

WC legends set Myanmar date

Football

AFF, Yangon

World Cup winners Cafu, Bebeto and Roberto Carlos will join an All-Star Brazil team in Myanmar next month as the nation tries to boost its footballing prowess, a sporting official said Friday.

The veteran trio are expected to play in an exhibition match in Yangon against a local XI, consisting of current and former national team players, after talks between the Brazilian Embassy and Myanmar's Football Federation.

Cafu, a flying wingback who won the World Cup with Brazil in 1994 and 2002, will arrive in Yangon on January 20 with striker Bebeto and former Real Madrid star Carlos.

"As we will have the chance to see nearly all the players of the 1994 Champion team here, both the football industry and fans will get an amazing experience, I think," said Soe Moe Kyaw of the MFF.

Impoverished Myanmar, which is undergoing major political and economic reforms after years of junta rule, was once a regional powerhouse in the sport, winning the Asian Games in 1966 and 1970, and sweeping the Southeast Asian Peninsular Games between 1965 and 1973.

But it has endured a four-decade slide down the rankings since then and the national side limped out of this year's Southeast Asian AFF Suzuki Cup at the group stages without a win.



Elephants play an exhibition soccer match during the final day of the Elephant Race event at Sauraha in Chitwan yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Proceed with caution MU aim to extend lead

AFF, London



Wariness of UEFA's Financial Fair Play (FFP) rules and concerns about a lack of value in the market mean the Premier League's top clubs will proceed with caution when the January transfer window opens next week.

The arrival of the authorised player trading period gives managers a chance to bolster tiring squads at the season's half-way point, but successful January purchases have been few and far between in recent years.

More notable have been the big-money flops; the result, perhaps, of clubs panicking at the prospect of having to muddle through to May with a group of players who have failed to meet expectations.

Two of the Premier League's most unsuccessful transfers occurred in January 2011. Liverpool shrewdly sold the misfiring Fernando Torres to Chelsea for a British record £50 million (\$81 million, 61 million euros), only to squander £35 million on the similarly ineffective Andy Carroll.

The Reds did also acquire Luis Suarez, who has become one of the league's most lethal strikers, but Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson -- a reluctant January spender -- says it is a bad time to be doing business.

"The January transfer market has never been the best transfer market and that has been proven over the years with very few big transfers happening," he said earlier this month. "All the big transfers happen in the summer."

Ferguson says he is happy with his squad and with United well clear of defending champions Manchester City at the league summit, there appears little need for him to worry, despite some chronic defensive performances

this term.

The onus therefore falls on the chasing pack, but Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini could find his attempts to improve his squad frustrated.

City invested massively in new players prior to last season's title success but there was a notable tightening of the purse-strings prior to the current campaign as the club's Emirati owners sought to balance the books.

Defensive midfielder Javi Garcia was the most expensive acquisition, at a reported fee of £17 million from Benfica, but there was no repeat of the lavish spending that had marked the close season in the previous two years.

Chelsea have been linked with Atletico Madrid's all-action Colombian striker Radamel Falcao, who has a release clause in his contract reportedly worth £48 million, but they, like City, must beware the looming shadow of FFP.

UEFA's initiative aims to prevent clubs from spending beyond their means and last week's announcement that indebted Spanish side Malaga will be banned from European competition for one year suggests that the plan may have more teeth than its critics have claimed.

Arsenal find themselves adopting a familiar defensive posture as the transfer window beckons.

Theo Walcott's talks over a new contract have stalled and the England winger will be free to speak to other clubs in January, but Arsene Wenger has mollified him in recent weeks by allowing him to play in his preferred central role.

"My gut feeling is that he belongs to this club and that I hope he will do it and sign for us," said the Arsenal manager.

Liverpool are also tipped to spend, with a move for Chelsea forward Daniel Sturridge already in the pipeline.

AFF, London



Manchester United will look to put even more daylight between themselves and Manchester City when they host West Bromwich Albion on Saturday, as the Premier League's busy festive season continues.

Speaking prior to the Christmas period, United manager Alex Ferguson had set his players the modest target of being top of the standings on New Year's Day, but his side are already disappearing towards the horizon.

Wednesday's thrilling 4-3 win at home to Newcastle United left the 19-time champions seven points clear, and with second-place City facing a difficult trip to Norwich City, United could stretch their advantage by disposing of West Brom.

Javier Hernandez's last-minute winner against Newcastle left Ferguson beaming, and he will have more room to manoeuvre with his squad after injury and illness robbed him of key players against Newcastle.

Wayne Rooney sat out the game after sustaining knee ligament damage in training that will keep him out for up to three weeks, but Ashley Young, Danny Welbeck, Phil Jones and Nemanja Vidic could all return.

"Ashley Young also got injured on Tuesday and Phil Jones got injured (in the 1-1 draw) against Swansea," said Ferguson.

"They should both be OK for

Saturday, and I will also have Tom Cleverley and Darren Fletcher, who are fresh.

"We couldn't risk Vida (against Newcastle) after playing his first game (at Swansea). He had a bit of soreness in his knee, which is only to be expected after being out for so long."

Manchester City's title defence was dealt a potentially decisive blow in a 1-0 loss at Sunderland on Wednesday, and Saturday's opponents, Norwich, have been beaten at home just twice all season.

FIXTURES	
(1500GMT unless otherwise stated)	
Saturday	
Sunderland v Tottenham Hotspur (1245GMT), Fulham v Swansea City, Reading v West Ham United, Aston Villa v Wigan Athletic, Stoke City v Southampton, Manchester United v West Bromwich Albion, Norwich City v Manchester City, Arsenal v Newcastle United (1730GMT)	
Sunday	
Everton v Chelsea (1330GMT), Queens Park Rangers v	

The champions' odds of retaining their crown are lengthening by the week, but manager Roberto Mancini says he is not fazed by his side's seven-point deficit.

"It hasn't changed. At this moment, United are better than us, they are at the top, but we have time to recover," said the Italian.

"We need to resolve our problems before and after, maybe we can win. It's no problem, seven points."

"That's not important. We know United are a fantastic team and probably they will win every game, but the season is long and it is not

important if it is six or seven or four points."

City's setback enabled Chelsea to close to within four points of second place by winning 1-0 at Norwich and Rafael Benitez's side -- 8-0 victors over Aston Villa in their previous game -- also have a game in hand.

On Sunday, last season's Champions League winners visit fifth-place Everton -- one of three teams in the table on 33 points, along with Tottenham Hotspur and West Brom.

Arsenal lost ground in the battle for a top-four finish, and Champions League qualification, after their Wednesday game with West Ham United was cancelled due to a strike on the London Underground transport network.

The Gunners have therefore benefited from an unexpected period of rest at a time when their rivals' resources have been stretched, but midfielder Jack Wilshere says his team-mates will have to switch on quickly when they return to action at home to Newcastle on Saturday.

"It's a tough game against Newcastle," he said.

"They need the points, they're not in a good run of form and they'll want to prove something, but we want to keep this momentum going."

Queens Park Rangers, who returned to the foot of the table after losing at home to West Brom, host Liverpool on Sunday, while second-bottom Reading tackle West Ham on Saturday and third-bottom Wigan Athletic are at Villa.

Abidal keen to play

AFF, Barcelona

Barcelona defender Eric Abidal says he feels fit and is keen to play again in an interview broadcast Thursday, eight months after he underwent a liver transplant.

"I feel good," the 33-year-old French international told Barcelona-based TV3 television.

"The truth is that it's been a long time since they operated on me. It has been eight months and I have fought a lot and I carry on fighting," said Abidal, who returned to training with the team last week.

"It is difficult but my spirits are still high and I am keen to fight and come back."

Abidal had the liver transplant operation on April 10 just over a year after a tumour was removed from his liver in March 2011.

Abidal said he never considered quitting the game.

"I never thought of stopping playing because football, apart from my family, is my whole life."

Meireles ban reduced

AFF, Istanbul

Fenerbahce's Portuguese star Raul Meireles had his 11-match ban for spitting and allegedly making an offensive gesture at a referee reduced to four after a Turkish Football Federation appeal commission ruling.

The commission watched more than six hours of video footage of the incident during the derby with Galatasaray on December 16 and concluded that while the former Chelsea and Liverpool midfielder was guilty of insulting the official, he did not spit at him. "As the player carried on talking throughout the entire incident, it would not have been physically possible for him to have spat," the commission ruled in a statement posted on the Federation website.

Meireles, 29, had already picked up a one-match suspension for two yellow cards he received in the Galatasaray game and the commission upheld the decision to fine him 20,000 Turkish pounds (8,400 euros).



অগ্রনিবন্ধন

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'Goals will come'

AFF, Manchester



Assistant manager David Platt insists there should be no concerns about Manchester City's lack of goals.

City, who trail United by seven points, have scored 34 league goals, which is 12 fewer than the Premier League leaders.

Their expensively-assembled strikeforce is badly out of form, with Sergio Aguero and Carlos Tevez having managed just one goal in their last eight matches.

Italy striker Mario Balotelli has scored just once in his last 10 games, while Bosnian Edin Dzeko has managed one in 13.

But Platt is adamant ahead of Saturday's trip to Norwich that all four will have significantly improved their potency by the end of the campaign.

He said: "I think if you asked them they would be disappointed in the return over the games they have played but goalscorers go through barren spells."

"It is just unfortunate that at the moment all of them seem to be having one at the same time. It's not just them. Compared to the number of goals we scored last season we are significantly down but that is all around the pitch."

"We have got to produce better chances and we have to put them away."

These are all players who have goalscoring records over a period of years but invariably at the end of the season that

quota will be back up to one in two, one in one and a half."

City manager Roberto Mancini was forced to leave his recruitment until the end of the summer transfer window.

He has suggested that he hopes to make several additions in January.

But Platt maintains that there will not necessarily be any new arrivals to bolster the squad in the new year.

Platt added: "I would just be speculating. I think it is a very difficult market to go and work in."

"The kind of players you would want to improve a squad like Manchester City are invariably already playing for the top teams that are involved in chasing honours."

"I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't do any business."

French defender Gael Clichy is training again after missing the 1-0 defeat at Sunderland with a minor injury, while Samir Nasri, who has been out with a hamstring problem, is also close to a return.

Balotelli is still struggling with a virus but Tevez returned to training on Friday after missing Thursday's session through illness.

Micah Richards and Jack Rodwell are still sidelined.

Although City trail United by seven points following their defeat to the Black Cats last time out, Platt is certain that Mancini's side will push their neighbours all the way to the end of the season.

ESPN
English Premiership
Sunderland v Tottenham
Live from 6:45pm
Man United v West Bromwich
Live from 9:00pm
Arsenal v Newcastle
Live from 11:30pm
STAR Sports
English Premiership
Norwich City v Man City



Bangladesh Premier League
Soccer Club, Feni v Muktijoddha
Time: 2:45pm
Venue: Feni Stadium
Sk Jamal v Arambagh
Time: 4:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Bangladesh Cricket League
(Four-day match, Day-3)
Walton Central Zone v Prime Bank
South Zone
Time: 9:15am
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, Mirpur
Islami Bank South Zone v BCB