

Primera Liga preview

Barcelona, the only place to be

Football

AFP, Madrid

The teams may only be lying 10th and fifth respectively in the Spanish first division, but the match between Barcelona and Real Madrid on Saturday overshadows all others this weekend.

There are few derbies in the world to equal the battle between the representatives of Catalonia and Castile and the match has become a distillation of centuries-old animosity between the two regions with differing cultures, ideologies and even languages.

To understand why the game invokes such passions, one has to be more of a historian than a football fan.

In 1920, King Alfonso XIII gave royal assent to Madrid to add Real to their name, much to the disgust of the independence-minded Catalans, who are traditionally opposed to all things emanating from the Spanish capital.

After Franco assumed power in 1939, he further disenfranchised Barcelona fan by openly favouring Real, and at the same time persecuting Catalans for their opposition to him during the three year Civil War.

For much of Franco's reign, until his death in 1975, Barcelona's football grounds were the only places where Catalan could be openly spoken.

The bitterness between the two sides remains to this day and the

principal debate this week has been whether Luis Figo would take Real's corners on his return to the Nou Camp stadium.

Figo was a Barcelona hero until his defection to the enemy in July 2000 for a then world record transfer fee of 59.3 million euros and, since then, 'traitor' has been one of the more pleasant words used by the Barcelona faithful at any mention of his name.

SEE IT LIVE!

The Barcelona v Real Madrid match will be televised live on ESPN from 2am BST Tomorrow (November 24),

On his first visit following his move, Figo was pelted with every imaginable object and the Portuguese captain admitted he lost his nerve, though he got to grips with the hostility a little better when Real won 2-0 in the Nou Camp in the Champions League semi-final first leg in April.

"If I'm playing I'm going to take the corners. I don't have a problem with that. I just hope people can control themselves. I know some people are sensitive about me but violence isn't part of football," pleaded Figo.

The other main talking point has been the return of Ronaldo to Barcelona, the club where he spent the 1996-97 season and topped the Spanish first division's scoring charts.

Ronaldo's main concern, apart from any effects from his tiring

midweek trip to Japan, where he scored two goals in Brazil's 3-2 victory over the World Cup hosts, will be to show his true colours after a disastrous match last Sunday against league leaders Real Sociedad.

"It was one of the worst games of my life and I now want to show people what I can really do. I am really geared up to try and win on Saturday," Ronaldo told reporters.

Barcelona coach Louis van Gaal was taking the threat of Ronaldo running amok very seriously this week, despite the World Cup winner's loss of form for Real.

"I'm not going to do anything that will wind him up. Ask me in July what I think about Ronaldo," commented the Dutch coach cautiously.

For the second week in a row, Van Gaal will have to reshuffle his defence after suspensions.

Left back Fernando Navarro will be sitting in the stands after picking up his fifth yellow card of the season in Barcelona's 2-0 loss at Deportivo La Coruna but Gabi Garcia returns to the back four after missing last weekend's trip to Galicia.

French superstar Zinedine Zidane will miss Saturday's 'el clasico' encounter with a back injury. The back strain forced Zidane out of his country's mid-week friendly win over Yugoslavia.

"I still feel sore. I can't play - I'll have to see if I will be able to turn out against AC Milan," said

Zidane, who is keen to make the Champions League second phase date away to the Italians next Tuesday.

Argentine Santiago Solari is expected to take the Frenchman's place as the visitors try and win a league match at Barcelona for the first time since in 19 seasons.

Away from the spotlight, Real Sociedad will be looking to stay top and extend their unbeaten run to 11 games - although the Basques have a long way to go to equal their 32 games without defeat at the start of the 1979-80 season - with three points at Rayo Vallecano on Saturday

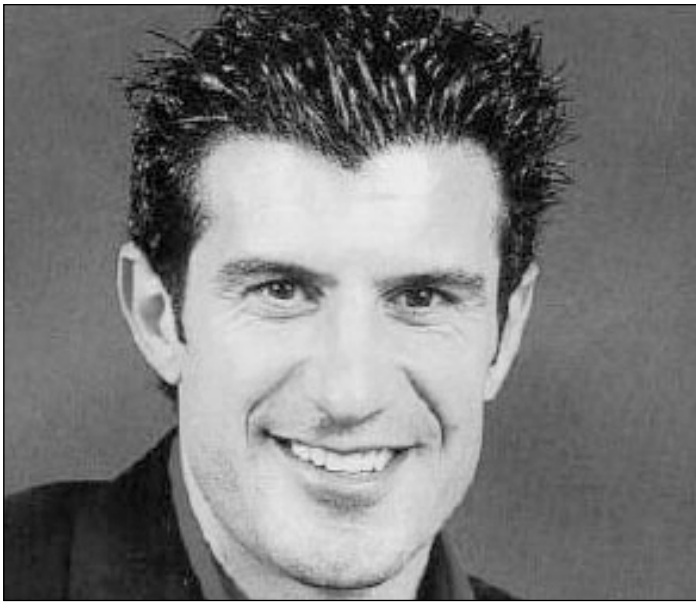
Real Sociedad have 22 points from their 10 games but Real Mallorca lie just one point adrift in second after having strung together a club record seven consecutive victories.

The Balearic islanders play host to Villarreal on Sunday but Mallorca coach Gregorio

Manzano will have to change his starting 11 for the first time in seven games as his Colombian midfielder Harold Lozano is sus-

FIXTURES

(Kick off GMT in parentheses)
Saturday: Sevilla v Deportivo La Coruna (1800), Barcelona v Real Madrid (2000), Rayo Vallecano v Real Sociedad (2030)
Sunday: Athletic Bilbao v Espanyol (1600), Celta Vigo v Osasuna (1600), Malaga v Alaves (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Racing Santander (1600), Real Mallorca v Villarreal (1600), Valencia v Valladolid (1600), Atletico Madrid v Real Betis (1930)



Fingers crossed

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Ronaldo can expect an ear-shattering reminder of just how much times have changed when he runs out in front of a 98,000 full house at the Nou Camp on Saturday to face Barcelona in the white shirt of Real Madrid.

The 26-year-old Brazilian, who became a hero to the Catalans during one astonishing season from 1996-97, should be spared the worst of the virulent abuse meted out to Luis Figo, though, when he follows in the footsteps of the Portuguese forward.

The date of October 21, 2000 will be burned into the mind of Figo after he was welcomed back to his former club by a vengeful crowd raining down insults, as well as coins, bottles and even a couple of mobile phones, throughout a 2-0 win for the home side.

While Figo jumped ship straight from Barcelona to Real in a bitterly contested \$56 million transfer in 2000, Ronaldo joined the Catalan club's eternal rivals by a less direct route.

The Brazilian left the Nou Camp for Inter Milan in 1997 after winning international renown, and the hearts of the Barca fans, by scoring 34 league goals and helping the side to a European Cup Winners' Cup triumph.

His \$45 million move to Real followed five years at Inter, four of them ravaged by injury, before a renaissance at the World Cup when his eight goals led Brazil to the title.

That time lag should be enough to ensure the reaction to his return is merely hostile as opposed to downright rabid.

"I'm not sure if Ronaldo is going to face the same sort of sting as Figo did," Barcelona midfielder Xavi told

Serie A preview

Milan focus of Italy

Football

AFP, Rome

The Milan derby takes centre stage on Saturday as the race for the Scudetto gathers pace in Italy with just three points separating the top four teams.

Unbeaten Juventus, who host Bologna at the Stadio Delle Alpi the same day, lead the title chase with Inter, Milan and Lazio in hot pursuit of the reigning champions.

In recent weeks however Inter and Milan have lost their early season sparkle, allowing the impressive Juventus to take pole position.

Inter followed their shock defeat at home to Udinese a fortnight ago with a fortunate 2-2 draw at AS Roma last weekend, while Milan have lost two out of their last five games.

Their most recent slip-up, a 2-1 defeat at Juventus two weeks ago, highlighted Milan's shortcomings.

Juventus were superior in every department and only allowed Milan back into the game by conceding a highly contentious penalty which Andrea Pirlo converted.

But even with a slender lead, Juventus' victory never looked in doubt with Czech international Pavel Nedved pulling the strings in midfield and striker Alessandro Del Piero in imperious form up front.

Milan's performances may have been unconvincing of late, but pugnacious midfielder Gennaro Gattuso is confident Saturday's derby will bring out the best in his side.

"Our team was born to win and on Saturday we will reach new heights," he said.

"Even though we have not played our best football over the last few weeks, we are still only two points behind the leaders and we have to be happy with that.

"Inter are a very competitive side that we must respect, but we are determined to get a win to maintain our challenge for the championship."

Milan's most expensive summer signing Alessandro Nesta misses the match after tearing a thigh muscle.

The former Lazio star suffered the injury in last week's 2-1 home win over Parma.

A thigh strain is likely to deprive Inter of key central defender Marco Materazzi, while coach Hector Cuper will assess the fitness of Argentine internationals Javier Zanetti, Matias Almeyda and Hernan Crespo, who were all involved in their country's friendly international victory in Japan in midweek.

Leaders Juventus, facing a tough test against sixth-placed Bologna this weekend, received a welcome boost earlier this week

with the news that coach Marcelo Lippi will be staying with the Turin club for another year.

The 54-year-old's current agreement with the 'Bianconeri' finishes at the end of the current Serie A campaign, but Juve general director Luciano Moggi has confirmed Lippi will remain at the club for another 12 months.

"He will sign a contract for another year. Then we will see," Moggi told Tuttosport.

With Lippi in control, Juventus have won four Italian titles, one Champions League, one European Supercup, one Intercontinental cup and one Coppa Italia.

Moggi also said that Italy striker Del Piero would be staying at the Delle Alpi.

"Alex is not for sale, he is our symbol," Moggi added.

Fourth-placed Lazio, whose future still looks uncertain due to crippling debts, host newly-promoted Modena on Sunday night.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday: AC Milan v Inter Milan (1930 GMT), Juventus v Bologna (1700 GMT)
Sunday: Brescia v Udinese, Chievo v Empoli, Lazio v Modena (1930 GMT), Parma v Roma, Perugia v Como, Piacenza v Torino, Reggina v Atalanta



ALAN SHEARER

Stage perfect for Shearer

AFP, London

Alan Shearer knows Old Trafford would be the perfect stage to score his 100th Premiership goal for Newcastle.

But the former England striker insists that will be the last thing on his mind as Bobby Robson's side bid to blow a hole in Manchester United's title challenge when the two clash on Saturday.

"It is a big game for us, and they don't come much bigger than Manchester United away," Shearer told Newcastle's official website.

"But it won't be easy against a team with the likes of Scholes, Giggs, van Nistelrooy and Veron there. People have been telling me that it is a good time to play them because of their injury problems, but the squad they have there is packed with quality in every position.

"Confidence is high in our camp and we are confident we can go there and get something, but we know that it's no good just saying that. We have to go there and prove it.

"We haven't won there for a long, long time so Saturday is as good a time as any to change that."

Shearer insists the 100th goal milestone is not affecting him.

"It's not a problem," he said. "People talk to me about this record and that record and they don't worry me. If the goal doesn't come on Saturday, then it will come the next week or the week after. It's not something that concerns me."

Desailly has to pay!

AFP, Toulon

France captain Marcel Desailly was ordered by a court here on Thursday to pay 1,200 euros (1,200 dollars) a month maintenance to his 12-year-old illegitimate daughter.

The inflation-linked payments will be backdated to February 1998, when the paternity case was first brought to the courts, and will continue till the child reaches 18.

In March last year, a Toulon court ruled Desailly had fathered Aida by Helene Mendy who said her legal claims for maintenance had been justified.

Testimony of witnesses produced by the mother had been enough to convince authorities Desailly was the father without recourse to genetic tests.

The player, currently with Chelsea in the English Premiership, had contested that he was the father.

Desailly's lawyer Serge Pautot had agreed to pay 733 euros but opposing counsel Jean-Claude Guidicelli had pushed for 2,200 euros, claiming this was "a drop in the ocean of the player's wealth."

Premiership preview

MU's work cut out

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United go into Saturday's match of the day against Newcastle knowing another stuttering display could see their title ambitions condemned to the scrapheap.

Trailing leaders Arsenal by nine points, Alex Ferguson's injury-racked squad know they can afford very few slip-ups from now on if they are to reclaim the championship.

With crucial games against Liverpool and Arsenal looming over the next two weeks, United have the chance to haul themselves back into contention.

But first they must come through a midday appointment with a Newcastle side brimming with confidence after stringing together a run which has seen them climb up the table to within a point of United, as well as unexpectedly reaching the second phase of the Champions League.

In contrast, United have been hit by a double whammy of injury setbacks over the last week with Rio Ferdinand (torn thigh muscle) and David Beckham (cracked ribs) ruled out of the crucial sequence of matches.

The injury problems have exposed a lack of depth in United's squad and resulted in the word crisis being attached to every story written about the club this week.

But Newcastle boss Bobby Robson dismisses suggestions that this is a good time to visit Old Trafford.

"Talk of them being a club in crisis is absolute nonsense," Robson said. "They have the best manager in the league because he's proved that, his players have proved they're the best, they have the biggest stadium and the most supporters.

"So if they're in crisis, the rest of us may as well pack in now!"

Robson though does believe his own side are closing the gap on United.

"We're getting there, but the way the league is at the moment no team will win every game. "We're full of confidence at the moment and we're looking forward to the game."

Saturday's match will be played on the second new surface to be laid at Old Trafford in less than a year.

A new fibre-reinforced turf has been transported in at a cost of nearly 100,000 pounds (158,000 dollars) to try and give United's ball players a better stage for their art.

United have suffered pitch problems since major Old Trafford development began in 1996. The increased height of the stadium has reduced the amount of sun and wind getting to the pitch, contributing to drainage problems and slowing the pace at which divots are repaired.

Arsenal will seek to extend their lead at the top at Southampton. A tricky assignment against Gordon Strachan's Saints looks set to be made more manageable with Dennis Bergkamp on track to be fit.

The Dutch striker had to go off with badly bruised ribs during last Saturday's victory over Tottenham but voiced confidence he would be ready.

"Thankfully no serious damage was done although they are still pretty sore around the front," Bergkamp revealed.

Liverpool, a point behind the Gunners after being held to a draw by Sunderland on Sunday, travel to Fulham.

Influential Swiss defender Stéphane Henchoz has resumed training after missing eight matches following surgery on his groin but will not be risked for the trip to London.

Henchoz's absence was cruelly underlined as Liverpool crashed out of the Champions

League. It also forced skipper Sami Hyypia to play recent matches with painfully bruised ribs - a sacrifice that won praise from Gerard

Houllier.

"It shows what a good leader he is that he was determined to play on," Houllier said.

Bottom club West Brom's trip to high-flying Everton will give the Baggies midfielder Sean Gregan the chance to meet up with his former boss David Moyes.

Gregan played under Moyes for five years at Preston and knows all about the managerial ability which has seen Everton revitalised by the Scot.

"When he came to Preston we were struggling," Gregan recalled. "We were stuck right at the bottom of the Second Division and then we just went off and had loads of success with promotion and near misses in the play-offs.

"He was very effective from every angle and I probably didn't appreciate just how good he was until he moved on."

Everton have strung five wins together on the trot to put themselves in a position to challenge for a place in Europe and West Brom are painfully aware that is the kind of run they need to haul themselves out of trouble.

West Ham and Bolton, who are both level with West Brom on points, also desperately need to kickstart their seasons but they could struggle to do it this weekend.

The Hammers are away to Aston Villa while Bolton entertain in-form Chelsea, for whom Marcel Desailly is doubtful after receiving a knock playing for France in midweek.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday: Aston Villa v West Ham, Bolton v Chelsea, Everton v West Brom, Fulham v Liverpool, Man Utd v Newcastle (1215 GMT), Middlesbrough v Man City, Southampton v Arsenal, Sunderland v Birmingham
Sunday: Charlton v Blackburn (1605 GMT), Tottenham v Leeds (1400 GMT)

Sport newspaper in the build-up to the game. "He was at Inter in between.

"The atmosphere is always charged, though, and that's going to work in our favour."

Ronaldo has, in fact, already made one appearance at the Nou Camp since leaving Barcelona.

That was back in April 1999, when he was part of a Brazilian side invited to the Nou Camp to play in a game to mark the club's centenary.

He was welcomed back warmly and when he scored in a match that ended in a 2-2 draw he was roundly cheered.

He would love the reaction to be the same on Saturday but he has been around long enough to know that is not going to happen.

"I'd like to be received by the fans with affection," he told Spanish sports daily Marca after his two goals helped Brazil to a 3-2 win over South Korea in a friendly international this week.

"I was there for a year, during which time things went very well for everyone and I trust that won't have been forgotten.

"I do understand that I'm now playing for Barcelona's biggest rivals and I'll understand whatever happens. I know what happened to Figo, though, and I do believe that was out of proportion."

Ronaldo has been a long way from his best since joining Real, managing just three goals so far.

His double against South Korea has rekindled the hopes of Real fans that he will help their side to what would be their first league win on enemy territory in 19 years.

"I'm really looking forward to it," said the Brazilian, who has already promised a special celebration if he does find the net. "I'm going to prove to everyone who has criticised me that they're wrong."

Belgium honour Wilmots

AFP, Brussels

Former Belgium football captain Marc Wilmots was awarded his country's highest sporting honour on Thursday.

Wilmots, who plays for German Bundesliga club Schalke 04, retired from international football after leading Belgium to the second round of this year's World Cup finals where they were defeated by eventual world champions Brazil.

The jury which awarded Wilmots the National Trophy of Sporting Merit highlighted "the exemplary nature of his sporting career, his commitment to the national team and his contribution to the reputation of Belgian sport."

Wilmots, 33, who played for Belgium 70 times, told the Belga agency: "I am not a fan of lifetime achievement awards, but this one represents the summit of my career, it crowns everything."

Wilmots is the first Belgian footballer to receive the award since Jan Ceulemans in 1990. He succeeds tennis stars Justine Henin and Kim Clijsters who won in the past two years.

Haan new China coach?

AFP, Beijing

China's football authorities have appointed former Dutch midfield star Arie Haan to coach the national team, replacing Bora Milutinovic who quit after the World Cup in June, state press said Friday.

The former Ajax great, now 54, who played for the seminal Dutch national side in the 1974 and 1978 World Cup Finals, was mainly appointed due to his relatively modest salary demands, the Beijing Evening News reported.

Citing unnamed sources in the China Football Association (CFA), the paper said Haan was appointed earlier this week following talks in Holland.

However the CFA denied a deal had been done. "We have not appointed anyone as national team coach yet," a CFA spokesman told AFP.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Hertha Berlin v Werder Bremen, VfL Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund, Arminia Bielefeld v Bayer Leverkusen, Borussia Monchengladbach v VfL Bochum, Schalke 04 v Hansa Rostock, VfB Stuttgart v Hannover 96, Kaiserslautern v Bayern Munich
Sunday: 1860 Munich v FC Nuremberg, SV Hamburg v Energie Cottbus



PHOTO: INTERNET

Inter Milan striker Christian Vieri stretches during a training session at the club's Appiano Gentile base on November 21.