

Becks, Toni eye openers

AFP, Rome



High-profile new arrivals David Beckham and Luca Toni will be aiming to be in the thick of the action for AC Milan and AS Roma respectively when the Italian league restarts after the winter break on Wednesday.

England midfielder Beckham is expected to start on the bench and come on at some point for second-placed Milan in their home game against Genoa after returning to the club on loan from the Los Angeles Galaxy following a successful stint at the San Siro last season.

Beckham is in Italy until the end of the campaign to get the top level football needed to push for a place in Fabio Capello's England World Cup squad.

Since he left last year, Milan have changed coach and system of play, and some pundits are unsure how he will fit into new boss Leonardo's 4-2-1-3 formation.

There has even been speculation he could be used at full-back with Massimo Oddo out through injury, a prospect that does not scare the former Manchester United and Real Madrid man.

"The system has changed. It will take some time to understand this new system, but not much," he told a press conference last week.

"I'd be happy to play in any role, even in goal. I'm a versatile midfielder and this will help me in any position."

The 34-year-old will have

been boosted by the praise of Milan's medical staff for his fitness after concerns that he might still be hampered by the ankle problem that troubled him in the run-up to the Galaxy's defeat to Real Salt Lake in November's Major League Soccer Cup final.

Milan, who trail Inter by eight points with a game in hand after their visit to Fiorentina before the break was postponed due to snow, face opposition reinforced by David Suazo, after Genoa signed the Honduras forward on loan from Inter.

Like Beckham, Toni has returned to Serie A on loan to boost his chances of reaching the World Cup finals after falling out of favour at Bayern Munich and being left out of recent Italy squads.

But unlike the Englishman, the centre-forward is tipped to go straight into the starting lineup at Cagliari for Roma, who have climbed to fourth since Claudio Ranieri replaced Luciano Spalletti in the dug-out after a bad start, with fellow 2006 World Cup winner Francesco Totti a doubt with a knee problem.

The Rome club now want to consolidate this position and qualify for the Champions League after missing out on a place in the competition this season.

FIXTURES

Wednesday
Chievo v Inter Milan (1130 GMT),
Atalanta v Napoli, Bari v Udinese,
Cagliari v Roma, Catania v
Bologna, Lazio v Livorno, Parma v
Juventus, Sampdoria v Palermo,
Sienna v Fiorentina (all 1600 GMT),
AC Milan v Genoa (1945 GMT)

season. Toni is confident he can contribute.

"I haven't just come here for the World Cup," he told reporters at the weekend. "I've come here to score goals and give a hand to the Roma cause."

Inter visit Chievo Verona without Samuel Eto'o after Cameroon irked coach Jose Mourinho by refusing to let the striker play the game and join their African Nations Cup squad late.

Goran Pandev looks sets to help cover the absence after media reports that the Macedonia striker had a medical with the champions on Sunday.

Free-agent Pandev liberated himself from his contract with Lazio last month after being frozen out for making a transfer request in the summer.

If the deal goes through, Mourinho may be tempted to use him immediately on the wing, as he is short of midfielders because of Dejan Stankovic's and Thiago Motta's suspensions.

Juventus boss Ciro Ferrara could face the sack if his third-placed side fall for their fourth consecutive competitive defeat at Parma ahead of next weekend's big match against Milan, amid speculation that the Turin club are lining up Russia coach Guus Hiddink as a replacement.

Ferrara's task is complicated by a long injury list and Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro being suspended, but defender Giorgio Chiellini should be back from a calf strain at fifth-placed Parma.

IN BRIEF

L. Cup succumbs to winter freeze

AFP, London

Sub-zero temperatures and heavy snow in the northwest of England has resulted in both this week's League Cup semi-final first-leg ties being postponed.

Blackburn's meeting with Aston Villa at Ewood Park, scheduled to take place on Tuesday evening, and Manchester City's derby clash with Manchester United, which had been due to be played 24 hours later, both had to be called off.

Although ground staff would have been able to ensure playable conditions at both venues thanks to under-soil heating, it was decided that the conditions would make it hard for fans to get to the grounds and back home safely.

The City-United first leg has been rescheduled for January 19, with the second leg now to be played on January 27. The new dates for the other semi-final have still to be arranged.

Stuttgart snap up Molinaro

AFP, Stuttgart

Juventus' Italian defender Cristian Molinaro has signed a loan deal until the end of the season with Bundesliga outfit Stuttgart.

Molinaro, 26, linked up with his new club, 2007 champions but currently languishing in 15th spot, in Spain where they are holding a training camp after the winter break and ahead of resumption of league business.

The German club are thought to have paid one million euros for the leftback with an option to buy at four million euros.

Cole convicted of speeding

AFP, London

England footballer Ashley Cole was found guilty of speeding Monday despite telling police he was trying to escape press photographers in his Lamborghini car.

Chelsea defender Cole could be banned from driving after being caught driving at 104 miles (167 kilometres) per hour in a 50 mph zone in southwest London in November 2008, Kingston Magistrates' Court heard.

Cole pointed out a man with a camera further down the road to the police officer who stopped him.

Prosecutor Richard Lomax said: "The defendant was stopped and spoken to and the words he said at the time, when it became plain that somebody was pointing a speed camera at him, were: 'Can't you do anything about those idiots who keep chasing me?'"

Cole, who was not in court for the hearing, also told police he thought he was travelling at 80 mph and Lomax said this amounted to an admission of guilt.

Diego's earrings up for grabs

Football

AFP, Rome

Italian financial authorities are set to auction off a pair of earrings worn by Maradona as they continue to pursue the Argentine football legend over massive tax debts, ANSA reported Monday.

Maradona's diamond-studded gold earrings were seized by Italy's financial police during his visit to a specialist weight-loss clinic in Merano during September 2009.

Valued at around 4000 euros, the sale of the earrings is unlikely to make a huge dent in his 36 million euros tax bill which according to an Italian taxpayer's association, www.contribuenti.it, has accrued 22.4 million euros in interest.

However the fact they are for sale signifies that Maradona is being given no quarter in Italy, where he played a pivotal role in the success of Napoli during his spell at the club from 1986-1991.

It was during his playing

days there that Maradona failed to pay tax on his earnings. In 2005 a High Court ruled that he owed 36 million euros in total.

A year later, in 2006, the tax authorities managed to scrape 11,000 euros off Maradona's bill when they seized two

expensive watches the Argentinian was wearing while he was visiting Naples for a charity match.

Maradona's earrings will be sold off on January 14, and they come with a bonus for any football-collecting buyer - a copy of the police's charge

sheet with Maradona's signature.

Maradona, a World Cup winner in 1986, is currently coach of Argentina whom he led through a tense and arduous qualification for the World Cup final in South Africa this summer.



Diego Maradona

Gunners look to close gap

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger admits Arsenal have a golden opportunity to underline their credentials as serious Premier League title challengers in Wednesday's crucial clash with Bolton.

Just six weeks ago Wenger's side seemed to have been exposed as title also-rans after Chelsea's 3-0 win at the Emirates Stadium left the Gunners 11 points behind the leaders.

But surprising slips from Chelsea and Manchester United have handed Arsenal an unexpected opportunity to get back in the race which they have seized with an impressive run of five wins from six matches.

Now a victory over managerless Bolton in front of the Emirates faithful will lift the north Londoners into second place and within one point of table-toppers Chelsea.

Wenger is convinced his

young, injury-hit squad won't be fazed by the prospect of moving above United and increasing the pressure on Chelsea.

"We know Bolton will be a big game. We will prepare well and be up for it," Wenger said. "The victory at West Ham on Sunday will help us believe we can do it again."

For Arsenal to defy the critics and mount a prolonged title challenge would be a significant achievement for Wenger, who has seen his side decimated by injuries.

Cesc Fabregas, Robin van Persie, Theo Walcott and Gael Clichy have all missed large periods of the season and now Wenger loses rapidly improving midfielder Alex Song for a month as the Cameroon star flies off to the African Nations Cup.

Song's sturdy presence in front of Arsenal's occasionally flaky defence has played a significant role in the Gunners' resurgence, but Wenger hopes French midfielder Abou Diaby can perform the role just as well.

"We will miss Song because

he is an important player," Wenger said. "In the system we play he plays in front of the defence and we will have to find a new balance without him."

Diaby came off the bench to help Arsenal come from behind to beat London rivals West Ham 2-1 in the FA Cup third round on Sunday and he is sure to return to the starting line-up against Bolton.

The 23-year-old has a more attacking attitude than Song but he believes he can rise to the challenge of filling in for his team-mate.

"I will talk about that with the manager and if he wants me to play in that position, I am happy to do it. We will see what happens," Diaby said.

"Alex is a very important player in our team. Because he is going, we have to replace him and make sure we do the same job without him."

Being completely out-classed by Chelsea could easily have shattered the morale of a more fragile squad, but Arsenal managed to maintain their equilibrium and Diaby insists they deserve

credit for showing a strong mentality under heavy criticism.

"We have the quality to beat every team and when we lost to Chelsea it was very frustrating, but we have won games since then and that is the most important thing," he said.

"We showed that mentally we are strong because we had big games, but we kept winning."

Wanderers can move out of the relegation zone with a draw on Wednesday, but the most important development in the club's future will take place in the boardroom as chairman Phil Gartside pursues Burnley boss Owen Coyle - a former Bolton striker - to replace Gary Megson, who was sacked following last week's 2-2 draw with Hull.

Coyle has held talks with Bolton and could be installed this week if compensation of around three million pounds is agreed, but caretakers Chris Evans and Steve Wigley will pick the team that takes on Arsenal.

French coaches' rule

Football

AFP, Luanda

France will dominate the African Nations Cup coaches line-up for the second consecutive tournament with five of the 16 in Angola this month hailing from the European state.

There were also five French handlers at the 2008 edition in Ghana although none survived to be involved in the first showcase of African football staged by a Portuguese-speaking country.

Jean-Francois Jodar (Mali), Roger Lemerre (Tunisia), Henri Michel (Morocco), Robert Nouzaret (Guinea) and Claude le Roy (Ghana) were the French representatives at the previous tournament.

And in Angola it will be the turn of Michel Dussuyer (Benin), Alain Giresse (Gabon), Paul le Guen (Cameroon), Herve Renard (Zambia) and Hubert Velud (Togo) to try and become the fourth French creator of champions.

Le Roy, a striking figure with flowing blond locks and now in charge of Oman, guided the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon to a 1-0 victory over Nigeria in the 1998 Casablanca final.

Lesser known Pierre Lechantre was next to succeed, also with Cameroon, in 2000 and once again the runners-up were Nigeria after a Lagos penalty shoot-out.

Lemerre completed a unique double in 2004 when he lifted the Carthage Eagles of Tunisia to the top four years after steering France to the Euro title with a golden-goal triumph over Italy.

Le Guen, a French Ligue 1 title winner with Lyon, is well placed to succeed in Angola while his four compatriots will struggle to get their adopted countries beyond the first round.

Disciplinarian Le Guen inherited a mess when he took over Cameroon in the middle of last year from former national team goalkeeper Thomas 'Black Spider' N'Kono, who lasted just one

game after unpopular German Otto Pfister quit.

The 45-year-old Frenchman elevated Inter Milan striker and three-time African Footballer of the Year Samuel Eto'o to captain and predecessor, veteran central defender Rigobert Song, was axed from the starting line-up.

His bold moves paid off with Cameroon defeating Gabon in Libreville and Yaounde inside four days to rise from the bottom to the top of a 2010 World Cup-Nations Cup qualifying group.

Further wins at home to Togo and away to Morocco assured the Indomitable Lions not only of a place in Angola, but a record sixth appearance by an African country at the World Cup when South Africa stages the 2010 tournament.

Coaches from Portugal, Nigeria (two each), Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Malawi, Netherlands, Serbia and Tunisia complete the line-up for the January 10-31 Nations Cup in Luanda, Benguela, Cabinda and Lubango.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian leftback Roberto Carlos (L) poses with his new Corinthians jersey next to club president Andres Sanches during his official presentation in Sao Paulo on Monday.

Japan, Aussies on verge

Football

AFP, Singapore

World Cup qualifiers Japan and Australia plan to secure their places at the 2011 Asian Cup finals on Wednesday as the scrap to make the grade enters a crucial phase.

Japan will make it through if they pick up a point against Yemen in Sana'a, a match that was under threat of being called off following the attempted bombing on Christmas Day of a US-bound airliner.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group's Yemen-based arm, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Japan decided to go ahead with the game and coach Takashi Okada has included 13 uncapped players in his 19-man squad.

"I don't feel any particular danger at the moment. I wish nothing happens as our stay is short. We will focus on football," Okada told reporters after a training session in front of machine gun-toting police.

"The players are highly motivated and they are working out in fine condition."

Bahrain are likely to join them in the finals in Qatar from Group A with Milan Macala's men playing the already-eliminated Hong Kong at home, with a victory enough to secure their berth.

Pim Verbeek's Australia travel to Kuwait looking for the win that will assure them of a place at the January 2011 showpiece.

But it won't be an easy ride with the Kuwaitis upsetting the Socceroos 1-0 when they clashed in Canberra last year.

Verbeek has an under-strength squad with the likes of Lucas Neill, Tim Cahill and Mark Schwarzer not available. Dynamo Moscow

midfielder Luke Wilkshire is the most prominent of Verbeek's overseas players and he believes the team's fighting spirit will carry them over the line.

"We're all winners, we're all fighters," he said from the Socceroos' training camp in Dubai.

"Playing for our country, you won't see any of us dropping off or giving up or letting things go easily. It's just inside of us."

In the other Group B clash, Indonesia have home advantage against Oman and need a win to keep alive their slim hopes of qualifying.

They have three points from their four games so far, one less than Oman and four adrift of Australia and Kuwait with only the top two from each group qualifying.

Indonesia coach Benny Dolo said he will stick to the same formation despite not getting the results he hoped for.

"We will still maintain our 3-5-2 or 4-4-2 formation which we have been using all this while," said Dolo, who will be without suspended defenders Ismed Sofyan and Maman Abdurahman.

Uzbekistan have already qualified from Group C with the second berth between United Arab Emirates and Malaysia, who play each other.

UAE are firmly in the driving seat with home advantage and a 5-0 victory against Malaysia when they last met a year ago.

They need a point to qualify but coach Srecko Katanec is taking nothing for granted.

"Football is a strange game and we must take this match very seriously, so as not to create any problems for ourselves," he said.

With Syria already through from Group D, the onus is on China with three points

against the Syrians in Zhejiang enough to book their place in Qatar.

Vietnam still have a slim chance of progressing from the group, but victory in Lebanon is essential.

Group E is more finely balanced with Iran on seven points, Singapore on six, Bryan Robson's Thailand on five and Jordan a point further adrift.

Singapore have a home fixture against Iran while the Thais must beat Jordan to stay in the hunt.

Rosicky signs new deal

AFP, London

Tomas Rosicky, the Czech international midfielder, has signed a new contract at Arsenal, the club announced Monday without revealing the length of the deal.

Rosicky, who was signed from Borussia Dortmund in 2006, is the 15th player to sign a new contract for manager Arsene Wenger since May 2009.

The 29-year-old has been rewarded for his fine form this season after missing nearly two full seasons through injuries which had threatened to end his career prematurely.

"The last two seasons haven't been easy for me because of injuries but I feel it speaks volumes about the club's belief in me for this to be signed, and I truly believe I have a lot left to offer the club, my team-mates and all the supporters," Rosicky said.

"It's felt like home since I arrived here four years ago and I believe we're on the verge of achieving something special together."

"I'm looking forward to the coming months and hope that together, we are all celebrating at the end of the season."