



Loic Anderson (C), son of Brazilian forward Sonny Anderson, takes a shot at goal in between former French players Pascal Fugier (L) and Jean-Marc Chanelet during Anderson's jubilee match at the Gerland Stadium in Lyon on Monday. Anderson turned up for clubs like Barcelona, Lyon and Villarreal in an illustrious career.

Agent dismisses Henry's Barca link

Football

AFP, London

Thierry Henry's agent on Tuesday categorically denied reports that the Arsenal striker has agreed terms with Spanish giants Barcelona.

France Football magazine claimed that Henry's agent Jerome Anderson met with Barca's sporting director Txiki Begiristain last week regarding a three-year deal with an option of a fourth year.

But Anderson insisted: "I can categorically state that I never had a meeting with anyone representing Barcelona. The whole thing is garbage."

"I did not meet with anyone - whether in the south of France or anywhere on this planet. I have read the article in the French magazine and there is not one element of truth in the story and they will be hearing from my lawyers."

"Where this comes from I have absolutely no idea. Nobody checked these claims with anyone involved in the story. It is scandalous."

And Jeff Weston, from the SEM Group which manages Henry, told BBC Sport on Tuesday: "No such meeting took place. That is absolute rubbish."

"There's never been any question of him not being at Arsenal next season."

Henry's future has been the subject of speculation again despite him signing a four-year contract with the Gunners last summer, with both Barca and AC Milan linked to the player.

Last week Henry told ESPN that it was "great to hear" reports of interest in him from European champions AC Milan, but stressed "I am an Arsenal player at the player."

The potential deal is likely to cost Milan an initial £25 million while they will also seek to open talks over deals for Thiago Motta and Emerson.

Eto'o has been linked with a switch to Liverpool in recent weeks although these reports have died down since his agent denied there had been a meeting with manager Rafael Benitez.

moment".

Henry went on to say he had been "devastated" by the departure of vice-chairman David Dein, who left after a dispute with his fellow directors over the increased involvement of American businessman Stan Kroenke.

"The bosses have been unsettled and a lot of players at the club have been unsettled," he added.

Milan set for Eto'o bid

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan are reportedly set for talks with Barcelona next Monday over a move for Samuel Eto'o.

The Gazzetta dello Sport claim Milan's vice-president Adriano Galliani will travel to meet with Nou Camp officials next week following talks with the Cameroon international's agent in the coming days.

Galliani has already spoken with Eto'o's prime agent in Athens before the Champions League final to register the club's interest and is now stepping up plans to land the forward with a six-year contract offer.

The potential deal is likely to cost Milan an initial £25 million while they will also seek to open talks over deals for Thiago Motta and Emerson.

Eto'o has been linked with a switch to Liverpool in recent weeks although these reports have died down since his agent denied there had been a meeting with manager Rafael Benitez.

Asia's season begins now

Football

AFP, Singapore

The football season might be all-but-over in Europe but Asian fans can look forward to a feast of soccer action over the coming weeks as the world's top players make a beeline for the region.

The Asian Cup finals get underway next month with a host of European-based stars on show as Japan, South Korea, China and Iran prepare to battle with Asian newcomers Australia for top honours.

Australia's participation for the first time has whetted appetites with their host of English Premier League players, including Mark Viduka, Liverpool's perennially injured Harry Kewell, Everton's Tim Cahill and West Ham defender Lucas Neill.

But it is the arrival of club sides, who are all under pressure to help develop the game in the region, that have fans excited.

The top draw is Manchester United who are expected to show off new signings Nani, Anderson and Owen Hargreaves for the first time.

Add in Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney, Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes, it's little wonder tickets have been selling well.

In Seoul, 65,000 tickets were snapped up in a matter of hours, with that many again disappointed

after the game on July 20 sold out. "Demand was huge. 130,000 people wanted to buy tickets so obviously we sold out in a matter of hours," said the internet company that organized the sale.

The Red Devils, fresh from winning the Premier League, get their tour underway against J League side Urawa Red Diamonds in Saitama on July 17 before playing FC Seoul and then to Macau on July 23 for a showdown with Shenzhen.

Their match against a Malaysian XI in Kuala Lumpur was called off after stinging criticism from the Asian Football Confederation which accused United of "disrespect" as the tour clashes with the Asian Cup finals.

The fear is that such a big club will divert attention from the flagship tournament.

But while United dumping the Malaysia match was a partial victory for the AFC, Asian football's power-brokers could do nothing to prevent the rest of the tour going ahead.

Two other high-profile events also clash with the Asian Cup.

Liverpool, boosted by Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher

signing new four-year contracts, headline the Asia Trophy in Hong Kong from July 24-27.

Joining the Champions League finalists are Harry Redknapp's Portsmouth and Fulham, with former Northern Ireland boss Lawrie

Sanchez at the helm.

Across the East China Sea in South Korea, Sammy Lee's Bolton, Steve Coppell's Reading, French champions Lyon and Argentina's River Plate will vie for the biennial Peace Cup from July 12-21.

Barcelona are also heading to Asia for matches in Japan, China and Hong Kong in August while German giants Bayern Munich make a one-off trip to Hong Kong on July 1.

One club that won't be coming is Real Madrid, a regular visitor to Asia, which has decided not to tour this year to give their players a well-earned breather.

It was Real Madrid that led the charge into the vast untapped marketplace of Asia with a tour of China in 2005 that was widely derided for their take-the-money-and-run attitude.

Other clubs have also been accused of milking the region, pocketing huge appearance fees and boosting their profile while putting nothing back in to develop Asian football.

Asia offers untapped riches in terms of talent, television revenues and merchandise, and FIFA president Sepp Blatter wants clubs to conduct training clinics for Asian

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4

Drogba wants away?

AFP, London

Chelsea's Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba admitted Tuesday that he was tempted by a move to either Spain or Italy.

"Spain and Italy attract me a lot and, although I am a long way from saying farewell to Chelsea, you never know what can happen," Drogba told The Sun newspaper.

"I'm at the last big turning point of my career.

"It's time for one final big choice: should I stay or should I go? I am tempted to discover another world and to see what footballing life is like outside England.

"It would be a big disappointment if I never manage to play for teams that I dream of playing for. That would be terribly frustrating."

Drogba has concerns over the club's ambition following rows between owner Roman Abramovich and boss Jose Mourinho.

He added: "If I think the club lacks ambition, then it is sure I will not stay too long. I'm 29 and I don't have much time to lose."

"I believed in being loyal to a stable club. But it is clear that, in such matters, players don't control anything."

Drogba extended his contract with the Premiership runners-up last November until 2010.

L'pool rubbish crisis talks

TIMES ONLINE

Rafael Benitez, the Liverpool manager, has demanded actions rather than words from the new owners at Anfield, but with the club's summer being dominated by unrest behind the scenes rather than the top-class signings he was hoping for, his supporters may be partly reassured by yesterday's address from George Gillett Jr.

Benitez is known to have been disgruntled by the lack of progress in his search for reinforcements, particularly in view of Manchester United's projected £25 million outlay on three new players. The Spaniard has expressed displeasure in conference calls with Rick Parry, the chief executive, and Gillett and Tom Hicks, the co-owners, whose working relationship is not running smoothly, but Gillett moved to defuse the crisis talk yesterday in characteristically colourful terms.

"I read that Rafa is throwing hand-grenades at us and making demands, that there's a tension or disagreement between him and the Gillett and Hicks families," Gillett said. "Nothing could be farther from the truth. As far back as February, Rafa laid out a programme for us. Each one of our sports businesses

has a core concept. You can't just flop around looking at opportunities here and there, go left, go right. It has to be part of an integrated plan."

"We have one at Liverpool, one we understand 100 per cent, believe in and support. The plan involves us spending money, but it will be part of a plan, not just spending like a drunken sailor."

Benitez has come to accept that the Americans' promise of support in the transfer market does not equate to the blank chequebook that he envisaged after his initial conversations. That feeling was reinforced at the weekend, when it emerged that a shopping list previously headed by Samuel Eto'o, the Barcelona forward, includes less inspiring names such as Diego Forlán, the Villarreal striker whose name was synonymous with profligacy during 2½ unsuccessful seasons with Manchester United.

Talks are continuing behind the scenes with a view to signing at least one top-class winger possibly Mancini, of AS Roma, or Florent Malouda, of Lyons, although the latter is also courting interest from Bolton Wanderers, while Aston Villa, Blackburn Rovers and West Ham United have registered strong interest in Craig Bellamy.

While much has been made of tension between Benitez and Parry, particularly about the time of the Champions League final, there have also been disagreements

Madrid deny Saviola reports

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid have denied reports they have signed striker Javier Saviola from arch rivals Barcelona.

Saviola will be available on a Bosman free transfer at the end of the season and several newspapers in Spain claim the Argentina international has already agreed to join Fabio Capello's side.

But Madrid president Ramon Calderon was quick to distance himself from those reports on Tuesday.

"I can assure you that Saviola has not signed for Real Madrid," said Calderon on the club's official website.

"It is all speculation. Had we signed all the players that have been linked to Madrid by the press we would be able to have five teams."

Mexican stint for Barthez?

AFP, Mexico

France's World Cup winning goalkeeper Fabien Barthez signed for Mexican club Necaxa a Aguascalientes on Monday according to the team president.

The 35-year-old 87-times capped goalkeeper had already announced his retirement from football after a stormy term with French First Division outfit Nantes - who have since been relegated - last April.

"We can announce the transfer of Fabien Barthez, who will come here for a year," said club president Javier Perez Teuffer.

Necaxa is owned by the private television station of Mexico, Televisa.



England forward David Nugent reacts in disappointment after failing to hit the target in their opening match of the U21 Euro Championships against Czech Republic in Arnhem on Sunday.

England, Italy struggle

AGENCIES, undated

Leroy Lita missed an 88th-minute penalty as England were held to a goalless draw by the Czech Republic in the European Under-21 Championship Group B opener.

The second-half substitute shuffled hesitantly before shooting weakly wide of the left-hand post, thereby failing to earn the full quota of points for the Three Lions.

England were fortunate to come away with a point and had been badly exposed before Lita's late miss, resulting from poor finishing by the Czech Republic and needing several outstanding saves by Scott Carson to stay in the game.

England's clearest chances fell to David Nugent, who also won the penalty with a neat flick that was handled by Roman Hubnik, but the Preston North End striker must improve his finishing if he is to thrive in the top flight after his proposed move to Everton.

"We had opportunities to seal the game so are disappointed, but we can play better," coach Stuart Pearce said. "The game was there to be won but we weren't good enough. On Thursday we have to do

better in what will be a tougher game [against Italy]. Italy, though, fared even worse than England last night, losing 1-0 to Serbia in their opening match.

Carson will pass Jamie Carragher and Gareth Barry's joint record of 27 caps in England's final group game, against Serbia, although that match in Nijmegen on Sunday could be where England's interest in the competition ends.

Without his first-choice central defensive pairing, Pearce moved Nedium Onuoha, a right back, into the middle alongside Gary Cahill, with mixed results. The fledgling partnership was carved open twice in the first half, Jan Kysela being denied by a good save by Carson and an important block from Cahill, the Aston Villa defender.

England improved in the second half as the impressive Nigel Reo-Coker began to dominate in midfield, with Nugent flashing a header wide from a cross by James Milner and shooting across goal, but their control of possession was undermined by vulnerability at the other end. Martin Fillo blasted over the bar with only Carson to beat after dispossessing the disappointing Kieran Richardson, while the goalkeeper did well to tip a David Pudil's free kick on to a post.

Richardson was replaced by Wayne Routledge after 57 minutes and showed his displeasure by marching down the tunnel without speaking to Pearce, who claimed he was seeking the sanctuary of an ice bath. The Manchester United winger's cousin, Charley, has been performing with greater distinction in the Big Brother house and, on this evidence, could spend longer in the spotlight than England this summer.

Away at Nijmegen, Serbia seized the early initiative in the group B as Dejan Milovanovic's fine second-half strike earned three points against five-time winners Italy.

In what is widely considered the oldest city in the Netherlands, the new generation of continental superstars showed how one of football's strongest traditions - the failure to take chances proving costly - still holds true in the modern game. Italy spurned three excellent first-half opportunities and were made to pay 18 minutes into the second half when Milovanovic, one of four Serbia players on show who were involved in the 2004 final defeat by Italy, drilled in the only goal from distance.