

## D-Day for Lehmann

Football

AFP, Berlin

Arsenal's out-cast German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann says he will make a decision on his future within the next week as he weighs up offers to leave the north London giants.

The 38-year-old lost his place in Arsenal's first-team in August to Spaniard Manuel Almunia and has been courted by other clubs including German league side VfL Wolfsburg, while he has been linked to Manchester City.

But in an interview with German daily newspaper Der Tagesspiegel, Lehmann says he wants to be involved in another Champions League final with Arsenal, even if he stays on the bench.

"My target is the Champions League final," he said having been sent off early in the 2006 final for a professional foul as his side went onto lose 2-1 to Barcelona.

"I have asked myself whether I will get the chance to play in another Champions League final. I would not leave this club just because I was on the bench."

"But if I am going to change clubs, I would have to make my decision by the beginning of January and I expect to do that in little over a week."

"That is just a week away and I am not actively looking for another club."

"I have had offers, but I can say that for the moment there is

nothing concrete.

"I have spoken with nobody at Manchester City, perhaps Arsene Wenger spoke with someone from Wolfsburg and my lawyer has spoken with people from other teams, but I can't say which clubs."

"I have thought about going back to Berlin."

"I have spoken with Hertha's manager Dieter Hoenes, he was a nice guy, but I have told him from the start, my goal is to play in the Champions League final. This one game."

Despite reports in British newspaper The Guardian of a break-down in communication with Gunner's manager Arsene Wenger, Lehmann insists he pair have a good relationship - away from football.

"It doesn't bother me what they write," said Lehmann.

"If my coach takes things which happen in football personally, then that is his prerogative."

"If I am not happy to be a substitute, then I also can do nothing about it."

"I have no idea where they get these headlines from."

"I rarely read a newspaper and I have a good relationship with Wenger, away from football."

Lehmann has repeatedly said he feels Wenger "uses a different yardstick to evaluate Almunia", but says he has no idea if or when he can get back his place in the Arsenal first-team.

"It could be I spend the next four months on the bench or that I play next week, who knows?"

Germany head coach Joachim Loew has already said he expects Lehmann will be his first-choice goalkeeper for next June's Euro 2008 and the shot-stopper says that is his inspiration to train hard.

"I will play at the European Championships and that motivates me, I train every day."

"I believe I could still be second-choice at Arsenal and play at Euro 2008."

"There is no reason why I shouldn't feel confident playing for Germany."

With his contract set to expire in June at the end of the season, Lehmann says he will miss London, if he moves back to Germany, but says there is still a racist undercurrent in the UK.

"It has been fantastic here. For my wife, children and I it was most important we learned the language to really experience living abroad."

"We have very good English friends here and the football has been great, but there have been some negative aspects."

"There are still some prejudices, I believe."

"My son recently played in a school rugby match and a boy from the opposing team called him a 'Bloody German Nazi'."

"Of course, that upset him and I believe most journalists here are pleased if I do not play. Then have a bit of a binge about it."

"It might have something to do with the fact I am German, but it's not so bad."

"You have to take the rough with the smooth."

## Securing his future

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Julio Baptista has gone from zero to hero after getting the only goal in the Spanish giants' 1-0 win over bitter rivals Barcelona on Sunday.

The victory gives Real a seven point lead over second-placed Barca at the top of the Spanish first division and makes them overwhelming favourites to retain their La Liga crown.

The headlines in the coming days will doubtless be about the 26-year-old Brazilian international striker - nicknamed The Beast because of his stocky physique - and his superbly taken goal in Barca's intimidating Nou Camp.

However, barely a month ago Baptista could hardly pick up one of Spain's four national sports dailies or watch the television without hearing or reading about how he was going to be sold during the winter transfer window.

"Real plan major winter transfer clear out," read the headline in Spanish's biggest selling paper Marca on November 27, with a prominent picture of Baptista.

Atletico Madrid and Roma were among the clubs apparently being lined up for at least a six-month loan deal.

It is a process Baptista is familiar with after spending last season at English Premiership side Arsenal.

He is still unhappy that Real's former coach Fabio Capello - now at the helm of England - deemed him surplus to requirements and he missed out on getting a Spanish league winner's medal with the club.

However, Real president Ramon Calderon knows that he now can't get rid of Baptista quite so easily.

"This was a great game, an incredible memory. I felt great. There is no denying that this is one of the most important goals of my life and I know that I will not ever forget it," reflected an inevitably delighted Baptista.

"My goal was important but this is not a personal victory, it's a victory of the whole team. Thanks to the solidarity of all the players and the team's effort, we have managed to win a match as important as this."

"The collective effort has been extraordinary and at a personal level, what can I say?"

"It might be bad to say this, but it must be remembered that this is a moment of euphoria and we have not won anything yet."

"We are still in three competitions and there is still a lot to play for by everyone," added Baptista.

However, in a game when his better-known Brazilian compatriots Ronaldinho and Robinho failed to shine, the plaudits fell to Baptista.

Despite his modesty about what lies ahead, thanks to his goal, he also now looks to have a good chance to pick up his first honour since moving to Europe in 2003.

## Speed set to leave Bolton

AFP, Bolton

Bolton's veteran midfielder Gary Speed is set to join English Championship side Sheffield United on loan with a view to a permanent deal.

Speed, 38, will complete the move in time for United's New Year's Day fixture against Wolverhampton.

The Wales international has been unable to convince Bolton manager Gary Megson that he can still play in the Premier League, forcing him to drop down a division to prolong his career.

Blades manager Bryan Robson told his club's official website: "I tried to get Gary before the season started but Bolton wouldn't release him."

"Since then I spoke to (former manager) Sammy Lee before deadline day and then Gary Megson but got the same answer so it has been an ongoing thing."

## Seeler warns Van der Vaart

AFP, Berlin

Hamburg's Dutch captain Rafael van der Vaart has been warned against a glamorous move to Italian giants Juventus by former German hero Uwe Seeler.

The Italians are reported to have offered 17 million euros (24.5 million US dollars) for Van der Vaart, 24, with a five-year contract, but former Hamburg idol Uwe Seeler, 71, has warned him to think hard about his options.

"Rafael should think hard about moving to Juventus," Seeler, a three-times German Footballer of the Year, told German tabloid Bild.

"In Germany, you can make good money and have a comfortable career. I would not like to be in Rafael's shoes."

Seeler retired in 1978 having scored 43 goals in 72 internationals for West Germany and stayed loyal to Hamburg, turning down transfers to Spain and Italy.



Inter players gather for a group hug after Esteban Cambiasso (centre) brought them level against Milan in their Serie A local derby at the San Siro on Sunday.

## Inter rule Milan

AFP, Milan



Milan 2-1 at the San Siro in Sunday's first Milan derby of the season.

It was a match that had been eagerly anticipated since a week ago when Milan added the Club World Cup title to the Champions League crown they claimed back in May when beating Liverpool 2-1 in the final.

Ironically, though, while the world champions began with seven Italian internationals, Inter - living up to their full name Internazionale - fielded a starting 11 including nine South Americans and not a single Italian.

Whatever the make-up of their side, Inter have been unbeatable this season and go into the three-week festive break with a seven-point lead over the chasing pack - Milan, who have three games in hand, are 25 points off the pace down in 12th.

What's even more remarkable is that Inter have been injury plagued this season, particularly in midfield, and were counting the cost of this match as Walter Samuel left the game in the first half with an injured knee.

"It's very important to reach the winter break with a seven-point lead on the second-placed team, particularly with all the problems we've had," Inter coach Roberto Mancini told Sky Sport television.

Despite their success Inter humbly formed a guard of honour to welcome their record-breaking opponents onto the field - last week Milan won their 18th international title, one more than Boca Juniors in second place.

"That wasn't forced on us, it came naturally and I think it was deserved," added Mancini of the guard of honour.

But then Inter knocked their cross-city rivals off their perch.

Nominal hosts Inter had the first chance of the match after barely five minutes when Brazilian right-back Maicon crossed to the back post where Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic volleyed over the bar.

Inter were pushing the pace of the game but Milan looked dangerous on the counter-attack and striker Filippo Inzaghi earned a free-kick on the edge of the box on 18 minutes after Colombian centre-back Ivan Cordoba dragged him down.

Andrea Pirlo stepped up to sweep home a delicious curler into the top corner.

That sparked some life into Inter and they almost equalised two minutes later but Chilean midfielder Luis Jimenez grazed the bar with a shot from a tight angle after Argentine forward Julio Cruz's right-wing cross had not been dealt with by a panicking defence.

Inter did find a way back into the game 10 minutes before the break in sumptuous fashion as Ibrahimovic and Esteban Cambiasso worked the ball to Cruz, who held off Clarence Seedorf's challenge before firing low past Brazilian goalkeeper Dida.

And that was despite Inter briefly playing with 10 men due to the injury to Argentine centre-back Samuel.

Milan were possibly feeling the effects of last week's trip to Japan and made a string of early second half changes, with Italy's striker Alberto Gilardino and Brazilian midfielder Paul Emerson and Serginho introduced into the fray.

Inter certainly looked the stronger side after the break and a seemingly innocuous shot from Argentine midfielder Cambiasso sent Dida the wrong way on 64 minutes to give the hosts the lead.

Late on Milan did start to exert some pressure but Brazilian goalkeeper Julio Cesar got down well to turn away World Player of the Year Kaka's fierce drive.

Emerson and Massimo Ambrosini then both missed gilt edged chances to equalise as Inter became jittery in the final moments.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti was not letting himself get too down, though.

"We're lacking a point in the standings because a draw would have been a fairer result," he said. "But we'll still have a good Christmas as we're world champions."

Roma stayed second after a Francesco Totti double gave them a 2-0 win over Sampdoria on Saturday.

Juventus are third, eight points off Inter, after goals from Hassa Salihamidovic and French forward David Trezeguet earned them a 2-0 success over Siena.

Fiorentina returned to winning ways in spectacular fashion as they thumped rock-bottom Cagliari 5-1 having not won in their previous five games.

## Schuster plays down title talk

REUTERS, Milan

Real Madrid coach Bernd Schuster played down the significance of his side's commanding lead at the top of the Primera Liga after they beat arch-rivals Barcelona 1-0 in the Nou Camp on Sunday.

"Seven points are an important advantage but it is too soon to talk of titles. The situation is good at present but you don't win things until the end," the German told a news conference.

Brazilian midfielder Julio Baptista scored the game's only goal in the 36th minute, to break Barca's 100 per cent home record and to leave them trailing the champions by seven points in second place.

"We managed to keep them away from our goal forcing them to play down the flanks which is what we wanted, and the fact they didn't score in their own stadium says it all. I think it's the first time in a very long time," Schuster added.

"We worked very well in defence and the goal was a tough blow for them. We had chances to finish it off in the second half but didn't take them. It was a fair result and we go home content."

Barca coach Frank Rijkaard agreed with Schuster that it was too soon for the result to have a major say in the title race, though admitted his side had a lot of work to do.

"My players showed a good attitude on the pitch and in the dressing room, but we have to keep looking forward. We have to believe in our chances," said Rijkaard.

"The fact we were in the game until the last moment shows we continued fight to the end."

When questioned about the poor showing from Brazil forward Ronaldinho, who was whistled from some sections of the Nou Camp near the end, Rijkaard added: "It was clear this wasn't one of his best games, the same as his colleagues, but he showed good commitment."

## Beckham sings Capello praises

AFP, London

David Beckham insists he has no problem with Fabio Capello and can't wait to work with the new England coach.

Capello dropped Beckham when the England midfielder was playing at Real Madrid last season because he had agreed to join LA Galaxy.

The Italian was forced to bring Beckham back into the Real starting line-up as the team struggled without him. Real went on to win the Spanish league and Beckham is adamant he doesn't hold a grudge against Capello.

"There were ups and downs with me and the manager at the time but he brought me back into the team and he had the belief in me to put me back in the team," Beckham, speaking in a BBC Radio 20 interview, said.

"It gave me an amazing end and I was sad when he got the sack as I believe he had turned the club and the players around and given the fans what they deserved, a trophy."

"I think he is a great appointment for England. Everyone wants someone leading you that has respect and success. He has definitely got that in his career."

Capello has admitted he admires Beckham's ability and character, but stopped short of confirming he will hand the former Manchester United star his 100th cap in February's friendly against Switzerland.

Whether he is part of Capello's plans or not Beckham believes England can only benefit from his appointment.

"Fabio is one of the managers players look up to and want to manage. I hope I'll be part of his plans," Beckham said. "I think he is going to be great for the players and the England team."

## Van Basten linked to Bayern post

AFP, Munich

Dutch coach Marco van Basten is poised to take over as boss of German giants Bayern Munich when Ottmar Hitzfeld's contract finishes in June next year, according to reports here.

German sports magazine Kicker says Hitzfeld is not expected to renew his contract at the end of the season and German-speaker Van Basten - who has coached the Dutch national side since 2004 - is the favourite to take over.

Hitzfeld has admitted he is interested in taking charge of the Swiss national team after next year's European Championships and has also been linked to succeed Italian coach Giovanni Trapattoni at Austrian side Salzburg.

Meanwhile, Werder Bremen's sports director Klaus Allofs has been linked to the club manager's role at Bayern with current incumbent Uli Hoenes set to step down in 2009.

Allofs is out of contract at Bremen in 2009.

"I can't say I will stay in Bremen," he told German tabloid Bild.

"I have spoken to other clubs and Bremen's board are aware."

## CECH INJURED

# Chelsea grind out win

AFP, Blackburn



Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech added to the club's growing injury crisis by limping out of the 1-0 win at Blackburn on Sunday with a suspected hip injury.

A first-half strike from England midfielder Joe Cole completed a fortuitous victory for Avram Grant's team, who were outplayed for long periods by the home side.

But the loss of Cech early in the second-half following a collision with Blackburn's Paraguayan striker Roque Santa Cruz took the shine off Chelsea's victory, who now look certain to be without the Czech Republic keeper, as well as the already-injured John Terry and Didier Drogba, for the busy Christmas fixture programme.

Having won just once in seven league games ahead of this game, Blackburn were in desperate need of a morale-boosting victory ahead of the festive period.

Chelsea were in the same predicament, however, after losing at Arsenal seven days earlier and anything but a win at Ewood Park would have left them with a sizeable gap to bridge between themselves and the top two.

Mark Hughes's men started the

brighter, though, and the impressive David Bentley was at the heart of everything as Blackburn poured forward inside the opening 20 minutes.

Santa Cruz, who had scored five goals in his previous two games and ended up on the losing side on both occasions, saw a powerful shot blocked by Ricardo Carvalho on four minutes before England midfielder Bentley aimed a 20-yard strike narrowly over the crossbar three minutes later.

Former Arsenal youngster Bentley had been deployed in an advanced role just behind Santa Cruz and Chelsea afforded him far too much space. And after hitting the crossbar with a curling free-kick, Bentley sent Santa Cruz and a breakaway with a precise pass after dummying John-Obi Mikel.

Santa Cruz escaped defender Alex, in for the injured Terry, but his half-volley flew wide of Cech's right-hand post as Chelsea survived another scare.

Grant's team simply could not get a foothold in the game, but everything turned on 22 minutes when Cole put them ahead with Chelsea's first effort on goal.

Cole was found brilliantly by Salomon Kalou's through-ball and, without breaking stride, the former West Ham midfielder beat keeper Brad Friedel with an unstoppable right-foot strike into the top corner

from just inside the penalty area.

Blackburn fought back well, though, and Steven Reid was only denied an equaliser on 33 minutes when Cech tipped his close range strike onto the post. But Frank Lampard, chasing his 100th goal for Chelsea, hit the woodwork himself moments later when Friedel also pushed his 20-yard effort against the woodwork.

After such an open first-half, it was no surprise to see both teams tighten up defensively after the break and the chances that were free-flowing before the interval suddenly dried up.

Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien would have put the game beyond Blackburn on 61 minutes but for a crucial tackle by David Dunn inside the six yard box. Ghana star Essien was set to pull the trigger, but Dunn's perfectly timed tackle took the ball away at the decisive moment.

With Cech then succumbing to his hip injury, Blackburn attempted to take advantage of Hilario's lack of competitive action by peppering the Portuguese keeper with crosses and corners.

Hilario looked unconvincing every time a high ball came into the penalty area, but he arguably produced the save of the game when he dived full-length to keep out Santa Cruz's bullet header on 71 minutes.



Chelsea winger Joe Cole races off to celebrate with the away faithful during their Premiership clash against Blackburn at Ewood Park on Sunday.