



Hamburg defender Joris Mathijsen (L) and striker Jose Paolo Guerrero share a light moment during a training session at the al-Nasr club in Dubai on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Fergie hints at double swoop

**Football**

INTERNET, *undated*

Sir Alex Ferguson could bring in two new players during the transfer window.

But the Manchester United manager insists he has no intention of raising funds by selling Cristiano Ronaldo.

Bayern Munich's England midfielder Owen Hargreaves is known to be target but Ferguson refuses to go into specifics about possible transfer dealings.

Ferguson explained: "We may sign someone in January, there may be a couple of signings, who knows? We are looking at some things.

But we have the squad to handle it (all competitions)."

Portugal winger Ronaldo has again been linked with a move to Real Madrid but Ferguson said:

"There has not been an offer. "It is not worth talking about anyway. It is not an issue for us."

Former Barcelona and Celtic striker Henrik Larsson is one new recruit and set to make his debut against Aston Villa in the FA Cup on Sunday after arriving on loan from Helsingborg.

Ferguson is debating whether to partner the Swede with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer up front as Louis Saha is sidelined with a groin strain.

The Old Trafford boss said: "Both players will be involved -- I have to decide whether to start with both or just one of them.

"Like Ole, Henrik is a good finisher. They are both experienced and they can use that knowledge.

"Certainly their positional play in the penalty box is the great strength of both of them."

Ferguson has been delighted with the way the veteran forward has applied himself since arriving.

"Larsson's performances in training have been very good, " he said.

"I have been very pleased. He is very sharp.

"He is a man who looks after himself and I have been an admirer of him for many years.

"On two or three occasions I thought I had him. But he was always happy at Celtic and that was a problem for us.

"It was understandable he did not want to move as he was settled there."

Former West Brom goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak will make his fourth appearance of the season in the third round, replacing Edwin Van der Sar, who is rested.

Ferguson said: "Tomasz has been excellent. In terms of a match situation he has played only three games but his performances in training have been absolutely superb.

"He is dedicated trainer, very quick and brave. He has a future the boy, no question of that.

"It is a good game for him to take part in.

"With European football beckoning next month it is important Tomasz gets a bit of football.

"Edwin has been fantastic but I think he understands we need to give the boy some experience."

Even though they have crucial Champions League and Premiership fixtures ahead, Ferguson insists they are not taking the FA Cup lightly.

He said: "It is a competition which creates a special atmosphere, no doubt it, when you look at all the shocks over the years.

"FA Cup history is full of United and Villa teams. We both have great records.

"We are all looking forward to the game and I hope we can get a good run.

"But we know it will not be easy against Villa as they are a very committed team under Martin O'Neill."

## Webster loaned to Rangers

AFP, Glasgow

Defender Andy Webster confirmed Friday that he has joined Scottish giants Rangers on loan from Wigan until the end of the season.

The 24 year-old moved from Hearts to the Premiership club in the summer.

"I am delighted to return to Scotland with Rangers," he told the club's website.

"I have obviously played against them many times during my time with Hearts and I can't wait to pull on the jersey on a regular basis in front of crowds of 50,000.

"I have agreed to join on loan until the end of the season and hopefully I can extend my stay beyond that."

Webster is unavailable for the Scottish Cup tie with Dunfermline on Sunday but is likely to start against Dundee United at Ibrox the following Saturday.

## Falkirk's no to Wolves

AFP, Glasgow

Scottish Premier League side Falkirk have turned down an offer from Wolverhampton Wanderers to buy their fast-improving young striker Alan Gow.

The 24-year-old Gow scored a hatrick in the New Year's Day victory over Dundee United, but he is out of contract at the end of the season.

The former Airdrie striker has held talks with Aberdeen and Hibernian this week over a possible transfer in the summer.

But such has been his good form that Rangers and Celtic have both been linked with moves for his services.

A club statement read: "Wolverhampton Wanderers have made an offer for the immediate transfer of Alan Gow.

"The offer has been rejected as Falkirk Football Club remain committed to securing Alan on a longer contract and are continuing to have discussions with him."

Falkirk boss John Hughes is trying to persuade Gow to continue his development with the club for at least another season.

# Carrick relishing United challenge

INTERNET, *undated*

Michael Carrick is not afraid of competition for places at Manchester United -- in fact he relishes the challenge.

The 18million-pound midfielder, a summer signing for Tottenham, has been pleased with his progress in the first half of the season at Old Trafford.

United take a break from Barclays Premiership duty -- they lie six points ahead of Chelsea at the top of the table -- when they entertain Aston Villa in the FA Cup on Sunday.

Carrick said: "I have made quite a contribution in terms of games played and am happy with that. It has gone pretty well.

"We are in a good place in the table after the festive programme and that is encouraging.

"From a personal point of view, there is always more to come and I need to improve. I am working hard to do that.

"While there is competition for places at United, there is no rivalry in any way.

"We all get on well and the manager tends to change things around. That's fine, it keeps you on your toes and at your best. Even in training you have to be on top of your game.

"That's a good thing because when you come into a match you are always sharp and raring to go."

United took 10 points from a possible 12 over Christmas to keep Chelsea at arms length.

Now they face a different challenge in the cup and one Carrick aims to make strides in.

He said: "When you are playing well and winning, you look forward to playing matches.

"It does not matter whether it is a cup tie or a league game - you just want to express yourself.

"We have to be challenging for

things at this club.

"The FA Cup is a massive trophy -and United have a tremendous record over the years.

"I have played in quarter-finals but that's as close as it has been and something I want to put right."

Carrick has been impressed with striker Henrik Larsson, who is expected to make his debut in the third-round match after arriving on loan from Helsingborg.

The former Barcelona and Celtic star will return to Sweden in March to prepare for their league season.

Carrick said: "Henrik has looked good in training. He looks sharp and has settled in well.

"Hopefully he will get a few goals in his time with United. I am sure he will be successful here."

Former West Brom goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak will make his fourth appearance of the season as Dutch international Edwin Van der Sar is rested.

# Rovers look to Bentley

AFP, Liverpool

Blackburn Rovers manager Mark Hughes prepares for his team's FA Cup third round tie at Everton on Sunday with plans to offer a new contract to David Bentley following reports of interest from Manchester United in the midfielder.

Bentley, 22, has emerged as a key player at Ewood Park since arriving in a 700,000 pounds transfer from Arsenal 12 months ago and his form this season, and an impressive hatrick against United last term, has prompted rumoured interest from the current Premier League leaders.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has made it clear that he wants to add "one or two" new faces to his squad during this month's transfer window, but Hughes insists keeping Bentley at Blackburn is his number one priority.

"I'm not aware of any bids for David, but he has done very well for us this season and we are looking to improve his current situation at

the club," said Hughes. "The plan is to sit down with him in the next few weeks and hopefully get something sorted in terms of an improved contract.

"David only signed his current terms a year ago, but he wasn't as established then as he is now and he has really come on in the last 12 months," the former United striker, who played under Ferguson at Old Trafford, added.

"I think he knows that we are the right place for him at this time in his career and I enjoy working with him."

Hughes won a record four FA Cups during his playing career with United and Chelsea, but with another former club in Premier League rivals Everton blocking Blackburn's path this weekend, he admits Rovers face a difficult start to their Cup campaign. "Everton are strong and formidable at Goodison Park," the Welshman said of the eighth-placed Toffees, three points ahead of Rovers in the league table. "But we always go into every competition with the desire to do well

"The third round day is a special

occasion in the football calendar, though, and the Cup is still a very important competition in my eyes."

Everton were the last team from outside the big four of United, Chelsea, Arsenal and Liverpool to win the FA Cup and that success, a 1-0 Final win against United, was way back in 1995.

But manager David Moyes insists that his team are capable of going all the way again this season.

"The FA Cup is something we want to try to do as well as we can in. We only have to look at the likes of Millwall and West Ham getting to the final in recent seasons to know that it is there for us," he said.

"As a Scotsman, taking a side to Wembley would be a great thrill for me. But there is a lot of work to be done before you can even think about getting there and there are 40 or 50 managers all thinking it is their turn.

"Blackburn is a really tough draw for us, though. We are at home, which gives us a little advantage, but they are a good side that has picked up some good wins recently, so it won't be easy for us."

## Wenger slams foul play

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger launched a scathing attack on deliberate foul play in the English game on Friday and blamed referees for failing to protect talented players.

Wenger said he was a great admirer of the bravery and physical contact that was part of the English style of play, but said that some players and teams deliberately kicked opponents and escaped punishment.

"I don't blame the other managers, or the players -- if they are asked to give 100 per cent, then of course, they do -- but it is the referees who have to decide how far they can go," Wenger told reporters.

"We have a young team and they are kicked and punched. And in the end, you are still supposed to say 'sorry, I am not strong enough?' That is difficult to take, frankly.

"I don't feel it is right to punch people in the stomach and afterwards to say 'ok, they are just babies crying'. It is not the way I see the game."

He said deliberate foul play could hold the English national team back in international tournaments like the World Cup finals.

"And I feel sometimes, if that is football, that's the way we go then it doesn't progress English football. And I am sorry because if you go to the World Cup you cannot say you behave like that -- because you go nowhere," he said.

Wenger also said he had video evidence of well-known players and managers swearing freely at referees and not being punished, despite foul and abusive language being a dismissible offence.

## Ferrari receives Chelsea offer

INTERNET, *undated*

Matteo Ferrari's agent admits he has received an offer from Chelsea, but he has turned it down to stay with Roma.

"Jose Mourinho knows Ferrari well and this is why, when Matteo played against Chelsea for Everton, he spoke very highly of him," explained Gianni Corci on 'Teleradiostereo Sport.'

It would be a prestigious switch for the former Parma central defender, who has made just eight appearances for the Giallorossi this season.

"Ferrari suits the English game, both for his technical and physical attributes, but it's clear he wants to continue with Roma."

It would be a return to the Premiership for the 27-year-old, who had a brief spell on loan at Everton when he failed to find room at the Stadio Olimpico.

"We have a strong rapport with the Giallorossi directors and plan to carry on this relationship. We want to extend our contract, although it has to be said matters haven't improved by much," added Corci.

"Even if in Italy too there are prestigious sides interested in Matteo, who have made some interesting approaches, we are perfectly relaxed. Roma are in our minds."

## Strachan feels for Le Guen

INTERNET, *undated*

Celtic manager Gordon Strachan admitted sympathy for Paul Le Guen and claimed Old Firm bosses inhabit a 'fantasy' world.

Since arriving at Parkhead in the summer of 2005, the former Coventry and Southampton manager has seen off two of his Ibrox counterparts.

The Frenchman left after meeting chairman David Murray on Thursday only seven months after taking over from Alex McLeish.

Beleaguered Rangers, currently 17 points behind the Hoops in the Bank of Scotland Premier League, will try to pick up the pieces of a disastrous season with Scotland manager and former Light Blues' boss Walter Smith hot favourite to return to the helm.

Strachan was keen to stress the peculiar pressures under which he thinks Celtic and Rangers managers operate.

He said: "If you can manage either half of the Old Firm without losing your sanity then you can go anywhere in the world.

"The physical and psychological toll that's taken of you by the time you leave depends on what kind of state the club's in at the time.

"The hardest part of working with the Old Firm is the fantasy that attaches itself to the clubs.

"By that I mean everything that is unreal. I can deal with my players and how we handle the opposition, everything else is unreal to me.

"So I can sympathise with Paul or any other manager when they lose their jobs because it's a hard business.

"Graeme Souness told me that when he was at Ibrox he knew the fight was on to keep hold of his sanity and he was right."

# TOUCHLINE

## No rest for the weary

**Football**

GABRIELE MARCOTTI

A few years ago I went to see Sven Goran Eriksson, who at the time was the England national team coach. He showed me a power-point presentation he had prepared, illustrating how countries in which there is no midseason break tend to underperform internationally. He was going to use it to persuade the English powers-that-be to introduce a winter break around the turn of the year (as is customary in most European leagues).

No prizes for guessing how he fared. Eriksson was laughed out of the room. Rather than give the players some time off in midseason, the Premiership goes in the opposite direction, doubling their fixtures. This season, most clubs played on December 23, 26, 30 and January 1: four games in nine days. Meanwhile, the rest of Europe's top leagues enjoyed breaks ranging from two weeks (Spain) to six weeks (Germany).

Eriksson's point was that the Premiership's insistence on scheduling additional TV-friendly games during the holidays ends up penalizing English-based players who find themselves staggering tired and battle-wearied into international competitions. Cynics -- especially now that the Swede is about as popular as the flu, at least in England -- will say that it's just an excuse.

But take a step back and ask yourself how many Premiership stars played well at Germany 2006? To a man, from Steven Gerrard to Thierry Henry and from Frank Lampard to Cristiano Ronaldo, most underperformed at the World Cup compared to what we're used to seeing, week in, week out. Which suggests that Eriksson may have a point.

Footballers are athletes, of course, but, as Giampiero Ventrone, the legendary former Juventus fitness coach told me, they are unlike most other athletes. First, most athletic training follows a natural peak-and-trough cycle. You plan your physical work in such a

way that you peak a certain number of times per year. For a world-class rower in an Olympic year it may mean peaking just once; for a boxer, three or four times (based on when his fights are scheduled); for a track and field star, the peaks will coincide with whatever Grand Prix events he or she has lined up.

The body is not a machine. You can only reach your peak potential every so often, which is why the most finely-tuned athletes only compete a limited number of times per year. But footballers are expected to turn out and be at their best 10 months out of the year. Simply put, it's impossible.

Soccer players also face a schedule unlike most other team sports. Most top teams play twice a week. It may not seem like a lot compared to, say, Major League Baseball (with its 162-game schedule) or the National Basketball Association, but those are very different sports. Both have off-seasons which are twice as long and, as far as baseball is concerned, much of the time is spent standing around (come to think of it, some NBA games are like that, too).

NFL football is more physically punishing than soccer, dictating a smaller 16 regular-season game slate. Even then, the NFL requires a different kind of physical effort: a series of short bursts (over a maximum of 35, 40 minutes per week) compared to the constant running of soccer.

And yet the irony is, according to Ventrone, that footballers train a lot less than athletes in individual sports. In fact, compared to swimmers and runners, they are relative softies.

"I work with these Ukrainian swimmers, they get up at 5 a.m. and train for 12 hours a day, every day," Ventrone told me. "That's an athlete's life. Footballers are spoiled brats compared to them. At Juve we worked more than most, but even then, you only got, at best, a couple of hours a day."

An assistant coach at one major Premiership club confirmed this.

"Most weeks we play two games, plus they get a day off," he told me. "And, if they don't have the day after a game off, we're usually

taking it easy. Then there's the day before the match. We almost always have light training, either because we have to travel or because we need to do more tactical work to prepare for our opponent. That's two more days lost. Which means we usually have just one day where we can train fully and properly and push ourselves, usually the Monday after a Saturday match."

And training "fully" and "properly" is a far cry from Ventrone's Ukrainian swimmers and their 2,000 daily laps.

"No, we'll start around 10, finish up by 12, 12:30 and that's it. But what can you do? Our only real chance to do serious work, the kind that builds fitness, is during pre-season. But that's just four weeks or so. And, even then, there will be tours and friendlies and all that crap."

Would players perform better if they put in more hours? Probably. At most clubs they have the morning or the afternoon off, which makes it a pretty cushy gig (and that's without considering the seven-figure salaries).

The problem with working them harder during the season is that they also need time off to recuperate. And the simple truth is that most simply don't get it. Those who went to the World Cup got, at best, three or four weeks off. At worst, like Andrea Pirlo or Thierry Henry (who had the "misfortune" of reaching the final), they got 12 days. Compare that to the three months most baseball stars get to spend their exorbitant salaries.

There is no easy solution to it, beyond reducing the number of fixtures, which, naturally, nobody wants to do, because you need to maximize profits to pay the massive salaries. Given that this won't happen any time soon, the best one can hope for is a mid-season break, a real one, across the whole continent (even if it means chucking in additional fixtures at other times of the year). And there's no better place to start than the English Premier League.

**(Gabriele Marcotti is a columnist for Sports Illustrated)**

# Trezeguet fancies Boca move

**Football**

AFP, Buenos Aires

France international striker David Trezeguet admitted Friday that he would be tempted to join Argentine side Boca Juniors if asked to by football legend Diego Maradona.

"If Diego asked me to come to

Boca it would be difficult to say no to him," Trezeguet, who plays for Italian Serie B side Juventus, told sports daily Ole.

"I see the passion that he has for Boca and he was an exceptional player. Because of this passion it would be hard to say no, even if up until now I've never really thought about it."

Trezeguet, 29, was born in

France to Argentine parents.

He started his career in top flight Argentine side Platense, but played just five matches before being signed by Monaco and then Juventus.

"I'd like to experience Argentine football. I left here very young and played very little in the first division. It would be an interesting experience on a personal level if not a financial one," he said.

"Talking to Maradona I'd like to play here some time."

Trezeguet said that he was also tempted by a move to Spain.

"I've always liked it (Spain). I come from the culture of Argentine football which is very similar. My priority is Juventus, but I've already told the management I want a competitive team."

Juventus were stripped of the first division title they won last season and relegated to the Serie B for match fixing.

Maradona, the 1986 World Cup winning captain, won his first league title with Boca Juniors in 1981 before moving on to Barcelona and Naples.

The 46-year-old quit his post as vice-president of Boca Juniors last August but said he would be ready to take up a management post early in 2007.



DAVID TREZEGUET

**CROSSWORD**

**By Eugene Sheffer**

<b>ACROSS</b>	<b>DOWN</b>
1 Post-bath applica-tion	1 A-one
5 Attract	2 Sheltered
9 Third degree	3 Trevi loss, WI
12 Hodge-podge	4 Carl Sagan series
13 John-Rice collabora-tion	5 Rhett's shocking word
14 Corn spike	6 Edge
15 Pulpy fruit	7 Fuss
17 Genetics abbr.	8 "A" Fish Called --
18 Tar	9 Sweat
19 Some-what dark	10 Williams or
21 Medita-tor's mantra	11 Strong genre
22 Vise	16 "— the "Sesame Street" audience
24 Track circuits	20 Diamond arbiter
27 San Diego attraction	
28 Swine	
31 Census stat	
32 B&B	
33 Wardrobe malfunction	
34 String name	
36 Maiden lead-in	
37 Vast	

**Solution time: 25 mins.**

AFAR	GOO	MEALS
YOGI	ROO	OVERS
EXAGGERATION	BITE	
SYRIAN	DANGERED	
EWING	SCOTT	
BILL	DEN	SOUR
BLEED	LAT	NEE
CORD	SAG	
RETTOR	CLOTHE	
ARILLA	REJECTION	
DIOR	SON	TEND
SEND	SET	ARKS

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**CRYPTOQUIP**

BD P VZPR BN RAPUNJZARBUQ

RSBUQN NTIS PN QPN

PUX IZPY, RSPR IZTYX

VM P NSBJ ZD DTMYN.

**Yesterday's Cryptoquip:** WHEN YOU HAVE THE GALL TO WRITE IN AN OLD EGYPTIAN LANGUAGE, I'D CALL THAT THE COPTIC NERVE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: D equals F

The Cryptoquip 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.