

Barca snap up Sanchez

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish and European champions Barcelona have reached a deal with Italian club Udinese to buy Chilean striker Alexis Sanchez for 26 million euros, it announced Thursday.

The 22-year-old will sign a five-year contract, the club said in a statement on their website.

"Barcelona and Udinese have reached an agreement on the transfer of Alexis Sanchez. The deal is for five years. The cost of the transfer is 26 million euros," said the statement.

The deal could be worth a total of 37.5 million euros depending on appearances.

Sanchez, who will be the first Chilean to play for the club, will undergo a medical test, sign the contract and be presented on Monday.

Sanchez has played for Udinese since 2008 and last season was voted best player in Serie A, after scoring 12 goals in 31 games.

The player had also been linked with English sides Manchester United and Manchester City, but said last month that he wanted "Barcelona or nothing".

He "has been sought by the best teams in the world. However, he has been strongly committed to playing for Barca," the statement said.

Barca coach Pep Guardiola said this week that his priority for the upcoming season was signing a forward, with Sanchez his top target.

"He is a very young player, can play in three attacking positions, has a lot of intensity in defence, very vertical, unbalancing, and from what I've been told he's a very good guy," he told a news conference on Tuesday.

The signing is the first of the new season for Barca.



Uruguay goalkeeper Fernando Muslera stretches for the ball during a training session in Ezeiza on Friday ahead of their Copa America final against Paraguay on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Tevez still important

AFP, London

Carlos Tevez remains a key player for Manchester City, the Premier League club's boss Roberto Mancini insisted on Friday, despite the Argentine striker seeing his hopes of a transfer to Corinthians in Brazil collapse.

The 27-year-old Tevez, who wants to return to South America to be closer to his wife and two daughters, was stunned when Corinthians pulled out of a £40 million move.

But Mancini said the want away player is still welcome at the club.

"At the moment Carlos is still a City player, like yesterday, like three days ago," Mancini said on Sky Sports News.

"In the future we will see what can happen. But for us Carlos is an important player.

"Carlos wants to leave, wants to come back to Argentina or maybe another country for his family. It is only because of this I think that the club accepted to sell Carlos, because I think that we respect his reasons."

L'pool title contenders

AFP, London

Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney believes a rejuvenated Liverpool can emerge as genuine contenders in this season's Premier League race, reports said Friday.

The England striker, who fired a hat-trick for United this week during their tour of the United States, said that Liverpool's summer transfer activity would leave them better equipped to challenge for the title.

Liverpool have spent nearly £50 million in the close season, acquiring midfielders Jordan Henderson and Stewart Downing as well as Scottish playmaker Charlie Adam from Blackpool.

With manager Kenny Dalglish also preparing further signings, Rooney thinks that the Reds could emerge as title contenders.

"I think they will challenge this time," Rooney was quoted in British media reports as saying.

"They have made some really good signings, British players, and under Kenny Dalglish I'm sure they will be trying harder than they ever have done, fighting to be up there.

"They will think they have a chance of winning the title next season."

Venezuela eye consolation

AFP, Buenos Aires



Heartbroken Venezuela are determined to capture bronze in Saturday's Copa America third place play-off against Peru despite believing they should really be featuring in Sunday's final against Uruguay.

Venezuela's plucky campaign was finally derailed in the semi-finals in a penalty shoot-out by Paraguay after a match where they hit the woodwork three times and had a goal disallowed.

Despite their lingering disappointment at the cruellest of exits, coach Cesar Farias and his men will be fired up to beat Peru, not least as President Hugo Chavez continues to laud them with constant eulogies via Twitter.

"You were great - what an honour," he said Thursday of a showing which left them undefeated, the penalties aside, throughout the tournament which they had opened by holding Brazil to a draw.

"They robbed us of a winner," added Chavez from Cuba, where he is undergoing treatment for cancer, referring to Oswaldo Vizcarrondo's ruled out header for offside.

Chavez has threatened to take the matter to the South American Football Confederation - whose head is Nicolas Leoz - a Paraguayan.

Lady Luck may be backing the Paraguayans - who survived another pen-

alty drama in the quarters to see off holders Brazil, but the Venezuelans want to go out with a bang, says Farias, rallying his side in the face of adversity.

"Look, we've been the away team (in terms of fan numbers) in most of the games and you can factor in the climate too," with the tournament taking place in a chilly Argentinian mid-winter.

The Peru game may end a chapter but not the overall story, adds Farias, promising more to come regardless of Saturday's outcome.

"If we can become strong at home then we will have many possibilities to qualify for the 2014 World Cup in warmer Brazil," he said.

Venezuela are to date the only South American country never to appear at the finals.

Peru themselves turned the form book upside down as far as the semis were concerned before finding Uruguay a bridge too far.

They finished rock bottom of the last World Cup qualifiers - Venezuela were third bottom - but under Uruguayan coach Sergio Markarian they have earned new respect.

"We have turned in a dignified showing and we can take away a number of positives," said Markarian, who, along with all coaches at the tournament, came in with one eye fixed firmly on 2014.

With Saturday a chance to weigh up his options for the next cycle, comprising the two-year, 18-match World Cup qualifying programme, Markarian says

he will make "several changes".

One will be enforced with combative midfielder Juan Vargas suspended.

Conversely, Farias can bring back Tomas Rincon, dismissed in the win over Chile, back into his midfield though Giacomo Di Giorgi acquitted himself well against the Paraguayans.

When the pair met in the 2010 World Cup qualifiers Venezuela won 3-1 at home but went down 1-0 away.

Park offered new deal

AFP, Chicago

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson said Thursday he expects South Korean midfielder Park Ji-Sung to sign a contract extension that will keep him with the club for two more years.

Speaking at a news conference in Chicago, where United will face Major League Soccer's Chicago Fire in a friendly at Soldier Field on Saturday, Ferguson said Park has been offered a new deal and is certain he will sign.

"He has been offered a new contract, yes," Ferguson said. "I'm sure he'll sign it. His career at United has been nothing but excellent, a tremendous professional."

"And I'm sure he'll accept the new offer, and tie himself to the club for the next two years."

Football

AFP, Zurich

Mohamed bin Hammam vowed "justice will prevail" on Friday, despite reports he has decided not to attend a two-day FIFA ethics committee hearing here that could see him banned from the sport for life.

The 62-year-old Qatari, suspended from all football activity since May 29, is accused of attempting to buy the FIFA presidency by offering \$40,000 cash gifts to Caribbean football officials in a bid to secure their votes.

He was due to appear before a five-person ethics committee panel chaired by Namibian judge Petrus Damaseb at FIFA headquarters in Zurich, but at 1245 local time (1045GMT) he had yet to arrive.

A source close to Bin Hammam told AFP that the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) president had elected to stay away from Zurich and leave the case in the hands of his lawyers.

In a fresh post on his personal blog on Friday, Bin Hammam reiterated his determination to overcome the charges but also opened the door for further legal action in the event that, as widely expected, he is handed a lifetime ban.

"I want you all to know that my legal team and I remain confident that the case and the evidence presented against me are weak and unsubstantiated," he wrote.

"They are flimsy and will not stand up to scrutiny in any court of law; that has been clear throughout this process and it remains to be so.

"If we believe earlier press statements

made by or on behalf of different FIFA officials or those working for them, then despite the weakness of the case against me, I am not confident that the hearing will be conducted in the manner any of us would like. "It seems likely that FIFA has already made its decision weeks ago. So, none of us should be completely surprised if a guilty verdict is returned.

"Following the events since my suspension, it now seems impossible for them to say that they were wrong, although I wish they would have the courage to correct their mistake.

"Rest assured, though, that justice will eventually prevail, whether through the FIFA Ethics Committee, the Court of Arbitration for Sport or, if necessary, through other courts or legal proceedings in courts where we will be equal and no special privileges will be granted to either party."

The corruption charges prompted Bin Hammam to withdraw from the FIFA presidential race, enabling his former ally Sepp Blatter to secure an unopposed fourth straight term in office at the beginning of June.

Bin Hammam's case will be heard alongside those of Debbie Minguell and Jason Sylvester, regional football officials who are alleged to have facilitated the bribery at a Caribbean Football Union (CFU) summit in May.

Former FIFA vice-president and CONCACAF president Jack Warner was also charged over his alleged role in the affair, but his subsequent resignation from the football arena saw FIFA drop their charges against him.

Japan coach says sorry

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Norio Sasaki, who piloted Japan to victory at the women's World Cup, apologised Friday after unsavoury alleged party conversations involving one of his players were exposed through Twitter.

Japan, nicknamed Nadeshiko after a pink flower seen in the country as a symbol of feminine beauty and grace, beat two-time champions the United States 3-1 on penalties after a 2-2 draw in the final in Frankfurt last weekend.

But defender Saki Kumagai, 20, who struck the winning penalty, was tracked on the micro-blogging site on Wednesday night when she attended a party with friends and university students.

One of the students, a 21-year-old man, used Twitter to quote Kumagai as criticising coach Sasaki and a rigid "hierarchy" in the team, and to display a picture showing the player and himself.

The tweeter also said Kumagai had shown him a picture on her mobile phone of one of her teammates, naked from the waist up.

Kumagai denied the allegations on Twitter late Thursday, apologising for "causing trouble to the coach, the teammates, the people concerned and every one who is supporting us."

"It is not true that I criticised the coach. But, undoubtedly, I was so inarticulate that my words were misunderstood," said the Urawa Reds Ladies defender, who is now bound for the women's Bundesliga side Frankfurt.

"About the team situation, it was written in expressions which were far from the facts," Kumagai said.

"I want to raise my awareness not only in the area of football but also in every aspect."



Chelsea striker Didier Drogba (C) holds hand garlands as the team arrives at a hotel in Bangkok yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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What to WATCH

STAR Cricket
England v India
First Test, Day 3
Live from 4:00pm

NEO Sports
Copa America
Third Place Playoff
Peru v Venezuela
Live from 1:00am (Sunday)

DAY'S EVENT

FIFA World Cup Pre-Qualifier
Bangladesh v Lebanon
Time: 8:00pm
Venue: Camille Chamoun Sports City Stadium, Beirut