximiliano Estevez (C) and Alexander Viveros, hold up a replica cup at the end of the match against Velez Sarsfield on December 27.

Racing rule Argentina

Football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Racing Club, saved from bankruptcy two years ago when the Argentine government declared the hugely popular club part of the national heritage, have won their first domestic title for 35 years.

Racing, who have since become one of two clubs in the country to embrace a private administration, clinched the Apertura (Opening) championship when they drew 1-1 away to Velez Sarsfield.

They finished one point ahead of River Plate, whose 6-1 win over Rosario Central - including a hat-trick from striker Martin Cardetti - was in vain.

Around 30,000 Racing supporters, who have stood by their club throughout recent crisis, packed

Velez' Jose Amalfitani stadium.

Another 40,000 watched the game on a giant screen at the Racing's own ground in the industrial district of Avellaneda. In contrast, only around 15,000 watched River in their 65,000 capacity Monumental stadium.

The two games were due to be played last weekend but were postponed following the riots which toppled President Fernando de la Rúa last week and led to the deaths of 27 people.

The rest of last weekend's programme was postponed until next year, at a date still to be decided, due to security worries in the wake of the rioting.

Racing, needing a point for the title, went ahead through a headed goal from defender Gabriel Loeschbor early in the second half.

Mariano Chirumbolo equalised in the 77th minute, forcing Racing to survive a jittery finale in which Velez

threatened to score the second goal which would have sent them to a play-off with River.

River took an early lead through Cardetti but, with half an eye on the Racing match, lost concentration and allowed Luciano de Bruno to equalise.

Guillermo Pereyra came to River's rescue when he headed them back in front just before halftime. River cruised through the second half with two more goals from Cardetti and one each from Ariel Ortega and Damian Alvarez.

The title completed a remarkable rise from the ashes for Racing, which has flirted with relegation for several seasons.

The club missed the start to the championship in 1999 as its huge debts threatened it with collapse. But, after around 50,000 fans took part in a demonstration demanding the club be saved, the government stepped in and the team was

allowed to carry on playing.

The Argentine Football Association (AFA) then changed its rules which until then banned clubs from being run as private enterprises.

Racing and second division Quilmes became the only clubs to bring in private management companies.

Despite the problems and title droughts, the club remained one of the most popular and loyally supported in Argentina.

Coach Reinaldo Merlo also enjoyed a huge change in fortunes.

Initially brought in with the task of saving the club from relegation, Merlo has led them to the title in less than three years ago.

Instead of calling for his head, as they were earlier in his reign, fans are now demanding that a statue of him be erected in front of the stadium.

Trap tempts Hubner



AFP, Milan

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni on Friday told Piacenza striker Dario Hubner that he could be on the plane for the 2002 World Cup finals if he continues his goalscoring form into the new year.

Hubner, who only made his Serie A debut at the age of 30 after a career spent in obscurity, is currently at the age of 34 the Italian first division's top scorer with 12 goals for Piacenza, the club he joined from Brescia in the summer.

And Trapattoni, interviewed by Gazzetta dello Sport, revealed that Hubner was on course for what could be a fairytale end to his career.

"If he continues scoring I do not

see why Hubner could not go to the World Cup," said Trapattoni. "If someone deserves to go he will go. And he deserves a big reward."

Trapattoni said that the door was still open for new candidates for the national team even with only five months left until competition begins in Japan and South Korea.

Realistically - and barring unforeseeable events such as injury - up to 18 of the 22 vacancies are already filled but Trapattoni maintained that there was still a chance for newcomers.

He mentioned Chievo winger Christian Manfredini, born in the Ivory Coast but adopted at the age of five by Italian parents, and Parma midfielder Marco Marchionni as two possible catchers.

"Marchionni and Manfredini are already under observation," said Trap. "Also there is (Atalanta winger

Luciano) Zauri and the Zenoni twins (Atalanta's Damiano and Cristiano of Juventus) who have already been called up to the squad."

The veteran coach also confirmed that AC Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati would be third choice after Juve's Gianluigi Buffon and Inter Milan's Francesco Toldo.

Many likely candidates are injured at present. Fiorentina striker Enrico Chiesa and Udinese defender Valerio Bertotto are ruled out for the season, meaning they are very unlikely to play in the World Cup, while Filippo Inzaghi (AC Milan), Vincenzo Montella (AS Roma), Roberto Baggio (Brescia), Paolo Maldini (AC Milan) are recovering from less serious injuries.

"Anyone who gets a long-term injury now is unlikely to recover in time," said Trapattoni.

Scottish Premier League preview Celtic won't be boring

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Runaway Scottish league leaders Celtic will be hoping to silence disgruntled sections of their own support when they travel to Dundee United on Saturday aiming to extend their 13-point lead at the top of the table.

A last-gasp 3-2 win over Livingston on Wednesday maintained Celtic's advantage over rivals Rangers and kept their 100 per cent home record intact, but the performance failed to capture the imagination of the Parkhead crowd.

Some of the home fans gave the players a hard time for a lacklustre performance. Only a 90th-minute winner from leading goalscorer Henrik Larsson saved Celtic blushes against the league's surprise package.

"We've spoken of the great European nights we've enjoyed here but the players had to win this one on their own," said the Irishman. "The supporters got their money's worth, even though they moaned at our players a bit."

"Our fans shouldn't be spoiled because this club has no divine right to win matches. The crowd got anxious but I don't think that was warranted."

"We took 52 points out of a possible 57 here last season and, so far this time, we've won 30 out of 30 so there should not be too many complaints."

Celtic are expected to be without striker Chris Sutton who was stretched out on Wednesday.

The former Chelsea and Blackburn forward fell awkwardly in an aerial challenge with Livingston

defender Marvin Andrews and injured his ankle.

The 6 million pound (8.7 million dollar) man was taken to hospital with suspected ligament damage but will not discover the full extent of his injury until a further scan is undertaken.

A club spokesperson said: "The X-ray taken after the game showed no damage to the bone so a further precautionary scan will be done on his ankle to ascertain the nature of the damage done to the soft tissue."

Second-placed Rangers, 3-0 winners at Hibernian on Wednesday, host bottom club St Johnstone at Ibrox on Saturday, looking to take advantage of any slip-up Celtic might make at Tannadice.

Rangers' win at Easter Road owed much to the performance of Scotland international Barry Ferguson who has retained the captaincy under new manager Alex McLeish, who took over from Dick Advocaat earlier this month.

"Barry Ferguson grew in stature under Dick. Dick gave him the captaincy, promoted him in the newspapers - and he's a class player," McLeish said.

"He's still very, very young, but if he recognises his strengths as a player he can get better and better."

"He's maybe not necessarily the killer-pass player - but he keeps the traffic flowing."

"There are plenty of other players at world level who are revered by coaches and team-mates alike that play the type of role I believe Barry can be a major success at."

Hibernian manager Franck Sauzee has now seen his side fail to score in each of the three matches since he succeeded McLeish in the Easter Road hotseat.

Now languishing in 10th place,

Sauzee believes his side's top priority in a season, which began with a UEFA Cup campaign, is to stave off relegation.

"That's the real deal now," he said.

Fixtures (1500GMT unless stated): Dundee United v Celtic (1735GMT), Dunfermline v Aberdeen, Hearts v Hibernian, Livingston v Kilmarnock, Motherwell v Dundee, Rangers v St Johnstone



PHOTO: INTERNET

A file image of Real Madrid defender Francisco Pavon (L) tackling AS Roma's Argentine star striker Gabriel Batistuta. Pavon has signed a long-term deal with the Spanish giants.

Cesare almost Paraguay's



AFP, Rome

Former Italy coach Cesare Maldini was due in Paraguay Thursday to formalise a deal to become coach of that country's national team for the 2002 World Cup finals.

Maldini, who was caretaker coach of AC Milan last season following the sacking of Alberto Zaccheroni and before the appointment of Fatih Terim, left Milan's Malpensa airport on Wednesday evening to fly to Asuncion where he

was to conclude the deal.

His assistant will be former Italian international Giuseppe Dossena, who was once in charge of the Ghana national side.

"I am honoured at the invitation from Paraguay which wanted to put the national team in the hands of an Italian coach," said Maldini who led Italy to the World Cup quarterfinals in 1998 where they lost on penalties to eventual winners France.

"The World Cup has a real fascination, I am delighted to be participating in what will be the fourth World Cup of my career," he told TG5 channel.

Di Canio not worried

Football

AFP, Rome

West Ham United's Italian star Paolo Di Canio said Thursday he had nothing to fear from a police inquiry into an alleged incident in the players' tunnel during his side's English Premiership game with Leicester City on Saturday.

Reports in Italy have said police are investigating a complaint into the Italian's behaviour during the match made by a match steward but Di Canio has denied any wrongdoing and refutes suggestions of any incident in the players' tunnel.

"Nothing happened in the tunnel leading to the dressing room," said Di Canio in a statement. "The police have not yet spoken to me. I can

Tabarez named Boca coach

AFP, Buenos Aires

Uruguayan Oscar Tabarez has been named as new coach of Argentine champions Boca Juniors, local reports said here Thursday.

Tabarez replaces Carlos Bianchi in what will be his second spell at the club after coaching Boca from 1990-1993.

Souness chasing Cole

AFP, London

Blackburn Rovers manager Graeme Souness has said that he would consider making amove for Manchester United striker Andy Cole if he went on the transfer list.

Cole is upset this season at finding himself behind new-signing Ruud van Nistelrooy in the queue for a place in United's front line and was again left out against Everton on Wednesday.

"Anyone would be interested in a player like Andy Cole and, if he's available, that's something we would consider," the Press Association quoted Souness as saying.

Vicenza sack Fascetti

AFP, Vicenza

Italian second division club Vicenza have Friday sacked coach Eugenio Fascetti, the club's director general Rinaldo Sagromola announced.

Fascetti thus received his cards for the second time in a calendar year after being sacked by Bari during last season when the southern club was virtually assured of relegation to division two.