

Serie A preview

Inter hope to break clear

Football

AFP, Milan

The pressure is on Italian title challengers AS Roma and Juventus this weekend as they face tough matches where anything other than victory could see them fall further by the wayside in the pursuit of leaders Inter Milan.

Inter's momentous 3-1 victory over Roma at the San Siro last Sunday put them three points ahead of the defending champions while a point further adrift are Juve, following their 1-0 defeat at Parma.

And this weekend Inter have what on paper is by far the easiest task when they visit a Fiorentina side who are all but relegated.

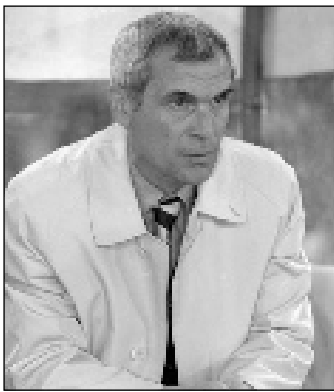
But the other two contenders face far sterner tests with champions AS Roma hosting fourth-placed Bologna at the Olympic Stadium with the visitors determined to hang on to the position that would earn them a place in the preliminary round of next year's Champions League.

And if that is not enough no less than four Roma players are suspended for various misdemeanours during the defeat by Inter.

French defender Jonathan Zebina is beginning a three-match ban after being sent off for striking Inter's Uruguayan forward Alvaro Recoba while striker Marco Delvecchio and Brazilian pair Assuncao and Cafu are also banned for a single game.

And inspirational skipper Francesco Totti is also a major doubt for the match after injuring a leg during Italy's 2-1 victory over England at Leeds on Wednesday.

Juventus also face a tough assignment with Lazio in their first home championship match since the club warned its fans that they would play more and more fixtures away from Turin unless supporters got behind the club.



HECTOR CUPER

FIXTURES

(14:00 GMT unless stated)  
Saturday: Atalanta v Piacenza, Fiorentina v Inter Milan, Lecce v Venezia, AC Milan v Parma, Perugia v Chievo, AS Roma v Bologna, Udinese v Brescia, Verona v Torino, Juventus v Lazio (19:30 GMT)

With six games remaining, however, it is Inter who are now firm favourites to win what would be their first Scudetto since Giovanni Trapattoni led them to the title back in 1988-9.

Their Argentinian coach Hector Cuper admits his most difficult task is trying to dampen down the euphoria that followed last week's win over Roma as he tries to keep his players focused on the job in hand.

"Now I must try and squeeze more out of them," said Cuper.

Meanwhile, Inter's twice World Player of the Year Ronaldo said he wants Cuper to realise that fitness is no longer a reason to leave him out of the side.

Ronaldo made his return to the Brazilian national side in Wednesday's 1-0 friendly win over Yugoslavia but has not been included in the Inter squad to face Fiorentina.

"I hope to have the chance before the end of the season to make

myself useful for Inter," Ronaldo was quoted as saying by the daily Gazzetta dello Sport on Friday.

"I need to convince the coach. But let us be clear - I am fine, I am cured and now I have overcome all the physical problems. If I don't play then it is only due to a tactical choice," added the Brazilian.

After two years out of the game following knee operations Ronaldo has made just six Serie A appearances for the Milan side this term.

There are only six Serie A games left of this campaign but the Brazilian is clearly hoping to make a contribution in order to secure his place in Luiz Felipe Scolari's final squad for the finals in Japan and South Korea.

Fiorentina's fans appear to have run up the white flag and have announced they will boycott the match on Saturday in protest against the much-documented financial problems that threaten the very existence of the club.

Just to make matters worse the club's new president Ugo Poggi announced this week that he would quit next week at the scheduled board meeting.

Away from the top Venezia could become the first club relegated if they lose to fellow strugglers Lecce and fifth-bottom Udinese pick up a point at home to Brescia.

Lecce, like Fiorentina and Venezia, are also the football equivalent of dead men walking and anything other than victory for the southerners would more or less scupper any realistic hopes of a last-minute reprieve.

AC Milan host Parma while Chievo hope to boost their Champions League bid when they travel to Perugia. Verona, beaten by Chievo last week in the city derby, hope to make amends at home to Torino while Piacenza travel to Bergamo to play Atalanta.

All this weekend's fixtures are played on Saturday to avoid a clash with Easter Sunday.

CUP CORNER



AFP/INTERNET, Bangkok

Thai authorities are setting up a surveillance network to stop students joining an anticipated epidemic of illegal gambling on World Cup matches, officials said Friday.

"The key points of the 11-point measure are to ask for cooperation from parents and schools to closely monitor their students," education ministry spokesman Vorawut Pummakanjana told AFP.

Students' general behaviour, cash spending and use of credit cards and mobile telephones will be under close watch during the event which kicks off in South Korea on May 31, he said.

Newspaper reports said plainclothes inspectors will keep a close eye on Internet cafes located near schools, colleges and universities and that students will be encouraged to report any betting among their classmates.

A recent survey indicated some 400,000 Bangkok residents are expected to lay down over 9.37 billion baht (217 million dollars) in bets during the football tournament.

Vorawut said students at secondary schools as well as vocational institutions and universities would be targeted in the campaign.

"We hope that the statistics of gambling involving students should be reduced, or at least prevented from increasing," he said.

"All teachers should refrain from gambling to set a good example for students," he said, adding they should keep a close watch on Internet shops near schools.

The measures are to be submitted to Education Minister Suwit Khunkitti before being approved and implemented nationwide.

Most forms of gambling, except for horse racing and the government-run lottery, are illegal in Thailand but illicit betting is rampant.

Thai police this week floated a proposal to delay telecasts of World Cup matches by half an hour to beat the gambling, much of which typically is laid down after the opening whistle.

But they were forced to backtrack amid a national outcry from sports-mad Thais who are keenly awaiting the competition.

MANCHOPPE MAY MISS FINALS

Manchester City striker Paulo Wanchope has been ruled out for the rest of the season and could miss the World Cup.

The Costa Rica international returned to training for the first time in four weeks on Tuesday but suffered a recurrence of a knee injury and will now visit a specialist in Colorado this weekend to learn the extent of the problem.

Wanchope has twice undergone surgery on the knee Kevin Keegan told the club's official website: "His season with us is over. But we hope and pray that it is something minor put right quickly so that Paulo can feature in the World Cup.

POSH, BECK PENGUINS!

Posh and Becks will be fed fish and vitamin supplements until they are old enough to join the rest of the team at London Zoo in time for the football World Cup final - in the penguin enclosure.

The two three-week-old black foot penguin chicks - named after Manchester United star David Beckham, the England captain, and his pop star wife Victoria - are currently being hand-reared by zoo keepers.

"With a little over 60 days until England kick-off their World Cup campaign, we thought this was a nice way to pay tribute to England's captain and his wife," a zoo spokesman said.

"The penguins' lifestyle is not exactly hectic, their lifestyle isn't jet set but they do live in a listed home with a big pool and every aspect of their lives has been the subject of much interest, so the names are very apt."

Primera Liga preview

Real psyched up by Sevilla!

Football

AFP, Madrid

Sevilla take on Spanish league leaders Real Madrid on Saturday in a match spiced up by controversial comments from Sevilla captain Jose Miguel Prieto.

"I'm sick to death of everyone saying how good, artistic and marvelous Real Madrid are," Prieto said on Wednesday.

"If we win this game what are people going to say then?"

"And we are going to be insisting that the referee doesn't fall for any of their usual tricks," said Prieto, adding his voice to the regular refrain that Real get preferential treatment from match officials.

However, Real are determined to make Prieto choke on his words in a match Madrid must win to ensure they remain on top of the Spanish First Division, although Sevilla have not beaten Real in their own Sanchez Pizjuan stadium since 1992, when Diego Maradona was in their side.

"He's just trying to wind us up and raise the stakes," commented Real Madrid defender Francisco Pavon.

Real have 56 points from 31 games but only lead Valencia on goal difference, with European Champions League quarter-finalists Deportivo La Coruna close at hand in third, just two points behind the leaders.

The defending Spanish champions are hoping that World Player of the Year Luis Figo will be back, after several weeks out with a sprained ankle.

If the Portuguese winger plays then Argentine striker Santiago Solari is expected to return to the bench despite his excellent recent form.

Sevilla are expected to be unchanged from the side that drew 0-0 in the local derby at Real Betis on Saturday, except that coach Joaquin Caparros needs to replace suspended Mexican midfielder Gerardo Torrado.

Should Real falter, then Valencia will be out to regain top spot at struggling Tenerife later on Saturday.

FIXTURES

Saturday (Kick off GMT): Sevilla v Real Madrid (19:00), Real Sociedad v Deportivo La Coruna (19:15), Barcelona v Las Palmas (20:00), Celta Vigo v Alaves (20:00), Tenerife v Valencia (20:30), Sunday: Osasuna v Malaga (16:00), Real Zaragoza v Valladolid (16:00), Real Mallorca v Espanyol (16:45),

Tenerife, despite being at the foot of the First Division, have only lost one of their last five games since former Spain coach Javier Clemente took over - a 3-1 defeat at Deportivo on Sunday, when they only gave the game away in the final 15 minutes - and now look a better prospect to escape an immediate return to the Second Division, as only two points separate the bottom six.

By contrast, Valencia are finding the going tough at the top. They grabbed three points at home to Osasuna on Sunday, but

only thanks to an injury-time winner from Spanish international Ruben Baraja, the 11th time in their 15 wins that they have triumphed by the odd goal.

Valencia coach Rafa Benitez will have to reconstruct the centre of his defence as Argentine international Roberto Ayala will be out for a month with a torn hamstring and his compatriot Mauricio Pellegrino could be missing for a similar period after dislocating his shoulder against Osasuna.

The 36-year-old veteran Yugoslav international Miroslav Djukic will come in for Ayala, probably accompanied by Carlos Marchena, 14 years his junior.

Deportivo have a tricky visit to a resurgent Real Sociedad, with the San Sebastian side having won both its games since Roberto Olabe took over as coach from John Toshack.

Those six points have meant Sociedad are now 13th, after spending much of the season in the relegation zone.

"There is no doubt that my biggest task is keeping the players focussed on this match rather than getting distracted by next week's Champions League game against Manchester United," said Deportivo coach Javier Irujeta.

Deportivo's top striker Diego Tristan is suspended and will not be able to add to his tally of 15 league goals, but he will be fully rested and ready to resume his role as the Mancunians' nemesis on Tuesday.

Dutch international striker Roy Makaay is an able replacement for Tristan but Deportivo will also have defender Lionel Scaloni suspended.

Bundesliga preview

Bayer coach's gamesmanship

Football

AFP, Berlin

Egos are growing apace as the Bundesliga title race heats up with the coach of leaders Bayer Leverkusen, Klaus Toppmoller, blasting Dortmund counterpart Matthias Sammer.

With six games to play Leverkusen have a one-point lead over 1997 European champions Dortmund going into Saturday's match at Kaiserslautern, who are in the hunt for a UEFA Cup place.

Leverkusen, who face Liverpool next week in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals, have never won the German title in a chequered history which has seen them come agonisingly close on several occasions.

Dortmund are at Stuttgart and reigning champions Bayern Munich, five points adrift, visit SV Hamburg as all the top three go off on their travels.

"Matthias Sammer sits in the boss's chair in Dortmund. Some get it all falling into their lap. I had to work my way up," Toppmoller told the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper, referring to how his rival went from player to manager of a big club in one fell swoop.

"Putting a team together from scratch, sorting out the jigsaw puzzle - that's football for me," said the 50-year-old.

Compared with wealthy clubs Bayern and Dortmund, who have a huge fan base to rely on, Toppmoller has to build a silk purse out of the proverbial sow's ear. And he doesn't like modern talk of squad rotation as he expects his limited player pool to have sufficient hunger to play every week.

"We're not as far on as Bayern or Dortmund that we can choose from a squad of 22 or 23 equally fine players.

"Look at the generation of our fathers or grandfathers, who built Germany up after the War," said Toppmoller.

"They didn't have any squad rotation. If we can win something maybe that would put a stop to the



KLAUS TOPPMOLLER

FIXTURES

Saturday: Kaiserslautern v Bayer Leverkusen, VfB Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund, SV Hamburg v Bayern Munich, Borussia Monchengladbach v Hertha Berlin, Energie Cottbus v SC Freiburg FC Nuremberg v VfL Wolfsburg, 1860 Munich v St. Pauli Sunday: Cologne v Schalke 04, Werder Bremen v Hansa Rostock

whole nonsense" that only a huge squad can bring 21st century success.

But if many would agree with Toppmoller in principle in practice he must be keeping his fingers crossed that his injury list does not grow too much.

Skipper Jens Nowotny and midfield dynamo Michael Ballack, both German internationals, are set to miss the Lautern match with leg and thigh injuries.

Bayern, meanwhile, must win at Hamburg in what used to be one of their matches of the season until the northerners fell on hard times if their quest for a record fourth straight title is to stay on the rails.

The European champions welcome back midfielder Mehmet Scholl and Peruvian forward Claudio Pizarro from injury but defender Robert Kovac has a groin strain.

Coach Ottmar Hitzfeld says, meanwhile, he has patched up a brewing disagreement with Brazilian international striker Giovane Elber.

Premiership preview

Win or bust for MU

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United face a make-or-break clash at bitter rivals Leeds at Elland Road on Saturday as the reigning champions battle to retain their Premiership crown over the Easter weekend.

With Arsenal in the driving seat, title holders United cannot afford any more slip-ups like the shock 1-0 reverse at home to Middlesbrough last Saturday - their eighth league defeat of the season.

Alex Ferguson's men are second in the table on 64 points from 32 matches, one less than leaders Liverpool, but third-placed Arsenal are firm favourites to win the Premiership as they have two games in hand on both challengers.

The Gunners entertain Sunderland at Highbury the same day and are unlikely to drop points against a team who have the worst goalscoring record away from home in the Premiership, finding the net just nine times.

It goes without saying United must win their midday match if they are to stay in the hunt for the title, but resurgent Leeds will be fired up as they continue chasing a Champions League place next season.

Even if United triumph at Elland Road they still have to play Chelsea (away) and Arsenal (home) but their captain David Beckham is not throwing in the towel just yet.

"It's always wrong to write off any big team. Some people wrote us off before Christmas but we came back and have been fighting ever since," said Beckham.

"It's difficult to be in this position as we've made it hard for ourselves and we shouldn't be there but we'll carry on battling.

"It's mostly down to our performances at the start of the season.

"Arsenal are now the favourites but you have to look at Liverpool as well as they have a lot of games at home. Out of the three of us, we've probably got the easiest run-in.



DAVID BECKHAM

FIXTURES

(all 15:00 GMT unless stated)  
Saturday: Arsenal v Sunderland, Bolton v Aston Villa, Chelsea v Derby, Leeds v Manchester United (12:00 GMT), Leicester v Blackburn, Liverpool v Charlton, Middlesbrough v Tottenham (17:35 GMT), Southampton v Fulham, West Ham v Ipswich Monday: Blackburn v Southampton (20:00), Charlton v Arsenal, Derby v Middlesbrough, Everton v Bolton, Fulham v West Ham, Ipswich v Chelsea, Sunderland v Leicester, Tottenham v Leeds

"But there can be a lot of twists and turns left. The season is still not over yet and looking from an England point of view, it's good for the players involved."

Leeds manager David O'Leary conceded he is likely to be out of England defender Rio Ferdinand and French midfielder Olivier Dacourt for Saturday's crunch clash.

Ferdinand damaged a leg muscle in training last week and is likely to sit out despite having round-the-clock treatment while Dacourt has not yet recovered from a hamstring strain.

"There is still some time to go before Saturday but I think we can forget about both of them," O'Leary said.

Japan dream with Nakata



AFP, Tokyo

Japan on Thursday rejoiced in Hidetoshi Nakata's return to their football firing line as the World Cup co-hosts scored an uplifting 2-0 away win over Poland overnight.

"Hide controls the game", "Hide leads in attacking and defending", screamed the Japanese evening newspaper headlines at Japan's first international-A victory in Europe for 31 years since they beat Iceland 2-0 in Reykjavik in 1971.

It was Japan's second straight win in as many matches so far in their eight-match World Cup build-up. They beat Ukraine 1-0 at home a week ago.

"It gives us great confidence in our aim to advance from the World Cup first round," said J-League executive director Kozo Kinomoto. "We realise anew that Hide Nakata is at the centre of our team."

Nakata opened the scoring after 10 minutes and he fed a cross which led to the second goal by Naohiro Takahara, formerly with Argentina's

Boca Juniors, in the 42nd minute.

The 25-year-old Parma midfielder narrowly missed a third goal when he beat the offside trap only to take the ball too close to Liverpool goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek just before half-time.

It was Nakata's first international goal since June when he scored on a free kick for a 1-0 win over Australia in the Confederations Cup semi-finals.

At that time, Nakata skipped the Cup final against France to take part in AS Roma's season-closing campaign which won them the Serie A title, sparking off a personal row with Japan coach Philippe Troussier.

But Troussier, a firebrand Frenchman, praised Nakata's impressive ability to blend back into the team.

The coach told Japanese reporters in the Polish town of Lodz he was satisfied with Nakata because "he played into the teamwork and also I think the teamwork is now very good for him."

J-League chairman Saburo Kawabuchi said here Thursday that Nakata had "completely regained coach Troussier's confidence in him."

Nakata blamed his missed goal on the bad pitch conditions at Widzew Stadium in Lodz.

"I regret that I could not score the third goal," said Nakata, who had been sidelined for 15 Italian league matches until last Saturday when he took part in Parma's 1-0 thrashing of Juventus. "I forgot about the bad pitch condition and failed to control the ball."

Japan will fight Costa Rica at home on April 17 in their next World Cup warm-up match.



HIDETOSHI NAKATA

The French on Cloud Nine



AFP, Paris

French sports daily L'Equipe was in no doubt Thursday in its match report on France's 5-0 win over Scotland headlining its front page "Dream team."

"The French team were absolutely superb in the first half as were all five goals by Zidane, Trezeguet (2), Henry and Marlet," it wrote.

Few would disagree as the world and European champions produced a display of football that few teams could have resisted, especially not an experimental and shell-shocked Scottish squad in front of a sellout crowd at the Stade de France.

Zinedine Zidane in particular was outstanding, scoring the opener after 12 minutes with a crashing volley from 30 metres and dominating the midfield until he was substituted with nine minutes to go.

But what was remarkable about the French was how they have

managed to keep together the nucleus of the 1998 World Cup-winning side and how comfortable they look playing with each other.

Fabien Barthez, despite a shaky moment early on when he let a ball roll under his foot, reigns supreme in goal with captain Marcel Desailly, Frank Leboeuf and Bixente Lizarazu in front of him.

Ball-winning Emmanuel Petit and the powerful Patrick Vieira are the perfect midfield foils for the silky skills of Zidane while David Trezeguet, Thierry Henry and Sylvain Wiltord, youngsters four years ago, are now in their prime and constitute a strike-force to be reckoned with.

"Four shots and four goals in the first half - that's exceptional, that's talent," said the normally downbeat French coach Roger Lemerre.

His Scottish counterpart Berti Vogts, in charge for the first time, could not disagree.

"In the first half maybe I was watching the new world champions," the man who led Germany to the 1996 European crown said.

"The pressure was too much for my young team."

Zidane, the two-goal hero of the 1998 World Cup final against Brazil said that rarely had the French put it all together like they did against Scotland.

"We played a tremendous first 45 minutes, scored great goals. It was perhaps one of the finest performances we have produced," he said.

But amid all the back-slapping and celebrations, there was one discordant note as once again the Stade de France crowd booed and hissed versatile defender Christian Karembeu every time he touched the ball after coming on as a substitute in the second half.

Karembeu, who now plays in Greece after spells in Spain and England, has been singled out for harsh treatment from the fans in the past, although just why remains something of a mystery.

Coach Lemerre and some of the French players were reportedly furious, and Karembeu said he was flummoxed by it.

Celtic's gesture for Sept. 11 victims

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Glasgow soccer giants Celtic are in talks over plans to take part in a fund-raising match in New York for victims of the September 11 terror attacks, a newspaper here reported

Friday.

The Scottish champions said they wanted to take on another high-profile team, possibly Italian side AC Milan, at the world-famous 80,000-seater Giants Stadium, The Daily Record said.

Discussions over the glamour tie are at a crucial stage though nothing has been finalised, the tabloid added.