

IN BRIEF

L'pool hold Rafa talks

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool claim boss Rafael Benitez's crunch talks with chairman Martin Broughton and managing director Christian Purslow over the future of the club were "constructive".

Benitez this week met with the Reds' hierarchy to find out how much money he would be given to spend in the transfer market during the close-season, as well as discussing his own future.

The Spaniard has been linked with a move to Italian side Juventus, while he is also aware new owners could be on the way to Anfield as Broughton has been appointed to find a new buyer to replace American co-owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

A Liverpool spokesman said: "We are pleased that the first of what is intended to be a series of meetings took place today between the chairman, managing director and the manager. The meeting was constructive."

Mikel has knee op

AFP, London

Chelsea and Nigeria's John Obi Mikel has undergone minor knee surgery with just over a month to go until the start of the World Cup.

The operation means the 23-year-old holding midfielder, who has been sidelined for the last three weeks with the injury, will miss Chelsea's match with Wigan on Sunday, where victory will secure the Premier League title, and the FA Cup final against Portsmouth on May 15.

Mikel is a first-choice player for Nigeria, who kick off their World Cup campaign against two-time winners Argentina on June 12. Their group also contains 2002 semifinalists South Korea and Euro 2004 champions Greece.

Bale extends Spurs stay

AFP, London

Tottenham star Gareth Bale signed a new four-year contract with the Champions League qualifiers on Friday.

The 20-year-old Wales international has impressed in defence and midfield this season and his performances have played a key role in Harry Redknapp's side securing a place in Europe's elite club competition for the first time since 1961-62.

Spurs clinched their top-four place with a 1-0 win at Manchester City on Wednesday and Bale immediately agreed an improved deal tying him to White Hart Lane until 2014.

A statement on the club's official website read: "The club is delighted to announce that Gareth Bale has signed a new four-year contract which runs until 2014."

"The Wales international joined the club as a 17-year-old from Southampton in May 2007 and has gone on to make 75 appearances in our colours, scoring five goals."

Bale scored winners against Arsenal and Chelsea last month and was named Premier League player of the month for April.

Bale made his Wales debut aged 16 years and 315 days against Trinidad and Tobago in May 2006 and has won 24 caps, scoring two goals.

Wenger confident of Chamakh deal

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger is "confident" Bordeaux striker Marouane Chamakh will become Arsenal's first signing of the close-season.

Wenger has been chasing Chamakh for several months and the Morocco international admitted this week that he is certain to join the Gunners, prompting the Gunners boss to reveal that a deal should be completed soon.

The 26-year-old, who has scored 15 goals for Bordeaux this season, will arrive on a free transfer as he is out of contract with his French club at the end of the season and is expected to agree a 50,000 pounds a week deal with the Premier League club.



2010 World Cup mascot Zakumi poses with the trophy on the stage during its unveiling in Cape Town on Friday.

Trophy arrives in S. Africa

AFP, Johannesburg



Former president Nelson Mandela welcomed the World Cup trophy to South Africa on Thursday before the coveted gold statue begins a tour of the country ahead of next month's World Cup.

"For us there was no way that the trophy would arrive in the country and not being brought first to Mandela," FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke said in a statement.

"Nelson Mandela was one of the architects of this FIFA World Cup."

Football governing body FIFA sent the gold-and-malachite trophy on a 134,014-kilometre (83,272-mile) world tour that stopped in every African country ahead of the June 11 kick-off of the continent's first World Cup.

The trophy will head next to the township of Khayelitsha outside Cape Town, where it will start the final leg of its tour, stopping in 38 cities and towns across all nine South African provinces.

The Nobel Peace Prize-winner last saw the trophy in Zurich six years ago, when South Africa was awarded the 2010 World Cup.

"It was so wonderful seeing Madiba (Mandela's clan name) in Zurich on the day South Africa won the right to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup, so happy with tears of joy rolling down his cheeks," Danny Jordaan, CEO of South Africa's organising committee, said Thursday.

"So, it is quite an emotional and joyful moment to be back bringing the trophy to him."

In 2008, FIFA president Joseph Blatter presented Mandela with a replica of the trophy, in tribute to his role in securing the World Cup for South Africa.

Chelsea almost there

AFP, London



Manchester United's hopes of a record 19th English title lie in the hands of an injury-depleted Wigan squad that has nothing left to play for and has avoided defeat away from home just twice this year.

That will be how the gloomier sort of United fans view the prospect of Roberto Martinez's side denying Chelsea, who have lost only twice at Stamford Bridge all season, the home victory they require to reclaim the Premier League trophy for the first time since 2006.

Red Devils of a more optimistic disposition will recall that Martinez has already masterminded a win over Chelsea this season while counting on an outbreak of last-minute jitters to frustrate Carlo Ancelotti's men in their quest to ensure a silver-tinted finale to the Italian's first season in English football.

Given the wealth of experience in a Chelsea squad that has won all six of their matches against United, Arsenal and Liverpool, that does not look like a likely scenario.

Since losing to Tottenham last month, Chelsea have knocked seven past Stoke and won at Liverpool, hardly the form of a team teetering on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"If at the beginning of the season someone had said we were going to play the last game at home and a win would

win the league, I think everybody would have signed for it," acknowledged Petr Cech, the Chelsea goalkeeper. "So we know what we have to do."

To take advantage of a Chelsea slip, the champions must beat Stoke at Old Trafford - in itself no straightforward task - and it has been apparent all week that United's players are resigned to missing out on what would have been an unprecedented fourth consecutive title.

"It is very strange," recognised Edwin van der Sar. "In the last three years we have been in command. Now we have to wait."

"It is going to be difficult. We have lost a lot of games this year but we are still in there at the end. Hopefully Wigan will have a go for it on Sunday and we will hear some positive news."

Club captain Gary Neville admitted that United have only themselves to blame for the position they find themselves in after a season in which five defeats before Christmas underlined the impact of the departures of Cristiano Ronaldo and Carlos Tevez.

Wigan will be without Chris

Kirkland, Titus Bramble and Marcelo Moreno through injury while Charles N'Zogbia is rated only a 50-50 shot to start at Stamford Bridge.

But Martinez is confident that his side, who have won plaudits for their thoughtful, passing style under the Spaniard, can derail Chelsea's celebrations.

"We have got nothing to lose, but I can guarantee you that there is a belief in the squad that on the day we can compete with anyone, and that is the approach we are going to have," said Martinez. "We are going to go to Stamford Bridge to try to win the game."

Outside of the destination of the trophy, the only other unresolved issue is whether Arsenal can hold on to third place, which carries the significant prize of direct entry to the Champions League group stages.

Tottenham could overtake the Gunners if they beat Burnley and their north London rivals lose at home to Fulham.

For Peter Crouch, the Tottenham striker whose winner against Manchester City in midweek guaranteed a top four finish for Spurs, that would be "the icing on the cake" but the odds must be on Arsenal getting the point they need against a Fulham side that will be preoccupied by Wednesday's Europa League final date with Athletic Madrid.

Ireland winger Damien Duff and top scorer Bobby Zamora will both miss the trip to the Emirates as they battle to be fit for the European final.

FIXTURES

Sunday
(all 1500 GMT kick-offs)
Arsenal v Fulham, Aston Villa v Blackburn, Bolton v Birmingham, Burnley v Tottenham, Chelsea v Wigan, Everton v Portsmouth, Hull v Liverpool, Manchester United v Stoke, West Ham v Manchester City, Wolves v Sunderland

Barry's WC fate in the balance

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City midfielder Gareth Barry faces a nervous wait to see if he makes England's World Cup squad after being ruled out for four weeks by an ankle injury.

Barry limped out of Wednesday's 1-0 defeat to Tottenham, which ended City's bid to qualify for the Champions League, and his club boss Roberto Mancini confirmed on Friday that the former Aston Villa star will need up to a month to recover.

"I don't know exactly how bad, maybe three to four weeks, so I hope he can still go. He deserves to play in the World Cup," Mancini said.

Barry may be fit by the time of England's first match in South Africa is on June 12 against the United States in Rustenburg, but he will definitely be absent from the friendlies against Mexico and Japan, which cover two training camps in Austria.

Barry has been a regular member of Capello's first-choice line-up, alongside Frank Lampard in central midfield, and is likely to be named in the 30-man provisional squad for the World Cup, which will be revealed on Tuesday, even though he is not fit.

Capello will then need to assess the player's recovery before finalising his 23-man party on June 1.

Parry got £4.25m pay-off

AFP, Liverpool

Former Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry was handed a 4.295 million pounds (6.307 million dollars) pay-off when he left Anfield last year, according to club's accounts.

Parry negotiated the deal with former chairman David Moores before current owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett bought the Reds and his pay-off is believed to be one of the biggest ever to a sports administrator.

It surpasses Keith Edelman's 1.5 million pounds deal when he left Arsenal in 2009.

Parry, who became Liverpool's chief executive in July 1998, quit Liverpool in February last year after a break-down in his relationships with both manager Rafael Benitez and Hicks.

The accounts, to July 2009, also showed Liverpool's finances had taken a hit as they made an operating loss before tax of 16 million pounds (23 million dollars) - down from a 10.2 million pounds (14.9 million dollars) profit the previous year.

Kop Holdings, the company set up by Hicks and Gillett to buy the club, continues to run up more debt as annual interest repayments on loans taken out to finance the purchase rose by 3.6 million pounds (5.2 million dollars) to 40.1 million pounds (58.9 million dollars).

Totti's racist slur?

Football

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan striker Mario Balotelli has accused AS Roma club captain Francesco Totti of racially abusing him during the Italian Cup final.

Totti was sent off a couple of minutes from time after wildly kicking out at Balotelli as the Romans went down 1-0 to a Diego Milito strike on Wednesday.

The veteran forward then came out on Thursday and tried to explain away his actions by claiming Balotelli had insulted him.

But the teenager of Ghanaian descent now says Totti used a racial slur.

"N****r piece of s**t, that's what he called," says Balotelli in Friday's Gazzetta dello Sport.

Totti, so often the darling not just at Roma but of Italian football, has been roundly criticised for his moment of madness at the Stadio Olimpico with many commentators claiming that kick has booted into touch his chances of going to the World Cup.

But speaking to the Corriere dello Sport Totti tried to explain away his behaviour by blaming it on the 19-year-old.

"Hearing a footballer repeatedly insulting my fans, my city, my sense of belonging to Rome, as well as me personally, telling me that I'm finished and unbearable," said Totti.

"One can't tolerate that he (Balotelli) is always allowed to provoke everyone, including his own fans and those of other teams and no-one does anything to prevent his behaviour."

"He does this in practically all the stadiums in Italy and Europe."

"That's probably why in his own team he's never been

fully accepted and is always seen by other clubs and his own national team as an unsettling element."

Totti also complained that those who usually supported him had abandoned him over this episode.

Balotelli's agent Mino Raiola denied Totti's claims that he had been insulted.

"Mario has assured me that he didn't insult anyone. He admits only to having said: 'stop kicking me, don't be a child and play football'. Nothing more, then Totti did the rest," he said before stoking up the tension

against Totti.

"Vodafone has invested a lot of money in his positive sporting image. I doubt that their coloured and anti-racist clients are happy now."

"What should (black Brazilian team-mate) Juan say to his captain now. Totti will have to be careful managing this incident."

This is not the first incident of racial abuse suffered by Balotelli this season.

Juventus were hit with fines three times this season after their fans chanted racial slogans against the 19-year-old.



Roma star Francesco Totti (L) is shown the red card during their Coppa Italia final against Inter Milan at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Wednesday.

Bommel on the verge

AFP, Berlin



Bayer Munich's Dutch captain Mark van Bommel is set to make history on Saturday

when he becomes the first foreign skipper of the German giants to lift the Bundesliga shield.

With the season ending on Saturday, Bayern are almost sure to be crowned German league champions for the 22nd time at relegated Hertha Berlin as they enjoy a three-point lead and vastly superior goal difference over rivals Schalke.

The 33-year-old is in his second season as captain and said it would be an honour to raise the Bundesliga shield with Munich bidding for a treble of the league title, the Champions League and German Cup trophies.

"It'll be a very special experience for me," said the hard tackling midfielder.

"I was captain in

Eindhoven for three championship triumphs, and this is my first with Bayern."

"It's terrific, and it makes me very proud."

Saturday's match at Berlin's Olympic Stadium against bottom-side Hertha will be followed by the following weekend's German Cup final against Werder Bremen.

It means a busy few weeks for Bayern with the Champions League final to come against Inter Milan in Madrid on May 22.

With Bayern virtually assured the title and Schalke sure to finish in second, Werder Bremen will claim the third Champions League

berth if they beat Hamburg.

Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf is expected to name a 4-2-3-1 formation with Mesut Ozil and Marko Marin, who were both named in Germany's provisional World Cup squad on Thursday, starting in midfield with Claudio Pizarro as the lone striker.

Europa League semifinalists Hamburg, who beat Nuremberg last weekend, continue their hunt for a new coach with Dutchman Ricardo Moniz continuing as caretaker after the sacking of Bruno Labbadia.

Only Bayer Leverkusen can potentially claim third, but they have to win at strugglers Moenchengladbach and hope Bremen lose.

Leverkusen are without goalkeeper Rene Adler who needs an operation for a rib injury which will keep him out of next month's World Cup.

At the other end of the table, Berlin are already relegated, but Bochum, Nuremberg and Hanover are all locked in a battle of survival with two out of the three set to go down.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Hertha Berlin v Bayern Munich, Hoffenheim v VfB Stuttgart, Werder Bremen v Hamburg, Freiburg v Borussia Dortmund, Mainz 05 v Schalke 04, Borussia M'Gladbach v Bayer Leverkusen, VfL Bochum v Hanover 96, Nuremberg v Cologne, VfL Wolfsburg v Eintracht Frankfurt