

United's point to prove



AFP, London

Manchester United were tipped to sail through their European Champions League group but their recent goal drought and poor start to the Premiership has raised doubts before Wednesday's opener.

Israel's Maccabi Haifa at Old Trafford is hardly a fixture to see United trembling in their boots but just five goals from their first six league matches will have increased self-doubt.

The other teams in Group F, Olympiakos and last year's runners-up Bayer Leverkusen, much changed from last season, are not top drawer opponents and the way ought to have been clear for Alex Ferguson's men to cruise through.

Maccabi Haifa aren't even going to play the return match at home because of the Middle East conflict meaning Manchester will surely have no trouble in Nicosia, Cyprus.

The superstitious might point out the last time Arsenal won the FA Cup and Premiership double, United went on to win the European title the following season.

A repeat pattern would see Ferguson's men lifting the trophy for a third time next May but getting out of their current slump is the first priority.

Striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer acknowledged they need to sort out their goalscoring problems quickly.

The Norwegian said: "We know we've got to sort it out now. Last year we took too long before we sorted things out."

Solskjaer and strike partner Ruud van Nistelrooy have each scored once in the league this season - with the latter's goal coming from the penalty spot.

And Solskjaer believes over-elaboration could be the reason for United's poor form in front of goal this season.

He admitted: "When we perform, dig in and stay together as a team we're the best in England - but at the moment it is not happening in front of goal."

"Injuries are not an excuse. Our midfielders are injured now and it's

not good when injuries all come in the same area - but we've got a big enough squad to cope.

"We just have to focus on what we're doing. We're not really concentrating on what others are saying - we know we have to stay together and listen to the manager."

Ferguson has a midfield doubt in Nicky Butt, who hurt his hip in Saturday's 1-0 defeat against Leeds, their second loss in four days, adding to the absences of Roy Keane and Paul Scholes.

In the other Group F fixture, Olympiakos, winners of the last six Greek league titles, dropped their

self-doubt.

The World Cup winner only played the final 20 minutes of Milan's 3-0 win against promoted Modena on Saturday but still managed to get the ball in the back of the net with a backheel though the goal was disallowed.

Rivaldo told coach Carlo Ancelotti he was ready for a full game on a television broadcast. "I'm now fit enough to play a whole match," Rivaldo said on air.

"If he fields me as a striker, I have the freedom to drop back deeper, but if I am selected as a midfielder, I can move forward into attacking positions. For me it's the same thing."

"At Barcelona, van Gaal always played me on the left and that just wasn't any good."

Alessandro Del Piero is Juventus' man in form for their Group E trip to UEFA Cup champions Feyenoord after his two-goal haul against Atalanta in their 3-0 victory in the Italian league on Sunday.

Dutchman Edgar Davids is expected to make his return in midfield and defenders Igor Tudor and Mark Iuliano, who did not play against Atalanta, should also make the pitch.

The Italian champions' French international striker David Trezeguet meanwhile is unavailable for the De Kuip stadium clash because of a knee injury.

In the other match in the group, Newcastle attempt to put their miserable league form behind them with a trip to Dynamo Kiev, where five years ago they secured a 2-2 draw which proved not enough to progress.

Group H pits Lokomotiv Moscow against Turks Galatasaray, and Barcelona, who lost to third division Novelda in the Spanish Cup last week, host Bruges.

Ballack is suffering from a painful left foot injury and did not train on

Sunday because of the condition but coach Ottmar Hitzfeld is pulling out all the stops in an attempt to get him fit.

"We will do everything we can to get him ready for the match," Hitzfeld vowed.

AC Milan's star striker Rivaldo is finally fit enough to play a full 90 minutes in the group's other match against French club Lens in the northern Italian city.

The World Cup winner only played the final 20 minutes of Milan's 3-0 win against promoted Modena on Saturday but still managed to get the ball in the back of the net with a backheel though the goal was disallowed.

Rivaldo told coach Carlo Ancelotti he was ready for a full game on a television broadcast. "I'm now fit enough to play a whole match," Rivaldo said on air.

"If he fields me as a striker, I have the freedom to drop back deeper, but if I am selected as a midfielder, I can move forward into attacking positions. For me it's the same thing."

"At Barcelona, van Gaal always played me on the left and that just wasn't any good."

Alessandro Del Piero is Juventus' man in form for their Group E trip to UEFA Cup champions Feyenoord after his two-goal haul against Atalanta in their 3-0 victory in the Italian league on Sunday.

Dutchman Edgar Davids is expected to make his return in midfield and defenders Igor Tudor and Mark Iuliano, who did not play against Atalanta, should also make the pitch.

The Italian champions' French international striker David Trezeguet meanwhile is unavailable for the De Kuip stadium clash because of a knee injury.

In the other match in the group, Newcastle attempt to put their miserable league form behind them with a trip to Dynamo Kiev, where five years ago they secured a 2-2 draw which proved not enough to progress.

Group H pits Lokomotiv Moscow against Turks Galatasaray, and Barcelona, who lost to third division Novelda in the Spanish Cup last week, host Bruges.

Ballack is suffering from a painful left foot injury and did not train on



REAL GET STRONGER! Pope John Paul II sits surrounded by Real Madrid President Florentino Perez (bottom L), Argentine youngster Esteban Cambiasso (standing L) and compatriot Santiago Solari (C), Jose Maria Gutierrez (partly obscured back R) and Brazilian superstar Roberto Carlos during the team's private audience with the Pope in Castelgandolfo, Italy on September 16.

Veron relief



AFP, Manchester

England midfielder Nicky Butt faces a race against time to be ready for Manchester United's Champions League opener on Wednesday but the Reds received a boost with news Juan Sebastian Veron will be back from injury.

Veron missed Saturday's defeat by Leeds with a slight groin strain but has recovered and will be ready to take his place in the middle of United's injury-devastated midfield against Israeli champions Maccabi Haifa.

The Argentinian midfielder is desperate to prove himself after a tough first season at United and a woeful World Cup in the summer and the atmosphere of a big European night at Old Trafford gives him the perfect stage to make a point to his critics.

But he was due to have a late fitness test after bruising a hip during Saturday's match, a loss which meant Alex Ferguson's side have made their worst start to a domestic campaign since the inception of the Premiership a decade ago.

Ferguson, who is struggling to cope in the absence of captain Roy Keane and Paul Scholes, suffered another blow when Scottish Under-21 international Michael Stewart was ruled out for fortnight.

Stewart, who could have come in for Butt, twisted an ankle in training.

Defensively, the injury clouds are beginning to lift however with England fullback Gary Neville hoping to be involved in his first senior game since April.

The England full-back broke a bone in his foot in the Champions League semi-final against Bayer Leverkusen which ruled him out of the World Cup, and has not played since then.

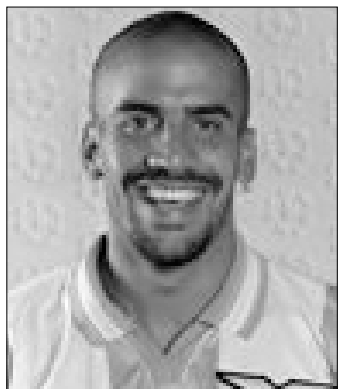
Ferguson has had to watch frustrated from the sidelines as chances have gone begging in back-to-back league defeats by Bolton and Leeds.

But his options up front are limited with only the out-of-sorts

Ruud van Nistelrooy, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and still goalless Diego Forlan to choose from.

Given the sense of crisis currently engulfing Old Trafford, Ferguson knows his side cannot afford any slip-ups against the Israelis.

But he will not have boosted the fans' confidence with comments in which he appeared to confuse Maccabi Haifa with Hapoel Tel Aviv, who knocked Chelsea out of the UEFA Cup last year.



JUAN SEBASTIAN VERON

"People have said Maccabi Haifa is a nice easy one but anyone who saw them last year against Chelsea will know they played well," Ferguson told United's website.

With apparently tougher clashes with Bayer Leverkusen and Olympiakos to come, Ferguson underlined the importance of starting with a win.

"I think we have got to take advantage of our home record in Europe and make sure we win our home matches because that is always a firm foundation for qualification for the next stage," he said.

"If you win your home matches and get even one result away from home and that gives you a minimum of ten points and you would hope that would be good enough".

Haifa's build-up to the biggest match in the club's history has been dogged by a row over bonuses that was only resolved this week.

The players had even threatened to boycott the match before a compromise was hammered out with club owner Ya'acov Schahar.

'Ballack better than Zidane'

AFP, Berlin

Germany's new midfield star Michael Ballack is worth more than the world's most expensive player Zinedine Zidane, according to German great Franz Beckenbauer.

The former German World Cup winning captain and coach told Bild newspaper that given the choice he would not exchange Ballack for the Real Madrid's French playmaker.

"Zidane is more elegant, more agile, but Ballack at 25 is not only five years younger, he is also more dangerous in front of goal and he gets more often into goal-scoring positions," said Beckenbauer.

"Quite honestly, I think that Ballack will become the new king of European football."

Ballack, the midfield inspiration behind Beckenbauer's side Bayern Munich, burst onto the international scene at the World Cup finals this summer inspiring an unfancied Germany side into the final.

But a yellow-card picked up in the semi-final win over South Korea kept him out of the showdown in Yokohama against Brazil which the South Americans won 2-0.

Afghanistan at Asian Games

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Afghanistan's exile from international tournament football will end later this month with news that the war-torn country will compete in the Asian Games in Busan.

Afghanistan, where football stagnated during more than 20 years of conflict, have taken the slot vacated by Mongolia in the Under-23 tournament and will play Iran, Qatar and Lebanon in Group E, the Asian Football Confederation said in a statement Tuesday.

Asian Games organisers have said that North Korea and Palestine would play instead of Tajikistan and Jordan.

Afghanistan, a founding member of AFC in the 1950s, were reinstated as members at the recent annual congress, paving the way for their participation in the Asian Games.

Wenger makes a point



AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has requested a rethink on how video evidence is used in the aftermath of elbowing incidents involving his star striker Thierry Henry and England skipper David Beckham.

The boss of the FA Cup and Premiership champions wants to see more consistency in the video evidence system, much like is currently done in France.

Wenger said Henry was being "unfairly" looked at by the Football Association for allegedly elbowing Charlton's John Robinson and wants all such controversial incidents to be routinely reviewed.

In theory, that would mean Beckham also coming under the microscope for a similar incident at Elland Road even though Wenger doubts whether he is guilty of misconduct.

In reality, however, Beckham will escape an investigation as referee Jeff Winter saw him make contact with Lee Bowyer but deemed it to have been an accident even after seeing a replay.

The FA can therefore currently not step in even if they wanted to, as the incident involving Henry was missed by referee Steve Dunn, the video advisory panel could be asked to pass their verdict.

Henry has strongly protested his innocence, while Robinson - who

was criticised by Wenger for tugging Henry's shirt - has also come to the striker's defence.

Wenger, however, questions whether any referee can reasonably be expected to reverse a decision on the basis of video evidence as that would admit he was wrong.

He wants the FA to introduce an automatic review of all such incidents, as happens in France, to end the "illogical" differences in the current system.

"It's all about whether you should overrule the referee or not on the basis of what you see on video evidence," argued the Arsenal boss.

"I'd say that you should (overrule) if the referee is not in a position to see what really happened."

"If the whole country is convinced that Beckham made an elbow and you cannot overrule it, is that right or not?"

"If Beckham has used an elbow and you show the evidence to the referee, do you think he'll say that he has seen it? No, he will say that he hasn't seen it."

"You can basically kill somebody if the referee was not in a good position to see it properly and you can still do nothing about it. So let's investigate the FA and see what comes out."

The Henry investigation is a further blow to Arsenal after Aliou Cisse's red card at Highbury was overturned while Patrick Vieira's at Stamford Bridge was maintained and he was charged with misconduct for swearing.

Romario slaps teammate!



INTERNET

Romario has been hitting more than just the headlines once again. Fluminense

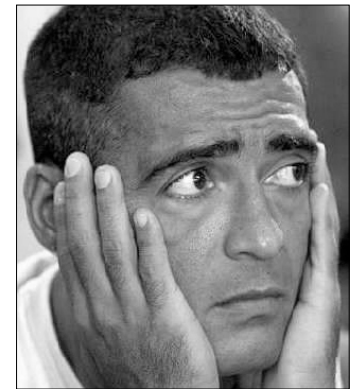
teammate Andrei bore brunt of the famous Romario temper during the first-half against Sao Paulo in a game that they eventually lost 6-0.

The incident in question came after Fluminense had conceded the first goal, which was scored by Julio Baptista. The former Brazil star, Romario, was incensed at the contribution Andrei had played in the goal and went over to remonstrate with his fellow teammate. It was during this confrontation that Romario was seen to slap Andrei in the face.

The talking-to did not help matters as Fluminense went on to concede five more goals in the second-half. Afterwards Romario refused to apologise: "I'm not one to say sorry. I've spoken to him and we are trying to sort things out."

Nevertheless, Romario acknowledged that had it not been for Andrei the situation might have escalated: "I lost my cool and did that thing. We had an argument and that's how I reacted. Fortunately, Andrei calmed things down and everything stopped there."

The episode is the last thing that Fluminense's new coach, Renato Portaluppi, needs as he tries to turnaround his team's poor form of late. It is the second heavy defeat



ROMARIO

that Fluminense have taken in recent weeks, after Flamengo beat them 5-2, and is sure to increase the pressure on Portaluppi to deliver sooner rather than later.

Yet, astonishingly Romario has come out in the aftermath of the sorry defeat to back his manager. "The result speaks for itself. We deserved to lose and we the players must bear the full responsibility." However, the aptly nicknamed Baixinho (which means 'short one' in Portuguese) did say: "Such a result may damage Portaluppi's career and therefore it is essential that he has the backing of all the Fluminense players."

Unfortunately, despite his public backing for his beleaguered coach, Romario seems likely to be hit with a club fine. "I will look at the pictures and talk to the players. If necessary I will punish either Romario or Andrei," said Portaluppi.

Premiership City rule Birmingham



AFP, Birmingham

Birmingham City beat Aston Villa 3-0 to emphatically come out of the shadow of their more illustrious neighbours on a humiliating Monday night for Villa keeper Peter Enckelman.

Clinton Morrison, an Enckelman own goal and Geoff Horsfield were on target to delight the home supporters, for so long upstaged by Villa, in this eventful Premiership fixture.

Enckelman surely made the gaff of the season, if not the greatest in English football history, when he failed to intercept a harmless throw-in back to him and the ball trickled into the net for Birmingham's second goal.

The Villa players were booed from all corners of the ground during

the warm-up as a capacity crowd of nearly 30,000 revved up for the first meeting in the top flight between these two bitter rivals for 16 years.

With such intensity, it was not surprising the match kicked off at full throttle. What was more unexpected was the quality on show as both sides matched commitment with skill.

Birmingham went one-up in the 31st minute as Morrison enhanced his growing reputation with the Blues fans.

Jeff Kenna lofted a cross from deep into the penalty area, the Villa defence froze fatally and the ball bounced off Robbie Savage for Morrison to hook in.

Villa attempted to even matters and only the woodwork stopped the visitors equalising seven minutes before the break.

Gareth Barry's quick free-kick picked out Ulises De La Cruz, and the Ecuador international produced a fabulous strike from 25 yards

which thumped off the crossbar.

There was controversy 11 minutes after the break when Darius Vassell had a goal ruled out for offside despite the ball coming to him off a Birmingham head.

Villa's strenuous efforts then collapsed in farcical circumstances in the 77th minute when a bizarre own goal from Enckelman handed Birmingham some breathing space.

The keeper's lazy attempt to control Olof Mellberg's throw-in saw the ball take a touch off his boot and roll across the goal-line.

Birmingham could not believe their luck and nor for that matter could Villa. Enckelman's expression said it all, his feelings not eased by the jubilant taunting of a fan who gestured in his face after running on to the pitch.

Substitute Horsfield rounded off an agonising night for Villa with a clean finish in the 83rd minute, after Alpay had failed to control a through ball.

Enckelman will be remembered!



INTERNET, Birmingham

Peter Enckelman dropped one of the greatest goalkeeping clangers of all time at St Andrew's last night.

Villa's Finnish keeper let a 77th-minute throw-in from team-mate Olof Mellberg slip under his foot into the net.

Ref David Elleray gave the goal

and Villa boss Graham Taylor admitted: "I've never seen anything like that in my career."

"It was a vital turning point because it was the second goal and we were looking to come back into the game."

Enckelman was not sure he had touched it and Taylor astonishingly admitted his keeper did not know the laws.

If he had missed it, it would not have been a goal because it went in straight from a throw. TV replays

were inconclusive.

Taylor said: "Peter felt once the throw-in had gone in, it was a goal anyhow - he did not realise he had to touch it. He does now, of course."

"I asked him if he touched the ball and he said 'I haven't got a clue but I thought I hit the ball'."

"He doesn't know the laws of the game and he's a very honest lad. It must have been the smallest of touches."

The former England boss admitted the Finn's stunned look did not

help.

"His head-in-hand reaction gave the impression that he had touched it."

"It's a sloppy goal but probably the sloppiest of luck. You wouldn't expect a throw-in to go straight into your own net."

"It was so extraordinary that I think it affected everybody, players and fans alike."

"I've spoken to Peter afterwards and he is feeling very, very low. "The last thing you would pick is

for this for happen against your local rivals but that has happened."

"It's going to live with him and he's going to be reminded of it in this city, so he has to show real character."

"It will be very humbling for the Villa supporters. There is no joy for us at all - it's more than a disappointing night. We've defended very poorly."

"The players now have got 24 hours to sulk, and then they have to get on with it."

Grinning Birmingham manager Steve Bruce said: "We've had the bounce of the ball and the rub of the green - but that's probably what we need."

"The turning point was the keeper's mistake, which is unfortunate."

"It will haunt him for the rest of his life after doing something on a big occasion like tonight."

"I have no idea what happened, but his reaction suggests he thought he got a touch - unless he

didn't know the rules. If he hadn't touched it, why was he chasing after it?"

"Overall I think we deserved it. We were the better side in the first half and deserved to go in front."

"It was an electric atmosphere and the fans have waited a long time for this."

"They will enjoy it and they deserve to enjoy it."

"But this is only three points and while I'm very pleased, our aim is to

stay in the division, so that we can make this football club bigger and stronger."

It was the first derby clash between the two for 16 years and Birmingham's Paul Devlin said: "This has been been a long time coming - it's a great feeling."

"It was a freak second goal but a deserved win."



THE ENCKELMAN NIGHTMARE! (L) Aston Villa custodian Peter Enckelman appears in control as he looks to deal with Olof Mellberg's innocuous throw-in. (C) The ball however, squirms under the hapless keeper's foot and he can only watch as it rolls into the net. (R) The goal puts Birmingham 2-0 up and a fan rushes on to the pitch to rub salt on Enckelman's wounds.

PHOTO: INTERNET