

Ribery to decide on Bayern

Bayern Munich star Franck Ribery will decide in the next eight weeks whether or not to stay with the German giants, his agent said Wednesday.

Ribery, 26, has a contract at Bayern until June 2011 but after a series of top class displays for Munich he has been linked to some of Europe's top sides, including Spanish giants Real Madrid.

Although Ribery has struggled with a knee injury since October, he is working his way back to fitness and is widely regarded, alongside Bayern team-mate Arjen Robben, as one of the most creative players in the Bundesliga.

"Franck has a contract until 2011 and so Bayern hold all the cards in their hands," Ribery's agent Alain Migliaccio told German daily newspaper Bild on Wednesday.

"Before we meet with (Bayern's chief executive Karl-Heinz) Rummenigge, (president Uli) Hoeness and (director of sport Christian) Nerlinger, nothing will happen."

Migliaccio also confirmed Nerlinger's rejection of reports that Ribery had been given an ultimatum by Bayern to prolong his contract before the end of March.

"The story about the ultimatum is absolute nonsense, nobody has given Franck an ultimatum," he said.

"We are waiting to see what the club wants to do."



Chelsea striker Didier Drogba celebrates the equalising goal against Hull City during their Premier League encounter at the KC Stadium on Tuesday.

Drogba rescues a point

AFP, Hull



Didier Drogba celebrated his return to Premier League duty with a first-half equaliser at the KC Stadium to cancel out Stephen Mouyokolo's earlier effort on a frustrating night for Carlo Ancelotti's Chelsea.

Drogba struck his 20th goal of the season on 43 minutes to haul the Premier League leaders level after Hull defender Mouyokolo had headed Phil Brown's Hull City side into a surprise lead with his first ever goal for the top flight strugglers.

But despite Drogba coming to the rescue it wasn't enough to help Chelsea secure the win they so badly needed to restore their four point advantage over Manchester United at the top of the table.

The London club now have a lead of just two points and United manager Sir Alex Ferguson will be thankful to Hull for holding his great rivals to a draw to blow the title race wide open.

Ancelotti had the luxury of recalling Drogba for the first time since he departed for the African Cup of Nations over four weeks ago, while England internationals Joe Cole and Ashley Cole had to be content with a place on the bench.

John Terry also maintained his place in

the side despite the on-going pressure on him to resign as England captain following his off-field problems while Deco was recalled to the starting line-up.

Brown, meanwhile, made just one change to the side which was held to a disappointing draw with Wolves last weekend, recalling Craig Fagan on the right wing in place of Bernard Mendy. The Hull manager resisted the temptation to hand a full debut to new loan signing Amr Zaki.

Hull had gone nine games without a victory and found themselves entrenched in the relegation zone. Considering Manchester City were the next visitors to the KC Stadium then the immediate future looked bleak.

But Chelsea struggled to find their rhythm from the start and seemed to make Hull's evening easier than expected.

Frank Lampard worried Boaz Myhill with a swerving drive inside nine minutes which the Hull goalkeeper could only palm straight to Nicolas Anelka but the French striker stubbed his shot badly wide with the goal at his mercy.

It wasn't until the 24th minute that Chelsea threatened again when Branislav Ivanovic sent over an inch-perfect cross for the waiting Michael Ballack but all the German midfielder could do was power

his diving header straight at Myhill from close range.

The longer the game went on the more Hull seemed to grow in confidence but it still came a surprise when they took the lead with their first real attack of the game.

Terry was nowhere to be seen as Stephen Hunt swung over a corner and Mouyokolo rose the highest to head past the helpless Petr Cech.

But Hull's lead always looked fragile and it lasted just 13 minutes before Drogba levelled the scores with a powerful free kick into the bottom corner of Myhill's goal.

Hull could have restored their lead on the stroke of half time when Tom Cairney's free kick found the head of the unmarked Anthony Gardner, but the defender could only direct his effort over the crossbar.

Yet Chelsea always carried a threat and Myhill had to be at his best to keep the scores level with a fine double save just before the hour mark.

First he got down sharply to tip wide a skidding drive from Florent Malouda before producing an even better stop to keep out Drogba's downward header from Malouda's cross as Brown's men hung on for a point that is of much more use to them than Chelsea.

Jose mocks schedule

Football

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho hit out at the Italian Cup schedule ahead of his team's semi-final first leg against Fiorentina at the San Siro on Wednesday.

Following the game, the teams will have to wait more than two months before playing the second leg in Florence.

"It won't be easy playing Fiorentina but mostly because the second leg won't be played until April and who knows what condition the teams will be in then," Mourinho said on Tuesday.

"It's like playing the first half of a match and then coming back two months later for the second period."

"I don't even know what result tomorrow night (Wednesday) would be considered good. It might not even be enough to win 3-0 just as it might not be a drama to have to overcome a 1-0 deficit in two months time."

The much-maligned Italian Cup has been ridiculed by the Italian League's scheduling this season, particularly with last week's quarter-finals.

The league's decision to reschedule the last

eight tie between AC Milan and Udinese meant that two matches were played on Milan's San Siro pitch on successive nights with Juventus's trip to Inter following 24 hours after the Milan-Udinese game.

And now the semifinals, which are played over two legs though no other round is, will be stretched over two months.

Even so, Mourinho is hoping to add this piece of silverware to his trophy cabinet, although he does not have Cameroon forward Samuel Eto'o available yet following his Africa Cup of Nations duty.

But new-signing MacDonald Mariga, the Kenya midfielder, has been included in the squad after joining from Parma on Monday when a proposed move to Manchester City fell through due to issues in gaining a work permit in England.

"I'm happy about his arrival, he's an extra option in central midfield. Today he trained for the first time," said the former Chelsea boss, who on Monday failed to land the coach of the year award for the 2008/09 season - voted on by his peers - losing out to Cagliari boss Massimiliano Allegri.

"We know he's just coming back from injury but he seems to be ready to play."

"He's not the finished product but I hope he will be because he's young. He needs to improve but he's one for the future as well as the present."

Berlusconi hits out at Mancini signing

AFP, Rome

AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister who is currently on official business in Jerusalem, has hit out at his club's decision to sign Brazilian winger Mancini on loan from neighbours Inter Milan.

In a shock transfer deadline day move, Milan brought the 29-year-old former AS Roma star across the city, ending an unhappy 18-month stint in the blue and black half of Milan.

But that move, sanctioned by club vice-president Adriano Galliani, who runs day-to-day business at Milan, has not pleased the owner.

"He hasn't played much recently, I don't understand why we signed him," he told reporters in Israel.

"He's a three-quarter (a player who plays between midfield and attack) and what we really needed was an out-and-out striker."

Kone joins Hanover

AFP, Hanover

Sevilla's Ivorian international striker Arouna Kone has joined struggling Bundesliga club Hanover on a six-month deal, the German club said Tuesday.

The 26-year-old arrives on a 1.2-million-euro loan deal as Hanover - who are third from bottom - look for a boost after five straight losses.

He joins compatriots Didier Ya Konan and Constant Djakpa at the north German club.

Hanover have also signed Brazilian midfielder Elson on loan from Stuttgart until the end of the season.

Guerrero fears flying

AFP, Lima

Hamburg's Peruvian international striker Paolo Guerrero is being treated here for his phobia of flying by a psychologist from the Bundesliga club after he fled from an aircraft on four different occasions in January.

The 26-year-old had been recuperating in Peru since undergoing an operation on cruciate ligaments last September but was unable to stay on the flights back to Germany even though he was accompanied by members of his family, who had tranquilisers at the ready to supply him with should the need arise.

Guerrero, who had started the Bundesliga season in tearing form scoring four times in four matches, has not commented on his condition but those close to him have told the local press that he recently developed his fear of flying.

Guerrero lost an uncle in a plane crash in 1987 and admitted that he had never been so scared in his life when the return flight from a Europa League match in France last August was caught up in severe turbulence.

Bordeaux in final

Football

AFP, Paris

French champions Bordeaux will play fellow First Division side Lorient in the League Cup semifinals in what is a rematch of the 2002 final after beating Second Division strugglers Sedan 1-0 here on Tuesday.

A 50th minute goal by Yoan Gouffran - who was one of 11 changes to the starting line-up made by coach Laurent Blanc following the league leader's 0-0 draw with Boulogne-sur-Mer last Saturday - was enough to see off the 'Wild Boars' who had ousted Bordeaux at the same stage on penalties in 2008.

There was to be no repeat of those heroics this time especially after the visitors were reduced to 10 men in the 61st minute when Sedan's Australian defender Ante Rozic was sent-off for a second bookable offence, just two minutes after his first offence.

Gouffran ensured that Bordeaux stayed in the running for four trophies this season - the three domestic pieces of silverware and the Champions League - when he pounced inside the penalty area after Sedan's defence had failed to clear the ball and shot past goalkeeper Benoit Costil.

Costil had seen action early on in the encounter as first he was saved by the cross bar after a fierce shot by Gregory Sertic in the 9th minute and then the midfielder forced the Sedan 'keeper into

Mancini eyes fresh start

Football

AFP, Rome

New AC Milan loan signing Mancini said he hopes the move will help resurrect his career after making the short trip from neighbours Inter Milan.

The Brazilian was a highly-sought addition to coach Jose Mourinho's attacking options when he arrived from AS Roma 18 months ago but after a poor start to life in the blue and black half of Milan, he suffered from Mourinho abandoning his favoured 4-3-3 formation.

The former Chelsea boss had bought wingers Mancini and Ricardo Quaresma to play either side of Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic when he took over at Inter but neither signing impressed and Mourinho soon switched to a 4-4-2.

That left both wingers - neither known for his

a good save from a freekick in the 41st minute.

Sedan had their moments, twice going close in the first-half, through a 36th minute header by Jerome Lemoigne and a minute later a shot by midfield partner Damien Tiberi, but the hosts' keeper Cedric Carrasso saved on both occasions.

Bordeaux, though, finished the strongest and could have added to their lead on no less than three occasions in the last 10 minutes but Costil saved all of them, first from Gouffran and then twice in the 84th minute from David Bellion and Brazilian Jussie Blanc, who along with fellow 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 winning teammate Didier Deschamps is among the favourites to succeed present France coach Raymond Domenech after the World Cup finals, was pleased to have progressed, though, he saw a downside as well.

"We won. We have qualified for the next round, the semifinals. We did our job, as we say," said the 44-year-old.

"Last year people said that Bordeaux didn't care about the domestic cups (though they did win the League Cup).

"This year they can't say that. Of course there is a price to pay for success and that is a heavier fixtures schedule, which will be the case this month."

Bordeaux will travel to Lorient - who beat Lyon last week in their quarterfinal - on February 17 while on Wednesday Toulouse host Marseille ... coached by none other than Deschamps.

work rate nor his propensity to track back - largely out in the cold and Mancini has featured in just seven matches this season, totalling less than four hours of playing time.

And he blames Mourinho for that.

"I've wasted the last six months. I was ready to leave in the summer but then Mourinho called me and said he had faith in me," he said.

"I would like to wipe out the last year. Now I'm turning over a new leaf and starting a new adventure."

"I'm looking for redemption, to win, to find the serenity that I lost a year ago."

"I will do what's possible and what's impossible to return to the top."

The 29-year-old also suggested that Milan's style of play would be more suited to him than Inter's was.

"Milan play more football, better football. Inter are a strong team but Milan are at the same level, just with different characteristics," he added.

County, Palace march

AFP, London



League Two's Notts County continued to fly the flag for English football's fourth tier by dumping Premier League side Wigan out of the competition on Tuesday with a 2-0 victory.

Wolves also tumbled out of the world's oldest knock-out competition with Mick McCarthy's side going down to a 3-1 defeat by the Championship's Crystal Palace, for whom Danny Butterfield scored a six-minute hat-trick.

Notts County were on the back foot for most of their match at Wigan.

But with 15 minutes left, Stephen Hunt headed home from a Ben Davies corner to give them the lead and, three minutes later, Wigan's recently-signed Scottish defender Gary Caldwell deflected another Davies cross into his own net.

That sealed a 2-0 victory and County's reward was a fifth round trip to another Premier

League side, Fulham.

Palace's hat-trick hero Butterfield was left in a state of shock after his second-half heroics against Wolves.

The defender turned striker had scored just one goal in six previous seasons at Palace and he admitted: "I still can't believe it's happened."

"I'm normally a one goal every four seasons man so three in one night is unbelievable."

Karl Hendry pulled one back for Wolves in the final minute but Butterfield's 62nd, 65th and 68th-minute strikes had made the game safe by then.

The win will mean a welcome cash boost for Palace, who went into administration last week and were forced to sell their highly-rated young striker, Victor Moses, to Wigan on the final day of the transfer window to appease creditors.

That prompted Butterfield to joke: "I think I was a day too late, I could have perhaps gone for four or five million yesterday!"

Palace entertain League Cup finalists Aston Villa in what should be a lucrative fifth round tie.

Cabanas's teammate shot

AFP, Mexico City

A teammate of Paraguay World Cup star Salvador Cabanas, who was shot in the head in a trendy Mexico City bar last week, has been slightly wounded in a shooting incident, a spokesman for Mexican team Club America told AFP on Tuesday.

Mexican footballer Juan Carlos Silva was grazed by a bullet after being shot in a buttock muscle, spokesman Edwin Victoria said.

Despite the injury the 21-year-old midfielder is expected to be back in training next week.

The attack comes eight days after Cabanas was shot, an assault from which doctors say the Paraguay player is making a remarkable recovery.



Crystal Palace defender Danny Butterfield (R) celebrates one of his three goals against Wolverhampton Wanderers during their FA Cup fourth round replay at Selhurst Park on Tuesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS**
- 1 Airborne Dracula
 - 4 Group of scenes
 - 7 Antitoxins
 - 11 Styptic agent
 - 13 Comment from Bossy
 - 14 Eastern bigwig
 - 15 Actress Spelling
 - 16 Pea holder
 - 17 Rubik's puzzle
 - 18 Carrot-top's secret?
 - 20 Unaccompanied
 - 22 Work with
 - 24 Addled by age
 - 28 Black leopard
 - 32 Calculating snake?
 - 33 Reed instrument
 - 34 Japanese pond carp
 - 36 Family
 - 37 Richly luxurious
 - 39 Annoys
 - 41 Guard
- DOWN**
- 1 Shower alternative
 - 2 Lotion additive
 - 3 Veer
 - 4 Rock band's need
 - 5 Talks like a dove
 - 6 Commo-tions
 - 7 Opportunity to make amends, maybe
 - 8 Ostrich's cousin
 - 9 Cage part
 - 10 Exist
 - 12 Quick-fry beef products
 - 19 Blond shade
 - 21 Meadow
 - 23 "A mouse!"
 - 25 Not working
 - 26 Mad king of literature
 - 27 Sea eagles
 - 28 Boston orchestra
 - 29 Skilled
 - 30 Verb's partner
 - 31 Steal from
 - 35 Charged bit
 - 38 Day fractions (Abbr.)
 - 40 Numerical prefix
 - 42 America's Cup vessel
 - 45 "Once — a time"
 - 47 Cupid's field
 - 48 Seed covering
 - 49 Stroll
 - 50 "The 7 Faces of Dr. —"
 - 51 Devil's disciple
 - 52 Deteriorate
 - 54 Suitable

Solution time: 24 mins.



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CRYPTOQUIP

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 R Z K C D L S H H Z D S U I H I U Z H I.

Saturday's Cryptoquip: THOUGH THE DRIVER COULD VEER TO AVOID THAT INSIGNIFICANT POTHOLE, IT WOULD SWERVE NO PURPOSE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: I equals O