

## Messi expects Ronaldinho will stay

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Argentine striker Lionel Messi said Thursday he hopes Ronaldinho, who is being courted by AC Milan, will remain at the club next year.

"At Barca, we want everyone to remain at the club. If he goes, I will be sad," he said.

"He has helped me a lot to integrate into the team. Any team would like to have him. I still hope that he will stay."

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani said on Sunday that the reigning European champions have come to an agreement with Ronaldinho over a possible summer transfer.

Former twice world player of the year Ronaldinho has fallen out with Barcelona this season as a dip in form and frequent off-field indiscretions have seen the love affair between club and player come to a bitter end after five years.

He is currently sidelined with a leg injury that could keep him out of Barcelona's run-in, where they are chasing La Liga and Champions League glory.

AFP, Liverpool



Michael Essien kept Chelsea's Premier League title hopes alive as Avram Grant's side all but ended Everton's hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League with a 1-0 victory at Goodison Park here Thursday.

Essien's second goal in as many games saw the London club move two points behind leaders Manchester United with three games to play.

Reigning champions United will re-establish a five point lead at the summit if they win at Blackburn Rovers on Saturday and this was a crucial win for Chelsea, who face the leaders at Stamford Bridge on April 26.

Essien struck four minutes before half-time as he capped off a fine move involving Shaun Wright-Phillips.

Chelsea just about did enough to deserve all three points on an evening when they suffered much frustration at the hands of an Everton side which started with hopes of securing a top four finish.

Yet David Moyes's side can forget about Champions League football for another season with

neighbours Liverpool now clear favourites to secure the fourth and final qualifying spot on offer to England's leading quartet.

Having surprisingly been held to a 1-1 draw at home to lowly Wigan on Monday, the pressure was well and truly on Grant and his side.

They responded with a performance which keeps the title race bubbling for another week at least.

Chelsea did not have it all their own way.

Indeed it required a fine save by Petr Cech to deny Portugal's Manuel Fernandes, on loan from Valencia, from giving the hosts an early lead after Nicolas Anelka had conceded a free-kick on the edge of his own area after fouling Everton captain Phil Neville.

For long periods the visitors looked as though they were still suffering a hangover from Wigan, a game which badly damaged their title hopes after Chelsea conceded an offside goal.

Instead it was Fernandes who proved to be the home side's most threatening player, Everton's No 23 going close to equalising from a 67th minute free-kick.

It was the nearest Everton came to levelling the match yet the way Chelsea's players celebrated at the final whistle proved how relieved they were to emerge with three points.

Essien started the move deep and after a neat one-two with the industrious Wright-Phillips, the Ghana star buried the ball beyond Everton's United States keeper Tim Howard.

The goal revitalised Chelsea, Jon Mikel Obi going close to doubling

the lead a minute with a stinging long-range effort which brought an excellent finger-tip save from Howard.

Everton have enjoyed an exceptional season by their standards, pushing neighbours Liverpool all the way in the race to finish fourth.

Yet one win in their previous five outings suggests they have finally run out of steam.

They were toothless for much of the game with Nigerian striker Ayiobeni Yakubu, who has been a revelation since his 11.25 million pounds (22.50 million dollars) move from Middlesbrough earlier in the season, particularly ineffective.

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## Talks start on Nedved return

AFP, Prague

A top Czech football association official said Thursday that he believed national manager Karel Bruckner had begun talks to bring back Juventus midfield star Pavel Nedved into the national squad for the Euro 2008 championships.

"I believe that some communication is going on there... But the situation is not so advanced that I could say that Nedved is returning to the national squad," first deputy president of the Czech and Moravian Football Federation Vlastimil Kostal said in an interview with radio station Frekvence 1.

The Juventus midfielder, with 18 goals from 91 caps to his name, called time on his international career after the 2006 World Cup.

But pressure has mounted for the 2003 European Footballer of the Year to return to the national fold especially in the light of doubts whether Arsenal midfield star Tomas Rosicky will recover in time for the championships from a long term injury.

"Of course there is a chance that both of them could play in the European Championships," Kostal added.

Chelsea keeper Petr Cech added to growing calls for Nedved's return on Thursday. He told the Dnes newspaper: "Pavel is part of the team, he's always made an important contribution to it. We're in real need of a player with such experience and blessed with such skills."

"His presence at the Euro would naturally be welcome, that's obvious," noted Nuremberg's Czech striker Jan Koller.

The Czech Republic start their Group A campaign against co-hosts Switzerland on June 7, with Portugal on June 11 and Turkey four days later.

At the other end of the table, bottom club Levante could be relegated on Sunday if they lose at home to Getafe and Recreativo Huelva have managed to get a point at Real Zaragoza 24 hours earlier.

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