SPÖRT

Chasers on Bayern's heels

AFP, Berlin

The four clubs in Bayern Munich's slipstream clash in Bundesliga action this weekend with just eight matches to go to try and topple the Bavarian giants

Second-placed Bayer Leverkusen and Schalke 04, in fifth spot, meet in a western German derby, which Leverkusen has always dominated in recent seasons.

In fact Schalke, the 1997 UEFA Cup champions who were top at the halfway stage, have never beaten Leverkusen. Schalke are also in a slump, having failed to score in nearly six and a half hours of play.

Leverkusen, meanwhile, are on ascendancy since wins over Werder Bremen and Dortmund.

Third-placed Kaiserslautern, equal on points with Leverkusen and three points behind Bayern, meet fourth-placed Borussia Dortmund, a

Kaiserslautern, coached by Andreas Brehme, the man who scored the winning penalty in the 1990 World Cup final, are still without French international midfielder Youri Diorkaeff who has a fractured toe.

Bayern Munich meanwhile host Werder Bremen who have not earned a single point in their last seven visits to the Olympic stadium.

Hertha Berlin, in sixth spot but equal on 43 points with Schalke 04, meet the other Munich side 1860 in the Berlin Olympic stadium.

Hertha's 3-0 home defeat against top flight new boys Energie Cottbus in their last game should act as a motivating spur for European qualifi-

FIXTURES

Hertha Berlin v 1860 Munich VfB Stuttgart v Cologne Hamburg SV v Unterhaching SC Freiburg v Eintracht Frankfurt Bayern Munich v Werder Bremen Bayer Leverkusen v Schalke 04 Sunday

Kaiserslautern v Borussia Dortmund

VfL Bochum v Energie Cottbus

Wenger out of Barca's reach

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona president Joan Gaspart admitted defeat Friday in his bid to land Arsenal's French boss Arsene Wenger. With current coachof Barcelona Llorenc Serra Ferrer expected to be dismissed at the end of the season. Wenger had been linked with a move to the Nou Camp. However, Gaspart has admitted

defeat in trying to lure the Frenchman, and AS Roma boss Fabio Capello, to take over the Barca

Wenger and Roma's Fabio Capello about possibly taking over at the end of the season," said Gaspart.

"Unfortunately, I couldn't guarantee that anyone would actually take over as the matter depends on Ferrer's success.

"Capello didn't want to wait and see, so he renewed his contract at

"Wenger told me he still has a contract with Arsenal that runs until

2002 and that he wanted to fulfil that," Gaspart told the Daily Mail. "So both men are ruled out in case

Serra Ferrer doesn't succeed and

JAWAOC's fear

AFP, Tokyo

Organisers of the 2002 football World Cup in Japan expressed fears Friday that next month's Confederation Cup would not pass as a perfect rehearsal for next

Yasuhiko Endo, secretary general of JAWOC, the organisers of the competition to be co-hosted with South Korea next year, said he had wanted the Confederation Cup to act as a "trial run" but problems with the Internet ticket sites had hampered preparations.

"Sponsors are not complete yet for the Internet," he said "I'm worrying about it very much.

Two are still vacant. Technicians working on the sites had also experienced problems trying to work in different lan-

guages.
"We'll just do our best whatever the situation will be," added Endo.

Japan and South Korea are to co-host the Confederations Cup

from May 30 to June 10. World and European champions France will be the star attractions of the tournament along with Brazil. The respective champions of FIFA's regional confederations -- Canada, Cameroon, Australia and Mexico -and the two host nations will join them. The final is scheduled to be held in Yokohama, Japan, on June 10 where one of the two semi-final matches will also be staged three days earlier. The second semifinal

is to be held in South Korea. The six preliminary matches in Japan will be staged in the port city of Niigata, and Ibaraki, home to the

Bundesliga preview | Premiership preview

L'pool vs MU II

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool will find themselves in the rare position of chasing a second League win against champions and runaway leaders Manchester United at Anfield on Saturday in a match set to feature a host of England players. Going on the form of both clubs' strikers, it should prove a cracker.

On Wednesday Michael Owen (Liverpool) and Andy Cole (United) fired home as England triumphed in Tirana with a 3-1 World Cup European zone Group Nine qualifying victory over Albania.

But as Owen added to his respectable strike rate of 10 goals in 27 internationals, Cole's injury-time effort was only his first in 13 games and 803 minutes of international

England teammates from both nonetheless, believe that former Newcastle striker Cole will soon take his prolific club form with him onto the world stage.

"Andy has had a lot of criticism over the past week or so because he hasn't scored for England," said United midfielder and England captain David Beckham.

"It's not been for a want of trying. He always works hard for the 90 minutes like on Wednesday and got his just deserts in the end and now he's silenced the people who doubted him."

Liverpool striker Emile Heskey, who came on as a substitute in Tirana, was equally supportive.

"When I got my first goal for England it meant so much, even though it was only a friendly in

"Now he (Cole) has got that breakthrough he can only take it on from there and score more although personally I don't think he has had much pressure on him recently because he has been playing well.' Other England players involved

in Wednesday's win who should be back on Premiership duty include United players Gary Neville, Paul Scholes - the scorer of England's second goal - Nicky Butt, Wes Brown, and Teddy Sheringham.

Steven Gerrard, Liverpool's combative midfielder, missed the Albania match with a recurrence of his long term back-related injury but should be fit for this match after playing at Anfield in England's 2-1 qualifying win over Finland last Saturday

Liverpool's flying Finn Jari Litmanen broke his wrist in that meeting and is expected to be out of Gerard Houllier's line-up for six

Owen and Beckham got their names on the scoresheet for England's win over the Finns and neither the United player nor his pop star wife, Victoria 'Posh Spice' Adams, received the customary verbal abuse directed at them from football grounds nationwide.

But that, along with the normal club rivalry, may well resume

Back in December Danny Murphy's first-half strike was good enough for a 1-0 Liverpool win at Old Trafford - one of just two Premiership defeats Alex Ferguson's side have suffered all United responded to their only

other Premiership reverse, a 1-0 loss away to second-placed Arsenal, by thrashing the Londoners 6-1 at Old Trafford.

Liverpool's aim of a second victory over the champions could therefore be a tad ambitious although Ferguson's team, who are currently 16 points ahead of Arsenal, seem already assured of their seventh title in nine seasons. Liverpool. who have already won

the English League Cup this season, are in the semi-finals of both the UEFA and FA Cups but they have lost six league games to leave themselves three places behind an automatic qualifying spot for next

season's Champions League.

At Highbury, Arsenal face arch rivals Tottenham in a dress rehearsal for next week's FA Cup semi-final. The visitors will have director of football David Pleat still in control, intended new boss Glenn Hoddle's first game in charge set to be the Cup clash.

Only bottom-of-the-table Bradford have a worse away record than Tottenham this season while Arsenal are unbeaten at Highbury in the Premiership. Coventry are pipped to win at

home to Derby if the second-frombottom side are to preserve their 34year unbroken run in English foot-Fellow strugglers Manchester City, currently in the last relegation

spot, entertain Aston Villa Joe Royle's team are four points behind Middlesbrough and anything less than victory may create an unbridgeable gap especially if Terry Venables' side lose their drawspecialists tag and come away with full honours from their match at

Southampton, furious that Hoddle has quit as their manager when his contract was due to run until next season and while the team he built is eighth and pushing for a European place, have a chance to extend their club record of seven matches without conceding a goal when Ipswich arrive at The Dell on

Fixtures (all 1400GMT unless stated):

Arsenal v Tottenham, Bradford v Newcastle, Chelsea v Middlesbrough, Coventry v Derby, Liverpool v Manchester United (1100GMT), Manchester City v Aston Villa, Sunderland v Leeds, West Ham v Everton Sunday:

Charlton v Leicester (1500GMT) Monday: Southampton v Ipswich (1900GMT)



Vice-chairman of Tottenham Hotspur Football club David Bulcher (R) holds out his hand as he arrives at White Hart Lane football on Friday.

French Cup preview

Nantes set for semis

Football

AFP, Paris

Viorel Moldovan is the only doubtful Canary for a Nantes side awaiting the visit of Auxerre Saturday, and a much anticipated flight into the semifinals of the French Cup.

However the possible absence of the international goals machine, who was in action for Romania against Georgia on Wednesday, should prove a minor hitch to a side chasing their third successive Cup triumph.

Nantes, on the strength of their attractive and flowing league performances, which tie them on points (53) with league leaders Lille, are fully expected to waltz into the

The next stage of their flight to a Stade de France final should be eased, psychologically, by the fact that, of the eight teams involved. three are in the French Third

That may leave coach Raynald Denoueix with elevated hopes, but on the capital another heavyweight contender, in the shape of Lyon, have their own designs on a place in

And with Cup results having thrown the bookies' predictions out of the window, the likelihood of Grenoble, Amiens or Reims showing up on the day is worth a bet or

Third Division leaders Grenoble host top flight side Troyes, still smarting at their League Cup quarterfinal defeat to Nantes.

Former giants Reims, who won six league titles and played in the first ever European Cup final against Real Madrid in the 1950's, travel to rivals Amiens, who are pushing for promotion to the Second Division.

Whatever happens, at least oneThird Division team will make it to the semis, but the final will prove more demanding territory. Lyon, meanwhile, are most

punters' favourites to join Nantes in the final as they face basement boys Strasbourg on Sunday. Jacques Santini's side has

overcome their pre-Xmas slump to

climb to respectable third place in

Champions League exams last

Not even home advantage for the struggling Alsatian side, and the fact that Lyon are carrying a few injury doubts, is considered armoury enough to keep Santini's boys from completing their mission.

Now co-favourites for the French league title, which with five games to go is turning into a tight four-horse race, Lyon could finally get their hands on a Cup which has evaded their trophy room since 1973. Another twist to the tale is that

Lyon will play Nantes in the semifinal of the French League Cup, which Nantes will try as equally hard to acquire in their bid to complete

The triple has never been completed in France - known historically as the land of revolutions. This year Lvon and Nantes could make their own mark on French history.

FIXTURES

Saturday Nantes v Auxerre (1500 GMT)

Amiens v Reims (1800 GMT)

Strasbourg v Lyon (1800 GMT)



San Jose Earthquakes' Landon Donovan (R) holds up his jersey along with Earthquakes coach Frank Yallop during a news conference at the Compaq Arena in San Jose, California on March 29. Donovan, 19, considered one of the top American soccer players, signed a four-year contract.

Ronaldo on Song

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian striker Ronaldo, playing alongside Formula One world champion Michael Schumacher, passed his latest fitness test with five goals in a charity match on Wednesday

Ronaldo, 24, showed no ill-effects in his first game following an 11-month injury lay-

More than 40,000 fans came to the Maracana Stadium to watch Ronaldo terrorise his opponents, mostly made up of retired players and television actors, with a series of powerful runs and deft flicks. After a cautious start, Ronaldo scored twice before the interval and capped his

performance with a second-half hattrick. The two-time world-player-of-the-yea underwent surgery to reconstruct knee ligaments last April and was recently given the go-ahead to resume full training.

Schumacher used the match to hone his fitness for Sunday's Brazilian Grand Prix at the Interlagos circuit in Sao Paulo, but the German was guilty of some poor finishing. He wasted a string of opportunities set up by Ronaldo and former Brazil striker Zico

before getting on the scoresheet with a second-half penalty "It was great fun playing alongside Schumacher," Ronaldo said. "He by no

means looked out of place. We even worked on some neat one-twos together." The Inter Milan player admitted the game had been little more than a kick-about, but

said it had still provided a valuable test of his "I feel fine," he said. "It's obvious I'm still not 100 per cent, but after the game I feel less

worried about the future. Although he was happy with his form, Ronaldo wouldn't set a date for his competitive comeback.

. "There's no timetable or deadline. I'll be back when I'm ready and not before," he

Captain **Beckham** in control

REUTERS, London

David Beckham says he is starting to get to grips with his new role as England captain after leading the side to three straight victories under new coach Sven Goran Eriksson.

The Manchester United midfielder, who had said he was not a natural leader after being named as skipper against Spain in February, believes he is getting better and better as captain. "When I talked about not being a

natural leader I meant it might take me a few games to get into it because I hadn't done it at this level before, Beckham told the Daily Mail. "I knew it was a case of working hard at it, wich I have done. I feel I am

show your authority and take respon-The 25-year-old Londoner added: I think I am getting stronger as a captain and I am a little more comfort-

a natural leader now. You have got to

able with it now. "Against Finland it went very well again in beating

hopefully it will carry on. "I do think there is a new authority in my play which there has to be if you are England captain, or anybody's captain."

Voller to coach till 2002

AFP, Berlin

Rudi Voller is now officially the German national team coach up to and including the World Cup 2002 in Japan and South Korea, according to German Federation (DFB) chief

Wolfgang Niersbach Thursday. Niersbach said that 40-year-old Voller signed his contract agreement prior to the Group 9 qualifying match against Greece, which Germany won 4-2 Wednesday in

"It was a mere formality," said

Niersbach. Voller succeeded Erich Ribbeck on July 2, 2000 after Germany failed to impress in the European championships. A World Cup winner with Germany in 1990 (Italy), Voller was initially on a temporary contract while Leverkusen coach Christophe Daum saw out his contract with the Bundesliga club.

When Daum was sacked by Leverkusen and ruled out of the running for the national post after testing positive for cocaine, Voller announced his intention to take over until the World Cup. Voller's right-hand man Michael

Skibbe, former coach of Borussia Dortmund, also signed a contract,

Toshack to quit Sociedad

AFP, London

Welshman John Toshack is to step down as coach of Real Sociedad at the end of the season, Press Association reported on Thursday.

However, the former Real Madrid boss will not be severing his links with the San Sebastian club, instead taking up the role of Sporting Manager

Serie A preview

Return to Rome

Football

AFP, Milan

Ridley Scott's 'Gladiator' may have scooped the laurels at this week's Oscars but on Sunday all roads in Rome take a detour from the Colisseum to the Olympic Stadium as AS Roma host Verona in their continued quest for a first Serie A title in 18 years.

The sealed envelope containing the name of the 2000-01 winners of Italian football's greatest prize may not be opened until June 17, but with a seven-point lead and 11 games to play Roma coach Fabio Capello is being touted to sob his way through an acceptance speech when the prizes are handed out.

But Carlo Ancelotti of Juventus and Dino Zoff of Lazio are not to be discounted in what is effectively a three-way title race. After a week's rest for interna-

mence Sunday with improving Verona no pushover for Roma. Second-placed Turin giants Juve entertain struggling Brescia while Lazio, whose 4-1 thumping of Juventus last time out rekindled fading hopes of successfully

defending their Scudetto, have the

toughest assignment, visiting AC

tional football, battle will recom-

But as with all good battle strategies, Roma will be hoping to call in

some favours where it counts. Brescia boss Carlo Mazzone, at 64 the oldest in Serie A, is a former Roma coach and openly supports his home town club, where he is fondly remembered for a wise

stewardship before president

Franco Sensi started to pump

noney into the coffers. Roma playmaker Francesco Totti, who came through the youth ranks, has always said Mazzone is the biggest influence on his career and now he will be hoping for one more good turn from his mentor.

Brescia's task has been made easier by one-game bans for Dutchman Edgar Davids and Frenchman David Trezeguet following their expulsions against Lazio. while their skipper Roberto Baggio will lead the underdogs against the side he once joined for a world record fee from Fiorentina

Also hoping to benefit from the old-pals act will be Capello, the man who led AC Milan to trophies galore.

The man building a footballing Roman empire will doubtless say Hail Caesar - or at least 'Ave Cesare' should Cesare Maldini's side deal what would be a near-fatal defeat to Lazio who, while co-tenants at the Olympic Stadium, have the bulk of their support in Lazio province while

Roma's main fan base is within the Eternal City.

But Capello and Totti will first and foremost be concerned with Verona, who have started to pull out of rele-

gation trouble. Elsewhere, Parma hope to consolidate their hold on fourth spot - and a Champions League place when they welcome Bologna to the Ennio Tardini Stadium while surprise packages Atalanta host relegation-

haunted Napoli in Bergamo. Udinese hope to give new coach Luciano Spalletti a winning start after he replaced the sacked Luigi De Canio when they make the long trip south to Reggio Calabria to face

Perugia, also aiming for European football next season, host Marco Tardelli's Inter Milan.

On Saturday Fiorentina visit Vicenza while Bari and Lecce clash in the Puglia derby. Fixtures (1300 GMT unless

stated): Saturday: Bari v Lecce, Vicenza v Fiorentina (both 1830 GMT)

Sunday: Atalanta v Napoli, Juventus v Brescia, Parma v Bologna, Perugia v Inter Milan, Reggina v Udinese, AS Roma v Verona, AC Milan v Lazio (18:30

a tricky match against sixth-placed

Villarreal, who are chasing a

European spot. Third-placed

Valencia take on Barcelona side

Elsewhere, Barcelona take on

Espanyol

Primera Liga

Target Champs League

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish giants Real Madrid resume their impressive title charge against lowly Numancia here Saturday, with one eye on next week's Champions League quarterfinal against

Vicente Del Bosque's team, who

lead the Primera Liga by five points, should make sure of preserving their cushion at the top against relegation-threatened Numancia. Victory against fourth-frombottom Numancia at the Bernabeu

League test in Istanbul on Tuesday. Del Bosque is currently on a roll with Real. This week the club repaid his impressive record since taking the helm by extending his contract

for a further two seasons.

will leave Del Bosque in good heart

as he plots Real's next Champions

Real officials said they wanted to do away with the tradition of sacking coaches at the first sign of trouble. "We no longer want to have one coach after another like in the past

few years," club director and former Real star Jorge Valdano said. "We have total confidence in Vicente and that is why we have extended his contract. Just look at his record," Valdano added of his

coach, who led Real to Champions

League glory in his first season in Luis Figo and Steve

McManaman, both on World Cup duty with Portugal and England



LUIS FIGO

respectively in midweek, are uncertain to start against Numancia with Del Bosque possibly wanting to rest them ahead of the Istanbul tie.

Champions League guarter-final

duty is also likely to be on the minds

of Real's nearest challengers in the

title race, Deportivo La Coruna and Deportivo face Leeds away on Wednesday in their quarter-final

while Valencia are due to meet Arsena Second-placed Deportivo have hard tie away to Real Mallorca with Welshman John Toshack still pondering news of a move upstairs at

manager role at the end of the season to become sports director at the club, with responsibility for tracking down new talent.

Toshack rejoined Sociedad earlier this season with a brief to avoid the drop. The club are currently third from bottom.

FIXTURES Saturday: Deportivo La Coruna v Villarreal,

Sunday: Barcelona v Las Palmas, Athletic Bilbao v Osasuna, Real Mallorca v Real Sociedad, Oviedo v Alaves,

Valladolid v Rayo Vallecano

Numancia, Valencia v Espanyol

Malaga v Celta Vigo, Real Madrid v

"I have to say this is hard to stom-

"Brazil lost, wich is becoming the

The newspaper's headline, "Just

ach," he said as Ecuador passed the

ball around to chants of "Ole" from an

norm. No surprise." said Juca Kfouri, an

outspoken columnist in the sports daily

Venezuela left", referred to the fact that

the baseball-playing nation is the only

one in South America against which the

Brazilians can still boast an unbeaten

variety of reasons; deep-rooted mis-

management of the sport, money,

alleged greed and lack of effort on the

part of the players, the exodus of

leading players abroad, lack of time for

Brazilians blame the demise on a

ecstatic 40,000 crowd.

Lance.

A Brazilian nightmare

attempts.

respected

Brazilians awoke on Thursday wondering whether it had all been a bad dream. They quickly realised that Wednesday's 1-0 World Cup qualifier

In the golden days of Garrincha. Pele and Zico. Brazil used to brush aside the lesser South American Ecuador and Paraguay to show off their

Atahualna stadium provided the final proof that those days are over as Ecuador, whose past results against Brazil included 9-1, 9-2 and 7-1 defeats, beat the four-times world champions for the first time in 22

boldly predicted victory from the outset with their Colombian coach Hernan Dario Gomez claiming: "Wednesday will be a different day for Ecuador.' Brazil had only lost one World Cup qualifier before the current competition

began a year ago. Now they have lost

Far from fearing Brazil, Ecuador had

three times in 11 outings after earlier defeats away to Paraguay and Chile. "I preferred the old days," said television commentator Galvao Bueno, whose career behind the microphone began when Brazil were still feared and

training and a negative approach by domestic coaches. Coach Emerson Leao admitted he was disappointed with his players. "Some didn't produce everything they are capable of," he said. "Some didn't produce 50 percent of what they are capable of." His comments appeared to be aimed at Rivaldo, substituted after 63 minutes of a performance which earned him three out of 10 in Lance's analysis. Brazilians now cling to the possibility that injury-stricken striker Ronaldo will return to action this year as if it were the only hope of a return to greatness. On Wednesday, Ronaldo took part in a charity kick about at the Maracana stadium. No tackling was allowed and the opposition consisted of veteran players and television celebrities. But the fact that Ronaldo scored five goals in a 10-9 win was seen as a ray of hope. On the other side of the Amazon jungle, the outcome was greeted with unbridled joy. Thousands took to the streets of

Quito and Guayaquil to celebrate the finest moment in Ecuador's sporting Celebrations were fuelled by the

prospect that Ecuador could now

qualify for their first World Cup. President Gustavo Noboa sent his congratulations and coach Gomez described the moment as the high point

The country came to a standstill during the game and the Guayaquil

daily El Universo published a picture of a deserted Congress on its website. "The honourable members went to approved late March 29, 2001, the transfer of Riquelme to Spain's Barcelona watch the game," it said.

KOREA JAPAN



REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

defeat to Ecuador was simply part of a harsh new reality.

teams, using matches against Bolivia

Wednesday's events at Quito's



for 22 million dollars, the most important in Argentina's soccer history.

Juniors jumping over Cristian Ledesma of River Plate. Boca Juniors Board

of his football career. A file photo of Juan Riquelme (R) midfielder of Argentine soccer club Boca