

It's showtime



REUTERS, London

Real Madrid will rekindle unhappy memories for Bayer Leverkusen, AC Milan head to Ukraine and Chelsea aim to add to Paris St Germain's misery when the Champions League kicks off this week.

The group phase of the world's top club competition gets underway on Tuesday and Wednesday, with all 32 teams believing they have a chance of making it to February's knockout phase.

Real start their quest for a record 10th European crown in Group B after making it two wins from two games in the Primera Liga last weekend. England captain David Beckham steered them to a 1-0 victory over promoted Numancia with a trademark free kick, though Real still showed some of last season's vulnerability.

Leverkusen, who were beaten 2-1 by Real in the 2002 Champions League final, had their minds on other things in Saturday's 2-0 loss at FSV Mainz, and paid for it.

"The players were already thinking about the game against Real and

exactly what I had feared happened," said coach Klaus Augenthaler.

Porto, surprise European champions last season after beating Monaco in the final, welcome CSKA Moscow in Group H after drawing the first match of their Portuguese title defence at the weekend, 1-1 at Braga.

AC Milan, who won their sixth European title in 2003, face a long haul to Shakhtar Donetsk in Group F after a frustrating start to the Italian season last weekend.

Milan had their Brazilian goalkeeper Dida red-carded after just seven minutes and could draw only 2-2 with promoted Livorno after twice being in front.

Semi-finalists last season, Chelsea will expect to add to PSG's woes after their miserable start to the Ligue 1 season. The Paris club are still without a win after five games.

Unbeaten in the Premier League after four wins and an unlucky 0-0 draw at Aston Villa on Saturday, Chelsea have the resources to exploit the struggling French side.

"We've still got some work to do because the team are tense and a long way from their true form," PSG coach Vahid said after a 1-1 draw at promoted Istres on Saturday.

"We mustn't go looking for excuses...and I hope to see a reaction against Chelsea." Chelsea's following game will be against Porto, the former club of their coach Jose Mourinho.

Two other Franco-English ties pitch Olympique Lyon against a struggling Manchester United in Group D and last season's finalists Monaco with Liverpool at Anfield in Group A.

Lyon are unbeaten in Ligue 1 this season, level on points with leaders Toulouse and buoyed by beating Stade Rennes 2-1 on Saturday with new Brazilian signing Nilmar getting both goals.

"The fact we're unbeaten is important in my opinion," said club president Jean-Michel Aulas. "It enables us to be more confident, and to show we know how to get stuck in."

United have yet to get stuck in to the Premier League, lying 10th after scraping a 2-2 stoppage time draw at Bolton Wanderers at the weekend.

One of this week's most intriguing games will be the return after four months of former Celtic idol Henrik Larsson to Parkhead -- wearing a Barcelona shirt.

The Swedish striker found the net in Barca's 2-0 win over Sevilla on Saturday, giving them six points from two games.

JESDAY'S FIXTURE

Matchday 1

Group E
At Athens
Panathinaikos v Rosenborg
At London
Arsenal v PSV

Group F
At Donetsk
Shakhtar v Milan
At Glasgow
Celtic v Barcelona

Group G
At Valencia
Valencia v Anderlecht
At Milan
Internazionale v Bremen

Group H
At Paris
PSG v Chelsea
At Oporto
Porto v CSKA Moskva

Maradona out of hospital

INTERNET SOURCE, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona briefly returned to a private clinic early Saturday with a fever and an apparent respiratory problem but left within hours, local news reports said.

Maradona, who has been undergoing treatment at a psychiatric hospital for the past three months, was taken to the Suizo-Argentine clinic before dawn, local television and news agencies reported. After a few hours, he returned to the psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of Buenos Aires where he is receiving treatment, the reports added.

Local television network TodoNoticias and independent news agency Noticias Argentina both cited unnamed sources as saying Maradona had suffered from an unspecified lung problem and a "bout of fever." Further details were unavailable and Maradona's private physician had no immediate comment. The clinic told The Associated Press it would release no information.

Samba first!

AP, Hamburg

Germany declined the chance to play in the opening game of the 2006 World Cup, with the host nation ceding the honor to Brazil, the 2002 champion.

The decision maintains a World Cup tradition that began in 1974 in which the defending champ plays in the first game. The opener in Germany will be June 9, 2006, at Munich's Allianz Stadium.

"We'll make way for Brazil," Germany team manager Oliver Bierhoff said Sunday.

Brazil still must qualify for the 32-team field. Unlike previous years, the previous champion does not automatically receive a berth this time. Germany most likely will play its first match three days later at Berlin's Olympiastadion, the site of the final.

Beckhams at romantic meal!

INTERNET SOURCE, Madrid

Soccer superstar David Beckham and his former Spice Girl wife Victoria have hit back at reports she has demanded a trial separation -- by heading off for a romantic meal together.

The Real Madrid midfielder on Sunday treated Victoria -- who is pregnant with their third child -- to a four-hour meal at the Spanish capital's Ritz Hotel.

The Beckhams left sons Brooklyn five, and Romeo two, with David's mother Sandra so they could spend some quality time alone.

An insider says, "They've always had a stormy relationship. But they're not splitting up."

And David promises to never let the pressures of being under the media spotlight get to him.

He says, "I will never crack. When you get criticised, some people go the other way. But my way is to come out fighting," said the source.

Ortega returns

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina World Cup forward Ariel Ortega ended his 19-month soccer exile by making a quiet comeback for Newell's Old Boys in their 1-1 home draw with Banfield on Sunday.

Ortega, still short of match fitness, showed a few flashes of his talent but was unable to inspire Newell's in a fixture between two teams who regularly occupy positions in the middle of the table.

A 30,000 crowd saw the match in Rosario, his first since he played for Argentina in a friendly in the Netherlands in February last year.

Ortega was involved in the move which led to striker Ignacio Scocco scoring Newell's equaliser in the 22nd minute, five minutes after Rodrigo Palacios had put the visitors in front.

Newell's, coached by Argentina's 1978 World Cup midfielder America Gallego, are seventh in the Apertura championship with eight points from five games.

Primera Liga

Torres on fire

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Atletico Madrid joined Barcelona and Real Madrid as the only teams in the Primera Liga with 100 percent records after striker Fernando Torres helped them to a 2-0 win over Albacete on Sunday.

The Spanish international gave Atletico the lead in the 85th minute with a fine opportunist strike and made a second for team mate Ariel Ibagaza on the stroke of full-time after a dazzling individual run.

The win means that after two games Atletico lead the fledgling table, level on six points with Barcelona and Real Madrid who maintained their perfect start to the season with victories over Sevilla and Numancia on Saturday.

Earlier Deportivo Coruna slumped to a surprise 3-1 home defeat against Osasuna on Sunday after the visitors fought back from a goal down and a sending-off to claim their first Primera Liga win of the season.

New signing Savo Milosevic weighed in with two classy strikes in the second half to give the Navarrans their first league victory at the Riazor and leave Deportivo with work to do before next week's Champions League match against Olympiakos.

Espanyol continued their fine start to the season thanks to an emphatic 4-1 win at out-of-sorts Real Betis with Argentine striker Maxi Rodriguez bagging a hattrick.

The victory propelled the Catalans into fourth place in the standings, level on four points with four other teams including champions Valencia who drew 2-2 at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

Bernd Schuster's Levante became the first promoted side to notch a win with a 3-1 victory over Racing Santander.

Atletico Madrid had Torres to thank for ensuring they made it two wins out of two when he pounced



PHOTO: AFP

SHH! Atletico Madrid's Fernando Torres celebrates after scoring against Albacete in their Primera Liga encounter on September 12.

The Navarrans looked to have blown their chances when defender Jose Izquierdo was dismissed for picking up a second yellow card for an unnecessary foul on Pedro Munitis.

The setback only spurred them into action, however, and they took the lead five minutes later when the unmarked Milosevic scored from the edge of the area after making a late run to meet a fine pass from midfielder Ludovic Delporte.

The Serbia & Montenegro international striker clinched victory with a delightful second when he chipped the ball over Depor keeper Jose Molina from 18 metres to take his tally for the season to three.

That's Di Canio!

Football

AFP, Rome

Lazio's temperamental forward Paolo Di Canio has made up with Simone Inzaghi after falling out with his strike partner during the Serie A side's 1-0 victory away to Sampdoria.

Di Canio, making his first league appearance for Lazio since joining them for a second spell, clashed with Inzaghi when the Rome club were awarded a first-half penalty in Sunday's match in Genoa.

Inzaghi assumed he was going to take it and marched towards the penalty spot, but Di Canio was having none of it and ripped the ball out of his team-mate's hands and pushed him away.

The pair exchanged angry words before Di Canio tucked away the spot-kick to give Lazio three points in their first league match of the new season.

Inzaghi did not celebrate the goal and he and Di Canio continued their row as they walked back to the centre-circle and had to be pulled apart by the other members of the team.

However, Di Canio had played down their spat and insisted Inzaghi eventually came round to his way of thinking.

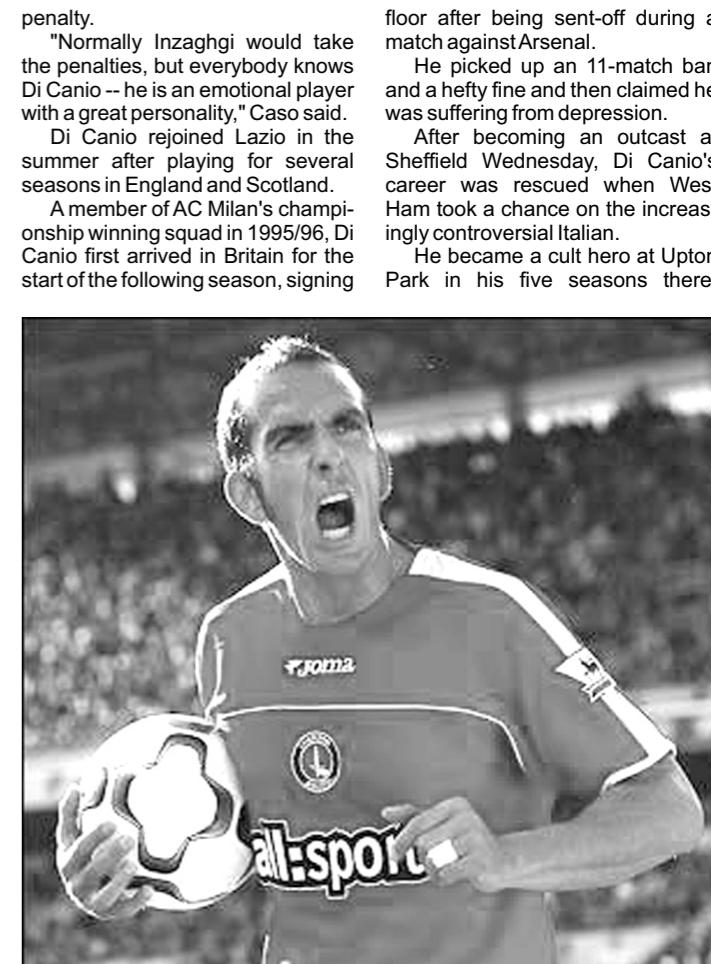
"When it came to taking the penalty we said a few words to each other, but at the end of the match he understood my actions," said the volatile 36-year-old.

"Yes, we had a healthy discussion, but there are players with strong personalities in this team."

"He wanted to take the penalty, but for me it was something that was too important."

"I've always taken penalties. But I want to say that he will take the next one."

Lazio coach Mimmo Caso said he fully understood why Di Canio was so insistent about taking the



PAOLO DI CANIO

for Scottish Premier League side Celtic.

He scored 15 goals in 37 appearances for the Glasgow outfit before falling out with the club's management and left to join English club Sheffield Wednesday a year later.

Di Canio spent two years at Hillsborough, but his time in Yorkshire was soured when he pushed referee Paul Alcock to the

despite falling out with manager Glenn Roeder towards the end of the 2002/03 season.

Di Canio was brought back into the side for the final stages of the campaign, but could not prevent the club from being relegated from the English Premiership.

He made the short trip across London to join Charlton in August 2003.

Mourinho in trouble

Football

AFP, London

New Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho could face sanction for his attack on the referee in charge of Saturday's goalless draw against Aston Villa.

Mourinho blasted Rob Styles for failing to award his side a penalty that could have extended Chelsea's winning start to the season.

Fulham boss Chris Coleman is also in danger of facing the Football Association's wrath after describing referee Mark Halsey as "crap" for reversing a penalty decision following protests from Arsenal players.

The FA's compliance unit is to look closely at whether the comments made by either manager cross the boundary between

acceptable criticism and questioning an official's integrity.

"We will be giving due consideration to the comments made by both managers," an FA spokesman



JOSE MOURINHO

confirmed Sunday. Mourinho criticised referee Styles' decision not to award a penalty after Didier Drogba fell under the challenge of Villa defender Ulises de la Cruz.

Even Villa boss David O'Leary felt moved to point out that he believed it was a clear-cut penalty decision.

Mourinho said: "The man of the match was the referee because of that decision."

"If a similar situation happens in the future to Thierry Henry or Ruud van Nistelrooy we will see if a similar decision is given. I do not believe it will be."

Coleman's anger will have been compounded by Halsey's admission that he reversed his penalty decision after protests from Arsenal players.

FIFA looks into double-headers

Football

REUTERS, London

FIFA is to re-examine arrangements for playing international double-headers to help ease the strain on players, clubs and their coaches.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said world soccer's governing body will consider a suggestion from Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger among others, that international double-headers should be played on Wednesdays and Saturdays instead of the other way around.

"This is a very intelligent pro-

posal from Mr Wenger and we will examine it next month," Blatter told a media briefing on Sunday, adding that a number of other calendar issues would be discussed at a Strategic Committee meeting early next month.

FIFA introduced their international co-ordinated calendar two years ago in a bid to streamline the dates for competitive internationals and friendlies and while the idea has generally worked well, there is still a huge burden on players appearing for both their clubs and countries a few days apart.

"This is a world of total communication now and to lose communication is wrong, and to instigate a

media blackout was wrong."

Blatter was critical of the England players who refused to speak to the media after being lambasted last week when they drew 2-2 with Austria in Vienna after leading 2-0 with just 19 minutes to go.

Blatter said: "International footballers are recognisable public personalities with an obligation to communicate with the media and the public and accept from time to time that they are going to be criticised.

Blatter also said the decision by English referee Steve Bennett to hand Everton's Tim Cahill a second yellow card for pulling his shirt over his face after scoring against Manchester City on Saturday was also wrong -- but that the rules on what constitutes the removal of a shirt also need to be looked at.

Tottenham Hotspur continued their unbeaten start to their Premiership campaign in a 0-0 draw with Norwich at White Hart Lane which will be remembered for defending and great saves.

Tottenham had the most chances.

England's Jermaine Defoe hit a post and Youssouf Safri of Norwich saved off the line and then after the break Norwich keeper Robert Green denied substitute Robbie Keane.