

Gago agrees personal terms

AP, Madrid

Boca Juniors midfielder Fernando Gago has agreed to personal terms with Real Madrid and is waiting for the clubs to reach an agreement on his transfer.

Madrid sports director Predrag Mijatovic has asked Gago's agent, Marcelo Lombilla, to press Boca Juniors president Mauricio Macri to allow the player to move during January's transfer window, sports daily As said Thursday.

Macri, who is reportedly asking for \$34.2 million for the 20-year-old midfielder, wants him to remain until June so he can play in the Copa Libertadores.

Madrid president Ramon Calderon hopes to complete Gago's transfer before the club's general assembly on Sunday.

Calderon is said to believe the Argentine's arrival would help him resist calls for new elections from members annoyed by the freezing of postal votes in the July poll.

However, Macri ruled out the imminent transfer of Gago, who has been compared with former Argentina midfielder Fernando Redondo, who won the Champions League in 1998 and 2000 with Madrid.

"It's impossible for Madrid to present Gago on Sunday or announce his signing because there is no deal between the clubs," Macri told Radio La Red.

Madrid recently signed 18-year-old left back Marcelo from Fluminense, and is said to be aiming to sign another teenager, River Plate striker Gonzalo Higuain.

Perrotta ready for 'World Cup Final'

INTERNET, undated

Roma midfielder Simone Perrotta believes that the derby against Lazio is just as big as the World Cup Final.

The former Chievo man, of course, was in the starting line-up for Italy's stunning triumph at Germany '06 against France, and he is now keen to add the Scudetto to his collection.

The Giallorossi have won their last six Serie A matches and are aware of the importance of the game with their Biancocelesti cousins if they want to close in on leaders Inter.

"A derby is like a World Cup Final, it is very exciting to see the entire stadium coloured by both the Biancocelesti and the Giallorossi supporters," said Perrotta, who has a slight ankle knock.

"I am feeling better and I think I will make it, and I hope that is also true for Francesco Totti. I don't think we will play the derby without him, we all know how much he wants to be part of it.

"The derby is a very special match and the strongest team isn't always the winner. The mental aspect is equally important -- If you keep a serene state of mind you are sure to play better.

"Totti said that he would be glad to have Angelo Peruzzi on his side? I agree, he is an excellent goalkeeper, but ours is just as good and is playing very well this year.

"In fact, I wouldn't take anyone from Lazio," added the midfielder, who revealed why the club have opted for a pre-match training camp.

"We will go on this retreat because we do not want to give anyone the chance to speak about things that have nothing to do with the football we play on the pitch," concluded Perrotta.

Cafu ready for action

INTERNET, undated

Marcos Cafu has recovered from injury and could be ready to return to playing as early as Sunday.

The Rossoneri defender has been out since the match with Empoli on November 18, but has been training well and surprised everyone by going through an intense fitness session on Thursday.

"I am fine, really fine and I hope to be available for the Coach on Sunday, if needed," said the Brazilian to Milan Channel, confirming his hopes of making an appearance against Torino.

"This is not a great moment for us, but we have to shrug it off as soon as possible and return to being the Milan the fans deserve, a team which can always make them dream," added the 36-year-old.

The Rossoneri have been under increasing pressure to turn their season around and were again handed an embarrassing defeat on Wednesday as they were beaten 2-0 by underdogs Lille in the Champions League.

"Maybe the defeat was due to the fact that we had already qualified, whereas they were playing a crucial game," explained Il Pendolino, who was forced to watch on from the stands by his injury."



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian club Internacional's forward Fernando (C) leads his teammates at a training session in Tokyo on Friday. They will take part in the World Club Cup that starts on Sunday.

Barca favourites for Club Cup



REUTERS, Tokyo

European champions Barcelona may have to tame a prodigious Brazilian teenager known as "Alex the Duck" in order to lift the Club World Cup this month.

The Catalans are red-hot favourites to go one better than Johan Cruyff's flamboyant side of the early 1990s by returning to Spain with an historic first world title.

South American champions Internacional are expected to provide Barca's stiffest test in Japan despite losing several key players since winning the Libertadores Cup in August.

Seeded teams Barcelona and Internacional are scheduled to meet in the final of the competition involving the world's six continental champions.

Barcelona begin their campaign in Yokohama on Dec. 14 when they take on the winners of Monday's clash between Mexico's Club America and South Korea's Chonbuk Motors.

New Zealand's Auckland City face Egypt's Al Ahli in the opening

game on Sunday for the right to play Internacional on Dec. 13. The final takes place in Yokohama on Dec. 17.

Inter are poised to unleash their secret weapon -- 17-year-old Pato Alexandre, or Alex the Duck, who made an extraordinary debut for the club last month.

He scored with his first touch after 94 seconds and created two more goals in a 4-1 win at Palmeiras to set tongues wagging about another potential great Brazilian discovery.

"We always thought something like this would happen," Internacional president Fernando Carvalho said. "He's phenomenal. He has a huge future."

Barcelona are unlikely to be quaking in their boots, however, the Spanish champions boasting one of the strongest squads in the world and, in Ronaldinho, arguably the game's best player.

Instantly recognisable with his flowing locks and toothy grin, Ronaldinho has already dismissed talk that Barcelona will be taking the Club World Cup anything but seriously.

"Ever since I was a boy I have wanted to win this title," Barca's talismanic forward said. "I remem-

ber watching it on TV. I'd love to win it. I want to win everything."

Brazil's Sao Paulo edged out Liverpool 1-0 in last year's final to win the first edition of the revamped FIFA tournament but Barcelona are anxious to restore parity for Europe.

"We know that we could become the first Barca team to win this trophy and go down in the history books of the club," said midfielder Xavi. "That gives us extra motivation to win it."

Cruyff's Barcelona lost 2-1 to Sao Paulo in 1992 in the Club World Cup's predecessor, a one-off encounter between the European and South American champions.

Barca coach Frank Rijkaard has told his players to show humility in a tournament they are expected to win with some comfort even with strikers Samuel Eto'o and Lionel Messi out through long-term injuries.

"We must go to Japan with a humble attitude, determined to work hard...without feeling that we are better than anyone else," the Dutchman said.

"I can imagine the newspapers saying that we are the favourites but I think that will only complicate things for us."

Podolski returns

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany striker Lukas Podolski should be fit for Bayern Munich's Bundesliga match against Energie Cottbus on Saturday after six weeks off with an ankle injury.

Podolski, who was originally expected to return in mid-November, would be part of the team, Bayern Munich coach Felix Magath said on Thursday.

The 21-year-old injured his ankle in training in late October. His comeback took three weeks longer than first expected.

Podolski was named best young player at the World Cup in July. He moved from Cologne to Bayern Munich at the start of the season.

Feyenoord hit with sanction

AFP, Paris

Dutch football giants Feyenoord have been handed a hefty fine and a suspended two-match closed doors ban by European football's ruling body UEFA on Thursday.

The sanction follows violent incidents by hooligans at the Nancy v Feyenoord UEFA Cup match last week which led to a temporary stoppage by the referee.

Feyenoord have been ordered to pay a 126,000 euros fine but will only have to play two matches in an empty stadium if there is a repeat of violence on the part of their fans during the next three years.

The Dutch top flight club will also have to reimburse French first division side Nancy for the damage caused at the Marcel Picot stadium. Feyenoord have three days to appeal.

The match at was interrupted in the 79th minute when tear gas drifted onto the pitch after police tried to control rampaging Dutch fans in the stands.

Play eventually resumed and Nancy secured a 3-0 win in their Group E tie over the two-time UEFA Cup winners to advance to the round of 32.

It is not the first time UEFA have made the club pay for the behaviour of their unruly fans.

Feyenoord were hit with a closed door ban by UEFA for clashes in Basel, Switzerland last year and an inquiry is currently underway after a Blackburn player was sprayed with beer in a recent UEFA Cup tie.

Spanish press hits back at doping claims

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish press hit back on Friday at reports from Le Monde newspaper that claimed four top Spanish football clubs were linked with Dr Eufemiano Fuentes who is alleged to have masterminded a vast blood-doping network.

The four clubs in the firing line are Real Madrid, Barcelona, Real Betis and Valencia.

Fuentes denied the Le Monde report, which was written after one of the newspaper's reporters procured documents containing allegations which have as yet been unfounded.

However in a separate interview with the newspaper Fuentes claimed that Barcelona, the current European champions, had tried to employ him on two separate occasions.

"France accuses" and "shows no proof," said Spanish daily newspaper Marca, which published a photo of a football pierced by a syringe.

"Either they reveal it or leave us in peace," added the paper which has close contacts with Real Madrid.

The editorial of AS sports newspaper said the "non-published" facts "that Le Monde considers proof (...) I imagine them to be false."

Barcelona newspaper El Periodico said that: "When a newspaper as prestigious as Le Monde points the finger at teams like Real Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Real Betis, it should have more solid proof than photocopies of hand-made notes (...) written by a doctor which half the planet believes to be a cheat."

Cisse fit to play

REUTERS, Paris

France striker Djibril Cisse has recovered from a broken leg and could resume playing for Olympique Marseille this weekend, his club said on Thursday.

Coach Albert Emon told reporters Cisse would be in his squad for a home Ligue 1 game against Monaco on Saturday but did not specify whether the former Liverpool forward would be in the starting line-up.

Cisse broke his right shinbone and fibula in a friendly international against China on June 7. The injury ruled him out of the World Cup finals in Germany.

Second face third

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Madrid put their fine away record on the line on Saturday when they visit Sevilla's Sanchez Pizjuan, where the UEFA Cup holders have the league's only remaining 100 percent home record.

With five wins from six on the road Real are the league's best travellers but their cautious, counter-attacking approach has won few admirers.

Real leapfrogged Sevilla into second place last weekend with a laboured 2-1 home win over struggling Athletic Bilbao, but Sevilla coach Juande Ramos stopped short of joining those who criticise Real coach Fabio Capello's pragmatic methods.

"I prefer a different style of play to Real's but I don't want to say it is more effective. Playing this way they have caught up with Barcelona and gone past us. Although it isn't exciting they make the most of their chances," Ramos said.

Sevilla slipped a point behind Real into third after surprisingly

losing 2-1 away to Espanyol last weekend, but might be able to count on the return of winger Jesus Navas for Saturday.

The pacy 21-year-old, one of their most effective players, has been out with a knee injury since early last month. Ramos is also awaiting news on injured defenders Aitor Ocio, Julien Escude and Ivica Dragutinovic.

An under-strength Real drew 2-2 against Dynamo Kiev in the Champions League on Wednesday when Brazilian striker Ronaldo took his tally for the week to three. They have midfielder Mahamadou Diarra suspended, though playmaker Guti returns.

The last time the two sides met in May Sevilla came out on top in a 4-3 thriller.

Real Sociedad, the only side without a win in the Primera Liga, face the daunting task of looking to break that statistic in the Nou Camp on Saturday against a Barcelona in full flow.

The league leaders appear to have shrugged off their indifferent form of the previous month and proved with the 2-0 Champions League win over Werder Bremen on Tuesday they can turn on the style when they need to.

Frank Rijkaard's side were held to a 1-1 draw away to Levante last time out, which left them just a point ahead of arch-rivals Real, and have an injury doubt over one of their form players, midfielder Andres Iniesta.

Sociedad are without defender Adriano Rossato who was injured in a training ground brawl with a team mate during the week.

Injury-hit Valencia, languishing in ninth place, have the perfect chance to put a stop to their slide when Deportivo Coruna visit on Sunday.

Depor have yet to win on their travels while Quique Sanchez Flores's side are without a win in six league games.

FIXTURES

(1600 GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday

Barcelona v Real Sociedad (1900), Sevilla v Real Madrid (2100)

Sunday

Athletic Bilbao v Recreativo Huelva, Celta Vigo v Villarreal, Getafe v Real Betis, Gimnastic v Levante, Osasuna v Real Mallorca, Racing Santander v Real Zaragoza, Atletico Madrid v Espanyol (1800), Valencia v Deportivo Coruna (2000)

INTERNET, undated



Werder Bremen.

With just two games to go before the midway stage of the season, Schalke will still be looking for the unofficial title of winter champions in the Bundesliga.

Not only is that honour at stake for them this weekend, but local pride dominates their fixture with Borussia Dortmund.

The North-Rhein Westphalian neighbours are among the most followed clubs in Germany.

But that is where the similarities end.

Schalke and Borussia Dortmund are the greatest of enemies and, no matter where each side is placed in the table when they meet, only one thing counts to both sets of fans: getting one over on the neighbours.

It would appear to be advantage Schalke this time around, but even in front of their own fans at the Veltins Arena, they will not be underestimating Dortmund on Sunday.

By the time the blues and yellows take to the field, Werder

Bremen will have already had the chance to further stake their claim for the winter champions gong.

They travel to Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday hoping to have put their disappointment of going out of the Champions League this week behind them.

Bayern Munich slipped up to Borussia Munchengladbach last weekend with a 1-1 draw at home.

The very same score in mid-week against Inter Milan was enough to put the Bavarians thorough as German football's sole representatives in the second round of the Champions League.

They topped Group A and can look forward to having home advantage in the second leg when the draw is made next Friday.

That will be put out of their minds for the time being, however, as they prepare to give their fans a treat in the final home match of the year.

The defending champions have rarely shone this season, but the visit of Energie Cottbus to the Allianz Arena on Saturday could provide Roy Makaay and Claudio Pizarro with a bit of shooting practice.

Stuttgart remain sandwiched between the top two and Bayern.

Their incredible season continues with VfL Bochum arriving at the Gottlieb-Daimler Stadium on Saturday.

Meanwhile, Hertha Berlin can leapfrog Bayern into fourth on Friday night if they can beat Bayer

Leverkusen by two goals at the BayArena.

Arminia Bielefeld are still clinging on to the top five, but could be cut down to size by the league's current form side Hannover.

The Lower Saxony outfit have moved off the foot of the table and out of the bottom three on the back of a three-game winning streak.

A fourth consecutive win at the AWD-Arena on Saturday would take them above Bielefeld and probably into the top half of the table.

Hamburg coach Thomas Doll will be breathing a little easier after his side's midweek Champions League win ensured the club only its second victory from the last 24 outings in all competitions.

However, anything other a win against Nurnberg could be the end of the line for the beleaguered Doll.

FIXTURES

(All times 1430 GMT unless stated)

Saturday

Bayern Munich v Energie Cottbus, Borussia Muenchengladbach v Mainz, Eintracht Frankfurt v Werder Bremen, Hamburg SV v Nuremberg, Hanover 96 v Arminia Bielefeld, VfB Stuttgart v VfL Bochum

Sunday

Schalke 04 v Borussia Dortmund (1600) VfL Wolfsburg v Alemannia Aachen (1600)

8x3