

Real sneak a win

INTERNET, undated

Despite being the better side for most of the game Spanish champions Real Madrid nearly ended up goalless against Portuguese side Belenenses in the Teresa Herrera trophy on Wednesday.

Real Madrid left it late, but managed to pull off a narrow win over a fairly uninspiring Os Belenenses side at the Riazor, A Coruna.

The 7,000 fans at the Riazor snoozed as Real Madrid failed to make their slight advantages count in a rather lacklustre first half.

The opening stages passed without incident - it took ten minutes for even a sniff of a chance to develop - but Madrid gradually settled into a pattern.

The Spanish side was looking impressive down the right, with Robinho and Sergio Ramos linking up nicely, and this partnership almost gave Saviola a chance at goal 25 minutes.

But the match didn't spark up in earnest until shortly before the interval. Guti's corner met Raul, whose header from the left only narrowly missed out on giving Madrid the lead.

Emboldened by this, the enthusiastic Saviola tried his luck two minutes later, but perhaps the best chance of the half fell to new signing Pepe.

Again, it was a Guti corner that set things up, but the defender just lacked a finish.

Saviola came off for Soldado at half time as Real Madrid decided to take the game to the Lisbon side.

This almost backfired. Although they were at no point Madrid's fluency was lacking and chances were at a premium.

And a lack of foresight almost let their opponents in at goal in the 55th minute. Moura was gifted a superb chance but blasted his

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Real Madrid's Robinho goes airborne as he tries to control the ball during the Teresa Herrera Trophy friendly match against Portuguese team Os Belenenses in Coruna on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Alves interested in Chelsea

AFP, Madrid

UEFA Cup titleholders Sevilla's left-sided Brazilian defender Daniel Alves on Wednesday demanded the Spanish club consider an offer from English Premiership side Chelsea.

"Out of respect for me, Sevilla have to behave correctly. During my four years with the club I have always behaved correctly. I want them to listen and weigh up the situation. My only consideration is to leave Sevilla on good terms," Alves told a press conference.

The 24-year-old has been targeted by Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho, who is reported to have made a 20-million-euro offer for the player whose contract runs until 2012.

Sevilla however are demanding 30-million-euro to let him go.

"It's a unique and magnificent opportunity to progress and I don't want to let it pass me by," he added.

Alves joined Sevilla from Brazilian side Bahia, winning two UEFA Cups along the way.

Ballack doubtful for England

AFP, Berlin

German coach Joachim Loew admitted on Thursday that his captain Michael Ballack is a doubt for Germany's friendly against England at the new Wembley on August 22.

Ballack, 30, has been out of action since picking up an ankle injury in April while playing for English giants Chelsea and was one of the London club's stars missing from last weekend's Community Shield clash.

Loew has already lost Werder Bremen midfielder Torsten Frings with a knee injury and Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski, who is recovering from a knee operation, now Ballack faces a race against time to prove his fitness.

"I will announce the team next Thursday: Frings and Podolski are definitely out, that is or sure," explained Loew.

"As for Michael Ballack, there is a lot of doubt he'll be ready, which is a huge pity for such a big game, but we have other options in the midfield," said Loew.

Germany face key qualifying games in their bid to reach next summer's European Championships in Austria and Switzerland when they travel to face Wales and the Republic of Ireland in September and October.

Loew, who replaced Juergen Klinsmann as German coach after last year's World Cup, says he is happy with his squad's progress.

"I am hoping certain players like Schalke 04's goalkeeper Manuel Neuer and defender Christian Pander, as well as VfB Stuttgart's defender Serdar Tasci, will continue their progress."

Loew said experienced forwards such as Gerald Asamoah and Sebastian Kehl could be set for recalls.

Real set for Drenthe

AFP, Madrid

Dutch midfielder Royston Drenthe is to join Real Madrid after they came to agreement with Feyenoord, according to reports in the Spanish press on Thursday.

Sports newspaper AS said that the Spanish champions would fork out 13 million euros for the player with Marca quoting the figure at 14 million euros.

The 20-year-old, who was also rumoured to be a transfer target for Chelsea, had been putting pressure on the Dutch club to let him leave for one of Europe's glamour teams.

AS said he will be unveiled on Friday on a five-year deal with the Spanish season due to begin on August 25.

Real are also still said to be chasing Chelsea's Dutch international winger Arjen Robben.

Domenech's warning

AFP, Paris

France coach Raymond Domenech has warned his team against focusing too much on their European qualifier against Italy next month.

The long time rivalry between the two footballing giants turned to fever pitch last year when Italy won the World Cup final on penalties after France star Zinedine Zidane was sent off for head butting defender Marco Materazzi.

But for Domenech the September 8 qualifier between the two nations in Milan "doesn't count" and should not be seen as another chance to avenge their World Cup loss.

Instead he told his side to focus more on their friendly against

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Team spirit pleases Jose

AFP, London



Jose Mourinho believes the team spirit he has forged at Chelsea is strong enough to see

his side through the injury crisis that threatens to damage their title challenge.

Mourinho could be forgiven if he had given up taking a roll call of his remaining fit players in case another one has joined the growing ranks of walking wounded.

Such a lengthy injury list would have shattered morale at most clubs, but Mourinho's demand that the team's needs come above all else has rubbed off on every player who works for him.

As a result, the Stamford Bridge changing room has plenty of strong personalities who will pull together during this testing period.

Which is just as well because only 12 players were available to train on Wednesday. Crucially, Mourinho will be without John Terry for at least a month, while Didier Drogba faces two weeks on the sidelines.

The loss of those two talismanic stars, along with injuries to Michael Ballack, Paulo Ferreira, Wayne Bridge, Claude Makelele, Salomon Kalou and Andriy Shevchenko has left Mourinho struggling to even name a squad of 16 players for Sunday's Premiership opener against Birmingham.

But the Portuguese coach is confident Chelsea's unified spirit will help them get off to a good start as they try to regain the Premiership crown.

"The players are adapting well," Mourinho told Chelsea TV. "The club are happy with the players. The players are happy with the club."

"They want to stay and I think this is a very happy and friendly group with a lot of quality in football aspects, but also a happy family and I think we can dream of good things because the group is fantastic."

"Everybody is intelligent enough to understand that we play around 60 matches a season and no one plays 60 matches."

"If you are not first-choice at the beginning of the season you know that, step by step, you will get matches."

Despite having so many absences, Mourinho is tempted by the prospect of a 20 million pounds fee for Arjen Robben.

Real Madrid are willing to pay that much for the Dutch winger and Mourinho would willingly trade an injury-plagued player for Sevilla's Daniel Alves, who he is trying to bring to London for a similar price.

If that deal goes through, Mourinho will finally have found a solution to the right-back position that was his side's Achilles heel for long periods last season.

Assuming he can eventually get his first choice team onto the pitch, Mourinho will expect to push Manchester United much harder

this season.

Through the second half of last season, the feeling persisted that Sir Alex Ferguson's team had a momentum that Chelsea, distracted by in-fighting between Mourinho and Roman Abramovich, were unequipped to halt.

But with that feud apparently settled, Chelsea will be United's most potent challengers again.

They proved in the Community Shield that even without so many players they could match United and Steve Sidwell, one of Mourinho's close-season signings, is certain there is no lack of desire to dethrone United.

"Other clubs are obviously going to think it is a good time to play Chelsea but what they have got to remember is the players who are going to be playing are going to want to make a mark on the manager's selection for the next game," Sidwell said.

"What I have seen in pre-season is the hunger for success, the hunger to get this title back."

"Chelsea are victims of their own success. We have been successful over the last few years and with that you get a lot of negativity. But we know what we want and what we have got."

Pizarro to fight for place

AFP, London



Claudio Pizarro on Thursday warned Didier Drogba to expect a fight for his place in the

Chelsea attack.

The Peru striker, signed on a free transfer from Bayern Munich, said he was not star-struck by the likes of Drogba and Andriy Shevchenko and was in no mood to spend the season sat on the bench.

The 28-year-old new recruit revealed he wants to be first choice striker at Stamford Bridge, ahead of Chelsea's opening fixture at home to newly promoted Birmingham City on Sunday.

"I am not in England to be a substitute for Drogba," Pizarro insisted.

"He and Andriy Shevchenko are

superstars but Claudio Pizarro is not lame and I will compete with them. My dream is to be the number one striker at Chelsea. I am not scared about having rivals for my place."

The Blues' coaching staffs have pledged to adopt a more expansive style of play this season.

The FA Cup holders have recruited fresh faces over the pre-season which Mourinho feels can adapt to a 4-4-2 formation as well as their trusted diamond system which helped them win the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 English Premiership titles.

However, given the number of injuries in the Chelsea squad, just who will be on the team sheet for the Birmingham clash remains to be seen.

England left-back Ashley Cole is the latest player to have sustained a knock - reportedly a calf problem - adding to manager Jose Mourinho's defensive headache with captain

John Terry already sidelined for around a month due to a knee injury.

Mourinho feels whoever he selects must be flexible, rather than just looking to slot into a traditional English 4-4-2 formation.

The Portuguese maintains that can be beneficial in Europe.

"We can see a lot of teams playing a very good possession game, we can see a lot of teams playing with players between the lines, a lot of teams thinking tactically from game to game and not playing always the typical 4-4-2 they used to play every game," he said.

"A lot of teams are playing with three midfielders and sometimes with five at the back."

"The game is more tactical, it's become more tactical thinking. In my opinion globally about the game, it prepares English teams better to play in Europe."

Will Bayern strike back?

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM



of one Oliver Kahn.

Love him or hate him (the latter numbers are understandably more) what cannot be denied is the universal singularity of Kahn's name with regards to German football.

goalposts showed one side of his characteristics--he doesn't like losing.

Which is why come the final game of the league season in May 2008, don't be surprised if Kahn's resolve sees him lifting the Shield in front of the Allianz Arena faithful. That and the small amount of 69 million Euros that Bayern have pumped into their squad this season.

For when King Kahn steps between the posts against Hansa Rostock on Saturday he will see in front of him talent like never before.

along with the already eye-catching talents of Bastian Schweinsteiger, the nifty Phillip Lahm and steely Lucio, Bayern have sounded out an early warning to reclaim the trophy they lost to Stuttgart last season.

And what of Stuttgart, surprise champions on the last day? Young turbo Mario Gomez has drawn many admiring glances but they have managed to cling on to their prized asset. Recently named the German player of the year for 2007, Gomez will be hoping to stamp his authority fully this season.

Coach Armin Veh has opted for experience in the form of Yildirim

thing proved to be futile. Luck deserted them, their players played horribly or some form of previously unheard of disaster came in their way to snatch away a crown they had dreamed of winning. The shocked Mirko Slomka now hopes that the funds he invested in securing replacements will come in handy.

But Schalke wont have it any easy this season either with Werder Bremen amongst the other teams out for revenge. Bestowed the title of 'winter champions' last season Bremen play a fine brand of attacking football full of flair and promise



OLIVER KAHN



MARIO GOMEZ



LUCA TONI

In an era where German talent has been pitifully hard to come by, Kahn and his former clubmate Michael Ballack have been leading lights--Kahn especially capturing the imagination with some magical performances in the 2002 World Cup. He finished runner-up in that tournament and a picture of the sultry, disconsolate shot-stopper leaning helplessly against the

There will be the mercurial Franck Ribery a man known for his blistering pace and mazy dribbles, architect of the French run to the World Cup final in 2006. And then there will be Miroslav Klose, top scorer in the same tournament snapped up from Werder Bremen. Missing will be World Cup winner Luca Toni but with the towering Italian also set for a return, them

Basturk (of the 2002 Leverkusen fame) and Ewerthon. Watch out too for rising Romanian star Ciprian Marica. Stuttgart have invested well and look set to challenge the big boys yet again.

The tale of Schalke is easily the most enduring. Champions for all of eight minutes (on the final day) last season, Schalke did a Schalke which meant that ultimately every-

led admirably by the mercurial Diego. The Brazilian has wowed the Bundesliga aplenty but this season will be missing the deadly Klose up front. His replacements have come in the form of the towering Boubacar Sango and the skilful Carlos Alberto a player who has

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MU confidence sky high

AFP, London



As Manchester United's players strolled onto their Carrington training pitch this week, the confi-

dence currently surging through the club was instantly discernable. There was a spring in their step that suggested they would happily start their Premiership title defence right now rather than have to wait until Sunday for the opening game against Reading at Old Trafford.

All the pieces are falling into place for Sir Alex Ferguson as he begins his 21st season in charge at United.

His 50 million pounds spending spree has added youthful verve to a side already crammed with world-class players and Ferguson believes he may have assembled

the most talented squad he has ever worked with.

Owen Hargreaves played his first match last weekend since his move from Bayern Munich and will stabilise the midfield when he is fully fit, while Portuguese winger Nani has already impressed his new teammates with some scintillating training performances.

Anderson and Carlos Tevez, when his protracted transfer from West Ham is finally rubber-stamped, will bring bucket-loads of flair to compliment Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney and Ryan Giggs.

As if they weren't reasons enough to approach the new campaign with enthusiasm, United inflicted an early psychological blow on Chelsea thanks to Edwin van der Sar's penalty heroics in the Community Shield.

The fragile state of Jose

Mourinho's injury-ravaged squad has added to the sense that everything is going in United's favour.

Rio Ferdinand's sky-high confidence was apparent from the way he nonchalantly stroked his penalty past Petr Cech in the Wembley shoot-out.

The England defender believes United are in such good shape that they have no reason to be concerned by Chelsea or any of their other title rivals.

"I don't really care what Chelsea do because it has no bearing on our season," Ferdinand said. "I am happy with what we are doing. That is all I am interested in."

"The manager's dealings in the transfer market have been very good. We are better prepared now than we were last season."

"Anderson and Nani are fantastic footballers with great potential and everyone knows all about Owen

Hargreaves anyway."

The last time United won the title in 2003, Arsenal took it off them a year later, but Ferdinand is convinced they can cope with being the team to beat again this season.

He said: "I don't have much experience of defending titles do I? I know the start of the season was good but it ended up being a difficult year, much different to the way I imagined."

"Yes, teams may want to beat you that little bit more and adjust the way they play. But we do a lot of training to combat that and it is down to us to ensure we do."

The most intriguing question at Old Trafford this season is how Ferguson manages to combine similar talents of Rooney and Tevez.

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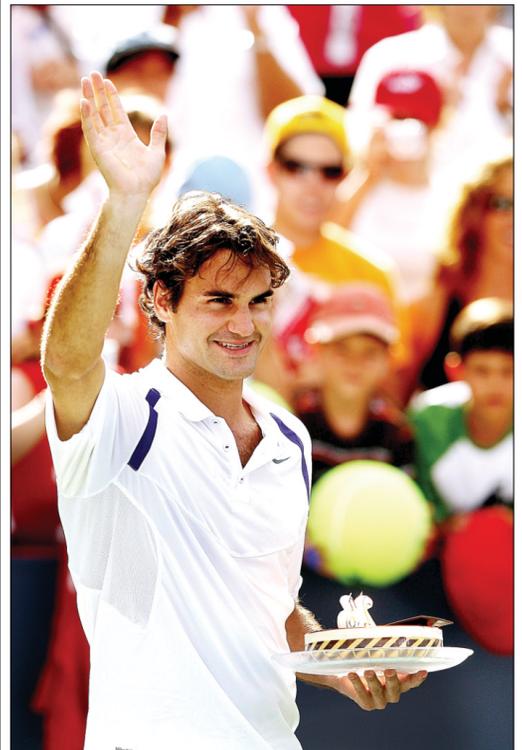


PHOTO: AFP

A delighted Roger Federer of Switzerland waves to the crowd after receiving a cake on his 26th birthday following his victory over Ivo Karlovic of Croatia during the Coupe Rogers at Stade Uniprix in Montreal on Wednesday.

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