

Easy draw for champions

AFP, Monaco

Two-time winners Manchester United will face a stormy Champions League return to Roma, where fans were stabbed and baton-charged by police last season, in this year's competition.

United were placed in Group F when the draw was made here on Thursday along with the Italians as well as Sporting Lisbon and Dynamo Kiev.

Liverpool, the five-time winners, are in Group A with 2004 champions Porto, Marseille and Besiktas, while Chelsea are in Group B with Valencia, whom they beat in the quarter-finals last year, Schalke 04 and Rosenborg.

Defending champions AC Milan, who beat Liverpool in last year's final, are in Group D with Benfica, Celtic and Shakhtar Donetsk.

England's fourth representatives Arsenal are in a relatively comfortable Group H with Sevilla or AEK Athens, who have yet to complete their qualifying tie, Steaua Bucharest and Slavia Prague.

But the most contentious tie will pit English champions United against Roma, a match which will bring back bitter memories of last year's quarterfinal.

United lost the first leg 2-1 in the Italian capital but the match was

overshadowed when several United fans needed hospital treatment after being stabbed while Italian police baton-charged the visiting supporters during the first half.

Paul Scholes was red-carded to add to the English side's troubles.

In the return leg, ugly pre-match clashes between police and Roma fans marred United's stunning 7-1 victory at Old Trafford.

The draw also threw up a return to Sporting Lisbon for United's Portuguese internationals Ronaldo and Nani, both of whom signed from the Lisbon side.

GROUP STAGE

Group A: Liverpool (ENG), Porto (POR), Marseille (FRA), Besiktas (TUR).
Group B: Chelsea (ENG), Valencia (ESP), Schalke 04 (GER), Rosenborg (NOR).
Group C: Real Madrid (ESP), Werder Bremen (GER), Lazio (ITA), Olympiakos (GRE).
Group D: AC Milan (ITA), Benfica (POR), Celtic (SCO), Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR).
Group E: Barcelona (ESP), Lyon (FRA), Stuttgart (GER), Rangers (SCO).
Group F: Man Utd (ENG), Roma (ITA), Sporting Lisbon (POR), Dynamo Kiev (UKR).
Group G: Inter Milan (ITA), PSV Eindhoven (NED), CSKA Moscow (RUS), Fenerbahce (TUR).
Group H: Arsenal, Sevilla (ESP) or AEK Athens (GRE), Steaua Bucharest (ROM), Slavia Prague (CZE).

Feyenoord snap up Lee Chun-soo

AFP, Seoul

South Korean striker Lee Chun-soo has agreed to join Dutch club Feyenoord and will likely sign a four-year deal, his team Ulsan Tigers said Friday.

The Dutch club has offered about two million euros (2.72 million dollars) for Lee, said Ulsan Tigers spokesman Lim Ji-O.

"Ulsan Tigers reached agreement with Feyenoord this morning and Lee is to leave for the Netherlands today to finalise the deal," he said, adding he is expected to sign a four-year contract.

Lee, who is considered one of Korea's best players, had previously been in talks with several English Premier League clubs.

"The offer from some Premier League clubs was below our expectations. Lee appears to be satisfied with the terms proposed by Feyenoord," the spokesman said.

Lee played in Europe with Spanish club Real Sociedad after the 2002 World Cup but failed to impress.

Several Koreans have successfully made the switch to English football, including Park Ji-Sung at Manchester United, Lee Young-Pyo at Spurs, Seol Ki-Hyeon at Reading and Lee Dong-Guk at Middlesbrough.

Recoba loaned to Torino

AFP, Rome

Uruguayan international striker Alvaro Recoba has been loaned by Inter Milan to Torino for the season, Inter announced Friday.

Recoba, who has been at the club since 1997 and played 261 matches for Inter, played only 13 matches last season due to injury and falling down the pecking order.

It appears he has now become surplus to requirements with Inter also boasting the talents of Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Brazilian Adriano and Argentine pair Julio Cruz and Hernan Crespo.

Spain name squad

AFP, Madrid

Spanish coach Luis Aragones on Friday named a 20-strong squad for Euro 2008 qualifiers away to Iceland on September 8 and home to Latvia four days later.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Iker Casillas (Real Madrid), Jose Manuel Reina (Liverpool/ENG).
Defenders: Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid), Carlos Marchena (Valencia), Juanito (Real Betis), Pablo (Atletico Madrid), Mariano Perna (Atletico Madrid), Joan Capdevila (Villarreal), Angel Lopez (Villarreal).
Midfielders: Francesc Fabregas (Arsenal/ENG), Xavi Hernandez (Barcelona), Andres Iniesta (Barcelona), Xabi Alonso (Liverpool/ENG), David Silva (Valencia), David Albelda (Valencia), Joaquin Sanchez (Valencia).
Forwards: David Villa (Valencia), Miguel Angel Angulo (Valencia), Fernando Torres (Liverpool/ENG), Luis Garcia (Espanyol).

Tragedy looms heavy

AFP, Madrid



The death of Sevilla's Spanish international defender Antonio Puerta has cast a shadow over this weekend's La Liga action.

Puerta, 22, collapsed on the pitch during Saturday's 4-1 win over Getafe and died on Tuesday from multiple organ failure stemming from prolonged cardiac arrest.

A minute's silence at all the weekend's fixtures will commemorate the death of Puerta.

"It is a huge loss for Spanish football. He was a young man that had made his international debut and had a huge influence on those around him," said Real Madrid captain Raul.

"We have lost a team-mate and a great professional footballer."

League leaders Sevilla will face AC Milan in Friday's Super Cup final but Monday's league match against Osasuna has been postponed, as the club will face AEK Athens in the second-leg of their Champions League qualifier.

Buoyed by an opening day derby victory champions Real Madrid will go into their next match full of confidence but it does not get any easier for new coach Bernd Schuster as they head to a testing trip to in-form Villarreal on Sunday.

Villarreal have won nine league games in a row during an 18-match unbeaten run stretching back to April and started with an impressive 3-0 away win in their Champions League fixture against Empoli.

While city rivals AC Milan prepare for their hosting of Fiorentina Monday, Inter travel to Empoli knowing they can't afford another slip-up following their 1-1 draw with Udinese in their opening fixture of the season.

Udinese levelled late into the match with Roberto Mancini's men, who had been reduced to 10 players after Julio Cesar's sending-off for a deliberate handball.

Inter go into Saturday's match desperate to make amends, and have the memory of last year's 3-0 win away to Empoli as a psychological cushion.

Only six teams managed wins in last week's opening weekend and Juventus, who top the league on goals difference ahead of AC Milan, will be looking to extend their advantage.

Juve travel to Sardinian side Cagliari, who despite their tags as relegation contenders showed in last week's shock 2-0 win over Napoli that they won't go down without a fight.

Cagliari's defence however

"I'm not concerned at all," said Manchester United chief David Gill when asked if he feared a repeat of the trouble at the Olympic Stadium.

"What we need to do is do homework and work closely with UEFA and Roma."

"I'm sure lessons have been learned by UEFA and Roma from last year's incidents."

Liverpool's clash with Marseille will see them meet up with former striker Djibril Cisse and midfielder Bolo Zenden who left Anfield in the summer.

"It's clear when you look at some of the other groups that ours could have been easier," said Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez.

"Porto have good experience in the Champions League and have enjoyed a good record over recent seasons."

"Marseille are a good side in the French league and they will know a lot about us which could make it more difficult."

"And you always know when you go to Turkey that it will be hard because of the travelling involved and the wonderful support they give their teams over there."

Liverpool have happy memories of Istanbul having won the title there in 2005 with their famous come-from-behind win over AC Milan.

Rangers have a tough assignment in Group E where 2006 champions Barcelona, French champions Lyon and German champions Stuttgart await.

Andrew Dickson, Rangers' head of football administration, said: "It's not particularly easy but it's wonderful to be there. I don't think it could be any tougher but it was always going to be hard."

Arsenal, the beaten finalists in 2006, have never met any of their Group H opponents before and must wait for Sevilla and AEK to complete their qualifying tie, the second leg of which was postponed this week because of the death of Sevilla defender Antonio Puerta.

"The Champions League is a very challenging competition, you might not have heard of some of the teams but they give you tough matches," said Arsenal managing director Keith Edelman.

Celtic were knocked out of the tournament last season by AC Milan losing 1-0 on aggregate in a tight second round tie.

Celtic chairman Brian Quinn said: "It's of paramount importance that we are in the Champions League. It gives the fans the feeling they belong in the top level."

Chelsea beat Valencia last season with a late winner from Michael Essien in the Spanish city before the Londoners went out in the semi-finals to Liverpool.

"We have been semi-finalists three times in the last four years," said chief executive Peter Kenyon. "It is the elusive competition for us when you look at our record. But there is a big determination fuelled by a squad we have strengthened."

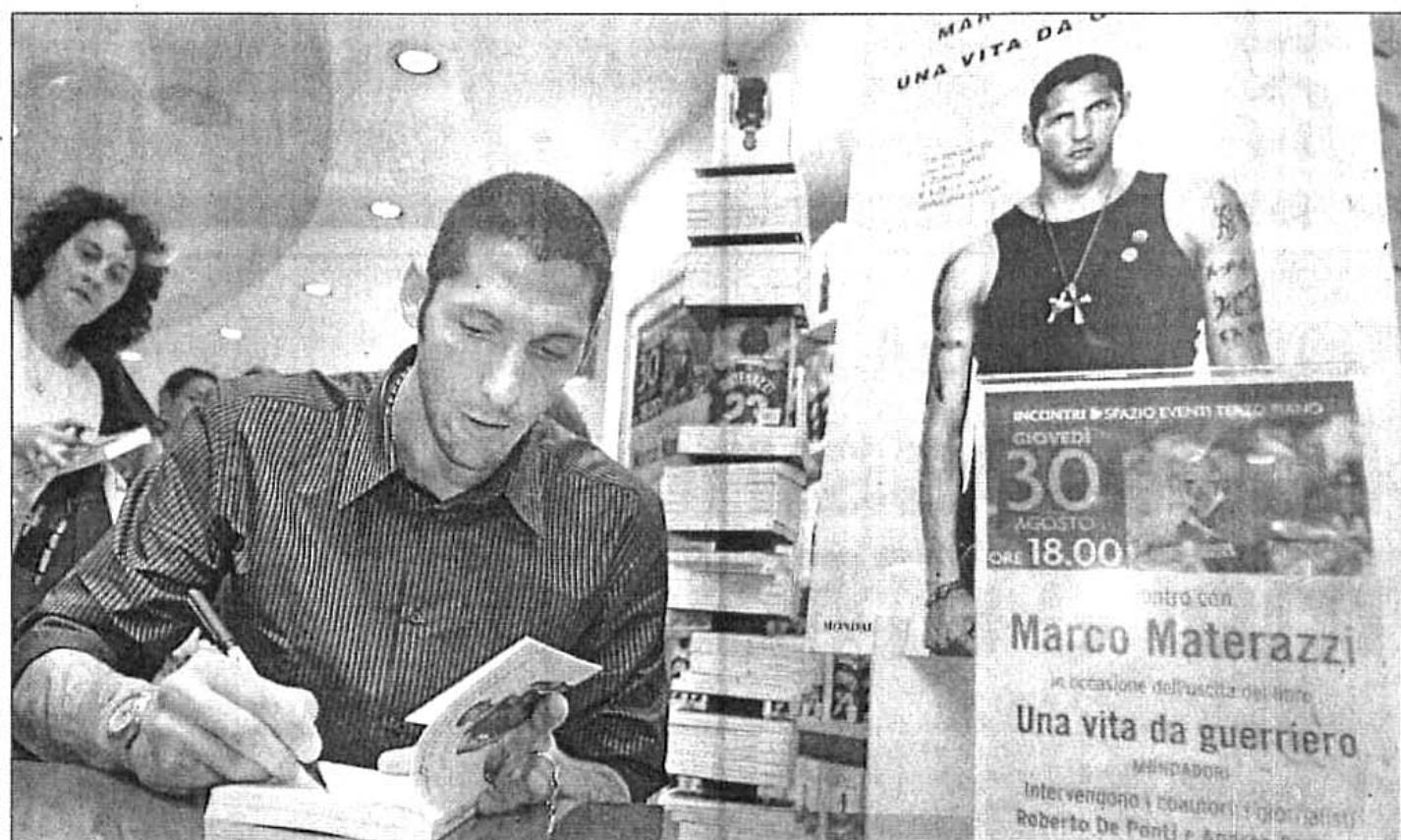


PHOTO AFP

Italy defender Marco Materazzi signs a copy of his autobiography entitled "Una vita da guerriero" (A life as a warrior) for fans at the end of a press conference to present the book at a store in Milan on Thursday.

Becks missing, Bentley in

AFP, London

England manager Steve McClaren on Friday named his 26-man squad for the Euro 2008 qualifiers against Israel on September 8 and Russia on September 12.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Paul Robinson (Tottenham), David James (Preston), Scott Carson (Liverpool, on loan at Aston Villa).
Defenders: Micah Richards (Manchester City), Wes Brown (Manchester United), Rio Ferdinand (Manchester United), John Terry (Chelsea), Ashley Cole (Chelsea), Sol Campbell (Portsmouth), Phil Neville (Everton), Nicky Shorey (Reading).
Midfielders: David Bentley (Blackburn), Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Frank Lampard (Chelsea), Joe Cole (Chelsea), Shaun Wright-Phillips (Chelsea), Michael Carrick (Manchester United), Gareth Barry (Aston Villa), Stewart Downing (Middlesbrough), Owen Hargreaves (Manchester United), Ashley Young (Aston Villa).
Strikers: Alan Smith (Newcastle), Michael Owen (Newcastle), Peter Crouch (Liverpool), Andrew Johnson (Everton), Jermain Defoe (Tottenham).

Valencia also need to regroup after a 3-0 home mauling by Villarreal last weekend.

Spanish internationals David Villa and Joaquin were sent off and will miss Sunday's trip to promoted Almeria.

"We have to be realistic and admit it was a bad performance. But we will go out and try to forget the last match and start again," explained Valencia coach Quique Flores.

Almeria crushed fallen giants Deportivo La Coruna 3-0 on their return to the top-flight.

Six week layoff for Beckham

AFP, Los Angeles

David Beckham suffered a sprained medial collateral ligament in his right knee and will be sidelined for six weeks, meaning he will miss England's two September Euro 2008 qualifying matches.

ESPN reported that Beckham underwent an MRI Thursday that showed the full extent of the damage, which would keep Beckham out of England's home matches September 8 against Israel and September 12 against Russia.

The injury could mean the loss of Beckham for the remainder of the Los Angeles Galaxy's Major League Soccer season as well.

The star midfielder, already hurting with a nagging ankle injury, suffered the knee injury Wednesday in the 30th minute of the Superliga final against Pachuca, a title match the Mexican club won 4-3 on penalties.

Should Beckham heal in the expected time span, he could be back on the field in time for England's October 13 Euro 2008 qualifier against Estonia.

That is also the date for a Galaxy home game against Toronto. The club will host New York five days later and play a season-ending October 21 at Chicago.

But the Galaxy, already a Major League Soccer worst 3-10 with five draws, are 13 points behind Colorado for the last Western Conference playoff berth and unlikely to gain ground without Beckham in the line up.

Should the Galaxy be eliminated from the playoff chase before Beckham could possibly return, he might be shelved from making what would largely be a ceremonial week's comeback with hopes of a healthy, fresh MLS start next year.

Beckham left Real Madrid for a contract worth a potential 250 million dollars and has provided a marketing boost for a US league in need of something to lure supporters.

Fans in cities around the 13-team league bought tickets with the expectation of seeing the celebrity husband of "Posh Spice" Victoria Beckham and most will now be denied even that.

Materazzi admits mistake

AFP, Rome

Italy's World Cup winning defender Marco Materazzi said Thursday he had made a mistake in sledging French icon Zinedine Zidane during last year's final.

Materazzi told Zidane that he preferred his "whore of a sister" to his shirt.

It was this comment that led to Zidane head butting the Inter Milan defender in the chest and being dramatically sent off. That incident preceded France losing the final in a penalty shoot-out.

"Six stupid words. I made a mistake but Zidane also made a mistake in reacting the way he did," said the uncompromising Materazzi, who scored in the final

and one of the penalties in the shoot-out.

Materazzi was talking at the launch of his book "Life of a warrior", co-written with two Italian journalists, and released just before the Italians face France in Milan in a Euro 2008 qualifier on September 8.

The French won the first match 3-1, but Materazzi will miss the re-match after picking up a thigh injury in a friendly win over Hungary earlier this month.

"I understand why he reacted that way," added Materazzi. "It all happened in a match of high pressure. But I don't understand what came after when he was forgiven by everyone except me who had been head butted."

"If we made peace, no-one would know about it, we would do it in private perhaps at my house or

his. That's why I didn't want to say anything publicly. I left the talking to others but only him and me know what happened."

Materazzi, who has undergone surgery on his injured thigh, believes he could be back in action in October.

Although he will miss the match with France in Milan, he appealed to fans to act peacefully in the return leg.

"I want spectators to greet the French team in the same way that we were welcomed by French fans in Paris. They were very fair. I ask the tifosi to do the same."

Materazzi also has his own thoughts on the one-match suspension handed out to France coach Raymond Domenech for that game.

"It's 19 years to the day that my mother died," he said. "Somethings are more important."

Loew welcomes back stars

AFP, Berlin

Germany's head coach Joachim Loew said Friday he is delighted to welcome back several key players including hot-shot striker Miroslav Klose for the Euro 2008 qualifier against Wales in Cardiff.

Klose, the top scorer at last year's World Cup, was one of several key players missing from Germany's 2-1 win over England at Wembley on August 22 after he strained knee ligaments.

The Bayern Munich sharpshooter is back in the 22-man squad for the Group D qualifier on September 8 at the Millennium Stadium and the friendly against Romania in Cologne on September 12.

Loew is still without several first-choice players such as Chelsea's Michael Ballack and Bremen's Torsten Frings, but has welcomed back four Bayern Munich stars - Bastian Schweinsteiger, Lukas Podolski and Marcel Jansen, plus Klose.

"It is very pleasing to have so many of our first-choice players back for such an important match against Wales," said Loew.

And there is also a place for Germany's player of the year Mario Gomez after the 22-year-old striker shook off the leg injury which had restricted his Bundesliga appearances this season.

Bayern Munich Philipp Lahm is expected to captain the side with Bayer Leverkusen's Bernd Schneider serving a one-match suspension for the Cardiff match.

Three goalkeepers have been included with first-choice keeper Jens Lehmann of Arsenal battling to shake off an Achilles tendon injury and Valencia's Timo Hildebrand could be promoted with Hanover's Robert Enke on the bench.

Germany lead Group D by five points, with Wales in fifth place and the Germans are odds-on favourites to reach the European Championships in Austria and Switzerland next summer.

But the Welsh showed some spark in their 1-0 win friendly win

in Bulgaria with Wolverhampton Wanderers striker Freddy Eastwood scoring the winning goal on his debut.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Timo Hildebrand (Valencia/ESP), Jens Lehmann (Arsenal/ENG), Robert Enke (Hanover).
Defenders: Gonzalo Castro (Bayer Leverkusen), Arne Friedrich (Hertha Berlin), Manuel Friedrich (Bayer Leverkusen), Marcel Jansen (Bayern Munich), Philipp Lahm (Bayern Munich), Per Mertesacker (Werder Bremen), Christoph Metzelder (Real Madrid/ESP), Christian Pander (Schalke 04), Serdar Tasci (VfB Stuttgart).
Midfielders: Robert Hilbert (VfB Stuttgart), Thomas Hitzlsperger (VfB Stuttgart), Simon Rolfes (Bayer Leverkusen), Piotr Trochowski (Hamburg), Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern Munich).
Forwards: Mario Gomez (VfB Stuttgart), Patrick Helmes (Cologne), Miroslav Klose (Bayern Munich), Kevin Kuranyi (Schalke 04), Lukas Podolski (Bayern Munich).

MU brace for Keane

AFP, London



Roy Keane will be given a hero's welcome when he returns to Manchester United on Saturday, but the Sunderland manager knows he will get no favours from his former teammates.

Keane captained United as they became the Premier League's dominant force in the 1990s and his ferocious will-to-win made him an idol for United supporters.

But the Irish midfielder, who left United in 2005 after falling out with Sir Alex Ferguson, is only too well aware that his side could face a rough ride.

Ferguson's champions have made a stuttering start to the campaign, but finally picked up their first win against Spurs last Sunday, so victory over promoted Sunderland is essential.

"I'm not expecting any hugs and kisses," Keane said. "Alex Ferguson will want to beat me and Sunderland as much as anyone else."

"They will be going at us from the first minute, trying to get points. There won't be a red carpet rolled out for me."

"People say you have to keep it tight in the first 20 minutes in games like these. Try the first 90 minutes, although it might be more if we go by Alex Ferguson's stopwatch."

United's main problem has

been a lack of goals. They have scored just twice in four games and the absence of Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo will give Keane hope of getting a positive result.

But United defender Nemanja Vidic believes the rest of the team have to share the burden in the absence of the two attacking stars.

"Yes, we have dropped points early but it is a long season and there are still a lot of matches to be played," Vidic said.

"Obviously, losing Cristiano and Wayne was not ideal but we are strong enough to cope."

Chelsea spent much of last season trying to hang onto United's coat tails, but they are back on top of the table as they prepare for Sunday's trip to Aston Villa.

Jose Mourinho's side are already five points ahead of United. They have made winning without being at their best into an art form and it would be no surprise to see a similar story at Villa Park.

Liverpool are likely to be without captain Steven Gerrard as they look to continue their unbeaten start against Derby.

Gerrard is struggling with the broken toe suffered against Toulouse two weeks ago and manager Rafa Benitez doesn't want to risk his most influential player at such an early stage of the season.

"I have spoken to Steven and the news is not very positive," said Benitez. "The doctor will continue to help him. But it will be very

difficult for him to play on Saturday."

If Liverpool are to fulfill their undoubted potential and make a serious title challenge, this is exactly the kind of game they must win.

Billy Davies's Rams have looked out of their depth following promotion last season and will arrive at Anfield still to win this season.

Arsenal striker Eduard is convinced his new team's spirit can help them defy the critics.

Arsene Wenger's men, who host Portsmouth on Sunday, have been written off as also-rans after the departure of Thierry Henry.

But Croatian Eduardo, who scored his first goal for the Gunners in their win over Sparta Prague on Wednesday, said: "You can see how the team are united. They knew it was my first goal and were all there to celebrate with me."

"I left a big mark in Croatia and I'm confident I can leave a big mark at Arsenal."

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated)
Saturday
 Bolton v Everton, Fulham v Tottenham, Toulouse v Derby, Manchester Utd v Sunderland (1615GMT), Middlesbrough v Birmingham, Newcastle v Wigan, Reading v West Ham.
Sunday
 Arsenal v Portsmouth (1230GMT), Aston Villa v Chelsea (1500GMT), Blackburn v Manchester City (1400GMT).