

Magpies still paying Owen

AFP, Newcastle

Manchester United new signing Michael Owen is still being paid 50,000 pounds a week by his former club Newcastle even though he left the squad at St James park a week ago, north-east England newspaper Sunday Sun reported on Sunday.

The 29-year-old ex-England, Real Madrid and Liverpool star accepted a massive drop in salary when he agreed Alex Ferguson's offer to move to Old Trafford. But contractual details mean his wages are being made up to their original level by the Magpies until the end of this month.

Several players who have left since Newcastle were relegated from the Premiership at the end of last season are owed hundreds of thousands of pounds due under terms of generous contracts, the newspaper added.

Australian striker Mark Viduka, who quit last month and whose name has been linked with Fulham is owed a golden farewell payment of more than 300,000 pounds.

Brazilian defender Cacapa is also continuing to draw a weekly paycheck from St James Park even though he left at the end of the season and seems set to return to French football with a possible offer from Montpellier.

Ballack confident of EPL glory

AFP, London

Chelsea's Michael Ballack believes English champions Manchester United, weakened by the inter-season departure of goal-scoring stars, will cede the title to the Blues next season, according to a newspaper interview published Monday.

The arrival of new manager Carlo Ancelotti at Stamford Bridge has prompted hopes by fans Chelsea can win their first domestic championship since 2006.

The German playmaker believes the club head into the campaign equipped to give them a head start over United, who have lost both Cristiano Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez this summer.

"It is our target every year to win the league and we are confident about winning the title," said Ballack, quoted in the London Evening Standard following his appearance at a Chelsea charity event, Right to Play.

"I think we had a good season last year, but United have played at a really high level the last few years."

"They made it really difficult for us to win the League in 2007 and 2008, but we were really close behind and last season we also finished

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'Newcastle dying a slow death'

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle are "dying a slow, painful death" as owner Mike Ashley tries to sell the club, goalkeeper Steve Harper claimed on Monday.

Several potential buyers have announced interest following the Magpies' relegation from the Premier League at the end of last season but there is no sign a deal is close.

The impasse has left Alan Shearer uncertain about whether he will be re-appointed manager, and players in the dark about tactics for the new campaign.

Harper told local newspaper The Journal: "It's an awful situation which we cannot do anything about as players. The sooner it is resolved, the better for everyone because we can start again."

"Everybody - fans, players, staff - wants it resolved so we can rebuild this football club because we are in an awful state at the moment."

"We want it to be done and dusted so we know where we are and where we are going because at this moment, the football club is dying a slow, painful death."

"We have to soldier on, but the sooner the better for everyone concerned - and most importantly for Newcastle United."

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Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson (2nd from R) poses with his new signings Gabriel Obertan (L), Michael Owen (2nd from L) and Antonio Valencia at the Club's Carrington training ground in Manchester on Monday.

Real still want Alonso

Football

SOCERNET

Real Madrid coach Manuel Pellegrini has not given up hope of signing Liverpool midfielder Xabi Alonso, although the Bernabeu boss knows it will not be easy.

Reds manager Rafa Benitez is eager to keep the Spanish international at Anfield and has already called on the player he plucked from relative obscurity at Real Sociedad to stay "loyal" to Liverpool.

Real are looking to strengthen the centre of midfield following their spending spree on the likes of Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo and Brazilian playmaker Kaka and may also sign another fullback, Pellegrini said at a news conference.

"It's not a mystery that Real Madrid are interested in signing him (Alonso) but it won't be easy," he said.

"We are looking at alternatives for some positions," he added. "The attack is complete and perhaps a central midfielder or fullback is still missing but the rest of the positions are covered."

Spanish daily Marca reported earlier this week that Alonso had telephoned Benitez to ask his permission to leave Liverpool and move to Madrid. The newspaper also speculated that £35m would be enough to secure the signing of the 27-year-old.

But the Premier League club are apparently

asking for up to £50m and although negotiations are yet to agree a compromise figure, Real sporting director Miguel Pardeza said that the deal was certainly not dead.

"Madrid don't discard an option until it is truly impossible," Pardeza said. "Right now there is an insurmountable economic barrier but that is something that can change."

Meanwhile, Pellegrini, in his first news conference since the players began pre-season training last week, also said media reports that Real's entire contingent of six Dutch players, including Ruud van Nistelrooy, Arjen Robben and Wesley Sneijder, would be leaving were inaccurate.

"When there is some news the club will announce it," he said when asked which players were on their way out. "But it's not true that all the Dutch players are going to leave as has been reported in the media."

Pellegrini also responded to criticism of Real's spending policies published in Vatican newspaper Osservatore Romano on Saturday.

The club's splurge of more than £200m on four players risks inflating transfer fees and pushing clubs towards bankruptcy or into the hands of organised crime, the paper said.

"Everyone has the right to give their opinion, right or wrong," Pellegrini said. "I am not the one responsible for talking about comments by the Vatican. If someone thinks that it's not good they also have the right to express an opinion."

Terry wants City talks

Football

SOCERNET

Chelsea captain John Terry has told Roman Abramovich that he wants to hold talks with Manchester City about a possible £40m move, according to reports in the UK press.

Terry held show-down talks with Blues owner Abramovich on Saturday night and although the centre-back stopped short of handing in an official transfer request the England international made it clear he wanted to speak to City officials.

The Sunday Times claim Chelsea were willing to make Terry the club's highest paid

player, ahead of Frank Lampard, but they would not match City's offer of £250,000 a week, plus a £5m signing-on fee.

Terry is thought to want to hear for himself what the Citizens have to offer but Chelsea insiders believe the 28-year-old is just using the transfer speculation to negotiate a better contract at Stamford Bridge.

If the England captain does head to Eastlands, the London club could replace him with Newcastle United centre-back Steven Taylor and will pay up to £10m for the 23-year-old.

Meanwhile, should City manager Mark Hughes miss out on Terry he will turn his attention to Porto defender Bruno Alves. The £20m-rated Portugal international is also wanted by Barcelona.

Bayern may sell Lucio

Football

INTERNET, undated

Brazil captain Lucio will be allowed to leave Bayern Munich if he wants, Kicker sports magazine reported Monday quoting club general manager Uli Hoeneß. "What happens next is up to him. If he comes to us and says he wants to go here or there we will consider the matter," Hoeneß is quoted as saying.

Lucio, who is under contract for another season at Bayern, has said he was ready to leave Bayern after reports that new coach Louis van Gaal is not planning with him.

However Hoeneß said there had never been any statements from the club about the central defender.

Last week Britain's Sky Sports said Lucio was on the verge of signing for Manchester City. But Kicker said Lucio had so far received no offers from top European clubs.

Meanwhile, Bayern's Italy striker Luca Toni

has said he would not accept a place on the substitutes' bench at the club.

"In 15 years I never belonged to the reserve players and I don't see myself now on the bench," he told Italy's La Gazzetta dello Sport.

Toni will be contesting a place in the team with Germany strikers Miroslav Klose and Mario Gomez, a Bundesliga record 30-million-euro (41.8 million dollars) signing from VfB Stuttgart.

But Toni, Bayern's top scorer in his two seasons at the club, said he was giving no thought to leaving the club, only to prove that I belong in my position.

The 32-year-old striker was the Bundesliga's top scorer with 21 goals in the 2007/2008 season, but his form seemed to dip last season when he scored 12.

He has also come in for criticism for his recent performances with Italy who were eliminated at the group stage of last month's Confederations Cup.

"I know that I can score goals as always. The goals will speak for themselves," he said.

C'Ron not a prima donna

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Manuel Pellegrini says Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo, who the Spanish giants signed for a record 94 million euros, does not have a star mentality.

"He's as I expected him to be. He is the first to arrive at a training session, he has fully integrated into the squad, he doesn't act as a star," he said Sunday during his first post-training press conference as Real's new coach.

"He is a very talented but normal player who is devoted to Real Madrid. His image is very different to how he is as a player."

Real signed the player from Manchester United last month on a six-year deal worth around 94 million euros (131 million dollars) and he will reportedly be paid 13 million euros each season, making him the most expensive player in the world.

The 24-year-old was officially unveiled before some 75,000 ecstatic Real fans on July 6 at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

He had to be hurried away when spectators

leapt over security barriers to try to get an autograph.

Real has spent over 200 million euros in the pre-season to sign new talent, including Brazilian playmaker Kaka and French international striker Karim Benzema.

Pellegrini said he hopes the squad will be completed by the end of the month.

"The sooner the better. July 27 would be good because that's when all our internationals return," he said when asked for an ideal date to have his squad finalised.

"But I'm not bothered about waiting a while longer if there are any doubts concerning a signing. There's no deadline. I know what I want, but I'm not looking to have it for our first pre-season match," he added.

The Chilean coach said recruiting Spanish international Xabi Alonso from Liverpool would not be easy.

"There aren't any players we can't do without. He is an important footballer and it is no mystery that Real want to sign him, but it won't be easy," Pellegrini said.

Real will face Deportivo La Coruna at home on the weekend of August 29-30 in their first league match of the new season.

Torres will be staying put

INTERNET, undated

Rafael Benitez says Liverpool have received "very big offers" for striker Fernando Torres this summer.

Chelsea, Manchester City, Manchester United and Real Madrid have been linked with a big-money move for the Spain striker, while teammates Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano have also been in demand this summer.

But Benitez is in no mood to weaken his squad by cashing in.

He said: "We have had some very big offers for some of our key players this summer - and that includes Fernando Torres.

"Clubs wanted Fernando and we were contacted by agents working for those clubs.

"But we always knew that when a bid came in we would say 'no'."

"The main thing was that Torres wanted to stay here. People knew the player wanted to stay, but it did not stop clubs trying.

"We wanted to send out a message that Liverpool are a strong team and that we want to improve. You don't improve by selling your best players."

I am no Ronaldo, says Nakamura

SOCERNET

Japan's Shunsuke Nakamura protested against his "Galactico" billing after his arrival in Spain sparked a chaotic airport crush among Espanyol fans.

Hundreds of fans greeted the midfielder as he swept into Barcelona for a medical on Saturday while Spanish media compared him to new Real Madrid signing Cristiano Ronaldo.

"I'm not a star," the 31-year-old told Sunday's Japanese media. "I will have to work twice as hard as everyone else at the club and be prepared to put in a defensive shift."

"It's not easy to make an impact in Spanish football. I'll be trying hard to establish myself step by step."

Nakamura joined Espanyol on a two-year deal from Scotland's Celtic last month after winning three Scottish Premier League titles at Parkhead.

He opted for Espanyol after snubbing a return to his boyhood League club Yokohama F-Marinos.

The former Scottish player of the year will instead make his home debut against the likes of Ronaldo and Kaka when Real Madrid visit Espanyol in the second week of the La Liga season.

Silvio backs Ronaldinho

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi said he expects Ronaldinho to make up for the loss of Brazilian countryman Kaka this coming season.

Milan sold star player Kaka to Real Madrid for 67 million euros and have so far failed to attract any major signings to the club over the summer.

They had been trying to land a striker but missed out on VfL Wolfsburg's Bosnian forward Edin Dzeko and are unwilling to meet Sevilla's asking price for Brazil starter Luis Fabiano.

He has left fans frustrated, fearing the club will not be able to improve on last season's third place finish in Serie A.

But Berlusconi, the Italy Prime Minister, says it is high time for Ronaldinho -- Milan's marquee signing last summer -- to step up and show the form that saw him twice crowned world player of the year.

"He needs to be the extra man this season, that's the responsibility of a sale we were forced

into making," Berlusconi told Mediaset.

"But this (sale of Kaka) will give Ronaldinho space. All the other players also want this to be Ronaldinho's year. He's 29 and in top shape physically."

"All he needs now is the desire to be decisive for this Milan team and I believe we can have faith in him."

As for signing his compatriot Fabiano, Berlusconi is adamant his team will not be held to ransom.

Milan are rumoured to have offered 14 million euros while Sevilla want something closer to 20 million euros.

"I don't know what chance there is of Luis Fabiano arriving but this season we want to concentrate on youth," added the president.

"We've added Gianmarco Zignani, who is a promising young player and that's the direction we're pointing to."

"Then there's (Marco) Borriello, Pato, (Filippo) Inzaghi; we're not lacking in attack."

"We'll see, we're not going to spend silly money in a moment such as this when we are experiencing financial difficulties."

Bolton sign Robinson

Football

SOCERNET

Bolton Wanderers' long pursuit of Paul Robinson is finally at an end after the club completed the loan signing of the West Bromwich Albion defender.