



Germans sign sponsorship deal

AFP, Berlin

German telecommunications operator Deutsche Telekom said on Thursday they would be continuing their sponsorship of the Bundesliga until 2009 but the league would not take the company's name.

Deutsche Telekom started their sponsorship this season but have now taken up their option of a two-year extension.

The company name will continue to adorn the shirts of first and second division teams as well as on the giant screens in the stadiums, a statement said, adding the actual league would not be renamed though press had speculated it would be called the T-Liga or Telekom-Liga.

Thailand to play Netherlands

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand will play the Netherlands here in June as a warm-up for the Asian Cup, the country's football association said Friday.

"We think that it's a good opportunity to warm up our team before we host the Asian Cup in July," said Chaipak Siriwat, chairman of the association.

No exact date was given but Chaipak said the match would take place in early June.

Thailand are co-hosts of the July 7-29 tournament along with Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Brawl in Chinese match

AFP, Beijing

A friendly match involving one of China's top football teams was abandoned after a mass brawl, state media said Friday, just days after a similar incident marred a Chinese visit to London.

Eight-time Chinese champions Dalian Shide were losing 3-0 to second-division side Chongqing Lifan when the fight erupted after a tackle on Dalian's Bulgarian import Zoran Jankovic.

"It's like you're not even aware of the fight with the Olympic team," Dalian's Dutch coach Jo Bonfrere screamed at his players afterwards, according to the Dalian Evening News.

"Do you think you are acting honourably?"

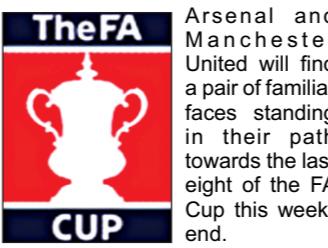
After the match, which was not open to the public, Dalian immediately left Chongqing and returned home to the nation's northeast, the papers said.

Chinese football is in the spotlight since the notorious punch-up between the national under-23 team, which will represent China at the Beijing Olympics, during a match with England's QPR this month.

Both China and QPR apologised and handed out punishments after pictures of up to 30 players and coaches kicking and punching each other were broadcast worldwide.

Old foes for Gunners, Red Devils

AFP, London



Arsenal and Manchester United will find a pair of familiar faces standing in their path towards the last eight of the FA Cup this weekend.

While Gunners old boy David Bentley returns to north London with Blackburn, Reading's trip to Old Trafford means a reunion for their Irish midfielder Stephen Hunt with his boyhood friend John O'Shea, the United defender.

As well as putting him in contention for promotion to the full England squad, Bentley's form of late has been good enough to suggest that, for once, Arsene Wenger's judgement may have let him down when he decided to allow the winger to leave the club that had fostered his talent.

First-team opportunities at Arsenal were thin on the ground for Bentley when he requested a transfer in the summer of 2005. But his development since then has done nothing to dispel the belief that, had he stayed in London, the 22-year-old Bentley might have been that rare thing -- a young English footballer good enough for Wenger's starting line-up.

Bentley's new team-mates certainly have no doubt about the former England under-18 captain's technical ability. "We have many quality players at Blackburn but David is something special," said Shabani Nonda, the DR Congo striker whose time at Monaco and Roma leaves him well-placed to judge.

"I call him 'our Beckham'. No two players are the same but there is a bit of Beckham about him, the way

he crosses the ball and the style he possesses."

Blackburn will relish their tilt at an Arsenal side that will have had barely 60 hours recovery time after being forced to extra-time in their fourth round replay at Bolton on Wednesday.

Wenger, who rested Thierry Henry on Wednesday, must also weigh his options for a Champions League clash against PSV Eindhoven in Holland on Tuesday, but is confident that an extension of his side's 11-match unbeaten run will mitigate against tired legs.

"The fatigue factor is important but as long as you win you hope you can recover," said the Frenchman. "The team has been doing really well recently and the spirit has been exceptional."

Hunt and O'Shea, who grew up together in Waterford, have both hit the headlines this season; Hunt for the horrific collision that left Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech with a fractured skull and O'Shea for his spell in goal for United following an injury to Edwin van der Sar in a recent Premiership match.

"We met up recently with the Ireland squad but we didn't really discuss this FA Cup game - most of the banter was about him going in goal," revealed Hunt.

"It would be nice if it happened again so I could score against him, although I don't suppose that is very realistic. We know it's going to be

FIXTURES

Saturday

Arsenal v Blackburn (1230 GMT), Chelsea v Norwich, Watford v Ipswich, Plymouth v Derby, Middlesbrough v West Brom, Manchester United v Reading (1715 GMT)

Sunday

Preston v Manchester City (1315 GMT), Fulham v Tottenham (1600 GMT)

tough because United are playing with all guns blazing at the moment but hopefully we can give a good account of ourselves."

Plymouth's home draw against Championship leaders Derby means at least one side from outside the top flight is guaranteed to reach the last eight, although the odds on the winner being joined by Norwich, who face a daunting trip to Chelsea, would appear slim.

Ipswich and West Brom will travel to Watford and Middlesbrough respectively with higher hopes, but it is perhaps Sunday's meeting between Championship high-flyers Preston North End and a Manchester City side that has struggled for goals of late that has the greatest potential for an upset.

It is also an encounter imbued with the history of the world's oldest competition.

The two clubs have been crossing swords in the FA Cup since the 1890s, a time when North End were one of the great powers in the land. It is 59 years since they last met in the Cup however and Preston fans will gladly settle for a repeat of the outcome of that day: their Scots centre-forward Billy McIntosh having scored the only goal at Maine Road in February 1948.

Sunday also sees a London derby clash between Fulham and Tottenham. Woefully inconsistent in the league this season, Martin Jol's Spurs remain capable of matching the country's best on their day and the under-pressure manager could badly do with the distraction of a quarter-final tie to look forward to.

Fulham's home form however suggests it might take a replay for that objective to be achieved.



Chelsea striker Andriy Shevchenko walks during a training session at the club's training ground in Cobham on Thursday.

Slomka's Schalke looking up

AFP, Berlin

clear," he told the club website. "But while we have the quality to win the league, there are another 13 games left, not two."

"We're hoping to have lots of support in Wolfsburg on Saturday. It's going to be another very difficult game because Wolfsburg are having a good spell."

"But we'll be looking to maintain our lead there and if possible even extend it. We want to carry on winning."

Schalke midfielder Fabian Ernst was cautious in his outlook for forthcoming matches.

"I don't really care what the table says," said Ernst. "We aren't dreaming. If anything, we need to be careful and keep our feet on the ground."

A view shared by midfield partner Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

"I'm not letting it get to me. There are three months to go until the end of the season and so much can happen before then."

Royal Blues captain Marcelo Bordon was more positive.

"We are stronger than in 2005," referring to the team which

finished second for its best performance since winning its last title.

Schalke won't find it all their own way however with Wolfsburg losing just once in the last nine visits of Schalke to their Volkswagenarena stadium.

Werder Bremen meanwhile host Hamburg SV on Saturday after their rousing 3-0 UEFA Cup last 32, first leg win over Ajax on Wednesday to boost morale following consecutive Bundesliga defeats including a 2-0 home loss to Schalke.

Bayern travel to lowly Alemannia Aachen on Saturday

having last weekend earned their first victory in four attempts since the winter break in beating Arminia Bielefeld 1-0.

It was Ottmar Hitzfeld's first victory in his second spell as Munich coach, having led them to the 2001 Champions League title, following the departure of Felix Magath at the beginning of the month.

"In my opinion, the fact we've made progress was as important as the three points," the 58-year-old said at the time saying that clean sheets were what mattered in football.

"You only succeed as a team with a solid defence. That's the fundamental element in winning matches."

On Bayern's selection front, Brazilian defender Lucio and Italian midfielder Martin Demichelis are unavailable but French defender Willy Sagnol is expected to return after sitting out the Bielefeld game with a knee problem.

Defining weekend for MU

Football

AFP, Manchester

Henrik Larsson believes the strength of Manchester United's squad will prove decisive as Sir Alex Ferguson's side begin a seven-day stretch that could determine whether or not they repeat their treble of 1999.

United face Reading at Old Trafford on Saturday in the FA Cup fifth round knowing that victory will move them into the last eight and on course for the first final at the newly rebuilt Wembley Stadium.

Then, three days later, Ferguson's side will resume their Champions League campaign in Lille before facing Fulham in a game that could extend their lead in the Premiership to nine points over second-placed Chelsea.

The United manager is certain to ring the changes over the coming week and will make an enforced change against Reading with striker Wayne Rooney missing through suspension.

That means Larsson will be partnered up front by either Louis Saha or Ole Gunnar Solskjær but the Swede insists United have the resources to cope with whatever the demanding programme throws at them.

"The season is entering a massively important stage," said Larsson. "And it's now that you

really appreciate having a big squad of quality players."

"I thought Ji-Sung Park and Darren Fletcher did really well when they came in against Charlton and the fact that they scored the goals shows just how important it is to have guys like that who are an integral part of the set-up."

"When you have these other tremendous players coming in it's just a matter of doing things slightly differently. Each player offers something different to the team."

"In training, I look at the squad and see that anybody could start a game and United would be as strong as ever. There has been a great process of bringing players through and buying intelligently at the club," Larsson added.

"We have a lot of games coming up now over the next couple of weeks, but we train well and prepare well, so there is no reason why we can't take these games in our stride. Everybody is up for it."

Cristiano Ronaldo and Michael Carrick are expected to return and Ferguson has once again moved to deny continuing reports that Ronaldo could move to Spain at the end of the season.

"Cristiano loves it here," he said. "He's in his best spell, he's improving and progressing fantastically as a footballer," the Scot added. "Without question, he loves it here."

Slomka, who was formerly in charge of the club's youth system, is taking nothing for granted as Schalke seek their eighth title but first since 1958.

"We're happy to be six points

FIXTURES

Saturday

Alemannia Aachen v Bayern Munich, Werder Bremen v Hamburg SV, VfL Wolfsburg v Schalke 04, Borussia Dortmund v Borussia Monchengladbach, Hertha Berlin v Mainz 05, Bayer Leverkusen v Hanover

Sunday

Arminia Bielefeld v VfL Bochum, Nuremberg v Energie Cottbus