

# All eyes on Nou Camp

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona and Liverpool, the last two Champions League winners, will both be trying to put their off-the-field problems behind them in their last 16 first leg encounter on Wednesday.

The big question concerning Barcelona is whether their coach Frank Rijkaard will include striker Samuel Eto'o in his squad to face the men from Merseyside when he names his squad later on Tuesday.

Last week's bout of public bickering between Rijkaard and Eto'o, with former World Player of the Year Ronaldinho joining in as well, has trained the spotlight on relationships within the Barcelona dressing room.

Eto'o, last season's top scorer in the Spanish first division, then asked to be left out of the Barca squad that travelled to Valencia for a league match on Sunday.

The three-time African Player of the Year claimed that he wanted to continue working on his fitness after four months out of action with a knee injury.

As a result of Eto'o's reluctance to don the famous claret-and-blue

jersey at the weekend, there have been serious doubts about whether Rijkaard would select the Cameroon striker for the Champions League match.

However, Barca's lack of firepower in front of goal during their 2-1 defeat at Valencia, with Icelandic striker Eidur Gudjohnsen once again proving to be a big disappointment, may force Rijkaard to even start with Eto'o.

Despite the loss and their unconvincing form since the start of the year, Barcelona are still on top of the Spanish first division and Rijkaard believes that his team will bounce back against The Reds.

"It's a reminder that we cannot go out relaxed against Liverpool. Anytime we suffer a defeat we then have to go out and win the next game," said Rijkaard, who many pundits consider to be an expert motivator.

Liverpool are third in the English Premiership but have often struggled away from home this season and may not be relishing a trip to Barca's intimidating Nou Camp stadium.

However, Liverpool coach Rafael Benitez may be glad to be anywhere away from their Portuguese training camp after newspaper allegations of a fracas there between Craig Bellamy and

John Arne Riise emerged on Sunday.

"The players worked extremely hard at last week's training camp but we will take disciplinary action and fine any of them who are found to have breached club rules during our stay in Portugal," said Benitez in the wake of lurid English newspaper stories about the bust up.

"Despite reports to the contrary, the spirit amongst the lads is very good with everyone looking forward to the game against Barcelona on Wednesday.

"We remain totally focused on what will be a very tough game against the defending European champions," added Benitez, whose origins as a Real Madrid reserve team player and coach make him even more determined to beat Barca.

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard believes that the side will put all their personal problems behind them once they step out in front of a capacity 98,000 crowd on Wednesday.

## FIXTURES

**Wednesday**  
Inter Milan (ITA) v Valencia (SPA)  
Barcelona (SPA) v Liverpool (ENG)  
Roma (ITA) v Lyon (FRA)  
Porto (POR) v Chelsea (ENG)

"A lot of our lads have experience of the Nou Camp so there is no fear factor. We have to go there with confidence, and not worry about Barcelona."

"If you spend too much time worrying about Barcelona it will give you nightmares because they are a great side.

"We know what we are capable of and we know the performance we can come up with on the big occasion.

"We also know that whatever Barcelona say, they are going to be wary of us," commented the England international midfielder and hero of their 2005 Champions League triumph in Istanbul.

The last two recent encounters between Barcelona and Liverpool on the Spaniard's home turf, in the 2001 UEFA Cup and 2002 Champions League, have ended in typical dull 0-0 draws.

Gerrard is not completely sure that it will be third time lucky for neutral fans of football on Wednesday.

"We would love to go there and win. We're not a team that goes anywhere to play for a draw.

"But a draw would not be a bad result for us. A positive result would set us up nicely when we bring them back to Anfield for the second leg," added Gerrard.

## Jose's home challenge

AFP, Porto



Portuguese counterparts, FC Porto, here on Wednesday.

Jose Mourinho returns to the club he guided to 2003 UEFA Cup and 2004 Champions League triumphs with a Chelsea squad that have put together a run of six successive wins without conceding a goal since they were beaten 2-0 by Liverpool at Anfield at the end of January.

On the back of those performances, Mourinho has done his best to foster a sense that Chelsea have gone through their sticky patch and emerged unscathed on the other side, a belief which, he claimed, led him to rest Claude Makelele and Ricardo Carvalho for Saturday's FA Cup tie with Norwich.

"Because the team is in a good moment, winning matches, confidence back, I thought I could give

some players a rest," he nonchalantly explained after watching his side win 4-0.

Closer scrutiny of the winning sequence however suggests that the 'business as usual' rhetoric, if not total bluster, could yet prove to have been premature.

Three of the six victories have been recorded against lower league opposition - Nottingham Forest and Norwich in the FA Cup and Wycombe in the League Cup, the final of which, against Arsenal, takes place on Sunday.

And although both Middlesbrough and Blackburn have been outclassed in recent league matches at Stamford Bridge, a scrappy 1-0 win at relegation-threatened Charlton will have been accorded equal significance by the rest of Europe's elite.

Unlike Charlton, Porto are a side in form. A 4-0 hammering of Naval on Friday allowed them to pull four points clear at the top of the Portuguese top flight. And, as Mourinho knows only too well, the Estadio do Dragao is an intimidating venue where English clubs have not prospered in recent seasons.

Manchester United's 2-1 loss there in the second round in 2004 was arguably the key match in Porto's successful campaign that season and Mourinho himself suffered defeat by the same margin when he took Chelsea there in the group stages the following season, his first in London.

Arsenal fared only marginally better this season, registering a goalless draw in December to ensure that both sides progressed to the knockout stage.

Having already been back once, Mourinho and his former Porto players, Ricardo Carvalho and Paulo Ferreira, might be hoping that some of the animosity associated with their departure has dissipated.

The manager however is resigned to the fact that for a section of the Porto support, his decision to move on to a new challenge will never be one they can understand or accept.

"Those people will give me some nice songs like sometimes I have in England," he said. "That's

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## Gerrard the danger man

AFP, Paris

Barcelona's Nou Camp is no stranger to staging heavyweight bouts and they don't come much bigger than Wednesday's visit by Liverpool.

This last 16 first leg tie brings together the last two winners of the Champions League with Rafael Benitez' Liverpool having already defeated Barca en route to UEFA Cup glory in 2000/01.

Liverpool's build-up for the trip to Catalonia has been clouded by a reported run-in between teammates Craig Bellamy and John Arne Riise at a training camp in Portugal last week.

The mood has hardly been sweetness and light in the Nou Camp either where last week Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o launched a stinging attack on his manager Franck Rijkaard and Ronaldinho.

Barca president Joan Laporta predicts an "extraordinary tie" in store while Liverpool's Steven Gerrard believes Benitez' experience at Valencia and the Reds' Spanish contingent will play heavily in their favour.

Laporta identified the Liverpool captain and lanky striker Peter Crouch as Liverpool's danger men.

"I love Steven Gerrard. He is an emblem of Liverpool. I was watching TV last weekend and saw a replay of the Champions League final between Liverpool and AC Milan.

"It was so emotional to watch Gerrard in that game. Xabi Alonso and the goalkeeper were important but Gerrard was the heart of the team.

"When he went to celebrate with the supporters after the match and to speak to them, I felt very emotional.

"Our captain, Carles Puyol, represents Barcelona in a similar way to Gerrard. He is always thinking of the team and giving to the team.

"He is generous to his teammates and he is a fighter.

"The other player who is difficult for us to play against is Peter Crouch. He came to Barcelona on a visit and asked to see us play. Someone at the club thought he was a basketball player, but I told them 'No, he is a Liverpool player'.

"It is good for us that our defender, Rafael Marquez, is good with his head but we know Crouch is also a good finisher with his feet."

## Just rumours!

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have strongly denied that the Spanish giant's coach Fabio Capello had resigned on Monday.

Several Spanish media outlets had reported earlier on Monday that Capello had decided to leave Real on the eve of their Champions League last 16 match with German side Bayern Munich.

"We can dismiss these rumours, which surprised us," said Miguel Angel Arroyo, spokesman for the Real board of directors.

"We have had nothing presented to us in writing nor has anything been said to us verbally on this matter from Fabio Capello," added Arroyo after the usual Monday night business meeting of the club's directors.



French football legend Zinedine Zidane talks to his wife Veronique (L) during their visit to the Grand Palace in Bangkok on Tuesday. Zidane, whose career ended with an infamous head-butt in last year's World Cup final, visited one of Thailand's top tourist sites ahead of his participation in next Saturday's charity match in the northern city of Chiang Mai.

## Past no inspiration

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan's Ivan Cordoba believes his side's excellent record against Valencia will count for nothing when they face the Spaniards in the last 16 of the Champions League.

The Italians host Wednesday's first leg at the San Siro before the return at the Metella stadium in a fortnight's time.

Inter knocked Valencia out in the quarterfinals of the 2001-02 UEFA Cup and the last eight of the 2002-03 Champions League, while they handed them a 5-1 drubbing in Spain in the group stages of the 2004-05 Champions League.

But Cordoba, who captained Inter against Cagliari on Saturday when the club extended their record run of consecutive Serie A wins to 16 and stretched their lead to 14 points, is aware of the dangers of revelling in past glories.

"The past meetings might be in our favour, but they don't count for

much because each match has its own story," said the hard-tackling Colombian who joined Inter in January 2000.

Cordoba has painful memories of last season's Champions League quarterfinal defeat to another Spanish side, Villarreal, on away goals, when overconfidence perhaps got the better of his team.

"That's an experience we will have to remember and it would be a mistake to forget it," said the 30-year-old central defender.

"We will have to be humble against Valencia, and approach both matches in the right way."

As the San Siro has yet to fully comply with security measures introduced by the government in the wake of the crowd violence in Sicily earlier this month which claimed the life of a policeman, only Inter's 36,000 season-ticket holders will be allowed into the stadium.

Cordoba appealed to the fans who will be there to make twice as much noise to make up for the reduced capacity against the two-time finalists.

"Each fan will have to shout for us to make it feel like the stadium is

full," he said.

"It's not easy to play with half a crowd, so we will really need their support. It will be crucial."

Valencia striker Fernando Morientes has warned Inter that their supremacy in Serie A will have no bearing over the two legs.

"Inter have been getting stronger and stronger in the past year and they are at the top of their game domestically, but the Champions League is a different matter altogether," said the 30-year-old striker, a three-time Champions League winner in his eight-year spell with Real Madrid.

Winners of the old European Cup in 1964 and 1965, Inter have not lost for 29 matches in all competitions. Their last defeat was back on September 27, a 2-0 loss at home to Bayern Munich in the Champions League's group stages.

Bubbling with confidence after their 2-1 league win over Champions League holders Barcelona on Sunday which left them joint third in La Liga, Valencia have painful memories of the San

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## Benitez fines 15?

INTERNET, Undated

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez is reported to have fined 15 players who broke a midnight curfew during the squad's five-day trip to Portugal last week.

The Spaniard is said to be incensed that preparations for the Champions League tie with Barcelona have been overshadowed by reports of drunken brawls and had already rapped up Craig Bellamy and John Arne Riise.

But the Daily Mirror understands that 15 players will now be hit in the pocket, although Benitez won't identify them as he does not want to comment any more on the trip.

Although Bellamy is expected to start against the Spanish champions on Tuesday night, his days at Anfield appear to be numbered.

According to The Daily

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## Larsson going back home

AFP, London

Swedish striker Henrik Larsson has ruled out any extension to his loan period at Manchester United and has insisted he will return home next month as planned.

The former Celtic star is set for his first Champions League appearance for Alex Ferguson's team against Lille in nearby Lens later Tuesday.

But the 35-year-old has said he will return to Swedish parent club Helsingborgs on March 12 as originally planned, a week after the second leg against the French club.

"I am not saying that I am not flattered or grateful to get the opportunity to extend my stay but there are other things I need to think about," he said.

"The Swedish season starts at the end of March and I need to get back to that. I will stay only until March 12."

Larsson said that although he had been enjoying his time at Manchester, the travel to and from Sweden had been testing.

"I am going back and forward and it's not an ideal situation," he said.

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FC Porto's Pepe (L) plays with the ball next to a teammate during a training session ahead of their Champions League clash against Chelsea at the Dragao football stadium in Porto on Tuesday.

AFP, PHOTO