

Blues on Gunners sight

AFP, London



Wayne Rooney was widely believed to have shattered Arsenal's Premier League title hopes when he orchestrated Manchester United's 3-1 win over the Gunners at the Emirates last weekend. So tamely did Arsene Wenger's men surrender that it was hard to resist the conclusion that the title race had just been downgraded from a three to a two-club contest. Wenger, understandably, begged to differ and Chelsea's unexpectedly lacklustre display in a 1-1 draw at Hull on Tuesday suggested the Arsenal manager was right to predict a few more twists in the plot before the denouement of what has been an intriguing season. Chelsea's midweek slip means Arsenal can move back to within three points of their London rivals if they can repeat last season's win at Stamford Bridge on Sunday. The way in which Arsenal were bullied into submission by Didier Drogba when the two clubs met at the Emirates in November will not give Gunners fans any great cause for optimism, but Wenger is confident of engineering a reaction from his players to last weekend's humiliation. "Against United, we were

naive," the Frenchman admitted. "We were completely not at our level and now we need to deliver something special to stay in the race." Chelsea's recent tendency to concede goals from set pieces - described as their Achilles heel by Hull boss Phil Brown - could prompt Wenger to start Denmark striker Nicklas Bendtner, who is fit again after three months out following groin surgery. Abou Diaby is also back from injury and could be brought in to stiffen a midfield that was overrun in the defeat by United, who could return to the top of the table by beating crisis club Portsmouth at Old Trafford on Saturday. Avram Grant's side have lost 16 of their 23 league matches so far this season and, although performances of late have been spirited, do not look capable of producing the goals they need if they are

to escape relegation. With United scheduled to take on Aston Villa on Wednesday, manager Sir Alex Ferguson may take the opportunity to give Rooney a rest, which could mean a rare start for Michael Owen, who is rapidly running out of time in which to persuade Fabio Capello that he deserves an England recall. Elsewhere, Liverpool entertain Everton in the 213th Merseyside derby with both clubs having found some form of late. Victory in the lunchtime fixture on Saturday would lift Liverpool back into the top four for a few hours at least and manager Rafael Benitez believes a six-match unbeaten run shows his side are on the mend. Manchester City, arguably the club best-equipped to deny Liverpool the final Champions League spot, travel to Hull with Wayne Bridge set to play for the first time since revelations of England team-mate John Terry's affair with his former girlfriend. Manager Roberto Mancini believes the left-back is in the right state of mind to feature in a match which could also see Patrick Vieira make his injury-delayed debut for the club. The other two contenders for Champions League football next season, Tottenham and Aston Villa, meet at White Hart Lane on Saturday evening.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)

Saturday
Bolton v Fulham, Burnley v West Ham, Hull City v Manchester City, Liverpool v Everton (1245GMT), Manchester Utd v Portsmouth, Stoke v Blackburn, Sunderland v Wigan, Tottenham v Aston Villa (1730GMT)

Sunday
Birmingham v Wolves (1330GMT), Chelsea v Arsenal (1600GMT)

Chelsea ban lifted

Football

AFP, Geneva

The Court of Arbitration of Sport (CAS) said on Thursday that Chelsea and French club Lens had settled their dispute over French player Gael Kakuta, lifting sanctions on the London club. World football's governing body FIFA had ruled last September that Kakuta's 2007 move from Lens to Stamford Bridge was illegal following a complaint by the French side, and imposed a 16-month transfer ban on Chelsea. But, following an appeal by Chelsea, the arbitrators announced that the two sides and FIFA had agreed that a contract tying the player to Lens was not valid and the London side could therefore not have been liable for inducing a breach of contract. "As a consequence, in light of these new circumstances, the sanctions imposed upon Chelsea FC and the player by the FIFA Dispute Resolution Chamber had to be lifted," the CAS added in a statement. The Lausanne-based court had temporarily lifted the ban for last month's international transfer window while it considered Chelsea's

appeal against the FIFA ruling.

Kakuta, then a Lens player, was only 15 years old when he signed up with the English club. Lens felt that Chelsea had used their wealth to "steal" a young player that they had nurtured, and had complained to FIFA. "The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) has issued an award today ratifying the agreement reached by Chelsea FC, Racing Club de Lens and the French football player Gael Kakuta, putting an end to this arbitration procedure which also involved FIFA," the statement said. Details of the settlement would remain confidential, it added. FIFA's four-month suspension on Kakuta was also removed under the award. Reacting to the news, Chelsea chairman Bruce Buck said: "We are pleased to have come to an amicable resolution of the matter and that it has been ratified by CAS and recognised by FIFA. "It was always our intention to work together with Lens to reach this end, and both clubs have strengthened their relationship as a result of resolving this case to everyone's satisfaction." Chelsea chief executive Ron Gourlay added: "Naturally, we are pleased Chelsea has been cleared of any wrongdoing and that the matter is now closed."



PHOTO: AFP

Roma defender Philippe Mexes (L) is ecstatic after scoring against Udinese during their Coppa Italia semifinal first leg at the Olympic Stadium on Thursday.

Wolves test for Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich are expected to be without French midfielder Franck Ribery when they hunt their eighth straight Bundesliga win against defending champions Wolfsburg on Saturday. Bayern's winning run has bolted them up to second in the table, just two points behind league leaders Leverkusen, and an eighth win at Wolfsburg would keep the pressure on with the leaders at strugglers Bochum on Saturday. With Munich's Dutch playmaker Arjen Robben chasing his third consecutive league goal after curling in free-kicks against both Werder Bremen and Mainz in recent weeks, Ribery should be on the bench. With his contract set to expire in June 2011, Ribery is expected to announce whether he will stay at Bayern in the next few weeks, but coach Louis van Gaal is trying to return him to the side after recovering from a knee injury.

"Ribery is getting ever more fitter, you can see it in training," said van Gaal. "I must integrate him back into the team, but that is difficult, because I must do that in a league game." Ribery's agent has said his client is being chased by European giants Manchester United, Real Madrid and Barcelona. "He would love to play alongside (Barcelona star Lionel) Messi, that would be phenomenal," Ribery's agent Alain Migliaccio told Spanish radio. "There is no door closed, neither to Real Madrid nor to Barcelona or Manchester. "With Bayern we will see how things go up to the beginning of March."

Van Gaal insists his side have put last season's 5-1 hammering at home to Wolfsburg out of their heads and Wolves, who sacked coach Armin Veh nearly a fortnight ago, are chasing their first win for 10 games. Germany Mario Gomez has scored six goals in his last eight league games and is relishing facing Wolfsburg. Meanwhile, Wolfsburg are desperately trying to keep hold of their striker Edin Dzeko with their hot-shot striker being chased by a number of top European clubs, including Manchester United. Wolfsburg's caretaker coach Lorenz-Guenther Koestner is undefeated after his side drew 1-1 at Hamburg, but morale is rock bottom at the defending champions. Leverkusen, the only unbeaten team in the Bundesliga, are at Bochum with the league's top-scorer Steffen Kießling back to scoring ways having netted in last weekend's 3-1 win at Freiburg. Schalke are at Freiburg and are defending a six-game unbeaten record which has put them amidst the title contenders and just three points off Leverkusen.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Vfl Wolfsburg v Bayern Munich, Cologne v Hamburg, Freiburg v Schalke 04, VfL Bochum v Bayer Leverkusen, Hoffenheim v Hanover 96, Nuremberg v VfB Stuttgart

Sunday
Mainz 05 v Borussia M'Gladbach, Borussia Dortmund v Eintracht Frankfurt



PHOTO: AFP

Atletico Madrid striker Diego Forlan (L) celebrates one of his two goals with teammate Sergio Aguero (R) during their King's Cup semifinal against Racing Santander at the Vicente Calderon Stadium on Thursday. Atletico won 4-0.

Mourinho fined

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho was on Thursday fined 13,000 euros for having insulted an Italian journalist following a game in December. Mourinho allegedly told Andrea Ramazzotti of the Corriere dello Sport to 'get lost you *****' after finding the journalist in a restricted area reserved for his players following a match in Bergamo against Atalanta on December 13. The Football Federation's disciplinary commission said the fine was also for having grabbed Ramazzotti by the arm. Inter were themselves fined 20,000 euros for having failed to control their coach. At the time of the incident, Mourinho explained that he was fed up with finding journalists and Ramazzotti in particular, in the area around the team coach following matches.

Roma in driving seat

AFP, Rome

AS Roma's stunning recent run continued as they beat Udinese 2-0 in the capital to take a commanding lead in their Coppa Italia semifinal. Goals from Mirko Vucinic and Philippe Mexes settled the first-leg tie in Roma's favour and took their recent run to 15 wins and three draws in their last 18 matches. It is a run that has lifted them from just above the relegation zone in Serie A to joint second while they have also progressed in the Europa League and Italian Cup. They did the damage in the first half with Montenegro forward Vucinic giving them the lead on 12 minutes when he ran onto Daniele De Rossi's pass to find himself one-on-one with goalkeeper Samir Handanovic and he shot home in off the post. Five minutes before the interval French defender Mexes doubled the advantage as he headed home a free-kick from David Pizarro. Having dominated the first period, Roma controlled the second to ease to a comfortable victory.

Inter's victory in the Milan derby two weeks ago despite playing more than two-thirds of the match with a numerical disadvantage seems to have settled the title question. But there is still much to play for in Serie A and many issues to be resolved. Not least there is the Juventus situation. They are the biggest and most decorated team in Italy with 27 titles to their name and they began the season expecting to wrest back the Serie A crown from Inter. Indeed many pundits, including Italy coach Marcello Lippi, tipped them to bring to an end Inter's four-year reign. But now they are a club in turmoil, knocked out of both the Champions League and Coppa Italia and out of the title race, down in fifth place - they trail Inter by 15 points having played a game more. Their recent form is abysmal and reads more like a relegation candidate than a title contender - three wins, a draw and nine defeats in their last 13.

Azzurri to play WC warm-ups

AFP, Rome

Italy will play Cameroon on March 3 in Monaco and Switzerland on June 5 in Geneva in warm-up matches for this summer's football World Cup, the reigning world champions, will also play a friendly on June 3 against a team to be decided, the federation adding that talks were underway with Mexico. Cameroon, Switzerland and Mexico will all be making the trip to South Africa for the June 11-July 11 World Cup. Italy have been drawn in Group F alongside Paraguay (June 14 at Cape Town), New Zealand (June 20 at Nelspruit) and Slovakia (June 24 at Johannesburg).

Real aim to keep winning

AFP, Madrid



After ending their 19-year jinx at the Riazor Stadium with last weekend's 3-1 win over Deportivo La Coruna, Real look to keep their perfect home record intact with victory over Espanyol on Saturday and try to make inroads into Barcelona's five-point lead at the summit. Real veteran Guti, 33, has been the talk of the Madrid media after his audacious back heel - which has been replayed constantly on Spanish television this week - set up Real's standout goal against Depor and the club hope he can produce more moments of magic as they attempt to overtake Barca. Barcelona have notched up four consecutive wins without conceding a goal and entertain Getafe at Camp Nou on Saturday before Real take to the field against Espanyol. Guti looked to be on his way out of the club following a rift with coach Manuel Pellegrini earlier in the season but that now seems to be water under the bridge and the playmaker is even dreaming of making Spain's World Cup despite winning the last of his 15 caps back in 2005. Real will again be without

Cristiano Ronaldo as the Portuguese striker completes his two-match suspension but a perfect 30 points from ten league games at home make Madrid strong favourites for the win despite his absence. Espanyol, down in 14th, have won just once away from home largely due to their woeful three goals on the road but have a habit of turning it on against the big sides. Barcelona will be cheering on their city rivals while Real hope their neighbours Getafe can at least take a point at unbeaten Barcelona. Getafe could be heavily-legged after playing the first leg of their Kings Cup semifinal on Wednesday - losing 2-0 at Sevilla - while Barcelona are rested after no midweek commitment. In other matches, Villarreal stand-in coach Juan Carlos Garrido takes charge of the

team for the first time in Sunday's match at Real Mallorca following the dismissal of coach Ernesto Valverde. A trip to Mallorca is not the easiest start considering the islanders have won all nine games at their fortress Ono stadium and lie fifth. Struggling Valladolid also got rid of their manager with Jose Luis Mendilibar with the club hovering one place above the relegation zone and reserve team coach Onesimo Sanchez has taken over and must fire up the team for a testing trip to Valencia on Saturday. Valencia are in third, three points above Sevilla who beat them 2-1 last time out. That win helped Sevilla move back into the top four and they aim to close in further on Valencia with victory against lowly Real Zaragoza on Sunday. Sevilla put one step in the Kings Cup final with a 2-0 semifinal first leg win over Getafe on Wednesday so confidence is high. Atletico Madrid gained a huge psychological boost ahead of their Sunday clash with Racing Santander after they thrashed the same opponents 4-0 in Thursday's King's Cup semifinal first leg meeting. Atletico may be going strong in the cup but languish down in 13th in the league a full 13 points off the top four.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Valencia v Valladolid (1700 GMT), Barcelona v Getafe (1900 GMT), Real Madrid v Espanyol (2100 GMT)

Sunday
all 1600 GMT unless stated
Malaga v Deportivo La Coruna, Osasuna v Tenerife, Real Mallorca v Villarreal, Almeria v Sporting Gijon, Real Zaragoza v Sevilla (1800 GMT), Racing Santander v Atletico Madrid (2000 GMT)

Juventus in turmoil

AFP, Rome



The Serie A title race will most likely take a back seat for the foreseeable future after Inter Milan opened up an eight-point lead over bitter neighbours AC Milan. Inter's victory in the Milan derby two weeks ago despite playing more than two-thirds of the match with a numerical disadvantage seems to have settled the title question. But there is still much to play for in Serie A and many issues to be resolved. Not least there is the Juventus situation. They are the biggest and most decorated team in Italy with 27 titles to their name and they began the season expecting to wrest back the Serie A crown from Inter. Indeed many pundits, including Italy coach Marcello Lippi, tipped them to bring to an end Inter's four-year reign. But now they are a club in turmoil, knocked out of both the Champions League and Coppa Italia and out of the title race, down in fifth place - they trail Inter by 15 points having played a game more. Their recent form is abysmal and reads more like a relegation candidate than a title contender - three wins, a draw and nine defeats in their last 13.

Since a difficult start under coach Claudio Ranieri and losing three in a row in October, AS Roma have been on an incredible run, winning 14 and drawing three of their last 17 games in all competitions. They have stormed up from just above the relegation zone to level on points with second-placed AC Milan. But their trip to Fiorentina on Sunday will be as tough a test as they've faced on this run. Napoli are fourth and four points ahead of Juve. Since losing to Roma in October, a match that saw Roberto Donadoni fired and replaced by Walter Mazzarri, they are unbeaten in Serie A. Eight wins and seven draws later they have proved defensively sound and difficult to beat - they haven't conceded a goal in six matches. They travel to Udinese on Sunday looking to continue this run. Milan have a tricky away trip to Bologna as they hope to bounce back from their last two disappointing results, the defeat at Inter followed by a home draw with Livorno. They had been the form team in Serie A until then but will have to continue for the moment without injured pair Alexandre Pato and Andrea Pirlo, although Gianluca Zambrotta should make his return. Inter's clash on paper looks straight-forward at home to Cagliari but the Sardinians have proved tricky opponents this season and beat Juventus 2-0 back in November.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Livorno v Juventus, Palermo v Parma

Sunday
Atalanta v Bari, Bologna v AC Milan, Fiorentina v AS Roma, Genoa v Chievo, Inter Milan v Cagliari, Lazio v Catania, Siena v Sampdoria, Udinese v Napoli

Terry lose England captaincy

AFP, London

John Terry was Friday stripped of the England captaincy following reports of an extra-marital affair with the ex-girlfriend of international team-mate Wayne Bridge, the Football Association (FA) confirmed. The move followed a meeting between Terry and England's head coach, Fabio Capello, at FA headquarters at Wembley. In a statement, Capello said: "After much thought, I have made the decision that it will be best for me to take the captaincy away from John Terry. "As a captain with the team, John Terry has displayed extremely positive behaviour. However, I have to take into account other considerations and what is best for all of the England squad. "What is best for all of the England team has inspired my choice. John Terry was notified first."

Ronaldinho rubbishes party claims

AFP, Rome

AC Milan star Ronaldinho has denied claims he partied for three nights in a row ahead of the crucial Milan derby against Inter two weeks ago. Reports in the press this week claim the 30-year-old spent three nights out on the town until the early hours as preparation for the top of the table clash. But writing on his official website, the former Barcelona forward said those rumours simply aren't true. "I want to unburden myself and explain this to all those of you who follow me, he told his fans. "Rumours are circulating in the press that I organised a 'mega party' during the days leading up to the Inter-Milan derby and even though it is true that I stayed in the hotel, it's not true that I organised a party and the details reported are even less true. "I've worked hard over the last few months to achieve my personal objectives and those of Milan. "I find it unjust that very old photos and the fact that I admit to liking music, are being used to create a negative impression and invent stories about me. "I'm committing myself wholeheartedly to the project here at Milan and I'm working hard to give my best, even if the results aren't always positive. "This is not the first time Ronaldinho has been accused during his career of being more interested in partying than his football. After a difficult first season with Milan, he has become ever more influential this season and is the club's top scorer. FIFA grants Haiti \$3m World football's governing body FIFA on Friday granted Haiti's beleaguered footballing community an additional three million dollars following the devastating quake there last month. FIFA said its finance committee had approved a fund to rebuild football facilities on top of the 250,000 dollars in emergency aid it released earlier. "Just like everyone else, I was deeply moved by the reports coming from Haiti," FIFA President Sepp Blatter said in a statement. "We will continue to evaluate the situation very closely with the Haitian Football Association and will do everything in our power to assist them in their hour of need. The fund would help rebuild the football association's headquarters, regional youth facilities and provide basic equipment for local competitions.