

Eriksson quashes Marseille link

REUTERS, Marseille

Former England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson says he has no interest in joining Ligue 1 club Olympique Marseille.

"These were only rumours. I never considered joining Olympique Marseille," Eriksson was quoted as saying by local newspaper La Provence on Tuesday.

Eriksson made the comment after he attended a Dubai Cup match between Lazio and the French league side.

"I'm here on holidays, that's all," he said.

French press reports hinted that the Swede could become Marseille's next team manager as main shareholder Robert Louis-Dreyfus was said to be eager to sell the club.

Double blow for Juve

AFP, Rome

Serie B promotion hopefuls Juventus were dealt a double injury blow with defenders Giorgio Chiellini and Jean-Alain Boumsong both being ruled out for several weeks.

The pair were crooked in Saturday's 3-2 defeat to AC Milan in the Berlusconi trophy match. Chiellini has a left thigh strain and Frenchman Boumsong has a left leg injury.

Juventus said Chiellini is expected to be sidelined for six weeks and Boumsong for three to four weeks.

Juventus, who were relegated from Serie A and given a nine-point penalty for match-fixing, are currently third in the table, a point off the lead.

West Ham sign Quashie

AFP, London

West Ham have signed West Brom midfielder Nigel Quashie in a 1.5-million-pound deal rising to two million if the struggling London side avoids relegation.

West Brom manager Tony Mowbray confirmed on Monday: "Nigel recently expressed an interest in getting back to the Premier League."

"When West Ham lodged their interest in signing Nigel, coupled with my desire to create some revenue to bring in fresh faces, I thought it was an opportunity which suited all parties."

Quashie joined the Baggies from Southampton in a 1.2-million-pound deal minutes before last January's transfer window closed.

The 28-year-old made 30 appearances for The Championship club, scoring once in a 3-1 defeat at Arsenal in April.

Quashie's departure will give Mowbray extra spending power to press on with his own plans to bring in new blood during the January transfer window.

He is set to lodge a four-million-pound bid for the Hibernian midfield duo of Scott Brown and Kevin Thompson from his former club.

And Mowbray is also keen to bring the Luton pair of striker Rowan Vine and defender Leon Barrett to the Hawthorns. He is anxious to hold onto his big-name players, most notably skipper Curtis Davies, but Albion have midfield options already at their disposal to compensate for the departure of Quashie.

Lennon commits to Spurs

AFP, London

Aaron Lennon has signed a new five-and-a-half-year deal with Tottenham to keep him at White Hart Lane until 2012, the English Premier League club announced Monday.

The 19-year-old England winger, who was signed from Leeds in 2005, impressed towards the end of last season and was called up to the World Cup squad.

"Aaron has taken his chances and made himself into a regular first-team player in a short space of time and we often forget how young he still is," said manager Martin Jol on the club's official website.

Lennon added: "I'm feeling really settled here at the club and I'm thoroughly enjoying my football. There is a terrific spirit in the squad and we have everything to play for this season."



PHOTO: AFP

Hamburg wingback Mehdi Mahdavikia (L) hurdles the challenge of Iran midfielder Amir Hossen Sadeghi during their Challenge Cup 2007 encounter in Dubai on Monday.

A Sicilian revolution

AFP, Rome



Thirteen years ago Catania came close to extinction, but now 'The Elephants' are stampeding their way up the Serie A table and dreaming of the Champions League.

The modest Sicilian club, situated close to Mount Etna, Europe's largest active volcano, are causing seismic waves following their promotion last season, soaring to fourth place with almost half the season gone.

In all probability they would not be in such a lofty position were it not for the Italian match-fixing scandal, which saw Juventus relegated and AC Milan, Lazio, Fiorentina and Reggina all docked points.

But with the league more open than ever before, 'Gli Elefanti', have seized on their opportunity and trampled on those who branded them as relegation fodder.

"It was an exceptional year and could not have finished any better," said coach Pasquale Marzio.

"We won promotion to Serie A and now we are in contention for a Champions League place. It's beyond our wildest dreams. Let's hope our success continues in 2007."

Like all shrewd club owners, Catania president Antonino Pulvirenti, owner of a low-cost

magistrate finally declared the FIGC's decision to be unlawful and demanded the club be allowed back into its leagues.

Catania won a place back, but were forced to start the 1993-94 season in the regional Eccellenza League, Italy's sixth division.

Within a few seasons the club made it back into Serie C1, and in 2002 they won promotion to the second division. Despite finishing

in the relegation zone the following season, Catania were allowed to stay in Serie B after winning another controversial court case.

The club claimed that Siena used an ineligible player in the 1-1 draw between the two teams. The two points lost from a potential win would have been enough to keep Catania in the division.

With the new season close to starting, the FIGC were reluctant to give Catania a reprieve, but the legal fight was so fierce that they eventually backed down, resolving the situation by expanding Serie B from 20 to 24 clubs.

Catania's rise this season has been built on solid home form with the team unbeaten at their intimidating 21,000 capacity Angelo Massimino stadium, boasting five wins and three draws.

Their most influential player has been striker Gionatha Spinesi, for whom the club paid Bari 450,000 pounds (595,000 dollars) this summer and is their biggest signing.

Spinesi has netted 11 goals, one less than Roma's Francesco Totti, Serie A's current leading scorer.

Many predict Spinesi and his teammates will fall by the wayside in the second half of the season due to a lack of depth in their limited squad.

But should they perform a minor miracle and reach the promised land of the Champions League, the shockwaves will be felt all over Italy.

Capello now seems to be drinking in the last chance saloon, as the Merengues supporters do not seem keen on spending another season without winning any trophies.

Galacticos' latest performance as a 'disaster', as stated by newspaper Marca.

AS instead wondered if the results are worth the 70-million-pound investment that the club underwent to please Capello's requests.

It also reported that the tactician was summoned on Monday morning by sporting director Predrag Mijatovic to discuss the team's situation.

Real Madrid's management traditionally have a meeting on Monday morning, but it usually takes place after training at the

Santiago Bernabeu.

However, Monday's training session was guided by Capello's assistant Toni Grande, adding further weight to the claims.

President Ramon Calderon did not attend the meeting but was informed of the fact and is expected to be back in Madrid on Monday evening.

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Inter willing to take Cassano

AFP, Rome

InterMilan coach Roberto Mancini said he would be happy to sign Real Madrid's unsettled striker Antonio Cassano, but not until the current season has ended.

"Personally I would take Cassano," Mancini said Monday. "He has extraordinary technical ability, but I think it would be difficult bringing him into the squad now midway through the season."

"To have a player like him can only be an advantage. His return would also be good for Italian football."

Cassano's fractious relationship with Real coach Fabio Capello came to a head last week when he was kicked out of a training session.

The 24-year-old Italy international, who joined Madrid a year ago from Sene A side Roma, has struggled to gain a first team spot at Real under Capello and has become increasingly frustrated.

Cassano was overlooked by Marcello Lippi for Italy's World Cup squad last year, but earned a recall under new coach Roberto Donadoni.

Cassano scored on his Italy debut against Poland in November 2003 and played for the Azzuri at the 2004 European championships in Portugal where they went out in the first round group stage.



FABIO CAPELLO

Srnicek staying at Magpies goal

AFP, Newcastle

Pavel Srnicek is to remain at Premiership side Newcastle until the end of the season, the goalkeeper announced Monday.

Former Czech international Srnicek, 38, arrived for a second spell at St James' Park in September on a three-month deal as cover for Shay Given and Steve Harper.

The keeper, who spent seven years with north-east side Newcastle from 1991 to 1998, then made his return before Christmas with Srnicek playing the final few minutes of United's 3-1 victory over Tottenham to Given sustaining an injury, and then the 90 minutes of the 2-1 defeat at Bolton on Boxing Day.

Srnicek has since been on the substitutes' bench, and with Harper still out with a hernia problem, he will now stay on for the remainder of the season.

"We have agreed that I will stay until the summer, then we will see," said Srnicek. "Maybe these are the last six months of my career, maybe not. I don't know. I would like to make some more appearances."

"But I did not expect to make any as I came here to cover my colleagues' backs. Then I appeared in two games."

"The first one was fantastic. The whole of St James' Park stood up and cheered my name. It was breathtaking. I can't even describe it, but I felt like I was in seventh heaven."

"If I don't get any more chances to play, I will not be unhappy. The two games have been something extra."

Mijatovic has faith in Real

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's sporting director Pedrag Mijatovic claimed Monday that he feels confident the struggling club have identified the source of their problems this season.

Madrid are in the midst of a miserable run of form having lost three of their last four league games, including Sunday's 2-0 defeat at Deportivo La Coruna, who had not won in their previous 10 games.

"This morning (Monday) there was a meeting between the sports management and the technical staff, at which the president (Ramon Calderon) was also there," said Mijatovic.

"We spoke openly about all the problems we have in this situation which is unfortunate but which can be overcome."

"We have identified all the problems and we are able to solve them."

Mijatovic also insisted that Italian coach Fabio Capello, whose defensive tactics are much derided by the club's fans, still has the full backing of Real chiefs.

"This is a man who has been in this situation many times before and he has always come out of them with good results, achieving the stated goals, that's why there are no problems. I am convinced we will get through this situation."

Real are third in La Liga, five points off pacesetters Sevilla having lost their most recent home match 3-0 against unfashionable Recreativo Huelva.

Hargreaves amazed at value

INTERNET, undated

England midfielder Owen Hargreaves admits he is amazed at reports his value has hit £25million - but is concentrating on regaining his fitness.

The Bayern Munich star was subject of an approach from Manchester United last summer and the Barclays Premiership leaders are expected to renew their interest in this month's transfer window.

Bayern, however, have steadfastly refused to sell a player they value at £25million and the 25-year-old himself is focusing on his recovery from a broken leg.

Hargreaves, quoted in The Sun, said: "It is a lot of money they are talking about. Is it even realistic? But football is a crazy world and ridiculous sums are paid."

"Right now, I don't want to think about that. I just want to think about playing football, working hard and doing well."

"All the other things will take care of themselves - it is not down to me."

"Everything will fall into place but at the moment I have other priorities and that is to get healthy. I just want to come back and play football."

Hargreaves, who has previously stated a desire to play in the English top flight, broke his leg in September and is hoping to return to action this month.

Bayern have again reiterated their intention to keep Hargreaves, who shone in England's midfield in last summer's World Cup.

General manager Uli Hoeness said: "At this moment, Hargreaves will stay. But then it is up to the board whether we sell him. We don't want to lose him."

TOUCHLINE

A long wait for fruit to ripen

Football

GABRIELE MARCOTTI

Real Madrid's two prized winter signings Fernando Gago, the midfield player, and Gonzalo Higuain, the striker, were in the squad who took on Deportivo La Coruna last night. The local press are describing the pair as a dynamic duo, who are set to jump-start Real's season and restore Fabio Capello's troops to the top of La Liga. Between them, the pair cost in excess of 20 million pounds. These days, it is an eye-popping sum for two 19-year-olds who have started fewer than 100 professional league matches between them. But perhaps the biggest caveat is that they are Argentinians.

For a land that produces, arguably, more talented footballers than any other bar Brazil, Argentinians have struggled in European leagues, at least in their first season. The most high-profile recent cases are Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano at West Ham United and, to a lesser degree, Sergio Aguero at Atletico Madrid. But they are not alone.

Before them, Argentine would-be superstars failed to be instant hits in Italy (Nicolás Burdisso, Mario González, Ernesto Farias), Spain (Maxi López, Sebastián Battaglia), the Netherlands (Mauro Rosales), Portugal (Leandro Romagnoli), Russia (Fernando Cavenaghi) and England (Gabriel Paletta, Luciano Figueroa).

Note that all of the above were very young at the time and were highly touted prospects who commanded princely transfer fees. Yet all found the transition to Europe very difficult. Indeed, of the recently arrived Argentinians, the only ones who enjoyed a seamless transition are Lucho González, the FC Porto midfield player, Gonzalo Rodríguez, the Villarreal defender, and Diego Milito, the Real Zaragoza striker. (Lionel Messi, the Barcelona forward, is a special case because he arrived

in Spain at 14).

Changing continents and cultures in one's teens or early twenties is always going to require some adjustment, but, curiously, Brazilians are more adaptable when going overseas. Given that, if anything, Argentine domestic football is closer in style and substance to Europe than Brazil, such a disparity in performance cannot be chalked up to footballing differences alone.

Part of the problem is that many of these players are too young and raw to learn a new brand of football. Once they adjust, the cream does rise to the top; just think of Juan Román Riquelme, who was hounded out of Barcelona before establishing himself at Villarreal, or Esteban Cambiasso, who flopped at Real Madrid but was one of the best holding midfield players in Europe at Inter Milan last season.

Sociologists might see a link with the severe economic crisis that hit Argentina in 2001, when the gross domestic product shrank, the country defaulted on its debt and the peso lost 75 per cent of its value against the US dollar. Football clubs were hit hard. Argentina's top stars had always moved abroad, but, while previously clubs had hung on to them for as long as they could, in an effort to win silverware, all of a sudden it became more important to cash in.

Stars were sold as soon as they were created, which led to a dearth of talent at the top. This was soon rectified when youngsters came through the ranks and, because these youngsters were generally facing others of the same age or opponents who were not good enough to go abroad, they tended to do well.

"Every season we have a next big thing, a new batch of superstars," Diego Simeone, the head coach of Estudiantes, said. "That's normal, what isn't normal is that these youngsters