

Italians to the fore



AFP, Paris

Italian giants AC Milan and Juventus produced two astonishing Champions League displays last week to suggest after several years in the wilderness they are capable of producing a real challenge for a trophy they used to dominate.

Milan trounced Spanish side Deportivo La Coruna 4-0 away while Juventus downed Ukraine's Dynamo Kiev 5-0 at home.

While both were brought down to earth with draws in the league on Saturday they will be looking to extend their dominance in their respective Champions League groups on Tuesday.

Juventus have certainly the easier task at home to goalless and pointless Newcastle in Group E while five times champions Milan are pitched into battle in probably the pick of Tuesday's matches away at Bayern Munich, winners of the trophy four times, in Group G.

Milan, who won the last of their Champions League titles in 1994, were nothing like the imperious attacking force in the 1-1 draw at Lazio that swamped the unfortunate Spaniards but coach Carlo Ancelotti believed that was more down to them having their minds on Bayern.

"Our heads were turned towards Munich where we must get a result to move nearer to the next phase," the former Italian international midfielder said.

Milan will once again be looking to 'SuperPippo' Inzaghi to hit the back of the net after the Italian international's stunning hat-trick against Deportivo, although it is unlikely he will be partnered by Rivaldo as Ancelotti believes the Brazilian star needs more time to regain match fitness.

Bayern fans too could have been mistaken for thinking their 2001 Champions League heroes had their minds on the Milan clash as they went down 2-1 to last season's finalists Bayer Leverkusen in the league and will be fully expecting more from Michael Ballack, Jens Jeremies and co against the Italians.

Thus far Bayern Munich have garnered just one point having gone down 3-2 at home to Deportivo which given the manner of the thrashing handed out to the

Spaniards by Milan would suggest the Germans are in for a rare old mauling.

However Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld suggested otherwise. "We have been patchy this season and I would have preferred us to be going into such a crucial match with a win behind us.

"The players know what they have to do and they realise that anything less than a win on Tuesday will leave them struggling to qualify," he said.

FIXTURES	
European Champions League matches on Tuesday:	
Group E	
At Rotterdam	Feyenoord v Dynamo
At Turin	Juventus v Newcastle
Group F	
At Nicosia	M. Haifav Leverkusen
At Old Trafford	Man. United v Olympiakos
Group G	
At Munich	Bayern v Milan
At La Coruna	Deportivo v Lens
Group H	
At Istanbul	Galatasaray v Club Brugge
At Moscow	Lokomotiv v Barcelona

Defeat for Bayern and a home win for Deportivo over Lens would leave the Germans five points behind the second placed spot with just three matches remaining.

Elsewhere the team that deprived Hitzfeld of the Champions League in the dying minutes of the 1999 final, Manchester United, will look to maintain their 100 percent record at home to Greek outfit Olympiakos in Group F.

While Olympiakos started with a crushing 6-2 home victory over Leverkusen their away form is distinctly dodgy having succumbed to Maccabi Haifa last week and that cannot augur well for their prospects of leaving Old Trafford intact.

United look certain to welcome back Gary Neville to the starting line-up for the first time since April after he impressed when he came

on as a substitute in Saturday's come from behind 3-1 win over Charlton.

His return and the outstanding performance of Paul Scholes just a week after returning to training was the good news for manager Alex Ferguson countered by the likely absences of French international defender Mmakael Silvestre and midfielder Nicky Butt, who took a blow to his back in the Premiership clash.

"It seems to be never ending as soon as a couple of the boys come back another two step out again," Ferguson said.

"However it's better at this stage of the season for it to happen than at the business end and we should be able to cope on Tuesday," added the Scot.

Olympiakos had the weekend off because of a strike by the professional clubs but the players are under no illusions about their fate if they fail to improve on their loss to Maccabi.

"It was a tragedy (the defeat by Maccabi). It was a circus," said president Socrates Kokkalis.

"I want those who can give a 150 percent effort at Manchester to play only and I believe we can win the match.

"Only with a win in England will I be pleased.

"If we don't advance to the next round of the Champions League you the players will all lose out."

Leverkusen, pointless after two matches, will have to win away in Cyprus against Maccabi - who are playing their home matches there because of the unrest in Israel - if they are to have a realistic chance of staying in the race for the next round.

Juventus and Feyenoord are involved in a nip and tuck tussle in Group E tied on four points and both should be looking for easy home wins this week as Newcastle have patently failed to come to terms with the higher level of football.

Feyenoord, the UEFA Cup champions, take on a Dynamo Kiev side that is a shadow of the outfit that threatened in past years to break up the monopoly of Western clubs in the European competitions.

Barcelona will look to their away trip to Lokomotiv Moscow to rebound from their 3-0 hammering by Real Betis on Saturday and maintain their 100 percent record and hold over Group H.



Brescia's Brazilian recruit Francelino Matuzalem(L) goes for the ball along with AS Roma star Francesco Totti at the Mario Rigamonti stadium in Brescia on September 29.

Serie A Vieri puts Inter atop



AFP, Rome

Two goals from Italian international Christian Vieri propelled Inter Milan two points clear of the pack and maintained their 100 percent start to the season on Sunday to earn a 2-1 win over Chievo.

Inter may have lost Ronaldo to Real Madrid in the summer break but their title hopes have not suffered as they moved clear of AC Milan, Juventus and Bologna, who ended Piacenza's fine start with a 1-0 victory.

Inter were thankful Vieri had his shooting boots with him as they fell behind initially to a third-minute goal from Massimo Marazzina before the hosts came back.

They were back on terms with Vieri's opener on 15 minutes and he bagged full points with the winner from the penalty spot 12 minutes from the end as Inter marched to the summit on nine points from three games.

Francesco Totti went one better than Vieri as he turned in a true captain's performance earlier to

drag AS Roma back to winning ways with a hat-trick in a 3-2 win at Brescia to kickstart their season.

Earlier losses to Bologna and Modena had left the Romans on the floor in Serie A but Totti came up with the goods with a penalty and a freekick along the way to cool the temperature of embattled coach Fabio Capello's hot seat.

Not even a second goal in a week for the 'divine ponytail' Roberto Baggio, who netted from the spot, could save the hosts who slid to their second loss in three games.

But Piacenza saw their perfect start end with a 1-0 loss at Bologna for whom Luigi Della Rocca was on target midway through the second period.

Bologna are now joint second on

seven points with AC Milan and Juventus.

Juventus fell some way off their Champions League cloud on Saturday when they followed up Tuesday's 5-0 thrashing of Kiev with a last-gasp 2-2 Serie A draw against Parma.

The goals were the first Juve had conceded in the new league season. AC Milan, like Juve, also dropped their first points as they settled for a 1-1 draw to Lazio on Saturday.

Brazilian capture Rivaldo floated in a freekick for skipper Paolo Maldini to head home for Milan on five minutes but Lazio fought back and Argentine Claudio Lopez levelled for the Rome-based side five minutes after the restart.

Serie A's top six						
Italian league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):						
Inter Milan	3	3	0	0	5	2 9
AC Milan	3	2	1	0	7	1 7
Juventus	3	2	1	0	7	2 7
Bologna	3	2	1	0	5	3 7
Empoli	3	2	0	1	5	3 6
Piacenza	3	2	0	1	4	2 6

Ronaldo kept waiting



REUTERS, Madrid

The anxiously-awaited debut of Real Madrid's new signing Ronaldo remains on hold after the Brazilian striker was not included in the squad to play AEK Athens in Wednesday's Champions League group C match.

The 26-year-old, who moved to Real from Inter Milan for 45 million euros (\$44.38 million) at the end of last month, trained with the rest of the team on Monday after shaking

off a minor ankle injury but was not deemed fit enough to make the trip to Athens.

Ronaldo, who was top scorer for Brazil during their triumphant World Cup campaign, has yet to make an appearance for his new side and may now make his debut in next weekend's league match against Alaves.

The player insists that he has now got over the injury and will be back in action in the near future.

"I no longer feel any pain at all," he was quoted as saying by sports daily Marca on Monday. "It was not an important injury and I will be playing very soon."

Skipper Fernando Hierro is being rested and has also been left out of the squad, as has goalkeeper Cesar who is nursing a bruised finger.

But fellow central defender Ivan Helguera has recovered from a blow to his hip and will make the trip to the Greek capital.

The European champions have made a perfect start to the defence of their title, taking a maximum six points from their first two matches.

They claimed an impressive 3-0 victory away to Roma in their opening match and then crushed Belgian champions Genk 6-0 at the Bernabeu last week.

Cuper returns compliments!



INTERNET, Milan

Internazionale Milan coach, Hector Cuper, has broken his silence on Sunday after former San Siro favourite Ronaldo made disparaging comments about him earlier in the week.

The Brazilian forward, now with Real Madrid, told Italian news programme TG1 that Cuper nearly ruined his career, claiming that he was forced to participate in training sessions and play in matches whilst still unfit. Ronaldo also suggested that once he had regained full fitness he was surprisingly omitted from the first-team by the Argentine.

However, Inter's coach has vociferously refuted these allegations, declaring: "Last season, before sending Ronaldo on the field, I always consulted the medical team and the player's personal trainer. I always asked what would be the right thing to do."

Talking to the Italian sports' daily Corriere della Sera, Cuper said that he had the necessary evidence to back up his case: "The work that every player does in training, day by day, is recorded in his personal file and we have all the details to offer a complete framework of what was done with Ronaldo through the season."

The relationship of the two South Americans was always tempestuous, even at the best of times, and this was cited as one of the factors in Ronaldo's exit from Milan.

Nevertheless, Cuper maintains that he did not deliberately try to wreck the Brazilians' career: "It was always my dream to coach



HECTOR CUPER someone like him... only an idiot would think about ruining a player," he proclaimed.

Relations between the two have not improved since the parting of the waves in August. In recent days both protagonists have come out and labelled each other a liar. "Cuper is a liar when he says that he had a normal relationship with me. Ever since Cuper arrived at Inter the side has never entertained the public. This is one of the reasons why I decided to leave Italy," Ronaldo said. Cuper retorted by saying: "Of Ronaldo I just want to offer a reminder that despite my attempts to ruin his career he enjoyed a beautiful World Cup. I am staying calm about this though, because I don't lose sleep about those who tell lies."

The whole sorry affair is beginning to bore football fans across the world, something that Inter's president, Massimo Moratti, can testify to. "Ronaldo simply said things that we are already aware of and I have no desire to add to this argument because for me it has turned stale."

Bundesliga Bremen go second

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen moved into second place in the Bundesliga on Sunday with a 4-1 win at Bochum as the latter's bubble finally burst following a spell among the pacesetters since promotion.

Brazilian striker Ailton bagged a pair of goals on 16 and 50 minutes as Werder ripped into Bochum, who made a riproaring start to the campaign but are now fading rapidly.

Paul Freier levelled briefly for the hosts but that provided only brief respite before Angelos Charisteas and Mladen Krstajic put the outcome beyond all doubt.

Ailton's second goal was his 50th in the Bundesliga.

Bremen are now just one point behind leaders Bayern Munich after their fifth win in seven matches.

Bayern are on 16 points from their seven matches.

Moeller plans retirement

AFP, Gelsenkirchen, Germany

FC Schalke's former German international playmaker Andreas Moeller revealed Sunday he intends to hang up his boots at the end of the season.

"After this season it will be over," the 35-year-old Moeller, who won 85 caps and was among Germany's 1990 World Cup and 1996 European winning squads, told Bild. "My decision is final. Maybe physically I could continue but I feel mentally tired."

Moeller said he intended getting a coaching licence and saw himself in a managerial role in the future.

Wembley demolition begins



REUTERS, London

Demolition experts finally began ripping the heart out of Wembley Stadium on Monday, turning one of the world's most famous sporting landmarks into a pile of dust and rubble.

With a new stadium set to rise in time for the 2006 FA Cup final, the Twin Towers that have watched over so many of English football's greatest moments are being torn down and consigned to the history books.

However, the replacement of a venue which cost 750,000 pounds to build in the early 1920s by one costing more than 750 million, is only the latest chapter in a Wembley story that is already 110 years old.

An unremarkable patch of land northwest of London first made

Stadium rose nearly 20 years later as the centrepiece of the British Empire Exhibition, opened by King George V in 1924.

Wembley Stadium had enjoyed a memorable opening in 1923 when it hosted Bolton Wanderers' 2-0 FA Cup final victory over West Ham United in what became known as the "White Horse Final."

Organisers had hopelessly underestimated the crowds who would flock to see the match and although the official attendance is given as 126,947, the true figure is probably closer to 200,000.

The match only went ahead because of an early exercise in crowd control carried out almost single-handedly by policeman George Scorey and his white horse Billie, who drove the crowds back from the pitch and beyond the touchline.

Among the many epic finals to have brought in the fans, the great-

est was probably the "Matthews Final" of 1953 in which Stanley Matthews wreaked havoc down the right wing.

His Blackpool team were 3-1 down to Bolton Wanderers with 22 minutes to go and trailing 3-2 with two minutes on the clock before roaring back for a thrilling 4-3 victory - Stan Mortensen scoring a hat-trick.

That same year, Wembley hosted probably England's most numbing defeat in their footballing history when they were outclassed

by Ferenc Puskas' Hungary - the "Marvellous Magyars" - in a 6-3 defeat at Wembley.

Thirteen years later, though, Wembley would host the greatest ever moment for English football, when the World Cup came to the country which invented the game.

Wembley hosted England's group one games and their road to a victorious 4-2 final over West Germany in which Geoff Hurst's hat-trick and a Russian linesman helped to make history.

Tofik Bakhrarov won himself a place in English hearts when, asked by Swiss referee Gottfried Dienst whether a Hurst pledrider had crossed the line after it crashed off the underside of the bar, replied in the affirmative.

It made the score 3-2 in extra time and Hurst put the result beyond doubt with an unstoppable strike that nearly burst the back of the West German net.

The Germans got plenty of revenge in the ensuing years, in World Cups and European championships, including a 1-0 victory over England in the last football match to be played at Wembley Stadium, a World Cup qualifier in October 2000.

It has taken almost two years of political and commercial wrangling for the final contracts to be signed for work on the demolition of the old and the building of the new to start.

Though Wembley is synonymous with English football, the stadium has also witnessed other historic moments.

When London hosted the 1948 Olympics, Wembley provided the cinder track on which Dutch housewife Fanny-Blankers Koen won four gold medals and Czech great Emil Zatopek announced his arrival on the world stage by winning the 10,000 metres.

In 1963, British boxer Henry Cooper lost a memorable battle with the then Cassius Clay after initially felling the man who would later become Mohammed Ali - and probably the greatest fighter of all time - at a packed Wembley Stadium.

Speedway, rugby league and greyhound racing were more regularly on the bill at Wembley, which was also a successful music venue - notably with the Live Aid concert in 1985.

MU have money to burn



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United on Monday belied suggestions that their reign at the top of English football may be coming to an end by unveiling a sparkling set of results for the year to July.

United have struggled in the Premiership this season and have been eclipsed on the pitch by the dazzling performances of Arsenal domestically and in the Champions League.

But the club's unrivalled financial muscle was underlined by a bottom-line hat-trick that exceeded analysts' expectations:

- Pre-tax profit surged 48 percent to 32.3 million pounds (50.4m dollars)
- Turnover was up 13 percent at 146.1 million pounds
- Player sales yielded a net profit of 17 million pounds.

Club chief executive Peter Kenyon dismissed suggestions that United's decade of dominance was

nearing an end. "We are well placed in the Champions League, fourth in the Premiership and the depth in squad terms is very good," he told BBC Radio. "The dynasty is not over at all."

The increase in turnover was largely the result of increased television income with United benefiting from the first year of the FA Premier League's improved three-year television deal with British Sky Broadcasting and their run to the semi-finals of the 2001-02 Champions League.

The collapse earlier this year of the English lower divisions' television deal and its subsequent renegotiation at a much lower price has generated fears that the football boom may be on the verge of turning to bust.

But Kenyon voiced confidence that the public's enthusiasm for the top level of club football in Europe would ensure revenues from television would continue to rise sufficiently to avoid a cash squeeze for a club like United.

Primera Liga Valencia back on song



AFP, Madrid

Spanish champions Valencia returned to the top of the Spanish First Division, where they spent 10 weeks last season, following their emphatic 3-0 win over Rayo Vallecano on Sunday.

Valencia are unbeaten with 10 points from four games. Celta Vigo lie second and Real Sociedad are in third with the same number of points as Valencia but an inferior goal difference.

Mista Ferrer put Valencia ahead after 34 minutes by scrambling the ball into the net after Vicente Rodriguez had sent a cross from the left wing flying into the box.

Ruben Baraja added the second from the spot just seconds before half time after Rayo defender Diego Mainz had brought down Mista, while the thrashing was completed by Miguel Angel Angulo's vicious swerving free kick four minutes from the whistle.

Celta's perfect record came to an end as they were held 2-2 by visiting Costa Del Sol side Malaga.

All the goals came in an action-packed first half with Malaga striker Kiki Musampa opening the scoring by getting his fifth goal of the season after 15 minutes.

However, the Galicians were back on level terms 11 minutes later when Celta's Brazilian-born Spanish international Catanha scored from the spot.

Celta went ahead after 39 minutes when Magnolo Berizzo headed home an Alexander Mostovoi freekick but little more than a minute later, Celta defender Fernando

Caceres sent the ball into his own net.

In the second half, Catanha and Peter Luccin both had chances to grab a winner for Celta, as did Musampa for Malaga, but neither side could add to their tally.

Real Sociedad kept their championship challenge alive with a 3-2 victory at Osasuna, their winner coming from a Dimitri Khokhlov header six minutes before the end.

Athletic Bilbao's Jupp Heynckes job is clearly in jeopardy after the Basques went down 2-0 at home to Real Mallorca, who had started the day with three consecutive losses to their name.

Bilbao are now in the relegation zone, third from bottom, with just one point to their name.

Recreativo Huelva got its first point of the season when they managed a 1-1 draw in the Spanish capital against an unimpressive Atletico Madrid, but slump to the foot of the table on goal difference.

Espanyol also finally managed to break their duck by grinding out a 0-0 draw with Sevilla. However, the Barcelona-based side remain one place above hapless Huelva.

Real Madrid dropped their first points of the season when they were held to a 1-1 draw at Valladolid on Saturday.

Real Betis continue to give the pundits cause to consider them one of the dark horses of the championship race after their impressive 3-0 victory over Barcelona on Saturday.

The game was played in Huelva as Betis were serving the first of a two match ban from using their own Manuel Ruiz de Lopera stadium, following crowd trouble at their local derby with Sevilla last season.

Primera Liga's top six						
Spanish league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):						
Valencia	4	3	1	0	10	2 10
Celta Vigo	4	3	1	0	9	3 10
Real Sociedad	4	3	1	0	13	8 10
Deportivo La Coruna	4	3	0	1	8	6 9
Malaga	4	2	2	0	9	7 8
Real Betis	3	2	1	0	10	5 7



Pablo Aimar (R), Valencia's Argentine international feels the presence of Pablo Sanz of Rayo Vallecano at the Mestalla stadium in Valencia on September 29.