

'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.

PHOTO: AFP

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 substitute 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 did well."

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

"We have had some problems before, but now our idea is to improve in the league and afterwards think about the Europa League and the FA Cup."

"Sometimes the team has a bad moment, but that is the same at all the clubs. The only way to change things is to work harder and try to do things well."

Benitez has been forced to issue a biting response to the criticism flowing his way in recent weeks.

He singled out former Anfield boss Graeme Souness and Jurgen Klinsmann, the ex-Germany coach linked with the Liverpool job two years ago, after they wrote off his team on television following the Fiorentina match.

Speaking about Klinsmann, Benitez said: "I think he was an expert in marketing. His management career? Short."

He added: "There is always criticism but I don't listen. I turn off the volume on the TV."

"If someone talks too much, it is their problem, but the fans know the record they both have as managers, fantastic!"

Like Liverpool, Arsene Wenger's Arsenal have been cast adrift in the title race.

The Gunners are four points and four places better off than Liverpool, but Wenger's men have lost two of their last three league games and arrive on Merseyside on the back of a 1-0 Champions League defeat against Olympiakos.

Wenger insists the game is as important to his side than it is to Liverpool, and is refusing to write off Benitez's side.

"For us, it's a very big game," Wenger said. "I don't deny that. We go into this game with that feeling."

"Everybody has a real chance of not making the top four if you don't perform right."

"They're (Liverpool) a contender like everybody else. It's very early in the season still, with many games to be played, and Liverpool have the quality."

Wenger has also had to contend with the loss of key players to injury and will once again be without Robin van Persie and Nicklas Bendtner, while Tomas Rosicky and Emmanuel Eboué are also out.

Blazevic quits as Bosnia coach

AFP, Banja Luka

Miroslav Blazevic on Friday quit as Bosnia national coach, a month after just failing to lead the side to the World Cup finals, BHT television reported.

"Miroslav Blazevic presented a resignation letter as coach to the Bosnia-Herzegovina team," BHT said on its website.

The resignation is set to be formally presented to the Bosnian Federation in Sarajevo, the report added.

Sportsport.ba portal confirmed that Blazevic, who coached Croatia to third place at the finals of France '98, was stepping down, quoting Federation head Sulejman Colakovic.

"That's quite so. Blazevic presented his resignation ... The Federation will give its opinion on Saturday after its executive committee meets," Colakovic said.

According to Sportsport.ba, Blazevic has agreed a deal to coach Chinese team Shanghai Shenhua.

Blazevic, 74, took Bosnia to the playoffs but there they lost out to Portugal to miss out on a first finals appearance.

BUNDESLIGA Hertha hold Leverkusen

AFP, Berlin

German league leaders Bayer Leverkusen just preserved their unbeaten league record this season with a 2-2 draw Friday at tailenders Hertha Berlin.

Jupp Heynckes' side managed to extend their lead to a provisional four points but Hertha, winless since the opening day of the season, gave them a run for their money with Colombian Adrian Ramos putting the hosts in front in the eighth minute.

Eren Derdiyok almost headed the visitors level inside five minutes but Jaroslav Drobný just denied him.

Leverkusen upped the pace after the interval against a side which last season came fourth before its recent fall from grace.

League top scorer Stefan Kiessling and Toni Kroos forced Drobný into further fine saves before a Kroos half volley on 75 minutes made it 1-1.

Burak Kaplan then scored in the final minute but just as it seemed Leverkusen had sealed the points Ramos headed in a deserved leveller for Friedhelm Funkel's batters in injury time.

Hertha's comeback was all the worthier in that they had been down to ten men from the 77th minute following the dismissal of Gojko Karar.

Werder Bremen will Saturday hope to close the gap to a single point with a victory over third-placed Schalke while a resurgent Bayern Munich, buoyed by their midweek success at Juventus, can go within two points of pole position with a win at modest Bochum.

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 semi-finals 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 Mbenza Bedi.

Asian 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."

At the Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium, TP Mazembe dominated the first few minutes till Steelers got their act together. Kim Jae-Sung made the first meaningful attempt, but his shot was deflected by Mazembe goalkeeper Muteba Kidiaba.

Steelers almost went ahead in the 23rd minute when a superb free kick by No Byung-jun was heading for the top corner, but was deftly tipped away by Kidiaba.

Mazembe took the lead in the 28th minute when Bedi latched on to a Mputu pass and he rammed home past the outstretched right arm of Shin Hwa-Yong from 25 yards.

The goal spurred the Steelers and they made several good moves. It started with an exquisite Denilson pass which drilled a hole in the Mazembe defence, but Namkung Do could only shoot it straight into the hands of Kidiaba.

Just before the half-time, Denilson, Do and Jae-Sung made unsuccessful attempts on goal and there was no let-up in the second half either.

Kidiaba made a great save to deny No in the 49th minute, but parity was restored by Denilson a minute later, when he headed home a No pass.

Mazembe had a great chance to regain the lead in the 63rd minute when Ekanga sent Kabangu clear, but he shot wide from just inside the box.

It was all over for Mazembe when Denilson scored again in the 78th minute.

Manager Diego Garzitto made several substitutions in the Congolese club line-up in the last few minutes, but the Steelers defence held on easily.

A disappointed Garzitto said: "It was hardly our best evening. The Koreans were better than us in the air, we were at a disadvantage in that respect. We kept it on the floor and made chances, but unfortunately we weren't determined enough to take them."

Door left open for Sol

AFP, London



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger won't rule out signing

Sol Campbell on a free transfer after Manchester United played down talk of an Old Trafford switch for the former Gunners defender.

Campbell has been training with Arsenal since walking out on Notts County earlier this season after making just one appearance of the League Two club.

The 35-year-old is now able to resume his career following a contract wrangle with County, but a mooted move to the Premier League champions won't happen, according to United boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

Campbell has also been linked with Newcastle but there is also a slim chance of an emotional return to Arsenal, where he spent five

years before joining Portsmouth in 2006.

"I love Sol Campbell and the fact he came back here and wanted to practice with us shows he loves the club as well. You never say never in these kinds of situations," Wenger said on Friday.

Wenger's first choice centre-backs are currently William Gallas and Thomas Vermaelen, with Mikael Silvestre and Philippe Senderos as back-up. If any of those were to get injured, Wenger could be tempted to sign Campbell.

"At the moment, we have four centre-backs and we will always have four," Wenger said.

"If one would go, then I would consider it, but at the moment we are four, so I have no need to sign anybody else."

"Sol can still do a job in the Premier League, especially now he is fit. He has worked very hard."

Meanwhile, Wenger wants to give Tomas Rosicky a con-

tract extension, even though the Czech Republic winger is still struggling to find full fitness after 18 months out of action.

The 29-year-old recently returned to action following knee and hamstring injuries and then suffered another setback with a groin problem which has ruled him out of Sunday's trip to Liverpool.

Rosicky, who signed from Borussia Dortmund in May 2006, is out of contract at the end of the season but Wenger said: "I want to extend his contract, so that shows you how patient I am with him."

"I look first for the quality of the player, at his attitude and at his leadership."

"The injuries can happen to anybody. Tomas is not responsible for what happened to him."

"At the moment he has small setbacks which keep him out for eight to 10 days, but once he can regularly play again, he will come back to his normal level."

Jens refuses to pay fine

Football

AFP, Berlin

Jens Lehmann announced Saturday he would refuse to pay the fine he was given for criticising his club Stuttgart's fringe coach Markus Babel.

Babel was sacked last Sunday and replaced by former Tottenham Hotspur boss Gross, with Lehmann claiming his bosses had simply bowed to the demands of angry fans.

Supporters turned on Babel after Stuttgart's 1-1 draw with Bochum when he third from bottom in the Bundesliga.

Lehmann told German daily Bild: "I don't accept having to pay this fine and I have explained that to the

club's management."

On Friday Stuttgart chairman Erwin Staudt said Lehmann had been out of order to go public with his criticism.

"Our players can freely express themselves, but what he said was not to be tolerated and damaged the image of the club."

"Anyone can have an opinion and voice criticisms but that must not be done through the media," Staudt told broadcaster Sky.

Gross for his part commented: "I need players who roll their sleeves up. Jens knows the situation in which we find ourselves."

Stuttgart's general manager Horst Heldt said Lehmann was wrong and had been guilty of "egotism". He also warned of "conse-

quences."

"These are statements which of course we cannot tolerate," Heldt warned.

Lehmann, 40, who retired from international football in August 2008, accused Heldt and Stuttgart of listening to a group of hardcore supporters.

"There was a certain bunch of fans, most of whom are just going through puberty, and that's what influenced the club in making certain decisions," Lehmann told Sky.

"That's the way it is in football."

The Stuttgart goalkeeper said he was shocked after a group of angry fans stopped the team bus to shout insults and chant death threats, prompting police intervention.



Hertha Berlin striker Adrian Ramos (L) is hugged by teammate Fabian Lustenberger (C) after scoring against Bayer Leverkusen during their Bundesliga encounter in Berlin on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP