

Vidic rules out Spain move

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia captain Nemanja Vidic brushed off speculation here Thursday of a possible move to Spain, saying he wanted to stay with Manchester United until the end of his contract in 2012.

"I will repeat for the hundredth time: my contract with Manchester is until the summer of 2012 and I want to stay in Old Trafford until the last day," Vidic told Belgrade daily Vecernje Novosti.

"Only this is true, everything else is a baseless story," Vidic said.

Vidic, 28, said he has not been in contact with any other European club.

"No, no, no, I have made a career in Manchester and I respect that fully. No one has contacted me and I have not spoken to anyone," he insisted.

The Serbian centreback said he has missed several matches since January as he suffered two injuries.

"First I had troubles with a calf muscle, but I started with training too early and felt strong pain in the back of a calf," Vidic said.

But he insisted he was ready to return to the field.

"I am healthy... I feel strong and I believe I can return in full," Vidic said.

British media have reported that United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has been unhappy with Vidic, fuelling rumours the Serbian international is keen on a move to either Barcelona or Real Madrid.



Bayern Munich forward Arjen Robben (L) goes airborne to control the ball as he is chased by Fiorentina defender Manuel Pasqual during their Champions League round of 16 encounter at the Allianz Arena on Wednesday.

Wolves given punishment

AFP, London

Wolves were given 25,000 pounds (39,000 dollars) suspended fine on Thursday for fielding a 'B' side against Manchester United at Old Trafford in December.

Wolves manager Mick McCarthy changed his entire outfield line-up for the 3-0 Premier League loss to United from the side that had beaten Tottenham the previous weekend.

The only player surviving the cull was American goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann.

Wolves then recalled nine of the players that had been in action at White Hart Lane for the next league game at home to fellow strugglers Burnley - and won 2-0.

The Premier League said in a statement: "The Premier League Board has issued Wolverhampton Wanderers FC with a suspended 25,000 pounds fine after deciding that the team fielded in their league fixture against Manchester United on 15 December 2009 was not full strength and therefore in breach of Rule E20.

"The board also deemed that the club had failed to fulfil its obligations to the league and other clubs in the utmost good faith and was therefore in breach of Rule B13.

"The board considered submissions from Wolverhampton Wanderers FC and had sympathy for the explanation submitted by the club in relation to similar cases from previous seasons. However the board ruled that this case could be differentiated from the other matches cited and that disciplinary action was warranted."

McCarthy commented: "I accept the Premier League's decision. It was never my intention to break any of the Premier League's rules, only to pick a team that was in the best position to get a result. I'm pleased the matter is now closed."

The Premier League statement added: "In coming to this decision the board also wants to put clubs on notice that any future rule breach of this nature would be subject to a disciplinary commission that would have available a full range of sanctions."

Wolves chief executive Jez Moxey said he believed the action taken against his club would serve as a "clear warning" to rival teams.

Donetsk booters turned away from Harrods

AFP, London

Footballers from Ukrainian team Shakhtar Donetsk said they were refused entry to London's Harrods store which is owned by tycoon Mohamed Al Fayed, ahead of a match Thursday against his team Fulham.

The players, in the British capital for the Europa League clash, tried to go into the upmarket shop Tuesday but staff turned them away saying their group looked "too big and suspicious."

"The players decided to increase the earnings of one of London's reputable shops -- Harrods," said Shakhtar Donetsk's website.

"You may be surprised, but the (team) weren't allowed to enter the shop. The staff said that the group was too big and suspicious. All of them were wearing similar tracksuits."

"The players explained that this was the football team and they had no habit of taking tuxedos to the training camp to go shopping."

"But those explanations were fruitless."

They ended up buying gifts in a different shop, said the team.

Harrods said the store had been busy and the footballers were turned away over "health and safety" concerns.

"There are periods, when the store is at its busiest, that Harrods has to take the difficult decision to deny access to tour parties," a spokesman told the BBC.

"This is done in the interest of health and safety."

He added: "Needless to say, we do not wish to offend or upset visitors when making these decisions."

Fulham Football Club owner Fayed, who is Egyptian, is the father of Dodi Fayed, the lover of Diana, princess of Wales. They were killed in the same 1997 Paris car crash.

Bayern leave it late

AFP, Munich



Bayern Munich left it late to beat a dogged 10-man Fiorentina with a controversial last-minute goal to hand the German giants a 2-1 win, making it 13 in a row in all competitions.

German international striker Miroslav Klose headed home in the 89th minute after the ball went loose from a long distance shot from Dutch international Arjen Robben, but he appeared to be in an offside position.

The strike gave the Bundesliga outfit a slender advantage for when the two sides head to Florence for the second leg on March 9, with the Italians holding a precious away goal.

Earlier in the second half, Fiorentina had been reduced to 10 men when Massimo Gobbi was handed a straight red card for a blatant elbow in Robben's throat.

But Bayern's defensive frailties had gifted the Italians a goal only five minutes after the restart.

The German giants failed to clear a corner and Fiorentina's Danish international defender Per Kroldrup pounced in the ensuing goal-mouth scramble, toe-poking the ball home from close range.

Bayern, brimming with confidence after an impressive run of 12 straight wins, took the lead on the stroke of half-time through a Robben penalty.

Three minutes into injury time at the end of the first-half, Bayern's French star Franck Ribery was unceremoniously upended in the area by Cesare Natali.

Striker Mario Gomez slotted the ball home, but to Bayern's disgust, the referee had already blown for a penalty.

But Robben made no mistake from the spot, sending Fiorentina goalkeeper Sebastien Frey

the wrong way for his sixth goal in as many games but his first in this season's Champions League campaign.

The penalty brought an end to a largely frustrating first half for both sides as Bayern struggled to break down a well-organised Italian defence.

Bayern had shown their attacking intentions from the kick-off, a long ball finding Robben in space on the right, whose pull-back into the box just evaded Gomez with only 15 seconds on the clock.

But after this early foray into the Fiorentina box, neither goalkeeper was seriously tested in an uninspiring first half.

With the score at 1-1, Bayern coach Louis van Gaal rang the changes, pulled off Gomez and Thomas Mueller and brought on Klose and Croatia's Ivica Olic.

However, despite numerous chances created by Bayern's potent attacking force in a hectic second half, no one was able to deliver a telling blow until the very last minute, leaving the four-times European champions with plenty to do in Florence.

Bayern came into the game as clear favourites on the back of their exceptional run of form that has seen them catapulted to joint top of the league and into the semi-finals of the German Cup.

In contrast, Fiorentina's form before their visit to Munich had been patchy, with five straight games without a win in Serie A, slumping to a disappointing 11th place in the league.

Injuries and suspensions also hampered Fiorentina's preparations, with star Romanian striker Adrian Mutu out of action after failing drugs tests and defender Alessandro Gamberini dislocating his shoulder.

Bayern, on the other hand, welcomed back Ribery and Klose from injury as they remained in the hunt for their 22nd German league title and their fifth triumph in Europe's top club competition.

Rafa ridicules playoff

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez has ridiculed the prospect of a play-off to decide which English Premier League side gets the fourth Champions League place.

The Premier League is considering alternatives to the current system of the top four automatically qualifying for European football's leading club competition.

Liverpool, the 2005 winners, have taken part in the Champions League for the last six seasons.

Despite slipping into the second tier Europa League, they are once again fighting with Manchester City, Tottenham and Aston Villa to finish fourth this season.

Benitez feels a play-off system would be unfair, because the team that finishes fourth could lose out on the Champions League to a side that has finished 20 points behind them.

He also thinks English teams already play too many matches and are stretched by the commitments of international competition.

Benitez, speaking at Anfield on Wednesday, said: "If a team finishes fourth and they have to play against a team that's finished seventh after a fantastic season, against a team that maybe finished 20 points behind, what does this mean?"

"They (officials) want to keep the competition alive and then play probably four

more games when you don't have time, when you play a lot of international football and the players go off with the international team.

"When will you play, how will you play these games?," the Spaniard asked. "What does it mean for the team that finishes fourth to play against a team that finished seventh and maybe 20 points behind, maybe we can do the same with the teams at the bottom of the table."

Sarcastically, he added: "If you finish fourth you could play against the team that finished fourth bottom of the table and then we can play 50 games every season and we don't need to rest so it will be fantastic!"

"And still people can be in their offices analysing the fixtures and creating different things and players will be injured, which we've had a lot."

"In England we have massive problems with injuries and if we carry on playing games, we will probably end up playing three games a week which will be fantastic for television."

"I'm trying to say that we are playing too much now. The players are injured because they are playing too many games."

Premier League chiefs floated the idea of a '39th' league game in Asia only to see it sink under the weight of fan, club and media criticism.

And Benitez said: "They were talking about the 39th game, games in Asia, now the play-offs, we'll be playing until the end of the century at this rate."

IN BRIEF

FIFA to help Haiti

AFP, Zurich

Part of the proceeds from 2010 World Cup warm-up matches will be donated to quake-stricken Haiti, world football's governing body FIFA said on Thursday.

FIFA said in a statement that it would donate its two percent levy on the friendly games between March 1 and June 11, and appealed to the 32 World Cup teams to match the donation.

The governing body had announced some 3.25 million dollars in funding for Haiti's beleaguered footballing community after the devastating quake there last month.

FIFA said the money from the friendlies would go to the special fund that will finance projects submitted by the Haitian Football Association.

Britain's princes plan WC tour

AFP, London

Britain's Prince William and Prince Harry hope to visit South Africa during the World Cup, in their first joint overseas tour, sources close to the royal family said Wednesday.

Long-time fans of Africa's people and wildlife and with a string of charitable interests on the continent, the royal brothers are planning to visit in June.

William is president of the Football Association, English football's governing body, and he will attend a match played by his national side during the tournament.

Both princes are keen to highlight their charity work in Africa during the tour, the sources said.

Harry helped found the Sentebale organisation which aims to help impoverished AIDS orphans in Lesotho, a land-locked nation within South Africa.

William, second-in-line to the British throne, is royal patron of the Tusk Trust which runs projects in Africa to protect wildlife, particularly endangered species, as well as helping alleviate poverty in rural communities.

A royal spokesman would not confirm the trip but said the princes were eager to highlight issues in Africa during the football tournament.

"We are not in a position to confirm it," he said.

"Both princes are keen to put the spotlight on some of Africa's issues while the World Cup is going on."

"There are no further plans developed at this stage."

South Africa hosts the month-long World Cup from June 11 in nine cities.

FA charges Vieira

AFP, London



Manchester City midfielder Patrick Vieira was charged with violent conduct by the Football Association (FA) on Tuesday following an incident involving Stoke's Glenn

Whelan in Monday's Premier League match at the Britannia Stadium.

The France star, who could be banned, has until 6pm local time (1800GMT) on Thursday to respond to the charge. A regulatory commission will hear the charge on Friday.

Stoke manager Tony Pulis was furious after Vieira kicked out at Whelan following a challenge early on in the 1-1 draw.

Whelan made a joke of the incident, saying: "Maybe if I was a bit bigger, then maybe it would have hurt more!"

But Pulis urged the FA to take retrospective action, pleading for "parity" after Stoke

defender Robert Huth was banned in October when television cameras caught him striking West Ham's Matthew Upson.

Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand was recently banned by the FA for four matches after TV cameras caught him elbowing Hull's Craig Fagan off the ball.

"We had a player given a three-game suspension after an incident a couple of months back," Pulis said. "There were incidents in the first half with Man City players where I think it is as bad if not worse."

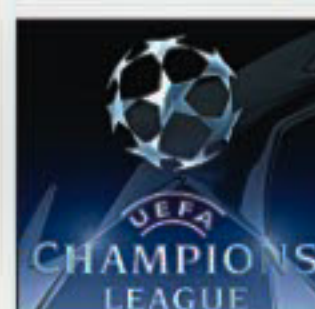
Referee Alan Wiley spoke to former Arsenal captain Vieira after the challenge but took no action.

Vieira has been hauled before the FA on many occasions after being sent off 10 times in his nine years at Arsenal. He was also booked on 100 occasions playing for the Gunners.

Vieira joined City on a free transfer from Inter Milan in the January window and immediately left his mark as he earned a booking on his debut at Hull earlier this month.

Porto pip Gunners

AFP, Porto



Two errors from Arsenal goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski allowed Porto to establish a 2-1 lead in the first leg of the Champions League last 16 tie here on Wednesday.

The 24-year-old Pole started in place of the injured Manuel Almunia but gifted the hosts an early lead with a soft own goal and presented them the opportunity to score their second five minutes into the second period by inexplicably picking up a back-pass.

The industrious Falcao was the beneficiary on the latter occasion, rolling the ball past a stranded Fabianski after Ruben Micael took a quick free-kick to secure a slim advantage for his side prior to the second leg on March 9.

"Schoolboy goals. What can you do? Nothing. After the second goal, we went down," said Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas.

"We are still a little bit soft in that aspect. When we concede a goal we are not strong enough to lift ourselves up. Until the second goal

we were having a very good game."

Fabianski's nightmare performance distracted attention from an impressive return to European action by Sol Campbell.

The 35-year-old veteran marked his first appearance in continental competition since his return to the club in January by scoring the equaliser - three years and nine months since his goalscoring turn in Arsenal's defeat by Barcelona in the 2006 Champions League final.

Porto's winner sparked a furious reaction from Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger, who was also without William Gallas, Alex Song, Andrey Arshavin, Eduardo and long-term absentee Robin van Persie due to injury.

Wenger stormed to the touchline to remonstrate with Swedish referee Martin Hansson, who was in charge of his most high-profile match since the infamous Thierry Henry handball incident during the 2010 World Cup play-off between France and the Republic of Ireland.

Hansson had turned down a strong penalty appeal from Arsenal midfielder Tomas Rosicky shortly before Porto's second goal.

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Porto forward Radamel Falcao is elated after scoring the winning goal against Arsenal during their Champions League round of 16 tie at the Dragao Stadium on Wednesday.