

United urge on Ronaldo

AFP, London



Cristiano Ronaldo is being urged by his teammates to continue his thrilling form as Manchester United look to strengthen their grip on English Premiership top spot at home to Reading this Saturday.

Ronaldo was public enemy number one with many English fans before the season started for his role in the sending-off of United team-mate Wayne Rooney during Portugal's World Cup quarter-final win against England.

But the 21-year-old winger has been forgiven at Old Trafford, if not elsewhere, after scoring 10 goals so far this season -- including four in United's last two matches, against Aston Villa and Wigan.

His tally and greater effectiveness in open play, where his ball trickery is now often a means to a productive end and not an end in itself, have helped his side open up a four-point gap over second-placed champions Chelsea.

Now Ronaldo is just five goals away from reaching the pre-season target set by United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

However, United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar said there was even more to come from Ronaldo.

"Ronny is in a good spell. He has been scoring goals and playing well for a couple of months," said the Dutchman.

"The manager has made a target of 15 goals for him this season, but I think we should maybe lift that a little bit now," van der Sar also told the Manchester Evening News.

"If he gets to 20 then, for sure, we will have a good chance of winning the title this season."

This week Chelsea captain John Terry had surgery on his injured back, the 26-year-old centre-half having missed the London club's last three Premiership matches in which they have conceded six goals.

Jose Mourinho's men were held to a shock 2-2 draw at home to Reading on Tuesday and in-form Chelsea striker Didier Drogba -- who could be switched to the back -- admitted Chelsea had tightened up come Saturday's west London derby against Fulham at Stamford Bridge.

"We cannot give the other teams the belief that they can score, that they can win," said Ivory Coast international Drogba, who so far this season has scored 19 goals.

Arsenal are set to be without striker Emmanuel Adebayor for their trip to struggling Sheffield

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday

Blackburn v Middlesbrough, Bolton v Portsmouth, Charlton v Aston Villa (1245GMT), Chelsea v Fulham, Everton v Newcastle, Manchester United v Reading, Sheffield United v Arsenal (1715GMT), Tottenham v Liverpool, Watford v Wigan, West Ham v Manchester City

United.

The Londoners are 14 points behind Manchester United but Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger hasn't given up hope of the title just yet.

"I know we sound a bit crazy but no matter how big the gap is we want to get it down as much as possible," the Frenchman insisted.

Champions League hopefuls Bolton (fourth) and Portsmouth (fifth) go head-to-head at the Reebok Stadium.

Pompey manager Harry Redknapp is set to rest leading scorer Nwankwo Kanu on the grounds the nine-goal Nigerian cannot be expected to play in both this match and the New Year's Day clash with Tottenham.

"We have been lucky with injuries all season really, but Kanu cannot play two games so close together. If he plays at Bolton he won't play on Monday against Tottenham," Redknapp said.

Pompey seemed destined for relegation last season when Redknapp returned for a second spell in charge after a brief stint at archrivals Southampton and Bolton manager Sam Allardyce praised the way his opposite number has turned the south coast club around.

"To resurrect a side that looked dead and buried and odds on to be relegated that was remarkable. But I'm not surprised at all by what Harry has achieved this season. Not when you look at the quality of the players he's signed, and the fact

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Hingis to tie the knot

AFP, Sydney

Former world tennis number one Martina Hingis rewarded Australian curiosity Friday with details of her recent engagement to Czech player Radek Stepanek, a fact that passed her Swiss compatriots by.

Ahead of Sunday's start to the Australian Women's Hardcourt Championships at Royal Pines on the Gold Coast, the former world number one confirmed that Stepanek had proposed to her in Prague last month.

"I'm happy," said Hingis, the top seed in the Gold Coast tournament where she staged her comeback last year after three years out of action due to debilitating foot injuries.

"I was surprised when it (her diamond ring) was spotted right away because in Switzerland I've been walking around for a month and no-one's said anything. I guess people here pay more attention to things."

Spanish prank on Zidane

AFP, Geneva

A Spanish newspaper claimed on Thursday that Zinedine Zidane should have been World Footballer of the Year and not Italian World Cup winner Fabio Cannavaro after a voting blunder.

However, it was all an elaborate joke played by the Marca sports paper on the Day of the Innocents, Spain's equivalent of April Fool's Day.

FIFA, the sport's world governing body, decided to take the story in good faith.

"Every country and region has its own time-honoured customs and traditions, many of them involving practical jokes. With the advent of the Internet, such traditions can also create quite some confusion," said a FIFA statement.

"The Spanish sports paper Marca published a story on its website regarding the FIFA World Player. Marca alleged that FIFA had recounted the votes after admitting errors and would give the award to Zidane instead of Cannavaro. This story is, of course, completely invented and a joke."

"As a matter of fact, Marca was quite successful -- not in Spain but abroad. While no Spanish media

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Buffon cleared of betting

AFP, Rome

Juventus keeper Gianluigi Buffon was cleared of illegal gambling by a Turin prosecutor on Friday.

The 28-year-old, who kept goal for Italy in their triumphant World Cup campaign this year, was suspected of betting on five Juventus matches between 2004 and 2005.

After a review of the evidence, Turin prosecutor Stefano Palazzi decided to archive Buffon's case. Also cleared were former Juventus players Antonio Chimenti, Enzo Maresca and Mark Iuliano.

Buffon, the world's most expensive keeper, was under suspicion of flouting the law on illegal gambling.

He admitted placing bets on Juve matches when he voluntarily appeared before prosecutors in Turin on May 13, but insisted he stopped when the Italian football federation (FIGC) made gambling on any game an offence last year.

Players found guilty of breaking the FIGC's rules on gambling face bans of anything from three months to three years.

Buffon's acquittal brought some festive cheer to Juve after a black year for the 'Old Lady'.



Former world no.1 Martina Hingis poses for photograph at a press conference for the Australian Hardcourt Championship in Brisbane on Friday.

Make or break for L'pool

AFP, London



Liverpool find themselves in a mini-league below the top two

in the battle for Champions League places, according to manager Rafael Benitez.

The Reds' next two opponents are genuine threats to their top four ambitions for the remainder of the season.

New Year's Day rivals Bolton leapfrogged Liverpool on Tuesday, while Spurs will also go above them if they win at White Hart Lane on Saturday.

The upcoming fixtures are pivotal as Liverpool seek an instant recovery from the disappointing single goal defeat at Blackburn.

Although Benitez knows his side didn't deserve to lose, he is also aware his players lose composure too quickly when they concede a goal.

"When we concede, we sometimes play too quick," accepted the manager.

"Maybe a different style of football is needed when the other team scores."

"Of course, it's a different game when that happens because the opponent is able to play much deeper and counter attack. But it's also clear we need to improve our composure and take control of situations."

"Against Blackburn, there were too many long balls in the second half when Peter Crouch wasn't on the pitch."

Liverpool went into the holiday period looking up to Chelsea and Manchester United, but now their eyes are fixed firmly over their shoulder as Martin Jol's side close in.

The Reds are now sixth, and while Benitez insists he pays no attention to the Premiership table, he knows who the club's competitors are.

"We won't look at the table. It's a waste of time," he said.

"But we know we now have to play Tottenham and Bolton who are in a league with us and very close together. We know how important it will be to beat these teams and stay in good position."

"Despite the result against Blackburn we've been playing well. Sometimes these kinds of games happen, but we need to keep going and stay confident. All away games in the Premiership are difficult, particularly games like at Tottenham."

Jol has been buoyed in recent weeks by the timely return to form of England striker Jermain Defoe, who started the season on the bench.

Spurs are without Robbie Keane through injury and Defoe has seized his chance to prove his worth by scoring 11 goals in his last 10 starts.

"Maybe the fact I was on the

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Collina's comeback

INTERNET, undated

Italy's most famous referee Pierluigi Collina is set to take an active role in the game once again as a technical adviser to the Association of Italian Referees.

One of the game's most respected officials, Collina became something of a cult figure all over the football world before his retirement in 2005.

The Bologna-born financial adviser has been working for Sky Italia since his exit after signing a two-year contract worth around £470,000.

However, he has now opted to take the role of technical adviser to the nation's officials a voluntary post.

"I've talked things through with Sky and we found a way that this can suit everyone," he explained.

"In my opinion the preparation of referees is a crucial part of the profession. The work interests me

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Former England captain David Beckham kicks a ball at a promotional event in Tokyo on Friday.

PHOTO: INTERNET

Beckham to consider Japanese sunset

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Former England captain David Beckham ate sushi for the cameras and even said he may play in Japan one day as he went all out on a flying promotional tour to Tokyo.

It was the seventh and shortest visit to Japan by the celebrity footballer since he first came in 1997 as a member of Manchester United.

Beckham, who flew in by private jet for a 14-hour stay, dutifully used disposable wooden chopsticks when a presenter for Fuji television confronted him with a plate of cucumber sushi rolls.

"When I go out for dinner, Japanese food is one of my favorites," Beckham assured.

When begged to play some day in Japan, the 31-year-old

Terry undergoes back surgery

AFP, London



Chelsea and England captain John Terry has undergone surgery on his back injury, the Premiership champions announced in a statement here Thursday.

The 26-year-old centre-half has not featured in the London club's last three Premiership matches, in which they have conceded six goals and fallen four points behind leaders Manchester United.

"Chelsea Football Club can confirm that today club captain John Terry underwent successful surgery following his back injury," said the Blues' statement.

"The operation took place in France following consultation between the Chelsea medical

department and a leading neurosurgical specialist. The operation to remove a sequestered lumbar intervertebral disc was successful and everyone at the club wishes John a speedy and full recovery."

It is unclear how long Terry's recovery will take but early indications are that he could return within weeks not months although whether he will be fit to lead England in their first match of 2007, against Spain at Old Trafford on February 7, remains to be seen.

As well as being without Terry, Jose Mourinho's men have also seen Petr Cech sidelined for most of this season after the inspirational goalkeeper suffered a fractured skull in a challenge with Reading's Stephen Hunt in October.

"Chelsea have conceded 15 league goals so far this season --

only seven fewer than they did over the whole of the last Premiership campaign.

Mourinho, having sold both William Gallas and Robert Huth, has admitted the continued absence of Terry has left him short of defensive options. The Portuguese boss has even considered asking 19-goal striker Didier Drogba to step into the role on an emergency basis.

"I do not like to play at centre-back -- but I do it for the team because sometimes we have difficult moments in the game," Drogba said before admitting Chelsea needed to shore up their defence.

"We cannot give the other teams the belief that they can score, that they can win," he insisted. "Last

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Former Italian referee Pierluigi Collina gestures during a press conference at the Italian Soccer Federation headquarters in Rome on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP