

## City attempt to stay on track in 4 competitions

## Pellegrini faces FA Cup selection dilemma at Norwich

NORWICH, United Kingdom, Jan 8, (AFP): Manuel Pellegrini faces an FA Cup selection dilemma at Norwich on Saturday as he attempts to keep Manchester City on track in four competitions.

Pellegrini has indicated the FA Cup is bottom of his priority list in the midst of a testing January schedule that consists of a minimum of seven matches, and potentially as many as nine.

City's manager has even gone as far as to suggest that his side will struggle to find time to play all of their fixtures if they reach the finals of all three cup competitions.

A run in the Champions League is a genuine prospect thanks to a kind draw, while Pellegrini's team can

reach Wembley in the League Cup by overturning a 2-1 semi-final first-leg deficit against Everton at the end of this month.

With the focus on those two competitions in addition to a Premier League challenge, Pellegrini will give some consideration to squad rotation as his team travel to Norwich for Saturday's FA Cup third-round tie.

In the Chilean's mind, winning a quadruple of the Champions League, the Premier League and England's two major cup competitions is impossible.

"It's a lot of games. If you ask me, I always prefer to play in all the competitions," Pellegrini said.

"But I am worried about the FA Cup, because after the early rounds,

you start having to postpone your Premier League games to continue in the tournament.

"I am not sure if you can continue in all the competitions. I think if you play in the semi-final of the FA Cup and you are in the semi-final of the Champions League, then you don't

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have time to play all of your Premier League games."

While the fixture schedulers would surely find time to squeeze in all of City's games somewhere, Pellegrini's point is that pushing for success on four fronts is bound to result in a fail-

ure somewhere along the line.

Their recent form suggests the strain may be showing: just two wins from their last five fixtures in all competitions, culminating in Wednesday's League Cup defeat at Goodison Park.

City's defence continues to look vulnerable in the absence of their captain Vincent Kompany with a calf injury, with Martin Demichelis at fault for allowing Romelu Lukaku the space to head Everton's first-leg winner.

Pellegrini, though, feels he has the attacking talent to hurt Norwich, even if he decides to rest Argentina forward Sergio Agüero, who is still regaining full fitness after a heel injury.

"We've got good players in the squad. But the way we play, our men-

tality, we give chances but we also create a lot of chances. If our players get chances, normally they will score," he said.

A run of three wins from their last four games means Norwich go into the tie with renewed belief after easing their Premier League relegation concerns.

A successful holiday period means they sit six points clear of the bottom three, easing the pressure that was beginning to build at Carrow Road and allowing them to view the meeting with Pellegrini's side as a more welcome distraction.

The game also marks the first anniversary of Alex Neil taking charge of the club after moving south from

Scottish club Hamilton.

May's Championship final win was a high point and the manager believes the club is moving in the right direction.

"To get back-to-back wins is very important. It takes pressure off the games coming up and we need to approach them in the same manner," he said.

"Belief comes with wins, that is the bottom line. People might watch you, you don't play well and lose and everybody will write you off but if you can get a bit of momentum it is massive.

"We have found a nice balance at the moment, we are looking threatening going forward and that is now two clean sheets."



Manchester City's Argentinian striker Sergio Aguero (left), battles with Everton's Argentinian defender Ramiro Funes Mori (right), during the English League Cup semifinal first leg football match between Everton and Manchester City at Goodison Park in Liverpool, north west England on Jan 6. (AFP)

## Gabonese named African Player of Year

## Aubameyang dethrones Toure

ABUJA, Jan 8, (AFP): Gabon and Borussia Dortmund star striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang on Thursday upstaged favourite Yaya Toure to win a first African Player of the Year Award.

In a vote of coaches and technical directors of Confederation of African Football (CAF) member-nations, Aubameyang tallied 143 points ahead of Manchester City and Ivory Coast star Toure, who scored 136 points and was bidding for a fifth successive

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award.

Swansea City and Ghana striker Andre Ayew was third on 112 points.

It was sweet revenge for Aubameyang after he lost the 2014 prize to Toure who scooped the prestigious individual accolade in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014.

The 26-year-old Gabon skipper was in outstanding form for German Bundesliga club Dortmund in the year under review.

He has also had his best start to a season since arriving from Saint-Etienne in 2013, scoring 18 goals in 17 Bundesliga games and 27 in all competitions.

That kind of form has seen him linked with a winter transfer window move away from the Bundesliga with Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United all linked with him.

Frenchman Herve Renard, who led the Ivory Coast to the 2015 African Cup of Nations, was named Coach of the Year.

This was his second such award after the 47-year-old also led Zambia to upset favourites Ivory Coast to lift a first-ever Nations Cup trophy in 2012.

Compatriot Bruno Metsu has also clinched two Coach of the Year Awards when he was in charge of Senegal in 2001



Gabonese striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang poses with the African Player of the Year Award during the 2015 Glo-CAF Awards in Abuja on Jan 7. (AFP)

and 2002.

Ivory Coast were named Team of the Year.

Other award winners included Cameroon's Gaell Enganamouit (Women's Player of the Year), TP Mazembe (Club of the Year), Nigeria Under-23 midfielder Oghenekaro Etebo (Most Promising Talent) and Nigeria's Under-17 star Victor Osimhen (Youth Player of the Year).

Charles Kumi Gyamfi (Ghana) and Samuel Mbatia (Cameroun) were recognised as African Legends.

Gabon president Ali Bongo Ondimba paid tribute to Aubameyang who will be key to the country's hopes of lifting the African

Cup of Nations on home soil in 2017.

"The epitome of commitment and success at the highest level, this exceptional Gabonese demonstrated dazzling intuition and an attack of unparalleled velocity," said the Gabon president in a statement.

"His genius is a major asset for the Panthers in preparation for the next African Cup of Nations.

Ivory Coast captain and Manchester City star Yaya Toure has said he was disappointed after narrowly missing out on a record fifth straight CAF African Player of the Year Award. The 32-year-old midfielder has previously bagged the prestigious individual accolade in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014.

Given his form at Manchester City and that he led Ivory Coast to victory in the African Cup of Nations in 2015 he might easily have won a fifth award.

But free-scoring Gabon and Borussia Dortmund star Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang tallied 143 points to upset Yaya in a vote done by coaches or technical directors of CAF member-nations.

"I am disappointed but that won't take anything from anybody. I am sure Andre (Ayew) is also disappointed after what he did last year," said the Elephants captain.

"This is not the time to complain. We will all go back and continue to work hard."

Livewire striker Aubameyang had been strongly tipped to clinch this year's prize after scoring 18 goals in 17 Bundesliga games and 27 in all competitions this season.

The 26-year-old Gabon skipper said he was delighted to win the award for the first time while praising the abundant talent in his native country.

"We have good players and a good national team in Gabon," declared Aubameyang after he was named the best African player for the past year and dedicated it to his country.

LONDON, Jan 8, (AFP): Arsenal's sights are set on the Premier League title but Gunners defender Calum Chambers says the possibility of becoming the first club in the modern era to lift the FA Cup for a third successive season will fire their defence of the trophy.

Arsene Wenger's side face Sunderland in the third round at the Emirates Stadium on Saturday eight months after their 4-0 victory over Aston Villa in last season's final.

And having ended the club's nine-year wait for a trophy by beating Hull City 12 months earlier, the Gunners last suffered defeat in the FA Cup way back in February 2013.

The north Londoners sit top of the Premier League and beat struggling Sunderland 3-1 in December, meaning they will face Sam Allardyce's team confident of extending their impressive run.

With the Champions League due to resume next month, Arsenal's chances of becoming the first club since Blackburn Rovers in the 1880s to make it three FA Cup wins in a row will hinge on their ability to manage the demands of competing on different fronts.

But Chambers insists there will be no lack of incentive to deliver success in the main domestic cup competition.

The centre-back, who could be handed a rare starting opportunity if Wenger rotates his squad, said: "I think for every Englishman it is a very memorable cup. It gives that edge to it so you want to win it even more.

"It would be an amazing achievement to win it for the third time in a row and I'm sure everyone will be everything to get there.

"I wouldn't say we are discussing it but we are thinking about it. Anything in the

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cup can happen, it is not always straightforward.

"You have to have both short range and long-range goals. A long-range goal would be to break records, win trophies and do well, so I think everyone strives for that."

Wenger has ruled out a return for Alexis Sanchez who has a hamstring problem, while Santi Cazorla and Tomas Rosicky are still out.

"Will a young player or two start? I haven't decided yet," Wenger said.

"The thinking is to give absolutely everything to qualify. We are the holders of the cup and I know as well by experience that it is very important that you get in the competition and that you have a successful third round."

Meanwhile, Black Cats boss Allardyce has criticised the scheduling of the next round of Premier League matches in the mid-week following this weekend's third round ties.

Allardyce claims it de-values the FA Cup and will force him into making several changes this weekend.

He says his priority is securing a 10th successive season of top flight football at the Stadium of Light, with his side facing a crucial visit to fellow strugglers Swansea four days after their trip to London.

Teenage defender Thomas Beadling and back-up goalkeeper Jordan Pickford, 21, are expected to be involved for the 1973 FA Cup winners.

Allardyce is unlikely to risk veteran defenders John O'Shea and Wes Brown, while nine-goal top scorer Jermain Defoe and key midfielder Lee Cattermole are also set to be rested for Wednesday's trip to South Wales.

Injuries to Younes Kaboul, Seb Larsson and Jack Rodwell further lessen the options available to Allardyce, who said: "We've got a ridiculously short period of time to recover after the Arsenal cup match, so I will be making changes.

"That's not me disrespecting the FA Cup, it's me having to deal with the situation caused by the diabolical way the games have been scheduled. The staff are working very hard to help the lads recover."



Crystal Palace's English defender Scott Dann (right), vies with Chelsea's Brazilian midfielder Oscar during the English Premier League football match between Crystal Palace and Chelsea at Selhurst Park in south London on Jan 3. (AFP)

## China dismiss head coach Perrin

## MLS releases full 2016 schedule

LOS ANGELES, Jan 8, (Agencies): The Portland Timbers will face a replay of their Major League Soccer Cup final classic against the Columbus Crew when the new season kicks off in March.

Portland's opening day rematch at home to Columbus was the pick of an intriguing 2016 full season schedule released by MLS chiefs on Thursday.

All 20 teams will be in action when the league kicks off on March 6.

Five-time champions the Los Angeles Galaxy host four-time champs DC United and Montreal visit Vancouver in an all-Canada clash on opening day, while the New York Red Bulls host Toronto and Italian Sebastian Giovinco -- the 2015 MLS Most Valuable Player in his first North American season.

The schedule includes a previously announced break from June 3-17 to accommodate the Copa America Centenario and "rivalry weeks" featuring match-ups of regional rivals.

Among those rivalries, New York City FC will host the New York Red Bulls at Yankee Stadium on May 21 and July 3. The two Big Apple clubs will also meet at Red Bulls' Harrison, New Jersey, ground on July 24.

The 2016 season will also feature an increased MLS presence on US television, with nationally televised matches again set for Fridays on UniMas and Sundays on the Fox and ESPN families.

Hollywood funnyman and football fan Will Ferrell was introduced Thursday as the latest addition to the ownership group of Major League Soccer expansion franchise Los Angeles Football Club.

"This is not a joke," Ferrell said upon his introduction by US footballing legend and fellow co-owner Mia Hamm at a press conference at Los Angeles' Union Station.

Ferrell joins an ownership group that numbers 25 and includes Hamm and her husband, former baseball player Nomar Garciaparra, basketball great Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Vietnamese American entrepreneur Henry Nguyen and entertainment mogul Peter Guber.

Ferrell's most famous prior football connection was his role as a youth coach in the comedy film "Kicking & Screaming".

But he said he played the game as a youngster in suburban Irvine, California, his wife, actress Viveca Paulin, played in college and his three sons still play.

China dismissed their French coach Alain Perrin on Friday after a disappointing World Cup qualifying campaign. The Chinese Football Association officials met with Perrin on Thursday and opted to remove him despite two games remaining in

the second round of their World Cup and Asian Cup qualifying campaign.

China, ranked 82nd in the world by FIFA, are third in Group C with two home matches against Maldives and Qatar to come in March.

The Qataris have already secured top spot in the group and a place in the third round of the World Cup qualifiers in Asia with China chasing one of the best runners-up spots to join them.

Porto have sacked their coach Julen Lopetegui after the Spaniard failed to deliver a trophy last season and with no improvement in sight during the current term, the club said on Friday.

Former player and assistant coach Rui Barros will oversee an interim period on the Porto bench, the club said in a brief statement.

Lopetegui joined on a three-year deal in May 2014 after winning the European under-19's and under 21's championships with Spain in 2011 and 2013 and a spell at the helm of La Liga's Rayo Vallecano.

The 49-year-old coach leaves Porto in third place in the national league, level on points with second placed Benfica and only four points adrift of leaders Sporting Lisbon, to whom Porto lost 2-0 last weekend.

Argentine forward Rodrigo Palacio has extended his contract with Serie A leaders Inter Milan, the Italian club said on their website (www.inter.it) on Friday.

Palacio, a member of Argentina's squad at the 2014 World Cup, has committed to the Serie A team until June 2017. The 22-year-old joined Inter from Genoa in 2012 and has played 132 matches for them, scoring 54 goals. He has netted only once in 13 appearances this season.

"There's nothing like playing for this club. I'm delighted and I can't wait to be involved in the big matches this season has in store for us," Palacio said.

Southampton manager Ronald Koeman has warned his players that they will be made to sit "in the stands" if they attempt to force through transfers away from St Mary's in January.

Striker Sadio Mane, who lost his starting place for the defeat by Norwich City after showing up late for a team meeting, and holding midfielder Victor Wanyama have both been linked with moves to other clubs in the transfer window.

"If there is any player thinking if his behaviour is not good that makes it more easier for the player, then I'll put the player in the stands until the end of their contract," the Dutchman said ahead of Saturday's FA Cup third-round tie against Crystal

## Africa Players of the Year

## Africa Players of the Year

1970 — Salif Keita, Mali  
1971 — Ibrahim Sunday, Ghana  
1972 — Cherif Souleymane, Guinea  
1973 — Tshimen Bwanga, Zaire  
1974 — Paul Moukila, Congo  
1975 — Ahmed Faras, Morocco  
1976 — Roger Milla, Cameroon  
1977 — Tarak Dhiab, Tunisia  
1978 — Karim Abdoul Razak, Ghana  
1979 — Thomas N'Kono, Cameroon  
1980 — Jean Manga Onguene, Cameroon  
1981 — Lakhdar Belloumi, Algeria  
1982 — Thomas N'Kono, Cameroon  
1983 — Mahmoud Al Khatib, Egypt  
1984 — Theophile Abega, Cameroon  
1985 — Mohamed Timoumi,

## Morocco

1986 — Badou Zaki, Morocco  
1987 — Rabah Madjer, Algeria  
1988 — Kalusha Bwalya, Zambia  
1989 — George Weah, Liberia  
1990 — Roger Milla, Cameroon  
1991 — Abedi Pele, Ghana  
1992 — Abedi Pele, Ghana  
1993 — Abedi Pele, Ghana  
1994 — George Weah, Liberia (FF)  
1994 — Emmanuel Amunike, Nigeria (CAF)  
1995 — George Weah, Liberia  
1996 — Nwankwo Kanu, Nigeria  
1997 — Victor Ikpeba, Nigeria  
1998 — Mustapha Hadji, Morocco  
1999 — Nwankwo Kanu, Nigeria  
2000 — Patrick Mboma, Cameroon  
2001 — El Hadji Diouf, Senegal

2002 — El Hadji Diouf, Senegal  
2003 — Samuel Eto'o, Cameroon  
2004 — Samuel Eto'o, Cameroon  
2005 — Samuel Eto'o, Cameroon  
2006 — Didier Drogba, Ivory Coast  
2007 — Frederic Kanoute, Mali  
2008 — Emmanuel Adebayor, Togo  
2009 — Didier Drogba, Ivory Coast  
2010 — Samuel Eto'o, Cameroon  
2011 — Yaya Toure, Ivory Coast  
2012 — Yaya Toure, Ivory Coast  
2013 — Yaya Toure, Ivory Coast  
2014 — Yaya Toure, Ivory Coast  
2015 — Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, Gabon

Note: From 1970-94 the award given by France Football magazine. Since 1995, given by African Football Confederation. (AP)



Wenger