

FA Cup preview
Gunners versus who?

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal are top of the Premiership, gunning for glory in the European Champions League and 11/4 favourites to retain the FA Cup this season.

Farnborough Town, their opponents in the fourth round on Saturday, are tenth in the Football Conference, only go to Europe on their holidays and are priced at a slightly more generous 10,000-1 to win the world's oldest football tournament.

But all of that will not prevent their manager Graham Westley from praying for a miracle every bit as fervently as he will be hoping that his side avoid humiliation at Highbury on Saturday.

Farnborough were initially drawn at home but the tie has been switched from their 4,100-capacity Cherrywood Road ground to Highbury for security reasons, further reducing the prospect of what would be one of the all-time great upsets in the competition.

"If they play at 20 percent and we play at 200 percent, you never know," said Westley, who already admits his first reaction after the draw was made was one of fear.

"Any man who claims he feels no fear in life is lying."

The non-leaguers will at least be able to count on coming up against an Arsenal team that will be without the imposing presence of Patrick Vieira, who is to be given the chance to rest his troublesome groin.

Dagenham and Redbridge will also fly the flag for non-league football in the fourth round and look to have a better chance of progressing from their tie away to First Division Norwich City.

Shrewsbury produced the upset of the last round when they eliminated Premiership high-fliers Everton.

The reward for Kevin Ratcliffe's team has been another home tie against top flight opposition in the form of Chelsea and Nigel Jemson,

the two-goal hero of the win over Everton, believes another major upset is possible.

"If we can raise our game as we did against Everton, who knows," he said this week. "Nobody dreamt we would get this far but we have."

Another intriguing match-up pits Gordon Strachan's Southampton against first-division Millwall, who are coached by Mark McGhee.

Having both played for Aberdeen in the glory days under Alex Ferguson, the two managers are long-standing friends. Strachan even served as McGhee's best man when he got married.

Liverpool got back to winning ways at Southampton's expense on Saturday and went on to clinch a place in the League Cup final in midweek.

Victory at Crystal Palace on Sunday will make it the best week Gerard Houllier's side have enjoyed since November, when the wheels began to come off their Premiership challenge.

There are three all-Premiership clashes over the weekend: Blackburn entertain Sunderland on Saturday while Fulham face London neighbours Charlton and Manchester United host West Ham on Sunday.

FIXTURES (1500 GMT kick-off unless stated) Saturday: Blackburn v Sunderland, Brentford v Burnley, Farnborough v Arsenal, Gillingham v Leeds (1230 GMT), Norwich v Dagenham and Redbridge, Rochdale v Coventry, Sheffield Utd v Ipswich, Southampton v Millwall, Walsall v Wimbledon, Watford v West Brom, Wolverhampton v Leicester Sunday: Crystal Palace v Liverpool (1600 GMT), Fulham v Charlton (1400 GMT), Manchester Utd v West Ham (1300 GMT), Shrewsbury v Chelsea (1830 GMT), Stoke v Bournemouth (1500 GMT)

Bundesliga preview
Holidays over

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga action gets underway after the six-week winter break this weekend with Bayern Munich holding a six-point lead on second-placed Borussia Dortmund and Werder Bremen.

After their shock elimination from the Champions League, the Bavarian giants can now focus solely on chasing their 18th league title.

Their cushion is the largest since Schalke 04 in the 1971/72 season and short of an upset Ottmar Hitzfeld's men should grab three points from the home clash against relegation-threatened Monchengladbach Sunday.

Former Bayern playmaker Stefan Effenberg, who is now playing for rivals Wolfsburg, is in no doubt who will be champions at season's end.

"Bayern will be champions. The only question is - by what margin?" predicted Effenberg.

Internal battles and injuries, however, are the main threat to the team's ambitions.

Peruvian international Claudio Pizarro has already threatened to leave unless he gets a slice of the action.

"We can only defeat ourselves with less battles," warned Bayern playmaker Michael Ballack.

Their campaign continues without a string of injured players including French international Willy Sagnol, Bosnian midfielder Hasan Salihamidzic, Paraguayan striker Roque Santa Cruz and German midfielder Sebastian Deisler.

Dortmund have a solid defence which has the best record in the Bundesliga conceding just 13 goals in 17 matches.

They travel to midtable Hertha Berlin on Saturday, while Werder Bremen, who are equal on points but behind on goal difference having conceded 27 in 17 games, host 11th-placed Bielefeld.

Bremen are very much in the running and are second to Bayern in goals, with 34, of which 13 are down solely to Brazilian star Ailton, the top Bundesliga scorer so far this season.

Fourth and fifth placed Schalke 04 and VfB Stuttgart will need to win to stay in the chase as they are already some eleven points off the pace.

Schalke, whose European hopes were dashed this season after a 4-1 UEFA Cup second round home defeat last month against Polish minnows Wisla Krakow, are now focusing on their league hopes and travel to 10th-placed Wolfsburg. Stuttgart, targeting a place in

Europe next season, visit second from bottom Kaiserslautern, who are facing major problems both on and off the field.

The four-time German champions are going through financial



MICHAEL BALLACK

turmoil with debts of 17.8 million euros and their bid to stay in the Bundesliga will not be helped if they are forced to sell World Cup star striker Miroslav Klose.

Last year's Champions League finalists Bayer Leverkusen have had a poor run this season and are struggling in 14th place.

They are counting on the return of central defender Jens Nowotny to help them battle the drop as he returns from a torn knee ligaments injury which has kept him out since last April.

Leverkusen coach Klaus Toppmoller, elected the top trainer in 2002, is currently tipped as for the chop by bookmakers and desperately needs a win against bottom-placed Energie Cottbus.

Meanwhile, Bundesliga newcomer Naohiro Takahara, the Japanese league's top scorer, will be hoping to debut during Hamburg SV's trip to Hanover.

The 23-year-old impressed during a trial at Hamburg last month and signed a two-and-a-half year deal before Christmas.

New signings during the break also included Argentine Pablo Quattrocchi (Wolfsburg), China's Jiayi Shao to 1860 Munich and Cameroon international Bill Tschato, at Kaiserslautern.

FIXTURES Saturday (14:30 GMT): Bochum v Nuremberg, Hansa Rostock v 1860 Munich, Hanover v SV Hamburg, Werder Bremen v Bielefeld, VfL Wolfsburg v Schalke 04, Kaiserslautern v Stuttgart, Hertha Berlin v Borussia Dortmund Sunday: Bayer Leverkusen v Energie Cottbus (16:30 GMT), Bayern Munich v Monchengladbach (19:00 GMT)



Inter Milan coach Hector Cuper briefs new signing Gabriel Batistuta during a training session at the club's Appiano Gentile base on January 23.

Primera Liga preview
Van Gaal's final hours?

Football

AFP, Madrid

For Barcelona coach Louis Van Gaal, the situation on Sunday is a simple one. If the Catalan club lose at Celta Vigo, he is likely to be out of a job within 24 hours.

Barcelona currently lie 10th and the prospect of finishing in the bottom half of the Spanish First Division for the first time since 1942 looms ever larger.

Van Gaal has refused to talk to the media since last Saturday's 4-2 defeat by Valencia in the Nou Camp, which finished with Barca fans baying for his sacking and the resignation of club president Joan Gaspart.

"I don't think it is the coach's fault that we are in this position," said Spanish international midfielder Xavi Hernandez on Thursday.

"I can understand the attitude of the supporters, after all we are 10th, but I can't condone it. The sort of things that have been said and done don't help anyone," added Xavi.

"It would be unfair to sack him (van Gaal)," said Dutch international striker Patrick Kluivert.

However poker rather than football is the game on most fans' minds at the Nou Camp this week.

And Gaspart may find he has no other alternative but to stick with van Gaal rather than have to pay off his lucrative contract and add to the club's heavy debts in the process.

In any case, potential replacements for van Gaal, as touted by the media, have spent the last few days counting themselves out of the reckoning for arguably the most arduous club job in world football.

"Barcelona is a club without a soul. Go to Barcelona? It would be like rushing in like a fireman trying to

put out a fire," said Argentine World Cup-winning coach Cesar Luis Menotti, who knows from personal experience how hot it can get at the Barca helm.

Former Barcelona icon Bernd Schuster, now coach at Spanish Second Division side Xerez, said that he had neither the stamina nor the mental dexterity to coach at his old club.

"I've seen my name on the list of possible coaches but that's football. However nobody has talked to me



LOUIS VAN GAAL

about it. I'm the coach here and I'm happy," Schuster said on Thursday.

The Sword of Damocles has hung over van Gaal's head on many occasions, but rarely has it been closer to his scalp than it is now.

The one thing that will avoid him getting the chop immediately is some points in Vigo, and van Gaal has history on his side with Barcelona having won on 16 of their 32 league visits to the Galician city.

Celta, despite still being sixth, have begun to upset their own fans, having lost their last three league matches. More worryingly, they haven't scored a goal yet this year.

Athletic Bilbao coach Jupp Heynckes is in a similar position to van Gaal, with fans and the media

alike calling for his head only days before Sunday's visit of his old team Real Madrid, who have now gone 12 games without defeat and have moved up to second in the table.

Heynckes is aware that the pressure is on his struggling Basque team, who sit in 15th spot, but he remains optimistic, especially as Athletic beat Real in the Spanish Cup last year in their San Mames stadium.

"I'm actually very happy with the way we are playing but we do need to win. We've been conceding inexplicable and incomprehensible goals," said the German, who guided Real to the 1998 Champions League title.

One foreign coach secure in his job is Real Sociedad's French import Raynald Denoueix, whose team will defend their impressive unbeaten record at Atletico Madrid on Saturday.

The San Sebastian side lead the league with 40 points from 18 games, three ahead of Real Madrid, while Atletico are back in eighth with 25 points.

Denoueix will welcome back his young inspirational midfielder Xabi Alonso after a month's injury lay-off.

Sociedad however will be without Russian midfielder Valeri Karpin, who is out for the next three weeks after suffering a slight hamstring tear in midweek training.

FIXTURES Saturday (kick off GMT): Atletico Madrid v Real Sociedad (2030) Sunday: Real Betis v Villarreal (1600), Espanyol v Deportivo La Coruna (1600), Osasuna v Racing Santander (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Rayo Vallecano (1600), Valencia v Sevilla (1600), Valladolid v Alaves (1600), Malaga v Real Mallorca (1700), Athletic Bilbao v Real Madrid (1800), Celta Vigo v Barcelona (1930)

Italian Cup
Perugia's mighty kill

Football

AFP, Rome

Perugia knocked mighty Juventus out of the Italian Cup at the quarter-final stage on Thursday courtesy of two goals in the last five minutes for a 2-0 win and 4-0 on aggregate.

Perugia, who won the first leg 2-1 in Turin, will now face AC Milan in the semi-finals thanks to a goal from Fabrizio Miccoli, with an 85th minute drive from the edge of the area, and Brazilian Ze Mario who converted an injury time penalty.

Juventus went into the game without several of their regular first teamers including Alessandro Del Piero and French striker David Trezeguet as they preferred to concentrate on Sunday's league clash with Piacenza.

But Perugia were still worth their win as they were well-organised in defence and midfield.

In the other semi-final, AS Roma will play city rivals Lazio in a mouth-watering last four derby clash after beating Vicenza in a thrilling nine-goal quarter-final at the Olympic Stadium on Wednesday.

Serie A preview
Waiting for 'Batigol'

Football

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan's Uruguayan playmaker Alvaro Recoba believes the goosering instincts of new loan signing Gabriel Batistuta can help the club end their agonising 14 year wait for the Italian championship.

Batistuta joined the Serie A title-contenders this week after failing to hold down a regular place in AS Roma's first team and is expected to start Sunday's match at home to Empoli alongside Christian Vieri.

"Gabriel won the title in his first season at Roma so let's hope he can do the same at Inter," said Recoba on the club's satellite television station, Inter Channel.

"The most important thing is his great desire. He will be important for us."

"The statistics speak for themselves, he's one of the best strikers in the world."

"He's a very positive player and good man too. Inter have done well to bring him here."

"Batigol" played a pivotal role in Roma's title triumph in the 2000/01 season, netting 20 goals in 28 matches.

But in recent months the Argentine's predatory powers have deserted him and he has been forced to spend much of the current season on the substitutes' bench in

Rome. Inter however believe they can tap into the 33-year-old's vast experience which will be invaluable following the loss of compatriot Hernan Crespo whose groin injury has ruled him out until March.

Asked if he thought Batistuta and Vieri were too similar in style to play together, Recoba replied: "When you have strikers like these two who have so much quality, the only problems are for opposing defences."

Crespo aside, Batistuta will team up with an already sizeable Argentine contingent including Javier Zanetti, Matias Almeyda and Nelson Vivas.

On Sunday night league leaders AC Milan, three points ahead of Lazio and Inter who are tied for second place, travel to Udinese, unbeaten at their Friuli stadium this season.

Udinese defender Valerio Bertotto said his side were determined to make up for last week's narrow 2-1 defeat at Lazio by beating the star-studded table-toppers.

"We were superior to Lazio and it was difficult to take losing in such a manner," he said.

"My only consolation was our performance which demonstrated we are in good shape."

"We will look to bounce back against Milan but we have to be very disciplined."

Lazio, who on Tuesday advanced to the semi-finals of the Italian Cup

where they will meet city rivals Roma, host struggling Calabrian club Reggina.

Coach Roberto Mancini has selection problems for Sunday's clash at the Olympic Stadium where Lazio have lost just once this season.

Sinisa Mihajlovic and Brazilian Cesar still recovering from long-term injuries and Bernardo Corradi suspended.

In Sunday's other matches Juventus, currently in fourth, four points off the lead, welcome Piacenza to the Delle Alpi Stadium while fifth-placed Chievo visit Perugia.

Juve will be looking to bounce back from their disappointing Italian Cup exit at the hands of Perugia on Thursday at the quarter-final stage.

On Saturday bottom club Como, still searching for their first win since being promoted from Serie B, entertain Roma.

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

Spanish King's Cup
Mallorca deny Real

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid will face an uphill battle to reach the last four of the King's Cup after they were held to a 1-1 draw by Real Mallorca in a tight quarter-final first leg at the Bernabeu on Thursday.

Young striker Javier Portillo put Real ahead on 13 minutes, heading in a cross from Raul Bravo, but there were few other chances for Vicente del Bosque's side in an unconvincing performance.

Mallorca's Cameroon international Samuel Eto'o had two goals disallowed, one either side of Portillo strike, before the visitors hit back just before the hour with a brilliant piece of work from Miguel Angel Nadal.

The former Barcelona centre back appeared at the far post to control a corner on his chest and swat the ball in right-footed to level the score.

Del Bosque responded by bringing in Luis Figo and Raul to play alongside Portillo and Ronaldo but that quartet failed to trouble the Mallorca defence and Real left the field to whistles from their own

supporters. Deportivo Coruna, who beat Real in last year's final, will take a slim lead into their second leg away to Murcia next week after Aldo Duscher stuck late to give them a 1-0 win over the Second Division side in one of three games played on Wednesday.

Recreativo Huelva were the other victorious side as a spectacular free kick from Emilio Viqueira gave them a 1-0 win at home to Atletico Madrid. The match between Sevilla and Osasuna ended 1-1.



Ibagaza (L) of Real Mallorca trying to contain Real Madrid's Portillo (R) during their quarter final Spanish King's Cup match at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid on January 23.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer
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CRYPTOQUIP
C I W M G H I N A L S N
B N J N H I S C I I M G G B S L C K S
O C V V C I S L N H V I W A V M S H W I G I
B W J J G V W A N O I K G H ?
Yesterday's Cryptquip: MY HORSE LIKES STAYING AWAKE UNTIL THE WEE HOURS. SHE'S A REAL NIGHTMARE.
Today's Cryptquip Clue: G equals F

The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.