

Toni ready to return

AFP, Berlin

Italian World Cup winner Luca Toni will return to action for Bayern Munich on Sunday against Schalke 04, the Bundesliga champions announced Friday.

The 31-year-old Toni has been hampered since mid-October with a rib injury, which notably left him on the sidelines for Wednesday's Champions League clash at his old club Fiorentina.

On Friday Bayern manager Jurgen Klinsmann said the Italian is fit, and he wants to see him back to his goalscoring best.

"Luca will be with us on Sunday," confirmed Klinsmann. "He appears to be fighting fit, so I hope he's hungry for goals."

Bayern are currently third in the table with 21 points, four adrift of surprise pacesetters Hoffenheim.

Van Nistelrooy faces long layoff

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's talismanic Dutch striker Ruud Van Nistelrooy could be sidelined for two to three months if he undergoes surgery on his injured knee, according to reports.

Van Nistelrooy was the top scorer in the Spanish league last season so any prolonged absence would prove a huge setback for Real, whose limitations in attack have been exposed of late.

The Madrid giants sit third in La Liga two points adrift of on-form arch rivals Barcelona, but were resoundingly beat 2-0 by Juventus in the Champions League in midweek.

Real have confirmed that Van Nistelrooy, who is out of Saturday's league match against Malaga, is suffering from the same external meniscus injury on his right knee which prompted him to go under the knife in 2000.

The club said the Dutchman is set to consult American doctor Richard Steadman, who carried out that operation eight years ago. According to Spanish sports dailies AS and Marca Saturday, a second operation is imminent.

AS added that Real are already looking into the possibility of signing VfB Stuttgart's German international striker Mario Gomez, 23, as a replacement.

Barca after Fabregas

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona have made Cesc Fabregas their No. 1 priority for next summer and are prepared to offer \$47 million to pry him back to Camp Nou, according to an outlandish report.

The Catalan outfit have been linked with their former youth team product before, but Fabregas' discontent with life at the Emirates could see him tempted to make a return home, the Daily Star reported.

Fabregas has stated that he would stay with the Gunners while Arsene Wenger remains in charge, and the latest news is linked to rumours that the manager could be prepared to walk away at the end of the season.

If the news is true, then it would mark a major U-turn on the part of Barca sporting director Txiki Begiristain, who has always claimed that he would only consider signing the player if he asked to go back.

Barca were upset that Fabregas chose to leave the club and have stated publicly that they would not be prepared to make the first move for a player that chose to play elsewhere. But the Daily Star claim to have spoken to a Camp Nou insider and the news is that things have changed with Barcelona, who are now prepared to bring back the playmaker.

"Pique returned to Barcelona and now we want Fabregas back," the paper claims a club source said. "Barcelona know that he loves the club and they will do whatever they can to use the emotional ties he has with Barca to get him to return."

"It will take a lot of money, but he will be the No. 1 priority."

Any grain of truth in the story could come from Joan Laporta's desire to leave his mark on the team and signing Fabregas ahead of the president's final term in charge would do just that.

Boruc to have knee surgery

AFP, Glasgow

Poland goalkeeper Artur Boruc is to have knee surgery after his club Celtic's Scottish Premier League match with Motherwell here on Saturday, the Scottish champions announced Friday.

The decision that Boruc should go under the knife means he will miss Celtic's Champions League trip to Aalborg at the end of this month, a match Celtic must win to keep their faint hopes of reaching the knockout stage alive.



Chelsea manager Luiz Felipe Scolari (R) poses with latest signing Brazilian midfielder Mineiro during a photocall at their training ground in Cobham on Friday.

Ince relishes Blues tie

AFP, Blackburn



Paul Ince, the Blackburn Rovers manager, faces Chelsea on Sunday expecting the Premiership title hopefuls to provide his team with a strong physical challenge.

In a week in which Arsene Wenger publicly criticised Stoke City for their physical approach in the recent victory over Arsenal, the issue of underdog teams trying to out-muscle the Premiership elite has been to the fore.

But Ince, a former midfielder well known for relishing the physical side of the game in his own playing days, believes that Chelsea are now capable of mixing both styles of football.

"Chelsea can do both sides of the game now. They can play and they can also handle the physical side of the game," said the former England international.

"You look at the likes of John Terry, Carvalho, John Obi-Mikel and you can see that they are a big side."

"Last season, they had a lot of 1-0 wins, so that shows they are a team well capable of defending a lead. They defend, they can tackle and they are strong players."

"But since Luiz Scolari came in, he has taken them to another level and they are now playing

Manchester United-style football. So that makes them twice as hard to beat because they are top notch at both aspects."

"They have world-class players, so when you come up against them, you have to rely on your work ethic and getting in people's faces to get results against the big boys."

"But when the big boys are capable of exactly the same thing, but with world-class players, they are going to out-play you and you can't do anything about it. That's a fact."

Ince, a former favourite with Manchester United and Liverpool, believes those two clubs are genuine title contenders, along with the team he faces at Ewood Park on Sunday.

And the Blackburn manager finds it difficult to separate the three early-season pace setters. "Are Chelsea better than United? I don't think so, and you shouldn't forget Liverpool in there either," he said.

"They've changed as a team and the players seem to be enjoying what they are doing. With the likes of Deco in there, Chelsea are now playing football the way it should be played. We just need to hope they have an off day if we are to get the win."

"But if Hull and Stoke can beat Arsenal, then there is no reason why we can't beat Chelsea."

Scolari, however, has been

shocked at the physical style of Premiership football despite making an instant, and impressive, impact on English football.

"Yes, I have been surprised at how physical it is," he said. "You never look at a club in English football and think their players are small. They all have big bodies."

"Sometimes, there is more physical contact in games but, hopefully, we're not bad at that."

"All the teams have a minimum ten players who are about 1m 90cm (6'3") so sometimes you need to do something different in training because you are playing against a team that has six or seven players inside your area and that makes a big problem for us because we're not that big."

"We need some strategic movements to control the game and control throw-ins and corner kicks."

Scolari is expected to hand veteran Brazilian midfielder Mineiro his debut on Sunday with Nigeria midfielder John Mikel Obi making way as a result of the mistakes which contributed to two of Roma goals in their 3-1 midweek win over Chelsea in Rome.

England defender Ashley Cole misses the trip with a calf problem while Michael Essien, who had knee surgery earlier in the season, and Michael Ballack (foot) are long-term absentees.

Spalletti calls for calm

AFP, Rome

AS Roma coach Luciano Spalletti has moved to calm down expectation following Tuesday's stunning 3-1 victory over Chelsea.

The Italian's Champions League Group A victory not only gave them a European lifeline but came as a welcome boost to morale and confidence in an otherwise dire season.

Roma are still just one point and one place above the Serie A relegation zone having begun the season with ambitions of pushing for the title.

On Saturday they travel to lowly Bologna, who will be boosted by the arrival of new coach Sinisa Mihajlovic, a former Roma player.

"We've won one match but we've lost many others, we have to keep working seriously," said Spalletti, as a word of caution before looking on the bright side.

"However, the lads can now work with the tranquillity that was previously missing. That's vital for the team to find its game."

"It's better to expect the worst but the new found enthusiasm was clear for all to see in the changing room after the Chelsea match."

"It's spirit that counts and if you have that everything goes well. I hope the bad times are behind us."

Mihajlovic meanwhile has told his new charges to have no fear, regardless of their opponents. "You don't need a missile, all you need is a water-pistol, as long as you hit them in the eye," he said cryptically.

Cologne tops Hannover

INTERNET, undated

Substitute Wilfried Sanou scored the winner as Cologne beat Hannover, 2-1, on Friday to continue their fine recent form in the Bundesliga.

Cologne now has won five of their last seven matches, a run which has seen them climb to sixth in the table, just six points behind league-leading Hoffenheim.

Despite going behind to Jan Schlaudraff's goal in the 15th minute, Cologne rallied under the leadership of captain Peti.

Pedro Geromel equalized for the hosts before halftime before Sanou hit the winner in the 71st minute.

Hannover got off to the perfect start when a poor corner kick from Cologne gave them a chance to launch a counter-attack down the left wing through Mikael Forsell.

His cross found Schlaudraff and the former Bayern Munich man picked out the bottom right corner from just outside the area.

Hannover could have then doubled its advantage, but Jiri Stanjer missed the target from six yards out, and the visitors were left to rue that miss when Cologne pulled level in the 42nd minute.

Youssef Mohamed headed Miso Brecko's corner back across the area and Geromel's shot from six yards out was given as a goal after the referee's assistant ruled the ball had crossed the line.

Replays showed Szabolcs Huszti's attempts to clear had come too late and the decision was correct.

Cologne then got the winner midway through the second half when Huszti botched a clearance of Pierre Wome's cross and Sanou pounced on the ball and fired home from 25 yards.

Any lingering hopes of a revival for Hannover disappeared in the 89th minute when Stanjer was dismissed for a foul on Roda Antar.

Serena pulls out

Tennis

AFP, Doha

Serena Williams' chances of ending the year on a high note evaporated unexpectedly when she withdrew Friday from the Sony Ericsson championships with a stomach muscle problem.

The younger of the two world-beating sisters had been in tears during her odd one-sided 5-7, 6-1, 6-0 defeat to Venus Williams during their round robin match Thursday - and it emerged that she may have suffered the injury then.

"I had zero pain last night," Serena said of her post-match experience. "But I didn't serve well and I think that's why I was doing that. I might have been over-compensating."

"When I got home I didn't feel pain. But when I woke up I was in pain. I have had this before and so when I felt this it was like a red flag. I went to see how I felt in practice yesterday, and it was hard when I

was hitting ground strokes. I didn't want to risk it."

Serena was challenged by a British journalist who suggested that sometimes in a major tournament such as this she should play through the pain for the sake of the event and for the sponsors.

"I think what I should do is make you work out, have a severe stomach strain and play for the sponsors," she chided.

When the journalist suggested he would have, Serena responded with satirical laughter, adding: "You really should. You should go for it and live the dream!"

Later she explained: "I had this once in LA and played through it and I was out for six to eight weeks. So when I had these symptoms I thought I must start the New Year well. I can't afford to be out for so long."

The setback means that Serena is unable to take the chance of avenging herself for her Olympic loss to Elena Dementieva, who went on to take the gold medal in Beijing in August.

Nadia Petrova came in as the second alternate to take on her fellow Russian instead, but Dementieva is already certain of qualifying for the semifinals, where she joins her compatriot Vera Zvonareva, Jelena Jankovic, and Venus.

It was the tournament's second major setback within two hours, for earlier another former world number one, Ana Ivanovic, withdrew with a virus.

Jankovic, the world number one from Serbia, was meanwhile beaten Friday by Zvonareva, the last player to qualify for the original eight.

The little-considered Russian's 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 surprise victory means that she remains unbeaten with three wins, finishes top of her group, and avoids facing Wimbledon champion Venus Williams in Saturday's semifinals.

Instead, Zvonareva will meet her compatriot Dementieva, the Olympic champion, while Venus will play Jankovic.

Wenger not quitting

Football

AFP, London

Under-pressure Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger denied he could quit the Gunners following criticism of recent performances, saying on Friday: "No, I love it here."

Wenger's team, who host Manchester United on Saturday, squandered Premiership points recently against Tottenham and Stoke and failed to beat Turks Fenerbahce at the Emirates stadium in midweek Champions League action.

Wenger reiterated his commitment to Arsenal despite his youngsters' recent struggles, insisting he would not swap places with Manchester United counterpart Alex Ferguson.

Former Arsenal goalkeeper Bob Wilson has suggested the criticism levelled at Wenger, after going without a trophy since 2005, could lead to the Frenchman walking away.

Wenger, who has a contract until 2011, told British media: "No, I love it here. I don't question my commitment for Arsenal and I could show you concrete signs that I've done that over the years."

The Frenchman's commitment stems from the faith he has in his

young players to turn their season around after a dismal week.

"I would not exchange today my position with any manager of any other team because I believe strongly in our qualities," he said.

"If the result at the end of the season will be based on experience, we will go down. Every single team has more experience than we have."

"I don't believe that success is linked with experience. It is linked with desire, with talent, with intelligence. You can be intelligent at 18 or 20 and you can be stupid at 30."

"The solution is not always to buy players. The solution for me at the moment is to trust the players I have because I trust their strengths, I trust their intelligence so let's show it."

Wenger feels his squad will match Ferguson's in terms of quality.

"I believe we are as good as well," he said. "It is down to us to develop well and to show that we can win big games. Manchester United is a great side but we have a good opportunity to show we can beat them."

"I believe in my team and I'm very proud of the job I'm doing as well, even if at the moment we are not as good as I want them to be."

"There is no alarming sign of the team not having the potential and I am convinced there is a mental strength there."

Victory over United would also

lift spirits after the last week, when morale appeared to low.

"Morale is of course down when we don't win," he said. "We have to keep winning, learn from what has happened to us and continue to believe in our strengths."

Wenger accused Stoke players of deliberately trying to injure his players last week, and he also feels his team are treated differently by referees when it comes to bookings and fouls.

He has called on referee Howard Webb to protect his players against United.

"I have nothing against physical games. What I want is just that the referee protects both teams on the pitch, makes the right decisions," Wenger said. "I expect a committed game."

Wenger's preparations have not been helped by injury concerns to Mikael Silvestre (nose), William Gallas (hamstring), Bacary Sagna (ankle) and Theo Walcott (shoulder).

They will require late checks but forward Robin van Persie is suspended, while Emmanuel Adebayor (ankle) and Emmanuel Eboué (knee) will miss out, along with long-term absentees Tomas Rosicky and Eduardo.

"You can risk one or two but not three or four because if something happens you have no potential change anymore," Wenger said.

Spurs test for City

AFP, Manchester



They might have broken the British transfer record with the astonishing 32.5-million-pound move for Robinho on September 1, but Manchester City are quickly discovering that keeping goals out is just as important as providing the Brazilian forward with the chances to score.

Mark Hughes's team face Spurs on Sunday having shipped eleven goals in their last six games in all competitions and the high hopes which followed the Abu Dhabi-backed takeover of the club two months ago have been replaced by an eager anticipation of the opening of the January transfer window.

With Hughes flying out to Abu Dhabi to meet the new owners on Tuesday, another negative result against Spurs will make for an uncomfortable trip for the City manager, whose team has lost four of its last eight games.

The inconsistency of the team has left City languishing in mid-table ahead of the Spurs visit and

captain Richard Dunne admits that the players must quickly address the defensive frailties.

He said: "At the moment, we're a side who are going to entertain people, but probably not get many results if we keep defending as we are."

"Over the last few years we've not conceded many, but then we've not really scored many goals. Now we're starting to score a lot, but we're conceding too many."

"I think it takes time to find a balance and keep an even keel where people are doing both jobs. Over the next few games we'll have to tighten up at the back and make ourselves difficult to beat. It is the eleven of us who have to defend as a team it is not just down to the goalkeeper and the back four."

Spurs are unbeaten under new manager Harry Redknapp since his arrival as replacement for the sacked Juande Ramos two weeks ago and Dunne admits that the change at the top has made the London club a much tougher proposition.

He said: "Spurs had a poor start, but I think now with the change in

manager and a new face around the dressing room, there has been a whole attitude change."

"They now look like a side who are going to keep pushing up the table. They're looking really good at the moment and it'll make it a very difficult game for us."

The goalscoring form of Darren Bent, who now has nine goals this season following his UEFA Cup hat-trick against Dinamo Zagreb in midweek, has been key to Tottenham's revival and manager Redknapp admits he has been impressed by the former England striker.

He said: "It's a terrific return getting nine goals and hopefully he can keep going. Darren has done well."

"This is the first time I've worked with him, he has a good attitude and works hard at his game. I think we have three strikers who can do the job."

"There's competition for places up front. Darren and Roman (Pavlyuchenko) are both scoring goals and Fraizer Campbell has shown terrific enthusiasm when he has been involved."



Cologne's Pedro Geromel (2nd from L) scores his team's first goal during their Bundesliga match against Hannover 96 at Cologne on Friday.

PHOTO: INTERNET