

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 Quisque 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 GRT.

"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 fined 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.

"I sometimes miss a good cross I'd get from Willy Sagnol or Philipp Lahm. Chelsea's style is different than at Bayern. It's difficult to take advantage of my 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."

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 Miquel Correia 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 Italians Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real.

And with Capello signing highly-rated Franco-Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain last month, Cassano's path to the first team seems to be blocked by ever more obstacles.

When asked if his arrival could hasten Cassano's departure, Higuain replied: "I have come here to win a place in the team. Whether Cassano is here or not changes nothing."

Earlier this week, Real president Ramon Calderon admitted Cassano had failed to adapt to his new surroundings.

PSG stand to stay closed

AFP, Paris

A notorious stand at Paris St Germain that was closed after a fan was killed outside the ground in November, will remain shut at least until the end of January, a municipal source claimed.

The Boulogne stand at PSG was closed after a fan was shot dead by an off-duty police officer at the end of November, following the club's 4-2 UEFA Cup loss at home to Israeli's Hapoel Tel Aviv.

The police officer was defending a Jewish fan that had been attacked by a mob chanting racist and anti-semitic slogans.

The closed stand is notorious for being the home of some of PSG's most hardcore fascist fans.

The municipal source said it would not be opened until certain conditions had been met.

These are, according to the source: "The putting in place of a new system to control access to the Boulogne stand, scheduled for the end of January 2007, (and) the explicit commitment of all supporters associations in condemning violence, racism and anti-semitism."

London merry-go-round

BRIAN GLANVILLE



London: the managerial merry go round, or perhaps the better word would be farce.

That good old German word, schadenfreude, seems all too relevant in the case of Chelsea, Abramovich's billions, and the metamorphosis of the supposedly Special One, Jose Mourinho. At the turn of the year, we suddenly find him a seemingly contrite but certainly a vastly diminished figure, recklessly and potentially disastrously putting public blame on his players, but also -- if not quite so emphatically and convincingly -- accepting it for himself, raising the surprising hypothesis that perhaps he is not special at all.

Irony piled on irony. Not so long ago he was telling us at Stamford Bridge press conferences that he only had a small squad of players, the implication being that his resources were strained. Yet as the season was approaching, he declared that it was his deliberate policy to reduce the size of the squad, since it meant that all its players would have their chance.

For those of us who feared that Chelsea with their Russian billions were permanently unbalancing the English game, it is something of a relief to see how money, indeed, isn't everything; even in football. One of the players castigated by Mourinho for his poor performance is the one who cost most of all, 30-million-pounds plus, in Andrei Shevchenko. I hardly think you could blame Mourinho for the departure of William Gallas to Arsenal when the Frenchman was so at odds with the club that he had even threatened to give away goals. But the loss of Gallas, and the absence for so many recent games of the dominant John Terry, has emphasised the unwisdom of buying the aggressive Khalid "The Cannibal" Boulahrouz, whose tuggery against Portugal was one of the least pleasing sights of the German World Cup.

Another to be criticised is the teenaged Nigerian talent, the supposedly unpunctual Jan Obi Mikel, but here again you might say that Chelsea and the player himself are hoist with their own petard. For Chelsea moved Heaven and earth to prise him away from Manchester United, via Lyn Oslo; the player himself insisting he preferred Stamford Bridge to Old Trafford. You wonder what he thinks about it now.

As for Arsenal and Arsene Wenger, theirs has been a switch-back of a season. Defeat at Sheffield United, albeit with a much weakened team, was both crucial in terms of any faint chance they still had in the Premiership, and lamentable in their inability to score against a team which, for the last half hour, had an outfield player in Phil Jagielka. Who decried Arsenal's lack of sportsmanship after the game when several players refused to shake hands. Not that you could have expected any of them to shake the hand of the rugged Sheffield centre back Chris Morgan with which he had blatantly punched Robin Van Persie in the stomach and unless the FA take action on TV evidence got away with it.

United themselves were lacking several players, but the way the big French striker brushed off the supposedly commanding Kolo Toure to score the winning goal raised unhappy memories of the goal Toure gave away a couple of years back at Bayern Munich. No Thierry Henry, no Emmanuel Adebayor, in incisive form of late. But why did Arsenal allow three such promising strikers as the young Irishman Stokes, top scorer in Scotland even with unfashionable Falkirk, Danish international Bentner (Birmingham) and teen-aged Italian Arturo Lupoli (Derby) all to go out on loan? As for their manager, that aura of cool, calm polyglot sophistication barely survived his contretemps with Tottenham's Martin Jol at Highbury late last season and went to the winds after the fierce confrontation with Alan Pardew this season at West Ham.

Pardew of course didn't last much longer after that heady victory; the Icelanders wielded the ice pick, you might say. But here he is installed at Charlton, where he once used to play. Hard to see what's happened at The Valley as anything but the stuff of sheer inept farce. Having managed to tempt Iain Dowie away from an outraged Crystal Palace. Quite why Dowie was shown the door so early in the season, when the beginning had been gloomy rather than disastrous, became the more mysterious when far from having another experienced manager up their sleeve, the club appointed the veteran coach Les Reed, who had never yet managed a club at any level. And when bad went to worse and Charlton collapsed ignominiously 5-1 at Tottenham, what did Charlton's chairman Richard Murray and chief executive Peter Varney do but give Reed a three-

year contract! Results continued to be disastrous, not least a home defeat in the League Cup by humble Wycombe Wanderers and after he'd been in office for just 41 days, Charlton got rid of poor Reed too and appointed... Alan Pardew!

Somewhat ill advisedly, Reed published a long e-mail in a daily paper, informing us that having been told by Varney and Murray that they had every confidence in him, they dismissed him. No hard feelings at all on Reed's part. Xmas after all is the season of forgiveness.

As for West Ham, they too appointed an ex-player in Alan Curbishley who began with a sensational home win over Manchester United. Since then things have fallen apart, a 1-0 home defeat by Manchester City followed on New Year's day by a humiliating defeat at Reading.

At the home game against Manchester City, one was amazed to hear a fortissimo chorus from the fans at the start of the second half of, "One Carlos Tevez, there's only one Carlos Tevez!" He, of course, being one of the two Argentine internationals suddenly brought to the club at no expense by a young Iranian entrepreneur from the Corinthians of Sao Paulo, who didn't own him either; a conglomerate supposedly did. By general consent the sudden arrival of these two seriously unbalanced the team and lowered morale. For many fans the young captain Nigel Reo Coker was the villain of the piece allegedly sulking because he'd failed to get a transfer to Arsenal; but it was he who scored the goal which beat Manchester United.

After Man City beat his team, Curbishley marvelled at the fact that the crowd had called for Tevez -- a major star in South America -- who hadn't even scored this season. But I thought their demands were justified, as Tevez, playing wide left rather than centrally where he is best known, did immediately put some skill and movement into a previously flaccid attack. But no goals resulted.

Nor did they two days later when Hammers were thrashed and humiliated 6-0 at Reading. So much for the ruthless Icelanders. Could Pardew have done any worse? Or even poor Broken Reed had he stayed at Charlton.

And how come Tevez at Reading never got off the bench? Could he conceivably have done less or worse than those who played?

Mascherano makes exit plea

Football

INTERNET, undated

Argentinian international Javier Mascherano has told West Ham he wants to leave the club as soon as possible. The 22-year-old, who, with compatriot Carlos Tevez, arrived at Upton Park amid so much fanfare last August, is disillusioned with life on the sidelines and has reportedly abandoned all hope of nailing down a regular place with the Hammers.

Hailed as two of the hottest properties in world football just five months ago, Mascherano and Tevez were supposed to simultaneously catapult West Ham and their own careers to new heights by moving from South America to Europe, but instead both the players and the club have flopped.

While Tevez still makes occasional appearances despite failing to find the net even once since his arrival, Mascherano has been

largely left in the reserves as West Ham have sunk further into the relegation zone. New manager Alan Curbishley does not appear to have any more confidence in him than the deposed Alan Pardew did and he has played just six minutes of first-team football since the defeat at Tottenham on October 22.

"I must get out of here," said Mascherano today. "I cannot stay at West Ham any more like this, without playing. At my age my game will stagnate if I don't play."

While Curbishley reportedly mulls over a move for West Brom midfielder Nigel Quashie, Liverpool are among a host of other club said to be interested in giving Mascherano the chance to re-assess their talent that earned him such rave reviews as recently as last summer's World Cup. Clubs in Italy and Spain are also said to be keen on him and the player has not ruled out moving to any of them.

"I came to England to do well but I have not had the opportunities necessary to show what I can do

but if I am not playing in the West Ham team I will have to leave to continue my career with another team."

One obstacle to Mascherano's escape bid is the fact that it is against FIFA rules for a player to play for more than two clubs between July 1 and the end of the following June -- and Mascherano has already turned out for Brazilian side Corinthians and West Ham since last summer. However, Mascherano may still be able to make an exit, as national associations are allowed to apply to FIFA for a dispensation.

Another complication afflicting Mascherano, though, are the terms of his contract, which is effectively owned by an investment company. The demands of this company are thought to have put Juventus off a move for the player recently. Mascherano has played in seven games since joining West Ham in August, five in the Premiership and the two UEFA Cup ties against Palermo.

Neill is hot commodity

AFP, London



Lucas Neill's agent has insisted the Australia 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's 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 Paul Jewell hopes to learn before the end of the week if a deal can be agreed to re-sign former striker Nathan Ellington, sold last year by the Latics to West Brom, now in the second division Championship.

West Brom are thought to be holding out for around three million pounds, with Wigan having reportedly made a bid of two million pounds.

"We will see what happens in the next 48 hours, but I do expect some sort of outcome one way or another," said the player's agent, Tony Finnigan.

Ellington, 25, scored 67 goals

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

Football

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 Vinovo 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.

"We are 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."

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Some-where out there

5 Bush league?

8 Towel designation

12 Lawrence Berra's nickname

13 Kanga's kid

14 Water-melon shape

15 Black-mailer's doing

17 Nibble

18 Dama-scene, e.g.

19 Tripped the light fantastic

21 Sister

22 Coin aperture

23 Ram's mate

26 Ess follower

28 Tolerate

31 Tab

33 Lair

35 Turn, in a sense

36 Censor-ship

38 Long, crosser

40 Born

41 Twine

43 Droop

45 Shackle

47 Enrobe

51 Met

52 Pilot's escape method

54 A-line designer

55 Trinity member

56 See to

57 Fax

58 Solidify

59 Clumsy

1 Favorable votes

2 Sly

3 Culture medium

4 Castor-bean poison

5 Smiled like the Cheshire cat

6 Tic-tac-toe win

7 Fishing sites

8 Rubs elbows

9 Tenant's dread

10 Assess-ment

11 Coaster

16 Lacking slack

20 Carte lead-in

23 Undergo recession

24 Actor

25 Novem-ber event

27 Conger, for one

29 Payable

30 Before

32 Ballet-class wear

34 Coming into existence

37 Opposite of "post-"

39 Body powder

42 Complete a salad

44 Must, slangily

45 Crazes

46 Canal zone

48 Wedding-cake feature

49 Gridlock noise

50 Tackles' team-mates

53 Montana or

54 Namath

Solution time: 21 mins.

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CRYPTOQUIP

XSLY WEZ SIHL KSL AIGG KE

XOUKL UY IY EGM LAWRKUIY

GIYAZIAL, U'M NIGG KSIK

KSL NERKUN YLOHL.

Yesterday's Cryptquip: WHAT SHOULD A DOG OWNER DO WITH A LEASH? PERHAPS HE OUGHT TO PULL THE PUG ON IT.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: K equals T

The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.