

Barkley not for sale

AFP, London

Everton manager Roberto Martinez has claimed that his club would not sell breakthrough Premier League star Ross Barkley even if they received a world-record offer for him.

Barkley, 20, has been one of the most impressive performers during the first half of the season and hit the headlines again on Sunday when his fine late free-kick gave Everton a 2-1 win at Swansea City.

The midfielder made his England debut in September and is being tipped for a place in the squad for next year's World Cup, while Martinez has compared him favourably with Michael Ballack and Paul Gascoigne.

However, the Spaniard has warned potential suitors that even a fee comparable to the £86 million (\$141 million, 103 million euros) that Real Madrid reportedly paid for Gareth Bale would not be enough to prise Barkley away from Goodison Park.

"Ross is in a moment of his career where first, he knows that he needs to carry on developing and this is the perfect place to do that," Martinez said, in comments reported by several British newspapers on Tuesday.

"Second, he is a mad Evertonian and enjoying every single second. And third, we are in the middle of a season where we would never, ever consider disrupting what we have got in our squad now."

"It is not the right time for the player or the club to consider anything. Even if we got a Gareth Bale-size valuation we would never even consider it in January (when the transfer window re-opens)."

Everton are currently in fifth place in the Premier League table.

Spurs hire Sherwood

AFP, London



Tim Sherwood was on Monday appointed head coach of Tottenham with a contract to the end of the 2014-2015 season, the Premier League club announced.

Sherwood had been named as interim coach after Andre Villas-Boas was sacked earlier in December following a 5-0 defeat to Liverpool.

The 44-year-old Sherwood had overseen a 3-2 over Southampton on Sunday.

Chris Ramsey, Les Ferdinand and Steffen Freund will work alongside the former England international midfielder.

"We were extremely reluctant to make a change mid-season, but felt we had to do so in the club's best interests," said Spurs chairman Daniel Levy.

"We have a great squad and we owe them a head coach who will bring out the best in them and allow them to flourish and enjoy a strong, exciting finish to the season."

"We are in the fortunate position of having within our club a talented coach in Tim Sherwood."

"We believe Tim has both the knowledge and the drive to take the squad forward."

Sherwood played 93 matches for Spurs between 1999 and 2003 and also turned out for Blackburn, Norwich, Portsmouth, Watford and Coventry before hanging up his boots in 2005.

He made his mark on Sunday when recalled striker Emmanuel Adebayor, left out in the cold by Villas-Boas, scored twice.



Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech (C) challenges Arsenal playmaker Mesut Ozil (R) during their Premier League encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Fiery derby ends in stalemate

AFP, London



Arsenal missed their chance to return to the top of the Premier League after being held to a bruising 0-0 draw by title rivals Chelsea in a spiteful London derby on Monday.

This was the final English top-flight fixture before Christmas, but there was little festive cheer on display at the Emirates Stadium as Chelsea battered Arsenal with a series of bruising challenges.

John Obi Mikel was fortunate to avoid a red card after the Chelsea midfielder crunched into Mikel Arteta, while Arsenal also complained they should have had a penalty for Willian's challenge on Theo Walcott.

It was a frustrating night for Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, who failed to secure his first win over Jose Mourinho at the 10th attempt and as a result saw his side

waste an opportunity to climb back above leaders Liverpool.

Instead, second placed Arsenal go into the Christmas programme level on points with Liverpool but behind the Anfield outfit on goal difference.

Chelsea, who moved up to fourth and are two points behind Liverpool, finished the more satisfied side after stifling Arsenal with ease and creating the better of the few chances on offer.

Mourinho sent Chelsea out in a 4-5-1 formation, with Fernando Torres as the lone striker, and that cautious approach worked impressively as Arsenal struggled to find any rhythm.

It didn't help that torrential rain and gale-force winds lashed the Emirates throughout the match, making passing something of a lottery.

Frank Lampard made a typically intelligent run to meet Cesar Azpilicueta's cross in

the early stages, but for once the Chelsea midfielder's clinical finishing deserted him and he scuffed a mistimed effort well wide.

Mourinho's men finally cast off their defensive shackles just before the break and almost took the lead when Lampard met Eden Hazard's pass with a volley against the crossbar.

Wenger was growing increasingly vexed on the touchline and he was furious when referee Mike Dean refused to even book Mikel for his aggressive lunge on Arteta.

Mikel's eyes were on the ball when he went into the tackle and Arteta slid in with equal intent, but it was the Chelsea midfielder whose follow-through contained more menace and could easily have left the Spaniard nursing a serious injury.

Arsenal's anger increased when they appealed in vain for a penalty after Willian's challenge caught Walcott on the foot without making contact with the ball.

Willian squandered a golden opportunity to add to Arsenal's angst when he shot straight at Szczesny after a rapid break caught the hosts out-numbered.

Arteta was the victim of another crunching tackle from Ramires, but the Brazilian escaped with just a booking.

By now Walcott, usually so mild mannered, had had enough and the winger responded by chopping down Azpilicueta, earning a yellow card of his own.

The tone of an already fiery match became ever more combustible after Chelsea defender Branislav Ivanovic caught Mesut Ozil and then started a bout of shoving with an incensed Kieran Gibbs.

Arsenal's Tomas Rosicky sought retribution and went into the book for a crude foul on Ivanovic.

It was Arsenal who finished the stronger, with Giroud firing into the side-netting and then forcing Cech to block at his near post.

Jose taunts Arsenal

AFP, London



José Mourinho accused Arsenal of "crying" about decisions that went against them after Chelsea bullied their way to a fiery 0-0 draw at the Emirates Stadium.

Mourinho's side subjected Arsenal to some ferocious challenges as they hassled the Gunners out of their stride in Monday's bruising London derby.

John Obi Mikel was fortunate to avoid a red card after the Chelsea midfielder crunched into Mikel Arteta, while Arsenal also complained they should have had a penalty for Willian's challenge on Theo Walcott.

There were several other bone-jarring tackles that left Arsenal players writhing in agony, and Gunners boss Arsene Wenger seething on the touchline.

But Chelsea manager Mourinho refused to apologise for his team's no-holds-barred approach and instead took the opportunity to get one more dig in on old rival Wenger and his players.

"They like to cry, that's tradition," Mourinho said.

"I prefer to say that English people -- and I give one example, (Chelsea's) Frank Lampard -- would never provoke a situation like that."

"Players from other countries, especially some countries, they have that in their blood."



don't win once. What do you want to call me?"

Fourth placed Chelsea are just two points behind leaders Liverpool heading into the busy Christmas schedule, and Mourinho was adamant his defensive tactics were the right choice on a night when torrential rain and gale-force winds made smooth passing almost impossible.

"We came to win, but it was very important not to lose, because if we lose we are five points behind the leaders," Mourinho said.

"And, with a point, we are two points behind Liverpool and Arsenal. That's a completely different picture. We tried to win, but we are not unhappy with the point."

Wenger inevitably saw it rather differently, but he was careful not to be drawn into a war of words with Mourinho.

"Of course I can understand that," he said with a wry smile when told Mourinho said he thought referee Mike Dean had a good game.

"It's Christmas, so let's give everyone their own opinion and I can have mine."

"I don't think he (Dean) had a great game at all."

"On the pitch it (Mikel's foul) looked bad, but the referee was in a good position."

"As for the challenge in the area, I think it was a penalty. Honestly. If I'm wrong, I apologise."

Gerrard sings Suarez song

REUTERS



England captain Steven Gerrard has acclaimed Liverpool teammate Luis Suarez as the best player in the world on current form.

In 12 appearances this season the red-hot Uruguayan striker has scored 19 goals to fire Liverpool to the top of the Premier League. That is six more than his nearest rival, Argentina and Manchester City forward Sergio Agüero.

Suarez's prolific streak has earned him a new long-term contract at Anfield where he has overcome widespread misgivings after several controversial incidents including one last season when he bit the arm of Chelsea defender Branislav Ivanovic.

"On current form he's the best player in the world," Gerrard said of Suarez.

"Lionel Messi's out injured and Cristiano Ronaldo's had a bit of an injury of late," the Liverpool skipper told Sky Sports television, referring to the number one players at Barcelona and Real Madrid respectively.

"He (Suarez) is certainly the best striker out there. He's proving that with his minutes-to-goals ratio."

The Ivanovic incident resulted in a 10-match domestic suspension that meant the Liverpool striker missed the start of this season.

The 27-year-old Suarez has this season become the first Liverpool player to score at least twice in five consecutive home matches.

He is on course to surpass the Premier League record of 34 goals shared by former England strikers Andy Cole and Alan Shearer.

Cole achieved his haul with Newcastle United in 1993-94. Shearer's was with Blackburn Rovers in 1994-95.

"He will certainly push it close," said Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers after Suarez bagged two goals in a 3-1 win over Cardiff City on Saturday. "He looks like he can score a hat-trick in every game."

Liverpool visit Manchester City, who are one point behind the leaders in third place, on Thursday.

England left back Leighton Baines is likely to make his comeback from injury in Everton's Premier League home match against bottom of the table Sunderland on Thursday.

The defender has been out for five games since fracturing his toe in the 3-3 derby draw against Liverpool last month.

"Leighton Baines is getting really close and I think it's fair to say that, depending on how today and tomorrow go, he should be available," Everton manager Roberto Martinez told a news conference on Monday.

"We have missed Leighton because you can't underestimate his quality, experience and know-how."

Fourth-placed Everton, who have lost only one league game all season, were unbeaten in the five matches Baines missed.

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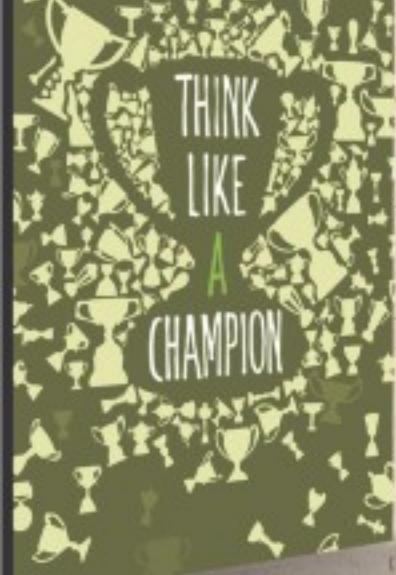
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Michu blow for Swansea

AFP, London

Swansea will be without Spanish striker Michu for up to six weeks as he recovers from an ankle operation, manager Michael Laudrup confirmed.

Michu, 27, has scored 28 goals for the Swans since signing from Rayo Vallecano in the close season in 2012 but has been hampered all this season by ankle and knee problems.

"It's not good news," said Laudrup. "Unfortunately it has been confirmed that he will need an operation.

"It can be done in the next week and he should be back playing in around a month and a half."

The news is a further blow for Swansea after losing winger Nathan Dyer until February after he suffered an ankle ligament injury against Norwich.

France to play three pre-WC friendlies

AFP, Paris

France will play three friendly matches on home soil before departing for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, it was confirmed on Monday.

The French Football Federation said that Les Bleus will play games at the Stade de France on May 27, in Nice on June 1 and in Lille on June 8.

The names of their opponents will be revealed early in the New Year.

Didier Deschamps's squad will get together on May 19 at the national team training centre in Clairefontaine near Paris as they prepare to face Switzerland, Ecuador and Honduras in Group E.

Baines set to return

REUTERS