



Real Madrid captain Raul (C) takes the ball past Mallorca defender Ivan Ramis during their Copa del Rey match at the Ono Stadium in Mallorca on Thursday.

Becks keen on bid role

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The Football Association have yet to say what, if any, role the England midfielder would play in their campaign but Beckham, who had a high-profile position during London's successful bid for the 2012 Olympics, made it clear he would be happy to help try to bring another major sports event to his country.

Speaking after showing British Prime Minister Gordon Brown around his football academy in Greenwich, London, the 32-year-old former Manchester United and Real Madrid star said Wednesday: "I was proud to be involved in 2012 and being involved in 2018 is something I would be very interested in too."

"Being English, to bring the World Cup back to England would be something really special and I would be honoured to be involved in that," added Beckham, who now plays his club football for US side LA Galaxy.

Brown, although a Scot, has repeatedly made clear his support for England's 2018 bid. He said: "David Beckham is known in every part of the world."

"It's a matter for the FA but I'm sure David Beckham will be associated with every big sports campaign that happens in this country because of his reputation, and because of the fame and the respect he has worldwide."

Beckham hopes to win his 100th England cap in next month's friendly international against Switzerland at Wembley - Italian Fabio Capello's first match as England manager.

England previously staged the World Cup in 1966 when they won the tournament for the only time in their history.

Ranieri cool on Van der Vaart

Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri on Friday poured cold water on transfer rumours linking his club with a move for highly-rated Hamburg midfielder Rafael van der Vaart.

The Netherlands international almost moved to Valencia in the close season before his club blocked the move and he has been touting himself around Europe's top clubs all season.

Following recent speculation linking him to Juve, van der Vaart made it clear he wants away from Hamburg, but Ranieri seems less than keen on a move for the player.

"Van der Vaart is not a central midfielder in the sense that we understand here in Italy," he told the Gazzetta dello Sport.

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It was the 2003 champion's third straight cup win over Madrid, who were eliminated by Real Betis at the same stage last season - at the Ono Estadi.

Ware Milan's 'Kaparo'

That has been the main cause of their poor league position and lacklustre start to the season. They sit 12th, a massive 25 points off leaders Inter Milan and notwithstanding their three games in hand, their title hopes are certainly dead.

Even the players admit it with Gennaro Gattuso and Alessandro Nesta both claiming that Milan's sights have been set somewhat lower.

"The goal in the championship is fourth place because it's unthinkable that Milan will not qualify for the Champions League," said Gattuso.

"Our aim is to win as many matches in a row as possible and go on a positive run. In the fight for fourth place I think we have a really dangerous challenger to look out for: Fiorentina," added Nesta.

But with a rejuvenated Ronaldo and with Pato's arrival, Milan certainly have the squad and the quality to bounce back.

Despite Milan not yet winning at home, Napoli will certainly not arrive at the San Siro on Sunday believing they're the favourites.

But if Pato does feature at all, that could work in Napoli's favour

With Inter 25 points clear and Roma and Juventus 18 and 17 points ahead respectively, Milan must look to try to close the 11-point gap to fourth-placed Udinese and the 10-point one to fifth-placed Fiorentina.

Udinese have a trip to rock-bottom Cagliari while Fiorentina bounced back to form just in time for the winter break, thumping Cagliari 5-1 having previously picked up just two points in five games.

Their trip to struggling Parma is distinctly winnable.

Meanwhile Inter will be expected to prove too strong for lowly Siena while Juventus and Roma will have their work cut out trying to stop the gaps between them and the leaders from growing.

Juve have a tricky trip to Sicily and Catania to negotiate while Roma travel to Atalanta, who are enjoying a good season in the top half of the table.

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In Dusseldorf Michel Platini, in his first press conference since taking over as UEFA president, said: "My answer is clear."

"We cannot consider making it 24 without taking account of the qualification system. The qualification system is a great deal more important than the wishes of this or that association."

"But for now, nothing's decided. A study is in progress."

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"There's no chance of us selling him. Absolutely no way, whatever the money," he said in The Sun.

"He signed a new contract last season to 2012 and we are not a selling club. Alex Ferguson has never let a player go when he was not happy to do so."

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Pato warned by predecessor

AC Milan's new Brazilian teenage sensation Pato has been warned about the perils awaiting him by a player who trod the same path 50 years before.

Jose Altafini joined Milan as a 20-year-old in 1958 after being part of the Brazil squad that won the World Cup in that summer.

He went on to represent Milan for seven years before moving on to Napoli and Juventus and his 216 Serie A goals rank him third in the overall list of league goalscorers.

A lot was expected of him as a youngster at Milan and, while he exceeded expectation, he is as well placed as anyone to offer advice to the new star.

League minus Africans

This weekend will see the squad strength of several Premier League clubs put to the test as they face up to life without players now required by their respective countries for the African Nations Cup.

Table-toppers Arsenal, two points clear of champions Manchester United, go into their home game against Birmingham City without Kolo Toure, Emmanuel Ebou and Alexander Song, all on their way to the 2008 Nations Cup in Ghana.

As if that were not bad enough for the Gunners, defenders Philippe Senderos and Johan Djourou are both injured.

Gilberto Silva is likely to line-up alongside William Gallas at the back.

But unlike several managers in English football's top-flight who can be heard complaining about the timing of the three week Nations Cup, Arsenal's French boss Arsene Wenger is willing to accept the consequences of signing those players who are eligible for the tournament.

"I won't use (the African absences) as an excuse if we don't win the title because I've known who

will lose since the start of the season."

The build-up to Manchester United's meeting with Newcastle has been overshadowed by the departure from St James' Park of manager Sam Allardyce.

But given a run that has seen Newcastle take just nine points from 12 games and last weekend's uninspired goalless draw against Championship side Stoke, Allardyce was always likely to be on thin ice particularly as the team were not playing the flowing football beloved of so many Newcastle fans.

Allardyce's tenure with the Tyneside club lasted a matter of months but by contrast, Sir Alex Ferguson is now entering his 22nd year in charge of Manchester United.

Saturday's match at Old Trafford could see Ferguson able to field his first-choice forward pairing of Wayne Rooney and Carlos Tevez after injuries to the duo.

"We have a strong season ahead of us, so it is important Wayne is ready along with all the other players as well," said United's Cristiano Ronaldo.

Chelsea too have been depleted by the call of Africa.

Ivory Coast internationals Didier Drogba and Salomon Kalou, Nigeria star John Obi Mikel and Ghana's Michael Essien are all

away for the biennial competition. Meanwhile injuries to goal-keeper Petr Cech, defender and captain John Terry, midfielder Frank Lampard and striker Andriy Shevchenko have created problems even for a club of Chelsea's resources.

One consolation for Blues manager Avram Grant ahead of Saturday's home match against Tottenham is that Chelsea's London rivals have not won in the league at Stamford Bridge for close on 18 years.

Everton and Manchester City, two terrors on the verge of breaking into England's elite, go head-to-head at Goodison Park, basement club Derby are at home to fellow drop candidates Wigan in what could be Robbie Savage's first match for the Rams since he joined earlier this week.

Liverpool, currently outside

their customary place in the leading quartet, travel to Middlesbrough while second-bottom Fulham will look to kick-start their push for Premier League survival in a London derby with West Ham.

On Sunday, Sunderland - also relegation candidates - are at Fratton Park where hosts Portsmouth haven't scored in the league since September.

Sunderland manager Roy Keane said that if his side were to improve on a run of just two wins in 16 matches in all competitions it was vital his players improved their discipline.

"Some of our yellow cards and our sendings-off, I really think we have no-one to blame but ourselves," said Keane, himself not always on the right side of referees during his time as a Manchester United midfielder.

Pompey are currently eighth in the table but have four players - strikers John Utaka and Kanu and midfielders Uley Muntari and Papa Bouba Diop - at the African Nations.

But that does give a chance to striker David Nugent, who scored the south coast side's winner against Ipswich in the FA Cup last weekend, to make Keane regret not signing him when he had the chance during the pre-season.

Blackburn will have South

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match. Includes fixtures for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.

Real ready for derby

The African Nations Cup will deny some teams in the Spanish top-flight some of their best players but league leaders Real Madrid are one side unlikely to feel the pinch with their huge squad.

Real must do without Mali international midfielder Mohamed Diarra but Guti and Fernando Gago are waiting in the wings as Real defend their seven-point lead at the summit.

A trip to bottom side Levante on Sunday looks a certain three points for the champions and confidence is high in the Madrid camp.

"If we continue playing like we have been doing we can win everything," said Brazilian defender Marcelo. "We have a big squad and everyone is more than capable of playing at this level."

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While Casillas is keeping the opposition at bay Real have been plundering the goals with Ruud van Nistelrooy, Raul and Robinho all in double figures for the season.

Barcelona, who drew 1-1 with Sevilla in their midweek cup tie, are waiting for Real to slip up but must first concentrate on three points at home to Real Murcia on Saturday.

Barca have lost Ivory Coast international Yaya Toure for the African Cup of Nations and Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o will depart after the Murcia match.

Brazilian Ronaldinho and Portuguese playmaker Deco continue to struggle with minor injuries and coach Frank Rijkaard reacted angrily to claims that he is keeping the duo out of the firing line.

"It's wrong to doubt these injuries," said Rijkaard. "I know journalists have their work to do but these players are suffering with injuries and are working hard to get back to fitness."

Sevilla look like the team that will suffer most from the Jan 20-Feb 10

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Bayern appoint Klinsmann

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Former Germany coach over Juergen Klinsmann will take over from Bayern star Lothar Matthausen and Dutch pair Marco van Basten and Frank Rijkaard all named by the German media as possible successors to the veteran Hitzfeld.

Klinsmann coached Germany to the semifinals of the 2006 World Cup on home soil, but the Bayern club will be his first coaching job at a club although he has worked as an advisor to David Beckham's current club Los Angeles Galaxy.

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German legend Juergen Klinsmann arrives in Munich airport on Friday. Klinsmann is scheduled to attend a press conference where he will be unveiled as the new Bayern manager.

appointment and denied the club were taking a risk on an inexperienced coach.

"It is not a courageous decision, it is an intelligent and thought-out decision," Beckenbauer told Bild newspaper to be published Saturday.

"Juergen Klinsmann brought success to the national team with his new methods and I am sure he will also be successful at Bayern."

Klinsmann ploughed his own course as Germany coach, drafting in young players and creating a formidable team spirit that carried the 2006 World Cup where they lost to eventual winners Italy.

He left his post immediately after the tournament, turned down a host of offers and retreated to his home in California.

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