

Primera Liga preview

Rallying around Van Gaal

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's under-performing players rallied to the support of besieged coach Louis van Gaal on Friday and pledged to take out their frustrations on Mallorca on Saturday.

Barcelona have gone five league games without a win and find themselves in an unfamiliar 13th place in the Spanish first division.

Not since the 1941-42 season have Barca made such a poor start and they are only two points away from the relegation zone, with the nightmare of going down for the first time in their history suddenly becoming far from the preposterous proposal of the past.

The Catalan club's fanatical supporters are baying for the head of the unpopular Dutch coach, as well as the Barcelona president Joan Gaspart.

So far the players have publicly backed Van Gaal but their opinion may be irrelevant if Barcelona lose again on Saturday.

"The fault is everybody's. The coaches and the players but we players are the ones going out on the field. I don't think we should be changing the coach," said midfielder Javier Saviola.

"In the last few games it's true that we haven't been playing good football and that we have committed important errors.

"In this atmosphere it is difficult to concentrate on preparing for a game, when everyone is talking about changing the coach, but I think we are going to show people what we have and get out of the situation."

Van Gaal has more to worry about than the fans' lack of confidence in him - he goes into the match at the holiday resort short on specialist defenders.

Fernando Navarro became the

latest name to join the list of injured players when doctors announced on Tuesday that they did not expect him back before the end of the season after snapping ligaments in his right knee during Sunday's humiliating 3-0 defeat by Sevilla in the Nou Camp.

Michael Reiziger and Patrik Andersson are both out until at least



LUIS VAN GAAL

the end of January, Carles Puyol and Philip Cocu face fitness tests while Frank de Boer has had a succession of minor problems and is less than 100 per cent fit.

Mallorca have slipped down to seventh place, drawing two and losing the other two of their last four games after a club record seven wins on the trot, but Barcelona will remember that they have lost on three of their last four league visits to the island.

By contrast to the gloomy atmosphere prevailing at Barcelona, Real Sociedad's seasonal celebrations are likely to be the most joyous for the last 20 years.

They have 32 points from an unbeaten 14 games and lead the league by four points from reigning champions Valencia.

The Basques have also been presented by the fixtures computer with the possibility of a three point Christmas present as they play bottom club Recreativo Huelva on

Sunday, who have only won one match at home this season.

"I get up in the morning feeling happy that I am here and that's the sign of being with a good team," said coach Raynald Denoueix.

"We are getting the points but we are also doing it with style. I know that the public are enjoying us play." Valencia will have their work out out keeping up with Real as they have a tricky game at home to Deportivo on Sunday.

The Galicians are showing signs of getting back to their best form after an indifferent start to the season and with Roy Makaay they can boast of having first division's leading scorer.

"I may have 10 already but I won't start feeling as though I've achieved anything until I pass last season's tally of 14. I want to score in every game," warned Makaay.

Real Madrid are in third place with 24 points but have a game in hand on the two clubs ahead of them and are looking to end their centennial year on a high note with a good result at Malaga on Saturday.

However, Real coach Vicente Del Bosque has some midfield problems to resolve as Claude Makelele is out until the New Year and Flavio Conceicao is doubtful for Saturday's game with a thigh strain, which could mean a rare start for either Albert Celades or Steve McManaman.

FIXTURES
(Kick-off GMT in parentheses)

Saturday: Atletico Madrid v Racing Santander (1700), Malaga v Real Madrid (1900), Celta Vigo v Villarreal (1930), Athletic Bilbao v Alaves (2000), Rayo Vallecano v Sevilla (2000), Real Mallorca v Barcelona (2030)

Sunday: Real Betis v Osasuna (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Real Sociedad (1600), Espanyol v Valladolid (1600), Valencia v Deportivo La Coruna (1930)

Serie A preview

Juve's work cut out

Football

AFP, Rome

Title-holders Juventus travel to Umbria to face Perugia on Sunday aiming to halt an alarming dip in form which has seen the Turin club drop to fifth in Italy's Serie A.

Successive defeats against Brescia and Lazio has left them six points adrift of league leaders AC Milan in the race for the championship which enters its three-week Christmas break after this week-end's matches.

French striker David Trezeguet believes a lack of desire and tired legs has contributed to Juve's recent slump.

"I think that we are lacking the hunger that we had last season and at the start of the current campaign," he said.

"We are also a bit tired at the moment. But there was no disgrace in losing to Lazio last week because they are a very good side."

Trezeguet missed that game as the club are slowly bringing the France international back from a knee injury which has troubled him since August.

But the former Monaco marksman is feeling fit and expects to start at Perugia.

"I'm feeling good physically even if I will still have to train during the Christmas period in order to complete my rehabilitation programme," he added.

"My knee is causing me no

problems and I hope to be of use to the side again at Perugia.

"We need a win to boost morale and help us to have a nicer Christmas."

Trezeguet dismissed media speculation linking him with a move abroad next summer.

"My contract expires in the summer of 2005 and to be honest there is plenty of time to discuss an extension," he said.



DAVID TREZEGUET

"I'm honoured Juventus have shown great confidence in me and have helped me develop as a player."

Table-toppers Milan host Brescia at the San Siro on Sunday while second-placed Lazio welcome Bologna to the Stadio Olimpico.

Milan's Danish striker Jon Dahl Tomasson this week rubbished talk of a move to English champions

Manchester United when the transfer window opens in January, insisting he is happy at the San Siro.

"I want to stay at Milan because they are the best side on the continent at this moment in time," he said. "Manchester United are a great club but Milan is the ultimate for any footballer."

The giant Dane has spent a lot of time on the substitutes' bench this season since signing from Dutch giants Feyenoord, but is happy to bide his time before claiming a regular first-team place.

"I obviously want to play more games but I'm not going to start moaning because I'm often on the bench," he added.

"I play for a great club that has many star names so it is only normal that the coach uses a rotation system."

Tomasson did feature in mid-week, however, scoring twice in the 5-1 Italian Cup win over Ancona.

Third-placed Inter Milan face a tough test at Parma on Sunday while Chievo, in fourth, entertain bottom club Como.

FIXTURES
(1400 GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday: Modena v Udinese (1700 GMT), Torino v AS Roma (1930 GMT)

Sunday: AC Milan v Brescia, Atalanta v Empoli, Chievo v Como, Lazio v Bologna, Parma v Inter Milan (1930 GMT), Perugia v

Italian Cup

Inter shown the door

Football

AFP, Rome

Struggling Second Division side Bari pulled off the shock of the Italian Cup third round on Thursday when they knocked out mighty Inter Milan at the San Siro.

Bari won 2-1 for a 3-1 aggregate score and will be the only Second Division side in the quarter-finals of this season's competition which takes place on January 15 and 23 next year.

Struggling in 18th place in their division, Bari fell behind to a goal from Sergio Conceicao after 56 minutes but Carlos Gamarra levelled the scores on the night three minutes later.

Gionatha Spinesi then struck the killer blow in injury time to send Bari through against an Inter Milan side who were without strikers Christian

Vieri and Hernan Crespo.

"If they carry on like this, then there should be no reason to worry about our future in the championship," said Bari coach Attilio Perotti.

Elsewhere on Thursday, Perugia beat Second Division Sampdoria 2-0 for a 3-1 aggregate while Lazio, second in Serie A this season despite their financial problems, won 2-1 at Empoli for a 4-1 aggregate.

Enrico Chiesa and Giuseppe Pancaro scored a goal either side of half-time with Gaetano Grieco pulling one back for Empoli.

The other sides in the last eight are Juventus who, despite losing 1-0 at home to Reggina on Wednesday, went through 2-1 on aggregate.

Chievo drew 0-0 with Piacenza but went through on away goals after the first leg finished 1-1 while there are also quarter-final berths for AC Milan, Vicenza and AS Roma.

More Barca woes

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona president Joan Gaspart suffered a further setback in his attempt to unite the Catalan club behind him when vice-president and former right-hand man Joan Castells resigned on Thursday.

Castells, who is the second vice-president to quit this week and the fifth to leave since Gaspart became president in July 2000, said his decision was a result of "irreconcilable differences over the running of the club".

Barcelona announced that Castells will be replaced by Sixte Cambra, who joined the board of directors at the end of October.

Earlier this week another high-profile vice-president, Gabriel Masferrer, handed in his resignation because of disagreements over Gaspart's management of the club.

Both men are thought to have asked Gaspart to call early elections in an attempt to heal the divisions that have emerged at Barcelona in recent months.

The president is elected through a vote in which the more than 100,000 members of the club are



JOAN CASTELLS

entitled to take part, although only about 45,000 voted in the 2000 poll.

The latest resignation will further increase the pressure on both Gaspart and coach Louis van Gaal, who have been blamed by fans and the Catalan press for the team's dismal start to the domestic season.

Barcelona dropped to 13th place in the table, a distant 16 points behind leaders Real Sociedad, after their 3-0 defeat at home to Sevilla on Sunday, their fourth loss in five matches.

Barca make the trip to Real Mallorca on Saturday in what could prove a make-or-break match for president and coach.

Bosnich doomed

Football

AFP, London

Mark Bosnich was Thursday facing the end of his career at Chelsea - and possibly in football - after a second sample reportedly confirmed his positive test for cocaine.

The former Australian international, who earns two million pounds (3.2 million dollars) a year despite rarely playing at the west London club, was due to hold talks on his future later Thursday, according to reports here.

Chelsea, who have already suspended Bosnich without pay, are now expected to take the option to cut the Australian from their wage roll permanently by terminating his contract.

But the player's union will argue that Bosnich must first be given a chance to put his side of the story to a disciplinary hearing organised by the Football Association.

The 30-year-old Australian first tested positive last month. He then checked into a private clinic to be treated for clinical depression.

According to sources cited by Britain's Press Association, Bosnich's second sample was examined by an IOC-accredited laboratory in Paris, rather than one in Moscow which the player's advisers had requested.

Chelsea chairman Ken Bates on Wednesday criticised the FA for the delay in confirming Bosnich's positive test.

Bosnich was once rated as one of the top goalkeepers in the Premier League, making his name at Aston Villa before joining Manchester United on a lucrative Bosman free transfer in June 1999.

But his career at Old Trafford, where he once played as a young-



MARK BOSNICH

ster, was blighted by injury and a high-profile bust-up with boss Alex Ferguson which contributed to him ending up as fourth-choice keeper at the club.

He was allowed to leave Old Trafford on a free transfer at the start of 2001 and landed a lucrative deal with Chelsea.

But a torn thigh muscle cost him his place in the first team and Carlo Cudicini has since established himself as the first choice while Bosnich, who goes out with model Sophie Arderton, has been seen more regularly at London nightspots than its football grounds.

League One Ronaldinho spoils it

Football

AFP, Paris

Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldinho missed a penalty six minutes from time as struggling French glamour club Paris Saint Germain were held to a 1-1 draw by Bordeaux here on Thursday.

But despite his second spot-kick miss in three games, coach Luis Fernandez said he still believed Ronaldinho was the man for the job.

"There is no reason why he won't be taking them again," said the coach.

"He is just low on confidence at the moment but he had a good match."

The point lifted PSG into eighth place in the table but that stay will be shortlived with the rest of the French league programme taking place on Friday.

The result too would not have helped the frame of mind of under-fire coach Fernandez who has been desperately clinging to his job for most of the season although earlier on Thursday the Le Parisien newspaper reported that his job is safe until the end of the season.

The paper said the club's owners, cable television operators Canal Plus, had decided Fernandez would remain in his job regardless of the result of the match.

The match began in a hostile environment with PSG fans demanding the resignation of club president Laurent Perpere, but the atmosphere seemed to inspire the home side who made the early running and took the lead in the 13th minute.

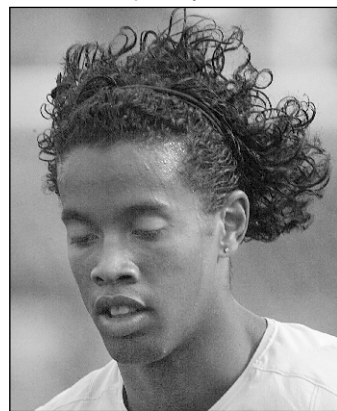
Fabrice Fioresse was the man on

target firing in a right foot shot past Ulrich Rame in the Bordeaux goal.

Eventually, the visitors began to settle on the slippery surface and Pascal Feindouno levelled the scores five minutes before half-time after fine passing between Brazilian pair Savio and Eduardo Costa.

For PSG, Frederic Dehu squandered an easy chance when he headed over on the hour mark but they were handed a golden chance to grab the winner when Fioresse was fouled in the penalty area.

Marco Caneira was sent-off for protesting the decision, but that didn't affect Rame's concentration as he dived to his left to push away Ronaldinho's penalty kick.



RONALDINHO

TOP SIX
French league table after Thursday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Marseille	19	10	4	5	20	18	34
Nice	19	9	6	4	24	14	33
Monaco	19	9	5	5	31	19	32
Lyon	19	9	5	5	35	24	32
Guingamp	19	9	4	6	28	23	31
Sochaux	19	8	6	5	20	14	30

Premiership preview

Focus on the last four

Football

AFP, London

Festive cheer will be thin on the ground on Saturday with the Premiership's bottom four involved in two cut-throat battles that could have a crucial bearing on who survives in the top flight.

While West Ham, currently anchored to the foot of the table, entertain Bolton at Upton Park, West Brom will play host to Sunderland, who are riding high after last weekend's win over Liverpool.

All four managers will be desperate to avoid demoralising defeats at the start of a crucial period of four games in the space of 15 days over Christmas and New Year.

But it is Hammers boss Glenn Roeder, the runaway favourite to be the next Premiership manager to be axed, who has most to lose.

Roeder's side were the victims of some cruel decisions in last weekend's defeat by Manchester United, with a goal dubiously disallowed for offside and a good penalty shout turned down, and he admits he is hoping his luck will change.

"It is the second time this year that (Jermain) Defoe has had a good goal ruled out. At Fulham he scored a fantastic goal with a great strike, when he clearly ran from an outside position.

"You do need people to do their jobs and get it right more than they get it wrong - and just at the moment we don't seem to be getting the rub of the green."

While West Ham pray for better luck from the referee, Bolton are hoping striker Michael Ricketts quickly rediscover his touch in front of goal.

Ricketts has not scored from open play since January and has

reportedly asked to leave the club, which he denies.

"I have not asked for a transfer," he said. "I am concentrating on playing football, that's what I am paid to do and what I am trying to do."

"People go through barren spells, mine has just continued a bit longer but I feel I have been a bit sharper recently."

"Hopefully when the next opportunity comes I can show something. I am confident not just from penalty spot but from wherever I get a decent opportunity."

"It is only a matter of time until it does come and I am sure I will come through this a better player."

"One goal to start me off will be nice. Then I will take it from there."

Bolton meet the Hammers on the back of a 3-0 defeat by Leeds on Monday and manager Sam Allardyce described the clash as the biggest since the club returned to the Premiership last season.

One bonus for the Bolton boss is that midfielder Kevin Nolan is available again after suspension.

Gary Megson admitted West Brom will have a mountain to climb to avoid relegation if they lose to Sunderland.

The Baggies are currently in the bottom three and will find themselves five points adrift of Howard Wilkinson's side at the halfway point of the season if they go under.

"There are 20 games to go and, if at the end of Saturday's game we've still got 15 points, then we are going to give ourselves a massive task," Megson said.

"It is a massive game because of the position we find ourselves in as a direct result of last weekend's matches with teams at the bottom having a good time."

"We are in a relegation battle. We are not even at the halfway stage but we've got to accept that it is the case and try to get out of it sooner

rather than later.

"We know that if Sunderland were to beat us that it would put a bit of a gap between themselves and us - but if we get the three points then we will be right back in the pack."

"We've got to start winning, start growing up and do the kind of things that I feel we're very good at doing."

Leaders Arsenal face a tough home clash with Middlesbrough, although the visitors

could be without their central defenders Ugo Ehiogu (back) and Gareth Southgate (thigh) who are both struggling to be fit.

Confidence is high in the Middlesbrough camp after a thrilling draw with Chelsea last weekend in which Cameroon midfielder Geremi scored a stunning free-kick.

"When you score a goal like that it makes everyone happy," he said.

"We were disappointed not to win that game but we are creating chances and that is good."

"Arsenal are a good team but we are in great spirits."

Chelsea, beaten by Manchester United in the League Cup in mid-week, will seek to get back to winning ways at home to Aston Villa.

Manchester United travel to Blackburn on Sunday, when Liverpool entertain Everton in the unusual position of trailing their Merseyside rivals.

FIXTURES
(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday: Arsenal v Middlesbrough, Birmingham v Charlton, Chelsea v Aston Villa, Leeds v Southampton, Newcastle v Fulham, West Brom v Sunderland, West Ham v Bolton

Sunday: Blackburn v Man Utd (1400 GMT), Liverpool v Everton (1605 GMT)

Monday: Man City v Tottenham (2000 GMT)

Stage set for Keane return

Football

AFP, London

Roy Keane is set to return to the Manchester United first team squad for the first time since August for Sunday's trip to Blackburn Rovers.

United boss Alex Ferguson has vowed not to rush the hugely influential club captain's return after hip surgery.

But after coming through 90 minutes of a reserves match on Thursday with no apparent ill effects, Keane is expected to be on the bench for the sell-out clash at Ewood Park.

There was further Christmas cheer for Ferguson with news that Nicky Butt has stepped up his training regime following his ankle operation and has set his sights on a return to action next week.

"It is a case of taking it easy now and not doing anything stupid. I have been in the gym keeping fit and hopefully, once I have proved myself running again, I can go back into full training quite quickly," the England midfielder said.

"If everything goes well this week

then I should be back to full training next Monday. Hopefully that may take me to Boxing Day or something like that for a chance of being selected again."

Butt's fellow England star Rio Ferdinand is also on the road to recovery after missing United's last

United defence.

"The people that have come in have done well and it makes it difficult for the manager when players get fit," Ferdinand said.

Despite the injury crisis, United have strung together a run of eight victories that has lifted them into second place in the league, put them into the last four of the League Cup and in pole position in their Champions League group.

Ferdinand admitted he had been bitterly disappointed to have missed so many big games. "But we are now back in a position where we are in contention for silverware," he added.

"There are not many teams that could have had the injuries we have had and come through them with flying colours."

Blackburn will be without their key midfielder David Thompson through suspension. But Turkish striker Hakan Sukur could make his Rovers debut after being included in Graeme Souness's squad for the first time since signing for the club as a free agent earlier this month.

Former United duo Dwight Yorke and Andy Cole are however expected to form Blackburn's starting strike-force.



ROY KEANE

nine games.

But he knows that even once he is fit, he is not sure of an immediate return to the first team given the superb form of Wes Brown and Mikael Silvestre in the heart of the

Shootouts bad for heart!

AFP, Paris

The number of heart attacks in Britain rose by 25 percent when England lost to Argentina in a penalty shootout in the 1998 World Cup, according to a study to be published next Saturday in the British Medical Journal (BMJ).

Researchers led by Douglas Carroll of the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at the University of Birmingham looked at hospital admissions on the day of the match, June 30