



FANCYING A CHANGE OF SPORT? Manchester United striker Dimitar Berbatov throws a marker post during a training session at their Carrington training complex in Manchester on Wednesday in preparation for next week's UEFA Champions League final against Barcelona in Rome.

Rio fighting to be fit



AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson admitted on Wednesday that Rio Ferdinand is likely to have to prove his fitness against Hull to stand a chance of featuring in next week's Champions League final. England defender Ferdinand, 30, has missed the last three United matches with a calf problem. United travel to the KC Stadium on Sunday for their final Premier League fixture with the title already won. Ferguson was hoping to field a reserve team to keep his key men fresh for the game against Barcelona in Rome on Wednesday. The United manager maintains that he would be happy for youngster Jonny Evans, 21, who has regularly stood in for Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic this season, to play in the final. And he acknowledges there would be a risk of playing Ferdinand against the Spanish champions after a three-week lay-off. United are optimistic that Ferdinand will return to training on Thursday but Ferguson is still unsure about his chances of playing against Barcelona. He said: "I'm hoping that he'll be fit for Sunday and if he's not then he's doubtful for Wednesday. "To go into the Champions League without playing for three weeks is too much so hopefully he'll be fit for Sunday. "We hope he can start training with us on Thursday and after the transfer to football training we'll have a better idea about his availability for Sunday. "I think he will probably be fit before Wednesday but whether I'd start him without a game is another matter. "I'm close to knowing the team. Obviously you have to assess the performance, our own strengths and the form players. "It would be no problem at all to start with Jonny Evans against Barcelona.

"He's had a fantastic season and he grew up with Gerard Pique and it would be fitting if they're both playing in the final. "I'm sure Gerard Pique will be playing. It'd be a nice touch. I wouldn't worry one bit about him playing in the final. The match has been billed as a potential classic with two of the most attack-minded teams pitting their wits against each other. Ferguson accepts that Champions League finals rarely live up to their hype but is confident it will be an attractive match against Pep Guardiola's side. He added: "The profile of the final is very good and I hope it lives up to that profile. "The players that Barcelona have got and Manchester United have got, it suggests a good final and I hope it lives up to that. "European finals can be disappointing and if you look at the results over the years there were some really disappointing games and results, penalty kicks. Veteran winger Ryan Giggs could be set for a third Champions League final appearance in the last decade. And the 35-year-old midfielder, who has now won 11 Premier League titles, believes that United are now starting to show maturity after they were written off during a period of Chelsea dominance four years ago. He said: "We have the players to get to a Champions League final. Maybe four years ago the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney had just come to the club and hadn't matured into the players that they are now. "They're world-class players now and together with the other players that the manager has brought in, we've just got better and better since then. Giggs is also optimistic about the chances of an open game next Wednesday. He said: "I hope it's a free-flowing game and there are lots of goals but sometimes the teams cancel each other out and I hope that's not the case. "Hopefully we keep their danger men quiet and the players that are match winners for us, perform."

'Beckham was underhand'

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Former Bayern Munich midfielder Stefan Effenberg has attacked David Beckham's style of play, labelling the AC Milan loan star as "underhand". One-time Germany international Effenberg claimed the ex-England skipper drew a comparison with the Roy Keane, arguing that Beckham was not as fair on the field as his former Manchester United teammate. Beckham and Effenberg locked horns numerous times in the Champions League, most notably the final in 1999, a game Keane missed through suspension, and which saw United come from behind netting two late goals to defeat Bayern. Talking in Germany's Bild newspaper, Effenberg was asked about his duels with the former England captain. "Yes, there were (duels)," said Effenberg. "Also with Roy Keane. But Beckham was the more underhand of the pair. Roy Keane was hard and fair. He came from in front, knocked you away, everything was wonderful. "But Beckham always came from behind, in the Achilles, I didn't like that. "You didn't see him, and suddenly he clobbered you from behind in the tendon. No, Beckham was underhand."

Messi rejects City offer

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Argentine star Lionel Messi has rejected a multi-million-euro offer to move to big-spending English Premiership club Manchester City, a Spanish sports newspaper reported Wednesday. Representatives from the English club, owned by the Abu Dhabi United Group, offered to buy out the striker's contract for 150 million euros (204 million dollars) and pay him 10 million euros per season over four years, the Marca newspaper said. It said Messi, 21, who has always insisted he wants to stay at Barca, immediately rejected the offer. The paper said Real Madrid's Spanish striker Raul had also recently rejected a similar offer from Manchester City. Another Spanish sports newspaper, AS, said Wednesday that City are also interested in two Atletico Madrid strikers - Argentina's Sergio Aguero and Uruguay's Diego Forlan - as well as Valencia's Spanish international David Villa. City's takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group last year left them as one of the world's wealthiest clubs - a point they proved with the British record 32 million pounds (36 million euros) capture of Brazil star Robinho in September.

Mijatovic quits Real

INTERNET, undated



Troubled Spanish giants Real Madrid announced on Wednesday that Pedja Mijatovic had quit as director of football "by mutual agreement." An official statement on the club's website expresses "our sincere gratitude for the work done" by Mijatovic, and wishes him "all the best...in his future projects." Mijatovic - who played for Real from 1996 to 1999 - was appointed director of football by Ramon Calderon after the latter controversially won the presidential elections in 2006, amidst allegations of electoral fraud. He had become a very unpopular figure at the Estadio Bernabeu, partly because of unsubstantiated rumours that he was taking commissions on his transfer deals - and also because most of his expensive signings have turned out to be flops. Amongst Mijatovic's unsuccessful signings have been Pepe, Mahamadou Diarra, Royston Drenthe, Rafael Van de Vaart and Klaas-Jan Huntelaar. On the other hand, he did well to bring in Ruud Van Nistelrooy - league top scorer in the 2006/7 season - and young Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain. It was Mijatovic who insisted on bringing back Fabio Capello to the club as coach in 2006, though he then sacked the Italian just days after Real had edged their way to the Liga title in June 2007. Mijatovic replaced Capello with Bernd

Schuster from Getafe, and was rewarded with the 2008 league title, but then sacked the German in December 2008 and brought in Juande Ramos. Mijatovic was expected to resign along with Calderon in January, when the latter stepped down as president after sports daily Marca proved that he had sneaked false delegates into the club's annual general assembly. However, he refused to quit - until now. Ironically, at exactly the same time as Real were announcing Mijatovic's departure, Calderon was in a Madrid court on Wednesday as the accused party in a civic lawsuit about the general assembly fiasco brought by a group of angry club members. Real have not revealed how much Mijatovic, who was under contract until 2010, has been paid off. In a statement on the club's website, Mijatovic has explained his departure by saying that "with the season coming to an end, with the team mathematically positioned in second place, and with the electoral process officially started, I have considered (this decision) to be the most opportune one, with the objective of not interfering in any way in the important events that will take place at the club in recent weeks." Presidential elections are scheduled to take place at Real on Sunday June 14. The clear favourite to win is construction millionaire Florentino Perez, president from 2000 to 2006, who is rumoured to be already lining up top stars such as Kaka (AC Milan), Xabi Alonso (Liverpool), Franck Ribery (Bayern Munich) plus David Villa and David Silva of Valencia.

Akram signs with Twente

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Dutch Eredivise club FC Twente Enschede have signed Iraq national team captain Nashat Akram on a three-year contract. The 24-year-old midfielder, who already has 75 caps to his name, joins as a free agent from Al-Gharafa of Qatar and will officially become a Twente player after the Confederations Cup in June. Akram, who had a trial with Manchester City last season, told the Twente website: "This is a dream come true, to play in Europe. FC Twente is a good club with a big coach. "I want to develop further at FC Twente and grow together with the club." Coach Steve McClaren added: "We've been following Nashat for a year. He's a young and very talented player, who has bags of experience given his age." Akram can look forward to testing himself at the highest level next term after McClaren, in his first season with the club, guided Twente to a place in the qualifying round of the UEFA Champions League.

Petrov staying at Villa

AFP, Birmingham



Stilijan Petrov, the Bulgaria midfielder who has been one of Aston Villa's outstanding performers this season, has committed his long term future to the club by signing a new four-year contract. The new deal will keep the former Celtic star at Villa until 2013 and ends speculation that he could leave if England international Gareth Barry gets the move to Liverpool that he wanted last year. Petrov, who turns 30 in July, was manager Martin O'Neill's first signing at Villa with the Northern Irishman paying six million pounds to sign him from his former club in 2006. O'Neill had generally deployed Petrov as an attacking midfielder at Celtic but, having suffered a major dip in form last season, it is as a holding player that he has thrived in the current campaign.

The Villa boss said he was delighted to have held on to Petrov. "It is only just a year ago that people were concerning themselves about whether Stilijan had a future here," O'Neill reflected. "But he has battled back so much so that I'd like him to be around here for the next few years. "If every person shows the same determination and willingness and drive that Stilijan has shown the last year, there will be a future for anyone at the club." O'Neill meanwhile admitted that he expects to receive approaches this summer for his star performers -- Barry and the young forwards Ashley Young and Gabriel Agbonlahor. "I would be surprised if some people were not inquiring about our players - big teams - but I am hoping we will be able to withstand that," he said. Barry was stripped of the club captaincy last year after putting in a transfer request in an attempt to force Villa to sell him to Liverpool, who would not meet the Midlands club's valuation.

Juve, Ranieri impasse

INTERNET, Rome



Claudio Ranieri and Serie A side Juventus seem to be heading for a show-down over payments and Ranieri's freedom to find a new club. Italian media reported Wednesday that after being fired this week, Ranieri expected the Turin club to pay him a severance fee and allow him to find a new job. It appears, however, that Juve consider the coach's firing a mere layoff and intend paying his salary until his contract expires in June 2010. This would mean that Ranieri needs to receive Juventus' approval before he is allowed to join another club. "When we signed that contract (in 2007), I and (Juve director general Jean-Claude) Blanc had a clear talk, face to face," la Repubblica quoted Ranieri as saying. "He gave me his gentleman's word that if

Juve were not satisfied they would apply a severance clause (in the contract). "He didn't do so. He didn't keep his word. Really, I didn't expect this. I thought certain things didn't happen at Juve." As Juve have not replied Ranieri, his lawyer said he "hopes that fair play and the moral commitment taken by the club can prevail in the end." Ranieri, 57, was fired Monday in the wake of a dismal 2-2 home draw with Atalanta, which left Juve a single point ahead of fourth-place Fiorentina in the race to secure the last of three berths that grant direct access to the next Champions League. Fourth place implies having to play a qualification round in the summer to access the elite continental tournament. Former Juve defender Ciro Ferrara, 42, will coach the team for the two remaining games of the season.

Maria cruises into quarters

AFP, Warsaw

Maria Sharapova continued her successful return to the WTA circuit on Wednesday with a confident 6-2, 6-0 victory over Darya Kustova of Belarus which took her into the quarterfinals. The former world No.1 is playing her first singles tournament in nine and a half months after taking time off to recover from a persistent shoulder injury. Despite the doubts over her fitness, the 22-year-old showed signs of her glory days when she won three Grand Slams including Wimbledon as a 17-year-old. The Russian pin-up cruised through the first set in a much improved showing from her inconsistent three-set first round win over Italy's Tathiana Garbin 6-1, 6-7 (6/8), 6-3. With her right shoulder still strapped up, the Russian used crisp baseline shots and strong serving to keep Kustova pinned to the baseline. She raced through the second set and won 13 straight points to take her to 5-0, 40-0 before Kustova delayed the inevitable with a forehand winner. The Russian then closed out the match when Kustova hit long and Sharapova's unbeaten return was assured for at least another match. She now plays Ukrainian eighth seed Alona Bondarenko for a place in the semifinals. Bondarenko, who defeated Poland's Marta Domachowska 6-3, 6-1, promises to provide a stiffer test for Sharapova.

I am staying: Wenger

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Arsene Wenger will continue as Arsenal manager and spurn the advances of Spanish giants Real Madrid, according to quotes from the Frenchman. Wenger is understood to be Madrid presidential candidate Florentino Perez's first choice to become the club's new manager next season should he be elected this summer. News of Perez's interest coincided with growing frustration amongst Arsenal fans about Wenger's management; the club are without a trophy in four years and some are losing patience with the 59-year-old. Last week Wenger was involved in a heated exchange at a shareholders meeting where his players were accused of lacking backbone and recent signing Mikael Silvestre was branded "geriatric". On Tuesday chairman Peter Hill-Wood

described those comments as "out of order" and added that he expected Wenger to at least see out his current contract, which expires in 2011. Despite previously describing Real's advances as "strongly interesting" Wenger is quoted in Wednesday's Daily Mail insisting that he has no plans to quit the Emirates. "There's nothing to worry about, it's not an issue for me," he told the paper. "I'm staying here. If that changes I will let you know, but don't worry about that. It's not an issue." Wenger has transformed the fortunes of Arsenal since arriving in September 1996, revolutionising the club and guiding them to the title three times, including the double twice, and also into the final of 2006 Champions League. However, despite a squad boasting considerable talent Arsenal have failed to win over some doubters who feel the side lacks both experience and strength in depth to challenge for titles.

Klinsmann speaks out

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Bayern Munich would have won the Bundesliga this season had Jurgen Klinsmann been given the chance to complete his first season in charge of the Bavarian giants. Klinsmann only replaced Ottmar Hitzfeld in July 2008 but was sacked last month after suffering defeats to title rivals Wolfsburg and FC Schalke 04 and a humiliating Champions League quarterfinal defeat against which included a 4-0 thumping in the Camp Nou. Louis van Gaal, who led AZ Alkmaar to the Dutch title this season, has been confirmed as Bayern's coach for next season, but Klinsmann contends that he was harshly treated by the club he served as a player between 1995 and 1997.

"Many things were chalked up to me which I could do nothing about," he said in an interview with RTL programme stern TV. He added: "That was actually the most painful thing in the matter, that you had the feeling you would have been able to finish this job. I would have been able to lead the team to the championship." Bayern currently lie two points behind Wolfsburg with just one game remaining. If they are to retain the Bundesliga title, Bayern must beat VfB Stuttgart and hope the Wolves lose to Werder Bremen. The former Germany national team coach was removed after the club's senior figures revealed they and the Bayern players had lost faith in his capabilities. But Klinsmann is unrepentant and believes that his work at the club will bear fruit, saying: "We have laid the foundation stone for the future."



TRADEMARK MARIA: Russia star Maria Sharapova waves to the crowd after defeating Darya Kustova of Belarus during their Warsaw Open match on Wednesday.

Eduardo to undergo ankle op

AFP, Zagreb

Arsenal's Croatian striker Eduardo Da Silva is to undergo minor surgery Wednesday on the leg he suffered a horrific break last year, sports daily Sportske Novosti reported. During the arthroscopy of his left ankle, to be performed in Amsterdam, the 26-year-old Brazilian-born player will have metal screws, implanted after the injury, removed, the paper said. It is expected that his recovery will take between four and six weeks meaning he will miss the 2010 World Cup qualifier against Ukraine on June 6 in Zagreb. Eduardo suffered a compound fracture of the left leg following a tackle from Birmingham defender Martin Taylor at St Andrews in February last year. After the lengthy rehabilitation he has returned to Arsenal's team a year later. However since then Eduardo has suffered several minor injuries.