

French preview Leaders face Marseille's glamour

AFP, Paris The French league is a mad mad world.

One would have got long odds at the beginning of the season that Lille would be going into the league match at home to Marseille with them on top and the 1993 European Cup winners battling against relegation.

But that is exactly the situation as the unglamorous newly promoted side, who lead Nantes on goal difference, from the north take on the bigspending but faction-riven giants from the south - who are fifth from bottom five points above the drop - on Saturday.

Lille, who won the last of their two titles in 1954, have built their season round the meanness defence in the league and have conceded just 19 goals in their 27 league matches and have had to fight off bids from Premiership clubs for rightback Pascal Cygan.

While Lille, coached by former Yugoslav international Vahid Halilhodzic, will be missing striker Djezou Boutouille on Saturday it is Marseille who will be praying that former world footballer of the year George Weah makes it.

Their strike force has been goal shy all season and while 34-year-old Weah has scored just four times since he arrived after a miserable spell at Manchester City he has that extra bit of class and vision lacking throughout the team.

However, Weah, who created the goal that brought them victory against PSG in their relegation sixpointer a fortnight ago, has returned from Liberia's 1-0 World Cup qualifier win over Sierra Leone last weekend in an exhausted state.

"I hope to at least play one half of the match," he said.

His presence will be all that more important if Yugoslav playmaker Jovan Stankovic, who has added much needed class to midfield since he left Real Mallorca in the winter break, fails to recover from pulled thigh muscle.

Elsewhere Lyon take on Bordeaux on Saturday with the hosts minds still on a potential domestic treble and a faint dream of qualifying for the Champions League quarter-finals while their visitors have just the title to concentrate on.

A win for Lyon and losses for Lille, Nantes and Sedan would take them to within a point of the top two while Bordeaux, whose rampant Portuguese forward Pauleta will be licking his lips with Brazilian defender Edmilson departed for international friendly duty, could also go top if they win and the other three lose.

Confused? That's French football this season for you.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Lyon v Bordeaux, Lille v Marseille, Sedan v Lens, Bastia v Troyes, Paris SG v Toulouse, Auxerre v Monaco, Strasbourg v Guingamp, Metz v St-Etienne Sunday: Rennes v Nantes

Cantona, Solskjaer's number one

AFP, London

Despite the brilliance of David Beckham and Ryan Giggs, Eric Cantona remains the best Manchester United player that Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has played with.

Solskjaer has no doubts that Cantona is number one, even though he only played with him for a season before the Frenchman retired in 1997.

The Norwegian international striker claims Cantona was a joy to play alongside because he was such a creative player.

Speaking in the latest issue of United On CD Solskjaer said: "He was a fantastic player. "He was the best I've played with and no disrespect to the other players because they're fantastic, but he was the best player. He was number one.

"It's a good feeling and a strange feeling. Only once in a lifetime do you get one of these players. He created so many chances for everyone," Solskjaer said.

Wenger going nowhere

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger denied reports on Friday that he's about to leave Premiership giants Arsenal to become coach of Spanish giants Barcelona.

The 51-year-old Frenchman, who looked shellshocked as leaders Manchester United thrashed the Gunners 6-1 last Sunday to open up a 16 point gap on them in the Premiership standings, insists he is staying at Highbury.

"I have a contract until the end of the 2002-2003 season," he said.

Primera Liga preview

It doesn't get any bigger than this

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid star Luis Figo will be gunning for revenge when the Spanish league leaders take on arch-rivals Barcelona in a crucial Primera Liga clash here this weekend.

Figo was idolised at Barcelona for five seasons until he moved to the Catalan club's bitter rivals for a world record 56-million-dollar transfer fee last summer.

Ill-feeling aroused by Figo's defection to Madrid erupted when the two superpowers of Spanish football last met at Barcelona's Nou Camp in October.

Figo was mercilessly targeted by the 98,000 capacity crowd in that match and was forced to weather an avalanche of abuse, insults and rotten fruit as Real slipped to a 2-0 defeat.

But now Figo has the perfect chance to avenge his humiliating treatment at the hands of Barcelona's fans last time - by dealing a hammer-blow to the Catalan giants' title chances.

Real have been the form team in Spain this season, opening up a four-point lead at the top of the table.

Barcelona meanwhile have failed to mount a sustained challenge, and are currently nine

points adrift of Real in fourth place.

Star Sports channel will telecast the Real Madrid-Barcelona game live from Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu Stadium from 2am Bangladesh Standard Time BST on Sunday

Defeat on Saturday would leave them 12 points behind, almost certainly consigning their already slender hopes of winning a 17th title to the dustbin.

Real have been boosted by the news that in-form English midfielder Steve McManaman is likely to be fit for the clash after straining a hamstring last week.

McManaman and his teammates are warily looking over their shoulders at second-placed Deportivo La Coruna, and insist the title race is far from over.

But the Liverpoolian admitted a victory on Saturday could leave Barcelona struggling to catch up.

"If we win it will make it very hard for them to get back in the race," said McManaman, who missed England's 3-0 victory over Spain in a friendly at Villa Park on Wednesday.

Elsewhere this weekend Deportivo La Coruna, who scrambled a 2-2 draw with Real Madrid last weekend, face a tricky tie away to sixth-placed Real Mallorca.

Valencia meanwhile will attempt to warm up for next week's Champions League campaign with a morale-boosting win against lowly Real Zaragoza.

Hector Cuper's team have hit a purple patch recently and are full of confidence after disposing of Villarreal 3-1 last week.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Real Mallorca v Deportivo La Coruna, Real Sociedad v Rayo Vallecano, Real Zaragoza v Valencia, Real Madrid v Barcelona Sunday: Osasuna v Valladolid, Colta Vigo v Oviedo, Las Palmas v Athletic Bilbao, Numancia v Racing Santander, Espanyol v Alaves, Villarreal v Malaga

Premiership preview

Yet another MU week?

AFP, London

Manchester United's relentless march towards a seventh league title in nine seasons can edge a step closer Saturday when the reigning champions, who have lost just once on the road in the English Premiership, travel to high-flying Leeds.

United, 16 points ahead of closest challengers Arsenal with just 10 games to go, are closing in on another championship while the chasing pack are left to fight for places in next season's lucrative European Champions League.

One of those teams are Leeds who have taken 14 points out of a possible 18 from their last six Premiership matches, lifting them to within two points of third-placed Liverpool.

Newcastle in Dyer straits

AFP, London

Kieron Dyer's season looks to be over after it was revealed Thursday that he needs surgery on his troublesome shin injury.

The 22-year-old Newcastle midfielder underwent a scan on the problem Wednesday when it became clear that there was little alternative but to remove the cyst which has been causing the problem for several months.

He will have one operation on Saturday and a second a fortnight later in a bid to resolve the situation once and for all.

The Magpies released a statement which confirmed that he will be out of action for "several weeks", but privately, manager Bobby Robson is facing up to the prospect of losing arguably his most inventive player for the remainder of the season.

The enforced break is certain to rule Dyer out of contention for England's vital World Cup qualifiers against Finland and Albania next later this month and possibly Greece in June.

"This is very disappointing for Kieron and Newcastle United," admitted Robson. "That said, we can now remedy the situation for him, which is the most important thing."

"We are extremely sad that we are losing his services at such a crucial time for the club, but hopefully the operation will enable us to have Kieron back fully fit as soon as possible."

Dyer was understandably depressed after playing himself firmly into Sven-Goran Eriksson's plans with a series of exhilarating displays.

"This has left me completely devastated but I am not feeling sorry for myself, it's for Bobby Robson and our fans," he said.

"The manager does not deserve all the injuries he has had to contend with lately and all I can do is promise him and the fans I will be firing on all cylinders when I am completely fit again next season."

Advocaat condemned SPL chairman Lex Gold's suggestion that a wage cap is required to stem the huge losses being suffered by many clubs.

"What good would wage limits be for Rangers and Celtic in terms of Europe? The only way we can get quality players is to pay them well," Advocaat said.

PHOTO: AFP

Stadium ban for Inter

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan have been hit with a two-match stadium ban following crowd trouble during their humiliating UEFA Cup exit to Alaves of Spain last week, the club said on their website Friday.

UEFA fined the Serie A side 75,000 Swiss francs (45,000 dollars) as well as ordering that their next two matches in European competition be played away from the San Siro.

Inter's 2-0 home defeat against Alaves was interrupted for several minutes towards the end of the match after fans bombarded the pitch with bottles and missiles.

Busby Babe Webster dead

AFP, Swansea

Former Manchester United striker Colin Webster, a member of the legendary Busby Babes, died on Friday of lung cancer aged 68.

The Welsh international, who fought against cancer for two years, played for six years with Manchester United, who were coached by Matt Busby, from Cardiff in 1953.

Webster, who played in the 1954 World Cup finals, only avoided the Munich air disaster in the same year because he had flu and was not selected for the trip to Belgrade.

Kidd new Leeds head coach

AFP, London

In a move that will add spice to a traditionally passionate fixture Brian Kidd was appointed head coach of Leeds United on Friday just 24 hours before their English Premiership match against his old club Manchester United.

Kidd worked as Sir Alex Ferguson's right hand man for eight years at Old Trafford before leaving to take over as Blackburn Rovers manager in 1998.

However, that job ended disastrously with relegation from the Premiership at the end of the 1998-99 season.

To make matters worse for Kidd, a member of United's 1968 European Cup winning team, he also found himself the recipient of some stinging personal criticism in Ferguson's autobiography.

"No-one though has disputed Kidd's credentials as a coach and the former striker, already on the Elland Road staff as youth coach should have no problem adjusting to his new role which will see him working alongside assistant manager Eddie Gray.

Leeds manager David O'Leary said: "I've made Brian Kidd the new head coach at Leeds, a role which he started today (Friday)."

"There isn't a much better coach than him in the country or in Europe."

"He has fulfilled his task as youth development coach here earlier than I thought, so I felt there was no point in keeping him in that role any longer."

"I've never had a first-team coach - so now, with Brian in place, it will give me a break and I can step away from the lads a little bit," he added.

Kidd said: "I'm delighted to move into my new role at Leeds United."

"I've thoroughly enjoyed my time here and have received great support in putting together our new youth development team."

"There are some very talented and caring people on the staff. I'm sure the new youth set-up will go from strength to strength - but when the boss invited me to change roles I was happy to oblige."

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Serie A preview

Roma's tricky outing

AFP, Rome

AS Roma have broken all records in their pacesetting exploits this season in the Italian First Division but on Sunday night they must break their Milan jinx if they are to keep their closest challengers for the Scudetto Juventus at arm's length.

Fabio Capello's side has lost only two matches this season in Serie A - both against the Milan clubs Inter and AC.

Both those setbacks were at the San Siro and Roma will hope that when they welcome Marco Tardelli's Inter to the Olympic Stadium on Sunday evening that home advantage will make the difference.

It will not be plain sailing for Roma who learned this week that Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta is likely to be out of action for three to four weeks after aggravating his longstanding knee injury.

And playing away from the San Siro may well suit Inter who have been subjected to some vicious abuse by their own supporters in recent weeks.

Juventus visit Udinese who inflicted the Turin side's only home defeat of the season in the First Division this season when the two

teams met at the Stadio Delle Alpi.

But Juve are very much in form and will be anxious to win all three points to put maximum pressure on Roma who play their match with Inter several hours later.

Frenchman David Trezeguet could return for Juve for whom Alessandro Del Piero is also returning to form after two years dogged by injury.

Defending champions Lazio are third, eight points adrift of Roma and two behind Juve, and will hope to stay in the race on Saturday evening when they visit Brescia who are on a fine run.

Luca Marchegiani will replace the injured Angelo Peruzzi in the Lazio goal and will have his hands full against a Brescia frontline of Roberto Baggio, who scored twice in last weekend's 2-2 draw with Fiorentina, and 13-goal Dario Hubner.

Crisis club Fiorentina will visit bottom club Bari on Sunday, though, new coach-designate Roberto Mancini will not be allowed on the bench unless Italian football chiefs waive rules that decree he is ineligible for such a role because he was Sven Goran Eriksson's assistant at Lazio earlier in the season.

Morale is rock bottom at Fiorentina after the week's events.

Turkish coach Fatih Terim quit on Monday after his position was made virtually untenable by the

relegation trouble.

On a more positive note for Bayern, the club's vice-president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge is keen to see international goalkeeper Oliver Kahn finish his career at the club he joined from Karlsruhe in 1994.

"We need Olli for a lot longer," former German star striker Rummenigge told Kicker magazine. "Oliver Kahn should see out his career with us."

The 31-year-old keeper's contract expires on June 30, 2003, and he has said he wants to play at least until the 2006 World Cup, which is being held in Germany.

The team breathing down Bayern's well-tailored collar are the less fashionable Schalke 04, who could have drawn level with Bayern last weekend but instead also dropped two points by drawing 0-0 in the Ruhr derby with Borussia Dortmund.

Schalke will be hoping to collect all three points on Sunday as they take on SV Hamburg, a team with high hopes at the start of the season who have faded to 13th in the table.

Third-placed Dortmund, now equal on points with Schalke, play Eintracht Frankfurt in the first game of the weekend on Friday, while Leverkusen lock horns with

1860 Munich.

Eighth-placed Werder Bremen and their South American duo - Brazilian striker Ailton and his Peruvian strike partner Claudio Pizarro, who scored the goals in their 2-1 win against Frankfurt last weekend - face fifth-placed Freiburg.

Hertha Berlin captain Michael Preetz is doubtful for his side's clash with Cologne. Preetz is unable to turn at the waist and will have tests on his back on Friday.

Kaiserslautern, in seventh place, will be wary on Saturday against Energie Cottbus, who are threatened by relegation but did their cause a world of good by beating Leverkusen 3-1 last weekend.

FIXTURES

Friday (1915 GMT): Borussia Dortmund v Eintracht Frankfurt Saturday (1430 GMT unless stated): Hansa Rostock v Bayern Munich, Energie Cottbus v Kaiserslautern, Werder Bremen v Freiburg, VfB Stuttgart v VfL Wolfsburg, Unterhaching v VfL Bochum, Cologne v Hertha Berlin (1915 GMT)

Sunday (1630 GMT): 1860 Munich v Bayer Leverkusen, Schalke 04 v SV Hamburg

Bundesliga preview

Bayern have work cut out

AFP, Berlin

German champions Bayern Munich face an injury crisis as they seek to jolt themselves out of a run of poor league form when they face in-form Hansa Rostock on Saturday.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has suffered the curse of the friendly international, with Jens Jeremies and Mehmet Scholl both returning injured from Germany's 1-0 defeat against France in Paris.

Jeremies is struggling to shake off a sore right knee and Scholl has a thigh strain.

"It would be a blow if both were out," Hitzfeld said. "Jens is our defensive chief and Mehmet is obviously an essential element."

Swiss international Ciriaco Sforza, Germany's Alexander Zickler, Brazil's Roque Santa Cruz and Slawomir Wojciechowski of Poland will also miss the trip to the former East Germany.

Bayern are just two points clear at the top after last weekend's 1-1 home draw with Cologne, while Rostock have beaten Kaiserslautern and Bayer Leverkusen in their last two matches to climb out of

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Angry Advocaat

REUTERS, Glasgow

Rangers manager Dick Advocaat has become involved in a row with the Scottish premier league (SPL) over a proposal to limit players' salaries.

Advocaat condemned SPL chairman Lex Gold's suggestion that a wage cap is required to stem the huge losses being suffered by many clubs.

"What good would wage limits be for Rangers and Celtic in terms of Europe? The only way we can get quality players is to pay them well," Advocaat said.

PHOTO: AFP

PSV Eindhoven's Dutch international striker Ruud van Nistelrooy (R) threatening the goalkeeper of Sparta 2 while playing in game for PSV's second team at Rotterdam on March 1. Van Nistelrooy, who is recovering from a serious injury, scored twice in the match.

Football

AFP, Rome

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