

Primera Liga preview

Irureta wants a Real slip

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish league leaders Real Madrid have found an unusual supporter in the form of Javier Irureta, the coach of championship rivals Deportivo La Coruna.

"I hope that Real Madrid overcome Juventus and go on to the Champions League final," said Irureta.

"If Real are concentrating on the Champions League then it will be a boost for us because they will have several tiring games, and that could be crucial in the final league games of the season," added Irureta whose team visit Malaga on Saturday.

Deportivo, the 1999/2000 champions, lie second with 63 points from 32 matches, just one point adrift of Real with six games remaining.

Roy Makaay, the Spanish first division's top scorer with 27 goals this season and the leading contender for the European Golden Boot award, will be fit to play after missing several days training with a cold.

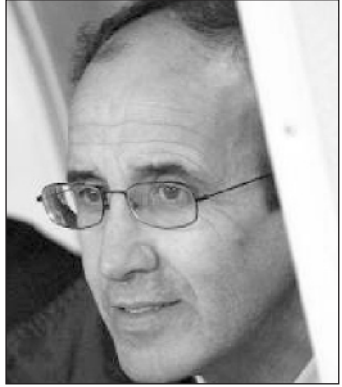
Strikers Diego Tristan and Albert Luque could also be available, both well on the way to recovering from injury problems.

Malaga will be without Uruguayan striker Dario Silva, who is serving the first game of a two match ban, and midfielder Miguel Angel Lozano is also suspended.

Meanwhile, World Player of the Year Ronaldo will miss Real Madrid's trip to relegation-threatened Recreativo Huelva.

The absence of the Brazilian, and the continued recuperation of Raul from his appendix operation means that Real coach Vicente Del Bosque has a selection dilemma.

Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez is expected to move from the midfield role he occupied so well in Tuesday's 2-1 Champions League win over Juventus, to play just behind the main target man who will be either Fernando Morientes or Javier



JAVIER IRURETA

Portillo.

Luis Figo will also face a late fitness test on a thigh injury and Del Bosque may take the precaution of resting the Portuguese midfielder and using Steve McManaman.

Real Sociedad are also in contention for the title, lying third also on with 63 points, but the Basques have a tricky trip to Real Mallorca on Sunday.

Mallorca are now unbeaten in their last eight games and buoyant

after beating Real Madrid 5-1 in the Spanish capital last weekend, Madrid's first league defeat for more than two and a half years.

The island side are also defending their sixth place which will see them in the UEFA Cup next season.

"Sociedad are playing the best football in the first division at the moment. Real Madrid have their brilliant moments but Sociedad have been far more consistent," said Mallorca's Argentine international goalkeeper Leo Franco.

Mallorca will have to without the services of suspended roving midfielder Albert Riera, a goalscorer against Madrid.

Barcelona are away at Sevilla on Sunday, a game that they must win to keep alive their hopes of European competition next season.

Radomir Antic is expected to name the same side that beat bottom-club Rayo Vallecano 3-0 on Sunday, which will mean Spanish under-21 international Victor Valdes retains his place between the posts ahead of the out-of-favour Argentine international Roberto Bonano.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off GMT): Atletico Madrid v Alaves (1500), Recreativo Huelva v Real Madrid (1700), Athletic Bilbao v Valladolid (1800), Espanyol v Osasuna (1830), Malaga v Deportivo La Coruna (1900)

Sunday: Celta Vigo v Racing Santander (1600), Real Mallorca v Real Sociedad (1700), Rayo Vallecano v Real Betis (1700), Valencia v Villarreal (1800), Sevilla v Barcelona (1900)

Fairytale envoy Pele!

Football

AFP, Copenhagen

The latest chapter in Pele's post-playing day career sees him taking on the role as ambassador of Denmark's famous poet and author of children's fairytales - Hans Christian Andersen.

The Brazilian legend will be assigned the role by Denmark's Crown Prince Frederik at a May 15 ceremony here as part of the preparations for the author's 200th



PELE

Reid now a full-timer

Football

AFP, Leeds

Leeds United on Friday confirmed they were giving Peter Reid the job of full-time manager of the English Premiership club.

The former Sunderland boss had been in charge for the past two months since the sacking of Terry Venables.

But having performed a rescue

act to keep the team in the top flight following last week's away win at Arsenal Reid got the vote of the club board - several senior players having already spoken up on his behalf.

Reid is the debt-laden Yorkshire club's third manager in 12 months, following Venables and David O'Leary.

"Leeds Utd are delighted to announce the appointment of Peter Reid as their football manager," said Professor John McKenzie in a club statement.

Premiership preview

All eyes on Stamford Bridge

Football

AFP, London

Gerard Houllier has raised the stakes in Liverpool's winner-takes-all showdown with Chelsea by claiming his side deserve a place in the Champions League more than their London rivals.

Houllier takes his side to Stamford Bridge on the final day of the season on Sunday needing a win to leapfrog Chelsea and join Manchester United, Arsenal and Newcastle at Europe's top table next season - a prize worth an estimated 25 million dollars.

Chelsea can book their ticket to the continent with just a draw and Blues boss Claudio Ranieri believes his side are worthy of a money-spinning place among the elite.

"We deserve to achieve the result we need," the Italian manager claimed.

But Houllier was adamant that it was his side who had proved they were Champions League material over the course of the season.

"No team in the Premiership can have earned a place in the Champions League more than us," he said. "I think we deserve it more than any other team."

"A month ago it didn't look as though we had a chance of making the top four, but now we are one game away and we have everything to play for. That shows we have the character, and deserve our place."

Form may favour Liverpool but history is on the side of Chelsea, who have not lost at home to the Merseysiders since 1989.

But Houllier believes his squad's capacity to win crucial matches - demonstrated most recently in the League Cup final

win over Manchester United - will see them through.

"Our European experience will help us in this situation. We've been to many countries and performed well under these circumstances.

"The good thing is, we know what we have to do. I recall a few seasons ago when we just had to draw at Bradford to make the Champions League, but we lost the game. This time we know only a win will do."

Houllier has been given a boost



GERARD HOULLIER

by England midfielder Steven Gerrard's recovery from a hip injury that had threatened to keep him out of the match.

But Liverpool will have to do without Vladimir Smicer and Gerrard's midfield partner Dietmar Hamman is doubtful with a shin injury.

In financial terms, the stakes are no less significant at the bottom of the table, where Bolton and West Ham are engaged in a cut-throat battle to avoid joining Sunderland and West Brom in the first division next season.

Bolton have the twin advantages of playing their final match - against Middlesbrough - at home and having their destiny in their own hands.

Although the two relegation candidates are tied on points, Bolton's goal difference is six better so any kind of victory is virtually certain to see them safe.

West Ham travel to Birmingham, who have little left to play for other than the possibility of finishing above cross-town rivals Aston Villa.

An emotional deluge is guaranteed at both grounds - but they are not the only grounds which will witness a few tears.

Manchester City will play their final match at their beloved Maine Road stadium against FA Cup finalists Southampton while Manchester United will be presented with the Premiership trophy after their match at Everton.

Any hope the United players had of finishing off a gruelling season with a Sunday afternoon stroll have been dashed by Everton's surprising renaissance this season under David Moyes.

Everton must beat United to be sure of ensuring a place in the UEFA Cup next season - an outcome the club's long-suffering fans would undoubtedly have settled for at the beginning of the season.

FIXTURES

Sunday (1400 GMT kick-off): Birmingham v West Ham, Bolton v Middlesbrough, Charlton v Fulham, Chelsea v Liverpool, Everton v Man Utd, Leeds v Aston Villa, Man City v Southampton, Sunderland v Arsenal, Tottenham v Blackburn, West Brom v Newcastle

Ligue 1 preview

PSG wary leaders

Football

AFP, Paris

The race to the wire in the French championship enters the final furlong this weekend with title-holders Lyon out to preserve a two-point lead by seeing off Paris Saint Germain on Sunday.

Lyon hit the front last week after clubbing Strasbourg 4-0 away while PSG were lending their support by defeating previous leaders Monaco 2-1 in Paris, a result which allowed Marseille to nudge into second spot.

Theoretically, despite their poor season, PSG can still come third and can certainly still qualify for Europe so will not turn up at the Stade Gerland looking to aid Lyon's championship charge.

But so lacklustre has been PSG's campaign that Lyon will be favourites to add three points which will take them to the brink of a title defence even if Monaco, as expected, take Montpellier to the cleaners in the principality.

While PSG have slid into midtable obscurity in recent years and Marseille havstruggled to escape the same fate Lyon have emerged as the team to set the yardstick.

The team enjoys an increasingly close-knit relationship with the city in eastern France to the extent that fans can even hail club-brand taxis and recent forays into the Champions League have put Lyon firmly on the footballing map.

Lyon's rise has been as meteoric as the almost simultaneous decline of former giants and near neighbours Saint Etienne, now half way down the second division.

But on Sunday they fear the damage that could be done by a World Cup winner with a big money transfer to play for.

Ronaldinho has had a topsy-turvy season with PSG but the samba star has turned on his best form against the big clubs, twice performing brilliantly to give his

side maximum points against Marseille while netting the winner against Monaco from the spot.

"Ronaldinho can make all the difference on his own. We will have to keep a watchful eye on him," said fellow Brazilian Juninho Pernambucano, one of Lyon's top performers in another successful campaign.

The past five seasons have seen the club establish themselves among the elite clutch of French sides. In 1999 they placed third and reached a UEFA Cup quarter-final. In 2001 they made the Champions League second phase and came second at home while ending their trophy drought with the League Cup.

Then last year came the big breakthrough in the league and this year the upward trend has continued with players such as former Monaco and Marseille forward Sonny Anderson and French international striker Sidney Govou providing the attacking impetus.

Govou could return on Sunday following a knee injury but if he fails to make the date Peggy Luyindula is an able deputy.

Monaco have to take three points at home to Montpellier, who have only a four-point cushion above the relegation zone.

Marseille, despite having moved a point above Monaco into second with last week's win over Bastia, have a tough assignment Saturday at fifth-paced Sochaux, who can still snatch a Champions League berth with nine points to play for and only four to make up on Monaco at present.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Nantes v Guingamp, Bordeaux v Le Havre, Lens v Troyes, Sedan v Bastia, Rennes v Strasbourg, Ajaccio v Nice, Sochaux v Marseille, Auxerre v Lille, Monaco v Montpellier

Sunday: Lyon v Paris Saint Germain

Serie A preview

Title knocks at Juve's door

Football

AFP, Rome

Double-chasing Juventus will retain the Italian title on Saturday should they win at home to mid-table Perugia.

A point however could even be enough for the 26-time champions, depending on Inter Milan's result at home to Parma.

Juventus have 68 points from 31 matches, eight more than second-placed Inter, with three Serie A games left to play.

However, should Juve succeed, celebrations are likely to be kept short as they have to prepare for the second leg of their crucial Champions League semi-final at home to Real Madrid on Wednesday.

Holders Real have a slight advantage after their 2-1 first leg win at the Bernabeu, but David Trezeguet's precious away goal keeps the tie alive for the Italians.

"If we win the championship there'll be no party on Saturday - we'll postpone it," said Trezeguet, Italy's joint leading goalscorer last season with 24 goals along with Piacenza's Dario Hubner.

"The match on Wednesday is too big an occasion to spoil. It would be nice to wrap up the Scudetto this weekend so we can concentrate fully on Europe.

"The next few days will determine our season and we are confident of winning both matches."

Juventus will be without midfield dynamo Pavel Nedved for the Perugia match as the Czech Republic international has a knee injury.

But the former Lazio star, who spent five seasons in Rome before moving to Turin, is expected to be fit in time to face the mighty Spaniards.

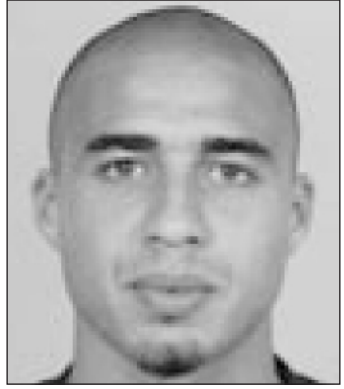
Perugia could prove to be tricky opponents for Juve, having knocked them out of the Italian Cup earlier in the season.

The match will be particularly significant for Perugia duo Fabrizio Miccoli and Manuele Blasi, who

are both on loan from Juve and expected to return to Turin in the summer.

With the title practically sewn up, Inter and third-placed AC Milan can concentrate all their energy on the Champions League semi-final between the two clubs.

Honours were even in



DAVID TREZEGUET

Wednesday's first leg goalless derby at their shared San Siro stadium. Inter are the hosts of the second leg which takes place on Tuesday.

Fourth-placed Lazio can move closer to a place in the Champions League next season by winning at Bologna.

The cash-strapped Romans would welcome the windfall Europe's most prestigious club competition brings, as they are struggling to pay their players' salaries.

Several members of the squad have threatened to leave and the club's board may be forced to offload some of their star names in the summer in order to ease debts.

AS Roma, champions in 2001 but currently languishing in eighth position, host struggling Atalanta at the Olympic stadium.

Disappointed at not being in the top four, Roma coach Fabio Capello is already preparing for next season.

"We have a list of players who we want to buy this summer," he said.

"I'm convinced that the current financial crisis in the game will reward teams that spend wisely, even if funds are limited.

"The transfer market will offer some unbelievable opportunities. If we can take advantage of this then we can strengthen our team."

Capello admitted his defence was the root cause of Roma's problems this season.

"We've conceded far too many goals," he added. "Championships are won with a strong defence and Juventus have proved that theirs is the best once again. They deserve to win the Scudetto."

FIXTURES

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

Old Trafford calling?

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Manchester United have expressed interest in signing AC Milan's Rino Gattuso as a successor to Roy Keane in the role of midfield enforcer, the Italian international revealed Friday.

Gattuso, who spent the 1997-98 season at Rangers, told Scotland's Daily Record that United had been in touch with his agent and said he would definitely be interested in a move to Old Trafford.

"My agent informs me that there are a number of English clubs interested in signing me, including Man United," he was quoted as saying.

"I've another two years on my contract at Milan and I'm happy here but Man United are also a huge club and I would be interested.

"It's flattering to be linked with Man Utd and I know my Scottish girlfriend would be delighted if we moved closer to home.

"If they do make a bid for me it would be a hard decision as I have a great relationship with Milan and their supporters."

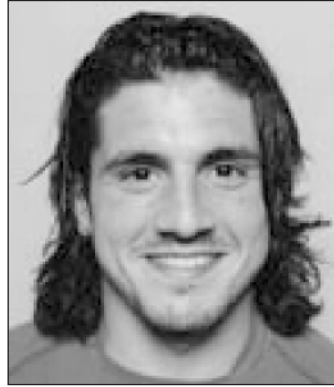
Gattuso has been a revelation in Italy since leaving Ibrox after a fallout with then manager Dick Advocaat.

But he believes his style is better suited to the English game.

"I think English teams like me because my style of play is suited to the Premiership," he said.

"I'm only 25 at the moment and I would like to play in England at some stage of my career. But for now the only thing on my mind is helping Milan reach the Champions League final."

Gattuso would cost United in excess of 10 million pounds, having cost Milan around eight million when he joined them in 1999 from



RINO GATTUSO

Salernitana.

Keane's effectiveness as the anchorman in the United midfield has been diminished by a series of injuries, including a hip problem which required major surgery earlier in the season and may lead to him needing a hip replacement when he stops playing.

Unknown men attack Lennon

AFP, Glasgow

Scottish police on Friday issued descriptions of three men wanted in connection with a suspected sectarian attack on Celtic's Northern Irish midfielder Neil Lennon.

The 31-year-old midfielder was attacked at a set of traffic lights in the West End of Glasgow during the early hours of Thursday. He was slightly hurt while his 21-year-old female companion was left shaken after being pushed over by one of the attackers.

Lennon, a Roman Catholic, retired from international football last year after receiving death threats before a Northern Ireland match.

Police said they could not rule out the possibility that the assault was linked to the bitter sectarian rivalry between Celtic and their Glasgow rivals Rangers.

Celtic's roots are among the predominantly Catholic workers who emigrated from Ireland to Scotland in the 19th century while Rangers, until the late 1980's, would only sign protestant players.

Although sectarianism has declined in society as a whole in the west of Scotland, it remains at the core of the rivalry between the two clubs.

Detective Constable David McFall, who is leading the investigation, said: "I cannot rule out the possibility that this was a sectarian incident and I am anxious to speak to anyone who was in the area around lam on Thursday and saw or heard anything which may assist in this inquiry."

Lennon was sitting in his car when he was approached by three men who shouted abuse at him, police said.

The player drove off, but the car was chased by the men, who kicked it as the couple sat at traffic lights.

The Celtic star got out of his car to confront the men and was assaulted. Neither Lennon nor his companion needed hospital treatment.

Money isn't a problem

Football

AFP, Manchester

Peter Kenyon, the man who controls the purse strings at Manchester United, has promised Alex Ferguson the cash he needs to challenge Real Madrid in next season's Champions League.

In a clear sign that Ferguson will be allowed to pursue his interest in Brazilian World Cup hero Ronaldinho, the United chief executive said Ferguson had been allocated an unspecified budget for summer purchases.

Only if that ceiling is breached



RONALDINHO

will Ferguson have to sell players.

"Money is available and if we go over the budget then clearly it's a case of disposing of players as well as bringing them in," Kenyon said.

"But that's not a headline, it's a normal course of business, the way we do things. Manchester United is about evolution, not revolution."

Although United's squad proved good enough to clinch an eighth English Premiership title in 11 years, the Champions League defeat by Real Madrid exposed deficiencies which Ferguson will seek to put right in the transfer

market.

Ronaldinho, believed to be ready to move from Paris Saint-Germain in a 10-million-dollar (16-million-dollar) deal, will provide a new dimension in terms of creative flair.

Ferguson also needs another top class striker to play alongside or provide cover for Ruud van Nistelrooy, on whom United are currently dangerously dependent.

Sporting Lisbon forward Ricardo Quaresma is seen as Ferguson's top target in that department and he will also be in the market for a replacement for the injury-prone Fabien Barthez.

The defeat by Real also underlined the relative inexperience of United's young defenders.

Nobody disputes the potential of the likes of Rio Ferdinand, Wes Brown and John O'Shea. But with Laurent Blanc retiring, Ferguson may look to the continent for an experienced defender who can give United extra solidity at the back and aid the development of the players already at Old Trafford.

Kenyon's comments appeared further to reduce the possibility that David Beckham will be sold for financial reasons and the chief executive insisted that the club wanted to keep the England captain.

"You don't spend 12 months negotiating a new contract to give up on it 12 months later. We resigned David because we saw him as part of our squad for the next three years."

"We want Sir Alex Ferguson to stay for three more years because we want continuity."

"It's all about continuity and David is one player we want to form that continuity around - like Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, the Nevilles, Ruud van Nistelrooy and everybody else."

United's first decision in terms of squad development since retaining their Premiership title came on Thursday, when South African midfielder Quinton Fortune signed a new three-year contract.