

English giants go for the top



AFP, Paris

England's Manchester United and Chelsea may have already qualified for the Champions League knockout stages but they could win their respective groups outright in Tuesday's matches against VfB Stuttgart and Besiktas.

Manchester United are level on 12 points with Stuttgart in Group E and both teams are already assured of a berth in the last 16 but have the incentive that the group winners will have an easier draw. Stuttgart need a draw to take top spot.

Chelsea meet Besiktas in Group G and a draw following their match in Gelsenkirchen, Germany - which was moved from Istanbul due to the recent terrorist bomb attacks in Istanbul - would ensure the Blues win the pool.

Real Madrid host Porto in Group F and both clubs are already through but a draw for the Spaniards would ensure their crown as pool champions.

In Group H, AC Milan are already group winners but any one of Ajax, FC Bruges and Celta Vigo could grab that second spot.

Premiership champions Manchester United go into their match against Stuttgart in a much better frame of mind than they were on Friday.

A 4-0 trouncing of Aston Villa, a likely four-year contract renewal for manager Alex Ferguson and even more significantly the return of England star Paul Scholes has given them a huge morale boost after two successive defeats to Chelsea and then the League Cup clash with West Brom.

Ferguson confirmed that Scholes would start on Tuesday - after he played half an hour of the Villa match in his first appearance since a groin operation on October 28 - which probably means it will be back to the bench for Uruguayan striker Diego Forlan despite scoring a brace of last minute goals against Villa on Saturday.

"It was a great day for us in terms of Paul Scholes," Ferguson said.

"He gets half an hour of play and he'll play on Tuesday now so that is him on the way back."

In the other Group E game, Scotland's Rangers must avoid defeat at home to Greek side Panathinaikos to ensure their UEFA Cup berth as a third-placed team.

Chelsea warmed up for the encounter with a 1-1 draw against Leeds United but Besiktas' preparations have been far from ideal with a knife incident casting a dark cloud over the Turkish camp.

Striker Ahmet Dursun is reported to have thrown a knife - used for cleaning football boots - at Italian team-mate Federico Giunti after a robust challenge.

Besiktas have kept quiet over the incident and will hope to do their talking on the pitch against Chelsea's galaxy of stars.

After defeating Chelsea 3-0 at Stamford Bridge, the Turkish outfit, currently three points adrift of the Londoners, can win the group, courtesy of their superior head-to-head record, with victory at the Arena Auf Schalke.

However Besiktas will be fired up knowing they need all three points to be 100 percent sure of qualification with the winners of the Lazio-Sparta Prague tie in the Czech capital still able to oust the Turks.

Lazio's former Manchester United defender Jaap Stam said: "No-one enjoys being in the position of relying on other teams and I'm praying Chelsea will not let us

down.

"Looking at the strengths and weaknesses of Chelsea and Besiktas, there is no doubt in my mind Chelsea can win in Turkey but they must take a full squad with them for the game.

"Luckily, Chelsea are not yet confirmed as the group winners and that should mean there is still motivation for them to win the match. They have the talent to do it and I hope they will also have the hunger."

In Group H, Spanish side Celta Vigo must better second-placed Ajax's result against FC Bruges on the same to join AC Milan in the knockout phase.

Celta are currently level with the Dutch team on six points but have an inferior head-to-head record.

However the Spaniards' chances of qualifying have been boosted by the fact that Milan, who have already won the group, will field an under-strength team for the San Siro clash with one eye on their Intercontinental Cup final against South American champions Boca Juniors in Yokohama on December 14.

Paolo Maldini, Alessandro Nesta, Marcos Cafu, Giuseppe Pancaro, Gennaro Gattuso, Andrea Pirlo and Andriy Shevchenko will all be missing for the European champions as they are flying to Japan on Monday.

Celta are expected to be without Russian international forward Aleksandr Mostovoi, who tore a thigh muscle in training last week.

FIXTURES

Champions League fixtures on Tuesday (all kick-off times 1945 GMT):

Group E
At Old Trafford
Manchester United (ENG) v VfB Stuttgart (GER)
At Glasgow
Rangers (SCO) v Panathinaikos (GRE)

Group F
At Belgrade
Partizan Belgrade (SEM) v Marseille (FRA)
At Madrid
Real Madrid (SPA) v FC Porto (POR)

Group G
At Gelsenkirchen, Germany
Besiktas (TUR) v Chelsea (ENG)
At Prague
Sparta Prague (CZE) v Lazio (ITA)

Group H
At Bruges
FC Bruges (BEL) v Ajax (NED)
At Milan
AC Milan (ITA) v Celta Vigo (SPA)

WEDNESDAY

Group A
At Munich
Bayern Munich (GER) v Anderlecht (BEL)
At Lyon
Lyon (FRA) v Celtic (SCO)

Group B
At Kiev
Dynamo Kiev (UKR) v Inter Milan (ITA)
At London
Arsenal (ENG) v Lokomotiv Moscow (RUS)

Group C
At Athens
AEK Athens (GRE) v Monaco (FRA)
At Eindhoven
PSV Eindhoven (NED) v Deportivo La Coruna (SPA)

Group D
At Juventus
Juventus (ITA) v Olympiakos (GRE)
At San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (SPA) v Galatasaray (TUR)



PHOTO: INTER

Inter Milan hotshot Christian Vieri (L) being checked by a Perugia defender on December 7 at the Mapez Stadium in Milan.

Serie A

Roma rout Chievo



AFP, Rome

Roma matched AC Milan stride for stride, drawing level with the European champions at the top of Serie A on Sunday thanks to a 3-0 win at Chievo.

Milan threw down the gauntlet by defeating Empoli on Saturday to take sole possession of first place, but Roma ensured top spot was shared between the two title rivals with an impressive victory in Verona.

A purple patch in the second half in which Roma scored three goals in five minutes ended Chievo's plucky resistance which had threatened the visitors' unbeaten start to the season.

Unbeaten midfielder Mancini was the architect of Roma's ninth victory, setting up goals for Francesco Totti and Antonio Cassano and grabbing one himself to send the 6,000 travelling fans delirious.

Mancini played down his contribution from the wings which stretched Chievo's defence and provided the breakthrough for Fabio Capello's men.

"It's something I do week in, week out in training," he said.

Capello praised his players for raising their game in the second half and playing their usual passing game which at times was exhilarating.

"We suffered a lot in the first half and Chievo made it difficult for us to play by pushing us back," he said.

"But in the second half we saw the real Roma and class told in the end. We scored three great goals and deserved the victory."

A dire first-half, notable only for numerous misplaced passes and clumsy challenges, sprang to life six minutes before the break when Chievo came within inches of taking the lead.

A loose ball fell to Daniele Francheschini just inside the penalty box and his powerful shot cannoned off the crossbar with Roma goalkeeper Ivan Pelizzoli beaten.

Determined to make amends for a disappointing first half, Roma came out fighting after the interval and their positive approach reaped rewards in the 67th minute when Mancini's pinpoint right wing cross found Totti, who slotted home his sixth goal of the season from close range.

Mancini put the game further out of Chievo's reach three minutes later, collecting Totti's pass before lashing a fierce cross-shot past a helpless Giorgio Frezzolini.

And the tireless Brazilian, who last season was playing with Venezia in the second division, rounded off an eye-catching performance by setting up Cassano to volley in Roma's third 18 minutes from time.

Earlier Sunday Inter Milan's

title challenge gained momentum after they chalked up their fifth Serie A win on the trot with a scrappy 2-1 victory over Perugia to move to within five points of the joint leaders.

Italy international Christian Vieri netted both Inter goals before Giovanni Tedesco's late consolation goal ensured a few nail-biting moments in the closing stages for Alberto Zaccheroni's men.

Inter, who face a do-or-die Champions League match away to Dinamo Kiev in the Ukraine on Wednesday where they must win to stand any chance of making it through to the last 16, took the lead in the 25th minute at the San Siro.

Turkish midfielder Emre Belozoglu burst into the box and fed Javier Zanetti, who in turn teed up Christian Vieri to fire a low left foot shot which crept in off the far post off the outstretched hand of Michele Tardiolli.

Inter pounced Perugia's goal in the second-half but had to wait until the 80th minute before doubling their advantage.

The visitors were caught short at the back as they poured forward in search of an equaliser, and Julio Cruz took full advantage of the extra space, threading an inch-perfect pass through to Vieri who headed straight for goal and slotted the ball past Tardiolli.

Tedesco took advantage of some poor Inter defending to reduce the deficit two minutes from time and Perugia nearly left with a point when Massimo

Margiotta's header flew narrowly over the crossbar.

Parma leapt up to fifth with a 2-1 win at Lecce where Alberto Gilardino grabbed both goals for the visitors.

On Saturday AC Milan rode their luck in a 1-0 win at struggling Empoli.

Brazilian midfielder Kaka saved Milan's blushes by scoring the winner nine minutes from time with a 30-yard screamer which maintained their unbeaten run.

Elsewhere on Saturday, reigning champions Juventus crashed to their second consecutive league defeat, losing 2-0 at Lazio.

Bernardo Corradi broke the deadlock in the 21st minute at the Olympic stadium before setting up Stefano Fiore's for Lazio's second goal in first-half stoppage time.

Defeat left Juventus in third, four points off the pace while Lazio remain in sixth place.

TOP SIX

Standings in the Italian championship after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Roma	12	9	3	0	28	4	30
Milan	12	9	3	0	21	4	30
Juventus	12	8	2	2	26	14	26
Inter	12	7	4	1	22	7	25
Parma	12	7	3	2	21	12	24
Lazio	12	7	1	4	20	16	22

Ferdinand chalks up excuse



AFP, London

Manchester United will claim Rio Ferdinand was never given the chance to take a routine drug test when he realised he had missed the controllers, it was reported Monday.

The Sun newspaper says his legal team will contend at a Football Association hearing on December 18 he could have complied with the regulations had he been given the chance.

Ferdinand telephoned the United doctors who were with the doping controllers at United's training ground 25 minutes before they left.

Ferdinand, who was in Manchester city centre at the time he made the call, told club medics he would return and take the test. But he was told he was too late.

The defence might save him from a possible two year ban but it could drag the saga out even more - to the fury of FIFA president Sepp Blatter who wants tough action taken against United's 30 million pound England defender and has vowed to act himself if, as he described it, the FA do not do the job properly.

Blatter has also slammed

United and the FA for the time it has taken to convene a hearing.

The testers are obliged to wait two hours from the time that a check is due to take place. After that, they are forced to make an official ruling that it has not been carried out.

FA executive director David Davies conceded regulations do not specifically cover a missed drugs test, as is the case with Ferdinand.

"It is fair to say that the processes we have, backed by UK Sport, were not introduced with the thought of people failing to turn up for tests. Clearly that has to be put right," he said.

Ferdinand has been charged with failure or refusal to comply with the testing procedure and could be banned from playing for up to two years if found guilty.

FA officials insist Blatter does not have the authority to intervene in the case.

FA chairman Geoff Thompson said: "The disciplinary committee will deal with the facts as they see fit and will not be influenced - by anybody."

Manchester can only blame themselves for Blatter's threat to step in.

The FIFA boss was infuriated when United chief executive David Gill said Blatter's comments were "incomprehensible".

Lucio open to offers



AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen's Brazilian World Cup winner Lucio has revealed he is willing to sit down and talk about a move if a big club such as Manchester United or Chelsea make a bid.

However the 25-year-old added he has no intention of following former team-mates Ze Roberto and Michael Ballack to Bayern Munich.

The Leverkusen defensive stalwart is the target of multi-million bids from wealthy Europe sides but insists he will only move to one of the European football powerhouses expressing his contentment with life at Leverkusen.

"If a big club comes in for me and matches Bayer's valuation I am willing to sit down and talk," Lucio said in an interview with German newspaper Welt am Sonntag.

"Real Madrid, Manchester United, Barcelona, Juventus and Chelsea are big clubs."

Chelsea, bankrolled by Russian oil magnate Roman Abramovich, have already registered their interest along with Champions League finalists Juventus.

Sections of the German media have even suggested that Lucio has already struck a deal to join the Italian champions in the winter break.

The fact that Ballack and Ze Roberto opted to move to Bayern prompted speculation the Brazilian defender would follow suit, but the 2002 World Cup victor was quick to quash such talk.

"Bayern is a top club but one thing certain is that if I decide to change clubs it will not be inside the Bundesliga," declared Lucio.

Although a transfer to one of Europe's glamour clubs looked on the agenda Lucio has insisted he has doubts about risking his current family happiness in Leverkusen.

"My family and I are happy in Leverkusen and I sometimes ask myself whether it makes sense to move somewhere where my family might not like life so much," confessed the Samba ace.

Sheikh really interested



AFP, Manama

Crisis Premiership club Leeds United have received an offer from a consortium headed by Sheikh Abdul Rahman Ben Mubarak Al-Khalifa he told AFP on Sunday.

Sheikh Al-Khalifa, a member of the Bahraini Royal Family, said the consortium made up of two Saudi Arabian businessmen and an Asiatic company had put the offer to the Leeds board - whose club is a reported 78 million pounds (135 million dollars) in debt - and were awaiting a response.

"The group put an offer to Leeds United and we are awaiting a reply in the next few days," Al-Khalifa, who is a lifelong Leeds fan, told AFP.

"The two Saudis are notable personalities and there are no Arabic shareholders in the Asiatic company.

"Our offer is in the hands of the Leeds board.

"Another group has entered the race and also presented an offer to the club.

"I would urge the Leeds directors to make a decision as quickly as possible so it would allow us to buy new players when the transfer window opens on January 1," added the Sheikh, who refused to divulge any details of the bid.

Sheikh Al-Khalifa said the improved performance of the team on the pitch in their two latest matches - beating highflying Charlton 1-0 and a 1-1 draw with leaders Chelsea - showed what a morale boost his interest in the club had had.

Primera Liga Vicente lifts Valencia



AFP, Madrid

A goal in either half by Spanish international Vicente put Valencia back into second place in the Primera Liga behind leaders Real Madrid on Sunday with a 2-1 win over Athletic Bilbao.

In a toughly-fought tie at home Valencia could thank goalkeeper Santiago Canizares for saving Ismael Urzaiz's injury-time penalty to move within two points of Real Madrid who beat Barcelona 2-1 Saturday to record their first league win in the Catalan capital since 1983.

Valencia's goals came after 11 and 65 minutes from Vicente with Santi Ezquerro having drawn Bilbao level after 52.

The result leaves them on 31 points, one clear of third-placed Deportivo La Coruna who beat Malaga 1-0 Saturday.

At the Nou Camp on Saturday, Real Madrid ended their decade drought with goals from Brazilian

superstars Roberto Carlos and Ronaldo - Barcelona's consolation coming from Patrick Kluivert.

In other games, Real Mallorca made it five wins in a row with a 1-0 victory over Valladolid on Sunday, which puts them sixth just behind Atletico Madrid, who came away 2-0 winners over tailenders Espanyol, thanks to a Fernando Torres double.

Albacete moved out of the relegation zone for the first time this season with a 4-0 win at home over Racing Santander, with their place in the drop zone being taken by last season's runners-up Real Sociedad, who crashed to a 4-0 defeat at home to Real Betis.

TOP SIX

Spanish league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Real	15	10	3	2	31	16	33
Valencia	15	9	4	2	29	12	31
Deportivo	15	9	3	3	23	11	30
Osasuna	15	7	5	3	18	12	26
Atletico	15	8	1	6	19	18	25
Real	15	7	2	6	19	22	23

Tibet China's neighbouring country!

AFP, Beijing

Football's world governing body FIFA has raised eyebrows in China by referring to Tibet as a neighbouring country on its 2006 World Cup website.

The website lists Tibet among countries that also include North Korea, India, Pakistan and Russia.

The Beijing Times Monday said the gaffe had provoked anger among net surfers and the newspaper had emailed FIFA to ask for an explanation.

The China Football Association had no immediate comment.

China, the 2008 Olympic host, views Tibet as a part of its territory, maintaining that it was "peacefully liberated" in 1951. It has ruled the Himalayan region with an iron fist since then.

Tibet's spiritual leader the Dalai Lama fled in 1959 after an uprising against Chinese rule was crushed by the army.



PHOTO: AFP

Valencia's Vicente Rodriguez (R) is the toast of his teammates Miguel Angel Mista (top), David Albelda (C) and Ruben Baraja after scoring against Athletic Bilbao at the Mestalla Stadium in Valencia on December 7.