



Inter Milan goalkeeper Julio Cesar (L) walks with teammate Samuel Eto'o (R) upon their arrival in Abu Dhabi on Friday to take part in the Club World Cup.

PHOTO: AFP

Fergie calls for respect

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has pleaded with the club's fans not to bombard Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger with obscene chants when the teams face off at Old Trafford on Monday.

United's fans regularly subject Wenger to an avalanche of abuse when the two clubs meet, but Ferguson has said the offensive chanting has to stop.

"I plead to our fans. They have got to stop that kind of thing," Ferguson told MUTV. "I have faced it myself in the past. I have had some chants at various grounds up and down the country and it is not a nice thing."

"We have a great rivalry with Arsenal. But it shouldn't extend to those levels, not for Manchester United. I hope we don't hear any more of that."

Keegan blasts Hughton sacking

AFP, London

Former Newcastle manager Kevin Keegan blasted the sacking of Chris Hughton as St James' Park boss on Friday and warned long-suffering Geordie fans that the club was heading nowhere.

Keegan, who ended his second spell in charge of the north-east club in September 2008 citing interference from the board in playing matters, said that as long as Mike Ashley remains the owner, the club will continue to tread water.

"Chris Hughton's shock departure has once again demonstrated that Newcastle United need some stability, but you will never get stability when you have Mike Ashley and (managing director) Derek Llabias running the club," Keegan told ESPN.

"Ashley has made no secret that he wants to sell Newcastle, and the best day will come when someone buys it from him and runs Newcastle like that club should be run. The club can never go anywhere under Mike Ashley and Derek Llabias."

Arsene shrugs off jibes

AFP, London



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger shrugged off jibes by Patrice Evra on Friday after the Manchester United defender ridiculed the Gunners as little more than a "training centre."

In remarks broadcast by Canal Plus, French international Evra stoked tensions ahead of the two teams' Premier League clash on Monday by taking aim at Arsenal's five-year trophy drought.

"Arsenal is a training centre. I watch them play and enjoy it but will they win the title? That's what people remember," Evra said. "Arsenal are a great club but it has been five years since they won anything and that for me is a crisis."

"We could lose to them on the 13th but then what? There is nothing (for them), there will be no trophy, nothing."

In a restrained rebuttal of Evra's comments, Wenger said he had little interest in

trading verbal barbs with the Manchester United stalwart.

"He gave you some good stuff to make it all hot before the game," the Arsenal manager told reporters.

"We are guided by the way we want to play football and not by the statements of anybody who plays against us."

"Personally, I believe if you are a big player you always respect your opponent and that is what we try to do."

Asked if he believed whether Evra had been disrespectful, Wenger replied: "I leave that judgement to you. We do not want to go into any unneeded talking before a game like that."

"We want to focus on the way we want to play and ignore any provocation before a game."

"We are motivated by the desire to win the game and by the quality of the football we want to play."

Arsenal currently top the Premier League standings by one point, with Manchester United in second having played one game fewer.

Michel's choice Xavi

AFP, Rome

UEFA president Michel Platini says Spain playmaker Xavi would get his vote for the Ballon d'Or award for world player of the year.

Xavi is one of three Barcelona players, alongside Lionel Messi and Andres Iniesta, on the short-list to win the award which will be handed out on January 10 in Zurich.

But Platini also criticised the absence of Inter Milan's Dutch playmaker Wesley Sneijder from the shortlist.

"I would give it to Xavi, then Sneijder, who but for one goal would have won everything, and then Iniesta," he said.

Sneijder was part of the Inter team that won the treble last season -- the Champions League and a domestic Italian double -- while the Netherlands also reached the World Cup final.

But there Spain's Iniesta scored the only goal of the game to give the Spaniards the world crown.

"It's not fair that the Inter player is not amongst the top three. The best players are Messi and Cristiano (Ronaldo) but the World Cup comes first," said Platini.

Ribery pleases Van Gaal

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal on Friday insisted that he was satisfied with the work of Franck Ribery, despite the French winger having asked for more freedom on the pitch.

Ribery, who had been out for eight weeks with an ankle injury, scored a brace in Bayern's 3-0 victory over Swiss side Basel in their final Champions League group game on Wednesday.

It was his first goal for the club since he scored in the first round of the German Cup in August.

Napoli and Roma."

That's something Milan failed to do in Wednesday's meaningless Champions League game against Ajax.

Milan were already guaranteed second place in the group and a spot in the last 16 while Ajax were playing for a place in the Europa League.

The Dutch side consequently ran out 2-0 winners at the San Siro and Milan were much criticised for an insipid display.

"We have to produce a different type of performance (against Bologna), me included," said Allegri.

"We have to show a different image. It's a defect of Italian teams that they behave in this way when playing matches that count for little."

"I really hope that we've learnt the lesson, I hope that in that one night we realised everything that we shouldn't do and that we got it out of our system against Ajax."

One player who came in for particular criticism against Ajax was Ronaldinho, making a rare start, but Allegri said it's not fair to blame him.

"He's been neither rejected nor sent away. It's normal that when the team runs and plays well that he also manages to do so."

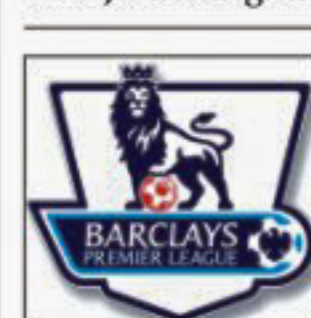
"And vice versa when the team plays badly he feels it too."

Milan lost French midfielder Mathieu Flamini and Brazil centre-back Thiago Silva to injury during that match against Ajax and both are due to be out until 2011 but Allegri said he wouldn't be rushed into knee-jerk acquisitions in January.

"If it's necessary we'll buy someone in attack although our primary objective is to get Pato fit again."

Houllier says sorry

AFP, Birmingham



Gerard Houllier has apologised to Aston Villa's fans after triggering outrage with his behaviour at former club Liverpool earlier this week.

Houllier sparked uproar following Villa's 3-0 loss to the Reds at Anfield on Monday after remarking that "if I was going to lose 3-0 to anyone, it would be Liverpool as I like Liverpool".

The comments were seized upon by Houllier's critics as evidence that the Frenchman, who managed Liverpool between 1998 and 2004, was not fully committed to his new assignment at Villa.

Houllier also angered Villa's supporters by touching the iconic "This Is Anfield" sign above the tunnel en route to the pitch and appearing to ignore the travelling fans at the final whistle whilst waving to Liverpool's fans.

However Houllier moved to dampen down the controversy on Friday ahead of Villa's midlands derby with West Bromwich Albion.

Allegri aims at summit

AFP, Rome



AC Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri has set his team a challenge: to finish the year at the top of Serie A.

Milan are already at the summit and three points clear of Lazio with just two games to go before the Christmas break.

In fact, should Milan earn just one point over those last two games, then the Romans would be the only team capable of over-taking them.

Having won nine of their last 11 league games, following just one win in their first four, Milan have taken control of the scudetto race and even sit 10 points clear of champions and arch rivals Inter Milan.

And that's a position Allegri wants his team to get used to.

"It won't be easy but if we manage to finish the year on top that would be much better," he said ahead of Sunday's trip to Bologna.

"I expect two complicated matches. We're playing Bologna, who are doing amazing things, and at a strange hour (12.30 local time)."

"They're an aggressive team and they have (striker) Marco Di Vaio, we'll have to play with great intensity."

"And then Saturday 18 there's Roma, a team in direct competition for the title."

But to stay at the top in the long term, Allegri says his team must avoid complacency.

"There's still a long way to go but we have to keep playing as we have done so far," he added.

"And we have to keep the tension high, not just towards Juventus and Lazio but also Inter,

Testing times start

AFP, London



Carlo Ancelotti insists Chelsea will use Sunday's crucial London derby at Tottenham to show they can emerge unscathed from the woeful run that threatens to ruin their defence of the Premier League title.

Ancelotti has presided over the worst run of results since Blues owner Roman Abramovich bought the club in 2003 and Chelsea are in danger of being cast adrift in the title race unless they can end that dismal sequence of four defeats in eight matches.

The champions have slipped to third place and trail leaders Arsenal by two points going into a three-game stretch that Ancelotti admits will define their season.

After the trip to in-form Tottenham, the Blues host Manchester United and then take on Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium.

That would be a testing sequence at any time, let alone during Chelsea's current crisis, yet Ancelotti takes heart from the way he survived a similar run during his time at AC Milan.

"I had this difficult moment in 2003," Ancelotti said. "We didn't start well, we lost the top of the table, the fight for the title. But I managed to maintain my job and we won the Champions League."

"A bad moment is the same in Italy or England. I know how to manage my team."

From the brutal dismissal of his assistant Ray Wilkins, Frank Lampard's long spell on the sidelines due to injury, Didier Drogba going through a barren run in front of goal and John Terry and his defenders struggling to keep cleansheets, it must seem to Ancelotti that he has been beset by a new problem every day.

And, despite his claims that he still has Abramovich's complete support, Ancelotti must be aware that more poor results will leave his job under threat given his employer's habit of sacking managers at a moment's notice.

Publicly at least, Ancelotti shows few signs of

being affected by the pressure and he cut a relaxed figure as he called on his squad to show they have the character to fight through their problems and get back on track.

"At this moment, experience, personality and character are the most important qualities. Everyone can do more to help the team to move on, not just the most important players," Ancelotti said.

"At this moment you die or you improve your relationships and show character. That is what happened last year after we lost to Inter Milan in the Champions League."

"We could have had a bad season but we improved our relationships. After that we were better as a team."

"It is the little details that can change this moment. We have to search and work on it and not wait for it to arrive from heaven."

While Ancelotti tries to restore Chelsea's equilibrium, his Tottenham counterpart Harry Redknapp is savouring the best season of his life.

Redknapp has assembled a squad good enough to qualify for the last 16 of the Champions League as group winners ahead of holders Inter Milan and his team's brand of attacking football makes them a daunting proposition for any opponent, as well as earning him a place on the English FA's list of long-term replacements for Fabio Capello.

Although Redknapp will be without influential Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart due to a hamstring injury, the confidence surging through Spurs at present is perfectly summed up by Heurleho Gomes' assessment of the fixture.

Brazilian goalkeeper Gomes is convinced Spurs, who are on a seven-game unbeaten run, can repeat last season's 2-1 win over the Blues and he said: "I think we can do it again against them."

"We need to press them - like we did last season. I think they are inconsistent at the moment but we need to be careful against them. They are still a great side."

Platini moots Jan WC



AFP, Prague

UEFA president Michel Platini on Friday called for a debate on whether the 2022 World Cup in Qatar could take place in January, to spare players from soaring summer temperatures in the country.

"There are questions that must form part of a global reflection," said Platini, at the end of a two-day UEFA executive committee meeting here.

"We have lots to discuss in the months and years ahead. Because if we have a World Cup in January, there are lots of things that will have to be changed in the calendar."

The idea of hosting the 2022 World Cup in January was recently mooted by former Germany captain and coach Franz Beckenbauer, who is a member of world governing body FIFA's executive committee.

"I agree, and why not?" said Platini on Friday, adding that it would be "easier" for players from around the world to play matches in the Gulf country in January rather than in June.

"But in the month of January, there are matches in lots of countries. Should we play football or stop?" the Frenchman asked.

Another question linked to the idea of organising the World Cup in January is the issue of how much time the players would need to recover afterwards -- raising the possibility that domestic leagues would not resume until March.

"In the United States, the temperature in cities like Dallas was 45 degrees (Celsius) during the 1994 World Cup and nobody criticised the United States about anything," said Platini.

The chief of UEFA, European football's governing body, also took the opportunity to celebrate FIFA's decision to award the 2018 and 2022 World Cups to two countries -- Russia and Qatar -- who have never hosted it before.

"If we're talking about global football development, which is the goal of organisations like FIFA, or the development of European football, which is the goal of UEFA, it's a great thing," said Platini.

"Anyone could have organised the World Cup (in 2018 and 2022), all the candidates were great, but FIFA perhaps chose to open things up."

Hanover go second

REUTERS, Berlin



Didier Ya Konan struck twice to steer Hanover 96 to a 2-1 win over VfB Stuttgart and into second place in the Bundesliga on Friday as their opponents sunk deeper into trouble.

The Ivorian notched his ninth goal of the season only two minutes after Georg Niedermeier had levelled for troubled Stuttgart in the 74th minute for Hanover's fifth straight win.

Ya Konan had also given them a deserved 35th minute lead after Hanover missed several good chances in the early stages.

The result lifted Hanover, who have already recorded one more victory than in the whole of last season, to a club record 31 points from 16 games, one more than third-placed Mainz 05, who take on Schalke 04 on Sunday.

"It is the 31 points that matter and not the second place," said Hanover coach Mirko Slomka.

"To be able to turn the game after the equaliser was very good. The team believes in itself, it is tied together and not affected by anything from the outside," he said.

Stuttgart, whose coach Jens Keller was already under immense pressure before the game, are anchored in 16th place in the 18-team table with just 12 points.

Keller had taken over from Swiss Christian Gross in October but has failed to turn things with Stuttgart bosses saying this week they would meet on Saturday to discuss the situation.

Former Hamburg SV coach Bruno Labbadia has been reported to be in talks with Stuttgart.

"I am deeply disappointed by the team, especially in the first half," said Keller, whose team, however, top their Europa League group.

"If we play like we played today there is no need to look higher up the table. We have to stop thinking we are better than our place in the standings."

"As for my position, this is not something I think about. I believe I am doing a good job but I cannot influence other things," he said.



Hanover striker Didier Ya Konan celebrates one of his two goals with teammates during their Bundesliga encounter against Stuttgart in Hanover on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

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Bangladesh v Zimbabwe
Fifth one-day international
Live from 9:00am

ESPN
English Premiership
Bolton v Blackburn
Live from 7:25pm
Tottenham v Chelsea
Live from 9:55pm

TEN Sports
Serie A
Juventus v Lazio
Live from 1:40am (Monday)
Primera Liga
Zaragoza v Real Madrid
From 4:00am (Monday)