

Premiership preview

# Hot clash at Highbury

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool will want to get their Premiership challenge back on track when they travel to title rivals Arsenal on Sunday.

The Anfield club's hopes were dealt a blow Wednesday when improving Southampton beat them 2-0 at the St Mary's Stadium.

Liverpool were without Michael Owen, missing because of an ankle injury and this defeat once again raised questions about their ability to score in the England striker's absence.

They now lie fifth, having taken just six points from their last seven games but that still leaves them only a point behind third-placed Arsenal, who are just two points shy of leaders Leeds and have a game in hand. Liverpool assistant manager Phil Thompson insisted his side could recover in the same way as reigning champions Manchester United.

"We will come back," said former Liverpool captain Thompson, who was a cornerstone of the club's Championship-winning teams of the 1970s and 1980s.

"Just look at Manchester United and the disrespectful things that were said about them a month or so ago. They turned things around. Liverpool can turn things around," Thompson told Thursday's Daily Telegraph.

Thompson said Owen would return for the match at Highbury and the match is also likely to see a return to north London for former Arsenal striker Nicolas Anelka, now on loan at Liverpool.

The French striker made his name at Arsenal under fellow Frenchman Arsene Wenger.

But after winning the Premiership title in the 1997-98 season he fell out

with Wenger and left the club in 1999 for a 23million pound (33.12million dollar) move to Real Madrid. That move turned sour, as did his return to France with Paris St Germain, and he joined Liverpool last month.

"Perhaps, when I look back on the past few years, it would have been easier to have stayed and continued the progress I'd made under Arsene Wenger," Anelka recently told the Sunday Mirror.

"It is easy to look back on Arsenal with a great deal of happiness because I had a very understanding coach who played to my strengths."

"I can go over things in my head but so many things were said, so many things left unsaid."

"But the relationship with Arsenal became difficult and just pushed me through the door."

"At the time I was accused of all sorts of things, a great deal that wasn't true. But that is in the past, and it's a past I'd rather leave behind than talk about."

Thompson, continuing to deputise for Gerard Houllier as the Frenchman recovers from emergency heart surgery, is in no doubt about the worth of Anelka, who is still only 22.

"His work-rate has really impressed me. He will be a tremendously asset to us."

Elsewhere Sunday, Southampton, now twelfth, look to build on their win when they host United, who are second after staging a revival.

When the sides last met in December, United thrashed Gordon Strachan's side 6-1 but Southampton defender Wayne Bridge is ready for the return.

"We will be looking forward to some revenge because we played poorly at Old Trafford. Hopefully people will take more notice of us now."

But former United midfielder Strachan was more cautious. "I

don't want to think about United. I want to be able to get some sleep!"

Strachan also told the Daily Telegraph that the secret to Southampton's recent good form was that he had instilled confidence in his players. "I need to remind the players that they are better than they think they are."

"I enjoy seeing the players enjoy themselves," the former Scotland international added.

On Saturday fourth-placed Newcastle host Leeds, with David O'Leary's leaders looking to recover from their shock 2-1 third round FA Cup defeat against Second Division Cardiff on Sunday in a match marred by crowd violence.

O'Leary will have defender Dominic Matteo and midfielder Seth Johnson fit again and available for the St James' Park clash.

At the other end of the Premiership, bottom club Leicester are away to West Ham with fellow strugglers Ipswich travelling to Tottenham.

The other team in the relegation zone, Derby County, will look to bounce back from their 3-1 FA Cup defeat at the hands of Third Division Bristol Rovers, when they face Aston Villa.

But the home side will also be looking to recover from a FA Cup reverse after surrendering a 2-0 lead in a 3-2 defeat by Manchester United.

FIXTURES

(All 1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday: Aston Villa v Derby, Blackburn v Charlton, Bolton v Chelsea, Everton v Sunderland, Fulham v Middlesbrough, Ipswich v Tottenham, Newcastle v Leeds, West Ham v Leicester

Sunday: Arsenal v Liverpool (1600GMT), Southampton v Manchester United (1400GMT)



Javi Moreno (L), AC Milan's Spanish striker is the toast of his teammates after scoring against Lazio in their Italian Cup fixture at Milan on January 10.

# Italian Cup Moreno makes Milan's day

Football

AFP, Milan

A spectacular late goal from Spanish striker Javi Moreno handed AC Milan a 2-1 win over Lazio in their Italian Cup quarter-final first leg match here at the San Siro on Thursday.

Moreno, who joined AC Milan from Spanish outfit Alaves in the summer, crashed the ball home from a freekick to ensure Milan take the narrow advantage into next week's return match at the Olympic Stadium.

Lazio made most of the early running with Italian international midfielder Stefano Fiore prominent.

First he fired wide when well placed to score and then was unlucky when what appeared to be a goalbound shot hit a divot and deflected onto the post.

But just as Lazio appeared to be getting the upper hand AC Milan struck to take the lead.

# FA charges Henry

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal and France international striker Thierry Henry has been charged with improper conduct by the Football Association (FA) for his recent and dramatic outburst against a referee.

Henry saw red at the end of the English Premiership match against Newcastle at Arsenal's Highbury stadium on December 18, which 'The Gunners' lost 3-1, and had to be restrained by teammates and team physio Gary Lewin.

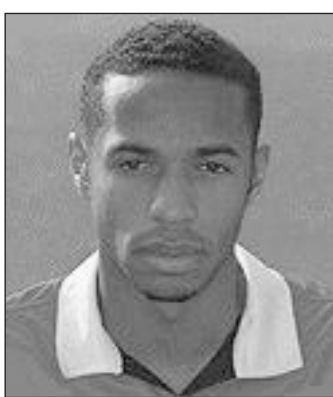
The target of Henry's ire was referee Graham Poll, who had sent off Arsenal midfielder Ray Parlour for two bookable offences when Arsenal were leading 1-0.

Poll also awarded a controversial penalty to Newcastle for Sol Campbell's challenge on Laurent Robert and the Magpies' eventual victory prevented Arsenal from going top of the table.

If found guilty of the FA's charge, which equates to bringing the game into disrepute, Henry could be served with a significant suspension.

Henry's latest outburst has placed a question mark over his evolving behaviour on the pitch, and of Arsenal's behavioural record in the Premiership.

He showed a similar reaction at the end of Arsenal's Champions League tie away to Panathinaikos in September when he complained loudly to the referee about the



THIERRY HENRY

Greek side's diving antics. However team boss Arsene Wenger has defended his team despite the 40 red cards handed out to his players in his five-year reign at Highbury.

Wenger insisted at the time: "I don't know if Thierry lost the plot. It is not my job to be a policeman. Look, my players are human beings."

"Do not make this a trial of Thierry Henry. Do not make a fuss about it. Of course I will stand up for him if charged by the FA."

Arsenal have been under growing criticism about their players' antics, with team captain Patrick Vieira the hub of most discontent.

Vieira, who has been involved in a number of flare-ups with opposing players, is still under investigation for an alleged elbow into Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink's face in the Boxing Day clash at home to Chelsea.

# Italy divided left & right

Football

AFP, Livorno, Italy

An academic study has revealed a worrying level of political infiltration of Italy's football supporters with rival extreme right and left factions using the country's stadia as recruiting grounds.

The study, carried out by Professor Massimo Ampola of Pisa University, shows how some groups of 'ultras' (hardcore fans) often form around an extreme ideology.

Ampola, who specialises in juvenile delinquency and worked with agents from the security forces in compiling his research, divides supporters groups into two categories, left and right.

"Stadia along with the developing politico-social situation is becoming a recruitment place for juvenile delinquents," said the unnamed agents who helped Ampola in a statement.

His research finds that supporters groups with Italian First Division clubs Venezia, Atalanta and Perugia and lower division outfits Genoa, Pisa, Livorno, Empoli and Ternana have a predominantly left-

wing ideology. At Atalanta's Stadio Comunale a huge banner of the late Latin American Communist revolutionary Che Guevara is displayed at every match while at other grounds former Soviet dictator Josef Stalin and author of Das Kapital Karl Marx are displayed.

Communist anthems such as the Internazionale or the Red Flag are often sung.

But some groups of ultras with Serie A outfits Juventus, Inter Milan, Verona, Udinese, Parma, Piacenza and Lazio are listed by Ampola as having extreme right ideology. Racism often rears its head in Italy at football stadia.

Ampola has found some evidence that groups of right-wing 'ultras' around the country are uniting to create a nationalist-fascist support base for the Italian national side.

He uncovered internet communications between rival groups when studying the left-wing 'Autonomous Livornese Brigade' faction, associated with Livorno, who are considered Italy's most notorious fans but who refused an alliance with two right-wing groups on ideological grounds.

Serie A preview

# Roma look to carry on

Football

AFP, Milan

Defending champions AS Roma host Verona on Sunday at the Olympic Stadium knowing that they are in pole position to retain their crown as the season moves into its second half.

Last week Roma retained the 'winter championship' - an honorary accolade awarded to the team that tops the Italian First Division table at the halfway point - and now Fabio Capello's side can turn their attention to holding on to the prize that really matters.

But Verona, who only avoided relegation by winning a play-off with Reggina last season, are now made of sterner stuff this year even if their feats have been somewhat eclipsed by the miraculous performances of city rivals and Stadio Marc'Antonio Bentegodi co-tenants Chievo.

Former Parma and Fiorentina coach Alberto Malesani, who first found fame as the coach who led amateur Chievo into Serie B in 1994, has imposed his trademark fighting spirit and aggression on Verona.

However, Malesani's side have their work out to halt a Roma side who have put an impressive run together after what was the traditional poor start to the season made by a side defending the title.

And this week doctors told Capello he was again free to pick Vincenzo Montella, the Italian international striker whose 13 goals last season - many at crucial moments - made him for many the emblem of Roma's first title victory in 18 years.

Montella, out for two months, said in time-honoured fashion: "I am ready for the call but it is up to the boss."

Hoping to take advantage of any Roma slip-up will be Inter Milan who visit a Perugia side that has won its last two matches.

The San Siro side are refreshed after a mini-break in Mallorca although it is unlikely that Brazilian striker Ronaldo will be rushed back for this match with Sierra Leone international Mohamed Kallon set to continue alongside Christian Vieri.

Chievo, four points behind Roma with a game in hand, are also still in contention for what would be by any accounts the most unexpected Scudetto success in history.

The side from Verona hosts a Fiorentina side that is in a state of total disarray with the boardroom feud between president Vittorio Cecchi Gori and managing director Luciano Luna reaching epic proportions this week.

The situation regarding coach Roberto Mancini who offered his resignation earlier this week was still to be resolved on Friday morning.

Fourth-placed Juventus have been in fine fettle recently and a trip to bottom club Venezia should pose few problems.

AC Milan entertain Brescia at the San Siro Stadium with both boosted by Italian Cup wins this week - Brescia having seen off Roma.

Parma look to continue their recent improved form in the knowledge that victory over Lecce will probably lift them out of the relegation zone.

The arrival of Turkish striker Hakan Sukur from Inter Milan will further boost a team that has been carried by the outstanding form of Italian international striker Marco Di Vaio.

His hat-trick in the 4-3 win over Venezia last week made him the division's joint top scorer with Dario Hubner of Piacenza on 12 goals.

Piacenza host Lazio whose coach Alberto Zaccheroni admits can afford few further slip-ups if they are to feature in the title equation.

Torino host Udinese while Bologna make the trip to Bergamo to play Atalanta.

FIXTURES

(14:00 GMT unless stated)

Sunday: Atalanta v Bologna, Chievo v Fiorentina, AC Milan v Brescia, Parma v Lecce, Piacenza v Lazio, AS Roma v Verona, Torino v Udinese, Venezia v Juventus, Perugia v Inter Milan (19:30 GMT)

Primera Liga preview

# Valencia test for Real

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid led the Spanish league throughout the entire second half of last season and they could fancy their chances of performing a similar feat again if they beat Valencia on Sunday.

Real are on the crest of a wave at the moment with six wins in their last seven league outings, including a 3-1 victory over Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday, which saw them displace their opponents from the top of the table.

However, Real are likely to be severely tested in this repeat of the 2000 Champions' League final.

The defending Spanish champions, and 28-times Spanish title holders, have 35 points from 19 games at the halfway point in the season but Valencia lie menacingly in third, just two points adrift.

Valencia have one of the best away records in the Spanish First Division having lost just two matches this season.

The match will once again pit Valencia's Spanish international midfielder David Albelda against Real's world record signing Zinedine Zidane.

The first meeting between the two, in the opening match of the season, gave the French former World Player of the Year a rude introduction to the rough and tumble of Spanish soccer, as Valencia hacked out a 1-0 home victory.

"I know I'm going to get a negative reaction in the Bernabeu. I'm conscious of the fact that the Real Madrid fans are waiting for me, but everything I did was legal and I

haven't killed anyone. The funny thing is everything remembers my duel with Zidane but nobody remembers the two outrageous tackles Luis Figo did on me," said Albelda on Thursday.

Valencia coach Rafa Benitez will have to replace his suspended striker Salva Ballesta, the Spanish First Division's top scorer two seasons ago, but his goal-scoring worries have eased with the return to fitness of Romanian international Adrian Ilie.

Additionally, Valencia boast the second best defensive record in the First Division while Spanish international midfielder Ruben Baraja is returning to his best after missing the first battle with Real and most of the season so far through injury.

Last Sunday, Baraja started his first match since his return and was instrumental in a 3-1 victory at Real Betis.

Real Madrid now have a settled formation with the same outfield ten players starting the last seven league matches but midfielder Ivan Helguera injured his achilles tendon in Tuesday's Spanish Cup quarterfinal first leg against Rayo Vallecano, which Real won 4-0.

Del Bosque has no natural replacement for Helguera. Albert Celedes damaged a knee in training this week, Steve McManaman and Flavio Conceicao both have long-term injuries and Cameroonian utility man Geremi Njitap is on African Nations Cup duty.

Del Bosque might instead have to use Argentine left-winger Santiago Solari in a makeshift role in front of the back four.

Second-placed Deportivo hope to keep up the pressure on Real with another good result against Valladolid on Sunday.

After beating them 2-0 at home in the Spanish Cup on Wednesday, with goals from Joan Capdevila and Roy Makaay, the two sides will meet again for the second time in four days, this time in Valladolid.

Deportivo coach Javier Irureta decided to start with Makaay, Diego Tristan and Djalminha on Wednesday, for the first time this season, and he could well opt for a similar tactic again.

Barcelona play host to Sevilla on Sunday and the Andalusian visitors will be without their top scorer Moises Garcia and defender Javi Navarro, who are both suspended.

However, Barcelona, who lie seventh despite an impressive 2-0 win over Real Zaragoza last Sunday, seem riven by internal controversy.

The latest concerns coach Charly Rexach dropping Argentine international goalkeeper Roberto Bonano last weekend, in favour of Jose Manuel Reina.

Bonano, who has been Barcelona's saviour in countless domestic and European matches this season, is unhappy.

"The decision surprised me, I don't agree with it and I'm fed up," Bonano said.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off 1600 GMT, unless stated): Villarreal v Rayo Vallecano (1930), Athletic Bilbao v Real Sociedad (2030)

Sunday: Alaves v Tenerife, Barcelona v Sevilla, Real Betis v Malaga, Celta Vigo v Osasuna, Valladolid v Deportivo La Coruna, Real Zaragoza v Espanyol, Las Palmas v Real Mallorca (1700), Real Madrid v Valencia (1900)

# What's the Beckham story?

Football

REUTERS, London

After seven successive wins, everything is rosy in the Manchester United garden again. Except if your name is David Beckham, that is.

In a matter of weeks, the England captain has been transformed from national hero to Old Trafford misfit. Beckham is also involved in protracted negotiations over a new contract.

Those two facts may not be unrelated.

In October Beckham completed his rehabilitation as far as England fans were concerned when his stoppage time free kick against Greece secured a place in this year's World Cup finals.

Just as the 26-year-old finally laid to rest the ghost of the 1998 World Cup, when his red card against Argentina meant he was blamed for England's exit, Beckham has mysteriously fallen out of favour at Old Trafford.

There were several candidates to blame for the champions' jittery start to their final Premier League campaign under manager Alex Ferguson.

Gaffe-prone goalkeeper Fabien Barthez and compatriot Laurent Blanc were the obvious targets, together with a subdued Roy Keane and the out-of-sorts, out-of-position Paul Scholes.

To most observers outside Old Trafford, Beckham, while not setting the world alight, had continued to

work his red and black socks off for his manager.

But while Ferguson kept faith with his faltering Frenchmen, England's captain found himself suddenly sidelined.

Initially, the official line was that Beckham was resting a back injury, but his exile has gone on too long for that still to be the case.

Ever since he was hauled off after 75 minutes of the abject 3-0

preference for a 4-4-1-1 formation has put Paul Scholes's nose out of joint as well as Beckham's.

With Beckham's contract negotiations still ongoing, Europe's leading clubs are keeping a close eye on the situation, although few have the buying power to meet a likely asking price in excess of 30 million pounds.

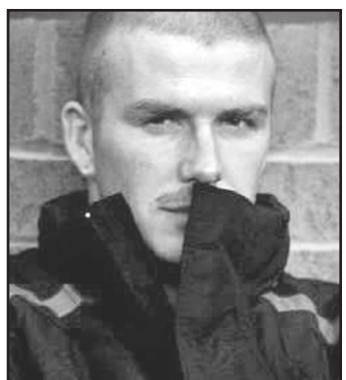
Beckham, meanwhile, maintains he doesn't wish to leave. "Everyone knows I want to stay here," he said before Christmas. "It was where I was brought up and it's a way of life for me."

The situation must come to a head soon, with the player's contract expiring in 18 months when United could lose him for nothing under the Bosman ruling.

It seems that is not Beckham's motive for delaying and perhaps he wants to know who will be Ferguson's successor as manager next season before committing himself to the club.

It could be that Ferguson wishes to focus Beckham's mind on those contract talks, reminding him that nobody is bigger than the club.

Or just maybe Ferguson has hatched an even more Machiavellian plot aimed at helping United win the approval of England coach Sven Goran Eriksson, a candidate to be the next United boss.



DAVID BECKHAM

home defeat by Chelsea on December 1, Beckham has been unable to command a regular place in the starting line-up.

He has now started only twice in United's last 10 games - playing only 112 minutes out of a possible 900 - and he is by no means certain to start at Southampton on Sunday.

All season long Ferguson has tinkered with the United midfield. The arrival of Argentine Juan Sebastian Veron and Ferguson's