

Tavano completes Roma switch

AFP, Rome

Striker Francesco Tavano has joined Roma on a six-month loan deal from Spanish side Valencia, the Serie A club said on Thursday.

The 27-year-old forward completed his move after passing a medical and was then introduced to his new team-mates at the club's Trigoria training ground.

Tavano joined Valencia from Serie A side Empoli in the summer for a fee of seven million pounds (9.1 million dollars), but has rarely featured having failed to impress coach Quique Sanchez Flores.

Tavano was outstanding for Empoli last season, scoring 19 goals in Serie A.

Ribery hints at Marseille exit

AFP, Marseille

France international midfielder Franck Ribery said Thursday he might leave French club Marseille at season's end and that his preference would be to go to either Spain's La Liga or the English Premiership.

"I've already said that I would stay at Marseille until the end of the season in a bid to help the club qualify for the Champions League, then we will see," Ribery said from Marseille's training camp.

"Clubs have been interested in me since the World Cup, and they're coming again," said the 23-year-old, who rose to prominence as part of Raymond Domenech's French side that made it to the World Cup final.

"I like two leagues, the Spanish and the English," he said, adding: "If Marseille qualify for the Champions League, I'll be forced to ask myself some questions."

Marseille are currently lying sixth in the French league, 20 points off runaway leaders Lyon but only five points off second-placed Lens.

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon has expressed his interest in Ribery but in the same breath said that the immediate priority of the Spanish giants was to sign a defender.

FA charge Morgan

AFP, London

Sheffield United captain Chris Morgan has been charged with violent conduct by the Football Association after a clash with Arsenal's Robin van Persie.

Morgan appeared to strike the Arsenal striker out of sight of Alan Wiley, the referee, during United's 1-0 win at Bramall Lane on December 30.

The Blades skipper has until 1800GMT Thursday to respond to the charge and a disciplinary commission will consider the case on Friday.

The centre-back was on the receiving end of a punch earlier this season, with Wigan's Lee McCulloch banned for three games for hitting the former Barnsley player.

Milan go for Di Vaio

INTERNET, undated

Milan are reportedly keen on Monaco striker Marco Di Vaio, who could join the Rossoneri on a free transfer.

The 30-year-old had been mentioned as a target for the San Siro outfit a year ago, as he is liked by Coach Carlo Ancelotti, but negotiations failed because he was Cup-tied.

Di Vaio is currently contracted to the French club until 2008, but has reached an agreement which would allow him to leave as early as January on a free transfer, allowing Monaco to cut his £2.4m salary from the wage bill.

Milan could therefore decide to sign the former Parma man, who would favour a return to the peninsula and could be immediately fielded in the Champions League.

The player's agent Franco Zavaglia, however, has dismissed all rumours suggesting his client was close to leaving the Ligue 1 side, where he signed a two-year contract in the summer.

"I think an immediate transfer is very difficult, despite the player's will," said Zavaglia to news agency GTR.

"Di Vaio has an agreement with Monaco and would prefer to end the season with them before considering the option of leaving."

The Via Turati outfit have also been paired with both Valeri Bojinov and Antonio Cassano, but it now seems unlikely that either player will move to the San Siro.

Vincenzo Iaquinta of Udinese also remains a target for the Rossoneri, but the 8.5m-pound price tag might force Milan to postpone any move for the world champion until the summer.



FILE PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack has hit back at German legend Karl Heinz Rummenigge for his comments on his decision to leave Bayern Munich.

Ballack lashes out at Kalle



REUTERS, Berlin

Germany captain Michael Ballack has hit back at criticism from Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge over his decision to leave Munich for English champions Chelsea.

In an interview with Sport-Bild newspaper published on Wednesday, Ballack dismissed Rummenigge's comment that Bayern did the right thing by "letting Ballack go" on a free transfer at the end of last season.

"Herr Rummenigge should simply tell the truth and accept the fact a player decides to go to another club," Ballack said, adding that Rummenigge's comments "just make me laugh".

Bayern had made Ballack, 30, the most lucrative offer in club history in 2005 which would have extended his contract beyond mid-2006 after he had led them

to three Bundesliga championships and three German Cups in his four seasons in Munich.

After the midfielder decided not to stay, Rummenigge publicly questioned Ballack's character and commercial manager Uli Hoeneß said Ballack was only interested in another currency rather than another culture and language as he had claimed.

Ballack was jeered at his final home match in Munich after the public bashing from Rummenigge and Hoeneß while at the same time his future Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho was calling him "one of the best players in the world".

Ballack said the jeers had hurt and blamed Rummenigge at the time for whipping up public sentiment against him.

Last season Ballack scored 14 league goals, most of them decisive, in his final Bundesliga campaign while leading Bayern to their second consecutive league and cup double. Noting

Bayern's struggles this season after they dominated last season, Ballack said he had long urged Bayern executives to acquire a playmaker but said he got fired for his suggestion.

"But it shows now that I wasn't far off with my ideas," Ballack said, referring to Bayern's struggles in the first half of the season where they lacked creativity in midfield.

Ballack said he was still adjusting to England and finding it difficult to take advantage of his strength in the air.

Ballack said even though Chelsea coach Jose Mourinho had included him in the group of key players: "No one has a job guarantee. I think I've been on the pitch because I've been doing my job well, because I fit in the team and can help it."

Neill is hot commodity

AFP, London



Lucas Neill's agent has insisted the Australian defender has already been the subject of interest "from England and abroad" just days into the January transfer window.

Neill, 28, is currently with English Premier League side Blackburn Rovers, presently 11th in the table, having joined the north-west club in a one-million-pound move from Millwall - now in third tier League One - in 2001.

Rovers' Premiership rivals Liverpool had a pre-season approach for Neill rebuffed but that hasn't stopped the speculation surrounding his future and

agent Peter Harrison told www.skysports.com: "We know there have been bids put in for him. There is a lot of interest from England and abroad."

Meanwhile Wigan manager Adrian Boothroyd fears the bottom of the Premier League club may struggle to keep England Under-21 forward Ashley Young at Vicarage Road.

Boothroyd, who has already rejected one bid of five million pounds for Young, said: "I have had three Premiership clubs on the phone making verbal bids for Ashley Young, but I have turned them all down."

"As it stands today, I absolutely do not see him leaving the club this month. If and when the time is right, and he wants to go, he will go. But the price has to be right, and it has to mean the club will be improved."

in three seasons with Wigan to help them into the Premiership but left after failing to agree a new contract.

Elsewhere, Watford manager Adrian Boothroyd fears the bottom of the Premier League club may struggle to keep England Under-21 forward Ashley Young at Vicarage Road.

Boothroyd, who has already rejected one bid of five million pounds for Young, said: "I have had three Premiership clubs on the phone making verbal bids for Ashley Young, but I have turned them all down."

"As it stands today, I absolutely do not see him leaving the club this month. If and when the time is right, and he wants to go, he will go. But the price has to be right, and it has to mean the club will be improved."

No Juve signings



INTERNET, undated

Juventus President Giovanni Cobolli Gigli believes there is no need for any winter signings. "This is a good group," he stated.

The Bianconeri are second in Serie B and have yet to play the match with Cesena, which was postponed after the tragic accident involving Alessio Ferramosca and Riccardo Neri at the Vino training centre.

"We hope that the new year will bring more luck than the past one," declared Cobolli Gigli in an interview to Juve Channel.

"However, you make your own luck and we must work hard to

deserve it if we are to return to Serie A. The signs are positive, but the road is still long."

"I am all working for next year. The team is made up of champions and it has to stay like this, with the addition of one or two reinforcements."

"This is a good group and even if it is January, I believe we will keep things as they are, to return to the top spot as soon as possible. Then we will have to work to return to Europe and be competitive."

Cobolli Gigli is also aware of the comments by several key players, including Gianluigi Buffon, David Trezeguet and Mauro Camoranesi.

"The trio have stated they are willing to remain only if they receive guarantees that next

year's team will be competitive at the highest level."

"I appreciate the spirit with which our champions have tied themselves to Juve's project," he insisted.

"The fact that they stayed is yet another stimulus for us, as we want to give our all from a professional point of view to repay them."

Juventus will now face Milan at the San Siro on Saturday in the Trofeo Berlusconi, which the President believes will be an intriguing contest.

"It's an important game against a historic club in one of the most important stadiums in the world and we will go there to honour the name of Juventus -- I believe it will be a great match."

Newcastle takeover talks abandoned

AFP, Newcastle

A consortium backed by American group Polygon have broken off talks with Premiership side Newcastle over a potential takeover.

Newcastle chairman Freddy Shepherd revealed last month the club were in discussions with the St James' Park Group Limited.

The group -- one of two linked with a takeover -- requested access to the company's books with a view to making a formal offer.

A statement to the Stock Exchange Thursday morning, however, read: "St. James' Park Group Limited confirms that it is no longer in discussions regarding such possible offer and has no intention of making an offer for Newcastle United PLC at this time."

Newcastle have been linked with a takeover for sometime, with the Jersey-based investment group Belgravia also speaking to the club.

Flo to Leeds

AFP, London

Tore Andre Flo has linked up with former Chelsea teammates Dennis Wise and Guy Poyet after signing a short-term deal with Championship strugglers Leeds United.

The 33-year-old striker has moved to Elland Road from Norwegian side Valerenga until the end of the season.

Flo played alongside Leeds's management duo of Wise and Poyet at Chelsea -- when current Elland Road chairman Ken Bates was in charge of the Londoners -- before making a 12.5 million pounds (24.4 million dollars) move to Rangers in July 2001.

Other players who joined Leeds on short-term deals Wednesday were Tresor Kandol -- who had been on loan from Barnet -- and Espanyol defender Armando Miguel Correa De Sa, subject to international clearance.

Leeds are currently second bottom in the Championship and in danger of being relegated to the third tier of English professional football for the first time in their 88-year history.



Cassano cannoned

AFP, Madrid

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

Controversial Italian forward Antonio Cassano is edging nearer the exit door at Real Madrid, according to the Spanish press who said he had been kicked out of training by his coach Fabio Capello.

Cassano, who joined Madrid a year ago from Italian Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

</