



USA head coach April Heinrichs (R) blocks Abby Wambach (C) while showing a drill during a practice session in Washington, D.C. on September 18. Behind Wambach are Kate Sobeck (L) and Shannon Boxx.

The gap is getting smaller

Women's World Cup kicks off today



AFP, Washington

Defending champion United States will begin the Women's World Cup as a favorite playing on home soil, but improved global rivals threaten the Americans' reign when the football showdown opens Saturday.

Asian champion North Korea, African champion Nigeria and perennial power Sweden will test the US women in the Cup's Group A first-round "Group of Death" far before the hosts can look to the October 12 final in Carson, California.

"Looking past our group would be premature," said US defender Brandi Chastain, whose winning

Another factor was the

penalty kick in a shoot-out lifted the Americans past China in the 1999 final.

Olympic champion Norway, 1999 World Cup runner-up China and South American dynasty Brazil are title threats. Australia, Japan, South Korea, Ghana, Russia, France, Canada, Germany and Argentina also have qualified.

"There are at least eight teams that have a chance to win the trophy," China coach Ma Liangxiang said.

The Chinese have never lost to any of their Group D rivals -- Ghana, Russia and Australia -- while Germany is favored over Canada, Argentina and Japan in Group C and Norway, France and Brazil join longshot South Korea in Group B.

Several nations have invested in women's football and risen quickly to prominence.

"They saw what a success it was in 1999 and now a lot of countries are funding their women's programs and putting emphasis on them and giving them a chance instead of just barely having a team," US defender Kate Sobeck said.

Another factor was the

Women's United Soccer Association, a US women's pro league which folded Monday for lack of money. Top talent from around the world, including 56 Cup players, sharpened their skills in the WUSA.

"We're sad. We're all sad," US star forward Mia Hamm said. "This is something (in which) we've all invested so much time and energy."

Hamm, the 31-year-old forward who is football's all-time scorer, joins Kristine Lilly, Julie Foudy, Joy Fawcett and Chastain as veteran leaders on the Cup's oldest team, with an average age of 28 despite new young talent.

US women dream the league can be revived if they shine again as they did in 1999 to spark the league's formation.

"We will have to deal with the black cloud and then we will have to put it behind us," US coach April Heinrichs said.

China was to have hosted the 16-team, 32-match affair. But the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) forced FIFA to relocate the event and US officials accepted the short-notice hosting challenge.

China's Sun Wen, playing in her final World Cup, needs two goals to match the all-time World Cup finals record of 12 owned by American Michelle Akers.

North Korea, the Stalinist

nation whose nuclear arms program has heightened tensions between leader Kim Jong Il and American officials, has overtaken China as Asia's top women's team.

With impressive speed and endurance, strong counter-attack skills and years of work together, North Korea will be a formidable foe against the US squad September 28 at Columbus, Ohio.

"Team spirit gives us our power," North Korean goalkeeper Chon Kyong Hwa said during a reception in Philadelphia, where her team plays Nigeria after the French face Norway in the opening matches Saturday.

Opening ceremonies will be here Sunday before the US women host Sweden and the South Koreans meet Brazil, which features playmaker Katia and Milene Domingues, the wife of Brazilian men's World Cup hero Ronaldo.

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North Korea, the Stalinist

Serie A preview

Turin brace for fireworks

Football

AFP, Rome

Whenever Juventus and Roma play sparks fly and Sunday's top-of-the-table clash in Turin promises to be as explosive as ever.

A thorny relationship that has lasted more than 20 years became even more fractious this summer after Juventus hijacked Roma's attempts to sign Nicola Legrottaglie from Chievo.

Roma president Franco Sensi thought he had closed the deal after holding lengthy negotiations with the 26-year-old, only for Juve general director Luciano Moggi to scupper the deal at the last minute.

The prospect of playing in the Champions League, which Roma failed to qualify for, proved decisive in luring the central defender to Turin.

Sensi reacted angrily after being

outdone by his nemesis Moggi, with

whom he has been at loggerheads for several years.

"I was dealing with Legrottaglie and then got cheated," he fumed.

Legrottaglie fanned the flames of an ugly transfer spat when he gave his reasons for turning his back on Roma.

"How could you choose Roma ahead of Juve? Juve are the strongest team in the world and I am happy and honoured to play for them," said the Italy international.

The tussle for Legrottaglie is the latest chapter in a feud that began in May 1981 when the two teams were battling for the Italian league title.

With three matches of the campaign left, Roma visited Juventus for a potential Scudetto decider trailing their Turin rivals by one point.

After 80 goalless minutes, Roma's Brazilian star Falcao latched on to a high ball and headed it forward to team-mate Roman Turin.

The nimble-footed sweeper escaped his marker and swept the ball home past Dino Zoff for what

looked like a perfectly good goal and one that would have taken Roma a step closer to the championship.

But referee Paolo Bergamo disallowed the goal for offside after consulting his linesman and the match ended 0-0.

Television replays showed Turone to be clearly offside, prompting Roma officials and supporters to lash out in anger, accusing Juventus of influencing the referee.

Lazio, who won 2-0 away to Besiktas in their Champions League opener on Tuesday, entertain Parma at the Olympic stadium.

Roma's Romanian defender Christian Chivu, who scored a debut goal in Sunday's 5-0 thrashing of Brescia, said his team had nothing to fear about facing the Italian champions.

"If we continue to play the way we have been lately, we won't have any problems," he said.

Juventus are looking to make amends for a poor performance in

the Champions League on Wednesday when they scraped a 2-1 win over Galatasaray.

In Sunday's other matches, Inter Milan, who kicked off their Champions League campaign with a stunning 3-0 win away to Arsenal on Wednesday, host Sampdoria at the San Siro, while European champions AC Milan, 1-0 winners over Ajax on Tuesday, visit Perugia.

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Besiktas in their Champions League opener on Tuesday, entertain Parma at the Olympic stadium.

FIXTURES

(all matches 1300 GMT unless stated)

Saturday: Ancona v Modena (1830 GMT), Siena v Empoli (1600 GMT)

Sunday: Bologna v Udinese, Brescia v Reggina, Inter Milan v Sampdoria, Juventus v Roma (1830 GMT), Lazio v Parma, Lecce v Chievo, Perugia v AC Milan

Campbell might not play

AFP, London

Sol Campbell has been told he can opt out of Arsenal's showdown with Manchester United on Sunday if he wishes following the death of his father.

Campbell took part in Wednesday night's Champions League tie against Inter Milan even though his 74-year-old father, Sewell, had suffered a stroke as his condition was thought to have stabilised.

But his father later died and Campbell has been told he has until Saturday to make a final decision about playing.

"We will leave it up to him. First and foremost our thoughts and sympathy are with Sol and his family at the tragic news. We will wait and see how he recovers from it," Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger told the Evening Standard.

If Campbell, who turned 29 yesterday, decides that he is not up to playing at Old Trafford, Martin Keown would be expected to partner Kolo Toure in defence, although Pascal Cygan is another option.

Ronaldo having fun!

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian superstar Ronaldo said Friday the arrival of David Beckham had taken some of the pressure off him, allowing him to enjoy his football more than ever.

"I am enjoying the football we are playing and it's an honour to be on the field with my teammates. We're having a great time and the 90 minutes fly by," said the striker, who arrived last year from Inter Milan and who earlier had a brief, if successful, spell with Barcelona.

"With Inter I definitely didn't have so much fun and things are better now than they were with Barcelona," he told reporters at Real's training ground.

"We have made a good start to the season, but we can do better," said the man whose two goals helped shoot down Marseille in Tuesday's Champions League opener which the Spanish giants won 4-2.

"I hope I can keep on scoring goals and help the team stack up the points."

Ronaldo admitted: "Beckham's signing had helped as he was himself less in the spotlight."

"I am calmer than I was last year, when the pressure was fully on me," he explained, having been the big signing of the summer as Beckham was this pre-season.

"This year I'm having fun and with so many stars the attention is divided among us."

"Beckham is a great player and getting better and better with us. His appetite and performance may surprise some but not us. We were already well aware of it."

Ronaldo had promised to bag at least 35 goals this season and will be looking to move nearer to that total in Sunday's league game at Malaga.

"With the quality we have we can enjoy an unforgettable season. We will try to win both titles," he added, alluding to a league title defence and the Champions League.

"If we can only manage one I'd like to be the Champions League this time," said the star, who is one of few Real stars yet to lift the trophy, which the club has won nine times overall and three times since 1998.

Ronaldo had to fend off some criticisms in his early months with Real, whom he joined after the 2002 World Cup, where his two goals in the final saw off Germany.

"Last year I had a few problems in the first three months," he told reporters. "But then I felt fine. This year I had more time to tune-up, although the pre-season (tour of Asia) was tough with all the travelling."

"Now I feel fine physically," he said.

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Premiership preview

All roads lead to Old Trafford

Football

AFP, London

Patrick Vieira has warned Manchester United to brace themselves for the backlash from Arsenal's Champions League defeat by Inter Milan.

After being humbled 3-0 by the Italians, the Gunners travel to Old Trafford for Sunday's Premiership summit meeting desperate to extinguish the burning sense of humiliation brought on by the club's worst European result at Highbury in two decades.

"When you have had a bad day like we had against Inter and concede three goals at home, you want the next game to come straight away," Vieira admitted.

"The next game is at Old Trafford so we have the chance to prove everything. We will respond well because I really believe we are strong enough."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger did his best to play down the significance of Wednesday's defeat, in which a superbly disciplined Inter ruthlessly exploited the structural faultiness running through his side's defensive strategy.

But he acknowledged that it had raised the stakes involved in Sunday's encounter between his 2002 double winners and the reigning champions.

"We want to go up there and show how strong we are. It is not only points that are stake, we also have to show that we are mentally strong."

Vieira has his own private point to prove. In the corresponding fixture last season he found himself dominated by an inspired Phil Neville as an injury-wracked United secured a 2-0 victory which laid the foundations for a revival which ultimately delivered the title.

Vieira could find himself up against Neville once more with United skipper Roy Keane doubtful

for the match with an ankle injury.

Keane, who sat out United's 5-0 Champions League thrashing of Panathinaikos in midweek, has looked back to his old self this season but it is feared the injury could be serious enough to warrant surgery that would sideline him for up to six weeks.

United-Arsenal clashes in recent years have all been full-blooded affairs in which penalties have repeatedly played a crucial role.

But despite his midweek miss

With the big showdown not until Sunday, Manchester City can go top of the table on Saturday with victory away to Fulham.

American midfielder Claudio Reyna can expect a hostile reaction from the home crowd after snubbing Fulham at the last minute to join City in the summer.

Liverpool will seek to put their row with Blackburn over the Lucas Neill tackle that broke Jamie Carragher's leg behind them when they take on Leicester at Anfield.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated)

Saturday: Aston Villa v Charlton, Fulham v Man City, Leeds v Birmingham, Liverpool v Leicester, Newcastle v Bolton, Portsmouth v Blackburn, Tottenham v Southampton, Wolves v Chelsea (1130 GMT)

Sunday: Middlesbrough v Everton (1130 GMT), Manchester Utd v Arsenal (1505 GMT)

Reds manager Gerard Houllier is hoping for more of the same from El Hadji Diouf, who has enjoyed a scintillating start to the season after being branded a ten-million-pound flop in his first year at the club.

"We were probably too impatient with him when he came here because it was on the back of two major competitions, the African Nations and the World Cup," Houllier reflected.

"Now we are seeing the best of him. His team-mates like him because he works hard, never hides and is a team player."

Glenn Hoddle's Spurs will entertain his former club Southampton at White Hart Lane with the beleaguered manager knowing a fourth defeat in six games this season could cost him his job.

"Big games bring out the best in you, that's when the big players come out and do their stuff," Giggs said. "The last two or three games with Arsenal have been quite feisty and you can expect more of the same on Sunday."

Goalkeepers were looking into the matter.

After Friday's further problems, Kahn had further tests and it is believed sinus problems could be complicating matters.

Bayern Munich's star goalkeeper Oliver Kahn has had eye and ear problems hampering his performance so far this season and early Friday awoke with inflamed eyes he could hardly see out of.

The 34-year-old Germany international has had problems for both club and country this season because of conjunctivitis which has affected his vision, and ear problems which required his ear drums to be burst.

"His conjunctivitis has

recently got worse but he will

keep his place this weekend,"

said Bayern coach Ottmar