



Liverpool players line up and jump over footballs as part of a training routine ahead of tonight's Champions League match against PSV Eindhoven in Liverpool on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

Anxious times for champions

REUTERS, London



Barcelona would have expected to be safely installed in the last 16 of the Champions League by now

instead of facing an anxious night in Bulgaria knowing anything less than victory could knock them out. Frank Rijkaard's side find themselves in third place in Group A with five points, having won just one of their four matches so far, and even if they do beat hapless Levski Sofia on Wednesday their fate will not be decided until the final group game when they host Werder Bremen.

The German club, who have seven points, host leaders Chelsea (10 points) on Wednesday buoyed by the knowledge that the English champions are far less formidable on the road in Europe where they have won just two of their last 10 away games.

Should Bremen win and Barca

drop points it would mean the Catalans having to content themselves with a humbling place in the second-tier UEFA Cup.

Bremen, though, are out of form after needing a late Miroslav Klose goal to salvage a 2-2 draw with lowly Alemannia Aachen at the weekend, and they cannot expect any favours from Chelsea, despite what the conspiracy theorists might say.

Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho, public enemy number one at the Nou Camp, said his side will go all out for victory, despite a huge Premier League clash with Manchester United next weekend.

"The game against Werder Bremen is a game that can influence the future of the Champions League so we have responsibilities," Mourinho said after Chelsea's 1-0 win over West Ham United on Saturday.

"We need to play a serious game. We cannot go there like some people were expecting, with a second team -- Bremen beat Chelsea, maybe Barcelona is out of the competition."

"That's not our war, that's not our problem. We go there to try to get a result."

Germany playmaker Michael Ballack, rested against West Ham, is likely to return as Mourinho backs up his promise.

Barca are not the only big club sweating.

Arsenal, who they beat in the final in Paris this year, have also lost their

way although a home match against Hamburg SV on Tuesday should calm their jitters in a tight Group G.

The London club have seven points, level with Porto, and one behind group leaders CSKA Moscow, but visit the Portuguese side in their final match so victory over Hamburg is crucial.

Arsenal are likely to be without Dutchman Robin van Persie who injured his foot in the disappointing 1-1 home draw with Newcastle United on Saturday.

CSKA would reach the last 16 if they beat Porto.

Unlike their arch-rivals Barcelona, Real Madrid are already in the last 16, although they face a formidable task against Group E leaders Olympique Lyon on Tuesday.

The French champions have a 100 per cent record and a point in the Bernabeu will clinch first place in the group.

"We will have to be careful. We know that they have improved a lot since we last met," Lyon's France

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TONIGHT'S FIXTURES

- GROUP A**
Levski Sofia (BUL) v FC Barcelona (ESP)
Werder Bremen (GER) v Chelsea (ENG)
- GROUP B**
Inter Milan (ITA) v Sporting Lisbon (POR)
Spartak Moscow (RUS) v Bayern Munich (GER)
- GROUP C**
Bordeaux (FRA) v Galatasaray (TUR)
Liverpool (ENG) v Eindhoven (NED)
- GROUP D**
Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) v AS Roma (ITA)
Valencia (ESP) v Olympiakos (GRE)

Argentine future in Pardew's hands

INTERNET, undated

The futures of Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano at West Ham will be decided by Alan Pardew, according to Eggert Magnusson's spokesman Mike Lee.

Magnusson is poised to take control of The Hammers after the West Ham board unanimously recommended that remaining club shareholders accept the offer made by the Icelandic businessman's consortium.

The Icelandic has vowed to keep faith with Pardew and the focus is set to shift towards strengthening the West Ham playing staff.

However, talk has centred on the futures of Argentine duo Mascherano and Tevez who arrived at the club at the end of the summer transfer window.

Kia Joorabchain, who had rivalled Magnusson to gain control of West Ham, played a key part in taking the pair to Upton Park and this has led to questions on the future of the pair.

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Levski vow to behave

REUTERS, Sofia

Levski Sofia fans help to start behaving better and help the club to improve their image, owner Todor Batkov said on Monday.

This season Levski have become the first Bulgarian team to compete in the Champions League's group stage but their matches have often been marred by violence.

Last week, the 24-times Bulgarian champions were fined 50,000 Swiss francs (\$40,230) by UEFA because of crowd trouble during their Champions League match against Chelsea on Sept. 27.

The Sofia club were fined \$117,000 in total by the European governing body last season because of the bad behaviour of

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Bremen test for Chelsea

AFP, Bremen



Chelsea go into Wednesday's Champions League clash at Werder Bremen knowing a point will secure them

top spot in group A and manager Jose Mourinho has promised his team will not take their foot off the gas.

The English champions have dropped just two points in their four European games and a draw in Bremen will see them progress as group winners because of a superior head-to-head record.

Chelsea have a title duel with Manchester United on Sunday but Portuguese supremo Mourinho

insists his charges are focussed on the task in hand.

"We can not go to Bremen with a second team. We will go there to get a result," Mourinho explained.

"It does not matter what the next game is whether it be Manchester United or Manchester City."

Bremen are second in the group on seven points and need a win against Chelsea to maximise their chances of edging reigning champions Barcelona, two points behind, for the second qualification spot.

The Spanish champions face Levski Sofia on Wednesday and are expected to net the three points to set up a thrilling finale against Bremen at the Nou Camp on December 5.

"If Bremen beat Chelsea and

Barcelona end up out of the competition, that is not our problem," added Mourinho.

Chelsea and Barcelona have met two years running in the Champions League and the animosity between the two giants has led to suggestions that Chelsea will not want to do the Spaniards any favours.

German international captain Michael Ballack, rested against West Ham at the weekend, is expected to return for Chelsea on his first return to Germany since leaving Bayern Munich in the summer.

Ballack has several international team-mates in the Bremen side and Torsten Frings is hoping to get one over on his good friend.

"We have already had a difficult

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Carlos, Guti extend Real deals

REUTERS, Madrid

Brazilian fullback Roberto Carlos and Spanish midfielder Guti have reached agreements to extend their contracts with Real Madrid, the Primera Liga side said on Monday.

The club said that the 33-year-old Roberto Carlos had extended his existing deal for another year until June 2008 and that the new agreement included an option for a further 12-month extension.

The Brazilian joined Real from Inter Milan during Fabio Capello's first spell in charge of the club in the 1996/97 season.

He has been a fixture in the team ever since, helping Real to win three league titles, three European Cups and two World Club Cups over the last decade.

Guti, who has just turned 30, has prolonged his contract for an extra two years until 2010.

The midfielder graduated from Real's youth team more than a decade ago and has retained his place in the first-team squad despite the arrival of a stream of high-profile signings in recent years.

Real's sporting director Predrag Mijatovic, a former team mate of both players, said he was delighted with the new agreements.

"We are very happy, first because they are going to remain with us for more years and second because they are both playing very well and that is good for everyone," Mijatovic told the club's Web site.

Last season for Maldini

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan captain Paolo Maldini says he is likely to retire at the end of the season.

The 38-year-old defender, Italy's most capped player with 126 appearances, told the daily La Repubblica he was constantly battling against pain in his knee.

"I'm suffering a lot. At this moment I really think I could quit in June," said Maldini, whose contract runs out at the end of the season.

Maldini, whose father Cesare was also captain of Milan, made his debut for the club in January 1985 and has never played for any other team.

He has won four European Cups and seven Italian league titles.

Maldini retired from international soccer after the 2002 World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan but has continued to be a regular in Carlo Ancelotti's side having converted from left back to the centre of defence.

Milan are away to AEK Athens in Champions League Group H later on Tuesday.

Knee injury derails Cruz

REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan's Argentine striker Julio Ricardo Cruz faces a lengthy lay off after tests found he had suffered damage to the internal collateral ligament of his right knee.

Cruz suffered the injury during Sunday's 1-0 Serie A win over Reggina and underwent a scan on Tuesday, Inter said on their Web site (www.inter.it).

Inter did not give an estimate for how long the forward would be sidelined for but Italian media has suggested Cruz could be out for up to two months.

Inter, who face Sporting Lisbon in Champions League Group B on Wednesday, have Argentine Hernan Crespo and Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic as their first choice strikers.

Brazilian Adriano returned from a month's rest and rehabilitation on Sunday while Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba is another attacking option available to coach Roberto Mancini but is currently suffering from a calf injury.

'Premiership is overrated'

INTERNET, undated

Gordon Strachan has stirred the pot ahead of Celtic's clash with Manchester United by claiming The Premiership is not everything it is cracked up to be.

Strachan's Celtic team face Premiership leaders United on Tuesday in a crucial UEFA Champions League clash that sees the best of British lock horns.

Observers from south of the border have often cast aspersions at the standard of The SPL, but Strachan claims there is 'not that much difference' between the English and Scottish top flights.

And Strachan believes packaging The Premiership as 'the best league in the world' is a misrepresentation.

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Here comes the Ashes



AFP, Brisbane

Cricket's time-worn rivalry, stemming back to 1877, fires up again here Thursday in the first of five much-anticipated Ashes Tests between traditional foes Australia and England at the Gabba.

England's magnificent series win over the Aussies last year has generated interest and ticket sales not witnessed Down Under since the halcyon days of Don Bradman and the 1932-33 'Bodyline' series and all is set for a potential 25 days' of cut-and-thrust cricket with no-quarter given.

England come to these shores without their steady skipper Michael Vaughan and pace bowler Simon Jones and have been further set back on tour by the sudden departure home of senior opening batsman Marcus Trescothick with a stress-related illness.

But led by match-winning all-rounder Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff, England present their best chance of becoming the first English side to win a series in Australia in 20 years after taking 16 years to retrieve the urn at The Oval 14 months ago.

The Australian team, accustomed to having their own way in

world cricket, had their period of introspection over the upset loss of the Ashes and are consumed by retrieving the urn amid huge national expectation.

An issue which has been a slow burner is the ageing Australian side, dubbed 'Dad's Army' by those Britons with long memories back when England was taunted with the epithet.

Five players in Australia's 13-man squad are 35 or older: Glenn McGrath (36), Shane Warne (37), Matthew Hayden (35), Justin Langer (36) and Damien Martyn (35), four others are in their thirties and for some are a few months away from retirement.

In contrast, England's average age is likely to be just 27, with no

player over 30.

Although Warne (685) and McGrath (542) are among Test cricket's all-time leading wicket-takers, there are fears they may struggle to back up with little respite between the (1st and 2nd) Brisbane-Adelaide and (4th and 5th) Melbourne-Sydney Tests.

But despite being one year older, the Australians have put together 11 wins from their last 12 Tests (the other drawn), while England, excluding The Oval forfeit success against Pakistan, are just four out of 13.

"We will be a better team this time around. We've looked at ourselves closer than before the last Ashes. We've identified what might have held us back last time," Australian skipper Ricky Ponting said.

England's attention on tour has been shoring up the tailend batting and deciding on two key positions: Geraint Jones or Chris Read at wicketkeeper and between Ashley Giles and Monty Panesar for the left-arm spinner's berth.

Jones appears to have received the imprimatur of coach Duncan Fletcher for the gloves, with incumbent Read yet to appear in a tour game, while James Anderson is expected to fill the third fast bowler's spot behind Steve Harmison and

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TEAMS

AUSTRALIA (from): Ricky Ponting (captain), Adam Gilchrist, Stuart Clark, Michael Clarke, Matthew Hayden, Mike Hussey, Mitchell Johnson, Justin Langer, Brett Lee, Damien Martyn, Glenn McGrath, Shaun Tait, Shane Warne.

ENGLAND (from): Andrew Flintoff (captain), Andrew Strauss, Alastair Cook, Ian Bell, Kevin Pietersen, Paul Collingwood, Geraint Jones, Ashley Giles, Matthew Hoggard, Jimmy Anderson, Steve Harmison, Monty Panesar.

Icelandic takeover for West Ham



AFP, London

Eggert Magnusson, the head of the Icelandic consortium which has won its bid for control of West Ham, has promised Alan Pardew that his job is safe and that he will be handed funds for new players.

Magnusson, currently head of the Iceland FA and a UEFA executive committee member, also revealed Tuesday that he would be exploring the possibility of moving the club from Upton Park to the new stadium being built to host track and field events at the 2012 Olympics.

Magnusson's assurances for Pardew came after his consortium confirmed to the Stock Exchange that West Ham's main shareholders, including current chairman Terry Brown, had agreed to sell their stakes at a price which values the club at 85 million pounds.

The new owners are also taking on the club's 22.5 million pounds of debt.

Magnusson, 59, said: "I am both delighted and honoured that Terry Brown and his colleagues wish to support our offer for West Ham."

"We can now end the uncertainty of recent weeks and move forward into the next phase of development of this great club, with Alan Pardew leading our efforts on the pitch."

Magnusson indicated that funds would be available for new players as soon as the transfer window opens in January.

He said: "I will be continuing talks with Alan Pardew on how he sees the future on the playing side."

"This is very much my domain and he has my full confidence and support. He already knows that funds will be made available for the January transfer window but we need to discuss his needs and the investment that might be required to strengthen the squad."

Any new arrivals in January look likely to be preceded by the departures of Argentinian World Cup

stars Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano.

The pair were brought to the club in the close season by Kia Joorabchain, an Iranian-born financier who had explored the possibility of organising his own takeover bid.

Tevez and Mascherano were brought to London without Pardew being consulted and the unsettling

effects of their introduction to the squad have been linked to West Ham's struggle for form this season.

The club is currently just above the Premiership's relegation zone after finishing ninth on their return to the top flight last season.

Magnusson suggested that he favoured a move, in the longer-term, to a new stadium, although a

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Icelandic businessman Eggert Magnusson (L) walks side by side with West Ham United manager Alan Pardew at Upton Park on Tuesday following his takeover of the club. PHOTO: AFP

Moratti thinking big



REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan owner Massimo Moratti is looking forward to Wednesday's Champions League clash with Sporting Lisbon in the knowledge that the Serie A leaders are finally showing the consistency absent in some recent campaigns.

Inter, who are three points clear at the top of Serie A, will qualify for the last 16 if they win on Wednesday.

After facing Sporting they have a head-to-head clash with their closest domestic challengers, second-placed Palermo, but it is the European challenge which most excites Moratti.

"This is the one that really counts. In this week with two important games, Wednesday's one is certainly the most important and I hope the team is focused and realises this," Moratti told the club's Web site www.inter.it.

Inter have not won the European Cup since 1965 and having ended their long search for a domestic league title last season they are firmly focused on the continent's top

prize. Perhaps with Wednesday's game on their minds, Inter struggled to a 1-0 win over Reggina at the San Siro on Sunday and some parts of the media were critical of a sluggish display.

But Moratti has taken heart from the fact that Inter managed to win while playing below par.

"We can easily deal with this kind of attitude. We need criticism to improve. The team is solid but must continue to show it," he said.

"The project with (coach Roberto) Mancini is working and I think the results are proving us right. But we are at the start of a long road."

Mancini will be without Argentine striker Julio Ricardo Cruz against Sporting after he picked up a knee injury on Sunday. But the Inter coach has Brazilian Adriano close to full fitness again. He will compete with Argentine Hernan Crespo and Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic for a starting place.

For Sporting, Portugal goalkeeper Ricardo is ready for action in Italy after sitting out Sunday's league match as a precaution.

Substitute teenager Rui Patrício saved a penalty at his Sporting debut to secure a 1-0 win over Maritimo that kept the Lisbon club two points behind leaders Porto after 10 matches in the Portuguese Premier League on Sunday.

Suspended Brazilian striker Liedson will be substituted by Yannick for Wednesday's match.

"We are going through a good moment, we head into the Inter Milan game confident and ambitious," coach Paulo Bento told reporters.

"We know we will face a great team that has enormous ambitions in this competition but in football there is nothing that can't be done," Bento said.

TEAMS

INTER MILAN - 12-Julio Cesar; 4-Javier Zanetti, 2-Ivan Cordoba, 25-Walter Samuel, 11-Fabio Grosso, 7-Luis Figo, 14-Patrick Vieira, 5-Dejan Stankovic, 21-Santiago Solari, 8-Zlatan Ibrahimovic, 18-Hernan Crespo.

SPORTING LISBON - 1- Ricardo, 12-Marco Caneira, 13-Tonel, 4-Polga, 11-Rodrigo Tello, 27-Custodio, 10-Carlos Martins, 28-Joao Moutinho, 18-Nani, 19-Alessandro, 20-Yannick.



Barcelona's Cameroonian striker Samuel Eto'o waves to supporters during a meeting of the 'Union of African Football Players' (UAF) held in Algiers City on Monday. Eto'o was voted the best 'African footballer of the year 2006' in the meeting. PHOTO: AFP

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