

Bellamy raring for a go

AFP, Liverpool



Craig Bellamy admits he will be heartbroken if he does not feature in Liverpool's Champions League final against AC Milan this week.

The Wales striker has scored nine times in his first season at Liverpool but injury and off-the-field controversy mean his Anfield future hangs in the balance in the run-up to Wednesday's showpiece in the Olympic stadium in Athens.

Since being fined after a fracas with teammate John Arne Riise at a training camp in Portugal in February, Bellamy has had to cope with persistent speculation that he will be sold this summer, a year after joining from Blackburn for six million pounds.

The forward readily admits his first 12 months on Merseyside 'hasn't been the best' but he wants to end it on a high by helping Rafa Benitez's side become champions of Europe for the second time in three years.

"I am not daft enough not to

realise I will not get a bigger night in my career than this," said the 27-year-old former Newcastle and Celtic player whose career has been plagued by a series of injuries.

"There is no guarantee I will be involved, but I aim to be in the squad, grasp the opportunity and relish being in such a final.

"It is something I have been working for all my life. All the rehabs I have been through after the string of injuries I have had will be worthwhile if I am involved in this.

"This is the moment for me. If it happens then everything I have done, all the rubbish I have had to go through, all becomes worthwhile.

"This has always been my goal, my aim to play in the biggest competition in the world. Apart from the World Cup Final, which I know I am not ever going to play in, this is the biggest event of my life.

"I am just trying to make sure I cement a place at least on the bench. I don't want to be watching it from the stands because that wouldn't help. I just want to be involved, and hopefully lifting the trophy up.

"Then it does not matter what

any one has said, or written about me, I will have the biggest trophy of all in my back pocket to always bring out now and again."

Liverpool is Bellamy's fourth club in two-and-a-half-years and there are reports Blackburn will attempt to re-sign him should Benitez decide to sell before the start of next season.

Dirk Kuyt is the only striker guaranteed to be at Anfield in August after Benitez was given the green light to spend big this summer by the club's new American owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

Yet Bellamy insists he is not looking beyond Wednesday as he focuses all his efforts on defeating AC Milan.

"If people know my career, they will know how often I have been the subject of transfer speculation," added Bellamy.

"It happens to me all the time. I was even supposed to be off in January just a few months after signing for Liverpool.

"I'm used to it. No matter where I have been, whatever club, I'm used to it. I have always seemingly been about to be off somewhere

else.

"Personally, this has been a very strange season, very up and down. Different to anything I have experienced before.

"But I knew when I arrived the part I would have to play, but you always only want to cement your place in the side.

"That hasn't always been the case. But I cannot moan, hopefully I have got a European Cup Final to look forward to.

"I have had better seasons but never one with something like this at the end of it. I feel very privileged to be in this position. I am very fortunate.

"I have had great seasons, ended with nothing and never come close to winning things.

"This season hasn't been the best for me and at the end of it I am facing a European Cup final. It helps to be at a club like Liverpool for that.

"It is a chance to be part of that history, part of a team that could be that history. To be mentioned amongst the names who have achieved so much before, to have won the trophy five times -- that is enough to drive anyone on."



PHOTO: AFP

FC Porto's players celebrate after winning the Portuguese Super League title following their victory over CD Aves at the Dragao Stadium in Porto on Sunday.

Shevchenko eyes MLS move

INTERNET, undated

Andriy Shevchenko says he would like to move to the American MLS league when he leaves Chelsea.

The Ukrainian, who has endured a disappointing first season in the Premiership, said he would be excited to follow David Beckham across the Atlantic.

"Soccer is growing in the US and I would like to be a part of that," he said. "I played there last summer against the Major League Soccer All-Stars and I saw that it is definitely improving."

Shevchenko's wife Kristen Pazik is American and spent much of her formative years in Washington DC, whose team DC United are among the leading MLS sides.

Beckham recently signed for the Los Angeles Galaxy and will be the biggest star to go stateside since the likes of Pele and Franz Beckenbauer featured in the NASL during the 1970s.

German referee for Champions League final

AFP, Geneva

Germany's Herbert Fandel will referee the Champions League final between Liverpool and AC Milan in Athens on Wednesday, European football's governing body UEFA said Monday.

Fandel, an experienced referee at international level since 1998, will be assisted by Carsten Kadach and Volker Wezel, UEFA said in a statement.

The 43 year-old has proved to be something of a bogyman for Liverpool and a lucky charm for Milan in the past.

Fandel has officiated matches involving AC Milan five times since 2002, all of them victories for the Italian side in which they only conceded one goal.

Meanwhile, Liverpool have never scored in three appearances with Fandel, including their 0-1 Champions League defeat at home to Barcelona in March, another defeat and a draw.

No big signings for Chelsea



AFP, London

Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon said Sunday that the FA Cup winners would not be looking to make any major new signings during the close season.

However he said there would be some movement in and out of the club before the start of next season.

Chelsea may have relinquished their Premiership title to Manchester United this season but they finished on a high by winning the FA Cup on Saturday, beating United 1-0 after extra time at the new Wembley to complete a domestic cup double.

"We were second in the Premier League and in the semi-finals of the Champions League, so you have got to say on the back of two other seasons of winning the Premiership, it has been a very good year, and the team is getting stronger," said Kenyon.

"It would have been unjust had we finished up with only one trophy, because of the team effort this season. They and the manager have shown great spirit."

Kenyon insists the squad will not

need major surgery this summer.

He told BBC radio: "I doubt we will have big-name signings because I do not think we need it.

"We are in the region of moving three out and bringing three or four in. We are looking for some cover.

"We are looking for central defence, a midfielder and a striker. They will be good players who can contribute to the team and the squad.

"That will give us not only the added numbers we need for the competitions, but also cover.

"We have got to bear in mind that we are losing potentially four players for the African Nations Cup in January next year, which is going to be a challenge for us."

The Chelsea chief executive also rejected suggestions Andriy Shevchenko and German international Michael Ballack would be offloaded following largely disappointing first campaigns at Stamford Bridge.

"We have brought both these players in for three or four years -- we did not bring them in for a season," Kenyon insisted.

"I am confident they are going to be here as big players with Chelsea next season.

"They want to contribute a lot

more, they feel they have a lot more to give. It takes time to settle in."

"They are two fantastic professionals. It is an exciting prospect to see those two guys on top of their game for us next season."

Kenyon said the club would now also be focussing on tying down two of its stalwarts to long-term deals.

Reports have suggested England midfielder Frank Lampard, 28, is considering buying out the remainder of his current deal, and he has been linked with a move to Barcelona.

However, both Lampard and England captain John Terry, 26, have made it clear they would prefer to extend their stay at Chelsea, provided the right terms can be agreed.

"We got to the point within the season where we all like to just concentrate on football, and they both reacted very positively to that," said Kenyon.

"Now we will be concentrating on getting those contracts put to bed, and John Terry and Frank Lampard starting back with us on July 9.

"It is business as usual now, it is just a slightly different business to what we have been involved in during the last six months."

Hildebrand to join Valencia

AFP, Berlin

German international goalkeeper Timo Hildebrand will leave newly-crowned Bundesliga champions VfB Stuttgart for Spanish giants Valencia this summer, it was revealed on Monday.

The 28-year-old, who has won five caps and is Germany's number two goalkeeper behind Arsenal's Jens Lehmann, has been at Stuttgart since he was 16, but is expected to sign a four-year contract with Valencia to try to make Germany's number one shirt his own.

And with Valencia's 37-year-old Spanish international 'keeper Santiago Canizares reported to be set to leave, Hildebrand's move to Spain is likely to be finalised when his Stuttgart contract finishes at the end of June.

"He will join Valencia, but it has not been announced yet, because of who they have in goal," said Stuttgart manager Horst Heldt.

"But there is no chance the deal will fall through."

Hildebrand will play his last game for Stuttgart in this Saturday's German cup final at Berlin's Olympic Stadium against Nuremberg and Spanish media agencies have already heralded Hildebrand's imminent arrival.

Stuttgart have formally said farewell to Hildebrand and fellow goalkeeper Dirk Heinen as well as defenders Markus Babel and Heiko Gerber, with former Liverpool star Babel set to join the club in a coaching role.

After 288 Bundesliga appearances, 46 in the VfB shirt, 67 games in the English Premier League and 51 internationals, Babel will retire after Saturday's cup final to join Armin Veh's coaching staff.

Stevie, Jamie await new deals

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry insisted Monday that no announcement on new deals for England stars Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher will be made until after their midweek Champions League final clash with AC Milan in Athens.

Reds skipper Gerrard and Carragher are believed to be poised to sign new long-year deals with the club, but Parry said: "Nothing will happen until after the final."

Reports Monday claimed that the pair have agreed bumper five year contracts with the club, as manager Rafa Benitez looks to secure the futures of his top players before embarking on his expected summer spending spree.

Both players have spoken about wanting to end their playing days at Anfield, despite being able to buy out their contracts under new rules introduced by FIFA.

And Carragher told the Liverpool Daily Post: "I never want to leave Liverpool and I hope I can get my contract sorted out as quickly as possible.

"I'm not interested in this new FIFA rule where players can buy themselves out of their contract. I know it's there, but I don't know anything about it as it is something I wouldn't do.

"My ambition is to wear the red shirt for as long as I can and I'd be absolutely gutted if I ever had to leave."

Last week Gerrard said: "I'm coming up to 27 years old now and hopefully I can sign a long-term deal that will see me having the best days of my career at Liverpool."

Giggs rues the lost goal

AFP, London



Ryan Giggs claimed Manchester United had been harshly treated in the FA Cup final after his extra-time effort was ruled not to have crossed the line.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side missed out on the double after Didier Drogba's goal five minutes from the end clinched Chelsea's 1-0 victory at Wembley on Saturday.

But United captain Giggs insisted it could all have been so different for the Premiership champions if a linesman had seen that his close range shot was over the line.

United felt aggrieved as also they claimed Giggs was pushed and should have been given a penalty before the Wales winger collided with Petr Cech, who then carried the ball over the line.

"We felt that we played well and just edged it," Giggs said. "If that goal had been given it could have been

difficult.

"I knew it had crossed the line. I couldn't understand why it wasn't a goal. Obviously we're disappointed.

"You just hope on a day like this they get the big decisions right and on the day he didn't. I think he (Cech) was looking for the players reactions and he knew he had got away with it."

In truth, the phantom goal could have been disallowed anyway as the Giggs challenge that forced Cech and the ball over the line looked a foul.

Rio Ferdinand admitted that the luck wasn't with United and said: "Maybe it wasn't meant to be. I've not seen Giggs' one yet but that's how it goes.

"That's why Cup finals are interesting because decisions go this way and that. They are always controversial.

"I saw Ryan's reaction on the pitch, but I was too far away to see if went in. If the officials were doing their job they would have made the decision that it was over the line."

Despite a defeat that will leave United with a bitter taste until next season, Giggs is convinced his side have plenty of positives to take from a match that they had the better

chances to win in normal time.

"We can take a lot out of the way we played," he said. "We said at the start of the season the Premiership would be our number one aim and we've managed to do that, but I thought we deserved something out of the game.

"We've come so far. We nearly did the Double. Each season you look to move forward. I'm sure there will be new signings and the young players will get better. There's a lot to look forward to."

United's Serbian defender Nemanja Vidic insisted tiredness was not a factor despite both sides producing performances that were well below their best.

"We played a lot of games this season and it is normal to be tired, but we were no more tired than Chelsea," he said. "We had a couple of chances to win it.

"At the beginning of the season we wanted to win the Championship and we have done that. We are not happy because this was an historic game at Wembley and we lost it.

"We don't need to be too disappointed though. We had a great season."

Terry committed to Chelsea



AFP, London

John Terry has given a clear indication that he will commit his future to Chelsea after playing down reports he was ready to demand a transfer.

Terry's talks over a new contract broke down in March after he demanded a nine-year deal that would guarantee him parity with the team's highest earner and offer an option to manage the club when he retires.

Chelsea were only willing to give him a five-year contract, so the negotiations were put on hold until the end of the season.

It had been reported that Terry would hand in a transfer request if he didn't get his way, but the Blues captain insisted there is no way he would consider asking to leave.

"I'd never do that," he said. "Now the season's over I'm hopeful things are going to get sorted out. I was not going to talk in the build-up to the cup final. I said we should wait.

"It's not right coming into these

games with things on your mind and being unhappy."

Now the FA Cup has been added to the Stamford Bridge trophy room after Saturday's 1-0 win over Manchester United, Terry is keen to sit down with owner Roman Abramovich and the Russian's advisor Eugene Tenenbaum to thrash out a deal.

Terry said: "It's all sorted and hopefully things can be resolved. As soon as possible really. I said to the club once the season's over I'd have a chat, with Eugene and Roman maybe, and that's the way it is."

The England defender became the first captain to lift the FA Cup at the newly-rebuilt Wembley and he admitted the occasion will go down as one of the most memorable of his career.

"It's special, even more so because it's against United," he said. "It's a double of our own. We won the League Cup and we're on a high now. It's unbelievable.

"I felt really proud to walk up those steps and get out there on the last line of that walkway to actually lift it. It's an amazing feeling.

"I'm quite emotional. You know what, it is actually one of the best moments of my career, especially after what happened in the Champions League and going out on the last day of the season and winning this. I'm really pleased with that."

Didier Drogba's extra-time winner ensured Chelsea ended the season on a high note after the anguish of surrendering their Premiership title to United and losing to Liverpool in the Champions League semi-finals.

Terry believes Chelsea can use their Wembley triumph as a springboard to wrench the league crown back from United next season.

"Yeah, of course we're confident about next season," he said. "We were confident about it anyway before kick-off. Winning the title back has to be the target for next season. We'll come back stronger."

"If we had only won the League Cup a lot of people including the Chelsea fans maybe wouldn't have accepted it. But we've come here and picked up the trophy and we go away happy."



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's Brazilian Roberto Carlos (C) is mobbed by teammates after scoring a late goal against Recreativo Huelva during their Primera Liga match at the Nuevo Colombino in Huelva on Sunday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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