

Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo makes a rude gesture to fans mocking him after their stalemate against Aston Villa in the English Premier League on Saturday. Despite Ronaldo's problings, Villa managed to shut the champions out to gain a valuable point.

## Respite for Schuster

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid's embattled coach Bernd Schuster was happy to close to within two points of leaders Barcelona with a 1-0 home win over Recreativo Huelva on Saturday but admitted the growing injury list at the Santiago Bernabeu was a major concern.

A deflected shot from Wesley Sneijder on 39 minutes ensured Schuster's 50th league match in charge of Real was a win to ease the pressure but it was not all good news with Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain spraining his ankle.

"The result was important although not flattering enough for the chances we had," said Schuster.

"It is difficult to find an explanation because almost all of the injuries are coming from matches. We can't be in this situation in November."

Real move into second above Villarreal, who lost 3-0 at home to Valladolid, and now trail Barcelona by two points although Pep Guardiola's side have a game in hand against Getafe on Sunday.

Villarreal fell to their first league defeat since April with Valladolid surprise 3-0 winners at El Madrigal.

Jonathan Sesma scored a brace (24 min, 43) and Luis Prieto added a third in a sensational first half as Valladolid, who beat Real Madrid 1-0 last weekend, took another big scalp.

In fact Valladolid are becoming a bogey team for Villarreal having crushed them 5-1 on their own ground in a pre-season friendly.

Villarreal slip to third, a point behind Real and three adrift of Barca, and their first defeat of the campaign is a setback ahead of Tuesday's Champions League home match against Manchester United.

"It was a dark day for us," admitted Villarreal coach Pellegrini. "There may have

been a lot of reasons for what happened and maybe the international matches was one. However, we should have been focused and we weren't. They ended up winning quite easily." The important thing now is to improve our performance and focus on Champions League qualification.

In Saturday's showpiece match title contenders Sevilla and Valencia shared the spoils in a 0-0 draw at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan.

Sevilla's Brazilian Luis Fabiano had scored a hat-trick for his country in their 6-2 friendly win over Portugal and Valencia's David Villa had scored in Spain's 3-0 win over Chile but despite the striking talent on show there were no goals in Seville.

Valencia drop one place to fourth while Sevilla stay fifth with both sides four points behind pacesetters Barcelona who have played one game less.

The result, combined with the Villarreal loss, was perfect for Real, now two points ahead of Sevilla and Valencia, who surge up to second.

## Bayern pull together

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich eased to their sixth win in their last eight league games with an impressive 4-1 victory over Energie Cottbus on Saturday with coach Jurgen Klinsmann aiming for top spot by Christmas.

Goals by Munich stars Franck Ribery, Luca Toni, Miroslav Klose and Martin Demichelis put Bayern third in the table with games against title rivals Bayer Leverkusen and Hoffenheim coming in the next fortnight.

"We're very pleased with the three points," said Klinsmann.

"In terms of the result, it would have been nice to see a couple more goals, because we certainly had the chances.

"We're slowly getting to where we want to be, because our goal is to be top at Christmas."

With Bayern facing Steaua Bucharest in Munich on Tuesday in the Champions League, Klinsmann says his side are finding their rhythm after a poor start which saw them 11th in the league in September and the upswing is partly down to Ribery.

The Frenchman converted a first-half penalty at Munich's Allianz Arena on Saturday and Munich's midfield marshall has now scored a goal in each of their last six league games.

"The team is picking up more and more rhythm, which is obviously partly due to an exceptional player like Franck Ribery.

"He keeps coming up with moments of inspiration."

With Bayer Leverkusen slipping to a 2-1 defeat against Arminia Bielefeld on Saturday, Hoffenheim now have a clear

gap and continue their fairytale debut season in the Bundesliga to regain top spot with a 3-1 win over Cologne.

Bosnia striker Vedad Ibisevic scored twice to confirm his presence as the league's top-scorer and coach Ralf Rangnick said he always believed his side would pick up their 10th win of the season - even when reduced to ten men.

"I believe that we have shown we are worthy of leading the league," said Rangnick.

Hoffenheim are now three points clear of second-placed Bayer Leverkusen after their win in Cologne.

After Ibisevic netted twice, to leave him 16 goals in 14 games, his side was reduced to ten men when Brazilian defender Luiz Gustavo Dias was sent off after he was shown a second yellow card for a heavy challenge.

And Hertha Berlin kept up their pressure on the league leaders with an impressive 3-2 win at snowy Bochum.

Schalke 04 moved up to sixth in the league thanks to their 3-1 win over Borussia Moenchengladbach.

Eintracht Frankfurt did their flagging league position the power of good with a rampant 4-0 win over Hanover.

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But he could not sustain the success and Stuttgart finished sixth in the league last season while Saturday's hammering by Wolfsburg on Saturday was their fourth away defeat this term to leave them mid-table.

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"This was a difficult decision, because we are grateful for what they have done for the club over the last three years.

"I spoke to the team this morning and made it clear that everyone must now work to their full potential.

"The leaving of Armin Veh does not create an excuse for the players.

"I expect each and every one of them will concentrate on the task in hand."

In Veh's absence, ex-Germany defender and Euro '96 winner Babel is promoted from coach of Stuttgart's reserves to become head coach at VfB with Rainer Widmayer as trainer.

"We hope that they will bring success back to VfB," added Staudt.

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"They were excellent from start to finish. Obviously I'm very happy about beating Juve."

"We knew we would win if we made no mistakes. Alessandro Del Piero is in great form at the moment but we controlled the match.

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## Gunners implode at City

AFP, London



Crisis-hit Arsenal's woes worsened Saturday as a desperate 3-0 defeat at Manchester City blew their chance to close the gap on the goal-starved English Premier League leaders Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester United.

The imploding Gunners suffered their worst result of the season, as the top three were all held to goalless draws -- top club Chelsea at home to Newcastle, second-placed Liverpool at home Fulham, and United away to Aston Villa.

Elsewhere, Portsmouth drew 2-2 with visitors Hull and Bolton grabbed a 3-1 win at Middlesbrough.

Arsenal are now in serious trouble with dressing-room strife matched by dismal results on the pitch.

William Gallas, stripped of the Gunners captaincy having blasted his teammates in midweek for their lack of passion, was not even in the squad for the trip to Eastlands.

And the damage worsened as Arsenal collapsed to their third defeat in four league games, leaving them 10 points off the pace in fifth place.

"I believe in this team and in the squad of course. We just have to not talk too much and keep our belief and be united and work together."

City's in-form midfielder Stephen Ireland took advantage of a dreadful Gael Clichy clearance to score in the 45th

minute.

Brazil star Robinho scored a cheeky second in the 56th minute, chipping the ball over goalkeeper match-day captain Manuel Almunia.

Two minutes after coming on as a substitute, Daniel Sturridge earned and scored a 90th-minute penalty to complete Arsenal's misery.

Chelsea had 25 shots at Stamford Bridge but failed to score as their once imperious home form took another knock with a 0-0 draw against strugglers Newcastle.

Frank Lampard and Ashley Cole missed the best chances for the hosts as Newcastle failed to get a shot on target.

Meanwhile, Spain striker Fernando Torres returned to the Liverpool starting line-up but took his failure to score at Anfield this season to a seventh straight game as his fledgling partnership with Robbie Keane once again failed to click.

"We had a situation when maybe five players were well below their best. The players who had been away with their countries looked tired," said Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez.

Fulham manager Roy Hodgson said: "We have eventually seen through a decent away performance. So often this season we have been 0-0 with 10 minutes to go and conceded a goal."

Manchester United remain third, eight points behind Chelsea and Liverpool, after their goalless draw with Villa, a point behind them in fourth place.

United star Cristiano Ronaldo gesticulated to the taunting home fans as the Portugal winger he limped off injured.

The visitors' Wayne Rooney missed the best chance of the game, firing over the crossbar from close range.

Hull grabbed a last-gasp point to deny Portsmouth victory in a 2-2 draw at Fratton Park.

Peter Crouch gave Pompey the lead in the 20th minute.

Hull defender Michael Turner equalised in the 54th minute with a header before Pompey's England right-back Glen Johnson scored a splendid goal nine minutes later.

However, there was a dramatic finish as Portsmouth defender Noe Pamarot scored an own goal in the 89th minute.

Bolton pulled themselves four points clear of the relegation zone with a 3-1 away win over Middlesbrough at the Riverside.

The Trotters' Iceland defender Greta Rafn Steinsson headed in Matthew Taylor's free kick in the eighth minute and then set up Taylor to score the second two minutes later.

Emanuel Pogatzetz gave Boro a lifeline with a goal in the 77th minute but Swedish striker Johan Elmander sealed the points for Bolton just one minute later.

In a dire game at the Britannia Stadium, Stoke City beat rock-bottom visitors West Bromwich Albion 1-0 thanks to Mamady Sidibe's header six minutes from time.

## Defoe facing injury layoff

AFP, Portsmouth

Portsmouth striker Jermain Defoe could be ruled out for several weeks if a specialist decides the England international needs surgery to cure a calf injury.

Defoe was forced to come off during England's win over Germany in Berlin after aggravating the problem and he missed Portsmouth's 2-2 draw with Hull on Saturday as a result.

Portsmouth manager Tony Adams admitted the former Tottenham star will now go for tests on Monday to get to the root of the problem.

"He's had this problem before and we've got to get it sorted out for him. We will," Adams said.

"He is seeing a (specialist) guy on Monday and we'll know more about his situation then. I'm not a doctor so I can't really comment at this stage but we'll see. He won't play against Milan (in the UEFA Cup) on Thursday."

## Stuttgart sack Veh, appoint Babel

AFP, Stuttgart

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## Jose back to bullish best

SOCCERNET



Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho said he understood the importance of beating rivals Juventus after the Serie A leaders won 1-0 at the San Siro on Saturday.

The champions extended their lead at the top to four points after Sulley Muntari turned in Zlatan Ibrahimovic's effort.

"We played better than the opposition. The team did fantastic from the first minute to the last, those on the pitch and those on the bench," the jubilant Portuguese coach told reporters.

Mourinho and Juventus counterpart Claudio Ranieri are also far from being best friends after a number of crossed words and the fact that Ranieri was sacked by

"I understood during the week how important it is for Inter to beat Juventus. To beat a team like Juventus you have to play very well. We scored a goal that wasn't beautiful but it is three points to us."

Their already fierce rivalry worsened in 2006 when Juve were stripped of the title and demoted in a match-fixing scandal, leaving Inter to be awarded the championship and then sign Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Patrick Vieira from their rivals.

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Chelsea in 2004 to make way for the Portuguese.

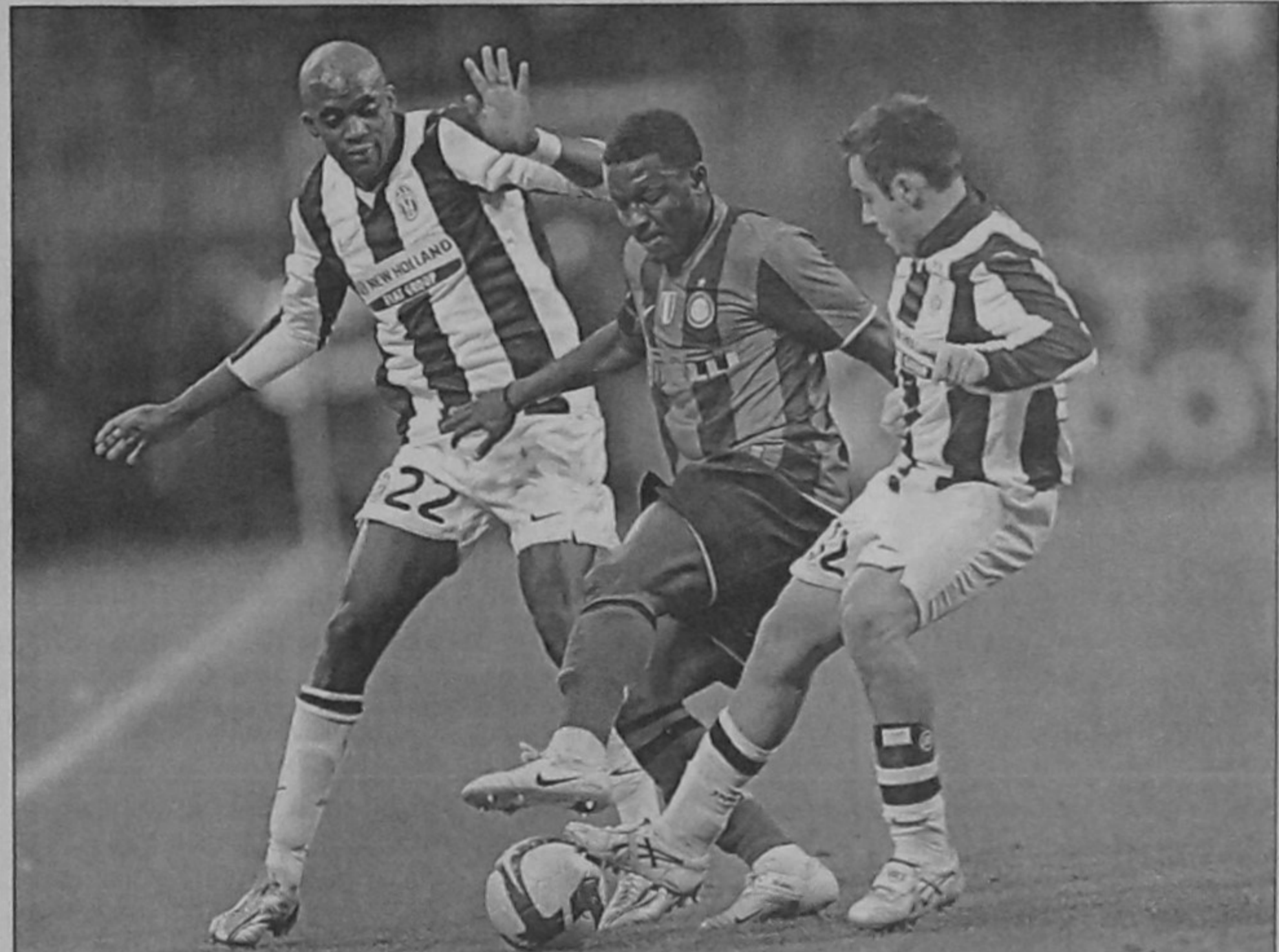
"Juve played a negative game," Mourinho said before explaining why he had brought back striker Adriano from a four-match absence after discipline problems.

"For a game like this we needed an 'animal' like Adriano."

Ranieri, whose third-placed side could have gone joint-top with Inter with a win, was gracious in defeat.

"Inter deserved it because they pressed and stopped us playing our game," he said.

"I think Ibrahimovic wasn't trying to pass but was trying to shoot. It could have been tiredness on our part. Tonight we maybe played too many long balls."



Inter Milan hardman Sulley Al Muntari (C) fights for the ball with Juventus players Mohamed Sissoko (L) and Marcho Marchionni during their crunch Serie A clash at the San Siro on Saturday. Ghanaian Muntari made the difference in a frenetic end-to-end match with a solitary goal.

## Muntari the difference

AFP, Rome



A second half goal from Ghanaian midfielder Sulley Muntari gave champions Inter Milan a narrow 1-0 win over Juventus at the San Siro on Saturday.

Meanwhile, stuttering Fiorentina relunched their faltering title challenge with a vital 4-2 home victory over Udinese.

Dejan Stankovic broke through for Inter on 12 minutes but couldn't quite keep his balance under pressure from challenges by Christian Molinaro and then Chiellini.

On 26 minutes, Legrottaglie completely missed the ball, allowing Zlatan Ibrahimovic to scamper away down the left but the Sweden striker dragged his shot wide when a square ball to the waiting Adriano would have presented the recalled Brazilian with an open goal.

In first half stoppage time Muntari took a pass from Ibrahimovic in his stride and brought a smart save out of Alex Manninger.

Inter continued to create the best openings after the break and Adriano headed a cross from Ibrahimovic over the bar before the Swede took a Stankovic pass on his chest but

shotwide of the near post.

But the hosts took the lead in scrappy fashion 18 minutes from time as a scuffed Ibrahimovic shot found Muntari at the back post with an empty goal to tap into.

That spurred Juventus into life and Alessandro Del Piero drew a fine diving save from Inter goalkeeper Julio Cesar with a header from a corner on 82 minutes.

In Florence, Riccardo Montolivo scored a brace, Adrian Mutu hit the net from the penalty spot and Alberto Gilardino also got his name on the scoresheet, although Gianluca Comotto was sent off late on.

Antonio Floro Flores had given Udinese a first half lead and substitute Antonio Di Natale tucked home a penalty late on for the visitors.

Fiorentina had lost two of their previous three matches at lowly Cagliari and Siena and were seeing their championship hopes start to drift away.

For Udinese it was a third straight defeat and fourth match in a row without a win since they enjoyed a share of the Serie A lead.

Udinese boss Pasquale Marino blamed the referee.

"It wasn't Fiorentina whose form changed the match, it was the referee's," he moaned.

## Gallas still has London future

AFP, Manchester

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger insists deposed skipper William Gallas still has a future at the club despite his shock public criticism of his teammates last week.

Gallas was stripped of the club captaincy, fined two weeks' wages and dropped from the squad that lost 3-0 at Manchester City, the north London club's third defeat in four English Premier League games.

Wenger refused to talk about his decision to discipline the France defender but insisted the events of a turbulent week could not be blamed for Arsenal's desperately unconvincing performance at Eastlands.

And despite the fall-out between manager and player, Wenger is adamant that his compatriot Gallas could yet rebuild his bridges and remain at Emirates Stadium.

"Of course he has a future at the club," Wenger said.

"We have had difficult times. We have always been strong enough to deal with it and we will be strong again to deal with it."

"Nothing was disturbed by what happened before the game. We had a good focus, good concentration and I believe it was a flattering score-line for Manchester City."

## Deco delighted at Ballack return

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea's Deco has made no secret of his delight at Michael Ballack's return to fitness, as he believes his fellow midfielder will give the club a welcome boost.

Ballack has spent much of the season so far on the sidelines, and he underwent surgery in October to remove neuromas - benign tumours - from each of his feet.

The German star returned to action yesterday as a second-half substitute in Chelsea's 0-0 draw with Newcastle United, and he instantly reminded everyone of his importance to Luiz Felipe Scolari's side with his aggression and class.

The 32-year-old's recovery could see Deco rotated in and out of the first team over the next few weeks, but that does not seem to bother the ex-Barcelona playmaker.

"It is good for us to have him back because he is a great, great player," he told the press.

"We need more players because we are playing many games and have some injuries."

"It is difficult to play against him because he is a strong player, very competitive and experienced. I have played against him three or four times for Portugal."

The Blues currently top the Premier League table despite the absence of several key players, including Michael Essien, Ricardo Carvalho and Didier Drogba.

## Reds might buy back Rossi

INTERNET, undated

Sir Alex Ferguson has revealed that he would be interested in re-signing former Manchester United striker Giuseppe Rossi.

The Red Devils sold the Italian in 2007 for £5.6 million but the Premier League champions insisted a buy-back clause be inserted into the player's contract.

Ferguson will take a closer look at the American-born striker when United travel to Villarreal in the UEFA Champions League group stages on Tuesday.

It is expected that Rossi would cost United more than they received for him just over a season ago, but Ferguson has insisted that it was a difficult decision to sell him in the first place.

Ferguson said in the News of the World: "He's a good player, in fact, an excellent player. It was difficult to let him go to Villarreal."

"It was based on the fact that he wanted first-team football and we couldn't guarantee him, that."

"When they offered the money they did for him and we got the buy-back clause, it became attractive to us."

"We'd consider buying him back. We will keep our options open."

Ferguson's comments pour further doubt on Carlos Tevez's Old Trafford career as the club have yet to offer the Argentinean a permanent deal, with his two-year loan set to run out at the end of the season.