

Coach opposes Rocha move

AFP, Lisbon

Benfica coach Fernando Santos said Friday he wants defender Ricardo Rocha, who has reportedly sparked interest from English Premiership club Tottenham, to stay put at the Lisbon-based club.

"Obviously a player who regularly starts for Benfica is not considered to be available for a transfer," he told a news conference when asked about the reports linking Rocha to a move to Tottenham.

"But these issues are decided by the club's management, not by the coach. My job is to prepare the team technically."

Benfica's international striker Nuno Gomes also weighed in, telling reporters it would be better for the club if Rocha stayed.

"If he leaves that is life for a footballer but if he stays it is Benfica who wins," he said.

Earlier this week Portuguese media reported that Tottenham have offered Benfica five million euros (6.5 million US dollars) for Rocha, who has said he would welcome a move to the English Premiership.

Benfica issued a statement denying it was holding talks with Tottenham or any other club regarding the 28-year-old player while a Tottenham spokesman refused to confirm or deny the press reports.

Rocha joined Benfica in the summer of 2002 after spending time at Portuguese sides FC Famalicao and SC Braga. He is under contract with the club until 2010.

The player has scored three goals in 12 appearances for Benfica this season and also has three Portuguese caps.

Real threatened with sanctions

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish football authorities on Friday fined Real Madrid and threatened the club with a stadium ban after fans threw objects onto the pitch as the club crashed out Thursday to Real Betis in the Spanish Cup, Marca sports daily reported on its website.

The Cup competition authority of the Spanish Football Federation elected to hand down an unspecified fine and added it was mulling the possibility of an additional stadium ban after a bottle thrown onto the pitch hit a linesman's arm, the report indicated.

A mobile telephone was also hurled onto the pitch at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium and referee Enrique Mejuto Gonzalez had to stop play briefly before Betis emerged with a 1-1 second leg draw which took them through to the last eight on the away goals rule.

Fans had been outraged that Real defender Ivan Helguera's late header, which found the back of the net, had been ruled out through offside.

USA, Ecuador book March friendly

AFP, Chicago

Ecuador, a loser only once in nine matches against the United States, will play the Americans in an international football friendly on March 25 at Tampa, Florida, the US Soccer Federation said Friday.

The match comes during a FIFA window allowing top European players to be available for the match, allowing US interim coach Bob Bradley to assemble an elite side in a key tuneup for June's Copa America and Gold Cup tournaments.

"With the ability to bring together our full group of players from Europe and MLS, the match against Ecuador will provide an excellent opportunity to prepare for the upcoming tournaments," Bradley said.

Ecuador, which advanced to the second round at last year's World Cup before losing to England, lost to the US men for the first time in their most recent meeting, a 1-0 away defeat in 2002 at Birmingham, Alabama.

The Ecuadorans are 4-1 with four drawn against the US team, the only match not on US soil being a 2-0 home triumph in Quito during the 1993 Copa America.

The Americans play their first friendly of the year on Saturday against Denmark at Los Angeles and will meet Mexico on February 7 at Phoenix, Arizona.

After meeting Ecuador, the US men will have only three days before their next international test, a friendly against Guatemala at Dallas, Texas.

The US team will try to defend their continental title at the 12-team CONCACAF Gold Cup from June 6-24 in US cities, then travel to South America's regional championship June 26 to July 15 in Venezuela.



Polish Sport minister Tomasz Lipiec speaks to the media in Warszawa on Friday.

Polish bosses 'suspended'

Football

AFP, Warsaw

Polish Sports Minister Tomasz Lipiec on Friday suspended the bosses of the country's football federation, accusing them of not doing enough to crack down on match fixing.

"We have noted total inaction against corruption," Lipiec told a news conference where he also announced that Andrzej Rusko, head of the Ekstraklasa company that groups first division clubs in Poland, had been appointed to oversee federation business until a new board is elected.

More than 60 people associated with Polish football -- players,

referees, federation officials and coaches -- have been detained or arrested in the past 18 months on suspicion of corruption.

Last year, Polish chief prosecutor Janusz Kaczmarek said it was "unthinkable" that federation bosses were unaware of the illegal practices that have marred the sport in Poland, and Lipiec warned that he could suspend the federation chiefs over their inertia.

Then, in October, the International Football Federation (FIFA) denounced political interference in Polish football and condemned attempts by the Polish government to fire federation bosses, saying the move was in breach of FIFA rules.

Lipiec had called Thursday on the federation chiefs to resign, but

they decided at an emergency meeting hours before they were suspended to remain.

"Most of us have nothing to be ashamed of. You can't blame the whole group. We live in a country governed by rule of law, not in Belarus," said former Poland international Grzegorz Lato, who was one of the federation chiefs who found himself sidelined on Friday.

Allegations of scandal were not the only blot on the copy book of Polish football last year.

In July, days after then prime minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz announced that the federation's books would be audited, the national squad made a humiliating first-round exit from the World Cup in Germany.

Belletti set for Barca extension

AFP, Barcelona

Brazil international defender Juliano Belletti is set to sign a contract extension at Barcelona, the club's official website quoted him as saying Friday.

"I will stay. Barca have offered me a new contract and I have accepted it," said the fullback.

Belletti, who scored the winning goal in Barcelona's 2-1 Champions League final victory over Arsenal last May, also moved to quash rumours he is set to join AC Milan.

Belletti has Italian citizenship but has no intention of leaving Barca.

"I don't know anything about this rumour about Milan, it is a lie and you should not pay any attention to it," he added.

"Barca have made me an offer and I have accepted it. Next week, my brother (who is also his agent) will arrive in Barcelona to sort everything out."

FRENCH CUP Nantes through

AFP, Paris

World Cup winner Fabian Barthez conceded his first goal in Nantes's colours but still saw his side progress to the last 16 of the French Cup with a 3-1 win at second division Amiens on Friday.

Nantes seemed to be cruising to victory at half-time, already a goal to the good and with a man advantage.

Belgian forward Luigi Pieroni gave the visitors the lead from the spot in first half injury time after David Vairelles was harshly adjudged to have handled. To make matters worse he was also given his marching orders.

Just before the hour mark it seemed all over as Pieroni notched his second of the game, and third for Nantes since his January transfer window arrival.

But the ten-men of the second division hosts pulled a goal back through Bertrand Fayolle on 76-minutes and sniffed a shock draw until Kenyan forward Dennis Oliech sealed the win deep into stoppage time.

British FM backs WC bid

AFP, London

Britain's finance minister Gordon Brown, tipped to succeed Tony Blair as prime minister this year, suggested Friday he wanted England to host and win the 2018 World Cup over his native Scotland.

However, Brown backtracked later, saying his ideal scenario would be for Scotland to win the final against hosts England. If England reached the final without Scotland, he added, he would transfer his allegiance to England.

His remarks to BBC television were seen as the latest attempt by Brown to woo English voters in the event that Brown has to call snap general elections if he succeeds Blair by September, the date Blair has promised to leave office.

Interviewed during a tour of India, Brown said he would be happy to see England again host and win the World Cup in 2018, more than half a century after it staged a similar feat against Germany in 1966.

"It will be great, 50 years after we had it before. It's the right time for England to have it," the Scotsman said.

"It means that we would have had the most magnificent sporting decade," with not just the World Cup but also the 2012 Olympics.

"All the effort to win England's place for the World Cup has got to happen in the next year or two," he said.

Asked then who he wanted to win the World Cup, Brown replied: "I think the host."

When asked "Not Scotland?" Brown replied: "Well, of course, I want Scotland to do well, but let's just see how it all works out."

Immediately after the interview was broadcast, the chancellor of the exchequer, who is member of parliament for Kirkcaldy in eastern Scotland and a regular at his local team Raith Rovers, issued a "clarification."

He said: "My ideal scenario is that England meets Scotland in the World Cup Final, and Scotland win the World Cup."

"However, if Scotland didn't qualify or went out of the tournament before England, then I would transfer (...) allegiance to the other home nation, England," he said.

Brown and Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell last year launched a joint study into whether it would be feasible for England to host the 2018 World Cup.

During the World Cup in Germany last year, many English fans were upset because Scottish soccer fans supported any team but England even though Scotland failed to qualify for the tournament.

Make or break for Gunners

AFP, London Colney



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has admitted his side cannot afford to lose

against leaders Manchester United this weekend if they are to maintain their slim hopes of winning this season's English Premiership title.

United are currently a huge 15 points clear of fourth-placed Arsenal and Wenger, asked if defeat would spell the end of the Gunners' title challenge, told reporters at the club's training ground here Friday: "For us, certainly."

All the Premiership's top four teams are in action against one another this weekend with Liverpool (third) at home to second-placed reigning champions Chelsea at Anfield on Saturday.

Victory for Chelsea would cut United's lead at the top of the table to just three points heading into Sunday's match at the Emirates Stadium, one Wenger is relishing after Arsenal's 1-0 win at Old Trafford in September.

"It's a good opportunity to reduce the distance with Manchester United," he said. "It is a big weekend for the Premiership as well because Liverpool play against Chelsea."

"It can have a big influence on us first and on the Premiership as well. We are really determined to reduce the gap," added the Frenchman.

"We know we can beat United."

We've done it away from home, why shouldn't we do it at home?

"We are in good form. They are as well so it is a very promising game. I feel both teams will go for it because United are a team that tries to score goals and we try to score goals."

Wenger said the gap between the two sides in the table was down to Arsenal's indifferent early season results at their new north London home after they quit nearby former base Highbury and United's record against 'lesser' sides.

"The difference is basically the fact that at the Emirates, at the start of the season, we dropped some points. They (United) have been more consistent against the teams which don't fight for the championship."

Arsenal haven't lost in the league to any of their top four rivals so far this season but have suffered defeats against the likes of Fulham, West Ham, Manchester City and Sheffield United.

"If you look at what we did against Liverpool, Chelsea and United, we have done very well. We dropped some points against teams in the second-half of the table, away from home as well," said Wenger.

Arsenal will be without injured defender William Gallas on Sunday while influential Brazil midfielder Gilberto is suspended.

But Wenger hinted at an intriguing plan to cope with a United attack atop the Premiership scoring chart with 52 goals already this season.

"You cannot afford having one player who does not defend well in his department. I have an idea in my head. But if I gave you the idea, you wouldn't believe me."

Arsenal are unbeaten in nine league matches since losing 2-1 to Fulham in November and Wenger added: "The essential for us is to continue our run and it is important we finish the season well. To do that it is very, very important to be strong at the Emirates."

"We had a little bit of a hesitant start at the Emirates but since October I feel we are really at home when we play there."

United have lost just twice in the Premiership this season - their other defeat was against West Ham - and Wenger admitted: "They have been more consistent than I expected them to be."

"After their defeat against us, we were six points (behind them) and today it is 15 points."

The build-up to recent fixtures involving the sides has often centred around a verbal spat between Wenger and United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

But there has been no such 'row' in the run-up to this game and Wenger said that was partly down to Chelsea's emergence as a major force under their outspoken manager Jose Mourinho.

"In the last two seasons, it has become a little better," said Wenger of his relationship with Ferguson. "Maybe it's because Chelsea have come in. It has focused the attention on Chelsea."

Raul hits out at Calderon

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid skipper Raul on Friday described as "inopportune" recent critical comments of the squad by club chairman Ramon Calderon, saying they had created a "malaise".

Other players had already spoken out against Calderon in a 90-minute discussion session Wednesday designed to clear the air after his controversial remarks, which included a suggestion David Beckham was heading to Los Angeles Galaxy in the United States to become a "second rate

actor".

"The chairman is the chairman and he can talk when he wants but his declarations created a malaise and were not opportune," said Raul, one of few survivors of the pre-Beckham era which brought the 2003 league title - the club's last major honour to date.

"As a player I hope there is no repeat of such a thing," Raul concluded at a press conference where he said he hoped the chairman would refrain from such loose talk in future.

Calderon, who made a series of observations which included the view that in general his team was vain and not especially civilised,

later apologised "a thousand times" on Real Madrid TV for his indiscreet observations.

Raul said that when he met the players to explain himself "face to face," Calderon had "asked for forgiveness and apologised" during what had ended up as a "positive" meeting.

Third in the table, but hoping to capitalise on recent slip-ups by main title rivals Seville and Barcelona, Real saw another trophy avenue close Thursday when Real Betis dumped them out of the Spanish Cup.

The club will try to put a week of turmoil and strife behind them with a win at Real Mallorca on Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid captain Raul Gonzalez ponders a question during a press conference in Madrid on Friday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Kreskin's claim

4 Morse bit

8 Trade

12 Actress Thompson

13 "When you see — reach ..."

14 — Alto, Calif.

15 Arguer's goal

17 Sandwich treat

18 Trinity member

19 Waste (away) bit

21 "Touched by an Angel" star

24 Every last crumb

25 Altar

26 Rotation duration

28 Excitingly fashionable

32 Campus home

34 Chart

36 Albacore

37 Command

39 Set of equipment

DOWN

1 Right angle

2 Ocean

3 Long-popular TV game show

4 Began to develop

5 Past

6 Turf partner

7 Many-headed monster

8 Directed attention to

9 Imperfection

10 Sheltered

11 Indigent

16 Heavy weight

20 Sort

21 Sister of Pygmalion

22 Blood-hound's clue

23 Sweet potato

27 Tibetan beast

29 Oath

30 Dangling site

31 Sailing vessel

33 Act as a go-between

35 Pendulum's place

38 Sinbad's bird

40 Boy's dad

43 Group of plotters

45 Spread seeds

46 Nails a base runner

47 Family member

48 Picture of health?

49 Hide

53 Buddhist sect

54 Carnival city

55 Insecticide, for short

Solution time: 25 mins.

OLD	FALK	DEER
WEE	ILIE	ROSE
EEC	ELEPHANTS	
DROPS	TOW	
IT	TA	WELSH
ELEGANCE	PIATA	
DITY	STAKE	WET
GREW	GLAVENT	
YES	SEB	EDITH
BE	EE	DA
ELECTRODURE	EGO	
LAVA	SHUN	ALP
FOAM	TOOT	LYE

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59				60					61	

CRYPTOQUIP

S C Z G T I N Z F G I A G V N U  
S R E V F F J A W V N E Z Q , S  
B J V R R Q I J G I J F W R Z Q

UTZU SU'R SA CJFF RSAB.  
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: TO BE GOOD AT WORKING WITH TOOTHED WHEELS, IT HELPS TO BE A SPROCKET SCIENTIST.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals S



Andy Johnson (L) & Tim Cahill