

Suarez leads Uruguay

AFP, Tokyo



Unsettled Liverpool striker Luis Suarez denied a report Wednesday saying that he had decided to stay at Anfield, according to Japanese media.

The 26-year-old scored with a rocket and provided the ammunition for two quick-fire Diego Forlan goals as Uruguay overpowered Japan 4-2 away in a pulsating friendly.

The Arsenal target had been quoted beforehand as saying in an interview from Japan with the Uruguayan newspaper El Observador that he would stay with Liverpool.

But speaking after masterminding his country to a comfortable win, he denied that he had had a change of heart.

"I didn't say that, maybe someone else did and the main thing is that I am here now with the national team," Japan's Kyodo News quoted him as saying.

Before the friendly with Japan, Suarez had been quoted as saying: "Right now, because of all the affection of the people, I'll be staying."

The striker was all smiles before kickoff Wednesday -- in contrast to the forlorn figure he has cut in recent weeks during his transfer standoff.

A bundle of energy, he wriggled clear down the left before squaring unselfishly for strike partner Forlan to slide home the opener in the 27th minute at Miyagi Stadium.

Moments later Forlan doubled Uruguay's lead, curling home a free-kick from the edge of the box after Suarez had gone to ground following a robust challenge from Maya Yoshida.

Suarez proved a constant menace and scored a deserved goal in the 52nd minute with a venomous strike.

Manchester United's Shinji Kagawa pulled one back for the hosts from close range two minutes later, only for Alvaro Gonzalez to head Uruguay's fourth in the 58th minute as the floodgates threatened to open.

Keisuke Honda fizzed home a superb free-kick in the 72nd minute but Japan had already left themselves too much to do.



PHOTO: AFP
Uruguay striker Luis Suarez attempts a shot during their international friendly against Japan at the Miyagi Stadium yesterday.

Bremen sign Di Santo

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga side Werder Bremen on Wednesday signed Argentinian striker Franco Di Santo on a three-year deal from English Premier league side Wigan on a free transfer.

The 24-year-old has been signed to team up with Bremen's ex-Bayern Munich striker Nils Petersen after 57 appearances and 13 goals over three seasons at Wigan, where his contract expired at the end of last season.

The 1.93m striker has already passed the medical and is expected to hold a news conference at Werder on Thursday.

Di Santo comes with some Premier League experience after spells at Chelsea and Blackburn Rovers as well as Wigan, who were relegated last season.

'MU given up on Baines'

AFP, London

Everton manager Roberto Martinez said on Wednesday that he does not expect Premier League rivals Manchester United to submit another bid for left-back Leighton Baines.

Everton rejected an initial offer -- reportedly worth £12 million (\$18.3 million, 14.1 million euros) -- from United for the England international in June.

Media reports have subsequently claimed that United manager David Moyes is planning to return to his former club with an improved offer, but Martinez does not think that will happen.

"Before we went to Austria, one club officially contacted ourselves with an offer (for Baines) and it was a final offer," he told local newspaper the Liverpool Echo.

"They put something over and the valuation wasn't anywhere near the quality of Leighton Baines. That was the end of it, but since then there's been all the speculation, which has been part of what the transfer window is.

"There's never been another club or anyone else putting in an offer for Leighton."

Stoke striker fined

AFP, London

Stoke City striker Cameron Jerome has been fined £50,000 (\$77,400, 58,400 euros) after he admitted breaching betting regulations, the Football Association announced on Wednesday.

The 27-year-old Englishman was warned about his future behaviour after he accepted contravening the rules on several occasions.

"Stoke City's Cameron Jerome has been fined £50,000, subject to any appeal, following an Independent Regulatory Commission hearing," read a statement on the FA website.

"Jerome, who was also severely warned as to his future conduct, admitted a number of breaches of The FA's Betting Rules and requested a personal hearing which took place on Tuesday 13 August 2013."

The FA has not suggested that Jerome gambled on matches involving either himself or Stoke, or that he was involved in match-fixing. He has the right to appeal against his punishment.

Jerome is the second Premier League player to be charged under betting rules in recent months, after Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Andros Townsend

Pedro, Cesc back in training

AFP, Madrid

Spanish international duo Pedro Rodriguez and Cesc Fabregas are expected to be fit for Barcelona's league opener against Levante after taking part in training on Wednesday.

"The two players who were injured on the tour of Asia have taken part in some of the session with the rest of the team," said a statement on Barca's website.

Neither player had travelled with the Spain squad for their friendly with Ecuador in Guayaquil on Wednesday evening.

Pedro was not included in Vicente del Bosque's squad because of a calf injury, while Fabregas was forced to pull out of the travelling party to South America with a sprained right ankle.

Lionel Messi meanwhile could yet face Levante on Sunday as he continued his recovery work from a thigh injury that ruled him out of Argentina's friendly against Italy on Wednesday night.

There was more good news on the injury front for the Catalans as captain Carles Puyol stepped up the intensity of his training following knee surgery to remove a cyst last month.

West Brom re-sign Gera

REUTERS, Undated

West Bromwich Albion have re-signed Hungarian midfielder Zoltan Gera on a one-year deal, the Premier League club said on Wednesday.

The 34-year-old has been out since January with a serious knee injury and was released by West Brom at the end of the season.

However, after continuing rehabilitation at the club he was offered a new deal, and is expected to be available for selection in October.

"I believe his form last season before his injury was as good as at any time in his career and our main aim is to get him back to that level as quickly as possible," manager Steve Clarke said on the club's official website

BARCA'S trump card

AFP, Madrid



In contrast to previous seasons, Barcelona played their trump card in the transfer market early this year by securing the services of Brazilian starlet Neymar for 57 million euros (\$75.7 million, £49.5 million) back in May.

The 21-year-old had been on the Catalans' radar for some time with Barca having even made a down payment of 10 million euros to Santos for first option on the player a year previously.

One question that remains unanswered though is how Neymar's talents will dovetail with four-time World Player of the Year Lionel Messi?

The need for Messi to play in a deep-lying central striking role hastened the sale of Samuel Eto'o, resulted in Zlatan Ibrahimovic ending his sole season in Catalonia on the bench and has also limited Cesc Fabregas' chances to play where he has successfully combined with Xavi and Andres Iniesta with Spain.

Those sacrifices though have been worth a return of 271 goals over the past five seasons and concerns over how Messi and Neymar will co-exist appear to have been overblown for a number of reasons.

Firstly, as much as they still need defenders, Barca also desperately needed a scoring option that isn't Messi.

Moreover, unlike Ibrahimovic or Fabregas, Neymar is naturally much more compatible with Messi as he likes to start on the left of a front three and cut inside towards goal.

With Villa's departure to Atletico Madrid last month, that position is now vacant in the Barca side and Neymar's movement should also help drag defenders away from focusing their attention solely on Messi.

Should the South American duo hit it off, that philosophy will, more than ever, be based on winning with an exciting brand of attacking football.



Trio brace for impact

AFP, London



The approaching Premier League season will be defined to a large extent by the ability of the new managers at England's three leading clubs to tackle the challenges awaiting them.

Last season's top three sides are all under new management, with David Moyes succeeding Alex Ferguson at Manchester United, Manuel Pellegrini taking over from the sacked Roberto Mancini at Manchester City, and Jose Mourinho returning to Chelsea.

Amid the attendant flux, there are expectations that a new order could emerge in the English top flight, but Moyes' task is to ensure that United's 20-year dominance persists.

The 50-year-old Scot appears to face the most daunting task of the three new men.

Although he inherited a squad that finished the last campaign as convincing champions, he has no experience of competing at the very top of the table and will find Ferguson's shadow wherever he turns.

Ferguson led United to 38 titles during his 26-year tenure, turning the club into one of the biggest names in

global sport, and fans will be quick to pine for his return if Moyes fails to successfully negotiate an awkward opening run of fixtures that includes meetings with Chelsea, City and Liverpool.

Moyes' first pre-season at United has been far from ideal, amid continued speculation over the future of unsettled striker Wayne Rooney, who the manager insists is not for sale despite lingering interest from Chelsea.

Unlike Moyes, Mourinho knows what it takes to win the Premier League, having led Chelsea to successive title triumphs in 2005 and 2006.

In returning to Chelsea from Real Madrid, he has ignored the old football truism that says one must never revisit the scene of former glories, but this time he is determined to lay down a lasting legacy.

The 50-year-old Portuguese returns to find a squad now geared towards patient possession football, rather than the counter-attacking style he introduced during his first stint at Stamford Bridge.

He will have a dizzying array of attacking midfielders to select from, with new signing Andre Schuerrle and returning loanee Kevin De Bruyne

expected to compete with Juan Mata, Eden Hazard, Oscar and Victor Moses for the three advanced midfield positions in a 4-2-3-1 formation.

Up front, he must either seek to pursue the rehabilitation of Fernando Torres or place his trust in 20-year-old Romelu Lukaku, who scored 17 goals during an impressive loan spell at West Bromwich Albion last season and has a profile similar to Didier Drogba, the indomitable spearhead of Mourinho's first Chelsea side.

Pellegrini, the former Villarreal, Real Madrid and Malaga coach, has never worked in England before, but the early conclusion of City's transfer business has given him ample time to get to know his squad.

The urbane 59-year-old Chilean has £90 million (\$139 million, 105 million euros) of new talent at his disposal in the shape of Spain pair Jesus Navas and Alvaro Negredo, Brazilian midfielder Fernandinho and Montenegrin forward Stevan Jovetic, all of whom had arrived by late July.

"I think we have the best squad in England," Pellegrini said last week. "We bought four important players, we already had a very good team and with these four players I think we improved a lot."

UEFA throws Metalist out

AFP, Lausanne

Ukrainian side Metalist Kharkiv have been thrown out of this year's Champions League over match-fixing claims, UEFA said on Wednesday.

Metalist had been due to play Schalke of Germany in a play-off to enter the group stage of the competition on August 21 and 27.

UEFA opened disciplinary proceedings against the Ukrainian club in early August after suspicions were raised about matches they were involved in.

Given that qualifying for this year's competition was already under way, the case was heard directly by UEFA's appeals tribunal.

"The UEFA Appeals Body carefully analysed the statements and documents submitted by the club, as well as the statements and documents submitted by the UEFA Disciplinary Inspector and reached the following decision: FC Metalist Kharkiv are disqualified from the 2013/14 UEFA competitions," UEFA said in a statement.

Russia hails Yelena

AFP, Moscow



Russia on Wednesday hailed the stunning triumph of pole vault queen Yelena Isinbayeva at her home world championships in Moscow, hoping her victory would not mark the culmination of an illustrious career.

Isinbayeva's victory at Moscow's Luzhniki stadium late Tuesday galvanized the entire championships and left Russians hoping that the career of their best-loved athlete would not end there.

"I congratulate Yelena Isinbayeva on a bright, emotional and well-earned victory. I wish Yelena new achievements -- in sport and in her personal life!" Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev wrote on Facebook.

Isinbayeva announced afterwards that she intended to take an 18-month break to have a baby but said she could still compete in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games if she still had the condition.

"Continue Yelena! You are wonderful!" said the Soviety Sport daily. "Isinbayeva did not give one chance to her opponents. It would be a shame if she left sport."

"A bird of happiness," said the Sport Express daily. "Yesterday evening, Yelena Isinbayeva made thousands of fans in the Luzhniki stadium happy as well as millions across the country."

The head of Russia's Olympic Committee, Alexander Zhukov, said he would petition the government to ensure that Isinbayeva is honoured with a high state award.

"Yelena Isinbayeva was stunning yesterday. I think her gold is comparable, or even better, than Olympic gold since she came back after a period of not-so-successful performances," he added, quoted by the RIA Novosti news agency.

Loved in Russia for both her sporting prowess and her emotional honesty, Isinbayeva lives in the southern city of Volgograd and is the daughter of an ethnic Russian mother and a father from the Caucasus region of Dagestan.

The leader of Dagestan region, which is battling an Islamist insurgency, also joined in the congratulations. "You are the real pride of Dagestan and Russia," Ramazan Abdulatipov said in a statement. "In the name of the Dagestani people, I wish you further achievements and happiness."

Her exploits in front of packed stands were also a boost for the championships, which until now had failed to create much buzz in the Russian capital and had been criticized for banks of empty seating.

"I could not have believed in the past that 50,000 people could come to Luzhniki to watch athletics," former Olympic long jump champion Tatyana Lebedeva wrote on Soviety Sport.

Her coach Evgeniy Trofimov told Sport Express that he realized Isinbayeva was in the form to capture the title "two weeks before the start of the competition".

He said that Isinbayeva had the potential to jump higher than her 4.89-metre title-winning height and would be able to aim for previously untouched levels of 5.15 or 5.20 if she competes at the Rio Olympics.