



Real Madrid players (L-R) Marcelo, Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo do warm up exercises during a training session in Madrid on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Mourinho bemused

INTERNET, Undated



Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho finds the criticism currently being aimed at Cristiano Ronaldo ludicrous. The Portuguese has pointed out that his compatriot's goal tally this season of 21 goals in 17 Liga games warrants comparison with any player in Europe

The Portuguese forward, who has scored 21 goals in 17 Primera Division games this season, has looked somewhat out of sorts in recent weeks and has copped some flak from both the media and his own supporters.

Much was made of the fact that he did not celebrate his strike in the 5-1 win over Granada last weekend.

However, Mourinho has pointed out that Ronaldo's goal record stands comparison with anyone in Europe.

"We are talking about a striker and a striker should be compared with those of other teams," the former Inter coach said of his compatriot during a press conference on Friday.

"But if you want to compare, do you have statistics of the others?"

"We're talking about the Golden Boot winner here. The only one who has scored more goals than him is a player from Estonia [Aleksandrs Cekulajevs]."

Meanwhile, despite an injury sustained by Sami Khedira in the midweek win over Malaga, Mourinho claimed that there are unlikely to be any new arrivals at the Santiago Bernabeu during the current transfer window.

"We are not interested in buying or selling," he said.

Mourinho then insisted that he is solely focused on this weekend's Liga match against Mallorca.

# Fergie defends decision

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has defended his decision to recall Paul Scholes out of retirement after suggestions the 37-year-old's return was a

"regressive" step for his side.

Ferguson, who kept the news from his players, brought Scholes back for last weekend's FA Cup win over Manchester City and the former England midfielder came off the bench as United completed a 3-2 win over their local rivals.

For midfielder Darron Gibson it was the final straw and Friday saw the 24-year-old Republic of Ireland international complete a move to the champions' Premier League rivals Everton in the hope of more regular first-team football.

But veteran manager Ferguson had no doubts about the value of having Scholes back in his squad.

"There were no negatives as far as I was concerned," Ferguson said in a joint interview with Eurosport and

www.yahoo.com, carried out in conjunction with the League Managers' Association.

"One or two people have been negative. They're making out it's been a 'regressive step' for Manchester United.

"How can it be regressive? You're getting a player for nothing who's been part of the club for 20-odd years.

"He's not going to play every game but in terms of composure and passing ability, is there a better player going around? Definitely not."

For Ferguson a much bigger problem was keeping the news of Scholes' impending return a secret.

"I don't know how we managed it," he said. "We registered him on the Friday, and thought somehow it would get out.

"But we didn't let any of the players know simply because of the impact value.

"We were going away from home in a very difficult FA Cup tie against City.

"We had 5,000 fans at that end of the ground and as soon as they knew his name was on the team sheet they were fantastic, there was a great response."

Scholes' professionalism and avoidance of any off-field limelight made

him a manager's dream but Ferguson said the presence of growing entourages around increasingly young players was making life more difficult for rising stars.

"What you have to do is (ensure your players) understand how fragile that celebrity status can be," said Ferguson.

"One minute you're a star, the next minute you're not. Dealing with success is a bit more difficult today, because of television and the headlines they can get. So you do a lot of work with them to keep their feet on the ground.

"I say to them all the time: 'Go back to your mother the same person you were when you arrived. That's important, because I'm sure your mother doesn't like to see you change'. And we don't like to see them change either."

Several of Ferguson's former players have since followed in his footsteps by becoming managers and he has been particularly impressed by Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, who ended his first season at Molde by taking the club to the Norwegian title.

"Ole was one of these professionals who used to take down all the notes of the training sessions and games," said Ferguson.

# Wenger slams fixture

AFP, London



broadcasters, saying the game had "sold its soul".

The angry Arsenal manager, speaking ahead of his team's televised clash with Swansea on Sunday, voiced his concern over other sides getting more recovery time between matches because of the way broadcast matches are allocated.

"I don't believe the Premier League in the last months or last year have played a very fair role in the distribution of the fixtures," he said.

"They are sold to television and television is influenced by some clubs to choose the fixtures.

"And some clubs get advantaged by television, if it's (satellite broadcasters) Sky or ESPN, because they have an influence there from the clubs directly," the Frenchman added.

"If things are repeated then it's not a coincidence any more. In England it's always very difficult to say what you feel about that, but I'm not the only manager who thinks that. There's a real

problem there."

Wenger refused to name clubs, but there is a clear disadvantage to Arsenal during a round of fixtures at the end of the month.

Manchester United, Manchester City, Chelsea and Tottenham will all play on January 31 and Arsenal, currently behind the quartet in fifth place, will have two fixtures by the time those four step onto the field again.

Wenger accepted television would want a say on deciding which matches to screen but urged the Premier League to take a tougher line with broadcasters.

"We have sold our soul and we do not control our games, our fixtures, any more. But it is the truth.

"I cannot say that the television is wrong, but it's not normal that they can have a direct influence on the schedule. The Premier League should be in complete control of the Premier League."

Arsenal's match at the Liberty Stadium could see Thierry Henry make his first Premier League appearance since returning to the Gunners in a loan move from New York Red Bulls.

The club's record goalscorer, who marked his return by coming off the bench to score the winner in their FA Cup third round victory at home to Leeds on Monday, is again set to be among the substitutes.

# Cassano cleared to train

AFP, Rome

AC Milan striker Antonio Cassano, who underwent surgery on a heart defect in November, has received permission from his doctors to resume training, the club announced on Friday.

The 29-year-old underwent a "neurological test and cardiological exam from which the results were positive, and so Antonio Cassano can resume progressive individual athletic training from tomorrow," read a statement on the club's website.

Cassano is ahead of schedule, strengthening his chances of playing at Euro 2012 in Poland and the Ukraine this summer.

The Italian international was operated on at the start of November after tests revealed a heart defect, and initial estimations were that he could be out for six months.

# Spurs' feet on the ground

REUTERS, London



Redknapp is keeping his feet firmly on the ground.

"We are not getting carried away," he told a news conference ahead of the visit of Wolverhampton Wanderers on Saturday. "I am certainly not anyway. As I said at the start of the year, we are looking to try and get back in the Champions League this year.

"It is going to be difficult because the top six are all good sides. They have all improved and it is going to be very tight. I still see it being that way. But we are in a good position at the moment."

A win over Wolves - which would be their ninth in their last 10 home league games since they lost 5-1 to City in the second game of the season - would put Tottenham level with Roberto Mancini's pacesetters who visit Wigan Athletic on Monday.

Spurs are the form team having won 14 of their last 18 Premier League outings after thrashings by United, who beat them 3-0 at Old Trafford, and City in their first two league games of the season but Redknapp is cautious about their title chances.

"It is going to be difficult, very difficult. We are certainly not the favourites. To finish above Manchester United will be in our wildest dreams. I never thought I'd be thinking about that. It is going to be difficult, let's see how it goes."

Redknapp also ruled out bringing any marquee signings to the club in the January transfer window because of the cost.

"We can't quite buy those players," he said. "We are not in a position to go and pay 40 million pounds (\$60 million) and 200,000 pounds a week (wages).

"The chairman (Daniel Levy) doesn't run the club this way and quite rightly so. We get 36,000 people (in the ground), we sell out every week (but) we are not in a position to do that."

While a big-name signing may not be on the horizon, Redknapp is also reluctant to let anyone go despite the likes of South Africa international Steven Pienaar being the subject of a bid from Queens Park Rangers according to British media.

# Cahill close to Chelsea switch

INTERNET, Undated

Gary Cahill is due to undergo a medical at Chelsea on Saturday with a view to completing his move from Bolton over the weekend, Press Association Sport understands.

The England defender was in London overnight and looks set to end two weeks of uncertainty over his future by joining the Blues.

It is more than a fortnight since Bolton accepted a £7million bid from Chelsea for their prize asset, whose contract expires at the end of the season.

# Allegri signs new deal

AFP, Rome

AC Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri signed a new deal on Friday which will keep him at the helm of the Italian champions until 2014, the club announced.

According to Italian press reports, Allegri, who won the Serie A title in his first year in charge last season, wanted an annual salary of three million euros while the club would only go as high as 2.5 million.

"I'm very happy to have the chance to work with Milan for another two years," Allegri told the club's official website.

"I believe that everything is in place to continue what we started a year and a half ago."



PHOTO: REUTERS

Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba celebrates his goal against Tunisia during their international friendly in Abu Dhabi on Friday.

# Elephants stamp on Tunisia

AFP, Johannesburg

English Premier League stars had mixed luck with Ivory Coast Friday as Salmon Kalou and Didier Drogba scored in a 2-0 Africa Cup of Nations warm-up win over Tunisia and Cheik Tiote was sent off.

Chelsea strikers Kalou and Drogba struck just before and after half-time in Abu Dhabi as the African Cup co-favourites dominated until Newcastle midfielder Tiote was sent off on 73 minutes for striking a rival.

Kalou burst on to an angled through ball and curled a side-foot shot past Aymen Mathlouthi and captain Drogba sent the goalkeeper the wrong way after Tunisia skipper Karim Haggui used an arm to block a cross.

Tunisia improved when they had a numerical advantage, testing goalkeeper Boubacar Barry several times, before substitute Seydou Doumbia was foiled by a superb tackle when poised to add a third Ivorian goal.

Ivory Coast will share Group B at the January 21-February 12 African tournament with Angola, Burkina Faso and Sudan and many pundits believe they will contest the final against Ghana.

Tunisia are in Group C with co-hosts Gabon, Morocco and Niger and have completed their warm-ups.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Do you think the BPL will be successful?

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What to WATCH

STAR Cricket

Australia v India

Third Test, Day 3

Live from 8:30am

ESPN

English Premiership

Newcastle United v QPR

Live from 7:25pm

Arsenal v Swansea City

Live from 9:55pm

TEN Action

Serie A

Genoa v Udinese

Live from 7:55pm

STAR Sports

Australian Open

First Round

DAY'S EVENT

Premier Div Cricket League

Old DOHS v Biman Bangladesh

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur

Surjo Torun v Sk Jamal Dhanmondi Club

Venue: BKSP-2

Prime Doleshwar v Brothers Union