

Fabregas to return in April

AFP, London

Cesc Fabregas has confirmed he expects to play again for Arsenal at the start of April...

The Spanish midfielder has been sidelined since December 12 when he partially ruptured ligaments in his right knee...

Fabregas, 22, did not require surgery but was immediately ruled out for four months by his manager Arsene Wenger.

The Gunners captain duly flew to his home city of Barcelona to begin his convalescence before returning to north London last weekend to resume light training exercises.

Doctors expect him to be able to begin ball work within the next 10 days and Fabregas hopes to make his return in the meeting with Manchester City at Emirates stadium on April 4.

"I have been working hard on the training ground," Fabregas said.

"The most important thing is working on my legs to build them up, which will take another three weeks or so, and hopefully in five or six weeks I will be back playing."

"I have to make sure it's 100 per cent cured before I come back. Especially because I am a midfielder - I play with the inside of my leg all the time and I'm trying to be involved in the game. But it's been great to be back at the club."

WICB checked

Peters insisted Stanford's legal problems and frozen assets were not something the WICB could see coming.

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"We had sat down with him a couple of times, Nial and I," Keane told the Irish Times.

Former Sunderland manager Roy Keane has revealed that relationship with American investor Ellis Short and chairman Niall Quinn played a major role in his decision to leave the Premier League club.

Keane resigned in December after two years in charge at the Stadium of Light and the Manchester United legend has now spoken for the first time about the reasons behind his departure.

The former Republic of Ireland midfielder, who lifted Sunderland from the foot of the Championship to Premier League respectability, insists Short's attitude towards him was uncomfortable from the start.

Keane also revealed a change in attitude from Quinn concerned him deeply after the club's supremo revealed his desire for the manager to put a smile back on the players' faces.

"There was good spirit. That's what had kept us in the Premiership last year. Our spirit. That got the alarm bells ringing. Without a shadow of a doubt. The American fella would have been on Niall's case."

Mahela, Thilan put

Pakistan's last Test was against India at Bangalore in December 2007 and the team had not played a home Test since facing South Africa in October that year...

Warnapura, who hit nine boundaries, edged paceman Yasir Arafat to Haq who held a low catch in the slip.

Sri Lanka, who reached 120-2 at lunch, lost well-set Sangakkara when he miscued a drive off Kaneria and was well caught by Haq at short mid-wicket.

Sangakkara hit nine boundaries and added 84 for the third wicket with Jayawardene.

Pakistan's first Test in 14 months failed to attract a big crowd as just a handful of schoolchildren watched the first day's play at the National Stadium.

Scott praised Peer's poise throughout the week. "Thanks to the courage of Shahar, and all those individuals and organizations - including her fellow players - that supported her, the UAE has changed their policy and another barrier of discrimination has fallen," he said.

'Money the ruination'

Cricket

AFP, London

Money has been the "ruination" of cricket, former Test umpire Dickie Bird said Saturday, after the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) terminated all contracts with alleged fraudster Allen Stanford.

Bird called for a return to "old traditions and principles" in a comment piece in the Sun tabloid and said he felt "saddened" when he saw large sums of money pour into cricket.

"It was right for the England and Wales Cricket Board to terminate all contractual links with Allen Stanford," Bird, a county batsman for his native Yorkshire and Leicestershire before becoming an umpire, wrote.

"But it is too late because the damage has already been done. It depresses me what has happened to the game I know and was brought up on as a boy. Money has been the ruination of cricket."

He said that authorities should have questioned Stanford's interests in financing multi-million-dollar cricket tournaments, but instead "saw the dollar signs and dived in head-first, without thinking."

Bird continued: "There was nothing wrong with the game throughout my era as a player and an umpire. But it has all changed. Why can't we leave things alone? We need to return to some of the old traditions and principles."

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Negotiations between the ECB and Stanford were suspended on Tuesday when it was revealed that the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) had charged the Texan tycoon with an alleged nine billion dollar fraud.

ECB draws Allen stumps

Cricket

AFP, London

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ECB chief executive David Collier said in a statement: "The ECB was shocked by the charges filed against the Stanford organisation and personnel earlier this week by the SEC."

"Within minutes of the announcement, the ECB determined to suspend any further discussions with Stanford and the Board has now agreed to terminate the ECB's agreements with Stanford."

Under the deal struck between the ECB and Stanford last year, England were due to play four further 20 million dollar matches in the Caribbean, while the proposed quadrangular events were scheduled to take place annually from 2009 to 2011, with each worth around nine million dollars.

Rifts led to Keane exit

Cricket

AFP, Dublin

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Yelena to bid for 27th WR

AFP, Birmingham

Olympic pole vault gold medalist Yelena Isinbayeva will bid for her 27th world record at the Birmingham Grand Prix on Saturday.

The 26-year-old Russian has already set seven world records in the UK and is hoping to improve upon the five metres indoor record she set in Donetsk last weekend.

"My first world record was in the UK, in Gateshead, and my most important world record was in London (when she first cleared 5m) - everything seems to happen here for me," she said.

"My first aim will be to win in Birmingham and then I'll try for a new world record. I would love to do that for the British crowd."

"I will never get bored of setting world records. Each time I break one I get the same strange feelings, that I have done something that nobody has ever done before. I enjoy that."

Isinbayeva's dominance of the discipline is such that she is expected to win every event she enters, and she concedes that the lack of serious challengers can make for a predictable spectacle for supporters.

"It would be good to have a closer rival," she said. "It would be good for the crowd as at the moment they are maybe skeptical and say, 'oh, we know that Isinbayeva is going to win'."

"But for me it is no different as I always try and do my best - even if I am alone there. I'll always try and do a world record so that I can put on a great show for the spectators."

The reigning IAAF Female Athlete of the Year will not defend her European indoor crown at next month's championships in order to concentrate on the outdoor season.

It means she will lose her current haul of all the indoor and outdoor titles at Olympic, world and European level, but the blow has been softened by the fact she recently signed a reported 1.5 million-dollar (1.7 million-euro) deal with Chinese sportswear firm Li Ning.

U-19s in tough

FROM PAGE 17 began with 45 participating teams being drawn into eight groups for the qualification tournament.

The qualification campaign is scheduled to run from October 3 to 18, with the group venues to be confirmed at a later date.

The winners and runner-up of each of the seven six-team groups as well as the best third-placed side overall will advance to the finals along with the country that emerge victorious from the trio-testing Group H, namely Australia, Laos and Malaysia.

U-16 GROUPINGS

Group A: Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Kuwait, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan.

Group B: Iran, Bahrain, Lebanon, Nepal, Tajikistan, Maldives.

Group C: Syria, Yemen, Qatar, Palestine, Iraq, Bhutan.

Group D: UAE, India, Turkmenistan, Oman, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan.

Group E: Japan, Indonesia, Mongolia, Chinese Taipei, Bangladesh, Philippines.

Group F: China, Singapore, Guam, Hong Kong, Macau, Timor Leste.

Group G: Korea Republic, Thailand, Vietnam, DPR Korea, Cambodia, Myanmar.

Group H: Australia, Malaysia, Laos.

Drogba slams

FROM PAGE 20 Chelsea is a family - and a family needs to be together," Drogba told the Sun.

"When Scolari started blaming individuals, then that was bad. To name one player as to blame for what happened in a squad of 24 is wrong."

Scolari also claimed that Drogba was one of three players who betrayed him and led to his eventual demise. But Drogba hit back and said: "I was shocked he said that."

"I have respect for Scolari as a man and a coach but I was not involved in any discussions with the owner."

Andy eyes fixed role

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

Andy Flower has said he will consider applying for the England head coach role when it is officially advertised in the next few days.

Flower said: "I am sure there are many experienced, fine coaches out there but I haven't quite made my decision yet."

Shortly before departing on the tour Flower said he would see how the trip developed before deciding whether to aim for the full-time position instead of the old-style coach.

If he helped England turn around the 1-0 deficit and claim the series over the next two Tests that would strengthen his credentials, although he faces tough competition with the ECB likely to want leading world figures to apply.

In the aftermath of Moores's departure, the current Kent director of cricket Graham Ford became one of the frontrunners, but Flower said he has plenty to offer.

"[There's] my experience as a Test cricketer and the fact that I've been involved with these guys for almost two years. I know the personnel involved and I believe I can help gel a unit together," he said.

One key factor that may count against him, however, is his closeness to Moores. When Kevin Pietersen made his demands for the team

structure, which ultimately cost him the captaincy, Flower was also on the list of people he wanted out. "Peter Moores is a good friend of mine and I really enjoyed working with him," Flower said.

Flower's first priority though is to ensure England don't dwell on the disappointment of the near-miss in Antigua when West Indies saved the Test with nine wickets down. "It was very disappointing," he said. "We dominated the whole Test and didn't win in the end, so it did feel a bit like a loss."

He supported Andrew Strauss's tactics in batting on to leave a target of 503 although England's continued struggle to take 20 wickets remains a concern. Since the back-to-back series against New Zealand last year England have only bowled a side out twice on one occasion - against South Africa at The Oval.

"Declaration-wise it allowed the captain to set attacking fields throughout the day and I suppose the proof is in the pudding," Flower said. "We didn't get 10 wickets, we only got nine of them. There have been a few cases, so we have to examine why. Are we doing the right things with reverse swing? Are we bowling reverse swing in the right way? Are our spinners having the right effect in the last innings? Questions have to be asked."

England have a two-day game starting on Sunday to give their squad players and outing and the match may include Ravi Bopara and Amjad Khan, who have been called in as cover for Andrew Flintoff. They are only due to arrive from the Lions tour of New Zealand shortly before the game, but England will want to assess their options.

Hiddink salutes spirit

AFP, Birmingham



Guus Hiddink saluted Chelsea's spirit after Nicolas Anelka's goal gave the new Blues manager a 1-0 victory at Aston Villa on Saturday.

Anelka's superb first half strike was enough to hand Hiddink a winning start to his reign after the Dutchman replaced Luiz Felipe Scolari last week.

Following stories of dressing room divisions and player power ruining morale at Chelsea, Hiddink insisted the way the players dug in for the win, as well as the sight of the entire team hugging at full-time proved there was no lack of spirit.

"If you see the record of Aston Villa at home it is good that we can break that. We had a good spirit. Everyone was doing a job for himself but also helping out the other players which I respected," Hiddink said.

"Lets not exaggerate. I did not see what sometimes is suggested about this big division. I have analysed it rather well. The hug was not for the cameras. I think it's real."

Hiddink was also delighted with the football produced by his side in the first half.

"It was a very good start with the new circumstances. What pleased me most was in the first half we played very good football," he said. "We had good possession, good triangles, were dangerous and got in the box."

"The only thing we didn't do was make the second goal to kill the game. Of course the second half we sat back a little bit too much because they have this power in the air. But we could have scored one or two more so I was pleased."

Anelka believes Chelsea's win, which lifted them above

Villa into third, has kept their slender title hopes alive.

"It is good for all the players, and for the new coach as well, if we continue in this winning way. We hope we will win more games with him," Anelka said.

"We hope we are back in the race. It is going to be difficult but everything is possible in football."

"Once again we showed a lot of character because it was a hard game. "I'm pleased to score but it's even more important because we won in the end."

ICC eyeing

FROM PAGE 17 recognised by the BCCI or the ICC, unlike the Indian Premier League (IPL) which has paid fantastic sums to lure players to its tournament.

"I hope we might be successful in coming to a mutually acceptable conclusion. I can't be certain that will be the case but I hope we can at least make a start in bringing about a settlement," added Morgan.

Earlier this week, a Pakistani court lifted domestic bans on the country's last six active players who had joined the ICL.

Flintoff

FROM PAGE 17 England squad.

He made a return to national colours following a long-term ankle injury for the second Test of four against South Africa last year in England.

Flintoff is due to play for three weeks in the Indian Premier League Twenty20 tournament after the Caribbean tour for the Chennai Super Kings.

Together with England teammate Kevin Pietersen, he was the most expensive buy in the recent IPL auction when he went for 1.55 million dollars.

But, with the Twenty20 World Cup and an Ashes series due to take place in England later this year, ECB chiefs may order him to rest in what will be a rare break in a crowded fixture schedule.

The final Test in Trinidad is due to start on March 6.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down.

Cryptogram puzzle with letters J, S, Q, L, M, V, E, O, F, K, G, F, Y, N, R, G, O, L, N, M, V, H, Q, M, S, Q, Y, J, S, F, K, Q, J, V, Y, I, F, L, H, V, L, O, M, O, R, I, U, V, T, K, N, A, V, T, R, O, A, M, S, Q, A, O, Y, Q, U, V, L, -, E, V, F, L, Q, N, ?