

## Stadiums reopen across Italy

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's interior ministry has reopened to the public 12 more stadiums closed after a policeman was killed by rioting fans earlier this month.

In a statement on Thursday, the ministry said the grounds at Messina and Modena would be fully reopened.

Only season ticket holders will be allowed at Bergamo, Empoli, Florence, Lecce, Livorno, Perugia, Pescara, Trieste, Udine and Verona if the required safety measures are implemented.

The decision brings to 23 the number of stadiums that to varying degrees meet tougher regulations introduced by the government to stop hooliganism at matches after the policeman's death occurred during the Serie A match between Palermo and Catania on Feb. 2.

## Capello quashes Emerson rumours

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello moved to quash further murmurs of dissent inside the Bernabeu on Thursday by denying that Brazilian midfielder Emerson had refused to play against Bayern Munich.

Spain has already been gripped by one alleged refusal to take to the field as Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard last week claimed that his star Cameroonian forward Samuel Eto'o had refused to come on as a substitute -- a charge Eto'o publicly denied.

Now Capello has been forced into denying his player acted in such a way during Tuesday's Champions League last 16 first leg.

"Emerson did not refuse (to come on as a sub). That's a lie. He did not tell me that he would not play," said Capello.

"It was not an act of indiscipline. He is a player in our team and we can count on him."

Capello was speaking ahead of this weekend's Madrid derby with Atletico.

Cadena Ser radio station had said Wednesday on its internet site that Emerson had copied Eto'o.

"There were 20 minutes to play when the Italian coach (Capello) asked Emerson to go and warm up."

"But, taking a leaf out of Barcelona player Samuel Eto'o's book, he refused and the cameras are our witness."

However, also on Wednesday, Real left back Roberto Carlos, another Brazilian, denied that his international colleague had refused to warm up.

## Catania lose ban appeal

AFP, Rome

The Italian football federation's disciplinary commission on Thursday rejected Catania's appeal against their stadium ban.

The Massimino stadium was closed in the wake of the fan riot earlier this month in which a policeman was killed.

The Sicilian club pleaded for the ban to be lifted on the grounds that most of the trouble occurred outside of the stadium, but the disciplinary commission upheld their decision.

Therefore the stadium will remain shut for the rest of the Serie A season and Catania must play all of their home matches at neutral grounds.

Catania are at 'home' to Serie A leaders Inter Milan on Sunday, but the match will be played in Cesena.

## Now City for takeover?

AFP, London

English Premiership club Manchester City said in a statement to London's Stock Exchange on Thursday they were having discussions about a possible takeover of the club.

A bid from the USA is one of four consortiums competing for purchase of Manchester United's cross-town rivals, it is understood.

Although City said late last year that a financial injection may be forthcoming from an outside investor, their statement implies that the situation has moved on since then.

City's statement read: "The board of Manchester City notes the recent press speculation regarding the possibility of an offer being made for the company."

"Further to the company's announcement on December 7 2006, the board of Manchester City confirms that it remains in preliminary discussions with third parties that may or may not lead to an offer being made for the company."



PHOTO: AFP

Osasuna players gather to celebrate the only goal of the game in their UEFA Cup clash against Bordeaux in Pamplona on Thursday.

## FIESTY MADRID DERBY Barca aim to stop rot

AFP, Madrid



Spanish league leaders Barcelona will be looking to avoid a third consecutive defeat when they travel to struggling Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

"We know we lost to Valencia (last Sunday) and now Liverpool, that's the reality, but we now have to keep on working, trying to improve," said Barca coach Frank Rijkaard after their shock Champions League defeat to the Englishmen.

The Catalan club are still in pole position as they bid for their third straight La Liga crown but a recent rocky run of form has meant they are top from Sevilla on goal difference.

"Perhaps we are getting too predictable," said Barca's Mexican defender Rafa Márquez.

"Teams have learnt how to play against us, and how to contain Ronaldinho better, although they usually have to commit fouls to do it."

"The team is aware of this and we are working on some new plays or changing our positions."

Second-placed Sevilla have a tricky trip to Getafe on Sunday, where both Valencia and Real Madrid have both lost this season.

Coach Juande Ramos left out Fredi Kanoute, Adriano and Javi Navarro from the Sevilla squad that faced Steaua Bucharest in the UEFA Cup on Thursday in order to have some of his best men available for the anticipated battle.

However, Sevilla will be without

Daniel Alves and Jose Luis Martí in Madrid's southern suburbs as both players are suspended.

Real Madrid are four points in arrears of the leading pair in fourth place, just behind Valencia on goal difference, and have the derby match at local neighbours and rivals Atletico ahead of them on Sunday.

David Beckham will not make the short trip across the Spanish capital as he is suspended after getting sent off against Real Betis last Saturday.

In the wake of a good performance in Real's 3-2 win over Bayern Munich in the Champions League on Tuesday, Beckham's absence is a blow to the Spanish giant's under-fire coach Fabio Capello.

"We are arriving at the derby in good shape. We had a good game (against Bayern) and the last two results have been very positive," said Capello.

"They will be coming out and looking to get back their confidence against us. We know they are outstanding professionals and they will look to forget the Liverpool defeat with a good performance," reflected Athletic's Javi Casas.

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## Javier can't wait

AFP, Liverpool



Javier Mascherano has vowed to make the most of his Premier-hip second chance at Liverpool after escaping the nightmare of his five month spell at West Ham.

Argentina midfielder Mascherano, 22, could make his Reds debut against Sheffield United at Anfield on Saturday after finally having his switch from Upton Park rubber-stamped earlier this week.

The 2006 World Cup star made just five Premiership appearances for the Hammers after arriving in a blaze of publicity from Brazilian club Corinthians alongside Argentina team-mate Carlos Tevez last August.

That move proved to be a disaster as West Ham sacked boss Alan Pardew and dropped into the relegation zone, but Mascherano has now been given the chance to prove himself with Champions League giants Liverpool.

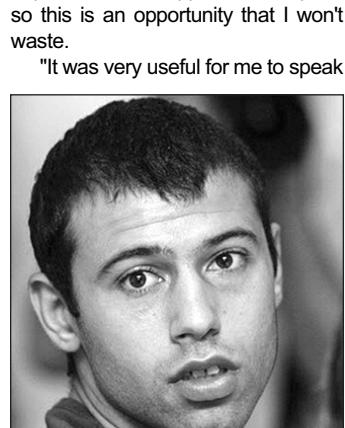
And with boss Rafa Benitez expected to rotate his squad for the visit of Neil Warnock's team following the midweek victory against Barcelona, Mascherano admits he is determined not to blow his Anfield chance if he gets the nod against the Blades.

Mascherano said: "From not being taken into account at West Ham, I'm

now in a team that is at the top and that plays in the Champions League.

"I am aware that this is an important step in my life and that my career will depend on what happens at Liverpool, so this is an opportunity that I won't waste."

"It was very useful for me to speak



JAVIER MASCHERANO

with Rafa Benitez. He showed a great deal of interest in the way I play and that was very good to me because it made me feel confident.

"After three months without playing, a call from my new coach saying that he was the best thing that could happen to me. That's what I needed."

"There are amazing players at Liverpool, like Steven Gerrard, and that is why there is going to be great

## Fixtures

(Kick-off times in GMT)

## Saturday

Real Sociedad v Deportivo La Coruna (1900), Atlético Madrid v Real Madrid (1900)

## Sunday

Real Betis v Recreativo Huelva (1600), Celta Vigo v Racing Santander (1600), Levante v Real Zaragoza (1600), Osasuna v Espanyol (1600), Getafe v Sevilla (1600), Villarreal v Real Mallorca (1600), Gimnastic Tarragona v Valencia (1900), Barcelona v Athletic Bilbao (2000)

1st leg: March 8; 2nd leg: March 14/15

## UEFA CUP LAST 16 DRAW

AFP, Paris

Newcastle (ENG) v AZ Alkmaar (NED) Maccabi Haifa (ISR) v Espanyol (ESP) Rangers (SCO) v Osasuna (ESP) Sporting Braga (POR) v Tottenham (ENG) Sevilla (ESP) v Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) Lens (FRA) v Bayer Leverkusen (GER) Paris SG (FRA) v Benfica (POR) Celta Vigo (ESP) v Werder Bremen (GER)

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