

Roma make Mutu offer

AFP, Bucharest

AS Roma have made an offer for Fiorentina's Romanian striker Adrian Mutu, media reports said Wednesday, quoting Fiorentina sporting director Pantaleo Corvino.

"I met Roma officials Roma and they said they passed on their wish to land the player," the reports quoted Corvino as telling the media.

He added that the club intended to "hold onto important players" but not by force.

Romanian daily Gazeta Sporturilor headlined its story with "20 million (euros) for Mutu" and said the player would be in Bucharest on Saturday when Steaua Bucharest face Roma in a friendly.

The paper said Roma had offered 20 million euros for Mutu, whom they were offering a three-year worth an annual 3.2 million euros compared with his current 1.8 million at Fiorentina, where he had played for the past two seasons.

Mutu was on explosive league form last season, scoring 17 goals as the club finished fourth, earning them the right to compete in preliminary matches of the Champions League, the first time since the 1999-2000 season.

He also scored six goals in Fiorentina's march to the UEFA Cup semifinals.

The 29-year-old was earlier this summer ordered by FIFA to pay former club Chelsea 12 million euros relating to a failed drugs test.

Henry guns for goals

AFP, Madrid

Thierry Henry has promised Barcelona fans that he's anxious to make up for last season's modest tally by scoring bags of goals in 2008-09.

Handcuffed by a series of injuries and forced to play on the left by then manager Franck Rijkaard, Henry's harvest in the Liga last season was a mere dozen goals (19 in all competitions) whilst in his Arsenal days he was a regular 25 to 30 season man.

Henry, looking forward to playing more in the centre under new Barca coach Josep Guardiola, told the club's website on Tuesday, "I hope to do better this year as long as I'm not troubled by injuries."

"Last year I had to help out the defence, but this year my main objective is to score goals and in my preferred forward position."

Henry approaches the upcoming season after failing to make much of an impact in France's disappointing Euro 2008 campaign which saw the double former champions sent packing after the first round with just one point and one goal - which Henry scored in the 4-1 humbling by Holland.

The 30-year-old is training this week with the rest of the Barca squad in Scotland.

Ribery targets UCL return

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich's French star Franck Ribery has targeted a September return date for the German giants' Champions League campaign as he continues his rehabilitation from ankle surgery.

The 25-year-old midfielder is still in plaster after an operation to repair the ligaments he damaged in France's 2-0 defeat at the hands of Italy in Zurich which knocked them out of last month's Euro 2008.

Having done the German league and cup double last season with Bayern, Ribery is hoping to be part of their Champions League challenge when the Group Stage matches begin on September 16/17.

Ribery is in Munich as new Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann this week began preparing his side for the new Bundesliga season which starts on August 15 when Bayern begin their title defence against Hamburg at the Allianz Arena.

"I am very pleased to be back in Munich again and I am hoping to be back in the team in September," he said on the club's website.

Ribery was due to be examined by Bayern's doctors on Wednesday and a more precise date for his return is expected to be announced soon.

Mertesacker blow for Bremen

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen suffered a blow on Tuesday as it was revealed German international defender Per Mertesacker would be out for several weeks after undergoing an operation on his meniscus.

The 23-year-old, who was an integral part of the German team that reached the Euro 2008 final where they lost 1-0 to Spain, suffered the knee injury during a training session with the Bundesliga side.



Manchester United star Wayne Rooney (L) evades a tackle from Orlando Pirates' Leihlohonolo Seema during their friendly match in Durban on Tuesday.

'Chelsea are favourites'

AFP, Guangzhou

Michael Essien insisted Chelsea were the Premiership favourites after Manchester United's Alex Ferguson kicked off the pre-season mind games by casting doubt on their ageing squad.

The Ghana midfielder said the "world-class" experience of players such as Frank Lampard, Michael Ballack and new signing Deco - all aged 30 or more -- would give Chelsea the edge in the trophy race.

"For me, only Chelsea is going to win the title," he said.

"We have got a lot of the best players in the world. They are world-class players and it's a privilege for me to work alongside them."

Essien said his teammates had proved they were not "losers" despite last season's heartache of narrowly missing out on both the domestic and European titles to United.

"As you can see in training or during the games, they can always change the games. They have a winning mentality so it's going to be good for us," he said.

"Hopefully this year we will win more trophies. Last year was unlucky for us, these things happen in football but you just have to forget about it."

Ferguson opened hostilities as Chelsea's World Cup-winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari prepares for his first match in charge against Guangzhou Pharmaceutical late on Wednesday.

The United boss said "no one" could top Mourinho, Scolari's predecessor-but-one at the glamorous London club who assembled much of the current squad.

"Mourinho won the title two years in a row and beat us in the FA Cup final, so there's no one who can improve on his record really," Ferguson said.

"It's hard to see where there's going to be a big improvement with a team that's really very experienced. 'Plateau' is maybe not the word, but how can they accelerate beyond what they've done up to now?"

Ferguson was confident that United's youth made them title favourites. The two sides face an early-season clash at Stamford Bridge in September.

"I'm not saying necessarily that

they're old because, with the modern-day training methods, you should be playing in your thirties," he said.

"What I am saying is that I don't see outstanding progress in a team that's in their thirties."

But Essien rejected the comments, also expressed by some supporters. Only three first-team squad members are under 25, and eight are 30 or more.

"I don't know what the fans are thinking about. We've got some quality players," he said, adding that the ebullient Scolari was also a significant addition.

"He's really strong, he's a big guy and he's a very good coach," he said. "We're all glad to have him here."

Essien, who has signed a new five-year deal worth a reported 20 million pounds (40 million dollars), also appealed for unsettled striker Didier Drogba to commit his future as the pre-season begins in earnest.

"We all need him to stay. If he can make up his mind it will be really good for us," he said.

Chelsea also face China's Chengdu Blades in Macau on Saturday before heading to Malaysia and then Russia for the Railways Cup.

Cannavaro back in training

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Italian defender Fabio Cannavaro on Wednesday trained on the pitch for the first time since he injured his ankle in early June, just before the Euro 2008 finals, the Spanish club said.

"The Italian player did some recovery exercises on the pitch with recovery expert Carlos Lalin. Cannavaro is making great progress thanks to the specific programme he is following," the club said in a statement.

Cannavaro, who will turn 35 in September, is taking part in a Real Madrid pre-season training camp in Irtding, Austria.

The Italy captain sprained his ankle after colliding with his Italian squad teammate Giorgio Chiellini during a practice match in Austria on June 2.

The injury ruled him out of Euro 2008, which was won by Spain.

Cannavaro is under contract with Real until 2009, at which point his agent has said he will return to Italy, most likely to his hometown club Napoli.

Toure diagnosed with malaria

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger's summer woes have been compounded by the news that defender Kolo Toure has been diagnosed with malaria.

It is thought that Toure contracted the disease while on holiday in his native Ivory Coast. After flying out for Arsenal's pre-season tour of Austria and Hungary, the 27-year-old was sent to hospital in Vienna where malaria was diagnosed.

Although Arsenal spokesman described Toure as "being in good spirits", it seems unlikely he will be fit for the start of the new season.

That leaves Djourou or Philippe Senderos as potential partners for William Gallas after he decided against recruiting any new defenders this summer.

United edge Pirates

AFP, Durban

Lee Martin netted a first-half winner for Manchester United as the Premier League champions' young stars overcame Orlando Pirates to seal a 1-0 win here on Tuesday.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson took his big guns out of the firing line for this clash after seeing the likes of Wayne Rooney and Paul Scholes subjected to a series of bruising challenges in Saturday's draw against Kaizer Chiefs.

But his latest crop of youngsters grabbed their chance to shine against an unconvincing Pirates outfit and Chris Eagles all gave glimpses of their potential.

Eagles, who scored against the Chiefs in Cape Town, almost teed up Carlos Tevez for an opener on seven minutes with a neat pass that saw the Argentinian test keeper Senzo Meyiwa.

And Martin also forced Meyiwa into action with a low shot after being released following a one-two between Tevez and Michael Carrick.

Martin, loaned out to Sheffield United last season, gave United the lead on 23 minutes, though, after Wes Brown, playing despite the death of his half-sister at the weekend, and Campbell had combined to tee up the midfielder.

Brown's flick-on to Campbell was headed into Martin's path in the penalty area and the youngster beat Meyiwa with a low strike into the far corner.

Campbell, who netted 15 goals in a loan spell with Premier League new-boys Hull City last term, could have doubled United's lead on 42 minutes with a right-foot strike that glanced wide from 12 yards.

United were comfortably dealing with Pirates until the 65th minute, when keeper Ben Foster produced a fingertip save to push Lebogang Motshapane's long-range effort over the crossbar.

The South Africans were suddenly causing United problems at the back, prompting Ferguson to bench Rooney and Scholes off the bench on 69 minutes in an effort to turn the tide back in United's favour.

And the switch almost paid immediate dividends when Scholes forced keeper Senzo into another save with a long-range effort from Rooney's lay-off.

Blues romp to a win

AFP, Guangzhou

Nineteen-year-old Franco Di Santo scored on his debut as Chelsea kicked off the Luiz Felipe Scolari era with a 4-0 romp against Guangzhou Pharmaceutical on Wednesday.

Di Santo slid in on 78 minutes after Salomon Kalou's first-half opener and Frank Lampard's sublime lob had left the Chinese Super League side on the ropes. Shaun Wright-Phillips wrapped up the scoring in the dying minutes.

It was the perfect start for World Cup-winning coach Scolari, tasked with re-stocking the Chelsea trophy cabinet.

The London side went close early on through Lampard, Michael Essien and the lively Nicolas Anelka, who was saved from close range after a one-two with debutant Deco.

As another new signing, Jose Bosingwa, truffled off with a thigh strain after just 20 minutes, Kalou latched onto a diagonal ball to plant the opener past Guangzhou keeper Li Shuai.

Essien twice forced Li into action and Anelka teed up Lampard's weak shot before rattling the right post with a powerful drive as the visitors threatened to run riot.

But Guangzhou found a way through the one-way traffic and Petr Cech was forced into a smart stop, parrying Xu Liang's near-post free-kick against the woodwork on the stroke of half-time.

Substitute Wayne Bridge hit the post early in the second term before Lampard brought the crowd to its feet with his classy chip from 20 yards.

Young Argentine Di Santo, who had already hit the post after replacing Anelka at half-time, met Malouda's cross at the far post as he marked his debut with a goal on 78 minutes.

Wright-Phillips, who has been linked with Portsmouth, scored from Wayne Bridge's cross with two minutes left.

Andrei Shevchenko missed the match with an unspecified knock and Joe Cole was rested with an ankle injury. Deco lasted 62 minutes and there was also a run-out for Branislav Ivanovic.

Scolari, the ex-Portugal boss who took Brazil to the 2002 World Cup title, starts the job under no illusions about the expectations of billionaire owner Roman Abramovich.

His immediate predecessor Avram Grant was sacked despite taking Chelsea to their first Champions League final and finishing just two points behind Manchester United in the Premiership.

Scolari has also been welcomed with a broadside from Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson, who suggested his squad were too old to reach new heights.

Argentina the team to beat

AFP, Sydney

Defending champions Argentina, likely to field two of world football's most exciting and in-demand youngsters, loom as the team to beat again at the Beijing Olympics.

Twenty-year-old prodigies, Lionel Messi and Sergio Agüero, are expected to spearhead a richly-talented Argentine squad, which is the undisputed favourite to claim consecutive gold medals.

Argentina stormed through the 2004 Athens tournament without losing a match or conceding a goal.

Messi, christened the new Diego Maradona and even endorsed by the football legend as "the player who will inherit my place in Argentina", is so keen to play at the Olympics that he may forgo a Champions League tie for his Spanish club Barcelona.

Barcelona play their first leg of the Champions League tie on August 12 or 13, with the second leg taking place on August 26 or 27.

The Olympic tournament runs from August 7 to the final on August 23 and FIFA is still mulling whether clubs are obliged to release their U-23 players.

"I am going to the Olympic Games whatever may happen," Messi said. "The truth is though that I do not know how we can resolve things, but there is no doubt that I will be there."

"I have really high hopes with

the Olympic squad. I am very pleased that Sergio Agüero is joining us and I am looking forward to playing alongside him."

Agüero, who won the Golden Ball as the best player in Argentina's Under-20 World Cup win in Canada last year, recently turned down the opportunity to leave Atletico Madrid for Chelsea after the rich English club matched Agüero's release clause of 55 million euros.

Argentina national coach Alfio Basile raves about his two dynamos and their pulsating brand of football.

"They always astonish me, because they invent something new," Basile said.

The Argentines are also set to call on Liverpool's 23-year-old midfielder Javier Mascherano, who is keen to become the first Argentinian footballer ever to win back-to-back gold medals.

"It's important for any athlete to defend the gold medal," Mascherano said.

"I might be the only person from my country ever to do it and I'll go down in history, nothing counts for me more than helping my nation."

Argentina launch their campaign against Ivory Coast in Shanghai on August 7 with the Africans likely to field Chelsea's Salomon Kalou and Didier Drogba and Arsenal defender Kolo Toure.

Australia and Serbia are also in Argentina's Group A.

Brazil, who have won five FIFA World Cups but not an Olympic gold medal, are in Group C along with hosts China, Belgium and

New Zealand.

The Brazilians will be without 2007 FIFA World Player of the Year Kaka after AC Milan's refusal to release him as an over-age player, but Real Madrid defender Marcelo said he wants to be part of history in Beijing.

"If we win gold we will go down in Brazilian national team history. It would be a very special title. I want to make history but first we have to produce the goods on the field," Marcelo said.

But he believes fierce South American rivals Argentina stand in Brazil's path to the gold medal.

"Argentina could provide our toughest test because they've got a very strong generation of players like Messi, Agüero, (Gonzalo Higuain and Fernando Gago."

Italy, the reigning World Cup champions and bronze medalists in Athens, launch Group D against Honduras and are also grouped with South Korea and 2000 Olympic champions Cameroon.

The Koreans though will be missing Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-sung as an over-age player due to fatigue.

Nigeria, who were the first African nation to win Olympic gold in Atlanta 12 years ago, are drawn alongside Netherlands, Japan and the United States in Group B.

The Dutch are looking to Liverpool winger Ryan Babel to drive them to gold.

"With his qualities, Ryan is a vital player for our plans," Holland's Olympic coach Foppe de Haan said.

Carlo happy with signings

AFP, Carnago

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said on Tuesday that he was delighted with the three additions he has made to his squad as the Club World Cup holders go in search of a first Italian title since 2004.

Ancelotti has reinforced on all parts of the field, bringing in full-back Gianluca Zambrotta and forward Ronaldinho from Barcelona as well as midfielder Mathieu Flamini from Arsenal.

"We've signed some top quality players. A great defender, an incredible midfielder and a phenominal attacker," said Ancelotti.

Milan are desperate to mount a title challenge having finished only fifth in Serie A last season - missing out on the Champions League - and watching city rivals Inter Milan claim a third Scudetto in a row.

"We're not comparing ourselves with Inter," insisted Ancelotti, "only with ourselves and the team is better than it was last season."

"Now we will see on the field who is the best."

The signing of twice former world player of the year Ronaldinho is one which Ancelotti believes could make a huge difference, but he is not expecting to have the kind of problems which have previously followed the Brazilian due to his nocturnal lifestyle. "He's a shy lad

and has come in with the minimum of fuss. He's an integral player for us even if his condition is a little bit behind the others."

"I think the Olympics could help him."

Ronaldinho has been selected as part of the Brazilian Olympic squad although Milan blocked his international teammate Kaka from being a part of that.

And the seven-time European champions are still trying to fend off interest from Chelsea for the current world's best player.

Ancelotti insists he is happy at Milan, though.

"I've seen him and he seems happy, calm and serene and obviously pleased to be so well appreciated."

Bayern duo must deliver

AFP, Munich

Miroslav Klose, while Schweinsteiger is up against midfielder Tim Borowski, who has joined from Werder Bremen.

"I don't really want to talk about the Euro any more," Schweinsteiger told the Bayern website.

"The past counts for nothing in football."

"My goal for this season is to make my contribution and be as successful as possible."

"I showed what I'm capable of at the Euro."

"I had more of a free role and was able to express myself a lot more in attack."

And new boss Klinsmann insisted the 23-year-old is part of his plans.

"There's no way we'd consider that, because we're approaching a season which promises a great deal," the Bayern boss said.

"We need at least three top strikers to get anywhere in Europe and Lukas is one of the three."

"He's still developing as a player, he has bags of talent, he's already achieved a lot despite his young age."

"The next step for him is to hold his own in the Champions League and take more responsibility for Germany, and Bayern set the standards in both respects."

"His job is to attack the other two (Toni and Klose), so they know they've been in a fight, Lukas will get chances to prove himself."

But Podolski has made no secret of his unhappiness about his lack of game time last season.

"I can't be satisfied with last season," he said.

"I would ever played. Anyone would consider his position in the circumstances."

"I don't want to warm the bench."

"I want to play matches and win trophies."



Bayern Munich players with their coach Juergen Klinsmann (C) and children present the team's new jerseys in Munich on Tuesday.