



PHOTO: AFP

Switzerland star Roger Federer lifts the winners' trophy after defeating compatriot Stanislas Wawrinka in the Kooyong Classic final in Melbourne on Saturday.

Pennant wants to stay

AFP, London

Liverpool have accepted an undisclosed bid for out-of-favour Jermaine Pennant from Portsmouth but the former Arsenal and Birmingham winger is reluctant to move to the south coast.

Pennant, who cost Liverpool 6.7 million pounds when he joined them from Birmingham in 2006, has also attracted interest from Real Madrid and AC Milan.

But he insists that he wants to stay at Liverpool.

"My preference is to stay at Liverpool and I am still hoping to do so," he said.

"There has been a lot of speculation about my future but I have always maintained my position of wanting to stay at the club.

"I am happy to compete for my place and hope I am given the chance to do so."

Pennant played in the 2007 Champions League final defeat by AC Milan in Athens but has been sidelined by manager Rafael Benitez this season.

His last appearance for the first team was at the end of October.

Makukula joins Bolton

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal international Aziza Makukula of Benfica has been loaned to Bolton till the end of the season, the top Portuguese club said on Friday, after a move to West Bromwich Albion fell through.

The Benfica club added, in a statement on Portuguese financial site CMVM, that there would also be an option to buy the 27-year-old striker for five million euros.

Benfica said: "An agreement has been agreed with Bolton for the loan of Aziza Makukula till the end of the season, an agreement which also has an option to buy for five million euros."

The West Brom deal did not succeed because Makukula did not want to join a club which was bottom of the Premiership.

Yobo in line for derby

AFP, London

Everton's Nigerian defender Joseph Yobo is in line for a place in the squad to face city rivals Liverpool in the Merseyside derby on Monday as he returned to training Saturday after four matches out with hamstring trouble.

But the Toffees will be without midfielder Marouane Fellaini, who is suspended after receiving 10 yellow cards so far this season.

Everton, currently sixth in the English Premiership and six points adrift of fourth-placed Aston Villa, are pushing hard for a UEFA Cup spot while Liverpool went into the weekend top but knowing Manchester United could knock them off their pedestal - if only temporarily - with a win Saturday over Bolton.

Timely boost for Federer

Tennis

AFP, Melbourne

Roger Federer received a timely confidence boost ahead of the Australian Open after lifting his second warm-up title in five years at the Kooyong Classic Saturday.

The world number 2 will start his bid Monday for a fourth title at Melbourne Park, bolstered by a near-perfect tune-up this week at suburban Kooyong which ended in a 6-1, 6-3 win over Swiss compatriot Stanislas Wawrinka in the final Saturday.

After labouring a year ago with the effects of a glandular fever which coloured the first half of his season, Federer's health is not currently an issue.

"I'm always confident entering any grand slam because of all the success I've had the last six years," the 13-time grand slam champion

said after his 57-minute match against 16th-ranked Wawrinka, with whom he lifted the Beijing doubles gold medal last August.

"I always feel at the end of the day I'm going to play well at the slams and it will take an incredible performance from someone else to beat me."

Federer improved his record against his Davis Cup teammate to 3-0.

The only good luck for the 23-year-old Wawrinka came at the net before the start when the flip of a Swiss franc coin went in his favour.

From then on, Federer took control in an opening set which lasted less than half an hour.

His warm-up week completed, Federer's next objective is first-round opponent Andreas Seppi of Italy.

"Expectations are high from my side to do well. I'm always eager to do well early in the season to build some momentum for the rest of the

year. "My draw is tough but possible. I go round by round. Seppi is difficult, but I beat him in Doha recently. Hopefully I'll get through that one and we'll see what happens."

Federer believes that himself, top seed Rafael Nadal and current title-holder Novak Djokovic are the leading title contenders.

"Novak is defending champion, Rafa had an incredible year and I've won this event plenty (three) times. But it will take a heck of a performance from one of the players to win this tournament," he said.

"We are the ones to beat. Of course we have to put Andy (Murray) in there as favourite as well. He played well the last few months. But it will take a heck of a performance from one of the players to win this tournament," he said.

"My serve is working well and things are falling into place nicely. I hope it's all gonna pay off next week."

'Messi better than C'Ron'

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine coach Diego Maradona on Friday rated Lionel Messi as the best player in the world, rather than FIFA choice Cristiano Ronaldo.

"Obviously Messi is the best player in the world," said the 1986 world champion.

"They gave me the accolade as the best when I was 26-look at Messi's age (just 21)."

"They gave me the golden ball after a lot of time had elapsed. So just think how many golden balls Messi can get if he keeps his head down," said Maradona.

He added that as it is the convention that coaches of national sides do not vote for a compatriot "I voted for Cristiano Ronaldo - we couldn't vote for Argentines," explained Maradona.

Ronaldo duly topped the poll last week after his exploits in winning the Champions League and the English Premiership with Manchester United.

In contrast, Messi's Barcelona under-achieved and ended the campaign empty-handed.

Maradona was speaking after returning from a trip to Europe to check on his squad.

Kinnear offered extended deal

AFP, Newcastle

Joe Kinnear claims he has been offered the chance to carry on as Newcastle's manager beyond the end of the season on what he described as "very lucrative" terms.

Kinnear was expected to be only an interim appointment when he arrived at St James' Park in September in the aftermath of Kevin Keegan's acrimonious departure from the manager's seat.

But his first short-term contract was extended until the end of the season and the 62-year-old, who has led Newcastle out of the relegation zone, is now set to agree a longer deal with owner Mike Ashley, who has abandoned his plan to sell the club.

"I know what my own future is. I'm just mulling over things in my head at the moment. I have been offered a very lucrative contract," Kinnear said on Friday.

The former Nottingham Forest and Wimbledon boss added that he had held talks with Ashley about the owner's investment plans for the future.

"First and foremost, we have to work hard and establish ourselves as a Premier League side and get away from the relegation fight," Kinnear added.

"I really don't need any more distractions than that. What I suggested to the club was that we all sit down in the summer and look at each other and say what direction do we want to take the club in, refinancing it, letting players go and bringing in my own players."

"I'll also see what my wife and family have to say about the situation of moving up here permanently."

Kaka exit on the cards

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi hinted on Saturday that he is in favour of the proposed 100 million euro transfer of Kaka to Manchester City.

The mega-rich English Premier League team's interest in Kaka has been much documented with current rumours suggesting a bid in excess of 100 million euros is on the table with Kaka set to more than double his salary to 15 million euros a season if he moves.

Milan have not publicly accepted any offer but have given Kaka permission to speak to City and Berlusconi doesn't seem to be doing anything to try to hold on to his star Brazilian.

"Nothing is decided yet but

it is very difficult to ask someone to stay and respect his contract when he has been offered such a huge amount of money," said the Italian Prime Minister.

"You have to act in a moral way, like a big brother, as I did with Sheva (Andrei Shevchenko)."

"I didn't know how to say no to him when the offer came in from Chelsea."

Berlusconi may claim that he can't prevent Kaka from signing for City with such money on offer but Milan did manage to reject a lower bid from Chelsea for the Brazilian last year.

And following Milan's Champions League final victory over Liverpool in 2007 he described Kaka as the 'symbol' of the club and said he would never let him leave.

But money seems to be the motivating factor with what

seems an imminent acceptance of City's bid, with the Prime Minister finding a convenient excuse not to fight to hold on to Kaka.

"We can't possibly increase the salaries for everyone as we would have to do to keep hold of Kaka," he said.

"I've already said it and (vice-president) Adriano Galliani believes it too but my reasoning is clear: you can't say no to a lad who has a short career and who has the potential to earn much more than he is currently being paid."

"On the other hand we can't raise his salary because it's already very high and we would have to raise the salary of all the other players as well."

Yet despite that, Berlusconi tried to avoid angering the club's fans, some of whom protested on Friday against the sale of Kaka.

"I hope he stays," he said.

Scolari might off-load

Football

AFP, London

Luiz Felipe Scolari is ready to sell any player unhappy with life at Chelsea as the Blues boss tries to revive the club's flagging spirits.

Scolari is fed up of hearing complaints from several of his stars about tactics and team selection and then watching those same players produce lacklustre displays.

The Brazilian believes some members of his squad have been unsettled by interest from other clubs and he is determined to clear out the disaffected before the transfer window closes.

Didier Drogba, Nicolas Anelka, Ricardo Carvalho, John Terry and Frank Lampard have all reportedly had disagreements with Scolari in recent weeks as the pressure of the team's spluttering form begins to tell.

England duo Terry and Lampard are clearly untouchable but Ivory Coast striker Drogba, who was left out of Chelsea's FA Cup win at

Southern in midweek following a lacklustre display against Manchester United, could have been on Scolari's mind when he demanded more spirit from the players.

"I don't know where the spirit has gone. Maybe some offers outside have caused a problem," Scolari said.

"This is the time for everybody to play as a group with spirit. Or it is time to change the group. They know they need to stay together and fight until the end of May. If not now is the time to change."

Drogba has cut a forlorn figure for much of this season and it would be no surprise if he was pining for a reunion with former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho at Inter Milan.

As yet no-one has made a firm offer for Drogba and Scolari insisted he is determined to improve the player's fragile mental and physical condition.

"Now is the time to buy but who has come to buy? No-one," he said.

"Didier has started to change his technical conditions and his mind because sometimes he gets in front of goal and he is not ready."

"Now is the time to give him more confidence, then afterwards we see what happens."

"He only doesn't play for one game. We have 40 games until the end of the season. We have time to change something."

Scolari was understandably angry with his side's dismal display in their 3-0 defeat at Old Trafford last

weekend and responded by admitting several of his players were giving only 50 percent or less.

But their performance in Wednesday's FA Cup tie, where the Blues came back from a goal down to beat Southend 4-1, at least proved to the former Portugal coach that some of his squad are still willing to fight.

"We won on Wednesday not because we played a fantastic game but because we wanted to win," he said.

"When we have heart we are very good as a technical team. We are better than other teams. This is the difference because we have fantastic players. We need spirit, every game, every week, every day and every hour."

With senior players like Terry, Lampard and Carvalho all asking Scolari to change aspects of his regime, including training intensity and defensive marking schemes, the Brazilian acknowledges that he would be a fool not to listen but he knows the buck stops with him.

"I am not a dictator, I am a democratic man. I listen. It is better for my team I change some things," he said.

"I am an international coach. I stay awake many times at night looking at videos. But if I am wrong it is my mistake."

Rafa wants full control

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez has rejected a proposed new contract from Liverpool and warned the club that he will not sign a new deal unless he is given full control of transfer policy.

But the club's American owners moved quickly to reassure fans that the current impasse in negotiations over Benitez's future would not lead to the Spaniard leaving Anfield when his current contract expires at the end of next season.

Benitez said it was with "with great regret" that he had decided to reject the draft contract presented to him by the Americans, Tom Hicks and George Gillet.

Benitez, 48, said he had no problems with the financial

terms on offer or the length of the deal but revealed that he was unhappy with being required to answer to Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry over the buying and selling of players.

"The owners feel that the manager's decisions need to be subject to the chief executive," Benitez told local newspaper The Liverpool Echo.

"But I know that I am subject to results and to our fans and they are the best judges I will ever have."

The Spaniard is also holding out for a greater say in the running of the club's academy.

With Liverpool currently sitting at the top of the Premier League table, Benitez is negotiating from a position of strength and Hicks was anxious to play down the differences between the owners and the manager.

"I will be working with Rafa to get this resolved - and I am just not worried about it at all," Hicks said.

"Rafa is going to be coach of Liverpool for the next five years, and we will work through all this."

Benitez's relations with the Americans have been strained in the past but he insists that he is now on good terms with them.

"My relationship with the owners is better than people think. I have regular contact with them and especially with Tom Hicks, who has always been very supportive," Benitez said.

"The talks between my agent and the advisers of the owners have been very positive and friendly and our differences are about my responsibilities."

"The only person who can decide the value of a player to his squad is the manager because he knows what elements are needed to improve the squad."

Benitez has been at Liverpool since 2004. He guided them to a Champions League triumph in his first season in charge and, despite being regularly linked with every major managerial vacancy in Spain, has repeatedly stated that he wants to stay in Liverpool for the foreseeable future.

Hicks said he expected to meet Benitez at the end of this month to seek a resolution of the contract dispute.

"Rafa has been frustrated for a long time at the length of time it has taken certain things to happen," the American said. "We understand that and are committed to working with him."

"I think he's just trying to position himself to do his job better. We will work through it. We can fix it - and we will."

Liverpool will be knocked off the top of the Premier League on Saturday if Manchester United win at Bolton but Benitez's men can return to the top if they overcome Everton in a derby clash on Monday evening.



RAFAEL BENITEZ

'City not right for Kaka'

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool striker Fernando Torres thinks Brazilian star Kaka would be wrong to join mega rich Manchester City because the club are not currently competing for silverware, the benchmark for ambitious players.

"Manchester City is not the right team for Kaka," Torres told Saturday's Daily Mail. "Seriously, how can they pay 100 million pounds for Kaka?"

"Big players want to win trophies and Manchester City is not even in the race for trophies in England. They are fighting to stay in the Premier League, or to get to the middle

of the table," the Spaniard noted.

City's billionaire Arab owners are reportedly bidding 108 million pounds (120 million euros) for Kaka, 26, who would receive a reported weekly wage of half a million pounds per week.

Torres drew parallels with Chelsea as he noted that the Londoners "were high in the league before they started to sign really big stars. Now everyone wants to play for Chelsea, but they did not when (owner) Roman Abramovich first arrived. They built a strong club and then it happened."

And Torres insisted that winning trophies was more important than anything else for a player, including

money.

"Imagine 10 years after you stop playing, you go back, you look around, you are not in any picture, you have no medals, no trophies; it is like you played for nothing."

"You may have a fantastic car, a fantastic home, but what does it matter? No player looks back and says: 'I won more money'."

Milan have given Kaka permission to talk to City and he is due to examine the bid for his services on Monday before deciding if he wants to make the most expensive move in footballing history.

The former world Footballer of the Year joined Milan in 2003 and is under contract at the San Siro up to 2013.

Gourcuff will return if Milan rate him

Football

AFP, Rome

The father of Bordeaux's France international midfielder Yoann Gourcuff said Friday that his son, currently on loan with the French outfit, would return to AC Milan if the Italians show they have "confidence" in his abilities.

"Yoann belongs to Milan. He can stay in France - but only with Bordeaux if the team strengthens itself and qualifies for the Champions League," Christian Gourcuff, who coaches top flight side Lorient, told the Gazzetta dello Sport sports daily.

Christian Gourcuff said that Bordeaux did not necessarily have to hang on to highly-rated coach Laurent Blanc for his son to stay with the Girondins.

"In football, everything is possible. The release clause in his contract (15 million euros) is ambiguous and there is also the possibility of a loan," he said.

Asked what would persuade his 22-year-old offspring that he would be best served by returning to Milan, Christian Gourcuff said: "(Obtaining) the confidence of the person who sends him out onto the field."

"In Bordeaux, he has the confidence of the coach. That is the essential thing."

"At Milan he turned in some good showings but gave the impression of not having found his rhythm. In fact that's because he did not have the confidence of (coach Carlo) Ancelotti who counted on older players and limited (squad) turnover."

"You cannot not play a 21-year-old -- his career is at stake. We all agreed a loan out

was necessary."

At Bordeaux, Gourcuff has been playing superbly and the club trail champions and leaders Lyon by just one point.

Ronaldinho suspended

AFP, Rome

Brazilian international Ronaldinho was handed a three-match Italian Cup suspension on Friday for elbowing Lazio's Czech defender David Rozenthal in a last 16 clash.

The decision was reached after disciplinary chiefs viewed television footage of the incident which took place on December 3 in a game won by 2-1 by Lazio.

Ronaldinho's ban will come into effect next season following Milan's exit from the 2008/2009 tournament.