

Gunners' eyes on treble



AFP, Paris

Notions of the 'treble' will resurface for ambitious Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger on Wednesday as the English Premiership high-flyers bid to transfer impressive domestic form to the European stage.

Yet on a night when the last four quarterfinalists, from Groups C and D of the Champions' League, will be decided, Arsenal face the biggest logistical challenge in a Group D where everything is still to play for.

Arsenal take on Juventus, who are already out of the competition, in Turin while Bayer Leverkusen face an uphill battle to outscore their English counterparts away to on-form Group D leaders Deportivo La Coruna to claim the coveted second spot.

Group C is a more straightforward affair. Real Madrid, who play away to Panathinaikos, are already qualified but the Greek side, in second place, will be looking to use significant home advantage to keep that position.

Panathinaikos need only a point but are likely not to sit back against the reigning Spanish champions.

The Greeks will be without the services of midfielder Angelos Basinas and defender Sotirios Kyrgiakos, both suspended, and defender Leonidas Vokolos who is doubtful with a leg injury.

The good news for coach Sergio Marcarian is that defender Ioannis Goumas is fit and available for selection. Madrid coach Vicente del Bosque meanwhile is expected to send seven of his reserve side to Athens.

Portuguese side Porto, in third on three points less than Panathinaikos, face a tough battle away to Sparta Prague who have only pride to play for after being eliminated from the competition.

Currently struggling on the domestic front, where they are on the brink of losing their league

FIXTURES

European Champions' League second phase matches on Wednesday:

- Group C Panathinaikos v Real Madrid Sparta Prague v FC Porto
- Group D Deportivo La Coruna v Bayer Leverkusen Juventus v Arsenal

place, synonymous with a place in Europe next season, to Benfica, Porto will be doubly determined to win at Prague and hope for Real Madrid to win at Panathinaikos.

Porto will be without injured goalkeeper Vitor Baia for Wednesday and defender Carlos Secretario, who will sit out a suspension.

Arsenal sit second in Group D on seven points and have hit a rich vein

of form since going down 2-0 to Deportivo at home two weeks ago.

A 2-1 league win against Aston Villa on Sunday, complete with a penalty save from 'keeper David Seaman and a peachy game-winning lob from French maestro Robert Pires, suggested the Londoners are back to their old selves.

Wenger could bring in veteran Gunner Tony Adams alongside Sol Campbell in central defence in the wake of Igor Stepanovs' injury against Villa.

Adams has been fit to play for a few days, but, without a tune-up game in the reserves, Wenger may not want to hasten his return. He has only played five games this season and he had a recurrence of a foot injury against Gillingham in the FA Cup last month.

Arsenal's hopes of winning the treble -- Champions' League, Premiership and FA Cup -- has been boosted by Juventus' absenteers.

Veteran defender Ciro Ferrara, one of four survivors from the Juve that won the 1995-6 Champions' League in Lippi's first stint at the club, is ruled out of the match through suspension.

French defender Lilian Thuram is not yet fully recovered from a strained adductor muscle in his right leg and trained apart from his teammates on Monday.

In the absence of Ferrara and Thuram, the likely centre-back pairing will be of Croatian Igor Tudor and Mark Iuliano.

Lippi's team are eliminated even though they have a better head-to-head record with Leverkusen and could yet manage the same with Arsenal but Lippi has no complaints about the elimination.

"We deserve to be out because our rivals have been better than us," he said.

Arsenal's bid could be given a boost if high-flying German Bundesliga side Bayer Leverkusen, who like Arsenal also have seven points in group D but less favourable goals difference, maintain their poor away record at Deportivo.

Leverkusen forwards Dimitar Berbatov and Thomas Brdaric were on target again for the ambitious German outfit on Saturday in a 2-0 away win at VfB Stuttgart, prompting coach Klaus Toppmoller to sing their praises.

Midfielder Carsten Ramelow, suspended in Leverkusen's victory, is back in the reckoning.

Deportivo, with 10 points and a healthy goal difference, are already assured of qualification. But favours from the Galicians at their blue-and-white decked Riazor stadium are likely to be few and far between.

Coach Javier Irureta is expected to line-up a virtually second string side with expected absenteers including Juan Carlos Valeron, Diego Tristan, Fran and Romero, all injured, and Lionel Scaloni and Victor suspended.

Brazil doesn't impress Pele

AFP, Tokyo

Football legend Pele said Tuesday Brazil need to improve their organisational set-up to boost their chances of winning the World Cup finals.

"We know we have good players," he told reporters here. "But we don't have a team organised yet for the World Cup."

Brazil has struggled recently to live up to high expectations, in part because many players are based in Europe and the team has not had sufficient preparation time, said Pele, on a three-day visit to Japan.

"Argentina, England, France, Portugal, Italy ... All these teams are already organised," he said. "Italy has a very good team."

The Brazilian, himself a member of three World Cup-winning teams, said the first World Cup finals to be held in Asia would not give any of the major contenders to lift the title an added advantage.

Japan and South Korea are co-hosting the month-long tournament that kicks off on May 31.

"I think this World Cup will be very special. It will be neutral for all," he said, referring to the success of the top European and South American teams when the finals have been played in their regional backyards.

The 61-year-old Pele also said the second tier of football nations, such as Japan and the United States, were catching up with the traditional giants of the game.

"They are almost the same. It is not easy playing against Japan. It is not easy playing against the United States."

WC becomes Sino fever

AFP, Beijing

Chinese football fans are lining up to snare tickets for the month-long World Cup finals beginning on May 31, state media said Tuesday.

The Beijing Morning Post said 20,000 fans had registered for tickets at China's major travel agency, the state-run China Travel Service (CTS).

However, FIFA has only allotted 10,747 regular tickets to China, the report quoted a CTS official as saying.

CTS has sent staff to South Korea targeting big companies and football associations from whom it can buy more tickets to meet the strong demand from Chinese fans, it said.

China plays its group games in South Korea, co-host of the finals along with Japan. However, the CTS said it is unlikely to obtain any more than 3,000 additional tickets.

China has been gripped by football frenzy since the national team sealed qualification late last year for the World Cup finals.

But only the very rich or well-connected in China will be able to travel overseas to watch the games, given the relatively high cost of the tickets, air travel and lodging.

Sepp exudes confidence

REUTERS, Zurich

Sepp Blatter, who has come under fire in recent weeks over allegations of financial mismanagement and vote-rigging, says he expects to remain as president of world soccer's governing body FIFA.

"I am very confident that in a year I will still be at the head of FIFA, that I will still continue to be able to continue my activities at FIFA," Blatter said in an interview on Swiss television on Monday.

Blatter faces a fight to retain his position after Cameroon's Issa Hayatou, 55, president of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), declared his candidacy on Saturday for world soccer's top job. A decision is due at the FIFA Congress in May.

Blatter rejected the allegations of financial mismanagement and vote-rigging, saying such comments made him sad.

He said the allegations arose from infighting within the ranks of world soccer.

Blatter also dismissed allegations FIFA faced severe financial trouble following the collapse last year of the ruling body's marketing agent ISL-ISMM.

He said any talk of FIFA being in financial difficulty was "nothing else other than a very, very liberal interpretation of the truth".

At an extraordinary meeting of the Executive Committee earlier this month, it was agreed that an internal audit of FIFA's finances should be set up. The decision was seen as a major defeat for Blatter.

But the president said he had recommended that FIFA have an internal audit "as is customary in companies".

Blatter was elected FIFA president in 1998, beating UEFA president Lennart Johansson by 111-80 votes at the FIFA Congress in Paris.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazil's football legend Pele attends a news conference in Tokyo on Tuesday to promote an anti-impotence awareness campaign. Pele met reporters in Japan sporting a new roll as educational ambassador for Pfizer, the US drug firm known for its impotency cure Viagra.

Liberia, Zim back Blatter



REUTERS, Johannesburg

Liberia and Zimbabwe will back FIFA president Sepp Blatter in his battle for re-election against the leader of African football Issa Hayatou, who announced his candidacy at the weekend.

And Blatter has also received support in Europe from Germany.

Edwin Snowe, president of the Liberian Football Association, says he will launch a campaign called 'Friends of Blatter in Africa' to seek support for the incumbent FIFA president.

Zimbabwe Football Association president Leo Mugabe has also said he would vote against Hayatou in what is expected to be a tightly contested race.

Confederation of African Football (CAF) president Hayatou, 55, ended weeks of speculation by announcing he would stand, saying on Saturday he was confident of overwhelming support from Africa in his bid to unseat Blatter.

Hayatou already enjoys the support of UEFA and of the powerful FIFA vice president and executive committee member Chung Mong-joon, the president of the Korean FA

and co-chairman of South Korea's World Cup organising committee.

But in Berlin, German Football Association (DFB) president Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder said Germany would keep supporting Blatter.

Mayer-Vorfelder, who said at last October's extraordinary congress of European body UEFA in Prague that he stood by Blatter, said his position had not changed.

"I said at the time that we would continue to support Blatter in the future and there was no contradiction," Mayer-Vorfelder told Tuesday's Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ).

Snowe, speaking on the BBC's African service, said he would seek to rally support against Hayatou and would be travelling to neighbouring countries this week to campaign.

"CAF, under Hayatou, has done nothing for any country in Africa and that's something that most of my colleagues in Africa agree about," he said.

"Blatter has done more for African football than any other person. Because of him FIFA has given \$10 million to Africa plus he backed the South Africans in their bid to win the hosting of the 2006 World Cup," said Snowe, himself a member of CAF's standing committees.

Liberia were the first country to receive aid under Blatter's assistance programme, having an artificial pitch installed near the capital Monrovia two years ago.

"CAF has lots of money but it doesn't help us," added Snowe. "I believe many African countries will see reason and support Blatter instead."

Zimbabwe's decision comes as no surprise after Mugabe's bitter ousting from the CAF executive committee earlier this year.

He lost a re-election bid to South African Football Association president Molefi Oliphant by an embarrassingly large margin at the end of a campaign Mugabe said had been orchestrated by the leadership of CAF.

Hayatou is the first man for 28 years to challenge the sitting president of world soccer's governing body and will become FIFA's first African president if he wins the election at the FIFA Congress in Seoul on May 29.

Allegations that Blatter's supporters made cash payments to persuade African delegates to vote for him in the 1998 leadership election may hurt the incumbent's credibility.

Juve plan to win fans over



AFP, Turin

Italian Serie A giants Juventus are considering playing home matches away from their base in Turin in a bid to galvanise their fans, Gazzetta dello Sport reported Tuesday.

The move, which does have precedents in the club's history, comes with fans failing to turn up in large numbers at the unloved Stadio Delle Alpi with individual players constantly barracked and jeered by their own fans.

Juventus have a huge support base all over Italy and beyond and the directors are said to be considering playing at least some games away from Turin.

It is already being suggested that Juve's home leg in the two-legged Italian Cup Final with Parma might be played in Palermo, Sicily.

Gazzetta even suggest Juve may play all next season's fixtures

away from Turin. Other potential venues are Reggio Emilia (between Parma and Bologna) and Monza, the town near Milan that is more famous as the home of motor racing.

In the past the 'vecchia signora' (old lady), as Juve are affectionately known, has shown a willingness to play away. In 1999, for example, Juve played all their Intertoto Cup home matches at Cesena.

Juve's honorary president Umberto Agnelli pointed out on Sunday that the club did not get the support it deserved in its home city.

"They turn up in small numbers and are very demanding on the players," said Agnelli. "I don't know if they (the supporters) deserve a great team."

In Tuesday's Gazzetta, Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon said he felt more at ease playing away.

"It's terrible seeing individual players being jeered," said Buffon who became the world's most expensive goalkeeper when he left

Parma for Juve last summer for 37 million dollars.

"As for me I have never been booed yet but I feel more at home playing away: at least half the crowd is normally for us. When I was at Parma and Juventus were in town (Parma's stadium) the Ennio Tardini Stadium was always half full of Juve fans."

The Stadio Delle Alpi, a vast concrete bowl built for the 1990 World Cup, is widely considered one of the least attractive grounds in football and often only reaches half its 70,000 capacity for league games.

Last weekend, for the 1-0 victory over Verona with Juventus very much in the title race, only 2529 paid on the gate in addition to the season ticket holders.

Many Juve fans are still pining for their former home at the Stadio Comunale which was in service until the Delle Alpi was built and which now serves as Juve's training ground.

Nee kneed out

AFP, Lyon

Lyon striker Frederic Nee will be out for the rest of the season after injuring his right knee during a reserve team match, the club said on Monday.

Tests revealed torn knee ligaments which will need an operation and keep him out for the rest of 2001/02. To add to his woes, he broke his right big toe in the same incident when he collided with the opposing keeper in the final minute.

The 26-year-old Nee has one cap for France, earned in the Confederations Cup last June.

Man United hope Beck will stay

REUTERS, London

Manchester United are optimistic England captain David Beckham will agree a new contract with the club before the World Cup.

"I am sure we will get it done, hopefully before the end of the season or the World Cup," chief executive Peter Kenyon told BBC radio on Tuesday. "There is no such thing as 100 percent but we are very, very confident."

Beckham, whose current United deal expires in the summer of 2003, has been discussing a new contract with United officials for some time.

Media reports claim Beckham wants around 80,000 pounds a week under a new deal, with image rights on top.

The value of the image rights have been the main sticking point for the 26-year-old, but United have grown increasingly confident of keeping their prize asset following Alex Ferguson's decision last month to stay on as manager.

Fiorentina face judicial inquiry

AFP, Florence

A Florence court on Monday ordered that a judicial inspection be carried out on ailing Italian Serie A outfit Fiorentina, ANSA news agency reported.

Florence businessman Vincenzo Pilla has been appointed to thoroughly examine the books of the club which is looking odds-on to be relegated to Serie B after a season when their playing squad has been decimated by injuries and forced sales to meet the club's crippling debts.

The court will reassemble on May 29 to decide which is the best way forward after Pilla presents his report.

Florentina president Ugo Poggi said that he welcomed the move.

"I think this decision is a positive one because it will show that the accounts situation is not as bad as people have made out," Poggi said.

"It's also positive that a judicial inspector stands beside the board because he can see that the economic situation of the club is decidedly good."

"With this decision I hope that when the tribunal next meets that the case could be consigned to the archives."

Less impressed were the club's long suffering fans whose spokesman Walter Tanturli, in reference to club owner and movie mogul Vittorio Cecchi Gori, said:

"With this the agency continues because now the club will not make choices," said Tanturli.

"Besides it is nothing but a mouthful of oxygen for Cecchi Gori. We were hoping for a shake-up to persuade the owner to leave."

Spurs keep losing



AFP, London

Charlton Athletic dealt another blow to Tottenham's faltering English Premiership campaign on Monday with a 1-0 victory at White Hart Lane.

A 70th-minute goal from Chris Powell secured three points for Alan Curbishley's side and preserved Charlton's superb record against London opposition in the Premiership.

The Addicks have now gone 12 games unbeaten in Premiership matches against teams from the capital, and this latest win catapulted them into seventh place in the league.

But the defeat deepened the gloom surrounding Glenn Hoddle's beleaguered Spurs, coming hard on the heels of last week's back-to-back 4-0 thrashings against Chelsea.

"It was hard work, but I think it was our night," Charlton boss Curbishley said, paying tribute to Richard Rufus in his first game since suffering knee ligament damage in August.

"I think he was magnificent. I upset young Paul Konchesky by bringing Richard back, but we needed his height."

"They just couldn't get back in the game," he said. "The night was ours, it's just fantastic the position we've got ourselves in. We've had plenty of problems this season."

After seeing his side reach 41 points Curbishley set them a new target.

"Last year we got 52 points, if we can get anywhere near that we will be delighted," he added.

Meanwhile man-of-the-match Scott Parker said the victory should give Charlton the confidence to aim for a place in European competition next season.

"I think we've got to look at that, I think we should try for Europe. We're seventh in the table and the table doesn't lie," Parker told Sky Sports.

The midfielder said Charlton's tireless industry in all areas had provided the foundations of the win. "We got it down and played a bit but the majority of it was hard work," he said.

Tottenham's fourth loss on the trot leaves Hoddle desperate to halt the slide in form that has seen Spurs' season unravel in recent weeks.

Against Charlton, Spurs created several openings but were robbed of a goal after some superb keeping

lous one-handed reflex save from Les Ferdinand, flicking an angled header from the Spurs striker away on 32 minutes to frustrate the home team.

Charlton, whose forays into Spurs territory were few and far

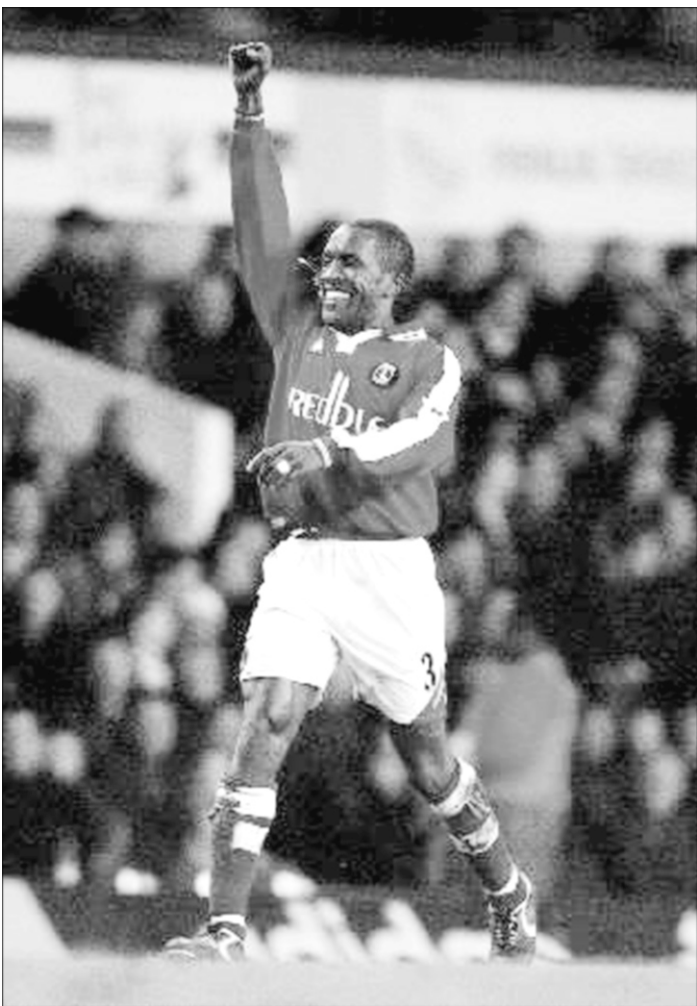


PHOTO: INTERNET

Charlton Athletic's Chris Powell celebrates scoring against Tottenham Hotspur during their English Premiership match at White Hart Lane on Monday.

from Dean Kiely.

The Irish reserve goalkeeper made two crucial saves from Uruguayan Gus Poyet in the second half, with the South American also seeing a header rebound off the woodwork.

Kiely had also pulled off a marvel-

between, took the lead 20 minutes from time with a scrappy goal.

A hopeful cross into the Spurs penalty area saw England international Powell nip in behind Ledley King, to bundle the ball past Neil Sullivan with his thigh.

Trapattoni's dribbling



AFP, Milan

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni on Tuesday gave Corriere dello Sport some very heavy hints as to who -- barring injury -- will feature in his 23-man World Cup squad.

Italy still have three friendlies -- against England, Uruguay and the Czech Republic -- before the summer tournament but, judging by Trapattoni's remarks he already knows who will be on the plane to Asia, health permitting.

Trapattoni has already confirmed Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus), Francesco Toldo (Inter Milan) and Christian Abbiati (AC Milan) as his three goalkeepers.

And Trapattoni named six of his defenders to Corriere. He had already named his three-man starting unit of Paolo Maldini (AC Milan), Alessandro Nesta (Lazio) and Fabio Cannavaro (Parma) plus Marco Materazzi (Inter Milan) in previous interviews.

On Tuesday he added two more, saying: "Nesta, Maldini, Cannavaro, Materazzi and (AS Roma defender



GIOVANNI TRAPATTONI

join Parma in the summer, could be the seventh man, saying: "Among the players I am watching with attention is Bonera."

Gianluca Pessotto of Juventus or Lazio's Giuseppe Pancaro could be the eighth.

In attack Trapattoni names his likely five-man selection.

"(Inter Milan's Christian) Vieri,

(AC Milan's Filippo) Inzaghi, (AS Roma's Marco) Delvecchio and (Juventus Alessandro) Del Piero look pretty certain," said Trapattoni who then went on to hint that Roma's Vincenzo Montella would win the fifth berth over Parma's Marco Di Vaio.

"He's (Di Vaio) an interesting lad who can turn things around but he is not as big as Delvecchio and does not have Montella's agility," said Trap.

That leaves seven midfielders with Francesco Totti (who plays behind the front two in Trapattoni's 3-4-1-2 formation) and Damiano Tommasi (both AS Roma), Atalanta's Cristiano Doni, Juventus winger Gianluca Zambrotta already considered cast-iron certainties Trapattoni adds one more name.

"Let's say (AC Milan midfielder) Gennaro) Gattuso is an ugly player but he makes his presence felt on the field," said Trapattoni.

That leaves Lazio's Stefano Fiore, Inter's Cristiano Zanetti and Luigi di Biagio, AC Milan's Demetrio Albertini, Fiorentina's Angelo Di Livio contesting two more places with Barcelona's Francesco Coco also not yet discounted.