



Arsenal striker Eduardo lets loose a long range shot during their Premier League encounter against West Ham at the Emirates Stadium in London on Tuesday.

Totti set to extend deal

AFP, Rome

Roma talisman and captain Francesco Totti is set to extend his current contract at the club until 2012, according to a report in Corriere dello Sport on Wednesday.

The 31-year-old is currently contracted until 2010 but the Corriere said: "In the first month of the year he will extend his contract until the end of 2012."

That would take Totti almost to his 36th birthday - he was recently quoted as saying he wanted to play until he was 35.

Corriere said that he met with Roma's owners over Christmas when the two parties came to agreement on a new deal.

The 2001 newspaper also claims that contract renewals are not high on Roma's list of priorities - Luciano Spalletti's side are hoping to strengthen in the winter transfer window to try to boost their title chase - but Totti is a "special case."

The World Cup winner is a huge hero at Roma having played his entire career there and helping them to the Serie A title in 2001.

Koeman stands by decision

AFP, Madrid

Valencia's Dutch coach Ronald Koeman, who is struggling to impose himself at the Spanish side, on Tuesday defended his decision to exile three veteran players from his squad.

"I am sure that I am more unpopular today with some people, for others I am not, but that is part of making a decision," he told reporters.

"If I don't have that power to decide things I can't coach a big team because there will always be a moment when you will have to make a decision," he added.

Last month Koeman told midfielder David Albelda, 30, striker Miguel Angel Angulo, 30, and goalkeeper Santiago Canizares, 37, that they no longer featured in his plans.

The Dutchman said on Tuesday that Valencia president Juan Soler was "totally in agreement" with the move and it was time to move on.

"What we have to do is not talk anymore about this topic, work, play well and win matches," said Koeman.

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Ramos wants Berbatov stay

REUTERS, London

Tottenham Hotspur coach Juande Ramos has dismissed suggestions that striker Dimitar Berbatov would be sold in the January transfer window.

"Obviously Berbatov's agent is looking to do his business and has been making comments," Ramos was quoted as saying on the BBC Web site (www.bbc.co.uk) on Wednesday.

"But we are happy because we have the player on a contract and we plan to keep him."

The Bulgarian's agent had said earlier in the week that Berbatov would be prepared to leave Tottenham if a big enough club made an offer.

The 26-year-old forward has been linked with a move to Premier League clubs including Manchester United and Arsenal since signing for Spurs in July 2006.

Chelsea coach Avram Grant could also be targeting the player after saying he admired Berbatov's skills.

But Tottenham assistant coach Gus Poyet said no offer had been received for Berbatov.

"There is nothing on the table and there is nothing happening. It is not a problem for us. He is here

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Sharapova cruises

AFP, Hong Kong

Russian superstar Maria Sharapova overpowered the young Dane Caroline Wozniacki in Hong Kong Wednesday, only just breaking a sweat in chilly conditions for a straight sets victory.

The world number five brushed away plucky resistance from her 17-year-old opponent for a 6-2, 6-2 victory in the opening game of the JB Group Classic.

Wozniacki, ranked 60 in the world, was simply overwhelmed by the double grand slam winner's power tennis, as Sharapova turned on her top game whenever she was under any pressure.

The 20-year-old said an injury-free close season had provided a real boost ahead of this month's Australian Open.

"I have had one of the best off seasons that I have probably had in my career," said the Russian, who

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Grant can get tough

AFP, London



Avram Grant insisted he was prepared to get nasty in order to keep Chelsea in the English Premier League title race.

The Blues boss said he was not afraid to smash up the dressing room furniture if his players needed a hard-hitting wake-up call.

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson is known for giving his players the "hairdryer" treatment of a full-on tongue-lashing and Grant said he had no problem venting his fury if his men weren't at their best.

"If it helps to win I can break the chair," Grant said after Chelsea came from a goal down at half-time to beat hosts Fulham 2-1 in the New Year's Day West London derby.

"Maybe you need it sometimes," he said, stressing that he normally gets his players going through a more conventional pep talk.

Stand-in Chelsea captain Michael Ballack said the dressing room was "loud" at half-time on Tuesday with the visitors 1-0 behind at Craven Cottage.

Danny Murphy scored a 10th-minute penalty, awarded for an apparent trip by Joe Cole on Moritz

Volz, though there appeared to be little contact, if any.

Ivory Coast striker Salomon Kalou equalised with a 54th-minute header before Germany skipper Ballack won and converted a penalty in the 62nd minute following a nasty injury tugging by Clint Dempsey.

"I didn't say that I was aggressive," Grant, often described as being far more mild-mannered than Portuguese predecessor Jose Mourinho, said with a smile about his half-time team talk.

He added: "Basically the job of a manager is to do the right thing. At half-time we don't have enough time sometimes but the time that we have we can use it."

"When everybody's nervous he needs to be calm. When everybody's too calm he needs to be not calm. At half-time sometimes when you see that your players are slipping you need to wake them," the Israeli explained.

Against the Cottagers, Ballack made just his fourth Blues appearance since suffering an ankle injury in April.

For such a high-profile signing, he has generally failed to sparkle since joining from German giants Bayern Munich on a free transfer in May 2006.

But Grant said the 31-year-old midfielder was just the sort of player Chelsea need to maintain their title tilt.

The Blues are third in the Premier League, six points behind leaders Arsenal and four points adrift of Manchester United.

"Football now has become more tactical, more physical and you need to know everything about tactics, but you need intelligent players also, and he is an intelligent player," Grant said of Ballack.

"I like intelligent players because I like intelligent football. So he is important. He cannot be at his best after eight months but he is OK and he will be better."

"We have some leaders in this team and he is one of them. All of his life he was a captain, including the national team."

Ballack's return to the Chelsea line-up comes at a time when the Blues have been forced to deploy second and even third choice players due to a string of injuries and suspensions to key players.

"I want Ballack to play when we have all the players, not when we don't," Grant said.

"The most important thing is what he can do on the pitch. He can do many things good. First he can score, second he can give assists. He's a player that I like to have on the pitch. He's a hard worker."

Chelsea have another west London derby on Saturday when they welcome improving Championship side Queens Park Rangers to Stamford Bridge in the third round of the FA Cup.

Trio start year well

AFP, London



It was a case of as you were at the head of the Premier League as the top three sides all enjoyed a winning start to 2008.

Leaders Arsenal remained two points in front with a 2-0 New Year's Day victory over West Ham at the Emirates Stadium.

Elsewhere on Tuesday, reigning champions Manchester United stayed hot on Arsenal's heels after a 1-0 success at home to Birmingham City.

Chelsea cemented their grip on third position by coming from behind to win 2-1 at Craven Cottage as Roy Hodgson's first match as manager of relegation candidates Fulham ended in a west London derby defeat.

Liverpool, who headed into the New Year in fourth place, are at home to Wigan on Wednesday.

Portsmouth, who in September defeated Reading in an 11-goal spectacular, won 2-0 in a match where the Royals played most of the game with 10 men.

Everton beat Middlesbrough by the same scoreline and in the day's late Kick-off Aston Villa defeated

Tottenham 2-1 at Villa Park.

Arsenal were ahead as early as the second minute at the Emirates Stadium when Eduardo scored his third goal in two league matches.

And the Gunners were 2-0 up in the 18th minute when Gael Clichy's long pass released Emmanuel Adebayor.

"It was quite comfortable in the end because we did the job early and controlled the game," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

Carlos Tevez broke the deadlock at Old Trafford in the 25th minute when he made no mistake after being played in by Cristiano Ronaldo's cheeky backheel.

But worryingly for United, Tevez had to be helped into the dressing room at full-time with an ankle problem after being on the receiving end of a strong first-half challenge.

"He is doubtful for Saturday now (when United play Villa in the FA Cup)," said United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

Reflecting on the match, the Scot was unhappy with United's display and the lack of support from the Old Trafford faithful.

"We were very careless in our finishing and when that happens you leave the door open."

Ferguson added: "It was a funny game because the atmosphere in the ground wasn't very good either."

I thought it was dead. We needed them (the crowd) to lift us a little bit. We didn't get that today."

Fulham gave Hodgson, a replacement for the sacked Lawrie Sanchez, an early boost through Danny Murphy's 10th minute penalty after Moritz Volz was seemingly clipped in the box by Joe Cole.

But the Cottagers have had a problem hanging onto a lead this term and Chelsea were level in the 54th minute when Alex's flick-on was headed in by Salomon Kalou.

Minutes later Chelsea went ahead when Germany's Michael Ballack, the captain of an injury-hit side, scored from the penalty spot after his shirt had been tugged by Clint Dempsey.

Fulham stayed second-bottom with just Derby County below them.

"I thought the attitude and desire of the players was very good," said an upbeat Hodgson.

However, he added: "If there are players available in the transfer window that we think would make us better then we would be interested."

Reading were a man down in the third minute at the Madejski Stadium after Ibrahim Sonko was red-carded for a foul in the box on Portsmouth striker Benjami Mwarurwi.

But from the resulting penalty

Pompey, who beat Reading 7-4 at Fratton Park, saw Croatia midfielder Niko Kranjcar hit the post.

However, they went ahead in the ninth minute when Sol Campbell scored from close range after Reading goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann dropped Sulley Muntari's free-kick and Pompey's Papa Bouba Diop headed on.

John Utaka put the match beyond Reading in the 66th minute.

Everton struck twice towards the end of the second-half at the Riverside, Andrew Johnson netting in the 67th minute before Scotland's James McFadden doubled the lead five minutes later.

Villa took the lead through Olof Mellberg four minutes before half-time when the Sweden defender headed in an Ashley Young free-kick.

England striker Jermain Defoe equalised with a hooked finish in the 79th minute but Villa, again exposing Spurs' problems at set-pieces, responded when Martin Laursen, left free at a corner, headed home five minutes from full-time.

"We've had some tough games recently and I thought our own energy might drop but we have a fantastic desire in the side," said Villa manager Martin O'Neill.

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O'Donnell died due to heart failure

AFP, Glasgow

Motherwell captain Phil O'Donnell died of heart failure, according to a post-mortem examination.

The 35-year-old collapsed while being substituted towards the end of Motherwell's 5-3 Scottish Premier League win against Dundee United on Saturday and later died in hospital.

Robert Little, Motherwell's club doctor, said on Tuesday: "The post-mortem revealed that Phil had suffered left ventricular failure of the heart."

O'Donnell's funeral will take place at St Mary's Church in the western Scottish town of Hamilton, near Motherwell on Friday.

His death caused widespread grief within Scottish football and beyond and O'Donnell's wife Eileen, speaking on Tuesday for the first time since her husband's passing, said she'd been "overwhelmed" by messages of support.

Mrs O'Donnell, the mother of the couple's four children, who on Monday visited a makeshift shrine of scarves and photographs at Motherwell's Fir Park ground, said: "Although he achieved so much in football the most important thing for him was his family."

"He would like to be remembered as a family man and we were all so proud of him," she added.

"We are all devastated by what has happened. We hope we will now be given peace and time to grieve but we are overwhelmed by the messages of support we have received. Three of Wednesday's scheduled Scottish Premier League matches, including the Old Firm derby between Celtic - one of his former teams - and Rangers, as well as Celtic's game at Motherwell on Sunday, have been postponed in tribute to O'Donnell.

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Hitzfeld will leave

Football

AGENCIES, undated

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has confirmed reports he will leave the club at the end of the season.

"I already told the club three weeks ago of my decision to finish in the summer," Hitzfeld said.

"I will try again over the next half year to be successful and win as many titles as possible."

Hitzfeld, whose contract expires in June, has led Bayern to the top of the Bundesliga going into the winter break, although they have taken only 10 points from the last 21, scoring a meagre four goals.

Bayern's general manager Uli Hoeness earlier told Bild: "It is to be

expected that he will not be staying, although he will be here until June."

The 58-year-old is known to be considering an offer to take over as coach of Switzerland when the position becomes available after Euro 2008.

Hitzfeld, in his second spell as Bayern boss after taking over from Felix Magath in February, has seen his relationship with the club's directors deteriorate in recent weeks.

Bayern president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge criticised his tactics during a 2-2 UEFA Cup draw with Bolton, prompting Hitzfeld to respond: "When the club president publicly criticises his coach, the pleasure (of doing the job) is no longer the same."

In his first spell in charge from 1998 to 2004 he won four Bundesliga titles, one German Cup

title and the Champions League in 2001.

Bayern spent some 70 million euros (100 million dollars) on new players in the summer and top the Bundesliga, although their bright early-season form had faded in the weeks before the winter break.

Meanwhile speculation has already begun on who will lead Bayern from next season.

Dutch former internationals Marco van Basten, the Dutch national team coach, and Frank Rijkaard, under fire at Barcelona, as well as former Germany coach and Bayern player Jurgen Klinsmann are seen as candidates.

Liverpool's Spanish coach Rafael Benitez is said to be admired by Bayern, while former Chelsea coach Jose Mourinho is also on the market.



Russian star Maria Sharapova is a picture of concentration as she makes a return against Danish Caroline Wozniacki at the JB Group Classic in Hong Kong on Wednesday.

PHOTO AFP



Manchester United goalscorer Carlos Tevez (C) is carried off the pitch by members of the medical staff after their win over Birmingham in the Premier League clash at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Tevez laid low

AFP, Manchester



Carlos Tevez faces an anxious wait to discover the extent of an ankle injury sustained against Birmingham City after being carried off at the end of Manchester United's 1-0 New Year's Day victory here at Old Trafford.

Argentina striker Tevez sealed the points for Sir Alex Ferguson's team with the first-half goal that took his tally for the season to ten and he celebrated the occasion by producing a pink child's dummy from inside his shorts.

However, there were fewer smiles when an injury suffered in the first-half which caught his Birmingham captain Liam Ridgwell ultimately forced Tevez out of the game in the second-half and United boss Ferguson admitted the club must now wait before discovering the seriousness of the injury.

"Carlos suffered a bad tackle in the first-half which caught his ankle. We had to take him off because the longer the game wore on, the worse it got," Ferguson said.

"We will have to assess it in the morning and see what the damage is, but he is obviously doubtful for the FA Cup game against Aston Villa on Saturday."

"Carlos has real tenacity and he is as brave as a lion. He doesn't roll around and he wouldn't normally come off, so that gives you an idea of the tackle. It's a sore one."

Despite being watched by a crowd of more than 75,000, the noise levels inside Old Trafford were muted and Ferguson, echoing the infamous 'prawn sandwich brigade' complaint of former captain Roy Keane, accused United's fans of failing to give his team the support they needed to overcome Alex McLeish's dogged Birmingham.

"We were cautious, but the crowd were dead. We need the crowd to create a good atmosphere and the players will respond to that. It's the quietest I have known them and it was like a funeral," Ferguson said.

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"Realistically, when you are up against Sir Alex, it is like a water pistol against a machine gun. He had over 125 million pounds of talent out there, but that doesn't mean that you can't come away something."

"At 1-0 down, we were still in the game, but we couldn't get the goal we needed," the former Scotland centre-half and manager added. "It was a good performance, though, with good spirit. The players gave everything."

McLeish, set to be given money to spend during the January transfer window, vowed to scour the globe in a bid to strengthen his squad.

"People have misunderstood

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