



Milan defender Paolo Maldini relaxes during a practice session in Yokohama on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Owen not leaving

AFP, Newcastle

Michael Owen will not be allowed to leave Newcastle in January, manager Sam Allardyce insisted on Friday amid continued speculation about a potential bid from Manchester City.

Owen has been linked with a reunion with former England boss Sven-Goran Eriksson and City are reported to be ready to offer up to eight million pounds for the striker.

Allardyce dismissed the rumours as typical speculation in the run-up to the opening of the transfer window on January 1.

"Certainly at this moment in time, my squad coming to January is going to be depleted by four players going to the African Nations Cup, and there is no room for me moving any players out of this football club," Allardyce said.

Owen, who turned 28 on Friday, is not in the squad for Saturday's Premier League trip to Fulham but could make his comeback from a thigh injury against Derby on December 23.

Rumours that Newcastle could be prepared to cash in on Owen have been fueled, in part, by the serial injury problems which have blighted his time in the north-east.

The forward, who is under contract until the end of next season, has managed just 25 appearances for Newcastle since making a 17-million-pound move from Real Madrid in August 2005.

Podolski to become father

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski, voted the best young player at last year's World Cup, is set to become a father for the first time.

The 22-year-old, who has scored 24 international goals in 44 appearances for Germany, is expecting a child with long-time girlfriend Monika Puchalski, 21.

The pair met in Poland when they were 17 and Puchalski's twin brother told German on-line magazine Bunte he is looking forward to next year's birth.

"I am really looking forward to being an uncle," said Lukas Puchalski.

Chelsea back in title race

AFP, London

Chelsea defender Alex believes the Londoners have hauled themselves back into the Premier League title race after an unconvincing start to the season.

The Blues were thrown into turmoil in September when Jose Mourinho left Stamford Bridge, with director of football Avram Grant named as his successor.

Despite the upheaval, they have lost only one match - at Manchester United - since Grant took over and now the Israeli has been rewarded with a new four-year deal.

On Sunday, Chelsea travel to the Emirates Stadium just three points adrift of opponents and league leaders Arsenal.

Milan expecting tough tie

AFP, Yokohama



Carlo Ancelotti is predicting a bruising battle when his AC Milan side face Boca Juniors in the Club World Cup final on Sunday, with both sides ready to make history.

"I think it will be a very aggressive, open game," the Milan coach said.

"Boca's defence line is not well controlled and not so strong but they are very aggressive overall.

"We must keep ourselves highly motivated."

Boca coach Miguel Angel Russo said: "We want to show Boca's style. I think it will be a very good game with both sides full of big players.

"A defensive error would cost dearly. The midfield holds the key to both teams," he added. "We will just move forward with the ball."

Both the Serie-A side and Argentina's most crowned club won the Intercontinental Cup three times before the traditional Europe-South America contest was merged into this veritable world

club championship in 2005.

It will be a record-breaking fourth honour when one claims the mantle of the world's top club on Sunday.

And Milan have a score to settle after losing to Boca on penalties in the 2003 Intercontinental final. Ancelotti said that Brazilian playmaker Kaka, who set up the winning goal by Clarence Seedorf in Milan's 1-0 win over Japan's Urawa Reds in the semis on Thursday, will lead the offence again.

But the Boca coach said: "We know how wonderful he is, but we can stop Kaka."

"They will have to stop (Martin) Palermo and (Rodrigo) Palacio as well," Russo added, citing the Boca front men.

"Anything could happen in the final, especially against Boca," said Kaka. "We must be prepared."

The 25-year-old Brazilian said here earlier about the 2003 event: "I don't like the word 'revenge'. In 2003 Boca won and it ended there, closed story."

The pride of European football may also be at stake after Sao Paulo beat Liverpool in the inaugural Club World Cup and Internacional whipped Barcelona last year.

Kaka, who won the prestigious French Ballon d'Or award for the best player of the year just before coming here, admitted this event was seen in Europe as a "bonus" after the Champions' League.

But he said: "For us South Americans it's a very important trophy, and my team-mates and I shall do everything to win it."

Milan, who have won the Champions League and Super Cup this year, arrived here unusually early this time despite a tight schedule at home and on their continent - a full week before their first match against Urawa.

Boca came one day later and also struggled 1-0 against Tunisia's Etienne Sahel in the other semifinal on Wednesday, where Neri Cardozo scored the only goal.

"It's a nice coincidence, perhaps unique," mused Milan's 30-year-old hardman midfielder Massimo Ambrosini, referring to the Rossoneri's Champions League final win over Liverpool last May which avenged their defeat two years earlier.

"It's incredible that we will face Boca and that to get there we had to beat Liverpool," he said.

Barca target Mestalla seige

AFP, Madrid



Facing Valencia at the Mestalla stadium used to strike fear into Spanish teams, but this season Ronald Koeman's side are proving a soft touch at home and Barcelona hope to take advantage on Saturday.

Four home defeats, including a 5-1 mauling by Real Madrid, offer Barcelona hope of closing the four-point gap to their arch rivals and league leaders although Frank Rijkaard's team have collected just seven points from a possible 21 on their travels.

"The most important thing is not to fall away from Real," explained Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o. "We hope they do not escape from us."

Eto'o returned to action last weekend for the first time since a knee injury at the end of August and Portuguese international Deco is also back in the fold to bolster Rijkaard's options.

"I imagine that people aren't optimistic ahead of the duels with Valencia and Real but you have to have confidence in this team," said Rijkaard.

"We have got Eto'o and Deco back and Yaya Toure on the road to recovery too. "We have a lot of options to help us have a good season. We want to win and play well but it is not possible at the moment."

Barcelona's cause will be helped by the fact that Valencia, the league winners in 2002 and 2004, have failed to score in their last five games and will be without star striker David Villa who sustained a hamstring injury in the 0-0 Champions League draw with Chelsea in midweek.

"We have a number of players

who are unable to play at 100 per cent," admitted Valencia coach Ronald Koeman. "There are injuries and knocks that are hindering them but we have to get on with it."

Meanwhile Real have what looks an easier task when they host Osasuna on Sunday.

Real, who qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League in midweek, have won 11 out of 15 games this season and midfielder Guti believes they will retain their title if they can continue at this pace.

"If we continue at this rate we will be champions," said Guti. "However we are in a competitive league where everyone can beat each other and you can go through a bad patch."

Real have yet to hit a rocky patch under new coach Bernd Schuster with Raul and Ruud van Nistelrooy plundering 15 goals between them. Ex-coach Fabio Capello revealed that Real were ready to part with captain Raul when he arrived at the club at the beginning of last season but the skipper has proved his worth weighing in with eight goals already this season.

Meanwhile Van Nistelrooy is Real's good luck charm with the team never losing when he scores in the league. The Dutchman has netted 32 goals to help Real achieve 19 victories and three draws.

With 'El Clasico' between Real and Barcelona on December 23 both teams are keen to maintain

FIXTURES

Saturday
Espanyol v Levante, Valencia v Barcelona
Sunday
Valladolid v Sevilla, Real Betis v Almeria, Getafe v Villarreal, Deportivo La Coruna v Real Zaragoza, Real Mallorca v Athletic Bilbao, Murcia v Racing, Recreativo Huelva v Atletico Madrid, Real Madrid v Osasuna

Bayern pull off Breno coup

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich have signed Brazilian teenage defender Breno on a four and a half year contract which will keep him at the German giants until June 2012.

The 18-year-old, currently of Brazilian side Sao Paulo, becomes a Bayern player on January 1 and will join the Bundesliga leaders for their winter break training camp in Marbella from January 13 to 19.

"We are very pleased to have signed such a young and hugely talented player," said Bayern's chief executive Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, who described the Brazilian as a "star for the future".

Bayern will pay Sao Paulo an undisclosed fee for his services.

"He is an absolute talent," said Bayern's former striker Giovane Elber, who works as the German team's scout in South America and spotted the talented teenager.

"For his age, he is already world class. He is a strong header of the ball, has great pace and is very composed on the pitch."

Bayern had to beat off a host of big European clubs to sign Breno with AC Milan, Juventus, Fiorentina and Real Madrid all expressing interest.

"I wanted to play for a big team," said Breno, who can play right or centre back.

Wanted: Karim Benzema

AFP, Paris

Lyon striker Karim Benzema insisted Thursday he will only be tempted by a big-money move to another major club once the French champions finally conquer Europe.

Benzema is currently the French league's top scorer and sealed Lyon's ticket to the last 16 of the Champions League by scoring a brace in the 3-0 away win at Rangers on Wednesday.

The 19-year-old's debut for Lyon's first team this season has alerted some of Europe's top clubs, with AC Milan, Inter and Real Madrid said to be following his progress closely and ready to pay 30 million euros for his services according to Italian media reports.

However Benzema told RTL radio Thursday: "I have a contract with Lyon until 2012, and I've always told the president (Jean-Michel Aulas) I will stay with the club at least until we win the Champions League."

Lyon qualified for the last 16 knockout phase for the fifth consecutive year on Wednesday, although it took Benzema's double - and a scoreless performance from Rangers, who beat Lyon 3-0 in the first leg - to seal their passage.

Even before his commanding attacking performance Benzema had made sure he will appear on some clubs' wish list for Christmas.

But he added: "There are still a lot of things I want to achieve at Lyon. Afterwards, we'll see."

Hitzfeld set to leave Bayern

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich are almost certain to part with their Champions League-winning coach Ottmar Hitzfeld at the end of the season, according to reports in the German press on Friday.

Hitzfeld, 58, has been in discussions to take over as the coach of Switzerland's national team after June's Euro 2008 tournament and Bayern are recruiting a coach for next season, report tabloid newspaper Bild.

According to the report, chief executive Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and general manager Uli Hoenes are scouting for talent to replace Hitzfeld, who won the Champions League with Bayern in 2001 having already lifted the trophy with Borussia Dortmund in 1997.

After Bayern sacked previous coach Felix Magath, Hitzfeld returned in February and won praise for forging a strong unit with eight new players in the first-team following a 69 million euro summer spending spree.

His contract expires next summer and relations between Hitzfeld and Rummenigge became frosty when the coach made several late substitutions in the UEFA Cup draw against Bolton Wanderers in November which led to the English forcing an equaliser.

Since then, league leaders Bayern have struggled for form and have won just two of their last six league games hence enquiries have been made about suitable replacements for Hitzfeld, said Bild.

A German-speaking coach is being sought by Hoenes and Rummenigge with Dutch national coach Marco van Basten and Barcelona boss Frank Rijkaard having been linked to the job.

Hitzfeld replaced previous coach Felix Magath in February and won praise for moulding a strong unit after eight new players came into the first-team following a 69-million-euro spending spree.

Can Cagliari beat Inter?

AFP, Rome



Italian football fans all over the country will be rooting for Cagliari at the weekend as the rock bottom Sardinians entertain league leaders Inter Milan.

There is a great fear here that this season's title race will go the way of last season's and turn into a nerazzurri procession.

Inter cantered away to the title in May, finishing more than 20 points clear of second-placed Roma.

And after just 15 games of the season, they are already five points clear of Roma, eight clear of third-placed Juventus and out of sight of the rest of the league.

And to make matters worse, Roma and Juventus both face tricky away ties - at Torino on Sunday and Lazio on Saturday respectively - while Inter will be expected to coast to the three points in Sardinia.

Cagliari were trounced 4-1 at previously bottom Empoli a week ago but responded with a 1-0 Italian Cup victory over Sampdoria on Wednesday.

But facing Inter is a totally different proposition, as Torino found out last week. Having held on almost until half-time they ended up on the wrong end of a 4-0 hiding

at the San Siro.

Talking about Inter Milan's title chances has become a bit boring in Italy; the problem is that only Roma are holding out any hope of beating the reigning champions.

And even they are getting desperate with Italy midfielder Daniele De Rossi admitting last week that he was frustrated by Inter's unstoppable form.

And now Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon has said his side are not even considering a title challenge, concentrating instead simply on qualifying for the Champions League.

"Being eight points back from Inter can be read in two ways," Buffon told Tuttosport. "In a normal year, we would already be disappointed and be dismissing the season as a failure and in December we would be concentrating on next year."

"However, this is not a normal year as we are newly promoted (they won Serie B last season having been demoted for match-

FIXTURES

Saturday
Catania v Udinese, Lazio v Juventus
Sunday
Atalanta v Palermo, Cagliari v Inter Milan, Empoli v Genoa, Parma v Reggina, Sampdoria v Fiorentina, Siena v Napoli, Torino v Roma

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich's hardman midfielder Mark van Bommel says his side need a win at Hertha Berlin on Saturday to restore flagging confidence as the league leaders recover from a turbulent week.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld banned captain Oliver Kahn for the trip to Germany's capital and fined him 25,000 euros on Tuesday after the goalkeeper criticised Bayern's star players Frank Ribery and Luca Toni.

After just two wins in their last six league games, Bayern are suddenly looking vulnerable and need a convincing win in Berlin to guarantee them top spot for the six-week long winter break which starts after this weekend.

"Things have not gone so well for us in recent games," said the Dutchman. "We have to keep battling away and always give 100 per cent, if we don't do that things won't work out for us the way we want them to."

Bayern began the season crushing league rivals Hanover and Werder

Bremen and van Bommel admits teams raise their game when they take on the league leaders and Saturday promises to be just as tough at the sold-out Olympic Stadium.

"Wherever we play it is always our opponent's 'game of the year. The fans give 120 per cent, as do the opposing team, which means that anything less than the same is not accepted at Bayern."

With Kahn suspended deputy Michael Rensing steps into the number one shirt.

In the day's other big game, second-placed Werder Bremen must bounce back quickly from the disappointment of their Champions League exit at the hands of

FIXTURES

Saturday
Schalke 04 v Nuremberg, Werder Bremen v Bayer Leverkusen, Hertha Berlin v Bayern Munich, Arminia Bielefeld v VfB Stuttgart, VfL Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund, Karlsruhe v Hamburg
Sunday
Hansa Rostock v VfL Bochum, Duisburg v Eintracht Frankfurt

A blockbuster weekend

AFP, London



Jose Reina believes the best performance of his time at Anfield has provided the perfect platform for Liverpool to assert their Premier League title credentials at Manchester United's expense.

Liverpool meet the champions on Sunday just hours before leaders Arsenal entertain Chelsea at the Emirates Stadium in what has long been anticipated as a day that could shape the rest of what has been an intriguing season to date.

United's recent defeat by Bolton and Arsenal's reverse at Middlesbrough last weekend have reduced the stakes involved in Super Sunday: whatever the outcomes of the two matches the top four will head into the hectic end-of-year programme as a bunch with the points gap between first and fourth in single figures.

But there will be still be a huge psychological premium on offer to the clubs who emerge the strongest from this weekend.

And Reina believes Liverpool are in the kind of form to make a significant statement about their desire to end their 17-year wait to reclaim the title of English champions.

The Spanish goalkeeper had an unexpectedly quiet evening Tuesday as Liverpool steamrollered Marseille 4-0 to book their spot in the last 16 of the Champions League, and he was impressed by how events unfolded in front of him.

"It was the best performance I have seen since I have been at this club," said Reina, who is now in his third season at Anfield.

"We were great going forward, narrow and compact in defence and all

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Birmingham v Reading, Derby v Middlesbrough, Fulham v Newcastle (1715 GMT), Manchester City v Bolton, Portsmouth v Tottenham, Sunderland v Aston Villa, West Ham v Everton, Wigan Athletic v Blackburn
Sunday
Arsenal v Chelsea (1600 GMT), Liverpool v Manchester Utd (1330 GMT)

round that made it a very easy game." Reina knows however that a United side spearheaded by the attacking trident of Carlos Tevez, Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney will ensure he has a busier 90 minutes on Sunday.

But the scintillating form of Liverpool's own match-winners, Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard, makes him bullish about the prospects of a first Anfield win over United since 2001.

"We know we have to be ready for them but it could be a beautiful game in front of our own supporters and we expect to win," he said.

League leaders Arsenal will be hoping injury victims Cesc Fabregas, Mathieu Flamini and Alexander Hleb are able to line up against a Chelsea side who have been significantly weakened by the loss of Didier Drogba, who underwent knee surgery at the weekend.

Flamini's bite in midfield was missed as badly as the smooth combinations of Fabregas and Hleb when the Gunners suffered their first league defeat of the season at Middlesbrough last weekend.

Manager Arsene Wenger will leave decisions about the trio until

fixing) and we have the potential to return to the highest level.

"We are third in the table and we want to stay there or better. Champions League qualification is more than possible and it would be such a good achievement after the pre-season predictions."

Juve have also been boosted by the news that Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart is keen on a move to the Italian giants.

"If I was to leave Hamburg, it would be for a team of great international stature," said van der Vaart. "Juventus certainly fit into that category."

With AC Milan still away in Japan trying to claim the Club World Cup, focus will also switch to the Champions League qualification race.

Udinese are currently in fourth spot after a surprisingly strong start to the season. They're only one point behind Juventus.

They travel to Catania with Italy striker Fabio Quagliarella in scintillating form having scored five goals in his last four games.

Fifth-placed Fiorentina are in dire need of a boost having picked up just one point from their last four games.

They were second before their mini-collapse but now trail Udinese by four points and also face a tough trip to Sampdoria on Sunday, where they will likely find it hard to turn around their miserable form.

Olympiakos when they take on fourth-placed Bayer Leverkusen.

Bremen were beaten 4-3 by Hanover last Saturday and must pick up three points at home to Bayer Leverkusen if they want to keep up the pressure on Bayern.

Seventh-placed Schalke, Germany's only representative's left in the Champions League, take on Nuremberg and can expect their bad-boy trio of Mladen Krstajic, Ivan Rakitic and Jermaine Jones back in the starting eleven.

Resurgent Borussia Dortmund, who have hauled themselves up to ninth in the league, are chasing their third consecutive win having hammered Arminia Bielefeld 6-1 a week ago and take on VfL Wolfsburg.

Having been hammered by Dortmund which saw their coach Ernst Middendorp shown the door, Bielefeld face defending champions VfB Stuttgart who are showing signs of improvement despite slipping 3-1 to Barcelona in Spain midweek.

Midfielder Thomas Hitzlsperger is carrying a slight knock and is Stuttgart's only injury concern. Third-placed Hamburg, who were unimpressive in last weekend's draw with Cottbus, take on Karlsruhe.

the last minute but has made it clear that Dutch striker Robin van Persie, who played for the first time since October in the midweek Champions League win over Steaua Bucharest, will be involved.

"On the footballing side Robin looked like he'd never been out," Wenger said. "He's ready for Chelsea."

Andriy Shevchenko has yet to show that he can fill Drogba's boots but Chelsea have been bolstered this week by the return of goalkeeper Petr Cech and right-back Paulo Ferreira to bolster a defence that has conceded one goal in eight matches.

With the top four all playing Sunday, Saturday's action will be dominated by the dogfight at the other end of the table.

Middlesbrough will hope to build on their win over Arsenal by taking maximum points at bottom side Derby, whose chances of survival are fading rapidly.

Roy Keane's Sunderland, who slipped into the drop zone last weekend, desperately need to get back to winning ways at home to Aston Villa and will be hoping arch rivals Newcastle can do them a favour by winning at Fulham.



FRENCH FRANKIE? Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard (R) and his wife Ellen Rives arrive at the club's Christmas party on Thursday.