

Barca leading the race?

Football

PRESS ASSOCIATION, Paris

Paris St-Germain president Francis Graille today claimed that Barcelona have moved ahead of Manchester United in the never-ending race to sign Ronaldinho.

The bid from the Catalan club, claims Graille, is "completely" superior to the offer from United, and the PSG president added that he is keen to get the sale done as soon as possible.

Even though Barcelona have proposed the inclusion of two players as part of their bid - which is believed to be around £21m - PSG are warning that United must move swiftly to increase their £15.5m bid, and do so significantly, in order to remain in the race for the Brazilian.

Asked whether the offer from Old Trafford was insufficient compared to the sum which Barca are prepared to pay, Graille said: "Yes, completely. However nothing has been done yet."

Graille wants the situation resolved "as soon as possible", and the longer Barcelona's bid remains the preferred option for PSG, the more likely they are to sign the striker.

When asked whether there were meetings planned with United chief executive Peter Kenyon, Graille added: "Nothing has been planned so far but things can happen very quickly."

Barcelona have made Ronaldinho their prime target since losing out on David Beckham to Real Madrid, and their new president Joan Laporta is eager to secure a big-name signing - both to improve a team which last season

descended into mediocrity, and to increase the club's worldwide profile.

Laporta stated Wednesday he has no intention of getting into a

bidding war with United for Ronaldinho.

"Barcelona tabled a significant offer to Paris Saint-Germain and at the last moment, when we were on

the point of signing contracts, Manchester United came in with a counter bid and sparked off a bidding war," said Laporta.

"We don't think it's in Barcelona's interests to up our bid to Manchester's level, which, it seems, is very high," he added.

"Barcelona made a sizeable offer and will stick to it," said the Catalan club's boss, and that "the matter is now closed."

According to Laporta, Barcelona's sporting vice-president Sandro Rosell went to Paris on Tuesday to reach an agreement with Ronaldinho and his agent and brother Roberto Assis.

The latter, talking to AFP by telephone Wednesday afternoon, declined to comment on the state of play in the negotiations. According to him, Ronaldinho is still in Brazil.

Ronaldinho has said that he wants to join United but he and brother Roberto Assis, who acts as the 23-year-old's agent, are understood to be disappointed by the protracted nature of the transfer.

He is also known to be enthusiastic about playing in Spain, but would have preferred to join Madrid rather than Barca, only for the team from the Spanish champions to withdraw their interest when Ronaldinho dismissed their suggestion that he should stay at Old Trafford on a loan basis.

PSG have stopped Ronaldinho's wages and he remains in Brazil - seven days after he was due to report back for pre-season training.

Ronaldinho is best known for his 40 metre free kick which fooled England goalkeeper David Seaman in the World Cup quarter-finals.



RONALDINHO

Heading for Highbury?

Football

AFP, Sandwich, England

Golfer Sergio Garcia may have let the secret slip Thursday when he claimed his friend Steve McManaman was on the verge of leaving Real Madrid for Arsenal.

McManaman further down the pecking order at the Bernabeu and the 31-year-old could be keen to move to see some first team action.

"I think Steve is talking to Arsenal," Garcia revealed.

The Gunners, despite finishing second to Manchester United last season, are yet to make any signings to bolster their squad.



STEVE McMANAMAN

Garcia, in Sandwich for the British Open, is a Real Madrid fan, and believes the arrival of England captain David Beckham will see his pal McManaman leave.

Beckham's arrival knocks

Mendieta extends Lazio stay

Football

AFP, Rome

Spanish midfielder Gaizka Mendieta has signed a two year extension to his existing contract that will keep him at Lazio until June 2008, the Italian club confirmed on Thursday.

Mendieta, who joined the Rome club from Valencia two years ago for a fee of 41 million euros (46 million dollars), has accepted a 40 per cent pay cut to remain with the cash-strapped Serie A outfit.

The decision to extend his contract comes as something of a surprise as Lazio has seemed keen to offload a 30-year-old Spain international.

Mendieta struggled in his first season in Serie A and failed to hold down a regular place in the first team.

He was loaned out to Barcelona last season but the Spanish giants turned down the chance to make the move permanent.

Mendieta rose to fame with his performances for Valencia in their Champions League campaign in 2000 when they reached the final only to lose to Real Madrid.

He helped Valencia to the final the following year and scored an early penalty against Bayern Munich before the Germans equalised and then won a penalty shoot-out.

Mendieta made his debut for Spain in March 1999 as a substitute in a European championship qualifier against Austria and his first international goal came in the last minute of a 9-0 win against San Marino.

The tie, scheduled for 20 August, is a warm-up for the Euro 2004 qualifiers with Macedonia and Liechtenstein but Beckham may be rested for the clash at Portman Road.

"We haven't made any decisions about David yet," Eriksson declared on the Football Association website.

"But we'll see how things go for David and we'll make that decision just before we pick the squad."

Beckham, who recently swapped Manchester United for the Spanish capital in a 25 million pounds deal (40million dollars), missed England's last qualifying match against Slovakia through suspension.

Eriksson is keen to monitor the progress of Beckham in Madrid with speculation mounting as to where he will play.

"It will be very interesting of course to see what position he will play," said an intrigued Eriksson.

"I don't need to see him every week, but Tord Grip (Eriksson's assistant) and myself will travel to Madrid to see him."



GAIZKA MENDIETA

Kleberson deal on the cards

AFP, London

Manchester United were expected to complete the signing of Brazil's World Cup winning midfielder Kleberson later Thursday.

Media reports said the 24-year-old had left Sao Paulo for Manchester where he was due to pass a medical.

United manager Alex Ferguson said two days ago he hoped to make



KLEBERSON

Kleberson the first Brazilian to play at Old Trafford in a reported seven million pound (11 million dollar) move from Atletico Paranaense.

United also hope to wrap up a 19.3 million pound deal (31 million dollar) deal with Paris St Germain for their Brazilian world champion Ronaldinho later this week.

Ferguson sees the pair as ideal replacement to England captain David Beckham who moved to Real Madrid.

Kleberson, linked with Leeds and Newcastle in April, began last year's World Cup in the bench before replacing Juninho and establishing a match-winning partnership with Gilberto Silva, now playing for Arsenal.

Chelsea getting Duff

Football

THE SUN, London

Damien Duff is winging his way to Chelsea after a £17million deal was struck as he prepared to jet to America.

Duff was boarding a plane at Manchester Airport to head off on Blackburn's pre-season tour to Washington.

But then Rovers accepted Roman Abramovich's FOURTH mega-bid for the Republic of Ireland wing wizard, who did a swift about-turn and dashed off to work.

The Londoners are also waiting to see if a £14m offer for Deportivo La Coruna striker Roy Makaay will be successful.

Bayern Munich had hoped to land the Dutch ace for £12.5m, but Chelsea aim to pip them by including Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink in their package.

Makaay is currently thinking over his future on holiday in Holland. He believes it's a switch to England rather than Germany because that is what his wife would prefer.

Duff can look forward to a double-your-money pay deal of £70,000 a week to join Red Rom's Stamford Bridge revolution.

The 24-year-old ace has been claiming he would prefer to stay at Ewood Park. But new Chelsea owner Abramovich is not used to rejection and the player knows he cannot afford to snub this chance-of-a-lifetime transfer.

Duff's exit for the capital will be a blow to Manchester United, who had also been after him.

He will join £6m West Ham and England Under-21 full-back Glen Johnson and £6.9m midfielder Geremi in the Londoners' new-look squad.

Duff's ability to create goals would be perfect for 28-year-old



DAMENI DUFF

European Golden Boot winner Makaay, who hit 42 goals last season including nine in the first two phases of the Champions League.

Deportivo would love Hasselbaink in exchange, but cannot afford his £70,000-a-week wages.

To help out and speed up business, Abramovich has offered to pay the player's salary for his first year in Spain. Hasselbaink, 31, is said to be happy to return to the country where he banded in 30 goals for Atletico Madrid before joining Chelsea in June 2000.

Abraham has moved for Makaay because he now knows Christian Vieri is unlikely to leave Italy and Patrick Kluivert is staying at Barcelona.

Bayern already look resigned to losing out to the man with the fattest cheque-book in football.

Angry coach Ottmar Hitzfeld

insisted: "We are in the comfortable position that we have enough top strikers even if Makaay won't come."

Geremi is poised to become Chelsea's latest free-kick king, having completed his move from Real Madrid last night.

The Cameroon international, 24, has a five-year contract and is already dreaming of replacing hotshot Gianfranco Zola.

Geremi told Chelsea TV: "I know Zola was one of the finest at delivering set-pieces. But I will do my best to do the same."

There was further good news for the club when Eidur Gudjohnsen signed a new three-year deal.

Midfielder Jody Morris, 24, will join First Division new-boys Cardiff today on a Bosman free.

Geremi relishing the prospect

Football

AFP, London

Cameroon international midfielder Geremi said he was targeting winning several Premiership titles with cash-rich Chelsea after completing his 7million pounds (11.1million US dollars) transfer from Real Madrid on Wednesday.

The 24-year-old signed a five year contract after passing his medical becoming Chelsea's second signing - Glen Johnson having signed on Tuesday - since Russian oil billionaire Roman Abramovich bought the club for 140million pounds a fortnight ago.

Geremi had been a target of Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri last year but a shortage of funds prevented him from signing him and he went to Middlesbrough instead on loan where his impressive performances were a big

Motivation

He currently in Mexico with the Brazil squad competing in the CONCACAF Gold Cup.

A string of impressive performances in the reserves soon saw Motta selected for the first team and he made several appearances for Barcelona in last season's Champions League.

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Eriksson to give Becks time

AFP, London

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson says captain David Beckham may sit out the upcoming friendly against Croatia to give him time to settle at new club Real Madrid.

The tie, scheduled for 20 August, is a warm-up for the Euro 2004 qualifiers with Macedonia and Liechtenstein but Beckham may be rested for the clash at Portman Road.

"We haven't made any decisions about David yet," Eriksson declared on the Football Association website.

"But we'll see how things go for David and we'll make that decision just before we pick the squad."

Beckham, who recently swapped Manchester United for the Spanish capital in a 25 million pounds deal (40million dollars), missed England's last qualifying match against Slovakia through suspension.

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"I don't need to see him every week, but Tord Grip (Eriksson's assistant) and myself will travel to Madrid to see him."

Walter Centeno scored in first-half injury time, netting a 16-yard



GEREMI

Costa Rica, Cuba in last four



CONCACAF

GOLD CUP

CONCACAF