

Serie A preview Coaches cornered

Football

AFP, Rome

The three-way race for the Italian First Division title between AS Roma, Juventus and Inter Milan briefly takes a back seat this weekend as attention switches to the fate of the two most beleaguered coaches in Serie A.

On Saturday night AC Milan host Atalanta at the San Siro in a match where anything other than victory will heighten speculation over the future of coach Carlo Ancelotti to fever pitch.

And 24 hours later at the Olympic Stadium it is Lazio coach Alberto Zaccheroni who runs the gauntlet when his side hosts Chievo at the Olympic Stadium.

Both men inherited control of their respective clubs during this season but instead of turning sinking ships around have watched them continue to list alarmingly.

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani, who has day-to-day control of the club owned by Italy's prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, has said no changes will be made until the summer.

However that was before the latest dismal Milan performance, a 1-1 home draw with Perugia who had been reduced to nine men by two harsh sendings off.

And Galliani had given Turkish coach Fatih Terim two votes of confidence in the six weeks preceding his sacking in November and the appointment of Ancelotti, whom they stole from under rivals Parma's noses.

Terim's record compares very favourably to that of Ancelotti.

Zaccheroni, who replaced the sacked Dino Zoff earlier this season, is having an even worse run with Lazio who have only picked up six points in the last nine matches and are 16 points behind leaders Roma.



ALBERTO ZACCHERONI

'Zac', who also received a vote of confidence this week, can barely afford another slip-up against fourth-placed Chievo who have shown signs of slipping in recent weeks.

However they still hold a position that would put them in the preliminary round of next season's Champions League tournament.

Meanwhile, leaders and defending champions AS Roma make the

FIXTURES
(14:00 unless stated)

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trip to Brescia who have looked a demoralised outfit in recent weeks with death, doping scandal and injuries all contributing to their decline.

Roma's closest challengers Juventus will be equally confident of victory against a Fiorentina team whose much-documented problems have left them looking almost certain to go down.

The momentum appears to be with Juve who had the better of last Sunday's 0-0 draw with Roma in a match where the sides from Turin played with 10 men for most of the match.

A much more tricky assignment faces Inter Milan who - a point behind Juve and two behind Roma - have slipped badly in recent weeks with only two points in their last three matches.

They visit in-form Verona whose bullish coach Alberto Malesani has this week declared his team will overhaul city rivals Chievo by the end of the season.

While Inter coach Hector Cuper's position is not in the same jeopardy as Zaccheroni or Ancelotti's another reverse would further weaken him.

The authoritarian Argentine made no attempt to hide his displeasure at the decision by the club to allow Brazilian striker Ronaldo stay in Rio de Janeiro for the carnival.

Elsewhere Perugia host Lecce while bottom club Venezia make the trip to Piacenza.

Parma meet Torino in a battle between two clubs who have climbed away from the relegation zone in recent weeks while in-form Bologna, who are now fifth, visit Udinese.

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Bellamy punished

Football

AFP, London

English Premiership club Newcastle confirmed Thursday that forward Craig Bellamy had been found guilty of a serious breach of club discipline and will be punished.

Bellamy, 22, who scored for Wales in their 1-1 draw with Argentina in Cardiff on Wednesday, will receive an undisclosed penalty after being cautioned by police for an incident of common assault on a 21-year-old woman.

"It has been a terrible week for me," said Bellamy on Thursday. "A lot of people have tried to stick the boot in and have a go over the last few days."

"But the only way to answer them is to play football and do well, and that's exactly what I did against Argentina."

"One moment your life is turned upside down, and the next it's back up there. I have set myself certain



CRAIG BELLAMY

challenges in my football career, and it's up to me to back them up."

Newcastle team-mates Carl Cort and Wayne Quinn, who were present but not involved, have been reprimanded by manager Bobby Robson for being out on the town in the early hours of the morning.

Injured England midfielder Kieron Dyer, who had earlier picked his colleagues up, has been cleared of any wrong-doing.

Mboma to 'seduce' Sunderland manager!

Football

AFP, London

Former African Player of the Year Patrick Mboma said Thursday he wanted to "seduce" Sunderland manager Peter Reid.

The 31-year-old joined the English Premiership side on Wednesday on loan for the rest of the season from Italian club Parma.

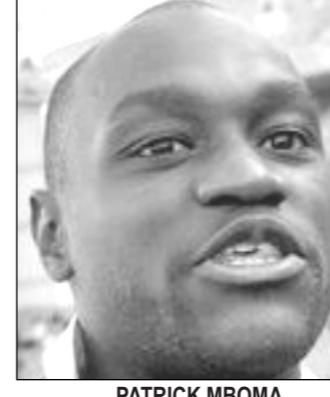
The Cameroonian, a member of the 'Indomitable Lions' squad that retained the African Nations Cup though he missed the final with a foot injury, will aim to give Sunderland another striking option.

So far this season Sunderland have scored 21 Premiership goals, with 15 coming from forward duo Kevin Phillips and Niall Quinn and 11 of those from England international Phillips alone.

Mboma has had a tough time in Italy, left out of the starting line-up after a row with Parma coach Gidone Carmignani.

But the 2000 African Footballer of the Year's self-belief remains intact.

"I am confident about myself after the African Nations Cup, but I know it will be different here and harder,"



PATRICK MBOMA

said Mboma. "First I will have to introduce myself to my team-mates and then seduce Peter Reid," he told the club's official website Thursday.

"After that I hope things will be okay for me. I hope to stay for a number of years."

He added: "It was very difficult in Italy, it is a tactical war every Sunday and it is very difficult to score there."

"But I still had some good moments. I will try to do my best here and score as many goals as possible, I am very confident."

Blatter boasts majority support

Football

AFP, Damascus

Sepp Blatter boasted here on Thursday of having the support of 112 of the 204 FIFA members for his re-election as head of football's world governing body.

"I've received letters from 112 countries expressing their support for the next elections," Blatter told journalists shortly before leaving for Beirut.

The elections are due to take place on May 29 in Seoul on the eve of the World Cup finals.

The Swiss-born Blatter declared himself confident on Wednesday at being re-elected as FIFA president even if he is challenged by Issa Hayatou, the Cameroonian president of the African Football Confederation (CAF).

Hayatou, the current FIFA vice-president, must declare his candidacy by March 28.

Blatter meanwhile on Thursday denied that FIFA had financial problems.



SEPP BLATTER

"Our situation is very comfortable, we are fulfilling all our commitments," he said.

A member of FIFA's executive committee, Qatar's Mohammad bin Hammam, who is accompanying Blatter on the Middle East trip, accused other members of the committee of spreading malicious rumours on FIFA's finances "as part of the war surrounding the elections."

"In the Gulf Cup we achieved third place and this is more than we expected, taking into consideration that the Kuwait team have only amateurs and the national team are the only nation not to play in the second World Cup qualifying round."

But he added that he was pleased to be back in Europe.

"Scotland means to me a return to the European melting pot of football. Everyone who knows me knows that I love the kind of football that is full of emotion and passion as displayed by the Scots."

"I am looking forward to the great

Primera Liga preview Real really fit

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque is not known as an especially religious man but he was offering up some quiet prayers during the week that all his players would return unscathed from their midweek international commitments. Whoever received Del Bosque's devotions answered in full because the league leaders will be almost back to full strength for their visit to Athletic Bilbao on Saturday, a chilling prospect for the Basques as Real beat Las Palmas 7-0 on Sunday with several key players missing.

Club captain Fernando Hierro will decide on Friday whether he will return to the centre of the defence after missing the last four league games through injury.

Even though the 33-year-old Spanish international - and a near certainty for the Spanish World Cup squad if fit - has lost a lot of pace over the last two seasons, he still remains an inspirational presence in the dressing room and on the field.

"The last word belongs to the coach," said Hierro on Thursday.

However, the indications are that he will travel to Bilbao. Ironically, the man Hierro will replace if he starts is Aitor Karanka, the only ex-Athletic player in the Real Madrid squad.

Michael Salgado will also return at right back after suspension but the defending champions are still without their injured striker Raul Gonzalez.

Julen Guerrero and Tiko Martinez face late fitness tests for Athletic.

Real Madrid lead with 43 points from 25 games but are only ahead of Valencia on goal difference.

Valencia travel to near-neighbours Villarreal on Saturday for what is expected to be a tense battle.

"We have to win at Villarreal if we are to carry on having a chance of

taking the league title," said Valencia striker Mista Ferrer on Thursday.

Valencia coach Rafa Benitez may make several changes to the side which could only draw 0-0 at home to Celta Vigo last Saturday.

The most likely switch is the recall of Norwegian international striker

Salva Ballesta.

Villarreal appear to have grown in confidence after taking four points from their last two games, following plenty of erratic performances after the injury to their Argentine international striker Martin Palermo in November.

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