

Boca missing Riquelme

INTERNET, undated

Argentine giants Boca Juniors have yet to find their form this season, and the local press are looking for reasons why this is the case. The obvious reason is the departure of Juan Roman Riquelme, and the fact that Boca haven't brought in anyone to replace him.

Boca started off the season with a disappointing goalless draw against a struggling Rosario Central in the Bombonera, and last Sunday were edged 3-2 by Argentinos Juniors, a side they would normally overcome with little difficulty.

There's no question the departure of Juan Roman Riquelme has a lot to do with their dip in form. The Argentine international was Boca's best player last season when they won the Copa Libertadores, after thrashing Brazil's Gremio 5-0 on aggregate, with three goals from their inspirational midfielder.

Boca manager Miguel Angel Russo realizes his side has been in poor form but is still confident in his team: "Don't underestimate us or say we are done for. This team, this squad, of those players who are here, have overcome difficult situations in the past. This is one of them. It isn't difficult, but we have to get through it as soon as possible".

In recent days he has stated that Riquelme makes a huge difference to the side, but they can still win the championship without him. The biggest problem so far is Boca have yet to replace the playmaker, although they are looking into the possibility of signing a high profile midfielder in his absence.

Miguel Angel Russo's side is paying the penalty for not making any big incorporations this season, despite offloading three of their regulars in Riquelme, Daniel Diaz, and Clemente Rodriguez. They also got rid of Bruno Marioni, a prolific striker who made a good impression the few times he was taken into consideration last season.

Russo has had to utilize Ever Banega and Sebastian Battaglia in Riquelme's midfield position, but both players haven't been able to lead the team with any success.

Boca will definitely need some experienced reinforcements in order to continue to be a title contender this season, particularly because they will also participate in the Copa Sudamericana, meaning they will be playing midweek football as well.



LA Galaxy midfielder David Beckham poses with children while conducting a youth soccer clinic at Jacob Schiff Field in New York City on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

'Travel not a problem'

Football

AFP, New York

Football star David Beckham insisted again on Friday that the long travel required for his international duty won't negatively affect his performance either for England or the Los Angeles Galaxy.

"I don't think it would affect my performance for my country nor the Galaxy," said Beckham, who joined the Major League Soccer club last month.

"I've handled the travelling pretty well so far. It's something that I've not been used to in my career. Playing in Europe, we've only had to travel an hour, two hours to play."

The 32-year-old midfielder, in New York for the Galaxy's Saturday match with the New York Red Bulls, will travel to England Sunday to play against Germany in a friendly at Wembley on Wednesday. He will then fly back the following day to Los Angeles for a game against Los Angeles rivals

Chivas USA in the evening. "I haven't done that since I was probably eight years, nine years old when we played games Saturdays and Sundays. It's definitely going to be difficult," Beckham admitted. "Hopefully I can have some rest on the plane. Everybody knows I want to play as many games possible for England."

Despite its friendly tag, Beckham said any match against Germany is serious business.

"I'm not sure any game at Wembley against Germany is a friendly," he said. "They're a great team. They've got great tradition. Last time we played them at Wembley, they beat us 1-0."

Beckham, who arrived Stateside nursing a left ankle injury and has therefore gotten off to a slow start in the MLS, scored his first goal for the Galaxy in their SuperLiga semi-final against DC United on Wednesday, striking with a free kick in the 27th minute.

"I was a little tired after the game," he said. "My first training session was on Tuesday and my first game was on Wednesday. That's the first time I ran and kicked the ball like I wanted."

Hopefully my ankle will hold up like it did. It felt good. It felt strong."

In Wednesday's match, Beckham took over as captain, a title previously held by US striker Landon Donovan.

"David and Landon had a discussion," Galaxy head coach Frank Yallop said. Landon was honoured to pass the captaincy to David who has earned the right to be captain at all the teams he's played on, including this one. It was a great gesture by Landon and greatly accepted by David."

Asked if he was becoming familiar with the MLS style of play, the former Manchester United and Real Madrid standout said he still had work to do.

"My knowledge of MLS is not as good as it was for European teams. I'm still learning. I came to America not only to be a player, but also to be an ambassador and take football to another level."

Wenger backs youth

AFP, Blackburn

Arsene Wenger has backed his young side to prove that they now have the physical attributes to succeed in the Premiership when they face Blackburn at Ewood Park on Sunday.

Arsenal, having sold former captain Thierry Henry to Barcelona during the closed season, started the season brightly last Sunday by fighting back from a goal down to beat Fulham 2-1 at the Emirates.

Although the Gunners go in search of their fourth win in five league visits to Blackburn, Mark Hughes's men have often proven a tough opponent for Wenger's team.

Blackburn's committed approach has at times frustrated Arsenal, who lost in the FA Cup at Ewood Park last term, and Wenger has in the past complained about their apparent over-physical tactics.

The Arsenal manager insists that his players are now fully-equipped to handle anything that Blackburn choose to throw at them on Sunday, however.

He said: "It is a different Arsenal now. They are not going to let other teams kick them off the pitch."

"Teams reflect the character of their managers and yes, of course, Blackburn have the aggression of Mark Hughes. But we are not worrying about that. We will worry about how we play not how they play."

"Last year, we had the team that committed the fewest fouls in the league. They have shown they will fight for each other and that is so very important."

Blackburn launched their campaign with a 2-1 win at Middlesbrough last Saturday and followed it up with a UEFA Cup victory against Finnish outfit MyPa-47 in midweek.

And after being billed as potential challengers to break up the established top four and claim a Champions League spot this season, the club's Norwegian winger Morten Gamst Pedersen admits that Rovers have set high targets.

He said: "The Premier League is the priority because we want to finish as high up as possible, but the Champions League will always be the target."

"Two years ago we were only two points away or something, so we know it can be possible and if we can maintain a good start to the season it might become a more realistic possibility."

Fergie eyes derby win

THE TIMES



Sven-Göran Eriksson may rarely have got the better of Sir Alex Ferguson during their numerous run-ins when he was England head coach, but it was the Manchester United manager who came off worse the last and only time they shared a technical area.

Eriksson was in charge of Lazio when they beat United 1-0 in the European Super Cup in August 1999 and, as football's most contrasting managers prepare to pit their wits again tomorrow, in the most eagerly anticipated Manchester derby for years, the Swede's wish to repeat that feat with Manchester City is matched only by Ferguson's desire to avenge a defeat that, on the surface at least, still appears to rankle.

Of course, there are more important reasons than revenge for why the United manager will want to put one over a man for whom he has struggled to contain his indifference. Defeat would leave United with only two points from their opening three matches, hardly the way in which Ferguson would have envisaged his team

beginning the defence of their Barclays Premier League title, although, more galling may be the prospect of trailing City by seven points.

It is why Ferguson's suggestion yesterday that there is more riding on the match for City than United did not quite pass muster. Sure, some City fans may even expect their team to collect all three points, such has been the optimism generated by back-to-back wins, but even against a United side missing Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney, victory would be as much a surprise as a bonus.

For United, however, defeat would be unthinkable and doubly so for Ferguson, given that his opposite number is, after all, Eriksson. "It is still the biggest game of their season, where we have more challenges ahead," Ferguson said, somewhat dismissively of City's prospects this season. "But we want to win because supporters go to work on Monday morning and it is quite something to be getting the bragging rights until we meet again. No, you won't change the derby feeling in the city." Ferguson has seen off 12 City managers in his 21 years at Old Trafford and it is something that the wily Scot

takes pride in. But, given the backing that Eriksson has from Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire former Prime Minister of Thailand, the suggestion from Ferguson yesterday was that the present holder of the poisoned chalice may be around for a while but the expectation on the Swede may be greater than on any of his predecessors.

"They have had a fantastic start and Sven will be hoping his luck holds for a good part of the season," Ferguson said. "They have had a bagful of money and spent a lot of it and, no matter what people say, there will be an expectation around them."

Eriksson has spent about £38 million and Ferguson believes that it is conceivable that, in the money stakes, City could be a "Northern Chelsea".

He said: "In the long term, if you get enough money, Chelsea have proved you can break into the top four," he said. "Time will tell, but maybe it is just the start of the buying. This guy [Thaksin] has got so much money this is only a starting point."

Captaincy delights Barzagli

INTERNET, undated

Andrea Barzagli has expressed his delight at being awarded captaincy of Palermo.

"Being the Palermo captain is a great honour for me, I will always feel great affection for these colours," trumpeted the 26-year-old, who was entrusted with the captain's armband following Eugenio Corini's departure to Torino.

The World Cup winner had actually been fairly close to leaving the Sicilian side during the summer but, after a fleeting flirtation with Juventus and Fiorentina, he is now more committed to the Rosanero cause than ever, and recently extended his contract to 2012 to prove it.



Chelsea's Peruvian forward Claudio Pizarro attends a press conference in their training ground of Cobham on Friday ahead of their Sunday clash against rivals Liverpool. Pizarro related that his family was safe and sound following a horrific earthquake in Peru on Wednesday. PHOTO: INTERNET