



Arsenal's French striker Thierry Henry (C) controls the ball on his head during a training session at Highbury on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

PREVIEW

Win and join last sixteen



AFP, Paris

Arsenal, Bayern Munich and Barcelona can seal Champions League last 16 places if Wednesday's latest batch of group matches go their way.

Arsenal will guarantee a first two finish in group B if they dish out the same treatment to Sparta Prague at Highbury as they served up a fortnight ago.

That game in the Czech capital featured two mesmerising goals from Thierry Henry who was returning after a six-week injury lay-off, and Arsene Wenger is looking for an encore from the Gunners' record goalscorer.

Victory for Bayern Munich against Juventus in Turin could assure them top spot in group A, while Barcelona must beat Panathinaikos at home and Werder Bremen see off Udinese for the Spanish champions to book their ticket from group C.

Group D however is too close to call with any of the four teams still in with a shot of making it into the next phase. A mere three points cover the quartet.

Tabletoppers Manchester United take on Lille at the Stade de France in Paris desperate to draw a line under a disastrous 4-1 Premiership defeat to Middlesbrough at the weekend.

Wayne Rooney, who missed Lille's

goalless draw at Old Trafford a fortnight ago, is back from suspension but any thoughts of a shake-up in defence may be wide of the mark given United's injury crisis.

Rio Ferdinand could even end up as captain as Roy Keane, Ryan Giggs and Gary Neville are all injured, while Paul Scholes is suspended.

Ferguson believes the way his side fell apart against Middlesbrough will boost their French hosts.

"All we have done is given encouragement to Lille. They will be really buoyed when they see this result. We will get a reaction, that is without question. It is my job to see that happens.

"But we also have to try to stay positive and make sure we don't make the same defensive mistakes again because if we do, we will be out. "We have to do better than we did at Middlesbrough because on that form, we couldn't beat anyone."

Keeper Edwin Van der Sar manfully held up his hands to accept the bulk of the blame for one of the worst losses in the English giant's history.

"We are not in the greatest spirit at the moment but we have to analyse what went wrong and somehow start to focus on Wednesday's game against Lille," said the Dutch stopper.

Second-placed Benfica host Villareal in an all-Spanish clash in the other group D fixture.

How Ferguson must envy Arsenal, whose European record this season stands at three wins from as many

matches, albeit only an injury time goal from Dennis Bergkamp secured a 2-1 win against Swiss minnows FC Thun.

Although another injury prevented Henry from taking part in the north London derby against Tottenham on Saturday, the French hitman is expected to be back in action on Wednesday.

"At the moment we have one foot in the Champions League because we did well away from home," Wenger said.

"That's a contrast with the Premier League. I feel we performed well in the two away games, the disappointing match we had was at home against Thun.

"Overall I feel we have done what is expected of us in a group like that and we want to finish the job now."

Ajax, lying second five points adrift, are away to Thun.

The stakes are high in Turin where Juventus are looking to bite back against Bayern after their 2-1 defeat in Munich two weeks ago left the Italian titleholders lying second.

But like United they hardly had the best of build-ups, Saturday's 3-1 loss to AC Milan bringing to an end their 100 per cent Serie A record.

Juventus striker Alessandro Del Piero, due to start against Bayern having been dropped to the bench for the Milan clash, insisted the defeat at the San Siro would only make his team stronger.

"The only thing to do is accept the

defeat, have a look at where we went wrong and refocus on our targets. We have to get over it as quickly as possible.

"The page must be turned and we have to work harder to improve. We need to as facing Bayern is always a tough challenge," said the 30-year-old Italian international.

In group C Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard is expected to stick with the same starting line-up against Panathinaikos as the one that beat Real Sociedad 5-0 on Sunday which pushed them into second in the Spanish league.

Sylvinho will keep his place at left back ahead of Dutch international Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Andres Iniesta is also expected to retain his place in the midfield, keeping teenage Argentine international Lionel Messi on the bench.

FIXTURES	
Wednesday's Group A	
FC Bruges v Rapid Vienna	
Juventus v Bayern Munich	
Group B	
Arsenal v Sparta Prague	
FC Thun v Ajax	
Group C	
Barcelona v Panathinaikos	
Werder Bremen v Udinese	
Group D	
Benfica v Villareal	
Lille v Manchester United	

Romania not going to Iran

REUTERS, Bucharest

Romania will not take part in a four-nation soccer tournament in Iran because of the tense political situation there, the Romania Soccer Federation (FRF) said on Tuesday.

The tournament also included Iran, Togo and Paraguay, who have all qualified for the 2006 World Cup finals, and was scheduled to start on Nov. 11.

Romania's decision followed the foreign ministry's request for the FRF to reconsider the trip.

An FRF spokesman said Romania might host a friendly against another national team in a city to be named in mid-November.

Best getting better

AFP, London

George Best's condition improved further on Monday with doctors reporting that the ailing British football legend could be out of intensive care this week.

The 59-year-old former Manchester United star, who is suffering from internal bleeding and kidney problems, managed a few words to his sister Julie and girlfriend Ros Hollidge at the Cromwell Hospital, in south west London.

Doctors said Best was slowly getting better - but friends warned the ex-Northern Ireland midfielder was in terrible pain.

Professor Roger Williams, who oversaw his liver transplant three years ago, said: "Mr Best is greatly improved, he is out of bed and sitting up talking.

"However, he will remain in intensive care for several more days at least."

Best's manager, Phil Hughes, said: "It's great news, but he is in an incredible amount of pain.

"He isn't yet able to hold conversations, but he did manage to say a few little things this morning."

Best's illness is believed to be related to the immuno-suppressant drugs he takes to stop his new liver - which he received in July 2002 - being rejected.

His condition deteriorated severely last week after four weeks of hospital treatment for an infection, prompting new fears for his life.

Family members and former colleagues, including ex-team-mate Denis Law, flocked to his bedside to offer him their support.

Hughes, who has confirmed that Best carries a donor card, said his client is likely to need attention from medical staff for some time.

Best, who won the European Cup with Manchester United, has a well-documented history of alcoholism.

He caused outrage when he embarked on a drinking binge within months of his liver transplant operation - despite vowing to stay dry.

The player was told that one more drink could kill him when he underwent the surgery and has been criticised by a liver specialist for putting people off organ donation.

The football star earned his status when he helped Manchester United to win the English league championship in 1965 and 1967 and the European Cup in 1968.

Voted European Player of the Year in 1968, Best's ability, coupled with his long-haired good looks and sometimes wild temperament, led him into party-going habits which took an increasing toll on his career.

He quit United for good aged 28, a fact viewed by many football experts as a tragic waste of his unique talent.

First Test

FROM PAGE 12

TEAMS

AUSTRALIA (from): Matthew Hayden, Mike Hussey, Ricky Ponting (captain), Michael Clarke, Simon Katich, Adam Gilchrist, Shane Watson, Shane Warne, Brett Lee, Nathan Bracken, Glenn McGrath, Stuart MacGill.

WEST INDIES (from): Chris Gayle, Devon Smith, Ramnarresh Sarwan, Brian Lara, Shivnarine Chander-paul (captain), Marlon Samuels, Dwayne Bravo, Dinesh Ramdin, Tino Best, Daren Powell, Fidel Edwards, Jermaine Lawson, Corey Collimore.

Umpires: Ian Howell (South Africa) Rudi Koertzen (South Africa)

England'll miss

FROM PAGE 12

I am surprised Pakistan is talking of taming them through their spinners," said Nawaz, who criticised leg-spinner Mushtaq Ahmed's recall.

Mushtaq, who took 80 wickets for Sussex in the recently concluded English county season, was among the 16-man squad for the first two Tests and was tipped to play his first Test in two years.

"It's no big deal to get wickets in the county season," said Nawaz.

Keane too harsh to go public



Football

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has refused to comment on reports Roy Keane had castigated several team-mates in an interview that was so scathing the club's television station was ordered not to broadcast it.

Leaked details of the interview with MUTV suggested Keane had delivered damning verdicts on the performances of Alan Smith, John O'Shea, Kieran Richardson, Darren Fletcher and Rio Ferdinand in Saturday's humiliating 4-1 defeat by Middlesbrough.

Liam Miller, who did not play on Saturday, was also understood to have been included in a verbal broadside against the perceived lack of desire and sloppy attitude of some of United's younger players.

That has been the theme of previous rants from the notoriously short-fused Keane in the past, although he has never before directly identified the individuals he was targeting.

The interview with Keane had been due for broadcast on Monday night but was pulled after the intervention of chief executive David Gill, reportedly with the blessing of Ferguson.

The row could not have erupted at a worse time for the Scot, who is desperately trying to get United's season back on track in the wake of the Middlesbrough debacle, which has left his side trailing Chelsea by a massive 13 points in the Premiership title race.

A defeat by Lille in the Champions League on Wednesday would leave United struggling to qualify for the knockout stages of the competition and would inevitably trigger renewed

speculation that the Scot's 19-year tenure at Old Trafford could be drawing to a close.

But as he prepared to fly out to Paris with his squad, Ferguson was in no mood to respond to questions about the Keane interview.

Instead, he reiterated the importance of producing a performance to demonstrate that Saturday's setback



ROY KEANE

was nothing more than a blip.

"That is the great thing about football - we have had a few days to recover from a bad result and hopefully we can put things right tomorrow," Ferguson said.

Keane, who is currently sidelined with a broken foot, has already said he does not expect to be playing at United next season, although the club are hoping to dissuade him from moving on following the expiry of his current contract.

The latest episode may have ensured that Keane will definitely quit Old Trafford. His suggestion that the current squad are simply not good

Vassell double for City delight



Football

AFP, Manchester

Darius Vassell scored twice against his old club Aston Villa in a 3-1 Premiership victory from an opportunist strike and then a superb piece of finishing here Monday.

Vassell, bought by City manager Stuart Pearce from Villa in the summer, found the net in the fourth and 26 minutes which gave the visitors too much to do to get back into the match.

City moved up four places to fourth spot in the table but Villa were left way down at fifth from bottom.

City's Claudio Reyna did not start after picking up knee and ankle injuries in last week's defeat at Arsenal, bringing about Pearce giving Lee Croft a Premiership debut. Andy Cole was also back in the side.

Villa were without Juan Pablo Angel, giving Luke Moore a chance in the starting XI, but pre-match drama was to come. Villa's Danish keeper Thomas Sorensen twisted his ankle in the warm-up to hand a debut to Stuart Taylor who signed from Arsenal in the summer.

It turned into a terrible start for Taylor who saw the ball go into his own net for the first goal after a defensive mix-up.

Vassell headed on a long ball from Sylvain Distin but with Villa's Liam Ridgwell and Jloyd Samuel covering, it looked as though the ball was going to be picked up by Taylor.

But Samuel did not see that Taylor had come out of his box to take the ball and the full-back disastrously headed over him allowing Vassell to easily run on to it and score into an empty net.

Vassell also hit the post after good work from Cole before he got his second.

Cole was again involved and his lobbed pass sailed over Ridgwell and Vassell turned quickly and rifled a first-time volley into the left-hand corner of the net.

Ridgwell then pulled a goal back for Villa midway through the second half from close in after a cross from the left.

Cole made the match safe for City however with a left foot shot from the edge of the box on 83 minutes which took a lucky deflection and sailed over hapless keeper Taylor for the third goal.

TOP SIX	
Chelsea	11 10 1 0 28 6 31
Wigan	10 7 1 2 11 5 22
Tottenham	11 5 5 1 13 7 20
Manchester City	11 6 2 3 14 9 20
Bolton	11 6 2 3 13 11 20
Charlton	10 6 1 3 15 10 19

England

FROM PAGE 12

Earlier, England pacemen James Anderson and Liam Plunkett shared six wickets between them to wrap up the Patron's XI first innings for 211.

England had declared their first innings at their overnight score of 256-9 -- which included a fighting undefeated 124 from opener Marcus Trescothick who rescued England after a disastrous start on Monday.

Both Anderson (3-50) and Plunkett (3-41) are vying for the Test place of reverse swing specialist Simon Jones, who failed to make the Pakistan trip due to a knee injury.

Anderson, who was dispatched for three boundaries in his opening over, hit back by claiming top order batsmen Asher Zaidi (11), Bazid Khan (2) and Test discard Yasir Hameed (28) in a spell of seven overs for 32 runs.

The 21-year-old Plunkett, making rapid strides to win a Test place, then removed Patron's XI captain Misbahul Haq (9) and Faisal Iqbal (9) to leave the hosts reeling at 79-5.

Asim Kamal, part of Pakistan's 16-man squad for the first two Tests, didn't last long as he fell leg-before to part time pacer Paul Collingwood after making a flashy 14.

Veteran off-spinner Shaun Udal then chipped in with the wickets of Khalid Latif (2) and Yasir Arafat (16) to make his presence felt in case Pakistan prepare spin-friendly pitches.

Shahzad Malik, who hit a record 403 not out in a Hertfordshire League match with 38 sixes off just 137 balls in July this year, shaped up well during his 37 but fell to Udal who finished with 3-36.

At 150-9, England were destined for a big lead but Zulqarnain (34 not out) and Tahir Khan (32) frustrated the tourists during a last wicket stand of 61.

Plunkett returned for his final spell to have Khan caught behind by Jones who took five catches behind the stumps.

England's frontline spinner Ashley Giles did not bowl because of a stomach upset.

England, who play another warm-up game in Lahore from Sunday, take on Pakistan in the first of three Tests starting at Multan from November 12.

A Russian football dictator!

AFP, Edinburgh

Vladimir Romanov, the tycoon whose money has revitalised Hearts as a force in Scottish football, has been accused of acting like a "dictator" after sacking the Edinburgh club's manager and chief executive in the space of nine days.

Former club chairman George Foulkes, who resigned on Monday after the sacking of chief executive Phil Anderton, said he now regretted ever having got involved with Lithuanian businessman Romanov, who has installed his son Roman as an executive chairman.

"I brought in Vladimir Romanov and I am very much regretting that now," said Foulkes, who admitted he had been "bounced" into sacking manager George Burley on October 22.

"Phil Anderton has only been there six months and done a very good job - ask anyone in Edinburgh, ask anyone in Scotland.

"Not only were we top of the Scottish Premier League, our season tickets had doubled and we were planning ground expansion.

"Vladimir Romanov is behaving like a dictator and if he continues to do that there will be a revolution against him."

Burley's sacking, which was triggered by a row over Romanov's interference in team affairs, was one of the most surprising moves in the history of Scottish football.

The former Ipswich boss had guided Hearts to the top of the Scottish Premier League with eight wins and two draws in their first ten matches and he was dismissed just hours before an SPL encounter with Dunfermline.

Burley's sacking came 24 hours after Romanov increased his stake in the club to 55 per cent.

The club owner has promised a big-name replacement but Claudio Ranieri has already ruled himself out of the

running and Foulkes predicted that former English boss Bobby Robson could decline any offer from Romanov.

"I'm still regretting that we were bounced into sacking George Burley," Foulkes said. "I think that was a very big mistake.

"I know Bobby Robson was lined up as one of the front-runners but I wouldn't be surprised if he was having second thoughts."

Foulkes added: "I've still kept my season ticket and I'm going to be there on Saturday. I think we should be there because Heart of Midlothian Football Club is greater than anyone and it's certainly bigger than Vladimir Romanov.

"I hope that someone else in the longer term might come in and take over but at the moment Vladimir Romanov is the only option."

Romanov took control of Hearts in January in a boardroom coup that saved the club from financial collapse and ensured that the team could remain at its historic home of Tynecastle rather than becoming tenants of the Scottish Rugby Union at Murrayfield stadium.

After sacking former manager John Robertson, Romanov brought in Burley but the relationship between the two men was always tense, with the manager scarcely consulted over summer signings that included Greek Euro 2004 winner Panagiotis Fyssas and Czech Republic international midfielder Rudi Skacel.

Romanov has also promised that Tynecastle will be expanded and has further bolstered his standing his fans with a populist style which has seen him travelling to away matches on supporter buses.

stellar start to the season.

The managerless side suffered their first defeat of the season on Saturday when they went down 2-0 to Edinburgh rivals Hibs, a result which allowed Celtic to move to the top of the SPL table on goal difference.

Hearts however remain well-placed to, at the very least, clinch a place in Europe next season, possibly at the expense of champions Rangers, a situation that would have been unthinkable when Romanov arrived in Edinburgh just under a year ago.

Coria suffers early setback

AFP, Paris

Argentina's Guillermo Coria suffered a setback in his bid to reach the Masters Cup in Shanghai when he was beaten 6-4, 6-2 by the Czech Republic's Tomas Berdych in the Paris Masters second round on Tuesday.

A win for the 23-year-old Coria, the world number seven and second seed here, would have guaranteed him a place in the eight-man field at the 4.45-million-dollar season-ending tournament in China next month.

But despite enjoying the first break of the match to lead 2-0 against the 20-year-old Czech, he was then comprehensively outplayed by the man who last year knocked Roger Federer out of the Olympics.

While Berdych goes on to face either Spain's Juan Carlos Ferrero or Stanislas Wawrinka of Switzerland for a place in the last eight, Coria must wait to see how a host of rivals for China fare here.

World number one Federer, Rafael Nadal, the number two, as well as Andy Roddick, Lleyton Hewitt, Andre Agassi and Marat Safin have already qualified for the Masters Cup.

enough or the impression that the club is in disarray will not have gone down well with the United hierarchy.

But everyone at Old Trafford is acutely aware that Keane will leave a huge gulf in the middle of the United midfield behind him.

Ferguson has spent the last three years trying to find a replacement for the 34-year-old. Eric Djemba Djemba and Brazilian World Cup winner Kleberson were both found wanting and United are currently attempting to convert Alan Smith, bought from Leeds as a striker, to a midfield enforcer in the Keane mould.

Striker Ruud van Nistelrooy admitted morale had been affected by the defeat at Middlesbrough.

"There is a very negative feeling after Saturday," he said. "You could talk for hours about what went wrong. It was a bad performance and we didn't do ourselves or the fans justice.

"We have to try to look at things in a realistic way. In my first season here, we lost the derby (against Manchester City) at home. That was also a low point. But it was an unusual occurrence. We have not conceded four in how many years.

"What we have to do is go out tomorrow and prove ourselves again."

Ferguson has included 17-year-old Belfast-born central defender Johnny Evans, who has no previous first-team experience, in his squad for Wednesday's match.

With Keane out and Paul Scholes suspended, Rio Ferdinand could captain United in the Stade de France on Wednesday, despite his shaky recent form.

'Barmy Army'

FROM PAGE 12

hoping a larger than usual number of English fans will come for the series, drawn by mounting interest in the game after the Ashes.

The tour is expected to bring a windfall to hoteliers in Pakistan who are anticipating full houses in the Test venue cities of Multan, Faisalabad and Lahore.

Long's three companions Keith Smith, John Freeman and Jonathon Dyson -- all from the English county of Leicestershire -- intend to stay in Pakistan for the whole tour on a budget of 89 dollars a day (50 pounds).

"It's fun to be in Pakistan," said Smith, 21, who thinks England are on a roll and will beat Pakistan.

"Both teams are balanced and it'll be an exciting series," added Freeman.

Smith said another batch of fans will arrive in the eastern city of Lahore next week for England's second warm-up match, followed by more ahead of the first Test in Multan from November 12.

He insisted they faced no security problems in Rawalpindi, despite earlier concerns by England officials which led to one Test being shifted from the volatile southern city of Karachi.

"There are no fears and we've been well received in Pakistan," he said.

The England and Wales Cricket Board agreed to play only a limited overs international in Karachi and have also said they have security worries for the Barmy Army during the tour.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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