

Kenyon cool on transfer talk

AFP, London

Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon has insisted the Premiership champions will not use their financial might to bring in new players during the January transfer window just to freshen-up their squad.

Although the Londoners are owned by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, they are determined not to pay over the odds for players and earlier this week withdrew from talks to bring Bolton and Israel defender Tal Ben Haim to Stamford Bridge.

"It is not just about filling space; it is only if we can get the players we are interested in," Kenyon said Friday. "It is about if that player is available, will that player feature next season as well? This is important - not just bringing in a player for two-and-a-half months."

He added: "It is notoriously difficult to find the sort of player who will join and make an impact on Chelsea."

Blues boss Jose Mourinho's future has been thrown into question against a background of tensions with Abramovich over the handling of misfiring 30-million-pounds (59 million dollars) striker Andriy Shevchenko.

There have also been reports that the Portuguese manager has been angered by Abramovich's apparent refusal to provide funds for transfer window purchases.

Chelsea, currently second, will cut Manchester United's lead at the top of the Premiership table to three points - for 24 hours at least - if they win away to third-placed Liverpool on Saturday.

United face Arsenal at the fourth-placed club's Emirates Stadium on Sunday.

For all the talk of backstage disharmony, Chelsea still have a chance of winning four major trophies this season.

They are in the semi-finals of the League Cup, the last 32 of the FA Cup, have reached the knockout phase of the Champions League and they could yet win a third straight Premiership title.

Ronaldo inching towards Milan

AFP, Rome

Brazilian superstar Ronaldo is "very close" to signing for AC Milan, the Italian team's manager Silvano Ramaccioni said Friday.

Ronaldo has found himself surplus to requirements at the Bernabeu after Italian coach Fabio Capello decided to put his faith in younger players.

"From what I know, Ronaldo is very close to transferring to AC Milan," said Ramaccioni during a Milan training session.

"I don't have any more details but it is through speaking to the management that I know this."

According to Friday's edition of the Italian sports newspaper Gazzetta dello Sport, Real are prepared to let the Brazilian leave if his contract of six million euros a year until June 2008 is paid off.

It also claimed that Milan has agreed to waive any claims to Ronaldo's image rights, believed to be worth five million euros a year.

The 30-year-old three-time world player of the year was due to meet with Real president Ramon Calderon on Friday morning to negotiate the termination of his contract.

Calderon claimed Thursday that he was not against letting Ronaldo go for free as Milan were reluctant to pay a fee for the World Cup's record goalscorer.

In all competitions Ronaldo has taken to the field just 13 times this season, including six times as a substitute, scoring just four goals.

New teammates 'resent' Becks wage

AFP, London

David Beckham's multi-million pound contract with the LA Galaxy has sparked resentment amongst his new team-mates according to midfielder Peter Vagenas.

Former England captain Beckham, currently at Real Madrid, has signed a five-year deal with the Major Soccer League club worth 128 million pounds and is due to arrive in the United States at the end of the current European season.

"I think, as we all are fans of soccer, he is David Beckham and a wise man told me you're worth what you negotiate," Vagenas told BBC Radio Five on Friday.

"But at the same time, of course there's resentment, I'd be lying if I said there wasn't."

Vagenas, a holding midfielder, has been with the Galaxy for six years and was a member of the US football team at the 2000 Olympics. The BBC reported his wages as being in the region of 63,000 pounds per year.

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PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool winger Jermaine Pennant (R) celebrates his spectacular strike with forwards Dirk Kyut (C) and Peter Crouch in their Premiership clash against Chelsea at Anfield on Saturday.

Blues capsize at Anfield

AFP, Liverpool



Chelsea's hopes of emerging from their current crisis to win a third straight Premiership title suffered a major setback on Saturday as Jose Mourinho's side slumped to a 2-0 defeat at Liverpool.

A fourth-minute goal from Dirk Kuyt and a stunning 25-yard from Jermaine Pennant allowed Rafael Benitez's side to establish a stranglehold on the match inside the first 20 minutes, and Chelsea never looked capable of breaking it.

With better finishing, Liverpool's first Premiership win over Mourinho's Chelsea could have been achieved by a much bigger margin and the insipid nature of the champions performance will do little to dampen speculation that the Portuguese manager's time in London is nearing its end.

The background of internal conflict at Stamford Bridge was reflected in the team-sheet, with 30-million-pound striker Andriy Shevchenko restricted to the bench.

Petr Cech's first appearance since he suffered a horrific head

injury in a match against Reading in October did offered a solitary element of comfort for the travelling supporters.

But even Cech's reassuring presence could not compensate for the continuing absence of injured skipper John Terry from the heart of a defence deprived of the suspended Claude Makelele's unrivalled shielding qualities.

Having spent the last three and a half months recovering from a fractured skull, Cech deserved better from his back four than to be left completely exposed barely three minutes into his comeback game.

Chelsea's pair of makeshift centrebacks, Michael Essien and Paulo Ferreira were both at fault, failing to close down either Peter Crouch, as he rose to meet a long ball to the edge of the area, or Kuyt as he latched on to his team-mate's flick-on.

The Dutch striker knocked the bouncing ball forward past Ferreira with his head and an unstoppable shot ensured Cech's first contribution was to pick the ball out of the empty net.

Three minutes later, the Czech international, playing in a protective helmet, was able to demonstrate

why he has been so badly missed, getting down smartly to his right to deny John Arne Riise when the Norwegian wingback should have scored.

Chelsea finally mustered an effort on goal but Didier Drogba's header from a Lampard corner slipped comfortably wide and Liverpool soon doubled their lead.

Again, it was a long ball fired towards the edge of the area that generated the opening. Essien was unchallenged as he met it but his headed clearance was directed straight at Pennant on the right of the box.

The former Arsenal winger took one touch to control it before striking the bouncing ball over Cech and into the net via the underside of the bar close to the far post.

Three minutes later, Mourinho pulled off Arjen Robben. The Dutch winger may have been suffering from the knock he had received earlier but the manner in which he ripped off his shirt and headed straight down the tunnel without a glance at his manager suggested otherwise.

Even trailing by two goals, Mourinho was not prepared to

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Feyenoord thrown out

AFP, Nyon



November, the sport's governing body in Europe announced.

Up to 600 Dutch fans ransacked parts of the eastern French city before the November 30 game which Nancy won 3-0 to join Feyenoord in the last 32.

The match was then temporarily halted when visiting supporters ran riot in the stands, raining down seats on stadium stewards.

Three supporters of the Dutch club subsequently received prison sentences ranging from two weeks

Dutch side Feyenoord were thrown out of the UEFA Cup on Friday following the violent scenes which marred their group stage match against French club Nancy in

to a month for their part in the disturbances.

Feyenoord were due to face English side Tottenham in the last 32 of the tournament in February.

UEFA said a decision on the London club's opponents will be made next week.

"This is a huge slap in the face for the club," said Feyenoord financial director Onno Jacobs.

"It will have enormous consequences, both sporting and financial. We'll lose ticket receipts, TV rights and the possibility of progressing in the competition.

"Our true supporters are the real victims of this decision. They are paying the price for the faults of individuals who have nothing to do with the club and from whom Feyenoord has always distanced itself."

UEFA said in a statement that it had decided to toughen the original sentence against the club.

"The UEFA Appeals Body has considerably toughened the sanction against the Dutch club

Feyenoord following the crowd disturbances by its fans at the UEFA Cup group stage match between French club AS Nancy-Lorraine and Feyenoord on 30 November 2006," said a UEFA statement.

"The UEFA Appeals Body has excluded the club from all UEFA competitions for the season 2006/07, including the current UEFA Cup in which the club had progressed from the group stage to face England's Tottenham Hotspur FC in the round of 32.

"The initial fine of 200,000 Swiss francs (124,000 euros) was reduced to 100,000 Swiss francs (62,000 euros).

"The decision follows an appeal made by UEFA (allowed under Article 50 of the Disciplinary Regulations where "the parties directly concerned and UEFA have the power to appeal") after an initial decision by the UEFA Control and Disciplinary Body.

"Their decision had consisted of a fine of 200,000 Swiss francs and

a suspended sentence of two matches behind closed doors, on probation for three years.

"The appeal by Feyenoord against the original sanction of the UEFA Control and Disciplinary Body was also rejected. Feyenoord were also ordered to contact AS Nancy-Lorraine regarding settlement of the damages."

Feyenoord, who stand to lose around two million euros in ticket sales for the tie against Spurs, can now appeal to the Court of Arbitration of Sport (CAS) to have the decision overturned.

Feyenoord, UEFA Cup winners in 2002, have been cursed by violent fans in recent years.

In 2005, they had to play one match behind closed doors after trouble broke out in a tie against Sporting Lisbon with the Portuguese club's goalkeeper Ricardo injured by a missile thrown from the stands.

League matches with bitter Dutch rivals Ajax also attract violent elements.



AFP, Melbourne

World number two Rafael Nadal and fifth seed James Blake closed in on an anticipated quarterfinal showdown with impressive victories as Lleyton Hewitt was dumped out of the Australian Open Saturday.

Nadal, seeded to meet defending champion Roger Federer in the final, took just over two hours to put away the Swiss Stanislas Wawrinka 6-2, 6-2, 6-2 and surge into the last 16 where he will face young British star Andy Murray.

Blake, last week's Sydney International winner, rode his luck to book a place in the fourth round with a 7-6 (9/7), 7-5, 6-2 win over compatriot Robby Ginepri on the enclosed Vodafone Arena.

He will have a round of 16 match with Chile's 10th seed Fernando Gonzalez, who played blinding tennis to end Hewitt's Open challenge.

Gonzalez held his nerve after losing two match points to put away 19th seed Hewitt with his third opportunity to win 6-2, 6-2, 5-7, 6-4 in two hours 40 minutes.

"It's always going to be hard to come back against a guy like that when they get their nose in front, swinging like that out there," Hewitt said.

"But I was nearly able to turn it around. A couple points in the fourth set, I could have nearly got back on even terms.

"It's always going to be a tough ask coming back from giving him such a big start."

Toilet seat theft

REUTERS, London

Portsmouth defender Glen Johnson has been fined by police for trying to steal a toilet seat and bath taps from a store, according to media reports on Friday.

Johnson, on loan from Chelsea, tried to smuggle the bathroom accessories out of a B & Q home improvement store with the help of Millwall striker Ben May on Wednesday, British media said.

A police spokesman said: "Kent Police arrested two 22-year-old men on Wednesday on suspicion of theft in Dartford. Both men have been issued with 80 pound (\$157.9) fixed penalty notices."

Johnson, who has played five times for England, was Chelsea's first signing following the club's takeover by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich in July, 2003. He arrived from West Ham United for six million pounds.

Babel to hang up boots

AFP, Stuttgart

Former Germany international Markus Babel has said he will wind up his footballing career when his contract with Bundesliga club Stuttgart comes to end this May.

"I will call time," the 34-year-old told the Bild newspaper. "I've always been an influential player in the game and I'm getting to the stage where I can't play that role."

Babel, who previously played for Hamburg, Bayern Munich and Liverpool, has only played two matches in the Bundesliga since the season's start.

The defender, who was part of

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PHOTO: AFP

Spanish second seed Rafael Nadal throws his headband into the crowd after beating Swiss player Stanislas Wawrinka in their third round clash at the Australian Open on Saturday.

Emirates braces for showdown

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson believes Wayne Rooney's love of the big stage can be Manchester United's trump card in Sunday's eagerly-anticipated clash with Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium.

United's first visit to the Gunners' 60,000-seat stadium comes at a time when both teams are pelting towards the decisive phase of the season in a rch vein of form.

Having put themselves in a position to win their first Premiership trophy since 2003, it is imperative for United to keep the pressure on their principal chasers, Chelsea, while Arsenal know only a victory on

Sunday will revive their faint hopes of hauling themselves back into title contention.

"Every game is important for us now and we want to navigate this match with Arsenal successfully," Ferguson said. "The form of our team has been excellent and hopefully we can reach that level on Sunday."

The Scot's opposite number, Arsene Wenger, who has yet to see his side lose at the Emirates, insisted that a win for his side, which would move the Gunners to within 12 points of the leaders, could yet make the title race a three-club affair.

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

"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."

Arsenal have not 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," added Wenger. "We dropped some points against teams in the second-half of the table, away from home as well."

As well as important points, there will be pride at stake too.

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