

Roma give up Mutu chase

AFP, Rome

AS Roma coach Luciano Spalletti admitted on Friday that he has all but given up on his bid to sign Romania forward Adrian Mutu.

Roma are in the hunt for a forward having let Brazilian winger Alessandro Mancini move to Serie A rivals Inter Milan.

Spalletti had set his sights on Fiorentina's Mutu but earlier this week La Viola president Andrea Della Valle insisted the Romania captain will be staying put.

"I think it's over. There were certain conditions with which it could have happened," said Spalletti.

"These conditions were at an advanced stage and everything was put in place so if Mutu hasn't arrived that's through no fault of this club."

Roma were rumoured to have offered Mutu double the salary he is on at Fiorentina but La Viola's technical administrator Sandro Menecucci insisted the forward is happy to be staying.

"The situation with Adrian Mutu is perfect, the player understood our intentions and now he just wants to think about playing and he's not protesting."

Roma will be pursuing other options now with Chelsea's France winger Florent Malouda, Real Madrid's Brazilian attacking midfielder Julio Baptista and even Zenit St Petersburg star Andrei Arshavin potentially on the capital-based club's shopping list.

"We will sign a pair of players. Right now we have to look elsewhere but calmly because there's still time," added Spalletti.

"Baptista? I've never said anything about him. Baptista is a good player who has strong characteristics (but) we are strong in central midfield."

Yorke breaks cheekbone

AFP, Sunderland

Sunderland midfielder Dwight Yorke is likely to miss the rest of the Premier League club's pre-season programme after suffering a suspected fractured cheekbone.

Yorke, 36, was hurt in a collision with goalkeeper Nikola Milojevic in Wednesday's draw against Vitoria Setubal in Portugal.

The former Manchester United star, who signed a new one-year contract at the end of last season, will now have X-rays to determine the full extent of the injury.

"We thought it was just a bang on the head, but there could be a fracture there, around his eye. He will be out for a number of weeks," Black Cats boss Roy Keane said.

'Hulk' moves to Porto

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese champions FC Porto on Friday signed Brazilian striker Givanildo Vieira de Souza, nicknamed "Hulk" for his muscular physique, for 5.5 million euros from Tokyo Verdy in Japan.

"The contract runs until June 30, 2012," said a Porto statement.

The 21-year-old began his career with Corinthians in the Brazilian top flight before moving to Tokyo Verdy in 2005.

Mikel-ele to fill Makelele boots

AFP, Macau

Chelsea midfielder John Mikel Obi said he was hoping to step into Claude Makelele's shoes by making the holding role his own next season.

The 21-year-old said he was hoping for a run in the team after the departure of Makelele, who occupied the position so successfully it has been informally named after him.

"I played that role sometimes last season and, hopefully, I'll have a long run in the team now," he said.

"It's something I've wanted -- a run in the team -- and I suppose Claude's departure has opened up that door for me, but I was playing in that role when I was in the team last season too."

Mikel played all of Wednesday's 4-0 win over Guangzhou Pharmaceutical in the "Makelele position" in front of the back four, and said he was enjoying a fresh start under new coach Luiz Felipe Scolari.

"In Avram Grant's time I was in and out of the side, and that was a bit frustrating, but it's what happens in football," he said.

"This time, under the new boss, I will try and make it my position in the team each week."

Makelele, 35, left on a free transfer this week for Paris Saint Germain this week after five years at Chelsea.



Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack (L) and striker Andrei Shevchenko stretch during a training session in Macau on Friday.

Ballack laughs off age jibes

Football

TIMES ONLINE

It is an indication of the high esteem in which Michael Ballack is held by his Chelsea team-mates that the Germany midfielder player was applauded on to the pitch before training at the Macau Stadium last night, although the fact that he had just returned from his honeymoon may also have had something to do with it.

After the departure of Claude Makelele to Paris Saint-Germain, Ballack has become Chelsea's senior player, which goes some way towards explaining the strength of his reaction to claims from Sir Alex Ferguson that he is part of an ageing team.

The Manchester United manager is not thought to have had Ballack in mind when he signalled an early start to the silly season from the Barclays Premier League champions' tour to South Africa this week, not least because he went to great lengths to try to sign him from Bayern Munich 2 years ago, but that did not prevent the Germany captain biting back with interest. Ballack insisted that Ferguson's comments should not be taken seriously, identifying them as part of the phoney war before the Premier League campaign begins next month.

"Like we always say, it's not about old or young players," Ballack said. "It's about good or bad players. Of course this team can still improve. If you're 13 or you're 31, you're not old. Look at Maka (Makelele) last season. I think he was 34 or 35, yet he still played a very good season. That's no age for a footballer."

"I don't think he (Ferguson) was talking about me or any other specific player. I think it's just what happens in the summer break - you tickle each other a little bit. What Ferguson said cannot be taken seriously."

Ballack is confident that Chelsea can prove his point by striking back at United to regain the title this season. Given the 31-year-old's impressive career, it seems harsh to characterise him as a nearly man, although the fact remains that four German titles, three German Cups and a Carling Cup represent a poor return for a player of his ability. Germany's defeat by Spain in the final of Euro 2008 is just one more disappointment to add to a lengthy list of ones that got away, including two Champions League finals and the 2002 World Cup final.

"We'll be a better team this season," Ballack said. "I think you saw towards the end of the season we were in very good shape. If the season had gone on two more weeks we could have won the league. We

are always competitive. United have had two very good seasons. They won the double last year and it was a fantastic season for them, but we were very close. We were behind them by a millimetre and this time we will try to be the first."

Much of Ballack's confidence springs from the club's appointment of Luiz Felipe Scolari, whom he met for the first time as his manager yesterday. The pair first met at that World Cup final win for Brazil in Japan six years ago and most recently locked horns in the European Championship quarter-finals in Zurich, where Scolari accused Ballack of pushing Paulo Ferreira to score what turned out to be the winning goal for Germany.

"It was the first question we spoke about, whether I pulled Paulo or not," Ballack said. "He's a nice person, but it's all different now he's my manager. It's difficult to say too much about him yet because he only talked to us for a few minutes. A lot of people have told me there is a very good atmosphere here with the new coach around the team."

Ballack's personal life is equally harmonious, which is part of the reason he wishes to extend a contract that has one year to run with an option for a further 12 months, although, unlike Frank Lampard, he is not seeking to force the club's hand. No wonder Ballack is so popular.

Inter still eyeing Lamps

THE TELEGRAPH



Despite rumours of a pending contract extension that will keep Frank Lampard at Chelsea for another four or five years, Inter Milan have not given up hope of signing the midfielder this summer, according to the Serie A club's chief executive.

The England international has been strongly linked with a move to the Nerazzurri, where he would be reunited with former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho.

Although Chelsea are reportedly reluctant to sell the 30-year-old Lampard is seemingly yet to decide where his future lies, Inter are happy to play the waiting game as he enters the final year of his contract.

"We will see how things evolve in the next coming days," said Ernesto Paolillo. "But that is not to say that the negotiations are over. Anyway, we have made sure we have a competitive team even without Lampard."

Paolillo was referring to the imminent signing of attacking midfielder Sulley Muntari from Portsmouth. The 23-year-old, who played at Udinese before moving to the Premier League, is expected to

complete the transfer over the weekend.

Earlier this week, Mourinho admitted that he was increasingly resigned to waiting another year for Lampard to join him in Italy.

"For Lampard, it will be easier to play with Chelsea until the end of his contract rather than break it now, all of a sudden," Mourinho said. "It seems to me difficult for him to be able to come here now, it's easier that he comes next season."

Lampard is on a Far East pre-season tour with the rest of the Chelsea squad and, although his future remains unresolved, he appears untroubled and scored in Chelsea's 4-0 demolition of Guangzhou Yiyao in midweek.

Meanwhile, Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon also gave a clear indication that the club were prepared to keep Lampard until the end of his contract even if he remained unwilling to sign a proposed four-year deal. "It is an important statement that he is on tour with us and we have always said that we want Frank to stay and we are confident he will," Kenyon said.

"Everything comes back to Frank at the moment. He is here and he is training exceptionally hard for us. He is a big pro and we are confident he will be with us next season. No one is stalling over

this."

Scolari has been speaking to Lampard on a daily basis about how he sees the England international fitting into a central midfield where he will be competing for places with John-Obi Mikel, Deco, Michael Essien and Michael Ballack.

"We have spoken about how to win games with Chelsea and no more," said Scolari.

Bosingwa out for 3 weeks

AFP, Macau

New Chelsea signing Jose Bosingwa faces at least three weeks on the sidelines with a torn thigh muscle, the club said on Saturday.

The Portugal right-back, 25, who lasted just 20 minutes of his debut match this week, has left the club's Asian tour after undergoing scans here.

"Jose Bosingwa's injury has been diagnosed as a small tear in his thigh. The player has returned to England for the remainder of his recovery," said a statement on Chelsea's website.

Chelsea face Chengdu Blades in their second tour match later on Saturday.

Eto'o-Benzema in swap deal?

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona are out to swap Samuel Eto'o for Karim Benzema in a deal with French champions Olympique Lyon, the Catalan daily Sport said on Saturday. Sport said that Lyon are interested in signing Eto'o, who is not wanted by the new coach of the Spanish top club Barcelona, Josep Guardiola.

According to Sport, Barca technical secretary Txiki Begiristain is trying to interest Lyon in exchanging their young forward Benzema for Eto'o.

Barca have been interested in Benzema for several months. The other forwards they are interested in, according to Sport, are Didier Drogba of Chelsea, Emmanuel Adebayor of Arsenal and Juventus' David Trezeguet.

Guardiola's new-look team - featuring new signings Daniel Alves, Marin Caceres, Gerard Pique, Seydou Keita and Alexander Hleb - is currently on a pre-season tour of Scotland.

Real go for 'Plan V'

INTERNET, undated

Spanish football champions Real Madrid are considering a transfer "Plan B" if Cristiano Ronaldo stays at Manchester United, local news reports said on Saturday. The Marca sports daily said that Ronaldo "is starting to get impatient" with his transfer saga, which has dragged on for two months now and shows no signs of being resolved quickly.

Real president Ramon Calderon remains determined to snatch the Portuguese winger away from United, who are just as determined to keep him.

The AS sports paper said that Calderon and sporting director Pedja Mijatovic are now considering signing Euro 2008 top scorer David Villa and SV Hamburg's Dutch playmaker Rafael Van Der Vaart.

AS said that crisis club Valencia would accept around 40 million euros (62.83 million dollars) for Villa, because of their massive debts.

The paper also suggested that Villa was keen to leave Valencia because of a massive internal crisis that is tearing the club apart.

Vicente Soriano, Valencia's third president in four months, said on Friday that he would not sell off any of the team's stars. At the same time, though, he did accept that the club was heavily in debt.

Real also submitted a bid for van der Vaart, allegedly in the region of 6-7 million euros (9.4-11 million dollars), but that was rejected instantly by Hamburg on Thursday.

"The offer was absolutely out of the question. We swiftly dismissed it," sports director Dietmar Beiersdorfer said in a statement on Hamburg's website.

Capello denies retirement talk

AFP, London

England coach Fabio Capello moved quickly to deny reports on Friday that he was set to retire after the 2010 World Cup.

An Italian newspaper claimed Capello would end his management career following the tournament in South Africa and said that when they asked the Italian if he planned to step down in 2010, he said, "This is certain."

Capello's four-year contract will be reviewed following the World Cup, but the 62-year-old has reiterated to the English Football Association that he has no intention of calling it quits ahead of schedule.

An FA spokesman said: "Fabio just wishes to clarify he did not mean he was planning to quit the England job after the World Cup."

"I have spoken to him and his focus is solely on one tournament at a time."

"At the moment, his full concentration is on qualifying for the 2010 World Cup and he is not thinking past that objective at the moment."

Maradona angry at Barcelona

AFP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona attacked Barcelona on Friday for their refusal to allow Argentinian superstar Lionel Messi to play in the Olympic Games.

"The Catalans are very stubborn. Barcelona must know that he has the whole country behind him," said former World Cup winner Maradona, insisting that the football competition in Beijing represented one of the few chances for a gold medal for Argentina, the defending champions.

The Olympic football tournament takes place from August 6-23 but Barcelona have a Champions League qualifier on either August 12 or 13.

Bilbao ditch tradition

INTERNET, undated



Athletic Bilbao have won admiration across Planet Football for proudly and defiantly sticking to their traditions. They were one of the first clubs to be founded in Spain, by British railway engineers in 1898.

They are the only major club in Europe never to sign a foreign player, insisting on local-born youngsters from the northern Basque provinces.

Despite, or maybe because of, this policy, Bilbao have won eight Spanish league titles and no less

than 23 Spanish cups.

They are one of the three Spanish clubs, together with twin giants Real Madrid and Barcelona, never to have been relegated since La Liga started in 1928.

And they have been the only team in Spain, and one of the very few in Europe, to have refused to carry shirt publicity.

Until now, that is. Sports daily Marca reported on Saturday that Bilbao have signed a lucrative contract with Basque oil refinery Petronor to carry their shirt publicity for the next three seasons.

The deal is to be made official on Tuesday evening, when the club will show off its shirts for next season.

The famous red-and-white

stripes will continue, but now with Petronor written across them.

Marca said that the shirt deal will earn the famous "Basque Lions" around two million euros (3.14 million dollars) per season.

This is one of the ideas of new club president Fernando Garcia Macua to increase revenue and he seems to have the approval, albeit reluctant, of most club members.

Barcelona were the other Spanish club to refuse to wear shirt publicity for many years.

In 2006, however, Barca president Joan Laporta agreed to a three-year deal to promote the work of Unicef, and the Catalans have carried publicity for the United Nations agency free of charge since then.



CARLOS TEVEZ... set to make his Manchester United deal permanent.

swiftly.

The club will now have to sort out a permanent contract with Tevez himself - in all likelihood for five years - before the transfer can be completed.

Just this week in South Africa, Gill said: "We have spoken to Carlos and see him as part of our long-term squad. We have been pleased with his first season. He is a good age, a great player and well liked within the team."

"We know what we have to do and what we have to pay. The only issue is that we would have to sort out a long-term contract for him. But it's not a problem. We can do it in September, October, November or December."

"Sir Alex has explained it to him and he is very comfortable with it." Tevez scored 14 goals for United

last season and has quickly become a favourite with United fans who are impressed not only with his abilities but also his work-rate.

The Argentina international will be offered an £80,000-a-week deal by United and has already indicated that he wants to stay.

Tevez has been owned by MSI since Joorabchian bought him from Boca Juniors for £12m in 2004 and took him to Corinthians in Brazil. From there, he went on loan to West Ham in 2006.

The £32m fee will not be paid up front by United. In reality, a sum of about £15m will be paid, with the rest following on in relation to Tevez's appearances and achievements. United's current record fee is the £29m paid to Leeds for defender Rio Ferdinand in 2002.

Rummenigge concerned

Football

AFP, Berlin

After the Federal Cartel Office's insistence the German Football League (DFL) must re-negotiate their contract to screen live Bundesliga matches, Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge has painted a bleak picture of the consequences for football in Germany.

"The day will come where we will have to state this truth in the eye and it will be painful for everyone," Rummenigge told German sports agency SID.

"I don't see a Champions League winner coming from one of the German clubs in the next few years."

On Thursday, the Federal Cartel

Office rejected the current six-year plan, starting in 2009, between the DFL and broadcasters Premiere to screen live Bundesliga football.

The current deal is worth three billion euros over six seasons, but the Federal Cartel Office has ruled the contract a monopoly.

They insist a highlights package must be available on free television before 8pm - something Premiere are keen to avoid.

The Federal Cartel Office is insisting the contract is re-negotiated and have the power to heavily penalise the DFL including taking football off air unless their demands are met.

The Bundesliga's 18 clubs are now concerned they will lose money when the new deal is decided, which will have the knock-on effect of damaging their ability to recruit players.

German clubs negotiate their television contracts through the DFL to use their collective weight to get the best price for screening Bundesliga games.

And Rummenigge, a DFL board member, wants Bayern Munich to stay with the collective agreement and not follow the paths of Real Madrid in Spain or Juventus in Italy who negotiate their own television contracts separate from other clubs in their countries.

"I still stand by the central marketing we currently have," said Rummenigge.

"If we quit the solidarity as Bayern Munich, which would help us in the short term, we would harm German football."

"We don't want to leave professional football in Germany out in the rain."

Becks-mania on wane

Football

AFP, Los Angeles

David Beckham, who sparked a wave of 'Beckhamania' one year ago when he joined the Los Angeles Galaxy, has seen the fascination slow and Major League Soccer grow due in part to his arrival.

The 33-year-old English international midfielder still draws sellout crowds, quadrupling New York Red Bulls attendance to more than 46,000 earlier this month, and Beckham souvenirs remain among the league's most popular items.

While the hype has cooled, attendance leaps when Beckham arrives in MLS venues and he deserves a lion's share of credit for the growth spurt the US league is enjoying, the latest example being plans to add two teams by 2011.

"I'd like to think so," Beckham said of his playing a major role in boosting the sport in America. "It's one of the reasons why I moved here, to be a part of growing the game here. Hopefully people are seeing the changes."

"Attendances are up 20 per cent. Shirt sales are up 780 per cent, so I heard. So it's going well. That's obviously what the game needs in this country. The hype is there and it's just about keeping it going."

Beckham's 250 million-dollar deal to jump from Real Madrid to the Galaxy brought him and wife Victoria, better known to many as Posh Spice of the Spice Girls, to Hollywood and they have been regulars on the celebrity scene.

While Beckham missed most of his debut season with injuries, he has fulfilled the promise of last year's hoopla this season in quieter fashion and helped ensure the long-

term stability and growth of the US football league.

"Soccer is definitely changing in this country and it's getting bigger, but it's going to take time," Beckham said.

"It's not just going to happen in a year or two. It's a long-term plan to raise the profile of the game in the country and it's going well so far."

MLS has 14 teams, adding Toronto last year and San Jose this season. Seattle Sounders will join next year with Philadelphia to follow in 2010 and MLS commissioner Don Garber said Thursday that two new clubs will be added by 2011.

Cities being considered for the newest clubs include Montreal, Ottawa and Vancouver in Canada and the US markets of Atlanta, Las Vegas, Portland, St. Louis and a second club in the New York area.

"There are a lot of people putting a lot of money into this league and trying to grow it, and in the next few years you going to see that emergence," Beckham said.

"I've always said that the level here is a lot higher than people actually think it is. I've been here a year now and seen some of the talented players and teams that are in this league."

Beckham, whose contract runs through to 2011, has scored five goals and set up seven more for the Galaxy in 16 MLS matches this year. The Galaxy missed the 2007 playoffs but is fighting for the Western Conference lead this year.

More time, money and support will be needed to transform MLS into a league capable of luring big-name stars in their prime from European clubs, but Beckham sees a bright future for US players such as Jozy Altidore, who went to Villarreal of Spain last month from New York. "It's going to take longer than a

year to happen, but this league and the teams in it will start attracting players from Europe," Beckham said.

"It's not just about ticket sales. It's not just about attendances. It's not just about sellingshirts."

On the other side, you see Jozy Altidore go to Villarreal and so if you're a good player in this league, you're going to have a chance to play in other big leagues in the world, in Europe."

"To be honest, I've always said that the level is a lot higher here than people actually think it is. Every game is a tough game. We do want to get it to the level of other leagues in the world."

"It will take time, but it's not that far away."

Rovers sign Robinson

AFP, Blackburn

Blackburn Rovers on Friday signed Tottenham's England goalkeeper Paul Robinson for 3.5 million pounds (4.44 million euros), the Lancashire club announced.

With the deal sealed, it's expected that Rovers' long-serving keeper Brad Friedel will complete his two million pound move to fellow English Premier League side Aston Villa.

The 28-year-old Robinson will be hoping for a fresh start at Ewood Park after a remarkable fall from grace at White Hart Lane which started when he was dropped as England's number one, and ended with his first-team spot under Juande Ramos threatened by Radek Cerny and summer signing Huelho Gomes.