

Primera Liga preview

Tricky outing for Real

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will take a step closer to clinching their 29th Spanish championship if they can avoid an upset against Real Mallorca on Saturday.

However, Real will not relish the visit of the Balearic island side, who were the last team to beat them in the Santiago Bernabeu back in November 2000.

Madrid have since gone 49 home games without defeat in the league but Mallorca showed little sign of buckling under the pressure in the Bernabeu last season when they managed a 0-0 draw to confirm their status as Real's bogey team.

Mallorca, unbeaten in their last seven matches, also thrashed Madrid 4-0 in the Spanish Cup earlier this year.

"Beating Real Madrid in the Bernabeu will be difficult but it's not impossible," said Mallorca defender Poli Fernandez.

If Mallorca are to defeat Real Madrid then they will be looking for goals from their Cameroonian striker Samuel Eto'o, who hit a brace in the 3-0 defeat of Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday.

"I'll always be grateful to Madrid because they discovered me when I was a young player. But I never got a chance to show them what I was capable of," said Eto'o.

"I was always being sent on loan to other clubs and it was very frustrating. When I go back to the Bernabeu I am always keen to show them what they missed out on."

Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque will make a late assessment on Ronaldo after the Brazilian's mid-week journey to Mexico for a friendly match.

The coach could give disgruntled striker Fernando Morientes his first start of the season in the wake of the centre-forward's hat trick for Spain in their 4-0 defeat of Ecuador on Wednesday.

The European champions are four points clear at the top of the



SAMUEL ETO'O

Spanish first division, with 64 points from 31 games with just seven games left.

Deportivo La Coruna and Real Sociedad lie second and third respectively with both teams on 60 points.

A resurgent Recreativo Huelva pay a visit to Deportivo on Sunday, hoping to continue their revival which saw them last week move out of the relegation zone for the first time this season after a 5-0 thrashing of Villarreal.

"We've had a lot of bad luck this season and we've always said that we didn't deserve to be stuck in the relegation zone," said Recreativo midfielder Emilio Viqueira.

"Now a lot of people are starting to realise that we are a much better team than our position would suggest."

Real Sociedad play host to Sevilla, who still have ambitions of getting into next season's UEFA Cup despite their 3-1 loss at home to Real Madrid last weekend.

Sevilla's stingy defence will be reinforced by the return of Javi Navarro and David Castedo after suspension while Sociedad will be weakened by the one-match ban on inspirational Russian midfielder Valery Karpin.

Barcelona, who beat Real Sociedad 2-0 last weekend, will expect to improve their position against bottom club Rayo Vallecano on Sunday but they will be without Xavi Hernandez for the rest of the season, after the midfielder underwent surgery on his right shoulder.

FIXTURES
(18:00GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Real Madrid v Real Mallorca (19:30), Real Sociedad v Sevilla (21:30)
Sunday: Alaves v Celta Vigo (17:30), Villarreal v Malaga (17:30), Real Betis v Espanyol, Racing Santander v Valencia, Valladolid v Atletico Madrid, Osasuna v Athletic Bilbao (19:00), Barcelona v Rayo Vallecano (19:00), Deportivo La Coruna v Recreativo Huelva (21:00)

Brazil fire blanks

Football

REUTERS, Guadalajara, Mexico

World champions Brazil were still looking for their first win under coach Carlos Alberto Parreira on Wednesday after being held to a goalless draw in Mexico.

Eighteen-year-old Santos midfielder Diego came on in the 84th minute for his international debut but it was too late for him to inspire Brazil, who were lucky not to have fallen behind in the first half.

Brazil, returning to the stadium where they played memorable matches in the 1970 and 1986 World Cups, took 58 minutes to muster a shot.

The five-times world champions have drawn 0-0 in China and Mexico and lost 2-1 in Portugal since Parreira, who led them to their fourth World Cup title in 1994, returned for a third stint in one of soccer's hottest seats.

In a total of five outings since the World Cup final in Yokohama on June 30, Brazil have won only once.

Real Madrid striker Ronaldo, the hero of their World Cup triumph, again had another off-night for his country, making little impact until the closing minutes of the game.

Meanwhile, Mexico striker Jared Borgetti, who missed his team's best chances, was jeered off at the end by fans angry at the surprise exclusion of volatile striker Cuauhtemoc Blanco.

"In the first half, we didn't mark and we didn't play and we didn't have a shot on goal," Parreira said.

"In the second, we sorted out the marking and created chances. All that was missing was the goal."

Mexico, still looking for a convincing performance under coach

Ricardo Lavolpe, took the game to Brazil early on with Borgetti and Omar Bravo both having two chances apiece in the first half-hour.

Borgetti wasted an excellent chance in the 32nd minute when he took too long over his shot.

The Santos Laguna striker was also close just before halftime when the ball rebounded to him in the six-meter box and goalkeeper Dida parried his shot onto the crossbar before Bravo volleyed wide.

Brazil finally threatened in the 58th minute when Ronaldinho broke down the left and rolled the ball across to Amoroso, who fired just over the crossbar from the edge of the penalty area.

Ronaldo's best chance came in the 79th minute when he broke down the left, only to fire his shot too high.

He also had a chance shortly afterwards when he deflected a cross over the bar.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE
Results of International friendlies at a glance:
April 30
Uzbekistan 1-2 Belarus
Finland 3-0 Iceland
Sweden 1-2 Croatia
Bulgaria 2-0 Albania
Lithuania 0-1 Romania
Liechtenstein 1-0 Saudi Arabia
Slovakia 2-2 Greece
Denmark 1-0 Ukraine
Czech Republic 4-0 Turkey
Libya 1-3 Argentina
Hungary 5-1 Luxembourg
Belgium 3-1 Poland
Ireland 1-0 Norway
Tunisia 1-0 Senegal
Germany 1-0 Serbia & Montenegro
Holland 1-1 Portugal
South Africa 0-0 Jamaica
Switzerland 1-2 Italy
France 5-0 Egypt
Scotland 0-2 Austria
Morocco 0-1 Ivory Coast
Spain 4-0 Ecuador
May 1

Serie A preview

Juve keep fingers crossed

Football

AFP, Rome

The fat lady will burst into song should Italy's league leaders Juventus defeat Lazio here at the Olympic stadium and closest challengers Inter Milan fail to win at struggling Atalanta on Saturday.

If results go their way, Juventus will be out of reach of their championship rivals and retain the Serie A title with three games to spare.

Wrapping up the Scudetto early would be welcomed by Juventus, who along with second-placed Inter and AC Milan, in third, play the first leg of their Champions League semi-finals next week.

Juventus take on European champions Real Madrid in Spain, while Inter and Milan meet in a mouth-watering derby clash at the San Siro.

Lured by the prospect of playing Champions League football next season, Lazio, the only team to win at the Delle Alpi stadium in the league, are likely to prove difficult opponents for Juve this weekend.

The order may be a tall one, but Juventus' veteran midfielder Antonio Conte is confident the 'Old Lady' of Turin can cut the Romans down to size in the Eternal City.

"The finishing line is very close and it's in our hands," said the 33-year-old former Italian international, in his 13th season with the club.

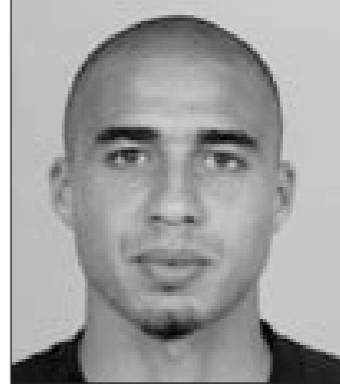
"We have been here many times before and we know we can handle the pressure. This is the time of the

season when the quality of the squad shines through.

"We feel strong and determined and would obviously like to seal the Scudetto as soon as possible.

"That would allow us to focus on our Champions League semi-final against Real Madrid.

"But we know Lazio are a tough team to beat. With a little more luck this season they could have been challenging for the title them-



DAVID TREZEGUET

selves."

David Trezeguet is expected to lead the attack for Juventus after playing for nearly an hour in last week's 2-1 win at home to Brescia.

The French international missed the previous three weeks after dislocating his shoulder.

The former Monaco forward, Italy's leading goalscorer last season, is determined to make a telling contribution as the season

draws to an exciting close for the 26-time Italian champions.

"I feel fine and the Brescia game was a good test for me," he said.

"Now I'm back in the side and I want to be decisive in this crucial part of the season."

Inter's hopes of pipping Juventus to the title and very slim, so coach Hector Cuper may decide to rest several players against Atalanta with one eye on next week's crunch European tie against neighbours Milan.

According to Italian media reports, Cuper's future hinges on Inter winning a trophy this season after two barren campaigns since arriving from Spanish side Valencia.

In the day's other matches, third-placed AC Milan host second-from-bottom Como, who could go down on Saturday after one season back in the top flight if they lose at the San Siro.

Torino, who also look doomed, host Udinese, challenging for a place in next season's UEFA Cup.

Parma and Chievo, both looking to finish in the top four and qualify for the highly-lucrative Champions League, host third-from-bottom Piacenza and Bologna respectively.

FIXTURES
Saturday (all kick-offs 1300 GMT): AC Milan v Como, Atalanta v Inter Milan, Chievo v Piacenza, Lazio v Juventus, Modena v Empoli, Parma v Bologna, Perugia v Brescia, Reggina v AS Roma, Torino v Udinese.

A 36-team Cup?

AFP, Zurich

FIFA's executive committee will decide on Saturday whether the World Cup finals should be expanded to include 36 teams.

Sepp Blatter, president of world soccer's ruling body, has asked Germany, organisers of the next championship, to give its opinion about a South American plan to add four teams to the current format in 2006.

Thirty two teams means the competition can be completed within a calendar month and has a logical progression.

Having 36 teams would appease those confederations who feel under-represented but would add hugely to the cost and logistical problems of staging soccer's showpiece event.

Blatter has not stated whether he supports the expansion plan but FIFA's deputy general secretary Jerome Champagne said: "The legitimacy of a competition takes a long time to acquire and it can be lost very quickly."

The 36-team idea was put forward in March by the South American confederation CONMEBOL after South America, home of 2002 Cup winners Brazil, lost half a qualifying place to Oceania.

The winners of the Oceania group now qualify automatically for the finals rather than facing a play-off with a team from the much stronger South American confederation.

The CONMEBOL idea should face little opposition from European body UEFA which would gain two more places at the finals. The others would go to CONMEBOL, which has four qualifying slots at present, and the winners of a play-off.

But UEFA president Lennart Johansson said his executive was not united on the issue and he could not predict the outcome.

"It's a very clever proposal from the South Americans," he said.

"No losers, only winners and, if we had said 'No' right away, we would be criticised from within our own membership for turning down the opportunity to bring two more European teams to the World Cup finals."

Last December, FIFA decided that in addition to CONMEBOL losing its play-off place, holders Brazil would no longer qualify automatically for the 2006 finals.

Premiership preview

United can dictate terms

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United will move to within touching distance of their eighth Premiership title in 11 seasons if they beat Charlton at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Victory would leave the Red Devils eight points clear of Arsenal and leave the Gunners without the slightest room for error in their three remaining matches.

United could even be crowned champions by Sunday evening if they win and Arsenal fail to take all three points against relegation-threatened Leeds.

And skipper Roy Keane believes the way United have come back after being written off as a team past its sell-by date would make reclaiming the title from Arsenal, who clinched last year's championship at Old Trafford, particularly sweet.

"Deep down we're all thinking that this would be the nicest one to win," Keane said.

After a dismal start to the season, United's campaign reached its lowest ebb in early December with a humiliating derby defeat at the hands of Manchester City.

That left Alex Ferguson's side trailing Arsenal by nine points, and as recently as the start of March the gap was still eight points.

"After the City game at Maine Road, we were looking down and out," Keane admitted. "But we've bounced back and it's great to be in with a chance."

"Four or five weeks ago Arsenal would have been favourites, and now we are a lot of peoples' favourites. But until you've got the Premiership medal in your hand it's all to play for."

"The pressure is on us to beat Charlton. They came here last season and kept a clean sheet so they'll be confident of getting a result."

"But if we'd been offered the chance to win our last two games to win the League, we'd have bitten

their hands off. If you want to win Championships then you have to beat Charlton at home."

Ruud van Nistelrooy, whose haul of 40 goals has been the underpinning of United's revival, is expected to have shaken off minor back and groin injuries in time for Saturday's lunchtime kick-off after being left out of Holland's friendly draw with Portugal in midweek.

United boss Alex Ferguson must decide whether to recall Fabien



SIR ALEX FERGUSON

Barthez in goal after leaving the French international out of the side that beat Tottenham on Sunday.

Ferguson is believed to be looking at bringing in long-term replacements for the injury-prone Barthez this summer and his current number two, Roy Carroll, is keen to press his case for promotion to a regular starting slot.

"I was surprised to get picked on Sunday but these things happen in football and having been given a chance I wanted to prove I was up to the job," Carroll admitted.

West Ham will have Scotland defender Christian Dailly back in their starting line-up for the first time since February for a hugely important London derby clash with Chelsea.

Realistically the Hammers must win to sustain their hopes of avoiding relegation but Chelsea are in no position to do them any favours as they are involved in their own cut-

throat battle for a Champions League place.

West Ham's temporary manager Trevor Brooking admits only three points will do.

"We want to put pressure on those above by getting to 41 points over the weekend, and whatever happens, that carries it over to the last weekend," said Brooking, who has stepped in after Glenn Roeder suffered a minor stroke last month.

As Liverpool travel to Chelsea on the last day of the season, Newcastle can virtually guarantee their return to the Champions League next season by beating Birmingham, who have nothing left to play for after ensuring their survival, at home.

FIXTURES
Saturday (1400 GMT unless stated): Aston Villa v Sunderland, Blackburn v West Brom, Fulham v Everton, Liverpool v Man City, Man Utd v Charlton (1130 GMT), Middlesbrough v Tottenham, Newcastle v Birmingham, Southampton v Bolton (1630 GMT), West Ham v Chelsea
Sunday: Arsenal v Leeds

France rout Egypt

Football

INTERNET, Paris

France turned on the style in the Stade de France on Wednesday night with a resounding defeat of Egypt in the first-ever international match between the two countries.

Two goals from Arsenal striker Thierry Henry and a powerful strike from his club team-mate Robert Pires gave the French a 3-0 lead going into the break.

Djibril Cisse scored a fourth just after the hour mark with substitute Olivier Kapo adding the fifth with 10 minutes remaining.

Marcel Desailly, making his record 104th appearance for Les Bleus, was in the thick of the action in the opening 20 minutes as the visitors pushed forward in search of an opening goal.

But resolute defending from the hosts snuffed out the danger and the Egyptians never got close to troubling Fabien Barthez in the French goal.

The breakthrough finally came in the 25th minute and not unsurprisingly fell to Henry.

Willy Sagnol fired in a left-footed cross from the right which Egypt defender Hossam Ghali failed to get his head to.

Henry's powerful header forced a fantastic one-handed save from Essam Al Hadari in the Egypt goal only for the Arsenal striker to leap again to head home the rebound.

In the 34th minute France were 2-0 up.

Sagnol sent a curling pass into the box and Cisse was there to give it the lightest of back heels to Pires, who nudged the ball to Henry.

Henry has time to take a touch before placing the ball in to the bottom right hand corner.

game.

Cisse broke down the left flank, squared the ball into the penalty area where Pires was waiting to lay it on to Wilford.

His fierce shot flew off the inside of the post back to Cisse at the by-line and the young French striker then sent the ball back into the box for Pires to bury into the back of the net.

Cisse deservedly got his name on the scoresheet in the 62nd minute with a low right-footed shot into the bottom left-hand corner to claim his second goal in international colours.



THIERRY HENRY

With the game already won, France coach Jacques Santini began to introduce a number of the younger players as Henry, Pires, Desailly and Wilford were all withdrawn.

And it was Kapo, on for Henry, who scored the home side's fifth and his first international goal when he latched onto a long ball over the defence and with the outside of his foot pushed it past Al Hadari to round off an impressive display by the French.

Ligue 1 preview

It's tight at the top

Football

AFP, Paris

With four matches to go the French league title can still go to any one of four clubs and Monaco, top on goal difference from reigning champions Lyon, have a difficult assignment at Paris Saint Germain on Sunday to retain their place at the summit.

Lyon's task looks easier as they head Saturday for midtable Strasbourg but they will be hoping for the return to action in time of strikers Sonny Anderson and Sidney Govou, who missed Wednesday's 5-0 friendly international win against Egypt with a leg injury.

Monaco and Lyon both have 61 points from 34 matches but the former have a better goal difference which could prove crucial in the final analysis.

Coming up on the rails are Marseille, on 59 points, and Bordeaux, on 57.

Marseille should prove too good for Bastia at the Stade Velodrome on Saturday afternoon while Bordeaux will have to be at their sharpest to overcome an Auxerre team lying just three points behind them - close enough to think about snatching away a potential Champions League place.

Beckenbauer not happy

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

Franz Beckenbauer has threatened to step down as president of Germany's 2006 World Cup organising committee over arguments with FIFA in the build-up to the event.

Beckenbauer accused soccer's ruling body of being interested chiefly in making money from ticketing and hospitality.

"I fear that it might come down to a major confrontation with FIFA," the former World Cup-



FRANZ BECKENBAUER

winning captain and coach told Friday's issue of football magazine Kicker.

"FIFA's main goal is to make money and all the rest is secondary," said Beckenbauer, who accused FIFA of wanting to set unreasonably high ticket and hotel prices for packages for VIPs.

"We do not want to be held responsible for what we have no influence on," he said.

"We will not let that happen. I will not. I would rather quit. I would make my position available."

"This is a warning to Zurich (FIFA's hometown)."