

Shades of vintage United



AFP, Paris

Manchester United's needs were briefly well served last season by the part league, part knockout format of the Champions League...

United were twice outplayed by Wednesday's opponents Deportivo La Coruna in the opening group stage...

"We won the ones that mattered," as United boss Alex Ferguson dryly noted.

United are now hoping to take their Spanish sequence to 3-2 in their favour on home soil...

Two wins going into the tournament's winter break would be a sizeable Christmas-time fillip for the back-in-form Red Devils...

Defender Rio Ferdinand is also making good progress from a thigh muscle injury and Ferguson says both men could be in the frame to start the Group D match against Javier Irureta's men.

"I doubt Duscher will play because it might fuel hostility," said Deportivo coach Javier Irureta, who says he received hate mail after the incident.

"United fans sent me some terrible letters saying I'd told my

players to 'do' Beckham. But that's absolutely unfair and untrue.

"Their fans wished the worst things to happen. They wanted me to suffer pain and torture and they told me I should suffer all kinds of accidents from a plane crash to being killed in a car smash.

"But worst of all they said they wanted my children to die from the same fate and that upset me a lot."

Ferguson says he is impressed with how Deportivo have coped with mounting injury problems.

"They have been playing with four full-backs in defence because

bench as he is short of match fitness following a knee injury.

Basel coach Christian Gross was in pugnacious mood looking forward to the game.

"We are well capable of recovering in Turin the three points we lost at home to Manchester, and we'll be going there to attack," Gross vowed.

In Group C, there should be little to choose between Germany's Borussia Dortmund, who beat Juve in the 1997 final, and five-times winners AC Milan.

Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo is unlikely to play although he is back in training following a thigh strain suffered in the win over holders Real Madrid at the San Siro.

Compatriot Serginho says the Milanese are out for revenge after losing to the Germans, who have a win under their belts achieved at Lokomotiv Moscow, last week.

"We want revenge for the 4-0 defeat they inflicted on us last season," Serginho told Milan's official website.

"It was a bad evening in which we played poorly. But this year things have changed a lot. This team is very different and we'll prove it on Wednesday."

Dortmund coach Matthias Sammer said he knew Milan were now a different proposition.

"Milan are a tough obstacle and one of the best teams in Europe. But we don't have to hide from anyone."

Both sides are bidding for a place in the last eight alongside Real Madrid, who should see off group makeweights Lokomotiv at the Bernabeu.

Real have ground to make up after their 1-0 loss in Milan but after a run of poor form they clicked handsomely in Sunday's 5-1 win over Mallorca where Ronaldo and Raul bagged two goals apiece.

Having wrapped up the Intercontinental Cup last week, Real are now officially the best club side in the world.

But coach Vicente Del Bosque, bidding for a third European Cup success in his fifth season in charge, warns that status counts for little.

"We have to realise that the Intercontinental Cup is now part of history," said Del Bosque.

FIXTURES

Champions League 2nd round group phase matches on Wednesday:

GROUP C

At Dortmund Borussia Dortmund (Ger) v AC Milan (Ita) At Madrid Real Madrid (Spa) v Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus)

GROUP D

At Turin Juventus (Ita) v Basel (Swi) At Manchester Manchester United (Eng) v Deportivo La Coruna (Spa)

(Nouredine) Naybet has been injured all season but they are still a very good football team.

Ferguson also likes striker Roy Makaay, currently indispensable given injuries to Diego Tristan and Juan Carlos Valeron.

"He seems to have hit a purple patch this season," Ferguson noted. Juventus, meanwhile, having settled for a draw at Deportivo, will bid to see off surprise qualifiers Basel in Italy in the other group game.

The Italians are set to recall striker Alessandro Del Piero, dropped for Sunday's shock league defeat at Brescia - the club's first loss of the season in the league.

But Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids could miss out after twisting his knee while French forward David Trezeguet is likely to start on the



IN LOVE! Kaka (L) and Mariah Carey

Kaka makes Carey crazy!



INTERNET, Sao Paulo

During a trip to Brazil to record a Christmas special, American pop diva Mariah Carey went gaga over Brazil's WC'2002 winning baby-of-the-squad, Kaka.

Carey, who refused to be photographed with anyone, except the

20 year old sensation, whom she couldn't keep her hands off during the shooting of their photo, which led to rumors that the two stars involvement went beyond the photo shoot.

Kaka, who is Brazil's most eligible bachelor is said to be headed to Europe, with Bayern Munich, Milan, Juventus, and Manchester United the most likely spots.

Violence-filled Italy



AFP, Rome

The latest figures of football-related violence at Italian matches released Monday showed that injuries to supporters and police this season had risen a massive 260 percent on last term.

After 13 weeks of the current campaign, statistics show that a total of 150 fans were injured following incidents inside and outside grounds, while the number

of police officers hurt rose from 97 to 357.

Many of those injured were victims of thrown objects, including bottles, fireworks and flares.

Home Office minister Giuseppe Pisanu met with the national chief of police Gianni De Gennaro and Italian football federation chairman Franco Carraro on Monday to discuss ways in which to prevent trouble.

"This meeting was not only to raise the alarm at the sudden rise in violent incidents, but also to increase dialogue about security levels," Pisanu said.

Gaspart facing vote of censure



AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona president Joan Gaspart is facing a vote of censure with the side struggling in the league and desperate to bridge the growing gap with rivals and serial European champions Real Madrid.

A fan on Monday presented the motion against the club's board and if 4,500 fellow supporters sign their support within 14 days, Gaspart

could face a vote for a new regime after two and a half years in charge.

A similar motion put down four months ago came to nothing and Gaspart is not supposed to have to face a vote until 2005.

Barcelona will bid to see off Newcastle United on Wednesday in the Champions League to keep up their perfect record this season in the tournament and relieve the growing pressure on Dutch coach Louis van Gaal, under the cosh in his second spell in charge at the Nou Camp.



Sunderland's Norwegian striker Tore Andre Flo (R) battles with Manchester City's Chinese international Sun Jihai at the Stadium of Light in Sunderland on December 9.

Ronaldo BBC's choice



INTERNET

Few international footballers have been able to earn redemption in such a spectacular way as Ronaldo did in the 2002 World Cup. His performance helped him become only the third footballer to win the BBC Overseas Personality Award, following Eusebio and Pele.

It was in the Far East that the Brazilian star as finally able to put the ghosts of France '98 truly behind him.

Having suffered from a string of injuries and a lack of first team football at Italian club Inter Milan, he made a triumphant return in Japan and Korea, leading Brazil to their fifth World Cup.

He won the Golden Boot award with eight goals during the tournament - two coming in the final - and erased all memory of the 3-0 final defeat by France four years earlier. The buck-toothed Brazilian made his name as a 16-year-old at Brazilian club Cruzeiro, before being lured to Europe by Bobby Robson at PSV Eindhoven.

In just 46 league games he scored 42 goals, earning the atten-

tion of all the top clubs across the continent.

In the end, it was Spanish club Barcelona who won the race for his signature and, in his only season there, he found the target on 47 occasions in all competitions.

The awards flooded in - he was named Fifa World Player of the Year in 1996 and 1997.

From there his career nosedived. Two major knee injuries and a series of operations crippled the striker and his appearances were severely limited for Inter.

His lowest point saw him ruled out for the entire 2000/1 season.

His recovery, though, was remarkable and timed to perfection.

He returned to full fitness and form ahead of the 2002 World Cup and the old Ronaldo was sparked back into life.

His sensational performance in Japan and Korea has seen a re-blossoming of the career of Brazil's biggest football hero since Pele.

In the true style of a world-class international, he promptly announced he was fed up with life in Milan and has moved to Spanish giants Real Madrid, where he hopes to attain even greater heights.

CSF boss wants five



REUTERS, Asuncion

South American Football Confederation (CSF) president Nicolas Leoz claimed that his continent should have five guaranteed places at the World Cup finals rather than the current 4-1/2.

Leoz said that while Africa and Asia had size and Europe had economic wealth, South America offered quality and an unmatched record at World Cups.

South America was given four automatic places at the 2002 World Cup, while fifth-placed Uruguay played off against Oceania winners Australia.

Soccer's world governing body FIFA, under pressure to increase places for Asia and provide a direct one for Oceania, has considered reducing the South American quota to four but Leoz wants more slots rather than less.

"We think it should be five," he told Reuters, seemingly bemused at the idea that South America could lose a place to Oceania after Uruguay beat Australia in last year's playoff.

"That's what I ask myself," he said.

Leoz remembered being involved in a heated argument last year with Issa Hayatou after the African Football Confederation (CAF) president suggested reducing the South American quota to three places.

"We have won nine of the 17 World Cups, Europe has won eight," he said.

"We have won more than 50 percent of the Intercontinental finals so we have supremacy at club and national team level."

Leoz added that although Real Madrid beat Paraguay's Olimpia in last week's meeting of European and South American champions in Japan, Brazilians Roberto Carlos and Ronaldo and Argentine Esteban Cambiasso were among the Spanish club's key players.

"Seventeen players (including the substitutes) on the pitch were South Americans," he added. "Quality is our business card."

"We have fewer inhabitants but we still have the raw material... There is always a South American distinguishing himself at the World Cup."

"We receive in television rights the same amount for one competition as UEFA receive for a match involving Real Madrid," he added.

"We have a very small market -- but good football."

A Chinese ambition



AFP, London

Plans to help China match European and South American countries on the world soccer stage centred on the biggest grass-root football project in the world have been unveiled here.

It is hoped that six million young players will take part in the scheme within three years.

Six thousand schools will take part in the first stage of the project, Chinese officials announced here Tuesday.

The scheme, with backing from German investment bank Deutschebank, is also intended to provide opportunities for overseas sports-related businesses to enter the Chinese marketplace.

"The introduction of a football training programme to schools throughout China will not only benefit Chinese youth and school children but also benefit Asia and even global football and other sports industries," senior Chinese official Wang Xiaopeng said.

China is already a major player in the sporting world. In 2008 it will host the Olympic Games, and in two years time will stage its first motor racing formula one Grand Prix.

The country made its World Cup bow in South Korea and Japan this year but returned home after three defeats and having scored no goals.

The new project is designed to mobilise China's vast human resources. In a country with a population of 370 million under the age of 18, the first stage will introduce football into schools in 12 major cities.

The scheme ranges from coaching to competitive matches, and special events for would-be professional players.

It is hoped that six million youngsters will take part by the end of the third year of the scheme.

Duscher won't be risked



AFP, La Coruna

Deportivo La Coruna coach Javier Irureta confirmed on Monday that he had left out his midfielder Aldo Duscher from the squad that will play Manchester United on Wednesday to avoid any trouble on the trip to England.

The Galicians play United at Old Trafford in a crucial Champions League Group B clash.

When the two sides met in last season's Champions League quarter-finals, Duscher brutally tackled David Beckham and broke a bone in the England captain's left foot.

Beckham recovered just in time to play in the World Cup but was far from full fitness and many English fans still hold Duscher responsible

for the demise of Manchester United and England's hopes on international stages last summer.

"I don't want to generate any tension, excitement or provocation which could affect the team," Irureta admitted to Spanish reporters, after originally saying that his team selection was based purely on the need to rotate his squad.

The Argentine player said that he understood Irureta's decision although he was saddened by it.

"Everything is fine now between myself and Beckham. I was hoping to be there because I had been thinking about trying to exchange my jersey with him," said Duscher.

Irureta also hinted strongly on Monday that his inspirational midfielder Juan Carlos Valeron will start against the Red Devils.

Valeron was one of the Spanish success stories of the World Cup but broke his left leg in a Spanish

League match on September 21 against Valladolid and has not started a match since.

His only two outings have been as a late substitute in Deportivo's last two Spanish league games.

"In keeping with my policy of rotating the squad, there are some players who were rested on Saturday who will be on from the outset," Irureta told a press conference on Monday.

The Spanish media have attributed some of Deportivo's mediocre results this season to the absence of Valeron, who was the main provider to Deportivo's sharpshooters Diego Tristan and Roy Makaay.

Other players in line to take the field at Old Trafford include Spanish internationals Enrique Romero and Sergio Gonzalez, neither of whom played in Deportivo's 1-1 draw at bottom club Recreativo Huelva on Saturday.

US plans of Barca, MU, Juve



REUTERS, Barcelona

Three of Europe's biggest football clubs -- Barcelona, Manchester United and Juventus -- are teaming up for a pre-season tour of the United States to open new marketing opportunities and promote the sport there, the Spanish club said.

The Catalan club said that the 11-day tour, which has been arranged as part of its strategic alliance with American Football's National Football League (NFL), would include a match against Juventus in Boston on July 27 and one against Manchester United in

Philadelphia on August 3.

The opponents and venue for a third match to take place on July 30 have yet to be confirmed.

"The tour forms part of the club's commercial strategy which is designed to open up the United States market," read a statement on the Barcelona website.

"The tour will represent an important source of revenue in terms of television rights, sponsorship and marketing."

The club said that the tour's official presentation will take place during Super Bowl XXXVII in San Diego on January 26.

Barcelona entered into a three-year partnership with the NFL last

February with the two bodies agreeing to work together to support each other's operations on either side of the Atlantic, each promoting the other in their own countries.

Barcelona agreed to support the Spanish City's NFL Europe team the Dragons, and the NFL have helped Barcelona schedule their tour which will take place at American football stadiums.

The strategic relationship was the first between a major American sports league and a leading European soccer club although Manchester United and the New York Yankees baseball team unveiled a similar business link-up last year.

Premiership No light in Sunderland



AFP, London

Sunderland, who lost 3-0 at home to Manchester City on Monday night, were booed off the pitch as their Premiership fortunes remained mired in the relegation zone.

Marc-Vivien Foe, Sun Jihai and Shaun Goater found the net for the Mancunians in a one-sided, comfortable win at the Stadium of Light which left a bitter taste in the mouths of the Wearside fans.

The home side pushed up from the start, with George McCartney making good progress down the left flank, but they lacked the final, penetrating ball up front.

City grabbed the opening goal

just before half-time when the Sunderland defence failed to pick up a hopeful punt upfield by Jihai and Foe outpaced the home rear-guard, flicked the ball over the on-rushing keeper Jurgen Macho on the edge of his box, and neatly scooped the ball home despite the attentions of Joachim Bjorklund.

Sunderland came under pressure straight from the restart when Anelka burst down the left and was stopped by a great saving tackle from Bjorklund.

Foe reacted best to the resulting corner with a flicked header which flashed inches wide of the helpless Macho's left-hand post.

The home side were playing a dangerous game with their offside trap against a man of Anelka's pace

and the Frenchman was very close to racing clear again in the 47th minute.

Sunderland's problem's intensified in the 62nd minute when more slack defending gave City their second goal.

Goater sent Anelka cutting into the Sunderland box from the left and Macho could only parry the Frenchman's cross-shot into the path of Jihai, who knocked home the simplest of chances.

City should have gone further ahead in the 84th minute when Richard Dunne cut in from the left and found Anelka who somehow hit the bar from under the post.

Goater finished off Sunderland however with a neat turn and low shot past Macho in the 87th minute.