

High noon for giants

AFP, London



Manchester United and Chelsea must find the energy to resume slugging on Saturday as their gruelling title bout edges nearer a conclusion.

Nothing can be decided this weekend. But with only four matches left to play – including the meeting of the two sides at Stamford Bridge on May 9 – any slip-ups are certain to have a huge bearing on whether the Premiership trophy remains in the Chelsea boardroom for a third successive season, or heads back to Old Trafford for the first time since 2003.

The latest chapter in this boiling pot of a title race will be infused with additional tension given that, for once, the two clubs kick off at the same time with United making the short trip to Everton while Chelsea's lunchtime appointment on the Kings Road is with Bolton.

On paper, the Londoners have the marginally easier task against a Bolton side that has taken just a point from their last three league outings and will be without injured duo Tal Ben Haim and El Hajdi Diouf, and, possibly, skipper Kevin Nolan.

But the champions have had a day less than United to recover from their respective Champions League semifinal exertions in midweek and Bolton's expertise at set pieces will surely test the concentration of a fatigued squad.

Jose Mourinho can freshen up the squad that beat Liverpool 1-0 on Wednesday night with an injection of Michael Essien's high energy levels, the Ghanaian midfielder having served a European suspension in mid-week.

But he faces a difficult dilemma over whether to field the likes of Joe Cole and Didier Drogba and risk leaving them exhausted for the second leg against Liverpool on Tuesday evening.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson is confronted with a similar balancing act ahead of his side's trip to Milan next Wednesday. Wayne Rooney ran himself into the ground as a solo striker in the 3-2 first leg win over the Italians and might be excused the trip to his former club with Alan Smith ready to come back into the starting lineup.

Ferguson is resigned however to fielding a makeshift defence once more with only Patrice Evra of his first-choice back four set to be available, although both Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic could be in contention for the Milan game.

United's resurgence this season resulted in eight of Ferguson's players being named in the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA)'s team of the year, while Cristiano Ronaldo was

named both young player and player of the year.

But Ferguson has warned his players that such recognition from their peers will be meaningless if their challenge for trophies disintegrates over the final month of the season.

"These awards only tell you what's been happening up until February," said the Scot. "What we have to do now is be great in April and May. That's the time to be great. If the players don't smell the scent of something big in their lives now then they never will. It's a great opportunity for them."

It is the smell of fear that can be expected to hang over this weekend's fixtures involving clubs at the other end of the table.

Bottom side Watford's drop back to the Championship was confirmed last weekend but there

are five teams – Fulham, Wigan, Sheffield United, Charlton and West Ham – embroiled in a cut-throat battle to avoid filling the other two relegation spots.

With only four points spanning 15th-placed Fulham and second-from-bottom West Ham, this particular dogfight is likely to still be going when the season reaches its finale on May 13th, but this Saturday could be hugely influential in determining which clubs join Watford in the Championship next season.

West Ham, who have the additional spectre of a possible points deduction related to the signings of Javier Mascherano and Carlos Tevez hanging over them, realistically cannot afford to lose at Wigan while Sheffield United will take a huge step to survival if they can claim maximum points at home to a Watford side with only pride left

to play for.

Charlton have a tough trip to Blackburn but they would probably prefer that to a clash with Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium, which is where free-falling Fulham will be on Sunday.

FIXTURES	
(1400 GMT kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	Blackburn v Charlton, Chelsea v Bolton (1145), Everton v Man Utd (1145), Manchester City v Aston Villa, Middlesbrough v Tottenham, Portsmouth v Liverpool, Sheffield Utd v Watford, Wigan v West Ham
Sunday	Arsenal v Fulham (1500)
Monday	Reading v Newcastle (1900)



PHOTO: AFP

Newcastle striker Michael Owen in a training session at their Benton training ground in Newcastle on Friday.

Woodgate seals Boro deal

AFP, London

England defender Jonathan Woodgate has handed Middlesbrough a huge boost by agreeing to transform his season-long loan move from Real Madrid into a permanent transfer.

Woodgate had been considering his options for several months with Arsenal and Newcastle among the clubs reportedly monitoring his situation now that he finally seems to have overcome the injury problems which blighted his time in Spain.

But the 27-year-old has decided to stay at his home town club and sign a four-year deal, which will mean Boro paying Real a fee of ten million euros (nearly seven million pounds).

Woodgate's decision will come as a relief to Boro boss Gareth Southgate, who is currently attempting to persuade another key member of his squad, Australian striker Mark Viduka, to stay at the club when his contract expires at the end of the season.

With a player of Woodgate's calibre agreeing to stay, it will be easier for Southgate to persuade the likes of Viduka that they can achieve things at the club, as well as helping to attract new players.

Woodgate arrived back in England having endured a miserable run of luck with injuries which had limited him to only a handful of games for Real.

However, having embarked upon a specially-designed fitness programme, he has returned to full fitness and his best form, missing only eight of the 41 games Boro have played since his arrival.

His composed performances earned him a recall to the England squad for the friendly defeat by Spain in February, although injuries subsequently prevented him taking part in Euro 2008 qualifiers against Israel and Andorra.

Schalke vow title

AFP, Berlin



The 28-year-old is battling to shake off a thigh injury for Friday night's trip to VfL Bochum, but with only four games left the race for the title will go to the wire and no Schalke player wants to miss a game.

Schalke are just two points clear of second-placed Werder Bremen and having won the last of their seven German titles in 1958, this would be their first time as Bundesliga champions since the new format was introduced in 1963.

Schalke suffered heartbreak in 2001 when they thought they had captured the title following a 5-3 win over Unterhaching only for Bayern Munich's defender Patrik Andersson to grab an equaliser deep into injury-time at Hamburg which snatched the title away.

"Each of us has a job to do, everybody has to give their all. We are ready, we'll do whatever it takes," said Lincoln.

Schalke coach Mirko Slomka says his side must concentrate on winning their last four games – against Bochum, Nuremberg, Borussia Dortmund and Arminia Bielefeld – to make the title safe.

"We just have to win our matches, whether on Friday, Saturday or Sunday.

"Our position on that score hasn't changed over the last few weeks.

"It's not a question of waiting for one of the others to slip up – we just have to put on a good performance

ourselves".

Should Schalke lose, second-placed Werder Bremen are on their heels just two points behind and they travel to Arminia Bielefeld on Sunday, having contested the first leg of the UEFA Cup semifinal at Spain's Espanyol on Thursday.

All is not rosy in the Bremen squad with question marks hanging over the future at the club of midfielders Torsten Frings and Diego, as well as striker Miroslav Klose.

"It is not pleasant that these discussions are permanently on the agenda," Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf said.

Last weekend's defeat at VfB Stuttgart means fourth-placed Bayern Munich have a five-point gap to close to secure a top-three finish which will guarantee them a Champions League place next year.

Failure to do so would mean they miss out on a place in Europe's premier tournament for the first time in 11 years and the German giants would have to swallow the bitter pill of life in the UEFA Cup.

Bayern have injury problems with German striker Lukas Podolski out for the rest of the season with a knee injury, while Mark van Bommel (ankle), Owen Hargreaves (knee) and Claudio Pizarro are all struggling to fit.

But Bayern's Brazilian defender Lucio insists the fight for a Champions League place is not over, even though the German giants are running out of games, with four left including Saturday's visit of Hamburg.

"We have to pull together and make sure we turn the corner," said the 28-year-old.

Third-placed Stuttgart can expect three points from their visit to bottom-side Borussia Moenchengladbach, while ninth-

placed Hertha Berlin travel to Alemannia Aachen, who are desperately trying to escape the bottom three.

Second-from-bottom Mainz 05 will be praying for three points when they host mid-table Hanover and they will be hoping for some magic from their Egyptian striker Mohamed Zidan, who has bagged 11 goals this season.

Borussia Dortmund and Eintracht Frankfurt, both hovering above the bottom three, will be scrapping for points, while VfL Wolfsburg travel to Nuremberg.

And on Sunday, Energie Cottbus are at Bayer Leverkusen, who are fifth and currently occupy the final UEFA Cup spot.

Zlatan undergoes surgery

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic has undergone surgery in the Netherlands to strengthen his abdominal wall, the recently crowned Serie A champions said on Friday.

The 25-year-old Sweden international, who has been ruled out for the remainder of the campaign with a groin injury, had been putting off the operation until Inter wrapped up the title.

Ibrahimovic, who played a significant part in Inter's Scudetto success with 15 league goals, will also miss the club's two-legged Italian Cup final against Roma.

He is also likely to be ruled out of Sweden's 2008 European championship qualifying matches in June against Denmark and Iceland.

Klinsmann still keen on coaching

AFP, Berlin

Germany boss Juergen Klinsmann revealed on Thursday he is set to return to coaching and will be spending the summer considering job offers – from both clubs and countries.

Despite German press reports on Thursday stating Klinsmann had effectively ruled himself out of coaching English Premiership champions Chelsea by taking a job with German TV, the 42-year-old insists he wants to coach again.

Klinsmann will work as an analyst and commentator for pay-TV channel Arena for the next two years and will fly to Germany from his home in California for major Bundesliga games.

But the ex-German striker insists he is also ready to coach again after taking a break having led Germany to third-place at last year's World Cup on home soil.

"Whatever happens, I want to get back into the coaching game. We'll have to see whether that happens sooner or later," Klinsmann said at a press conference organised by Arena.

He said he has told his new employers he may be taking up a coaching role in the future after receiving offers "from teams and from national federations."

"I made sure Arena are aware of that, so if I accepted a coaching post, our collaboration can be suspended at any time," specified Klinsmann.

"There are a certain number of proposals from clubs and national federations on the table, I am going to wait until this summer to analyse and sort out the offers to make a decision."

Klinsmann would not specify which jobs he is considering, but he has been tipped to succeed Jose Mourinho at Chelsea.

And the former Tottenham, Inter Milan and Bayern Munich forward explained why he stood down as German coach, saying he was "burned out" after two years in charge and needed to "recharge his batteries".

"It was necessary that I took a break after the World Cup, it was difficult for my family.

"During the last 10 months, I have enjoyed a normal family life and I also took time to assess the World Cup."

All roads lead to Rome

AFP, Rome



this weekend as second-placed Roma take on fierce rivals Lazio.

Roma are 11 points clear of third-placed Lazio and virtually assured of direct entry into next season's Champions League, while their neighbours are looking good for a top-four finish and a place in the third qualifying round of Europe's premier club competition.

Lazio are on 57 points, one ahead of AC Milan and seven clear of fifth-placed Empoli, with five games to go.

Lazio won 3-0 in the first capital derby of the season, and Roma defender Christian Panucci is gunning for revenge.

"We went into the match thinking we were superior and that we would win easily, but this time we won't be so complacent," said the 34-year-old former Italy international.

"Lazio were really fired up and they didn't allow us to play, and we became frustrated. That won't happen again on Sunday, we have learned from that experience.

"We want to win to make sure of second place, and because it's the derby."

Roma captain Francesco Totti, Serie A's leading scorer with 21 goals, has a back injury and faces a race against the clock to be fit in time for Sunday's match.

"If he doesn't make it, the rest of us will have to work twice as hard," Panucci said.

Security at Rome's Olympic stadium, where a crowd of around 65,000 is expected, will be tight given the history of violence between Roma and Lazio fans.

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti is likely to rotate his squad for Saturday's trip to Torino with one eye fixed firmly on their crunch Champions League semifinal, second leg against Manchester United the following Wednesday.

United won Tuesday's first leg at Old Trafford 3-2, but with two precious away goals Milan will fancy their chances of reaching the Athens final.

Milan are in fourth place on 56 points and still have some work to do if they are to claim a spot in the third qualifying round of next season's Champions League.

Down at the basement, Ascoli and Messina look set for the second division while above them eight sides are battling to stay up.

Even Livorno in 11th place are embroiled in the relegation dogfight, with the Tuscan club just five points clear of the drop zone.

Inter host Empoli in Sunday's late match at the San Siro which is likely to turn into a Scudetto celebration as the champions play in front of their home fans for the first time after securing the championship at Siena last week.

FIXTURES	
(all 1300 GMT kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	Torino v AC Milan (1600), Fiorentina v Chievo (1830)
Sunday	Ascoli v Reggina, Inter Milan v Empoli (1830), Livorno v Palermo, Messina v Atalanta, Parma v Cagliari, Roma v Lazio, Siena v Sampdoria, Udinese v Catania

Praise premature: Fergie

AFP, Liverpool



ahead of the final weeks of the campaign.

Ferguson's side has already begun to attract a host of accolades after maintaining their triple challenge for honours right through to the climax of the season.

And the United manager admitted he was thrilled to see eight members of his first team squad honoured by the Professional Footballers Association awards this week.

Cristiano Ronaldo headed that list by claiming the player-of-the-year and young-player-of-the-year awards while the Portuguese and seven of his teammates dominated the selection of the Premiership team of the year.

But Ferguson has warned the true test of his side's abilities lies in the weeks ahead and their ability to stay in the hunt for silverware – starting with the Premiership trip to Everton this weekend – will determine their lasting reputation.

"The PFA awards were a great night for Ronaldo and a great night for the club," he said. "But they were voted for in February and only tell you what's been happening up until then.

"What we have to do now is be great in April and May. That's the time to be great.

"If the players don't smell the scent of something big in their lives now then they never will. It's a great opportunity for them."

Last weekend's home draw to Middlesbrough threatened to derail United's bid to win the Premiership title for the first time in four years.

But with Chelsea failing to win at Newcastle United 24 hours later, Ferguson's side visit Everton's

Goodison Park still enjoying a three-point advantage over their nearest rivals with four games remaining.

United were given a further lift when they secured a 3-2 first leg victory over AC Milan in the Champions League semifinal although they will travel to Merseyside still battling against a crippling injury crisis.

Defenders Gary Neville, Nemanja Vidic and Rio Ferdinand will once again miss out, as will striker Louis Saha and midfielder Park Ji-Sung.

Everton's hopes of consolidating their grip on fifth spot won't be helped by the loss of keeper Tim Howard, who is ineligible as a condition of his season-long loan move from United.

In his place will come Richard Wright who is expected to end his five-year stay at the club when his current contract expires this summer.