



PHOTO: AFP
Barcelona players Eidur Gudjohnsen (R) and Edmilson visit sick children at the paediatric ward of the Vall d'Hebron hospital to distribute gifts on the traditional Kings Day in Barcelona on Thursday.

Le Guen leaves Rangers

AFP, Glasgow

Paul Le Guen stepped down Thursday as manager of Rangers after a mere seven months in charge of the Glasgow giants.

The Frenchman's departure came just days after he dropped skipper Barry Ferguson from his side.

A statement issued by the club said Le Guen had left by mutual agreement.

Second-placed Rangers are currently a huge 17 points behind Scottish Premier League leaders and arch-rivals Celtic.

Real urging on Ronaldo

REUTERS, Madrid

If Ronaldo gets in shape and commits himself to the cause Real Madrid will be able to end their four-year trophy drought according to club president Ramon Calderon.

"He is an exceptional player and if he dedicates himself to the project we will win a trophy because he can provide us with 15 to 20 goals," Calderon told Spanish sports daily Marca on Tuesday.

"He is the sort of player that can win a team the Champions League because he can decide games on his own."

The Brazilian striker has hardly featured for Real this season having struggled to regain fitness after knee surgery following the World Cup.

He has been in the starting line up in only three of the team's 16 league games and has found the net just once.

Calderon said he had spoken to the 30-year-old on the way back from last month's FIFA awards gala in Zurich and was confident the Brazilian could recapture his best form.

"He told me he was very enthusiastic and wanted to get involved, but he has to really commit himself."

'No Chelsea crisis'

AFP, London



Frank Lampard has insisted Chelsea are still in the hunt for a third straight Premier League title despite a disappointing sequence of results over the Christmas and New Year period which has left the Blues six points behind leaders Manchester United.

Chelsea failed to win three of their four holiday fixtures and on Tuesday were held to a goalless draw by Aston Villa – the first time this season that Jose Mourinho's men had failed to score in the league.

But England midfielder Lampard, Chelsea's stand-in skipper, was confident the anticipated returns from injury of Blues captain John Terry, Arjen Robben and goalkeeper Petr Cech would give the London club the boost they needed in the second half of the

season.

"It is certainly not a crisis. It is something we need to address because we are not used to drawing games and not getting three points for three games on the trot," he said.

"We are used to winning games and we want to win games again," former West Ham hero Lampard added.

Terry will be back for Chelsea's next Premiership clash against Wigan at Stamford Bridge on January 13 with Cech available the following week for the trip to Liverpool.

"It is a great boost to have Petr back," said Lampard. "For me he is the best goalkeeper in the world."

Credit to Hilario for coming in but we've been unfortunate to lose two of the best keepers in the Premiership (Cech and Carlo Cudicini) for a long period of time.

"Petr coming back is a big bonus especially with the sort of injury he had (fractured skull). As regards to

John, we all knew it was a short-term thing with his back. Psychologically it will be good to have him back. Who wouldn't want John Terry back in their side?"

Looking ahead, Lampard added: "Ourselves and Manchester United know the situation now and there is still a long way to go."

"I am confident we can pull the gap back. There are many points to play for and we've got a lot of confidence in this team. That's the reason we've been champions two years on the trot."

"It is important we carry on doing the right things. Slight things haven't gone our way. You can't dwell on that. You just have to wait for it to turn a little bit and I am sure it will."

"People only get carried away because of the standards we have set for the past two seasons. It is quite normal to have periods in a season where it doesn't quite go for you."

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Ferguson scents title

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson believes his

Premiership leaders are on course to deny Chelsea a third straight title.

United emerged from the busy Christmas and New Year period with a six point lead over second-placed Chelsea and Ferguson believes his side now have the understanding to stay in pole position in the second half of this season.

"We have got to a level where you can smell that the team is right together," he said. "People are familiar with one another -- their families get to know each other -- they understand each other's strengths and weaknesses."

"The longer they are with each

other they develop these relationships and you can see that blends the team together," Ferguson also told the club's official magazine, Inside United.

And, with Chelsea struggling with injuries, Ferguson believes fortune is favouring the Old Trafford giants.

"That is maybe Chelsea's luck changing. They have had some incredible fortune the last couple of years, scoring in the last minute against Wigan and Tottenham last season."

"Chelsea also scored in the first two minutes against us, things like that. I do not think we have had any real luck in games."

"In terms of injuries we started out without the full squad. Gabriel Heinze was not fit, we've had problems with Gary Neville, then Ji-Sung Park and Ole (Gunnar Solskjaer) got injuries."

"But we have coped really well because the squad has got stronger and more experienced. So when players are out we are handling it much better."

The Scot has also been pleased by United's disciplinary record this season. "It has been terrific. Basically we are concentrating on the game all the time."

"We are not surrounding referees like other clubs do. There is a good core of natural discipline because we do not have any players who go over the top."

"The younger players coming out of the academy are brought up the right way. Players like Darren Fletcher and Kieran Richardson are good, well-behaved players," Ferguson insisted.

On-loan striker Henrik Larsson is set to make his debut against Aston Villa in the FA Cup on Sunday

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Brazil to face Portugal

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil are to play Portugal in their first international of the year.

The match will be played on February 6 at a venue to be announced, possibly London, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said on its Web site on Thursday.

Portugal, led by former Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, beat the five-times world champions 2-1 when the sides last met in Brazil in 2003.

Brazil are unbeaten in five matches under new coach Dunga, having beaten Argentina, Wales, Ecuador and Switzerland and drawn with Norway.

The former world champions will take part in the Copa America in Venezuela in June and are due to begin their qualifying campaign for the 2010 World Cup later this year.

Real bid for C'Ron!

AFP, Madrid

Spanish giants Real Madrid have made a bid for on-fire Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo.

Real, without silverware for four years, have bid 40 million euros for the 21-year-old Portugal international in an effort to sign him in the January transfer window, the Madrid-based ABC daily has said Thursday.

But the English Premiership leaders have no intention of letting go of the in-form Ronaldo, who scored three consecutive doubles for his club over the holiday period, and have slapped a price tag of 70 million euros on him, ABC said.

It was not possible to confirm the report at Real Madrid.

Injury blow for Recoba

REUTERS, Rome

Inter Milan striker Alvaro Recoba will be out of action for around three weeks after injuring a calf muscle, the Serie A club said on Thursday.

The Uruguayan international, whose appearances this season have been mostly as a substitute, limped off during a 2-1 win over Atalanta on Dec. 23.

He is expected to miss Serie A matches against Torino and Fiorentina, as well as the first leg of Inter's Italian Cup quarterfinal against Empoli before returning to the team for Inter's away match against Sampdoria on Jan. 28.

Shaky win for Sharapova

AFP, Hong Kong

Russian sensation Maria Sharapova began her run up to the Australian Open with a less than convincing victory over China's Yan Zi in the first round of a Hong Kong invitational on Thursday.

The world number two overcame a tough start to defeat the Wimbledon and Australian Open doubles champion 7-5, 6-3 in a 92-minute slugfest marked by the tenacity of the young Chinese player.

Sharapova broke early in the first set to take a commanding 4-1 lead before Yan battled back, breaking the Russian's serve twice to almost force a tie-break.

But the US Open champion drew on her superior strength to claw back in a thrilling ten-minute game to take the first set.

Yan, 22, never got back into the match and despite breaking Sharapova one more time, in the

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Becks back to Real talk



REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid have offered a two-year contract extension to David Beckham and will hold talks with the former England captain's representatives during the next two weeks.

"We have a definite offer on the table which is for two more years and is worth slightly more than his existing deal," Beckham's spokesman Simon Oliveira said on Wednesday.

"We will be sitting down in the next couple of weeks to discuss things, but one thing that can be assured is that it is 100 percent certain that David will not be leaving Real during the January transfer window."

"He is determined to play a full part for Real for the remainder of the season."

Beckham's contract with Real expires at the end of June and as of Jan. 1 the 31-year-old has been free to talk to other clubs.

Several teams in England, Italy and the United States are reported to be interested in recruiting the midfielder.

Spanish and British media have said a possible new deal with Real Madrid was being held up because of a dispute over image rights with the club wanting to retain its pres-

ent 50 percent share.

Oliviera denied that image rights were a stumbling block.

"Any decision that is going to be made will be a footballing decision," he said. "His worth needs to be recognised but that is not a make or break part of the process."

"No decision has been made at the moment but we hope that we will know what is happening by March."



DAVID BECKHAM

Beckham was a fixture in the Real Madrid starting lineup in his first three seasons at the club, but he has lost his place since Fabio Capello took charge as coach at the start of the present campaign.

He has started just five of Real's 16 league games and appeared as a substitute in another seven.

Inter end Figo speculation

AFP, Rome

Serie A champions Inter Milan have released a statement saying Luis Figo will definitely not be joining Saudi Arabian club Al Ittihad.

Al Ittihad claimed last week that the 34-year-old Portuguese midfielder had signed for them on a one-year contract worth 4.5 million euros (5.9 million dollars) and would be arriving on January 5.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini has already dismissed talk of Figo's departure, and the club reiterated their desire to hold onto the former World and European Footballer of the Year in a statement posted on their website.

"There are no negotiations for the transfer of Luis Figo to another club," read the statement on Thursday.

"The recent news of a possible transfer of the Portuguese midfielder is, therefore, completely groundless."

However Figo, whose contract with Inter runs out at the end of the current season, has played little under Mancini this season and could be tempted by the lure of another lucrative deal before retiring.

He retired from international football after Portugal lost to France in the World Cup semi-finals in July, but said he wanted to continue at club level for a season or two.

Inter, the current Serie A leaders, are currently in Bahrain and will face the Bahrain national team in a friendly match this coming Saturday before flying back to Italy.

Henry hails Van Persie

AFP, London



Arsenal captain Thierry Henry believes fellow

Gunnars striker Robin van Persie

has it in him to become one of the Premiership's greatest players.

Dutch international van Persie scored twice during the 4-0 league win against strugglers Charlton at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium on Tuesday, making it five goals in his last four matches.

With Theo Walcott, Julio Baptista and Emmanuel Adebayor all injured, the 23-year-old van Persie had to shoulder additional responsibility against Charlton -- a match where Henry was making his return after seven league games out with a sciatic nerve problem.

France forward Henry put Arsenal ahead with a penalty after Charlton full-back Osei Sankofa was shown a straight red for pulling back van Persie in front of an open goal.

And when the Gunners were awarded a second penalty late on, van Persie made no mistake before chipping in his second goal in the last minute.

"Robin is finally playing as a centre-forward -- and when he plays there, he shows that he can score goals," said Henry.

"If he wants it and if his head is right, like it is at the moment, he can be, in years to come, one of the best ever in the Premiership."

"He is going that way and that is why I let him take the penalty. It would be great if he finished as Arsenal's top scorer. That would be something special for him."

Comparisons are being drawn between van Persie and fellow Dutch striker Dennis Bergkamp, widely regarded as Arsenal's best overseas player, who retired at the end of last season.

However, Henry insisted: "You should not compare people. Dennis was Dennis and Robin is Robin."

"He has reached that level

already. Robin is doing it for the national team and is doing it for Arsenal. It is up to him how far he is going to go."

Henry, who took his tally for the Gunners this season to eight goals, has had to endure a campaign interrupted by injury problems after playing for losing finalists France in last year's World Cup final.

But he said he was more concerned about Arsenal's performance than collecting another Golden Boot award for the Premiership's leading scorer.

"Goals do not matter to me," he said. "If they did, I would not have given Robin the ball for the penalty."

"I have always said I am not a natural-born killer. If I have to give a ball, I will do it."

"Sometimes people like to create tension. I gave Robin the ball for the penalty and celebrated with him. To me it does not matter who scores."

Henry added: "I have scored

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Montella takes Fulham flight



INTERNET, undated

Vincenzo Montella's era at Roma is over after he left the training ground today to complete his loan to Fulham.

The striker, nicknamed 'Aeroplanino' for his flying celebratory gesture, did not take part in today's session at Trigoria and the fact was not mentioned on the club website, indicating he is already considered an ex-Giallorossi player.

It's reported that Montella took a 21.30 flight from Rome's Fiumicino airport towards London Wednesday evening.

Roma will pay around a third of his wages, which currently total 1.2m-pound per season, during his six-month loan at Craven Cottage.

Released for the January transfer window after discovering he did

not play a part in Coach Luciano Spalletti's plans, he leaves after seven years at the Stadio Olimpico.

Although it is not yet official, even teammate Philippe Mexes admitted the switch to Fulham was a certainty.

"I hope he will score many goals in England and also that he one day comes back to Roma," said the defender.

It could well be a temporary transfer, as Montella's contract

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FILE PHOTO: AFP

Former Italy international Vincenzo Montella has completed his move from AS Roma to Premiership club Fulham.

Henin, Henman pull out



AFP, undated

World No.1 Justine Henin-Hardenne has withdrawn from this month's Australian Open citing personal reasons, Tennis Australia said Thursday.

The 24-year-old Belgian initially announced her withdrawal from next week's lead-up Sydney International tournament, but Australian Open officials later confirmed she would also not be playing in the year's first Grand Slam tournament.

The officials said they had not been told of her reasons.

Henin-Hardenne is expected to

release a statement on Friday.

Sydney International tournament director Craig Watson said he was told her withdrawal was due to a personal concern.

"Obviously, we are very disappointed -- Justine is our defending champion and the world No.1," Watson said.

"I believe she is quite upset and we certainly wish her the best and hope she is able to return to the courts very soon."

In her absence, reigning Australian Open and Wimbledon champion Amelie Mauresmo of France will be the top seed for the Sydney tournament and the opening major tournament of 2007.

Britain's Tim Henman has also withdrawn from the Open after

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PHOTO: AFP

Russian starlet Maria Sharapova makes a backhand return against Yan Zi of China during their quarterfinal encounter of the Watson's Water Tennis Championships in Hong Kong on Thursday.