



Bordeaux forward Marouane Chamakh (R) aims to control the ball while holding off the challenge of Reims defender Ludovic Jeannel (L) during their French League Cup semifinal match at the Delaune stadium on Tuesday.

Sheva wants to play

INTERNET, undated

Andriy Shevchenko has piled the pressure on Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho by declaring himself fit to face Liverpool at the weekend.

Rumours are rife that owner Roman Abramovich and Mourinho have fallen out to the extent that they are no longer on speaking terms.

The Ukrainian's availability for the crunch clash at Anfield will make Mourinho's team selection interesting as his 30-million-pound striker has been sidelined with a hamstring problem recently after failing to shine at Stamford Bridge.

"In light of recent events, I have certain misunderstandings on some issues with Mourinho," Shevchenko was quoted as saying in the Independent.

"I think that only the club's top management is capable of resolving those issues."

The confirmation of the 'misunderstandings' appears to support the talk of a behind-the-scenes rift in West London.

Ben Haim in Chelsea talks

INTERNET, undated

Bolton Wanderers defender Tal Ben Haim's father has confirmed the Israel international is expecting to join Chelsea.

The Premiership champions are willing to pay 2 million pounds for the no-nonsense centre-back in a bid to provide cover for injured skipper John Terry, even though the former Maccabi Tel-Aviv ace is out of contract in the summer and available on a Bosman free transfer.

Sam Allardyce accepts Ben Haim will not sign a new deal at The Reebok but is reluctant to lose him this month, with Bolton describing the numerous reports about a switch to Stamford Bridge as "speculation".

However, Emmanuel Ben Haim has stated: "There are advanced negotiations between the clubs."

"We are hopeful that Tal will be moving to Chelsea in the next week."

Ancelotti going nowhere

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan have rubbed claims that link manager Carlo Ancelotti to Premiership champions Chelsea. Newspaper reports on Wednesday suggested striker Andriy Shevchenko had asked Roman Abramovich to ditch Jose Mourinho at the end of the season and replace him with his former boss at the San Siro.

But Milan sporting director Ariedo Braida said on Wednesday: "Ancelotti has a contract with AC Milan and he will stay."

"What has been said in the press is all gossip, there's absolutely nothing."

The Italian coach, who joined the rossoenero in 2001 from Juventus, is under contract at the San Siro until June 2008.

Milan are currently in ninth position in Serie A, having fallen 28 points behind table-topping rivals Inter.

This is the first time that Ancelotti has been linked with a switch to south-west London.

The speculation comes as Mourinho faces his trickiest period at the club, who trail Manchester United by six points in the Premiership after a disappointing month.

MU in for Welsh wonder

AFP, London



Manchester United are on the verge of capturing 17-year-old Welsh left-back a c k Gareth Bale from Southampton in a deal that could trigger the departure of Gabriel Heinze from Old Trafford.

Tottenham were widely reported Wednesday to be waiting in the wings with a five-million-pound offer for Argentinian star Heinze ready to be lodged as soon as the Bale deal goes through.

Southampton have valued Bale, considered the most promising left-back in Britain, at 10 million pounds, nearly twice what United have offered so far.

But the Championship club know that Bale's value will fall if he stays at St Mary's until the end of the season, at which point he will enter the final 12 months of his contract.

That points to a deal being done before the end of the current trans-

fer window on January 31 with Bale tipped to remain at Southampton for the remainder of the season on loan.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson is still hoping to do a deal with Bayern Munich for Owen Hargreaves and the high cost of bringing the England midfielder to Manchester means other purchases have to be funded through sales.

That reality could mean the end of Heinze's Old Trafford career, despite the fact that the 28-year-old is hugely popular with the United Premiership.

The rugged defender was voted the fans' player of the year in 2004-05 before missing most of last season with a serious knee injury.

Now fit again, Heinze has fallen behind the more attack-minded Patrice Evra for the left-back slot and is behind Rio Ferdinand, Nemanja Vidic and Wes Brown in the battle for a first team place at centreback, where he can also operate.

Blackburn and Bolton meanwhile are involved in a battle to sign former England under-21

midfielder David Dunn after both clubs agreed to meet Birmingham's 2.2-million-pound valuation of the player.

Dunn left Blackburn for Birmingham in 2003, but his time at St Andrews has been blighted by recurring injuries, notably a back problem that caused him to suffer hamstring strains.

Despite that, the 27-year-old passed a medical with Bolton and is now set for a return to the Premiership.

Birmingham boss Steve Bruce, who paid 5.5 million pounds to acquire Dunn, said he felt the player needed a new challenge.

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Hargreaves back in training

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United target Owen Hargreaves is close to a return to action with Bayern Munich, a development that could accelerate moves towards a long-anticipated transfer to the Premiership.

"It things progress I'll be playing my first game in the near future."

Hargreaves is United's top transfer target and Bayern President Franz Beckenbauer suggested earlier this month that he would be allowed to leave if the English club came up with a transfer fee in the region of 30 million

euros.

The player himself has stated his desire to move to Old Trafford but would not be drawn on whether a deal could go through before the transfer window closes on January 31.

"There is lots of speculation but I am just getting ready to go training and not focusing on other stuff," he said.

Hargreaves, one of England's few successes at the World Cup in Germany last summer, is unlikely to be fit enough to feature in his national squad for their next match, a friendly against Spain at Old Trafford on February 7.

Juventus were reduced to 10 men four minutes later when defender Jonathan Zebina picked up a straight red card for a mis-timed challenge on Emilio Salvi.

They were given another scare in stoppage time when Cesena's Graziano Pelle put the ball in the net only for the referee to overrule his effort for a foul.

The win gave Juventus 35 points from 19 matches. Piacenza lie third on 34 points.

Chinese assault underway

Australian Open

The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

China's assault on the Australian Open gathered steam

Wednesday with victories for Li Na and Peng Shuai while Thai star Danai Udomchoke scored a big upset over 24th seed Juan Carlos Ferrero.

While they kept the Asian flag flying China's Mu Yan fell at the first hurdle, ousted by Ashley Harkleroad of the United States 6-3, 6-0.

Japan's number one Ai Sugiyama, in her 13th Australian Open and seeded 23, fought hard but didn't have enough ammunition to kill off Anastasiya Yakimova from Belarus, going down 6-2, 2-6, 10-8.

Taiwan's Lu Yen-hsun also crashed out, losing his second round match against Russia's Mikhail Youzhny 7-5, 6-4, 6-4 and missing out on a crack at world number one Roger Federer in the next round.

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Japan's Aiko Nakamura will have her work cut out against Belgium's fourth seed Kim Clijsters.

In the third set I started to fight and went to five-zero and was able to finish the match. I think I played OK today."

Peng, who loves playing football in her spare time, has never been beyond a Grand Slam third round and asked how far she would go in the tournament, replied: "I'm taking it step by step and match by match, not thinking about it too much."

The victory sets up a second round encounter with Lourdes Dominguez Lino of Spain.

"It was the first time I had played her. I knew she was carrying an injury but she has a good serve and I had to be careful," said Li, ranked 16 in the world.

"It was a tough match and I am glad to be past the first round."

Peng, born in Hunan province but based in Florida, fought out a 6-3, 4-6, 6-1 win over Slovenian Andreja Klepac, saying she was pleased to come through a hard match against an unfamiliar opponent.

"I didn't know her, it was the first time I saw her so it made it hard," said the 21-year-old, ranked 52 in the world.

"When the match started I was playing a little bit tired but won the first set and then in the second set I think she started to try again.

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Moratti holds Mancini talks

INTERNET, undated

Massimo Moratti is confident that Roberto Mancini will extend his contract with Inter after meeting the Coach on Tuesday.

The Nerazzurri tactician has yet to renew his deal with the outfit, which currently ends in June, after insisting that there was no rush in putting pen to paper.

That fuelled speculation that he might be interested in leaving the club at the end of the season, with England his preferred destination.

"We spoke this evening and it was a worthwhile meeting. Everything is okay," underlined Moratti.

"We confirmed our mutual respect and trust. We just met to understand what the future plans are, we spoke about the organisation and the future of the team," added Moratti.

"There is no disagreement between us. We had a clear and simple chat, as we have always done in the past and will continue to do so."

Mancini had stated that signing a renewal could not be considered as a formality, but the Nerazzurri owner can't see any problems.

"As long as everyone keeps on talking about this contract issue then we will not sign anything," he noted.

"We meet every once in a while and this shows that we both feel the need to keep things under control, I think this time it was really worth it."

"I also wanted to understand if there was the right tension needed to face the next run of matches, that are decisive for both Mancini and the players."

"I think that they are all focused and determined, although I am aware that every match is a different story."

"The relationship with Mancini? I am sure it will last a long time," concluded Moratti.

Milan sign Storari

INTERNET, undated

Milan have confirmed the capture of goalkeeper Marco Storari from Serie A strugglers Messina.

The Rossoneri made their move for the shot-stopper on Tuesday given that Zeljko Kalac is likely to be out for a month with injury.

Although Nelson Dida is being tipped to start against Lazio on Sunday after his knee problem, there are still doubts over his fitness.

As a precautionary measure, the Italian giants have increased their glove options with the acquisition of the 30-year-old.

Storari has signed a contract at the club until June 2010 even