

PREVIEW: PRIMERA LIGA

Barca feeling pressure?

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish league leaders Barcelona will be out to get back to their winning ways against Osasuna on Saturday, after two successive draws have seen their lead cut to six points.

"Our confidence is still as high as ever," insisted Barca keeper Victor Valdes.

"Our tactics and philosophy aren't going to change just because of a few mediocre results. They have been working until now and there is no reason why they are not going to continue to work again from this point."

Nevertheless, Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard is clearly worried that the pressure is getting to his men as he sent them all to an anti-stress clinic on Wednesday, where they underwent all manner of relaxation therapies.

At least they are visiting Osasuna at the right time.

The Pamplona-based side have not won in 2005 and have slumped

from being contenders for a place in Europe to just above the relegation zone.

Last Sunday, they suffered a humiliating 6-1 loss at home to Malaga.

"We hope that our fans will not turn on us after what happened last week and they'll receive us with open arms," said Osasuna striker Pierre Webo.

The Cameroonian international has missed Osasuna's last three games through injury but is expected to lead the line against Barca along with former Real Madrid striker Valdo.

Second-placed Real Madrid closed the gap on their bitter rivals with a 3-1 victory over Real Betis on Wednesday.

The 29-times Spanish league winners will visit reigning Spanish champions Valencia in an effort to increase the tension at the top of the table.

Real Madrid will be without their Spanish international goalkeeper Iker Casillas, who suffered a minor left hamstring strain against Betis, and will be replaced by their long-serving deputy Cesar Sanchez.

However, Real coach Wanderley Luxemburgo is likely to retain the same outfield players for the first time in his nine league games in charge.

Ronaldo is expected to keep his place alongside Michael Owen despite having not scored in six games and the Real fans boozing him to the rafters of the Santiago Bernabeu for his lack-lustre display against Betis.

"Whoever was whistling Ronaldo could tomorrow be back applauding him," said Luxemburgo.

"Ronaldo knows that he could score two goals in the next game. The public will then cheer him and everything will be forgotten."

The gap between Real and the rest of the top flight of Spanish football is now 10 points with Sevilla in third and leading the rest of the Champions League challengers on goal difference from Villarreal.

Sevilla travel to Atletico Madrid on Saturday, hoping to improve their prospects of getting into Europe's top club competition next season for the first time in nearly 50 years.

Atletico have their own ambitions

though and have only lost once in their Vicente Calderon stadium.

"Qualifying for the UEFA Cup is not lost despite defeat at Racing on Wednesday. There are still plenty of games and plenty of points to be won," said Atletico coach Cesar Ferrando.

However, Ferrando will have to reshuffle his pack.

Atletico have lost regular starters Luis Perea through suspension and Ariel Ibagaza with a groin injury.

Victory against Sevilla will make Atletico just the fourth team to win 1,000 Spanish first division matches, the others being Real Madrid, Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kickoff GMT): Osasuna v Barcelona (1700), Valencia v Real Madrid (1900), Atletico Madrid v Sevilla (2100).

Sunday: Real Betis v Getafe (1600), Espanyol v Levante (1600), Real Mallorca v Real Sociedad (1600), Numancia v Villarreal (1600), Real Zaragoza v Racing Santander (1600), Athletic Bilbao v Albacete (1800), Deportivo La Coruna v Málaga (2000).

PREVIEW: PREMIERSHIP

Drogba thinks it's in the pocket

Football

AFP, London

Premier League leaders Chelsea may still be only six points ahead of Manchester United but as far as the London club's striker Didier Drogba is concerned the Stamford Bridge side have already won the title.

Even though there are 10 weeks left in the season, the Ivory Coast forward said United's recent run of form has come come too late.

"We have won the title. This season we are the best," said Drogba as Chelsea look forward to picking up another three points at second-from-bottom Norwich on Saturday.

"Everybody knows we are now six points in front of United but we have one game in hand so we will do our best to keep the nine points and keep the distance."

"Manchester United are playing well and there is still Arsenal of course. But I think we are the best team."

United's pursuit of Chelsea is set to be upstaged by a questionable act of nostalgia at south-east London club Palace's Selhurst Park

ground.

It is 10 years since United great Eric Cantona delivered his spectacular 'kung-fu' kick' at a Selhurst spectator after being sent-off.

In honour of the occasion, United fanzine Red Issue has designated March 5 as 'Cantona Day', calling on supporters to wear Cantona masks even though Palace officials have made it clear that anyone sporting a mask inside Selhurst Park will be immediately ejected from the stadium on safety grounds.

Elsewhere in London, reigning champions Arsenal - 10 points behind Chelsea - are at home to Portsmouth.

Arsenal could start with 18-year-old Dutch striker Quincy Owusu-Abeijie, who featured for 75 minutes in the Gunners' penalty shoot-out FA Cup win against Sheffield United on Tuesday.

His participation could depend on whether or not Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is willing to risk leading goalscorer Thierry Henry ahead of Wednesday's Highbury Champions League tie against Bayern Munich.

The France forward missed the

FA Cup win with an Achilles problem and Wenger said: "You have a very good chance of seeing Quincy over the weekend."

"Patrick Vieira and Freddie Ljungberg should be alright but Ashley Cole has a hamstring problem and I might rest him on Saturday. Also Pascal Cygan has a problem with his groin."

Robin van Persie will be available after suspension while Dennis Bergkamp and Jose Antonio Reyes will complete their three-game bans.

Eden (hamstring), Justin Hoyte (ankle), Pires (ankle) and Sol Campbell (ankle) are all out.

Liverpool, eight points behind city rivals Everton in the race for the fourth Champions League place, will look to bounce back from their League Cup final defeat at the hands of Chelsea last weekend, away to Newcastle.

"Once we get over the final and start to concentrate on the Newcastle game it will be different for the players. We still have a lot to work for and, as I told the players after Sunday's game, they have a lot to be proud of," said Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez.

Everton will hope they can main-

tain the gap at home to Blackburn on Sunday.

Saturday's other matches see Aston Villa at home to Middlesbrough and relegation threatened Southampton at home to Tottenham while Fulham face Charlton in a London derby.

Sunday's other match is a West Midlands derby between bottom of the table West Brom and Birmingham where even a home win might not be enough to help the Baggies survive.

Manchester City are at home to Bolton on Monday.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday: Arsenal v Portsmouth, Aston Villa v Middlesbrough (1245GMT), Crystal Palace v Manchester United, Fulham v Charlton, Newcastle v Liverpool, Norwich v Chelsea (1715GMT), Southampton v Tottenham

Sunday: Everton v Blackburn (1605GMT), West Brom v Birmingham (1200GMT)

Monday: Manchester City v Bolton (2000GMT)

PREVIEW: SERIE A

Capello's 'homecoming'

Football

AFP, Rome

A hostile reception awaits Fabio Capello on Saturday when he returns to the Olympic stadium for the first time since walking out on Roma to coach Juventus.

The 58-year-old spent five seasons at Roma and was revered for guiding them to the Serie A title in 2001, but he caused a storm in the Italian capital when he defected to their bitter rivals last May.

Branded a traitor by the 'Giallorossi' fans for breaking an earlier promise not to join Juve, he twisted the knife in even further by persuading two of Roma's best

players - French defender Jonathan Zebina and Brazilian midfielder Emerson - to accompany him.

The return of the three renegades will only add fuel to an already explosive fixture with a history of controversy, but Zebina insists they can handle the pressure.

"I'm expecting a wonderful welcome with plenty of applause and cheers," said the French international with heavy irony.

"We are professionals and we are used to the whistles - we are going to Roma to win."

Zebina endured a difficult time at Roma and was once attacked by an irate fan who accused him of not pulling his weight on the pitch, but the 26-year-old Frenchman says

that's all in the past.

Hundreds of extra police have been drafted in for the match and 90 cheerleaders will provide the pre-match entertainment in an attempt to defuse the tension inside the stadium.

Juve's dynamic Czech midfielder Pavel Nedved, who was knocked unconscious in last week's 1-0 Champions League defeat at Real Madrid, is ruled out of Saturday's clash, while David Trezeguet could make the substitutes' bench.

The 27-year-old France international has missed the last three games due to a virus.

Roma welcome back their captain Francesco Totti from suspension to face the joint league leaders.

Juventus, who are level on 57 points with title-holders AC Milan,

will be determined to avenge their 4-0 defeat in the same fixture last season, while seventh-placed Roma desperately need the points if they are to qualify for the Champions League last season.

Earlier on Saturday, reigning champions AC Milan will be looking for their sixth consecutive league win away to bottom club Atalanta.

FIXTURES

(all 1400GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday: Atalanta v AC Milan (1700), Roma v Juventus (1930)

Sunday: Fiorentina v Reggina, Inter Milan v Lecce, Livorno v Palermo (1930), Messina v Lazio, Parma v Cagliari, Sampdoria v Chievo, Siena v Brescia, Udinese v Bologna

Zim hit rock-bottom

Football

It was also the lowest total by any side against South Africa. The previous low was 66 by India in Durban in 1996/97.

Ntini and wicketkeeper Mark Boucher achieved significant landmarks during Zimbabwe's brief innings. When Ntini claimed his first wicket, bowling Dion Ebrahim, he became the third South African to take 200 Test wickets. He was playing in his fifth Test.

Boucher held three catches, with the second, to dismiss Brendan Taylor off Ntini's bowling, making him the third wicketkeeper in Test history to achieve 300 dismissals. He finished the innings with 288 catches and 13 stumpings in 79 matches.

The Zimbabwe team included Heath Streak and Andy Blignaut, both making their first Test appearances since the player row that stripped the team of many of its leading players last year. But neither was able to stem the batting collapse, while both were expensive with the ball.

Smith was unbeaten on 38 at tea, while De Villiers had advanced to 49.

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard at tea on the first day of the first Test between South Africa and Zimbabwe at Newlands on Friday:

ZIMBABWE: First innings

Matsikenyeri c De Villiers b Ntini 12

Rogers c Boucher b Pollock 1

Ebrahim b Ntini 3

Masakadza lbw b Kallis 6

Taibu c Boucher b Ntini 2

Boucher c De Villiers b Kallis 7

Blignaut c Smith b Kallis 9

Streak c Boucher b Pollock 8

Cremer c Kallis b Pollock 0

Mpofu not out 0

Extras: (nb-4) 4

Total: (For no loss in 17 overs) 91

Total: (All out in 31.2 overs) 54

Falls of wkt: 1-2, 2-13, 3-20, 4-22, 5-33, 6-36, 7-37, 8-50, 9-50.

Bowlers O M R W

Blignaut 3 0 24 0

Chigumbura 2 0 7 0

Ntini 10 2 23 3

Langeveldt 6 2 9 0

Kallis 7.2 3 13 4

Smith not out 38

De Villiers not out 49

Extras: (nb-3, w-1) 4

Total: (For no loss in 17 overs) 91

Bowlers O M R W

Streak 6 0 34 0

Blignaut 6 1 26 0

Pollock 8 4 9 3

Ntini 10 2 23 3

Chigumbura 2 0 7 0

Langeveldt 6 2 9 0

Kallis 7.2 3 13 4

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