

Fergie the 'Bully'!

AFP, London

Fulham manager Chris Coleman has accused Manchester United of trying to "bully" them into selling 14-goal French striker Louis Saha.

Fulham chairman Mohamed al Fayed has already ruled out a renewed approach - believed to be 8 million pounds - for the 25-year-old French striker.

But Coleman claims United manager Alex Ferguson is trying to unsettle his player.

"You get that feeling that we are being bullied into selling one of our players," Coleman told the Sun newspaper.

"I don't like bullies and I don't like being bullied, that is why we are determined to hang on to Louis Saha."

Ferguson wants Saha to partner Ruud van Nistelrooy up front.

"When someone asks you if a player is available and you say 'no' and they make a bid and you say 'no' and they keep coming back, and it is in the newspapers and they come back again, that's disappointing," said Coleman.

"He has two and a half years left on his contract, so if he says 'I'm leaving' he can't just get up and walk out. Will he put in a request? I hope not."

Coleman's criticism of the Premiership champions follows a stinging attack on Ferguson by al Fayed.

"I am fed up with Sir Alex Ferguson trying to disrupt my club and constantly try to unsettle my players," said al Fayed.

"I have a clear message to Sir Alex and anyone else who is interested: 'Read my lips, Saha is not for sale.'"

Saha at a loss

AFP, Paris

French striker Louis Saha has admitted he was "appalled" by Fulham's refusal to sell him to Manchester United.

"I am completely gutted, appalled," Saha told the sports daily L'Equipe on Wednesday of Fulham chairman Mohamed al Fayed's rejection of Alex Ferguson's new bid believed to be 8 million pounds (14.6 million dollars).

"A transfer to Manchester was a good deal for everyone," added the 25-year-old striker whose 14 goals this term have taken Fulham into the top six in the English Premiership.

"MU offered 8 million pounds. It was great for Fulham. I am not Ronaldo after all. And I had the chance of playing for one of the greatest clubs in the world. It was the chance of my life.

"It is obvious Manchester will not try to get me again in six months' time, because they will have found another striker by then.

"I really don't understand the president. I have given a lot to Fulham, I thought that would be have given me a ticket out."

Fulham want to keep the side together in an attempt to qualify for next season's Champions League.

Valderrama's u-turn

AFP, Bogota

Former Colombian international midfield star Carlos Valderrama has announced that he will not after all make a comeback at the age of 42.

Eduardo Retat, the coach of his first professional club, Union Magdalena, announced at the weekend that Valderrama would be lacing up his boots again to play with the Colombian first division side.

But Valderrama, renowned for his distinctive afro hairstyle, said he had had second thoughts.

"I have already left soccer. The page has turned and then the president and the coach of the club suddenly gave the opportunity to fulfill my dream to finish my career in the club where it began, but it will not be," he told a press conference on Tuesday.

"I was supposed to link up with the team on January 5 but I was on holiday and then I lost the notion to go.

"I have always been a serious player, and don't want to delude anybody and will dedicate myself instead to the party in Barranquilla."

Valderrama will be the star of the show at the February 1 match in Barranquilla, which will feature past and present South American and European stars including Eric Cantona, Jose Luis Chilavert, Ivan Zamorano and Enzo Francescoli.

Valderrama - a two-time World Cup veteran and part of the team that performed so poorly in the 1994 finals in the United States when considered one of the favourites for the title - announced his retirement last April, saying he wanted to begin a coaching career.

He began his playing career in 1981 with Union Magdalena and also played with Millionarios and Deportivo Cali of Colombia before signing for French first division team Montpellier in 1988.

In 1990 he moved to Spanish club Real Valladolid, before returning to Colombia in 1992 to play for Deportivo Independiente Medellin, followed by Atletico Juniors in 1993 and remained there until joining the Mutiny in 1996.

An enigma called Rivaldo

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

It took only 18 months for Rivaldo to go from World Cup winner and national hero in his native Brazil to a figure of fun in Italy.

But having endured what he described as the worst year of his life with Serie A club AC Milan before being released last month, Rivaldo has the chance to put his career back on track after signing for Brazilian champions Cruzeiro on Monday.

It is a familiar challenge for the 31-year-old.

Although he was won football's ultimate team prize, the World Cup in 2002, and was voted FIFA's player of the year in 1999, Rivaldo is repeatedly having to prove to his detractors that he can play football.

Perhaps it is his seemingly awkward, bow-legged style on the pitch or possibly an introverted style that makes him a publicity man's nightmare off the field, but Rivaldo has become one of modern football's great enigmas.

He shuns the limelight to the same measure as his World Cup team mate Ronaldo attracts it.

While 'the Phenomenon' hops around the globe and revels in the publicity, Rivaldo prefers to shut himself away in the little-known provincial city of Mogi Mirim, in the heart of the state of São Paulo.

"He doesn't do any marketing

and that maybe part of the problem," said Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira recently.

Whatever the reason, Rivaldo seems to attract the blame for collective failure far more easily than he gets the credit for success.

In 1996, after being included as one of three permitted over-age players, Rivaldo was made the scapegoat after Brazil failed to win the gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics soccer tournament. It was a year before he wore the Brazil



RIVALDO

shirt again.

During five years at Barcelona, his astonishing skills made him a favourite with the fans yet he was at one stage banished to the substitutes' bench by Dutch coach Louis van Gaal for alleged tactical disobedience.

In the 1998 World Cup Rivaldo

played in all seven games and scored four goals as he helped steer Brazil to the final where they lost 3-0 to France.

His reward was to be accused of trying to upstage Ronaldo.

He then commuted to South America on an almost monthly basis to take part in the qualifiers for the 2002 World Cup -- and was accused of lacking commitment.

After being jeered by the crowd in Sao Paulo during a qualifier against Colombia in 2000, Rivaldo even threatened to pack in his international career.

But he stuck with it and, after receiving the unconditional support of coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, helped his country to their fifth World Cup title in Japan and South Korea, only for another nightmare to begin after he signed for Milan.

Rivaldo was banished to the substitutes' bench by coach Carlo Ancelotti and, after finally being released last month, was voted the worst player in the country in a poll conducted by a local radio station.

For all the ups and downs, Rivaldo has insisted that he will not change his personality or his style.

He is confident that he will go down in Brazilian football history as the man who helped them to win an unprecedented fifth world title.

After the 2002 final against Germany, he said: "I played 14 games with the number ten shirt (in the 1998 and 2002 finals), a shirt that lots of great players have worn, and I'm sure that in the future lots of people will remember Rivaldo."

A national farce!

AFP, San Salvador

A group of imposters pretended to be the national El Salvadoran team in the 0-0 draw with Zimbabwe last Sunday according to the El Salvador Football Federation on Tuesday.

The federation's president Humberto Torres told a press conference he would be investigating the matter which has been labelled by Zimbabwean newspaper The Herald as "one of the great frauds in the history of football".

"This is a serious matter," Torres said.

"That could cause us problems with FIFA as they might believe we had authorised this team to represent us as the national side.

"These players did not have this authorisation, we are going to study this matter in fine detail," he added.

He admitted the federation were aware of a match in Zimbabwe concerning a Salvadorean First Division side Isidro Metapan, but in no sense of the word was it the national side.

Inter Vieri's only choice

AFP, Rome

Striker Christian Vieri said Wednesday he is not interested in playing for another club despite constant speculation about his future.

Big-spending Chelsea made an offer for Vieri in the summer which was turned down, while several other European clubs are reported to be trying to lure the 30-year-old Italy international away from the San Siro.

"The market talk does not interest me - one day I'm staying, the next I'm supposed to be leaving," said Vieri, who scored his 100th goal for Inter in Tuesday's 3-1 win over Lecce which kept the club in fourth place, five points behind leaders Roma.



PHOTO: AFP

MARAUDING! AC Milan star Andriy Shevchenko celebrates scoring one of his two goals against AS Roma at the Olympic stadium in Rome on January 6.

Serie A

Milan end Roma run

Football

AFP, Rome

Roma coach Fabio Capello made no excuses for his side's 2-1 home defeat to AC Milan which saw the league leaders' 14-match unbeaten run come to an end and threw the Italian title race wide open.

Ukrainian striker Andriy Shevchenko scored twice for the visitors as Milan recorded their first league victory at Roma in eight years on Tuesday to move to within three points of Capello's men at the top of Serie A.

Milan, the reigning European champions, also have a game in hand on Roma having missed a round of matches last month due to their appearance at the Intercontinental Cup final in Japan.

"We had a few good chances but Milan deserved the victory as they were superior in every area of the pitch," said Capello, who was in charge of Milan in September 1995 when they last won in the league away to Roma.

Capello said rather than restrict their attacking potential, Milan's decision to play Shevchenko alone up front actually worked in their favour.

"I think Milan were helped by the fact they had so few options in attack," he said.

"Against such a tight team with

just one striker, we could not afford to leave a man free in midfield and I got angry with my players for doing just that.

"At times we were overrun in midfield so I brought on Vincent Candela because I thought his pace

TOP SCORERS	
Leading scorers in the Italian championship after Tuesday's matches:	
14 - Andriy Shevchenko (AC Milan)	9 - Francesco Totti (Roma), Christian Vieri (Inter Milan)
8 - David Trezeguet (Juventus), Dino Fava (Udinese)	7 - Marco Di Vaio (Juventus), Adriano (Parma), Fabio Bazzani (Sampdoria)
6 - Andrea Caracciolo (Brescia), Julio Cruz (Inter), Bernardo Corradi (Lazio), Ernesto Chevantoni (Lecce), Alberto Gilardino (Parma)	5 - Roberto Baggio (Brescia), Fabrizio Miccoli (Juventus), Pavel Nedved (Juventus), Simone Inzaghi (Lazio), Francesco Flachi (Sampdoria), Enrico Chiesa (Siena), Vincenzo Montella (Roma)

could cause problems out wide, but after he came on we ignored the left flank and tried to play through the centre."

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti paid tribute to veterans Alessandro

Costacurta and Paolo Maldini, who mopped up everything at the back and kept Roma captain Francesco Totti quiet.

"Our two central defenders were magnificent," said Ancelotti, a former Roma player.

Milan's Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf said the Champions League holders were worth their victory which helped erase the memory of their shock 2-1 home defeat to Udinese before the winter break.

"With all due respect we are not scared of anyone and fear is a word we don't know the meaning of," he said.

"We created loads of chances and could have won by more. Roma are a great side, but we showed our class when it mattered."

After a bright start, Roma lost their shape and started to drop further back, allowing Milan's midfield plenty of room to push forward.

And the home side paid the price for their overly-cautious approach in the 24th minute when Milan took the lead.

Seedorf picked out Shevchenko with a superb crossfield pass which the Ukrainian took superbly on his chest before lifting the ball over Ivan Pelizzoli for his 13th league goal of the season.

Yet despite being outplayed for all but the first 10 minutes of a frantic first half, Roma clawed their way

back seconds before the break.

Totti found Mancini with a left-wing cross to the back post and the Brazilian cleverly headed across the goal for Cassano, who side-footed home from an acute angle.

Milan refused to wilt however and they restored their lead in the 63rd minute with a lightning break which caught Roma cold.

Manuel Rui Costa ran straight at the heart of the Roma defence, and with defenders backpedalling furiously the Portuguese international laid the ball off for an unmarked Shevchenko whose angled drive found the bottom corner.

Cassano missed an easy header and had a goalbound lob cleared off the line by Costacurta as Roma went in search of another equaliser, but Milan refused

to buckle and held on for a narrow but deserved victory in the capital.

TOP SIX									
Italian football league table before Tuesday's late match between Roma and AC Milan (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):									
Roma	15	12	3	0	33	5	39		
Juventus	15	10	3	2	32	15	33		
Inter	15	9	4	2	28	10	31		
Milan	14	9	3	2	23	8	30		
Lazio	15	9	1	5	24	19	28		
Parma	15	8	3	4	24	18	27		



PHOTO: AFP

OOPS! Robinho (C), one of the stars of the Brazilian Under-23 soccer team, jokes with teammate Diego (L) as he pulls down his shorts while a photographer takes Diego's credential picture in Concepcion, south of Santiago de Chile on January 6. Brazil play against Venezuela on Wednesday for the South American Under-23 Pre Olympic which qualifies two teams to the Athens 2004 Olympic Games.