

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 Hoeness, 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.

"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."

CECH INJURED

Chelsea grind out win

AFP, Blackburn

Chelsea's 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 them-selves and the top two.

Mark Hughes' 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 unconvinced 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.

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."

Hilario 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.

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