

United sweep manager, player of month awards

LONDON, Feb 5 (Reuters/Internet): Manchester United swept up both the Manager of the Month and Player of the Month awards for January after their perfect start to the New Year.

Alex Ferguson was named as manager of the month -- a record seventh success since the start of the 1993-94 season.

Dwight Yorke picked up the player award after scoring five league goals in the month.

United won all five league and cup matches they played in January and have pulled four points clear at the top of the premier league, although they have played one match more than any of their immediate rivals.

Zagreb let Maric go

ZAGREB, Croatia, Feb 5 (AFP): Croatia Zagreb on Thursday accepted the transfer of their midfielder Silvio Maric to Newcastle for 10 million German marks (6.25 million dollars).

Maric, 24, is to play for Newcastle for five years, the report said.

The highly rated midfielder, who is currently in Spain, told the television station he would fly to Newcastle on Friday to do a medical check-up and meet the team.

"It's a great team, it has great players," Maric said. He added that he expected to start playing "as soon as I get used to the climate, the country and when I get to know my teammates."

Although Maric was eager to join Newcastle, Croatia was reluctant to let one of its best players go. The team eventually agreed to the transfer during 90-minute negotiations with Newcastle chairman Freddy Shepherd and his manager Rudd Gullit.

As a bonus to the successful negotiations, Croatia and Newcastle agreed to play a friendly match this year, most likely in Zagreb, the TV report said.

Maric impressed Newcastle during his club's two-legged European Champions League qualifier defeat by Newcastle last season.

He also became a national soccer hero during last year's World Cup in France, where Croatia reached the semifinals.

Karimi faces trouble

HO CHI MINH CITY, Feb 5: Iran's new star goalkeeper Mohammad Ali Karimi faces a lengthy ban for his attack on a referee at the Dunhill Cup here, reports AFP.

Karimi, 21, was one of the heroes of Iran's Asian Games winning side in December and has attracted attention from European clubs.

But the Asian Football Confederation disciplinary committee will meet in Kuala Lumpur next Thursday to consider action after Karimi kicked and pushed Japanese referee Toru Kamikawa in a match against Vietnam on Tuesday.

Such an assault on a match official can lead to a ban of up to two years.

Karimi was sent off and suspended for the rest of the tournament. He has apologised to Kamikawa but can expect no mercy from the AFC.

If the AFC goes for the maximum penalty it will take a convincing appeal by a contrite player and his apologetic national federation to get it reduced.

Karimi was one of two Iranian players sent off in a tense two minutes midway through the match against the hosts.

Ali Anasarian collected his second yellow card in the 69th minute for a tackle from behind. Iranian players immediately surrounded Kamikawa to protest the decision and Karimi pulled Kamikawa's shirt and kicked him in the shins.

MU look for 7th straight win

LONDON, Feb 5 (Reuters/Internet): Premier League leaders Manchester United visited bottom-of-the-table Nottingham Forest on Saturday, what appears on paper, a one-sided clash.

But the reality could be different as a revitalised Forest bid to build on last week's 1-0 victory over Everton -- their first in the league for 20 matches.

United, who have won all six league and cup matches they have played in 1999, lead Chelsea at the top by four points having played one match more -- but although they keep winning they have looked less than invincible in their last two outings.

Alex Ferguson's men struggled to beat Derby 1-0 at Old Trafford on Wednesday and it took a last minute Dwight Yorke goal -- his seventh in five matches -- to beat second-from-bottom Charlton last Sunday.

United, who beat Forest 3-0 the day after Christmas, will also be without Ryan Giggs who is expected to be out for at least a month after injuring his hamstring in the Derby match.

Former United manager Ron Atkinson has been brought in to work miracles and keep Forest from the drop, but he will have his work cut out on Saturday -- United have not lost on any of their four premier league visits to the City Ground.

Second-placed Chelsea welcome strugglers Southampton to Stamford Bridge in another apparently one-sided match just five weeks after winning 2-0 with ease in December.

But again, Chelsea have not looked their best of late -- their 21-match unbeaten league run was broken by Arsenal last Sunday and they needed a re-boost to start past division Oxford United in the FA Cup.

Southampton will have been boosted by their impressive 3-0 defeat of fifth-placed Leeds last weekend.

The Saints will be hoping they have turned the corner after a 7-1 drubbing by Liverpool and crashing out of the FA Cup to second division Fulham.

Aston Villa, third behind Chelsea on goal difference, entertain Bristol City at Villa Park, and will be looking to avenge their recent 2-1 defeat at Blackburn.

Villa went the way of Southampton in the FA Cup, also losing to lowly Fulham, lost Stan Collymore who checked into a rehabilitation centre to combat stress last Friday, and were beaten 2-1 by Newcastle in the league last Saturday.

Blackburn though have lost consecutive midfielder Tim Sherwood, who signed for Tottenham for 4.0 million pounds (6.54 million dollars) on Thursday, and also scored the winning goal when Blackburn beat Villa 2-1 on December 26, but they will have the equally hard-working Jason McAteer in the centre of the park.

The Republic of Ireland international made his debut in last week's 1-1 draw against Tottenham after his 4.0 million pounds move from Liverpool -- as did Matt Jansen.

The former Crystal Palace

striker scored a spectacular goal on his debut against Spurs and Blackburn will be looking to maintain the improvement that has seen them lose just one of their 10 matches since Kidd took over in December.

Fourth-placed champions Arsenal, who have won seven of their last eight matches, visit West Ham while Wimbledon visit Charlton. Tottenham, who expect to have Sherwood in the starting 11, welcome Coventry to White Hart Lane where they beat Wimbledon 3-0 in an FA Cup fourth round replay on Tuesday.

Coventry have recently been able to convert good form into points in the league, culminating in their 2-1 victory over Liverpool last Saturday which saw them inch further away from the danger zone.

Liverpool and Middlesbrough clash at Anfield with Liverpool looking to complete a league double over Boro after winning 3-1 at the Riverside.

Liverpool's new 2.7 million pounds (4.42 million dollars) signing Rigobert Song looked strong in his debut and the Cameroon captain should keep his place on Saturday.

The clever money would be on Liverpool for this match as Middlesbrough have nosedived since winning at Manchester United on December 19 and have now gone six matches without a win. They have also not won at Anfield since March 1978.

Meanwhile, Leicester host Sheffield Wednesday, Leeds entertain Newcastle while Derby and Everton play on Sunday.

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Top two bank on Argentine heroes

MADRID, Feb 5 (AFP/Reuters/Internet): Two of the Spanish League's most effective strikers Argentinians Claudio Lopez and Turu Flores came face to face on Saturday in top-of-the-table clash as Valencia host Deportivo La Coruna.

Should the 24-year old Lopez add to his haul of 10 goals in Saturday's only fixture, it could well take Valencia back to the top of the table although Barcelona can topple them on Sunday if, as expected, they beat lowly Extremadura.

However, Deportivo, whose sole trophy in 93 years was the Spanish Cup in 1995, have been on a great run of form recently. They thrashed Real Madrid 4-0 a fortnight ago, Flores scoring twice, and have become the 'bete noir' of UEFA Cup quarter-finalists Celta Vigo.

The 27-year old Flores, who joined Deportivo from Las Palmas last summer, scored both in their 2-1 league win over Celta last Sunday and what proved to be the decisive goal in their Spanish Cup fourth round encounter on Wednesday.

Other Primera Liga matches this weekend (league positions in brackets):

Sunday

Alaves (19) v Oviedo (9)

Alaves have three players suspended -- Pablo Gomez, Ibon Begona and Jorge Azkoieta -- while there is a doubt over goalkeeper Kike Burgos who picked up a knee injury in training this week. The visitors will be without Franck Rabarivony who picked up his fifth yellow card in last week's

Real Sociedad (10) v Tenerife (17)

Real Sociedad welcome back defender Jose Antonio Pikabea after his suspension last week. Tenerife coach Carlos Aimar recalls Antonio Mata to his squad.

Espanyol (13) v Mallorca (3)

Defender Mauricio Pochettino missed training this week with an eye problem but is likely to be fit for Saturday. Mallorca will be without Ariel Ibagaza (ankle) and Javier Olaizola (suspended). Francisco Soler and, recent signing Manuel Pineda are likely to step in.

Celta Vigo (4) v Villarreal (14)

Victor Fernandez can recall Brazilian midfielder Mazinho following his suspension last week. Mazinho is also pushing for a place in the starting line-up, possibly in place of Jordi Cruyff. Cesar Lainez, on loan from Real Zaragoza, will make his debut in goal for Villarreal who have regular number one Andres Palop injured and reserve Luis Pascual suspended. Oscar Telles is also ruled out after his red card against Real Madrid last week.

Real Madrid (5) v Valladolid (16)

Guus Hiddink has a problem in midfield with both Fernando Redondo and his natural replacement Guti injured. French World Cup winner Christian Karambeur could be the man to step in. Fernando Sanz should replace the suspended Manuel Sanchez at the back. Valladolid, who desperately need a result to take the pressure off coach Sergio Kresie, have no injury worries.

Extremadura (18) v Barcelona (1)

French midfielder Laurent Vidal, sent off against Valladolid last weekend, is out for Extremadura's next two games. Barcelona also have a player suspended in Frank de Boer, while strikers Patrick Kluivert and Sonny Anderson are injury doubts. Oscar Garcia could start up front.

Racing Santander (15) v Athletic Bilbao (7)

Victor Sanchez (knee), Sergi Shustikov (flu) and Olaf Melli (flu) are all miss out for Racing. Athletic defender Jose Maria Lacritz is having a three-week lay-off with a knee injury.

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