



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona forwards Ronaldinho (L) and Lionel Messi take part in specialised drills during a training session at the Nou Camp on Monday. Following Messi's return from holiday after the Copa America, the quartet of him, Ronaldinho, Thierry Henry and Samuel Eto'o, nicknamed "Fantastic Four", trained together for the first time and were watched by thousands of Barca faithful.

Barca's galactico problem

Football

INTERNET, undated

As the new season in Spain approaches fans of Barcelona will be licking their lips at the prospect of seeing Ronaldinho, Eto'o, Messi and Henry all gracing the Camp Nou turf.

However, it is looking increasingly likely that Frank Rijkaard will opt to stick with the tried and tested 4-3-3, meaning one of the 'fantastic four' will always be conspicuous by their absence.

As a result Rijkaard will have to cleverly rotate the four superstars to keep them all happy and avoid any dressing room unrest, which brightened the side last season.

Of the four, Rijkaard will probably be most concerned with the potentially volatile Samuel Eto'o. After the confusion over his refusal to take the field against Racing, Eto'o snapped and revealed the friction between himself and Ronaldinho. A few days later and they were claim-

ing to be best of friends again, putting down the problems to a lack of communication.

There have been no problems since, and the squad insist they are more determined and united than ever. However, how would Eto'o react to being left out of the team for a game such as El Clasico? Only time will tell, but Barca will be hoping not to see a repeat of the infamous outburst at Vilafranca.

Despite being the clubs top scorer last season, Ronaldinho came in for some criticism for performing below his own incredibly high standards. Milan's interest in the two time world player of the year is well known and Barca are thought to have knocked back numerous attempts to lure him away from Catalonia.

Rijkaard will be aware that Milan will be waiting should Ronaldinho become upset at constant rotations. However, after complaining of tiredness last season, Ronaldinho may welcome the extra rest.

The latest addition to the Barcelona frontline, Thierry Henry,

has already stated on more than one occasion that it is up to 'the boss' who plays and he'll accept any decision he makes. Although, after leaving Arsenal, where he was treated like a king, Henry hasn't just come to Barcelona to sit on the bench. He has shown in the past that he is determined to play every game and won't be satisfied to play second fiddle.

Perhaps the most important player for Rijkaard to keep happy is Leo Messi. At the age of 20 he is already one of the best players in the world and on course to become one of the greatest ever. Despite producing some jaw dropping performances in the last two seasons, Messi has been frustrated by injuries and could be unhappy to have his rhythm disrupted by being rotated regularly.

The problem has been complicated by the form shown by Bojan Krkic and in particular Giovanni Dos Santos. Spanish U-17 call up has denied Krkic a chance to impress, but Dos Santos has been the star of the pre-season thus far, eclipsing

one and all.

As much as he has Krkic with want and merit starts once in three games or so, if not more. That will see more of the big boys on the bench. It might even be better for them, keep them fresh for the business end of the season, but it remains to be seen if that is how they will choose to see it.

With the talent Rijkaard has at his disposal he'll be expected to deliver success. If everyone at the Camp Nou is happy they will take some stopping, and with Barca playing in numerous competitions there should be plenty of games for each of the player. However, that will work only if the stars leave their tantrums behind.

Barcelona's rivals will be hoping, waiting, almost praying for ego's to clash, for the Catalan giants to hit the self-destruct button. Will they succumb? Hand on heart, every Barcelona fan will have a few concerns.

Rooney joins England wounded

AFP, London

Wayne Rooney's left foot fracture adds to England boss Steve McClaren's woes ahead of key qualifying games for the 2008 European Championships.

England face Germany in a warm-up friendly match at Wembley on August 22, before the crucial qualifiers there against Israel on September 8 and Russia on September 12.

Rooney's hairline fracture, which his Manchester United club manager Alex Ferguson said Monday would rule him out for two months, meant McClaren would have been able to name an injured XI of stars currently unfit to play.

Rooney is also likely to miss the qualifiers away to Estonia on

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Ancelotti dreaming of Ronaldinho

INTERNET, undated

Carlo Ancelotti says AC Milan are waiting "with arms wide open" for the arrival of Ronaldinho at the San Siro.

The Rossoneri have long been linked with a blockbuster swoop for Barcelona's Brazilian superstar.

And the speculation increased on Monday with reports of a £43million bid.

Roberto Assis, Ronaldinho's agent and brother, told Gazzetta dello Sport: "Milan offered 60million euros, but Barcelona said no."

Assis also claimed that Barcelona are desperate to keep

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No regrets for Hunt

THE GUARDIAN



Stephen Hunt will not be speaking to Petr Cech when Chelsea visit the Madejski Stadium tonight. The Reading winger earned notoriety when he left Chelsea's goalkeeper with a fractured skull during the match there last October.

Now the Republic of Ireland international believes he has built a more positive reputation after a series of fine displays last season. "I haven't spoken to Cech and I won't either. That's not meant to be rude but it's just all forgotten now and we move on," Hunt said yesterday. "I approach every game as normal. We will line up and shake hands but that will be it. I will just look forward to the game as usual."

Hunt was accused by Jose Mourinho of causing the injury deliberately and was criticised by Frank Lampard for not visiting Cech in hospital, a stance backed up by several Chelsea players. "Unfortunately the incident made so many headlines and I guess a lot of people were asking, 'Who is he?'" he said. "By the end of the season I think I made a name for myself as a footballer."

Hunt relishes the chance to prove his ability against the high-profile sides. "There is more incentive to do well against teams like Chelsea. They have so-called superstars who earn so much money but the two times we have played them we have deserved results out of the game. We drew 2-2 at their place and played very well and even in the first game were unlucky to lose."

Chelsea's reserve goalkeeper

Carlo Cudicini also suffered a head injury after colliding with Ibrahim Sonko in the same game. Hunt said: "The incidents won't take anything away from what Reading players have achieved. It was hard to deal with at the time and the manager left me out for a few games but I came back and played well for the rest of the season."

The incidents at Reading prompted the Football Association and the Premier League to improve the level of care to players. A number of new measures have been introduced this season including the use of an ambulance specifically for players and officials. The Blackburn striker Benni McCarthy was afforded the new service when he collapsed in the fixture against Middlesbrough at the Riverside Stadium on Saturday with a head injury.

Real go Dutch

INTERNET, undated



Wesley Sneijder and Royston Drenthe are looking forward to a new Dutch revolution at Real Madrid after completing their transfers to the Santiago Bernabeu last night.

The 23-year-old playmaker Sneijder was unveiled alongside the 20-year-old wing-back after their respective 27 million Euro and 14 million Euro moves from Ajax and Feyenoord respectively. Both men have penned five-year contracts and will make up an attacking Dutch triumvirate for the Spanish champi-

ons with striker Ruud van Nistelrooy. If reports are to be believed they could be joined by Chelsea winger Arjen Robben while, not to be outdone, Valencia have shown firm interest in Rafael van der Vaart.

Sneijder hopes the Dutch colony will help Madrid repeat the success enjoyed by arch-rivals Barcelona when they boasted Netherlands greats such as Johan Cruyff and Ronald Koeman. "Real Madrid have now got Dutch players and I hope they will lead the team to victory as they did at Barcelona," he said. "I'm not the right person to tell Real Madrid to buy Robben as well, but he is a great player and maybe in the future I will play with him here at Real Madrid."

Drenthe, an attacking left-sided

player in the mould of Roberto Carlos, was the outstanding player at the European Under-21 Championship in June as the Jong Oranje retained their title on home soil. "I will play wherever the coach wants me to, he's the boss and I will do as he wants," said for the former Feyenoord man. "As a footballer you have to be prepared for anything; as a Real Madrid player you have to put up with a great deal of pressure."

Both players could make their debut for Madrid in the return leg of the Spanish Super Cup against Sevilla at the Bernabeu on Sunday. Madrid, who have also signed Jerzy Dudek, Pepe, Christoph Metzelder and Javier Saviola this summer, lost the first leg 1-0.

On-strike Alves set for exit

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea target Daniel Alves has been left out of Sevilla's squad for the Champions League third qualifying round first-leg tie against AEK Athens.

The highly-rated Brazilian wing-back has not been selected by Juande Ramos for Wednesday's home encounter despite being fit, increasing speculation that his days at Sevilla are numbered.

The 24-year-old Alves, who is also a target of Spanish champions Real Madrid, is reportedly keen on a move to London.

Ramos has described as Alves a very important part of his team, but admitted that his days could be numbered.

"It's true that Daniel has an important role in this team, especially in our attacking play," Ramos said.

"And it's also true that two teams like Madrid and Chelsea are trying to acquire his services."

"We will try to overcome his absence (on Wednesday) with another player who will show the same ambition as him."

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Owen targets Villa game

AFP, London

Injury-plagued striker Michael Owen has targeted a return to Premier League action this weekend after coming through a tough training workout on Monday.

The 27-year-old England stalwart missed Saturday's season-opener win at Bolton with a thigh injury sustained during shooting practice.

But after a friendly against Newcastle Blue Star at Kingsthorpe Park, in which he had two chances cleared off the line, the England star told the Newcastle United website: "I feel fine, it was only a small injury, a niggle."

"It had me out for a couple of weeks but I've trained for the last four or five days and I was confident I'd be fine and it was good to get back out on the pitch."

"It's a little frustrating to have missed some of the pre-season games but I've been able to do all the running work."

Owen's optimism means he is in line to Aston Villa at St James' Park on Saturday.

Apart from Newcastle boss Sam Allardyce, that will also be welcome news for England coach Steve McClaren following the injury to Manchester United front man Wayne Rooney.

Shola Ameobi scored both goals to help the Newcastle United second string to a 2-0 win in a match that also saw a first appearance in Newcastle colours for Brazilian defender Claudio Cacapa.

Midfielder Kieron Dyer, who recently saw a transfer to West Ham collapse at the 11th hour, also played.

MU seek first win

AFP, London



Manchester United are looking to Carlos Tevez to kick-start their English Premier League title defence as Chelsea seek to keep their winning ways in Wednesday's second round of matches.

United were to throw Argentina striker Tevez into action at Portsmouth in place of injury victim Wayne Rooney as Chelsea travel to Reading looking for a second straight win - but without the shaky defending.

Meanwhile Sven-Goran Eriksson takes charge of his first Premier League home match as Manchester City welcome newly promoted Derby County.

Tevez, not 100 percent match fit, is being rushed into the match at Fratton Park to fill in for England striker Rooney, who fractured his left foot in the 0-0 draw at home to Reading in their opening Premier League game Sunday.

The new signing from West Ham, after a protracted and complicated transfer, is disappointed he will not get to play alongside Rooney for two months.

"Losing Wayne is a big blow because obviously he is a great player. But at a big club like Manchester United you have lots of individuals who can hopefully slot in and do that job."

Pompey boss Harry Redknapp has got the better of United in his past three seasons in charge at Fratton Park - but fears the fixture schedule has not been kind to them so far.

"The best time to play United, Liverpool, Arsenal or Chelsea is on a Saturday when they have a Champions League game mid-week," he grumbled.

Chelsea, without talismanic captain John Terry, looked unsteady in defence as they beat newly promoted Birmingham City 3-2 on Saturday.

And Reading proved they are a tough side to break down in Sunday's creditable draw at Manchester United, and could deploy the same man-marking tactics.

Peru striker Claudio Pizarro, who equalised for his new club Chelsea against Birmingham, said he hoped to keep his place at the Madejski Stadium and feels under pressure to keep scoring.

"I am working hard for that and know there is a lot of competition. Jose (Mourinho the manager) just told me to play the way I have been playing."

Reading's USA goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann is happy to settle for goalless draws against top teams.

"We didn't score or create much but that's dictated by how good they are. Nil-nil is so much more special," he said.

Eriksson will probably receive a hero's welcome at Eastlands following Saturday's stylish 2-0 win at West Ham, which featured several of his signings in a new-look team.

But five homegrown players were in the starting line-up, including midfielder Stephen Ireland.

"We can score goals from anywhere, and it's really exciting for me to play in a team like this," the 20-year-old said.

"We're a passing team, and the more we play together the better."

"We can be positive going into Wednesday's game against Derby. I just hope we can be strong and take three points off them as well."

Sunderland are looking to keep up their perfect start at Birmingham, who pushed them close for the Championship title last season.

Dickson Etuhu, one of five players who made their Sunderland debuts in Saturday's 1-0 win over visitors Tottenham, insisted there was plenty more to come from the Black Cats.

"I thought we worked well together, considering that we are still getting used to each other," the midfielder said.

"Saturday's win has given us more confidence and we'll go to Birmingham with the belief that we can get something from the game."

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Tricky ties for giants

AFP, Paris



English giants Arsenal and Liverpool face tricky away ties on Wednesday as they bid to join Europe's top 16 clubs in the group phase of the Champions League.

Arsenal travel to Sparta Prague in the third qualifying round first leg in far from confident mood following their patchy 2-1 win over Fulham on Sunday.

And Liverpool face the tough task of traveling to a sweltering Toulouse to tackle a side that is on a high after beating French champions Lyon 1-0 on Saturday.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was relieved to win his first match of the season having previously complained that his team was at a disadvantage in the title race because of their Champions League qualifying round commitments.

While they and Liverpool are in European action, Chelsea, who travel to Reading, and Manchester United, hosted by Portsmouth, will both be looking to pick up three Premiership points.

But even if both win, Arsenal cannot find themselves more than a single point behind the reigning champions come Thursday following United's draw against Reading at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Of more concern to Wenger is his goalkeeper's concentration after

German Jens Lehmann gifted Fulham the lead in the first minute on Sunday, before late goals from Robin van Persie and Alexander Hleb saved his blushes.

"First of all, I was surprised he had made the mistake," said Wenger. "He's an experienced keeper and you want to deal with your first ball."

"Jens changed his mind, but wasn't quick enough to respond to his brain. He lost his co-ordination."

"Every goalkeeper can make a mistake. He made one. If you are an

outfield player you are not punished, but you are in goal."

He will have to be at his best against Sparta if Arsenal are to repeat the double they did over the Czechs in the 2005-06 Champions League.

Meanwhile, Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez revealed he was delighted with the start Spanish forward Fernando Torres has made at Anfield and he could again partner his 26 million pound signing with Dirk Kuyt in attack in France.

"I was happy with what Fernando did (in Sunday's 2-1 win over Aston Villa). He worked very hard. Him and Kuyt were a problem for their defenders. That was the idea," said Benitez.

"The movement and understanding was good and he showed the touches and class that I would expect from him."

"Normally players when they arrive need a little time to settle in but the understanding with Kuyt was good from the start."

In other games Scottish champions Celtic travel to Russia to face Spartak Moscow, who could be in hot water with the Russian Federation over racial abuse dished out by their supporters to one of their own players.

Spartak fans unfurled a banner containing racist abuse against Brazilian striker Soares Morais Welliton during a match at Samara,

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FIXTURES	
Wednesday (all times GMT):	
Toulouse (FRA) v Liverpool (ENG) (14:30)	
Tampere United (FIN) v Rosenborg (NOR) (16:00)	
Spartak Moscow (RUS) v Celtic Glasgow (SCO) (16:00)	
Bate Borisov (BLR) v Steaua Bucarest (ROM) (17:00)	
FK Sarajevo (BIH) v Dynamo Kiev (UKR) (18:00)	
Fenerbahce (TUR) v Anderlecht (BEL) (18:00)	
Werder Bremen (GER) v Dinamo Zagreb (CRO) (18:30)	
Red Bull Salzburg (AUT) v Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) (18:30)	
Ajax Amsterdam (NED) v Slavia Prague (CZE) (18:30)	
Sparta Prague (CZE) v Arsenal (ENG) (18:45)	
Sevilla (ESP) v AEK (GRE) (18:45)	
Second leg on August 28-29	



PHOTO: AFP

New Real Madrid signings Wesley Sneijder (L) and Royston Drenthe smile at their unveiling at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Monday.