

(L) AC Milan fans showcase where their heart lies by displaying a banner that reads 'Kaka has no price' during their Serie A match against Fiorentina at the San Siro in Milan on Saturday. (R) A grim-looking Kaka asks the fans to keep the faith by gesturing towards the club badge at the end of the game; an apparent sign of his willingness to stay on at a club where he feels at home.

The €110m hype?

AFP, London

The will he, won't he transfer saga of Brazilian star Kaka's potential move to Manchester City for a record fee is "ridiculous" hype engendered by his club AC Milan, according to a source close to City's Arab owners.

"The reports are absolutely ridiculous and so far wide of the mark it's unreal," the unnamed source told Sunday's The Observer.

The media has been awash all week with reports that the 26-year-old former world player of the year might join City for upwards of 100 million pounds (110 million euros), and Milan have given the Brazilian star and his representatives permission to talk to the English Premiership also-rans.

On Saturday, Milan club president and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi claimed that with the figures allegedly on the table they could not stand in Kaka's way if he wants to leave.

According to The Observer,

the unnamed adviser to City's billionaire owner Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, revealed from Abu Dhabi that the media coverage of a mega-bucks transfer and reported wages of up to half a million pounds a week were a fantasy.

That, The Observer suggested, gave "credence to growing rumours in Italy that the story has been hyped up by Milan owner Silvio Berlusconi, in an attempt to earn good publicity when no move materialises and Kaka stays at the San Siro."

Zinedine Zidane's 67 million euro move from Juventus to Real Madrid in 2001 is the current world record for a transfer.

"A hundred million, in pounds or euros, is ridiculous," the source continued.

"It doubles the previous record for a transfer and, in the current economic climate, how could there possibly be a return on that or a salary of 500,000 pounds a week? You could do so much else with that amount of money."

Milan still in the hunt

AFP, Rome

AC Milan put the Kaka transfer saga behind them to earn a vital 1-0 Serie A victory over Fiorentina at the San Siro on Saturday to keep their title hopes alive.

Third-placed Milan began the day nine points behind leaders Inter Milan but closed the gap to just six ahead of their bitter rivals' trip to Atalanta on Sunday.

The build up to Milan's match had been dominated by Manchester City's reported 100-plus million euro bid for Kaka and Milan fans made their thoughts known before kick-off by unveiling a host of banners pleading with the Brazilian star to stay.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti kept the former world player of the year in the starting side and handed ex-England skipper David Beckham a home debut.

However, Ronaldinho was dropped to the bench in favour of Massimo Ambrosini as Ancelotti looked for more midfield steel. Afterwards he insisted he would still rather keep Kaka than take the money.

"Kaka is important for us. I hope he stays in red and black," he said. "The situation is evolving, still anything could happen because there has been a big offer for a great player."

"I think time is still needed to evaluate everything. Tonight was a very positive one for him, the whole crowd should know how much they love him."

"From a personal, human point of view I've spent seven years with his guy and if he goes I'll be a bit sad."

Kaka, who had an unspectacular game despite some purposeful early runs, would have dearly loved to score but instead it was his teenage compatriot Pato who snatched the winner to condemn Fiorentina to a second successive defeat. They remain in sixth place in the table.

Milan survived an early penalty scare as Stevan Jovetic ran into the area and took the ball around goalkeeper Christian Abbiati who got the slightest of touches on the ball before up-ending the attack-

ing midfielder.

The referee originally pointed to the spot but then changed his mind after consulting the linesman.

Fiorentina were to be further enraged when Riccardo Montolivo crumpled in a heap under a robust challenge from Gianluca Zambrotta, but again no penalty was given. By then, Milan had the lead through a sumptuous strike from Pato on seven minutes.

Beckham had tried to cross from the left but hit a defender.

As players rushed to the loose ball, Beckham got there just before two Fiorentina defenders and poked it back to Marek Jankulovski who played in Pato in the space vacated by the visiting players.

There looked to be little danger from his position just inside the box in the left hand corner but Pato hit a stunning strike across goal and in off the far post.

Fiorentina were enjoying the better of the game, although with the talent at Milan's disposal they looked the more dangerous.

Even so a Montolivo shot forced Abbiati to parry and on 35 minutes former Milan forward Alberto Gilardino should have done better with a free header from Juan Vargas's cross than plant it well over the bar.

Just before half-time, Pato played a charging Beckham into the box on the right, from the same distance that the Brazilian had scored, but the former Manchester United man could not get the same power on his shot and Marco Storari tipped it around the post.

Fiorentina should have equalised on 66 minutes when Vargas got to the byline and crossed to Mario Santana but the Argentine put his shot too close to Abbiati who managed to save.

By this point Fiorentina were in complete control and Milan merely hanging on with Ancelotti replacing Clarence Seedorf with defensive midfielder Mathieu Flamini.

But hold on they did to secure a win in what may be Kaka's final match in the famous red and black jersey.

Joe Cole out for season

AFP, London

Chelsea winger Joe Cole will miss the rest of the season after surgery on a ruptured cruciate knee ligament on Saturday.

Cole suffered the injury in Wednesday's FA Cup third round replay win at Southend and was initially expected to be out for at least eight weeks.

But the England star underwent reconstructive surgery on Saturday and has no chance of recovering before the end of the season.

Cole's absence is another blow for Blues boss Luiz Felipe Scolari, whose squad has been ravaged by injury problems this season.

"I am very sad for Joe to have suffered this injury and I am disappointed to have lost a very important player for me and the club at such a vital moment in the competition," Scolari told Chelsea's website.

"However, I believe that with his spirit, Joe will come back to Chelsea even better than before."

Cole's injury also rules him out of England's friendlies against Spain and Slovakia, as well as their World Cup qualifier against Ukraine at Wembley in April and the June qualifiers with Kazakhstan and Andorra.

Chelsea and England captain John Terry added: "We're all behind Coley to get fit as soon as possible. He's going to be a big miss for us and I keep on saying he's the one who really opens things up in tight moments."

"He did it again on Wednesday against Southend. What a pass he produced for Salomon Kalou's goal."

"We're all gutted for him and we know how much it means to him to be playing."

"No-one will be more hurt at missing games through injury. But one thing we all know is that he'll work just as hard off the pitch to get fit as he does on it."

Moyes accuses Pompey, Hammers

AFP, London

Everton manager David Moyes has accused Portsmouth and West Ham of pursuing transfer policies that are "a danger to football".

"They bought players and gave them big wages. That made it difficult for clubs like Everton because we would try to get similar players but they blew us out with higher wages, far more than Everton could afford," he told The Sunday Express.

Moyes added: "It upset the whole market. Now they are backing off and selling players because they paid them higher wages than maybe they should have."

"In truth, the people who went into those clubs are now either one down, or bankrupt, or can't afford to pay the wages."

"Now Portsmouth might say, 'We had our day in the sun. We won the FA Cup and we don't really care'."

"But I think those sort of clubs are the ones which have disrupted the wages in the Premier League."

Everton play Liverpool in the Merseyside derby on Monday.

Rafa shadow hangs heavy

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez has attempted to reassure Liverpool fans that uncertainty over his future will not seep through to the dressing room ahead of Monday's crucial derby game with Everton at Anfield.

Benitez revealed on Friday that talks over a contract extension had stalled, sparking fears that the Spaniard is ready to quit the club he joined in 2004.

His current deal expires in the summer of 2010 yet negotiations between Benitez's agent and Liverpool's co-owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett have ended without the two parties being able to agree on the extent of the manager's remit.

Benitez is happy with the financial terms of the deal but has demanded more control over football matters, and is adamant that he should not have to answer to chief executive Rick Parry over the buying and selling of players.

Worryingly for Reds fans, Benitez quit Valencia in June 2004 over a similar issue, famously saying: "I asked for a table and they bought me a lampshade."

Benitez is negotiating from a position of strength with Liverpool mounting a serious challenge for their first title since 1990, and Hicks has insisted the outstanding contractual issues can be resolved.

Liverpool fans nevertheless will be concerned by the prospect that the coach who guided the

club to Champions League glory in 2005 could decide to walk away if his demands are not accepted by the Anfield hierarchy.

Manchester United's last-gasp win over Bolton on Saturday knocked Liverpool off the top of the Premier League table and Benitez knows that his side cannot afford any lapses in concentration over in what is certain to be a tense finale to the season.

For that reason, the Spaniard was at pains to stress that he did not believe his own situation would prove to be a distraction.

"We have finished the conversation about the contract and now we can talk about Everton," Benitez said.

"Do I think our build-up to the Everton game has been disrupted by this? No. I don't think so. We had Friday off and I don't think we have any problems."

Benitez, who is poised to welcome back Xabi Alonso to the midfield after the Spain midfielder recovered from a foot injury, believes Liverpool are well placed to win the title even though they have dropped crucial points lately.

Everton manager David Moyes has warned Liverpool that his side are confident of recording their first win at Anfield since 1999.

Despite losing key strikers Louis Saha and Aiyegbeni Yakubu to injury, Moyes's side have been in terrific form.

"We've not played well in the last two Liverpool games so we're looking forward to this one," said Moyes, who has a fitness doubt over Nigeria defender Joseph Yobo.



Manchester United forward Dimitar Berbatov stoops low to head in a 90th minute winner during their Premier League match against Bolton at the Reebok Stadium on Saturday.

MU provisionally top Chelsea leave it late

AFP, London

Dimitar Berbatov scored a last-minute winner to sink Bolton and send Manchester United to the top of the Premier League for the first time this season on Saturday.

Just as it seemed Gary Megson's side had done enough to hold out for a goalless draw, the 30-million-pound Bulgarian forward popped up in the box to meet a cross from Carlos Tveez and head in a 90th-minute winner that lifts United one point clear of Liverpool with 17 matches left to play for both clubs.

Liverpool can return to the top by winning their derby clash with Everton on Monday but defending champions United are now in the driving seat after a run of ten consecutive clean sheets in the league that equals Chelsea's top-flight record.

"Being top is not decisive at this stage but it is always nice because it is the best place to be," United boss Sir Alex Ferguson beamed.

There was an even more dramatic late show at Stamford Bridge, where Chelsea scored twice in the last two minutes to snatch a 2-1 win over Stoke.

The Londoners had fallen behind on the hour mark after Rory Delap produced a classic striker's chipped finish to beat Petr Cech following a pass from new signing James Beattie.

That goal came completely against the run of play and Chelsea's pressure finally told as Juliano Belletti's 88th-minute strike and a stoppage time winner from Frank Lampard earned Luiz Felipe Scolari's side a morale-boosting victory.

Aston Villa consolidated their grip on fourth place thanks to an 80th-minute penalty from Gareth Barry, which enabled Martin O'Neill's side to claim a scarcely-deserved 2-1 win at Sunderland.

Poldi all set for Cologne

AFP, Berlin

German international striker Lukas Podolski will return this summer to former club Cologne from Bayern Munich, where he has had an unhappy time since joining in 2006, a Cologne official said Sunday.

"A quick decision needs to be taken in everyone's interest and should arrive in the coming week," Cologne general manager Michael Meyer said.

"Our positions have come closer," he added in allusion to Cologne wanting to pay 7.5 million euros for a player they sold for 10 million.

The midtable side are now offering to pay 7.5 million and also the receipts from one or more friendly matches with Bayern, which Meyer said was "one solution."

According to German media reports, Podolski, who has scored 31 times in 60 appearances for the national side, is to sign a pre-contract with Cologne allowing him the right to talk to other clubs should the side be relegated.

Boluda will not be candidate

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's caretaker president Vicente Boluda said Sunday he would not be putting himself forward as a candidate when elections to appoint a full time president are held later this year.

Boluda, who stepped in to fill the void left by the resignation of Ramon Calderon on Friday, told sports daily Marca: "I'll stay until June. I want to simply organise things and then stand aside."

According to local media Boluda, vice-president under Calderon, would not have been a popular choice among Real Madrid members if he had decided to stand.

Boluda said he would back the possible candidacy of likely favourite for the job, former president Florentino Perez, who has yet to declare his hand.

Other potential candidates include Juan Villalonga, Eugenio Martinez, who mounted a campaign against Calderon, Juan Miguel Villar Mir. World rally champion Carlos Sainz's name has also been mentioned.

Calderon, who controversially tried to sign Cristiano Ronaldo, resigned Friday following allegations that he rigged voting at the club's last annual general assembly.

Buffon down with the flu

AFP, Rome

Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon's brief return from injury has come to an abrupt end due to the flu, the Turin club said on Saturday.

Italy's first choice stopper made his first team return in Wednesday's 3-0 Coppa Italia victory over Catania after three months on the sidelines with a thigh injury but will miss Sunday's trip to Lazio.

It means a quick return to the first team for Austrian former Arsenal goalkeeper Alex Manninger.

As well as Buffon, Italy centre-back Giorgio Chiellini and international teammates Vincenzo Iaquinta, a striker, and midfielder Mauro Camoranesi are all injured while full-back Zdenek Grygera is suspended.

MESSI MESMERIZING Barcelona blistering

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona were back to their brilliant best crushing Deportivo La Coruna 5-0 at Camp Nou on Saturday to move 15 points clear of Real Madrid and 12 ahead of Sevilla at the top of the Spanish first division.

A mesmerising first half display saw Barcelona score three times with Lionel Messi, voted second behind Cristiano Ronaldo in the World Player of the Year award on Monday, Thierry Henry and Samuel Eto'o all on the scoresheet.

Henry grabbed his 11th goal of the season with eight minutes left while Eto'o took his personal tally to 18 with a second from the penalty spot in the closing stages.

The Catalan giants are now 17 matches unbeaten in the league and have set a new record of 50 points at the halfway point of the season. Real set the previous best of 47 points last season.

"It has been a good first half of the season," admitted Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola. "We have lots of points, have only lost once (in the league) and scored lots of goals."

"We haven't won anything but we are another small step closer to our goal."

A late goal from Renato helped Sevilla defeat promoted Numancia 1-0 in Saturday's late game.

Barcelona struggled to defeat strugglers Osasuna 3-2 last weekend but Guardiola kept faith with his first choice XI leaving Andres Iniesta on the bench.

"The team is working so well at the moment," said Ivory Coast midfielder Yaya Toure.

Henry should have scored after just 30 seconds with Messi creating the chance in the

penalty area, but the French striker shot straight at the goalkeeper.

Eto'o then almost scored on the quarter hour mark, dummied two defenders only to scuff his shot.

The inevitable breakthrough came on 21 minutes with Messi dribbling at speed before guiding his shot in off the post for his 12th of the season.

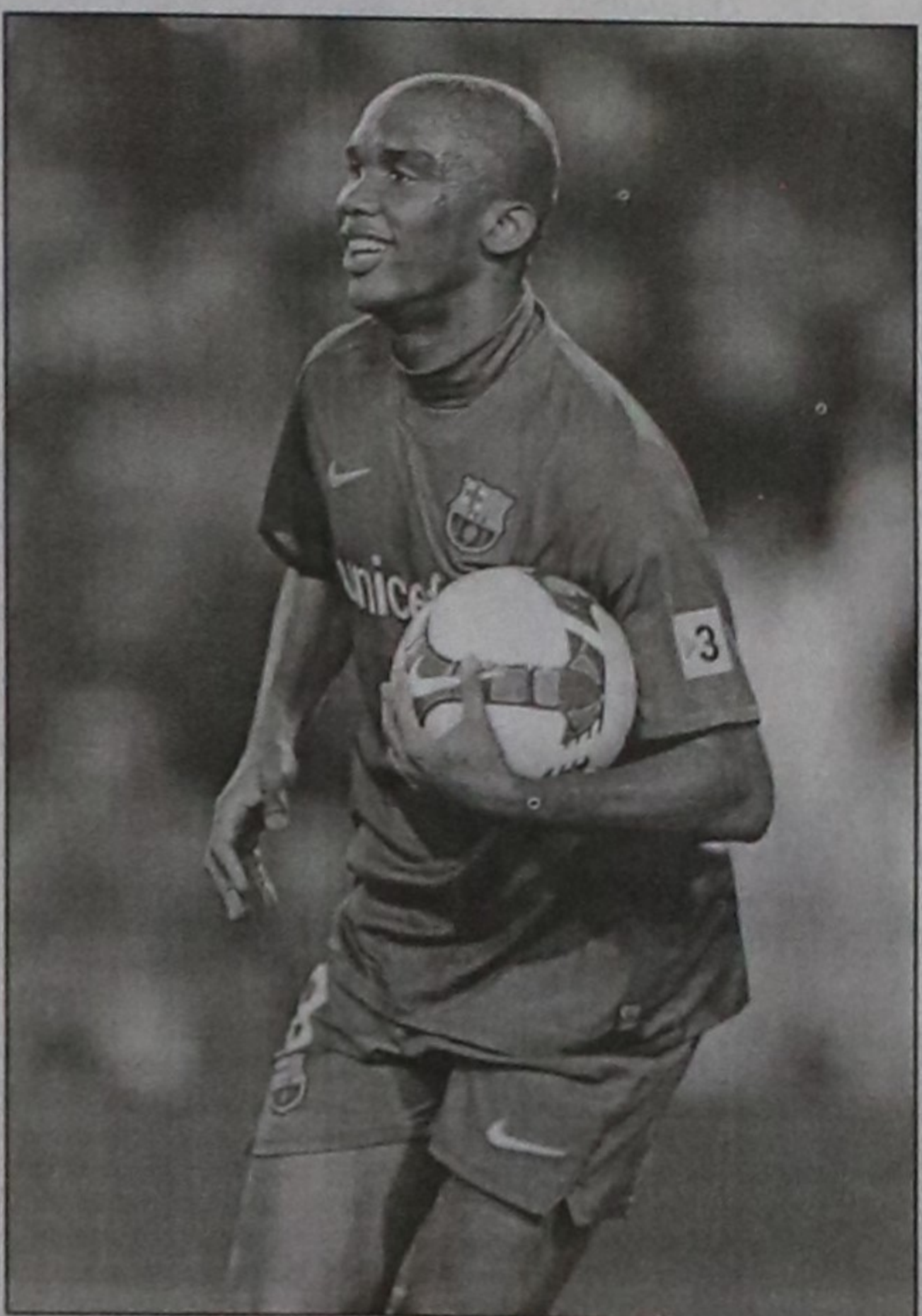
Henry went into double figures for the campaign six minutes later heading in a pinpoint cross from Dani Alves.

Messi should have scored his second with a clear header

but missed the target and Eto'o spurned another great chance. The Cameroon forward finally got his goal after 41 minutes with a tap-in.

Henry made it 4-0 on 82 minutes and Eto'o completed the scoring with a late penalty after goalkeeper Daniel Aranzubia chopped down Carles Puyol and was subsequently red-carded.

While everything is going Barca's way, Real have had a turbulent week with president Ramon Calderon resigning on Friday following allegations that he rigged voting at the club's last annual general assembly.



Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o celebrates after scoring during their 5-0 rout of Deportivo during their Primera Liga match at the Nou Camp on Saturday.