

Deschamps upset at Blanc treatment

AFP, Marseille

Marseille coach Didier Deschamps on Friday expressed support for former France team-mate Laurent Blanc, who is at the centre of the race row that has enveloped French football.

"I'm very sad for Laurent, for what's happening to him," said Deschamps at a press conference.

"We're attacking the man, not the national coach or the educator."

Blanc, currently on holiday in Italy, is under investigation after allegedly expressing support for a quota on the number of dual-nationality players at France's youth training centres.

"Laurent Blanc is there and I hope that he'll stay as long as possible," said Deschamps, who was Blanc's captain when France won the 1998 World Cup.

"There is not the slightest ambiguity about that."

He went on: "There are two enquiries that are under way (one by the French Football Federation, one by the French sports ministry).

"They're there to provide responses and to determine the degrees of responsibility of the different protagonists."

Several of France's 1998 World Cup winners, including Lilian Thuram and Christophe Dugarry, have spoken out about the affair and Deschamps said that each of them had "the right to express themselves, or to keep quiet".



PHOTO: AFP

Porto striker Radamel Falcao celebrates after scoring during their Europa League semifinal clash against Villarreal at the Madrigal on Thursday. Falcao's goal saw him overtake Jürgen Klinsmann's 15-year record for most goals in a European season.

Derby time in Catalunya

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona, fresh from reaching the Champions League final, face a highly-charged derby against Espanyol on Sunday where victory could deliver the Spanish league title.

With four games to go Barcelona have an eight-point lead over Real Madrid, their vanquished opponents in Europe, who go to Sevilla on Saturday.

Barcelona coach Josep Guardiola celebrated with his players on the Nou Camp pitch on Tuesday after reaching the Champions League final, but he now knows he must bring them back down to earth.

Only once the title is wrapped up will the coach let his star-studded side think about facing Manchester United in the final at Wembley on May 28.

"We have to be ready for the league games and hopefully we will have some players back fit," said Guardiola.

"It will be a key game on Sunday and a victory would take us closer to winning the title. The league is our main target as it gives us most credibility."

On the challenge of facing United, Guardiola still allowed himself a peek beyond this weekend and ahead to Wembley

where he played in the 1992 Barcelona team which lifted the club's first ever European Cup.

"Of course it is the new Wembley and so it is not going to be as special going back there. It is a chance for us to show our way of football, to keep hold of the ball and move it around as quickly as possible."

Espanyol have struggled since Christmas and are four points off a European place despite beating rivals Athletic Bilbao last weekend.

It will be hard for embattled Real coach Jose Mourinho to lift his team who play a Sevilla side who have had a late surge to take them up to fifth.

Mourinho also has a potential UEFA sanction hanging over him after his controversial comments following his team's 2-1 defeat to Barcelona in the first leg of their stormy Champions League semi-final.

Sevilla believe they are facing Real at the right time.

"We are in form at the moment. All year we have worked hard but we have lacked consistency and so it would be great to finish the season on a high note," said Sevilla striker Alvaro Negredo.

Valencia and Villarreal continue the battle for third place and Valencia maintain a three-point lead over their local rivals despite having lost their last two matches.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Hercules v Racing Santander, Sporting Gijon v Deportivo La Coruna, Athletic Bilbao v Levante, Getafe v Almeria, Valencia v Real Sociedad, Atletico Madrid v Malaga, Sevilla v Real Madrid
Sunday
Mallorca v Villarreal, Barcelona v

Saturday

Hercules v Racing Santander, Sporting Gijon v Deportivo La Coruna, Athletic Bilbao v Levante, Getafe v Almeria, Valencia v Real Sociedad, Atletico Madrid v Malaga, Sevilla v Real Madrid

Sunday

Mallorca v Villarreal, Barcelona v

'Win will secure title'

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United will go on to secure a record 19th title if they defeat Chelsea in this weekend's Premier League shoot-out, Sir Alex Ferguson said Friday.

Speaking at a press conference ahead of United's showdown with Chelsea on Sunday, Ferguson said he was convinced that a win against the reigning champions would guarantee the title.

United, who lead Chelsea by three points going into the game, would need only a point from their final two matches against Blackburn and Blackpool to seal the title if they win on Sunday.

"Everyone is aware of the magnitude of Sunday's game," said Ferguson. "If we win, we should win the league."

Ferguson will recall his big guns on Sunday however after relying on a second-string XI to dispatch Schalke 04 in the Champions League semi-finals.

"It is a game we are looking forward to. Last Sunday's result (at Arsenal) has certainly brought us an awareness of how important this week's game is," Ferguson said.

"It is one of the reasons why I picked the team I did on Wednesday. I wanted to give us a real chance."

"We will have a fresh team on Sunday and that makes a difference at this time of the season."

"It should be a fantastic game."

All-Portuguese finale

AFP, Paris

Unheralded Sporting Braga edged domestic rivals Benfica 1-0 in a nerve-jangling semi-final second leg on Thursday to set up an all-Portuguese Europa League final with league champions FC Porto.

Braga's success saw the club from northern Portugal advance on away goals after a 2-2 aggregate draw and thwarted neutrals' hopes of a clash between traditional rivals Porto and Benfica in the final in Dublin on May 18.

Domingos Paciencia's side, runners-up to Benfica in last season's Portuguese championship, will be appearing in their first ever European final.

In stark contrast, two-time European champions Porto are bidding to complete a treble, having already sewn up the Portuguese league title and reached the final of the Portuguese Cup on May 22.

Captain Vandinho's goal in the away leg meant Braga went into the game at their Estadio Municipal home needing just one goal to turn the tie around and it duly arrived in the 19th minute.

Static defending allowed Custodio to launch a running jump at Hugo Viana's outswinging left-wing corner and his bullet header put the hosts ahead on away goals.

Right-back Silvio came close to a second goal for Braga on the half-hour, but his low shot from the edge of the box flashed inches wide of the far post.

Benfica did not threaten until three minutes before the break, as Javier Saviola

swept a shot against the right-hand upright from Oscar Cardozo's low centre before Fabio Coentrao slammed the rebound over the bar.

Benfica's best chance of the night also fell to Saviola, but he was unable to convert from inches with 10 minutes remaining after Luisao flicked on a corner at the near post.

There was even more drama to come in the 88th minute, when substitute Alan Kardec's back-post header beat Braga goalkeeper Artur only for Paulao to hack the ball off the line.

"I'm no hero," said Custodio. "We all are heroes. Those who played, those who stayed on the bench, those who stayed in the stands, the fans. We will play to win the final, it's our ambition. We are true warriors."

Colombian striker Radamel Falcao entered the history books as Porto, who are yet to lose a league game this season, completed an emphatic 7-4 aggregate victory over Villarreal despite a 3-2 loss at El Madrigal.

Falcao claimed his 16th goal in this season's tournament, breaking Jürgen Klinsmann's 15-year record for the most European goals in a single season.

Villarreal went into the game trailing 5-1 from the first leg but took a 17th-minute lead when Cani side-footed home following a one-two with Marco Ruben.

Porto equalised five minutes before half-time via a deflected effort from Brazilian forward Hulk, however, and in the 50th minute Falcao claimed his record-breaking goal to put the tie beyond the Spaniards.

Victory would have made Andre Villas Boas's team the first in history to win eight consecutive away games in European competition, but Joan Capdevila drew the

Real now want Altintop

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho has added Bayern Munich's Turkish international Hamit Altintop to his shopping list for the summer transfer window, a Spanish sports daily said Friday.

Mourinho hopes the versatile and powerful 28-year-old will give some strength to the midfield as the club look to rebuild for next season, the AS newspaper said.

Altintop's contract with the German giants ends on June 30 and Real hope his transfer would therefore be "a straightforward operation," it said.

Real are already eyeing another German-based Turkish midfielder, Borussia Dortmund's Nuri Sahin, and are close to reaching a deal with Espanyol of Barcelona to sign Spanish striker Jose Maria Callejon for five million euros, Spanish media said Thursday.

The German-born Altintop joined Bayern from Schalke 04 in 2007 and signed a one-year extension to his contract last year.

Real won the King's Cup with victory of arch-rivals Barcelona last month, but hopes of further silverware this year are all but over.

The club lies second in the Primera Liga, eight points behind Barca, who could secure the league title this weekend.

Milan on the brink

AFP, Rome

AC Milan will be celebrating an 18th Serie A title this weekend if they avoid defeat away to Roma on Saturday.

Milan just need one more point to ensure they win the league and even if they don't get it on Saturday night, they could still be crowned champions on Sunday if Inter Milan fail to beat Fiorentina.

Only a month ago the Serie A title race appeared to be heading for a thrilling three-way finish, with some even speculating that then-inform Udinese could turn it into a four-way battle.

But Milan beat both Inter and Napoli 3-0 at home and neither side recovered from those defeats to mount a serious challenge.

Since a surprise defeat at Palermo seemed to open the door to their rivals in March, Milan have won five in a row.

What's more, star forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic has played in only one of those matches and is due to return to the fold against Roma, who will be without suspended midfield pair Daniele De Rossi and Simone Perrotta.

It's perhaps just as well that Milan have a healthy eight-point lead going into these final three games, because on paper at least they appeared to have the toughest run-in.

Away trips to Roma, who are sixth, and

fifth-placed Udinese sandwich a home clash with Cagliari.

Arriving at this stage with only a couple of points advantage over Inter and/or Napoli would have put the pressure on Milan but now Massimiliano Allegri's team can relax safe in the knowledge that the job is almost done.

And the coach himself admitted as much after last week's victory over Bologna.

"We'll get one point from three games, we hope to do it as soon as possible but we're in good shape," he said.

Once they have secured the title, Milan will start to focus on next season and an improved assault on the Champions League.

Since winning the competition in 2007 they have not made it past the last 16 and vice-president Adriano Galliani has promised some big signings in the summer, although he also said they will have to clear out

somesquad players.

"Due to injuries our squad grew to 31 players this year and it needs to return to 25-26," he said.

"It was an emergency brought on by the injuries.

"If we do win the league after many years of success for the other team in this city (Inter), our transfer dealings will be with the Champions League in mind which, more than ever, will be our priority."

Three-match ban for Jose

Football

AFP, Madrid

UEFA on Friday handed a three-match ban to Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho after he made allegations of favouritism towards bitter rivals and Champions League conquerors Barcelona.

Mourinho, already banned from the touchline for Tuesday's semi-final second leg at Camp Nou, which cemented Real's exit 3-1 on aggregate, will have a further one-match ban suspended for three years.

UEFA's Control and Disciplinary Body found that a string of comments from Mourinho alleging that Barcelona benefited from decisions in their favour at their rivals' expense had constituted "inappropriate statements".

The Portuguese coach, who had been hoping to become the first man ever to coach three teams to the European Cup after previous successes with FC Porto and Inter Milan, was also fined 50,000 euros (\$72,500).

Real defender Pepe, who was red-carded in the first leg, received a one-match ban but UEFA said it would consider this already served as he did not feature in the return leg.

Real furthermore received a 20,000 euro fine for poor conduct by their supporters.

Barcelona reserve goalkeeper Jose Pinto, red-carded in a half-time melee in the first leg, received a three-match ban.



Benfica defender Fabio Coentrao (C) loses his cool after his side crashed out of the Europa League against rivals Braga at the Municipal Stadium in Braga on Thursday.

Ze to leave Hamburg

AFP, Hamburg

Former Brazil international Ze Roberto is to quit Bundesliga outfit Hamburg at the end of the season after they only offered him a one-year deal rather than the two he wanted.

"We would really have liked Ze to wear the Hamburg shirt for another season but he wanted a long-term contract," said Hamburg sporting director Bastian Reinhardt.

Ze Roberto, who turns 37 in July, has made 335 Bundesliga appearances - a record for a foreign player.

SPORTS POLL

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Mohammedan Farashganj
Time: 4:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu
National Stadium
Sk Russell v Ctg Mohammedan
Time: 4:30pm