



Sevilla's Brazilian striker Luis Fabiano (C) shoots towards Betis goal only to be blocked by 'keeper Contreras during their King's Cup match at the Sanchez Pizjuan Stadium in Sevilla on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

SPANISH KING'S CUP Sevilla, Betis draw blank

REUTERS, Madrid

Primera Liga strugglers Real Betis produced a battling performance to hold high-flying city rivals Sevilla to a 0-0 draw at the Sanchez Pizjuan in the first leg of their King's Cup quarterfinal on Thursday.

Betis, who knocked out Real Madrid in the last round, held out against the UEFA Cup holders in a derby that was high on effort and tension but low on skill and entertainment.

Sevilla have a slight advantage in the tie as they will go into the return leg on February 28 knowing that a score draw will be enough to put them into the semifinals.

The remaining first leg games were played on Wednesday with Real Zaragoza holding the edge in their tie against league leaders Barcelona after a 1-0 victory at the Nou Camp, the Catalans' first home defeat in almost a year.

Bernd Schuster's Getafe and Deportivo Coruna hold the whip hand in their ties after emphatic first-leg victories.

Getafe were in unstoppable form as they overpowered Osasuna 3-0 at home, while Deportivo came from a goal down to defeat second division leaders Valladolid 4-1 at the Riazor.

Bring a Bazooka

AFP, Paris

A bazooka would be needed to start transfer talks for Cristiano Ronaldo, the Portuguese star's Manchester United teammate Patrice Evra jokingly told a French radio station on Thursday.

Ronaldo's agent Sergio Alves was quoted by Wednesday's The Sun newspaper as saying offers for next season might be looked into if they came from a big club like Real Madrid or Barcelona.

However, Evra said that if Alves wanted to start discussions, he would do well to bring a bazooka with him.

"Any agent asking for a transfer request for Cristiano Ronaldo would have to come with a bazooka," Evra said.

"Sir Alex Ferguson would know exactly how to welcome him. Protective equipment would be needed before going into the manager's office."

Chelsea deny Lippi link

AFP, London

Chelsea denied Thursday they had been in discussion with former Italy coach Marcello Lippi and insisted no list of candidates had been drawn up to replace current boss Jose Mourinho.

The Portuguese's position at Stamford Bridge has come under intense scrutiny this season amidst reports he has fallen out with the English Premiership champions' Russian owner Roman Abramovich.

Lippi, who led Italy to World Cup glory in Germany last year but is currently without a job, became the latest high-profile candidate to be linked with the Chelsea hotseat last weekend.

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Barca bid to answer critics

AFP, Madrid



LFP

League leaders Barcelona will be looking to bounce back at Osasuna on Sunday following their shock 1-0 home defeat by Real Zaragoza in the Spanish Cup in midweek.

The defeat was Barcelona's first in their Nou Camp stadium in any competition this season and prompted questions over the European champions' ability to win La Liga for the third consecutive year.

"Maybe we are not at the level we were at last year," admitted Barcelona's Mexican international defender Rafa Marquez.

Critics have pointed to the slump in form of 2004 and 2005 World Player of the Year Ronaldinho who was subjected to jeers from Barca fans after Wednesday's loss.

Nevertheless, Barcelona are still in pole position by a point and in the last 16 of the Champions League once again.

"Barcelona aren't as bad as everyone says," said Osasuna midfielder Raul Garcia.

"It's clear that they are not having some of their best games but they

are always a difficult rival. They are still the league leaders."

However, the Pamplona-based side are quietly optimistic that they can make life difficult for Barca.

Last season, they were one of the few teams to defeat the champions, beating them 2-1 in their intimidating Reyno de Navarra stadium en-route to finishing fourth.

However, this season, Osasuna have been more erratic and currently lie 10th.

One slight problem for Osasuna coach Jose Antonio Ziganda is that defender Josetxo Romero and striker Roberto Soldado are both suspended.

Sevilla lie second but coach Juande Ramos will take stock of his options for Sunday's match against struggling Real Sociedad in the

FIXTURES	
(Kick-off times in GMT)	
Saturday	Deportivo La Coruna v Real Mallorca (1900), Espanyol v Real Zaragoza (1900), Valencia v Atletico Madrid (2100)
Sunday	Athletic Bilbao v Real Betis (1600), Celta Vigo v Gimnastic Tarragona (1600), Racing Santander v Getafe (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Villarreal (1600), Sevilla v Real Sociedad (1600), Real Madrid v Levante (1800), Osasuna v Barcelona (2000)

Jose sounds caution

AFP, London



BARCLAYS

Jose Mourinho has admitted a slack performance against Charlton on Saturday could cost Chelsea their Premiership title.

The champions, who will welcome skipper John Terry back to their line-up following his recovery from back surgery, head across London aiming to cut Manchester United's lead at the top to three points for at least 24 hours.

United take on Tottenham at White Hart Lane on Sunday and Mourinho has warned his side that they cannot afford to give Sir Alex Ferguson's on-form squad the opportunity to pull further ahead at the top.

"In this moment we can't let the six points (gap) become eight or nine," said Mourinho, who is conscious that the title battle is rapidly approaching the closing stretch with 13 rounds of matches left.

"We need to keep it at six or let the six go to three or four."

A 3-0 win over Blackburn in midweek suggest the cutting edge that Chelsea lacked over Christmas and New Year is returning.

Despite that match also seeing Ashley Cole added to the Stamford Bridge casualty list, the England defender is expected to play again this season despite his knee injury.

Morale is on the up at Charlton following a mini-revival in the fortunes of Alan Pardew's relegation-battling side.

An away win at Portsmouth was followed on Wednesday by a battling draw at Bolton, and Pardew believes those results will have an important psychological boost for the upcoming meetings with Chelsea and Manchester United.

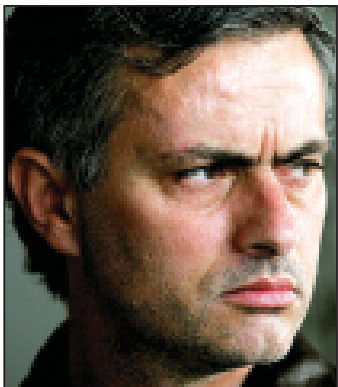
"It was a real lion-hearted performance at Bolton and it puts us into a position where we can attack the

next two games with a little bit of freedom," said Pardew.

After fielding a weakened team in the 4-0 midweek win over Watford, Manchester United will be back at full strength for the trip to Spurs, with Ferguson facing a difficult selection dilemma in attack.

Louis Saha is fit again but Henrik Larsson's rapidly developing understanding with Wayne Rooney means the Frenchman is not guaranteed an instant return to the starting line-up.

Rooney set up Larsson to score his first Premiership goal since his loan move from Helsingborg during the romp against Watford and the Swede paid tribute to the vision of his teammate.



JOSE MOURINHO

"As long as you move well when you have a player like Wayne around you're always likely to get chances," Larsson said.

"I enjoy playing with the likes of Wayne and Cristiano Ronaldo immensely. At 35-years-old I didn't expect to get this kind of chance again. So to be here now playing alongside them is fantastic."

Liverpool face Everton in a lunchtime derby on Saturday hoping

wake of the Cup derby against Real Betis on Thursday.

Real Madrid are in third place, four points behind Barcelona, and will be looking to keep up the pressure by beating relegation-threatened Levante on Sunday.

Coach Fabio Capello will be relieved that club captain Raul Gonzalez, Jose Antonio Reyes and Emerson have all recovered from injuries and trained with the rest of the team on Thursday.

With Ronaldo now having signed for Milan, there is a strong possibility that Raul will play up front alongside Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Sergio Ramos and Fernando Gago were still training lightly on their own on Thursday, recovering from knocks suffered in the 1-0 loss at Villarreal last Saturday, but club officials said they were optimistic that they would also be fit to play against their visitors from Valencia.

"We are still in contention in the league and still in the Champions League. I don't see why we can't win both titles," said Gago.

Meanwhile, a degree of calm has returned to Real with Spanish judges throwing out a legal challenge to last summer's presidential elections on Thursday, leaving the incumbent Ramon Calderon to continue as president.

to continue the recent run which has given them an outside chance of forcing their way back into the title shake-up.

Revenge is also on the menu after the 3-0 humiliation Everton inflicted on their neighbours at Goodison Park earlier this season.

"It was a really bad day for us in the last game with Everton and it's an experience I hope I never have to go through again," said the Reds' Dutch striker, Dirk Kuyt, who scored a spectacular long-range strike in the midweek win over West Ham.

"It was really important to win at West Ham after beating Chelsea because we knew we had to maintain our momentum."

"No matter how you play, at this stage of a season, you have to just think always about winning. It seems every game we are playing is really important for us, and it's the same this weekend."

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez is hoping that he might be able to include Argentina midfielder Javier Mascherano in his squad following his transfer from West Ham.

That depends on clearance from the Premier League but Liverpool will definitely be without Momo Sissoko, who needs more time to recover from the shoulder injury that has kept him sidelined since November.

FIXTURES	
(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	Aston Villa v West Ham, Blackburn v Sheffield Utd, Charlton v Chelsea, Fulham v Newcastle, Liverpool v Everton (1245), Manchester City v Reading, Middlesbrough v Arsenal (1715), Watford v Bolton, Wigan Athletic v Portsmouth
Sunday	Tottenham v Manchester Utd (1600)

Aragones seeks England double



Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain coach Luis Aragones hopes his side can emulate the performance they put on to beat England the last time they played, when the two sides meet again in a friendly at Old Trafford next Wednesday.

In November 2004, Spain won a friendly 1-0 in the Bernabeu thanks to an early goal from defender Asier del Horno.

The scoreline did not reflect the home side's dominance of a match that was marred by fans' racist abuse of England's black players.

"We played one of the best games I have had as coach. We won quite easily and missed a penalty in that game," Aragones told a news conference on Friday.

"We need to play the same way again. We need to maintain possession because they have a direct style, aggressiveness and rhythm to their game which can make life very difficult for you."

Aragones has recalled striker Fernando Torres to his 20-man squad, though former captain Raul

was overlooked again.

Torres, who had been a fixture in Aragones's squads, was dropped for November's 1-0 friendly defeat to Romania after a poor start to the season with his club Atletico Madrid.

However, the 22-year-old's form has picked up and he has contributed seven goals to help Atletico climb to fifth in the Primera Liga.

Real Madrid striker Raul was dropped for the first time in 10 years for reasons other than injury for Spain's Euro 2008 qualifier away to Sweden in October and he has now failed to make the last three squads.

"The door remains open for Raul but he has been injured recently. I have had a conversation with him and I told him this," Aragones added.

There was no room for Joaquin or Jose Antonio Reyes. Several players who missed the last match through injury return, including midfielders David Albelda and Xavi, and centre-back Pablo Ibanez.

Real Betis defender Juanito and Liverpool's Luis Garcia are both out injured.

It will be Spain's first visit to England since they were beaten 3-0 in a friendly in 2001 in Sven-Goran

Eriksson's first match in charge of England.

England and Spain have both made stuttering starts to their Euro 2008 qualifying campaigns. In March, Spain will face Denmark and Iceland at home in Group F and England will travel to Israel and Andorra in Group E.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Iker Casillas (Real Madrid), Pepe Reina (Liverpool)

Defenders: Antonio Lopez (Atletico Madrid), Pablo Ibanez (Atletico Madrid), Carles Puyol (Barcelona), Joan Capdevila (Deportivo Coruna), Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid), Javi Navarro (Sevilla), Angel (Celta Vigo)

Midfielders: Cesc Fabregas (Arsenal), Andres Iniesta (Barcelona), Xavi (Barcelona), Xabi Alonso (Liverpool), Miguel Angel Angulo (Valencia), David Silva (Valencia), David Albelda (Valencia)

Forwards: David Villa (Valencia), Angel Arizmendi (Deportivo Coruna), Fernando Torres (Atletico Madrid), Fernando Morientes (Valencia)

AFP, Rome



Scudetto

showdown at leaders Inter Milan.

While the top-of-the-table clash at the San Siro takes centre stage in Italy this weekend, Ronaldo will steal much of the limelight if he is deemed fit to make his debut for AC Milan at bottom club Ascoli.

Inter are 11 points clear of second-placed Roma after a record sequence of 14 consecutive Serie A wins -- a run that has prompted Italy's largest bookmaker to pay out on the 'Nerazzurri' retaining the championship.

The fat lady may be preparing to deliver her opening note, but Roma feel they could be the ones singing after Sunday's crunch match.

"We have the utmost respect for Inter, but if the real Roma shows up we can do it," said Chilean playmaker David Pizarro who joined Roma last year but is still half-

owned by Inter.

"A win there will reopen the championship and we still believe the title race is far from over."

However, Pizarro's midfield partner Daniele De Rossi has his doubts whether Inter can be caught.

"Inter seem determined not to ease up, but unless they have a bad run there will be little we can do," said the tough-tackling Italy international.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini dismissed talk that the Scudetto was already in the bag.

"For us the championship is not over," he said. "We have a good lead, but on Sunday we face Roma - a very dangerous team in form."

Roma will also meet Inter in the

FIXTURES	
(1400GMT kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	Reggina v Messina (1700), Livorno v Cagliari (1930)
Sunday	Ascoli v AC Milan, Empoli v Atalanta, Inter Milan v Roma (1930GMT), Lazio v Chievo, Parma v Fiorentina, Siena v Torino, Udinese v Sampdoria

Trez in Domenech's plans



Football

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech pulled no surprises as he named his 22-man squad to play a friendly match against Argentina in Paris on February 7.

As expected, Marseille's on-loan Liverpool forward Djibril Cisse was welcomed back into the fold as Domenech insisted this match was all about preparation for March's Euro 2008 qualifiers.

And one player who looks certain to feature is Juventus forward David

Trezeguet, who Domenech said needs a confidence booster after missing the vital penalty that handed Italy the World Cup last July.

Playing in this match holds special significance for Trezeguet, whose parents are both Argentine.

"I imagine this match pulls at his heart-strings," said Domenech. "There are those who suffered from not playing at the World Cup. His pain is another degree higher than that."

"He took the penalty that handed the World Cup to Italy. He needs a confidence-boost. I am expecting a lot from him during this qualification campaign."

Domenech has a mini-defensive crisis to cope with as Arsenal's William Gallas and Juventus centre-half Jean-Alain Bounsong are both out.

So too is Barcelona's Lilian Thuram, who has a sore calf, although he was included in the squad for his motivational powers.

That move brought stinging criticism from Thuram's club-mate Ludovic Giuly, who is not in the squad.

"Thuram hasn't trained all week. I can't understand how he can play against Argentina. He still has pain in his calf," said Giuly.

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Brazilian superstar and new Milan signing Ronaldo (L) poses with his new jersey next to the club's vice president Adriano Galliani at a Milan hotel on Friday. PHOTO: AFP