

## UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE DRAW

# Old foes meet early

AFP, Monaco



Champions Barcelona and English league winners Chelsea will renew their stormy rivalry after they were drawn in the group stages of the Champions League here on Thursday.

It was the third time in three years that Barcelona, who beat Chelsea in the second round of last season's competition, have been paired with the London club.

The two teams will also meet Werder Bremen, who finished second in the German Bundesliga last season, and debutants Levski Sofia of Bulgaria in Group A.

"The third time in three years, it's a big draw," said Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon. "But we must not overlook the other teams, there's all to play for now."

"The Holy Grail is lifting the Champions League and players like (Michael) Ballack and (Andrei) Shevchenko will bring their experience."

"We have great respect for Barcelona as a team, and good relations with them as a club."

"But we must concentrate on getting through. Winning (group) games is important not only to qualify but to improve co-efficients (the factor used to determine seedings in next year's draw)."

Last season's losing finalists Arsenal will face 2004 champions Porto and have potentially tricky trips to Hamburg of Germany and CSKA Moscow in Group G.

"I'm quite happy with Hamburg. We finally get to play a German club," said Arsenal goalkeeper and German international Jens Lehmann.

"I think Sporting and CSKA Moscow are good teams but we have the favourite position in this group."

"As for Hamburg, they're always dangerous in set pieces and you always have to be aware of this."

Hamburg coach Thomas Doll was satisfied with the group.

"It's a great draw for us. Our goal is to reach the quarter-finals. It's possible even if Arsenal and Porto will be favourites," he said.

The money-spinning group stages of European football's most prestigious competition also saw

2005 winners Liverpool drawn with Dutch champions PSV Eindhoven, Bordeaux and Turkey's Galatasaray in Group C.

Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry said he was happy to have avoided a draining trip to Romania, Russia or Ukraine.

"PSV and Bordeaux are a little bit of a unknown for us," said Parry. "Turkey's a long way but we've avoided Eastern Europe. It's okay. We're looking forward to it."

Spanish giants Real Madrid, nine-time European champions, were drawn in the same pool as five-time French champions Lyon, as they were last year.

Completing Group E are Steaua Bucharest of Romania and Ukrainian club Dynamo Kiev.

Real coach Fabio Capello said the draw was "not good" and lamented having to play Lyon away first up after the French team beat them last season.

"We will start off away to a good side who are up and running (in the French league - Real begin their programme Sunday)," he said, adding he would have preferred to go up against Steaua as a perceived weaker side.

A "Battle of Britain" scenario was set up in Group F as Manchester United were drawn with Scottish champions Celtic.

Also in the mix were Benfica of Portugal and Danish debutants FC Copenhagen.

"We're looking forward to Celtic, and Benfica put us out last year so there's a chance for revenge," said Manchester United chief executive David Gill.

Inter Milan were drawn with German champions Bayern Munich in Group B alongside Sporting Lisbon and Spartak Moscow.

Inter director Gabriele Orsini, responsible for the club's transfer activity, said: "We respect the opponents in our group, but we don't fear any of them."

"We have strengthened our squad this summer and our coach Roberto Mancini has lots of options. We feel we can go all the way in every tournament that we are competing in."

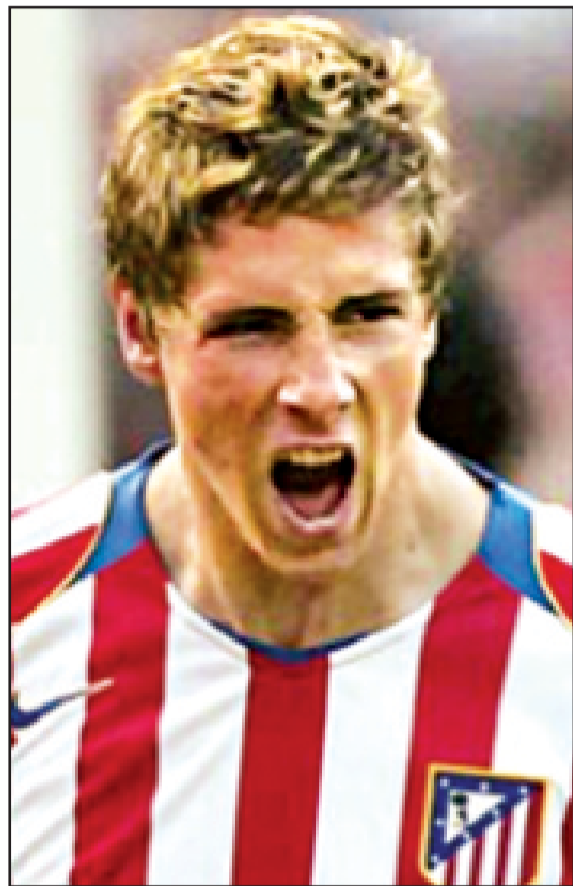
Group D saw Valencia pooled with Roma, Olympiakos of Greece and Ukrainian club Shakhtar Donetsk.

AC Milan, found guilty in the match-fixing scandal in Serie A but reinstated on appeal, had a favourable draw in Group H against Lille, AEK Athens and Belgian outfit Anderlecht.

Milan director Umberto Gandini said: "It's a balanced group with two of our three opponents having qualified through the preliminary round, just like ourselves."

"We're happy with the draw and we are up for the challenge."

The opening group games are scheduled for September 12/13.



From (L-R) Fernando Torres is the biggest hope for goals for an erratic Atletico Madrid, while Ruud van Nistelrooy's inclusion to title-contenders Real Madrid will add new force to an already potent attack, as current title-holders Barcelona will be looking to their Argentine prodigy Lionel Messi to provide their strikers with enough firepower.

# The league of stars

## QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM



Quite possibly the greatest conundrum in the international football world is simply the burning question of why Spain always (I repeat to stress

my point) fail to make it in the big stage, when they have what is commonly believed to be the strongest league in the world. It is common logical perception to come to the conclusion that the country with a strong domestic league will more often than not be a strong international representative. Italy, a prime example with England not far behind.

Spain however looks more likely to be the exception that proves that rule. The Primera Liga (as their domestic league is known) is easily one of the most eye catching leagues in the world, full of flavour and spice, character and charisma and of course winners galore—Ronaldo, Ayala, Eto'o, Ronaldo and Beckham to name but a few. And we haven't even come to the Messi's.

But despite boasting a talent pool at par or beyond any other leagues in the world the Spanish national team fails to fire when it matters most. But that is a story for another day. This is the story about the *Liga de Las Estrellas* (League of the Stars) and its resumption today.

Football has already started in England and Germany. But as they say in Spain, *the early bird may catch the worm and we can let him*. And besides, as a Spanish journalist so aptly puts it -- the best do not take the bow first.

Big words but refreshing our memories of the last Spanish season will tell us all we need to know about how exciting and strong a competition, the Primera Liga really is.

In a season where Ronaldo inexplicably declared that he wanted to win the Nobel Peace Prize (he did not) and where Cadiz fans chanted "Alcohol, alcohol, alcohol! We came here to get drunk and the result doesn't matter at all!" (they were promptly relegated), the city of Barcelona ran away with all the awards on display. Espanyol won the Copa del Rey and Barcelona won the Primera Liga. They also went on to win the European Cup and underlining Spanish (not Catalan) domination of

the European football calendar, Sevilla (the surprise package of the year) won the UEFA cup. Honestly, it does not get any more comprehensive than that. Their journalists have a right to be bullish.

But if Barcelona was the City of Light for football, the sun finally set on eternal rivals Real Madrid.

Having worked his way through seven coaches and over 400 million euros, having presided over three trophy-less years for the first time since 1953, having tried to shift the

interesting moments. Johnny Woodgate being one. Waiting 561 days for his Real debut the defender made a whirlwind start. He played all of an hour during which time he scored a goal; an own goal and then got himself sent off. But that was not all. Afterwards a Real coach was remarked in the press as saying, "Apart from the own goal and the sending-off, Woodgate had a solid debut." Go figure.

To compound the Real circus, Ivan Helgura, during a conference

could take up that role. There are rumour mill's spinning aplenty about Ronaldo and his possible departure to Milan with Kaka maybe featuring in that deal. But until that is done and dusted let us not worry ourselves with it.

And what of David Beckham, subject to chants of 'ugly, ugly' from Osasuna fans? The erstwhile England captain confounded his critics at the Bernabeu last season with an incredible 93 passes that led to direct goalscoring opportunities. To put it into perspective, the next best man was Bilbao's Francisco Yeste who had 78 with four more games. Beckham's tireless running, excellent passing and tactical nuance made him quite a favourite with the Madrid faithful and looks to have secured him a contract extension.

There still however seems little reason to assume that Barcelona cannot begin where they finished off last season, and indeed, they have been looking awesome in pre-season.

They thumped neighbours Espanyol 4-0 on aggregate in the Spanish Supercup (amid allegations of controversy), hammered Bayern 4-0 in a friendly, and play UEFA winners Sevilla on Friday in the European Supercup in a game that will delay these two sides' league bow until the following week.

In terms of personnel, the loss of Henrik Larsson has been compensated by the shrewd signing of Eidur Gudjohnsen, a player whose mix of good technique and physical ability should see him thrive in his new surroundings. But the two biggest coups looks set to be Lilian Thuram and Gianluca Zambrotta. To be honest Barca did not really need the two but then again everyone could not go to Madrid could they? Thuram provides extended stability to a backline already consisting of Rafael Marquez and Carles Puyol. But the arrival of Gianluca Zambrotta will strengthen both wingback positions, with the Italians ability at both sides. But all eyes will be on not Ronaldo, the Brazilian looking to re-establish himself following a sub-par World Cup, but Argentina sensation Lionel Messi. He is special the lad and this can be his breakthrough season. The European Cup is in the bag already for Barca and they will look to pocket it this time too. The World beckons.

So what other sides are expected to put up a fight this time around? Valencia of course, and their return to Europe should set

warning bells alight. The arrival of Asier del Horno and Fernando Morientes in the summer adds balance to the team but the greatest excitement lies around the capture, or soon to be capture of Betis winger Joaquin. A wonderfully gifted winger, Joaquin could well use Valencia as his stepping stone to worldwide prominence. The likes of Vicente on one wing and Joaquin on the other complemented by Albelda's steel in the centre and David Villa's goalscoring exploits can yet see Los Che's pip the favourites to the title. Don't count them out.

On paper though, Atletico Madrid are the team to watch. The Mexican, Javier Aguirre's success at Osasuna last season sees him take the reigns at Atletico and make something of the continual under-achievers. In this he will be aided and abetted by the continued presence of Fernando Torres, fresh from a good World Cup, the left-back Pernia from Getafe who also made it to Germany, along with Mista from Valencia. Maniche also looks set to

## FIXTURES

(1700 GMT unless stated)  
**Saturday**  
 Valencia v Real Betis (2000 GMT)  
**Sunday**  
 Real Madrid v Villarreal  
 Deportivo La Coruna v Real Zaragoza  
 Osasuna v Getafe  
 Recreativo Huelva v Mallorca  
 Espanyol v Gimnastic Tarragona  
 Racing Santander v Atletico Madrid  
 Athletic Bilbao v Real Sociedad (1900 GMT)  
**Monday**  
 Celta Vigo v Barcelona (1900 GMT)  
**Tuesday**  
 Sevilla v Levante (1900 GMT)

switch from Russia. The greatest hope however lies with the next in the line of new Maradona's, Sergio "Kun" Aguiro, who signed for them for a deal in excess of 20 million Euros. If they can adapt to their change of kits and Aguirre's acumen then they can make it far.

It would be interesting to report that someone other than Real Madrid, Valencia and Atletico look equipped to take up Barca's challenge, but the truth is that nobody does. A dark horse may emerge, but at the moment all the signs point to a similar season to the last.

Nine of the teams lining up this weekend will have new managers

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(From L) The UEFA best defender of the year Carlos Puyol, best midfielder Deco, best player Ronaldo, best goalkeeper Jens Lehmann and best forward Cameroonian Samuel Eto'o pose with their respective trophies after the draw of the group stages of the 2006-07 European Champions League in Monaco on Thursday.

## Spain unchanged for Euro qualifiers

AFP, Madrid

Spain coach Luis Aragonés kept faith on Friday with the same squad he picked for a recent friendly against Iceland ahead of the country's Euro 2008 qualifiers.

Spain play Liechtenstein on September 2 in Badajoz before travelling to face Northern Ireland away on September 6.

The squad is also virtually the same as the list of players who went to Germany for the World Cup in June and July.

Only Valencia goalkeeper Santiago Canizares and Villarreal's Manchester United target Marcos Senna have been left out from the World Cup party with Celta Vigo's Borja Oubina Melendez being drafted in.

## SQUAD

**Goalkeepers:** Iker Casillas (Real Madrid), Jose Reina (Liverpool/ENG)

**Defenders:** Carles Puyol (Barcelona), Michel Salgado (Real Madrid), Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid), Carlos Marchena (Valencia), Mariano Pernia (Atletico Madrid), Antonio Lopez (Atletico Madrid), Pablo

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# No place yet for RvN, Bommel

## Football

AFP, Zeist

Netherlands coach Marco van Basten admitted Friday he is unlikely to call up Ruud van Nistelrooy or Mark van Bommel ever again, after leaving them out of his Euro 2008 qualifiers squad.

Van Basten named a 22-man squad for the September 2 and 6 matches against Luxembourg and Belarus respectively.

But there was still no place for the experienced duo who were also left out of van Basten's squad for a friendly against Ireland earlier this month - a game the Netherlands won 4-0.

"You should never say never but I don't think I will be calling up Mark and Ruud again," said van Basten. "I want to keep faith in other players I rate more highly."

Van Basten has adopted a policy of rejuvenating the Dutch national team since taking over and has already discarded veteran players

such as Edgar Davids, Clarence Seedorf, Patrick Kluijver and Roy

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## SQUAD

**Goalkeepers:** Edwin van der Sar (Manchester United), Henk Timmer (Feyenoord)

**Defenders:** Khalid Boulahrouz (Chelsea), Joris Mathijsen (Hamburg), Giovanni van Bronckhorst (Barcelona), Tim de Cler (AZ Alkmaar), Urby Emanuelson (Ajax), John Heitinga (Ajax), Kew Jaliens (AZ Alkmaar), Andre Ooijer (Blackburn Rovers)

**Midfielders:** Theo Janssen (Vitesse Arnhem), Nigel de Jong (Hamburg), Denny Landzaat (Wigan), Stijn Schaars (AZ Alkmaar), Wesley Sneijder (Ajax), Rafael van der Vaart (Hamburg)

**Strikers:** Ryan Babel (Ajax), Klaas-Jan Huntelaar (Ajax), Dirk Kuijt (Liverpool), Martijn Meerdink (AZ Alkmaar), Robin van Persie (Arsenal), Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink (Celtic)



Real Madrid have strengthened their defence by signing Italy's World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro.



Fabio Capello could be the biggest 'player' of the Primera Liga season.

blame on to Spain's refs, and having milked the club for as many motorways as he could build, Florentino Perez finally sacked the man really responsible: himself. What that will bring for Real is something we can only wait and see.

But let us not dwell on the negatives. There were after all other

discussing the benefits of glugging ale (yes, alcohol) admitted that: "We all (Real players) like a drink after a game and sometimes we like to have a drink before a game too." Yes, and that explains why Iker Casillas had to make a total of 144 saves last season.

For the neutrals though, it should be said that Madrid are a much different side this season.

Pedrag Mijatovic put his frequent flier miles to good use. The newly appointed Sporting Director travelled to and fro between Turin and Madrid and managed to bring back two prized jewels with him. Fabio Cannavaro, arguably the best defender in the world today and Emerson, a no less combative defensive midfielder. That added to the signing of Ruud van Nistelrooy and the capture of Lyon's indefatigable Mahamadou Diarra has catapulted Madrid into genuine title contenders once again. The twelve point margin of the last season could well be a distant memory. The only case of worry could be a direct replacement for Zidane but it seems likely that the erratic yet highly talented Antonio Cassano and maybe even the Brazilian Robinho



Valencia will pin hopes on their prodigal striker David Villa after his excellent performance at this summer's World Cup.