

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 over Sevilla on Saturday, giving them six points from two games.

Liga rivals Valencia are at home to Anderlecht, Inter Milan host Werder Bremen at the San Siro and Juventus are away to Ajax Amsterdam, the club they beat on penalties in the 1996 final.

Bayern Munich travel to Maccabi Tel Aviv while Arsenal, unbeaten in a record 45 Premier League games and winners of all five games this

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-Argentino 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 Americo Gallego, are seventh in the Apertura championship with eight points from five games.

Premiership Spurs still unbeaten

AFP, London

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 Youssef Safri of Norwich saved off the line and then after the break Norwich keeper Robert Green denied substitute Robbie Keane.

Primera Liga Torres on fire



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 hatrick.

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

Albacete in their Primera Liga encounter on September 12.

after Albacete defender Miquel Buades failed to deal with a hopeful through ball and kept his head as he rounded the keeper to score.

Five minutes later he danced his way into the area and laid the ball off to Argentine midfielder Ibagaza, who had time to pick his spot before firing home his side's second.

Deportivo took a 19th-minute lead at the Riazor when Uruguayan striker Walter Pandiani guided home a first-time shot from 15 metres after a poor clearance from the Osasuna defence.

The visitors equalised early in the second half, however, when Australian striker John Aloisi scored from the penalty spot after he had been pushed in the area.

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 Delpierre.

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.



PHOTO: AFP

Juventus' Czech superstar Pavel Nedved (L) dodges past Brescia midfielder Matias Almeyda on September 12.

Serie A Strong Juve start



REUTERS, Milan

Serie A title hopefuls Juventus and AS Roma made winning starts on Sunday, gaining an early advantage on rivals AC Milan and Inter who were held to draws on Saturday.

Juventus enjoyed a comfortable 3-0 win at Brescia with goals from European Footballer of the Year Pavel Nedved, Frenchman David Trezeguet and Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic on his debut.

Substitute Vincenzo Montella scored for Roma in their 1-0 victory over promoted Fiorentina. Fiorentina defender William Viali and Roma striker Antonio Cassano were sent off in the first half.

Paolo Di Canio celebrated his return to Serie A after eight seasons in British football by scoring the penalty that gave Lazio a 1-0 win at Sampdoria.

Promoted Palermo and Cagliari enjoyed 1-0 wins on the opening

day with Siena and Bologna their victims.

Champions Milan were held to a 2-2 draw at home to Livorno on Saturday and Inter had to come back to secure an identical result at Chievo.

Of the likely title challengers it was Juventus who made the best impression on the opening weekend with their potent strikers showing their full value.

Czech international Nedved put Fabio Capello's side on their way with a header from a corner in the 34th minute and four minutes later Trezeguet doubled the lead.

Juve never looked in trouble and wrapped up victory when substitute Ibrahimovic, a 16 million euro signing from Ajax Amsterdam, added the third in the 59th minute.

Picking up the ball with his back to goal, Ibrahimovic turned two men before firing a low shot under the body of Brescia keeper Luca Castellazzi.

It was much tougher for Roma against Fiorentina, who were mak-

ing their return to the top flight after a two-year absence.

The visitors were reduced to 10 men after just 13 minutes when Viali was dismissed for pulling down Francesco Totti as he headed goalwards.

The Florence side were not deterred, however, and with Fabrizio Miccoli dangerous in attack they caused Roma plenty of trouble.

Roma's numerical advantage was lost on the stroke of halftime when Cassano was sent off after a petulant push in the face of Fiorentina defender Giorgio Chiellini.

Roma's German coach Rudi Voeller brought on Montella at the break and within eight minutes he scored the decisive goal when he raced on to a long ball from Italy international Daniele De Rossi and beat advancing Fiorentina keeper Cristiano Lupatelli.

There was a big smile on the face of Lazio's Di Canio who, almost 16 years after making his debut for the Rome club, returned to action for the

club he supported as a boy and lived up to his reputation as the fans' favourite.

Di Canio's superb heeled flick put Simone Inzaghi through, Sampdoria keeper Francesco Antonioli brought down the Lazio striker and was dismissed.

Inzaghi fancied taking the penalty himself but Di Canio was not in a mood to take no for an answer and after a brief altercation strode up to slot home the goal that proved enough.

Luca Toni was on target for Sicilians Palermo as they celebrated their first Serie A match for 31 years with a 1-0 home win over Siena.

Sardinians Cagliari have only been out of the top flight for four years but they will also be pleased with a winning start after a Mauro Esposito goal, set up by former Italy striker Gianfranco Zola, gave them victory over Bologna.

Bologna's Federico Giunti missed a penalty five minutes from the end of the match.

media blackout was wrong."

Blatter is meeting England coach Sven Goran Eriksson while in London on Monday and says he intends to tell him personally he thinks the England players should have spoken to the press last week.

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.

FIFA looks into double-headers



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.

If the switch was adopted and the first of the double-headers was played on Wednesday rather than

Saturday, players would have a full week to recover before their next club match.

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.

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



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 feeling 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.