

'MU move will secure WC spot'

REUTERS, Manchester

Juan Mata hopes his move from Chelsea to Premier League rivals Manchester United will help secure his place in champions Spain's squad for the World Cup in Brazil in June.

Playmaker Mata spoke to the media for the first time on Monday following Saturday's 37.1 million pounds (\$61.22 million) move.

The club revealed he would wear the number eight shirt rather than the number seven used by former greats David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo and Eric Cantona.

The 25-year-old Mata struggled for game time this season under Jose Mourinho, with Chelsea's manager preferring an attacking midfield trio comprising Brazilian internationals Oscar and Willian and Belgium winger Eden Hazard.

That led to fears that if he continued to be overlooked he would struggle to claim a seat on the plane to Brazil.

Mata said getting regular game time was crucial ahead of the June finals. "It was really important," he told a news conference ahead of Tuesday's Premier League match with Cardiff City.

"As you know the Spanish squad is really difficult to get in. Lots of players are fighting to be in the last 23 going to Brazil so I hope this is going to be a great chance for me to keep playing, to keep being fit and to keep showing to the manager of the national team that I want to be there and I have to be there."



Manchester United's latest signing Spanish midfielder Juan Mata holds his jersey at the club training ground in Manchester on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pirlo best in Italy

AFP, Rome

Italian football great Andrea Pirlo was named Serie A player of the 2012/13 season on Monday by his fellow players.

The 34-year-old Juventus playmaker -- a pivotal player in the Italy side that won the 2006 World Cup and is set for another appearance in the finals in Brazil later this year -- said the award meant extra because it came from his fellow players.

The former Brescia, Inter Milan and AC Milan star -- nicknamed 'Mozart' by the Juventus fans for his supreme talent -- was also named in the team of the season.

"The fact the vote was by my colleagues makes it extra special," he said before adding he would be remaining with Serie A champions Juventus.

"That is for sure," added Pirlo, who was also Serie A player of the year in 2012.

Aguero warns title rivals

AFP, London

Sergio Aguero has warned Manchester City's title rivals he will do everything in his power to fire the club to Premier League glory this season.

Aguero scored a hat-trick in City's FA Cup fourth round win over Watford to take his goal tally so far this term to a remarkable 25 from 24 appearances.

While Aguero's second half treble once again showcased his sublime skills, more significantly the goals spared City's blushes after Manuel Pellegrini's team trailed 2-0 against second tier Watford.

Pellegrini, whose side continue their challenge for the Premier League title at Tottenham on Wednesday, later branded City's defending in the 4-2

win as a "disaster" and said he could have made 11 substitutions at half-time.

Fortunately for the City manager, Aguero is in the form of his life and shows little sign of being slowed by the calf injury that sidelined him over the Christmas period.

Since returning to fitness, Aguero has scored six times in four matches to keep City firmly in the hunt for an unprecedented quadruple trophy haul.

The 25-year-old is happy to take the plaudits when he shines, but he is more concerned with ensuring City finish the year with silverware.

"The important thing is the goals contribute to the team's victories and we win titles," Aguero said.

"I don't have any specific goals to reach but (I want) as many as possible. We weren't expecting to score four

goals. We knew at half-time we needed to improve and in the end we won and we have made it to the next round. We are happy with that."

City travel to White Hart Lane unbeaten in their last 10 matches in all competitions and having scored 22 goals in their previous five games.

But Pellegrini's team will have to maintain that blistering pace to keep in touch with leaders Arsenal, who have been in fine form themselves.

The Gunners can open up a four-point lead at the top if they win at Southampton on Tuesday, leaving City will little margin for error when they arrive in north London.

If Aguero does draw a rare blank on Wednesday, Pellegrini can still turn to a battery of other top-class strikers, including Montenegro international Stevan Jovetic, who has finally recovered from a series of ailments.

Falcao to fight to bitter end

AFP, Lisbon

Colombian international striker Radamel Falcao said on Monday he would do everything in his power to recover from his serious knee injury in time for the World Cup finals in June.

The 27-year-old -- who has yet to appear at world football's showpiece tournament -- ruptured the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee during his side Monaco's 3-0 win in the French Cup over amateur side Chasselay last Wednesday.

However, Falcao, who underwent an operation on Saturday in Oporto, Portugal, said he would draw on the slight hope he had been given by the surgeon that he would be fit for the finals in Brazil.

"They told me there was a slim chance of me being fit for the World Cup finals and I am going to cling to that hope," he said at a press conference in the city where he first made his name in European football for Porto.

Balotelli fined for gesture

REUTERS



Maverick striker Mario Balotelli has been fined 10,000 euros (\$13,700) for making a provocative gesture to rival Cagliari supporters after scoring against them in AC Milan's 2-1 win on Sunday.

Serie A's disciplinary tribunal said Balotelli had "angered the crowd with a provocative and insulting gesture" after claiming the equaliser from a free kick.

Balotelli was also booked for the eighth time this season over the incident and will miss Milan's next league game at home to Torino through accumulated yellow cards.

The 23-year-old has already served a three-match ban this season after being sent off for insulting match officials at the end of the game at home to Napoli.

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli said on Monday that Balotelli needed love and would eventually learn from his mistakes.

"Balotelli will learn," Prandelli told reporters. "He will need a lot of love, he is a guy who we give a lot to and is important for Milan."

The AC Milan forward added to his long list of misdemeanours on Sunday when he was booked for making what Italian media described as a vulgar gesture with his hand to Cagliari supporters after scoring in his side's 2-1 win.

He was booked for the incident and then got into an altercation with Cagliari defenders.

Prandelli, who has dropped Balotelli in the past for misbehaving with his club, said he was encouraged by comments from new Milan coach Clarence Seedorf.

"Seedorf has used the right words with Balotelli," said Prandelli. "I'm sure that with his help we can get the best out of Mario."

Black Cats incensed

AFP, London

Sunderland are taking legal advice after the team's former manager Paolo Di Canio launched a scathing attack on the struggling Premier League club.

Di Canio branded the Black Cats "weak" as a club and called some of his former players "cowards", with his strongest criticism reserved for captain John O'Shea, Phil Bardsley and Lee Cattermole.

In his comments over the weekend, the controversial Italian, who was sacked in September after just 13 games in charge, also suggested he was too good for Sunderland and confirmed his intention to make his name as a manager in England with another Premier League club.

Sunderland's owners have been infuriated by Di Canio's outburst and hit back in a statement on Monday that hinted they were considering legal action.



Celebrity actors Zahid Hasan and Mahfuz Ahmed inaugurate the 2nd Crown Cement Badminton Tournament at the company's head office in Gulshan on Sunday. The company's chairman Jahangir Alam, additional managing director Alamgir Kabir and DMD of Eastern Bank Limited Hasan Rashid were also present.

PHOTO: COURTESY

Iniesta back for Barca

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona quartet Andres Iniesta, Carles Puyol, Alex Song and Martin Montoya have recovered from minor injuries and are included in the squad for Wednesday's King's Cup quarterfinal second leg at home to Levante.

Playmaker Iniesta was sidelined for a couple of weeks with a bruised knee while centre back Puyol hurt his left leg in last week's 4-1 first-leg triumph.

With the record King's Cup winners holding a comfortable lead, Barca coach Gerardo Martino has rested regulars Xavi, Sergio Busquets and Dani Alves for the game at the Nou Camp, the club said on their website.

Taylor steers NZ to series win

PTI, Hamilton



India slumped to their second consecutive series defeat overseas as New Zealand rode on Ross Taylor's unbeaten century to thrash the visitors by seven wickets in the fourth one-dayer and take an unassailable 3-0 lead in the five-match rubber here on Tuesday.

Chasing 279 for victory, the Kiwis reached 280 for three in 48.1 overs with Taylor scoring a match-winning 127-ball 112 not out to take the hosts home with 11 balls to spare.

Taylor also shared two important partnerships -- first with Kane Williamson (60) putting on 130-run for the third wicket and then with skipper Brendon McCullum (49 not out), an unbroken 92 runs for the fourth wicket.

Earlier, India skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Ravindra Jadeja had produced

magnificent late onslaught after opener Rohit Sharma scored a half-century, to guide India to 278 for five in their allotted 50 overs.

In reply, New Zealand got-off to a rollicking start with Jesse Ryder and Martin Gupitll mistreating the Indian bowling attack. The two of them scored a flurry of boundaries, especially off Mohammed Shami's bowling, and together hit 10 fours and a six in their opening stand of 54 runs.

But once again Ryder failed to sustain and was bowled in the eight over by first-change Varun Aaron. He scored 19 off 18 balls with four boundaries.

SCORES IN BRIEF

INDIA: 278 for 5 in 50 overs (R Sharma 79, Rayudu 37, Dhoni 79 not out, Jadeja 62 not out; Southee 2-36)

NEW ZEALAND: 280 for 3 in 48.1 overs (Gupitll 35, Williamson 60, Taylor 112 not out, B McCullum 49 not out; Shami 1-61)

Result: New Zealand won by 7 wickets and lead 5-match ODI series 3-0.

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