

Becks vows return

INTERNET, undated

David Beckham has vowed to prove his critics wrong and show he can still have an impact at the highest level.

Having been dropped by England and relegated to the substitutes bench at Real Madrid in recent times, Beckham's star appears to be on the wane.

However, the 31-year-old midfielder still has total confidence in his ability, and plans to use his own experiences from Manchester United and those of his former Red Devils team-mate Ryan Giggs to get back to where he wants to be.

"I will work hard and try to prove people wrong," he said on Monday. "It's up to me to prove to people that I can do it, and I am confident I can."

Beckham has been used mainly as a substitute this season under new Real coach Fabio Capello, and the former England captain has admitted it is a frustrating situation for him to be in.

However, being consigned to the sidelines is not a new experience for Beckham, who was also benched by former United boss Sir Alex Ferguson in his last season at Old Trafford.

"It was similar," he admits. "I worked hard when that happened and I got back into the team. I missed out for the game against Real Madrid and the game against Arsenal, but after that and I got back into the team and we won the league.

"But this happens in footballers' lives, it doesn't matter who you are.

Brazil to play in Europe

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil will continue playing international friendlies in or near Europe as part of an agreement which will allow South America to keep its World Cup qualifying competition, the head of the national federation said on Monday.

Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) president Ricardo Teixeira told reporters Brazil would not be playing any friendlies at home in the near future.

He said in return, European clubs where most of Brazil's top players are based, would drop their opposition to the South American World Cup qualifying system in which the 10 teams play each other twice over a period of nearly three years.

"It's impossible," Teixeira told reporters after being asked if Brazil would play any home friendlies.

"There's a five-hour time difference, a 12-hour flight and a demand in the agreement which allow us to keep the qualifying system in which we can only play (friendlies) within four or five hours' flying time (of Europe)," he said.

"This makes it impossible for us to play in South America or Asia."

Brazil have played four international friendlies since the World Cup in Europe.

In addition to an away game against Norway, the five-times world champions have played neighbours Argentina in London, Ecuador in Stockholm and Wales, also in London.

They also played an exhibition match in Kuwait against a local selection.

VDV boost for Hamburg

REUTERS, Berlin

Rafael van der Vaart is ready to make his first Champions League appearance for Hamburg SV against Porto on Tuesday but the Dutchman's return is likely to be too late to save the struggling German side.

Van der Vaart was the inspiration behind Hamburg's run to third place in the Bundesliga last season.

He suffered a serious thigh injury in August and has been sorely missed as Hamburg have lost all three of their matches in Group G to date.

The last of those, a 4-1 defeat away to Porto, pretty much ended Hamburg hopes of making the last 16 of the Champions League.

They are not mathematically out of it, but realistically their best hope would appear to be third place and a spot in the UEFA Cup.

"The target is to finish second in the group or at least third," Hamburg's Peruvian international striker Paolo Guerrero said. "It's going to be tough but we'll give it everything."

Since Van der Vaart returned to the team, Hamburg have managed a win and a draw to move out of the bottom three in the Bundesliga.

Another win on Wednesday would take them to within a point of third place with two games to play.

For Porto, the target will be another victory to take them up to seven points from four games and put pressure on top two CSKA Moscow and Arsenal, who meet in London.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Manchester City captain Richard Dunne (C) celebrates his headed goal in their Premiership encounter against Middlesbrough at The City of Manchester Stadium in Manchester on Monday.

Pearce shrugs off pressure

AFF, Manchester



Manchester City boss Stuart Pearce shrugged off suggestions his players had

secured him some valuable breathing space with Monday night's 1-0 win over Middlesbrough, insisting he had never felt his job was on the line.

City skipper Richard Dunne's first half header was enough to earn City the three points in what had become a must-win match in the wake of a 4-0 thrashing by Wigan on their last Premiership outing.

That performance was condemned as "embarrassing" by the club's chairman, John Wardle, prompting a sharp fall in the odds against Pearce becoming the top flight's next managerial casualty.

But Pearce himself maintained the crisis headlines had been overdone.

"I've had no pressure internally," he insisted. "Not once have I heard any disenchantment from the fans or the chairman or anyone else connected with the club."

"It comes from outside and its good media coverage. It is me this week, it was Iain Dowie (Charlton) last week and (Alan) Pardew (West Ham) the week before and it just

wears a little bit thin.

"We are all professional people and we all know our job and we all know exactly what we have to do.

"We will get judged on where we finish at the end of the season and I said that at this time last season when people said how well we were doing at this stage."

City striker Paul Dickov, whose return to the starting line-up was one of five changes made by Pearce from the side that had surrendered to Wigan, admitted the players had felt under pressure to put on a performance in front of their own supporters.

"It was a big result for us after what happened last week," said the Scot. "We knew we had let ourselves down and we were all a bit embarrassed and hurt by it and it was really important that we bounced back."

Dunne fully deserved to pick up the man-of-the-match award after scoring the winning goal and marshalling City's defence with an authority that was conspicuous by its absence at Wigan.

Dickov had City's first real chance, running on to Joey Barton's chip. Dickov beat Boro's keeper Mark Schwarzer to the ball but was unable to hit the target.

Two minutes later, City took the lead from a corner that Barton swung over to the back post, where

Dunne rose highest in a group of players to send a header into the net high to Schwarzer's right.

City might have had a penalty just after the interval when a Barton shot appeared to strike Boro's German defender Robert Huth on the arm.

The home support will have felt hard done by over that decision but City rode their luck in the closing stages when Boro substitute Massimo Maccarone saw two shots strike the post in quick succession.

"We might have got something from the match at the end but it is questionable whether we would have deserved it," admitted Boro boss Gareth Southgate, who was an England team-mate of Pearce's when they lost on penalties to Germany in the Euro '96 semi-final.

"We lost the game in the first half. I thought Manchester City were there to be beaten today - they looked edgy but we just didn't start the game well enough.

"It is disappointing to say the least but now we have got to go to Watford and get a result on Saturday."

Strachan talks up Nakamura

AFF, Galsgow

Celtic manager Gordon Strachan, whose side face Benfica in the Champions League on Wednesday, said Japan's Shunsuke Nakamura was becoming more and more vital as the season went on.

Nakamura's free kick in the 3-2 defeat to United was voted the best goal of matchday one on the www.uefa.com website.

And the Japanese player is known to enjoy working in the Champions League atmosphere, where he is usually given a bit more space to express his talents.

Strachan told the Celtic View: "We've worked it out that, of the last nine games we've scored, Nakamura has been involved in eight of them - and we can't speak highly enough of him.

"He's not a good tackler, but he knows where to stand to make it difficult for the opponent to get past and he runs back and tracks back."

"People say, 'he's not a good tackler', but so what, as long as you're a good teammate and get in the right place and track runs back, that's all you can ask."

Celtic travel to Lisbon hoping to secure entry into the last 16 of the Champions League, with a win over Benfica in the Stadium of Light virtually guaranteeing passage into the knockout stages for the first time.

Buffon might yet leave

INTERNET, undated

Italy's World Cup-winning goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon admits he could leave Juventus in the summer.

The 28-year-old, who had been linked with Chelsea after the serious head injury to Petr Cech, said: "There is the possibility that I will remain at Juventus but there's also the possibility that I will leave."

Buffon turned down a move to Inter Milan in the summer to remain with the Turin giants, despite the club's demotion to Serie B and additional punishment of a 17-point deduction following the match-fixing scandal.

Last week, Juve were given a huge boost in their fight to return to Serie A when they were handed eight points back following a successful appeal.

"I will decide in June what to do," said Buffon.

"I have to consider several things. I always take a last-minute decision and right now, I am in no hurry."

Jose blasts Eidur

INTERNET, undated

Jose Mourinho has taken a swipe at Eidur Gudjohnsen and accused Barcelona's former Chelsea striker of learning to dive in Spain.

Mourinho made a reference to Gudjohnsen's dramatic tumble which earned Barca a penalty in Saturday's win against Recreativo Huelva.

The city of Barcelona has still not forgotten Mourinho's jibe last season when he accused striker Lionel Messi of play-acting.

With heavy sarcasm, the Chelsea manager talked of the Catalan capital as a very cultural place with lots of theatres and fine actors.

Messi appeared on the front page of Barcelona newspaper Mundo Deportivo today, posing as Hamlet with a skull in his hand.

The cheat row was then stoked up by Mourinho, who warned Italian referee Stefano Farina to be wary of Barca's tricks.

Mourinho said: 'I know the number of penalties they have at home. I know the number of times they play against 10 players.

"I am surprised with Eidur because he played in English football all his professional life and three months later he gets that penalty."

Asked whether the Nou Camp could expect more theatre tomorrow, he said: 'Ask Eidur.'

He then claimed Gudjohnsen, who spent six years at Chelsea before his summer transfer, would have been ridiculed in England for taking such a dive, when he was never touched.

Mourinho said: 'It is a tribute to English football because, in England, players are not allowed to do that. If players do that in England, you will kill them.'

Chelsea's Didier Drogba was booed by his own fans last season when he dived to try to win a penalty against Manchester City.

Dynamo brace for Lyon

AFF, Kiev

Injury-hit Dynamo Kiev are bracing themselves for a tough Champions League Group E encounter away against an on-fire Lyon.

Like five-time French champions Lyon, Dynamo also sit atop their domestic league, a 2-0 away win over FC Kharkiv on the weekend seeing them move three points ahead of reigning champions Shakhtar Donetsk.

But Dynamo manager Anatoly Demianenko said he was far from optimistic ahead of the Lyon match, adding however that his team were now focusing on qualification for a UEFA Cup place.

"We do not have any illusions ahead of the match at Lyon," Demianenko told AFP on Monday. "The French champions are now one of the strongest clubs in Europe.

"We had several chances against Lyon at home but failed to convert them into goals," he added. "I hope we will be more lucky on Wednesday.

"We have lost the chance to advance into the Champions League knockout stage but still have a chance to clinch a place in the UEFA Cup."

Dynamo, however, will be without a set of their starting-line defenders as Vladislav Vashchuk, Sergei Fedorov and Goran Sablic, who have all been sidelined with injuries.

Two of Dynamo's Brazilian midfielders, Diogo Rincon and Carlos Correa, are also uncertain for the match at Lyon.

Roma wary of Rivaldo

INTERNET, undated



After taking six points from three games in Champions League Group D, AS Roma coach Luciano Spalletti is targeting a third win against Olympiakos on Tuesday to make passage to the knockout phase a near certainty.

"This is a chance to qualify that we should not miss," Spalletti said of Roma's rematch against the Greek side they beat 1-0 in Athens two weeks ago. Victory will guarantee that progress as long as Shakhtar Donetsk fail to beat leaders Valencia in the group's other fixture.

But with just one point to their name, from the Matchday 2 trip to Shakhtar, Olympiakos need at least a draw to stay in contention - leaving Spalletti with no illusions as to the visitors' intent. "They have won the Greek league, they are top again, and Rivaldo is scoring as well," the coach warned. "They know they have nothing to lose."

Olympiakos boss Trond Sollied begged to differ. "We feel we do have something to lose, because if we win, everything is open for us," said the Norwegian. Olympiakos have not won on the road in 29 Champions League

outings, yet an expected travelling support of 5,000 will be urging their team to break with tradition in Rome. "The key is midfield," said Sollied. "We have to do better than we did against Roma two weeks ago, and we must not allow their key players to play."

After the Athens tie, Spalletti's side experienced what he called a "mini-crisis" draws with Chievo and Ascoli before returning to winning ways with a single-goal victory at Udinese on Saturday. The anticipated recovery from injury of mercurial Brazilian winger Mancini has, however, been postponed. Mancini has been crucial to Roma's free-scoring midfield, and without him their forward momentum has stuttered - their three goals against Ascoli and Udinese coming, directly or indirectly, from Francesco Totti free-kicks.

With strikers Vincenzo Montella and Mirko Vucinic out of form, Spalletti could start with Totti alone up front, while Simone Perrotta, the match-winner las week, faces a late check on a knee injury. Olympiakos have worries of their own, with Uruguayan attacker Nery Alberto Castillo out with a respiratory infection, defender Grigorios Georgatos sidelined by knee, and Marco Ne succumbing to flu trouble.

Having hit four goals in the Greek Super League and two in the Champions League this term,

Castillo's fire power will be missed, although veteran Brazilian Rivaldo has been finding the net, registering four times in five league appearances, including the strike from distance that earned Saturday's 1-0 success against Ergotelis FC following a surprise defeat at Atromitos FC.

Rested for that game in order to be ready for Roma was defender Georgios Anatolakis, while midfielders Ieroklis Stoltidis and Predrag Djordjevic - both likely starters on Tuesday - were kept on the bench. Olympiakos will need all their energies if they are to deny the hosts while also reviving their hopes of a sustained campaign.

Teams

**Roma:** Doni; Christian Panucci, Philippe Mexes, Matteo Ferrari, Cristian Chivu; Daniele De Rossi; David Pizarro, Alberto Aquilani, Simone Perrotta, Taddei; Francesco Totti.

**Olympiakos:** Antonios Nikopolidis; Anastasios Pantos, J lio C sar, Georgios Anatolakis, Micha  ew  akow; Ieroklis Stoltidis, Rivaldo, Christos Patsatzoglou, Predrag Djordjevic; Yiannis Okkas; Michalis Konstantinou.

Wenger calls for ruthlessness

AFF, London



Arsene Wenger has told his Arsenal stars they must show a ruthless streak if they want to avenge their most painful defeat this season.

Wenger's side left Russia two weeks ago furious at the controversial nature of a 1-0 Champions League defeat against CSKA Moscow that has made their path to the second round more difficult than anticipated.

Arsenal's French striker Thierry Henry had more reason than most to feel aggrieved after he had a goal disallowed in the closing minutes when the referee ruled he had controlled the ball with his hand before scoring.

Television replays showed that Henry's strike was perfectly legitimate and he was fiercely critical of the decision after the match.

Henry and company have a chance to put the record straight on Wednesday when Group G leaders CSKA visit London for the return meeting at the Emirates Stadium.

But Wenger is disturbed by Arsenal's recurring habit of suffering costly lapses of concentration.

Three times this season they have been held to 1-1 home draws by Premiership opponents who have taken advantage of a mistake and then clung on for a point as Arsenal made heavy weather of breaking them down.

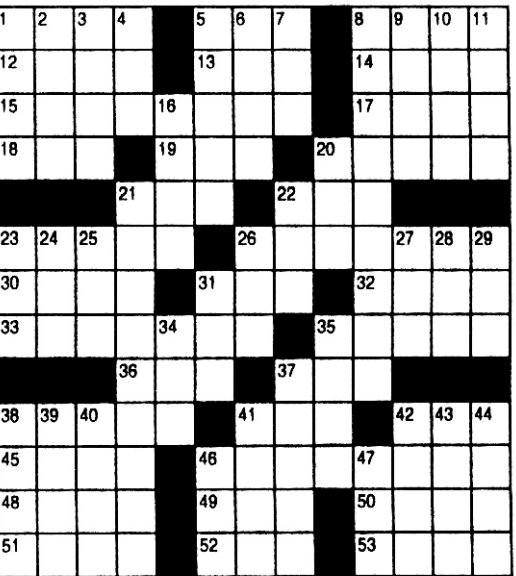


PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid midfielder David Beckham listens to a question during a press conference in Madrid on Monday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down.



CRYPTOQUIP

AW TPX'NC AY M DPJCV
NPPD MYL JZC LPPN AB
BMWCVT VPHCL, LPCB JZMJ

DMHC TPX AYY-BCIXNC?
Yesterday's Cryptiquip: GROUP FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TRAINING FOR ART GALLERY CAREERS: FUTURE FRAMERS OF AMERICA.

Today's Cryptiquip Clue: N equals R

The Cryptiquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.