

### Fergie expects Mourinho to return

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson believes former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho is certain to return to the Premier League.

Mourinho, currently in charge at Italian champions Inter Milan, this week fuelled speculation that he will be back in England soon by admitting that he misses the country's unique football atmosphere.

The Portuguese coach, who led Chelsea to Premier League triumphs in 2005 and 2006 before being sacked in 2007, has struggled to gain acceptance in Italy and is regularly linked with the jobs at Liverpool and Manchester City.

Mourinho was back in England on Monday to watch Chelsea's victory over Fulham ahead of Inter's Champions League clash with his former club.

And Ferguson admits he wouldn't be surprised to lock horns with Mourinho again sooner rather than later.

"Every time I have spoken to Jose Mourinho, he has always said that he liked English football better than anywhere else," Ferguson said.

"The attraction to get back to England at some point will always be there."

"He is still a young man and being at Chelsea on Monday will have reignited his thoughts about English football because you don't get the atmosphere, intensity and closeness to the pitch at Chelsea in a lot of the Italian grounds. He will miss that."

Mourinho has also been mooted as a potential successor for Ferguson at United, but the Scot was less keen to entertain that possibility just yet.

"Is that right?" he said with a shrug when told Mourinho was one of the favourites to follow in his footsteps.

### Stosur eyeing top 10 spot

AFP, Perth

Australia's top-ranked female player, Samantha Stosur, believes she is poised to make the quantum leap into the rarefied air of the top 10 next year.

Speaking shortly after she arrived in Perth on Wednesday to prepare for her season-opening duties at the mixed teams Hopman Cup, which starts on Saturday, the world No.13 said her confidence had only continued to rise during a breakthrough 2009, including her first singles title.

The imposing 25-year-old, who will be paired with dual grand slam winner Lleyton Hewitt in the Hopman Cup, said continued hard work and discipline would ensure a further rise in the rankings in 2010.

"I have had the best year of my career this year and I hope to build on that," she said.

"I have improved a lot and it is all going in the right direction."

"I'd love to be top 10 and I am not too far off it and that is definitely the next goal."

"I am only going to get there if I keep doing what I am doing."

Stosur said the guarantee of three singles matches under the Hopman Cup round robin format offered perfect preparation for the Australian Open, the new year's first grand slam starting January 19 in Melbourne.

Blessed with one of the biggest serves in women's tennis, she believes she has all the necessary weapons to snare a grand slam singles title, and that it is just a matter of fine-tuning her game.

"If I can keep improving my game anything is possible," she said.

"If I match up my game against a lot of the girls that have won grand slams, I have got as good a serve as them, I've got as good a forehand, I move well and everything else."

"It just tidying all those things together and making it happen for that two weeks of the year."

"Two weeks is a long time to peak and you have to get used to playing great players day in, day out."

"There is no reason I can't."

Stosur and Hewitt open their Hopman Cup campaign on Saturday against the Romanian pairing of Sorana Cirstea and Victor Hanescu.



Liverpool striker Fernando Torres (R) is locked in an aerial tussle with Aston Villa defender Carlos Cuellar during their Premiership encounter at Villa Park on Tuesday.

## Bolton sack Megson

AFP, Bolton

Bolton manager Gary Megson has been relieved of his duties with immediate effect, the struggling Premier League club confirmed on Wednesday.

Megson, 50, was axed after his side squandered a two-goal lead in Tuesday's 2-2 draw with Hull at the Reebok Stadium.

That result left Bolton languishing in the relegation zone, although the third bottom team do have two games in hand on the sides directly above them.

The final straw for Bolton chairman Phil Gartside came during the Hull match when the club's fans turned on Megson after he substituted striker Ivan Klasnic with Wanderers leading 2-1.

Hull went on to equalise and Bolton fans unveiled banners proclaiming "Megson out" at full-time.

A club statement read: "The decision has been taken in the light of the position the club finds itself in the Premier League at the halfway point of the season."

Assistant manager Chris Evans and first-team coach Steve Wigley will take charge of first-team matters for the interim period.

Although Megson saved Bolton from relegation when he took over from Sammy Lee in October 2007, the club's supporters have never warmed to him because of his negative tactics.

Megson even admitted after the Hull match that he knew he would never be loved by Bolton fans.

"There are probably 10 other clubs around the relegation zone this year and I'll bet there's no other team who have to play in similar circumstances," he said.

"Do I think I'll ever be given a fair crack of the whip here? No."

Megson leaves the Reebok after losing 45 of his 99 games in charge of Wanderers and becomes the third Premier League boss to be dismissed this season following Mark Hughes' exit from Manchester City and Paul Hart's departure from Portsmouth.

Hughes has been installed as the bookmakers' favourite to replace Megson, but Gartside will also look at the likes of former West Ham boss Alan Curbishley, ex-Wigan chief Paul Jewell and Darren Ferguson, who recently left Peterborough, as he seeks to ensure Bolton avoid relegation.

But with an FA Cup third round tie against League Two Lincoln on Saturday, followed by a Premier League trip to Arsenal next Wednesday, Wigley and Evans have to steady the ship quickly.

## Roman rids Blues' debts

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich has erased virtually all of the Premier League club's 340 million pounds (\$375.75 million euros) debt, according to the 2009 financial figures released on Wednesday.

Russian billionaire Abramovich, who reduced the club's debts by half last year, was reported to be owed the money as an interest-free loan, but that has now been turned into shares to make Chelsea all but debt free.

Chelsea claim Abramovich's move "demonstrates the continuing commitment from the shareholder to the group" and it removes any fears of a financial meltdown if the tycoon, who bought the west London club in 2003, ever decided to walk away.

During his six-year reign, Abramovich had bankrolled massive spending in the transfer market which helped Chelsea win the Premier League in 2005 and 2006, but he has kept a tighter hold on the Stamford Bridge cheque book over the last year.

A statement from Chelsea read: "Following previous conversions of half of the debt, the remainder of the interest-free loans from the parent company, whose ultimate controlling party is Roman Abramovich, have been converted into equity making the group effectively debt free."

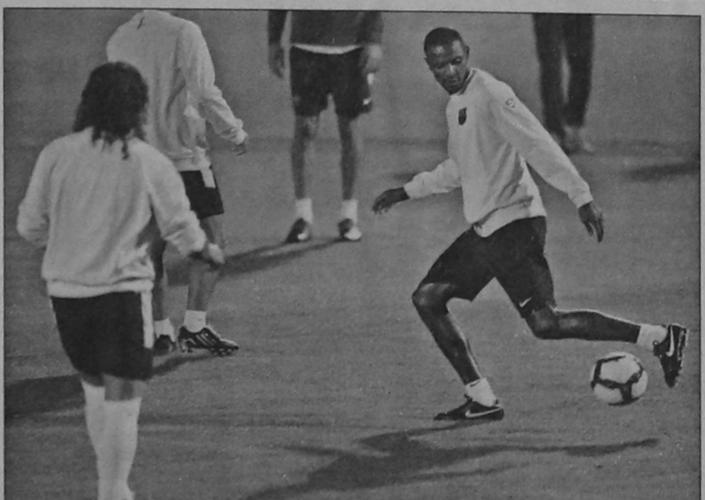
The club's chairman Bruce Buck said: "The club's debt load has been reduced almost to nil in order to provide more long-term stability for the club."

"The reduction will also enable the club to comply with any regulations on debt levels which are being discussed by the football community."

The Blues' financial results revealed losses down to 44.4 million pounds (48.6 million euros), which included a compensation payment of 12.6 million pounds (13.9 million euros) to sacked former manager Luiz Felipe Scolari and three of his staff.

The losses announced by the club are down from 65.7 million pounds (72.6 million euros) last year and Chelsea chief executive Ron Gourlay said: "It is still our aim to be self-sufficient and we will achieve this by increasing our revenues as we continue to leverage off our brand."

"We are reducing our costs by controlling expenses, including salaries and wages."



Barcelona defender Eric Abidal (R) plays with the ball during a training session at Joan Gamper on Tuesday.

## Torres sinks Villa

AFP, London



Fernando Torres's stoppage-time goal saw Liverpool to a 1-0 win away to Aston Villa on Tuesday as the Merseysiders reignited their bid for a Champions League place.

The match at a snow covered Villa Park was heading for a goalless draw until Spain striker Torres made the most of a defensive mix-up deep into added-on time with a precise and powerful finish past Brad Friedel.

Victory saw Liverpool leapfrog Birmingham into seventh place and close to within four points of a top four spot that will secure Champions League football next season for the five-times European Cup winners.

Defeat, Villa's second in as many games after their 3-0 loss away to third-placed Arsenal, left them in sixth place and revived doubts about their ability to sustain a bid to break into the leading quartet after they faltered at a similar stage last season.

Torres's strike saw him become the quickest Liverpool player to 50 league goals, needing only 72 appearances to reach the landmark, and Reds manager Rafael Benitez, speaking to Sky Sports, said of his compatriot: "He's a very, very good player, a key player for us and his record is amazing."

"I'm really, really pleased for him and for the team."

He added: "It was a very difficult game. We were trying, they were trying."

"We need to keep working hard. You could see the team was working everyone together and I think that's the only way to change things."

Liverpool's win was marred by the sight of

England defender Glen Johnson limping off and Benitez said: "He'll have to have a scan but maybe he'll have a problem with his knee."

Villa manager Martin O'Neill felt this latest defeat was harsh on his hard-working team. "We definitely didn't deserve that. It was a cruel blow."

O'Neill added: "We've given everything. We played two games in 48 hours and we've thrown everything at it."

"I don't think it's any damage to confidence if we can keep performing."

At the other end of the table, Stephen Hunt was Hull City's hero with two goals as they came from 2-0 down to share the points in a 2-2 draw away to relegation rivals Bolton Wanderers at the Reebok Stadium.

Ivan Klasnic and Kevin Davies looked to have secured a win for Bolton that would have lifted the hosts out of the bottom three.

But Republic of Ireland midfielder Hunt scored in the 71st minute and was on-target again seven minutes later.

The draw did little for either side's survival prospects, both teams staying in the relegation zone.

"At 2-0 down you are not staring into the abyss you are staring at ways and means of getting back into the game," insisted Hull manager Phil Brown.

"The team spirit and commitment of these players has been epitomised by the performance after the second goal went in and the boys deserved to get something from the game."

Bolton boss Gary Megson said: "It's happened and we've got to deal with it. It's happened to other teams."

"But it still doesn't take away the disappointment of being 2-0 up and cruising," he added.

## McGregor proclaims his innocence

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers goalkeeper Allan McGregor admits he would take a lie detector test to prove the infamous v-sign gesture that threatened to end his international career was not aimed at Scotland fans.

McGregor is in line for a recall to the Scotland squad following the appointment of Craig Levein as replacement for sacked boss George Burley.

McGregor and Scotland team-mate Barry Ferguson were told they would not play for Scotland again after being caught on camera making v-sign gestures during the World Cup qualifying win over Iceland in April.

The incident occurred after McGregor and Ferguson were dropped to the bench by Burley following reports they had been drinking for more than eight hours before the match at the team's hotel.

McGregor is adamant the gestures were not directed at the Tartan Army and he hopes he can be forgiven if Levein does hand him a recall.

"I'm not a bad guy - anyone who knows me will tell you that," McGregor told the Daily Record. "But that night at Hampden I felt I had been thrown to the wolves if I'm honest."

"The whole Boozegate thing had not been well handled and Fergie and myself felt we were being hammered for something others had been involved in."

"Then we had to sit there with 300 cameras pointing in our faces. And that's when it happened. People think we hatched it between us in the dressing room as some kind of way of sticking our fingers up at the whole country."

"But that's honestly not the way it was. It happened at the spur of the moment when we were sitting there with all the cameras flashing."

"I can say this with my hand on my heart - the V signs were not meant for the Tartan Army or for all of Scotland."

"It was just a stupid, childish reaction to the situation we were in. If I had felt that way about the fans I would have walked out into the centre circle and stuck two fingers up there."

"What else can I say? I'd take a lie detector test if I could - that's how strongly I feel about it. I wish I could turn the clock back."

## McCarthy wants out

AFP, Blackburn



South Africa striker Benni McCarthy wants Blackburn to let him leave during the January transfer window.

McCarthy is unhappy at the Premier League club and was booed by Rovers fans after a disappointing performance in Monday's 2-2 draw with Sunderland.

The 32-year-old has also fallen out with Rovers boss Sam Allardyce and admits he is no longer prepared to put up with being called in for extra early morning fitness sessions.

McCarthy believes a fresh challenge at a new club would revitalise his career and allow him to go into next year's World Cup on top form.

"Enough's enough. I feel I've been stepped on too much and it's best I go," McCarthy said in the Daily Mail.

"I feel I'm being singled out unfairly. I wasn't any worse than the other lads, yet I'm the only one on duty from that game (against Sunderland) being asked to come in at 7am."

"Yes, I admit I've had issues with hitting the weight targets the manager has set and that's my fault, but I put 100 per cent in on the pitch and always try my hardest. It seems I'm being punished more than others."

However McCarthy, who joined Blackburn from Porto in 2006, is keen to stay in the Premier League.

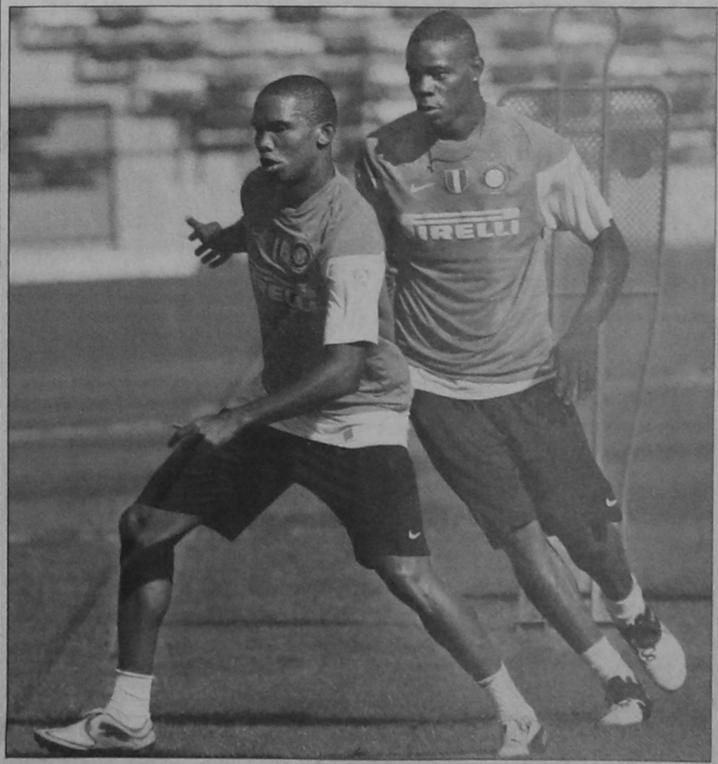
"I'd like to stay in the England. This is a great league," he said. "I'm just unhappy with my situation and need to feel wanted again. I'm not getting any younger but I know I can still make an impact."

"This is a very big year for me. To come from South Africa and have the chance to play for my country in the World Cup is massive."

"I can't risk that by playing the odd game here and there for Blackburn. I need to play and I hope they will allow me to fulfil that dream."

"They got me for next to nothing and they've had a good return with more than 50 goals in about 130 games."

"Hopefully they won't ask an unreasonable fee and let me go when the window opens."



Inter Milan strikers Samuel Eto'o (L) and Mario Balotelli take part in a training session at Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday. Inter will head to Saudi Arabia to play Al-Hilal in a friendly on Saturday.