

Primera Liga preview

Sociedad demand notice

Football

AFP, Madrid

Unfancied Real Sociedad could continue to defy Spain's football pundits by taking over the lead of the Spanish league table on Sunday.

The San Sebastian side, who play away at fellow Basques Alaves, are one of five unbeaten teams and lie second with 13 points from five games, just behind Celta Vigo on goal difference.

Sociedad spent much of last season down in the relegation zone and only saved their fate with a late burst of form but their results so far this season has revived memories of their glory days in the early 1980s when they twice won the league, in 1981 and 1982.

Much of the recent success is being put down to the arrival of French coach Raynald Denoueix, who led Nantes to the French league title in 2001 and is creating the belief that Sociedad could end their 20-year hoodoo by winning a third league title.

"I had offers to coach Rennes, Fenerbahce and the Saudi Arabian national team but I came here because they listened to my plans and how I thought the team should play," Denoueix, who also won the French league twice as a player, said on Thursday.

Real Sociedad president Jose Luis Astiazaran was full of praise for the master tactician who has turned the club's fortunes around.

"Raynald has clearly made the difference because we didn't get many players in the summer. The squad is almost the same as last season."

However, the few new faces that have arrived have been critical. Russian midfielder Valery Karpin returned to the club where he started his career in Spanish football in 1994 while Argentine defender Gabi Schurrer has shored up what used to be a leaky back four.

Sergio Boris also arrived from Oviedo and is set to start his first game for Real on Sunday. Being the first non-Basque Spaniard to play for Real Sociedad for more than 30 years, his purchase is a sign of the new times.

To boot, the team is also winning over their own hard-core, and long suffering, supporters by turning on the style.

"We are not only winning, but winning and playing well," purred Denoueix this week.

Ronaldonia mania continues unabated at third-placed Real Madrid with the topic of conversation having moved on from the two goals he scored on his debut in Real's 5-2 thrashing of Alaves two weeks ago to an apparent weight problem.

Spanish newspapers revealed last week that he is tipping the scales four kilograms heavier than when he won the World Cup in June and Real Madrid medical staff revealed that they have been told to get the player's weight down.

"He needs to lose even more than four kilograms," commented Real Madrid's ever-caustic honorary president Alfredo di Stefano.

But spare tyre or not, Ronaldo will still drive the forward line at Racing Santander on Saturday.

He is likely to be accompanied up front by Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez as Raul Gonzalez is suffering from a slight hamstring strain. Luis Figo is also doubtful and English midfielder Steve McManaman could start his first league game of the season.

Racing will send Real cast-off Pedro Munitis into action against his old club hoping that he exorcises the frustration borne of two difficult years at the European champions.

"It makes no difference whether I am here or at Real Madrid, I always have the same motivation to play and win," Munitis, who was loaned back during the summer to the club of his birthplace, told reporters Thursday, although none really believed him.

League leaders Celta Vigo will bid to maintain their position at home to Rayo Vallecano on Sunday.

Rayo goalkeeper Imanol Etxeberria is doubtful after spraining his right ankle last week and Sergio Segura is likely to start his first league game after moving across the Spanish capital during the summer from Atletico Madrid.

Fallen giants Barcelona, languishing down in eighth on the same number of points, are set to ring the changes at Valladolid on Sunday.

The Catalans' coach Louis van Gaal has indicated that goalkeeper Victor Valdes will be dropped after errors in the 2-2 draw with Osasuna two weeks ago, although the Dutchman hasn't said whether he will replace him with Roberto Bonano or Robert Enke.

Patrick Andersson and Marc Overmars are also set to return, albeit probably starting on the substitutes bench, after having been injured for the best part of four months each.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off GMT): Villarreal v Deportivo La Coruna (1700), Racing Santander v Real Madrid (1830), Atletico Madrid v Valencia (1930)

Sunday: Real Betis v Real Mallorca (1500), Alaves v Real Sociedad (1600), Athletic Bilbao v Malaga (1600), Celta Vigo v Rayo Vallecano (1600), Espanyol v Recreativo Huelva (1600), Osasuna v Sevilla (1600), Valladolid v Barcelona (1830)

League One preview

Lyon focus on home front

Football

AFP, Paris

Lyon might be holding their own in Europe's Champions League, but any domestic ambitions they may be harbouring since winning the league last term seem conspicuous by their absence.

But as league leaders Auxerre prepare to pay a visit to the Gerland stadium on Saturday, Paul Le Guen's Lyon side know it's time to refocus their efforts on climbing back up the league.

Auxerre, a team rich in home talent and still being led by the evergreen veteran coach Guy Roux, sit top on 21 points after 10 games, one ahead of surprise package Nice with Paris St Germain in third.

Lyon sit in ninth spot, on 15 points, and know that Saturday's match will be crucial if they are to set a pattern for the next few weeks.

"It will be a big match for us Saturday against Auxerre, and the matches that follow," Lyon midfielder Eric Carriere, who has had the pleasure of winning league titles with Nantes (2001) and Lyon, told the club's website.

"We're going to have to reconcentrate our efforts, although I don't think we'll have too much trouble as we've been winning matches pretty regularly."

"We had a great match against Rennes last week and now we have to maintain that rhythm against Auxerre."

Confident-sounding Carriere is nevertheless aware that Lyon will have to be at their sharpest on Saturday if they are to repel a team which has lost only one game so far this season.

In addition, Auxerre's pace-setting, at least for the past month, has also been done in the absence of star striker Djibril Cisse, demonstrating the depth of quality in Roux's squad.

In Cisse's absence 24-year-old

Zimbabwean Benjami Mwaruware has proved his goalscoring touch - and given Cisse food for thought - with seven goals in seven games.

Cisse, seemingly not worried about losing his team place, could return in time for next weekend and said he is looking forward to playing alongside the team's new star striker.

"Of cours I'm looking forward to playing with Benjami," Cisse said. "I'm even certain that we'll get well together."

It is perhaps fortunate for Lyon that both players will not be on the same park this Saturday.

With six wins, three draws and one defeat, it's no surprise Auxerre are winning the plaudits.

"Auxerre's confidence is flying and they've been playing well since the start of the campaign," added Carriere.

"They lost recently against Arsenal (in the Champions League), which shows they can be beat, although they're a tough team and they'll be coming here in search of the three points."

"However, we're playing at home and we've showed we're not an easy team to beat at home."

Elsewhere on Saturday Nice, who are doing brilliantly having almost been demoted to the third division because the league believed their finances were dodgy, face a tough test away to a Nantes side desperate to move up a place or two from 16th.

Paris St Germain, who have notched up too many draws (five) for their own good, make the short trip to Troyes in search of what should be a welcome three points.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Troyes v Paris St Germain, Sedan v Rennes, Monaco v Lille, Lyon v Auxerre, Lens v Ajaccio, Guingamp v Montpellier, Bastia v Le Havre, Nantes v Nice, Sochaux v Bordeaux

Sunday: Marseille v Strasbourg



ZIDANE CARES: French superstar Zinedine Zidane (L) arrives with a child who is suffering from Leucodystrophia and his mother for the launch of a health campaign against genetical diseases Leucodystrophia on October 17 in Lyon. The T-shirts read: "Everybody wears sport shoes 18 October!"

Premiership preview

Seaman search for shore

Football

AFP, London

England goalkeeper David Seaman will attempt to bounce back from one of the worst weeks of his football career when Arsenal travel to Everton on Saturday looking to extend their Premiership lead.

The 39-year-old has been pilloried for conceding a goal direct from a corner in England's disappointing 2-2 draw with Macedonia in a Euro 2004 qualifier on Wednesday.

But while his days as first-choice England keeper may be over, Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger is expected to give Seaman the chance to rebuild his shattered confidence at Goodison Park.

By a twist of fate, the goalkeeper at the other end on Saturday will be Richard Wright, once regarded as Seaman's natural successor at Highbury.

He left for Everton in the summer having concluded that Seaman was set to continue for years to come - an assumption that looks less than certain after this week's events.

Arsenal central defender Sol Campbell will also be seeking to shrug off a midweek hangover - it was his poor clearance that gave Macedonia the chance to score their second goal.

In contrast, Arsenal's French stars, Thierry Henry, Sylvain Wiltord and Patrick Vieira are riding high after a 4-0 drubbing of Malta in which Henry and Wiltord contributed three of the goals.

Despite the mixed emotions in the dressing room, Arsenal have been so impressive this season that they will start as clear favourites to extend their unbeaten Premiership run to 31 matches.

But to do so they have to overcome an Everton side that have become much more resilient under new boss David Moyes. The

Everton manager has lost big striker Duncan Ferguson, who needs surgery on a trapped nerve in his back, and could start exciting young forward Wayne Rooney, who only turns 17 next week.

Second-placed Liverpool are also grappling with the fallout from the busy week of international football. Emile Heskey was forced to

Managers Kevin Keegan branded City's performance in their last match, a 2-0 defeat at Southampton, as one of the worst by any of his teams and has made it clear he will expect changes on Saturday.

"Too much of our possession is breaking down in our own half of the pitch. We have got to be sharper from the first whistle - we cannot keep giving early goals away," Keegan said.

"There are lots of things to work on in very little time."

City have Irish international defender Richard Dunne in their squad for the first time since he narrowly avoided the sack for heavy drinking. He has since been on a special diet and fitness programme and Keegan believes he is ready to return to action.

Chelsea will be without Dutch winger Boudewijn Zenden, who was injured on international duty in midweek and will be out for several weeks.

In other action, Howard Wilkinson takes charge of Sunderland for the first time against bottom of the table West Ham, West Brom entertain Birmingham in a derby clash and Blackburn take on Newcastle.

Manchester United travel to Fulham still reeling from the five-match ban and record 150,000-pound (230,000-dollar) fine imposed on their captain Roy Keane over the contents of his autobiography.

United boss Alex Ferguson is uncertain whether top scorer Ruud van Nistelrooy, who flew home early from the build-up to Holland's Euro 2004 qualifier in Austria, will be available after a recurrence of his recent hamstring problem.

Manchester City meanwhile will seek to arrest their slide down the table at home to Chelsea.

Wise taking Leicester to court

AFP, London

Former England winger Dennis Wise has added to cash-strapped Leicester's problems by launching a 2.3-million pound (3.6 million dollar) legal suit over his sacking for punching a team-mate.

Wise's lucrative contract with Leicester was terminated in August after an altercation on a pre-season tour of Finland which left Callum Davidson with a fractured cheek bone.

The Football League has upheld Leicester's right to sack the player, who has subsequently signed for Millwall on much reduced terms.

But Wise appears convinced the club breached English labour laws and has decided to risk landing himself with hefty legal bills in the hope of recovering the money he believes he is owed.

A statement released through his solicitors said: "We confirm that civil proceedings have been commenced in the High Court on behalf of Dennis Wise, against Leicester City Football Club plc, for wrongful termination of his employment on August 14 2002."

"The claim is for a sum in excess of 2.36 million pounds. Separate employment tribunal proceedings are to be instituted shortly in regard to unfair dismissal in addition to the civil proceedings."

Leicester would not comment on Wise's move but it comes at the worst possible time for the club, which is in dire straits financially after relegation from the Premiership last season.

The club reportedly has 30 million pounds of debt and its players agreed this week to defer 20 percent of their wages to give the club some breathing space from creditors.

Caniggia not ready to quit

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Veteran Argentinian striker Claudio Caniggia believes he can extend his career for another two seasons and he is determined to pick up a championship medal before he does call a halt.

Caniggia, who will be available for the Premier league leaders home clash with Motherwell on Saturday, will be 36 in January and will be out of contract at the end of the season.

He is hopeful though that Rangers will agree to extend his deal - but if they do not, he is determined to go out on a high note by helping Alex McLeish's side finish above arch-rivals Celtic.

"We won the two cups last year and the aim now is to win the championship," Caniggia said. "There are so many games before the season ends that it is impossible to say now that we'll win the championship."

"We are hopeful and it is important to stay at the top of the league. It is good that we are there - even when you are an experienced player it is good for confidence."

"We were second in the league last year and we lost some confidence - we didn't play very well and we had injured players and drew so many games."

"It was difficult because Celtic kept on winning and, if Celtic or Rangers go 10 points ahead, it is hard to catch them."

Caniggia survived the football world when he arrived in Scotland to play for Dundee two years ago. But he has settled in Scotland and now plans to sit down with Rangers

chairman John McClelland to thrash out a new deal before the end of the season.

"I think there is a chance to stay. I spoke with the chairman two months ago and we'll meet each other again a few months before the end of the season," he said.

"So there is still time to see what will happen and if I can carry on playing here. I'm happy here and I think I can play for two more years because I am well and I feel fit."

Totti's best wishes for Molina

AFP, Rome

AS Roma captain Francesco Totti on Tuesday sent a message of support to Deportivo La Coruna goalkeeper Jose Francisco Molina who is taking time out from the game to undergo a course of chemotherapy.

"I'm convinced he will win this battle which for him is the biggest of his life," said Totti in his personal website, www.francescototti.com.

"I want to give my best wishes to a player and a man who has never been short of determination, character and fighting spirit."

Molina, a Spanish international, needs treatment after complications set in following the removal of a benign tumour on a testicle last year.

Chemotherapy was recommended by doctors after a routine check-up last week.

Italy international Totti is currently out of action with a knee injury.

'Time to go'

AFP, London

England goalkeeping legend Peter Shilton has told David Seaman it's time to hang up his international gloves.

Seaman, 39, has been pilloried mercilessly by the British press after conceding a goal directly from a corner in England's embarrassing 2-2 draw with Macedonia in a Euro 2004 qualifier.

"The best keepers make the fewest mistakes and David is making too many," said Shilton, who won a record 125 caps between the posts for England.

"I have always been a fan of David's. He is a superb professional who has given great service."

"It would be a terrible shame if he hung on until he was hounded out."

Shilton played his last match for England when he was 41 but that did not stop him calling time on Seaman, who turned 39 last month.

Seaman's mistake against Macedonia came in England's first competitive match since they lost the World Cup quarter-final to Brazil - due in part to the goalkeeper's misjudgment of a Ronaldinho free-kick.

But for that error, Seaman may have decided to retire from international football after the tournament but he opted to continue in an apparent and misjudged attempt to redeem himself.

"I think David would have quit after the World Cup in June if he hadn't made that mistake against Brazil," Shilton told The Sun.

"But we all like to go out on a high so what happened made him determined to go on and try to make up for it."

"I felt there were signs in the 18 months leading up to the World Cup that David was losing his edge. But I still felt it was right that he started the finals because of his experience."

"I chose my time when to finish and told then England manager Bobby Robson before the 1990 World Cup finals."

West Ham's David James has been installed as the bookies' favourite to replace Seaman for England.

But head coach Sven-Goran Eriksson, who has said he will look at his options in the coming months, may instead turn to 23-year-old Leeds keeper Paul Robinson as a better long-term option.

England do not play another match until February, when they are due to take on Denmark or Australia in a friendly.

French fan Ronaldinho

AFP, Paris

Coach Jacques Santini's rejuvenated French team has found support from an unexpected quarter - Brazil World Cup winner Ronaldinho.

The Paris Saint Germain forward told a press conference Wednesday: "I always follow France's games - I have to tell you I'm one of their fans."

France, who thrashed Malta 4-0 in their latest installment of the Euro 2004 qualifying campaign on Wednesday, look to have consigned to history their dreadful World Cup defence judged on another flamboyant 5-0 win over Slovenia at the Stade de France last Saturday.

Ronaldinho certainly believes so. "I reckon they've regained the confidence they had before the World Cup."

"I always try to gain inspiration from what the great players on the French team are doing."

Turning to himself the Brazilian ace said he was well on the road to recovery after he'd missed PSG's last two games with a right thigh problem and hoped to be back in action for the French capital side's date with Troyes on Saturday.

Serie A preview

San Siro takes centre-stage

Football

AFP, Rome

Table-toppers Inter Milan, who lost the Italian championship on the final day of last season, lock horns with the team that pipped them to the title when Juventus visit the San Siro on Saturday night.

The derby d'Italia, as this fixture is known despite the clubs not being neighbours, is normally a bone-crunching contest between Italy's fiercest rivals.

Inter president Massimo Moratti, whose side have won all four league games this season, believes matches against Juve are more important than those against ground-sharers AC Milan.

"They are two different matches," Moratti said. "With Juventus it's a more traditional duel and it's always more important."

"They are the two teams with the most fans, the two teams that bring about the most enthusiasm in people."

"With AC Milan it's a city match and it means a lot more at the stadium when you find yourself near friends supporting the opposition."

"For certain reasons Juventus is Inter's enemy and vice versa."

Saturday's encounter is given added spice following the events of last season when Inter choked on the last day to hand Juventus the 'Scudetto' (Italian title), despite having led Serie A for almost the whole campaign.

Inter's 4-2 defeat at Lazio that day, in front of 40,000 of their travelling fans at the Stadio Olimpico, all hoping to see their heroes win their first championship crown since 1989, was a bitter pill to swallow.

But Uruguayan striker Alvaro Recoba insisted the team must forget history and focus on chalking up their fifth win in a row against third-placed Juve, four points adrift of Hector Cuper's pacesetters.

"We want the satisfaction of beating a great side and to maintain our 100 per cent record," said Recoba. We must walk out at the San Siro with the sole intention of winning."

"Juventus have won many titles

so seeing the Scudetto badge on their chest won't exactly be something new.

"It is definitely an important game for us, one that is of deep significance to our fans."

Moratti touched on the issue of refereeing decisions which have often been contentious in this particular fixture.

"I hope to see for once an Inter-Juventus game without controversy but it has never happened before," he added.

Inter marksman Christian Vieri is battling to be fit to face his former team after missing out on international duty with a sprained ankle while Portugal international Sergio Conceicao is suspended.

Juventus have problems of their own with striker David Trezeguet, last season's leading goalscorer in Italy, still not fully fit due to the recurrence of a knee injury.

Fellow forward Marco Di Vaio is another concern. The former Parma star has not played since suffering concussion in a Champions League tie at home to Newcastle on October 1 but has resumed training.

Juve defender Emiliano Moretti's is expected to miss out because of a high strain so Alessandro Birindelli is on stand-by.

Earlier Saturday, improving AS Roma, who have won successive matches after losing their first two games, travel to surprise package Empoli, fifth in the table following promotion from Serie B last season.

On Sunday, AC Milan, unbeaten in second place and only two points behind Inter, travel to second bottom Atalanta.

FIXTURES

(1300 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday: Empoli v Roma (1600 GMT), Inter Milan v Juventus (1830 GMT)
Sunday: Atalanta v AC Milan, Bologna v Brescia, Como v Piacenza, Lazio v Perugia, Modena v Parma (1830 GMT), Torino v Chievo, Udinese v Reggina

Trap under observation



REUTERS, Rome

The future of Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni hung in the balance on Friday after the head of the Italian FA announced he was going to review "every aspect" of the national team following this week's 2-1 defeat by Wales.

FA President Franco Carraro gave Trapattoni a public vote of confidence before the match on Wednesday, but his tone had changed in a statement posted on the FA's website.

Although he paid tribute to Trapattoni's "human and professional qualities", Carraro added that the shock loss to Wales had left Italy facing an "extremely delicate" task in qualifying for the 2004 European Championship.

"Therefore, the Italian FA will examine - with calm and attention - every aspect relating to the activity of the national team to ensure that the squad is in the best possible condition to start the next official match in March 2003 against Finland."

On his return to Italy on Thursday, Trapattoni insisted that he would not resign.

The 2004 European Championships were still a realistic target, he said, denying that his team was suffering from a crisis of

identity.

"It's as though you journalists decided to resign after writing three bad articles," he told reporters. "If we all pull on the same rope we'll go to Portugal."

If Trapattoni is to go, he will have to be pushed.

In a coaching career spanning almost 30 years, Trapattoni has only resigned once, from Cagliari during the 1995-1996 season after a 4-1 loss to Juventus left his side facing possible relegation to Serie B.

The main problem faced by Carraro is the lack of potential successors.

Dino Zoff - often cited among the candidates - has been tarred with the same accusations of defensiveness that have been levelled at Trapattoni.

Zoff guided Italy to the final of the 2000 European Championships against France, which they lost to David Trezeguet's golden goal.

He then quit after billionaire-businessman-turned politician Silvio Berlusconi publicly criticised his team's failure to attack.

Among other names put forward by the Italian media are AS Roma's Fabio Capello and Juventus's Marcello Lippi, but both are involved in long-term projects at their clubs.

From a financial point of view, there is no incentive for either man. Their clubs pay far more generous salaries than the one million euros on offer to coach the national team.

Another Eriksson girl!

Football

AFP, London

Beleaguered England manager Sven Goran Eriksson faced further embarrassment Friday after newspaper revelations that he was courting another woman at the time of his high-profile affair with Ulrika Jonsson.

Blonde sales promotion girl Jayne Connery told the Daily Mirror newspaper that Eriksson had pursued her relentlessly, although their relationship was never consummated.

Eriksson has only just ridden out the storm over his relationship with television personality Jonsson. His long-term relationship with

Italian partner Nancy Dell'Olio survived that liaison but is likely to come under more pressure following the latest revelations.