

Serie A preview Baggio haunts Juve

Football

AFP, Milan

Italy's favourite footballer Roberto Baggio again finds himself at the centre of attention Sunday as he and his Brescia team-mates stand in the way of title hopefuls Juventus in the penultimate round of games.

Juventus host Brescia in Turin only one point behind leaders Inter Milan who meet Piacenza at the San Siro while third-placed AS Roma, a further point back, face a tough home encounter with fourth-placed Chievo.

But while relegation candidates Brescia have naturally been overshadowed by the three-way fight for the Scudetto, there is no doubt that 35-year-old Baggio is Italy's most talked-about footballer.

Having defied doctors by returning to score twice against Fiorentina last week as a substitute the 35-year-old now bids to thwart the title ambitions of his former club for a second consecutive year.

Last year his equaliser at the Delle Alpi helped ensure safety for Brescia and inflicted a near-fatal wound to Juve who eventually lost out to Roma.

This year it's personal. Marcello Lippi, who has since replaced Carlo Ancelotti as Juve coach, is no friend of Baggio who has claimed Lippi drove him out of Turin in his first spell in charge.

Should Baggio strike again it would increase the pressure on Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni who has been inundated by appeals to reconsider his decision not to pick the player for the World Cup.

Juventus will also tremble under another name on the Brescia team-sheet is announced. Unheralded defender Alessandro Calori scored the goal on the last day of the 1999-2000 season that gave Perugia a 1-0 victory over Juve, allowing Lazio to

steal the Scudetto.

Inter coach Hector Cuper, meanwhile, has both a dream scenario and nightmare scenario for Sunday's home battle with Piacenza.

The dream is a long shot: Inter win the title with a week to spare as Juve lose and Roma fail to win. The nightmare would see Inter concede top spot going into the final game.

Last week Inter were within two minutes of going four points clear with two matches to play but first Juve's Pavel Nedved scored at Piacenza and then Chievo's Federico Cossato equalised to hold Inter to a 2-2 draw.

Now only a single point separates Inter and Juve as Argentinian Cuper strives to lose his reputation as perennial runner-up - he has lost two Champions League Finals with Valencia and one Cup Winners Cup Final with Real Mallorca.

"We have to learn how to better

FIXTURES

Sunday (1300 GMT): Atalanta v Perugia, Bologna v Lazio, Fiorentina v Parma, Inter Milan v Piacenza, Juventus v Brescia, Lecce v Udinese, AS Roma v Chievo, Venezia v Torino, Verona v AC Milan

organize our play and spread it out over 90 minutes, and keep our concentration from beginning to end" said Inter's Argentine captain, Javier Zanetti.

If Inter doesn't pull it all together in this 33rd and penultimate week of the Italian league season, the title race could go down to *Serie A's* final day on May 5.

"We must win these two games and we're in position to do it," said Inter's veteran midfielder Luigi Di Biagio. "I'm already anticipating a celebration."

If Inter was completely healthy, the title winner might have been certain by now. But with the status of

star strikers Christian Vieri and Ronaldo in the air for Sunday, it's not a sure thing.

The Italian national team forward sat out last week's match with a sore leg and the multit talented Brazilian pulled a thigh muscle against Chievo. However, both practised on Thursday and looked in good shape.

Ronaldo admitted that he was still not 100 percent and a bit jaded as he had to play a number of games within a short period but added that it was time for him to forget about physical problems

"Twenty long and difficult days. Quite a few matches, Feyenoord, 90 minutes against Brescia, national team and Chievo. Fortunately this week we were able to recuperate properly. I still do not have 90 minutes in my legs, but it is the moment to exceed our limits. Against Brescia I suffered from cramps in the second half. However physically I feel great and it is time go over our limits."

Roma tackle a Chievo side determined to hang on to fourth spot and secure a Champions League place.

The champions are stricken by defensive injuries that leave Christian Panucci, Frenchman Jonathan Zebina and Brazilian Antonio Zago all unlikely to play.

Fiorentina, already relegated, host a Parma side determined not to join them while the same situation applies at Lecce where the already-doomed local favourites host a Udinese side striving not to fill the last of four relegation spots.

At Venice another already-banished club Venezia host Torino.

Bologna and Lazio meet head on in a battle between two of the three clubs still hoping to deny Chievo a place in the Champions League.

AC Milan, the third of that trio, visit Verona who are not yet safe while Atalanta host Perugia in a battle between two teams in a match with no relegation interest.

Shearer tips Brazil



AFP, London

Newcastle veteran and former England striker Alan Shearer on Thursday issued Sven-Goran Eriksson's squad with a reality check prior to next month's World Cup finals.

Shearer, who scored his 200th Premiership goal last week as the Magpies secured a Champions League spot for next season, believes a number of factors will combine will leave England short of their goal to win the World Cup.

Apart from England having to contend a tough group which includes Argentina, Sweden and Nigeria, Shearer believes Eriksson's squad will prove too inexperienced, tired and unaccustomed to the conditions to succeed.

And while he is confident England has world-class, the 31-year-old striker ultimately believes that Brazil, and not reigning champions France or their co-favourites Argentina, will rise to the challenge in Japan and South Korea.

"It will be very tough for England at the World Cup," Shearer told Maxim magazine.

"I think a more realistic target will be to make a real impression at the European Championships in Portugal in 2004.

"But that doesn't mean to say

that England can't win it because on paper they have some truly world-class players like (Steven) Gerrard, (Michael) Owen, (David) Beckham and (Paul) Scholes.

"They are playing very well as a team and I think all the signs are very encouraging for England.

"But because of the climate and because of the age of the side it may come a little early for them."

Shearer also believes the demands of the Premiership, which finishes in just over two weeks time, will conspire to injure England's World Cup hopes.

"I don't think it will help, I really don't but that's been the case in England for years. You expect it and it isn't going to change," added Shearer, who scored 30 times in 63 England appearances.

"English football is very demanding both at international level and club level. You have to be able to deal with that."

And Shearer confessed: "You have to look at Brazil. I am not too sure about Argentina - I think England can do very well against them in the group.

"But I would have to stick with Brazil or France to win it.

"I would love it to be England, don't get me wrong. I will be sitting in my armchair watching the games and I will be as rooted to the spot as everyone else."

England kick off their campaign against the Swedes on June 2.

Finals to be Maldini's last



AFP, Milan

Veteran Italian international defender Paolo Maldini confirmed Thursday he will quit the 'Azzurri' after the 2002 World Cup.

Maldini, who turns 34 during the World Cup, is Italy's record caps holder but he confirmed that although he has two years left on his contract with club side AC Milan he would not be tempted by the prospect of competing in Euro 2004 in Portugal.

The veteran of three World Cups, who made his Italy debut in 1988 against Yugoslavia as a 19-year-old, said: "With the World Cup I will end my career with the 'Azzurri'. For me it is the last time."

Maldini, who has won three European Cups, two Intercontinental Cups, six Scudetti and a host of lesser prizes with AC Milan, has never won a trophy with Italy but has twice gone agonisingly close.

In 1994 he was part of Arrigo Sacchi's team defeated on penalties in the 1994 World Cup Final with Brazil while in Euro 2000 - under Dino Zoff - he was part of the team denied Euro 2000 glory when France equalised in injury time before going on to win on a golden



PAOLO MALDINI

goal.

"We have gone close many times," said Maldini whose father Cesare coached Italy in 1998 and will lead Paraguay in the World Cup.

"This could be the right moment to win something with the national team.

"I will continue with AC Milan for the two remaining years of my contract and then I will decide what to do. I am thinking about it but one thing is for certain - I will not be a coach."

Maldini, who should return from injury against Venezia on Sunday, is a member of Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni's three-man defensive unit playing on the left alongside central defender Alessandro Nesta and right-sided Fabio Cannavaro.

Italian Cup

Juve draw first blood

Football

AFP, Turin

Uruguayan striker Marcelo Zalayeta was the inspiration Thursday as Juventus beat Parma 2-1 in an Italian Cup Final first leg match at the Stadio Delle Alpi.

Zalayeta won the early penalty from which strike partner Nicola Amoruso opened the scoring and then headed the second himself in the second half.

But in injury time Parma grabbed a precious goal that keeps the tie finely balanced for the second leg when their Japanese substitute Hidetoshi Nakata volleyed home.

Juve coach Marcello Lippi admitted: "Nakata gave us a bit of a shock but on the whole I thought the team did very well tonight."

Juventus struck the first blow

after only four minutes. Zalayeta was bundled over in the penalty area by Parma's French international Alain Boghossian and referee Pierluigi Collina pointed to the spot.

Amoruso beat Parma's Brazilian goalkeeper Claudio Taffarel from the spot and Juve led 1-0.

In the second half Parma's French midfielder Sabri Lamouchi fired narrowly wide from distance as the visitors started on a sprightly note.

But just as Parma looked to be getting back into the match it was Juve who struck to make it 2-0.

Paramatti overlapped on the left and bent in a cross which Zalayeta headed past Taffarel.

But in injury time Nakata struck. Marchionni crossed deep to the far post and Nakata volleyed home a fine shot inside Carini's near post.

The second leg at Parma's Stadio Ennio Tardini will be contested on May 11.

Golden goal to go next season

Football

AFP, Stockholm

Football's golden goal, which is used to decide matches in sudden death overtime in major competitions, will be pulled out of use in European club competition as of next season, according to UEFA's inaugural magazine.

The official magazine of European football's governing body,

Primera Liga preview

Wanted a real Real

Football

AFP, Madrid

On the Spanish football pools this weekend, most pundits are suggesting punters put a 'triple' for Saturday's match between Real Sociedad and their real counterparts Real Madrid.

In local betting language 'a triple' is when all options - a win either way or draw - are covered.

That sums up the unpredictability of the match, despite Madrid's outstanding 2-0 victory at bitter rivals Barcelona in their European Champions League semi-final first leg on Tuesday.

This season Madrid have a habit of climbing to the peak just before falling the furthest.

Overconfidence or fatigue? Nobody, not even Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque, has provided an adequate explanation but the record speaks for itself.

Real's 3-1 loss at struggling Osasuna came just four days after they had trounced German champions Bayern Munich 2-0 in the Champions League quarter-finals.

Perhaps their most comprehensive loss of the season, a 3-1 defeat at Real Betis in September, came only a few days after triumphing over Serie A champions Roma 2-1 in the Italian capital.

Del Bosque's task, with the Spanish First Division so finely poised, is to ensure that Real don't crash in similar fashion at Sociedad, who are still not out of relegation trouble despite a recent run of good form.

Valencia lead the league with 66 points from 35 games and just three games to go, while Real are one point adrift.

Deportivo La Coruna, who play Malaga on Sunday are third with 61 points but lost touch with the leading

pair when they went down 1-0 at Valencia on Sunday.

"Now we have to get our feet back on the ground as quickly as possible," said Del Bosque, in his usual pragmatic fashion.

"A good result against Real Sociedad is very important if we are to keep our hopes of winning the league.

"I started thinking about the game in San Sebastian almost as soon as the whistle went on Tuesday and only after we have played Sociedad will I turn my attention to the second leg against Barcelona," added Del Bosque.

However, Del Bosque will have to reshuffle his pack in San Sebastian as Fernando Hierro, Francisco Pavon and Jose Maria Gutierrez are all suspended.

Central defender Aitor Karanka is expected to replace Pavon while, in the absence of Guti and the injured

FIXTURES

Saturday (Kick off GMT): Barcelona v Villarreal (1900), Valencia v Espanyol (1930), Real Sociedad v Real Madrid (1930)

Sunday: Real Mallorca v Real Betis (1600), Osasuna v Las Palmas (1600), Rayo Vallecano v Athletic Bilbao (1600), Sevilla v Alaves (1600), Real Zaragoza v Celta Vigo (1600), Tenerife v Valladolid (1700), Deportivo La Coruna v Malaga (1800)

Fernando Morientes, Spanish international striker Pedro Munitis is likely to have a rare start.

Ivan Helguera could move back into the defence and fill the gap left by Hierro, with Flavio Conceicao coming into the midfield, however Hierro's third ban of the season raises the question about whether the Real captain has become more of a liability than an asset on the

Bundesliga preview

Leverkusen so close

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen need to translate their form on foreign fields to their clash with Nuremberg on Saturday as the league leaders seek to avoid choking in the *Bundesliga* title run-in.

Leverkusen put themselves in a fine position to reach the Champions League driving seat with a 2-2 draw against Manchester United in the semi-final first leg on Wednesday.

They looked a different team at Old Trafford from the outfit who lost 2-1 away to Werder Bremen last Saturday as their closest rivals Borussia Dortmund defeated Cologne 2-1 to close the gap to just two points with just two matches each remaining.

So as Leverkusen go in search of their first German title in their 98-year history, Klaus Toppmoller's side know that if they slip up at Nuremberg and Dortmund win at SV Hamburg, then Dortmund will move one point above them ahead of the final day of the season on May 4.

Leverkusen face Hertha Berlin in the final fixture, while Dortmund host Werder Bremen, who can justifiably claim to have upset all of the big boys this season.

To make matters worse for Leverkusen on Saturday, Nuremberg are fighting for survival in the *Bundesliga* - they are just one point ahead of the bottom three

clubs who will be relegated.

Bayern Munich meanwhile are experiencing a turbulent end of the season as they seek to hold on to third place to clinch a qualification spot for the Champions League to salvage their campaign.

If finishing without a trophy for the first time since 1995 was not bad enough, their veteran midfielder Stefan Effenberg has dragged the club into more trouble as his title-laden reign at the club comes to an end.

He caused uproar when he branded Germany's unemployed as 'lazy' in an interview in Playboy.

And he denied flatly reports on

FIXTURES

Saturday (1330 GMT): VfL Wolfsburg v Bayern Munich, 1860 Munich v VfB Stuttgart, Kaiserslautern v Energie Cottbus, Cologne v SC Freiburg, SV Hamburg v Borussia Dortmund, Werder Bremen v St. Pauli, Nuremberg v Bayer Leverkusen, Hertha Berlin v Schalke 04, Hansa Rostock v Borussia Monchengladbach

Thursday that he had signed for Manchester City.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said he would be leaving Effenberg on the sidelines for Saturday's trip to VfL Wolfsburg, just as he did for last week's 3-0 win over Hertha Berlin.

"We can expect a lot of reaction from the spectators and I wanted to avoid that," said Hitzfeld on Thursday.

He said he had yet to decide

field.

With 15 bookings to his name, Hierro ranks second on this season's Spanish First Division list of bad lads, only behind Alaves' Pablo Gomez.

There is no doubting his presence in the dressing room and his fans say that referees single out Hierro for special attention because of his reputation, but his detractors suggest his deficiencies has been responsible for a fair number of the 38 goals Real have conceded this season.

League leaders Valencia play host to Espanyol on Saturday, fully aware their visitor's away record is lamentable with them having won once outside of Barcelona all season.

However, the suspension of right back Curro Torres has meant striker Miguel Angel Angulo is expected to be an emergency replacement, leaving a space open for the recall of Salva Ballesta, the Spanish First Division's top scorer two seasons ago, for his first start in six games.

"Normally, the league is won by the best team, not the one that makes the fewest mistakes, but this year it could all come down to whose nerves are stronger," said Valencia coach Rafa Benitez this week.

Barcelona aim to bounce back, after their morale-crushing Champions League defeat, with a good showing against Villarreal on Saturday but, in addition to the injury-enforced absence of his former World Player of the Year Rivaldo, the Catalans' coach Carles Rexach has defensive worries.

Gabri is suspended and Dutch international Michael Reiziger highly doubtful, after suffering a pulled right hamstring against Real Madrid, while Carles Puyol is unlikely to be fit in time after his left hamstring strain in their 2-1 loss at Celta Vigo last Saturday.

Premiership preview

Wenger's fingers crossed

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger is refusing to take anything for granted as his side close in on their first Premiership title for four seasons.

The Gunners, who take on Bolton on Monday, gave themselves some breathing space at the top of the table after beating London rivals West Ham 2-0 on Wednesday and are now just two wins away from guaranteeing the championship.

With just three games left, they are now four points ahead of second-placed Liverpool and five ahead of Manchester United, who were held to a 2-2 draw in the first leg of their Champions League semi-final by Bayer Leverkusen the same night.

Even if their rivals both win on Saturday, victory for Arsenal at the Reebok on Monday would enable them to secure the title at Old Trafford on May 8, provided they beat reigning champions United.

So strong is their position that they could even lose to Alex Ferguson's side and still lift the trophy by defeating Everton at Highbury in the final game of the season.

Wenger has consistently expressed his belief in his team's ability to win the domestic double, with an FA Cup final to come against Chelsea as well.

However, he is only too aware that complacency could prove to be Arsenal's most difficult opponent.

"We are not taking anything for granted," he said.

"It's down to us to win at Bolton and then we'll see. It's nice to win

the title at any moment. The fans feel that the team want it so much and they got behind us brilliantly. We are in the final sprint now."

Wenger was particularly impressed with the way his players refused to panic on Wednesday even after being given a rough first-half ride by an in-form West Ham side.

Only an oversight by a linesman prevented Arsenal falling behind when Frederic Kanoute's 'goal' was ruled out just before the break even though the ball crossed the line

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Aston Villa v Southampton, Charlton v Sunderland, Derby v Leeds, Fulham v Leicester, Ipswich v Manchester United (1635 GMT), Middlesbrough v Chelsea, Newcastle v West Ham, Tottenham v Liverpool (1100 GMT)
Sunday: Everton v Blackburn (1500 GMT)
Monday: Bolton v Arsenal (1900 GMT)

before Ashley Cole cleared it.

Freddy Ljungberg eased mounting nerves with his 15th goal of the season when he converted Dennis Bergkamp's through-ball with 13 minutes left, and the Swede then crossed for Nwankwo Kanu to seal the victory soon afterwards.

Wenger was delighted with the way his players kept their nerve against a determined West Ham side.

"I'm proud of the boys as they dug deep again," he added. "There is a great resilience in the team and now it's even more in our hands."

Arsenal have now won 10 con-

Leonardo bids bye

Football

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's World Cup winning midfielder Leonardo announced his retirement from football on Thursday.

The 32-year-old, capped 56 times and a member of the 1994 World Cup winning squad though he was suspended for the final after fracturing American Tab Ramos' skull with his elbow, said he was going to concentrate on a TV commenting career and running the charity he set up with 1994 team-mate Rai.

"Football has been good to me," said Leonardo, who also played in the 1998 World Cup final defeat by France.

"Everything that I have got out of the sport has been delightful and

positive.

"I began my career at Flamengo, whom I had dreamt as a child of playing for, and it is there that I draw the curtain on it," he added.

Leonardo, who also won the 1997 Copa America with Brazil, denied the parlous state of Brazilian

football's finances had persuaded him to retire.

"I signed a contract with a Japanese TV station for the World Cup finals and I need to prepare myself for that," he said.

Leonardo, who played for several top European clubs winning the Italian title with AC Milan in 1999 and reaching the 1997 Cup Winners Cup final with French outfit PSG, revealed the importance of the World Cup had not really hit him until the 1994 renewal.

"I was born in 1969 so I was too young to appreciate the enormity of Brazil's win in 1970.

"I only realised what an enormous impact winning it had when we won in 1994," he said.

Leonardo added he would be devoting a lot of his time with Rai concentrating on their charity, the GoldeLetra Foundation, which raises funds for poor children in the areas of education, healthcare and sport.



LEONARDO