

Charlton open to Bent offers

THE GUARDIAN

New Charlton manager Alan Pardew revealed yesterday that his plan to save Charlton from relegation involves selling the club's prize asset, striker Darren Bent.

Bent has been the only player capable of scoring regularly for the Addicks this season, hitting eight of the club's 17 Premiership goals as he continues the excellent form he has shown since arriving at The Valley from Ipswich for 2.5 million pounds in June 2005.

When Pardew took over from the sacked Les Reed on Christmas Eve, he insisted he had no intention of letting the 22-year-old go, but the striker has since picked up a knee injury that will keep him out for much of January, meaning the club is obliged to find a replacement for him. That replacement -- plus several other new players -- could be funded by the sale of Bent, though Pardew was at pains to point out today that he believes the player to be worth much more than 7 million pounds, the value that some Premiership suitors have reportedly put on him.

7 million isn't going to touch the sides for Darren Bent," said Pardew. "This is a top-class player in my view. After watching him for just a week and a bit, he's an England player and that's how he should set his goals. My priority when I came here, and when he was fit, was that he was not going to go anywhere, that was categorical.

"But his injury at the moment gives us a problem. We cannot afford to have him out of the team for five weeks, so I'm having to assess it and weigh up all the situations and I'll have to do what's right for Charlton. The injury changes things. We are trying to locate a strike to replace him, so we'll see. Certainly the figures for Darren Bent being banded around are way too low."

In total, Bent has struck 33 goals in 66 appearances for Charlton, a strike-rate similar to the one he had during his four seasons at Ipswich. Liverpool and Tottenham have been strongly linked with a move for Bent, but Spurs this morning denied that they have already made a bid. West Ham manager Alan Curbishley is also reported to be keen on a reunion with Bent, whom he signed for Charlton.

Meanwhile, Charlton also announced today that former Hull City boss Phil Parkinson has been hired as Pardew's assistant.

Sociedad sign Savio

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Sociedad have agreed a deal to sign Brazilian forward Savio on loan from Flamengo until the end of the season, the Primera Liga side said on Friday.

The agreement does not include an option to buy the former Real Zaragoza player who will turn 33 next week.

Sociedad are in 19th place in the 20-team Primera Liga after winning just one of their 16 matches this season.

Savio is the second player to join the Basque side in the January transfer window. They have also signed Argentine defender Victor Lopez from Arsenal de Sarandi.

Moratti prepares Messi move

INTERNET, undated

Inter chief Massimo Moratti is ready to make a sensational 71m-pound summer bid to bring Barcelona star Lionel Messi to the San Siro.

The oil tycoon has made no secret of the fact that he would love to sign the Argentine international and reports in Spain suggest that he is ready to make an offer at the end of the season.

According to El Mundo Deportivo, Moratti is planning a blockbuster move for the 19-year-old and could offer up to 71 million pounds -- which may still not be enough!

Messi is tied to the Blaugrana until 2014 and has a 107m-pound release clause, but the Inter supreme seems willing to do all he can to convince the player to leave the Camp Nou.

Inter could offer a 3.9m-pound a season contract to the striker, who is allegedly discontent over his current deal and could therefore ask for a discounted switch.

Transfer market consultant Ernesto Bronzetti has confirmed the Nerazzurri's interest in the South American, although it seems that there has been no contact so far.

"I don't think I'm saying anything new if I confirm that Inter's President would be willing to do anything for Messi," declared the consultant.



PHOTO: AFP

English League Two side Macclesfield Town coach Paul Ince speaks at a press conference, with the FA Cup on the foreground, at their Moss Rose ground in Macclesfield on Thursday.

Mascherano all set for Liverpool

THE GUARDIAN



Liverpool have agreed to sign Javier Mascherano from West Ham United until the end of the season with a view to a longer-term deal, though there still appears to be a major obstacle to overcome if the move is to be completed. FIFA said on Thursday it would refuse to sanction the transfer.

Mascherano arrived at Upton Park from Corinthians on transfer deadline day in August having already represented the Brazilian club in competitive action since the World Cup finals. Article Five, Paragraph Three of FIFA's regulations stipulates that, while players can be registered for a maximum of three clubs from July 1 until June 30 the following year, they are eligible to play for only two in that time.

The West Ham manager, Alan Curbishley, who has agreed a fee

of 5 million pounds with Fulham for Luis Boa Morte, is already planning for life without Mascherano despite FIFA indicating that the rules would technically prevent the Argentina midfielder from completing a loan move to Anfield. Indeed, it is understood to have outlined the situation to the West Ham owner, Eggert Magnusson, when asked at the end of November.

"Our understanding, as of today, is the rule is binding," said a FIFA spokesman. "That means that, if a player has already played and registered and been eligible for two clubs from the period of July 1 to June 30, he is not any longer eligible for another club until the next period begins (on July 1). There is no provision that allows for any kind of waiving of this rule."

Yet Mascherano's representatives, Media Sports Investments, whose founder Kia Joorabchian brokered his move alongside that of Carlos Tevez from Brazil to east London with the company retaining the players' image rights, are convinced a deal can still be struck

even if they must challenge FIFA to force completion. The Liverpool manager, Rafael Benitez, is understood to share that confidence, with the player having agreed personal terms and the transfer discussed at length at a board meeting yesterday. The deal is expected to be a loan with an option to purchase at the end of the season.

Benitez will also add the Blackburn Rovers defender Lucas Neill to his ranks this month, with Stephen Warnock possibly moving in the other direction. While both Neill and Mascherano have played in the UEFA Cup this season, Liverpool will most likely submit the Australian as their one additional eligible player for their Champions League campaign under new UEFA rules, leaving the Argentinian as cover for Steven Gerrard and Xabi Alonso in domestic competition. The 22-year-old has made only seven appearances for West Ham and none since Curbishley took over.

Hammers seal Boa Morte deal

AFP, London



West Ham on Friday began the process of strengthening their squad for the fight to avoid relegation from the Premiership with the capture of Fulham captain Luis Boa Morte.

The Portuguese forward, who had played 250 games for Fulham, switches from west to east London for a fee believed to be in the region of five million pounds.

Boa Morte, 29, is the first major signing for new Hammers boss Alan Curbishley and he is joining a squad badly in need of new blood following a dismal first half of the season which has left them mired in the relegation zone, four points from safety. A delighted Curbishley said he had signed Boa Morte because of his experience and ability to adapt to different positions.

"I like players who are versatile, and Luis can play on the left, on the right, through the middle

as a centre-forward, and even as an attacking midfielder," the former Charlton manager said.

"He is also very experienced, which is something I think we need and have been endeavouring to bring in. We have some very exciting young players, but I just felt we needed more experience in certain areas to help them out.

"The signing also puts other players under pressure, and that is what football is all about. Luis has great pace, a fantastic left foot, and he makes and scores goals."

Fulham boss Chris Coleman admitted he was unhappy to lose one of the lynchpins of his squad.

"Luis has been a great servant to the club and we all wish him well," said Coleman.

"However, I have always said that if a player is not happy playing for this club and expresses a desire to go, then I would be prepared to let him leave; and this was the case with Luis.

"Having discussed this with the chairman and the managing director, we believe it is in the

Race dictates managerial choice?

REUTERS, London

Former England captain Paul Ince has criticised the absence of black managers at leading clubs and pointed the finger at ageing chairmen.

Ince, who became England's first black captain, has just started his managerial career at fourth division Macclesfield Town and is preparing for their third round FA Cup tie at Premier League champions Chelsea on Saturday.

"Most chairmen are 65 or 75, so maybe it's a generational thing," Ince was quoted as telling British media on Friday.

"Maybe black managers will have more of a chance with foreign owners coming into the game, people who don't really see this as an issue."

Ince, who missed out on the manager's job at second division Wolverhampton Wanderers last year, added: "Maybe I'm the one now to take it on and be that first (black British) Premiership manager.

"The Wolves job would have been ideal. The fans wanted me, the players wanted me, everyone wanted me but for some apparent reason I didn't get it.

"At Macclesfield, the owner's from Iraq and all he wants is this club to stay in this division. I feel wanted at this club, which is why I'm working my nuts off to make sure we stay up." Ince indicated there was a particular reluctance to hire black managers who were English, pointing out that foreigners such as former Chelsea coach Ruud Gullit and ex-Fulham manager Jean Tigana have worked in the Premier League.

"It's crazy that we're still talking about race issues these days," Ince said.

"Other countries have moved on, yet we seem to have our heads stuck in the sand.

"Look at Tigana and Gullit -- they've managed in the Premiership, but they're not English, are they? We need to move on from this."

Benfica to appeal Assis ban

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese giants Benfica are to appeal the one-year doping ban imposed Thursday on midfielder Nuno Assis by the Swiss-based Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

Benfica vice-president Silvio Cervan told a press conference: "We have started preparing a request for the decision to be annulled by the Swiss federal court."

The 28-year-old player was banned by the Professional Football League for six months after he tested positive for the steroid nandrolone following Benfica's 1-0 win over Maritimo in a Portuguese league game in December 2005.

Assis successfully appealed the ban prompting the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) to request that CAS impose a two-year ban.

CAS on Thursday suspended the player for one year.

Assis would be eligible to play again on July 26.

Jittery Maria reaches final

AFP, Hong Kong

Russian ace Maria Sharapova shrugged off a less than convincing start to her Australian Open preparations with a three-set semi-final win Friday over compatriot Elena Dementieva in Hong Kong.

The world number two overcame the jitters that also marked her quarter final win over China's Yan Zi Thursday to snatch victory from the 2004 French and US Open finalist 3-6, 6-3, 6-2.

"I felt like I improved as the match went on," said the US Open champion, who lost her serve three times in the opening set and twice in quick succession early in the second set.

A blistering 15-minute game secured the second set for the Russian, who from then on never looked like losing.

A downhearted Dementieva blamed her loss on her serve. "I have to work on the serve, it is the weakest part of my game," she said. "In an exhibition match like this I like to mix up the shots but Maria was pretty solid in coming back at each of them."

Sharapova will play the winner of the second semi-final, between Belgian world number five Kim Clijsters and Switzerland's Patty Schnyder, being played later Friday.

Eight of the world's top women players competed in the annual Hong Kong invitation, which is seen as a key warm up for the season's first Grand Slam, the Australian Open.

Money makes the ball move

JAMES RICHARDSON



Emerson is fed up of Real Madrid and wants some Milan. Milan want some of Massimo Oddo, and possibly a family-size striker like

Vincenzo Iaquinta, to score some goals. Inter are standing optimistically next to a 60m-pound pot with Lionel Messi's name on it, while according to Wednesday's papers, Juventus have lined up Javier Mascherano and Werder's Miroslav Klose. Or, said Thursday's, Peter Crouch.

Yes, it's the Italian transfer market -- home to more tall stories than the island of Manhattan. In recent years the mid-season mercato has seen grim financial realities invariably winning over the natural creative exuberance of the papers, but this year may just prove different.

For example, second-place Roma have waved goodbye to Vincenzo Montella, but agreed terms with Valencia for the wilfully wasted Italian starlet Francesco Tavano. Montella's a slice of Serie A history with his 137 career goals, but only four of those have come in the last two seasons and given that forward-thinking Roma manager Luciano Spalletti reckons centre-forwards are passé these days, he fancies the cover Tavano supposedly offers him for his Brazilian widemen Rodrigo Taddei and Alessandro Mancini. Time will tell if he is right.

Meanwhile, spurred by recent events, Italy's big three are all preparing to splash out like a pre-diet Michelle McManus at the plunge pool. Inter, dizzy with their new-found success, want to celebrate next season's centenary in style, hence the planned spree at Barca. Juventus, now just one point from the top of Serie B with a game

in hand, know they must make investments to keep hold of current stars like Gigi Buffon, another Inter target. For the first time in over a decade, they've been promised a proper war chest from the club's controlling Agnelli family. Stumbling Milan have also been promised similar intervention from Uncle Silvio and, unlike their fellow giants, they're planning to act immediately -- little known Argentinian left-back Leandro Grimi has been flown in, while fellow full-back Oddo's move from Lazio looks more likely by the day.

The month may yet hold other surprises, with Luis Figo's rumoured flight to Saudi Arabia resparking life into the Beckham rumours, for example. Otherwise, the transfer story to watch this January could well prove to be at Parma.

Readers will recall this club from it's 90s heyday when it was plucked from third division obscurity by Calisto Tanzi, the man who gave the world UHT milk. They went on to enjoy a fairytale ... no, a dairytale rise to the heights of the European game. The cream of the world's players graced the club's tiny stadium Ennio Tardini -- men like Faustino Asprilla and Gianfranco Zola, Hernan Crespo and Hristo Stoichkov. Sadly, after it later emerged that, whoops, Tanzi's billions didn't actually exist, Parma were forced to downsize dramatically, and for the past few years they have been living life one step ahead of football's knacker's yard.

Despite a cleaned up set of books and a very productive youth programme, prospective new owners haven't exactly been queuing up to buy Parma, which made it all the more surprising when the official receivers announced this week that the small town club is now up for auction, or under, one might say, the Parma hammer.

Are the receivers -- as the

townsfolk fear -- just plain bored of counting the pennies and fielding crank calls from former Madrid man Lorenzo Sanz? Do they plain want shot of the former Milkmen? Or are they, as they claim, capitalising on a moment of sudden interest in the club? The papers reckon it's the third option and this Thursday they offered a sizzling sextet of potential new buyers that included, alongside hardy perennial Sanz, such unexpected delights as formula one team boss Flavio Briatore, Juve shareholder Al Saadi Gaddafi and the recently disgraced former administrative director of Juventus, Antonio Girardo, a bully of a man immortalised in Luciano Moggi's many phone taps, but now apparently planning to walk back into football through the front door.

All very exotic. A potentially safer bet may prove to be Giambattista Pastorello, already director general of the club back in the glory days of Nevio Scala and the Wembley Cup Winners' Cup final win over Royal Antwerp. But whoever it is had better hurry -- Parma are floundering down in penultimate place in Serie A, behind even the massively-penalised Reggina, and are leaking almost two goals a game. With even the town's famously quiet supporters growing restless, few clubs in Italy need help, and with the transfer window open, what better time to start?

The receivers promise to have an owner sorted within the next three weeks. In the meantime Serie A continues this years extended winter break (very extended, for some of us). The next round of action doesn't take place until the weekend of the 14th. Until then, Buon Anno to all.

(James Richardson is a columnist for Guardian Unlimited)

Smith poised for Rangers return



Football

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers are set to name Scotland boss Walter Smith as their manager for a second time, with the club's former star striker Ally McCoist joining him as back-up, the BBC reported on Friday.

The pair had emerged as favourites to return to Ibrox following the shock sacking of French coach Paul Le Guen on Thursday.

Le Guen lasted only seven months with Rangers during which time the Glasgow giants made their worst start ever to the Premier League and he increas-

ingly came under attack from several fronts.

His demotion of skipper Barry Ferguson on Monday proved to be the last straw and the club announced that the former Lyon coach would be leaving by mutual consent.

Smith coached Rangers to nine successive titles before leaving to join Everton in the English Premiership in 1998 where he had little success.

Since then arch-rivals Celtic have regained dominance in Scottish football and are set to win the league title once again this year with a 17 point advantage over second-placed Rangers.

Rangers chairman David

Murray, however, has maintained close links with Smith and the BBC said his return to the club was set to be announced.

Sheffield United assistant manager Stuart McCall could also be part of the new management setup.

Rangers would first have to agree terms with the Scotland national team who are the surprise leaders of their Euro 2008 qualifying group under Smith's astute tutelage.

McCoist, who has become a leading television pundit since he retired from football, has already been working with Smith in the Scotland coaching team.



PHOTO: AFP

Russia's world number two Maria Sharapova exults after winning a point during her semifinal encounter against compatriot Elena Dementieva in the Watsons Water Tennis Championships in Hong Kong on Friday.