

'Robinho has long future at City'

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City manager Mark Hughes is confident Robinho will enjoy a long stay at Eastlands after the Brazilian played down reports linking him with Barcelona.

Former Real Madrid star Robinho has emerged as a target for Barca this season, but he said in a recent television interview that he would like to remain with City for five to 10 years.

Hughes believes the forward will be true to his word and said: "I know Robi's feelings. He is very happy around the place and with life in Manchester. He always has a smile on his face."

"He is playing alongside good players in a good team. He knows he can be successful with the club and the players that are here already. He likes the way we play and wants to be a part of that."

"Robi was frustrated earlier in the season because he wasn't playing. Now he is playing perhaps people will start speaking about his performances."

Robinho has returned to full fitness after a three-month absence because of an ankle injury and should feature against Bolton at the Reebok Stadium on Saturday.

Hughes believes Robinho's creativity will play a crucial role in the club's bid for a top four finish.

"We have a lot of players who have the ability to produce something out of nothing," he said. "You need that if you have the ambition to be a top team."

"There are going to be occasions where you don't play particularly well and those type of players can win you games."

"They make their reputations by doing something out of the ordinary and certainly Robi is one of those type of players."

IN BRIEF

Aguero pledges Atletico stay

AFP, Madrid

Argentine striker Sergio Aguero indicated Friday he intends to stay with Atletico Madrid after insisting he knows nothing of an impending swoop by Chelsea.

The Blues have long been touted as suitors for Diego Maradona's son in law but Aguero suggested he will stay in Spain.

"What is clear is that I am happy here and my future lies with Atletico," Aguero told a press conference.

"It's always good when a team is interested in you but the truth is I know nothing and if anything happens I'll refer it to the club for it to decide what to do. Right now I'm not thinking of anything - my future is with Atletico," said Aguero, noting he has another two years on his Madrid deal.

Scala applies for Scotland job

AFP, Glasgow

Italian coach Nevio Scala revealed on Friday that he has applied for the vacant Scotland job.

The 62-year-old is currently a radio pundit in Italy after being sacked by Spartak Moscow, but is keen to get back into management and hopes to succeed the recently sacked George Burley as Scotland chief.

Former Borussia Dortmund boss Scala - who has been a candidate for the Scotland job before, made his name during a successful spell at Parma, leading the club into Serie A and winning the European Cup Winners' Cup, the UEFA Cup and the European Super Cup. Scala, who has also managed in Germany, Turkey and Ukraine, told the Daily Record: "I have made my interest known to the Scottish FA. I have always had a great respect for Scottish football and have an affinity for the country."

"I would want to have a Scottish coach working beside me and I believe I could do a good job."

"I've every confidence in my own ability and I am still hungry to be a successful coach. Why not with Scotland?"

"I have coached in several European countries and I have always had no difficulties with language or settling in. We speak the universal language of football."



HEAD OVER HEELS: South Korean team Pohang Steelers striker Denilson Martins Nascimento (L) performs a somersault after scoring against Congolese team TP Mazembe during their Club World Cup quarterfinal at the Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi on Friday.

Rafa demands more

AFP, Liverpool



Rafael Benitez believes Liverpool will use Sunday's showdown with Arsenal to kick-start a season in danger of spiralling out of control.

Benitez's side have won just three of their last 14 matches, a woeful run that has seen the Reds crash out of the Champions League and slip to seventh in the Premier League.

They suffered one final indignity in Europe's elite club competition on Wednesday as a distinctly average Fiorentina won 2-1 at Anfield, but Benitez is convinced that result could prove the catalyst for a far more successful second half of the season.

The pressure to finish in the Premier League's top four and qualify for next season's European Cup is growing by the week. Yet Benitez is confident that the return of fit-again Fernando Torres will inspire his team, who start the weekend 12 points adrift of leaders Chelsea and four behind fourth-placed Tottenham.

Torres returned from a groin injury to make a substitutes appearance against Fiorentina and the Spain striker is poised to start against Arsenal along with Italian midfielder Alberto Aquilani.

"I think we will be in a better position if we don't have too many problems with injuries in the next few weeks," Benitez said.

"Torres and Steven Gerrard didn't play too many games together last season, but the team is doing well."

"It is the same this year. If both are fit and can play together, we will push them, but we also want to protect them."

"The Arsenal match is important, but every game will be important until the end of the season."

"We have to start with this one because Arsenal are near the top of the table, so if we can win we will be closer and will have a better chance of finishing in the top four."

"Every year you have to approach the season thinking about winning something, but each season is different."

'African stars can leave early'

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti has told his African stars they have permission to leave early for international duty at next month's Nations Cup.

Ancelotti already knew he would be without Ivory Coast strikers Didier Drogba and Salomon Kalou, Nigeria midfielder John Mikel Obi and Ghana midfielder Michael Essien for most of January and he has now agreed to let them leave at the end of December so they can go to pre-tournament training camps.

The quartet will miss five Chelsea games in January while they are on international duty at the tournament in Angola.

However Essien faces a battle to be fit in time after suffering a hamstring injury in the midweek Champions League draw against APOEL Nicosia.

Ancelotti is happy for Ghana to send over their doctor to examine Essien and the Italian said on Friday: "The African players can all go on December 28."

"Michael had a scan and I think he will be out for between three and four weeks."

"The aim is to work to improve his injury but I think

he will be ready to go on December 28, if he stays well."

"I have no problem with the Ghana doctor coming here. If they want to come here to see Essien, there is no problem."

If their respective nations stay in the tournament until the end, Ancelotti's African players will miss the FA Cup third round tie against Watford, plus Premier League games at Hull and Burnley and at home against Sunderland and Birmingham.

Even though he will be without those four key players for a lengthy period, Ancelotti insists he has no plans to make many signings in the January transfer window.

The Blues have been linked with Bayern Munich's Franck Ribery, Ajax playmaker Luis Suarez and Shakhtar Donetsk right-back Darijo Srna.

But Ancelotti said: "There is no news on the market in January. We have the same view as we have had in the last week - we do not, at this moment, need to have new players in January."

"We have confidence in our young players, Fabio Borini, Gael Kakuta, Jeffrey Bruma and Nemanja Matic."

"Matic could not play in the Champions League but he is improving very well and very soon he will play in the first team."

"The aim is to work to improve his injury but I think

and the Premier League leaders are just two points ahead of Manchester United after last weekend's defeat at Manchester City.

Ancelotti was critical of his players' "soft" display in the 2-2 draw with APOEL and is determined they get back to winning ways against Everton at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

"I was not angry after the game, I prefer to say I was unhappy," he said. "We didn't do well in the second-half so I spoke with my players after the game, nothing else."

"I do not need a whip with these players, because I know their professionalism. They have to concentrate in every game and play with the same intensity for 90 minutes."

"I know the game against APOEL was not that important but we have to maintain our intensity. But I have seen a very good reaction in the last few days in training. On Saturday we will play a strong match for 90 minutes."

"Mikel make a mistake in the last minutes but I was not unhappy, disappointed or angry. Mikel played well and did one mistake that is not a problem."

"I don't shout at my players. If a man shouts at me, I don't listen. I prefer to speak. It is not good to have a bad reaction. I want a man-to-man relationship with my players and respect them."

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CLUB WORLD CUP Denilson fires Pohang

Football

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Pohang Steelers FC's Brazilian striker Denilson fulfilled his pre-match promise Friday to wow UAE fans as two superb second-half strikes helped his South Korean side to a 2-1 victory over TP Mazembe, earning a place in the semifinals of the FIFA Club World Cup.

Denilson, who moved to South Korea after spending six years with various clubs in the UAE, was on target twice - in the 50th and 78th minutes - to deny the Congolese club, who had raced ahead in the 28th minute with a strike from Mbenga Bedi.

Asham champions Steelers will now take on Argentine side Estudiantes de La Plata, winners of the 50th edition of the Copa Libertadores earlier this year, in the semifinals.

Steelers coach Sergio Farias said: "We were unduly nervous at the start. We failed to take our best chances, and we lost concentration. Their goal took us by surprise, and we were unable to impose ourselves on the game the way we wanted to after that."

"We corrected this mistake at half-time, and duly equalised as a result. We turned up the pressure again by bringing on another striker, and we went on to score the winning goal."

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