

# 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 fire-power 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. Any time 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.

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.

"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.

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## FIXTURES

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

## Gerrard the danger man

AFP, Paris

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 it."

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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.

AFP PHOTO

# Jose's home challenge

AFP, Porto

The strength of Chelsea's recent revival faces its first real test when the English champions take on their 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 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.

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AFP, Porto

Portuguese footballer 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.

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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.

"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.

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"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.

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"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.

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