

Serie A preview

Time running out for Juve



REUTERS, Milan

Italy's three-way race for the title enters the decisive phase on Sunday with Juventus knowing this could be their last chance to make up ground on leaders Inter and second-placed AS Roma.

With three games remaining Inter lead on 65 points, two more than second-placed Roma and three ahead of Juventus.

But Hector Cuper's Inter, searching for their first Serie A title since 1989, face a tough test away to fourth-placed Chievo Verona, who are fighting to hold on to a Champions League qualification spot.

Roma face one of Chievo's challengers for that lucrative place in Europe's elite competition when they travel to the San Siro stadium to face AC Milan.

On paper Juventus have the much easier job of taking three points from a trip to Piacenza in a fixture they have never lost.

Juve have Pavel Nedved back from suspension and the Czech international believes the Turin team are hitting their peak at just the right time.

"We are in form and at this moment that is what counts the most," he said. "We have a good chance. We need to focus hard on these three games. It isn't going to be easy against teams that are fighting against relegation."

Juve are without Gianluca Pessotto, who has been ruled out for six months with a knee injury, and Michele Parmatti will deputise on the left.

Inter's task at the Bentegodi stadium will be made even harder by the likely absence of striker Christian Vieri, who is suffering from a thigh strain.

Coach Cuper is likely to ask Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba to partner Brazilian Ronaldo in attack against a Chievo team who won the

season's previous meeting between the sides at the San Siro stadium in December.

Inter's Portuguese winger Sergio Conceicao said there will be no question of underestimating the Verona side.

"At the moment, an away game at Chievo is the most difficult game there is," Conceicao said. "They are playing for fourth place. We will need to be totally focused and go out there with the right attitude."

Roma coach Fabio Capello enjoyed some of his greatest success at the San Siro during his time as AC Milan coach and his hopes of making a winning return have been boosted by the recovery of Francesco Totti.

The playmaker has missed Roma's last two games as well as Italy's friendly against Uruguay on Wednesday and he is likely to be given an attacking role alongside Vincenzo Montella.

But Capello will be without Argentine Gabriel Batistuta, who is still recovering from a head injury sustained in last week's win over Parma, while Marco Delvecchio is also doubtful with a thigh injury.

Roma have a poor record at Milan, where they have not won since 1987 but defender Christian Panucci, who played for both AC Milan and Inter, believes they can finally end that run.

"I don't know why Roma can't win at the San Siro but we want to end that run on Sunday," Panucci said. "With the league table the way it is, we have no choice but to go there for a win and to attack right from the outset."

SUNDAY'S OTHER MATCHES (KICK OFF 13:00 GMT, Serie A position in brackets)

BRESCIA (14) v FIORENTINA (17)

Brescia's Roberto Baggio could make his return after a rapid recovery from his knee operation. Coach Carlo Mazzone is likely to offer him a place on the bench against the club

where he made his name. Fiorentina are already relegated and, with Portugal's Nuno Gomes injured, Yugoslav Pedrag Mijatovic is set for a rare start.

LAZIO (7) v VERONA (12)

Lazio are back in the race for the fourth Champions League spot after one defeat in eight games. They could have Argentine striker Hernan Crespo back from injury although he is likely to start on the bench.

Verona still have some work to do to be safe from relegation and they will travel to Rome without striker Adrian Mutu and defender Marco Zanchi, who are both suspended.

PARMA (13) v ATALANTA (9)

Parma are close to full strength for a game they must win if they are to avoid a late relegation dogfight. Atalanta have only won once at Parma - in Serie B back in 1975.

PERUGIA (10) v BOLOGNA (5)

Bologna's hopes of a first Champions League spot have diminished with just one point from their last three games but, with tough games for rivals Chievo and Milan, they will look to gain ground with a win against Perugia who still need to secure their Serie A status for next season.

TORINO (8) v LECCE (16)

Lecce need a win to keep alive any hopes of survival. Defeat sends them down to Serie B.

Torino's Antonino Asta returns to the right flank as they seek a place in the UEFA Cup.

UDINESE (15) v VENEZIA (18)

Udinese may be regretting sacking English coach Roy Hodgson when they were in mid-table and this game against relegated Venezia is now a must-win encounter. But Udinese striker Roberto Muzzi is suspended and Danish midfielder Martin Jorgensen is injured.

Brazil on track



AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil showed progress in their 1-1 draw with Portugal but still need to improve, especially in defence with six weeks to go before the World Cup finals, the Brazilian press said on Thursday.

The match in Lisbon on Wednesday saw the first appearance in the same team of former world footballer of the year Ronaldo, midfielder maestro Rivaldo and 22-year-old midfielder Ronaldinho, the so-called 'Triple R' formation.

Sports daily Lance! said: "Ronaldo returned to play well in the Brazil shirt but Ronaldinho was the best player on the field, although Rivaldo, once again, continues to perform well for the national team."

The newspaper said the match was entertaining and while victory would have been preferable, Brazil "played with personality, created more goal-scoring chances than Portugal and in general showed signs of progress."

Ronaldo looked back to fitness in his second international match since recovering from a series of potentially career-ending injuries although the Inter Milan forward only played the first half as arranged.

Sergio Conceicao put Portugal ahead with half an hour to go but Paris Saint Germain midfielder Ronaldinho replied from the penalty

spot in the 73rd minute to ensure Luiz Felipe Scolari's men did not come away empty-handed.

The newspapers agreed that while the team had improved since the four-time World Cup winners struggled to even qualify for this year's finals in South Korea and Japan, much work still needed to be done.

"The Extra daily noticed 'a gentle progression' but expressed concerns over defensive frailties.

"Brazil have improved, they played a good first half ... There is light at the end of the tunnel, but the defence again failed at times, especially losing out in the air."

O Estado de Sao Paulo concluded that Brazil can now dream of lifting a fifth World Cup after making steady improvement but also criticised the defence, especially AC Milan player Roque Junior.

"The defence made the most mistakes. It was clear that Roque Junior cannot, and should not be asked to, mark any attacker individually.

"Lucio is growing but has a tendency to over-embellish his game."

But the paper conceded that "Brazil had a good performance, with a good show from both Ronaldos."

And the Folha de Sao Paulo raised concerns that Portugal were the only heavyweight opponents Brazil would face in their run-up to the finals.

Argentine media pumped up



AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina showed they are heading for a successful World Cup finals after their impressive 1-0 win over Germany, the Argentinian press said on Thursday.

In a crisis-wracked nation where the fine form of the national team is providing a rare bright spot, the newspapers said Marcelo Bielsa's squad had looked good in Wednesday's match just six weeks away from the start of the finals.

The Cronica daily newspaper said "the sky blue and whites will have an ideal opportunity to win their third World Cup title" in Japan and South Korea.

Cronica said Bielsa's team had played well in Stuttgart "although

they still needs several of their stars" who were missing through injury on Wednesday, including first-choice striker Gabriel Batistuta, Hernan Crespo, Juan Sebastian Veron and veteran striker Claudio Caniggia.

Argentina, who face England, Sweden and Nigeria in a tough first-phase Group F at the finals, had "justified their position as favourites for the World Cup" with their performance in the bad-tempered match, La Nacion said.

The paper agreed that the scorer of the only goal, long-haired defender Juan Pablo Sorin, was the man of the match but condemned the rough tactics used by some German players to stop the South Americans.

"But when (Jens) Jeremies almost broke (Pablo) Aimar in half, German coach Rudi Voller apologised to Bielsa. It was a good gesture."

Paraguay laments hammering



AFP, Asuncion

Paraguay's 4-0 defeat to England in their World Cup warm-up match left the country's press in no doubt Thursday about which superlatives to use to describe the rout.

England's Michael Owen crowned his first game as captain by heading home the opener, while Liverpool teammate Danny Murphy and Darius Vassell of Aston Villa put England on their way to an easy win.

A late own goal from Celso Ayala rounded off a comfortable victory for the home side on Wednesday which the press did only too well to highlight.

"Catastrophe" screamed the headline from one daily while others described the result as "alarming" and a "nightmare".

The newspaper La Nacion preferred a lighter-hearted approach to getting their point across about the shocking defeat at Liverpool's Anfield Road stadium.

"The red-and-white (Paraguay) dress up as the Fab Four," said one sub-heading in the paper in reference to The Beatles, who came from Liverpool.

Wiltord out for three weeks

AFP, London

Arsenal striker Sylvain Wiltord has suffered a slight strain on his left thigh and could be ruled out for the Gunners' Premiership title run-in, manager Arsene Wenger said Friday.

"Sylvain Wiltord is out for about three weeks, in fact it might be difficult for him to play again this season," Wenger told the club's official website.

However, Wenger admitted there was some hope that France international Wiltord could make a swift recovery.

"You never know, he is a quick healer and he might recover." Arsenal are hoping for a domestic double this season. They currently lead the Premiership with five games left and have reached the FA Cup final in Cardiff where they will meet Chelsea on May 4.

Premiership preview

Chelsea challenge for MU



AFP, London

Reigning champions Manchester United face a tricky match away to Chelsea on Saturday in a game Alex Ferguson's side must win if their hopes of a third consecutive title defence are to be kept alive.

United, who have won the English Premiership title three years in a row since 1999, are currently third with four games left to play, two points behind title favourites Arsenal who have a game in hand.

Arsene Wenger's men are unlikely to slip up at home to relegation candidates Ipswich on Sunday but Ferguson will be doing all he can to maintain the pressure despite a string of injuries.

England captain David Beckham (foot) and Ireland skipper Roy Keane (hamstring), among other key players, have both been ruled out for the match.

But at least Ferguson can take solace from the fact that Wednesday's international friendlies did not heap further woe on a United side also preparing for a Champions League semi-final at home to German league leaders Bayer Leverkusen on Wednesday.

England quartet Nicky Butt, Paul Scholes, and brothers Gary and Phil Neville were all uncscathed after Sven Goran Eriksson's side beat Paraguay 4-0 at Anfield.

Meanwhile United's flamboyant French international goalkeeper

Fabien Barthez was reportedly suffering from a minor knee injury after the goalless draw with Russia.

He could miss Saturday's match which would mean a start for Northern Ireland "keeper Roy Carroll, whose confidence may not be sky high after being on the wrong end of a 5-0 thrashing by Spain.

Up front Ferguson has less to worry about, with the players' player of the year Ruud van Nistelrooy preparing to up his sensational

FIXTURES (All 1400GMT unless stated) Saturday: Bolton v Tottenham, Chelsea v Manchester United (1100GMT), Leeds v Fulham, Leicester v Aston Villa, Liverpool v Derby, Middlesbrough v Blackburn, Newcastle v Charlton, Southampton v Everton (1615GMT), West Ham v Sunderland Sunday: Arsenal v Ipswich (1500GMT)

goals tally for the season to 34.

But while van Nistelrooy has taken most of the official plaudits, it is fellow forward Ole Gunnar Solskjaer who has lately been catching the eye of United great Bobby Charlton.

"I think he's one of the best finishers I've ever seen. I've got to be honest, in the box I don't think I've seen anyone better," said Charlton referring to the Norwegian "supersub".

"He's phenomenal and he has very little backlift, right foot or left

foot, and I think that's why he scores so many goals.

"He's actually done it before the goalkeeper or defender can read what he's going to do," the England 1966 World Cup-winner added.

Chelsea, who sit fifth in the table on 61 points and three behind Newcastle, will hope to have France duo Marcel Desailly and Emmanuel Petit back in their line-up as they continue their push for a Champions League place.

Double chasers Arsenal's game against Ipswich appears a foregone conclusion but George Burley's men, who were wrapping up a UEFA Cup place at this time last season, are now third from bottom and fighting for Premiership survival.

Liverpool, who only have the league to concentrate on now after their exit from the Champions League, welcome second-from-bottom Derby in a match where the visitors must take something if they are to maintain their Premiership status.

Earlier in the week Liverpool striker Michael Owen celebrated his elevation to England captain, in the absence of injured David Beckham, by scoring in front of his adoring Anfield fans.

And despite 2002 being a World Cup year, Owen insisted the race for the league title was still vital.

"We've got a lot of club stuff to do before the World Cup and that's very important for everyone," the forward said.

"I don't think all eyes are on the World Cup just yet."

Bundesliga preview

Champagne on ice for Bayer



AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen, Europe's revelation of the season and still on for a historic triple, could win their first ever German league title this weekend.

Leverkusen will now be hoping arch rivals and once mighty neighbours Cologne, whom they have overshadowed in recent seasons, will earn at least a point at Borussia Dortmund on Saturday to help their cause.

In that case, Leverkusen would win their first German league title since the club was founded in 1904, with two matches remaining should they win at home to Werder Bremen on Saturday.

Leverkusen, coached by Klaus Toppmoller, are also in the Champions League semi-finals and German Cup final against Schalke 04, meaning they are on course for an unprecedented triple.

Leverkusen, who are sponsored by the large pharmaceutical group Bayer which dominates the city, have 66 points, five points ahead of second-placed Dortmund, and seven points in front of third-placed and reigning champions Bayern Munich.

In the continent's most prestigious and money-spinning event, the Champions League, Leverkusen face Manchester United with the first leg at Old Trafford on April 24 and the second match six days later at their BayArena stadium.

Meanwhile Leverkusen's general manager Reiner Calmund has insisted Brazilian international defender Lucio will be staying for next season although there has

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

been enormous interest from many top clubs.

"We have spoken and the matter is closed," Calmund told German football weekly Kicker. "Lucio will stay with us next season."

According to Italian newspaper Tuttosport, Euro giants Real Madrid, AS Roma, Juventus, Barcelona and

AC Milan are interested in signing the 23-year-old.

"I know Bayer will not release me," Lucio said. "It's one of my dreams to play in Italy."

Only on Tuesday, Spanish newspaper Marca had also quoted Lucio as saying: "I want to play for Real Madrid. Madrid is a great club. If I had my way I would play for Real."

Bayern Munich, who at one point looked good for their fourth consecutive and 18th title in all, are only chasing third spot in Germany and the last Champions League berth having been eliminated from the domestic cup and Champions League.

With Leverkusen and 1997 Champions League winners Dortmund looking virtually certain to claim their Champions League berths, Munich are battling with Hertha Berlin and Schalke 04, a point behind in fourth and fifth places, for the final spot.

Munich meet Hertha Berlin at their Olympic stadium in Bavaria on Saturday meaning in effect it is a six-pointer and will have the accountants of both teams in nervous mood on Saturday, knowing a victory would have a big impact on entry to the lucrative 2002/03 Champions League.

Primera Liga preview

Valencia's crunch time



AFP, Madrid

Only four of the present Valencia squad were born when the club last lifted the Spanish league title in 1971 and the only Spaniard among that quartet, national team goalkeeper Santiago Canizares, was only a few months old and too young to remember the celebrations.

"But I've let them know what it's like to be champions in a Valencia jersey and I have the feeling that next month they are going to find out for themselves," former Spanish international midfielder Pepe Claramunt said confidently on Thursday.

"The current squad is very compact, not dissimilar to the type of team we were," he added about the league leaders.

However, if Valencia are to lift only their fifth league title in their 83-year history then victory at home on Sunday against fellow contenders Deportivo La Coruna is essential.

Valencia top the Spanish First Division on 63 points from 34 games with four games to go, but Real Madrid a close second only one point behind while Deportivo are third with 61 points.

"There is no doubt this game is one that will have a profound effect on whether we win the championship," commented the current Valencia striker Juan Sanchez on Thursday.

Both sides will go into Sunday's match missing key marksmen.

Deportivo's Diego Tristan is out for at least two weeks after the Primera Liga's top scorer suffered a tear in his left hamstring while training with the Spanish national side on Tuesday.

Dutch international Roy Makaay

will revert back to his habitual position as a striker, after playing behind Tristan in Sunday's 3-1 win over Espanyol in which he scored twice, which will open up a space in the midfield that is likely to be filled by mercurial Brazilian playmaker Djalmirna.

The Galicians could also be without their captain Mauro Silva after his expulsion against Espanyol, although Deportivo are making last minute appeals to the Spanish football federation for clemency, and Aldo Duscher could take his place if the Brazilian 1994

door for either Sanchez or Salva Ballesta to return to the starting line up.

Real Madrid will be hoping both sides cancel each other out with a draw, which would allow the defending champions to go top again if they beat bottom club Tenerife in the Santiago Bernabeu on Saturday.

They have yet to lose a league match at home this season and, still smarting from Sunday's surprise 3-1 defeat at Osasuna, the odds are on Real making life miserable for the Canary islanders.

However, Tenerife coach Javier Clemente is prepared to play a spoiling game.

"To try and take on Real head-to-head would be suicide. We don't have their technical ability or their speed but we can make life hard for them in various ways, although to get a victory in the Bernabeu means my players will have to have their best game of the year," commented the former Spanish national coach.

Real will be without suspended Spanish international Ivan Helguera with Aitor Karanka expected to be recalled into the back four.

Barcelona still have a mathematical chance of lifting the league title but, lying in fourth place and six points adrift of Valencia, their focus is on Tuesday's European Champions League semi-final first leg against rivals Real, rather than Saturday's visit to Celta Vigo.

The Catalans' coach Carlos Rexach breathed a sigh of relief that, after all his injury problems this season, Rivaldo came through unscathed after playing nearly an hour for Brazil in their 1-1 draw with Portugal on Wednesday after the former World Player of the Year missed last weekend's 3-2 victory over Alaves.

FIXTURES Saturday (Kick off 1600GMT unless stated): Celta Vigo v Barcelona (1845), Real Madrid v Tenerife (1930), Las Palmas v Rayo Vallecano (2000) Sunday: Espanyol v Villarreal, Malaga v Real Mallorca, Athletic Bilbao v Sevilla, Alaves v Real Zaragoza, Real Betis v Real Sociedad, Valladolid v Osasuna, Valencia v Deportivo La Coruna (1800)

World Cup winner is ruled out.

Duscher admitted on Thursday that he suffered from being the centre of attention following his tackle in the Champions League on Manchester United's David Beckham, which left the England captain with a broken foot.

"I just had to close my ears to all the noise that was being made and concentrate on playing. The worst has now passed so I'm just getting on with my work," said the Argentine midfielder on Thursday.

Valencia will be without Duscher's compatriot Pablo Aimar, after he twisted an ankle in Argentina's 1-0 victory over Germany on Wednesday, which could open the

Houllier feels blessed



AFP, London

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier believes he is "a lucky man" to be alive after surviving life-saving heart surgery six months ago.

The Frenchman, now back in full control at Anfield, is hoping his luck holds in the Premiership run-in as Liverpool bid for their first title in 12 years.

Liverpool will be aiming for a 10th win in their last 11 Premiership games when they face Derby at home on Saturday to keep the pressure on title rivals Arsenal and Manchester United.

But 54-year-old Houllier said in a BBC interview that he was just lucky to be able to experience the closest title climax in years as he revealed the circumstances surrounding his survival on the day he was taken ill

at half-time against Leeds in October.

He admits the timing of the chest pains, at half-time rather than the end of the match when the roads around Anfield would have been clogged with traffic, contributed to the luck that saved his life.

He said: "Because it happened at half-time I was able to get away more easily to hospital because the crowds were still inside the ground. At the final whistle I might have needed a helicopter.

"Also I might have just gone home and gone to sleep thinking I was just feeling tired. We were due out on a long flight to Kiev the following day. So yes, there are several reasons why I feel lucky."

He said: "Yes, I do feel lucky and there are several reasons for that. Firstly it happened in Liverpool and the city has a very good cardiothoracic centre - and also one of the best heart surgeons in the country was not on his holidays!"

Houllier, who has lost weight and looks sprightlier since returning from his convalescence, dismissed any suggestions that he might step down from management to avoid any further damage to his health.

He said: "My passion and desire for the job is still as strong as ever, and from a personal point of view I'm not going to step out now.

"It never occurred to me that I would not be back once I knew I would be fine. Once I knew that, I knew I would be back in business. "I knew it would take time, and in fairness I thought I would be back earlier than I was."

Liverpool manager David O'Leary had advised Houllier to walk away from the game to preserve his health.

But he said: "I hope the people who said I should retire from football were saying that because they cared about my health."

Ruffinen on the attack



AFP, Geneva

FIFA secretary-general Michel Zen-Ruffinen lashed out at the running of world football's governing body under president Sepp Blatter on Thursday, charging that internal financial procedures were broken.

In the latest salvo in the battle to run world football as Blatter prepares to face a challenge to his re-election from African football chief Issa Hayatou, Zen-Ruffinen told Swiss newspaper Le Temps that he had noticed several instances where standard financial checks by his office were bypassed, against internal rules.

The lawyer and former referee, who ensures the day-to-day management of FIFA and the competitions it organises, also said he thought Blatter suspended a special internal inquiry into FIFA finances last week because the FIFA boss feared Zen-Ruffinen would have given evidence to the panel led by vice-president David Will.

Blatter called off the audit last Thursday only minutes before FIFA's financial director Urs Linzi was to be quizzed by three members of the committee and independent experts.

Zen-Ruffinen told the newspaper: "I think these manoeuvres also aimed to stop me from being a witness, because I could reveal some sensitive items."

He confirmed later on Thursday that he has begun legal proceedings against the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) for defamation of character.

CONCACAF had alleged on its website that Zen-Ruffinen had asked CONCACAF President Jack Warner and General Secretary

finances," he added. Zen-Ruffinen told the newspaper he had told Blatter and written to him several times about the problem, but had little response.

Blatter insists that FIFA is sound and accused his critics of trying to wreck his re-election hopes.

Zen-Ruffinen said that during his 16 years at FIFA he had got on well with Blatter -- who used to be secretary-general -- but the climate deteriorated after Blatter became FIFA president in 1998.

"For the past four years I have been rigorous in managing my work."

"Whatever happens from now on, I refuse to be swept away by a

potential scandal which I had nothing to do with," he said.

Meanwhile, Hayatou said he launched his campaign in Paris that he would be happy to work with Zen-Ruffinen if he were elected.

"If I'm elected head of FIFA, I will work with Zen-Ruffinen, there's no reason why I wouldn't," said Hayatou, the president of the African Football Confederation (CAF).

"His competence has made him the current secretary-general and that hasn't happened by chance," he added.