

# Primera Liga preview Mighty clash at Madrid

Football

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish championship reaches its halfway point on Saturday and fittingly the fixtures computer has brought together the top two in the First Division, league leaders Deportivo La Coruna and defending champions Real Madrid.

Deportivo have notched up 33 points from 18 games, and have a one-point advantage over Real, but they face a difficult trip to the Spanish capital if they are to be crowned as the 'winter champions' - the traditional name given to the team that leads after half the season in Spain.

The Galicians, who got their one and only league title two years ago, have only won once in 31 league encounters at Real Madrid and that victory came more than 35 years ago, in October 1955.

"It's a difficult place to play, equal to what Madrid must face when they come to our Riazor stadium. However, I'm confident we can get a good result and even if things don't work out there are still plenty of games to go," said Deportivo's Brazilian midfielder Mauro Silva, who has been with the club nine years and has still yet to taste league success in Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

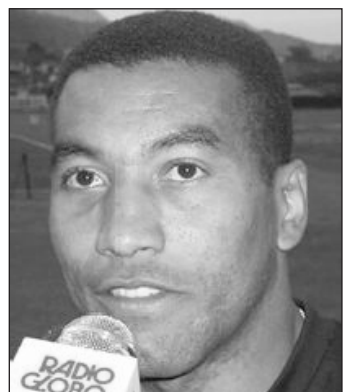
"We are all conscious of the fact that it is going to be a complicated game but Deportivo is capable of winning anywhere," added the inspirational 1994 World Cup winner.

However, this season's statistics suggest otherwise. Deportivo have not won away in the league in 12 weeks, since they beat Real Zaragoza in mid-October, while Real Madrid are unbeaten at

home this season.

To make matters more difficult for Deportivo, Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque will recall his rested first-choice goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

Casillas was suspended for the 1-1 draw at Real Mallorca the week



MAURO SILVA

before Christmas and, as a precaution, the Spanish international missed Wednesday's 3-2 win over local rivals Atletico Madrid in a friendly to herald the start of the eight-times European champions' centenary year.

The only worry Del Bosque has is down the left wing, with English midfielder Steve McManaman still suffering from back problems, although his bench will be missing the Cameroon international utility player Geremi Njitap, who is on African Nations Cup duty.

Deportivo coach Javier Irureta has former Real Madrid striker Inyur Sanchez fully fit after recent injury problems but winger Jose Emilio Amavisca is a doubt for the match against his former club.

Amavisca, like Victor, was also a 1998 Champions League winner with Real Madrid before finding himself surplus to requirements.

Perhaps though, Deportivo can take some small comfort from the omen that when they did beat Real Madrid in 1955, the history books record that the game was conducted in a downpour.

The forecast for Madrid indicates there could be similar climatic conditions on Saturday night.

If the top two draw then, then Celta Vigo should leap frog over them into pole position after hosting bottom-placed Rayo Vallecano on Saturday.

Few pundits expect the visitors to escape from Vigo with more than a modicum of pride after not winning away from Madrid all season.

Rayo's misery persisted on Wednesday when four players, including former Spanish international goalkeeper Julien Lopetegui, had their clothes stolen by dressing room thieves while they were training.

Villarreal are expected to propel former Spanish international Juan Antonio Pizzi straight into their starting lineup against Sevilla on Saturday.

The Argentine-born striker was signed last week from Rosario Central last week. Pizzi was the Spanish First Division's top scorer in the 1995-96 season and remains, apart from Ronaldo, the last man to score 30 league goals in a season in the top flight of Spanish soccer.

**FIXTURES**

**Saturday (kick off times 1600 GMT unless stated):** Celta Vigo v Rayo Vallecano, Villarreal v Sevilla, Real Madrid v Deportivo La Coruna (2030 GMT), Las Palmas v Real Sociedad

**Sunday:** Alaves v Osasuna, Real Betis v Valencia, Malaga v Espanyol, Valladolid v Real Mallorca, Athletic Bilbao v Tenerife (1700 GMT), Barcelona v Real Zaragoza

# Di Canio United bound?

Football

INTERNET, London

West Ham United manager Glenn Roeder has played down newspaper reports linking Paolo Di Canio with a move to Manchester United.

It was reported in The Sun on Thursday that the Italian striker was talking to the English premier league champions about an imminent 3 1/2 million pound (US dollars 4.33 million) move to Old Trafford.

Di Canio missed Tuesday's 3-0 defeat at Leeds United to fuel the speculation further, but Roeder insists he missed the game because of a hamstring injury.

"We are not in contact with Manchester United and the papers are having a field day at the moment running the speculation," Roeder told West Ham's official Web site.

"We feel that it is unsettling for everybody, not only for the player, but the club. The speculation is obviously coming from somewhere but it is not coming from our end."

"I have a very good relationship with Paolo but have not felt it necessary to speak to him about it, nor has he spoken to me on the matter."

"He is concentrating on rehabilitating his hamstring, but unfortunately hasn't been able to come in today because our doctor has been round to see him and he is carrying a very heavy load."

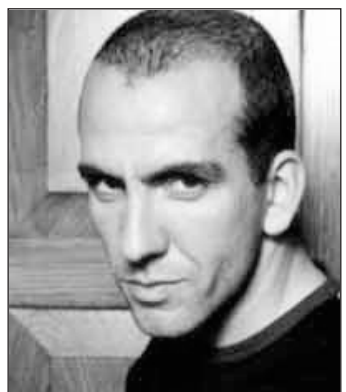
Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson is believed to be looking to sign a striker after selling Andy Cole to Blackburn Rovers last week for around eight million pounds.

The 33-year-old Di Canio, formerly with AC Milan, Celtic and Sheffield Wednesday, would be eligible to play for United in the Champions League.

Newspaper reports this week have also linked Manchester United with a move for 23-year-old Uruguayan forward Diego Forlan, who plays for Argentine club

Independiente and is valued at about six million pounds.

Meanwhile, the English defending champions' midfielder Ryan Giggs believes United have landed one of football's great entertainers in 33-year-old player, the Sun reported.



PAOLO DI CANIO

The Welsh international said: "I've heard United have been linked with a move for West Ham's Paolo Di Canio."

"He is a player who I've got a massive amount of respect for."

"I think his greatest strength is that he both scores and creates goals in equal measure, which is not something you can say about every striker."

"He's a natural entertainer who also produces the goods and there's no doubt that, on his day, he is one of the best players in the Premiership to watch."

"Of course, whenever a player is linked with United, there are questions about their ability to fit in at Old Trafford. But I think Di Canio would fit in anywhere in the world."

"He's one of those players whose technique and talent would grace any side and his ability to do the unexpected make him great entertainment."

"We'll have to wait and see what happens, although if he did sign it would mean even fewer chances for me to play up front again!"

# Serie A preview Inter after winter laurel

Football

AFP, Milan

Italy's Serie A season resumes after the Christmas break at the weekend with Inter Milan hoping to start the new year by beating Lazio at the San Siro and clinching the 'winter championship'.

That tag is little more than a Christmas bauble - a purely honorary accolade bestowed on the team leading the division at the halfway stage - but Inter know that more often than not the team that leads after 17 matches of the 34-game season goes on to win the real thing.

Victory over Lazio would clinch the seasonal title although a setback would allow defending champions AS Roma - who last year won both the winter crown and then the Scudetto - to retain the first of those two titles by beating Torino at the Olympic Stadium.

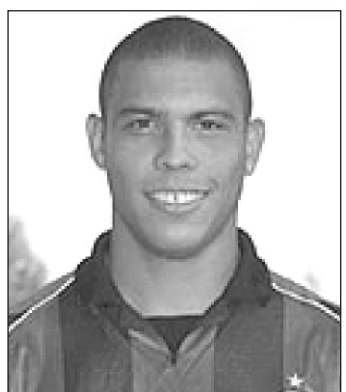
Cinderella club Chievo also has a chance of winning the festive folly, albeit a slim one. They would have to beat Atalanta at Bergamo, hope Inter and Roma both fail and then win their match on January 30 with Lazio which was postponed before Christmas.

But Inter are looking ominous. Their Argentinian coach Hector Cuper's iron discipline has fashioned a sense of purpose into a team that under predecessors Marcello Lippi and Marco Tardelli often looked like an ill-assorted jumble of pampered prima donnas. Even the likes of Christian Vieri and Ronaldo allow Cuper to punch them in the chest in the tunnel before the match, a technique the coach insists forces the players to stick out their chests in pride.

Vieri has scored 11 goals in only eight Serie A starts of an injury-

curtailed season but against Lazio his likely partner up front is Sierra Leonian forward Mohamed Kallon with Brazilian Ronaldo recovering from his latest injury.

The 25-year-old superstar is set to sit out Sunday evening's match as he is still recovering from a muscle injury he sustained before



RONALDO

Christmas in the 3-2 victory over Piacenza on December 23.

Kallon's selfless running has gone a long way to putting Inter at the top and with nine goals already he will take considerable credit for the Scudetto should Inter win it - even if he is likely to have been eclipsed by Ronaldo.

Roma are also in fine fettle, however, and once-mighty Torino are now merely a yo-yo club - one season they go up, the next down.

Vincenzo Montella, whose goals in the latter part of last season helped win the Scudetto, is close to a return for Roma although Fabio Capello will stick with Marco Delvecchio alongside Francesco Totti with Argentinian Gabriel Batistuta also sidelined.

Chievo begin what is a near impossible task of improving on

2001, when they won promotion to the top flight for the first time and then stunned the Serie A fatcats by topping the division for seven calendar weeks.

Coach Luigi del Neri, linked with all sorts of coaching jobs, still insists avoiding relegation is his aim, repeating the mantra: "New year, same routine."

The Verona-based club's president Luca Campedelli, dubbed Italy's Harry Potter for his boyish looks, owlsh glasses and apparently magical powers, has had a good Christmas.

The 33-year-old pudding mogul has seen sales of his 'Pandro' cake - a traditional Christmas delicacy in Italy - soar on the back of his club's success.

Parma will be anxious to turn over a new leaf for the new year after a disastrous end to 2001, during which they had five coaches and ended in the relegation zone.

Defeat at bottom club Venezia would set the alarm bells ringing while another club eager to put 2001 behind them is Fiorentina who host Perugia.

Juventus will hope to close on the leading group when they host Udinese while AC Milan, also yet to really catch fire, visit Lecce without the services of key players Filippo Inzaghi, Paolo Maldini and Portuguese star Manuel Rui Costa who are all injured. Bologna host Brescia while Piacenza make the trip to Verona.

**FIXTURES**

**(1400 GMT unless stated)**  
**Saturday:** Lecce v AC Milan  
**Sunday:** Atalanta v Chievo, Bologna v Brescia, Fiorentina v Perugia, Juventus v Udinese, AS Roma v Torino, Venezia v Parma, Verona v Piacenza, Inter Milan v Lazio

# Robson on Nistelrooy

Football

INTERNET, London

Newcastle United FC manager Bobby Robson believes Ruud van Nistelrooy may become Manchester United legend after only 6 months at Old Trafford.

Robson coached the Dutch international at PSV Eindhoven and admits he has always been confident the 24-year-old player would prove himself to be the world's best striker.

Van Nistelrooy scored United's first goal in the 3-1 victory over Newcastle to take his tally for the season to 20 goals in just 24 games.

Newcastle boss said: "Ruud is a terrific player. He will be a legend here over the years, no doubt."

"He's strong, has good energy levels, he's very quick and has an eye for goal. He will do very well. He's a top player."

"He's a 25-goals-a-year merchant in the Premiership as long as the service is there around him, which it is at Manchester United."

"I'm not surprised by what he's

done, because I know his character and I know his ability. I would love to have brought him to Newcastle, but we didn't have the money."

"Ruud was a player who could always step up and go to a higher



RUUD VAN NISTELROOY

league. You could always tell that with him."

"He was outstanding at PSV and at his age he can only get better - and he will get better."

Robson recalled meeting Sir Alex Ferguson's brother, Martin, who acts

as United's European scout, at Eindhoven airport after one of his many trips to watch van Nistelrooy.

Robson told him that United should snap up Van Nistelrooy, although he already knew the Old Trafford boss was on the case.

"I sat next to Alex's brother, Martin, one Wednesday morning at the airport as he waited for a flight out of Eindhoven," said Robson.

"I know he was wanting to say to me 'What do you think about him?' I said 'Tell your brother to buy him'. He said thanks, but in the end Alex made up his own mind and he wasn't relying on me."

"The formula is talent plus personality, and that's what he has. He's a good character, an absolute gem of a boy and got marvellous footballing qualities."

"He's a real player and he's a good footballing centre-forward. He can play with his back to the goal, he can play facing the goal, he joins in and keeps the movement going."

"He's got good athletic qualities and he's recovered from his cruciate ligaments injury and is as strong as he ever was," former England coach.

# Beckham taking his time

Football

AFP, London

England captain David Beckham is refusing to sign a new contract with Premiership champions Manchester United until the successor to manager Sir Alex Ferguson, who retires at the end of the season, is announced it was reported here Friday.

The 26-year-old playmaker, who was dropped again by Ferguson for Wednesday's win over Newcastle after making an all too rare start in Sunday's match, wants to know if he will remain a fringe player under Ferguson's successor, according to the Sun newspaper.

The hold out by Beckham, who has been the fulcrum of United's success in recent years, has cost dearly - he lost 1.5 million pounds (2.25 million US dollars) over not signing immediately when the talks started seven months ago and is set to lose the same amount if he carries out his threat to wait till the summer.

However, with Real Madrid stars Luis Figo and Zinedine Zidane reportedly earning double Beckham's basic wages, the England captain knows the contractual ball is at his feet and not United's.

And while money was the original sticking point it is now believed that Beckham is more concerned



DAVID BECKHAM

with getting regular first team football which while it will not cost him his place in the England team has been causing him some concern.

The major problem has been that Beckham wants the central midfield role he enjoys for England, but at United Juan Veron has edged him out and that Ferguson prefers Beckham in his more effective right-wing position.

Ferguson also remains adamant that Beckham will have to fight to regain his place after United went on a six match winning run which has completely turned their season round and left them just two points off leaders Leeds United.

"The midfield has been doing fantastically well," Ferguson said.

"The team is picking itself and David will just have to wait a bit longer."

"I'm sure he will get his chance," added the Scotsman. x

# Del Neri in demand

Football

AFP, Verona

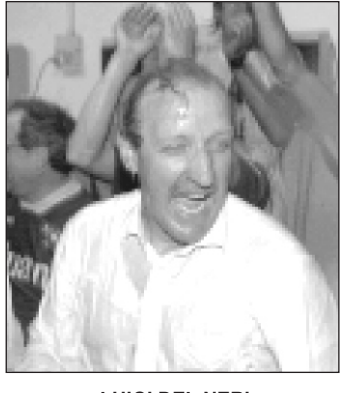
Chievo coach Luigi del Neri said Thursday that he was flattered by speculation linking him with some of the biggest coaching jobs in Europe but that he will not consider any offers until the season ends.

Del Neri, an unknown until 2001 when he led tiny Chievo to promotion to Serie A and then to the top of the top flight, has recently been linked with jobs at Juventus and Spanish giants Barcelona when the current season ends. His contract with the Verona-based side expires on June 30.

"I am not Padre Pio and therefore I can not be ubiquitous," said del Neri in reference to the monk widely revered in Italy for carrying stigmata (wounds) similar to those that Christian tradition insists were sustained by Jesus Christ on the cross and who will be canonised by Pope John Paul II this year.

"I can not stop people speculating. But I can assure you there has been nothing concrete and that none has been in touch with yours truly," said del Neri.

Chievo president Luca Campedelli has already said he will



LUIGI DEL NERI

offer his coach a new contract but will respect his decision should he choose to take on a new challenge.

Del Neri, 51, said: "With Campedelli there is a great relationship, perfect harmony. January is too early to talk about my future. We will see."

On Wednesday del Neri picked up another accolade when he was named by European football governing body UEFA as one of the continent's top five coaches alongside Liverpool's French boss Gerard Houllier, Mane Esnal of Alaves, Bayern Munich's Ottmar Hitzfeld and Inter Milan's Argentinian coach Hector Cuper.

"It can't be bad being appreciated at the top level," said del Neri.

# FA Cup preview Goalies under spotlight

Football

AFP, London

One of the landmarks in the English football calendar, the third round of the FA Cup, gets underway on Saturday with the tie of the weekend being Sunday's clash between Premiership rivals Aston Villa and Manchester United.

All eyes will be on the two goalkeepers, Villa's former United hero Peter Schmeichel and his Old Trafford successor, France international Fabien Barthez.

Both men have been involved in their fair share of bizarre goals this season, the latest coming when a Schmeichel throw hit referee Andy D'Urso and bounced kindly to Jari Litmanen who scored for Liverpool in a 2-1 win last month.

But that error has not stopped many United fans wishing Denmark great Schmeichel was still playing for the Premiership champions after a succession of costly Barthez blunders.

And Villa midfielder Hassan Kachoul believes Schmeichel's big game temperament could see his side to a famous victory.

"Peter Schmeichel was the most excited when he heard that he'd be up against his old club. He really wants to beat them and I'm sure he'll be perfectly ready for the game," Morocco international Kachoul told his personal website.

"He has brought so much confidence and enthusiasm to the team this year and he makes so much difference to the side. If you watch him playing he puts so much pressure on the defenders to concentrate every second of the game."

"That kind of player helps everybody become better just by his presence on the pitch. He makes some really good saves and I think he's won us some points already in the league."

"We've always done well against big sides and we did well this season against them (United) at home in the league."

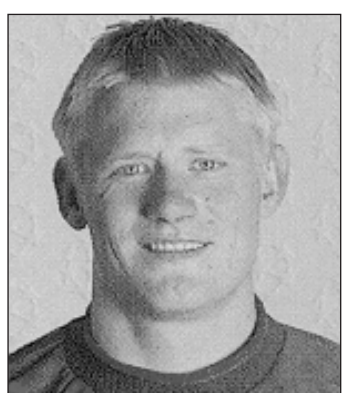
"It was a really entertaining game and if we can pass the ball the way we did then there's no reason why we can't beat them," added Kachoul, a summer signing from

Southampton. Between them the sides have won the FA Cup 17 times, the last of United's record 10 victories coming in their treble season of 1998-99.

By contrast, the last of Villa's

the First Division side would again be an upset.

The two remaining non-league sides Canvey Island and Dagenham and Redbridge have tough looking draws.



PETER SCHMEICHEL

seven FA Cup triumphs was way back in 1957.

In August, the two sides drew 1-1 in the English Premiership but have enjoyed contrasting fortunes since then.

A shaky early season spell had many questioning whether United had the hunger to retain their Premiership title in Alex Ferguson's last season in charge.

But six wins on the trot have taken United into second place in the table while Villa, after a solid start, have dropped down to ninth.

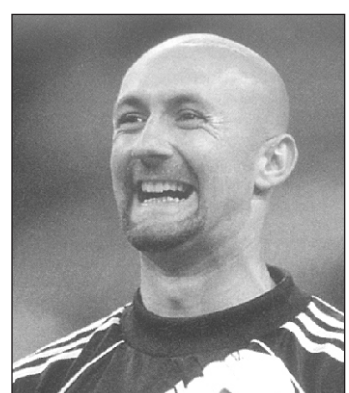
Schmeichel was one of the key components in United's dominant teams of the 1990s before heading to Sporting Lisbon after the 1999 European Cup final win over Bayern Munich.

Villa boss John Gregory lured the 37-year-old back to English football this summer on a free transfer and Schmeichel has been in fine form for the Midlands side.

Elsewhere, FA Cup holders Liverpool are at home to First Division Birmingham, whom they beat in a penalty shoot-out to win last season's English League Cup final, the first leg of their treble Cup winning campaign.

Coventry too will be hoping history repeats itself when they face Tottenham, their beaten opponents in the 1987 FA Cup final.

Their 3-2 win that day was a shock result and another victory for



FABIEN BARTHEZ

Canvey are away to First Division pacesetters Burnley but Dagenham could just possibly create a shock when they entertain Premiership strugglers Ipswich.

**FIXTURES**

**(all 1500GMT unless stated):**  
**Saturday:** Barnsley v Blackburn, Brighton v Preston, Burnley v Canvey Island, Charlton v Blackpool, Coventry v Tottenham, Crewe v Sheffield Wednesday, Dagenham and Redbridge v Ipswich, Darlington v Peterborough, Grimsby v York, Leicester v Mansfield, Liverpool v Birmingham, Manchester City v Swindon, Millwall v Scunthorpe, Newcastle v Crystal Palace, Norwich v Chelsea, Portsmouth v Leyton Orient, Rotherham v Southampton, Sheffield United v Nottingham Forest, Southend v Tranmere, Stockport v Bolton, Stoke v Everton, Sunderland v West Brom (1230GMT), Walsall v Bradford, Watford v Arsenal (1200GMT), Wimbledon v Middlesbrough, Wolverhampton v Gillingham, Wycombe v Fulham

**Sunday:** Aston Villa v Manchester United (1900GMT), Cardiff v Leeds (1600GMT), Cheltenham v Oldham, Derby v Bristol Rovers (1500GMT), Macclesfield v West Ham

# Give Henry a break

Football

INTERNET, London

Arsenal FC manager Arsene Wenger warned his player not to rely on French star Thierry Henry's goal to shoot them to title this season.

The French manager is worried that Henry's FA ban could seriously affect their title bid.

Henry received a three-match suspension for confronting referee Graham Poll at the end of Arsenal's 3-1 defeat by Newcastle last month.

The Gunners have dropped points against Leeds United FC,

Bolton Wanderers, Sunderland FC, West Ham United and Newcastle United - all games in which Henry has not scored.

However, they have done well without the hitman (Henry scored 22 of Arsenal's 55 goals) in their last two matches, when Sol Campbell and Sylvain Wiltord netted to beat Chelsea FC and Robert Pires and Ashley Cole helped to defeat Middlesbrough FC.

Wenger said: "It is important that we don't become over-reliant on Thierry."

"He has given us so much since the start of the season but I knew we would go through a spell when he wasn't scoring."

"When that happens, the concern is over who will get us the goals but in the last two big games we have got them even without him scoring. That's very important."

"Thierry is such a threat that you always expect a goal from him but I knew we would have a spell when it didn't happen."

Tony Adams sounds in unison with his manager: "It is vital that we get goals from elsewhere and don't rely too much on Thierry."

"It is important for everyone to get in on the act. I always aim to get six a season at least, a decent contribution. That can take a bit of pressure off the strikers. Sol (Campbell) can do the same."