



Aston Villa goalkeeper Stuart Taylor (R) is beaten despite his best effort against Sheffield United during their Premiership match at Bramall Lane on Monday.

Real to resume Higuain talks

INTERNET, undated

River Plate representatives will travel to Spain this week to resume negotiations over the transfer of Gonzalo Higuain to Real Madrid.

The 18-year-old, currently the subject of an international tug of war between Argentina and France, has been publicly targeted by Madrid president Ramon Calderon.

Several rounds of negotiation have already taken place with no fee being agreed, and it is believed the Spanish club will have to up their present 12 million euro (8 million pounds) bid to land their man.

"We received an invitation from Real Madrid to travel to resume negotiations, which we accept and when we arrive we will recommend talks," said River treasurer Hector Grinberg.

Big guns in for Milito chase

INTERNET, undated

Genoa claim a host of top clubs are interested in their striker Diego Milito, who is currently in the second season of a two-year loan at Real Zaragoza. They say both Milan giants and Catalan giants Barcelona have all put their hats into the ring in the chase for his signature.

The Spanish side have an option to buy Milito in June, but Genoa say they want more than the 5 million euros (5 million pounds) offered and there are plenty of other clubs ready to take him.

The Argentinian currently plays with his brother Gabriel at the Liga outfit and has enjoyed a jet-propelled start to the season with ten goals in 12 games.

Genoa president Enrico Preziosi said they would not accept a cut-price deal for the 27-year-old, telling El Mundo Deportivo: "The present value of Diego Milito to Genoa has changed."

"We have to review the issue because €5 million is not enough, and this week we'll discuss the matter with Zaragoza."

"Inter and Milan are interested in Milito and in the Spanish league Barcelona want to buy the player too."

Adu moves to salt Lake

AFP, Washington

Freddy Adu, the most recognisable name in the Major League Soccer, was traded Monday to Real Salt Lake after three seasons with DC United.

Adu, 17, twice was named an MLS All-Star -- in 2004 and 2006 -- and helped DC United capture the 2004 MLS Cup during his rookie season.

United dealt Adu and the rights to goalkeeper Nick Rimando to Real Salt Lake for a major allocation, the rights to goalkeeper Jay Nolly and future considerations.

The Ghana-born 17-year-old may play just one season in Utah.

Adu has often expressed a desire to play in Europe but will not be eligible to play for a club outside the United States until he turns 18 on June 2.

Adu had a two-week trial with English powerhouse Manchester United at the end of November.

After the trial, Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson praised Adu and said they would monitor him with the possibility of signing him when he turns 18.

In 87 career appearances with DC United, Adu has scored 11 goals and notched 17 assists.

Baros saves Villa

INTERNET, undated

Sheffield United's second half fightback claimed a 2-2 draw with a similarly resilient Aston Villa at Bramall Lane on Monday night.

Stiliyan Petrov opening the scoring inside two minutes for the visitors but second half goals from Stephen Quinn and Danny Webber saw the match turned on its head.

The winning position was all too brief for The Blades, though, as Milan Baros completed Villa's second quickfire strike of an engaging contest.

The visitors had made a stunning start by claiming a 76-second lead through Petrov's first goal for the club.

After Chris Sutton had seen his shot blocked, Petrov stole in to rasp an emphatic half-volley into the back of the net.

Buoyed by that lightning raid, Villa took a firm grip of the match with Sutton a commanding presence, as the hosts were forced into firefighting action.

Villa's support had seen little to worry them although United pro-

duced a flurry midway through the half when set-pieces twice unsettled goalkeeper Stuart Taylor.

Even then chances were few and far between for the hosts -- a wild deflection on Phil Jagielka's long-range shot saw the ball land on the top of the net in the 27th minute.

Villa carved out two more opportunities before the 45-minute mark. Sutton's header was only a fraction out as it struck the frame of the goal, while Paddy Kenny twice denied Gary Cahill after a right wing cross by Petrov.

United's only genuine chance of the half arrived at its conclusion, but Rob Hulse stabbed his shot wide when the ball broke kindly for the striker on the edge of the area.

With Neil Warnock's half-time teamtalk once again ringing in their ears -- United invariably stepped up their attacking assault in the second half of matches -- the hosts built up a sizeable head of steam which took just five minutes to bear fruit.

Quinn's volley from Rob Kozluk's cross had already been blocked by Olof Mellberg and the 20-year-old was not to be denied his first senior goal as, from a near identical position to his earlier effort, he volleyed his team level.

The respite lasted all of 30 seconds -- Quinn's shooting expertise forced a parry from Taylor as United sought a third goal.

Awinner appeared odds on, but Petrov's ingenuity from a stoppage time free-kick failed to deceive Kenny and both teams had to settle for a hard-earned point.

Hulse's powerful header was clapped impressively by Taylor on the hour as United continued to call the shots.

On 64 minutes it brought more tangible reward -- Keith Gillespie's short corner was headed into the centre of goal by Chris Morgan and Danny Webber flicked his finish past Taylor.

Remarkably the lead lasted just 56 seconds. Villa had been suppressed by their all-action hosts, but latching on to a cross Sutton again caused consternation in the hosts' defence and Baros took a touch before flashing a shot home for his first goal in eight months.

Back came United who were foiled no fewer than four times in a goalmouth scramble 12 minutes from time. Taylor repelled Hulse's header, while substitute Christian Nade, twice, and Hulse could not force the rebound through a sea of Villa bodies.

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Berlusconi backs Carlo

INTERNET, undated

Milan president Silvio Berlusconi has given a vote of confidence to Carlo Ancelotti.

Ancelotti has come under fire after a disappointing recent run of form in Serie A.

Milan have won just one of their last seven Serie A games raising speculation over Ancelotti's future.

However, Berlusconi insists he still has faith in Ancelotti to turn things round.

"Carlo has my complete faith and that of the club officials," said Berlusconi.

"We have a big group, but we can count only on half of them and it's evident at this moment there are problems."

Despite the club's crippling injury list Berlusconi has admitted Milan are unlikely to enter the transfer market in January.

"The group remains big and with value and I don't think we will enter the market," added Berlusconi.

Lyon rule out Ribery swoop

INTERNET, undated

Lyon have issued a double transfer denial, saying they have no intention of signing either Franck Ribery or Milan Baros in January. Club president Jean-Michel Aulas said he had been given a list of targets for the winter transfer market, but French international winger Ribery was not among them.

"I have agreed to sign a player because the coach has requested it," said Aulas.

"He gave me a list of names, but the player has to be available."

"As far as Franck Ribery is concerned, this avenue is no longer open."

Houllier has also confirmed he has no interest in out-of-sorts Aston Villa striker Baros.

Despite taking the Czech international to Liverpool earlier in his career, he said he did not want to add him to a slightly thin Lyon attacking line.

"Milan Baros will not come. I won't say twice," he said.

"Concerning signings, I was clear. I said that with the same setup, we could be in danger."

Romanov fined over ref jibe

AFP, Glasgow

Hearts majority shareholder Vladimir Romanov has been fined 10,000 pounds (20,000 dollars) by the Scottish Football Association (FA) on Monday for comments on the club's website.

Romanov was fined for breaches of the Scottish FA articles of association after he referred to the conduct of match officials during Hearts' successful Scottish Cup run last season.

Romanov claimed: "Last season, you didn't manage to protect the Scottish Cup and gave it to Hearts, despite all the referees' efforts and intrigues."

Heart tests for booters

REUTERS, Copenhagen

Players competing in UEFA's club tournaments from 2008 will have to undergo mandatory screening for heart disease, the Danish daily newspaper Politiken reported on Monday.

Citing UEFA sources, Politiken said clubs taking part in the Champions League or the UEFA Cup would have to document that their players aged over 21 had undergone testing for cardiovascular disease.



Barcelona players (L-R) Xavi, Ronaldinho, and Puyol stand together at a press conference in Yokohama, Japan on Tuesday. They flew into Japan on Monday to play in the Club World Cup.

Sponsorship ruling takes toll on FIFA

Football

REUTERS, Berne

FIFA has dismissed marketing director Jerome Valcke and three other employees following last week's New York court ruling against world soccer's governing body in a sponsorship case.

In a statement on Tuesday, FIFA acknowledged its World Cup sponsorship negotiations with rival credit card firms Visa and MasterCard had "breached" (FIFA's) business principles, adding that "FIFA cannot possibly accept such conduct among its own employees".

FIFA said in the context of the contract talks, the four had been accused of "repeated dishonesty during negotiations and of giving false information to the FIFA decision-making bodies in question."

The statement added FIFA were "considering lodging an appeal against the court's judgment, while

taking account of the interests of every party involved and seeking suitable solutions."

A U.S. District Judge overruled FIFA's planned eight-year sponsorship deal with Visa last week following a federal lawsuit brought by MasterCard.

As previous sponsors of the World Cup finals, MasterCard successfully demonstrated they had a right of first refusal on any future arrangements.

In her ruling, judge Loretta Preska said the FIFA negotiators had "lied repeatedly to MasterCard", including when they assured the company that FIFA "would not sign a deal for the post-2006 sponsorship rights with anyone else unless it could not reach agreement with MasterCard."

Visa announced in April it had signed an eight-year deal with FIFA, which sources said was worth up to 200 million pounds (392.3 million dollars).

Scholl makes quit plans

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich midfielder Mehmet Scholl has announced his decision to hang up his boots at the end of the season.

The 36-year-old former Germany international has decided to retire in June, Bayern general manager Uli Hoeness revealed on Tuesday.

"Mehmet will stop playing at the end of the season and Bayern will lose a player who has brought us a lot over the years," Hoeness told Bild.

Scholl's final appearance for the German champions will be a friendly against Barcelona at the Allianz Arena in August and he is then likely to become involved in Bayern's youth team programme.

Scholl, who is Bayern's longest serving player, joined the club from Karlsruhe in 1992.

He has made a total of 384 Bundesliga appearances despite seeing his career plagued by several long-term injuries.

Nantes admit Barthez interest

INTERNET, undated

Nantes have confirmed an interest in talking to veteran goalkeeper Fabien Barthez.

The former France international retired from football in October after failing to secure a new club following his exit from Marseille.

But reports have claimed Nantes are hoping to persuade Barthez to end his retirement and return to action in the New Year.

Vladimir Stojkovic has failed to impress in goal this season and chairman Rudi Roussillon is ready to sanction the signing of a replacement.

Barthez's name has been put forward and Nantes coach Georges Eo admits talks with the ex-Manchester United keeper are on the agenda.

"There has been too much talking about this. The only important thing is for Inter to do well until the end," said the former striker to the radio program La Politica Nel Pallone.

"There are still more than six months until the end. I am not a person who says something and thinks something different."

"All my thoughts go to my work -- we can wait four more months to take this decision," concluded Mancini.

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