

Scottish Premiership

Easy outing await Rangers

GLASGOW, Dec 3: Reigning Scottish champions Rangers have the chance to stretch their commanding lead at the top of the Scottish Premier League when they travel to struggling St Johnstone on Saturday, reports AFP.

Dick Advocaat's side are currently four points clear of Celtic and they also hold a game in hand over their arch rivals from the other side of Glasgow.

Advocaat, however, has serious injury problems in attack.

Finnish international striker Jonatan Johansson was taken to hospital after damaging his ankle in Wednesday's surprise 1-0 defeat by Aberdeen in the League Cup.

He joins a casualty list which already includes Rod Wallace, Gabriel Amato and Michael Mols.

Rangers' striking problems were all too obvious against Aberdeen who are currently propelling up the table with just one league win all season.

"It is a difficult time," says Advocaat. "I said it before that we have to play so many games and we have to win games which isn't always possible."

"We have a lot of injured players but I hope we can get Wallace and Amato fit and back."

Celtic, criticised by their own players this week for selling Scotland international Craig Burley to Derby, are at home to fifth-placed Hibernian.

The mounting pressure on head coach John Barnes, which has intensified since Burley's departure, has started to affect morale in the Celtic dressing room - according to the players.

Defender Alan Stubbs said: "I think it's obvious to everyone that all the bad publicity is affecting us. Anyone who says the players aren't suffering at the moment is a liar."

"There has been a lot of bad press and everything which has gone on has not done us any favours and has been eating away at our confidence. We know we haven't played well recently but hopefully that can change."

Fixtures (matches kick off 1500)

Saturday: Aberdeen v Motherwell, Celtic v Hibernian, Dundee v Kilmarnock, St Johnstone v Rangers

Sunday: Hearts v Dundee Utd (k/o 1805)

Italian Cup

Milan stunned by Atalanta

ROME, Dec 3 (Reuters/Internet): Italian champions AC Milan surrendered a two-goal lead to crash to a shock 3-2 defeat by Serie B side Atalanta in a Italian Cup third round, first leg game on Thursday.

Milan took the lead in the 14th minute through Ukrainian international Andriy Shevchenko but never looked comfortable against a determined side that lie third in Serie B.

Milan goalkeeper Sebastiano Rossi was forced to make a series of saves after the break as Atalanta piled on the pressure, but against the run of play Brazilian Leonardo added a second for Milan after good work from George Weah.

Atalanta's remarkable comeback began 20 minutes from time when Nicola Caccia pulled a goal back. Striker Marco Nappi equalised in the 87th minute and grabbed the dramatic winner a minute into injury time.

It was the second good result for Serie B sides in the Cup following Ravenna's 1-1 draw at home to title favourites Lazio on Wednesday.

The other remaining Serie B side in the last 16, Napoli, lost 3-1 at home to Juventus on Wednesday.

The second leg games will be played between Dec 14-16.

Keane to sit with MU officials

MANCHESTER, England, Dec 3: Manchester United captain Roy Keane will sit down with club officials next week in a fresh bid to break the deadlock in his contract negotiations, reports AFP.

Talks on Wednesday failed to find a breakthrough and both sides have agreed to continue their discussions on Tuesday.

Keane's lawyer, Michael Kennedy, said: "There's a meeting arranged for next week and we hope we will be able to carry on our discussions at that meeting."

So far Keane, whose contract with the European and English champions expires at the end of the season, has rejected United's offers and time is quickly running out if United are to persuade him to sign a new deal.

From January 1 the Republic of Ireland midfielder will be free to talk to other clubs and sign a pre-contract agreement.

Italian giants Juventus and Inter Milan, both of whom are reported to be interested in signing the 28-year-old, can officially join the bidding and they will be able to offer much more money than United.

Keane maintains that he wants the best deal he can get, prompting fears at United that he will leave for abroad on a free transfer under the Bosman ruling.

The Republic of Ireland midfielder arrived back in Manchester on Wednesday night after scoring the winning goal in the Inter-Continental cup victory over Palmeiras in Tokyo.

Bundesliga preview

Bayern-Borussia match of the day

BERLIN, Dec 3 (Reuters/Internet): Troubled Borussia Dortmund will be eager to restore some pride when they visit rivals

Bayern Munich in the highlight of the German First Division weekend programme on Saturday (1900 GMT).

The times when Dortmund contested Bayern's supremacy seem a long time ago to the 1997 European Cup winners, who have now had nine matches without a win.

They lost 1-0 to lowly Unterhaching on Wednesday to remain a modest fifth in the 18-strong league.

Not since the 1990-91 season had the once-mighty Ruhr Valley outfit experienced such a poor run and, to make matters worse, the atmosphere is particularly tense at the club.

Coach Michael Skibbe, clearly under pressure, fined Heike Herrlich this week after the striker complained about being left on the bench.

Two other Dortmund players, midfielder Andy Moeller and Nigerian striker Victor Ikpeba, had been fined for criticising their coach earlier this season.

Bayern, by contrast, are doing quite well. Last season's European Cup finalists, still in contention in the Champions

VFB STUTTGART (8) v TSV 1860 MUNICH (7)

VfB Stuttgart should welcome back Bulgarian playmaker Krassimir Balakov to entertain TSV 1860 Munich, whose coach Werner Lorant will be standing by their bench again after being suspended for two matches for insulting an assistant referee.

BAUER LEVERKUSEN (2) v WERDER BREMEN (4)

Title-chasing Bayer Leverkusen are at full strength to host Werder Bremen, whose Yugoslav striker Rade Bogdanovic is still sidelined by injury.

SUNDAY, BOTH 1430
SPVGG UNTERHACHING (13) v ARMINIA BIELEFELD (16)

Modest Unterhaching boosted their morale with a 1-0 win over Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday. Strugglers Bielefeld are without several key players through injury.

KAISERSLAUTERN (6) v VFL WOLFSBURG (11)

Kaiserslautern have been going strong lately but their libero and captain Ciriaco Sforza is a doubtful starter because of a knee injury. VfL Wolfsburg will miss two important players in Denmark defender Claus Thomsen, who is suspended, and Nigerian striker Jonathan Akpoborie, recovering from knee surgery.

SCHALKE 04 (9) v SC FREIBURG (12)

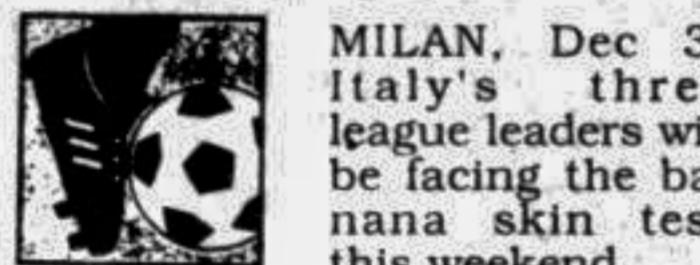
Only once, in the 1995-96 season, have Schalke won at home to SC Freiburg. The Gelsenkirchen club cannot rely on libero and captain Olaf Thon, fighting a bout of influenza.



Nadia Comaneci and her husband Bart Conner arrive at the Madison Square Garden in New York to attend the Sports Illustrated 20th Century Sports Awards function on December 2.

— AFP photo

Serie A preview

Big guns face tricky targets

MILAN, Dec 3: Italy's three league leaders will be facing the banana skin test this weekend.

With AS Roma, Lazio and Juventus all anxious to avoid any slip-ups against second rate opposition, reports AFP.

All three teams have 22

points from 11 matches and each of them is also doing well in European competition. In theory, they are in for a quiet weekend. But in practice, some one is likely to unstuck.

Fabio Capello's Roma are at

home to Lecce after resting two of their three forwards, 23-year-old skipper Francesco Totti and Vincenzo Montella, for their 1-0 midweek Italian Cup defeat to Piacenza.

The cup side featured several

reserves, plus Marco Delvecchio, who has scored two goals in each of his last two Serie A games and will be the one to watch on Sunday.

It is possible to score

points in Turin," he claimed.

"But it would have been better to have played them a month ago. Now they really are playing well."

The two Milan teams are

lurking two points behind the league leaders, though both are experiencing mixed fortunes.

Inter, who are at home here to Udinese, have finally emerged from a miserable run of form to win each of their last three games between cup and European Super Cup.

However, Ronaldo's season looks pretty much at an end after he underwent surgery in Paris this week. Chilean Ivan Zamorano is in doubt after a groin strain and Christian Vieri is still battling to return from injury.

Vieri, who hasn't played since facing his old club Lazio on October 30, should be partnered up front by rising star Alvaro Recoba.

However, Bologna goalkeeper Gianluca Pagliuca clearly isn't looking forward to the meeting.

"It is possible to score

points in Turin," he claimed.

"But it would have been better to have played them a month ago. Now they really are playing well."

The two Milan teams are

clearly not in the same

league as Inter and Udinese.

Inter and Udinese are

both in the top half of the

league, while Bologna and

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