

Bundesliga preview 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 point adrift.

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 Djorkaeff 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 qualification.

FIXTURES

Saturday
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 coach of Barcelona Llorenç 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 hot seat.

"I spoke personally to Arsene 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 Roma.

"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 has to leave."

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 year's tournament.

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 languages.

"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 J-League club Kashima Antlers.

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 football.

England teammates from both clubs, 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 Malta.

"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 weeks.

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 Saturday.

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 season.

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-from-bottom side are to preserve their 34-year unbroken run in English football's top flight.

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 draw-specialists tag and come away with full honours from their match at Chelsea.

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 Monday.

Fixtures (all 1400GMT unless stated):

Saturday:
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)

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-off.

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 hat-trick.

The two-time world-player-of-the-year 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-two's 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 fitness.

"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 said.

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, which I have done. I feel I am a natural leader now. You have got to show your authority and take responsibility."

The 25-year-old Londoner added: "I think I am getting stronger as a captain and I am a little more comfortable with it now."

"Against Finland it went very well and again in beating Albania, so 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 Athens.

"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, until June 30, 2004.

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 Coliseum 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 international football, battle will recommence 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

Milan at the San Siro.

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 money 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.

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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 relegation 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