

PREVIEW: *SERIE A*
Juve's first test

AFP, Rome

Serie A leaders Juventus face their sternest challenge of the season so far when second-placed Inter Milan visit the Delle Alpi stadium on Sunday evening.

While Juventus have won all of their five league matches to date, Inter's one blip was a 3-2 defeat at Palermo.

Title-holders Juventus are on 15 points, three ahead of Inter and four clear of surprise package Livorno. Then come four clubs tied on 10 points, AC Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio and Palermo.

With a 100 per cent record in the league and in Europe, Juventus have started the campaign better than last season when they won the championship for a 28th time and reached the quarter-finals of the Champions League.

FIXTURES

(all 1300 GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday: Chievo v Treviso, (1600), Udinese v Lazio (1830)

Sunday: AC Milan v Reggina, Ascoli v Parma, Fiorentina v Livorno, Juventus v Inter Milan (1830), Lecce v Cagliari, Messina v Sampdoria, Palermo v Empoli, Roma v Siena

Manikganj soccer

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Manikganj Sadar Upazila lifted the Manikganj inter-upazila football tournament title defeating Shivalaya by a solitary goal at the Shaheed Miraj-Tapan Stadium on Friday.

Amin Rana struck the winner for the Sadar upazila.

Chief Whip of Jatiya Sangsad Khondoker Delwar Hossain distributed the trophies after the final.

Advocaat lays down the law

AFP, Seoul

Dutchman Dick Advocaat, with just eight months to prepare South Korea for next World Cup, warned players Friday nobody had a guaranteed place in the squad for the 2006 finals in Germany.

In his first press conference since taking accepting the job as national coach two weeks ago, Advocaat said big reputations would count for nothing under his leadership.

"It doesn't matter... who you are," said the 58-year-old, who served two terms as Netherlands national coach. Advocaat said that his main task was to restore confidence to a side that has rarely performed to expectations during the past three seasons.

He said he was only interested in players ready to give 100 percent. "If someone is not doing that in training or on the pitch, then we take another player," he said.

He took over from fellow Dutchman Jo Bonfrere, who quit last month after complaining that senior players had lost their passion for the game.

Bonfrere lasted barely a year in the job after replacing Portuguese coach Humberto Coelho, who also departed under a cloud after about a year.

On arrival here on Thursday Advocaat said the target for the 2006 World Cup in Germany was to equal the glory days of 2002 when the side reached the semi-finals of the World Cup on home soil.

"We know that if we work hard, we can get a result," he said. Advocaat's first game in charge will be a home friendly against Iran on October 12. Iran have also qualified for the finals.

Arsenal player cleared of rape

AFP, London

Arsenal goalkeeper Graham Stack has been cleared of raping a 22-year-old girl at his home by a jury at Croydon Crown Court on Friday.

The 24-year-old, currently on loan to Championship side Reading, had been accused of attacking the girl at his flat in Beckenham, south-east London, in September 2004.

Stack was cleared of one count of rape and another of sexual assault. His friend, Allan Smilie, 24, was cleared of two counts of sexual assault.

The woman, from north London, went back to Stack's flat after meeting the player and his friend at a night-club.

She claimed he had forced himself on her after she lay down in one of the bedrooms because she had been sick.

But the Republic of Ireland Under-21 international, who was on loan to Millwall at the time, maintained she had consented to sex with him.

PREVIEW: *PRIMERA LIGA*

Can Celta carry on?

Football

AFP, Madrid

Few would have predicted that Celta Vigo would be the Spanish league leaders after the opening month of the season but the Galician club are hoping to consolidate pole position at Cadiz on Sunday.

Celta have never finished higher than fourth despite 44 previous campaigns in the top flight of Spanish football but so far this season they have notched up four wins out of five outings.

In similar fashion to Celta, the sight of Getafe in second place, just one point off the top, is a huge surprise in only their second season of first division football.

The team from Madrid's southern suburbs will try to maintain their unbeaten start against fourth-placed Valencia on Saturday, with the 2003-04 champions also still yet to lose a game.

The match will mark the return of Valencia coach Quique Flores to Getafe, the club which he steered to survival last season against the odds.

However, the biggest cheer of the night could be for Valencia defender Amedeo Carboni, who at almost 40 years and six months will become the oldest player to appear in the Spanish first division if he plays.

Spanish giants Real Madrid have moved up to third after two consecutive wins but all eyes will be on how they will have recovered from Wednesday's 2-1 win in the Champions League against Olympiakos when they face Real Mallorca on Sunday.

Real coach Wanderley Luxemburgo gave his squad the day off on Thursday, citing fatigue after the game against the Greeks.

One man who should be refreshed though is Ronaldo, who was suspended on Wednesday, but who has already scored four goals on the domestic scene this season.

Ronaldo's Brazilian international colleague Julio Baptista could be the man who makes way for the former World Player of the Year, after several lacklustre games.

Barcelona play host to an unbeaten Real Zaragoza but the visitors know that that the Camp Nou held a hoodoo

over them for four decades not having won in the Catalan citadel since the 1965-66 season.

"The key to the game is not to let Ronaldinho touch the ball," commented Zaragoza defender Leonardo Ponzio on Thursday, in the wake of the Brazilian's hat trick in the Champions League against Italian side Udinese on Tuesday.

At the other end of the table, Atletico Madrid are off their worst start to the season since 1978 but their Argentine coach Carlos Bianchi is hoping that they can turn things around with a win at Malaga on Sunday.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off times in GMT): Barcelona v Real Zaragoza (1800), Getafe v Valencia (2000)

Sunday: Cadiz v Celta Vigo (1500), Deportivo La Coruna v Osasuna (1500), Racing Santander v Alaves (1500), Sevilla v Espanyol (1500), Real Sociedad v Real Betis (1500), Villarreal v Athletic Bilbao (1500), Real Madrid v Real Mallorca (1700), Malaga v Atletico Madrid (1900)

PREVIEW: *PREMIERSHIP*

Target Chelsea

Football

AFP, London

Singing the praises of Liverpool is not something that comes naturally in the environs of Old Trafford.

But there is no doubting that Rafael Benitez's well-drilled side did Manchester United and the rest of the Premiership a large favour with the way they dominated their goalless draw with Chelsea in the Champions League on Wednesday.

It may be premature to suggest that Chelsea's aura of invincibility -- the product of the seven straight wins with which they have begun the defence of their title -- has been shattered.

It was however dented sufficiently to encourage the chasing pack to believe that all is not yet lost in a title race many had declared done and dusted when Morten Gamst Pedersen scored Blackburn's winner against United at Old Trafford last Saturday. That defeat, which left United 10 points adrift of the champions, and the cacophony of jeers to which Sir Alex Ferguson and his players left the pitch triggered an avalanche of media speculation that the Scot's reign at the club could be entering its final stages.

Several tetchy (even by his own Olympic standards) appearances in front of the media this week have confirmed that Ferguson is indeed feeling the pressure. But it remains credible to argue that Chelsea's current position at the top of the table is slightly artificial. Good fortune, notably in the form of last minute winner at Wigan and a controversial red card for Spurs striker Mido, has played a considerable part in the winning run. Ferguson is also justified in arguing that his side have had a tougher set of fixtures to navigate in the opening month of the campaign. Yet it is equally undeniable that United's margin for error has shrunk to the point that anything less than a victory at Fulham on Saturday is likely to provoke another wave of questioning of his leadership.

Ferguson, though, is hardly a stranger to such pressure-cooker situations and Blackburn manager Mark Hughes is not expecting his former boss at United to buckle this time around.

"When you are at Manchester Utd you are there to be shot at and people are firing barbed comments at you and making assumptions when they haven't got full possession of the facts," Hughes said. "At times it gets to a ridiculous point and I think that's where United are at the moment with regards to the media frenzy surrounding them."

"So I think he's been through it many, many times before and basically it just makes them stronger as a

group and certainly Sir Alex just becomes more determined to push words down people's mouths again.

"It's not something they'll worry too much about. I have every confidence that they will turn it around very quickly."

Fulham fans have had to endure one of their worst starts to a Premiership season, one win from seven matches having left Chris Coleman's side hovering perilously on the verge of the relegation zone.

Spurs climbed to fourth on the back of Monday's win but Martin Jol's side face a tougher test of their European pretensions against second-placed Charlton, whose only defeat so far came courtesy of Chelsea's best performance of the season.

Charlton's strong start to the season has been founded on the midfield axis of Danny Murphy and Alexei Smertin, and Murphy will have added incentive to continue his good form against Spurs.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Blackburn v West Brom, Charlton v Tottenham, Fulham v Man Utd, Portsmouth v Newcastle, Sunderland v West Ham (1615 GMT)
Sunday: Man City v Everton (1015 GMT), Wigan v Bolton (1200 GMT), Arsenal v Birmingham (1230 GMT), Aston Villa v Middlesbrough (1300 GMT), Liverpool v Chelsea (1500 GMT)

Real finally beat MU

Football

BLOOMBERG

Real Madrid said it ended Manchester United's eight-year reign as the world's biggest soccer team by revenue after signing players such as David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane.

Madrid's revenue increased 17 percent to 275.7 million euros (\$332.2 million) in the year ended June 30, according to accounts mailed to club members this week. Bloomberg News obtained a copy of the documents. United, which hasn't published figures for that period, had sales of 169 million pounds (\$298.6 million) for the year through July 31, 2004.

Since Florentino Perez, 58, took over as club president five years ago, he's more than tripled sponsorship and merchandising revenue even as the team struggles on the field. Madrid, which won the last of its record nine European titles in 2002, is trying to avoid a third straight season without a trophy for the first time in 53 years.

"The policy of signing the likes of Ronaldo, Robinho, Beckham and Zidane is driving Real Madrid's popularity," Oliver Butler, an account manager in London for sports consultant Sport+Markt AG, said in a phone interview. "None of Manchester United's players have the same kind of appeal."

Madrid expects to lift revenue to 300.1 million euros in fiscal 2006, the accounts showed. Profit fell 20 percent to 30.3 million euros in the latest period as the cost of paying its all-star squad rose 17 percent to 144.5 million euros. England's United had net income of 19.4 million pounds for the year to July 31, and by another 6.5 percent to 54.1 mil-

lion euros last campaign. Sponsorship and advertising income rose 78 percent to 45.9 million euros after Madrid signed an extension of its jersey sponsorship with Siemens AG through the end of this season on improved terms, the club said. It declined to provide figures. Madrid players share 50 percent of income from personal endorsements with the team.

United is unlikely to follow Madrid in acquiring star players to boost revenue, said Leigh Webb, an analyst at Panmure Gordon & Co. in London.

"United prefers to develop young players who become famous by winning trophies with the club," Webb said. Glazer, 77, has yet to disclose his plans for the club, he said.

Madrid's France midfielder Zidane and Brazil striker Ronaldo have six world player of the year awards between them. Like Alex Ferguson's United team, Madrid failed to reach the Champions League quarterfinals last season, when it finished second in the league to archrival Barcelona.

Madrid needs to start winning trophies or its sales growth will be affected, Freedman said. "If you win the Champions League your income spirals," he said. "You have to be successful, if not in the short term then in the long term."

Coached by Vanderley Luxemburgo, Madrid spent 77.2 million euros signing Brazil forwards Robinho and Julio Baptista, and Spain defender Sergio Ramos before the current season, according to the accounts. The club got 42.9 million euros for selling Michael Owen to Newcastle, and Walter Samuel and Santiago Solari to Inter Milan.

Shabbir no longer 'suspect'

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistani pace bowler Shabbir Ahmed's bowling action has finally been cleared by a biomechanic expert, Pakistan cricket authorities said on Friday.

"Shabbir underwent tests on his action in Perth, Australia, under the supervision of professor Bruce Elliot. We have been intimated his action is clear," said Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) director Saleem Altaf.

Ahmed's was reported to the International Cricket Council (ICC) in May during the first Test against the West Indies in Barbados, the third time since 1999 questions have been officially raised about his bowling style.

Shabbir has been suspended from bowling in international cricket since June, Altaf said.

"We are keen to have him available for the home series against England," Altaf said.

"Which is why he was sent for the tests to Australia after undergoing remedial measures on his action."

Altaf said the board had been informed that Shabbir's present action was within the permissible level of tolerance allowed by the ICC for bowlers to flex their elbow while bowling.

PCA spares Harbhajan

PTI, Mohali

After apparently apologising for his attack on Indian coach Greg Chappell, Harbhajan Singh was on Thursday let off by the Punjab Cricket Association with a warning.

The PCA had summoned the off-spinner for a hearing over the latter's comments that Chappell's strict regime had instilled fears and insecurity among members of the Indian team and that the Australian was using a divide and rule policy.

PCA president I S Bindra, after the hearing said that the bowler was told that his action was "not in consonance with the code of the BCCI and the state association."

The spinner was given the reprieve apparently after he tendered an apology to the committee. Harbhajan said: "that in hindsight he has realized he should have avoided airing his views the way he did in public," Bindra said.

Nadal to play in India

AFP, New Delhi

World No. 2 Rafael Nadal will be the top attraction at the season-opening 400,000-dollar ATP Chennai Open in January, organisers said on Friday.

The teenage sensation confirmed his participation this week in the 11th edition of India's only ATP event to be held on the Nungambakkam stadium hard courts in the southern city of Chennai from January 2-8.

It will be Nadal's second appearance in the tournament, having played and lost in the first round in 2004 to Frenchman Thierry Ascione before teaming up with Spanish compatriot Tommy Robredo to win the doubles title.

Nadal had a phenomenal 2005 during which he won 10 titles, including the French Open, to hold the number two ranking behind Roger Federer.

"The Chennai tournament is a great event and the enthusiasm of the crowds is very encouraging," Nadal said in a statement released by the organisers.

"I love India and it's a pleasure to be coming back there. I cherish my doubles title in Chennai. I hope to make good in singles this time and am really looking forward to playing at the Chennai Open."

"I am confident that I will raise my game to the highest level and get a great start to the new ATP Champions race."

Tournament organiser Ravi Krishnan said he was delighted that Nadal will be back in India. "It is an honour to have Nadal play at the Chennai Open and it augurs well for the tournament and Indian tennis fans," said Krishnan.

"Nadal is one of the most exciting players in the world of tennis currently, who has the ability to elevate his game to a powerful level."

Ashrafal visits

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children how to visit the library, how to get a library card, and showcase the importance of books and reading.

Sisimpur is funded through USAID, the United States Agency for International Development. As a children's educational TV show, it is the first programme of its kind in Bangladesh. It began airing in April 2005 and uses Bangla language and innovative educational methods to reach young children.



Scottish Andy Murray plays forehand against American Robby Ginepri in the quarterfinal of the Thailand Open in Bangkok on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Federer, Murray march into last four

Tennis

REUTERS, Bangkok

Briton Andy Murray celebrated his entry into the world's top 100 by beating US Open semifinalist Robby Ginepri 4-6, 6-4, 6-3 to reach the last four of the Thailand Open on Friday.

The 18-year-old Scot, who started the year ranked 411, defeated the American third seed to clinch the second best result of his career after his second round Wimbledon defeat of 15th-ranked Radek Stepanek.

Further good news for Murray was that second seed Lleyton Hewitt, his likely semifinal opponent, withdrew with a leg injury against Paradorn Srichaphan, handing the seventh-seeded Thai a walkover.

"Winning against two top 50 players in a row is a pretty big deal for me, and to get to my first semifinal is also great," said Murray.

Top seed Roger Federer eased past Gilles Muller of Luxembourg 6-4, 6-3 and will meet Jarkko Nieminen in the semi-finals. The sixth seeded Finn ended the run of Taiwan's Yeu-Tzuoo

Wang, winning 6-4, 6-7, 6-4.

Murray broke serve in the opening game of the match when Ginepri double-faulted, combining fine returns and strong serving to build a 3-1 lead.

The set was turned on its head when Murray suffered an inexplicable lapse, losing 12 out of 13 points as Ginepri broke back twice to take the first set.

Serve dominated the second set until the ninth game when Murray broke, courtesy of a backhand pass down the line.

Gaining in confidence, Murray raised his game to new levels in the decider, unleashing powerful forehands to keep Ginepri under pressure.

The American cracked when he double-faulted to give the Scot a 3-2 lead. His frustration boiled over and he received a warning for racket abuse. Murray broke again to claim victory and a place in his first ATP semi-final.

"Obviously Paradorn is playing in front of his home crowd and he's a big star over here," said Murray. "It's going to be a big match for me and I'm looking forward to it."

"I'm not expected to win, but if I

play like I did today I think I've got a very good chance. I would like to get through to the final and play my first ATP final against the best player in the world."

Federer needed patience but had little difficulty in disposing of Muller who recently sprung the biggest surprise of the US Open by bouncing Andy Roddick from the first round.

The Swiss world number one broke on his fifth break point in the opening game and held further break points at 3-1 and 4-2, although Muller often played his way out of trouble with a blistering serve.

Federer had to wait for a further 54 minutes to earn his second break of the match. Two consecutive double-faults at 5-3 led to Federer claiming a third break and the match.

Hewitt struggled in both his opening matches in Bangkok and he saved four match points against Justin Gimelstob before advancing to the quarterfinals.

"In my practice today I over-stretched the inside left of my groin which had been stiff from training and especially after the match over Gimelstob last night," said Hewitt.

Keane's Celtic plans

Football

AFP, Manchester

Roy Keane looks set to finish his illustrious playing career at Scottish side Celtic after announcing that he plans to leave Manchester United at the end of the season.

The Irish midfielder revealed his plans in a live phone-in on United's television channel, MUTV, telling one fan of his "gut feeling that it would be best to make a clean break" from the club he has served with such distinction for 12 years.

Keane, who turns 35 in the summer, insisted that he would not move to another Premiership club, and made it clear he would like to realise a long-cherished dream of playing for Celtic, the team he grew up supporting.

"I'd like to play on for another year

or two but I don't think it will be at United," Keane said.

"It would be a good experience for me to play for another team, another country, another dressing room. If I'm going to become a manager it would be good for me to experience a different environment."

Just in case Celtic manager Gordon Strachan did not get the message, Keane added: "When I say I might play for another team I don't necessarily mean an English team. I think that would be hard for me to stomach. I wouldn't fancy coming back to Old Trafford and going into the away dressing room."

Strachan refused to comment on whether he would be interested in taking Keane to Parkhead. "Since I've been at the club, or any other club I have been at, I've never spoke about anybody else at any other club," he said. "I'm not going to change it now. If I say

anything at all there will be headlines all over the place and I want to concentrate on Livingston tomorrow.

"It's not fair on the player or the club. It's as simple as that."

Keane's comments will inevitably dismay United supporters who are already disgruntled by the extent to which the club has slipped behind Chelsea, on and off the field.

It was not clear on Friday whether United manager Sir Alex Ferguson or any of the Old Trafford hierarchy were aware of Keane's intentions, but Ferguson's assistant Carlos Queiroz recognised that the Irishman would be a hard act to follow.

"You don't replace great players like Pele, Maradona, Eusebio or Roy Keane," the Portuguese coach said. "You just create new players in new teams. That is why the game moves forward."

It's only natural!

Football

AFP, Islamabad

The match was hailed as a victory in the fight for equality -- but it was the players themselves who ended up fighting in the final of Pakistan's first women's football championship.

The game on Thursday between Punjab province and WAPDA (Water and Power Development Authority) descended into an ugly brawl after a solitary goal from a spot-kick won the trophy for the Punjab team.

"I'm hoping that in the next few weeks I'll be staying on here for the series."

Also the West Indies star believed Australia slumped to their surprise Ashes defeat because they didn't plan well

enough. "One of the reasons I think that Australia has fallen off the pedestal a bit is the fact they've got 11 match-winners."

"Somehow they feel that they go out to play and think 'if the openers don't do it, the No.3 will do it, the No.4 will do it'."

"There never seemed to be like a plan - I was a bit worried about that. "There has to be a plan, you've got to have a structure in terms of how you're going to get your runs, how you're going to get the opposition out."

However, Lara said he does not believe Australian cricket will slide as alarmingly as the once-great West Indies team in the 1990s and should recover

some hot words.

The football federation played down the incident as a "football flare-up".

"In an exciting final such incidents happen but there would be no inquiry of the incident," said the spokesman.

The biggest fears of violence before the game had come from Islamic hardliners, who earlier this year caused a riot during a mini-marathon in Lahore because women were participating.

To avoid any trouble, players in the football tournament were not allowed to wear shorts or t-shirts and male spectators were also banned.

Lara hopes to tour down

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now to ensure that the best team comes to Australia," Lara said.

"I think they're trying to put some sort of mechanism in place that if things don't work out on the table, we're still going to have the best people playing."

"I think that in the next few weeks I'll be staying on here for the series."

Also the West Indies star believed Australia slumped to their surprise Ashes defeat because they didn't plan well

quickly after losing their