

English harbour hope



AFP, Paris

English expectations of European Champions League glory will rise substantially Wednesday should Manchester United and Liverpool end the year on a high note by putting themselves in the driving seat with wins.

Manchester host Portugal's Boavista in their second phase Group A match and Liverpool travel to AS Roma in Group B.

English teams went on to dominate the old European Cup format in the late 1970s and early 1980s once United had become the first side to lift the trophy in 1968.

But, aside from United's last-gasp win over current holders Bayern Munich two years ago, that dominance has not been carried over into the Champions League with Spanish, German and Italian sides ruling the roost in recent seasons.

An off-levelled criticism of United is that their domestic consistency has blinded them to the fact that Europe represents a significant step up - but continental action this year constitutes almost a haven from gathering strife at home.

Saturday's 3-0 home hiding by Chelsea was the Red Devil's fifth defeat in 14 league outings and left the club seventh.

Indeed, had United lost one more game they would now be flirting with a place in the bottom six of the English Premiership!

It's a situation to which even eight-times continental kings Real Madrid have become accustomed - albeit temporarily - in recent seasons as the "meringues" focus their eyes solely on the main prize, the mere trifle of being involved in the Spanish title race just an occasional means to the greater end.

That strategy has served Real well enough given their two titles in four seasons - but the downside is that a team "only" reaching the final requires the fall back position of securing an exalted league placing.

Therein lies United's European problem.

Coach Sir Alex Ferguson, who retires next May, insists he is ready to crack the whip, telling Manchester United Radio that "when you have a bad spell like this, it's up to you to do something about it."

"At the moment, we have to correct things. I relish the challenge, absolutely. That challenge will start when the players come to training tomorrow," he warned.

United take on a Boavista side at Old Trafford which twice held

Liverpool are happy just to have made a belated return to Europe's premier club competition 17 years after they won their fourth crown in Rome.

So it is appropriate that the Anfield Reds return to the Italian capital Wednesday en route to what they hope will be a fifth title.

In AS Roma they will meet a club who have been bursting to get their own back on that 1984 defeat in their own stadium.

This time round Liverpool will receive a musical welcome as Roma plan to mark the fact that former Beatle George Harrison, who died of cancer last week, was born and raised along with the other band members in the northern English port city.

Roma plan to play favourite Beatles hits before the match at the Olympic Stadium over the public address system.

Liverpool, for their part, opened with a morale-crushing home loss to Barcelona and avoiding defeat in Roma is imperative.

Barca could put one foot in the quarter-finals should they see off Turkey's Galatasaray in the Nou Camp in the other Group B meeting.

Roma held Galatasaray in Turkey last week.

Despite their Anfield heroics all is not rosy at Barca after Saturday's loss at Alaves.

Coach Carles Rexach was not amused to see El Mundo slam his side as "physically badly prepared with a suspicious lethargy" and also take aim at stars such as Rivaldo and Marc Overmars for the Catalan club's woes which see them sliding towards midtable in the Primera Liga following one point in three matches.

Rexach himself isn't happy with their current form though and has even threatened to cancel the players' Christmas break should results not improve.

Like Real and United, Barca's eyes are on a bigger, richer prize - but all three ignore the home front at their peril.

WEDNESDAY'S FIXTURES

European Champions League second phase fixtures on Wednesday (1945 GMT):

GROUP A
Manchester United (Eng) v Boavista (Por)
FC Nantes (Fra) v Bayern Munich (Ger)

GROUP B
AS Roma (Ita) v Liverpool (Eng)
Barcelona (Spa) v Galatasaray (Tur)

Liverpool in the opening group phase as proof of their pedigree.

The other match in Group A sees French side Nantes, still bottom of their league, host a Bayern side who, like United are in a mini-slump without a win in three domestic games.

Bayern did at least add the Intercontinental Cup to their trophy cabinet a week ago but their loss at Hertha Berlin on Sunday meant they slid to third in the Bundesliga table.

To make matters worse both talismanic keeper Oliver Kahn and dynamic midfielder Stefan Effenberg will miss the trip to Brittany with knee and thigh problems.

Weighing in United's favour in the Group is that they have already drawn in Munich.

Rivaldo to brave pain



REUTERS, Barcelona

Rivaldo, hampered by a niggling injury, said he was prepared to go through the pain barrier to ensure Barcelona win Wednesday's Champions League clash with Galatasaray.

"For me it has been a difficult season," the Brazilian was reported as saying in the Spanish press. "I still have pains in my thigh but I am prepared to sacrifice myself in order to help us win this match."

Rivaldo said the injury has prevented him from performing at his best in recent matches, but insisted that he would still play in the group B match against the Turkish side.

"We all have to be very focused and make sure that we do everything we can to win the game otherwise all our good work against Liverpool will be undone."

Barca got their second phase campaign off to a flying start as they



RIVALDO

out-played and out-thought Liverpool in a 3-1 victory at Anfield.

But the Catalan side's recent domestic form has been none too impressive, and consecutive defeats against Athletic Bilbao and Alaves have seen them drop to eighth place in the table.

"We began the season well but now after a draw and two defeats we have to stay calm and concentrate on the Champions League," he said.

The Brazilian also bemoaned his team's lack of goals in recent games, and warned against the danger posed by the Turkish side who drew 1-1 at home to AS Roma in their opening second phase match.

"We are not creating that many scoring opportunities and that worries us, but we will be doing our best to sort it out in Wednesday's game," he said. "Galatasaray are going to be very difficult opponents so we will have to be on our guard."

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Tottenham captain and England striker Teddy Sheringham wrapped up the points with a superb angled header from a free-kick four minutes from time in what was a dress rehearsal for an English League Cup quarter-final.

Bolton took an early lead through in-form striker Michael Ricketts but Tottenham hit back at the start of the second half courtesy of goals from Gus Poyet and Les Ferdinand.

Then Bolton's veteran forward Rod Wallace equalised in the 56th minute and it seemed Sam Allardyce's men would come away with a point until Sheringham's late winner.

Newly promoted Bolton, who stayed 10th, might still have had a point when substitute striker Dean Holdsworth was clean through on goal.

But he delayed his shot and Tottenham central defender Dean Richards got back in time to challenge.

Afterwards Tottenham manager Glenn Hoddle admitted: "It was a big test for the blood pressure."

"Bolton hit on the counter-attack but our lads in the second half produced a very good performance."

"We changed it around at half-time," explained Hoddle, a Tottenham hero during his playing days as an England midfielder, who brought on Ferdinand and Croatia defender Goran Bunjevcevic at the break.

"We threw caution to the wind, put Les on top and it worked," former England coach Hoddle told Sky Sports.

Meanwhile, Allardyce could not contain his disappointment. "I'm absolutely gutted. To score two goals away from home and come away with nothing is very frustrating."



FEVERNVA

Fevernova to debut Sunday



AFP, Seoul

Fevernova, the official soccer ball for next year's World Cup, will make its debut at a South Korea-US friendly match next week, sports officials said Tuesday.

"Fevernova will be used for the friendly match to be held at Sogwipo on Sunday," a Korea Football Association (KFA) official said.

The United States and South Korea, drawn last week to play in the same group next year, are to play an appreciation match to launch the

100-million-dollar new soccer stadium on the island of Cheju.

"Since it has been officially allowed for the World Cup finals, we are expecting no US objection to the immediate use," another KFA official said.

The Fevernova ball produced by sports equipment giant Adidas was unveiled last Thursday at the draw for the World Cup finals, to be staged in South Korea and Japan May and June.

Adidas described the synthetic-foam ball as "more accurate, faster and more efficient" than ones previously designated by world's football governing body FIFA.

and several of his squadmates also play in France.

"It's great," was how Soleil saw the draw, which pits the African hopefuls against "the adopted country of the majority of Senegalese players."

As the paper pointed out, the whole affair had been a pipedream which was now reality.

"The Lions wanted a friendly at the Stade de France, without really believing they would get one," wrote Soleil in an editorial.

"Now here they are up against

and the whole planet, in front of a television audience of billions."

"From the north pole to the Amazon, from the Kalahari desert to

It doesn't get any bigger for Senegal



AFP, Dakar

"France-Senegal - the dream match."

On paper it's not expected to be the classic encounter of the 2002 World Cup-tournament - but the opening match always conjures a special atmosphere.

For the Senegalese, however, it's their final as they take to the world stage for the ultimate challenge against the best team in the world.

And the fixture has caught the imagination of the media here.

"The Lions up against the Cockerels," was only one of a squadron of enthusiastic headlines in Monday's papers, who were delighted with Saturday's draw in Korea which saw their team drawn for the inaugural match.

The Soleil daily preferred to convey its thoughts in pictorial form with a massive front page photo showing Senegalese striker El Hadji Diouf, clad in his nation's green, yellow and red, dribbling the ball towards 1998 hero Zinedine Zidane, wearing the blue and white with red trim of the French.

As a sub-plot, Diouf plays for current French league leaders Lens

Kandahar, people will hear about our country ... that's something no tourist promotion could have achieved," the paper added.

Sud-Quotidien said it was a huge stroke of luck to draw the French for the opening game.

"It's also an honour to take on an adversary so covered in glory," the paper wrote.

And the Senegalese have not been slow to draw a parallel with the 1990 finals, when fellow Africans Cameroon took on - and beat - reigning champions Argentina, Diego Maradona and all, in the tournament opener in Italy.

"Our Lions are no less talented than their cousins from Cameroon," wrote the Sud daily, which suggested all the pressure could only be on the French.

And Le Matin weighed in with its belief that "this band of young, enthusiastic, professional friends have made us so used to agreeable surprises that the Senegalese people may allow themselves to dream."

Win or lose at least one Frenchman will be happy at the final whistle.

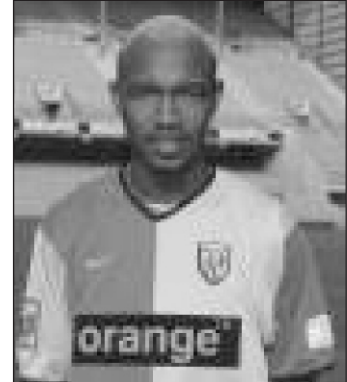
Either Roger Lemerre will as expected steer the holders past their opening test or the honours will go to Senegal's own French coach - Bruno Metsu.

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Premiership Spurs sail on Sheringham



AFP, London

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But Wallace's shot proved too strong for goalkeeper Neil Sullivan, who ought to have saved.

Earlier Ricketts continued his superb start to the season with an eighth minute goal.

Good work down the right hand side by former Marseille forward Bruno Ngotty saw him cross the ball to Kevin Nolan, whose back-heeled flick fell to Ricketts.

Instead of shooting first time with his stronger, right foot, he took the ball down as King rushed out to block.

Ricketts then shot through a narrow gap with his left and the ball flew past Sullivan into the corner of the net.

It was Ricketts' 10th league goal of the season and an early birthday present - he turns 23 on Tuesday.

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Premiership's top six