

Chelsea open Schuerle talks

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen have had talks with Chelsea over the possible transfer of 22-year-old attacking midfielder Andre Schuerle, the Bundesliga soccer club said on Friday, though they denied the deal was close to being finalised.

"I can confirm the talks in London," Leverkusen spokesman Meinolf Sprink told reporters, confirming German media reports of sports director Rudi Voeller's trip to the English capital on Thursday.

Sprink said no decision had yet been made. Voeller told Bild newspaper he had been to London for talks with Chelsea but declined to give details.



Paris Saint-Germain midfielder David Beckham (L) speaks with his son Cruz during a training session in Paris on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Jose to decide Real future

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho refrained from committing to remaining at the club beyond the end of this season on Friday and said a decision on his future would be taken at the end of the current campaign.

Speculation about the Portuguese's possible exit has been a near-constant feature of his stint at Real, whom he joined from Inter Milan in 2010, and he has been linked with a move to wealthy clubs including another of his former teams, Chelsea, and Paris St Germain.

Mourinho has rarely given the traditional coach's news conference the day before this season's La Liga games, typically sending out his number two Aitor Karanka, but appeared on Friday and was bombarded with questions about whether he will see out his contract, which ends in June 2016.

"The fundamental thing is to finish the season in the best way possible and then sit down together and reach conclusions that will be the most positive ones possible for everyone," he said.

Real, who are second in La Liga and host Real Betis on Saturday, are poised to surrender their title to great rivals Barcelona but are through to the Champions League semifinals to face Borussia Dortmund and meet city neighbours Atletico in the King's Cup final next month.

"My relationship with the president ... and the other directors and in general my relationship with the club is a very good relationship," Mourinho added.

"This allows us to sit down and analyse things calmly and decide what is best for Real Madrid, what is best for me, what is best for the president, what is best for everyone," he added.

"Normally there are problems between a coach and his club when situations like this arise but with me there are no problems, which is down to me, down to them and down to our personalities and our affectionate relations.

"We have a good relationship and that's why I think that with calm we will reach the conclusion at the right time that is the best for everyone."

Mourinho's departure would leave president Florentino Perez in a difficult position as he has constantly referred to the former Porto manager as "the world's best coach".

Milan eye Juve fortress

AFP, Milan



Juventus may be cruising to a 29th Serie A title but AC Milan are still aiming to come away from Turin with a victory this weekend,

insists striker Stephan El Shaarawy.

With Juventus now 11 points ahead of Napoli after the Partenopei's 1-1 draw away to Milan last week, a second straight Scudetto already seems a formality for the Turin giants.

However the fight for runners-up spot, which gives direct access to the Champions League, is far from over.

Napoli, who host Cagliari on Sunday, currently occupy second place on 53 points but Milan are just four points behind and unbeaten in 14 league matches since the turn of the year.

"Sunday will be a big test of concentration. Whichever team makes the least mistakes will win," El Shaarawy told the Milan Channel.

"We'll give it everything to bring back the three points. It will be crucial to make a strong start and maintain a fast tempo throughout."

A 31st minute strike courtesy of Robinho secured a 1-0 for Milan in the corresponding fixture in November.

While that win was one of several results marking Milan's resurgence following their worst ever start to a league season, Juventus have been just as efficient.

The Bianconeri have not lost a league game at home since a shock 2-1 reverse to Sampdoria in January and their 2-0 away win at Lazio on Monday means the champions now require seven points from their remaining six games to secure the title.

But with key games against Milan and then city rivals Torino, defender Andrea Barzagli says they can take nothing for granted.

"They will be two important games, but

we're focusing only on the first," Barzagli, who is two away from making 100 appearances for the club, told Juventus.com.

"Both Milan and ourselves need points. We're chasing the Scudetto, while they're aiming for Champions League qualification. It won't be easy, but we're preparing well."

Meanwhile, third-placed Fiorentina, who host Torino, will be looking to distance fourth-placed Lazio, who face a tricky trip to Udinese in Saturday's late game.

But La Viola coach Vincenzo Montella insists he is not looking over his shoulder at their pursuers.

"Our objective is to consolidate our position in the table, then we'll see," said Montella.

FIXTURES

(times GMT)

Saturday

Genoa v Atalanta (1600),
Udinese v Lazio (1845)

Sunday

Inter v Parma (1030), Bologna v
Sampdoria, Catania v Palermo,
Fiorentina v Torino, Napoli v
Cagliari, Roma v Pescara, Siena v
Chievo (all 1300), Juventus v AC
Milan (1845)

League winners Inter, who host Parma on Saturday still literally hurting after their midweek Italian Cup semifinal exit at the hands of Roma.

The Nerazzurri have gone from title contenders pre-Christmas to their current position of seventh and host Parma without key midfielders Fredy Guarin and Esteban Cambiasso.

Also missing is Diego Milito and, since last week, his replacement Rodrigo Palacio - taking Inter's casualty list to an astonishing 13 players.

Andrea Stramaccioni's position as Inter coach has recently come under media scrutiny, but club president Massimo Moratti appears to have given the 37-year-old a vote of confidence.

Time selects Balotelli

INTERNET, Undated

Mario Balotelli has been named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world for 2013. The list has previous included the likes of Lionel Messi and Didier Drogba, but 22-year-old Balotelli is the only footballer to be named this year and one of four athletes along with LeBron James, Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn and tennis player Li Na.

Chelsea legend and Watford manager Gianfranco Zola, who coached Balotelli for a bit of his time with Italy's U-21 team, wrote the blurb that accompanied Mario's inclusion in the "icons" section of the list. Zola says:

From afar, people may think he's a madman, but he isn't. Mario is a lovely guy, very humble and very funny. I can assure people he has always been a pleasure to deal with. He has returned to Italy from England as the main man with lots of attention. Now he has to ensure he keeps control and keeps focus. Mario loves the pressure, but to succeed, it is about finding balance.

The combination of Balotelli's developing brilliance on the pitch mixed with his innate ability to produce captivatingly odd moments (be it

with a bib or fireworks in his bathroom) and the many strange myths dreamed up by the press have definitely made him one of the world's most scrutinized footballers. He's also been forced into the centre of the fight for racial equality and subjected to vile abuse within the game since he was teenager. But to call him one of the most influential people in the world seems a bit speculative.

One person who isn't surprised about Balotelli's inclusion in the list is his eccentric agent, Mino Raiola.

"I am not remotely surprised," Mino Raiola told Sky Sport Italia. "Time saw something in him that many are unable to see."

"He can influence men, women, children. Mario can influence Italy in various different ways, starting from the issue of racism that can be fought."

"He is a perfectly normal young man, but it's clear there have been important responsibilities on his shoulders since he was 16 years old."

Balotelli will attend a presentation ceremony in New York on April 22. He previously appeared in Time Magazine for a cover story last year.

Bale hot favourite

REUTERS, London

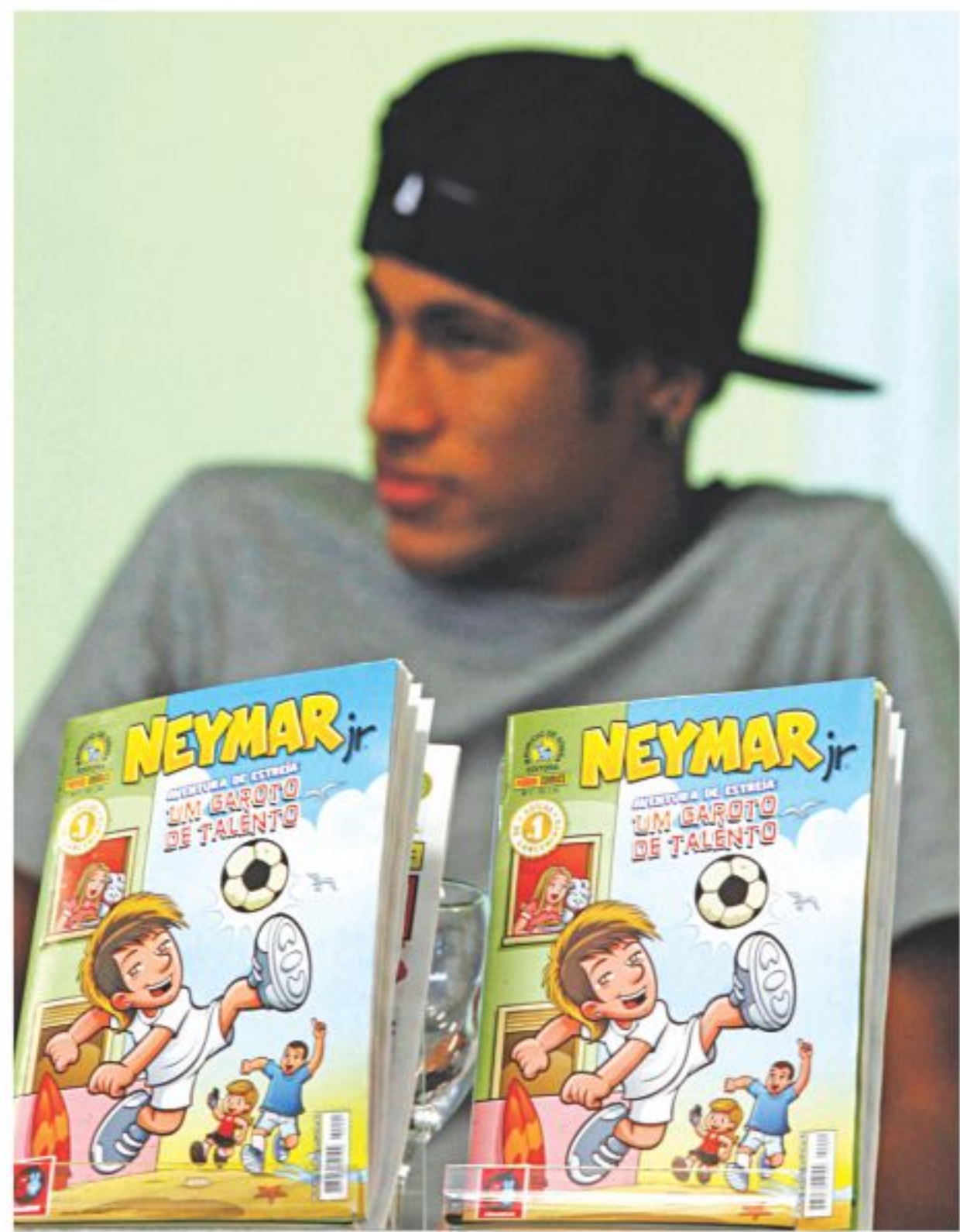
Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Gareth Bale is hot favourite to win the Player of the Year Award from his fellow professionals after the short-list for this season's nominations was issued on Friday.

The Wales international, 23, is also favourite to win the Young Player of the Year Award, the other honour voted by members of the Professional Footballers Association (PFA), after scoring 22 goals for Spurs and five for Wales this season.

He was also named PFA Player of the Year in 2011 and early indications show he is the front-runner for the Footballer of the Year Award voted on by members of England's Football Writers Association.

He faces some strong opposition though, as Robin van Persie has had a fine first season at Manchester United scoring 25 goals, despite a 10-game goal drought which ended last week, while Luis Suarez has been in superb form for Liverpool with 29 goals.

Bale was installed as the 4/11 favourite by bookmakers SkyBet, ahead of Van Persie and Suarez, both 4/1, Juan Mata of Chelsea (66/1) and outsiders, Eden Hazard of Chelsea and Michael Carrick of Manchester United, both rated at 100/1.



Brazil star Neymar attends the presentation of a children's comic magazine "Neymar Jr." based on him in Santos on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Neymar on comic book

INTERNET, undated

Neymar's rapid domination of all corners of Brazilian culture continues with his new comic book, which debuts later this month. The series was created in partnership with legendary Brazilian cartoonist Mauricio de Sousa, who quickly became frustrated with Neymar's ever-changing hairstyles.

Neymar will be portrayed as a child with his own football-playing friends and his well-known Mohawk hair style. The first issue is called "A boy with talent."

Other Brazilian players who have become children's comic book characters include Pele, Ronaldinho and Ronaldo.

At the launch event for the comic, De Sousa admitted that it's difficult to draw Neymar since his hair keeps changing. Neymar added that as he would go from blond to brown and long to short, De Sousa would call him to bemoan the inconsistency.

The series will include Neymar's real-life family and friends and De Sousa sees it spreading beyond Brazil and to the rest of the world like his other footballer based comics. The issue entitled "A boy who avoids the evil thieves of Europe" might not perform well everywhere, though.

Rooney going nowhere

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson on Friday dismissed speculation linking Wayne Rooney with a move to French league leaders Paris Saint-Germain.

England international Rooney has reportedly been a target of the French capital club, despite having two years of his five-year contract to run at Old Trafford.

But ahead of their game Barclays Premier League game against Aston Villa on Monday, Ferguson played down talk that the 27-year-old forward would leave the club at the end of the season.

"I don't think there's anything in that at all," Ferguson said in response to question about whether Rooney had been unsettled by talk of a move to PSG.

"I couldn't tell you (anything) about that. As far as taking him off on against West Ham, it's because he wasn't playing as well as Shinji (Kagawa) was."

"We had to get that goal that mattered and, of course, there are so many games where Wayne Rooney is better than other players. But on the night Shinji was playing so well."



Pope Francis (R) receives a Lionel Messi autographed Barcelona jersey during the weekly audience in Saint Peter's Square at the Vatican on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

What to WATCH

BTV
Bangladesh Games Opening
Live from 4:45pm
Maasranga TV
& TEN Cricket
Bangladesh v Zimbabwe
First Test, Day-4
Live from 2:00pm
SET Max
Indian Premier League
KKR v Chennai
Live from 4:30pm
Bangalore v Rajasthan
Live from 8:30pm
STAR Sports
English Premiership
Fulham v Arsenal
Live from 8:00pm
ESPN
English Premiership
QPR v Chennai
Live from 8:00pm

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh Games Opening
Time: 4:45pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium