



Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo (R), left-back Marcelo (C) and defender Pepe take part in a training session at Madrid sport city yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

It's all mind games

Manchester United's Darren Fletcher has insisted talk with title challengers Manchester City that the Premier League is the Red Devils to lose as nothing more than "kidology".

Appropriately enough, the comment was made by Manchester City assistant manager Brian Kidd, once deputy to United manager Sir Alex Ferguson, who as a striker made his name at Old Trafford before also playing for City.

United, chasing a record-breaking 19th English title, head into the New Year on top of the Premier League table but on goal difference alone, although they do have two games in hand over City.

"It is just a bit of kidology," said Scotland captain Fletcher ahead of United's trip to West Bromwich Albion on Saturday.

"It is still early stages and a lot of teams will feel they are capable of winning the league. We are one of them."

"We are in a good position. We are top of the league with games in hand."

London trio Arsenal, Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur are all close behind, with even fifth-placed Spurs, five points behind the Manchester duo, still in title contention.

City were last crowned champions of England in 1968 -- the same year a young Kidd scored for United as they beat Benfica 4-1 at Wembley to become the first English club to lift the European Cup.

But backed by the vast wealth of Sheikh Mansour, their Abu Dhabi-based owner, the Eastlands club enter 2011 with a real

shot at Premier League glory.

"Manchester City are realistic title challengers," Fletcher said. "They are winning games and look solid defensively."

United, who yet again this term dropped points late on in a 1-1 draw away to Birmingham in midweek, will look to return to winning ways against a Baggies side beaten 3-1 by Blackburn last time out.

City face a promoted Blackpool team who have provided one of the more heart-warming stories in English football this year by rising to eighth in the top-flight despite a budget that would barely cover a week's wages for City's expensively assembled squad.

Champions Chelsea will look to build on a 1-0 win over Bolton that ended a six-game winless streak in the league when they welcome struggling Aston Villa to Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

Blues boss Carlo Ancelotti believes such is the competitive nature of the title race there will be more twists and turns yet and the Italian has urged his side not to become too concerned by the four-point advantage United have over his men.

Arsenal, who dropped points in a 2-2 draw with Wigan, are away to Birmingham while Tottenham face Fulham in a London derby.

Bolton will look to heap fresh embarrassment upon a Liverpool side beaten 1-0 by relegation-threatened Wolves when they make the short journey to Anfield on Saturday.

Wolves, who swapped places with basement club West Ham in midweek, travel to Upton Park to face the Hammers in a potential relegation 'six-pointer'.

FIXTURES
(1500GMT unless stated):

Saturday
Birmingham v Arsenal (1730GMT),
Liverpool v Bolton, Man City v
Blackpool, Stoke v Everton, Sunderland
v Blackburn, Tottenham v Fulham, West
Brom v Man Utd (1245GMT),
West Ham v Wolves

Sunday
Chelsea v Aston Villa (1330GMT),

Gudjohnsen can leave

AFP, London



Former Barcelona and Chelsea forward Eidur Gudjohnsen will be allowed to leave Stoke City during the January transfer window if the Premier League club receives a suitable offer.

Gudjohnsen only joined Stoke from Monaco in pre-season but the Iceland international has failed to make any impact at the Britannia Stadium.

After just five appearances during the first half of the season, Gudjohnsen is growing frustrated and Stoke boss Tony Pulis admits he would let the 32-year-old go for the right price.

"If there's a deal you think is right for the club and the player thinks is right for him, then you get the deal done," Pulis said on Friday.

No clear favourites

Football

AFP, Doha

Australia, Japan and South Korea head into the Asian Cup as clear favourites in a tournament that will test Qatar's ability to host a major event after being controversially awarded the 2022 World Cup.

The three-week football festival, featuring the region's top 16 teams, kicks off on January 7 when the hosts face Uzbekistan ahead of the final on January 29.

How the tiny Gulf emirate fares in staging such a high-profile tournament will be closely watched after FIFA surprisingly handed it the World Cup ahead of more fancied bids from Australia, Japan, South Korea and the United States.

While 16 teams take part, the heavy-weight trio of Australia, Japan and South Korea are expected to dominate as they look to build on solid showings at the 2010 World Cup.

But it won't be a three-horse race with Iraq the defending champions and Kuwait coming off a morale-boosting victory at the recent Gulf Cup, while Iran and Saudi Arabia can never be written off.

Australia's squad of European-based

stars are desperate to make amends for their maiden tournament in 2007 when they struggled.

They are grouped with the Park Ji-Sung-led South Korea, who made the knockout rounds in South Africa.

The Koreans are gunning to land a first Asian title in 51 years, leaving fellow Group C teams Bahrain and India facing an early exit.

Japan also has a strong line-up, with CSKA Moscow midfielder Keisuke Honda chosen to lead the Blue Samurai.

The three-time champions get their campaign underway on January 9 against Jordan. Saudi Arabia and Syria are also in the group and play their opener on the same night.

Qatar and Uzbekistan kick-off the tournament at the Khalifa Stadium, one of five arenas being used, all in the capital Doha.

They are in Group A alongside perennial underachievers China and Kuwait.

Defending champions Iraq are back to try and emulate their finest footballing achievement when they beat Saudi Arabia in the 2007 final.

But it won't be easy with Iran, United Arab Emirates and North Korea awaiting them in Group D.

Freddie seals Celtic deal

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Former Arsenal and West Ham star Freddie Ljungberg has signed for Celtic, the Scottish Premier League (SPL) leaders announced here on Thursday.

The 33-year-old Ljungberg, capped 75 times by Sweden, passed a medical on Thursday and could make his debut for the Glasgow giants in Sunday's Old Firm derby away to bitter rivals Rangers at Ibrox.

"Celtic are delighted to announce the signing of Freddie Ljungberg," said a club statement.

Ljungberg, who has been training with Celtic this week, was at Parkhead on Wednesday to watch the 1-0 win over Motherwell that saw the Hoops go back to the top of the SPL.

Although terms of the deal have not been disclosed, reports in the Scottish press have said Ljungberg has signed until the end of the season with a view to extending his stay if the move proves successful.

Ljungberg, who has spent the last 18 months playing in the United States with Seattle Sounders and Chicago Fire.



ESPN

English Premiership
West Bromwich v Man United
Live at 6:40pm
Liverpool v Bolton
Live from 8:55pm
Birmingham City v Arsenal
Live from 11:25pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership
Tottenham v Fulham



DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League
Arambagh v Rahmatganj
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa

Happy New Year 2011

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