

Galaxy rake in Becks bucks

AFP, London

Los Angeles Galaxy have already earned millions of dollars from the signing of David Beckham, who has yet to kick a ball in anger for the Major League Soccer club.

Real Madrid midfielder Beckham will join the Galaxy in July after his contract with the Spanish giants ends at the end of the season.

The lure of Beckham has allowed Galaxy to sell an additional 7,000 season tickets, which translates into around five million dollars.

They have also increased the price of premium seats by 48 percent and are expecting revenue to double this coming season to around 10 million dollars.

To add to the coffers Herbalife Ltd, who sell nutritional and weight-loss products, have signed a five-year 20 million dollars agreement to have their names on club shirts. That equates to another four million dollars a year.

In all, Beckham's arrival should bring in an additional 14 million dollars in his first season - around nine million more than his annual playing contract with the club.

Tim Leiweke, chief executive officer of the Anschutz Entertainment Group, the Los Angeles-based company that owns Galaxy, said: "We were never worried about our financial commitment. We've already made our money back."

AFC pledges big bucks to India

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has pledged one million dollars a year over the next four years to help lift the sport out of its current dire straits in cricket-mad India.

In making the announcement, AFC president Mohamed Bin Hammam urged state governments in India and the corporate world to get behind the development of football.

"This money is to support clubs and the league. This is not a donation but we would like to see how it supports your clubs and leagues," he said.

"I am expecting support of the state governments and also of the corporate world for the development of football in India."

India, one of the most populous nations in the world, is currently ranked 165th in the world and 34th in Asia.

Bin Hammam was in India earlier this week alongside FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who urged the country to embrace football and improve the sport's infrastructure in order to compete with other nations in the region.

The AFC president was critical of the All India Football Federation (AIFF), which is headed by federal minister Priyaranjan Das Munshi, during the visit.

"With the existing structure, don't think of progress even in the next 100 years," he said Monday in New Delhi.

Bhaichung Bhutia, the only Indian to play professional football in England -- he spent three years with third-division Bury -- blamed a lack of planning for the current state of the sport.

"We have no infrastructure at all at the grassroots level," he said recently. "There is no system in this country to encourage young boys to play football. There is no professionalism."

Abidal set for Madrid

AFP, Madrid

Spanish champions and current league leaders Barcelona are set to sign Lyon defender Eric Abidal, according to Spanish sports daily Marca.

Marca said negotiations between the French club and Barcelona have been "going on for some time, and are at a very advanced stage", and that Abidal could join the Spanish giants for 12 million euros.

France international Abidal took a virtual step towards the exit door of the reigning French champions when he recently said he would be happy to join another Spanish side, Valencia.

The 27-year-old still has two years left on his contract with Lyon, who this weekend could be officially handed their sixth consecutive league crown, having arrived at the club in 2004 from Lille.

If he moves to the Catalan club he would be joining two other French international players, defender Lilian Thuram and midfielder Ludovic Giuly.



PHOTO: AFP

Newcastle Manager Glenn Roeder (4thR) talks to his players during a training session at Longbenton in Newcastle on Friday, prior to their Premiership clash against title-holders Chelsea scheduled for Sunday.

Lampard up for battle

AFP, London



Chelsea might be struggling to hang on to Manchester United's co-tails in the final stages of the season, but Frank Lampard insists he is relishing the closest Premiership title battle in years.

Even if it ultimately means he misses out on a third consecutive championship medal, the Blues' England midfielder believes the competition offered by a revitalised United is a good thing for the English game.

United will entertain Middlesbrough on Saturday looking to extend their lead over their London rivals to six points ahead of Chelsea's trip to Newcastle on Sunday.

With only five matches left for each of the top two, a single slip-up by either side could prove decisive and Lampard is happy to be at the heart of the nerve-shredding battle.

"We've won the league pretty comfortably for the last two years and this year Manchester United have upped it so it's been a bit different," the 28-year-old reflected.

"It's been a much closer race and I think it's probably not a bad thing for English football because everyone likes to see a good battle to the end."

Newcastle are expecting to welcome back Turkey midfielder Emre after an 11-week injury-enforced absence but star striker

Michael Owen looks likely to wait until the following week before finally making his comeback from the serious knee injury he suffered during the World Cup.

United meanwhile are hoping to welcome Rio Ferdinand back for Boro's visit to Old Trafford, easing the defensive injury crisis that manager Sir Alex Ferguson has had to deal with in recent weeks.

Ferdinand's injury has contributed to Wes Brown enjoying a prolonged run in the team and the back-up defender believes United will prove their squad has sufficient depth of quality to hold off Chelsea. "We have five games to go and we are looking to win every one of them because if we do, we know we have won the league," said Brown.

"Middlesbrough will be a tough game because they will get stuck into us, but we are at home and if we play as well as we can do, we can win the game."

Liverpool can guarantee a top four finish and a place in the final qualifying round for next season's Champions League by beating Wigan at Anfield on Saturday.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT kick-off unless stated) **Saturday** Bolton v Reading, Charlton v Sheffield Utd, Fulham v Blackburn, Liverpool v Wigan, Manchester Utd v Middlesbrough (1615), Tottenham v Arsenal (1145), Watford v Manchester City, West Ham v Everton **Sunday** Aston Villa v Portsmouth (1500), Newcastle v Chelsea (1230)

But, as captain Steven Gerrard acknowledged, the Reds' thoughts are likely to be dominated by next week's Champions League semi-final first leg against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge.

"I believe there is still more to come from us this season and we have kept enough in the tanks to bring success, and a trophy, back to Anfield in May," the England midfielder said.

"Now everyone is playing for places next week down at Chelsea, and that is always a nice situation for the manager to find himself in. We've just about got a full squad to chose from and everybody wants to be involved in the big games."

Arsenal are also virtually certain of Champions League football next season and Gunners fans will be keen for them to deal a blow to Tottenham's European ambitions in the north London derby at White Hart Lane.

Arsene Wenger's side are seeking to complete a hat-trick of wins over their closest neighbours this season -- an outcome which would bring a welcome respite from the boardroom squabbles currently dominating life at the Emirates.

At the bottom, Watford could be relegated if they lose at home to Manchester City, West Ham must beat Everton to have any realistic prospect of survival and Charlton and Sheffield United meet at The Valley in a match that looks like a duel between the most likely survivors in the bottom four.

Psychiatric treatment for Maradona

AFP, Buenos Aires

Ailing football legend Diego Maradona will be transferred from a hospital to a psychiatric clinic next week to be treated for alcohol abuse, his physician said Thursday.

Maradona, 46, who was hospitalized six days ago suffering from hepatitis-caused pain, will be taken either Monday or Tuesday to a psychiatric clinic in Buenos Aires, said his personal physician, Alfredo Cahe. "Diego has become aware of the seriousness of his situation," Cahe told Uno radio. "From now on, the main treatment will focus on his addiction to alcohol."

The latest medical report at the clinic De Los Arcos, where Maradona was being treated, said the former player's health continued to improve.

The ex-Argentina World Cup captain and Barcelona star was rushed to the clinic six days ago complaining of severe abdominal pain, just two days after being discharged from a different clinic where he had undergone two weeks of treatment for illness caused by excessive drinking.

Maradona's career on and off the football pitch has been marred by repeated drug and alcohol abuse. He was hospitalized in 2000 and 2004 for heart attacks provoked by cocaine overdoses.

Hosts promise perfect Euro 2012

AFP, Warsaw

The Polish and Ukrainian prime ministers vowed Thursday to work together closely to deliver a 'perfect' European Championships in 2012.

"Together, we will do everything to organise these championships to perfection so that they bring our two countries satisfaction and glory," Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski said at a joint press conference with his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yanukovich. Poland and its eastern neighbour Ukraine beat Italy and joint bidders Hungary and Croatia to win the right to host the quadrennial Euro 2012 tournament that will bring together Europe's 16 best footballing nations.

It will be the first time that either Poland or Ukraine have hosted a major football championship, and the two countries pledged immediately after the announcement was made by UEFA in Cardiff to do the necessary work to bring their infrastructure up to scratch.

"For the next few years, we will have the opportunity to show how two great, Slavic nations are able to work together," Kaczynski said at Thursday's press conference.

Yanukovich announced that a bilateral committee will be set up to coordinate Euro 2012 preparations and to ensure that the two countries are given all the financial help they will need to rise "to this great challenge."

"We will dig deep into our budgets and will open credit lines" with European and private funding bodies, Yanukovich said.

"We know people who love sport and football even more than money," he said.

Australia-Argentina match postponed

AFP, Sydney

Australia's clash with Argentina has been postponed so the South American giants can field a full-strength team in Melbourne, Football Federation Australia (FFA) said Friday.

The Socceroos were scheduled to play two-time world champions Argentina on June 6 but FFA said it had agreed to delay the match until later in the year after being told the visitors would be unable to bring their top players.

FFA said Argentina requested the delay because of commitments in Europe. Officials agreed because they wanted fans at the 95,000-capacity Melbourne Cricket Ground to see the strongest possible lineup.

"We agreed it would be in the best interests of both teams and Australian football supporters to postpone the match to later this year and we expect to confirm the new match date within the next week or so," FFA chief executive Ben Buckley said.

He said the delay was caused by Argentina making commitments to play in Europe after they had already agreed to the match Down Under.

"We share our fans' disappointment about rescheduling the match, but we hope that they will accept that a postponement was necessary so that we will see a full-strength Argentina," he said.

The Socceroos have two matches, against Uruguay on June 2, and against Singapore on June 30, before they play their Asian Cup group opener against Oman in Bangkok on July 8.

Barca hope for Messi magic

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona got a lucky break last weekend when they scraped a home win over Real Mallorca to move four points clear at the top of the table after Sevilla and Real

Madrid both lost.

With just eight games to go, Barca are aware that lifting their third successive Spanish title is in their own hands and they will be hoping to maintain their advantage at Villarreal on Sunday.

The big question among Barcelona fans is, can teenage phenomenon Lionel Messi produce some more of the magic which led to his 'wonder goal' in the Spanish Cup semi-final against Getafe on Wednesday.

Messi's goal, the second in Barca's 5-2 victory, was a near carbon copy of the famous strike by his compatriot Diego Maradona for Argentina against England in the 1986 World Cup, starting in his own half and going past four defenders.

The superlatives never stopped on Thursday with Spanish sports daily Marca leading the way.

"What planet did he come from?" asked the newspaper.

"I think it's the best goal I've seen in my life," added Messi's Portuguese international team mate Deco.

"I'm proud that people are comparing my goal with that one of Maradona's but I'm still learning," reflected Messi, making people wonder what he will be capable of in the future.

Messi should soon be a potential World Player of the Year but Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard also has his two-time former World Player of the Year Ronaldinho available again.

The Brazilian missed the 1-0 win over Real Mallorca last Sunday with a fever but finally returned to full training on Thursday.

Sevilla are in second, four points behind the reigning champions, and will face relegation-threatened Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

Earlier this season, most pundits would have predicted an easy win for the UEFA Cup semi-finalists but Sevilla have started to show the strain of being the only Spanish team to still be contesting three titles.

Athletic have also improved significantly in recent weeks and could preserve their historic status as one of only three clubs - Barcelona and Real Madrid being the others - to have been ever-present in the Spanish first division.

Real themselves are one place further back in third and face a huge battle against fourth-placed Valencia on Saturday.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT kick-off unless stated) **Saturday** Real Sociedad v Atletico Madrid (1800), Real Madrid v Valencia (2000) **Sunday** Deportivo La Coruna v Osasuna, Espanyol v Real Betis, Levante v Getafe, Real Mallorca v Gimnastic Tarragona, Recreativo Huelva v Racing Santander, Real Zaragoza v Celta Vigo, Sevilla v Athletic Bilbao (1700), Villarreal v Barcelona (1900)

Inter seek winning return

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan will be gunning to get back to winning ways and for AS Roma to slip up to finally seal the Serie A title on

Sunday at Siena.

Inter's bid to claim their second straight Scudetto was put on hold midweek when a 3-1 loss to second-placed Roma at the San Siro ended their season-long unbeaten run.

After back-to-back draws against Palermo and relegation-threatened Reggina, the champions campaign seems to be stuttering.

But with a 13-point advantage on Roma, and six games remaining, Roberto Mancini's men can wrap up the title this weekend if they beat Siena in Tuscany and Roma lose at Lombardy outfit Atalanta.

Mancini is confident they can do the job despite the absence of Adriano, who is sitting out a two-match suspension for simulating a foul by Roma goalie Doni which resulted in a penalty which Inter converted Wednesday.

"What happened against Palermo and Roma we will take note of against Siena," warned Mancini.

"Now we have to stay calm and try to finish it off as soon as possible."

Inter Milan president Massimo

Moratti admitted that he would be happy with a draw and to take the title at home to Empoli the following week.

"Just getting these points is enough for me," he told Inter Milan's website.

"What happened may have been due to the crowd's expectation. In any case, it's hard to be angry with the players over one match because they have played thirty-one good matches."

But Argentine international Esteban Cambiasso believes that only a win will do. "We must go to Siena with the tranquility we have always had, and try to win again immediately," the midfielder said.

"We just have to think that we only need a few points to finish it off. We must recover our strength and react."

Roma, meanwhile, are riding high after bouncing back from their humiliating 7-1 Champions League exit to Manchester United just over a week ago with a 4-0 win at Sampdoria followed by their victory over Inter.

"We won't talk about that again,"

FIXTURES

**Saturday** Sampdoria v Messina, AC Milan v Cagliari **Sunday** Atalanta v Roma, Catania v Ascoli at Modena, Chievo v Livorno, Empoli v Torino, Lazio v Fiorentina, Reggina v Udinese, Siena v Inter Milan, Palermo v Parma



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla's Brazilian striker Daniel Alves evades a challenge from Deportivo La Coruna's Cristian Hidalgo during their King's Cup semifinal match at the Riazor Stadium on Thursday. Sevilla won 3-0.