

Prank ends with Helguera exit

INTERNET, undated

Spanish giants Valencia Wednesday cancelled the contract of Ivan Helguera. Helguera, 33, was under contract at Valencia until 2010, but is now a free agent to join any club in the January transfer window.

Helguera - who won the Champions League with Real Madrid in 2000 and 2002 - joined Valencia on a free transfer in July 2007.

He has hardly played this season due to a stormy relationship with coach Unai Emery.

On Wednesday Emery and Helguera had another dressing-room bust-up, after the veteran, as a joke, had changed the words that Emery had written on a blackboard during a tactical theoretical session.

Helguera is the second player to be thrown out by Emery. Last week German goalkeeper Timo Hildebrand was shown the door, and promptly signed for Bundesliga leaders Hoffenheim.

Lehmann to take up coaching

AFP, Berlin

Ex-Germany goalkeeper Jens Lehmann has said he learned enough from his five years under Arsene Wenger at Premier League side Arsenal to consider a career in coaching.

"After each (of Wenger's) speeches to the team, you would learn something new about football," Lehmann told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

"During my first year at Arsenal, I started to take notes and I continued until my last season there."

"I noted the course of the training sessions, the exercises that he made us do and I carefully arranged my notes."

"I do not have a coaching qualification, but I think that I could begin a career as a coach tomorrow."

Lehmann joined Stuttgart last summer after losing his first team place at Arsenal and retired from international duty in August having made his last appearance for Germany in the Euro 2008 final in the 1-0 defeat to Spain.

At 39, Lehmann says he does not know how long he will continue to play football with his Stuttgart contract set to expire in June 2009.

"Either I stop in June, or I continue and I want to continue to play at the highest level," he said.

"I know I am 39, but I do not feel my age."

"My decision depends a little bit on the opinion of Stuttgart."

After Stuttgart sacked trainer Armin Veh three weeks ago, former Germany defender Markus Babel took over as head coach, in his first senior coaching role, but at 36 the new boss is younger than his goalkeeper.

But Lehmann insists both he and Babel learned from some of the best in the business.

"Like me, Markus played in one of the best clubs in Liverpool under the direction of Gerard Houllier, somebody who knows about football," Lehmann said.

Jan transfer window extended

AFP, London

The January transfer window, the last opportunity for players to join English clubs this season, will in fact end on February 2, the Football Association (FA) announced here Friday.

"After full consultation with our partners in the Premier League and Football League it has been agreed to push the transfer deadline through to 5pm (1700GMT) on February 2," an FA statement said.

"This is because January 31 falls on a Saturday and, in order to fall in line with procedures adopted by foreign Associations, the closure has been moved from a week-end date to the first available week day."

"This is consistent with the decision taken in August when the deadline was extended to September 1 and has the support of the majority of national associations and European leagues."



Middlesbrough striker Jeremie Aliadiere (R) celebrates after scoring a stunning equaliser against Arsenal during their English Premier League encounter at the Riverside Stadium on Saturday.

Zola eyes Blues defeat

AFP, London



Gianfranco Zola insists there will be no split loyalties when his struggling West Ham side to face his old club Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

The former Italy striker remains a Blues legend from his playing days at the Bridge and is facing his former side for the first time in his fledgling managerial career.

But the Hammers boss insists he will not be sorry if he inflicts another defeat on Chelsea as they bid to keep up with Liverpool at the top of the English Premier League.

"I will have no sympathy (for Chelsea) if we win," the Sardinian said.

"I have a commitment to this club. I will do everything I can for this club because they had faith in me."

"Not many people thought we were going to win in Sunderland or draw against Liverpool but that's football. It makes it even more interesting. It's very unpredictable. I know that the odds are against us and it's going to be a tough match but you never know."

"It's going to be a great game."

Zola scored 80 goals in 312 games between 1996 and 2003 for Chelsea, winning the European Cup Winners' Cup, the European Super Cup, two FA Cups and a League Cup in the process.

Chelsea assistant coach Ray Wilkins said he hoped Zola and his own predecessor Steve Clarke would receive a warm welcome, despite the traditional enmity between west London's Blues and east London's Hammers.

"The fellow is, no question about it, one of the greatest players that's played for our club. To go with it as well, a really nice guy," former England midfielder Wilkins said of Zola.

"He's trying to get them to play some very attractive football and I believe they're doing that but unfortunately for them perhaps the results haven't gone for them as well as they would have liked."

'Spurs will keep players'

INTERNET, undated



Harry Redknapp insists Tottenham will not pay 'silly money' to bring new signings to White Hart Lane in the January transfer window.

And the Spurs manager has said England winger Aaron Lennon is going nowhere, despite reported interest from Real Madrid.

The Spurs manager said: "We're not going to dive in and pay silly money for players. The chairman won't do that, so we've just got to wait and see. If people are asking big fees for players we're interested in, then we won't sign anybody."

Spurs tried to sign Zenit St

Petersburg forward Andrei Arshavin in the last transfer window but were unable to come close the Russian club's £25million valuation. While the Barclays Premier League club are expected to reignite their interest in January, Redknapp is non-committal on any signings.

"Possibly, if we found the right people at the right money," he said. "It just depends how we keep going in the next couple of weeks and if we're picking up results."

Harry also talked down rumours that he is trying to offload Roman Pavlyuchenko, who has made an indifferent start to life in north London since signing from Spartak Moscow in August.

"It's absolute rubbish," he said. "I've got two strikers for the game tomorrow, Darren Bent

and Roman Pavlyuchenko, so how can I be unloading anybody?"

The Spurs manager also denied that he had been making enquiries about possible goalkeeping replacements for Heurelho Gomes.

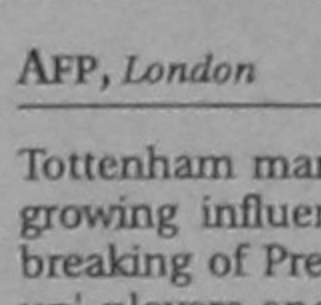
"I've not made any enquiries for anybody," he said. "I've not picked up the phone to speak to one manager at any other club about players and I'm sure nobody else has either."

And Redknapp was emphatic about any approaches new Real Madrid manager Juande Ramos might make to lure Spurs players the the Bernabeu, namely 21-year-old Aaron Lennon and Didier Zokora.

"Aaron Lennon's a player with a big future so he's not for sale," said Redknapp.

Tapping-up is common

AFP, London



Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp said the growing influence of players means that the breaking of Premier League rules by 'tapping-up' players and even managers now happens regularly.

Negotiating with players from other clubs is against Premier League rules in England, but the practice is one that is likely to be on the increase as the January transfer window approaches.

Redknapp, who recently ditched Portsmouth to take over at Spurs, said a culture of tapping-up is firmly entrenched, giving players and their agents power to decide when and where they want to go.

"It does happen all the time," he told the Daily Telegraph.

"Everybody has got the ear of a chairman, a chief executive or a director of football. Agents are talking to players direct, so it's become more and more difficult."

"When they want to go (leave), players have got so much power. I don't think there's a lot you can do about it."

Redknapp's comments come a day after Chelsea released a statement bluntly reminding their players of contract obligations.

The statement followed speculation that

"It would be great to see him succeed at West Ham."

Chelsea go into Sunday's London derby second in the table behind leaders Liverpool, while West Ham are hovering just above the relegation zone.

The Hammers are in woeful form, having won just one of their last 10 matches and having failed to score in six of their last nine games.

But Chelsea's once imperious home form is now looking shaky.

The Blues have lost two of their last four Premier League games, having previously gone 86 top-flight matches unbeaten at Stamford Bridge.

As part of his bid to revive their home form, Chelsea manager Luiz Felipe Scolari must work out how he plans to deploy strikers Didier Drogba and Nicolas Anelka.

France hitman Anelka won the Premier League player of the month award for November for his performances, while Drogba's season has been hampered by injury and suspension. But the Ivory Coast forward came on from the substitutes' bench to score the winner as Chelsea sealed a place in the last 16 of the Champions League at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday, beating Romania's CFR Cluj 2-1.

Some have questioned whether Anelka and Drogba can play together but Scolari says he will look to find a way to make them gel together.

Chelsea have won their last seven encounters with West Ham.

In last season's corresponding fixture in December 2007, The Blues beat the Hammers 1-0 thanks to a late goal from Upton Park old boy Joe Cole.

The east London side's last win over the Chelsea came in May 2003 in a 1-0 win at Upton Park and their last triumph at Stamford Bridge was a 3-2 win in September 2002, with Zola among Chelsea's goalscorers.

"I remember that game," the Italian said.

"We always had very good matches with West Ham and hopefully the result is going to be the same."

Phenomenal traitor

SOCCERNET

Ronaldo, the now portly three times FIFA Player of the Year, has been branded as a "phenomenal traitor" by Rio de Janeiro sports daily Lance after he joined Brazilian club Corinthians rather than their great rivals Flamengo, with whom he had been training for the past four months.

Flamengo allowed Ronaldo to begin his rehabilitation at the club after a serious knee injury prompted AC Milan not to renew his contract at the end of the 2007/08 season. Following the striker's decision to quit Flamengo for their Sao Paulo rivals furious fans gathered outside of the club's headquarters to burn shirts emblazoned 'Stay Ronaldo'.

But the 32-year-old striker was unrepentant and explained: "I was training with Flamengo for four months and didn't receive any offer. Corinthians made an offer that will let me continue my career."

Flamengo president Marcio Braga admitted that his club had not offered the striker a contract because they were waiting for him to fully recover from his injury as it could be "bad for him, he would be too anxious to play."

Ronaldo last played in the Brazilian domestic league for Cruzeiro in 1994, before he left to join PSV Eindhoven.

Pachuca sink Al Ahly in extra-time

AFP, Tokyo

Mexico's Pachuca came from behind to sink six-time African champions Al Ahly of Egypt 4-2 in the quarterfinals of the Club World Cup in Tokyo on Saturday.

Two freekicks and two dramatic extra-time goals put Pachuca in line for Wednesday's showdown against South American champions Liga de Quito of Ecuador, despite chasing the game for the majority of the match.

The scoring began in unfortunate fashion in the 28th minute when Pachuca defender Fausto Pinto directed a cross from the left by Al Ahly striker Mohamed Aboutrika into his own net.

Aboutrika then linked up with teammate Mohamed Barakat to feed Flavio in the 45th minute to put the Egyptians aside 2-0.

After failing to score in the first half, Pachuca launched a dramatic comeback after the break.

Midfielder Luis Montes, having replaced Jaime Correa for the second half, slammed home a freekick from the right side of the box in the 47th minute.

Pachuca equalized in the 73rd minute after a foul by Al Ahly defender Shady Mohamed resulted in a freekick which striker Christian Gimenez curled into the net, wowing the more than 30,000 spectators gathered at the National Stadium.

Extra time ensued, with Damian Alvarez scoring in the 98th minute before Pachuca striker Bruno Marioni set up the second Gimenez goal to make the game 4-2 12 minutes later.

The win for Pachuca, who dominated possession, helped to make up for their 1-0 loss to Tunisia's Ettouil Sahel in their Club World Cup debut last year.

Aliadiere spikes Gunners

AFP, Middlesbrough



Jeremie Aliadiere scored against his old club as Middlesbrough fought back to draw 1-1 with Arsenal and so further dent the Gunners' chances of taking the Premier League title.

Saturday's result here at the Riverside Stadium left Arsenal seven points behind Liverpool - and that was before the leaders kicked-off against Hull City at Anfield.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger's decision to rest his senior players during the midweek Champions League defeat to Porto rarely looked like paying dividends as Middlesbrough prevented the Londoners from winning at the Riverside for the fourth successive season.

Controversial ex-captain William Gallas returned to Premier League action for the first time since Arsenal's 2-1 win at his former club Chelsea last month and Spain midfielder Cesc Fabregas was recalled following injury.

Robin van Persie was paired with Emmanuel Adebayor up front but it was the makeshift Middlesbrough attack, with former Arsenal forward Aliadiere supported by the Turkey international Tuncay Sanli, which made all of the early running.

An inswinging corner from the Frenchman Didier Digard caused confusion in the Gunners' area and Adebayor's rushed header narrowly cleared goalkeeper Manuel Almunia's crossbar.

Van Persie's first-time shot skidded wide of Ross Turnbull's right hand post before the Middlesbrough goalkeeper was forced to block an Abou Diaby strike with his legs.

From the corner, curled goalward by Fabregas, former Chelsea central defender Robert Huth failed to stand his ground and Adebayor was left with the simplest of headers from six yards to break the deadlock in the 17th minute.

It was the Togo forward's seventh league goal of the season and should have provided the platform for a comfortable Arsenal victory.

Instead it was a former Gunner who turned a free-flowing contest on its head with one of the finest finishes of an inconsistent career.

Aliadiere, albeit played out wide during the bulk of his two-and-a-half-year stay on Teesside, has yet to find his best form at the Riverside but an angled 29th minute header, from a Tuncay cross, was far too powerful for Almunia.

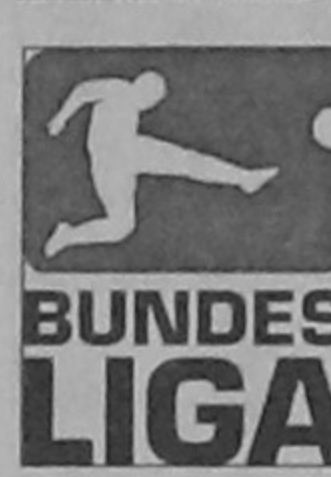
Almunia maintained parity with a superb reaction save from Middlesbrough's England winger, Stewart Downing, 15 minutes after the restart as a hesitant second period finally came to life.

Turnbull smothered a fierce Diaby strike with confidence in the 65th minute but Arsenal were struggling to dominate Boro's resolute central midfield partnership of Julio Arca, the Argentinian, and midfielder Digard.

Turnbull was again the saviour, two minutes from time, as he denied Gunners substitute and Denmark striker Nicklas Bendtner with another near-post block.

Dortmund win Borussia battle

INTERNET, undated



Borussia Dortmund ensured they would head into the winter break in the top half of the table with a 2-1 victory over bottom-placed Borussia Mönchengladbach on Friday.

The hosts' victory push was complicated by Tamas Hajnal's needless dismissal after 37 minutes, although they had by that stage already taken the lead through Mohamed Zidan.

A second goal from Nuri Sahin after 55 minutes tightened Dortmund's grip on the game and, despite Johannes van den Bergh pulling a goal back 10 minutes from time, the

hosts held on with relative ease given their man disadvantage.

Victory not only maintains Dortmund's unbeaten home record this campaign, but also moves them up to sixth in the table heading into the mid-season break.

By contrast, Mönchengladbach's poor run continues as they remain rooted to the foot of the table having lost their past four league matches.

Chances were few in the early exchanges although Hajnal should have scored with just four minutes gone, but he instead fired high over the crossbar when in plenty of space inside the area.

Neither side were showing much invention and it took a marvellous strike from Zidan to break the deadlock after 35 minutes.

The Egyptian controlled

Steve Gohouri's headed clearance with his stomach before smashing an unstoppable 25-yard shot into the far corner.

The home fans' celebrations would be tempered just three minutes later when Hajnal was given his marching orders after receiving his second caution in the space of five minutes.

The incident that resulted in his expulsion was easily avoidable with the winger needlessly outstretching a leg which caught goalkeeper Christofer Helmeroth above the knee as he came out to collect a stray pass that he was always favourite to get to first. Dortmund would, however, easily cope with their one-man disadvantage and their grip on the game was tightened when half-time substitute Sahin stroked home 10 minutes after coming on.

'Young is world-class'

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Martin O'Neill will soon be running out of superlatives for Ashley Young. Hailed as a "genius" and "world-class" last Sunday after his two goals illuminated Goodison Park, the Aston Villa manager today claimed Young belongs in the same company as Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo. For someone not prone to hyperbole, it was a quite a compliment.

"I think Ashley's a world-class performer, I really do," said O'Neill. "I don't use [those words] too often but he's absolutely class. And he's far from reached his peak. If you look at other top quality players who are 22 or 23 and who are absolutely brilliant ... you look at people like Ronaldo and Messi and ask how they

can improve, but they do, they just get better."

Asked whether he felt Young belonged in the same company as Ronaldo and Messi, O'Neill replied: "Yes, I've just put him in it. This is my opinion. I look at players; I see a lot of games in Europe, I watch a lot of football and you see a lot of players playing the game who are very functional. Some are decent, some are more than decent and some are very good. And then you have players who are absolutely exceptional and Ashley Young is absolutely exceptional."

"Could you name me two dozen players in the world who could have scored the second goal that he scored against Everton? [in Sunday's 3-2 win for Villa] asked O'Neill. "I can't. To have the presence of mind ... in the last minute of a game in which he had worked tirelessly ... to have the energy to do it was remarkable. To have that poise was world-class."

Drogba staying...till summer

Football

SOCCERNET

Didier Drogba insists he has not considered leaving Chelsea in January, although admits he will speak to the club about his future next summer.

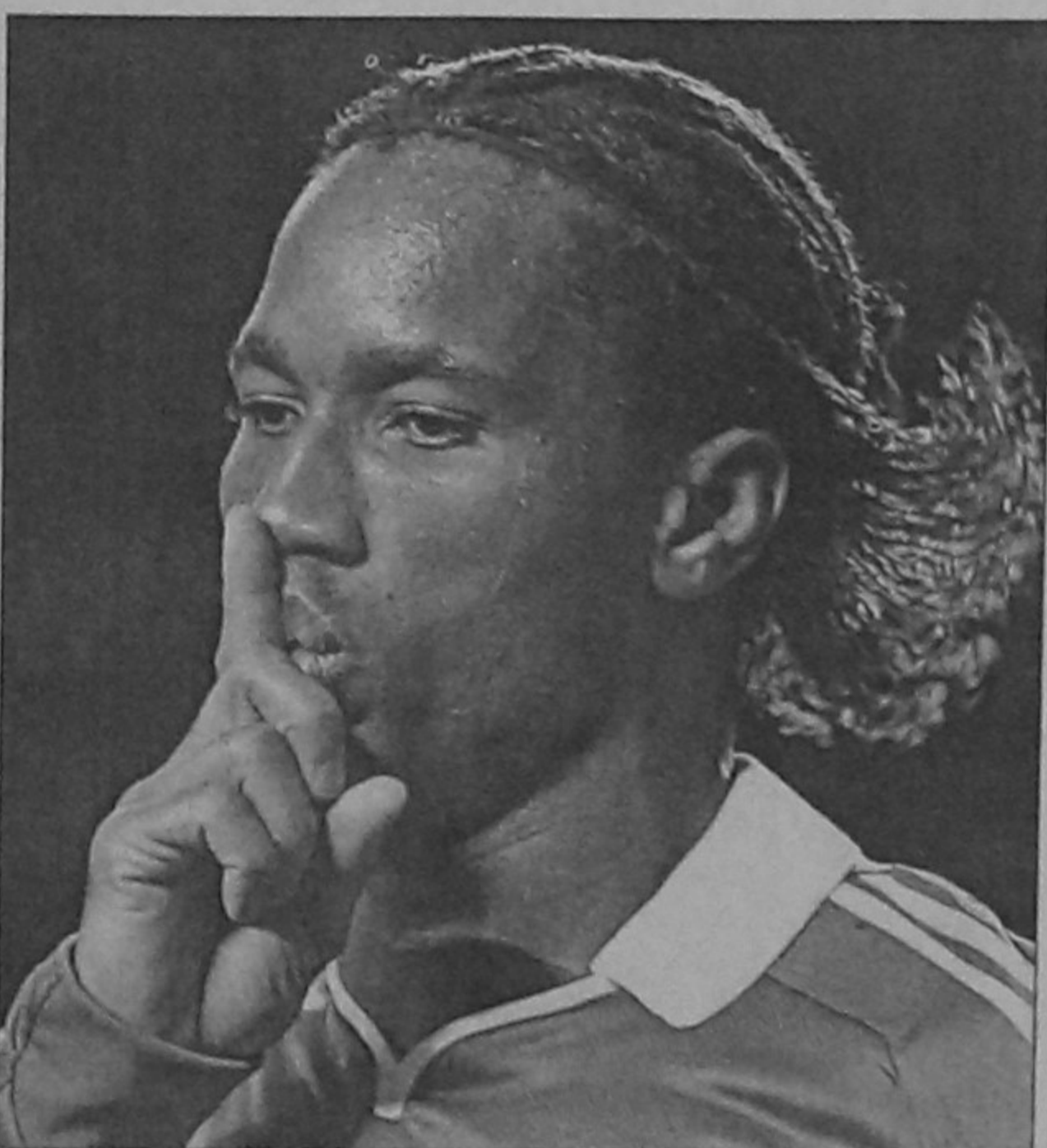
Drogba has endured a difficult start to the season after suffering from injuries and being suspended for throwing a coin into the crowd against Burnley; and he has been linked with a move away from Stamford Bridge.

The Blues, however, have insisted that the striker will not be going anywhere when the transfer window reopens and the player himself has now clarified his position.

The Ivory Coast international is focused on trying to establish himself as a regular member of Luiz Felipe Scolari's side again and wants to win silverware with Chelsea this term.

"I have spoken with Scolari and he knows that I want to play," Drogba told the Daily Mirror. "I am only thinking about Chelsea at the moment."

"At the end of the season I will talk to the club about my future but I have a contract with Chelsea. Not for a moment have I thought I will leave in January. My dream is to



DIDIER DROGBA