

Ballack expects to miss out

INTERNET, undated

Germany captain Michael Ballack has admitted he does not expect to recover from injury in time to face England at Wembley on August 22.

The 30-year-old midfielder has been struggling to overcome an ankle problem, which has also ruled him out of Chelsea's start to the new Premier League season.

And despite the game still being a week and a half away, he does not expect to feature.

"It is highly likely that I will not be playing," he told German TV station Premiere. "It does not look good."

Germany coach Joachim Low has also resigned himself to the fact that he may be without the influential player for what promises to be a tough encounter.

"I do not expect him to play - as annoying as it is," Low told ARD TV. "If he is not 100% fit, I will not play him. I would love to have him available for such a match, but the probability will not be fit."

Riquelme returns to Villarreal

AFF, Buenos Aires

Argentine playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme said on Saturday that he is heading back to Spanish First Division side Villarreal.

The 29-year-old was out of favour at the 2006 Champions League semifinalists last season and was loaned out to Argentinian giants Boca Juniors in February.

But now he seems to have patched up his differences with his paymasters and is heading back to Spain.

"Maybe I can wear Boca Juniors' colours again in 2009 when my Villarreal contract ends," Riquelme said.

Boca wanted to keep the midfielder but were unable to pay Villarreal's asking fee of around 10 million euros.

"I want to thank them (Boca's management) for trying to keep hold of me but I am a Villarreal player and I am obliged to return to the club," added Riquelme.

Villarreal coach Mauricio Pellegrini had said he didn't want to keep Riquelme but the player claims he is available for selection should his boss choose to call on his services.

Riquelme was an integral component in Villarreal's run to the Champions League semifinals two years ago, when he formed a lethal forward partnership with Uruguayan Diego Forlan.

Sol delight at England link

AFF, London

Portsmouth central defender Sol Campbell admitted Sunday he would jump at the chance to revive his international career for England.

Campbell, 32, has not played since the 2006 World Cup. But a fine debut season for Portsmouth last term led to speculation he might be recalled by England boss Steve McClaren who is short on numbers in defence.

"If it comes I will take my chances," Campbell told BBC 5live's Sportsweek.

"I have played a long time for my country. Of course I would love the chance to do it again. I will have to wait and see if it happens."

"I'm just going to concentrate on my game and see what I can do. That is the main thing - whatever comes after that comes after that."

"If there are no games I'll just get on with the season. If it is one game, good, if it is 15 games, fantastic."

Campbell, who has 69 caps, last featured as a substitute against Sweden in the 2006 World Cup.

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Ajax refuse Real ultimatum

AFF, The Hague

Dutch giants Ajax on Sunday revealed they had refused to meet Real Madrid's three-hour ultimatum over the transfer of midfielder Wesley Sneijder.

"Ajax refuse to be put under pressure and have rejected the ultimatum," said the club on their website.

Spanish media reported on Saturday that Real Madrid had reached an agreement in principle with Ajax for the signature of the Dutch international midfielder.

And according to Ajax they had received an official offer of 24 million euros (32.7 million dollars) for Sneijder but Madrid had also requested if the deal was to go ahead the player would have to be registered in Spain before August 24.

Ajax then increased the 23-year-old midfielder's transfer fee to 27 million euros.

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PHOTO: AFP
Newcastle United striker Obafemi Martins celebrates with an expansive somersault after scoring a stunning bicycle-kick goal against Bolton Wanderers during their Premiership clash at The Reebok Stadium in Bolton on Saturday.

Liverpool fire warning

AFF, London



Liverpool fired an early warning to their English Premiership title rivals as they made a gutsy winning start to the new season on Saturday.

Liverpool sent a statement of intent to Manchester United, Chelsea and Arsenal with a 2-1 win at Aston Villa.

Meanwhile Sven-Goran Eriksson, branded a flop as England manager, saw his Manchester City side win 2-0 at West Ham in his first Premiership test.

Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce took his new side to his old club Bolton Wanderers and returned with a 3-1 win.

And newly-promoted Sunderland beat big-spending visitors Tottenham 1-0.

Blackburn earned a 2-1 win at Middlesbrough, hosts Derby drew 2-2 with Portsmouth, and Everton beat visitors Wigan 2-1.

On Sunday, champions Manchester United host Reading, promoted Birmingham visit Chelsea, while Arsenal welcome Fulham.

Nigeria hitman Obafemi Martins

Liverpool took the lead against Villa through a 31st-minute Martin Laursen own goal.

The Villains equalised five minutes from time with a Gareth Barry penalty. However, two minutes later, Reds captain Steven Gerrard lashed in a splendid free kick.

Liverpool's next Premiership game is against Chelsea on August 19.

"The idea this time is to come out of the blocks quickly and stay in the title race," Gerrard said.

"It was a great three points and nice to go into the Chelsea game with three points on the board."

At Upton Park, Eriksson got off to a flying start, with new strikers Roland Bianchi and Geovanni scoring in a stylish 2-0 win over the Hammers.

"I'm delighted, we played an excellent game," the Swede said, singling out Brazil midfielder Elano.

"We sometimes played the same system for England, but for England I never had an Elano. I don't know why it is but Brazilians seem to be born with technical ability in their DNA."

Allardyce knows all about Bolton from his seven and a half years in charge at the Reebok and he put it to good use on his return in a 3-1 win.

Nigeria hitman Obafemi Martins

scored twice, one a splendid bicycle kick, to show England forward Michael Owen he faces a fight to be the first choice striker.

Allardyce looked to bury his war of words with Bolton chairman Phil Gartside.

"I am very disappointed with the comments he has made," he said. "But actions speak louder than words. We played them off the park and won the game. That answers everything for me, rather than get into a fight."

At the Stadium of Light, Michael Chopra scored the first goal of the new season in Saturday's early match as visitors Tottenham were beaten 1-0 thanks to his goal scored 13 seconds from time.

"I keep saying about the spirit they have and that desire not to settle for a draw," Keane told Sky Sports television.

"We just knew there was going to be a lot of question marks if we can do it throughout the season. The time to tell will be the end of the season."

Blackburn Rovers earned a hard-fought win over 2-1 Middlesbrough at the Riverside.

England winger Stewart

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PREMIERSHIP Record breaking start for Chelsea

AFF, London

Michael Essien ensured Chelsea's bid to regain the Premiership title got off to a record-breaking start as he sealed a thrilling 3-2 win against Birmingham on Sunday.

Jose Mourinho's side have now gone 64 home league matches without defeat, eclipsing Liverpool's previous top-flight record of 63, which Bob Paisley's team set between 1978 and 1980.

Chelsea have turned Stamford Bridge into an unbreachable fortress in the Premiership since Arsenal won there in February 2004, but they were made to sweat by newly-promoted Birmingham.

Mikael Forssell gave Steve Bruce's team a shock lead before Claudio Pizarro and Florent Malouda put Chelsea in front.

Olivier Kapo drew the visitors level but Colin Doyle, the young Birmingham goalkeeper who had already been at fault for Pizarro's goal, handed Chelsea the points when he made a hash of Essien's second half strike.

Mourinho is now just one match away from a remarkable record of his own. If Chelsea avoid defeat against Portsmouth on August 25, he will have reached a century of unbeaten home league matches.

The last time the Portuguese coach left a home game reflecting on a defeat was back in February 2002 when his Porto team lost to Beira Mar.

Despite the injury crisis that ravaged Mourinho's squad during pre-season, he was still able to field a strong side including home debuts for Malouda, Pizarro and Tal Ben Haim.

Chelsea made all the early running and were unlucky when Malouda just failed to give them the lead as he blasted over.

But just as Mourinho's men were in the ascendancy, they fell behind in the 15th minute. Liam Ridgewell flicked on Gary McSheffrey's free-kick and Forssell wrong-footed Petr Cech with a glancing header.

But Chelsea hit back in style two minutes later, as Birmingham keeper Doyle let debutant Pizarro's side-footed effort squirt through his grasp and over the line.

Chelsea were into their stride now. A second goal looked inevitable and it arrived in the 31st minute.

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Fergie wanted Tevez last season

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson wishes he had signed Argentine forward Carlos Tevez a year ago.

Tevez completed his transfer to the Red Devils on Friday - a year after Ferguson was first alerted that he was available.

At the time, United shied away from a deal because of uncertainties over the way it would be structured.

"In his year at West Ham, Tevez proved to be an absolutely top player," Ferguson said. "Every time I saw him playing last year, I thought to myself, 'I just wish we had done it last year.' But there were too many complications at the time."

Tevez's transfer was complicated by a third-party agreement between West Ham and the player's agent, Kia Joorabchian.

Gunners leave it late

AFP, London



Alexander Hleb ensured Arsenal began life without Thierry Henry in style as his dramatic late goal sealed a 2-1 Premiership victory at home to London rivals Fulham on Sunday.

The Belarusian pounced seconds into injury-time to a cap a remarkable late fight-back from Arsene Wenger's side, who had looked set for a shock defeat after Jens Lehmann's early blunder had gifted David Healy a debut goal.

But Robin van Persie cancelled out Healy's strike with an 84rd-minute penalty and the hosts' intense pressure was rewarded when Hleb collected Cesc Fabregas's delicate chipped pass and smashed into the bottom corner.

It was cruel on Fulham and their goalkeeper, Tony Warner, in particular. The 34-year-old had been drafted into Lawrie Sanchez's starting line-up moments before kick-off after his first-choice, Antti Niemi, injured himself in the warm-up, and made a string of

spectacular saves to keep Arsenal at bay.

Warner certainly enjoyed a better day than Lehmann. In the 53rd second, the German made a hash of dealing with Gael Clichy's gentle back-pass, attempting a clever reverse pass instead of clearing downfield.

Lehmann slipped at the crucial moment and scuffed straight to Healy, and the ball bounced in off the forward's shin.

Falling behind at the Emirates Stadium is hardly a new experience for Arsenal. No team won more points from losing positions last season, but then they could at least count on the steady influence of old heads such as Henry and Freddie Ljungberg. No longer. There was a frantic quality to much of Arsenal's football, although they still created a welter of chances.

In the 13th minute, Tomas Rosicky flashed a volley wide of the right-hand post following fine work by Bacary Sagna, while Hleb's low drive moments later was well blocked by a sprawling Zat Knight.

Even when Arsenal did break through, they found Warner in

inspired form. The former Liverpool goalkeeper tipped aside Rosicky's 35th-minute daisy-cutter, somehow blocked Hleb's shot from close range and then dived bravely at Fabregas's feet just as the Spaniard was set to equalise.

Fulham were hanging on grimly, although the quicksilver runs of Healy and Simon Davies ensured Arsenal were never entirely comfortable.

The visitors howled for a penalty after Davies collapsed under Fabregas's challenge shortly before half-time, but replays suggested Phil Dowd, the referee, was right to wave play on.

That did not stop Sanchez complaining vociferously on the touch-line, although the Fulham manager should have been grateful that Dowd had taken an equally dismissive view of Arsenal's own penalty claims in the 20th minute, when Hleb had been illegally scythed down by Chris Baird.

The second period started at a similarly break-neck pace, with

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Sven slams critics



AFP, London

Manchester City's new manager Sven-Goran Eriksson fired a broadside at his critics after he got his English Premiership career off to the perfect start.

The Swede, who was branded a flop England manager by the British press, hit back as he spelled out his vision for City following a stylish 2-0 victory over hosts West Ham at Upton Park on Saturday.

He has spent more than 40 million pounds of new City owner and former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's money since taking over at Eastlands.

Eriksson admitted he had not seen much of many of his new signings, but he had seen enough -- and heard enough from sniping critics.

"It can only be stupid people who

say I would sign players I did not know anything about," he told reporters.

"OK, I haven't seen all of them play nine or 10 times but I have big scouting staff at the club and I have as many videos as I need to watch."

"I've always signed good football players. And with these ones, some are young and for the future and some, like Martin Petrov and Elano, are more experienced."

There was no looking back for the Swede after the demolition of West Ham, with both goals coming from players he brought in.

Italian forward Bianchi, an 8.8-million-pound capture from Italian side Reggiana, scored in the 18th minute.

And Brazilian international striker Geovanni, signed on a free transfer from Brazilian side Cruzeiro, sealed victory from 12 yards out three minutes from the end.

"England is history for me," the Swede insisted.

"We are playing a different way with Manchester City. It is a big club and the aim is to make it much better."

"The owner has not asked me to win the Premier League -- not this season anyway -- or get into Europe, but we will see where we are when the squad is fully ready."

"I don't think I have anything to prove in English football, although at the start of a season everybody must prove they are the right man in the right place."

"I am delighted, of course, with the way we have started. I enjoy the club job more between matches than I did with England between matches. I enjoy being on the training field and in the dressing room."

"But (Chelsea manager) Jose Mourinho can still have all the headlines as far as I'm concerned. My job is to improve the club."

The former Lazio coach countered criticism that he has bought too many foreign players, saying:

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Bayern dazzle in opener

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich's 23 million-euro strikeforce Luca Toni and Miroslav Klose gave their employers an instant return as newly-promoted Hansa Rostock were beaten 3-0 at the Allianz Arena on Saturday.

Bayern's 69 million euros summer spending spree was rewarded after just 14 minutes as Klose, a 12 million euro signing from Werder Bremen, drew the goalkeeper for 11-million euro man Toni to knock the ball into an empty net.

Despite having injured knee ligaments in a pre-season game, Toni, 30, was a constant threat to Hansa on his debut, but Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld later admitted he had gambled on the Italian's fitness.

Klose, the top-scorer at last year's World Cup, showed his class to put Bayern 2-0 ahead as he

followed up defender Philipp Lahm's shot to slot home on 66 minutes, before adding his second on 84 minutes, heading home Lahm's cross.

"I am glad that the risk to play Luca Toni paid off. I think for a lot of fans it was worth the entrance fee alone to see him play," said Hitzfeld.

"We fulfilled our duty, the team put Rostock under pressure from the start and played well, we deserved our 1-0 lead at the break."

"But we gave Rostock too many opportunities to counter-attack, because we were badly organised at the back and we must improve on that."

After suffering their worst season for 11 years to finish fourth last season and miss out on a Champions League place, Bayern's aggressive spending over the summer looks to be a good investment as a host of their new stars shone.

As well as Italian World Cup winner Toni and Klose, French midfielder Franck Ribery was in superb form, while German defender Marcell Jansen was also solid in defence and quick in attack

as Hansa rarely troubled Bayern.

Last season's third place finishers Werder Bremen squandered a 2-0 lead at VfL Bochum to settle for a draw. Brazilian Diego netted on 39 minutes before summer signing Boubacar Sanogo scored in first-half injury time.

But Bochum got themselves level as strikers Stanislav Sestak of Slovakia and Dane Tommy Bechmann both scored within four minutes of the break to make it 2-2.

Hamburg started the season with a 1-0 win over Hannover as Namibian international Collin Benjamin hit the back of the net after 23 minutes, which proved enough to seal the points.

Eintracht Frankfurt also opened their season with a 1-0 win over Hertha Berlin after Greek striker Ioannis Amanatidis struck with a header on 31 minutes.

Having both been dumped out of the German Cup first round the previous week, there was nothing to separate Bayer Leverkusen and Energie Cottbus who drew 0-0.

Arminia Bielefeld enjoyed a 3-1

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Toulouse sink Lyon

AFP, Paris



Johan Elmander gave Toulouse a welcome boost ahead of their crucial Champions League clash against Liverpool in midweek with a last-minute winner against champions Lyon on Saturday.

Toulouse are embarking on their first ever season in Europe's premier competition and will host last season's finalists in the third qualifying round on Wednesday.

And Elmander's strike will see them in buoyant mood having quickly recovered from their opening day 3-1 defeat to Valenciennes a week ago.

"All week we worked on rediscovering our virtues, our desire, our solidarity, and that was the case this evening," said Toulouse coach Elie Baup, who was nevertheless worried that his team would struggle to recover from the match in time for Wednesday.

"It was very hot today," he added. "It won't be easy to play again in the same conditions on Wednesday."

Anyone hoping that this reverse may herald a changing of the guard in French football may be bitterly

disappointed, though.

The six-in-a-row champions never gave anyone else a chance last season, almost wrapping up the title by Christmas, but this defeat owed much to the dismissal of Swedish midfielder Kim Kallstrom after just 34 minutes for stupidly spitting in the direction of the fourth official.

Until then Lyon had been the dominant force and there was nothing to suggest they will not canter to another French title again this season.

Lyon were left disappointed at coming so close to holding out for the point, but ultimately coming up short.

"It's tough when you play 10 against 11 for the whole match and you concede a goal at the end - it's really disappointing," said midfielder Mathieu Bodmer.

"Toulouse put a lot of physical pressure on us. We did what we could, we tried to earn a point but we didn't manage it."

Brazilian playmaker Juninho tested Toulouse goalkeeper Nicolas Douchez from a free-kick on 19 minutes and on 33 minutes Karim Benzema fired narrowly wide.

But the red card changed the complexion of the match.

Toulouse started to make the extra man count after the break as

Andre-Pierre Gignac came close before defender Mauro Cetto thudded the bar with a header on 54 minutes.

Lyon remained dangerous as Abdul Kader Keita hit the post before Bryan Bergougnoux cleared the danger with his keeper beaten.

Lyon looked good for a point despite chances for Gignac and substitute Francois Sirieux until Elmander's exquisite finish with the outside of his boot in the last minute of regulation time.

Marseille remain winless and goalless despite the return of Samir Nasri after a second straight 0-0 draw, this time at home to Rennes.

Bordeaux - under new coach and former Manchester United, Barcelona, Marseille and Inter Milan centre-back Laurent Blanc - are the early high-flyers with six points from their two games having won 2-0 at Auxerre, although they had two Toiflou Maoulida penalty misses to thank for that win.

Brazilian midfielder Wendel gave Bordeaux the lead on the stroke of half-time and he added the second seven minutes after the break.

Nancy, who beat Caen 1-0, and Le Mans, who won 3-1 at Sochaux, also have a perfect six points from six.

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PHOTO: AFP
Bayern Munich striker Miroslav Klose (L) celebrates with fellow goalscorer Luca Toni after netting during their opening Bundesliga encounter against Hansa Rostock at the Allianz Arena on Saturday.