



PHOTO: AFP

Ivory Coast's phenomenal striker Didier Drogba runs for joy after scoring against Ghana during their group match of the Africa Cup of Nations at the Chiazhi Stadium in Cabinda on Friday. Ivory Coast won 3-1.

Martins rejoins Super Eagles

AFP, Benguela

Wolfsburg striker Obafemi Martins has rejoined the Nigerian team in time for Saturday's Africa Cup of Nations Group C match against Benin here, team officials said.

"Martins is back with the team. He returned here Friday night," the Super Eagles media officer Peterside Idah said.

Top Nigeria Football Federation official Taiwo Ogunjobi added: "Martins is now here with us. It is a big boost for all of us."

Martins was released by Nigeria to fly to England Wednesday to appear before a court over a compensation claim brought against him by his former agent.

Officials earlier said he left Angola to see a specialist over a troublesome shin injury.

Kalle keen to keep Ribery

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said Friday he will do everything he can to keep French international Franck Ribery at the German giants.

The 26-year-old has recently been linked to some of the most successful sides in Europe such as Real Madrid, Barcelona and Manchester United, but has a contract in Munich until June 2011 and Bayern are keen to extend it.

"Our goal is to prolong Franck's contract, I will do as much as I can to keep him in Bayern," Rummenigge told Munich daily newspapers AZ and TZ.

Ribery has been out since the start of October with a persistent knee injury and he is not expected to play until Bayern's Bundesliga match at Bremen on January 23.

While the knee injury has now healed, in-growing toe nails on both feet have restricted Ribery's training so far this year.

Bayern are keeping faith in the French star with their Champions League last 16 clash against Fiorentina set to take place next month.

Chaos reigns supreme

AFP, Luanda



Day six of the Africa Cup of Nations had Ivory Coast beaming, Mali fuming, and Algeria left out in the cold by their national media and accused of gamesmanship by organisers.

Friday's lone action came from Cabinda where competition favourites Ivory Coast became the first of the 15 Nations Cup teams to reach the quarterfinals.

They did it the hard way, defeating a severely depleted Ghana 3-1 with 10 men.

Down in Luanda what should have been a routine training session degenerated into high drama, face and recrimination.

Everything began normally at the Escoqueirus Stadium when Algeria turned up to prepare for Monday's must-win Group A clash with hosts Angola.

But waiting reporters were astonished when, a quarter of an hour later, the Mali team bus rounded a corner and parked outside the stadium.

Utter confusion then reigned as first Mali players, including Real Madrid midfielder and national team captain Mahamadou Diarra and 2007 African Footballer of the Year Frederic Kanoute, were made to wait in the coach for over half an hour.

Then they were told they could enter the ground, only to find the doors locked.

Diarra and some of his fellow teammates attempted to gain access by clambering through an open window while Kanoute and

Mali's Nigerian coach Stephen Keshi tried to talk their way in at the main gate, but to no avail.

After over an hour, and as dusk fell, Keshi led his charges away, furious at having missed a vital chance to prepare for their last group match against Malawi in Cabinda on Monday.

Keshi told AFP: "I'm fed up. How could this happen, to get the boys in a bus and travel to a ground and be told you can't train? I don't know whose fault it is."

Barcelona midfielder Seydou Keita added defiantly: "They can do what they like, but we're still going to qualify (for the quarterfinals)."

The Africa Cup of Nations organising committee (LOC) laid the blame firmly with Algeria.

LOC media officer Virgilio Santos explained: "This mix-up had nothing to do with us. What happened was this: Mali were supposed to travel to Cabinda today, but delayed their trip until Saturday."

"Algeria were supposed to train at the stadium until 1700, but when they saw the Mali team turn up they decided to make life difficult for Mali and they didn't leave the pitch until 1815, which made Mali angry."

In a separate subplot the Algeria team were cold shouldered by their local press who were angry at being refused entry to watch the training session.

The Desert Foxes' press pack formed a human wall and turned their backs on the players as they left the stadium.

Relationships between the two sides are fraught after coach Rabah Saadane took exception to the criticism which followed his side's opening 3-0 defeat to Malawi.

Babel's Twitter outburst

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool's out-of-favour winger Ryan Babel has risked the ire of coach Rafael Benitez after publicly lamenting his lack of playing time on the micro-blogging website Twitter.

The 23-year-old Dutchman has failed to hold down a first-team place since arriving from Ajax for 11.5 million pounds in July 2007 and revealed on Friday that he had not been selected for the Premier League game at Stoke on Saturday.

"The boss left me out. No explanation," Babel wrote.

Benitez, who is under increasing pressure after seeing his misfiring side crash out of the FA Cup to second division Reading on Wednesday, tried to downplay the incident at his pre-match press conference on Friday.

"When you have problems everyone has a different reaction," Benitez said.

"Everyone has a Twitter. It's impossible to stop people talking. It's not like in the past."

Babel, though, remained truculent and turned to Twitter once again later in the day to vent his frustrations.

"What happened after a first good season?" he said.

"Scoring 10 goals, being young talent of the year, and then second and this season don't play at all? One day, you will see what I'm capable of, will it be at LFC or somewhere else... I have faith."

The Dutch international is the latest in a growing list of players to have fallen foul of their coaches due to their activities on Twitter.

His international teammate Gregory van der Wiel was rebuked by Dutch national boss Bert van Marwijk for using the site to post a photo of himself visiting a concert while supposedly out of action due to concussion.

Sunderland striker Darren Bent went public with his unhappiness at the protracted nature of his move from Tottenham last summer, while West Ham centre-back Danny Gabbidon had to apologise to his club's fans after appearing to criticise them in a message posted on Twitter last month.

Ivory Coast into quarters

AFP, Cabinda



Ivory Coast became the first team to reach the 2010 Africa Cup of Nations quarter-finals with a 3-1 triumph over severely depleted Ghana in Group B on Friday.

It was a polished performance by the Elephants, who were reduced to 10 men on 56 minutes when Arsenal defender Emmanuel Eboue was red-carded for a vicious tackle from behind on Opoku Agyemang with his team one goal ahead.

Victory lifted the title favourites to four points from two matches and they will be joined in the knockout phase by Burkina Faso or Ghana, who clash Tuesday in the final mini-league fixture.

Togo, the other country drawn in the group, withdrew before the tournament kicked off last Sunday after the bus convoy carrying them into Angola was attacked in this restive northern Angolan enclave.

Lille forward Kouassi 'Gervinho' Yao put Ivory Coast ahead midway through the first half at the new, 20,000-seat Chiazhi Stadium, Siaka Tiene scored direct from a free-kick after 67 minutes and Chelsea striker Didier Drogba completed the victory in the final minute.

Ghana got a stoppage-time consola-

tion goal via an Asamoah Gyan penalty after he had been fouled by Souleman Bamba.

"We're all relieved," said Drogba. "We were consistent from the start. Even if we had difficulties we succeeded in remaining solid and performing the counter attacks."

Coach Vahid Halilhodzic made one change to the Ivorian team that failed to sparkle when held to a goalless draw by Burkina Faso last Monday, with Chelsea forward Salomon Kalou replacing Bakary Kone.

Ghana kicked off without eight first-choice players in defenders John Pantuil and John Mensah, midfielders Anthony Annan, Stephen Appiah, Michael Essien, Laryea Kingson and Sulley Muntari and striker Asamoah Gyan.

The absence of so many regulars meant Wigan goalkeeper and fourth-choice captain Richard Kingson, a brother of Laryea, wore the armband until Essien came on for the second half with Gyan.

Midfielder Didier Zokora stung the fingers of Kingson with a fierce drive that was parried for a corner and captain Drogba blazed a free-kick over during the early exchanges.

Ivory Coast took the lead with a master-class in counter-attacking as a sliding tackle just outside their penalty area deprived Ghana of pos-

session and set in motion one of the slickest goals so far seen in the tournament.

The ball was stroked into the path of Barcelona man Yaya Toure and his superb pass sprang the offside trap for Kalou, who crossed for Gervinho to tap the ball into an unguarded net.

Ghana made little impact in attack until six minutes before half-time when Ivorian goalkeeper Boubacar Barry, often considered the weak link in the team, dived to his left and superbly parried a Kwadwo Asamoah drive.

The presence of Essien, playing for the first time since early December when injured in a Champions League clash, offered hope to the four-time champions and the dismissal of Eboue threatened to tilt the balance.

Mathew Amoah was unlucky not to equalise soon after on a pitch that was cutting up alarmingly as his volley struck the base of a post and flew wide with Barry helpless.

But midway through the half the Ivorians doubled their lead against the run of play as Tiene curled a left-footed freekick from wide on the right over Kingson and into the roof of the net.

Playing a man short appeared to be having no effect on the Ivorians as they continued to attack and Drogba headed in a left-wing cross on 90 minutes to complete a handsome success.

West Ham fined

AFP, London

West Ham have been fined 115,000 pounds (130,000 euros) after serious crowd trouble marred their League Cup victory over London rivals Millwall in August.

The Hammers have also been ordered to pay adjusted costs of 5,000 pounds (5,600 euros) but they escaped being forced to play matches behind closed doors.

Violent clashes outside Upton Park on August 25 led to 64 arrests and the stabbing of a Millwall fan and there were also three pitch invasions by West Ham fans during the match.

West Ham were found guilty of two charges: failure to ensure their supporters refrained from violent, threatening, obscene and provocative behaviour, and failure to ensure their supporters did not enter the field of play.

The club were cleared of the more serious allegations of racist abuse and missile throwing during last week's three-day hearing, while Millwall were cleared of all charges.

No guarantee for Robinho's place

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini has warned Robinho that the Brazilian's price tag and reputation won't guarantee his future at Eastlands.

Robinho has failed to sparkle for long periods since his club record 32.5 million pounds move to City from Real Madrid 18 months ago and has often been criticised for a perceived lack of effort.

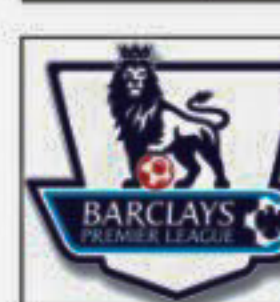
Mancini is adamant that only hard work and consistent performances will persuade him to pick any player -- even a star like Robinho.

"How much a player cost is not important," Mancini said on Friday. "What you pay only matters when you are in the act of buying someone."

"The important thing after that is the player working hard and playing well. Before the game at Middlesbrough, Robinho had a problem with one of his muscles and he didn't train for two or three days."

Benitez not giving in

AFP, Liverpool



Rafael Benitez has apologised to Liverpool fans for his side's woeful season the under-pressure Reds boss insists he has no intention of quitting.

Benitez saw Liverpool's troubled campaign hit a new low on Wednesday when Championship strugglers Reading claimed a shock FA Cup third round win at Anfield.

The Spaniard had already presided over a Champions League group stage exit, as well as what looks certain to be another failed attempt to end Liverpool's 19-year wait to win the league title.

It appears unlikely that Benitez will be sacked by Liverpool's American owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett midway through the season after club sources hinted that the manager's job was safe for the moment.

That may not be the case if he fails to secure the top four finish that guarantees Champions League football and Benitez, speaking ahead of Saturday's trip to Stoke, was quick to acknowledge that performances have been way below what is expected by the fans.

Recalling his infamous rant at Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson last season, Benitez addressed reporters from a sheet of paper as he mounted a staunch defence of his reign.

"We are not playing well and everyone here feels sorry for our fans," he said on Friday.

"This is a bad moment, we are not doing well during the season and we know have to improve and we have the belief we can do it."

"How can we improve? Winning on the pitch. How can we be sure we win on the pitch? By training well."

"If I am worried about my position or the future of the club at this moment I will lose my focus."

"Stoke is the most impor-

tant game now and we have to prepare properly. I cannot be worried about the other things. My future is Stoke now."

With Liverpool's financial worries mounting, Benitez could also be protected by the long-term contract he signed

Maxi vows to bail out Rafa

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool midfielder Maxi Rodriguez has vowed to help beleaguered boss Rafael Benitez by making an immediate impact at Anfield after his move from Atletico Madrid.

Rodriguez, 29, arrived on Merseyside on a three-and-a-half-year contract just in time to see the Reds dumped out of the FA Cup by Championship strugglers Reading on Wednesday.

Benitez is feeling the heat of Liverpool's worst season during his five-year reign and could do with some match-winning displays from his new signing.

The Argentina international goes straight into the squad for Saturday's clash at Stoke and is likely to play some part as Benitez is without injured stars Fernando Torres, Steven Gerrard and Yossi Benayoun.

"If you decide to come to a club you don't look at recent form and whether results are going for or against you," Rodriguez said on Friday.

"They are a great club with great tradition and you don't change your mind on something like that because of a short period of results."

"The important thing is to come here with that desire to win, work hard, make the team even more competitive and first of all try to win my place in the side."

"By hard work we will turn things around. I will be putting in lots of hard work, putting myself on the line for my team and team-mates because that is important."

in March worth an estimated 20 million pounds.

Paying off that deal would be a daunting prospect for Hicks and Gillett, but regardless of what his employers' may be planning, Benitez is determined to concentrate on getting Liverpool back on track.

The Spaniard's hopes of restoring the feelgood factor around Anfield won't be helped by the injuries to key players Fernando Torres, Steven Gerrard and Yossi Benayoun sustained against Reading.

Torres needs knee surgery which will keep him out for six weeks, Benayoun sustained a broken rib which is likely to sideline him for a month and Gerrard is out for a fortnight with a hamstring problem.

However, Argentine midfielder Javier Mascherano returns after a four-month suspension and new signing Maxi Rodriguez will also be involved after joining from Atletico Madrid in midweek.

Facing an obdurate outfit like Stoke at the intimidating Britannia Stadium is hardly the fixture Benitez would have chosen to erase the Reading defeat.

But he was backed by Stoke boss Tony Pulis, who said: "I think Rafa has been a little unfortunate this year in the respect that his best players have either been injured or not really on top form. They've not performed like they can do."

"Against Reading, (Pepe) Reina didn't play, and he is arguably the best goalkeeper in the Premier League."

"(Javier) Mascherano was missing, and he's the best holding player in the Premier League, and then you've Gerrard and Torres who have played with injuries and who have come off. You also had a quality right-back in (Glen) Johnson who didn't play through injury."

"So there are five players who, if they were available and playing to their maximum, would make Liverpool a completely different team."

Bayern back on top

AFP, Berlin



Hoffenheim 2-0 on Friday.

Despite being top-scorer at the 2006 World Cup, this was Klose's first league goal of the season and he started the game as third-choice striker behind Germany teammate Mario Gomez and Croatia's Ivica Olic.

Klose, 31, took over from Olic after 63 minutes and then netted from close-range on 86 minutes to hand Louis van Gaal's Bayern a single-point lead at the top of the table as action resumed after the long winter break.

"It is good to be league leaders again and it was nice to be able to get a goal," said Klose.

It was the best proof to van Gaal that Klose is back in business and the

Dutchman said the victory is a clear message to the rest of the Bundesliga -- Bayern are back in business.

"I think the rest of the league has seen we have a good team," said van Gaal.

"I have always wanted us to spread some fear through the other teams and I think we did this today. In the first-half, we did not play well and we gave away too many passes."

"We played much better in the second-half and we created many chances, not all of which were taken."

Argentina centre-back Martin Demichelis had opened the scoring for Bayern in the first half, but despite the win, Bayer Leverkusen could regain the lead on when they face mid-table Mainz.

Bayern have been crowned German champions 21 times, but May 17, 2008 was the last time they had sat on top of the Bundesliga.

The hosts took the lead at Munich's Allianz Arena after 35 minutes when Germany midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger crossed in the ball from the right and Hoffenheim defender

Josip Simunic headed the ball onto the back post.

Demichelis, who is set to play for his country against Germany in a pre-World Cup friendly in Munich in March, stabbed the ball home from five metres out.

Klose, who has only made eight league starts this season due to injury, proved his status as Germany's number one striker with some clinical finishing to make sure van Gaal's team claimed the three points.

Dutch winger Arjen Robben passed back to captain Mark van Bommel on the edge of the penalty area and his speculative shot was stabbed home by Klose, who was the fastest to react.

With 48 goals for Germany in 93 appearances, Klose showed just why he is, injury permitting, almost sure of being in Joachim Loew's squad for the World Cup in South Africa in June.

The defeat leaves Hoffenheim seventh, but Bayern could still finish the weekend only third if both Leverkusen and Schalke, who face second-from-bottom Nuremberg on Sunday, pick up three points.



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich's Dutch striker Arjen Robben (C) vies with Hoffenheim's Bosnian midfielder Sejad Salihovic during their Bundesliga clash at the Allianz-Arena in Munich on Friday.