

# MU aim to widen gap Inter appoint Leonardo

AFP, London



Manchester United hope to strike a major Boxing Day blow as the Premier League title race enters its most hectic period of the season on Sunday.

United head into the latest round of fixtures at the top of the table with Sir Alex Ferguson's men, who have a game in hand, two points clear of Arsenal and Manchester City, with champions Chelsea a further point adrift in fourth place.

United have yet to lose in the league this season, having won nine and drawn seven of their 16 matches.

They welcome a Sunderland side managed by former United captain Steve Bruce to Old Trafford on Sunday knowing the Black Cats have already won at Chelsea this term.

"Someone asked me 'are you surprised to be top of the league?'," said Ferguson. "I'm only surprised that people are surprised all the top teams are dropping points."

"They don't recognise how tough the league is now."

Victory for United would enable them to go five points in front of Arsenal before the Gunners face Chelsea, who have gone five games without a win, in an all-London clash on Monday.

Blues manager Carlo Ancelotti would love nothing more than for his side to extend Arsenal's winless run against Chelsea and United to 12 matches in total.

"Manchester United are having fantastic results because they've not lost a game, they're continuously obtaining results," said Ancelotti. "We don't want that gap to widen. So it's important to obtain an important result in this

game. We have to do our best to take three points against Arsenal, and the same against Bolton and Aston Villa."

Postponements brought about by the cold snap in Britain have left Chelsea without a game for more than two weeks but striker Didier Drogba will certainly fancy his chances on Monday after scoring 13 goals in 13 games against Arsenal.

"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."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger made no attempt to disguise the enormity of the clash, saying: "Of course this is a must-win game."

"We have mixed feelings because we came out of both games against Chelsea and Man United this season thinking we could have won and that there wasn't a difference between the teams."

Another London derby could have a key bearing on the relegation race with Fulham, above the drop zone on goal difference alone, facing bottom of the table West Ham -- currently three points behind the Cottagers.

Fulham manager Mark Hughes played down suggestions defeat by the Hammers would lead to the sack.

"There will be speculation, there always is," Hughes said. "There is nothing I can do about it."

"I don't particularly feel under pressure. I've been through this before," the former Blackburn and Manchester City boss added.

Wolves face Wigan in a relegation zone dogfight while, at the top of the table, Manchester City will look to maintain their title bid away to Newcastle.

## Football

AFP, Rome

Brazilian coach Leonardo was on Friday named as the new boss of European and Italian champions Inter Milan, taking over from the sacked Rafael Benitez.

"Leonardo has just signed a contract with Inter until June 30, 2012," said a statement on the club's official website.

"Everybody at Inter wishes to welcome Leonardo. He will take charge from December 29 when training resumes. The club will make an announcement over the next few days regarding his official presentation."

"We are sure that with his class, experience and winning mentality the club and the team can achieve the results that everyone at Inter and all the Inter fans want to see."

The 41-year-old Leonardo, who played in Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning squad and speaks five languages, spent a season in charge at AC Milan from 2009-2010 as successor to Chelsea-bound Carlo Ancelotti.

Inter sacked Benitez - who had only been in charge since the summer when he succeeded Jose Mourinho - on Thursday just days after the former Liverpool boss had guided them to the World Cup title.

Defending league champions Inter are currently seventh in Serie A, 13 points adrift of their bitter city rivals although they do have two games in hand.

Leonardo spent 12 years at AC Milan - four as a player, seven as part of the back-



LEONARDO

room staff and one as coach when he took the club to third place in the championship before leaving in the aftermath of a bitter fall-out with owner Silvio Berlusconi.

As well as attempting to boost Inter's league position, Leonardo also has a last-16 Champions League date against Bayern Munich on February 23 and March 15 in a repeat of last season's final.

Inter captain Javier Zanetti said the appointment

of Leonardo was the right move.

"I know Leonardo well. He is a very intelligent person, someone who is always on the ball," said Zanetti.

"He has a lot to give as a coach thanks to the experiences he gathered as a player and as a man."

Media reports in Italy suggested that Leonardo, the fifth man to have coached

both Milan clubs, will be paid around 2.5 million euros a

year.

Benitez, who won the Champions League with Liverpool in 2005, had only been in the Inter post since July after leaving Anfield by mutual consent.

But he failed to convince the Inter fans that he could repeat the success of Mourinho who secured the domestic double and the Champions League trophy last season.

Benitez had looked to

have ensured he would stay in the post with Saturday's 3-0 World Club Cup final win over Tout Puissant Mazembe in Abu Dhabi and was warmly embraced by Inter president Massimo Moratti.

However, the 50-year-old used the post-match press conference to attack the Inter board over transfer policy, an outburst which eventually persuaded Moratti to seek a new man for the San Siro hotseat.

# Maradona threatens to sue Grondona

## Football

AGENCIES, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona says he is taking the president of the Argentine Football Association to court, accusing Julio Grondona of spreading false information about his problems with drugs and alcohol.

Maradona said he has not had drugs or alcohol for six years in Friday's edition of the Clarin newspaper. Grondona implied in a television interview this week that Maradona was using again.

"There are reasons for what happens (with Maradona) and everybody knows them," Grondona said.

Maradona insisted on Friday that he is now free of drug and alcohol problems.

"I haven't taken anything for six years, not even a glass of wine."

Maradona said he has contacted his lawyers about filing the case, though it was not clear when that might happen.

He has been involved in a spat with the 79-year-old Grondona since July, when Maradona's contract as national coach was not renewed. Grondona offered to keep him on, but asked Maradona to fire some of his

assistants. Maradona refused and was dismissed. Grondona, who was also a FIFA vice president, hired Maradona in 2008.

Maradona has repeatedly accused Grondona of "betrayal" and has been just as angry with Carlos Bilardo, the general manager of the

"I am not senile, I am not an informer and I never will be," said the federation chief.

"One day he (Maradona) loves you, the next he hates you. There are reasons for this, we all know what they are," added Grondona, alluding to Maradona's long-time battle with drugs.



DIEGO MARADONA



JULIO GRONDONA

Argentina team and Maradona's coach on the World Cup-winning team in 1986.

In an interview on Monday, Maradona accused Grondona of being senile -- calling him "gaga" in Spanish -- and suggested he was receiving treatments several times a year at an expensive Swiss clinic.

On Thursday, the 79-year-old Grondona hit back at Maradona for describing him as "senile".

Maradona has been unable to find work since being released by Grondona. Months after being let go he suggested he might replace his assistants. By that time it was too late, with Sergio Batista taking over the national team.

He has also lobbied to coach other clubs and this week criticized the choice of Julio Cesar Falcioni as the new coach of Boca Juniors, saying he should have been given the job at his old club.

# Hughes doesn't fear axe

AFP, London



Fulham manager Mark Hughes insisted on Friday that he has no fears of the axe falling should his struggling side lose to rock-bottom West Ham on Sunday.

Fulham are just one place above the Premier League relegation zone but Hughes, the former Manchester City and Wales manager, said that chairman Mohamed Al Fayed has not discussed the team's plight.

"I haven't spoken to the chairman this week. It hasn't been discussed with me," said Hughes, who was appointed in July.

"We have no apprehension about the games ahead of us. There will be speculation, there always is. There is nothing I can do about it."

"I don't particularly feel under pressure. I've been through this before."

"People at the club understand the difficulties we have had this year and that the work we do is good work."

"At some point in the future we will turn our results into positive results and begin moving up the table."

"All I can do is make sure the team is in the best possible shape to take on top-quality opposition. It's very obvious where we are and the issues we have within the team."

"We aren't scoring enough goals due to the personnel missing. It's about making sure we are still working hard and doing the right things and wait for something to change."

"That has been the case in recent weeks where we needed a break to get our noses in front."

# Hodgson has faith in Torres

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Roy Hodgson believes key striker Fernando Torres will rediscover his deadly accuracy in front of goal, starting with Sunday's trip to Blackpool.

The Spanish World Cup winner has scored just five Premier League goals this season and wasted a golden chance in Liverpool's 3-1 loss at Newcastle two weeks ago in the team's last away game.

But Hodgson insists Torres is not struggling.

"The case all through the season is we have not been very lucky in front of goal - I don't think our goal return is not a fair measure of what we have created," said the manager.

"We have had our chances, we have created the danger but we have not converted as many of those occasions as we should have done and it is something we have worked on."

"The players are very aware of it because we do have goalscorers in the team and have one of Europe's best in Fernando Torres."

"He does not need reminding of when he misses a goal chance because I bet he can remember every chance he has missed over the last three to four months because they stay with people."

"The important thing is your players keep getting in the right positions and if we can keep getting Fernando into areas where he can score goals he will score goals."

# Lukaku dreams of Real

SOCCENET

Belgian starlet Romelu Lukaku has claimed that it would be a 'dream' to play at Real Madrid.

Lukaku, 17, is attracting a huge amount of interest from Europe with the likes of Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham among those looking to secure his signature. But the young striker has one ambition above all others and says he dreams of playing for Real Madrid.

"Of course, it's a dream to play at the Bernabeu. It's a top stadium," he said. "That Jose Mourinho is the coach of Real Madrid is an extra motivation. For a coach like Mourinho, I'd want to learn as much as I possibly can."

# Afellay seals Barca deal

## Football

AFP, Madrid

Dutch international Ibrahim Afellay completed his transfer to Barcelona from PSV Eindhoven on Friday by signing a four and a half year contract with the reigning Spanish champions.

"When I was a kid, I wanted to play for Barca, it was a dream. We all know that it is the best place to play football and when I heard about their interest I didn't think twice," he said.

The 24-year-old midfielder, who came through the ranks at PSV Eindhoven and whose family are from Morocco, has 29 caps

for his country and was a member of the squad which reached the World Cup final.

Barcelona paid PSV three million euros (3.9 million dollars) for Afellay and his contract includes a buyout clause worth 100 million euros, the club said in a statement posted on its website.

The club's sporting director, Andoni Zubizarreta, praised Afellay's versatility and maturity and said he would be the only player bought during the January transfer window.

"We have absolutely no plans to sign anybody else," he said during the player's presentation.

"He was a player who was about to finish his contract and with the squad we have he looks like somebody who can add something."

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