



PHOTO: AFP
Espanyol midfielder Luis Garcia (top) celebrates with teammates after striker Walter Pandiani (bottom) scored against Benfica in their UEFA Cup quarterfinal match at the Olympic Stadium in Barcelona on Thursday.

English fans cause more trouble

AFP, Seville



Lurid newspaper headlines in Britain on Friday, after the UEFA Cup match between Sevilla and Tottenham Hotspur, suggested that English football fans had disgraced themselves again.

However, the analysis of Thursday's incidents in Spain which came 24 hours after 13 Manchester United fans were taken to hospital after fighting between rival fans and police at Roma's Olympic stadium in Italy, was rather different.

The words mayhem and madness proliferated many of the British reports on Friday.

By contrast in Spain, what little mention there was of incidents of crowd violence during the 2-1 win by the local side and UEFA Cup holders over the visitors from London was confined to a few paragraphs on the inside pages.

"The behaviour of the English supporters was in general fine except for a group of around 200 violent ones who, from the start of

the game, started fighting between themselves and then afterwards with the police," commented Spanish sports daily As. Pictures of the fighting, which started about 10 minutes into the game, and other Spanish media accounts, suggest that only between 20 to 30 Tottenham fans were actually involved with the group throwing seats and stones at the police.

Local police said that one of their officers had been slightly hurt, with a blow to the back and a slight head wound.

Sevilla football club themselves said that six Spurs fans had been treated at the ground with three of them taken to hospital for further treatment.

Police also added that there had been no arrests made before or during the football match on Thursday.

"The behaviour of the Tottenham fans outside the stadium was good. What happened inside the Sanchez Pizjuan was sad, the police had to defend themselves," said a Sevilla vice-president Jose Castro.

With an estimated 4,400 Spurs fans descending on Sevilla on one of the city's main festival days, Holy Thursday, and thanks to the hard-line attitude of UEFA in refusing to move the fixture, problems had been

envisaged.

However, the nightmare scenario failed to emerge due to visible policing and the common sense from the vast majority of supporters from both sides.

"A better atmosphere was almost impossible to imagine before the game.

Thousands of Spurs fans mingling regularly with many Sevilla fans, with the swapping of scarves and other items," reflected one eyewitness account in the Spanish sports daily Marca.

There was only one negative note before the game, when some Spurs fans dropped or smashed some glasses in a road near the stadium and batons were drawn by the police.

"Statistically something clumsy is going to happen between 4,000 people... a few blows, and then peace," added Marca, perhaps making a little too light of the incident.

Football's European governing body UEFA have already promised an investigation into the clashes inside the stadium.

"Any incidents of crowd trouble in the Sevilla against Tottenham match will be investigated by UEFA," said UEFA communications director William Gaillard, who was at the

match.

Tottenham Hotspur released a statement early on Thursday morning. "The club will be working with the appropriate authorities to ascertain the events of this evening in Seville."

"Our initial reports suggest there was no fan-to-fan fighting at any stage of the proceedings. As such we are seeking explanations as to why the police reacted in the way they did with our fans.

"Tottenham Hotspur supporters have enjoyed an exemplary reputation across Europe this season which is why the events are unprecedented. We will be co-operating fully with UEFA, the British Embassy and the Spanish authorities to understand why this has happened.

"British Police, the club's security officials, and club stewards - supported by British Embassy officials - will also be providing the Spanish authorities and UEFA with full statements from their first-hand experience of what happened tonight," said the London side.

However, Spanish pundits were left wondering on Friday whether this was, for once, a story of English football hooliganism which had been blown completely out of proportion.

US tycoon buys stake in Arsenal

AFP, London

US tycoon Stan Kroenke has agreed to pay 65 million pounds for a 9.9 percent stake in English Premiership football club Arsenal from ITV, the British broadcaster said Thursday.

The deal, worth 95 million euros or 128 million dollars, will no doubt ignite speculation that Kroenke is preparing a takeover bid for the London club.

Premiership sides Manchester United, Liverpool and Aston Villa are already in American hands.

"ITV plc today announced that it had unconditionally sold its 9.99 percent shareholding interest in Arsenal Holdings plc to KSE UK INC, a vehicle controlled by Stan Kroenke," a statement said.

ITV added that it has also entered into conditional arrangements with KSE UK INC in relation to the sale of its 50 percent shareholding in Arsenal Broadband Limited.

Schalke seek a fix

AFP, Berlin



German league leaders Schalke 04 host Borussia Moenchengladbach on Saturday hoping European competition may have diverted the attention of two of their major challengers for the title.

Schalke coach Mirko Slomka must try and fill the void left by the suspension of Fabian Ernst for his fifth yellow card but, on a more positive note, Serb defender Mladen Krstajic is back following a broken rib.

Fourth-placed Bayern Munich, whose 2-2 draw at AC Milan on Tuesday has left them with one foot in the Champions League semi-finals, visit Hanover on Saturday while Werder Bremen, who drew 0-0 against AZ Alkmaar in UEFA Cup quarterfinal, first leg action on Thursday, host Nuremberg on Sunday.

Slomka must decide whether to

field Halil Altintop. "Halil has been struggling with a groin injury for weeks," Slomka told the club's website. "Every time he sets off on a sprint he's in pain. It's a very tough and unpleasant situation for him.

"What's important is if he can say to us on Friday that the pain has gone. That wasn't the case on Tuesday or on Wednesday," said Slomka.

Schalke have 53 points from 27 matches to lead by two points from Werder Bremen, and by four and six points from VfB Stuttgart, who travel to Hamburg SV on Saturday, and Munich respectively.

Krstajic has had to wear a special protective suit to help his rib recover but has finally been able to train without it.

"I'm not scared," the 32-year-old said on his ditching the protection. "It's just a different feeling, that's all. I'm still being a bit careful in the tackle, but things will be very different on Saturday. At least I can breathe properly again."

Schalke's 2-0 defeat at Bayern

on Saturday was a major blow to Slomka's men and it still rankles. "The main thing (against Monchengladbach) is not to concede a goal after three minutes," said Krstajic, referring to Roy Makaay's goal for Bayern.

Slomka said of the Moenchengladbach match: "Things always look cut and dried on paper. We're top and everyone else is behind us. So of course we're favourites when we play the bottom side at home."

FIXTURES

Saturday
Hamburg SV v VfB Stuttgart, Schalke 04 v Borussia Monchengladbach, Hertha Berlin v Arminia Bielefeld, Hanover v Bayern Munich, Eintracht Frankfurt v Energie Cottbus, VfL Wolfsburg v Mainz 05, Alemannia Aachen v Borussia Dortmund
Sunday
Werder Bremen v Nuremberg, Bayer Leverkusen v VfL Bochum

Maradona to go cold turkey

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine football legend Diego Maradona, who has battled drug and alcohol problems for years, now plans to clean up his act, his doctor said Thursday.

"I see in him the intention to rehabilitate himself soon," said Hector Pezzella, director of the Guemes clinic in Buenos Aires where Maradona, 46, has been for a week with hepatitis caused by alcohol.

"He knows that checking in is for the best," Pezzella told reporters.

He said the former captain of the Argentine squad was under sedation to avoid alcohol withdrawal symptoms, and so family visits were limited to his former wife, Claudia Villafane, daughters Dalma and Giannina and a few others.

The doctor said that the alcohol withdrawal episodes were less frequent and Maradona was improving since he was admitted on March 28.

Maradona has been called one of the greatest players of the last century but his career on and off the pitch has been marred by repeated drug and alcohol abuse. He retired from professional football in 1997.

He has suffered from chronic hepatitis since he contracted hepatitis B in 1991, while he played for Barcelona.

He suffered a heart attack in 2004 following a cocaine overdose, and has sought treatment in Switzerland and Cuba.

Adebayor targets African honour

AFP, London

Arsenal striker Emmanuel Adebayor believes he will be recognised as Africa's top footballer within three years.

Adebayor, 23, has established himself as a key figure for Arsenal this season and the Togo international has set his sights on being voted Africa's finest player sooner rather than later.

The former Monaco forward, who joined Arsenal for seven million pounds in January 2006, has stiff competition for the honour. Chelsea's Ivory Coast star Didier Drogba is the current African Player of the Year, and his Blues teammate Michael Essien of Ghana is regarded as one of the best young players in the world.

Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o can also claim to be Africa's best, but Adebayor, boosted by his 10-goal haul for Arsenal this season, is aiming high.

"I'm getting better and better," he told the London Evening Standard. "I have plenty of time to win the African Footballer of the Year. I have been second once and third once, so I believe I can win it within the next two or three years."

"I am learning a lot at Arsenal. It would be great to be one of the best in the world one day. That is why I am working hard."

"For me the important thing is to be consistent. In every game I have to show I am a good player."

Emerson blasts Juve 'traitors'

INTERNET, undated

Emerson has slammed former teammates Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Patrick Vieira for opting to join Inter last summer. "They didn't respect Juve," argued the Real Madrid man.

The three men were part of a mass exodus after the club's demotion to Serie B, but the midfielder can't comprehend why either of the duo opted to join the Nerazzurri -- a club who were assigned Juventus' Scudetto last season.

"After what happened last year some players had to leave as that was very logical," said Emerson to Sky Italia.

"In my case, I received some offers and discussed them with the club. We solved the situation in five minutes and I have to thank everyone at Juventus," added Il Puma.

"As for Ibrahimovic and Vieira, I do think their move to Inter illustrated a lack of respect towards the club."

"The Nerazzurri did not win the Scudetto either. It hurt me to see the shield on their shirts when the championship started. They were never even in the race to win that title..."

"Seeing Juventus play in Serie B is a disaster and the demotion was terrible. The Bianconeri players did not deserve it for what they accomplished on the pitch."

The Brazilian has struggled to adapt to life in Spain despite the presence of boss Fabio Capello -- who worked with him at both Roma and Juve.

"I miss your country and I had a good time in Turin," said the 32-year-old. "They were two happy years for me."

"A return to Juventus? I don't like to talk about other teams while I'm still under contract, but you can never say never. You can't know what will happen in the future."

"At my age you are not too old for new challenges. I wouldn't have any problems with that."

MU banking on depth

AFP, London



Ryan Giggs expects Manchester United's strength in depth will prove

decisive as his side try to cope with a series of injuries that threaten their treble bid.

United have been resting their weary limbs at an Italian hideaway following their Champions League clash at Roma in midweek. But they will have to rouse themselves once more on Saturday as they try to maintain their six-point lead over Chelsea at the top of the Premiership.

Jose Mourinho's side can cut the gap to three points with a win against Tottenham before United visit Fratton Park in Saturday's late game.

With Gary Neville, Nemanja Vidic and Mikael Silvestre all sidelined through injury, it won't be easy for Sir Alex Ferguson's team.

But Welsh winger Giggs believes United's reserves will come to the rescue and he said: "We've been without players all season, especially recently," Giggs said. "That's when the squad comes into play."

"We proved that against Roma with players like Ole Gunnar Solskjaer coming in. Louis Saha and Darren Fletcher both came back too, so there are some positives."

Joe Cole is determined to make

up for lost time by playing a decisive role in Chelsea's challenge to overhaul United.

Cole returned to action after four months out with a foot injury in Wednesday's Champions League draw against Valencia.

The England winger admits the painful memories of his time on the sidelines will motivate him to help the Blues land a third successive title - and he is ready to take out his frustrations on Tottenham.

"It's been a long time and a difficult season. I've missed more or less the whole campaign with two big injuries," Cole said.

"But I am back now and feeling my way into it. I am sure I will have something to say this year once I get my fitness and sharpness back 100 percent."

"I will be able to make a bigger impact and it is great to have all the big games to do it in."

"But it could go from being my worst season to my best now if we win some trophies. We are fighting on all three fronts for that."

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez believes his current squad is better than the team that won the Champions League in 2005.

The Reds travel to Reading on a high after their 3-0 win at PSV Eindhoven in midweek. Benitez claims that clinical victory is proof of how far his side have progressed since their famous triumph over AC Milan in Istanbul.

"It is clear that we are closer and closer to what we want," Benitez

said. "Our form has improved slowly to a point when we are approaching a peak at the right time."

"I believe that this is a better side than the one that won in Istanbul. We have signed better players and others have gained more experience in Europe."

"I can say I am happy with the progress of the side, it's fitness and improvement. I can see we are closer to our objectives. But we just play every game with our people fully concentrated on what we are doing."

Arsenal defender Kolo Toure has told his team-mates they must stick together as the Gunners try to get back on track after their 4-1 thrashing at Liverpool last weekend.

Arsene Wenger's side have nothing to play for, but Toure is determined not let the season tail off.

Toure, whose team host improving West Ham, said: "It is definitely a big motivation for the players to finish in third place. We need to be really strong all over the pitch. When we win, we win together and when we fail, we fail together."

FIXTURES

(1500GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday
Arsenal v West Ham, Blackburn v Aston Villa, Chelsea v Tottenham (1245), Middlesbrough v Watford, Portsmouth v Manchester Utd (1715), Reading v Liverpool, Sheffield Utd v Newcastle, Wigan v Bolton

Stern test for Barca

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona have a two point lead at the top of the La Liga, and seem well on their way to a third consecutive Spanish title, but will want to avoid coming unstuck at Real Zaragoza on Saturday.

Zaragoza are in fifth place and have ambitions of playing in Europe themselves next season, having only lost twice at home this season.

"Our main rival is ourselves," acknowledged Barca striker Samuel Eto'o.

"We are first and so only have to depend on ourselves. If other teams drop points then it makes our lives easier but we should never get tired of winning," added last season's top scorer in the Spanish first division.

For one of the rare occasions this season, Barca coach Frank Rijkaard will be able to select his side from almost his entire first team squad, helped by the news that Ronaldinho trained normally on Thursday.

There are no suspensions, no major injuries and only midfielder Thiago Motta has a question mark over his health, after having to end training early on Thursday after an over-enthusiastic challenge from his team mate Rafa Marquez.

Zaragoza have a six-game unbeaten streak in the league but lost to Barcelona 2-1 at home in the Spanish Cup six weeks ago and have revenge in mind.

"Barcelona have gone a long time without losing when they

have their magic trident of Eto'o, Ronaldinho and Lionel Messi all available but one day they'll have to, and that day could be Saturday," suggested Zaragoza coach Victor Fernandez on Thursday.

"This match has come at a time when both teams are in form and I'll have no problem motivating my players," added Fernandez.

Sevilla lie in second place and, with only one loss in the league in their Sanchez Pizjuan stadium this season, they will feel confident of beating Racing Santander on Sunday to keep up the pressure on Barca.

The morale of Sevilla was also boosted by their hard-fought 2-1 win over Tottenham Hotspur in the UEFA Cup on Thursday but seventh-placed Racing has suddenly hit a run of form, are unbeaten in their last games, and starting to sound very confident. "Most people have never known Racing to be in such a good position at this stage of the season and qualifying for Europe for the first time is now a realistic possibility," commented Racing captain Pablo Pinillos.

"We took three points off Valencia in their own Mestalla stadium two weeks ago, and we'll be thinking about doing the same against Sevilla," added the Racing defender.

Real Madrid are three points further back in third and have a tricky game against Osasuna looming up on Sunday.

The question is, how much did Osasuna's outstanding 3-0 triumph at Bayer Leverkusen in the UEFA Cup on Thursday take out of them?

Real are expected to wel-

come back David Beckham and Jose Antonio Reyes, with both men having been out of action for the last month due to knee injuries, although neither is expected to start.

Both sides have been hit by suspensions, with Real losing midfielder Fernando Gago and Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez while Osasuna will be without their own midfield pair of Hector Font and Juanfran Torres.

Osasuna will also be without their top scorer Roberto Soldado who is on loan from Madrid and cannot play against his old club because of a clause in the deal.

Fourth-placed Valencia, with confidence sky-high after their 1-1 draw at Chelsea in the Champions League on Tuesday, are one point behind Real and have an away trip to struggling Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

Trips to Athletic's San Mames stadium used to be a daunting prospect but Bilbao have only won twice there this season and face the prospect of being relegated from the Spanish first division for the first time in their history.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT Kick-off unless stated)
Saturday
Real Zaragoza v Barcelona (1800), Athletic Bilbao v Valencia (2000)
Sunday
Deportivo La Coruna v Gimnastic Tarragona, Espanyol v Real Sociedad, Levante v Real Betis, Real Mallorca v Getafe, Recreativo Huelva v Celta Vigo, Sevilla v Racing Santander, Real Madrid v Osasuna (1700), Villarreal v Atletico Madrid (1900)

Reggina in line for Inter

AFP, Rome



Runaway leaders Inter Milan visit struggling Reggina on Saturday knowing eight points from their remaining nine matches will guarantee them the Serie A title.

Inter have a massive 20-point lead over Roma and are poised to retain the Scudetto that was awarded to them last season despite finishing third.

The fall-out from the Italian match-fixing scandal saw Juventus stripped of the 2005-06 title, while second-placed AC Milan were deducted 30 points.

With no Juve this season and AC Milan given an eight-point penalty, there has been a certain amount of inevitability about Inter's championship stroll.

And Daniel Passarella, who captained Argentina when they won the World Cup on home soil in 1978 and played for Inter between 1986 and 1988, believes his former club could now go on to dominate Italian football.

"This Scudetto is already won, it's history," Passarella told ESPN.

"It's remarkable the difference

between Inter and the rest of Serie A, and this is only the start.

"There's no doubt that this Inter side has mastered the art of winning and they will get stronger and stronger."

Inter defender Marco Materazzi, a World Cup winner with the trip to Calabria while Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Brazilian wingback Maxwell are unlikely to play due to injuries. Ibrahimovic has a groin strain while Maxwell has a sore calf muscle.

AC Milan will need to pick themselves up from Tuesday's disappointing 2-2 home draw against Bayern Munich in the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal when they host Empoli this weekend.

Desperate to clinch a Champions League place for next season, AC Milan are currently in sixth place, a point behind Empoli and four adrift of fourth-placed Palermo.

Empoli striker Nicola Pozzi, who is partly owned by Milan, insisted his loyalties would not be divided at the weekend.

"Milan own part of me and I've played in some friendlies for their first team," he said.

"But right now I'm an Empoli player and once I'm on the pitch

you will see how committed to them I am."

Second-placed Roma, who beat English Premiership leaders Manchester United 2-1 in the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal on Wednesday, play Catania behind closed doors at Lecce's Del Mare stadium.

Catania have been banned from playing at their Massimino stadium following the death of a policeman during crowd trouble in February.

A civil court ruled on Wednesday that Catania fans would be allowed to attend matches at neutral venues, but a government-backed security watchdog overruled the decision for the Roma match given the reputation of the two sets of fans for causing trouble.

Lazio, who have propelled themselves up to third place after winning seven games in a row, host Messina at the Olympic stadium.

FIXTURES

(1300GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday
AC Milan v Empoli, Fiorentina v Chievo, Catania v Roma, Fiorentina v Ascoli, Lazio v Messina, Palermo v Cagliari, Parma v Livorno, Reggina v Inter Milan, Sampdoria v Torino, Siena v Udinese