

## Ballack is welcome to stay

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Luiz Felipe Scolari has told Michael Ballack age will be no barrier if the German wants to extend his stay at Stamford Bridge.

Ballack's current contract expires at the end of the season and Chelsea are yet to open talks over an extension.

The 32-year-old midfielder has endured an injury-hit two seasons with the Premier League club, but Scolari insists he would be delighted to continue working with the German star.

The Blues have an option to extend the deal by another two years if both parties are happy with the terms and talks are likely to start in the New Year.

"He is a player who is very professional and who I like to work with," Scolari said.

"He has a German style, direct. I like that. In the future we will see what will happen with Chelsea but his age is no problem because he is young and plays very well."

"If Chelsea can agree a deal it is fantastic for me but we have not had a conversation about this yet."

Scolari's league leader face struggling Newcastle at Stamford Bridge on Saturday without suspended Ivorian striker Didier Drogba.

But the Brazilian coach revealed Joe and Ashley Cole are both ready to return following injury and midfielder Frank Lampard should be fit after recovering from the rib problem that kept him out of England's win over Germany in midweek.

## Gerrard out of Fulham clash

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard will miss Saturday's clash against Fulham as he recovers from the muscle tear which stopped him playing in England's win over Germany on Wednesday.

Gerrard has been in light training but Liverpool boss Rafa Benitez ruled him out of the Premier League fixture and admitted the midfielder's chances of being fit for next week's Champions League game with Marseille are only 50-50.

"He is improving but it is still too soon for this weekend," Benitez told Liverpool's website.

"He is still working with the physios so he will not be fit for this game. He might be available for Wednesday but it depends on his progress. Hopefully we will have him back for the Marseille game."

Full-back Alvaro Arbeloa returns after a one-match ban and Robbie Keane has recovered from the shoulder injury which kept him out of the Republic of Ireland's friendly against Poland.

"I think he (Keane) will be okay," Benitez said. "He was training today (Friday) so he should be fit for the game."

"Some of the players who have returned from international games are a little bit tired, but I think most of them will be okay for this weekend."

## Donovan joins Bayern on loan

AFP, Berlin

Los Angeles Galaxy forward Landon Donovan has signed a short-term contract Thursday on loan to German giants Bayern Munich after impressing coach Jurgen Klinsmann on his 10-day trial.

With Galaxy currently on their winter break, Donovan, 26, will be with Bayern from January to March next year with Klinsmann hoping the United States forward can stay until the end of the season.

"Donovan made a very good impression during the ten days with us," explained Klinsmann, who has signed the American as fourth-choice striker behind Luca Toni, Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski.

"I need a fourth striker in the team and Landon will give us new possibilities in attack if someone is injured," said Klinsmann.

Last week, Donovan was named US football's Player of the Year for the fifth time, but struggled to impress on his last sojourn to the Bundesliga when he had a brief spell at Bayer Leverkusen.

Donovan has won 105 caps for his country and his market value is around 2.5 million euros (3.1 million US dollars).

## Title race gathers pace

AFP, London

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez expects the feelgood factor from his Spanish contingent's international adventure will help keep the pressure on Premier League leaders Chelsea.

Benitez breathed a sigh of relief as his players returned in one piece after friendly matches with their countries in midweek and he was especially pleased that Fernando Torres, Xabi Alonso, Albert Riera, Pepe Reina and Alvaro Arbeloa all starred in Spain's 3-0 win over Chile in Villarreal.

With their morale sky-high after impressing for Spain, Benitez is confident the quarter will be determined to claim a crucial win over Fulham at Anfield on Saturday to ensure they stay level on points with Chelsea, who are at home to struggling Newcastle. "It was good to see so many of our players involved because it shows how important

Liverpool are," he said. "I was especially pleased for Arbeloa and Riera because they are getting their reward for working hard and doing a good job for a good club."

"Hopefully now the players will all come back to us and they be fit and ready for the game against Fulham because that is the most important thing for us now."

Chelsea will be without suspended star Didier Drogba against Newcastle but Nicolas Anelka has proved more than capable of deputising for the Ivory Coast forward.

Anelka took his goal tally

FIXTURES	
(1500GMT unless stated)	
<b>Saturday</b>	Aston Villa v Man Utd (1730GMT), Chelsea v Newcastle, Liverpool v Fulham, Man City v Arsenal, Middlesbrough v Bolton, Portsmouth v Hull, Stoke v West Brom
<b>Sunday</b>	Sunderland v West Ham (1600GMT), Tottenham v Blackburn (1330GMT)
<b>Monday</b>	Wigan v Everton (2000GMT)

for the season to 13 in last weekend's win at West Brom and he should get plenty of chances to add to that total against one of the Premier League's leakiest defences.

Newcastle's best form of defence could be attack and interim boss Joe Kinnear hopes the return of Michael Owen for his first start since early October will unsettle Luiz Felipe Scolari's side.

"Michael's getting sharper and sharper. I'd say he is close to 100 percent now."

Manchester United return to one of their happiest hunting grounds as Sir Alex Ferguson's team aim to stay in touch with Chelsea and Liverpool.

United have won 11 of their last 12 visits to Aston Villa and the hosts, who would move into the top four with a victory, are desperate to improve that dismal record.

While the top three show few signs of stumbling, Arsenal are lurking from one crisis to another and Arsene Wenger's side travel to Manchester City apparently on the verge of imploding.

## Maradona's daughter recovers

AFP, Madrid

Diego Maradona, fresh from his opening win as Argentine coach, said on Thursday that seeing his daughter recover from a worrying setback with her pregnancy represented the high point of his week.

Maradona's daughter Giannina, the girlfriend of Argentine international Sergio Aguero, was hospitalised here on Wednesday and the football legend flew to Spain immediately after seeing his team beat Scotland 1-0 in Glasgow.

"Giannina will be going home, all is well and she will sleep peacefully. It's my biggest victory this week," Maradona told Argentine radio La Red.

The World Cup winner arrived in Madrid with his former wife Claudia Villafane, the mother of Giannina and his other daughter Dalma.

## Minister blasts Atletico ruling

AFP, Madrid

The decision by sport's highest court to uphold a ruling that Atletico Madrid must play a Champions League match in an empty stadium because of alleged racist behaviour by its fans is "deeply unfair", Spanish Interior Minister Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba said Friday.

"I think it is deeply unfair. I express my full solidarity with Atletico. I spoke last night with the president of the club," he told public radio RNE.

"I really regret it because if you look at it closely, first they punished them for racist offences and when it was shown that they did not take place they sanctioned them for the way police handled it," he said.

"I am a football fan, I watch matches every Sunday and if you punish Atletico Madrid for this, stadiums would not open in half of Europe," he added.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) halved Thursday a fine for Atletico Madrid to 75,000 euros (94,000 dollars) after its fans appeared to chant racist insults during a Champions League fixture against Marseille on October 1.

But the court said that Atletico's upcoming Champions League match in their Vicente Calderon stadium against PSV Eindhoven on Wednesday will still have to be played behind closed doors.

European football's top governing body UEFA had on October 14 imposed a two-match spectators ban and a fine of 150,000 euros, but then reduced it to a one-match ban.

Atletico then appealed the ruling to CAS, arguing that UEFA did not have evidence to prove its fans were racist and violent during the match.

He's never scored against Juve?" asked Moratti. "Well the important thing is that Ibrahimovic plays like he did against Palermo."

"He's in form. Whether he scores or sets one up, the important thing is that he continues to play well."

Should that match finish goalless, Milan could return to the top of the table with victory at Torino.

In other games Fiorentina host Udinese with both teams coming into the match off a defeat and needing three points to try to relaunch their title hopes.

Napoli and Lazio, who also lost last week, will be trying to keep pace with the top three as they host Genoa and Cagliari respectively.

And AS Roma will try to build on recent victories over Lazio and Chelsea as they travel to Lecce looking for their first away points of the season.

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## Gallas may lose captaincy

AFP, London

William Gallas faces a fight to hold onto the Arsenal captaincy after the France defender came under fire for his shock blast at his young team-mates.

Gallas lifted the lid on the simmering discontent in the Arsenal dressing room in a remarkably candid interview on Thursday.

The 31-year-old accused the club's youngsters of lacking the stomach to fight for the Premier League title, claimed he had to separate arguing team-mates during half-time of his side's 4-4 draw against Tottenham and insisted an unnamed Gunners star insulted him and several colleagues.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was furious with Gallas's outburst and reportedly summoned the centre-back to a meeting at the club's London Colney training ground on Thursday.

Wenger has gone out of his way to defend Gallas against accusations that he lacks leadership skills ever since the defender was criticised for his on-pitch tantrum at the end of Arsenal's draw at Birmingham last season.

But the former Chelsea star's latest rant could prove the final straw for Wenger.

Although the French coach won't rush into a decision before Saturday's game at Manchester City, the Times claims he could hand the captain's armband to Cesc Fábregas or Gael Clichy if the rest of Arsenal's squad express unhappiness with Gallas's comments.

## Miss World to add spice

AFP, Johannesburg

Miss World contestants will bring charm and glamour as they assist during Saturday's draw for the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup in Johannesburg, organisers said in a statement Friday.

"The eight Miss World candidates from the respective participating countries and continents -- Brazil,



Miss World Zilin Zhang of China poses at the Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg on Thursday. Zilin along with other contestants will assist in the 2009 Confederations Cup draw on Saturday.

Egypt, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, United States and reigning Miss World -- will lend a helping hand during the draw to determine the two groups for the eight-team competition," it said.

Miss World Zilin Zhang, who is from China, will represent Asian Champions Iraq at the draw, the statement said.

The eight beauty queens will assist FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke during the draw, also to be witnessed by the body's vice president Jack Warner and CAF president Issa Hayatou, it said.

The 58th Miss World pageant will be held in Johannesburg on December 13.

"Hosting as prestigious as event as the Miss World competition again underlines South Africa's ability to stage major global events. And as for the beautiful contestants assisting me on Saturday, it is certainly a draw I will be looking forward to more than most," Valcke said in the statement.

The Confederations Cup has traditionally been used to test a host country's state of preparedness for the World Cup.

The World Cup, which will be played in Africa for the first time, will be staged from June 11 to July 11, 2010. Its final draw will be held on December 4 in Cape Town.

The June 14 to 28 Confederations Cup, to be staged in four South African stadia, is expected to bring together continental football champions ahead of the 2010 World Cup.

## Schuster walks tightrope

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid players have been coming out in support of under pressure coach Bernd Schuster but the German manager knows results are what count and a home win against Recreativo Huelva on Saturday is crucial for both coach and club.

League leaders Barcelona have opened up a five-point gap over fourth-placed Real and the champions can't afford another slip-up after a 1-0 defeat at Valladolid last weekend that means they have collected four points from their last nine.

All the talk this week has been of who is going to replace Schuster - with AC Milan coach Carlos Ancelotti the big name mentioned in the Spanish newspapers - but everyone at the Santiago Bernabeu has been unusually tight-lipped in the press.

Last season it was Barcelona and their now

departed coach, Frank Rijkaard who were in crisis but now their fans are gloating after scoring 36 goals in 28 games and conceding just eight - meaning they have the best attack and defence in the league.

Barca hold a three-point cushion over Villarreal and will hope their title rivals drop points on Saturday before their home match against Getafe on Sunday.

Lionel Messi has been simply sensational this season and Spanish international Xavi believes the Argentine is as good as Brazilian Ronaldo in his Barca pomp.

"For me Messi is the best

player in the world and he is at the level of Ronaldinho when he was at his best in his first two seasons at Barca," added Xavi.

Villarreal, still unbeaten, can move level on points with Barcelona providing they can defeat Valladolid on Saturday night.

The undoubted game of the weekend also takes place on Saturday with title hopefuls Sevilla and Valencia locking horns in Seville.

Valencia sit two places above Sevilla in third, however, it is only on goal difference with both teams on 23 points.

Sevilla beat Valencia home and away last season and Valencia's Spanish international Raul Albiol hopes for an improvement on the 3-0 drubbing in Seville last time out.

"It is not an easy ground to play at," admitted Albiol. "We hope we give a better account of ourselves than last season."

With Sevilla and Valencia facing each other Atletico Madrid, five points off the pair, have a great chance to close in on their rivals when they travel to Numancia on Sunday.

## Juve, Inter face off

AFP, Rome

Juventus are brimming with confidence ahead of this weekend's crunch clash against champions Inter Milan.

Juve are only three points behind Jose Mourinho's leaders in third place and come into the match off the back of seven successive victories in all competitions.

Their last was one of their most impressive with a 4-1 defeat of Genoa who had previously come away from the San Siro with a 0-0 draw against Inter.

Juve's Brazilian forward Amauri is convinced his team can more than match Inter.

"If we take to the pitch with the same mentality as in the last seven games we will do well," he said.

"At this time of year a result cannot be decisive but nevertheless it's a crucial match: the winners could go top of the league."

"Juve are in great form while Inter won well against Palermo. They will be at home and will have that little lift."

"But looking back at our

last seven matches, at the two victories over Real, that too can give us a boost."

"Juve are playing better at the moment."

Claudio Ranieri's side did not start the season very well, winning only two of their first seven Serie A matches.

But five scudetto successes on the bounce has launched them up the table and only Milan rivals Inter and AC sit above them.

Even Inter president Massimo Moratti is getting excited about this match, after which Juventus could return to the top of Serie A for the first time since being stripped of the 2006 title, and relegated, for match-fixing.

"The tension is always there for this type of 'classic' match which is eagerly anticipated by both players and

FIXTURES	
<b>Saturday</b>	Fiorentina v Udinese, Inter Milan v Juventus
<b>Sunday</b>	Bologna v Palermo, Chievo v Siena, Lazio v Genoa, Lecce v AS Roma, Napoli v Cagliari, Reggina v Atalanta, Sampdoria v Catania, Torino v AC Milan

fans," he said.

One of the key players is expected to be Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who scored twice last weekend against Palermo but has never netted against his former employers.

"He's never scored against Juve?" asked Moratti. "Well the important thing is that Ibrahimovic plays like he did against Palermo."

"He's in form. Whether he scores or sets one up, the important thing is that he continues to play well."

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## 'Ronaldo tried to break my leg'

Football

INTERNET, undated

Cristiano Ronaldo was accused of almost breaking a Brazil defender's leg on a miserable night for the Portugal and Manchester United star.

The 23-year-old had hoped to press his claim as the best player in the world during the friendly in Brasilia, but was largely anonymous as his team were hammered 6-2.

The winger clashed with several opponents and sulked through the match as Kaka, Robinho and Luis Fabiano far outshone Ronaldo.

And Brazil centre back Thiago Silva, who has been linked with a January move to Chelsea, criticised the former Sporting Lisbon player for a crude tackle in the second half.

Silva, who is set to leave Fluminense when his contract runs out next month, refused to let Ronaldo help him in his feet after the challenge and the pair exchanged words on the

pitch.

The 24-year-old defender said: "I don't accept his apology. He has the cheek to say I jumped over his tackle. But if I did not jump he would have broken my leg."

"Being considered the best player in the world, he must have more respect. It is difficult to accept what he did."

"He is a little (naughty), yes. But that is football. And we need to know to deal with it. 'He was nervous because he couldn't create anything.'"

The incident came towards the end of Portugal's humbling by a team who had failed to score in five of their last seven games and were reportedly on the verge of ousting manager Dunga.

Things started brightly for Portugal when Zenit St Petersburg forward Danny scored in the fourth minute. But Sevilla's Luis Fabiano responded quickly with the first of a hat-trick. Maicon, Elano and Adriano scored the rest for Brazil, while Simao hit Portugal's second.

Ronaldo had swept into Brazil earlier in the week cheekily insisting he was the first, second and third best players in the world.

But reigning Ballon d'Or and FIFA World Footballer of the Year Kaka showed him a trick or two.

Ronaldo consistently looked frustrated and complained to the referee within seven minutes after limping out of a challenge with Manchester City rival Elano. Late in the game he clashed with a possible future teammate - Real Madrid left-back Marcelo.

The pair squared up and the Brazilian said afterwards: "He poked me in the chest and I said that he shouldn't do that. He wanted to shout louder than me and then I replied. But this is a game, it's normal."



Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo (R) fights with Brazil defender Marcelo during their international friendly at the Bezerrao Stadium in Brasilia on Wednesday.

## Stars praise Capello

Football

AFP, London

Fabio Capello has restored the feelgood factor to England after only a year in charge but his players have revealed the headline approach behind the dramatic improvement.

Just 12 months ago English football was at its lowest ebb for a decade as Steve McClaren's ignominious reign as national team coach culminated in failure to qualify for Euro 2008.

Capello's appointment as McClaren's successor was greeted with optimism but the Italian initially struggled to revitalise a squad which had grown increasingly cynical about international duty.

By the time England were booted off a friendly against the Czech Republic in August, it seemed certain that nothing would change under Capello.

Yet his single-minded approach and rigorous work ethic have gradually established a previously absent sense of purpose in the England camp and results have followed.

Four successive wins gave England their best start to a World Cup qualifying campaign and Wednesday's 2-1 win over Germany with a string of reserves in the team maintained the positive feeling around the team.

England captain John Terry believes the key to Capello's

success is his refusal to accept anything but the highest standards in training and matches.

"He's given the team a few bollockings and more so in training," Terry said. "We definitely got a kick up the backside on Tuesday. We weren't playing too well, the ball kept running out of play and we were looking at each other."

"He looked at me a couple of times as if to say, 'Sort it out.' He keeps everyone on their toes

and the egos of players who may have felt they didn't need to work hard once they made the England squad.

"We've evolved brilliantly under the manager from day one," he said. "In our first and second games we got caught on the counter-attack and he showed us a video, slowed the video down and told us we weren't working hard enough for each other. People were running past us and it was disappointing to watch."

"After we saw that, we knew we had to work a lot harder for each other. The quality has always been there, but if you have the workrate to match, we'll have a good future."

"You're looking at a different side now from 12 months ago. It's been a good year, but myself and the more experienced lads will make sure we all keep our feet on the ground."

England goalkeeper David James has no doubt that Capello has been the perfect antidote to the lethargy that set in under McClaren.

"We started a small-sided game and after about three minutes he called it to a halt and told us it was all wrong," James said. "He sees it, he says it and he tells you what's wrong, no matter who you are."

"He's not a shouter or a quiet one. It's a steely glare and you take it as read that you need to change it. His English isn't the best, but he says what he means and the beauty of it is that there's no ambiguity. That's what we've needed."



FABIO CAPELLO