

Magpies in uncharted territory



Inter Milan's super-strikers Christian Vieri (L) and Hernan Crespo locked in tussle during a training session at the club's Appiano Gentile base on November 25.



AFP, Paris

Newcastle United prepare to host Italian giants Inter Milan this Wednesday unsure, at least to some extent, whether they have the ability to make it out of the final Champions League group phase.

On the one hand, Bobby Robson's side took their fans halfway to nirvana this time two weeks ago when they beat Feyenoord 3-2 in Rotterdam to book their first ever foray into the second group phase.

However their recent 5-3 defeat in the English Premiership to a thrown-together Manchester United side provided Inter with a valuable insight into the Magpies' current defensive frailties.

On the day captain Alan Shearer scored his 100th goal for the club, he promptly wiped away the significance of his feat in the face of his team's failings.

"It is great, I love scoring goals and I treasure them all. But I can't celebrate, I can't enjoy it because we lost. We were very poor defensively and it is very annoying," Shearer said after the match.

"If you score three goals at Old Trafford you expect to come away with a victory, but not the way we defended today."

Inter, Newcastle's group A opponents alongside Barcelona and Bayer Leverkusen who meet in Germany on Wednesday, will by now have taken stock of the

Magpies' tendency to flap in defence against quality sides this season.

Despite having home advantage, Inter are sure to further test Robson's side who began their Champions League campaign by losing their first three matches.

Robson, who has coached some of the top clubs in Europe, knows only too well that Inter's South American front line of Alvaro Recoba and Hernan Crespo, either of whom could be partnered with Italian marksman Christian Vieri, can be deadly.

The Italians, unlike Newcastle, also cruised into the second group phase after finishing top of group D. Argentina striker Crespo, who scored both goals in their final group D match away to Ajax (2-2), was given the weekend off by Cuper after a tiring trip with his national team to Japan in midweek.

Whether his decision cost Inter the 1-0 defeat against city rival AC Milan is unsure - but Cuper, whose style has been described as "ugly" by the unforgiving Italian press, already has his mind elsewhere.

"We created openings and we had some excellent chances," Cuper said after Saturday's defeat.

"I can't just think about this match, we have another one on Wednesday, against Newcastle in the Champions League."

Newcastle had Craig Bellamy to thank for the last-gasp winner against Feyenoord which helped them leapfrog Dynamo Kiev in group E.

Bellamy this time could make

way for Peruvian striker Nolberto Solano, who was reported as being in the huff for being left out of the trip to the Netherlands.

English Premiership leaders Arsenal also face Italian opposition - but might feel a bit more optimistic travelling to AS Roma in Group B.

Roma, the 2001 Italian champions, are having a terrible time in Serie A, having slipped to ninth in the league after their weekend 3-0 defeat to Parma, their third reverse of the season.

Arsenal, who look to have buried a recent slump, will be looking to capitalise on the frailties of Fabio Capello's team, which is still without injured striker Francesco Totti.

Even Capello admits Arsene Wenger's extensive squad have the edge. "They have got players of the very highest standard now," Capello told The Sunday Times.

"They've got strength, they've got quality and above all they have pace and technique."

The Gunners are set to be without striker Dennis Bergkamp even though the non-flying Dutchman has offered to make the trip by rail and road.

Bergkamp scored the 99th goal of his Arsenal career in the English champions 3-2 league defeat by Southampton last weekend but Wenger was reported Monday to have turned down the forward's travel request.

Arsenal have now lost six of their last 10 matches. Elsewhere on Wednesday, Ajax face a tough Group B trip away to Spanish champions Valencia, whose injury list is nevertheless

growing.

Influential Argentine forward Kily Gonzalez will be sidelined for close to three months after injuring his ankle at the weekend while Valencia coach Rafael Benitez will also be without Norwegian forward John Carew, Francisco Rufute and Pablo Aimar.

Ajax coach Ronald Koeman knows their backs are against the wall, but makes no bones about their intentions.

"Valencia are a top quality club but we're going there with the firm intention of dominating and winning," Koeman said.

Koeman will welcome back from injury former Liverpool and Barcelona striker Jari Litmanen, who has been out for five weeks.

Zagallo taken to hospital

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian legend Mario Zagallo has been hospitalized here after being diagnosed with an irregular heartbeat, his doctor Renato Viella said on Tuesday.

The 71-year-old Zagallo made a brief return as manager of the Brazilian side for the 3-2 win over South Korea in a friendly match in Seoul last Wednesday, but that was only on an interim basis while a successor to Luiz Felipe Scolari is sought.

He was previously treated for heart problems in August at a time when he was in charge of club side Flamengo.

Zagallo won four World Cups with Brazil, twice as a player in 1958 and 1962 and twice as a coach and assistant coach in 1970 and 1994.

He was expected to be released on Wednesday if the medical treatment is successful.

No Enrique till New Year

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona skipper Luis Enrique will be out of action at least until the New Year, officials at the Nou Camp said on Tuesday.

He sustained an Achilles tendon injury on October 27 and club doctor Ricard Pruna said that it would be unwise to take a risk with the injury which could become chronic if he was rushed back to action.

That means he is sure to miss Barcelona's next four games in the Spanish First Division as well as the first two games in the second phase of the Champions League.

Luis Enrique is slated to return to action in a Spanish League Cup tie against Huelva at the Nou Camp on January 5.

Madrid-based daily AS launched a wide-ranging attack on Gaspart for defending his club's fans.

"Gaspart has no proper idea of what the institution of president represents," said the paper. "He never has grasped what this involves and now he is overstepping the ethical limits."

"He refused to eat with the Real Madrid president because he said he had to have lunch with his mother, he refused to release any players for Real Madrid's centenary match... and he said Figo was the guilty party for provoking the fans."

Meanwhile Barcelona hope to escape a ground ban for the violent incidents on Saturday after the referee's report confirmed that no player was hit by anything.

Figo, playing his second match at the Nou Camp since his transfer from Barcelona, was subjected to a hail of missiles from the radical

website of the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) on Monday.

Some Spanish newspapers carried a picture of the head of a roast sucking pig on the pitch, but it was not clear from where or when it had been thrown.

"None of the items hit Figo," the referee noted.

The RFEF will meet to discuss what action to take in the wake of the incidents, with one course of action being closure of the ground.

Barcelona president Gaspart said after the game that Figo had provoked the crowd by deliberately cleaning up the debris around the corner flag before taking the corner, a suggestion that was laughed off by

the player.

On Monday, the club changed tack, stating their case against a ground ban, while at the same time condemning the actions of the crowd.

"The club totally condemn the incidents in Saturday's game," club director Josep Maria Coronas said in a statement. "Non-violence has always held precedence over anything else."

He added: "No objective reasons exist to close the Nou Camp. Barcelona complied with all security requirements and at no time were the players placed in danger."

The incidents in Saturday's match provided the third case of serious crowd trouble in the last three years in matches between the two biggest rivals of Spanish football.

In October 2000, when Figo returned to his former club for the first time since his bitterly contested dollars 56 million transfer, he was given a similarly violent welcome.

On that occasion the player did not take the corners but he was still subjected to a volley of abuse, as well as items such as lighters and mobile phones, every time he approached the touchline.

Gaspart feels the heat

AFP/REUTERS, Barcelona

Spanish newspapers heavily criticised Barcelona president Joan Gaspart on Monday after he accused Real Madrid midfielder Luis Figo of provoking disgraceful scenes in the Nou Camp.

Gaspart even faced flak from Catalan newspapers based in Barcelona.

El Periodico reported that Gaspart had been warned by the Spanish government representative in Catalonia that his accusations against former Barcelona player Figo were inflammatory and the paper called for him to "show more moderation".

The match had to be suspended midway through the second half when Figo - who left Barcelona to join arch rivals Real in a then world record transfer in July 2000 - was pelted by fans with objects including a whisky bottle and a pig's head while he was trying to take a corner.

The teams later returned to the pitch and the match finished 0-0.

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A statement from Cirio said the restructuring plans "clearly indicated" that any new business plan would be led "by a new management team".

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He confirmed on Monday that he had bowed to the banks' wishes, saying he was "disposed to withdraw from the management of the group".

Cirio Finanziaria owns a 35.82 percent share in Lazio and its parent company Cirio Holding holds a further 15.14 percent.

The club has attracted interest from a consortium led by Al-Saadi Kadhafi, the son of Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi. Al-Saadi Kadhafi is already involved in the shareholding of another Italian club, Juventus.

Earlier this month, the London-based Law Debenture Trust Corp informed Cirio bond holders that the conditions have been met to allow the declaration that the company is effectively in default on all its bonds, worth more than one billion euros.

However, the Law Debenture Trust decided not to exercise its discretionary power to ask Cirio to redeem the bonds.

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Barcelona paid six million euros (dollars 6 million) for the Argentine playmaker in July and had the option to pay a further five million euros to buy him outright before the end of November.

Riquelme began the season on the bench, but has made the most of an injury to Luis Enrique to earn himself a place in the Barca starting line-up in recent matches and appears to have convinced coach Louis van Gaal that he has a long-term future at the club.

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Various strike partners during the ensuing years has been a major feature of United's play, and prompted Robson to go out and invest 10.5 million pounds two summers ago to match that from the left flank in the shape of Frenchman Laurent Robert.

But the arrivals of Jenas and Hugo Viana in the last nine months have increased competition for places in the United midfield, although Solano remains the only out-and-out right winger in the senior squad.

He knows he has a fight on his hands to prove himself once again, but with Spanish giants Real Madrid having trailed him in the past, there is sure to be a rise in the level of interest surrounding Solano in the weeks and months ahead.

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LUIS ENRIQUE

Hong Kong to allow betting

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong will legalise soccer gambling in a bid to put illegal operators out of business and bring in billions of dollars in new tax revenue to help cover a serious budget deficit, the government said on Tuesday.

The operating licence will go to Hong Kong's Jockey Club, which controls horseracing and Mark Six lotteries - until now the only two legal forms of gambling in Hong Kong.

"Illegal soccer gambling is invariably associated with other illegal activities, such as loan sharking," Home Affairs Secretary Patrick Ho said.

"It is also one of the major sources of funding for organised and serious criminal activities," he told a news conference.

"Authorisation of soccer betting... could alleviate the illegal soccer gambling problem and the police resources required to counter such activities."

Ho said he hoped legalised football betting would start by the middle of 2003.

The plan must still be approved by the legislature, a chamber which is dominated by pro-China figures who are not expected to raise any serious objections.

Hong Kong will join Macau, Singapore and mainland China as the few places in Asia where some form of football betting is allowed. Other Asian governments eager for fresh revenue are likely to monitor the scheme.

Most of the football bets placed in Hong Kong involve putting money on top British or European matches, which are often shown live on local cable television.

Football is fast coming of age in the region, thanks largely to satellite television and a huge boost from the World Cup finals co-hosted by Japan and South Korea, the first in Asia.

Major matches slot nicely into Asia's prime bar hours, making big-screen football broadcasts a must for any pub wanting to draw a crowd.

Illicit football gambling through small-time betting sharks in Hong Kong nets an estimated dollars 10.26 billion a year.

The government expects dollars 30 billion Hong Kong dollars (dollars 3.85 billion) a year to be spent by punters with more than HK dollars 1 billion (dollars 128 million) going into its coffers. Some sources close to the government, however, believe tax revenue could easily reach HK dollars 5 billion.

While these are sizeable sums, they would do little to close the territory's HK dollars 70.8 billion budget deficit.

AFP, Milan

The president of Lazio football club Sergio Cragnotti is ready to step down from his canned food group Cirio to let a new management team carry out the troubled company's restructuring programme, Cirio said on Monday.

Cirio Finanziaria SpA said its advisor Livolsi et Partners met the group's bank creditors on Monday to present an industrial and financial restructuring plan for the troubled group.

The plan involves the sale of non-core businesses including the Rome-based club of which it owns more than 35 percent, and retaining

all the canned food business, it said.

A statement from Cirio said the restructuring plans "clearly indicated" that any new business plan would be led "by a new management team".

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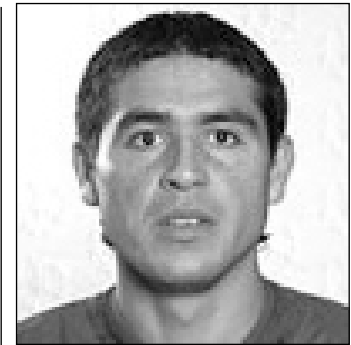
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JUAN ROMAN RIQUELME

Barca want Riquelme fully

REUTERS, Barcelona

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Solano not amused

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle midfielder Nolberto Solano says he may have to consider quitting the English Premiership club after losing his first-team place.

The 27-year-old Peruvian was devastated to be left out of the side for Newcastle's 3-2 defeat of Feyenoord in Rotterdam this month which saw Newcastle qualify for the second phase of the Champions League for the first time.

Solano, a mainstay of the side under the man who signed him, Kenny Dalglish, and his successors Ruud Gullit and Bobby Robson, has been on the bench ever since, but came on as a second-half substitute in Saturday's 5-3 defeat at Manchester United.

Teenager Jermaine Jenas has been asked to fill the right-wing

birth in the last three games amid rumours of a training ground bust-up between the South American and the Magpies' coaching staff.

However, while Robson has insisted that he still has a future at the club and has challenged him to fight for his place, the player is unhappy.

"I'm quite happy at Newcastle and I'm not planning to go anywhere," he said. "But I've been at the club for more than four seasons now and I just don't expect to be on the bench."

"If the club doesn't want me, then there's nothing I can do about that, but I'm desperate to stay at St James' Park."

"This is the most exciting time since I've been on Tyneside and nobody would want to leave a side in the second phase of the Champions League, but it might not be in my hands."

"If I am not playing first-team football, then I would have to consider my future."

Solano arrived in August 1998 in a 2.5 million pound (3.9 million dollar) switch from Argentinian side Boca Juniors, and after taking time to get to grips with the pace and power of the Premiership game, he proved himself a valuable asset.

The supply line he has provided for skipper Alan Shearer and his

various strike partners during the ensuing years has been a major feature of United's play, and prompted Robson to go out and invest 10.5 million pounds two summers ago to match that from the left flank in the shape of Frenchman Laurent Robert.

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