



Brazilian legend Pele poses with his six national championship medals during a ceremony in Rio de Janeiro on Wednesday. Pele became the most honoured Brazilian footballer after an old championship was validated to his former club Santos. PHOTO: AFP

Coaches want winter break

AFP, London



Manchester City boss Roberto Mancini added his voice to calls for the English Premier League to follow their European counterparts and introduce a winter break.

With Spain, Italy and Germany enjoying a Christmas and New Year rest, English clubs face the prospect of four games in a 10-day period which could play a major role in the destination of the title.

Sunday's Boxing Day programme marks the start of the gruelling schedule.

"In England, Boxing Day is very important game," said Mancini. "But maybe English players need a rest sometimes."

"It might not be Boxing Day but maybe in January you could have a week off for all the players. That would be a good opportunity for them."

Mancini's fellow Italian Roberto Di Matteo, who coaches West Brom, has backed the Eastlands manager.

"We're not living in the Middle East or Africa. We live in England, in Northern Europe, so let's have a winter break," said Di Matteo.

"Every year it snows, the pitches are frozen, training pitches are frozen, it's not safe for supporters, so let's have a break."

"This weather we are having now shouldn't be out of the blue because geographically it's where we are and the chances of it happening are high."

"In March we have two games. Can we not put another game in there, even though it's an international break?"

"Why not put one or two at the end of May when the pitches are beautiful and people will flock to the stadium."

"I know of the Boxing Day tradition but you will still get packed stadia later in the year

because it's a better climate and people will enjoy it more."

Meanwhile, Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti slammed the Premier League fixture planners as his side prepare to play twice in three days over Christmas.

Ancelotti's team, who trail leaders Manchester United by three points, will play crucial clash against title rivals Arsenal on Monday before a home match against Bolton two days later and the Italian is unhappy with the champions' workload.

Bolton host West Bromwich Albion on December 26 as part of the traditional Boxing Day schedule, while Chelsea have to wait another 24 hours before their fixture at Arsenal as the game is being shown live on television in England.

That means Owen Coyle's players will have an extra day to ease their aching limbs before travelling to Stamford Bridge to face the Blues and Ancelotti believes that gives Bolton a significant advantage.

"I want to say something about the Bolton game because we won't have the possibility to recover," Ancelotti told reporters on Thursday.

"We'll have two days, compared to Bolton who, unfortunately, play on the 26th. We play on the 27th. That's not a good thing, to have one day less to recover. I'm not happy about that."

However, tough-as-nails Wolves manager Mick McCarthy believes players and managers should "just get on with it" and stop whinging.

He said: "I've never wanted a winter break at all. Fans love going to a game on Boxing Day and I've done it all my life as a player and manager."

"I've trained Christmas Day and you just get on with it."

"I remember when I was at Sunderland a few years ago and over 40,000 turned up on Boxing Day against Leeds."

"It was like a full house, it was amazing - and that was in the Championship."

Modric going nowhere

Football

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Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp insists there is no possibility of Chelsea signing Luka Modric.

Dinamo Zagreb vice-president Zdravko Mamic, who is close to the player, claimed this week that he had been for lunch with Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti and that Modric is "top of his list" of targets.

However, Redknapp has now said there is no prospect of the player leaving White Hart Lane.

"He is a fantastic player," he said. "If we start selling such a player like that then we might as well all go home."

"He is a different class and is not going anywhere. Not a chance. He (Ancelotti) might have his eye on him but he is not going to get him for sure."

"He is a pleasure to work with. He is a fantastic player. We are building a team here, not dismantling one."

Robbie Keane, though, looks certain to move on amid reported interest from Aston Villa, Birmingham and West Ham.

"Robbie would like to move and he wants to play," Redknapp said. "He is a boy who has played all his career. He is not used to not playing."

"He is still a top player and would grace most clubs. It's just that he has been unfortunate with Rafa (van der Vaart) coming in and I've been playing one up with him. I have Defoe, Crouch, Pavlyuchenko and Robbie so it's been difficult getting him in the team."

"I haven't heard anything about any offers for him though."

Ancelotti taunts Arsenal

AFP, Cobham



Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti has taunted title rivals Arsenal by insisting the Gunners are scared of facing Didier Drogba.

Ancelotti is convinced Arsene Wenger's defenders won't relish the prospect of their latest meeting with Drogba when the champions travel to the Emirates Stadium for a crucial London derby on December 27.

Drogba has now scored an amazing 13 goals in 13 matches against Arsenal after his fine strike inspired Chelsea's 2-0 win over Wenger's team earlier this season.

After struggling for several weeks due to malaria, Drogba finally showed something like his best form in Chelsea's 1-1 draw at Tottenham and Ancelotti believes the Ivory Coast striker will once again have a key role to play at Arsenal next week.

"I think they are a little bit afraid of the performance of Drogba because he has done very well against them," Ancelotti said.

"This is not the reason that will decide the game but if Drogba plays at his best, we'll have more opportunity to win."

Ancelotti's men will make the short trip across London to face Arsenal in confident mood despite a run of five

league games without a win.

Chelsea have enjoyed some impressive results against the Gunners in recent years and, although the hosts can boast many attacking talents, Ancelotti expects his team to take advantage of weaknesses in the Arsenal defence.

"Every game has its own story," Ancelotti said. "Arsenal have fantastic ability and are able to play fantastic football. Maybe they concede something defensively, so we have to use our ability to find the right space to create difficulty in their defensive line."

"It is an important game obviously. Both teams are involved in the fight for the title and either can win this game."

"It will be an exciting game. I'm happy to play this game because we have moved on after our bad moment."

Ancelotti's players will have gone 15 days without a game by the time they face Arsenal following the cancellation of last weekend's meeting with Manchester United.

That has given Ancelotti time for some valuable extra training with his squad. Even more importantly, Frank Lampard has been able to hone his fitness after three months out of action due to injury.

The England midfielder, who had hernia surgery and then a groin problem, should start against Arsenal and Ancelotti said: "The advantage was we trained well

and improved our condition. We used this time well. It was a good time for us and now we are ready to play."

"The important thing is the players are fit and able to play. Lampard will be excited to play after a long time out. He can give fantastic support to the team with his performances."

"We had a problem with a lot of injuries. For this reason we had a bad moment."

"When you are not in a good moment it is difficult to put young players in because we don't want to put responsibility on their shoulders."

"Now it is different because we have a lot of players in good condition. We can play this game at our best."

Ancelotti, who will give his players the day off on Christmas Day, knows Chelsea can ill-afford to drop more points over the busy festive period after slipping three points behind leaders Manchester United, who also have a game in hand on the Blues.

"Manchester United did not lose a game this season. They have obtained results continuously. We don't want this gap to increase," Ancelotti said.

"Arsenal, Man City and Tottenham also have the opportunity and skill to fight for the title until the end. It will be a race with balance because a lot of teams are capable of winning the title."

Drogba demands end to violence

Football

AFP, Paris

Ivory Coast football star Didier Drogba demanded an end to the political violence in the strife-torn African state on Thursday and for the international community to be sympathetic to the country's latest troubles.

Drogba, who is the Ivory Coast's national captain, expressed his fears over the deadly stand-off between Laurent Gbagbo and rival Alassane Ouattara, following last month's presidential election.

In a statement, where he speaks for the national team, Chelsea star Drogba appealed for democracy to triumph.

"We are particularly affected by the events in Ivory Coast and call for reason to end all the violence," the footballer said in a statement sent to AFP.

"We are making this appeal to avoid new sacrifices. The people of the Ivory Coast deserve to see democracy triumphing. This serious political crisis has to end."

"We ask each of you, every official, every soldier, every person to turn their backs on all violence and pave the way for a restoration of the democracy that our country is waiting for."

Drogba was speaking as the United Nations demanded a halt to the "atrocities" triggered by the crisis that have left 173 dead, and accused Laurent Gbagbo's troops of harassing its peacekeepers.

In a second blow to Gbagbo's increasingly isolated regime, the Central Bank of West African States said only Ouattara's globally recognised government could manage the country's accounts there.

Chelsea-MU tie set for March 1

AFP, London

Chelsea and Manchester United's Premier League heavyweight showdown has been tentatively rescheduled for Tuesday, March 1 after being postponed due to a frozen pitch at Stamford Bridge last Sunday.

The new date is subject to neither team being still involved in FA Cup fifth-round replay action.

If the league title rivals are out of the competition, they could instead face each other on a Cup weekend.

Besiktas sign Almeida

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish football giants Besiktas signed their second Portuguese international this week when on Friday they secured the services of striker Hugo Almeida from Bundesliga side Werder Bremen for 2 million euros.

The 26-year-old - scorer of 12 goals in his 33 international appearances - signed a three year contract with Besiktas after his wage demands were refused by the Werder Bremen board.

Almeida, who had been at Werder since 2006, joins experienced compatriot Simao at the 13-time Turkish champions, who are way off the pace in the Turkish championship this season lying fifth, 14 points adrift of leaders Bursaspor after 17 matches.

Leonardo tight-lipped

Football

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Leonardo has refused to be drawn on speculation he is set to replace Rafael Benitez as Inter Milan boss following the Spaniard's departure.

Inter confirmed Benitez's exit after just six months in charge at the San Siro and former AC Milan boss Leonardo has been widely tipped as the man to replace Benitez, despite his long association with the Nerazzurri's city rivals.

Inter president Massimo Moratti has denied he has made contact with any possible replacement, while Leonardo has claimed he had not spoken to anyone about the job.

"I know less than you," he told Sky Sport 24. "The only thing that I can say now is merry Christmas to you."

Benitez's departure had been expected following five days of speculation after he appeared to issue an ultimatum to Moratti to sack him or back him in the transfer market.

Benitez made the comments following a poor start to the season that finds Inter 13 points adrift of leaders Milan in seventh place.

Moratti admitted, in confirming Benitez's sacking that he had been angered by the comments, but was tight-lipped about a potential replacement, telling ANSA: "All the names that circulate about the next Inter coach are interesting."

Asked if it would be Leonardo, he told reporters: "We'll see, I will tell you when we decide. All the people we have in mind are experienced, brave and intelligent. However, when the time comes we'll tell."

Brazilian Leonardo, 41, had two spells at Milan as a player and also served as technical director before taking over the coaching reins last season. He lasted just one season, however, after he was sacked after guiding the Rossoneri to third place in Serie A.

Milan vice president Adriano Galliani admitted it would be strange to see a player he helped bring to the club from Paris St Germain in 1997 on the bench of their rivals.

"I do not know what my reaction would be," he said. "He certainly has an important history with Milan. He made a career with AC Milan; first as a player, then as a coach and a manager."

"Last year this went wrong, but without all of the injuries they could have been better. I was sorry to see him go."

'We need to step up'

AFP, London



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has called on his players to end their poor run of results against the Premier League's best teams as they prepare to face Chelsea next

week. Wenger's men have suffered five straight defeats to the Blues in recent games, leaking 13 goals in the process.

Fresh doubts about Arsenal's ability to mix it with the best sides were raised last week after a 1-0 loss to Manchester United at Old Trafford.

Wenger insisted that while he was not concerned by Arsenal's form in crunch matches, it was time for the Gunners to step up.

"Of course we have a point to prove given our record against the big teams," Wenger said

Thursday. "You have to show that you are up to the level expected from you in these games."

"We don't really think about the record because the statistics are history and every game is a new start. Every player has lost a game before he has won one. One day, he wins. We have to make sure for us that day is on Monday."

Wenger believes all that is preventing his team from putting together a serious title challenge is confidence.

"It's good to feel that there is no difference between both teams but it's better to beat them and we are conscious that we have to add something that is a cold, determined attitude and belief that was missing a little bit."

"Having said that, at Chelsea and Man United this season, we conceded first to unbelievable goals so it's important that we are tight defensively against them," Wenger said.

Parma, Genoa swap players

AFP, Rome

Genoa paid seven million euros on Thursday for Parma defender Luca Antonelli and striker Alberto Paloschi with Raffaele Palladino and Francesco Modesto heading in the opposite direction, the Ansa news agency reported.

The transfers will become official on January 3, the opening day of the winter transfer window.

Demichelis moving to Malaga

REUTERS, Berlin

Argentine defender Martin Demichelis will go on loan to Spanish club Malaga from Germany's Bayern Munich for six months with an option to extend, he told Bild newspaper on Friday.

Bild reported that Malaga would take over Demichelis' salary and pay a 3 million euros transfer fee at the end of the season if the club stays in Spain's top division.

Demichelis, who played in the World Cup in South Africa, lost his starting spot this season and has been keen on a move to get regular playing time.

"Yes, it's a done deal," said the 30-year-old. "I've already said goodbye ... in the dressing room. It was seven unforgettable years."

Demichelis joined Bayern in 2003 and formed a successful central defensive partnership with Belgian Daniel van Buyten but both have performed below expectations over the past 18 months.



Barcelona's latest signing Dutch forward Ibrahim Afellay gives the thumbs up during his official presentation at Nou Camp yesterday. PHOTO: AFP