

Preview

Finally Serie A

Football

AFP, Rome

Title holders Juventus begin the defence of their title at home to Atalanta on Sunday as the Italian First Division championship finally gets under way after a two week delay.

The start was held up because eight of Serie A's smaller clubs had refused an offer from two pay-per-view television stations for the transmission rights to their matches during the season.

But following a meeting brokered by Italy's Minister of Cultural Resources and Affairs, it was agreed that the big six - Juventus, AC Milan, Inter Milan, AS Roma, Lazio and Parma - would make financial contributions to help out the rebels.

So after weeks of wrangling, the focus returns to football and who can wrestle the First Division title from reigning champions Juventus.

The 'Bianconeri' won the Scudetto on the final day of last season in a tight three-way race between themselves, Inter Milan and Roma.

Inter were in pole position going into the final round of matches but Juve snatched the title from their grasp with a 2-0 win at Udinese while Hector Cuper's men were losing at Lazio.

Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon is expecting another tough campaign with both Milan clubs

bringing in major reinforcements during the summer.

Milan splashed out for World Cup winner Rivaldo and stylish centre-back Alessandro Nesta while Inter brought in Argentine forward Hernan Crespo and pacy defender Fabio Cannavaro.

"AC Milan have the biggest budget, while Inter will show their jealous anger for losing the Scudetto last season," Buffon told Gazzetta dello Sport.

"But we have an advantage, we are a winning squad."

Team-mate Lilian Thuram, raring

club's official website, www.juventus.it. AC Milan begin their campaign away to Serie A newcomers Modena where Nesta is expected to make his league debut. Comparisons have been made between Nesta and former idol Franco Baresi who played at the San Siro for 20 seasons before retiring in 1997. But Milan's summer purchase feels he has a long way to go before he reaches the heights of the former Italy captain. "Milan have always had a great tradition of strong defences," he said. "Baresi was untouchable but I am a more discreet player."

Rivaldo should also start for Milan despite picking up an ankle injury in training this week. Roma, who are without injured captain Francesco Totti, face a tough test away to losing InterToto Cup finalists Bologna while Lazio host last season's surprise package Chievo.

Inter Milan's new forward Crespo is expected to line up alongside Christian Vieri in attack as last season's runners-up welcome Torino to the San Siro. And Argentina international Crespo believes the duo can forge a strong relationship, despite claims that they are too similar in style to gel as a strike force.

"Who says we cannot play together? Vieri and myself have different characteristics but we will do great things," he said.

Table with 2 columns: Fixture, Time. Rows: Saturday: Bologna v Roma, Como v Empoli (1600 GMT), Inter Milan v Torino, Modena v AC Milan (1830 GMT), Sunday: Brescia v Piacenza (1830 GMT), Juventus v Atalanta, Lazio v Chievo, Perugia v Reggina (1600 GMT), Udinese v Parma

to go after the fortnight's delay, is confident Juve can hold off their challengers once again despite a quiet summer in the transfer market. "We are finally starting the season so we're very happy," said the French international. "The championship? It's fantastic to have it but it's history now. "We have to think about new season and nothing else. The team is more or less the same as last year and this is positive. Don't forget we're the champions", he told the



RIVALDO

All eyes on Rivaldo

Football

AFP, Rome

Exit one Brazilian legend, enter another. Serie A may have lost Ronaldo to Spain but Italy now has Rivaldo.

The 1999 World Footballer of the Year parted company with Spanish giants Barcelona last month after falling out with new Barca coach Louis van Gaal and joined AC Milan on a free transfer.

He is reportedly being paid close to 5 million euros (5million dollars) a year plus bonuses for his services, but the 30-year-old refutes claims he has signed for the San Siro club just for the money.

And despite lifting the World Cup this summer the gifted South American has lost none of his hunger for medals.

"For me this is like starting from scratch again and I hope to win Lo Scudetto (the Italian title) in my first year," he said.

"I believe I can do well here in Italy just as I have done at all my other clubs.

"Even though I won the World Cup with Brazil I have lost none of my motivation. I would like to do great things with Milan.

"As a child I used to watch Zico and Falcao (playing in Italy) and dream of one day making my mark here. Now that dream has become

reality," he told Calcio Italia magazine.

Rivaldo is happy to be working under Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti who he nearly signed for when the former Italian international was in charge at Parma.

"Ancelotti has a very good reputation and before I arrived here everyone was very complimentary about him.

"In 1996 I was close to joining him at Parma before I signed for Deportivo La Coruna.

"Now I'm here and I'm impressed with what I've seen so far. The club structure is superb and the fans here are incredible."

After serving his apprenticeship at Paulista Recife, Rivaldo signed his first professional contract with FC Santa Cruz in 1991 before moving to Mogi-Mirim 12 months later.

In 1993 he joined Corinthians when he hit the headlines by scoring 11 times in just 19 starts.

A year after joining the Sao Paulo club he was on the move again, this time to local rivals Palmeiras where he won his first Brazilian championship.

Rivaldo took the well trodden path to Europe just after the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, joining La Coruna where he scored 21 goals in his first season.

In 1997 he was packing his bags and heading to Barcelona as a replacement for Ronaldo who had departed for Italy.

At the Nou Camp Rivaldo flourished into one of the best players in the world, as testified by the numerous awards he picked up.

In 1999 he won the coveted Ballon d'Or award and FIFA's World Footballer of the Year trophy.

Yet despite an abundance of talent, not everyone is a fan of the left-footed playmaker who was criticised by some for his performances for the national team during their scrappy 2002 World Cup qualifying campaign.

He was often accused of being selfish, preferring to go it alone rather than take the easy option.

But the Recife-born player takes criticism in his stride and believes some people will always find fault with his performances.

"There are some who would be ready to strike me down even if I scored 100 goals a season," he said.

"I have to put up with that - it's down to jealousy and nothing more."

He may have his flaws but on his day Rivaldo can turn a game with a moment of magic.

The Brazilian is capable of doing things with a ball that most players can only dream about, combining faultless touch with an outstanding reading of the game.

Rivaldo scores goals too and that's why he can light up Serie A this season and make Italy soon forget about Ronaldo.

Call for Van Gaal's head!

Football

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona's Dutch coach Louis van Gaal may have claimed his Catalan giants hadn't been humiliated by their 3-2 Cup defeat at the hands of Third Division tailenders Novelda but it was a view ridiculed by the Spanish press on Thursday.

Sports paper AS published a photograph of a policeman beside van Gaal in the dugout and titled 'He must be arrested' while labelling the Dutchman, whose return for a second spell to the club was not universally welcomed by the fans, 'dangerous, a liar and awful'.

Several commentators ridiculed van Gaal's belief that the 16-time Spanish champions had not been humiliated.

"Novelda, a club from the Third Division, is a giant of a team and Madrigal, the hat-trick hero, is just like Ronaldo," they commented drily.

Former coach and player Johann Cruyff also joined in the chorus of criticism.

"Such a defeat harms the image of the club and generates a negative impact," said Cruyff, who presided over four league titles

when he was in charge of the team in the early 1990s.

"Between last year and today there are few differences, and if you want to change something, it should be done", said Cruyff.

While van Gaal blamed the defeat on individual errors and the smallness of the pitch - which he compared to a tennis court - Dutch defender Frank de Boer tried to switch the focus away from his own poor performance onto debutant German keeper Michael Enke who he blamed for the loss.

However the Catalan press would have none of it with both Mundo Deportivo and Sport labelling the performance 'intolerable'.

"It is a torpedo into the good ship van Gaal," Sport opined. The Periodico de Barcelona wasted little time in saying the defeat added further ammunition to those who had not welcomed the return of van Gaal.

"With the most unbalanced team in its history, with no goalscorers and with players playing in positions they were not hired for, Barca looks to have begun on its road to Calvary."

"Their elimination from the Cup adds fuel to the fire of those who doubted the reliability of van Gaal's plans on his return to the club," it stormed.

Primera Liga preview

Real beware of Joaquim!

Football

AFP, Madrid

In one of the more bizarre spectacles of the past few months, Real Betis winger Joaquim Sanchez hypnotised a chicken live on Spanish television and the former farmer's boy will be looking to leave the Real Madrid defence similarly bewitched on Saturday.

Betis play host to the European champions looking to repeat the 3-1 victory in the corresponding fixture of 12 months ago, a game in which Joaquim scored and which was also notable for Zinedine Zidane getting his first goal for Madrid.

However, the odds on long-term success are stacked against the Seville club as they have only won one league title - back in 1935.

"Deportivo and Valencia have demonstrated over recent seasons that Real Madrid and Barcelona are not going to have things all their own way any more, and Betis are now ready to follow the same path," said Joaquim.

"There is no good reason why Betis cannot win the league. We have already shown what we are capable of by beating Deportivo 4-2 at their ground," added the 21-year-old, who has been dubbed 'The Spanish Luis Figo'.

Betis briefly topped the Spanish First Division early last season and later they put together a 14-game unbeaten run, but their inability to turn a draw into a victory cost them dearly down the home straight and they finished in sixth place.

This year Betis president Manuel Ruiz de Lopera has brought back Betis hero and former Spanish international striker Alfonso Perez, after a two year stint at Barcelona to add firepower.

Lopera also splashed out 10 million euros on the midfielder Marcos Assuncao and the Brazilian



JOAQUIM SANCHEZ

Table with 2 columns: Fixture, Time. Rows: Saturday (kick off in GMT unless stated): Malaga v Rayo Vallecano (1700), Osasuna v Deportivo La Coruna (1830), Real Betis v Real Madrid (1930), Athletic Bilbao v Barcelona (1930), Valencia v Recreativo Huelva (1930), Sunday: Espanyol v Real Sociedad (1600), Alaves v Racing Santander (1600), Celta Vigo v Real Mallorca (1700), Valladolid v Villarreal (1800), Atletico Madrid v Sevilla (1830)

already looks like good value-for-money after terrorising Deportivo two weeks ago.

Assuncao is certain to start on Saturday but his better-known compatriot Ronaldo will still be on Real Madrid's sidelines for a little longer as he recovers from a slight muscle strain.

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez was moved to say on Wednesday: "The dressing room has never been so united."

However, few believe him in the wake of the Brazilian's unsettling arrival two weeks ago, which means that someone will soon be probably losing their place in Real's starting line up.

Real's reserve strikers Tote

Lopez and Javier Portillo both responded to Ronaldo's challenging presence by scoring hat-tricks in Real's 8-1 thrashing of Third Division Sance in the Spanish Cup on Wednesday.

"I think I demonstrated that there are others of us who have some quality as well," said Tote, clearly laying down the gauntlet to Ronaldo.

Nevertheless, the disharmony seeping from the camp is mild compared to the internecine war that has engulfed Barcelona after their shock 3-2 Cup defeat by Third Division Novelda on Wednesday.

The Catalans' Dutch defender Frank de Boer publicly rounded on his team mates Robert Enke and Michael Reiziger, blaming them for their opponents' goals, and coach Louis van Gaal has the unenviable job of repairing relations before their tricky trip to Athletic Bilbao.

Barcelona were ragged at the back in their 2-2 draw with newly-promoted Atletico Madrid two weeks ago and although Athletic lost their opening fixture 4-2 at Real Sociedad two weekends ago, they are often a different proposition in their own San Mames stadium.

Deportivo - the 2000 champions and second for the last two years - go to Osasuna on Saturday and have fond memories of their 3-1 win in Pamplona last season.

Diego Tristan scored a hat-trick in that game and last season's top scorer in the Spanish First Division appears to be back to his best again despite a summer spent recuperating from injuries suffered during the World Cup.

However, Deportivo will be without their former Spanish international goal keeper Francisco Molina, who has tendon problems in his right knee. Juanmi Garcia will deputise and play his first league game for his new club after moving from relegated Real Zaragoza in the summer.

Premiership preview

MU in hostile territory

Football

AFP, London

Alex Ferguson is counting on a powderkeg atmosphere at Leeds on Saturday to inject some fire into Manchester United's faltering Premiership campaign.

With Rio Ferdinand making his first return to Elland Road since his 29-million-pound (46-million-dollar) summer move to Old Trafford, United are guaranteed a hostile reception for the midday clash.

But Ferguson believes that, far from being intimidated, his players will thrive on the atmosphere as they seek to bounce back from Wednesday's shock home defeat by Bolton.

"We have resilience and we'll show that," Ferguson said. "There will be a fantastic atmosphere at Leeds and that is the kind of atmosphere we'll respond to."

The Scot has dismissed suggestions that his squad is facing a crisis of confidence with Roy Keane, Paul Scholes and Gary Neville all out injured and Ruud van Nistelrooy struggling to regain last season's scoring form.

"There is no need to panic at this stage because the way the league is shaping up there are some surprising results," Ferguson said. "You are seeing a great deal of determination from everyone because nobody wants to go out of this division."

"You will see a different shape in the league in November."

The concern for United fans however is that the club's title cam-

paign could be over by then, unless there is a dramatic improvement in their form, particularly in front of goal.

In five Premiership games so far, United have managed only five goals - eight less than last year at the same stage and fewer than in any season since 1992.

Ferguson famously responded to that stuttering start by signing Eric Cantona from Leeds and United went on to claim the title.

Table with 2 columns: Fixture, Time. Rows: (All 1400 GMT kick-off unless stated) Saturday: Bolton v Liverpool, Charlton v Arsenal, Chelsea v Newcastle, Everton v Middlesbrough, Leeds v Man Utd (1100 GMT), Sunderland v Fulham, West Bromwich Albion v Southampton, Sunday: Man City v Blackburn (1300 GMT), Tottenham v West Ham (1505 GMT), Monday: Birmingham v Aston Villa (1900 GMT)

But the introduction of the new transfer window means he does not have that option this time around.

Ferdinand is resigned to a hostile reception from the Leeds fans, who are never backward when it comes to expressing their animosity towards former favourites.

Cantona was given a ferocious greeting when he first returned to Elland Road and former boss George Graham was pelted with coins when he went back with Tottenham.

"Obviously in an ideal world you

would like them to give you a good reception and hope they remember the good times we had together," the 23-year-old defender said earlier this week.

"But I am not naive enough to think that this is going to happen because I will be playing for Manchester United and I will be doing my utmost to make sure United get the result the players and our fans want."

Leeds are riding high after an impressive 2-0 win away at Newcastle in midweek and will fancy their chances of adding to the sense of crisis engulfing Ferguson's men.

Arsenal have a short trip to south London on a double mission to extend their lead at the top of the table and break a 66-year-old record. If they find the net at Charlton they will have scored in 45 consecutive games, beating the top flight record set by Manchester City.

The Gunners have not failed to score in any league match since their goalless draw with Newcastle on May 15 2000.

Coach Arsene Wenger must decide whether to play captain Patrick Vieira after the French midfielder's midweek revelation that he is feeling burnt out by too much football and in need of a break.

Liverpool are expected to be without defensive lynchpin Stephane Henchoz for their trip to Bolton.

The Swiss player went off at half-time against Birmingham on Wednesday with a calf strain and was sorely missed as the Reds allowed a two-goal lead to slip through their fingers.

League One preview

Nice the team to beat

Football

AFP, Paris

Little Nice travel to Guingamp in an attempt to hold on to their French League One lead on Saturday in a competition which has been littered with red cards.

The 35 red cards so far after six rounds of the championship include nine which overshadowed Wednesday's action.

Bernard Saules, president of the French national referees body UNAF, said: "I expected things to settle down a little bit after the first few matches. I'm surprised the dismissals have continued."

The 35 red cards beat the former record of 34 cards after six matches in the 1994/95 campaign and looks set to overhaul the 120 dished out at the end of that season.

Saules explained the changes in directives to referees in recent seasons have meant incidents which formerly did not merit a card now demand one.

He added: "Things have changed but it's the same for everyone."

Things reached a head in Lille's 2-1 victory over Paris Saint Germain on Wednesday when four players were sent off, three for the Parisians and one for the northerners.

The red cards mean PSG coach Luis Fernandez has a real headache for their home match against Strasbourg.

Francis Llacer, Alioune Toure, Lionel Potillon and Bartholomew Ogbeche were already out of the reckoning, but Mauricio Pochettino, Brazilian Aloisio and Frederic Dehu were added to his absentee list after being sent off.

PSG were due to train on Friday afternoon at the Parc des Princes in their last pre-match training session when Fernandez will have his final chance to consider his reduced selection options.

Nice, who celebrated their 2-0 victory over Marseille on Wednesday to stay in pole position,

travel to Guingamp without striker Christophe Meslin who is still short of fitness following a knee injury.

Nice coach Gernot Rohr is unlikely to make many changes, though he may tinker with the team a little in agreement with the players.

Auxerre, second in the table on goal difference, may be helped by the many injuries to their opponents for their trip to Sochaux.

Sochaux coach Guy Lacombe must do without striker Pierre-Alain Frau, Omar Daf and Michael Isabay, and both Teddy Richert and Sylvain Monsoreau are doubtful. All five got hurt in their match against Rennes on Wednesday.

Lyon's Swiss central defender Patrick Muller, who was suspended in their match against Lens on Tuesday, looks set to come back for their fixture at Nantes.

Lyon coach Paul Le Guen is expected to have a full squad at his disposal except for striker Frederic Nee who is not likely to be match fit for several weeks.

Monaco will be without Jose Pierre-Fanfan for their match at Sedan after he was sent off against Nantes though Eric Cubilier, Shabani Nonda, Pontus Farnrud and Gael Givet are back from suspension.

Marseille skipper Frank Leboeuf is back from suspension for their glamour fixture at home to Bordeaux though Abdoulaye Meite sits out after being sent off against Nice.

Marseille boss Alain Perrin had a long talk with the players after Thursday training in a probable attempt to jolt them into action after their mediocre display in the 2-0 loss to Nice.

Table with 2 columns: Fixture, Time. Rows: Saturday: Marseille v Bordeaux, Guingamp v Nice, Lens v Rennes, Montpellier v Lille, Nantes v Lyon, Paris Saint Germain v Strasbourg, Sedan v Monaco, Sochaux v Auxerre, Troyes v Le Havre, Sunday: Bastia v Ajaccio

Zola reborn

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Chelsea's Italian striker Gianfranco Zola, who has resurrected his career with four goals in five games this season, says he considered quitting the game last season.

Zola, in his sixth season in England, found it hard to make the starting line-up at Stamford Bridge last term as Chelsea boss Claudio Ranieri opted for the prolific pairing of Dutchman Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink and Iceland's Eidur Gudjohnsen up front.

"Last year I had to operate as a reserve again and only started 19 out of 35 games," Zola said in an interview with the daily Gazzetta dello Sport published on Friday.

"It was always Hasselbaink and Gudjohnsen...I have to admit I thought about quitting..."

"However I didn't want to end things with a season like that -- one which was certainly not the peak of my time in England."

"I told myself that the only way to get back as a regular starter was to show the coach that I was at the top and I have never given up," added the 36-year-old.

The former Napoli and Parma striker said his excellent start to this season was largely due to improved fitness, having trained alone while the rest of the Chelsea team were on holiday during the close-season.



GIANFRANCO ZOLA

has continued. I hope it carries on. "I did two to three hours a day of individual training throughout the holidays...it was a new programme for me and it has given me excellent results."

"Obviously at my age I don't need to wear myself out -- it is quality work which is very useful," said Zola, who added that he continues to put in extra training sessions on his own.

"Chelsea train two hours a day, I put in another two hours for myself," said the Sardinian.

Zola is not the only Italian to have made a positive start to the premier league campaign.

Massimo Maccarone, who joined Middlesbrough from Empoli in the close-season has already claimed three goals in his first spell in England and Zola said he is hoping for a long battle at the top end of the scoring charts with his compatriot.

No hard feelings!

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand is ready to end his bitter feud with Leeds chairman Peter Ridsdale with a handshake.

Ridsdale was left fuming when Ferdinand decided to leave the club after the World Cup and has been sniping at the England defender ever since.

Last week he claimed that Leeds had been happy to pocket the 29.1 million pounds (46-million-dollar) they got for Ferdinand, saying Jonathan Woodgate was a better long-term prospect.

Ferdinand, who is bracing himself for a white hot reception on his return to Elland Road on Saturday, called for a truce.

"If I see Peter Ridsdale I'll be happy to shake hands with him," Ferdinand told The Sun. "I don't see any point in either of us holding grudges. I've no axe to grind."

"I can understand he was disappointed I wanted to join Manchester United and he wished to make his feelings known."

"But there are two sides to every story. I've had my say as well and it's time to move on."

United got into Saturday's midday match looking to bounce back from a shock midweek defeat by Bolton at Old Trafford.

"All that really matters to me now is we get the three points, especially after the disappointment of losing to Bolton at home," Ferdinand said.