



Inter Milan players (From L-R) Javier Zanetti, Marco Materazzi, Adriano and Patrick Vieira jog during a training session in Manama on Friday. Inter Milan play Bahrain in a friendly match today.

Ancelotti realistic

AFP, Valletta

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti admits he is pessimistic about his team's chances of winning the Champions League.

Milan are six-time European champions and reached the final in 2005, but their confidence has been knocked by their eight-point penalty for match-fixing which has left them languishing in midtable in Serie A.

Ancelotti insisted a top-four finish in the league -- which would clinch a place in the third qualifying round of next season's Champions League -- was his team's main priority.

"We are looking at a fourth-place finish rather than the Champions League," the Milan coach said as he team prepared to leave their Maltese winter break training ahead of Saturday's Berlusconi trophy match against Juventus.

"To get to the final of the Champions League is an almost impossible dream, while finishing fourth is more likely, although less exciting."

Milan face Celtic in the last 16 of the competition. The first leg takes place at Parkhead, Glasgow on

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Larsson set for MU debut

AFP, Manchester



Henrik Larsson will make his belated introduction to English football in Manchester United's FA Cup third round tie against Aston Villa here Sunday having already won the backing of his new manager and teammates at Old Trafford.

After finally landing the Swedish striker -- albeit on a 10-week loan -- having failed on a number of occasions to lure Larsson from Celtic, United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has talked in glowing terms of the player's immediate impact on the dressing room.

Ferguson hopes the arrival of the veteran forward will provide his side with a valuable lift during a crucial stage of the campaign that he hopes will see United advance in the FA Cup and Champions

League as well as consolidate their six-point lead at the head of the Premiership.

With Louis Saha only just recovered from a niggling groin injury, Larsson is expected to start against Villa alongside Wayne Rooney or fellow Scandinavian Ole Gunnar Solskjaer as United attempt to book their place in the fourth round at the expense of a side they beat 3-0 last month.

United's Argentinian left-back Gabriel Heinze is convinced Larsson, who helped Barcelona win the Champions League final against Arsenal last year after coming off the bench, will settle into his new team with ease.

"He is one of my favourite players in the sense of what he has achieved, not just in Spain, but also at Celtic," Heinze said. "I think he is a great signing for us and will do really well here."

"He has not been a success for no reason. I saw him a lot for Barcelona. He was remarkable there considering he had come

back from a bad injury.

"Yet when he returned he was the same player as before. He was one of the best forwards in Spain and is going to be a great addition to our squad."

"If you are a bright young player you can learn from Henrik Larsson."

Larsson will be reunited his former Celtic manager Martin O'Neill but the Villa boss has singled out the Swede's teammate Cristiano Ronaldo as the biggest threat to the Birmingham club's hopes of avenging their recent defeat by United.

The Portuguese winger scored twice in a stunning individual display at Villa Park and O'Neill is convinced Ronaldo's form will be the deciding factor in this weekend's tie.

"He was simply outstanding against us before Christmas," O'Neill said. "If United were to sell him now they would get more than 50 million pounds for him."

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Return of joint TV rights?

AFP, Rome



Italy's antitrust authority, which investigates unfair competition and abuses of market position, on Friday urged the Italian football authorities to work towards a return of the collective selling of television rights among Serie A clubs.

The government-backed regulating body believes Italy's top division will be more competitive if the money from television is distributed in a fairer fashion.

"The system of sales of television rights and the distribution of money accentuates the economic disparity between the big and small clubs," said a statement issued by the Antitrust authority after an investigation into the business

dealings in Italian football. "The return of collective television rights would ensure a much tighter championship. There needs to be more cooperation from the clubs and more dialogue between the FIGC (Italian football federation) and Lega-Calcio (The Italian football league.)"

Lega-Calcio handles the day-to-day running of Serie A and Serie B but answers to the FIGC, Italian football's governing body.

Since 1999, clubs have been able to negotiate their own individual deals, giving more economic muscle to the bigger clubs such as Juventus, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Lazio and Roma.

The less fashionable clubs are offered far less money by broadcasters as their matches attract much smaller audiences.

Last season 14 Serie A clubs threatened to boycott matches

against Juventus (who have since been relegated to Serie B for match-fixing) AC Milan and Inter Milan after a proposed reform to the existing law governing TV rights was blocked by the then Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi.

Berlusconi happens to be the owner of AC Milan as well as Italian television company Mediaset, one of the three channels which show live Serie A matches.

Less prestigious clubs like Chievo and Livorno are estimated to bring in a tenth of what Inter Milan earn in TV money.

The antitrust authority said they would also like to see the end of the January transfer window. They believe it gives an unfair advantage to the bigger clubs who are in a better financial position than the smaller teams to strengthen their squads.

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Essien wins BBC poll

AFP, London

Chelsea's Ghana international Michael Essien was on Friday named the BBC's African Footballer of the year, carrying off the title with a massive 66 percent of the vote.

The 24-year-old midfielder was named ahead of Mohammed Aboutrika, of Egyptian club side El Ahly, while Essien's colleague at the English champions, Didier Drogba, of the Ivory Coast, came third.

More than 12,000 listeners to BBC World Service's Fast Track African sports programme voted in the poll, which was run in conjunction with the broadcaster's website.

Previous winners include Senegal's El-Hadji Diouf, Egypt's Mohamed Barakat, Sammy Kuffour of Ghana and Nigeria's Jay Jay Okocha, who won the award twice, in 2003 and 2004.



Bayern Munich players Hasen Salihamadzic (L), Roy Makaay (C) and Marc van Bommel engage in a game of keepy-uppy during a training session at the Al-Ahli club in Dubai on Friday. The Bundesliga giants are on a ten-day training camp at the Gulfemirate.

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Henry speaks of injury woe

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal striker Thierry Henry has likened his struggles earlier this season to "watching a bad movie".

The France striker was forced to take a break at the end of November to have treatment on a sciatic nerve problem, missing seven matches as a result.

He made a goalscoring return in the 4-0 Barclays Premiership victory against Charlton on Tuesday and is expected to line up against Liverpool in their FA Cup third round clash at Anfield on Saturday evening.

But Henry admitted he had made a mistake in trying to push himself to play when he clearly was not 100 per cent.

"When you physically can't go on, the wise thing to do is not to go out there. It doesn't help you and it doesn't help the team," he told The Sun.

"It's like when you are watching a bad movie with your wife and you are both falling asleep. You will say 'I'm not falling asleep' and you won't admit the film is rubbish. You keep on watching it."

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Scolari itching for Brazil friendly

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal's Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari says he is looking forward to his side's friendly against Brazil next month at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium in London.

"Obviously it will be a very special day and I am already looking forward to it with much expectation," he said in comments published on the Internet site of the Portuguese Football Federation.

"I am sure that it will be a spectacular and emotional match because there will be many players on the pitch of great quality and talent," added Scolari, who led his native Brazil to its fifth World Cup title in 2002.

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Wenger planning double blow on Reds

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger says his in-form team are relishing two cup ties in four days at Premier League rivals Liverpool.

Wenger, whose team travel to Liverpool in the FA Cup on Saturday and then return to meet them at Anfield in the English League Cup on Tuesday, thinks the tough draws may even help his players.

"It's a big draw, to play Liverpool, but I am sure we are going to be ready, strong and focused," he told reporters on Friday.

"Sometimes it is better to play a big team like this immediately because you have to focus and beat your best."

"We know we have to do this tomorrow and I am sure everyone will be focused on the job."

He said Arsenal have no fresh injury worries after the Christmas and New Year programme, but would continue without the injured Emmanuel Adebayor and Freddie Ljungberg. Midfielder Cesc Fabregas is suspended on Saturday.

A refreshed Thierry Henry was also a major boost, Wenger said. "We have a strong group and I am happy with the way we are playing and the way in which Thierry Henry has returned to the team."

"It has done him a lot of good to have a rest -- he needed it badly after the World Cup."

France striker Henry returned from an injury lay-off and scored for Arsenal in Tuesday's 4-0 victory over relegation-threatened Charlton Athletic at the Emirates Stadium.

"We beat Liverpool earlier in the season and quite convincingly. That gives us some confidence because we know we can win again against them," said Wenger.

"But that is only a belief and it is not any assurance. We have been winning and I feel we can continue to do that."

The Arsenal manager said he was not at all dismayed at Thursday's news that former West Ham United and current Charlton Athletic boss Alan Pardew escaped punishment by the FA for his part in a touchline confrontation with Wenger last year.

Wenger was fined 10,000 pounds (19,420 dollars) for his part in the incident.

"I didn't go there to get Pardew punished, I went there to try and prevent myself from being punished," said Wenger with a smile.

He said Arsenal would fly back to London immediately after Saturday's FA Cup third round clash and would return by plane to Liverpool early on Tuesday prior to their League Cup quarterfinal meeting.

Kyut impresses Benitez

INTERNET, undated



Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez has welcomed Dirk Kuyt's return to the scoresheet, but insists the Dutch striker has nothing left to prove at Anfield.

Kuyt took his Reds tally to seven with a fine strike in the New Year's Day win over Bolton but Benitez believes he has already proved that he offers much more than just goals.

Benitez said: "When we were playing with Peter Crouch and Kuyt and winning five in a row, people were talking about the understanding. Then we played Bellamy and people said he was fantastic.

"Maybe Kuyt keeps the other player's ability to play well. Because he is working so hard, the others can just play offensive football and think

about scoring goals.

"Kuyt is a player who can score goals and give a lot of assists and he is working really hard for the team. I am really pleased for him. For me it is not a problem who scores."

Benitez intends to make changes for FA Cup third round clash with Arsenal but insists he will still name a strong side as they start the defence of the trophy won in a thrilling final against West Ham last season.

Bellamy is set to return to the starting line-up, meaning Crouch could once again be left kicking his heels on the bench, but Benitez is convinced his players are happy with his rotation system.

Benitez added: "If you play for a small club you might play one game a week but when it is a big club such as Liverpool you are in all competitions and it is two games a week."

"This would be a big problem and when you explain the situation to the

players I think they understand."

Meanwhile Benitez has refused to comment on reports linking him with a loan move for unsettled West Ham midfielder Javier Mascherano but insisted that the confusion over his eligibility to sign for another club would not pose a problem.

Confusion surrounds Mascherano's ability to move given FIFA rules which state a player can only play for two clubs in any one 12-month period beginning on July 1.

Mascherano has already played for both the Hammers and Corinthians in Brazil, which has reportedly put off other potential suitors such as Juventus, but Benitez believes the rule can be overcome.

He said: "There are a lot of similar situations with players who have played for three clubs in the same season, and in some cases four, so I think it is not a problem."



Russian player Dinara Safina (L) and Swiss star Martina Hingis pose with their champion and runners-up trophies after Safina beat Hingis in the final of the Women's Hardcourt tennis championships at the Gold Coast on Saturday.

Safina springs surprise

Tennis

AFP, Gold Coast

Dinara Safina made it fourth time lucky when she overcame top seed Martina Hingis to clinch the Australian Women's Hardcourt tennis championship 6-3, 3-6, 7-5 on Saturday.

The 20-year-old Russian has participated in the tournament since 2004 and her best result until this year was a semi-final appearance in 2006.

But the world number 11 and second seed used her booming groundstrokes to overcome Hingis in two hours, ten minutes of high quality tennis at the Gold Coast, getting a major boost one week before the start of the Australian Open.

Hingis also made the semi-finals here last year in her first tournament back after a three-year break.

She countered Safina's power game with some delightful touches

of her own but the Russian was able to dictate play as the match wore on. She clinched the match by breaking Hingis to love.

Safina had a much tougher path to the final than Hingis and fought out long matches against Samantha Stosur in the quarter-finals and Shahar Peer in the semi-finals.

Her semi-final against Peer was played Friday night and was followed by a doubles match immediately after.

But she started brilliantly in the final, winning her first service game to love and striking the ball with enormous power and precision.

She broke Hingis' serve in the sixth game and held the advantage to take the set 6-3.