



Sporting Lisbon footballers train for their Champions League clash against Inter Milan at the Sporting Academia in Alcochete on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

## League of champions returns

AFP, Paris

Spanish giants Barcelona are looking to strike a psychological blow to the numerous challengers for their Champions League crown when the competition kicks off tonight.

Barcelona last season ended a 14-year wait to be recrowned kings of Europe after dominating Arsenal in a pulsating final in Paris.

And Frank Rijkaard's Samuel Eto'o and Ronaldinho-inspired side begin this season's campaign in group A with what should be a manageable encounter at the Nou Camp against Levski Sofia.

On the first night of Champions League group action this season, no less than five former European champions are in action -- and all, including Barcelona, will be desperate to get their respective campaigns off on the right foot.

Former titleholders Bayern Munich are at home to Spartak

Moscow, PSV Eindhoven host fellow former champions Liverpool and Inter Milan take their European pedigree to Sporting Lisbon.

However a night of European action would not be complete without those who have yet to get their hands on football's most coveted club trophy -- and Chelsea are leading the early claimants.

Chelsea and their expensively-assembled squad were sent crashing out of the competition before the quarterfinal stage by Barcelona last season.

But the Londoners face Werder Bremen at home hoping that tips from at least two of their new signings, former Bayern man Michael Ballack and former Arsenal star Ashley Cole, will give them the edge.

Bayern have been getting used to life without Ballack, but the German has already sounded out Bremen -- and their star striker Miroslav Klose -- for his new boss, Jose Mourinho.

Ballack already knows how dangerous Werder can be from his encounters against them in the

Bundesliga when he was at Bayern Munich and Bayer Leverkusen.

He believes Klose, who finished as top scorer at the World Cup with five goals, is one of the best strikers in Europe and told Chelsea's website: "He is scoring regularly. He can change a game on his own."

"At this moment, for the last six months, they are the best performers that he has ever produced."

England defender Ashley Cole is hoping his experience -- in getting a sniff of the trophy by going all

the way to the final with Arsenal last May -- will come to the fore for his new club.

"I feel like a new man. I am hungry for more medals and I think we have a good chance of winning the Champions League," said a confident Cole.

Liverpool travel to PSV Eindhoven whose coach, Ronald Koeman, masterminded the Reds' exit from the competition last season when he was in charge of Benfica.

"Liverpool are a strong side and they must be favourites to win the group, but when I was at Benfica we beat them so they will probably respect myself and PSV," said Koeman.

Barcelona begin this season's campaign as one of the odds-on favourites for the trophy.

A slight stumble at the start of their campaign to defend the Spanish league title, which came in the wake of a 3-0 hammering to fellow Liga side Sevilla in the European Super Cup last month,

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

### TUESDAY'S FIXTURES

<b>Group A</b>	Barcelona v Levski Sofia
	Chelsea v Werder Bremen
<b>Group B</b>	Bayern Munich v Spartak Moscow
	Sporting Lisbon v Inter Milan
<b>Group C</b>	Galatasaray v Bordeaux
	PSV Eindhoven v Liverpool
<b>Group D</b>	Olympiacos v Valencia
	Roma v Shakhtar Donetsk

## Klose doubtful against Chelsea

AFP, Bremen

German international striker Miroslav Klose revealed he is doubtful for Werder Bremen's Champions League Group A match against Chelsea on Tuesday due to a thigh injury.

Klose picked up the injury in Bremen's first round cup penalty shootout defeat to minnows FK Pirmasens on Saturday and said the injury was still troubling him ahead of the trip to London.

"If the game was today (Monday) I could not play," Klose admitted Monday.

Bremen will be desperate to get their star man fit for the group opener as they bid to come out of a tough group containing Chelsea and reigning champions Barcelona.

The 28-year-old Klose has been in the form of his life topping the Bundesliga scoring charts with 25 goals last season and then winning the golden boot for the World Cup's top scorer.

If Klose loses his fitness race Egyptian international striker Mohamed Zidan or Portuguese forward Hugo Almeida will deputise.

## Reds lose Riise

AFP, London

Liverpool have been forced to leave injured defender John Arne Riise at home ahead of their trip to face Champions League group rivals PSV Eindhoven in the Netherlands.

The Norwegian suffered an ankle injury in Saturday's 3-0 derby defeat by Everton, a recurrence of the injury that has dogged him since the opening day of the season.

Boss Rafael Benitez also included young defenders Daniel Agger and Gabriel Paletta, both of whom were not even on the bench at Goodison Park.

Also ready for action is Craig Bellamy, who was also left out of the derby-day squad.

Liverpool, the 2005 European Champions, will be hoping for an improved performance against the Dutch side after their weekend setback -- but will be wary.

PSV Eindhoven coach, Ronald Koeman, masterminded the Reds' exit from the competition last season when he was in charge of Benfica.

## Zola Unicef ambassador

AFP, Rome

Former Chelsea and Italy striker Gianfranco Zola, who is currently the assistant coach for the Italian under-21 team, was made a Unicef ambassador on Monday.

His appointment was announced by the Italian Unicef president Antonio Scavi.

Zola was understudy to the legendary Diego Maradona at Napoli between 1989 and 1993 before joining Parma.

In November 1996 he signed for Chelsea where he spent seven years and was idolised by the fans for his excellent skills and sporting behaviour.

He helped the Blues win the now defunct European Cup Winners Cup, the League Cup, two FA Cups and the European SuperCup.

In 2003, he was voted as the best ever Chelsea player by a fans' poll. The following years he was

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

## Ruud delight for Real

AFP, Madrid



LFP

Real Madrid's Ruud van Nistelrooy and David Beckham rediscovered the understanding they once had at Manchester United as the Spanish giants comfortably won 4-1 at newly-promoted Levante on Sunday.

The pair showed that they still have more in common than a mutual dislike of Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson with van Nistelrooy scoring a hatrick and Beckham making two of Real's goals.

Van Nistelrooy got his first official goal in a Real jersey from the edge of the area after 16 minutes, his mistimed right foot shot bobbling through the Levante defence.

Real's second strike on 27 minutes was equally fortuitous with Beckham's excellent long-range pass being bagged by Antonio Cassano.

However, not only did the ball look as though it had hit the Italian's hand, Cassano's shot was also fumbled by Levante's diving goalkeeper Pablo Cavallo before going in the net.

Life got worse for the hosts, with

former Real Madrid coach Juan Ramon Lopez Caro at the helm, two minutes later when former French international Frederic Dehu was dismissed after hacking down van Nistelrooy.

Against the odds, Felix Ettien reduced the deficit just before half-time and Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello, unhappy with the direction the game had taken in the last 10 minutes of the first half, rung the changes during half-time.

Capello pulled off Cassano and club captain Raul Gonzalez at half time and sent on Jose Antonio Reyes for his Real debut and the speedy Brazilian international Robinho.

Van Nistelrooy and Beckham then combined for Real's third goal, arguably the best of the night, 12 minutes after the break.

"Things were going well up to the point where we scored three goals, we were playing well, but after that we stopped," reflected Real coach Fabio Capello after the match.

Perhaps Capello was thinking of the penalty van Nistelrooy five minutes from the whistle, for which Levante midfielder Diego Camacho also got his marching orders for bringing van Nistelrooy down in the area.

Nevertheless, the Dutch striker completed his hatrick in injury time, chipping over the head of Cavallo from a Cicinho pass.

Sevilla retained their place at the top of the Spanish first division with a 3-1 win at Real Sociedad.

"The fact that we are at the top is no coincidence. We are winning, we have scored plenty of goals and as long as we can stay at the top the fans will be allowed to dream a little," said the delighted Sevilla coach Juan Ramos.

Last season's UEFA Cup winners went ahead after just eight minutes with Brazilian striker Renato finishing off a counter-attack by the visitors to the Basque country.

Frederic Kanoute added a second for Sevilla, the third consecutive game in which he has scored, 15 minutes before the end, before both teams got a goal apiece in injury time.

It was a good night for clubs from Sevilla against Basque teams on Sunday.

Real Betis won 3-0 at home to Athletic Bilbao, going in at half time well in the driving seat thanks to two first half two goals from close range by Juanito Gutierrez and Edu before 'Capi' Capitan put the game beyond any doubt with Betis' third seven minutes from time.

Getafe also retained their unbeaten record with a 1-0 win over Racing Santander, with Daniel Guiza getting the only goal of a scrappy game just before the hour to put the Madrid side up to third.



Real Madrid striker Ruud van Nistelrooy (L) celebrates his goal against Primera Liga rivals Levante with teammate Antonio Cassano at Ciudad de Valencia Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'Eidur will haunt Chelsea'

INTERNET, undated

Ronaldinho believes Chelsea will live to regret selling striker Eidur Gudjohnsen to Barcelona.

Gudjohnsen ended a six-year stay at Stamford Bridge during the summer when he was allowed to join Barcelona for 8 million pounds.

The Icelandic international has been quick to make his mark at the Nou Camp, scoring a spectacular late goal as Barcelona opened their Primera Liga season with a 3-2 win at Celta Vigo.

He will be back in west London next month for Barcelona's Champions League clash with Chelsea and Ronaldinho is confident Gudjohnsen will return to haunt his old teammates.

"He is a great player and he showed that when he played in England," said the Brazilian superstar.

"He has already shown with Barcelona that he is a very skilful guy. He will prove to be very important for

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

## Double injury blow for Inter

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan pair Esteban Cambiasso and Julio Cruz have been ruled out of tonight's Champions League clash away to Sporting Lisbon.

The two Argentina internationals were not included in Roberto Mancini's 20-man squad for the trip to Portugal.

Cambiasso, who scored twice in Inter's 3-2 win at Fiorentina in the opening day of the new Serie A season last Saturday, has pulled a calf muscle and Cruz has a groin strain.

Inter's other group B opponents are German champions Bayern Munich and Russians Spartak Moscow.

## FIFA to reunite ZZ, Matrix



INTERNET, undated

FIFA wants to reunite Zinedine Zidane and Marco Materazzi so they can put the head-butting incident from the World Cup final behind them.

"We are definitely working on that," FIFA president Sepp Blatter said Monday ahead of a two-day conference to assess the World Cup in Germany.

One suggestion was for them to meet at Robben Island in South Africa, where former President Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid leaders were once imprisoned, Blatter said.

"We are working on bringing together Zidane and Materazzi and to bring to end this story," Blatter said.

Zidane, the France captain playing the final match of his career, rammed his head into the Italian defender's chest in extra time of the World Cup final July 9 in Berlin. Italy went on to win the title on penalty kicks.

Zidane had already announced his intention to retire after the World Cup. The incident marred one of the greatest soccer careers of the last decade.

Materazzi acknowledged last week that he had insulted Zidane's sister. Zidane said Sunday he had put the incident behind him.

"It's in the past," Zidane told Canal Plus about his reaction to Materazzi's provocation.

Zidane said he has had nightmares about losing the World Cup final, and said France could have won it "much better than the Italians."

"But things happened the way they happened," he said. "We have to live with it."

In admitting his provocation, Materazzi said he was ready to

make peace with Zidane.

Blatter, who said the World Cup should not end with a red card, added that the title should not be determined by penalty kicks.

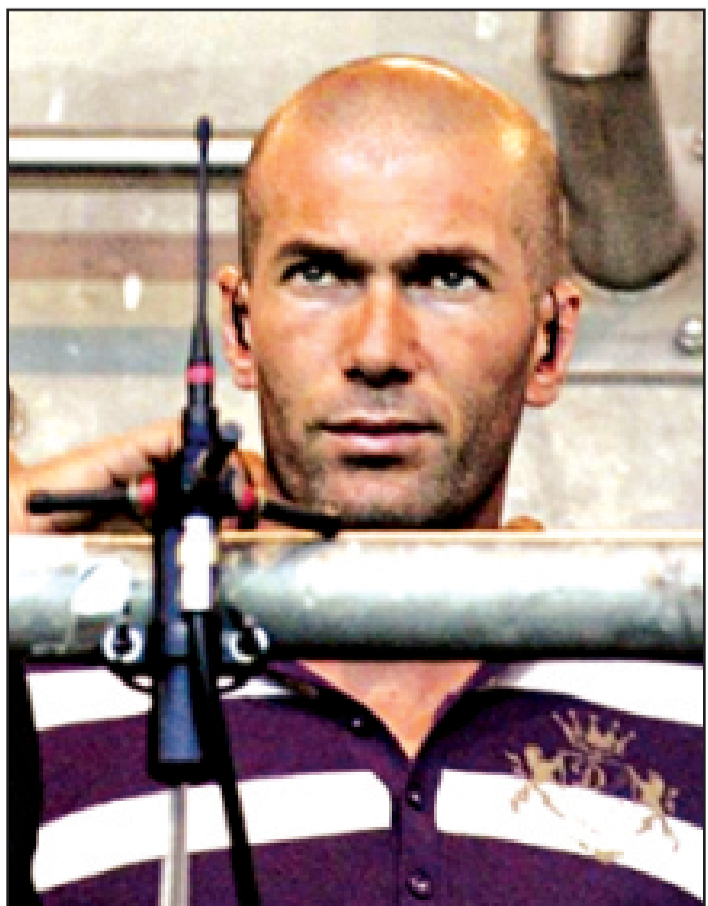
"But we have no other solution," Blatter said. "But we will find one. Penalties take out the essence of soccer as a team sport and it becomes one-on-one."

The two-day conference is orga-

nized by FIFA and UEFA for national team coaches and technical directors of the 32 World Cup teams, plus all other members of UEFA.

"I am still a happy FIFA president," Blatter said. "For four weeks, positive emotions went into the world."

He said the television audience for the four-week tournament surpassed 30 billion viewers.



French legend Zinedine Zidane watches from the stands the Ligue 1 encounter between Olympique Marseille and Paris St Germain at Parc des Princes in Paris on Sunday.

PHOTO: INTERNET

## Aragones resignation rejected

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) on Monday said it had rejected an offer by national team coach Luis Aragones to resign.

Aragones has been under fire after a humiliating 3-2 defeat by Northern Ireland last week in a Euro 2008 qualifier.

An RFEF spokesman told AFP on Monday that Aragones "met the Federation president this morning and indicated to him he wanted to go."

The spokesman said the RFEF had reiterated that the veteran coach still enjoyed "the full confidence" of the organisation, adding that Aragones was going to spend "a couple of days" thinking things over.

Aragones, 67, took over after a poor Spanish showing at Euro 2004 under predecessor Inaki Saez.

Despite saying he wanted to continue through to Euro 2008 in Austria and Switzerland he has

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1