

Primera Liga preview

Real excitement in Valencia

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's visit to Valencia on Saturday has been given high risk status by the Spanish police, and both teams will also be out to avoid jeopardising their title ambitions on the field at this early stage in the season.

Real Madrid lie second in the Spanish first division, and Valencia third, with both sides unbeaten on 10 points and only separated by goal difference.

League leaders Deportivo La Coruna top the table with 12 points and a 100 per cent record.

In the last few days it has been clear that Valencia fancy their chances of inflicting the first loss this season on the reigning Spanish champions.

"Even the great teams have their weak points, it is just that they have less than others. In Real's case it is probably their defence. They are a good side but so are we, and we can notch up a victory," said Valencia's inspirational playmaker Pablo Aimar earlier this week.

Madrid may also be without two of their superstars - Raul Gonzalez and Zinedine Zidane.

Raul took a hard knock on the hip in Madrid's 3-1 win at Malaga on Sunday while Zidane ended training early on Thursday due to a strained left adductor muscle.

Jose Mari 'Guti' Gutierrez and Javier Portillo stand by to start their first games of the season.

Fabian Ayala could be back in the Valencia side, after missing their last three matches apparently with a variety of muscular problems.

However, club president Jaime Orti has accused the Argentine defender of feigning the injuries in an attempt to engineer his departure from the club.

Real Madrid have been linked with Ayala, and desperately need more central defenders. Real president Florentino Perez has publicly promised not to sign the player but, in the wake of his protestations over David Beckham, his pronouncements tend to get taken with a pinch of salt.

FIXTURES
Saturday (kick off GMT): Celta Vigo v Valladolid (1730), Athletic Bilbao v Real Sociedad (1730), Osasuna v Deportivo La Coruna (1730), Valencia v Real Madrid (1930)
Sunday: Albacete v Mallorca (1500), Espanyol v Malaga (1500), Racing Santander v Villarreal (1500), Real Zaragoza v Racing Santander (1500), Sevilla v Murcia (1700), Atletico Madrid v Barcelona (1900)

In recent years, the animosity between Valencia and Real Madrid has taken on a ferocity matched only by Real's rivalry with Barcelona, hence its designation by the Spanish guardians of law and order.

The enmity can be traced back to 1996 when Real poached Valencia's star striker Pedja Mijatovic.

In 2001, one of the most brutal tackles in a violent match saw Valencia's David Albelda give Zinedine Zidane a less-than-friendly welcome to Spain in his first local league match while Luis Figo was shown a red card.

Last year the Real Madrid bus

was showered with missiles and several windows were broken while the players were inside.

"I don't think they (Real) should be worried though. There will be an atmosphere of friendly rivalry, not of violence," said Orti on Thursday.

With all the attention focused on the match between last two winners of the Spanish league, leaders Deportivo have been able to prepare relatively calmly this week for a potentially difficult match at Osasuna on Saturday.

Deportivo have won on their last two trips to Pamplona and have never lost in the El Sadar stadium since it was inaugurated in 1967, their last loss at Osasuna coming in the 1962-63 season, but Osasuna pride themselves on being a feisty outfit and this year has been no different.

"Physically we are much better shape than last season, all our work in the pre-season is starting to show," said Osasuna coach Javier Aguirre, whose team lie sixth.

The other big game sees Atletico Madrid play host to Barcelona on Sunday.

Atletico have just three points to their name, lie just one place above the relegation zone, and their struggle to find the winning formula can be seen by the fact that they have already used 23 players in just four games.

By contrast, Barcelona are unbeaten in fifth place but few pundits would say they have hit top form yet and the Catalans looked far from impressive during their scrappy 1-1 draw with Osasuna in the Nou Camp last Saturday.



RIVALDO

Milan release Rivaldo

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo has been released from his contract with European champions AC Milan, the Serie A club said on Friday.

Milan said in a brief statement on their website that the former Barcelona player had asked to be released from his contract which ran until July 2005.

"The decision to mutually cancel the contract, with effect from today, was taken in absolute friendship and calmness," said AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani.

Rivaldo, 31, has not featured for Milan in Serie A or the Champions League this season and recently said he felt "humiliated" by being left out of the side.

"I just cannot accept that I have so few opportunities to show what I can do," said Rivaldo.

"That became clear to me at Accona where I stayed on the bench during the whole game.

"If I am not allowed to play in games like that I certainly will not be picked for the big clashes.

"It's my own decision and I am not looking to blame anyone."

Galliani praised Rivaldo saying that he played his part in the side winning three trophies in the last year.

The forward, who played a major role in Brazil's World Cup triumph in Japan and South Korea last year, joined Milan from Barcelona on a free transfer at the start of last season but has struggled to make an impact.

He was forced to watch Milan's triumph in the Champions League final against Juventus in May from the bench at Old Trafford.

Milan won the Champions League and Italian Cup last season but Rivaldo scored just five goals in 22 league appearances, most times as a substitute.

Rivaldo said in an interview with a Brazilian newspaper on Monday that he intended to stay in Europe should he leave the Serie A club.

He was linked with a move to Real Madrid this week.

It was Brazil team-mate Ronaldo last week at a game honouring Real legend Alfredo di Stefano in Madrid who suggested that Rivaldo should join the galaxy of footballing stars at Real.

Serie A preview

Inter in tricky territory

Football

AFP, Rome

Serie A title hopefuls Inter Milan face their bogey team on Saturday when they visit Udinese at the Friuli stadium.

Inter lost both of their league meetings last season and are determined to erase the memory of a painful double defeat which put a massive dent in their championship hopes.

"We cannot go to Udinese and make the same mistakes again," said Inter midfielder Emre Belozoglu.

"Udinese are an excellent side and we know it will be very difficult, but we have the quality to take three points.

"We were not satisfied at drawing with Sampdoria last week and a point at Friuli will not be enough."

The 23-year-old Turkey international said the team had benefitted from a week without Champions League action.

"We've had a lot of rest and have prepared well, tactically and physically," said the former Galatasaray star, who joined Inter in the summer of 2001.

Inter are expected to be without Christian Vieri for a third consecutive match. The Italy international, last season's top goalscorer in Serie A, is still recovering from an ankle injury.

Udinese were very strong at home last season, winning 11 of their 17 games and losing only once.

Reigning champions Juventus face an equally difficult match away to Calabrian outfit Reggina.

David Baiocco, who joined Reggina from Juve this summer, is looking to put one over on his former club, with whom he spent just one season.

"It's a game of particular significance for me, but I am thinking only of Reggina," said the 28-year-old midfielder.

"Juventus were an important part of my professional life, but I have dreamt of scoring against them and

giving our fans their first victory of the season.

"It's going to be tough, but we are in fine form. Juve are a great club but no team is unbeatable and the support of our fans will give us a big hand."

Juventus coach Marcello Lippi is expected to give striker Marco Di Vaio a rare start in the absence of captain Alessandro Del Piero, who hobbled off with a calf strain in last Sunday's 2-2 draw with Roma.

European champions AC Milan, held at Perugia last week, host Lecce at the San Siro.

Brazilian midfielder Kaka is expected to start.

Kaka has won rave reviews for his assured performances since arriving in Italy, but coach Carlo Ancelotti has insisted the 21-year-old playmaker still has a lot to learn.

"Kaka is a modern player and will become a star but he still has to adapt to the rhythm and style of our football," Ancelotti said.

"He told me that in Brazil they are used to playing so many competitive games that they don't have time to undergo a real pre-season preparation. That's why he needs to improve his fitness."

Lazio hope to bounce back after last week's surprise home defeat against Parma by winning at bottom club Empoli, while Roma, buoyant after their 4-0 drubbing of Macedonian outfit Vardar in midweek in the UEFA Cup, host newly-promoted Ancona.

FIXTURES
 (all matches 1300 GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Reggina v Juventus (1600 GMT), Udinese v Inter Milan (1830 GMT)
Sunday: AC Milan v Lecce, Chievo v Perugia, Modena v Bologna, Parma v Siena, Roma v Ancona, Sampdoria v Brescia, Empoli v Lazio (1830 GMT)

Taffarel hangs up his gloves



REUTERS, Milan

Claudio Taffarel, Brazil's World Cup winning goalkeeper in 1994, has announced his retirement from the game at the age of 37.

Taffarel, who played in Europe for Italian clubs Parma and Reggiana and Turkish side Galatasaray, was offered a one-year deal by Serie A club Empoli but decided to retire.

"I don't want to continue playing. I am quitting. I am doing this above all for my children," said the Brazilian.

"I am certainly leaving football but I'd like to stay in Parma and I'd like to open a restaurant here," added the keeper.

Taffarel, out of contract after leaving Parma at the end of last season, had originally agreed to join Empoli but said he had a last minute rethink after his car broke down as he set off to sign a contract.

"I simply realised then that it wasn't what I wanted. I turned it down because it didn't feel right," said Taffarel.

Taffarel was a hero for Brazil when they won the 1994 World Cup final against Italy in the USA on penalties.

The keeper saved a penalty in the shoot-out from Daniele Massaro before Roberto Baggio struck his spot kick over the bar to hand Brazil the title.

Four years later he was in goal as Brazil lost 3-0 to hosts France.

Ronaldinho's Barca dreams

Football

Reuters, Paris

Brazilian midfielder Ronaldinho believes his new club Barcelona will help him to reach his full potential.

"I'm not at one hundred per cent of my potential yet", the 23-year-old playmaker told soccer magazine France Football.

"What matters is that I continue to grow and surrounded as I am by great players, at Barca or with Brazil, I can be full of hope," he said.

Ronaldinho's decision to join Barca in July from Paris St Germain after being approached by Real Madrid and Manchester United had come as a surprise, especially as the Catalan club are not playing in the Champions League this season.

"It was beautiful. The struggle between such great clubs was an extra motivation to work even harder to reach my best," he said.

The gifted Brazilian said he had signed for Barcelona "because it was a good offer and PSG agreed".

But the club's history and the example set by Brazilian players in the past was another reason.

"Any player would be glad to sign for Barcelona. I'm here to follow in the footsteps of other great Brazilian players like Romario, Ronaldo or

Rivaldo," he said.

Ronaldinho, who scored a memorable goal against England in last year's World Cup quarter-finals with a 35-metre lob, said he still had a lot to learn to emulate his idols.

"I must grow as a player. I'm still very far from Maradona, Romario, Stochkov, Zidane, Gullit, Van Basten, Rijkaard, Rivaldo or



RONALDINHO

Ronaldo. "They're the best. My goal is just to work hard and one day get near them," he said.

Ronaldinho added that Barca should not feel inferior to champions Real Madrid.

"Real are a great team with great players and a spectacular style of play. But honestly I don't feel any jealousy.

"I trust Barcelona have the means to challenge them," he said.

Ronaldinho said he owes his success as a player to the two seasons he spent in France.

"French football allowed me to mature. I am convinced that the Ronaldinho of Barcelona is mainly thanks to France. It is there that I grew up. I grew as a footballer and as a man," he told France Football.

The Brazilian superstar spent two seasons at PSG who he described as "a great team" but that eventually "things turned out bad" as they failed to deliver the league title to their long suffering fans.

"I was fine in Paris. It is a big city where football generates intense feelings, much more than people can imagine," said Ronaldinho.

"I loved playing at the Parc des Princes, it is an impressive stadium. I don't regret signing for PSG."

In his career at the French club, which stretched from August 2001 to May 2003, Ronaldinho played 55 matches and scored 17 goals.

"I don't regret a single second of my time in Paris. On the contrary, I am very proud."

MU not on Beck's side!

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham's former employers Manchester United have banned his autobiography, "My Side", from their club shop, a British newspaper reported Friday.

"It is an astonishing decision to deprive the 70,000 fans (who attend United's home games) a chance to buy the book about one of their icons," a spokesman for the book's publishers' HarperCollins was quoted as saying in The Sun.

The publishing house has said it believes the book could sell up to one million copies worldwide.

England captain Beckham left United in the summer to join Spanish giants Real Madrid, while

his autobiography, published earlier this month, contains scathing attacks on his former boss, United manager Alex Ferguson.

United said they were unable to stock the book due to the club's deal with a rival publisher, according to The Sun.

Beckham's autobiography charts the player's career from his early days with Manchester United to his signing for Real.

It deals with his take on his spat with Ferguson, who groomed him from a young teenager at United but who much criticised his glamorous lifestyle.

Emphasising Beckham's appeal away from the pitch, the married father of two was Thursday named most stylish sports personality of the year at the British Style Awards in London.

Premiership preview

Ferdinand pumped up

Football

AFP, London

Rio Ferdinand believes Manchester United's defence of their Premiership title is set to move up a gear as this summer's new signings settle into the side.

United travel to Premiership newcomers Leicester on Saturday having taken only four points from their last three league games.

The early season stutter has increased the scrutiny of United's new boys and led some to question the wisdom of Sir Alex Ferguson's decision to offload David Beckham and Juan Sebastian Veron in the summer.

But Ferdinand is confident United will get stronger as the season wears on.

"Against Arsenal (on Sunday) we were the team that looked more likely to win the game, and obviously before that we beat Panathinaikos 5-0 (in the Champions League) so we were in good shape at the moment," he said.

"We've got a few new players who are still becoming accustomed to the Premiership.

"But the longer they are here the better it will be for United."

With Leicester handicapped by an injury crisis which could deprive Micky Adams of virtually his entire first team line-up, United will be confident of taking all three points at the Walkers' stadium, where three of their five summer signings are likely to be on show.

Tim Howard has established himself as the first choice goal-



RIO FERDINAND

keeper ahead of Fabien Barthez, teenage winger Cristiano Ronaldo is set for an extended run in the side as Ole Gunnar Solskjaer recovers from knee surgery and midfielder Eric Djemba Djemba is also pushing for a regular starting role.

Brazilian World Cup winner Kleberson remains sidelined with a dislocated shoulder while French winger David Bellion is regarded as a back-up player by Ferguson.

going the way we want."

Veron missed last weekend's 5-0 thrashing of Wolves but is in line to return to the side for Saturday's visit of Aston Villa to Stamford Bridge.

Villa are hoping England striker Darius Vassell, on the comeback trail after surgery on his pelvis, will be fit enough to start the match alongside Juan Pablo Angel.

Birmingham and Fulham, who meet at St Andrews, will both be looking to bounce back from shock

FIXTURES
 (1400 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday: Birmingham v Portsmouth, Bolton v Wolverhampton, Chelsea v Aston Villa, Leicester v Manchester Utd, Southampton v Middlesbrough
Sunday: Blackburn v Fulham, Charlton v Liverpool (1300 GMT), Everton v Leeds, Manchester City

League Cup defeats by, respectively, second division Blackpool and first division leaders Wigan.

Birmingham boss Steve Bruce, who is expected to axe misfiring strikers Clinton Morrison and Stern John, has warned his players there must be no repeat of Tuesday's sloppy display.

"We have made a good start to the season and need to look at this as a blip but if we do not take our chances we are not going to win matches."

Bolton entertain Wolves and Middlesbrough travel to Southampton in Saturday's other two matches.

English fans to be stopped



AFP, Nyon

England and Turkey agreed on Thursday to try to stop English fans getting into Turkey for the potentially explosive Euro 2004 qualifier between the two teams in Istanbul next month, after a meeting at UEFA headquarters.

"I urge England fans not to travel to Istanbul," English Football Association chairman Geoff Thompson said in a public appeal at European football's governing body.

"Please support England by staying at home and watching the match on television or listening to

the radio commentary," he added.

Both sides have stepped up cooperation and public appeals to try to prevent a repeat of crowd violence that has marred games between English and Turkish teams in recent years.

Asked if English fans would be stopped from getting into Turkey, Turkish federation president Haluk Olusoy said: "Yes, it will be like this".

"It is important the England fans understand they are not able to get into the stadium," Olusoy insisted.

Meanwhile, Turkey has sold all 42,000 tickets for the qualifier against England for record gate receipts of 1.8 million dollars.

The winners of the game will qualify automatically for the finals.

Vintage Hamm



AFP, Washington

Only two games into the Women's World Cup, one thing is certain about the United States: Just about everything Mia Hamm touches turn to goal.

Take, for instance, how she scored her second goal 12 minutes into the Americans' 5-0 thrashing of Nigeria on Thursday night. Hamm took a 35-yard free kick from the left side that floated over goalkeeper Precious Dede to the far post. In the United States 3-1 Group A win over Sweden on Sunday, Hamm was instrumental in all three goals. On Thursday in Philadelphia, Hamm continued to put talk she doesn't come up big in important games behind her with another virtuoso performance.

The United States, with six points from two matches, lead Sweden and North Korea by three points in the Group A standings and need only a draw against North Korea in Columbus, Ohio, on Sunday.

"To us, it was an important

game," said Hamm, whose all-time international goal record is at 144 and counting.

The United States can thank Hamm and Cindy Parlow, who took a lot of punishment to set up Hamm's heroics. After Bunni Kayode and Florence Omagbemi made a Parlow sandwich in the penalty area, Hamm slotted home a penalty in the sixth minute. After Parlow was fouled 35 yards out, Hamm converted that free kick.

Hamm paid back Parlow, sending a corner that the forward headed home in the 47th minute.

Hamm became the second player and the first American to score in all four World Cups after Germany's Bettina Wiegmann.

Hamm's streak of being involved six consecutive goals was finally broken on Abby Wambach's 65th-minute goal. Julie Foudy joined Hamm as a four-Cup scorer, converting a penalty in the 89th.

While the defending champion United States were living up to their favorites status, 1999 Women's World Cup runners-up China were held to a 1-1 draw by Group D underdogs Australia in the Los Angeles suburb of Carson, California.

Russia finished the day atop the Group D standings as Marina Saenko scored one goal and set up another in a 3-0 victory over Ghana that gave the Russians two wins in two matches.

Back in Philadelphia, Victoria Svensson scored the only goal to give Sweden a Group A win over North Korea.



PHOTO:AFP

Mia Hamm celebrates one of her two goals against Nigeria at Lincoln Financial Field on September 25.

Stadium cheer for Gunners

AFP, London

Arsenal received a much-needed boost when it emerged that financing for a new 60,000-seater stadium has finally been put in place after months of uncertainty.

Friday's news will come as a relief to manager Arsene Wenger at the end of a traumatic week in which Arsenal have found themselves under siege from the media and the Football Association over the clashes which marred Sunday's match against Manchester United.

Wenger had been barred from significantly strengthening his squad while Arsenal attempted to finalise the funding for the 400-million-pound new stadium, which is due to be built at Ashburton Grove in north London in time for the 2006/07 season.

With concerns about the financial viability of many English football clubs rising, Arsenal's bankers initially struggled to persuade lenders to back the project.

But, according to The Guardian newspaper, they have now finalised a 260-million-pound package of long-term debt with a consortium of banks which will ensure the stadium goes ahead.

Arsenal are expected to confirm the deal in a statement to shareholders at next Thursday's AGM.

The move from Highbury, where the capacity is limited to 38,500 and further development restricted by local residents' objections, is scheduled to take place in 2006.

The increased capacity is seen as vital to Arsenal's ability to remain competitive with Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea.

United's Old Trafford ground holds 67,500 spectators and their gate receipts currently outstrip Arsenal's to the tune of one million pounds per match.

Although Wenger was unable to bring in any new big names this summer, he did succeed in persuading French trio Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira and Robert Pires to sign new contracts and recently said the new stadium had influenced their decisions to stay.

Arsenal's position in relation to the banks has been strengthened by the announcement in the last month of a new sponsorship deal with sportswear company Nike and the extension of the English Premiership's television rights deal with satellite broadcaster BSky until 2007.

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