

Primera Liga preview

Ronaldo sets New Year's goal

Football

AP, Madrid

After a near-perfect 2003, Brazilian ace Ronaldo says he hopes for more of the same in the New Year: lots of goals, trophies and no injuries.

Ronaldo, who scored a stunning 42 goals in 56 matches over the last 12 months, leads Real Madrid in its first match of 2004 on Saturday against lowly Murcia. Madrid is top of the Primera Division standings with 39 points from 17 matches, two points ahead of its nearest challenger, Valencia.

Besides being the league's most prolific scorer with 14 goals in the current season, Ronaldo also helped Madrid win the league title and the Spanish Supercup. And, perhaps even more importantly for him, he only missed two matches through injury.

"2003 has been magnificent, if only for the fact that I had no injuries," Ronaldo told the leading sports daily Marca. "In 2004, I want the same again... as well as the Champions League."

The Champions League, which Madrid has won nine times, is one of the few trophies that have so far eluded the 27-year striker.

For Saturday's match, Madrid can count on recovered midfielders David Beckham and Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez, both of whom missed the team's last game of 2003 against Mallorca through injury.

Ailing Murcia will be looking to the services of its new goalkeeper Roberto Bonano, who comes on loan from Barcelona after a disastrous six months with the Catalan club.

"I've had a tough six months and I'm taking this opportunity very eagerly," said the Argentine. "I'm sure we can stay in the first division."

Second-place Valencia looks to have a tough battle on its hands Sunday when it hosts regional rival Villarreal, a provincial club that has stormed into fifth place with sparkling performances from two other Barcelona rejects, Argentine Juan Roman Riquelme and Brazilian Sonny Anderson.

No. 3 Deportivo de La Coruna, which lies six points behind Madrid, faces an equally tough match when it travels down the coast Saturday to meet Celta de Vigo, which is currently floundering at No. 17.

Pamplona's Osasuna, fourth in the table at 27 points, travels north to the neighboring Basque region to play No. 8 Athletic de Bilbao on Sunday.

FC Barcelona, hoping for a brighter year after missing out on a place in the Champions League last season

and finishing the year in a dismal ninth place, faces mid-ranking Racing de Santander on Sunday.

"The championship so far has been pretty irregular for Barcelona but we're hoping that the second half of the season proves more solid and we can turn a brighter cheek," said Barcelona club member and former star Jose Maria Bakero.

Saturday's other 18th-round match sees No. 15 Zaragoza facing No. 6 Atletico de Madrid. On Sunday, Sevilla plays Albacete, Betis is at Valladolid, Espanyol receives Mallorca and Real Sociedad travels to Malaga.

FIXTURES	
Saturday (kick off GMT): Real Madrid v Murcia (1830), Celta Vigo v Deportivo La Coruna (2030), Real Zaragoza v Atletico Madrid (2030)	
Sunday: Athletic Bilbao v Osasuna (1600), Espanyol v Real Mallorca (1600), Malaga v Real Sociedad (1600), Sevilla v Albacete (1600), Valladolid v Real Betis (1600), Racing Santander v Barcelona (1800), Valencia v Villarreal (2100)	



RONALDO

FA Cup preview

Liverpool's Div Three trial!

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool face renowned goalkeepers Yeovil in the third round of the FA Cup this weekend with even some Anfield loyalists saying defeat could mark the end of Gerard Houllier's managerial reign.

Liverpool, once the pre-eminent team in England, are 20 points behind Premiership leaders Manchester United ahead of a weekend of matches which see top flight and First Division clubs enter the world's oldest senior knockout football tournament.

To make matters worse for Houllier, Liverpool are set to be without captain Steven Gerrard although Michael Owen could return from injury as a substitute.

In the tradition of Cup upsets, Sunday's match is taking part at the lower-ranked club's ground.

And although Third Division Yeovil no longer play on a sloping pitch their compact Huish Park ground could well test the resolve of players used to operating in grander surroundings.

Former Liverpool captain Emlyn Hughes is in no doubt about the importance of Sunday's match. "It's a big game for the club and a big game for Gerard Houllier," Hughes told Thursday's Daily Mirror.

"Liverpool will be looking to win the FA Cup and after that their only

other chance of winning a trophy this season is the UEFA Cup.

"If they lose to Yeovil it could be a catastrophe for them. Gerard's job could be on the line," added Hughes, whose trophy-laden spell as Liverpool captain included an FA Cup final win against Newcastle in 1974.

Despite spending heavily in the transfer market, Houllier has failed to return the English title to Anfield after a gap of nearly 14 years.

Although Liverpool are noted for rarely sacking managers reports from Merseyside suggest the board's patience is wearing thin.

Yeovil's place in Cup lore was secured back in 1949 when, as a non-league side, they defeated then mighty Sunderland in the fourth round.

Now fifth in the Third Division, they are managed by former Latvia coach Gary Johnson who insists his team are ready to add to the 20 League scalps collected in Cup competition by Yeovil's non-league predecessors.

"We want to win. I won't be saying, 'Go out there lads and just enjoy it.' That's not what we are about," Johnson insisted.

"If these lads are playing tiddly-winks or Liverpool in the cup they want to win. They are so focused."

Another upset could take place at Aggborough on Saturday where Third Division Kidderminster, managed by former Liverpool midfielder Jan Molby, face Premiership basement club Wolves.

history have played in four successive finals while the last team to win the trophy three times in a row were Blackburn Rovers between 1884 and 1886.

Sunday also sees Premiership leaders Manchester United away to mid-table Aston Villa. United's tally of 10 Cup successes is a tournament record but they have not lifted the trophy since their treble-winning season of 1999.

When the clubs last met at the same stage of the competition in the 2001-02 season United overcame a 2-0 deficit to win 3-2 with Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy scoring twice.

Long-serving Villa chairman Doug Ellis, 80 in February, is not alone among the Birmingham club's supporters in wanting revenge.

"No-one needs reminding what happened when United came to Villa Park at the same stage two years ago. The memory of losing after holding a two-goal lead still leaves a bitter taste," said Ellis.

"Although we are under no illusions it will be any easier this time, the fans can be rest assured our players will be intent on revenge."

Southampton, last season's beaten finalists, are at home to Newcastle on Saturday.

Both sides currently have 26 league points - the same as Liverpool - and the Cup represents their best

chance of silverware.

Other potential banana skin

Nakata bitter

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata hit out at Parma coach Cesare Prandelli after confirming his departure on a six-month loan deal to Italian Serie-A rivals Bologna.

Nakata said he had sought a move from Parma after Prandelli reneged on a pre-season promise to play him in his favourite role as an attacking central midfielder instead of on the right wing.

"I have decided to leave Parma for the rest of the season," the 26-year-old Japan captain said in a message posted on his official website.

"I have frustrated my supporters so far this season. I'll do my best to let them enjoy from now on."

The deal was expected to be announced by Parma later Friday when the Italian winter break transfer market re-opens, with Nakata joining Bologna immediately, press reports said.

"At this point in time, I am in a situation which is unfortunately unchanged from a year before or worse still," Nakata said.

"I haven't played behind the forward line at all and lately I have

fewer opportunities to play than before."

Nakata also said his move had been motivated largely by his trust in Bologna coach Carlo Mazzone, under whom he played in his second year at Perugia.

Nakata, twice the Asian player of the year, moved to Perugia after the 1998 World Cup finals for his first overseas contract. He also played for AS Roma before he was sold to Parma in 2001.

"I had talked with Mazzone directly by telephone and all the question about my position was cleared up," Nakata said, adding that Mazzone understands him "both as a soccer player and a person."

"More than anything else, he needs my soccer. It matters much," he said.

Press reports said Nakata would be paid an estimated 92 million yen (842,500 dollars) for the six-month deal, 30 percent down from what he would have earned at Parma, it added.

He may be eligible for Bologna's league match against Empoli on Tuesday.

In the middle of last year, Nakata was reported to be sought after by other European clubs including English Premiership title hopefuls Chelsea as well as Italy's AC Milan and Lazio.



HIDETOSHI NAKATA

A game or two more for Ferdinand?

AFP, London

Rio Ferdinand's ban for missing a drugs test, due to start on January 12, may be delayed which would allow the England star to play in Manchester United's league match against Wolves five days later.

England defender Ferdinand's legal team have asked for clarification of the original suspension decision.

Under Football Association (FA) rules, Ferdinand does not have to lodge an appeal until a full 14 days after he has received the explanation.

If that clarification were not to arrive until next week, Ferdinand would still be free to play in any possible third round FA Cup tie replay against Aston Villa - United's opponents this weekend - and the champions' league match at Wolves.

That could mean that Ferdinand's appeal would not be heard until March. The FA were severely criticised by FIFA president Sepp Blatter for taking three months to hold the initial hearing after Ferdinand failed to turn up for a drugs test on September 23.

In the meantime FA chief executive Mark Palios has vowed to speed up the disciplinary process.

As things stand at the moment, Ferdinand is banned from January 12 to September 12 meaning he will miss the Euro 2004 Championships in Portugal.

Ferdinand's ban was denounced as "savage and unprecedented" by United when it was imposed last month with the club saying an appeal was "inevitable".

Before the original hearing Ferdinand, 25, was left out of the England squad which played Turkey in October's decisive Euro 2004 qualifier, a move that almost led to his international team-mates going on strike.

Cisse's choice

Football

AFP, London

France striker Djibril Cisse said he still intended to sign for Liverpool at the end of the current European season, Britain's Daily Star tabloid reported Friday.

Recent speculation has linked the 22-year-old Auxerre forward with a move to English champions Manchester United but the Star quoted Cisse as saying: "I still intend to sign for Liverpool. It has always been very precise with them, although I have signed no deal."

He added: "We all know where we are because we have been

talking for a long time, so it is not necessary to talk every week. My manager, Guy Roux, has already spoken directly with Liverpool."

Cisse insisted he had not heard from United and said Liverpool, managed by Frenchman Gerard Houllier, were the only club who could tempt him away from Auxerre.

"There has been no direct contact with United," Cisse said. "I don't really know that much about it but I have heard something."

"But I am already advanced with Liverpool and they have my priority. I am not thinking about another club."

"If I leave at the end of the season it will be for Liverpool and not another club."

Moratti believes in Vieri

Football

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti says sought-after striker Christian Vieri still has a big part to play in the club's future despite intense speculation linking the Italy international with a move abroad.

Vieri is still believed to be a target for big-spending English Premiership club Chelsea, who tried to sign him last summer, while Spanish giants Barcelona and Real Madrid are also said to be in the hunt for the 30-year-old forward.

But Moratti is confident Vieri will remain at Inter and eventually link up with on-loan striker Adriano, who is expected to return from cash-strapped Serie A rivals Parma at the end of the season.

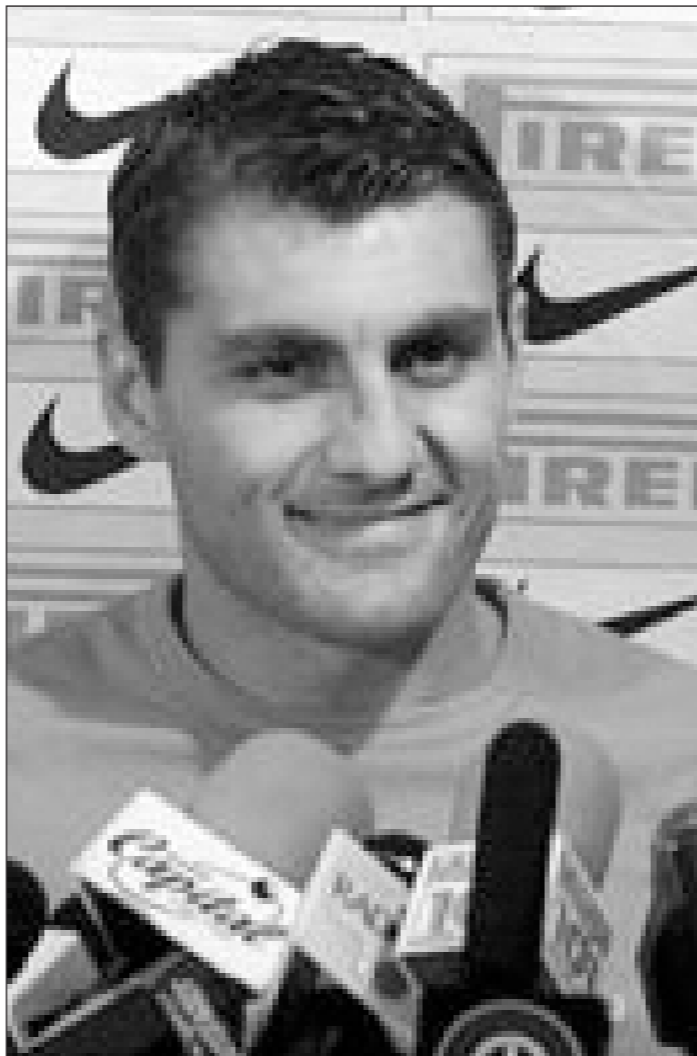
"Several clubs are interested in signing Vieri but we have our own objectives here and are looking forward rather than back," Moratti told the Gazzetta dello Sport.

"I hope Vieri is not imagining a future without us. He can team up with Adriano because all great footballers can play together. Then it is up to the coach to find the right system out on the pitch."

Vieri's future has been the source of constant speculation since the summer when Chelsea offered 20 million pounds (28.3 million euros) for the burly target man.

Inter turned down the offer only to agree to sell Vieri's strike partner Hernan Crespo to the big-spending English Premiership club.

The decision angered Vieri who openly criticised Inter's directors for weakening their squad rather than keeping hold of their best players.



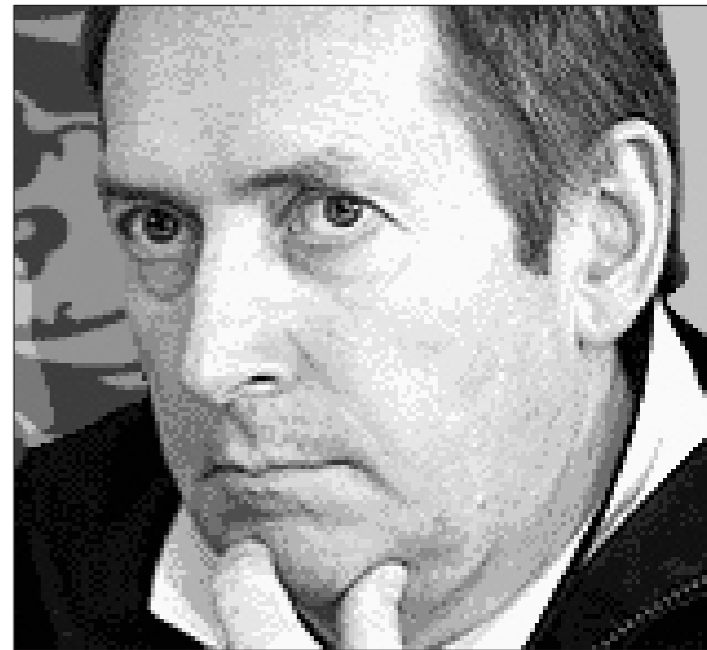
VIERI

FIXTURES

English FA Cup third round soccer fixtures for January 3 and 4 (Roman numerals denote division of non-premier league team, ML denotes minor league. Kickoff times 1500 GMT unless stated):

SATURDAY: Accrington Stanley (ML) v Colchester (II), Barnsley (II) v Scunthorpe (III), Birmingham City v Blackburn Rovers, Bradford (I) v Luton (II), Cardiff (I) v Sheffield United (I) (1200), Coventry (I) v Peterborough (II), Crewe (I) v Telford (ML), Everton v Norwich (I), Gillingham (I) v Charlton Athletic, Ipswich (I) v Derby (I), Kidderminster (III) v Wolverhampton Wanderers, Manchester City v Leicester City, Mansfield (III) v Burnley (I), Middlesbrough v Notts County (III), Millwall (I) v Walsall (I), Northampton (III) v Rotherham (I), Nottingham Forest (I) v West Bromwich (I), Portsmouth v Blackpool (II), Preston (I) v Reading (I), Southampton v Newcastle United (1735), Southend (III) v Scarborough (ML), Sunderland (I) v Hartlepool (II), Swansea (III) v Macclesfield (III), Tottenham Hotspur v Crystal Palace, (I) Tranmere (II) v Bolton Wanderers (1200), Watford (I) v Chelsea (1230), Wigan (I) v West Ham (I), Wimbledon (I) v Stoke (I)

SUNDAY: Aston Villa v Manchester United (1230), Fulham v Cheltenham (III) (1400), Leeds United v Arsenal (1605), Yeovil (III) v Liverpool (1300)



GERARD HOULLIER

There are several all top-flight ties with Arsenal, Cup holders for the past two seasons, away to second from bottom Leeds on Sunday.

If Arsene Wenger's men emerge victorious at Elland Road it could mark the start of an historic Cup campaign for the Londoners.

No team in the tournament's

contests see big-spenders Chelsea at First Division Watford, Portsmouth hosting Second Division Blackpool and another struggling Premiership side, Tottenham, taking on First Division London rivals Crystal Palace.

Barthez finally Marseille's

Football

AFP, Marseille

French first division side Olympique Marseille confirmed Friday they have signed Manchester United's French international goalkeeper Fabien Barthez on loan until June.

He will play in Saturday's French Cup tie against Strasbourg at the Velodrome.

Barthez, 32, had fallen out of favour at the English champions where he was third in the pecking order behind American Tim Howard and Northern Ireland's

Roy Carroll.

However, the keeper has been told by France team coach Jacques Santini that he needs to get back into regular top flight football if he is to keep his place for the 2004 European Championships in Portugal.

The 1998 World Cup and 2000 European Championship winner has been training at Marseille, who are paying part of his wages, since mid-October.

But world soccer's governing body FIFA had turned down Marseille's appeal last month to sign outside the approved transfer period on loan as a replacement for the injured Cedric Carasso who is

second-choice goalkeeper behind Croatian Vedran Runje.

Marseille president Christophe Bouchet praised Barthez "for his patience, professionalism and the unusual dignity that he has shown since his arrival" at the club in October.

Manchester United signed Barthez for a world record 7.8 million pounds (13 million dollars) from Monaco in May 2000. He played for Marseille until 1995, winning the European Cup with them in 1993.

Barthez has two and a half years left on his United contract but his prospects at Old Trafford look bleak.