

Carlo shrugs off ANC

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti shrugged off losing Didier Drogba, John Mikel Obi, Michael Essien and Salomon Kalou to the African Nations Cup, claiming the tournament may have come at the right time.

The Premier League leaders tackle Watford in the FA Cup third round on Sunday before games against Hull, Sunderland, Birmingham and Burnley during January when the African event takes place in Angola.

Despite the three-week Nations Cup, Ancelotti said he would not be put off signing another African player in the future.

He said: "I think that when they have to play for their national team, it's not a problem. It's like the European players.

"Every top player can go to the national team. It's not a problem for the Africans. It'll be a great opportunity for the young players now to show their quality. I hope they will do a very good job because I trust in these players."

Ancelotti will have his first taste of FA Cup football this weekend and the Italian is already aware it has a markedly different flavour in England compared to his homeland.

There, domestic knockout competitions are all but ignored, with even clubs like AC Milan and Juventus, who have both had spells with Ancelotti at the helm, going through the motions in front of sparse crowds.

Many believe the FA Cup no longer has the place in English hearts it once enjoyed but, nonetheless, Ancelotti knows the famous trophy remains worth fighting for, as Chelsea proved last season when they came back from

behind to beat Everton in the final.

"It is a very important competition in England," Ancelotti said. "In Italy, the Italian Cup is not so important.

"We want to do our best and it is one of our objectives, our aim, to win it. Last year we won it. We want to do the best again this year."

Championship side Watford are the visitors to Stamford Bridge on Sunday and Ancelotti will not need reminding that a stumble at this hurdle precipitated former Chelsea boss Luiz Felipe Scolari's exit almost a year ago.

Chelsea were held at home by Southend United, a third tier, League One, team and although the replay was negotiated successfully the Brazilian was dismissed in February, just a month later.

Ancelotti admitted he knew little of Watford save he is a big fan of their former chairman, pop star Elton John, but promised he would step up the research soon.

"Watford are a good team," he said. "I don't know them very well but I have an opportunity to watch a DVD. Every team can give you problems if you don't stay focused."

Watford, whose manager Malky Mackay became a permanent appointment before the season started when former Chelsea Academy coach Brendan Rodgers left for an ill-fated spell at Reading, are mid-table in the Championship.

But as well as hoping to cause an upset they will also be using the fixture as an opportunity to bring in much-needed funds after the club almost went into administration earlier in December.

This was avoided when former chairman Jimmy Russo and his brother Vince received a repayment of a loan of almost five million pounds.



Italian striker Luca Toni poses with his new AS Roma jersey during his presentation to the press in Rome on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

O'Neill defends Young

Football

INTERNET, undated

Martin O'Neill claims Aston Villa winger Ashley Young is in danger of being unfairly branded a cheat.

Villa boss O'Neill was unhappy with referee Phil Dowd's decision to caution Young for simulation during the 3-0 defeat at Arsenal last Sunday.

"It was crazy. I didn't realise it at the time but what the referee has done is utter lunacy. Is Ashley going to do three somersaults in the air and come down and potentially land on his head so he can get a foul?"

"There was real potential for Ashley to have landed on his head. Now, he hasn't got that off to a fine art, let me tell you. And he doesn't

perform acrobatics.

"Wayne Rooney was booked for diving against us at Old Trafford and the referee was right on top of it. If you look at a dive there is no real potential for the player to injure himself.

"The referee has to take into account the manner in which he has fallen down. That (decision) was nonsense.

"You would not try what Ashley did and put yourself under that sort of risk."

O'Neill added that the nature of Young's play means that he is always in danger of being tripped.

"What happens is referees go home at night and they have a look at what Premier League players are doing and get a notion in their head," said O'Neill.

"Then they will pick on him. What happened was a

nonsense. Because very little was said about it referees will gather and think it was a dive.

"It wasn't. I am not sure Ashley has that reputation, but if other referees think that is a dive then it will get the notion into other people's heads.

"They are worried about being castigated the next day as there are 37 cameras. So they get this notion in their head not to miss decisions. Referees should just go and referee the game and not be too concerned about that.

"I have a lot of sympathy for referees who are more worried about what Sunday might bring rather than Saturday. But if Phil Dowd thought that was a dive, then we will have to go back to the drawing board."

Breno, Ottl out on loan

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga strugglers Nuremberg have taken Brazilian defender Breno and midfielder Andreas Ottl on loan from Bayern Munich until the end of the season.

Neither player has been able to command a regular place in the starting line-up under Dutch trainer Louis van Gaal who has also made it clear he wants to offload some of his squad.

Bayern have already loaned out unsettled Italian striker Luca Toni to Roma as he seeks to seal a place in his country's World Cup squad.

The 20-year-old Breno was bought by Bayern for 12 million euros in January, 2008, but has never been able to establish himself and recently made it clear that he would prefer a move back to Brazil.

The 24-year-old Ottl is a product of the Bayern youth development programme but he too has seen few first team starts.

Nuremberg, who are second bottom of the first division, recently appointed Dieter Hecking as head coach in a bid to avoid the drop.

Maria outplays Venus

INTERNET, undated

Maria Sharapova outplayed an error-prone Venus Williams on the key points to take a 6-3, 6-4 win in an exhibition match on Saturday.

In a warm-up ahead of this month's Australian Open, Sharapova converted 75 per cent of her break points, against just 13 per cent by Williams.

Both players appeared in trouble in the baking heat and low sun at his beachside resort, with Williams particularly struggling to keep the ball on the court.

Sharapova, the world No. 14, displayed a solid and fierce baseline game to put Williams away in just one hour and 34 minutes, and record her first win over the American since 2007.

Sharapova broke Williams three times to take the first set which was over in 49 minutes. The second set was on serve until the final game when Williams missed two forehands to lose the match.

"It's good to be back. I'm glad to play against Venus in my first match of the year," said the 22-year-old Russian.

"I still remember when I first came here (in 2005). I was still young and had a great match with Venus."

Williams, who will still be chasing her first Australian Open title when she goes to Melbourne, acknowledged she was a little off the pace after the off-season.

Toni completes move

Football

INTERNET, undated

Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni has joined Roma on loan until the end of June.

The 32-year-old is surplus to requirements at the Allianz Arena after falling out with coach Louis van Gaal and had been linked with West Ham and Liverpool in recent weeks.

However, a statement on Bayern's official website read: "In a discussion Luca Toni asked the board of Bayern Munich to loan him out to Roma until the end of the season for personal reasons.

"He wants, through regular games in Serie A, to still realise his main goal of taking part in the 2010 World Cup with the Italian national team."

The statement continued: "The board of Bayern thanks Luca Toni for the success, in particular the double in 2008, that the club has been able to celebrate with Luca and wish him all the best for his time at Roma, much success and above all that he takes part in the 2010 World Cup

in South Africa.

"Luca Toni has thanked Bayern for their success together and the great time and wished Bayern the German title in 2010 and a successful campaign in the DFB Pokal and the Champions League."

Toni, 32, joined Bayern from Fiorentina in 2007 and impressed in his first two seasons with the club.

He has started just three Bundesliga games this term, however, and was fined by the club in November for leaving the stadium at half-time in their 1-1 draw with Schalke after being substituted by Van Gaal.

Roma confirmed the switch would go through on January 2 provided Toni passes a medical, which he underwent yesterday.

A statement from the club read: "Roma and Bayern Munich advise they have reached agreement for the transfer, on a temporary basis and for free, of the rights of the player Luca Toni, from 2 January 2010 until 30 June 2010.

"Finalisation of the agreement depends on the player's medical tests and the signing of the contract between him and Roma."

Totti signals WC interest

AFP, Rome

Italian veteran Francesco Totti has declared himself ready to play for his country in the World Cup if coach Marcello Lippi asks him to do so.

"If Lippi comes calling and if I am in good form and the squad needs me, I will go and I think that will please the younger ones," the Roma striker told the Repubblica newspaper.

Totti played under Lippi in Italy's 2006 World Cup triumph and he said that he had great respect for the coach.

The 33-year-old, who has played with Roma since 1993, resisting all big money attempts to lure him away, said that he felt he could play for a further five years during which he wanted to win another Italian league title with the club.

Meanwhile, Totti has laughed off claims from Mauro Zarate that he is "finished".

The 22-year-old Argentinian, who plays for Eternal City rivals Lazio, made the comment on Tuesday, adding: "He hasn't scored in about 10 derbies."

But Totti, who has scored 240 goals for Roma in all competitions, wrote on his website: "Since it's Christmas and we should all try to be better people, I send 240 well wishes to Zarate."

"In 2010, I hope to get more goals and assists to become a record goalscorer."

Roma beat Lazio 1-0 earlier this month with a goal from Marco Cassetti.

Wenger's no to Chamakh

AFP, London

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger on Friday ruled out a transfer window swoop for Moroccan international striker Marouane Chamakh, a long-time Gunners target.

"Chamakh is in the Champions League with Bordeaux and at the top of their league, so he will not move now," said Wenger.

"He has four months of his contract to go with Bordeaux and they have no interest in selling him."

Twelve months ago, Wenger concluded a January deal for Russian playmaker Andrey Arshavin, but with Robin van Persie out for most of the rest of the season, the Frenchman desperately needs a new striker.

But as yet he insists he has no specific target in mind.

"For now I am like I was when I was a student and I had to study for an exam, and I do not know what I will write," he said.

Aguero staying put

Football

SOCCERNET

Argentina striker Sergio Aguero has insisted there is no chance of him moving to Chelsea this month.

The Atletico Madrid hitman has been repeatedly linked with a move to the Premier League, and with the Blues allowed to sign players in the January window it is expected they will make a move.

But the 21-year-old has signalled his intention to remain in Spain with Atletico.

He told Atletico's official website: "I am aware that there are always rumours about my future, but actually I am isolated from everything. I have always made clear my commit-

ment to Atletico and everybody knows it. Do not pay much attention to what comes out. All I am doing is playing and worrying about the team, so these things do not affect me."

"I have changed many things," he said, reflecting on his time in Spain. "I am happy to be spending my fourth year at Atletico Madrid. I realise that I have learned many things both on and off the field during my time here."

"Now I know the Spanish league very well and that has made me grow as a footballer. Over these years, I have played alongside great players which has taught me a lot as a player and as a person."

"I am a very young boy. A lot has already happened, but I still have much to learn. I came to Spain very young and have always been surrounded by older players. It can influence and make you mature faster."

Mancini salutes Tevez

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City coach Roberto Mancini hailed Carlos Tevez's goal-scoring record on Saturday as the Argentine striker eyed an emotional cup clash with former club Manchester United.

Tevez has hit 12 goals since leaving Old Trafford last year and will get the chance to add to that total when the Manchester rivals clash in the League Cup semi-finals on Wednesday.

Before that, City travel to Middlesbrough on Saturday for an FA Cup third-round tie.

"Carlos Tevez has been outstanding," said Mancini. "He is a world-class striker who is in top form."

"He is playing with a smile on his face and to score eight goals during December was an incredible effort."

"He has scored 12 times already for City since he came to the club which is a pretty impressive ratio."

"But Carlos is not just putting the ball in the net. His movement and pace worries defenders and he is clever too. His team ethic is fantastic and he has a good understanding with the players around him."



French legend Zinedine Zidane attends the Fourth Dubai International Sports Conference in the Gulf Emirate on Saturday. The French have recently voted pop-singer and former tennis star Yannick Noah their favourite celebrity for the fifth year running. Zidane finished third.

PHOTO: AFP

'Cech is one of the best'

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech, in the firing line for some recent error-prone showings, Friday received a vote of confidence from coach Carlo Ancelotti, who described him as one of the best goalkeepers in the world.

Cech's relative loss of form in recent weeks was highlighted by Chelsea taking just nine points from a possible 18 in December - but Ancelotti rode to his defence.

"I said Petr Cech is one of the most important players for this team, one of the best goalkeepers in the world," Ancelotti said.

"I like him because he takes on responsibility in the box, he likes to come out to catch the ball. Above all, that's important in England, to have this kind of goalkeeper."

"A goalkeeper that takes responsibility can make the odd mistake. I prefer to have a goalkeeper who takes responsibility than one who just stays on his goaline and doesn't take that responsibility."

Cech is set to face Watford in the FA Cup third round tie on Sunday as Ancelotti wants to field a strong team in deference to the history and importance of the competition.

"I want to put out my best team. It's a very important competition in England. In Italy, the Italian Cup is not so important."

"We want to do our best. It is one of our objectives, our aim, to win it. Last year we won it. We want to do the best again this year."