

Porto fall at Leiria

REUTERS, Lisbon

Leaders Porto suffered their second league defeat of the season as they went down 1-0 at Uniao Leiria after having Ricardo Quaresma sent off on Friday.

Porto remain top with 40 points from 16 matches, seven clear of Sporting who visit Boavista on Sunday. Benfica, who meet Belenenses on Saturday, are third a point behind Sporting.

Fourth-placed Uniao Leiria scored the only goal after 71 minutes when Tixier headed home a free kick by winger Ivanildo at the far post to end the champions's eight-match winning run.

By then Porto had lost winger Quaresma who was dismissed just before halftime for fouling French defender Tixier.

Kachkar plan given thumbs up

AFP, Marseille

Marseille have given the thumbs up to the financial package proposed by Canadian businessman Jack Kachkar following a two-hour meeting, the French first division side said on Friday.

Kachkar, who is reported to be injecting 115 million euros into the club to become the new owner, said in another statement that he was "very happy" the plan had received the board's backing.

The meeting comprised 17 people including Marseille's managing director Thierry de La Brosse and president Pape Diouf was present part of the time.

The 43-year-old Kachkar, president of pharmaceutical firm Inyx which employs more than 575 people in North America and Europe, hopes to make the most of Marseille's commercial potential by getting international sponsors and boosting their profile in certain markets.

Kachkar is of Armenian Catholic origin yet born in Syria and raised briefly in Lebanon.

He expressed himself in English and his comments were interpreted by one of the lawyers of London legal firm Allen and Overy.

Kachkar was also accompanied by two of his advisors, Serge Delwasse, to examine the accounts and commercial organisation, and Harald Sven, whose role was more on the sporting side.

Kachkar also met the eight Marseille fan clubs in an amicable atmosphere, according to Michel Tonini, vice-president of one of the groups.

"We can feel the sincerity in his words," Tonini said of Kachkar. "He is here to invest and said he might even be active in the winter transfer market to help achieve our aim of qualifying for the Champions League."

Kachkar told AFP by telephone after the meeting that he had also met Marseille mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin, saying he was an "important partner of the club."

Liverpool confirm US approach

AFP, London

Liverpool confirmed on Friday that American businessman George Gillett has made an approach "which may or may not lead to an offer" for the club.

However Dubai International Capital are still regarded as the overwhelming favourites to succeed in its 450-million-pound takeover bid for the Anfield giants.

The announcement was made to the London Stock Exchange to comply with the Takeover Code and in response to growing speculation in the last week.

The statement to shareholders read: "Following the recent press speculation, and to comply with our obligations under the Takeover Code, Liverpool Football Club today confirms that it has received an approach from George Gillett which may or may not lead to an offer. "Shareholders will be kept informed as appropriate."

Earlier this week, sources at the club insisted the takeover by DIC could be confirmed "within weeks" despite reports of Gillett's interest and that a successful deal with DIC would mean that work on the club's new stadium in nearby Stanley Park could start in March, with a two-year completion date.

Gillett, the owner of Montreal Canadiens ice hockey club who has already had a bid to buy the club rejected, has recently written to the Liverpool chairman offering an increased deal.

It is expected that within a couple of weeks DIC will be in a position to announce through the Stock Exchange that they have had a bid accepted for chairman David Moores' 51-percent holding.

That would trigger the sale of the rest of the club's shares to DIC and the agreement to start work on the 60,000-seat new stadium.

The return of Gillett to the scene in the past few days has been an irritant to the current Liverpool hierarchy, who have been involved in detailed discussions with DIC over ownership of the club as well as the Stanley Park project.



PHOTO: AFP

Porto midfielder Lucho Gonzalez (L) and striker Lisandro Lopez react in disappointment after conceding a goal in their Portuguese liga football match against Leiria at Leiria on Friday.

Gunners seek revenge

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger will be motivated by a desire for revenge when Arsenal face the team that has infuriated him more than any other on Sunday.

It is bad enough for Wenger that his side has won just one of their last seven meetings with Bolton, but what really bothers the French coach is the way Sam Allardyce's outfit get the upper hand.

Playing highly-aggressive and direct football, which Wenger considers an affront to his purist principles, Bolton have consistently managed to stifle and often defeat the Gunners.

The Lancashire club dumped Arsenal out of the FA Cup last year and also claimed a convincing 3-1 win in the Premiership earlier this season.

Arsenal get the chance to set the record straight on Sunday when Bolton arrive in London for an FA Cup fourth round tie.

Wenger is convinced his side's chances of getting the upper hand

could rest on how much protection they are given by referee Mike Dean.

He said: "It is down to the referee to get the law respected, it is not down to Bolton. You need it every game.

"We have not had the best of games every time we go up there to Bolton, but we were a bit unlucky this season.

"They scored two amazing goals but we had the best part of the game. "Maybe one or two years ago we were not ready to face this type of opponent, but the team has improved a lot on this side."

Despite his obvious dislike of Bolton's style, Wenger concedes that Allardyce has assembled a talented group of players capable of troubling opponents with their talent as well as their tenacity.

"They are always a good character test but they are a good side as well. People sometimes forget that," Wenger said.

"Bolton can play. You cannot say that Gary Speed is not a football player. Nor Ivan Campo, or Kevin Nolan, or Nicolas Anelka, or El-Hadji Diouf. They are good football players."

This is the third season in a row that Bolton have been drawn against Arsenal in the FA Cup and Allardyce is convinced he can frustrate

Wenger again.

"It is not beyond us," Allardyce said. "We came within a few seconds of getting a victory at Highbury last season.

"We always seem to be drawn with each other in the FA Cup. This time around we are away from home and Arsenal have not lost at the Emirates Stadium.

"They are in superb form as they showed against Liverpool in the last round.

"Adraw would be a very satisfying result. Arsenal have a heavy schedule and would not relish a replay."

Wenger has to cope with a increasingly lengthy injury list after Emmanuel Eboue, ruled out with an ankle injury, joined Alexander Hleb, Robin van Persie, William Gallas, Freddie Ljungberg and Johan Djourou on the sidelines, while midfielder Gilberto Silva is suspended.

Despite those absences, Wenger has so far opted not to sign reinforcements in the transfer window and played down reports that he had made a bid for Southampton left-back Gareth Bale.

"He (Bale) is a potentially great player, but I am not in the race because I have two left-backs, Wenger said. "We will not buy anybody."

Feyenoord appeal expulsion

REUTERS, Rotterdam

Feyenoord will appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne over their UEFA Cup exclusion, the Dutch club said on Friday.

The Rotterdam-based club said in a statement they believe they cannot be held responsible for the crowd disturbances before and during their group-stage match against Nancy in France on Nov. 30 for which they were banned.

"We want to have the verdict of the (UEFA) Appeals Board tested in juridical terms as we have the feeling that justice has not been done," the club's financial director Onno Jacobs said.

Feyenoord qualified for the first knockout round but the UEFA ban handed their English opponents Tottenham Hotspur a bye into the last 16 of the competition.

"Pending our appeal we will continue our preparations for the matches against Spurs and we will urge the Court of Arbitration for Sport to make a quick decision," Feyenoord said.

CAS secretary general Matthieu Reeb told Reuters on Thursday the court was confident the case could be heard and a verdict announced in time for the first leg of the first knockout round tie to go ahead if it ruled in Feyenoord's favour.

During the trouble at Nancy in November, tear gas was used to contro rioting Feyenoord fans who spilled onto the pitch. The match was suspended for half an hour.

Bayern begin inquest

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich's hopes of winning the Bundesliga for a third successive year took a major blow as they went down 3-2 in Dortmund on Friday night.

Both coaches had made positive promises before the game, but it was only Jurgen Rober's whose were kept.

He had vowed to entertain the fans at the Westfalen Stadium after months of disappointment under his predecessor Bert van Marwijk, and his team certainly did that.

Felix Magath's side, on the other hand, were unable to live up to the hype, and could end the weekend six points behind the league leaders.

"I am definitely disappointed and will need a bit of time to analyse what went wrong," said Magath.

"I think the good preparations we have made have caused us to take it too easy tonight.

"Dortmund gave more than us and that is why we lost."

Bayern led 2-1 at half-time and seemed on course for the three points which would have taken them level with Werder Bremen and Schalke at the top of the table.

But they created only a handful of chances in the second half and stood back to let their opponents back into the game.

"If you take just one step back, then you increase the pressure on yourselves and the opponent can score two goals, which they did," Bayern midfielder Mark van Bommel said on ARD television.

Philipp Lahm added: "We still want to be German champions, but if we continue to play like we did today, then we won't be."

Dortmund probably won't win the Bundesliga either, but at least they have more reason to be optimistic this weekend than they ever did before Christmas.

"I think the potential is here," said Rober.

"The first half of the season didn't go as you would have thought, but I think we have seen what is in this team tonight."

Die for your club

AFP, London

Dedicated fans of English football club Plymouth Argyle can now literally die for their team after being given the opportunity to be buried in a coffin painted in the club's green and white colours.

A local undertaker is offering followers of the second-tier Championship team a new service where they can choose their own Argyle-themed funeral.

This could involve being buried in a Argyle shirt, in an Argyle coffin, having their wake at the team's Home Park ground, having green and white floral tributes in the shape of a football and even having their remains interred at the edge of the pitch.

Jack Walsh, the general manager of the Co-operative Funeral Services company told The Plymouth Evening Herald newspaper: "This is something that's for real fans. An important thing is that even in the blogs I've picked up - and there have been postings from Perth, in Western Australia - everyone's been taking the mickey and talking about die-hard fans, but it hasn't been in a bad way.

"It's all been taken with good fun and everyone has said that it shows what the club means to them."

Platini heralds new era



Football

AFP, Paris

Michel Platini began his first full day in office as the new president of European football's governing body UEFA on Saturday, pledging a manifesto based more on football than finance.

The 51-year-old former French football legend, who beat incumbent president Lennart Johansson by 27 to 23 after the vote by UEFA's 52 member nations at the UEFA Congress in Dusseldorf on Friday, said he would emphasise the development of the sport across the continent as a whole.

This has ruffled the feathers of some of the larger footballing nations such as England, who have four Champions League berths, because Platini plans to make three the maximum allocation for the 2009/10 season.

UEFA have already started helping the minnows and, hours after Platini was voted in, Andorra, San Marino and Montenegro were handed Champions league qualifying places for next season.

It was a great day for Montenegro who had earlier in the day been handed full UEFA membership from July 1 this year following their split with Serbia in 2006.

Platini said on proposed changes: "The new format of the Champions League is for 2009. I talked about finding a better equilibrium for the number of clubs and that's for 2009/10.

"The final decision will be (by

UEFA's executive committee) in April so we have a few months still to see which way we will go, but I would like a better equilibrium, it is very close to my heart."

Meanwhile, the G14 group comprising 18 of Europe's richest clubs, was in positive mood following the election of Platini to the post after 17 years of Johansson's tenure.

Since the 1992/93 season, the European Champions League has generated more than five billion euros with 635 million euros going into the coffers of national federations and leagues.

It might have been thought the G14 would have been cautious at the prospect of Platini's arrival but a statement read: "The G14 wishes Platini a lot of success. The G14 are going to continue working in a constructive way with UEFA and its new president as a contribution ensuring the sport is united and flourishing across the continent."

However, Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson said Platini should not tinker with the Champions League.

Ferguson said: "The tournament really starts in February, but I think it is OK the way it is at the moment. The appeal of the Champions League is when the giants of Spain or Italy or England come up against each other.

"If he wants to take a Champions League place away from us that is to the detriment of the Premiership.

"The Champions League has been good. If you go back a few years, there were maybe too many

games with two qualifying groups because you had to play about 17 games to win it.

"If you take away the fourth-place teams, the only way to address that is by reducing the competition or by giving other countries two places."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was positive about Platini's appointment, but hesitant to praise his plans about the Champions League.

"It is the first time that a player is in charge," he said. "We in football complain always that the players have no say, so at least we cannot complain anymore. What is happening today is that two go directly in and two have to qualify against the teams in the smaller countries."

"What will happen when the smaller teams go one round further and go out early in a group stage? The competition will lose interest, that is all that will happen."

"I believe that the competition should be organised with the best teams playing each other.

Bolton manager Sam Allardyce said he felt his team could be one of the victims of Platini's proposals.

"In one way it is nice to see a football man in charge," he said. "But on the other hand if he wants to take a Champions League place away from us that is to the detriment of the Premiership.

"If he can get away with that it is going to bring a lot of heartache to our league. It would be a big blow."

Higuain chooses Argentina



Football

AFP, Paris

Real Madrid's teenage striker Gonzalo Higuain, who was born in France to Argentine parents, has told French coach Raymond Domenech that he will never play for Les Bleus.

Higuain, who holds French nationality, caused a stir in November when rejecting Domenech's call-up for a France friendly against Greece.

But Domenech announced on Friday: "He told me clearly today after talks with him, his father in Madrid and after seeing (Real manager) Fabio Capello that he had chosen Argentine nationality and that his father had taken steps for him to obtain it.

"He said that he was Argentine, that all his family and friends were over there, that he'd always lived there and that he didn't feel French."

After the former River Plate star had turned a deaf ear to Domenech's November summons the French coach expressed the wish that in time the youngster would change his



GONZALO HIGUAIN

mind. "I hope we'll be seeing him in the future. He's French so he's eligible for selection. I hope reason will win

through in the end," the French coach said at the time.

Domenech said he now fully accepted Higuain's decision.

"We've had a proper explanation. I'm not going to fight him. From today the problem's solved and the shirt that he wants to wear is Argentine."

Higuain was signed by Real in December for a reported 13 million euros.

With the Real attacker out of the reckoning Domenech said his priority now was to focus on the players at his disposal for the upcoming Euro 2008 qualifiers.

"We're now able to concentrate on the French players who play so much quality and who want to play for France rather than waiting for something indefinite."

He added: "Our aim now is to prepare for the European Championships. I wanted to be finished with this. The matter's closed now."

Cole's no to crisis talk

AFP, London



Ashley Cole believes an FA Cup triumph over Nottingham Forest on Sunday will help banish talk of a crisis at Chelsea.

The Premiership champions' previously united front has crumbled in recent weeks, corroded by clashes between manager Jose Mourinho and owner Roman Abramovich.

The pair have fallen out over the Portuguese's use of striker Andriy Shevchenko, with Abramovich refusing to sanction more signings in the January transfer window.

That has left Chelsea's Premiership title defence in the balance and last week prompted striker Didier Drogba to claim that the bickering was damaging the club's form.

Cole admitted that Drogba's concerns were shared with the rest of the squad, but maintained that a victory over Forest would help ease the club's rifts and focus minds on the accumulation of silverware.

"We try and keep it as positive as we can," he said.

"Bad results don't help, but it's not down to the board or anyone else to help us stay strong.

"The responsibility of keeping spirits up is ours and we have to prove to everyone that we are a strong unit.

"It's results and trophies which will ultimately help us draw a line under this all - there can't be any more problems if we start winning again and we want that to start against Forest."

Relationships are breaking down all over Stamford Bridge, but the one bond which has remained tight is between Mourinho and his squad.

With the possible exception of Shevchenko, dressing room sup-

port for the 44-year-old is absolute, and Cole has now lent his public backing to the under-pressure coach, who is widely expected to quit Chelsea in the summer.

"Jose was the main reason I came to the club so of course I want him to stay," he said.

"It's down to him at the end of the day and we don't know exactly what is happening behind the scenes. But the squad all want Jose to sort out whatever differences he has so we can get back to enjoying each other's company."

The visit of League One opposition promises an ideal opportunity for redemption, although Forest are hardly archetypal minnows.

The two-times European Cup winners harbour grand ambitions of their own, having occupied a place in the promotion places for most of the season, and they enhanced their giant killing credentials by comfortably disposing of Premiership strugglers Charlton Athletic in the third round.



DIDIER DROGBA & ANDRIY SHEVCHENKO

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

CROSSWORD grid with clues and solution time: 25 mins.

CRYPTOQUIP puzzle grid and text: HE F EG PL MP Q M F V T M, OG W V FO V K I M G I T M G W V Y M, I Y G W M, H Q M T H M R M Y M ' K, D H R H W D V Y M L F P H W D G, Yesterday's Cryptquip: MY FATHER IS THE FINEST COOK AT OUR LOCAL ITALIAN RESTAURANT. HE MAKES A PRETTY PENNE. Today's Cryptquip Clue: I equals P

The Cryptquip 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.