

# 'Benitez missed the boat'

AFP, Macau

Manchester United chief executive David Gill fired back Wednesday at Rafael Benitez, saying the Liverpool boss "missed the boat completely" by suggesting he had a conflict of interest.

Benitez, who had earlier accused United counterpart Sir Alex Ferguson of hypocrisy and serial whingeing, returned to the fray Monday to point a finger at Gill, a senior figure at England's governing Football Association.

"Is there a conflict of interest with David Gill at the FA?" asked Benitez, whose side could be overtaken by United at the top of the Premiership if the Red Devils win their two games in hand against Wigan and Bolton.

"That is another fact. It is a fact that one person has a lot of power and control, and is on a lot of committees in the FA. To me that is very strange."

But Gill, who was in Macau

to launch United's 2009 tour of Asia, which will take them to China, South Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia, dismissed the comments as "pretty irrelevant in the grand scheme of things."

He said he acts on behalf of the 20 Premier League teams, not just United, in his role at the FA. Phil Gartside, chairman of Bolton Wanderers, and Premier League Chairman Dave Richards also sit on the association's board.

"I was elected over the summer by the Premier League clubs. I'm very clear in my role," he told reporters.

"I think it is totally incorrect to assert that," Gill added, referring to the conflict-of-interest accusation.

"It's not how I work. I do not think I would have been elected for the last two years if that was the case... He missed the boat completely."

Ferguson has already responded to Benitez's initial comments, saying there was "a lot of venom" in what he said.

"He is obviously disturbed about something," Ferguson added after watching his

English, European and world champions thump title rivals Chelsea 3-0 -- a day after Liverpool could manage only a goalless draw with Stoke.

"When he reflects on it he must realize what a ridiculous thing he is saying."

Until now, Benitez had enjoyed a fairly cordial relationship with his Manchester United counterpart.

The Spaniard has his own problems to sort out at Anfield, with British reports saying he is in another stand-off with the club's American owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

Benitez reportedly wants the terms of his new contract to include complete control over transfer policy as well as a greater say over how the club's academy is run, although he has played this down.

"I don't have any problems at all with the American owners," he insisted to the Liverpool Echo.

Benitez still has 18 months remaining on his existing contract, but said in November that negotiations had begun on new terms.

# FIFA WORLD RANKINGS

- AFP, Paris
- The FIFA world rankings for January released on Wednesday:
1. Spain
  2. Germany
  3. Netherlands
  4. Italy
  5. Brazil
  6. Argentina
  7. Croatia
  8. England
  9. Russia
  10. Turkey
  11. France
  - Portugal
  - Czech Republic
  14. Cameroon
  15. Egypt

# Mourinho is the best: Maradona

AFP, Rome

Jose Mourinho is the best coach in the world claimed Argentinian national hander Diego Maradona on Tuesday.

Maradona - who is in Milan to watch several of his compatriots play in the Italian Cup clash between Mourinho's Inter Milan and Genoa later on Tuesday - said the coach known as the 'Special One' had everything required of a coach.

"Mourinho is the coach I would have hired had I been president of no matter what club," said the former Argentinian playing legend, who almost singlehandedly inspired Argentina to the 1986 World Cup trophy.

"He was the best possible buy (Mourinho arrived as a replacement for Roberto Mancini in the summer of last year) and I also said that to Inter president (Massimo Moratti) when I had the opportunity to do so.

"Jose has everything; he knows how to talk to the players, to the press, and in the dressing room. For me he is the best," added Maradona, who replaced Alfio Basile in early November after a series of disappointing results in their 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

# Becks' grandpa was a scavenger!

AFP, London

David Beckham's great-great grandfather was a "scavenger," or rubbish collector, according to British census data which went online Tuesday, giving an eye-opening view of life a century ago.

Other tidbits revealed by the 1911 census -- which was besieged by people seeking to trace their family tree -- include that one of singer Amy Winehouse's immigrant ancestors was a fruiterer.

Prime minister Herbert Asquith and writers Virginia Woolf and Agatha Christie are also among those whose personal details are collected, and available online for the first time.

The Beckham family's census form, completed in neat handwriting, lists the football icon's great-great grandfather John as a "scavenger" who lived in Walworth, southeast London.

Abraham Granish, Winehouse's great-great grandfather, was a Russian immigrant described as a "hawker," selling goods door-to-door, who lived in the Spitalfields area of the capital.

Bloomsbury set author Woolf, whose groundbreaking novels include "A Room of My Own" and "To the Lighthouse," was 29 at the time and described herself as a "journalist." She used her maiden name Adeline Virginia Stephen.

Christie, whose crime thrillers have been translated around the world, was also recorded under her unmarried name, Agatha Miller. She was 21.

Within 10 hours of going live Tuesday, the census website had received 5.4 million page views, and had been used to carry out over 260,000 searches on Britain's then 27 million-strong population, said a spokeswoman.

But the site was coping with the surge of interest -- unlike when the 1901 census was put online seven years ago, and crashed when over a million users tried to log on at the same time.

Elaine Collins, the commercial director of the www.1911census.co.uk website, said it provides a unique glimpse into life in the early 20th century.

"As well as helping people trace their ancestors, these records shed more light on our ancestors' day-to-day lifestyles, providing a snapshot of a day in their lives," she said.



Inter Milan striker Adriano takes a penalty kick which is subsequently saved by Genoa goalkeeper Alessio Scarpini (not in picture) during their Italian Cup match at Rome on Tuesday. Adriano made up for his miss with a headed goal, while even Scarpini's heroics could not save Genoa from exiting the competition.

# MU safe from crunch

AFP, Macau

Manchester United chief executive David Gill Wednesday said the club remained in a robust financial position despite worries over its huge debt and sponsorship deal with troubled insurance giant AIG.

Gill insisted the ongoing economic crisis had so far had little impact on the club's finances, and that its revenue streams remained consistent in the face of the global slowdown.

"We are not complacent and we understand the issues in the world are such that we cannot expect to be immune from them," Gill said during a trip to Macau to unveil details of this year's Asian tour.

"At the same time, we have a robust business plan," he said, adding "football is only going to get bigger."

Gill said United was paying around 43 million pounds a year to service its huge debt of 660 million pounds, which was created when US owner Malcolm Glazer moved to buy up the club in a controversial swoop in 2005.

Some analysts have worried

that United could struggle to service its heavy debts as global credit markets contracted, but Gill said the annual payments were expected to remain consistent for the next few years as the financing was organised relatively recently, in 2006.

He added sales of season tickets and executive boxes had also stood up to the downturn, and that he was expecting improvements in the television income from the UEFA Champions League which is currently being renegotiated.

Gill added there had been no moves from shirt sponsor American International Group (AIG) to pull its \$6.5 million pound deal early, despite the US government having to rescue the ailing firm last year.

He conceded it was "more than likely" AIG would not renew the deal when it expires in 18 months' time, but said there were plenty of potential suitors.

"We think, given there is only one piece of real estate on the shirt, we think it is a very attractive proposition," he said.

"There are many companies around the world who would like to have that association."

Manchester United will head to Asia in July for a pre-

season tour with games in China, South Korea, Malaysia and the club's first ever game in Indonesia, Gill said.

The tour, alongside a permanent Manchester United exhibition and store in the Venetian casino in Macau, showed the club's commitment to Asia, Gill said, and how important the region was for the growth of the Premier League.

Gill said there were an estimated 12 million fans in Indonesia, which had prompted the trip to Jakarta. United were last in Asia in December when they won the Club World Cup in Japan.

Gill said the thorny issue of what happens when Alex Ferguson retires was not at the forefront of his mind, but that it was important to learn from the mistakes made by the club when legendary manager Matt Busby left.

"If you wind the clock back to when Matt retired... the team was on the wane. George (Best), Denis (Law), and Bobby (Charlton) were towards the latter part of their careers as opposed to the peak of their careers," he said, adding it was important to have young players to hand over to the next manager.

# ITALIAN CUP Inter make heavy weather

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan booked an Italian Cup quarterfinal date with AS Roma on Tuesday but they made heavy weather of beating a Genoa side 3-1 after their opponents were reduced to 10 men in the 20th minute.

Inter - who have faced Roma in the last four Italian Cup finals with both sides winning it twice - progressed eventually thanks to extra-time goals by Argentinian midfielder Esteban

Cambiasso - who was being watched by national coach Diego Maradona - and Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

Unpredictable Brazilian striker Adriano had put Inter ahead with 15 minutes remaining but a mistake by Argentinian defender Walter Samuel let in Genoa's captain Marco Rossi to level four minutes later.

Adriano had a curate's egg of a match having originally won the penalty in the 20th minute that saw Genoa's Giuseppe Biava sent-off - Adriano, though, had his penalty saved by the out-

standing Genoa goalkeeper Alessio Scarpini.

Time and time again Scarpini saved his side, but eventually something had to give and the barrel-chested Adriano headed home from a cross by Maxwell in the 75th minute - only for Rossi to benefit from Samuel's mistake minutes later.

However, Genoa's resistance eventually wilted 10 minutes into extra-time as first Cambiasso turned in an Ibrahimovic shot that had been saved by Scarpini and then three minutes later Ibrahimovic wrapped it up.

# Kovacevic has heart op

AFP, Piraeus

Serbian international striker Darko Kovacevic underwent a successful coronary angioplasty operation in San Sebastian, Spain on Tuesday and is expected to be discharged Wednesday, his club Olympiakos Piraeus announced Tuesday.

Kovacevic, 35, joined the Greek champions in the summer of 2007 from Real Sociedad after also playing for Lazio Rome, Juventus Turin, Sheffield Wednesday, Red Star Belgrade and Protelar Zrenjanin.

Last week the medical team at Olympiakos reported that Kovacevic showed high blood pressure and a medical exam which followed showed that he had a narrowing of the arteries.

Kovacevic, who has won 55 international caps, decided to go to Spain for the heart surgery.

A team physician told the Greek press that it was unlikely that Kovacevic will ever play professional soccer again and already Olympiakos is looking for his replacement.

This season Kovacevic lost his starting position on the team to Brazilian newcomer Diogo and has scored only four goals while last season he was the leading scorer for the Greek champions with 15 goals.

# Much ado about nothing?

AFP, Madrid

Manchester United's Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo has registered the trademark "CR9" in a move which Spanish sports daily AS said Wednesday was an "obvious" sign that the striker will join Real Madrid at the end of the season.

The 23-year-old already operates two clothing stores in Portugal under the "CR7" trademark, a combination of his initials and the shirt number he wears for both the English side and the Portuguese national team.

In November his lawyers registered in Portugal the

trademark "CR9", a combination of his initials and the number which he would likely be assigned when he joins the Spanish side since the number 7 is already in use by Real captain Raul, the newspaper reported.

The number 9 jersey is currently used by 27-year-old Argentine striker Javier Saviola who is expected to leave the club because he has failing to make an impact since joining from Barcelona in July 2007.

AS, which is close to Real, said the trademark move was "evidence" that Cristiano Ronaldo, who was named FIFA World Footballer of the Year for 2008 on Monday, "had thought of a future as a Real Madrid player in the short term".

The newspaper reported

Tuesday that Ronaldo will join Real in the summer for 85 million euros (113 million dollars) under a secret pact made between Real president Ramon Calderon, the player and his agent Jorge Mendes.

After picking up the FIFA World Footballer of the Year award, Ronaldo told Spanish public television station TVE that he was learning Spanish, a comment that fueled speculation over a possible move.

Real tracked Ronaldo all of last summer following his Champions League and English Premiership triumphs and 42 goals across the campaign before United boss Sir Alex Ferguson stepped in and emphatically vetoed his departure.

# Tosic more like Becks, than Ronaldo

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson claims Manchester United youngster Zoran Tosic bears more similarities to David Beckham than Cristiano Ronaldo after admitting that the Serbian winger is just six weeks away from breaking through at Old Trafford.

Tosic, 21, is due to receive international clearance this week after arriving at United from Partizan Belgrade in a 16.7-million-pound joint transfer with 17-year-old Adem Ljajic earlier this month.

The Serbia international will not be considered by Ferguson for the forthcoming Premier League fixtures against Wigan Athletic and Bolton Wanderers due to his lack of match fitness.

But the United manager

insists that Tosic has the attributes to make a quick impact in England, even if those expecting him to develop into another Ronaldo are likely to be disappointed.

Ferguson said: "There's a difference between Zoran and Ronaldo. Ronaldo is a player with fantastic speed who can dribble, but Zoran is more straightforward."

"There are similarities with David Beckham, though, in terms of getting from box to box and his delivery, but he is naturally left-footed. He has played on the right for Serbia, though."

"We have watched him play that position a few times, but his natural position is the left-hand side."

"Zoran understands the game very well, however. He is intelligent, has a great delivery of the ball and strikes it well too. He has good energy, so he is

# Kanoute accepts fine 'without problems'

INTERNET, undated

Sevilla striker Frederic Kanoute said on Wednesday that he accepts "without problems" the fine that has been levied on him for displaying a shirt in favour of the people of Palestine.

Kanoute, 32, was fined 3,000 euros (4,000 dollars) by the disciplinary committee of the Spanish football federation for displaying an undershirt in support of the Palestinians, after scoring in last Wednesday's King's Cup 2-1 defeat of Deportivo Coruna.

Kanoute told the media on Wednesday in La Coruna - where the return leg of the tie will be played - that "I am tranquil with my conscience and I have done what I believed I should have done."

He added that he accepted the fine "without problems."

According to the disciplinary committee, Kanoute infringed federation's statutes which prohibit players from making religious or political statements or gestures on the field of play.

This is the first time that a top player in La Liga has been fined for contravening this controversial article.

# City's crazy bid for Kaka

AFP, London

Manchester City have offered AC Milan a world record 100 million pounds (150 million dollars, 110 million euros) in cash in a bid to land former World Player of the Year Kaka, newspaper reports here said Wednesday.

A four-man delegation led by chief executive Garry Cook met top officials at Milan's headquarters Tuesday, where they offered to make the Brazilian player the highest paid in the

world on 15 million pounds a year after tax, the Daily Mail and the Sun tabloids reported.

Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's prime minister and Milan's owner, has resisted previous attempts to lure the 26-year-old Kaka away. But the player has said he is unhappy with his role in the AC Milan team and would love to play in the Premier League.

The Times newspaper on its website reported that City officials had gone to Milan armed with a salary offer from Sheikh Mansour, their billionaire owner from Abu Dhabi.

City chief executive Cook, met Ariedo Braida, the Milan

sporting director, and Adriano Galliani, the Italian club's executive vice-president, to discuss the offer, The Times said.

There was no official word from Manchester City, who have struggled for form all season and are currently just two points clear of the relegation zone casting doubts over the position of Hughes who took over at Eastlands from former England boss Sven-Goran Eriksson last year.

Press reports have suggested that the visit of Newcastle on January 28 has been pencilled in as a potential debut day for the former world footballer of the year, deposed by Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo on Monday.

Despite City's activity in the player market, former Blackburn boss Hughes has been insisting he is not a big fan of the transfer window.

"I don't particularly like the transfer window because you have to wait to address things that could be sorted out a lot more quickly under the old system," Hughes told the Manchester Evening News.

"I am sure there were reasons behind bringing in a transfer window in the first place but I cannot fathom what they were."

"There have been weaknesses in our squad for quite some time and I have not had the opportunity to address them."

# Calderon denies rigging

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon has denied a newspaper report that he rigged last month's stormy annual general assembly vote in order to get its fiscal accounts for 2008 and 2009 approved.

"I can assure and guarantee that neither Ramon Calderon nor any member of the club's assembly manipulated or allowed the assembly to be manipulated. That is not our way of being," he told radio Cadena Ser late on Tuesday.

"I have never robbed anyone and much less a general assembly," he said, adding the allegations made in a front-page report in Tuesday's edition of sports daily Marca "lacked the truth."

The newspaper said

Calderon had stacked the December 7 annual general assembly with a significant number of fake delegates in order to get the club's fiscal accounts and electoral assembly members approved by a slim margin.

Marca published on Wednesday a photo on its front page of the general assembly with a yellow circle around the heads of ten delegates who it says had voted even though they were not authorized to do so that was taken just as they cast their ballots.

"These are Calderon's cheats," the newspaper said in its headline.

Real will open a probe into the report that the assembly was rigged, the defending Spanish champion's director for members, Luis Barcena, said Tuesday.

In the case that any club members are found implicated, they will immediately be expelled from the club," he told

reporters, adding access to the assembly was strictly controlled.

The accounts for fiscal year 2009, which forecast a 9.4 percent rise in sales over the previous year to a record 400.2 million euros (536.3 million dollars), were approved with 564 votes in favour, 517 against and 32 abstentions.

Those for fiscal 2008 were approved by only a slightly larger margin at the assembly, which was marked by jeering directed at Calderon as well as calls for him to resign over the club's poor performance this year.

At the time of the assembly Real was under fire from many of its supporters as a string of injuries to key players had left it trailing its arch rival Barcelona.

But since the Christmas break the club has started to close the gap and is now in second place with 35 points, 12 fewer than Barcelona.



KAKA