

## Liverpool takeover soon

REUTERS, London

Dubai International Capital (DIC) should complete its takeover of English Premier League club Liverpool soon, club chief executive Rick Parry said on Sunday.

"It is a case of finalising the due diligence and pulling everything together, which we hope will be completed relatively quickly," Parry told BBC radio.

"A huge amount of work has been going on ... I imagine we'll have something to say relatively soon on that."

DIC, the investment arm of the Dubai government, has been holding talks with Liverpool for the past six weeks about a possible takeover.

Parry also said Liverpool could add to their squad in the January transfer window after they were knocked out of both the FA and League Cups on their home ground by Arsenal.

"You have to have priorities and ours are to invest in the first team, which we have done with substantial sums in the past three years. We may sign players before the transfer window shuts," he said.

## MLS, Mexico to square off in SuperLiga

AFP, Los Angeles

Major League Soccer and the Mexican First Division announced the formation of SuperLiga, a tournament involving four clubs from each league that will compete for a one million-dollar first prize.

Modeled after the widely popular UEFA Champions League, the SuperLiga will include a group phase and knockout phase, with all games being held in US venues from July 24 to August 29.

"We are proud to announce the creation of SuperLiga, which will quickly become one of the most prestigious international club soccer tournaments held in the United States," MLS commissioner Don Garber said Saturday.

"This tournament presents the most authentic competition between rival soccer nations and will bring out the passion and pride of fans in our hemisphere."

Group A will consist of MLS clubs FC Dallas and the Los Angeles Galaxy - the new home of English superstar David Beckham - and Mexican teams CD Guadalajara and CF Pachuca.

Group B will contain DC United and the Houston Dynamo of MLS and Club America and Monarcas Morelia of the Mexican league.

"Given the great soccer rivalry between the two countries, we strongly believe SuperLiga will be a great international soccer tournament," Mexican commissioner Decio De Maria said.

"Featuring the top teams in both leagues, SuperLiga will become an instant favorite among the millions of soccer fans in Mexico and US."



PHOTO: AFP

A distraught Ronaldinho sits on the pitch after watching his side slump to a defeat in their derby against Catalan neighbours Espanyol at the Olympic Stadium in Espanyol on Saturday.

## Espanyol rule Catalunya

AFP, Madrid



Reigning Spanish and European champions Barcelona crashed to their worst defeat of the season when they went down 3-1 to local rivals Espanyol on

Saturday.

The loss also meant that Barca stay second and handed over the advantage in the Spanish title race to the surprise league leaders Valencia.

Barca have 35 points from their 18 games, two behind Sevilla, but they have now played the same number of games.

Barcelona's Ronaldinho hit the crossbar with a free kick 11 minutes into the game but Espanyol deservedly opened the scoring after 30 minutes when Raul Tamudo outran the defence down the left flank before Luis Garcia sidefooted the ball home from a narrow angle on the edge of the six yard box.

Barca's second half substitute Javier Saviola equalised just before the hour, shaking off two Espanyol defenders before hammering the ball home from the edge of the area.

Tamudo, who had been doubtful until the very last minute after suffering from a knee injury, had recovered to score a spectacular diving header.

The sloppy defending from the visitors produced a rare display of

emotion from Barca coach Frank Rijkaard who punched out the plastic window of the dugout in frustration.

Francisco Rufete wrapped up the memorable night for Barca's modest neighbours by sliding in and scoring from a Luis Garcia pass.

Valencia notched up their fifth successive league victory with a comfortable 3-0 derby win over struggling Levante earlier on Saturday.

Beckham announced on Thursday that he was moving to Los Angeles Galaxy and Real coach Fabio Capello responded on Saturday by saying that the former England captain would never play again for the club.

"They were very well organized and were very quick on the counter-attack. We tended to play our way forward (more slowly) but that's the way we play," reflected Rijkaard.

Rijkaard also absolved his defenders Carles Puyol and Rafael Marquez of making elementary errors which led to Espanyol's goals.

"Other good teams have lost here so it's not that strange," said Rijkaard, although many Spanish pundits and Barca fans were not feeling so charitable on Sunday.

"We are not that far from first place. Sure, we'll be missing some people (against Zaragoza) but they'll be back soon," said the Italian coach.

The Spanish giants have lost three of their last four league games but are still starting the weekend in third place, although they are now five points behind leaders Sevilla.

League leaders Sevilla, secure that they will end the weekend in pole position, will be looking to extend their 100 percent record at home in their Sanchez Pizjuan stadium this season against Real Mallorca on Sunday.

Real have an injury crisis, as well as defenders Michel Salgado and Sergio Ramos suspended, which means there will be some strange faces in strange positions in their back four against Zaragoza.

However, Capello tried to sound upbeat on Saturday after dropping the Beckham bombshell.

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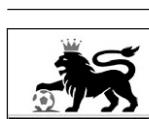
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To add to their woes in their

## Wenger elated with Gunners

AFP, Blackburn



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger paid tribute to his team's commitment as they continued their amazing start to the New Year with an impressive 2-0 victory away to Blackburn Rovers.

The win, Arsenal's fourth this year while scoring 15 goals since ending 2006 with a demoralising defeat at Sheffield United, came despite the 13th minute loss of midfielder Gilberto, sent off at Ewood Park for a retaliatory kick at Blackburn's Robbie Savage.

Wales international Savage received a booking for sparking the incident.

Wenger felt Savage, too, should have been dismissed for his role in the affair although not even the imminent three-game suspension facing Gilberto could detract too much from the Frenchman's satisfaction at the manner of Arsenal's win here Saturday.

"It was a superb victory under very difficult circumstances," said Wenger. "We have a good mixture between quality, spirit, solidarity. That is why it is fantastic to watch, when you see that commitment, mixed with class and technique."

"At the beginning of the season I felt there were games away from home when we were not as committed as we are at the moment. I feel we have progressed well and improved."

"We have the right balance between what is needed in the Premiership and not losing our

football, which is very important," he added after a victory that left the Gunners fourth in the table.

Kolo Toure, in the first half, and Thierry Henry, with a fabulous second half effort, guaranteed the victory although the loss of Gilberto, starting with next weekend's home clash against leaders Manchester United, was the one obvious negative.

"I felt if he sent Gilberto off, he should have sent Savage off as well," said Wenger of referee Rob Styles. "But the referee was very close to the action and decided to give Savage a yellow, which he

deserved.

"With Gilberto, he applied the letter of the law which means red card for retaliation. I just think in the spirit of the game he should not have been sent off."

Henry also defended the Brazilian, saying: "That was never a sending-off, but you have to accept the decision of the referee."

"Gilberto is going to have to miss three games now. Is that fair? It is always the guy who reacts who gets punished but I don't think he deserved to get red and three games."

France striker Henry ultimately

made sure Arsenal did not suffer for Gilberto's red card with a superb second goal which involved some fine inter-play with teammate Cesc Fabregas.

"The timing of the pass and the run, it was a fantastic goal and it definitely killed the game in the heads of the Blackburn supporters because when you are leading 1-0 you only need one mistake to be 1-1," said Wenger.

After two cup wins at Liverpool earlier in the week, talk of a belated Arsenal challenge to Manchester United and Chelsea at the top of the Premiership does not now seem so far-fetched.

"I said a few weeks ago that at the moment the title does not look realistic," Wenger explained. "But what we promised was we will go step by step, game by game."

"We don't have the idea in our heads that we can win the title but against Manchester United, it is a good opportunity to reduce the distance a little bit," he added.

For Blackburn, the frustration of seeing a four-game winning streak come to an end was tempered by the knowledge that early season fears of a relegation fight had been all but banished.

"Everybody is disappointed," said Blackburn manager Mark Hughes, who saw his team lose 6-2 at Arsenal last month.

"But we have had a decent run of late. The only side that has been able to beat us has been Arsenal and, thankfully, we don't have to play them again this season - at least not in the Premiership!"



PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal midfielder Aleksandr Hleb (C) tries to shimmy past the sliding tackle of Blackburn hardman Tugay during their Premiership match at Ewood Park on Saturday.

## Rijkaard admits wake-up call

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard tried to look on the bright side of life on Sunday after the reigning Spanish and European champions' worst defeat of the season less than 12 hours earlier.

The Spanish giants crashed 3-1 at their more modest neighbours Espanyol on Saturday, the Spanish Cup holder's first win in the derby between the Catalan capital's two top flight teams for five seasons.

"It's a wake up call for the players and the coaches," said Rijkaard humbly, after the loss which keeps them in second in the Spanish first division, two points in arrears of league leaders Sevilla.

Barcelona have also not won in their last three league outings.

"It's very painful to lose a derby but we have to keep on working. We didn't live up to expectations and that we have to take that on board," added the Dutch coach.

"It could serve us well for the games we have ahead. We have time to bounce back and it isn't the end of the world. We still have the confidence that we can go forward (and win trophies)."

Before Barcelona face Liverpool in the Champions League on February 21, they have six La Liga games ahead of them.

Apart from a tricky trip to Valencia, none are against opponents that would normally worry a Barca side on top form but Rijkaard knows that he cannot afford to throw away more points in games against relatively lowly rivals.

Nevertheless, despite his frustration at his team's failings which surfaced after the host's second goal when he punched out the plastic window of the dugout, he paid tribute to the part Espanyol played in an encounter of outstanding entertainment.

Espanyol always had the upper hand apart from a brief period either side of half time and they again showed that they are missing their injured Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o, last season's top scorer in the Spanish first division.

"The game was spectacular, aggressive, open and both sides had their chances. They pulled us out of position and we also lost the ball too often when the game was a draw. They also damaged us on the counter-attack."

"They were very well organized and were very quick on the counter-attack. We tended to play our way forward (more slowly) but that's the way we play," reflected Rijkaard.

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## 'Crisis, what crisis?'

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho dismissed talk of a crisis at Chelsea after his side's 4-0 win over Wigan at Stamford Bridge.

The days leading up to Saturday's match were dominated by speculation that the manager was ready to leave Chelsea after growing frustrated at his lack of influence over the club's transfer dealings.

Mourinho, who has led Chelsea to two successive Premiership titles, is unhappy at the club's failure to sign reinforcements during the transfer window and said he would leave if Chelsea ever tried, as has been suggested, to remove his assistant Steve Clarke from his position.

And while he would not be drawn conclusively on his own future, he revealed that Petr Cech, who suffered a fractured skull in the win at Reading in October, will be fit to return in time for Chelsea's next match.

Mourinho sought to stabilise the club after a turbulent week, which at least ended with Chelsea staying within touching distance of Manchester United, who beat Aston Villa 3-1 at Old Trafford.

"I don't understand what you could mean by saying there are problems at this club," he said.

"We are, in the last two years, a winning club. And because winning is part of our lives it is normal that, when we don't win, the club is not a

happy place.

"We are alive in all four competitions. We are not top of the league but we are still in a good situation."

"On Monday we have a 50-million-pound player with us, and the best thing is that we don't have to pay anything for him."

"The best goalkeeper in the world is ready to play. After three months in which Hilario and the other keepers have done well, Petr is ready to come back."

"Did I want to bring players here this month? That's the old story again. I have to work with what I have, which is not much, and that's a big challenge for me."

"I have no John Terry, no Joe Cole, but there is no point crying about it, I have to get on with my job."

"I can say that stories about Steve Clarke leaving are not true. He is such a good assistant to me and the club respects that. If the club tried to do that, they would have to remove me and together at the same time."

Mourinho had issued a call to arms in his pre-match programme notes, which many observers might interpret as a further dig at the Stamford Bridge hierarchy.

He wrote: "Are you up for the challenge of playing without the best goalkeeper in the world, the best central defender in the world, their deputies and more, and still going for the Premiership title, the League Cup and the FA Cup, with the Champions League to look forward to?"

"Are you all up for the challenge of playing without the best

lenger? Are you ready to enjoy us playing with 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds and still chasing these prizes?"

The fact that the Chelsea manager could boast 47million pounds worth of talent on his substitutes' bench appeared to be neither here nor there, and this was not lost on Wigan manager Paul Jewell.

Wigan's Norwegian midfielder Kristoffer Haastad endured a debut to forget as he scuffed his 63rd minute backpass from the halfway line, allowing Arjen Robben an easy opportunity to bear down on Kirkland before stroking the ball into an empty net.

With Wigan still reeling, Robben picked up the ball on the left six minutes later and his cross from the byline was diverted in for an own goal by Kirkland.

Then in stoppage time, Chelsea added a hint of flattery to the scoreline when Jon Obi Mikel's cross from the right was powerfully headed in by Didier Drogba.

"Chelsea have their own problems but it's nothing to do with me. I wouldn't mind having some of the players they have on their bench," said Jewell.