

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 Sevilla.

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 'flu, then exploited gaps in the Barcelona defence after 65 minutes to score with 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.

Second-half goals from Hugo Viana, Fernando Montes and Roberto Ayala put Valencia firmly back in the title race.

"We are now where we should be, because of our history, our squad and our aims at the start of the season. We're now floating back to the top again," said Valencia coach Quique Flores.

The 2002 and 2004 Spanish champions move up from fifth to third, although they will slip back one place should Real Madrid beat Real Zaragoza on Sunday.

Valencia took the lead when Portuguese international Viana got his first league goal after 52 minutes.

Viana found the net with a exquisite lob from 25 metres to help put behind him his unhappy last season at English Premiership side Newcastle United.

Four minutes later, Montes slotted home a Miguel cross from out on the left wing and clinched three points when Ayala headed home a David Villa free kick 10 minutes before the whistle.

To add to their woes in their

battle to avoid relegation, Levante look to have lost their highly-rated central defender Alvaro for at least a month after the Brazilian broke a collar bone in an accidental clash with his own goalkeeper Jose Francisco Molina.

Real Madrid start life without superstar David Beckham by playing host to Real Zaragoza on Sunday.

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.

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.

"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 started 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.

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 dug out, 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.

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.

Cech poised for comeback

REUTERS, London

Czech Republic goalkeeper Petr Cech is poised to make his long-awaited comeback from serious injury, Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho said on Saturday.

"On Monday I have a 50 million pounds (\$96.71 million) player back in training," Mourinho told reporters after his team's 4-0 Premier League win over Wigan Athletic. "After three months he is ready."

"I am not saying he will play (at Liverpool next Saturday) but Cech is ready. The best goalkeeper in the world is ready to play."

Cech has been sorely missed by Chelsea since fracturing his skull at Reading in October, with the champions trailing Manchester United by six points at the top of the table.

Mourinho again refused to quash speculation he might quit the club at the end of the season.

The Portuguese coach, at the centre of a storm of conjecture about his future after a run of three league games without a win, said that since his arrival at Stamford Bridge two and a half years ago the team had got used to winning.

"If you don't win matches consecutively, even not losing, it's normal the club is not a happy club," said Mourinho. "We are a winning club and now we are back to winning."

Throughout the game with Wigan he enjoyed sustained chanting of his name and choruses of "stand up for the special one".

But Mourinho, who has led Chelsea to back to back titles, sidestepped questions on his future.

"I've seen so many things in football. In football you cannot be 100 percent categorical about certain issues," he said.

"Everybody at the club should think about the club, not himself. I am a club man."

British newspapers have suggested owner Roman Abramovich, who has pumped in more than \$400 million since buying the club in 2003, wants to put a lid on spending.

Chelsea have been short at the back because of injury to inspirational captain John Terry and fellow centre back Khalid Boulahrouz.

Up front Mourinho has been frustrated by the lacklustre form of Andriy Shevchenko, another bone of contention as the Ukrainian striker is close to Abramovich.

Shevchenko did not play on Saturday because of a hamstring problem, Chelsea's goals coming from Frank Lampard, Arjen Robben, Didier Drogba and an own goal.

'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 goal for Chelsea next week.

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 is 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 I 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 chal-

lenge? 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.

In the 13th minute of the match, Frank Lampard's free-kick from a wide left angle was not attacked by any of the Wigan defenders and the ball was allowed to drift beyond goalkeeper Chris Kirkland for the opener.

Wigan's Norwegian midfielder Kristofer Haestad 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 rounding him and 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.

"I am missing a third of my players so don't talk to me about Chelsea being in crisis. It wasn't a very good team performance by us."

Lyon slump, PSG free-fall

AFP, Paris



Lyon slumped to only their second league defeat of the season on Saturday as the five-time French champions as well as fallen giants PSG caught a severe winter chill.

Lyon lost 2-0 at Toulouse but their title rivals failed to take advantage with second-placed Lens and Lille, in fourth, battling out a 1-1 draw while third-placed Sochaux lost 1-0 at Auxerre.

Despite the defeat, Gerard Houllier's Lyon are still well on course for a sixth successive crown as they boast a 14-point lead at the top of the table.

Toulouse went into Saturday's match having suffered three suc-

cessive defeats with two on home turf and had failed to find the back of the net in all three.

But they picked up their first home win over Lyon in 14 years thanks to a goal on the hour mark by Achille Emana with Johan Elmander adding the second nine minutes from time.

"Toulouse deserved to win," admitted Houllier.

"They were more aggressive and wanted it more in the second half. We deserved to lose, it's as simple as that."

At the other end of the table, Paris Saint Germain coach Guy Lacombe admitted that his side are now fighting for survival after suffering their eighth loss of the season against modest Valenciennes.

The Parisian giants are in freefall, one place above the relegation zone in 17th position, after suffering a 2-1 home loss against a

team with the worst away record this season and reduced to ten men.

"What we can say for certain tonight is that now we're fighting for our top flight survival," said Lacombe.

The Parisians' leaky defence conceded two second half goals after Valenciennes were reduced to ten men when Patrick Paauwe was given his marching orders for a second yellow card six minutes into the second half.

Lacombe admitted he had been expecting a win against Valenciennes, promoted last season, and who arrived in Parc des Princes with nine away defeats.

But striker Steve Savidan lifted the visitors with a header after 61 minutes with midfielder Sebastien Roudet adding the second three minutes from time. Pauleta pulled one back with an injury time penalty.

Nothing in the PSG game worked with new Argentine signing Marcelo Gallardo as disappointing as his teammates.

"Crushed? I'm more confused because I wasn't expecting this," said Lacombe.

"This was a non-match. We let it slip away. The club is in trouble. We don't have any solutions at present, but we have enough players who are up to the challenge," he said.

Valenciennes were delighted with just their seventh win in 20 games this season, which moves them into 13th position.

"We proved that our place is in the first division," said striker Laurent Dufrasne. "We soaked up the pressure and didn't give in. It's a victory that we're going to savour for a long time."

Second-placed Lens, meanwhile, were held 1-1 in their northern derby against fourth-placed Lille.

Brazilian striker Jussie pulled Lens level after 83 minutes after Michel Bastos had given the visitors the lead after 70 minutes.



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo receives the award for the Premiership Player of the Month for December before their match against Aston Villa at Old Trafford on Saturday.

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 hack 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.

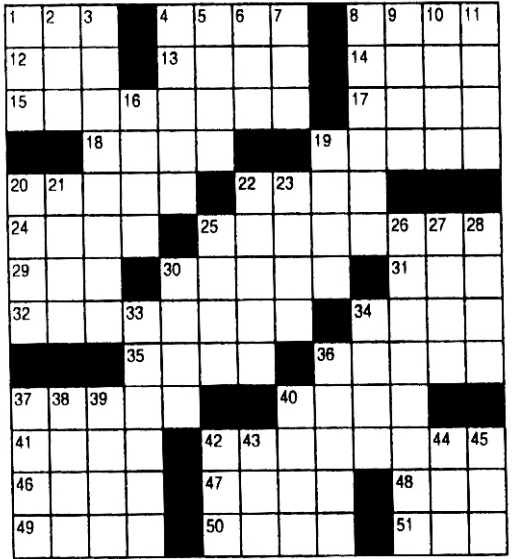
"Everybody is disappointed," said Blackburn manager Mark Hughes, who saw his team lose 6-2 at Arsenal last month.

"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.



CRYPTOQUIP

J O X C ' X O M M U Y F A Y W H A O A P

C F V W J A O P I M C S I F Z O N W

O A G S F F X W X N G Z Z W U :

" G H V F H O A M I W X W Z Z . "

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF BATMAN WERE FILLED WITH A CERTAIN SEASONING, I SUPPOSE HE MIGHT BE THE CAPERED CRUSADER.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: S equals W

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.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	36 Pinnacles	2 Freudian	20 Praiseful
1 Wager	37 Chopin	topic	pieces
4 Wan	piece	3 Lobster	21 Bloke
8 Thwack	40 Confed-	liver	22 Rash
12 Past	erate	4 Garden	23 War
13 Entreaty	uniforms	pest	god
14 Distasteful	41 Crow's-	5 Bed-	25 Elegance
15 Hatchel-like	nest	frame	26 Utter
weapon	call	part	foolish-
17 Reedy	42 Annie's	6 Chop	ness
18 Settled	song	7 Tibetan	27 Busy
down	46 Calif-	beast	as —
19 Expiate	length	8 Attacked	28 Whoppers
20 Looked	47 Rams	by	30 Grown-up
48 Indivisible	fans?	mosqui-	nits
49 — gin	9 Rever-	toes	33 Highland
fizz	berate	youngster	
50 Actress	10 Related	34 "Lion	
Hathaway	11 Actress	King"	
51 Pirouette	Daily	villain	
pivot	16 Sheltered	36 Got	
25 Re Mom	19 State	up	
and Dad	with cer-	37 "Desire	
29 Compass	tainty	Under	
pt.	1 Cudgel	the —"	
30 Also-ran	Solution time: 25 mins.	38 Manx	
31 Sapporo	C U F T R N O H V A N E	cal's	
sash	O S T I C T R E A V O W	lack	
32 Hair-	S E E D S K I A G E	39 Loosen	
dressers	T E S T E S P U R	40 Federal	
34 Hench-	O P I N T H E A I R	agts.	
man of	C H I N A O E D G N U	42 Afternoon	
Captain	L A G E B E D G E N S	social	
Hook	O L E M A N B E S O T	43 Possess	
35 Needing	D O W N A N D O U T	44 Lennon's	
a	A T A D A G A V E D	lady	
message	A L E G N O W I N E	45 Itty-bitty	
	M E R E S A N Y O L K		