

Hull in for Pennant

Unfashionable Hull City on Thursday muscled in on Real Madrid territory by revealing their interest in Liverpool winger Jermaine Pennant.

The 25-year-old, former Arsenal and Birmingham player, had been linked with a 3.5 million pound move to the Spanish champions, but that deal has stalled.

"I would be very interested in Jermaine Pennant if he was available at the right price. We will be making enquiries," said Hull boss Phil Brown.

Hull have also been linked with Wigan midfielder Michael Brown, but Brown denied making an approach.

He told the Hull Daily Mail: "We have got a number of irons in the fire, but just because the transfer window opens, it doesn't mean to say everyone jumps into business straightaway."

"A lot of these windows start with the big boys, and once they start to do their dealings everyone else follows suit. We have got certain targets earmarked."

Stuttgart snap up Gebhart

Stuttgart have signed up Timo Gebhart, skipper of Germany's under-19 European champions and earmarked for stardom.

Gebhart arrived Thursday from second division 1860 Munich, Stuttgart signing the 19-year-old on a three-and-a-half year contract for a reported three million euros.

The transfer was the highlight of a miserly round of transfer window business in the Bundesliga with clubs treading carefully amid the financial crisis.

"My goal was always to play in the top flight. I have chosen Stuttgart, which is a club that puts its confidence in young players," said Gebhart.

Stuttgart, champions in 2007, are currently only tenth and 10 points behind surprise leaders Hoffenheim.

Former Mexico international Pavel Pardo meanwhile left the club to head home to FC America after three seasons in which the 32-year-old only netted four goals.

Marseille dream of Larsson

Marseille coach Eric Gerets on Friday praised Swedish veteran Henrik Larsson as a player he would like to take on board in the transfer window.

Gerets would also like to snap up Shakhtar Donetsk's Brazilian star Brando as he seeks to bolster his forward line in the second half of the season - but is particularly keen on Larsson, even at the age of 37.

"I know Larsson as he played in the Netherlands (at PSV Eindhoven, where Gerets played and coached) and it was there I started to love his style of play - he has scored goals wherever he has played."

"I know a lot of Scandinavian players and they are exemplary, they integrate well and learn the language quickly. They are a good choice and Larsson is a true pro," Gerets told reporters.

Saha's prolonged absence is a major blow to Moyes, who is already without injured strikers Ayegbeni Yakubu, James Vaughan and Victor Anichebe.

Louis has been re-scanned and he will be out for another four to five weeks, Moyes told Everton's website.

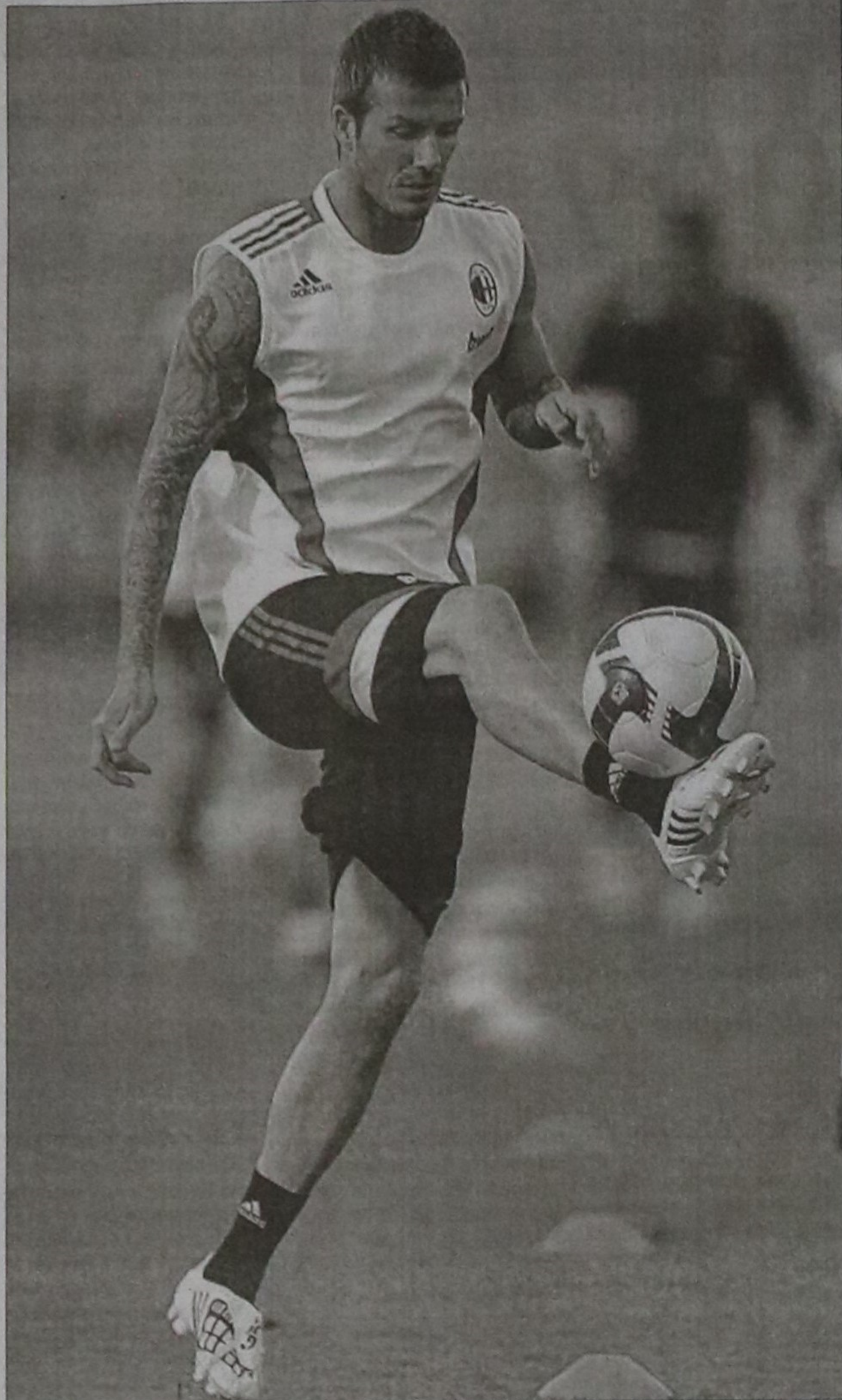
Saha's prolonged absence is a major blow to Moyes, who is already without injured strikers Ayegbeni Yakubu, James Vaughan and Victor Anichebe.

Louis has been re-scanned and he will be out for another four to five weeks, Moyes told Everton's website.

Saha's prolonged absence is a major blow to Moyes, who is already without injured strikers Ayegbeni Yakubu, James Vaughan and Victor Anichebe.

Louis has been re-scanned and he will be out for another four to five weeks, Moyes told Everton's website.

Saha's prolonged absence is a major blow to Moyes, who is already without injured strikers Ayegbeni Yakubu, James Vaughan and Victor Anichebe.



Milan midfielder David Beckham controls the ball during a training session at Al-Nasr's club ground in Dubai on Friday.

Last chance saloon

Football

England football legend Paul Gascoigne said drink and drug addictions nearly killed him in 2008 and knows he is now on his last chance to save himself, in an interview published Friday.

Gascoigne, 41, who is in a rehabilitation clinic on the southern English coast trying to get his life back in order, said going back on the booze would be the death of him.

"This is my last chance," the fallen idol told The Sun newspaper.

"My mate Jimmy 'Five Bellies' says I've got more lives than a cat and he's right. But this is my last one."

Gascoigne has battled alcoholism and depression since his playing days. Last year he was sectioned under British mental health laws.

"2008 was a terrible time for me, my worst year ever," the former Newcastle, Tottenham, Lazio and Rangers star said.

"The drink and drugs nearly killed me, not once but a few times."

"And getting sectioned was the worst thing ever. A little bit of me died when I went in there and I am never going back."

"The difference this time is I know what I have got to do. I know I can never drink again otherwise it will kill me."

His 12-year-old son Regan, in a documentary called "Saving Gazza" to be aired Monday on Channel Four television, said he thought his father would "die soon" and wished he would "go away" from the family.

"I don't think there's any point in helping

him... I feel bad and sorry for him because he's in this kind of state but it's not our fault," the youngster said.

In the television programme, Gascoigne admits: "I've got food disorder, bipolar, mood swings, anxiety. I drank when I was happy, I drank when I was sad. And yes, I must admit I thought of dying."

Gascoigne has been sober for a month and undergoes a punishing fitness regime at the rehabilitation clinic, The Sun said.

Gascoigne, who spent time in rehab in Portugal last year, accused his ex-wife Sheryl of having turned their son against him and laid the blame for his comments on her.

"If she hates me that much, why is she still called Gascoigne? Because the name Gascoigne is a bonus for her, that's why."

"I'm not going to watch the programme. It's a disgrace to use a child like that."

"If Sheryl was so interested in saving me then why did she come all the way out to Portugal as part of making a TV show?"

"Would it not have been better to have 'saved Gazza' without a camera crew in tow?"

"Walking into that wine bar and meeting her all those years ago was the most expensive drink I've ever had."

"It has cost me about 17 million pounds (25 million dollars, 18 million euros) over the years."

"I paid maintenance for two kids who weren't mine and the family lives in a 1.6-million-pound house. Yet they throw all this at me."

Considered one of the most talented players English football has ever produced, the former midfielder is best known for his exploits in the 1990 World Cup finals in Italy where he helped his country to reach the semifinals.

Falling pound makes players dearer

GABRIEL MARCOTTI



The chill economic wind is threatening English football's love affair with foreign talent as the sinking value of sterling makes new players from Europe increasingly expensive to bring to these shores.

And in a reversal of fortune, the plunging pound, which has lost 18 per cent of its value against the euro in the past month, makes Barclays Premier League players more attractive transfer targets to managers in Spain, Italy and France.

"The party is over," one leading French-based agent said as he predicted a sea change in the way transfer business and wage negotiations are done all over Europe.

The agent told The Times last night: "It used to be simple. As a rule of thumb, if a player earned 100 Euros in France, you could be sure he

could get 200 pounds in England, maybe more. Well, now that 200 pounds is worth 200 Euros, so all of a sudden it's not as attractive."

"And then there are the transfer fees. An English club might be willing to spend 3 million pounds on a central defender and, for that money, you could get a good solid pro, because it was 4.5 million Euros. But now, 3 million pounds is 3 million Euros. And you can't get the same quality for that amount."

Effectively, a Europe-based player who cost the equivalent of 10 million pounds a little more than a month ago would cost nearly 2 million pounds more today. Conversely, a player earning 50,000 pounds a week in England would effectively cost a continental club 20 per cent less than a month ago.

Real Madrid could give Cristiano Ronaldo a 20 per cent pay rise compared with what they were prepared to offer him last summer and in euro terms it would not cost

them anything more. It also means that they could offer Manchester United 20 per cent more than they were willing to pay for the Portugal forward last summer.

Another leading agent, Athole Still, whose clients include Sven-Göran Eriksson, the former England head coach, confirmed that the sterling free fall against the dollar it has gone down 25 per cent in the past five months was also affecting financial thinking within football.

"It's having a considerable effect, not just on European players, but also on players from South America, because many times their prices are quoted in euros or dollars," Still said.

"I was involved with a player who was for sale for 20 million Euros. Several English clubs were interested, but felt the price was too steep. Since then, the selling club has reduced the asking price to 14 million Euros. But, of course, to English clubs, that's no reduction at all."

Man Utd rope in Serb duo

TIMES ONLINE

Manchester United have completed the signings of Zoran Tasic and Adem Ljajic, the two Serbian youngsters, in a combined £16.3million deal from Partizan Belgrade.

The move was thrown into doubt last month because of Tasic's wage demands and the number of agents trying to get involved in the transfer, prompting reports that Arsenal or Manchester City could hijack the deal.

However, the 21-year-old winger will join United next week with Ljajic, an under-21 international, staying in Belgrade for the remainder of the season.

Sir Alex Ferguson, the United manager, who made a personal plea on Tasic's behalf at his work-permit hearing in Sheffield, regards the pair as players of outstanding potential, with Tasic, a full international, regarded as a potential long-term successor to Ryan Giggs. Under the terms of the deal, United have agreed to pay Partizan a maximum of £16.3m if the players meet certain pre-identified targets, but the up-front payments will be considerably smaller.

Tasic and Ljajic are likely to be United's only acquisitions during the transfer window, with the future of Carlos Tévez unlikely to be resolved until the summer. The Argentina striker's two-year loan agreement at Old Trafford expires at the end of the season, but while United had hoped to secure the permanent signing of the forward before Christmas, the situation appears likely to drag on.

Chelsea have confirmed an approach from City to sign the 28-year-old and Bridge is due at the City of Manchester Stadium to thrash out personal terms to bring an end to a frustrating five-and-a-half-year spell at Stamford Bridge, where he was a peripheral figure.

City manager Mark Hughes had identified his defence as a problem area and the signing of England international Bridge will come as a huge

relief for the former Blackburn Rovers manager, who had also considered a swoop for Bayern Munich left-back Philipp Lahm.

Hughes is reported to have a transfer kitty of around 60 million pounds at his disposal this month and Chelsea boss Luiz Felipe Scolari said it would have to be substantial bid to acquire Bridge.

"If any club wants to buy a player from Chelsea, they have to offer big money because if they play for Chelsea they are very good players," Scolari said.

"If they have a good deal, it is no problem for me," he added. "But it is best you ask (chief executive) Peter Kenyon as he knows everything that is happening."

"I have a meeting with Peter after training and I will ask him then about what is happening and whether we

have a deal or not." Bridge is set to sign a four-year contract at City and is expected to earn close to the 4m-pounds-a-year wages he earned at Chelsea, since moving to Stamford Bridge from Southampton in a 7 million pound deal in 2003.

The left-back is behind Ashley Cole in the pecking order at Stamford Bridge and has started just three Premier League games so far this season.

Meanwhile, Scolari is reportedly eager to sign CSKA Moscow's Yuri Zhirkov as a replacement for Bridge, although "Russia's Ronaldo" has earned far more recognition as an attacking winger rather than a left-back.

The 25-year-old is a Russian international and the Blues may face competition for the highly-rated player.

Murray upsets Federer

Tennis

INTERNET, undated

Andy Murray recovered from a set down to beat world number two Roger Federer 4-6-6-2-7-6 (8) at the semifinals of the World Tennis Championship in Abu Dhabi.

The world number four has now won three successive matches over Federer, since losing in straight sets in the US Open final last September, and extended his winning record to 5-2.

Murray made a slow start to the match, dropping his serve in just the second game and allowing Federer to race out to a 3-0 lead.

But he quickly found his composure, breaking back in the fifth game, whipping a forehand across court at an acute angle to deny Federer a game point before sealing the break by placing a drop shot right at the feet of his opponent.

Murray could not stick with Federer though and the world number two broke the Scot's serve again to steal the first set on a double fault.

But as is so often the case when Murray faces Federer, the 21-year-old recovered quickly from dropping the opening set and immediately took the lead in the second set.

Murray broke in the first and third games on his way to a 4-0 lead before Federer could finally get on the scoreboard.

Federer did manage to get one of the breaks back, in the seventh game, when Murray double

faulted but the Swiss player dropped his serve again in the next game, throwing in a double fault of his own as well as a couple of backhand errors and a wild forehand across court.

Murray quickly levelled up the match, serving out the set after an hour and two minutes.

The start of the third set was all Murray as Federer lost concentration and dropped his serve in the third and fifth games to leave the Scot leading 4-1.

But a mis-timed jump up to a straight-forward forehand overhead in the sixth game seemed to unsettle Murray as, despite laughing about it with the crowd, he dropped his serve in that game, when Federer found a forehand volley winner, and in the eighth game, when he slapped a forehand long of the baseline.

Two holds apiece later and the match was set to be decided on a tie-break. Despite taking the first two points, two forehand errors in quick succession from Federer, combined with an ace out wide from Murray allowed the Scot to take a 4-2 mini-break lead. Another two forehand errors shortly after the change of ends from Federer gifted Murray three match points.

The first went begging when Murray hit wide off the forehand side, before Federer saved the second, with a stunning forehand deep into his opponent's backhand corner, and the third, by putting away an easy forehand volley.

But it was the forehand that let Federer down once again as he slapped wide to hand Murray a fourth match point, before hitting long to concede the match.

City close to Bridge

SOCCERNET



Manchester City are expected to make Chelsea full-back Wayne Bridge their first signing of the January transfer window after agreeing a £10 million transfer fee for the England international.

Chelsea have confirmed an approach from City to sign the 28-year-old and Bridge is due at the City of Manchester Stadium to thrash out personal terms to bring an end to a frustrating five-and-a-half-year spell at Stamford Bridge, where he was a peripheral figure.

City manager Mark Hughes had identified his defence as a problem area and the signing of England international Bridge will come as a huge

relief for the former Blackburn Rovers manager, who had also considered a swoop for Bayern Munich left-back Philipp Lahm.

Hughes is reported to have a transfer kitty of around 60 million pounds at his disposal this month and Chelsea boss Luiz Felipe Scolari said it would have to be substantial bid to acquire Bridge.

"If any club wants to buy a player from Chelsea, they have to offer big money because if they play for Chelsea they are very good players," Scolari said.

"If they have a good deal, it is no problem for me," he added. "But it is best you ask (chief executive) Peter Kenyon as he knows everything that is happening."

"I have a meeting with Peter after training and I will ask him then about what is happening and whether we

have a deal or not." Bridge is set to sign a four-year contract at City and is expected to earn close to the 4m-pounds-a-year wages he earned at Chelsea, since moving to Stamford Bridge from Southampton in a 7 million pound deal in 2003.

The left-back is behind Ashley Cole in the pecking order at Stamford Bridge and has started just three Premier League games so far this season.

Meanwhile, Scolari is reportedly eager to sign CSKA Moscow's Yuri Zhirkov as a replacement for Bridge, although "Russia's Ronaldo" has earned far more recognition as an attacking winger rather than a left-back.

The 25-year-old is a Russian international and the Blues may face competition for the highly-rated player.

Real Madrid coach Juan Ramos, dumped by Spurs last year, starts 2009 with another daunting mission as his team try to cut Barcelona's 12-point lead at the top of the Spanish first division.

Bernd Schuster was axed by Real after admitting it was Barcelona's year and the odds are heavily stacked against Ramos, back in Spain after an unsuccessful spell at Tottenham, guiding Real to a third successive league crown.

Real have a tough start to 2009 with a home match against title rivals Villarreal on Sunday and Barca can crank up the pressure on Saturday by defeating Real Mallorca at Camp Nou to move 15 points clear of their arch rivals.

A good start is crucial for Real, languishing down in fifth, and Ramos has wasted no time during the January transfer window paying Portsmouth 20 million euros for holding midfielder Lassana Diarra.

Frenchman Diarra will step

in for namesake Mahamadou Diarra - out injured for the season, but he urged Real fans not to compare him with compatriot and former Real star Claude Makelele.

"I have known (Claude) Makelele for a while as I was with him at Chelsea and it is an honour to be compared with him," said Diarra. "However, Makelele is Makelele and I am Lassana Diarra."

Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, signed by Schuster for 20 million euros shortly before his dismissal, will also pep up an attack sorely missing the injured Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Sixth-placed Villarreal, who have the same points as Real, hit a rocky patch before Christmas and defender Javi Venta says the best way to start the new year is a morale-boosting win at the Bernabeu.

"We ended the year poorly and need a big victory at the Bernabeu to get back on track," said Venta.

"We know it will be difficult against one of the top teams in the league but this is a great opportunity to restore confidence."

Barcelona are on the crest of a wave, dropping just seven points in the first half of the

Mission: catch Barca

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Juan Ramos, dumped by Spurs last year, starts 2009 with another daunting mission as his team try to cut Barcelona's 12-point lead at the top of the Spanish first division.

Bernd Schuster was axed by Real after admitting it was Barcelona's year and the odds are heavily stacked against Ramos, back in Spain after an unsuccessful spell at Tottenham, guiding Real to a third successive league crown.

Real have a tough start to 2009 with a home match against title rivals Villarreal on Sunday and Barca can crank up the pressure on Saturday by defeating Real Mallorca at Camp Nou to move 15 points clear of their arch rivals.

A good start is crucial for Real, languishing down in fifth, and Ramos has wasted no time during the January transfer window paying Portsmouth 20 million euros for holding midfielder Lassana Diarra.

Frenchman Diarra will step

in for namesake Mahamadou Diarra - out injured for the season, but he urged Real fans not to compare him with compatriot and former Real star Claude Makelele.

"I have known (Claude) Makelele for a while as I was with him at Chelsea and it is an honour to be compared with him," said Diarra. "However, Makelele is Makelele and I am Lassana Diarra."

Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, signed by Schuster for 20 million euros shortly before his dismissal, will also pep up an attack sorely missing the injured Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Sixth-placed Villarreal, who have the same points as Real, hit a rocky patch before Christmas and defender Javi Venta says the best way to start the new year is a morale-boosting win at the Bernabeu.

"We ended the year poorly and need a big victory at the Bernabeu to get back on track," said Venta.

"We know it will be difficult against one of the top teams in the league but this is a great opportunity to restore confidence."

Barcelona are on the crest of a wave, dropping just seven points in the first half of the

Van Bommel to snub PSV

SOCCERNET

Mark van Bommel insists a return to PSV Eindhoven is not on the agenda with his Bayern Munich contract due to expire in the summer.

The 31-year-old Holland midfielder has been offered a one-year extension to his deal with the German champions, and will make a decision at the end of January on whether to sign it.

He told Sportweek magazine: "Bit by bit I have an idea which way the decision is going. But I want to take my time to think more about it."

Van Bommel attended PSV's goalless Eredivisie draw at home to FC Twente on December 27 but claims no talks took place over a switch back to the Philips Stadion.

"I have spoken with a lot of people, but with no-one about a possible contract in Eindhoven," he said. "So that's not part of the thinking process."

"PSV is at this point in my career not my first option. Only when no other big foreign clubs call us will PSV come into the picture."



THE CLOAKED MAN: Barcelona striker Thierry Henry (L) wearing a face cover and teammate Eric Abidal take part in a training session in Barcelona on Wednesday.

FIXTURES

Saturday  
Barcelona v Real Mallorca, Valencia v Atletico Madrid  
Sunday  
Almeria v Real Betis, Athletic Bilbao v Espanyol, Real Madrid v Villarreal, Recreativo Huelva v Numancia, Valladolid v Racing Santander, Malaga v Sporting Gijon, Sevilla v Osasuna, Getafe v Deportivo La Coruna