

Italian Cup Roma on course

AFP, Rome AS Roma, languishing in mid-table in Serie A this season, took a giant step towards the last four of the Italian Cup Thursday with a 2-1 quarter-final, first leg win at Second Division side Vicenza.

Roma, who rested playmaker and captain Francesco Totti, took a deserved lead in the 29th minute. Counter-attacking swiftly from deep inside their own half, Davide Bombardini played an intelligent one-two with Frenchman Vincent Vandela before crossing for Vincenzo Montella to head home from close range.

Italy international Marco Delvecchio doubled Roma's lead in the 67th minute, converting Montella's neat cut-back with his right foot a yard from goal.

Vicenza rallied after falling further behind and halved the deficit two minutes later. Andrea Zanchetta's 20-yard free-kick was poorly struck but took a massive deflection off the wall to deceive Francesco Antonioli whose outstretched hand could not prevent the ball from creeping over the line.

But despite a spirited search for an equaliser by the home side, Roma dug deep to hold on. Vicenza's Vasco Faisca was sent off in stoppage-time for a second bookable offence.

On Wednesday Perugia took advantage of a weakened Juventus side to battle back from a goal down to win 2-1 in their first leg tie in a game watched by less than 1000 spectators at the Delle Alpi Stadium. The Turin giants rested several key players including Alessandro Del Piero but they still managed to take the lead through young Uruguayan Marcelo Zalayeta just two minutes from the break.

However Perugia clinched their first leg advantage with a double from Fabrizio Miccoli in the 44th and 53rd minutes.

Fowler deal off

AFP, London

A England striker Robbie Fowler confirmed Thursday that he had pulled the plug on his proposed seven-million-pound (£11-million-dollar) move from Leeds United to Premiership rivals Manchester City.

Fowler told Sky Sports: "I had the opportunity to think things over and I wanted to stay at Leeds United."

"I am happy to do so now and I want to do my best for the club." City chairman David Bernstein said: "I had a call out of the blue from Robbie's agent, George Scott, to tell me he wasn't coming."

"Everything was in place. This has come as quite a surprise. Robbie is a great player, I'm disappointed," Bernstein added. Scott told Sky earlier Thursday: "He (Fowler) had time to reflect on the deal and realised it was not the deal for him although he was flattered by (City coach) Kevin Keegan's interest."

There had been fears that the deal would collapse on medical grounds as 27-year-old England international Fowler has been sidelined for much of this season with a hip injury.

But Scott said Fowler had passed his medical and was happy with the financial package on offer despite reports he had to take a 7,000-pound-a-week (£1,200 dollars) pay cut to join former England coach Keegan at Maine Road.

"Everything was agreed financially," Scott insisted. "He passed his medical. During the medical he had time to reflect and has decided this is not the right move for him."

City had hoped that Fowler, who made his name at hometown club Liverpool, would have been in their squad for Saturday's match against Newcastle.



THE SOCCER COLLECTION! Italian fashion designer Giorgio Armani (C) with football stars (from L-R) Georgija's Kakha Kaladze of AC Milan, Christian Vieri of Inter Milan, Portuguese Luis Figo of Real Madrid, Ukrainian Andriy Shevchenko of AC Milan, Fabio Cannavaro of Inter Milan and Alessandro Del Piero of Juventus at the end of Armani's fashion parade during the last day of Autumn-Winter 2003-2004 men's fashion week in Milan on January 16.

Serie A preview

Romance in the air!

AFP, Rome

Upstarts Chievo look more like thoroughbred horses than 'flying donkeys' as they continue to defy the odds by charging their way into contention for the Italian championship. Four points off the lead with almost half the campaign over, the tiny Verona club are perfectly placed to eclipse their performance last season - their first in Italy's top flight - in which they qualified for the UEFA Cup after finishing fifth.

On Sunday night the fifth-placed minnows host champions Juventus, level on points but ahead on goal difference, in a romantic encounter at the Bentegodi stadium, just a few kilometres from the balcony where love blossomed for Romeo and Juliet. The contest may not be as bloody as when the Montagues and the Capulets went head to head, but it could have a huge psychological bearing on the race for the title. Despite being labelled as 'one season wonders', Chievo have continued to flourish in the role of underdog this term - they have already beaten current league leaders AC Milan, title rivals Lazio and 2001 champions AS Roma.

Chievo coach Luigi Del Neri has been overwhelmed by his side's spirit, which has transcended the club's need to balance the books. "It's an achievement nobody at the club could have ever imagined," said the affable 52-year-old, one of Italy's finest footballing tacticians. "The squad has changed as we had to sell in the summer, so I thought to repeat last season's achievements would, quite frankly, be impossible. But we have a never-say-die spirit and that is one of the secrets of our success."

"Maybe we are not playing as well as last year, but we have more experience and know how to handle ourselves better." Owned by the wealthy Campedelli family, makers of festive cakes, Chievo are from the smallest community ever to be represented in the Italian First Division, a borough of less than 3,000 people. After nearly 60 years in the amateur leagues, Chievo turned professional in 1986 when they were promoted to the professional ranks of Serie C2, the Italian Third Division. When they reached the Second Division, fans of their more illustrious neighbours Hellas Verona, with whom they now share a ground, joked that "mules will fly the day Chievo meet us in Serie A" - hence the nickname. Last season, as Chievo were

cracking open the champagne after booking a place in Europe, Verona were relegated to the Second Division. In Sunday's other action, table-toppers AC Milan welcome Piacenza to the San Siro while Lazio, in third place, entertain Udinese at the Stadio Olimpico.

Second-placed Inter Milan, level on points with leaders and city rivals AC Milan, face a tough challenge in Umbria against Perugia, 2-1 winners over Juventus in the first leg of their Italian Cup quarter-final on Wednesday. Inter defender Ivan Cordoba has identified Fabrizio Miccoli, scorer of both of Perugia's goals in midweek, as the biggest threat. "He's exceptionally quick. We'll have to keep an eye on him all the time. We can't afford to give him a metre," he said.

FIXTURES

Saturday (1400 GMT kick-off unless stated): Parma v Empoli (1700 GMT), Reggina v Bologna (1930 GMT). Sunday: AC Milan v Piacenza, Atalanta v AS Roma, Chievo v Juventus (1930 GMT), Lazio v Udinese, Modena v Brescia, Perugia v Inter Milan, Torino v Como.

Ronaldinho eyes Inter move

AFP, Rome

Paris St Germain's Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldinho said Thursday he was interested in joining big-spending Italian club Inter Milan for the start of next season. "I feel ready to come to Italy," he told the Corriere dello Sport.

"To wear the shirt of Inter Milan would be a big achievement for me as we are talking about one of Italy's most famous clubs." Ronaldinho is a big fan of Inter president Massimo Moratti whose team are lying second in Serie A, level on points with city rivals AC Milan who have a better goal difference.

"Moratti is a great man. He wants to build a successful side using great players," Ronaldinho added. "I like this mentality. This is the right road to take, one that I prefer and the supporters too." PSG bought the 22-year-old Brazilian for 6.5 million euros from Gremio Porto Alegre two seasons ago.

Ronaldinho became a regular with Brazil, playing a starring role in their World Cup success in Japan and South Korea last year. He knocked England out in the quarter-finals with a long-range freekick which caught out veteran keeper David Seaman, who strayed from his line and watched helplessly as the ball sailed over his head. But since his Asian adventure Ronaldinho has struggled to shine in a mediocre PSG side which currently lies eighth in the French First Division.

Wenger aghast

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger Thursday branded world champions Brazil's friendly away to China next month as "nonsense". Wenger's reigning English champions and current league leaders could lose Brazil midfielder and 2002 World Cup winner Gilberto Silva for the February 12 fixture as the South American side have had to promise to take a full-strength side in order to guarantee their valuable appearance fee.

Wenger desperately wants to keep Gilberto in England and avoid him getting injured in what the Frenchman clearly regards as a meaningless encounter. "We will have to see whether we can keep him here as it's nonsense for Brazil to be playing in China in February," Wenger said.

Zimbabwe step up security

AFP, Harare

Police in Zimbabwe have vowed to step up security ahead of World Cup cricket matches due to be played here next month, newspaper reports said Friday. "The situation is very much under control," police commissioner Augustine Chihuri was quoted as saying by the state-run Herald newspaper. A Zimbabwean coalition of civic and political groups on Thursday vowed to hold widespread anti-government demonstrations ahead of the tournament.

"We are aware that there are certain people and influences that would not want to see peace prevail in this country, but let me assure members of the public that we will host the cricket games in peace," Chihuri said. Police this week accused the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) of planning to disrupt the cricket matches.

Primera Liga preview

Who will rule Madrid?

AFP, Madrid

The Madrid derby between Real and Atletico is a more friendly rivalry than that between Real Madrid and Barcelona but both sides still desperately want to claim supremacy in the Spanish capital. Sunday's match has an added edge because it is the first time in three seasons that the two clubs will meet in the league, Atletico having suffered what is usually described by their fans as "Two Years in Hell" following their surprise relegation at the end of the 1999-2000 season.

"When the two teams meet you can forget the form book," said Real keeper Iker Casillas this week. Real are in second place in the league, with 36 points from 17 games, and snapping at the heels of leaders Real Sociedad who have just a one-point advantage. Atletico are back in eighth with 24 points but, curiously, have beaten or drawn with the five teams they have played who are currently above them.

"But who doesn't get worried when he has to face Real's strikers," joked Mono Burgos, Atletico's Argentine goalkeeper, who will have to keep out Raul, Ronaldo and the rest. The mutual respect between the two clubs extends off the field, in sharp contrast to the vitriol regularly spat out between Real and Barcelona. Real president Florentino Perez was one of the first to congratulate Atletico when they secured promotion last summer.

"Real need Atletico in the Spanish First Division. Atletico are a club with a great tradition and our derby season and showed their true

matches always have a special place in the calendar. They are friends and neighbours," added Perez. The relative success of Burgos and Casillas between the posts will be one of the key factors in the match, as will the ability of Real's Raul and Atletico's Fernando Torres in getting the ball past them.

The pair of strikers have had parallel careers. Raul, now 25 and already a veteran of 300 league games, was a member of Atletico's youth teams until their controversial club president Jesus Gil dismantled them as a budget-saving measure while Fernando Torres, 18, spent his early teens learning his trade at Real until he was seduced across the city. Torres has already found the net nine times this season, compared to Raul's eight goals, and this spring looks on course to become the youngest Spanish international since Raul pulled on a Spanish jersey as a teenager.

"Fernando Torres has all the talent to be one of the best strikers ever. He's still young and so I am not going to burden him with other comments. Let me just say, he's very, very good," said Ronaldo on Thursday, no mean goalgetter himself. The Brazilian World Cup winner and 2002 World Player of the Year has fond memories of his only other league game against Atletico.

In 1997, wearing the colours of Barcelona, he scored a hat trick in a 5-2 drubbing of Atletico. Despite the Madrid derby hogging the headline, Real Sociedad could ensure on Saturday that they end the weekend holding on to the top spot with a victory over visiting Celta Vigo. Sociedad are unbeaten so far this season and showed their true

credentials after going two down at Valencia last weekend, by coming back to draw 2-2. The Basques have now set their sights on remaining undefeated for the first half of the season, while Celta have lost their last two games and will also be without their influential defender Fernando Caceres, who is suspended.

The other big game of the weekend pits Barcelona against reigning champions Valencia. Valencia are in third with 29 points while Barcelona languish down in ninth with 23 points. "We've been playing better than last year but that doesn't always translate into points so the one thing I want against Barca is a bit of luck to come in our direction for a change, then I won't be able to complain about anything else," complained Valencia coach Rafa Benitez on Thursday.

The Andalusian derby between Sevilla and Malaga will be played at midday on Sunday due to police concern about security, with crowd trouble inside and outside grounds having been a regular feature at games between the two clubs in the past.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off GMT): Real Sociedad v Celta Vigo (1900), Barcelona v Valencia (2030). Sunday: Sevilla v Malaga (1100), Alaves v Osasuna (1600), Deportivo La Coruna v Athletic Bilbao (1600), Real Mallorca v Recreativo Huelva (1600), Racing Santander v Real Betis (1600), Rayo Vallecano v Valladolid (1600), Villarreal v Espanyol (1600). Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid (1930) s

Premiership preview

Now or never for MU

AFP, London

Paul Scholes has warned his Manchester United team-mates that their title ambitions could be dead and buried if they fail to beat Chelsea at Old Trafford on Saturday. The England midfielder regards the showdown with Claudio Ranieri's side as a must-win match if United are to keep the pressure on Arsenal, who will not play until Sunday's Highbury clash with struggling West Ham but start the weekend five points clear.

After setbacks at Blackburn and Middlesbrough over Christmas, United have regained their momentum with wins over Birmingham, Sunderland and West Brom. But Scholes believes the winning run has to be sustained if United are to seriously challenge an Arsenal team that looks to be running back into form after grinding out some tough wins over the end-of-year period.

"If we are going to catch up on Arsenal then we are going to have to put another 10-game run together where we just win every match and hopefully see where that takes us," Scholes said. "So Saturday is a massive game for us. We have to beat them. A draw is not good enough."

While Scholes clearly regards Arsenal as the team to beat, United manager Alex Ferguson believes the title race is a four-horse affair with Newcastle in a position to force their way into the reckoning. Newcastle entertain Manchester City on Saturday knowing that a win, combined with defeat for Chelsea, will lift them into third place with a game in hand over the two teams above them.

Ferguson also played down the significance of Arsenal's lead. "Five points may seem a lot but we were 12 points ahead of them five years ago and they overtook us," the Scot recalled. "We've also had the experience of being behind and overtaking Newcastle. So it is possible. What we need to get is consistency. Obviously I would like to be first but we have done well to get where we are and it is about where I expected to be after what we've been through with injuries."

"I have said many times it's a very tough league this year and they don't come much tougher than Chelsea this Saturday." Ferguson has Scholes' international colleague Nicky Butt available again after a midweek outing with the reserves. But Butt, who has spent three months sidelined with an ankle injury, is unlikely to be risked with club captain Roy Keane, Juan Veron and Scholes all available.

Liverpool meanwhile will be hoping some of Ian Rush's magical goal touch will have rubbed off on their strike force in time for their difficult trip to Southampton. The Anfield legend this week began working with Michael Owen and company as a strikers' coach in

a bid to help the club end a miserable run which has left their season in ruins. After taking just five points from their last 11 games, Liverpool's chances of clinching a top four place and a place in next season's Champions League are receding rapidly.

Ironically, one of the teams who could deprive them of a place at Europe's top table are Southampton, whose renaissance under Gordon Strachan has hoisted them to fifth. James Beattie's 15 Premiership goals have been a crucial factor in the club's unexpected success this season and the blond striker will have added incentive to add to his tally on Saturday. England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson is expected to be in the crowd to assess whether or not Beattie is ready for a call-up for next month's friendly against Australia.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated) Saturday: Aston Villa v Tottenham, Blackburn v Birmingham, Charlton v Bolton, Everton v Sunderland, Leeds v West Brom, Manchester United v Chelsea (1230 GMT), Newcastle v Manchester City, Southampton v Liverpool (1735 GMT). Sunday: Arsenal v West Ham (1400 GMT), Fulham v Middlesbrough (1605 GMT)

'Racist foul-mouth'

AFP, London

Yorkshire's relationship with Lehmann. "We don't hold anything against him. We just want it to be sorted out quickly." Lehmann has played for Yorkshire for the last five English summers and the county are keen to retain him for the upcoming season. His availability depends on whether he is picked for Australia's tour of the West Indies after the World Cup. Under ICC rules designed to stamp out racial abuse, Lehmann could be banned for up to eight one-day matches. That would mean he would miss the rest of the current tri-nation series with Sri Lanka and England and the opening games of the February-March World Cup in South Africa.

His fate will be decided at a hearing with match referee Clive Lloyd in Adelaide on Saturday. The former West Indies captain told Melbourne radio station 3AW on Thursday that he had never heard anything like Lehmann's outburst during a career spanning more than two decades. Cricket had to be seen to take the issue of racism seriously, he added. "Anyone who transgresses now knows they can lose big time," he said.

"The guy has apologised," he told The Guardian. "He's been run out and said something in the heat of the moment. We've all done it." The county supreme made it clear he had no intention of ending

groups. "If he is found guilty, Yorkshire will surely have to terminate his contract," said Taj Butt, an anti-racism campaigner who also chairs England's biggest Asian cricket league. "How they handle this matter will be watched very closely not only by the Asian community but by all ethnic groups in Yorkshire."

"How they handle this matter will be watched very closely not only by the Asian community but by all ethnic groups in Yorkshire." how they are reviewed in terms of racism for years to come. "If they sweep this under the carpet, they will alienate every non-white cricket supporter in the area and all fair-minded white fans."

Butt's comments were echoed by an editorial in Britain's biggest-selling tabloid, The Sun, which said "racist foul-mouth" Lehmann should be banned from cricket for life. "His conduct also sullies the white rose of Yorkshire and the club must kick him out immediately," the paper said in an editorial.

But Yorkshire's chief executive Colin Graves said he was disappointed with the ICC's decision and claimed Lehmann was only giving vent to his frustration at being dismissed. "The guy has apologised," he told The Guardian. "He's been run out and said something in the heat of the moment. We've all done it."

The county supreme made it clear he had no intention of ending

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words. Includes a solution time of 21 mins and a solution key at the bottom.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with a key: N M T Z Y O R O R V U U T Q Z Z C V K M N S S N D Q I Z H R H N Q F K V B K Y V U U T B Z D I N C R O K F V K V " U N V S N U N K T . " Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF A RESIDENT OF PARIS FELL OFF A BRIDGE, IT'S POSSIBLE THAT HE'D GO IN SEINE. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: U equals L

South Africa and ICC headquarters in London to reach them by latest on Monday, Okute said. "The issues raised by ICC have all been looked at and resolved and the private security provider will work closely with the Kenya police to ensure all goes on well." He described the signatories as cabinet-level officials but did not identify them. The World Cup, starting on February 9, will be staged mainly in South Africa plus Zimbabwe and Kenya. New Zealand are scheduled to play in Nairobi on February 21 and Sri Lanka three days later. New Zealand raised security concerns after last November's suicide bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel in the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa which killed 17 people and a near-miss missile attack on an Israeli jet liner about the same time. An ICC delegation on safety and security conducted a two-day inspection tour of Kenya on January 12 and 13, which triggered speculation that the world governing body might move the two matches from Nairobi to South Africa. Campbell Jamieson, the ICC commercial manager and leader of the delegation, told a news conference after the inspection that it would make a detailed report to the ICC which would then make a decision on whether Kenya would host the matches. World Cup tournament director Ali Bacher said on Friday the two matches could still be moved out of Kenya due to safety concerns. "We're not contemplating any of the matches being moved in the event of a worst case scenario we have the structures and the capacity to accommodate any changes if ruled by the ICC," Bacher told Reuters. The chairman of the World Cup Organising Committee in Kenya Sharad Ghai said it was up to the whole cricketing family and not only New Zealand as to whether the matches would go ahead. "New Zealand can express their concerns but it is the Board of Directors of the ICC, which includes (KCA chairman) Jimmy Rayani to make that decision and this will involve all the 10 Test-playing nations plus Kenya, the Netherlands and Malaysia," Ghai said. Ghai said he was confident Kenya would host the matches, adding that representatives from Worldwide Nimbus, who secured sponsorship for Cricket World Cup, had flown into Nairobi on Thursday and were holding a series of meetings with the KCA over the issue of television and sponsorship of the Kenyan team. Fresh security concerns about east Africa, where 1998 bomb attacks on U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam killed 224 people, followed warnings issued by Britain and the United States about possible extremist attacks in neighbouring Tanzania.