

Inter go for 18th

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan host Udinese at the San Siro on Wednesday where the runaway Serie A leaders will be looking to extend their record run of consecutive league wins to 18 matches.

The match is the only one of Wednesday's 10 games with an evening kick-off, with the other nine all being played in the afternoon in an attempt to reduce the threat of crowd trouble.

The decision to reduce the number of evening games is part of the Italian government's crackdown on football hooliganism following the death of a policeman during violence in Catania earlier this month.

Inter's match is considered a low-risk game in terms of security and will start at 1930GMT, while the others have been given the unusual mid-week kick-off time of 1400GMT.

The San Siro stadium will be fully open to spectators after complying with security regulations imposed by the government in the wake of the Catania riot. Since then the ground has been open to season-ticket holders only.

Inter thrashed Catania 5-2 on

Sunday, a 17th successive Serie A victory maintaining their 14-point lead at the top of the table.

Many claim Inter's task of winning the championship has been made easier by last summer's match-fixing scandal, which resulted in penalties for their traditional rivals, Juventus and AC Milan.

Juventus were relegated to Serie B, while AC Milan kept their top-flight status but were given an eight-point handicap.

With Juve out of the picture and neighbours AC Milan 30 points off the pace, Inter are strolling towards the Scudetto.

But Inter coach Roberto Mancini, whose team finished third last season but were awarded the title after Juve and AC Milan were found guilty of manipulating the outcome of matches in the 2004-05 season, insisted the championship has not been a one-horse race.

"At the start of the championship

FIXTURES

Wednesday (all 1400GMT unless stated)
Ascoli v Parma, Chievo v Roma, Empoli v Messina, Inter v Udinese (1930GMT), Lazio v Catania, Palermo v AC Milan, Reggina v Fiorentina, Sampdoria v Atalanta, Siena v Livorno, Torino v Cagliari

many people said it would be easy for us," he said.

"But things that appear easy are often the most difficult because of the greater expectation.

"We are doing our duty and approaching each match with the right attitude. It will be a fantastic Scudetto if we win the title."

Inter's domestic winning streak has bettered the records held in the German and Spanish leagues (both 15). But they still have some way to go if they are to break Celtic's record of 25 consecutive Scottish Premier League victories in the 2003-04 season.

Udinese will be weakened by the loss of striker Vincenzo Iaquinta.

The 27-year-old Italy international fractured his cheekbone in Sunday's 3-3 home draw with Parma and has been ruled out for three weeks.

Second-placed Roma face a potentially difficult trip to Verona to face an improving Chievo, coached by former Roma boss Luigi Del Neri.

Third-placed Palermo, who have taken just two points from their last nine, host fifth-placed AC Milan. AC Milan's push for a Champions League place next season has been boosted by five wins in their last six matches.

Fourth-placed Lazio entertain Catania at the Olympic stadium.

Ferguson staying put

Football

INTERNET, undated

Sir Alex Ferguson has no plans to step down as Manchester United manager.

Ferguson reversed his original decision to retire in 2002, since when pundits have continued to speculate when the Scot will eventually call it a day.

Having signed a rolling one-year contract following the arrival of the Glazer family as owners, Ferguson's departure date has become harder to predict.

There are some who feel the former Aberdeen boss, who has become the most successful British manager of all time, may consider his

future if United were to win back the Premiership title this term.

However, Ferguson has rejected such talk and insisted his focus remains as total as it has always been.

"Retirement can wait, it is not a possibility for at least a couple of years," he told Gazzetta dello Sport. "I decided to retire back in 2002 and I regretted it. To have reconsidered that decision gave me a boost of energy."

It is a measure of Ferguson's longevity that the candidates to replace him have changed so often.

Former Red Devils skipper Roy Keane is the latest man to force his name into the frame, having begun his own managerial career in such superb style at Sunderland.

Mark Hughes is another live

option, while former England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson is believed to have been lined up to replace Ferguson until he performed his stunning retirement U-turn.

Ferguson's old friend Marcello Lippi has also been mentioned.

Lippi certainly has all the credentials to do the job, having enjoyed so much success at Juventus and then steered Italy to World Cup glory in Germany last summer.

"Any president who has great ambition should put Lippi at the top of his list if they are looking for a coach," said Ferguson.

"Marcello is an excellent tactician. There is no reason why he could not come to an English club but at this time I cannot see one available."

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Hiddink a tax fraud

Football

AFP, The Hague

Former South Korea and Australia coach Guus Hiddink escaped a prison term but was found guilty of tax fraud and handed a fine and suspended sentence here on Tuesday.

A court in the Netherlands refused a prosecutor's request for a ten month jail term and instead handed the Dutchman a six-month suspended sentence and a fine of 45,000 euros (59,000 dollars), according to Dutch news agency ANP.

The court said Hiddink defrauded the tax authorities of 1.4 million euros (1.8 million dollars) in 2002 after returning from South Korea, whom he had coached up to and during the 2002 World Cup finals.

Hiddink had claimed at the time he paid his taxes in neighbouring Belgium, where he also claimed to be living.

The prosecutor however ruled that Hiddink owned only a small apartment in Belgium and did not reside there.

M. Leliveld, one of the football

SEE PAGE 18 COL 7



GUUS HIDDINK

No problems with Becks: Fergie

INTERNET, undated

Sir Alex Ferguson has insisted there are 'no problems' between him and David Beckham.

The former England skipper is set to return to Old Trafford for the UEFA gala game on March 12 when Marcello Lippi's European XI tackle Manchester United in a match to celebrate the 50th anniversary of both the Treaty of Rome and the Red Devils' entrance into European competition.

It will be the first time Beckham has returned to his old club in a non-England capacity since his departure for Real Madrid in 2003.

At the time, it was suggested Beckham was the victim of a massive fall-out with Ferguson, who took a dislike to the midfielder's desire to court publicity away from the pitch and left him out of a key Champions League tie with Real Madrid in preference to Juan Sebastian Veron.

Ironically, since Beckham's exit, Real Madrid have won nothing and

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Lille continue goal appeal

AFP, Lille



goal was thrown out by UEFA last week, announced Monday that they intend to appeal the decision.

The French club are protesting Ryan Giggs's quickly taken 83rd-minute free kick goal while their players were still lining up their defensive wall.

Lille want European football's governing body to examine what they claim is at the heart of the problem, the neutrality of Dutch referee Eric Braamhaar, during the 1-0 win by the English side.

The French club claimed the referee made a technical mistake in allowing the free-kick to be taken without having blown his whistle beforehand and asked for the game to be replayed.

"The president (Michel) Seydoux and management have decided to appeal the decision announced Friday by the European authority," Lille said in a statement.

"The real question is to establish how the Manchester players came to take the free kick quickly which lead to a goal while they signalled their intention of doing the opposite.

"Following these principles, Lille have therefore taken the decision to go through with a fight that seems correct to them."

UEFA said they will consider the appeal on Friday.

Giggs's strike was the only goal of the first leg of the last 16 tie, with the second leg taking place in Manchester on Wednesday, March 7.

UEFA announced last week that it was investigating possible violations during the incident-filled tie at the Stade Felix-Bollaert in Lens where United fans were involved in a crush.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 7



Benfica's Miccoli (L) is in tussle with Pacos de Ferreira's Geraldo during their Premier League match at Luz Stadium in Lisbon on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

C'Ron seeks Madrid move?

INTERNET, undated

Cristiano Ronaldo wants to join Real Madrid in the summer, according to reports from Spain.

The Portuguese superstar, who has been the cornerstone of Manchester United's Premiership title bid with 16 goals this term, has been linked with both Real and their bitter La Liga rivals Barcelona.

But according to Madrid daily AS he's already made his mind up where he wants to go.

The paper says Ronaldo hopes to quit United in June and has already informed Real through his agent Jorge Mendes that he'd love to join them.

Ronaldo is reportedly flattered by the interest from Barca, as well as Italian giants Inter Milan.

But the lure of the Bernabeu and Los Galacticos appears to be too strong.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 6

Emphatic win for Benfica

REUTERS, Lisbon

Benfica closed to within four points of Portuguese Premier League leaders Porto with a 3-1 win over Pacos Ferreira on Monday.

Porto have 46 points from 19 matches, followed by Benfica on 42 and Sporting, who lost further ground in a goalless draw at home against bottom team Desportivo Aves on Friday, on 39 in third place.

Benfica's captain Simao Sabrosa, who scored twice, put the Lisbon team ahead after eight minutes with a superb free kick from outside the area.

Benfica, unbeaten at home, doubled the lead after 32 minutes when striker Nuno Gomes headed in a cross after neat work on the left

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

Football

AFP, London

John Terry said Monday he has no memory of the sickening head injury that saw him carried off on a stretcher during Chelsea's 2-1 League Cup Final win against London rivals Arsenal.

The Chelsea and England captain was knocked unconscious and began to swallow his tongue Sunday after being accidentally kicked in the head in the 57th minute as he tried to head towards goal.

He was stretchered off wearing an oxygen mask after several minutes of on-field treatment with both players and fans at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium fearing the worst for the centre-back.

But despite worries of a fatal blow, Terry was back at the ground within two hours of being discharged from a nearby hospital.

However, he had no recollection of his injury.

"I said to he lads I don't remember," Terry told Chelsea TV on Monday. "I remember walking out for the second half and nothing else until waking up in the ambulance on the way to hospital."

"I had the scans and they said it's okay. I'm still feeling a bit groggy, though."

He added: "It was great to be back with the lads, they were different class. I must say thanks to them as I didn't have much part to play in the second half. Throughout the competition they've been spot on."

It will now be up to the Chelsea doctor to decide if Terry can play in the reigning Premiership champions' league match away to Portsmouth on Saturday.

There was a suggestion that he would miss the match at Fratton Park because of a Football Association (FA) regulation governing players who'd been concussed.

'United are just lucky'

THE GUARDIAN



Jose Mourinho has claimed Manchester United have been fortunate in carving out a nine-point Premiership lead and believes "everything is on their side" in terms of lucky breaks in the title race.

Chelsea collected the first trophy of the season on Sunday with a 2-1 victory over Arsenal in the Carling Cup final. However, it allowed United to extend their Premiership advantage by three points on Saturday with a 2-1 win at Fulham.

Chelsea have 12 matches in which to recover the deficit but their

manager has set about planting a seed of doubt in United heads. "I didn't see the Fulham game to be fair - we were travelling - but the information I have is it was completely undeserved," said Mourinho. "But football is about this. Sometimes you don't deserve it and you win. It's a game they could lose and in the end they win."

Mourinho may have appeared resigned to being disadvantaged by United's good fortune but he warned to the theme, even referring to Ryan Giggs's controversial free-kick winner in the Champions League match against Lille. That match also saw Peter Odemwingie put the ball in the net only for the goal to be disallowed for a shove on

However, the FA said in a statement Monday: "Following John Terry's injury in yesterday's League Cup Final, the FA can clarify that the rules on head injuries do not set down an automatic rest period for players suffering from concussion, but rather stipulate that each injury must be assessed individually by a doctor."

It added: "The brain's response to the injury determines the time of return and playing and must be clinically assessed by the club medical officer or a specialist neurosurgeon/neurologist."

"The clinical rule is that no player should return to training or playing until symptom-free and sign-free at rest and on provocation."

Terry had only been declared fit to play against Arsenal after making a quicker than expected recovery from an ankle injury he had suffered against Porto in Wednesday's Champions League draw.

Nesta eyes Milan comeback

AFP, Rome

AC Milan received a welcome boost on Tuesday when injury-plagued Italy international Alessandro Nesta said he expected to return to action in three weeks.

The 30-year-old central defender, who suffered a groin strain in the third group stage match at last year's World Cup and played no further part in the Azzurri's eventual triumph, has spent the last two months in the United States on a rehabilitation programme after having surgery on an injured shoulder.

"The shoulder has fully healed, and I hope to be back in three weeks' time," Nesta told the Gazzetta Dello Sport's website.

"I've started to train, but I lack a bit of speed. It will be up to the coach to decide when to play me."

Nesta said media reports linking him with a move back to his hometown club Lazio were wide of the mark, and insisted he wanted to extend his contract with AC Milan beyond the summer of 2008.

"Three months ago I spoke briefly with the directors and I told them more than once that I wanted to stay here," said Nesta, who joined AC Milan from Lazio in August 2002 after 10 seasons with the Rome outfit.

"It didn't seem right to go into it in great detail while I was injured, but now I'm back, we will discuss it again."

"Milan know that I am ready to sign an extension. It's not true that I want to go back to Lazio. I'm happy here and I want to end my career with Milan."

Milan, who host Celtic in the last 16 of the Champions League a week on Wednesday after earning a goalless draw in the first leg in Glasgow, are currently fifth in Serie A.

Jose wants more silverware

Football

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho's five-finger salute following Chelsea's 2-1 League Cup final defeat of Arsenal appears to have further notified the club of his intention to stay on as manager.

Despite a period of uncertainty recently leading to speculation that club owner Roman Abramovich is looking for a new manager, Mourinho says he will only leave before his contract expires, in 2010, if he is sacked.

The Portuguese coach celebrated Sunday's triumph over Arsenal by waving five fingers into the Cardiff air.

Rather than a wave to his wife and children, who were back home in London, Mourinho confirmed it was to signify the five trophies he has won at Chelsea since his arrival in the summer of 2004.

And, with the Champions

League, FA Cup and Premiership title still to go for, the counting might not be finished yet.

"I wasn't waving at anyone," Mourinho said. "It was five fingers for five trophies we have won in two and a half years; Premiership, Premiership, Carling Cup, Carling Cup and Community Shield."

"Next time, maybe I will use another hand."

When asked whether he felt the club's hierarchy appreciated the work he has done during his time at Chelsea, Mourinho tellingly skirted round the question.

"The fans are fantastic to me. They know the happy moments we are living together. The players are fantastic too," he said.

"A club that gives me a contract until 2010 must be happy. If they were not, they would not give me a contract until 2010."

The League (Carling) Cup will always have a special place in Mourinho's heart as it was the first competition he won as Chelsea manager.



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho celebrates his team's victory in the English League Cup final against Arsenal at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff on Sunday.