

Primera Liga preview Leaders plan Barca welcome

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona seem never to be far from the headlines and fate has pitched them, just one week after their derby against bitter rivals Real Madrid with its disgraceful scenes of crowd trouble, against league leaders Real Sociedad on Sunday.

With grim humour, various Real Sociedad players said this week that their fans were not the sort to pelt the opposition with objects as diverse and as dangerous as the pig's head and whisky bottles that rained down on the Madrid players. However, the home side is hoping that the capacity 32,000 crowd in Sociedad's Anoeta stadium would make life audibly uncomfortable for the visiting Catalans as the Basques bid to extend their unbeaten streak to 12 games.

Last season, Barcelona managed to win 2-0 at Sociedad, with goals from Patrick Kluivert and Xavi Hernandez, who are both expected to be playing on Sunday, but Real were then bottom of the Spanish First Division and are a very different proposition this season. Under the guidance of French coach Raynald Denoueix and contributions from the likes of inspirational midfielders Valery Karpin and Nihat Kahveci, Real Sociedad are starting to look like serious candidates for their first league title in 21 years.

However, after Barcelona's 2-1 win at Bayer Leverkusen on Wednesday - which took them to eight victories in a row in this season's Champions League - the visitors feel that they have put the off-the-field distractions behind them.

"This victory has given us the confidence to go to Real Sociedad looking for a win. We've got just the boost we needed to try and beat the league leaders," said Kluivert on Thursday, after the victory in Germany.

"Why are we better in Europe than in the Spanish League? Because we raise our game when it is important and this will be just the type of game to show that we can do that at home (in the Spanish First Division)," added the Dutch striker, fully aware that Barcelona need to start winning games if they are not to miss out on European competition next season.

Barcelona currently lie in an unfamiliar 10th place and, as an indication of their spluttering domestic form, they have not finished the season in such a lowly position since 1942.

If Barcelona do manage to get their second league win away from home in San Sebastian then both

Real Mallorca and Valencia are poised to take advantage of the door to the league leadership being left open, although both challengers need to get three points away from home if they are to make an assault on the summit.

Real Sociedad have 23 points from 11 games while Mallorca lurk close at hand in second, just one point behind but a much poorer goal difference, while Valencia in third with 21 points.

Mallorca have a difficult trip to Deportivo La Coruna, with the Galicians still smarting over the way they gave away a two goal lead to Juventus in the Champions League on Tuesday, a game which ended in a 2-2 draw.

"We threw away the game against Milan and I am determined to ensure we don't make the same mistakes against Mallorca," Deportivo coach Javier Irujeta told Spanish reporters on Thursday.

Nevertheless, Mallorca can take heart from the fact that Deportivo's home form has been erratic and their slip up against the Italians was far from an aberration, having also suffered league losses against Real Betis and Racing Santander in their Riazor stadium.

Valencia travel to Alaves and will have less to fear after two wins and a draw in their last three visits to Victoria.

Atletico Madrid have been quietly moving up the table in recent weeks and now lie fifth after notching up six games without defeat.

They will be looking to improve further at Osasuna on Saturday although Atletico midfielder Txomin Nagore has mixed feelings about putting the relegation-threatened Pamplona side to the sword.

"I was born near Pamplona and played for Osasuna from when I was nine until 22. It will be strange playing against them, knowing that many of family and relatives will also be in the stadium supporting them, not me," explained Nagore.

Real Madrid's game against struggling Sevilla has been postponed until January 2 because of the European Champions' participation in the Intercontinental Cup against Olimpia of Paraguay on Tuesday.

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

Serie A preview Roma have a point to prove

Football

AFP, Rome

AS Roma welcome title holders Juventus to the Stadio Olimpico on Sunday looking for a spark to ignite a disastrous league campaign that has seen them take just seven points from their last six matches.

A surprise 3-0 loss at Parma last weekend, Roma's third defeat of the season, left them languishing in 10th place in the table, nine points adrift of leaders AC Milan.

With nearly a third of the season completed, the Giallorossi can ill afford many more slip-ups if they are to close that gap and haul themselves back into contention for the Scudetto.

Coach Fabio Capello, whose contract with Roma finishes at the end of the current season and is reportedly looking to move abroad, believes it's win or bust on Sunday.

"We have to beat Juventus at all costs," he said. Speaking after his side's 3-1 second phase Champions League defeat at home to Arsenal on Wednesday, Capello identified the problems behind Roma's alarming loss of form.

"Some of the team have a tendency to switch off when things are going against us," he said.

"It happened against Arsenal, and it happened at Parma on Sunday."

"It's something we have discussed in the dressing room and are determined to put right."

Striker Antonio Cassano, who put Roma ahead against the English champions before Thierry Henry scored a stunning hat-trick, remains confident the 2001 champions will turn things around soon.

"We have to keep believing in ourselves," said the 20-year-old former Bari marksman.

"It's a difficult period and the results are not going our way, but things can change quickly."

Roma's Italy international Damiano Tomassi is doubtful after missing the Arsenal match because of a sore ankle, while Lilian Thuram remains Juventus' biggest concern.

The French defender strained his right thigh in Tuesday's 2-2 Champions League draw in Spain against Deportivo La Coruna.

Table-toppers Milan, buoyant after their 1-0 win over Champions League holders Real Madrid on Tuesday, visit Empoli this weekend.

The newly-promoted side have won only one of their six matches at home, but with Antonio Di Natale in sparkling form the Tuscans could cause an upset at the Carlo Castellani stadium.

Di Natale, linked with a move to a bigger Serie A club next season, is joint leading goalscorer in Italy this season with eight goals.

A string of excellent performances earned him his first cap for the national team against Turkey earlier this month.

Cash-strapped Lazio, third in the table a point behind leaders Milan, look to continue their excellent progress away at Piacenza.

Crippled by massive debts and put up for sale by their major shareholder, the Roman club have shrugged off their money worries to excel on the pitch.

Under the guidance of coach former player Roberto Mancini, Lazio are unbeaten in 10 league matches. Their only loss in Serie A was the 2-1 home defeat against Chievo on the opening day of the season.

Fourth-placed Inter Milan, 4-1 winners over Newcastle in their Champions League contest at St James' Park on Wednesday, take on struggling Brescia at the San Siro.

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



GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN! Real Madrid's Brazilian superstar Roberto Carlos waves at fans on arrival at the new Tokyo International airport in Narita yesterday.

Intercontinental Cup One Real target

Football

AFP, Tokyo

European champions Real Madrid have set their sights on wrapping up their centenary year by being crowned world club champions with victory in the Inter-Continental Cup next week.

Real meet South American champions Olimpia next Tuesday - and are determined to avoid a repeat of their slip up against Boca Juniors in the same fixture two years ago.

"I'm happy that we were able to come back to Japan again, because we were beaten (by Boca Juniors of Argentina) two years ago and we've

got the chance to challenge again," said Madrid president Florentino Perez.

"Especially for our club, this is the 100th anniversary. I hope we can celebrate it by playing an exciting game for our fans and bringing the Cup to our country."

Real, whose challenge will be spearheaded by Brazilian striker Ronaldo and French international Zinedine Zidane, have won the world club title twice in 1960 and 1998 after winning the UEFA champions league nine times.

Ronaldo, 26, helped Brazil to the World Cup victory and was the tournament's top scorer with eight goals, including two in the final against Germany. He joined the Spanish powerhouse from Inter Milan at the end of August.

Zidane, 30, struck home the decider in the European Cup final in May with a spectacular volley shot from the edge of the area as Real beat Germany's Bayer Leverkusen 2-1.

Real came to Tokyo two years ago as the favourites to win the Cup but conceded two early goals before losing to Boca 2-1.

Ahead of next Tuesday's match, Real have failed to score for three games in a row, drawing with Real Sociedad and Barcelona in the Spanish league and losing to AC Milan 1-0 in the champions league.

Their skipper Fernando Hierro and Ronaldo have been sidelined, while Zidane has just returned from a back injury.

"We have four more days to prepare for the match. (Claude

Makelele, Raul (Sanfeliix), Raul (Gonzalez) and Guti, who had injured, are planning to join the practice," said head coach Vicente Del Bosque.

"(Francisco) Pavon, Ronaldo and Hierro have already re-joined after having a cold.

"Our goal this season is to win the Inter-Continental Cup, because when we lost to Boca Juniors two years ago, our performance was terrible.

"Of course, it's important to win, but it's also important how well we perform in a match.

"We'll challenge for our third Inter-Continental Cup. We'd like to play a fantastic game that we can carve our name Real Madrid into the world," said Del Bosque.

Rivaldo out for three weeks

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan forward Rivaldo will miss his side's Champions League game against Borussia Dortmund on December 11 after being ruled out for up to three weeks with a thigh muscle strain.

Milan said the Brazilian World Cup winner had picked up the injury during Tuesday's 1-0 win over Real Madrid in their opening group C game.

Rivaldo has finally begun to live



up to expectations for Milan - setting up the goal in the 1-0 derby win over Inter on Saturday and producing his best performance since moving to Italy from Barcelona during the close-season against Real.

His absence will give coach Carlo Ancelotti the chance to play strikers Andriy Shevchenko and Filippo Inzaghi together, while Rivaldo's compatriot Serginho could be another alternative for the trip to Germany.

Shearer in trouble

AFP, London

Newcastle's Alan Shearer was charged by UEFA's disciplinary committee Thursday for allegedly elbowing Inter Milan's Fabio Cannavaro during Wednesday night's Champions League clash.

Shearer was caught by television cameras swinging an elbow which appeared to catch the back of the Italian international defender's head, but escaped any censure by the referee.

A UEFA spokesman told the Press Association: "Disciplinary proceedings have been instigated against Alan Shearer on the basis of video evidence. A decision will be made on the case by UEFA's control and disciplinary commission tomorrow afternoon."

Newcastle, lost the game 4-1, and had Craig Bellamy sent off before the incident for lashing out at Marco Materazzi.

Draw suit Leeds fine



AFP, Paris

Under-fire Leeds United boss Terry Venables bought himself a little extra breathing space on Thursday when his faltering English Premiership side drew 0-0 with Malaga in their UEFA Cup third round, first leg clash.

Leeds went into the match having won just once in nine Premiership games - performances which had left them in 14th place in the table, just four points off the relegation zone and with angry fans calling for the head of the ex-England coach.

Venables said he was delighted with the result.

"It was a good result for us because they are a very strong side.

"We had a lot of chances in the first half and I thought we played really well then.

"But they pushed us back especially towards the end. However, the boys did really well," said the Leeds boss who could also look back on a first clean-sheet in six games.

Leeds went into the match missing nine regular first teamers including the influential Mark Viduka, Nicky Barmby and Robbie Fowler.

After a tight first half, it was veteran Panamanian striker Dely Valdes who had a golden chance in the 47th minute but Leeds keeper Paul Robinson did well to push away his eight-yard shot.

The Spanish side had the better of the second half and Edgar wasted another opportunity in the 75th minute when he raced away from his marker but could only shoot wide past Robinson's right post.

Leeds defender Gary Kelly said the team wanted to perform well for Venables.

"We wanted to knuckle down for the gaffer because he's been under

a lot of pressure," said the Irish international.

"The fans need to be patient and hopefully we have now turned the corner."

Earlier, Leeds' controversial striker Alan Smith had been lucky to stay on the pitch after 36 minutes when, having already received a yellow card, he dived in feet-first on goalkeeper Pedro Contreras but escaped further censure by the referee.

It had been Smith who had looked the most dangerous Leeds striker and came closest to scoring earlier in the first half when his shot was saved by Contreras.

Liverpool, who dropped into the UEFA Cup after failing to make it through to the second stage of the Champions League, had England striker Michael Owen to thank for a 1-0 win at Dutch side Vitesse Arnhem.

"If the result had reflected the number of chances we had would have been 4-1," said Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier.

"But the fact that we kept a clean sheet is a major factor for the second leg. We could have killed them off but I'm still pleased with the resilience my players showed."

Liverpool dominated throughout and the only goal came after 27 minutes.

Vladimir Smicer stole the ball from Vitesse defender Puel Frankel just outside the area.

A cross from the wing found Milan Baros inside the area and the young Czech held the ball up well before squaring to Owen who slipped the ball past Yugoslav keeper Dragoslav Jevric.

Henrik Larsson struck goal number 182 in his five years at Celtic to give the Scottish champions a first leg advantage in their third round tie with Spain's Celta Vigo in Glasgow.

Celtic have not survived beyond Christmas in any European competition in 23 years but they will fancy their chances of ending that dismal run after dominating for long periods at Parkhead.

After a frustrating first half for the home side, Larsson broke the deadlock six minutes after the break, latching on to a John Hartson flick-on from Steve Guppy's corner to head home from close range.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Results in UEFA Cup third round, first leg matches on Thursday:

At Krakow, Poland Wisla Krakow (Pol) 1 (Poulsen 38-og) Schalke 04 (Ger) 1 (Mpenza 81)	At Denizli, Turkey Denizlispor (Tur) 0 Lyon (Fra) 0
At Liberec, Czech Republic Liberec (Cze) 2 (Zboncak 45, Slovak 85-pen) Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Basinas 12-pen, Olsadebe 52)	At Salonika, Greece PAOK Salonika (Gre) 1 (Georgiadis 52) Slavia Prague (Cze) 0
At Bordeaux, France Bordeaux (Fra) 0 Anderlecht (Bel) 2 (Jestrovic 9, Hasti 90)	At Athens AEK Athens (Gre) 4 (Georgatos 13, Nikolaidis 24, Petkov 31, Zagorakis 36) Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 0
At Arnhem, Netherlands Vitesse Arnhem (Ned) 0 Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Owen 27)	At Istanbul Besiktas (Tur) 3 (Pancu 31, Ronaldo Guirao 71, Nouna 82) Dynamo Kiev (Ukr) 1 (Rincon 30)
At Bruges, Belgium FC Bruges (Bel) 1 (Van der Heyden 42) Stuttgart (Ger) 2 (Balakov 72, Karanyi 90)	At Graz, Austria Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Amoah 45) Lazio (Ita) 3 (Chiesa 46, S. Inzaghi 57, 87)
At Glasgow Celtic (Sco) 1 (Larsson 52) Celta Vigo (Spa) 0	At Malaga, Spain Malaga (Spa) 0 Leeds United (Eng) 0
At Seville Real Betis (Spa) 1 (Alfonso 9-pen) Auxerre (Fra) 0	At Porto FC Porto (Por) 3 (Helder Postiga 35, 45, Jankauskas 87) Lens (Fra) 0
Played Tuesday At Berlin Hertha Berlin (Ger) 2 (Beinlich 28, Sava 68-og) Fulham (Eng) 1 (Marlet 53)	At Paris Paris Saint Germain (Fra) 2 (Nyarko 17, Fiorese 45) Boavista (Por) 1 (Claudio 75)

Premiership preview Gunners in great spirits

Football

AFP, London

Reigning English title holders Arsenal go into Saturday's match at home to Aston Villa buoyed by their spectacular midweek Champions League success against Italian giants Roma.

Arsene Wenger's side were a goal down before a hat-trick from his fellow Frenchman Thierry Henry inspired the Gunners to a memorable 3-1 win Wednesday in the Olympic Stadium.

Wenger, who described the match as Arsenal's "best result ever in Europe" was soon thinking about the task ahead.

Asked on his return to Luton Airport, north of London, Thursday, what he was thinking about when Henry secured his hat-trick with a superb free-kick, Wenger replied: "I was thinking about playing Aston Villa on Saturday.

"Playing Villa is a very big game for us," said Wenger who last week saw his team surprisingly lose in the league to Southampton.

Arsenal's Swedish-born goalkeeper Rami Shaaban is set to make his second start of the week after deputising for David Seaman because of the England number one's groin injury.

After a shaky start against Roma, Shaaban held his nerve and said Seaman's pre-match words of encouragement helped him keep his composure during the game.

"He told me to go out and play my game, to do my best," Shaaban explained.

Lauren (ankle), Ray Parlour (hamstring) and Kanu (knee) have all been ruled out of Saturday's match.

But the good news for Wenger is that Dennis Bergkamp will be available after the Holland international striker's fear of flying saw him ruled out of the trip to Rome.

Victory for Arsenal would put them four points clear at the top but that lead would be cut to a point were Liverpool to beat Manchester United at Anfield on Sunday.

During their club's heyday in the 1980s, Liverpool fans regularly had the chance to unfurl banners proclaiming 'Manchester: trophy free zone'.

But United's recent dominance has put paid to all that. Meanwhile Liverpool, searching for a first title since 1990, last week saw their championship bid derailed by a 3-2 defeat against Fulham.

Manager Gerard Houllier has come under pressure to drop goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek but the Polish international retained his place for the team's 1-0 UEFA Cup win against Vitesse Arnhem on Thursday.

In the build-up to Sunday's match Houllier defended summer

signings El Hadji Diouf and Bruno Cheyrou who have yet to make an impact in England.

"You need six months to settle into the English game and Bruno and El-Hadji will not be kept out of the first team for long.

"Bruno had a problem recently because he had both his wisdom teeth out. That's why he couldn't be involved in our matches. It's worth pointing out we have not lost a match when he's played. It's as simple as that with him.

"Diouf only came back from South Africa late last week so couldn't be involved in our game with Fulham."

United, by contrast, appear to be back to somewhere near their best form after a shaky start to the season with wins over Newcastle in the league and Basel in the Champions League.

Now Alex Ferguson's side are just six points off the top of the table. However, the Scot is not getting carried away.

"I think Arsenal and Liverpool have improved and I don't think we are meeting our expectations at this moment in time," he told United's official website.

"I think Arsenal and Liverpool have built up very big squads. In particular Liverpool have built a strong and athletic squad."

But just across Stanley Park, Liverpool's city rivals Everton have also been making people sit up and take notice.

David Moyes' surprise package are now third in the table, having won their last six league games, five of those without conceding a goal.

But the Everton boss is trying hard to keep the lid on expectations ahead of Sunday's match away to Newcastle.

"We won't get carried away," Moyes insisted. "I can find plenty of teams who were in this position after 15 games and ended up in the bottom half."

Basement club West Ham, the only side in the Premiership or Football League not to have won at home this season, will be looking to end that record when Southampton visit Upton Park on Monday.

Another defeat could spell the end of manager Glenn Roeder's time in charge of the Londoners.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Arsenal v Aston Villa, Birmingham v Tottenham, Blackburn v Fulham, Chelsea v Sunderland, Manchester City v Bolton, West Bromwich v Middlesbrough
Sunday: Leeds v Charlton, Liverpool v Manchester United (1215GMT), Newcastle v Everton (1415GMT)
Monday: West Ham v Southampton (2000GMT)

Bundesliga preview

Bayern keep on fighting!

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has demanded his team make Hertha Berlin the fall guys on Saturday after another training ground bust-up at the German giants this week.

Victory on Saturday will give Bayern a nine point lead over their title rivals with second and third placed sides Werder Bremen and VfB Stuttgart not due to play until Sunday.

However, Bayern's build-up to the match has been hampered by another row amongst the players which Hitzfeld attributed to the Bavarian side's failure to make it into the second stage of the Champions League this season.

The Munich website reported that following Niko Kovac and Bixente Lizarazu coming to blows three weeks ago, Tuesday saw Ghanaian Sammy Kouffour and Jens Jeremies also become involved in a scuffle.

To make matters worse, Thorsten Fink, who tried to act as peacemaker, found himself on the end of a stray punch which landed on the player's left eye.

"You can't rule out a certain amount of uncontrolled aggression when players have more time to train and have to watch the Champions' League on the TV," signed Hitzfeld.

"One or two of them may well be a bit hot."

"That was a slip-up by Sammy. He has been fined, and that's the end of the matter," the Bayern coach said.

Sixth-placed Hertha, meanwhile, warmed up for the match with a 2-1 UEFA Cup win over Fulham on Tuesday but coach Huub Stevens is still fuming over his side's 1-0 home

league defeat against Werder Bremen last weekend.

"The second half was the worst I have ever witnessed from Hertha," said Stevens.

However, they have refused to have any thoughts about conceding the title to their rivals.

"Bayern are the favourites, but it is not finished yet," said their Brazilian ace Marcelinho.

But history is against Hertha on Saturday - they haven't won in Munich since 1977.

At least, Hertha have the consolation of being in the right half of the table unlike last

year's Champions League runners-up Bayer Leverkusen whose misery at their midweek 2-1 defeat at the hands of Barcelona was compounded on Thursday when midfielder Zoltan Sebescen was ruled out of action for up to eight weeks with a knee injury.

"It's an epidemic," moaned coach Klaus Toppmoller.

"All the time, we have new injuries."

Leverkusen, in 11th place, entertain SV Hamburg on Saturday, desperately needing the three points if they are to avoid slipping into further trouble.

On Sunday, Stuttgart go into their match with