



AN ICE RING? Workers clear snow from Munich's Olympic Stadium yesterday. Bayern Munich have insisted their European Champions League clash with Real Madrid tonight is not in danger despite heavy snow blanketing Munich.

PHOTO: AFP

All eyes on Munich



AFP, Paris

Real Madrid and Bayern Munich cross swords on Tuesday as two of the gladiators of European football provide a fitting curtain raiser to the home and away knockout phase of the Champions League.

As the continent's elite are reduced to 16 teams, Arsenal visit Spanish dark horses Celta Vigo, while Sparta Prague could create a first leg upset against holders AC Milan in the Czech capital.

Most eyes however will be on the Munich Olympic Stadium for the fourth Champions League clash in five seasons between Real and Bayern.

One or other of the old foes has reached the final in five of the last six years.

Bayern may enjoy a six-three advantage in their nine Champions League meetings, but their president Franz Beckenbauer says they are the definite underdogs this year. "Real are the better team and I would say there is a 70 percent chance of us being eliminated," Beckenbauer said.

Real's deadly striker Raul thinks the contest will be tighter than that.

"They are an enemy. Sometimes we've eliminated them and other times it has been the reverse," said

Raul.

"We know that any time we play them it's going to be hard. But Real Madrid will try to impose their authority."

Raul picked out Dutch striker Roy Makaay - who tormented Real in Spain in his days with Deportivo La Coruna - as a danger.

"We know almost everything against Bayern. Of the players they have brought in we of course know Makaay. He's probably an ideal striker for Bayern's style of play."

Raul confidently predicted that defeat for Real on Tuesday would set up a memorable second leg in Spain on March 10.

"The match will not end in Munich, regardless of the result. If they win 3-0, we are capable of beating them 3-0 in the Bernabeu. Of course we hope to get a good result in Munich because then the return leg will be a fiesta."

While Real top the Spanish league, Bayern trail Werder Bremen by seven points in the Bundesliga.

They desperately need goalkeeper Oliver Kahn and midfield playmaker Michael Ballack to be fit - Bayern only seemed confident about Kahn, who trained on Sunday, while Ballack's bronchitis was a cause for concern.

Arsenal are clear at the top of the Premiership but find their attempt to win Europe's top trophy for the first time blocked by Celta Vigo and a Serbian coach whose playing

career reached its peak at modest Luton Town, just a few dozen miles from Arsenal's Highbury home.

Raddy Antic's coaching career in contrast has taken him to among other clubs Barcelona and in late January to Celta, whom he has already turned into a tighter defensive outfit, qualities they will need against Arsenal's probable strikeforce of Thierry Henry and Jose Antonio Reyes.

Antic however is excited about what Savo Milosevic - virtually unrecognisable these days from his error-prone spell at Aston Villa - could produce.

"He's got more serious compared with when he was at Villa, where sometimes he used to get upset about his own performances. He's matured," Antic told the Sunday Times.

AC Milan are wary of banana skins after Sparta edged out Besiktas and Lazio to qualify for this stage.

Danish forward Jon Dahl Tomasson and defender Alessandro Nesta are injured and will not travel to Prague, but Filippo Inzaghi is recalled.

Milan are likely to use two strikers following criticism from club president Silvio Berlusconi. The Italian prime minister blasted coach Carlo Ancelotti for using Andrei Shevchenko in a lone role in the first half of Saturday's Milan derby. When Tomasson was introduced for the second period, Milan came back

from 2-0 down to win 3-2.

Lokomotiv Moscow, whose league season finished in November, returned home Sunday after preparing in Germany to face Monaco who include Dado Prso and Fernando Morientes to torment a weakened Muscovite defence.

FIXTURES

AFP, Paris

Champions League first knockout round, first leg fixtures on Tuesday and Wednesday (all kick-off times 1945 GMT unless stated):

Playing Tuesday

At Moscow Lokomotiv Moscow (RUS) v Monaco (FRA) (1730 GMT)

At Vigo Celta Vigo (SPA) v Arsenal (ENG)

At Munich Bayern Munich (GER) v Real Madrid (SPA)

At Prague Sparta Prague (CZE) v AC Milan (ITA)

Playing Wednesday

At La Coruna Deportivo La Coruna (SPA) v Juventus (ITA)

At Stuttgart VfB Stuttgart (GER) v Chelsea (ENG)

At Oporto

One and only Celtic

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic smashed one of Scottish football's oldest surviving records when they notched up a 24th consecutive league victory with a 4-1 win over bottom side Partick Thistle at Firhill on Sunday.

The run, which improved on the previous record of 23 straight wins, registered by Morton 40 years ago, has left Celtic virtually certain of reclaiming the Scottish Premier League title from Rangers, who trail their Glasgow rivals by 13 points with the same number of games left to play.

On their current form, Celtic also appear to be on track to match an even older record by going through an entire season unbeaten. The last time that was done was in 1898-99, by Rangers.

New records for the most points and most goals in an SPL season also appear to be within Celtic's grasp.

An example

AFP, Hanoi

Two professional footballers in Vietnam have been suspended for three matches by their club for deliberately underperforming amid allegations of match-fixing.

Nguyen Ngoc Tho and Nguyen Ngoc Thanh from the Eastern Asia Bank-Pomina Steel club in Ho Chi Minh City were punished following a poor performance in their 2-1 loss against V-League rivals Haiphong City on February 15.

"This decision was made last week but we are continuing to investigate their actions in this case," said club chairman Nguyen Van Thuan, adding that the midfield pair had also been fined a half-month's salary.

The V-League has been marred by allegations of corruption and match-fixing among players since its debut 2000-01 season.

Last year the new chairman of the Vietnam Football Federation, faced with the daunting task of cleaning up the scandal-hit league, warned that anyone engaging in match-fixing would be severely punished.

In November Vietnam international Vu Nhu Thanh was banned for five years for allegedly instructing teammates to underperform during a JVC Cup match between Vietnam's under-23 team and Malaysian club Perak earlier that month.

Two other players from the Hoang Anh Gia Lai club, the reigning domestic V-League champions, were also suspended in November for three years for their involvement in fixing a quarterfinal tie in July's ASEAN Club Championship.

Serie A

Cassano crushes Siena



AFP, Rome

Antonio Cassano scored a hat-trick as Roma thrashed Siena 6-0 here on Sunday to give a welcome boost to their goal difference and close the gap on Serie A league leaders AC Milan to five points.

Brazilian winger Amantino Mancini, Marco Delvecchio and Francesco Totti grabbed the other goals for Roma, who played the last 42 minutes a man down following the sending-off of French defender Jonathan Zebina.

Totti had a penalty saved by Marco Fortin before Siena were also reduced to 10 men when Juarez De Souza saw red.

European champions Milan had opened up an eight-point advantage on Saturday after they fought back from being two goals down at half-time to beat local rivals Inter Milan 3-2 at the San Siro.

Roma stay in second place on 50 points from their 22 matches played, while title-holders Juventus remain in third with a point less after scraping a 1-0 win at Bologna, where Mark Luliano netted the only goal.

Roma coach Fabio Capello said all his team could do was keep on winning and hope Milan drop points as the race for the championship gathers pace.

"There are many games left to play and we are hopeful we can close the gap," he said.

"We have to keep up the momentum and put pressure on Milan and make the most of our opportunities when they come our way."

"But you can be sure Milan will fight all the way and Juventus are still a big threat."

Lazio's kept hold of fourth place despite being held to a goalless draw at Chievo. The visitors might have come away with all the points had Claudio Lopez's penalty not been saved by veteran goalkeeper Luca Marchegiani.

Udinese are well placed to claim a UEFA Cup place next season after beating bottom club Ancona 3-0,

while struggling Perugia boosted their hopes of surviving the drop with a 2-1 win at Reggina, their first victory of the season.

Lecca climbed out of the bottom four thanks to a 2-1 win at Brescia. Ernesto Chevanton's 13th goal of the season, a stunning 25-yard free-kick, gave Lecce an early lead before Marco Cassetti's cheeky



PHOTO: AFP HE'S EARNED THAT RIGHT! AS Roma's hero of the night Antonio Cassano takes off his jersey as he celebrates his second score against Siena at the Olympic stadium in Rome on February 22.

minutes later thanks to a defensive blunder by former Roma defender Leandro Cufre.

The Argentinian lost his balance as he was about to clear a ball played into the box and Cassano robbed him of possession before rifling home.

Cassano then turned provider, setting up Mancini for an easy tap-in before completing his triple score 19 minutes from time after good work from Totti.

Totti crossed for Delvecchio to net Roma's fifth before the Roma captain made amends for his earlier missed penalty by scoring his 13th goal of the season.

Milan battled back from what seemed like a hopeless position to edge Inter and keep their title challenge firmly on track on Saturday.

Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf scored the winner with a 25-yard right foot shot to complete an amazing recovery for the Champions League holders.

Dejan Stankovic and Cristiano Zanetti gave Inter what appeared to be a commanding interval lead at the San Siro, only for Milan to draw level through second-half substitute Jon Dahl Tomasson and Brazilian midfielder Kaka.

A demoralising derby defeat for Inter was a blow to their hopes of securing a place in the Champions League next season and saw them drop to sixth position.

In Saturday's early match, cash-strapped Parma boosted their own chances of clinching a spot in Europe's premier club tournament with a narrow 2-1 at Sampdoria which lifted them up to fifth.

TOP SIX

Italian football league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, for, against, points):

Milan	22	17	4	1	43	13	55
Roma	22	15	5	2	47	9	50
Juventus	22	15	4	3	44	25	49
Lazio	22	12	4	6	33	22	40
Parma	22	11	6	5	32	26	39
Inter	22	10	6	6	38	20	36

Thai PM's 'Red' wish

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's billionaire Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is intent on buying an English football club by June and is eyeing league giants Liverpool, the Thai national team coach said Monday.

"He is considering Liverpool. The prime minister thinks the team is the most desirable of all," coach Thawatchai Sajakul told AFP after Thaksin revived talk of his plans to buy one of England's Premier league teams.

"It is time to shop around," added the coach, who as an MP in Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai political party has been assigned to look into taking over a club. An earlier attempt to buy Fulham had been unsuccessful.

"It's as if you definitely decide to buy shoes and now it's time to decide what brand you like."

Thawatchai said he had already approached Liverpool representatives about a possible purchase.

"It's under negotiation, but there is nothing confirmed yet," he said. "But the idea is, (Thaksin) will buy a team in the English Premier league" by June of this year.

However, the coach said he would not be surprised if Liverpool denied the reports of Thaksin's interest.

"Nothing is sure, we might be interested in Arsenal next month," he said, referring to the Premiership league leaders.

Thaksin, a self-made billionaire who founded a telecommunications empire before entering politics, caused a stir last October when he held talks with Fulham owner Mohammed Al Fayed about buying the London squad.

Al Fayed quickly denied the club was for sale.

Thaksin would not confirm his interest in the Merseyside club Monday, saying there may instead be a deal to cooperate on football training for Thai players, something he has proposed in the past.

"The press thinks I am interested in Liverpool because I watch their matches," he told reporters.

"I will not say whether I will buy (Liverpool) or not," he added. "We may not have to buy, we may cooperate with them by setting up a football academy instead."

Liverpool has visited football-mad Thailand twice on exhibition tours since Thaksin became premier in early 2001.

Thawatchai acknowledged that Leeds United is under intense financial pressure to find a buyer, but Thaksin was not interested because the team was saddled with too much debt.

FA Cup

Liverpool shown the door



AFP, London

Former Arsenal trainee Richard Hughes fired Portsmouth into an FA Cup quarter-final meeting with his former club on Sunday as Liverpool paid the price of a penalty miss by superstar striker Michael Owen.

Hughes's 72nd minute strike was enough to give Pompey a famous victory in a fifth round replay at Fratton Park.

But things might have been very different if Owen had converted a penalty awarded to Liverpool ten minutes earlier.

The spot-kick award was highly controversial with television replays suggesting Matthew Taylor's last-ditch tackle on Milan Baros had been legally executed.

Justice was done when, after a lengthy delay, Owen tamely pushed his penalty just to Shaka Hislop's left, allowing the Portsmouth goalkeeper to get down comfortably and mark his 35th birthday with a penalty save.

Liverpool paid the price for that mistake soon afterwards when Alexei Smertin played a quick first-time pass into Aiyegbeni Yakubu on the edge of the area.

The Nigerian striker laid the ball off to the unmarked Hughes, who rifled a low left-foot shot across Chris Kirkland and into the far corner for his first Portsmouth goal.

The defeat leaves Liverpool with only fourth place in the Premiership and a place in the Champions League to play for this season and will inevitably increase the pressure on beleaguered manager Gerard Houllier.

"Over the last two games we had enough chances to go through and we have to blame ourselves for wasted chances," Houllier said afterwards.

"We are disappointed but we have to be strong. The good thing in football is that in four days you get the chance to put something right and the boys will have a good reaction when we play (Levski) Sofia (in the UEFA Cup) next week."

Houllier has always stressed that Liverpool's top priority is a return to

the Champions League. But he acknowledged that Sunday's defeat amounted to yet another unwelcome setback in a bitterly frustrating season.

"We would have preferred to stay in the competition because the longer you stay in the better it is for morale and confidence," he said.

Hislop's heroics in the Pompey goal earned him the man-of-the-match award and the Trinidadian international was delighted to have celebrated his birthday by besting one of the world's most feared marksmen.

"I guess if you are going to guess right once it should be on your birthday, and I did that," Hislop said.

"It was a great tackle by Taylor, and he was a bit unfortunate to concede a penalty. But I saved it."

Hislop added: "Now we face Arsenal and we are confident. This is a real old-fashioned ground, with very passionate supporters who came in droves today. That gave us an advantage."

"Arsenal will be a test for us, but we are up for it."

Scholes waits ban

AFP, London

Manchester United midfielder Paul Scholes has been charged with violent behaviour by the Football Association for his two-handed push in the face of Middlesbrough midfielder Doriva.

The incident during Middlesbrough's 3-2 win over Manchester United at Old Trafford on February 11 was not seen by referee Paul Durkin.

But the FA have studied video evidence and decided to charge Scholes, who has until March 5 to respond.

Manager Alex Ferguson has already said he will fight the charge.

Scholes, who scored in Saturday's 1-1 draw with Leeds, faces a five-match ban if found guilty.

Manchester United defender Gary Neville said last week Scholes was vital to the Old Trafford club's hopes of retaining their Premiership title.

The England midfielder has been troubled by groin and hernia problems this season.

United are currently second in the table, seven points behind Arsenal.

Laporta's Henry hopes

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona president Joan Laporta, outbid by Real Madrid for Manchester United's David Beckham last summer, has not given up hopes of getting Arsenal's French striker Thierry Henry.

"I know Arsenal say he cannot be touched but I've still got hope," he told Catalan TV.

Barcelona won 1-0 at Valencia on Saturday to climb to fourth in the Liga after a dreadful start to the season under new coach Frank Rijkaard.

Two weeks ago, Real Madrid coach Carlos Queiroz said Henry was the top of his wish-list.

Henry has made it clear he has no desire to leave Arsenal. He signed a new deal in May keeping him at Highbury until 2007 and last December Arsenal rejected a 40 million pound (70m dollar) bid from Chelsea for the striker.

Arsenal vice-chairman David Dein has said Henry is not for sale at any price.



PHOTO: AFP

Portsmouth custodian Shaka Hislop (R) thwarts a Liverpool attack at Fratton Park in Portsmouth on February 22.