



Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni wins a header ahead of Werder Bremen defender Naldo (front) during their Bundesliga encounter at the Allianz Arena in Munich on Saturday. Bayern lost the match 2-5.

Pirlo out for two months

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan midfielder Andrea Pirlo could be facing up to two months on the sidelines after suffering a thigh injury.

The Italy international sustained the problem in training on Tuesday and missed Milan's Uefa Cup victory over FC Zurich on Thursday.

Pirlo has since undergone medical examinations and scans and they revealed that the injury is more serious than first feared.

The 29-year-old is now expected to be out of action for around eight weeks and is likely to return to the fold at the beginning of December.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti will view the news as a major blow following his side's unconvincing start to the season.

Crespo to decide on future

INTERNET, undated

Inter Milan striker Hernan Crespo has announced that he will make a decision on his future in January.

The 33-year-old has been left out manager Jose Mourinho's European plans and is unhappy that he is also playing second fiddle to Adriano, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Mario Balotelli domestically.

Crespo's agent Fernando Hidalgo has previously admitted the player is likely to move on when the transfer window reopens in 2009 and that the former Lazio star would be interested in a move to Roma.

And Argentina international Crespo, who was loaned to AC Milan by Mourinho during their time together at Chelsea, has now confirmed that he is considering his future.

"Nobody told me that I would not be playing in the league games or that I wasn't in the Champions League squad," he told Ole.

"I have to wait and see how things go. My decision is to wait until January."

"If I could choose, I would remain at Inter. But if not, I could go anywhere. I want to play at least as a first or second choice striker."

"The worst thing is that I don't play and nobody tells me anything. I want to play at the 2010 World Cup. I have a year and a half to be there and that is not much. But I have to do something. Coach Basile doesn't call on me because I don't play for Inter."

"It would be amazing to be in the World Cup. It is my dream, my objective."

Juventus lose Trezeguet

INTERNET, undated

Juventus striker David Trezeguet is facing at least two months on the sidelines after being told he requires surgery on his knee injury.

The Frenchman has undergone tests after aggravating an injury in his right kneecap hamstring in Wednesday's UEFA Champions League victory over Zenit St Petersburg.

And the analysis has identified that the 30-year-old requires corrective surgery.

A statement on Juventus' official website said: "The test showed that his (Trezeguet's) hamstring will need to be operated on again."

It has yet to be decided when Trezeguet will go under the knife, with Juventus set to make a further announcement next week.

Chopra brace sinks Boro

AFP, Sunderland

Sunderland striker Michael Chopra made amends for a miserable start to the season as his double-strike clinched a 2-0 victory over Middlesbrough on Saturday.

Chopra missed the first three matches of the campaign through suspension after being sent off in a pre-season friendly, but that was the least of his problems.

The former Cardiff star has spent time in the Sporting Chance clinic, which specialises in helping sports people deal with addictions, following a stormy period in his personal life.

He put those problems behind him at the Stadium of Light to give Roy Keane's side their first home league win since April, when they also defeated local rivals Middlesbrough.

Keane had started with Chopra on the bench but sent him on before the break after an injury reshuffle. It proved an inspired decision.

After Middlesbrough winger Stewart Downing missed a second half penalty, super-sub Chopra netted twice in the final nine minutes.

Middlesbrough had been dis-

appointing in their loss at Portsmouth last weekend and boss Gareth Southgate responded by dropping record signing Alfonso Alves. But Egypt striker Mido was injured in the warm-up, forcing Southgate to reinstate Alves into his starting line-up.

Alves nearly made an instant impact when he pressured Sunderland keeper Craig Gordon into a hurried clearance as he tried to deal with Anton Ferdinand's back-pass the ball.

Sunderland's first chance came when Djibril Cisse got the benefit of a tight offside decision, but the France striker shot woefully wide.

Downing's fierce drive from Alves's blocked free-kick forced Gordon to make a fine save in the 19th minute as the visitors pressed for a breakthrough.

Jeremie Aliadiere should have done better than weakly steer his shot wide of the far post when he met Downing's cross in the 26th minute.

Alves was denied by Gordon when the Brazilian took Adam Johnson's pass and drove a low strike against the Sunderland keeper's legs.

Keane was forced to make a change on the stroke of half-time when Teemu Tainio, who hurt his shoulder in a clash with Alves, was replaced by Chopra. Gordon was

plagued by a serious of serious knee injuries, revealed that his rehabilitation from his latest setback is going "marvellously well", and despite appearing overweight in recent weeks added that his fitness is not a issue.

"People can say what they want," he added. "Let's just say I am above my usual weight, but that is normal. That isn't surprising - I have gone five months without training. There is nothing illogical about putting on a few kilos. They can say what they want, it doesn't bother me. I am going to continue to work hard and to look to reach my goal, to get back playing football. Like before."

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Helmes leads Leverkusen

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen's Patrick Helmes scored a hat-trick in their 4-0 home victory over Hanover 96 on Friday to shoot them to provisional second spot in the German league table.

Simon Rolfes got Leverkusen off the mark after five minutes, paving the way for Germany international Helmes to find the net in the 19th, 59th and 66th minutes.

Helmes' goals makes him the league's top scorer with six and Leverkusen now have the best attack in the league with 15 goals.

Bayern have nine points, one behind leaders Hamburg who travel to VfL Wolfsburg on Sunday. The tie of the weekend is champions Bayern Munich hosting Werder Bremen on Saturday.

Kaka likes Mourinho

INTERNET, undated

Milan star Kaka has revealed his penchant for Inter coach Jose Mourinho and he admits Cristiano Ronaldo deserves the Golden Ball.

The Brazilian has had a turbulent few months as he was hampered with injury but he has made his return.

The playmaker has spoken of all things calcio, including his and Milan's recent woes. Kaka has also revealed that he has taken to Jose Mourinho's humorous style.

"Like Mourinho a lot. I think his comments are hilarious and they always fill up the papers but they are never mean, they are funny," Kaka told Il Giornale.

"He is a great person and I like him and I think he is a great coach."

"Me? It has been difficult recently because of injury and I missed the Olympics, World Cup qualifiers as well as some of the new season with Milan. It wasn't easy but it's ok."

"Our early form hasn't been good but we need to change a few things. We have to make some sacrifices and fight to get back to our best."

"We seemed to have lost awareness when making mistakes but we have to find our identity again."

The midfielder magician also had a few words on Ronaldo, and on Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo.

"The best transfer? I think it was Ronaldo. A lot of Italians wanted him in Serie A because he is great and to watch his skills," added Kaka.

"If I was to choose a winner for the Golden Ball I think that he deserves it more than anyone else for what he has done."

Milan welcome Lazio to San Siro on Sunday night and they will be hoping to pick up their first Serie A points of the new season.

Henry sidelined

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona said Saturday they have told French striker Thierry Henry to stay at home and recover from illness as they travel to Sporting Gijon for a must-win third league match of the season.

Henry has been diagnosed with pharyngitis - an inflammation of the pharynx in the throat - leaving Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola to choose from between Samuel Eto'o, Lionel Messi and Bojan Krkic.

Guardiola saw his side coast to victory over Sporting Lisbon in the Champions League in midweek, however the Catalan club are in dire need of a win against the bottom side in La Liga to boost morale after a draw and defeat from their first two games has left them in 15th place.

According to reports, defeat at Sporting Gijon on Sunday would leave Barcelona with their worst start to the season in over 35 years.

In the 1973-1974 season they had one point after their first three matches.

Boca build own hotel

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentinian side Boca Juniors will open their own 15-million-dollar hotel in 2010, the club said Friday, with rooms in the 17-floor development named after some of their most famous players, including Diego Maradona.

The construction of the "Hotel Boca by Design Suites", which will boast 89 rooms will get underway later this year in the San Telmo area of the city, one of the most popular with visitors.

"There are millions of Boca fans who dream of spending a weekend in a hotel like this and where they can share the experience with their idols," said Boca Juniors president Pedro Pompilio.

Boca players would meet before matches at the hotel which will be decorated predominantly in the club colours of blue and yellow.

The Boca Juniors brand already covers some unusual areas - from a taxi company to cartoons to even a cemetery which bears the club's name.

City wait for success

Football

AFP, Manchester

Harry Redknapp may admit to glancing enviously at Mark Hughes' spending power but Manchester City are still waiting for their new-found riches to translate into significant success on the pitch.

Hughes was handed his seemingly limitless budget on transfer deadline day when the Abu Dhabi United Group announced their planned takeover of the club.

That left the manager with just enough time to break the British transfer record by spending 32.5 million pounds on Real Madrid's Robinho and after the enforced international break, the Brazilian finally made his debut last week against Chelsea.

The subsequent 3-1 defeat was a chastening experience for Hughes and his players but at least they had the excuse that Chelsea played like potential champions.

Against Omonia Nicosia five days later City had no such excuse as they stuttered their way to a 2-1 victory in Cyprus in their UEFA Cup first round first leg tie.

Prior to Robinho's arrival, Hughes had already spent ambitiously to bring in Jo, Shaun Wright-Phillips, Vincent Kompany, Pablo Zabaleta and Tal Ben Haim

And the upbeat mood around the club means that results are now quickly expected to improve in the league starting with victory over Redknapp's Portsmouth side at the City of Manchester Stadium on Sunday.

"Mark Hughes must be wondering what is happening to him after going there as manager but if you are presented with the opportunity to buy top players you don't turn it down," admitted Redknapp.

"And it's possible City could become a top side again just as they were, I remember, in the days of Colin Bell, Franny Lee and Mike Summerbee."

Hughes has been working hard to keep a lid on the growing expectation that was fuelled further last week by the suggestion Brazil striker Ronaldo could join compatriots Robinho, Jo and Elano at City after leaving AC Milan last season.

And the manager was at pains to point out that Michael Johnson's new five-year contract was evidence that the club will not abandon its home-grown youngsters in favour of more expensive big name imports.

"The key message is that if you are good enough you will prosper here," said Hughes. "Michael, Micah Richards and Daniel Sturridge are players who all have a real feeling for the club. I believe that is important if you want to progress."

Portsmouth were also in UEFA Cup action this week, beating Portugal's Vitoria Guimaraes 2-0, and have recovered well in the league after a daunting opening that included meetings with Manchester United and Chelsea.

Redknapp accepts that the injection of so much cash into City makes it even harder for his own side to challenge effectively at the top of the table and apply pressure to the well-established top-four of Chelsea, United, Arsenal and Liverpool.

The demands of competing at home and in Europe are likely to be reflected in Pompey's starting line-up with both John Utaka and Armand Traore expected to be rested after their midweek exertions.

But Redknapp insists success in the Premier League remains his club's primary ambition.

"We want to go as far as we can in Europe because we know how much it means to the fans," the manager said. "They deserve it after suffering all the barren years here."

"But long term, The Premier League is still the number one because that is how you measure progress of a club like this."

And he added: "We're in good form, three wins in a row now, and although it will be a tough game we'll have a go and be positive, attacking teams when we can."

Sunshine, rain for Pep

Football

INTERNET, undated

A mixture of optimistic sunshine - and of dark pessimistic clouds - have marked Josep Guardiola's first 100 days as coach of FC Barcelona.

On the bright side, the former 1990s "Dream Team" captain - aged just 37 and without much coaching experience - has introduced a renewed sense of optimism and expectation into a club that was mired in pessimism after two trophy-less seasons.

In addition, Guardiola has managed to restore tension, discipline and order in the dressing-room, after the lawlessness and lethargy of the Frank Rijkaard-Ronaldinho era.

Guardiola's first decision was to get rid of Ronaldinho, because of his unprofessional habits and nightlife. Nine other players followed the Brazilian through the exit door.

Guardiola also wanted to offload the explosive Samuel Eto'o - but no serious offers were received.

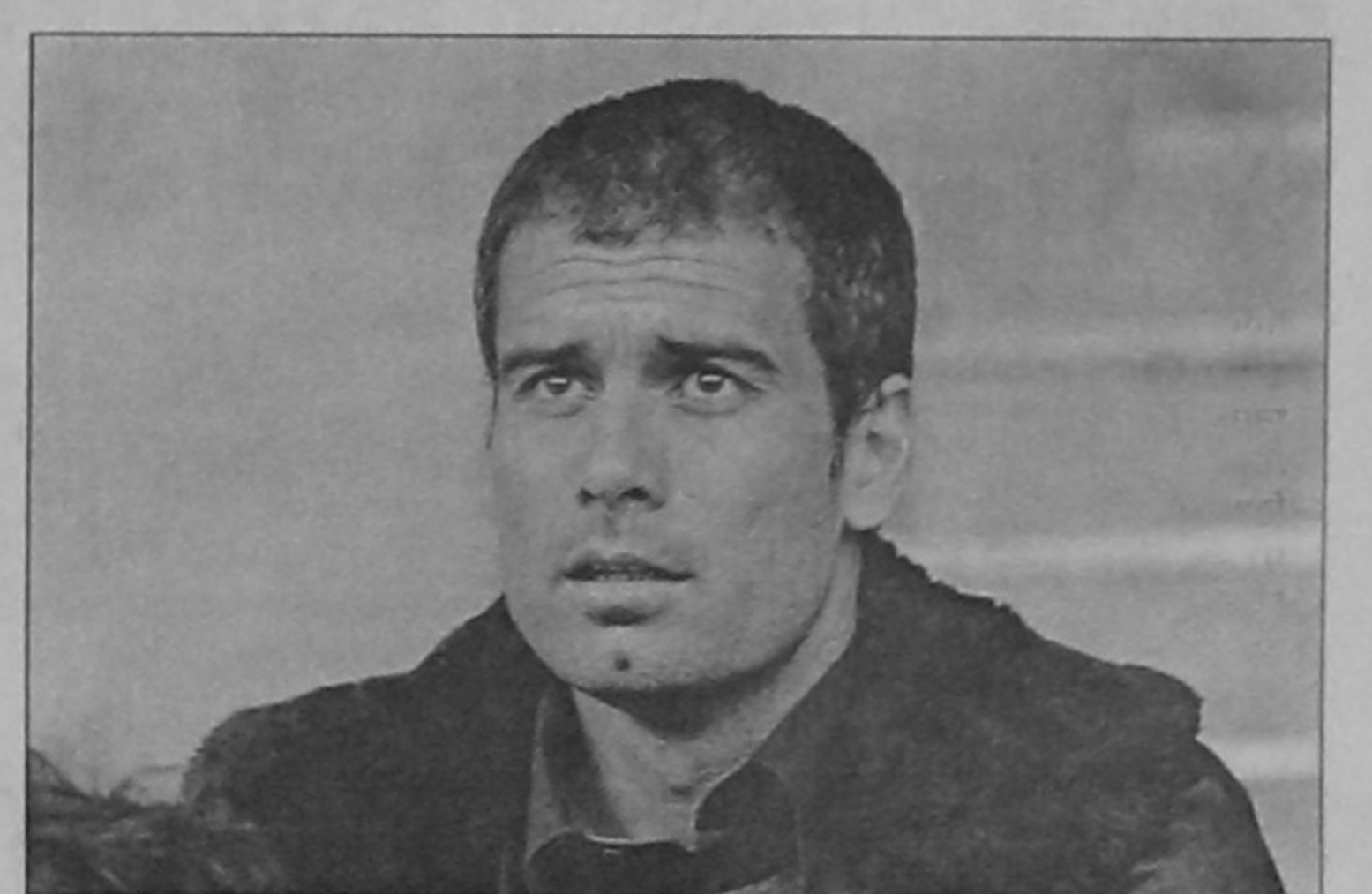
Guardiola has strengthened the defence and midfield by signing the likes of Daniel Alves, Gerard Pique, Martin Caceres, Seydou Keita and Alexander Hleb.

These new signings have helped Barca to make a good start in the Champions League (Tuesday saw a 3-1 debut against Sporting Lisbon).

The Catalan media and the Barca fans admire Guardiola for his strong work ethic and clear tactical ideas.

However, the negative side of the balance-sheet as the 100-day mark was reached on Friday is worryingly long.

The inescapable fact is that



JOSEP GUARDIOLA

Barca have made their worse start in La Liga since 1973, picking up just one point in their first two games - and this against modest opposition (Numancia and Racing Santander).

Barca are, worryingly, sixth from bottom - and have four points less than crosstown rivals Espanyol, the season's first leaders.

Guardiola's team is leaking goals as sloppily as did Rijkaard's, despite the defensive signings.

The midfield looks stronger than last season (despite Hleb's injury), but the attack is still mostly firing blanks.

Eto'o is in appalling form, Thierry Henry cuts a forlorn figure stuck out on the left - and Lionel Messi is doing his best to validate Diego Maradona's criticisms of his excessive individualism.

The poor form of the forwards makes Guardiola's attitude towards Bojan Krkic even more inexplicable.

Last season, the lively young Bojan either started or came off the bench in practically every match,

partly due to Eto'o injuries and to Ronaldinho's apathy.

Most fans expected Guardiola to give a starring role to Bojan, who has just become a full international at the tender age of 18.

Instead, the imaginative starlet has played just 54 minutes in five games - and is starting to look frustrated and indignant on the bench.

On Friday daily paper Sport calls on Guardiola to give Bojan more of a chance.

Attendance figures in the Camp Nou are down, argues Sport. What better way to restore optimism at the club, than to give Bojan "an extended run in attack... He could hardly make things worse."

At the same time, Sport asks the fans for a "margin of confidence" for Guardiola.

But if his team fails to win away to minnows Sporting Gijon on Sunday, then Guardiola's credit will start to evaporate - which will make his second 100 days even more difficult than his first 100.

Big impact by Asian Baggio

Football

AFP, Monaco

Monaco's Korean star Park Chu-yong may have already made a big impact in the French top flight, but the "Asian Baggio" says he still feels like a footballing apprentice.

Park, a two million-euro summer signing from FC Seoul, scored his side's opening goal in a 2-0 win against Lorient last weekend, and played a big part in Frederic Nimani's second to earn the man of the match award.

"I have a lot of pressure on me after my good start. I didn't know how to protect myself from that," said Park, the first Asian player to pull on the Monaco jersey.

"I'm little known in Europe ... this is a new departure."

The 23-year-old added: "I need to work hard to be at the championship level. I'm still an apprentice."

That's not necessarily a view shared by his fellow Monaco players.

"He's someone who is very intelligent and open. He has adapted quickly," said the Mediterranean side's defender Leandro Cufré.

"He surprised me against Lorient, especially his quality on the deck. His contribution takes a load off other defenders. His workrate is important for us."

Midfielder Camel Meriem said: "He proved himself in the first match. He has the look of a modern attacker, thanks to his workrate

and goal sense.

"He has an effective technique. He doesn't take the ball and attempt to make 15 passes. He looks for the right move and passes it efficiently."

Park, a Taekwondo expert, earned the sobriquet of Asian Baggio - after the Italian legend Roberto Baggio - while leading the Korean under-20 team to a record 11th Asian Youth championships in 2004.

A year later he made a scoring debut for Korea against Uzbekistan and was voted Asian Young Footballer of the Year.

In 2006 he was part of the World Cup squad in Germany but made only one appearance against Switzerland, a game Korea lost 2-0.

Park will be hoping to emulate his fellow countryman Park Ji-Sung's exploits with European and English champions Manchester United.

The former PSV Eindhoven star has made a huge impact in Sir Alex Ferguson's team of all-stars since signing in 2005, so much so that the Scot was devastated to have to exclude the Korean from his Champions League-winning squad.

"It was a terrible decision to have to take. In many ways it was the hardest decision I have ever had to make because Ji-Sung had played such a great part in the previous games against Roma and Barcelona," said Ferguson recently.

And with typical enthusiasm, Monaco's Park is taking three French language courses in a bid to help his integration into the team -

and, who knows, perhaps also into the French public's heart.

Monaco sit seventh in the league and will travel to second-placed Marseille on Sunday.

Door left open for Totti, Nesta

INTERNET, undated

Italy coach Marcello Lippi has left the international door open for Roma captain and legend Francesco Totti and Milan stopper Alessandro Nesta.

The Giallorosso decided to hang up his international boots in 2006 after he helped Italy lift their fourth World Cup trophy.

Totti has always said that he wouldn't return to the national set up but Lippi has dropped a massive hint to his former player and it seems as if the coach wants him back as he leaves the door open.

"Totti and Nesta decided to leave voluntarily and I have respect for their decisions because they gave Italy so much playing for La Nazionale," Lippi told FIFA magazine.

"However the door will always be open for them. I expect determination and enthusiasm from my players, that's the only way we can defend our 2006 title."

"I think Italy is on the same level as Germany, Brazil and Argentina in terms of football and we are condemned to win."

"Thankfully we have [Gianluigi] Buffon and he is the best goalkeeper in the world."

El Gordo linked to City

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Despite denials from Manchester City's new owners, the Brazil striker Ronaldo insists that he is in talks with the club about becoming their latest signing.

City confirmed on Tuesday they had spoken to Ronaldo and his representatives but would not be looking to sign the 31-year-old. However the player, who is currently out of contract after succumbing to another knee injury while playing for Milan last February, claims that it

is a "big possibility" he could soon be joining his fellow Brazilians Robinho, Jo and Elano at Eastlands.

"Yes, it is a big possibility," Ronaldo told the French newspaper L'Equipe when asked whether he would be interested in playing in England. "Manchester City are in the process of putting in place an unbelievable project, with some great players. A project which is long term but which could get immediate results because City want to topple the existing order of world football. We are in the process of talking to them. So we will see."

The three-time World Player of the Year, whose career has been

plagued by a serious of serious knee injuries, revealed that his rehabilitation from his latest setback is going "marvellously well", and despite appearing overweight in recent weeks added that his fitness is not a issue.

"People can say what they want," he added. "Let's just say I am above my usual weight, but that is normal. That isn't surprising - I have gone five months without training. There is nothing illogical about putting on a few kilos. They can say what they want, it doesn't bother me. I am going to continue to work hard and to look to reach my goal, to get back playing football. Like before."

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Argentine football legend Diego Armando Maradona (R) waves during a press conference in Cancun, Mexico on Friday.