

Ben Haim rues Mourinho exit

AFP, London

Chelsea defender Tal Ben Haim has insisted he would never have signed for the club had he known Jose Mourinho was about to be replaced as manager by Avram Grant.

Ben Haim, a longstanding target for Mourinho, eventually joined Chelsea last June. But only months later Mourinho had left Stamford Bridge to be replaced by Ben Haim's fellow Israeli Avram Grant.

Ben Haim has played just six matches since the turn of the year - just two of those in the league.

"Jose Mourinho is the reason I came to Chelsea and if I knew Avram Grant was going to be the coach then I would have signed for another club," former Bolton favourite Ben Haim told Wednesday's edition of the Sun tabloid.

"It was Jose who brought me here and no one except he and I know the conversation we had when he tried to sign me the first time a year ago last January," he added.

"The fact is while Jose was the coach I played most of the games and people who know me know that I would not have come here to be a reserve.

"I knew that nothing good would come with Grant as Chelsea coach."

Chelsea have reached the semi-finals of the Champions League, where they face English rivals Liverpool and are second in the Premier League table.

But a surprise 1-1 draw at home to Wigan on Monday left the Blues five points behind Premier League leaders and reigning champions Manchester United with just four games of the season left.

Japanese club after Ronaldo

AFP, Tokyo

A cash-rich Japanese football club is interested in acquiring Brazilian superstar Ronaldo on loan as the AC Milan striker recovers from a ruptured tendon, a report said Wednesday.

The unidentified J-League club, rumoured to be in or around the greater Tokyo area, has one billion yen (10 million dollars) a year to spend on players, the daily tabloid Nihon Gendai reported.

The 31-year-old Ronaldo has ruled out retirement after undergoing surgery in February for a ruptured tendon in his left knee. He is expected to be sidelined for at least nine months.

"He is expected to become able to run in May and train with the ball before the summer. That is enough to attract attention because he is Ronaldo," the daily quoted an unnamed Japanese broadcaster as saying.

"Depending on progress in his recovery, he may be asked to extend his loan period and play in the J-League in the 2009 season" which starts next March, the person said.

"The J-League and corporate sponsors are likely to join hands in backing the plan because it could serve as a catalyst in reinvigorating the league's popularity," he added.

There are nine J-League clubs in the Kanto region, which includes Tokyo. Among them are league champions Kashima Antlers and Asian club champions Urawa Red Diamonds.

Ronaldo said last week he had the idea of playing for Brazil's Flamengo, as part of his rehabilitation, before returning to Milan.

"I have an excellent relationship with my team. But I have to be up to the task. The idea is to go for a few months to Brazil -- why not Flamengo," the three-time FIFA world player of the year told the Italian daily Gazzetta dello Sport.

"And if all goes well I'll be a Rossonero (AC Milan player) once again."

Bremen keep up pressure

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich in the German league.

Bayern travel to Eintracht Frankfurt on Wednesday with the chance of restoring the 10-point advantage.

Three days after thrashing third-placed Schalke 04, Werder came up against a hardworking Rostock who are battling to avoid relegation.

Germany international Torsten Frings opened the scoring with a 57th minute shot for his first league goal since November 2006 but Rostock drew level in the 76th minute through Sebastian Haege.

Bremen got the winner with eight minutes to go however. A

penalty kick was saved by the Rostock keeper but the ball fell nicely to Ivan Klasnic who made no mistake with the rebound.

Werder have really come back into form following a poor March with three victories in a row - two of them away from home - however unless Bayern severely slip up the best they can realistically hope for is second spot.

"The main thing was to get the three points, not necessarily to play beautiful football," said Frings, who is nearly back to his best level after a season curtailed by a recurring right knee injury.

However Bremen are only two points ahead of third-placed Schalke who showed their fighting spirit with a 5-1 win over lowly Energie Cottbus, including four goals from Kevin Kuranyi.

It was hard to say if the Ruhr club had benefited from the axing of coach Mirko Slomka, and the fielding of two interim coaches, or whether it was merely the poor showing of Cottbus.

Kuranyi, who had been out of form since the beginning of the

year and had not been on good terms with Slomka, has certainly regained his form in front of goal.

Kuranyi said afterwards: "It was great to score four goals but I'm also happy with the football we played today. We were in fighting mood and gelled well as a team. It was important to find our feet again after the Bremen defeat."

And Mike Buskens, one of Schalke's two stand-in coaches, said: "We tried to speak with the players a lot since our arrival by telling them 'You have had a lot of pressure these last few days, but football is above all about enjoying yourself'."

Fourth-placed Hamburg, 12 points behind Bayern, could only get one point following their goalless draw at Hertha Berlin but would have won if Ivica Olic had not messed up his penalty kick.

The northern point club could even be ousted from fourth spot by Bayer Leverkusen should they win at Arminia Bielefeld on Wednesday.

Cech refuses to give up

AFP, Liverpool



Petr Cech has warned Manchester United to forget about starting an early title party after insisting Chelsea are still in the race to win the Premier League.

Reigning champions United can clinch the title when they face Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on April 26 after seeing Avram Grant's men drop two points in a shock 1-1 draw at home to Wigan on Monday.

Having fallen five points behind fellow Champions League semifinalists United, second-placed Chelsea must beat Everton at Goodison Park here on Thursday to retain any realistic ambitions of claiming a third Premier League crown in four seasons.

But Czech Republic goalkeeper Cech, who played against Wigan despite having had over 50 stitches inserted in a facial wound just eight days earlier, claims Chelsea can still snatch the title from United's grasp.

"We need to concentrate on ourselves," said Cech "and win every game because our destiny is not in our hands and we need to wait to see if someone can beat Manchester United."

"United were lucky against Arsenal on Sunday, so they can be unlucky against Blackburn on

Saturday.

"The best thing about the Premier League is that all the teams have quality and there is always pressure because games aren't easy to win, so as long as we keep fighting, we'll have a chance."

"We have a difficult game at Everton, but if we beat them we cut the gap to two points. We're not throwing the towel in yet."

"United have four games to play and they have to come to Stamford Bridge, so it is a must-win game for us, but every game is a must-win game and we just need to make sure we keep winning."

"The title is closer to them (United) but it is not over yet and the message from our dressing room is that it is not over and we still have games to go."

Cech, rated by many as the world's number one goalkeeper, admitted he gambled on his fitness by returning against relegation-battlers Wigan.

"When I got the protection for my face I decided to ask the club doctor if they would let me play," he explained. "He wasn't completely happy about it but he respected my decision and it was good to be back on the pitch."

"I wanted to play, I wasn't forced to play and I had no fear before the game because I knew the wound was protected."

Everton, desperate for points on

Thursday in order to reduce the five-point gap between themselves and fourth-placed Liverpool, who presently occupy the last spot on offer to English clubs for next season's Champions League, could receive a boost before they kick-off against Chelsea.

Toffees chiefs hope that by then South Africa midfielder Steven Pienaar will have made permanent his loan move from German club Borussia Dortmund in a 2.2 million pounds (4.4 million dollars) move.

Meanwhile American goalkeeper Tim Howard can equal Neville Southall's Everton record of 15 clean sheets in a league season if he denies Chelsea.

And defender Leighton Baines has backed the former Manchester United man to achieve the milestone.

"Tim has been amazing for us and if anyone deserves a record, he does because he's been so consistent," Baines said.

"Some keepers are just good shot-stoppers, but with Tim, you get the full package. He has a great spring when he comes for crosses and commands his area as well."

"As a defender, it makes you feel so much better to have a keeper like him behind you. We pride ourselves in being hard to break down, but if anyone gets past, you can rely on Tim to stop them."

Real admit C'Ron defeat



INTERNET, undated

Luring Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo to the Bernabeu is an "impossible" task, according to Real Madrid sporting director Predrag Mijatovic.

The Spanish giants have been tipped to make a summer move for the 23-year-old Portugal international, and Mijatovic has made it clear in the past he wants Ronaldo to become the new 'face' of the capital club.

But while he is full of admiration for the player widely tipped to win this year's Ballon d'Or, Mijatovic understands Ronaldo is highly

unlikely to leave United in the near future.

"Right now it is impossible to sign Cristiano Ronaldo. Who would not like to have him in their team? But we need to be realistic because his would be a very difficult signing," said Mijatovic.

Recent reports have claimed that Mijatovic met with United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz, but the former Madrid striker was quick to rubbish such talk.

"There has been talk about lots of things that have nothing to do with reality. They have also said I have been seen with Carlos Queiroz and it is not true," he said in Marca.

Meanwhile, Ronaldo - who has scored 38 times in all competitions

so far this season and is well on course to break the 40-goal mark - says all the speculation linking him with a move elsewhere makes him "angry".

He told The Sun: "I just don't care what the whole world seems to want to say about me or speculate about my future."

"I've said it a thousand times and, by now, people should realise... I'm totally happy at United."

"I'm in the form of my life and I'm having the season of my career so far so it makes me mad some times to read some of the things which are supposed to be related to my future."

"I get angry but I'm trying to accept it's a waste of energy to be furious because it is not worth it."



Schalke striker Kevin Kuranyi celebrates after scoring against Energie Cottbus during their Bundesliga match at the Veltins Arena Stadium in Gelsenkirchen on Tuesday.

Maradona praises Agüero

INTERNET, undated

Diego Maradona has compared Atletico Madrid winger Sergio Agüero to himself.

Agüero is the boyfriend of Maradona's daughter Giannina and the 1986 World Cup winner is pleased with the match.

"I'm proud of him because he is a wonderful boy," Maradona told Mananas Informales on Channel 13 in Buenos Aires.

"He looks like me when I was a player. He is strong, with thick legs. I took notice of that when I was in Spain."

"He uses his body a lot to shield the ball. Against Valencia, he scored a great goal."

Maradona added he wants stay in the Olympic village when he attends this summer's Games in Beijing.

He said: "I'd love to live with the athletes every day. I'd love to cheer (Argentina basketball star) Manu Ginobili."

Aragones to carry on

AFP, Madrid

Spain coach Luis Aragones said on Tuesday he wanted to carry on coaching after the Euro 2008 finals in Switzerland and Austria.

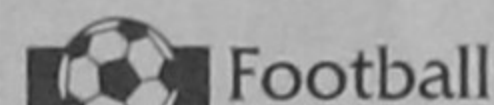
Aragones, who will be 70 this year, has been at the helm of the Spanish international team since July 2004 but announced back in November, when Spain sealed their place in the European extravaganza, that he would be leaving the Spanish post after Euro 2008.

"I am going to stop coaching the national team in three months but I am continuing to coach because I'm feeling well and I love this sport called football."

Aragones, who has guided Spain to a recent run of 14 matches unbeaten with 12 wins and two draws, is a former coach of Real Betis, Sevilla, Atletico Madrid and Real Mallorca.

Spain are in Group D along with holders Greece, Russia and Sweden.

Capello warns his charges



AFP, London

Fabio Capello made it clear Wednesday that England players would be putting their international careers in jeopardy unless they showed total commitment to their country.

The Italian's warning was issued ahead of England's friendly double header against the United States at Wembley on May 28 and the visit to Trinidad and Tobago four days later.

His message was plain - he expects players to answer any call up they receive for these two games after a lengthy domestic season other than for a genuine reason.

Capello said: "By the time of the two games, some of the players will have been on holiday for a week already. Do I want to see commitment to England? If a player doesn't love to play for England, then perhaps he should stay at home."

"Players must love the England

shirt and wearing the England shirt. That is all there is to it.

"If someone doesn't want to come and play for England, it means they don't love the England shirt enough. Obviously they must prefer to go on holiday."

The new England manager will continue his policy of rotating his captains in the two friendly internationals before making a final decision on who will lead the side by the time England face the Czech Republic at Wembley in August.

That means John Terry, skipper under former boss Steve McClaren, is by no means certain to retain the captaincy with Steven Gerrard wearing the armband when he was absent through injury against Switzerland and then Rio Ferdinand against France last month.

Capello said: "Has Terry been treated fairly by myself passing the captaincy around? I have choices to make. I am running my own tests and I will make my choice based on my ideas."

"The important thing is that

everyone plays for England at the top of their game and are as relaxed as they play for their own clubs."

"Will Terry get a chance in the rotation policy? We will see. There are two more games. We will decide every game. But I will have decided my captain by the time of the friendly with the Czech Republic in the new season."

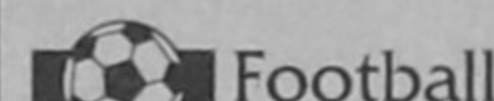
Capello is happy that England are making steady progress in the right direction despite losing to France in the Stade De France.

"After the Switzerland game, I said it was a promising start. After the France game, I said there had been a huge step forward even though a few people were surprised I said that."

"I expect another big step forward from the next two games."

England, who have failed to qualify for the Euro 2008 championships in Switzerland and Austria, have been drawn against Croatia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Andorra in their 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign.

Cruyff backs Guardiola



INTERNET, undated

Former Barcelona coach Johan Cruyff has backed the man who was captain during his reign, Josep Guardiola, to be a success in the Barca hotseat if he were to take over at the end of the season.

With Frank Rijkaard's position at the Barca helm under increasing scrutiny following a run of inconsistent results, the Spanish media have been full of stories regarding possible successors should the Dutchman leave in the summer.

Despite an official denial from the club that Rijkaard is set to be replaced, Guardiola, who currently coaches the club's reserves, continues to be linked with the job.

Speaking to Catalunya Radio on Tuesday morning Cruyff, now an adviser to club president Joan Laporta, added to the speculation

by backing him to excel in the position.

"Pep knows how and he is ready, so he can be coach," he said.

"He has done more than enough to show that he has a lot of capability, and he has the strength to make decisions and the ability to talk to the press."

"He was an important player who played the ball and was great in his position, and he knows how training should be and how players can think."

Guardiola may be seen as a long shot by some who see his inexperience of coaching at the top level as a barrier.

But Cruyff said no amount of experience can prepare for life at the Nou Camp.

"When you become coach of Barcelona you're a novice regardless of how much experience you've had in other teams. The tension here is much greater," he said.

He also added: "From here on

out these are decisions that aren't mine to make, it's up to the board to make them."

The Dutch legend, who was coach when Barca claimed their first Champions League trophy in 1992, also had words of advice for fallen star Ronaldinho.

A move to either AC Milan or Internazionale looks ever more likely for the 28-year-old forward, bringing an end to a successful career in Catalonia.

And Cruyff feels a change of attitude is needed from the Brazilian if his move is to prove successful.

"We have to look for the best thing for everybody," he said.

"To be one of the best you have to be at 100% and if there are problems you have to look for an answer."

"What did Ronaldinho have before arriving in Paris? Nothing. What has his had since? Everything. Ronaldinho needs to keep his feet on the ground."



Lyon striker Karim Benzema (C) tries to dribble through Metz midfielder Laurent Agouazi (L) and defender Sebastien Bassong during their French Cup encounter at the Gerland Stadium in Lyon on Tuesday.

FRENCH CUP Lyon ride on Benzema

REUTERS, Paris

France striker Karim Benzema sent Ligue 1 leaders Olympique Lyon into the French Cup semifinals on Tuesday with a 1-0 home win over Metz.

Lyon, four points clear at the top of the league, stay on course for their first domestic double.

The 20-year-old Benzema collected the ball inside the area with his back to the goal and swiftly turned around to score the winner six minutes from the break.

Metz, bottom of Ligue 1 and already relegated, fought bravely and created many chances with a powerful shot by substitute forward Daniel Gygax forcing a superb save from Gregory Coupet with 10 minutes left.

A late Roy Contout goal gave Amiens a 1-0 win over Ligue 2 rivals Dijon in earlier quarterfinal action. The striker scored from the edge of the box with two minutes remaining.

Girondins Bordeaux, second to Lyon in the league standings, take on Ligue 2 Sedan on Wednesday while fifth division Carquefou play Ligue 1 strugglers Paris St Germain.



AFP, Estoril

Roger Federer made a solid start to his clay-court season, relying on the counsel of provisional coach Jose Higuera to advance into the second round of the Estoril Open on Tuesday.

The Swiss top seed, seeking his first title of a slow-starting season, overcame gritty Belgian opponent Olivier Rochus, Belgium, 4-6, 6-3, 6-2.

"Getting through a match like this is good, especially being down a set," said the winner, who next plays Victor Hanesescu of Romania.

"I had to come back and fight, but the reward was great. I played well towards the end," said the Swiss, who lamented throwing out chances in the first set, double-faulting away a break point against Rochus.

"I played well towards the end. This is a bit of a relief," confessed the Estoril debutant, playing here due to spring scheduling in anticipation of the Beijing Olympics.

"I was under a lot of pressure today (Tuesday), at the end especially."

Federer is playing a non-

Masters ATP spring clay event for the first time since winning the Munich title in 2003.

He is guided this week under a temporary arrangement with Spain's past clay master Higuera, former coach of Pete Sampras, Jim Courier and Michael Chang - the latter two French Open champions.

Federer is keen - but not desperate - to correct an historic imbalance in his current season. It's the first time since 2000 that he's gone the first three months of a season without a trophy.

The 12-time Grand Slam champion is currently embroiled in his second-longest trophy dry spell (five events) since late 2002 and early 2003 when he went seven tournaments without a title.

The satisfied Swiss finished his afternoon in two hours with a 17th ace.

Rochus, who counts Federer as a friend after the pair grew up on court together a decade and a half ago, said he may be facing surgery on his right shoulder for inflammation.

"It was bothering me, but I served good," said the Belgian ranked 141.

"But Roger started making less errors and lifted his game."

"I knew when I trailed 5-2 in the second set that it would be tough. I've known Roger for 14 years, it's always an honour to play against him."

Federer lost the first set but quickly got a grip on his game, guided by the coach he hooked up with only a few days ago under an arrangement being trialled this week but with scope for extension through the clay season and possibly beyond.

Second seed and former champion Nikolay Davydenko was untroubled after arriving from a Davis Cup win in Moscow, dispatching Austrian Jurgen Melzer 6-3, 6-1 to ease into the second round.

Davydenko won the 2003 title, played the final two years ago but has also exited three times in the first round at the Estadio Nacional.

Portugal's Rui Machado surprised ailing third seed Ivo Karlovic, advancing to a surprise win as the Croatian with trailing 6-4, 1-0 with a knee injury.

In women's play, top-seeded Italian Flavia Pennetta defeated Yvonne Meusburger 4-6, 6-0, 6-2 while number two Maria Kirilenko faced a battle before stopping Swiss teenager Sandra Vogele 6-4, 6-7 (2/7), 6-1.