



Ivory Coast midfielder Yaya Toure (C) speaks alongside compatriot Didier Drogba (R) after receiving the African Footballer of the Year award in Accra on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Iraq denies Diego talks

AP, Baghdad

The Iraqi Football Association denies it is negotiating with Argentine great Diego Maradona to take over as coach of the national team.

Deputy IFA head Abdul-Khalil Masoud tells The Associated Press the association isn't in talks with Maradona "and doesn't have any intention to hire him."

Masoud's comments Friday came a day after an Argentine soccer official was quoted saying Maradona was a leading candidate to take over as Iraq coach. The Buenos Aires daily La Nacion reported that Maradona was close to signing a deal with Iraq.

Former Brazil great Zico resigned as Iraq coach last month over what he said was the Iraqi association's failure to live up to its commitments. Zico had been coach since August 2011.

What to WATCH

BTV

Bangladesh Premier League

Mohammedan v Arambagh

Live from 4:30pm

STAR Cricket

India v England

Second T20

Live from 7:30pm

ESPN

English Premiership

Wigan v Arsenal

Live from 6:45pm

Man City v Reading

Live from 9:00pm

Liverpool v Fulham

Live from 11:30pm

STAR Sports

Primera Liga

Malaga v Real Madrid

Live from 1:00am (Sunday)

Bilbao v Zaragoza

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh Premier League

Mohammedan v Arambagh

Time: 4:30pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National

Stadium

Muktijoddha v Team BJMC

Time: 2:45pm

Venue: Gopalganj Stadium

Soccer Club, Feni v Brothers Union

Time: 2:45pm

City launch MU pursuit

AFP, London



Manchester City's bid to reel in Premier League leaders Manchester United has been jeopardised by injuries to key players as they prepare to open their Christmas campaign at home to Reading on Saturday.

Six points off the pace after their 3-2 loss in the Manchester derby on December 9, the champions could be missing captain Vincent Kompany and midfielder Samir Nasri for the Royals' visit to the Etihad Stadium.

Kompany limped out of the derby with a groin injury, forcing him to miss last weekend's 3-1 win at Newcastle United, and he is a major doubt for Saturday's game.

Nasri picked up a similar injury in the game at St James' Park and looks set to be out for two weeks, potentially ruling him out of City's entire festive programme.

To compound matters for coach Roberto Mancini, central midfielder Jack Rodwell has revealed that he will probably be out of action until the beginning of 2013 due to a hamstring injury that he sustained in October.

"I've just had a little bit of a setback with my hamstring injury," Rodwell told the club website. "It will probably be another few weeks, so I'm looking into the new year."

Injuries aside, Mancini will expect his side to take all three points at

home to a Reading team who sank to the foot of the table last weekend and were thrashed 5-2 at home by Arsenal on Monday.

City can close to within three points of top spot if they beat Reading, with United not in action until their lunchtime trip to Swansea City on Sunday.

The festive season is a pivotal period in the Premier League, with teams facing four games in the space of only 12 days.

Arsenal kick off the weekend

FIXTURES

Saturday

(1500GMT unless otherwise stated):
Wigan Athletic v Arsenal (1245GMT), Newcastle United v Queens Park Rangers, Tottenham Hotspur v Stoke City, Manchester City v Reading, West Bromwich Albion v Norwich City, West Ham United v Everton, Southampton v Sunderland, Liverpool v Fulham (1730GMT)

Sunday

Swansea City v Manchester United (1330GMT),

programme at home to third-bottom Wigan Athletic on Saturday, when victory would provisionally propel them up to third place.

Buoyed by the rout at Reading, Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was given further reason for optimism in mid-week when Jack Wilshere, Kieran Gibbs, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, Carl Jenkinson and Aaron Ramsey all agreed new contracts.

The Frenchman faces demands from supporters to improve his squad in the January transfer window.

but he says the performance at Reading proves that the team are on the right track.

"What is important is this team develops in the way we want to play. I have seen some interesting aspects on Monday night at Reading," he said.

"Let's see how far this team can go. If we can add one or two exceptional players, we will do it."

Tottenham Hotspur quietly stole into the top four last weekend and they can put pressure on third-place Chelsea -- who host Aston Villa on Sunday -- with victory at home to Stoke City.

Gareth Bale and Michael Dawson are both expected to return from injury for Spurs, who found out on Thursday that they will face goalkeeper Hugo Lloris' former club Lyon in the Europa League last 32.

Everton, who have slipped to sixth after winning just two of their last 11 fixtures, visit West Ham United, while West Bromwich Albion will also hope to buck a run of disappointing results when they host Norwich City.

Having finally secured a first win of the campaign at home to Fulham last weekend, Queens Park Rangers bid to maintain their unbeaten record under new manager Harry Redknapp when they visit Newcastle United.

Liverpool, stunned 3-1 at home by Villa last weekend, host Fulham, while Southampton tackle fellow relegation candidates Sunderland at St Mary's.

Juve look to stretch lead

AFP, Rome



Defending Italian champions Juventus can top a successful 2012 on Friday if they beat struggling Cagliari to stretch their lead at the top of Serie A in the league's last match of the year.

The Turin club go into the match seven points ahead of their nearest rivals Inter Milan, who take on Genoa at home on Saturday, and will not even have to face opposition fans, as the game is being played at a neutral venue.

The match has been switched to Parma's Stadio Tardini because the municipal authorities in the Sardinian capital have deemed that the club's ground is not up to scratch for such a high-profile match.

The only bad news for the Old Lady of Turin, who named a 21-man squad for the game, is that the bedrock of their defence, Giorgio Chiellini, is out for two months, again with a right calf injury.

Defender Leonardo Bonucci returns to the fold after missing Juve's 3-0 home win against Atalanta through suspension, the club said on its website juventus.com.

This weekend's big match is between sixth-placed Roma and AC Milan, who are two points behind in seventh and looking to claw their way back up the table.

The Rossoneri were on Thursday drawn against Spanish giants Barcelona in the last 16 of the Champions League and coach Massimiliano Allegri said his players will have to be at their best after a disappointing first half of the domestic campaign.

The match is vital for both clubs to keep pace with the leading pack, particularly as only three points separate second from fifth.

Milan have not lost in five matches and will be looking to Stephan El Shaarawy, who has scored 14 times this season, for inspiration to overcome a Roma defence that has leaked 27 goals.

Poldi doesn't fear Bayern

AFP, London

Arsenal forward Lukas Podolski insists the Gunners will have no reason to fear his former club Bayern Munich when they clash in the last 16 of the Champions League.

Arsene Wenger's team were paired with Bundesliga leaders Bayern in Thursday's draw, with the first leg at the Emirates Stadium on February 19 and the return at the Allianz Arena in March.

That means a return to Munich for German international Podolski, who spent three seasons at Bayern from 2006.

Arsenal's slumping form this season means few pundits expect the Premier League side to beat Bayern, who reached the Champions League final last season.

But Podolski believes Arsenal have what it takes to get past one of the tournament favourites.

"They played in the final in 2010 and last year. It is a big club, but we have the chance to win against Bayern Munich," Podolski told Arsenal Player.

"They have (Mario) Gomez up front, they have (Franck) Ribery, (Bastian) Schweinsteiger, Philipp Lahm, Manuel Neuer."



Syrian players pray after Ahmad al-Salih (L) scored the winning goal against Iraq in the West Asia Football Federation championship final in Kuwait City on Thursday.

Syria savour rare success

Football

REUTERS, Undated

War-torn Syria enjoyed some rare soccer success by beating Iraq 1-0 in Kuwait on Thursday to win the West Asian Championships for the first time.

Ahmad Al Salih headed the winning goal for Syria's Red Eagles in the 75th minute of the final and they rode their luck in the closing stages before claiming the nine-team biennial tournament.

"I give this win and this worthy title to the Syrian people. I thank God that we succeeded in bringing happiness to the sad people," striker Omar Al Soma said in a televised interview after the match.

More than 40,000 people have been killed in Syria since violence broke out against the rule of President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011.

The Syrians reached the final after drawing with Iraq and coming from behind to beat Jordan in the group stages. They then edged Bahrain 3-2 on penalties when their semifinal finished 1-1 after extra time.

They had twice previously finished as runners-up in the tournament, in the inaugural edition in 2000 and again four years later, both times losing to Iran.

Syria are ranked 144th by world governing body FIFA and have never qualified for a World Cup but have made the Asian Cup finals on five occasions, most recently last year.