



Liverpool footballers Pepe Reina (L) and Fernando Torres take part in a training session at their Melwood training ground on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Crunch time for Chelsea

AFP, Paris

Chelsea's under-fire new manager Avram Grant will face his first European test Wednesday away to Valencia who are keen to avenge last season's quarter-final loss in the European Champions League.

There has been a chorus of protest since Grant took over from Jose Mourinho which grew louder after his first home match resulted in a 0-0 stalemate against Fulham on Saturday when the Chelsea players were booed off the pitch.

Grant will travel to Europe for the first time as Chelsea manager for the Group A match, probably without captain John Terry, who fractured his cheek against Fulham, and striker Didier Drogba who was sent off in the same match.

Chelsea are languishing in eighth place in the English Premiership, eight points away from leaders Arsenal.

However Valencia come into Wednesday's match after their 1-0 win over Recreativo Huelva on Sunday, their fifth victory in a row, and one point behind leaders Real

Madrid.

David Villa, who scored Valencia's winner on Sunday, admitted revenge for last season's painful quarter-final defeat, when Chelsea scored a late winner, was on their minds.

"We want to do well against Chelsea because of what happened last season," said Villa. "We are playing well and continue to win matches - hopefully nothing changes against Chelsea."

The Spanish side started their European Champions League campaign with a solid 1-0 away victory against Schalke 04 while Chelsea were disappointing with a 1-1 home draw with Rosenborg.

It will also be the first European match for new Marseille manager, Belgian Eric Gerets, who faces a tough Group A match away to last year's Champions League finalists Liverpool.

Gerets last week replaced Albert Emon who was sacked after Marseille's disastrous start to the French league season -- they are currently 16th with one win from nine games.

Liverpool, fourth in the English Premier League after a 1-0 win over Wigan, will be looking to notch up their first European win after a 1-1 away draw with FC Porto when they

were reduced to 10 men just eight minutes into the second half.

Marseille started their European campaign with a 2-0 win over Turkish side Besiktas, their first home win in any league this season.

But Liverpool's Rafael Benitez will be hoping his team can continue the impressive home form which helped them reach last season's final in Athens where they lost 2-1 to AC Milan.

They lost only one game in front of their own supporters in the first knockout round against Barcelona (1-0) after winning the away leg (2-1).

Celtics' hopes of upsetting last year's Champion League winners AC Milan at Celtic Park, in a Group D Champions League match, received a blow on Saturday when Dutch international striker Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink suffered a hamstring injury.

However Celtic manager Gordon Strachan is hoping their Japanese star Shunsuke Nakamura, who has missed their last three games with a ligament injury to his left knee, may still make it.

Celtic come into the game after moving to the top of the Scottish Premier League on Saturday with a 3-0 at home win over Dundee United.

They will be looking to avenge last season's defeat in the first knockout round by the Italian giants whom they are yet to beat after six meetings.

Celtic lost their first Champions League match away to Ukrainian side Shakhtar 2-0.

In other matches, Spanish league leaders Real Madrid are away to Lazio, Besiktas host Porto, Olympiakos travel to Werder Bremen, Benfica host Shakhtar and Rosenborg entertain Schalke 04.

FIXTURES

AFP, Paris

European Champions League fixtures on Wednesday:
Group A: Liverpool (ENG) v Marseille (FRA)
Besiktas (TUR) v FC Porto (POR)
Group B: Valencia (ESP) v Chelsea (ENG)
Rosenborg (NOR) v Schalke 04 (GER)
Group C: Lazio (ITA) v Real Madrid (ESP)
Werder Bremen (GER) v Olympiakos (GRE)
Group D: Celtic (SCO) v AC Milan (ITA)
Benfica (POR) v Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)

Gerrard in road accident

THE GUARDIAN

Steven Gerrard was involved in a traffic collision yesterday which left a 10-year-old boy with a suspected broken leg, his spokesman said.

The car was travelling along Grantham Road in Birkdale, Merseyside, when the incident happened at 3.15pm and the Liverpool captain's spokesman said: "Steven was driving very slowly through an area of Birkdale when a young boy ran out and hit the side of his car. Steven comforted the boy until the paramedics arrived."

"Steven later attended a police station where he produced his driving documents as a matter of routine and made a statement about the accident. He was distressed over the accident and has been in contact with the boy's family to check his progress and plans to visit him in the next couple of days."

Five weeks out for Kahn

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich captain and goalkeeper Oliver Kahn will be out for the next five weeks after having an operation on Tuesday to repair an elbow injury.

The 38-year-old former German captain missed last Saturday's 1-0 Bundesliga win over Bayer Leverkusen and former Germany under-21 keeper Michael Rensing, 23, will continue to deputise in his absence for the league leaders.

Kahn, who is set to retire from the Bundesliga at the end of the month, will miss all of Bayern's October fixtures including Thursday's UEFA Cup first-round, second-leg trip to Belenenses in Lisbon.

"We will be without Oliver for the next five weeks," Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld told German tabloid Bild with his side four points clear at the top of the table.

"It's not so bad," said Kahn himself, "because of the international break coming up, I won't miss too many games."

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FA move to protect Ref

AFP, London

The English Football Association (FA) is to launch a campaign aimed at getting players to be more respectful of referees.

The move follows growing alarm at the level of abuse that is being directed at officials which in turn results in fewer people being prepared to put up with the behaviour.

The FA chief executive Brian Barwick acknowledges the issue affects the highest levels of the game as much as the lowest and he believes methods introduced at grass-roots can have a huge impact.

The three main components of the pilot scheme to be launched in nine regions from next January are:

- Only the team captain will be allowed to speak with the referee.
- Roped-off areas will be introduced at junior matches so 'over-indulgent or abusive' parents cannot direct their bile at the referee.

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Real plan for Bali

AFP, Jakarta

Real Madrid plan to open a soccer academy on the Indonesian resort island of Bali, a spokesman for the national sports council said Tuesday.

Their CEO came to visit yesterday (Monday) and told us about their intention to build their soccer academy in Bali later this year," Atal Depari told AFP.

He was referring to Real Madrid's local venture, Realino Sports Indonesia, whose boss Jose Eduardo Nadal told the council that the academy would be Real Madrid's second overseas development. The first is in Mexico.

"When I asked, 'Why Bali?', he said that Indonesia had a vast population and an equally vast pool of sports talent," Depari said.

The academy will accept about 220 students between nine and 18 years of age, and train them for 10 months, he said, adding that the admissions process would begin in December.

Depari said that recruitments would initially be only from among Indonesians but gradually the school would open its doors to foreigners as well.

The state Antara news agency quoted Nadal as saying that tuition would cost 20,000 dollars per student for the 10 months. Top students would be sent to train and play with Real Madrid, he said.

L'pool lacking firepower

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool have not found goals as easy to come by this season as might have been expected from a squad boasting a strike quartet collectively valued at more than 60 million pounds.

Rafael Benitez's squad will however go into Wednesday's Champions League clash with crisis-hit Marseille bolstered by the knowledge that their defensive form is currently as good as at any time in the club's illustrious history.

Jose Reina has yet to concede a goal in open play this season and a first Premier League clean sheet at Wigan on Saturday ensured the class of 2007 have equalled a 30-year-old club record for the best defensive start to the season.

Reina's form has been key to that run but the Spanish goal-

keeper insists it is the way Liverpool defend through the team that means their former striker Djibril Cisse is likely to find life difficult when he returns to Anfield with his new teammates.

"We're proud of the record but we all defend together so it's everyone's record," Reina said.

"We have only conceded from penalties so far, which is important. It is something we can be proud of but we must keep working in that way."

He added: "We know that to win the most important thing is to keep clean sheets. Then we have possibilities to score with the quality of players we have here."

Liverpool's cause has probably been helped by the turmoil at Marseille, who last week sacked Albert Emon and installed former Belgium defender Eric Gerets as their new coach.

Emon paid the price for the club's disastrous domestic form. Marseille have won just once in

nine league matches this season and are currently hovering just above the relegation zone in France's top division.

Among those hoping to exploit the disarray in the French side's ranks will be Yossi Benayoun, who has demonstrated why Benitez snapped him up from West Ham in the summer with two goals in his last two appearances, including the winner at Wigan at the weekend.

The Israeli playmaker appears to have been ear-marked by Benitez as the kind of player who can provide the extra guile required unlocking defences in cagey European clashes, but he will not be banging on Benitez's door demanding a starting place against Marseille.

"I can't say I deserve to play in this game or this game, because we have a lot of great players," Benayoun said. "For me the most important thing when I'm on the pitch, whether it's for 10 minutes or

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FOUR-ALL AT WHITE HART LANE

Spurs save Jol's neck

AFP, London



Robbie Keane claimed a Spurs fight back to earn a 4-4 draw with Aston Villa

had felt as good as a win after a night in which manager Martin Jol came within half an hour of the sack.

That is how long there was to play when Villa opened up a 4-1 lead but a Pascal Chimbonda strike and a Keane penalty set the stage for Younes Kaboul to snatch an 92nd-minute equaliser and a point that may come to be regarded as a turning point in Tottenham's season.

"To come back from 4-1 down is unbelievable," Keane said after an unbelievable night of drama at

White Hart Lane on the club's 125th birthday.

"You talk about dead and buried but we showed lots of character. That's what we have in this team. When you're 4-1 down, you go hell for leather. It does feel like a sort of victory to us in many ways."

The players celebrated Kaboul's equaliser by sprinting to embrace Jol, who had looked distinctly like a condemned man when Villa's fourth goal, a Craig Gardner free-kick, went in the 59th minute.

"You should have seen him (Jol) at the end when we scored the goal," Keane added. "He had the support from everyone. He's shown what a good manager he is over the past couple of years."

Jol showed the strain of the evening when he admitted: "I don't know what to feel."

"It was awful but on the other

hand it was a big celebration at the end. We almost spoiled the night and it was a great night."

"But we came back from the death and that was a big positive but I don't think I've ever been involved in a game like this. We could have won it at the end."

Jol admitted that thoughts that this might be his last game in charge had crossed his mind but claimed: "I thought about my future for the last six weeks so that's nothing new."

Asked if he felt he was safe for the time being, he added: "I don't know. It's not up to me."

Jol must have thought he was in for a more relaxing evening than he finally endured when a bright start was capped by Dimitar Berbatov heading the home side ahead from a 20th-minute corner.

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PHOTO: AFP

An over-the-moon Younes Kaboul (L) is chased by ecstatic Tottenham teammate Didier Zokora (C) after he scored a last-gasp goal to secure a 4-4 draw in their Premiership match against Aston Villa at White Hart Lane on Monday.

Messi rising unabated

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Argentine striker Lionel Messi continues to stun Spanish football audiences unabated with the 20-year-old international scoring five goals in just six league matches so far this season.

His success has won him comparisons to former Argentine football legend Diego Maradona and sparked talk that he could be a contender for a place on the podium at the forthcoming FIFA World Player of the Year awards.

Spanish media, sports fans and Messi's teammates and rivals have all heaped praise on the player whose nickname is "the flea" because of his shortness.

"Messi is in a state of grace. There are few other players in Europe with his form," said Sevilla coach Juande Ramos whose side was defeated 2-1 by Barcelona this season with both goals coming from the Catalan club's star.

Messi scored twice within six minutes during his side's 4-1 thrashing of Real Zaragoza.

"He is probably the best player in the world because he is not just happy to destabilize you with his dribbling, he scores as well," said Zaragoza coach Victor Fernandez.

Messi's rise to superstardom has been meteoric. He made his first team league debut for Barcelona in October 2004, when he was the third youngest player ever to appear in the club's famous blue and claret jersey.

Later that season, while still only 17, he became the youngest player for the Catalan club to score in a league match.

He followed up these prodigious feats with an outstanding display at the under-20 World Cup in the summer of 2005 where he was voted the best player of the tournament.

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard made a deliberate play of not over-using the youngster in the following season but he still notched up six goals in 17 appearances, many of them coming off the substitute's bench.

Last season the upward trajectory continued with 14 goals in 26 appearances despite four months on the sidelines due to injury. One of his goals scored against

Getafe in the Spanish Cup was widely regarded to be amongst the best of last season anywhere in the world.

His effort from the halfway line, going past a myriad of defenders before slotting the ball home, has elicited comparisons to Maradona's famous strike at the 1986 World Cup against England.

In a contemporary test of popularity a video of the goal on the video-sharing Internet site YouTube has been one of the most viewed sporting features in recent months.

"I do not know whether or not I am the best in the world. I am working away as normal and feel good and I am pleased with the way things have been going," said Messi.

The striker has benefited from out-of-sorts Ronaldinho and the injury-induced absence of Cameroon Samuel Eto'o and French international Thierry Henry still finding his feet in his new team.

"He is currently playing at a very high level," said Rijkaard not wishing to inflate the player's ego although the player has not shown any inclination of getting big-headed about his talent.

Mask on for Terry

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea captain John Terry could play in his side's Champions League Group clash at Valencia tomorrow night with 'very small risk' to his fractured cheekbone after club doctor Bryan English arranged for him to have a protective face mask moulded.

Terry, who sustained the injury in a clash with Fulham's Clint Dempsey on Saturday and had surgery the following day, originally looked to have no chance of making the Group B clash, but English has expressed cautious optimism about the Blues skipper's participation.

He told Chelsea TV: 'In sport, if you get a fractured cheekbone behind a certain point you can play on.'

'The chance of getting another blow on the same point is minimal so it is a very small risk.'

'The reason John came off at half-time, after discussion, is that if there was another blow (in the Fulham match) it might make surgery more complex and with Valencia coming up, the decision was taken to take him off.'

'He couldn't train on Monday because we had to get a protective mask moulded,' English explained.

'The reason for getting it done as soon as possible is so he can be back playing. I don't know when that is going to be, but the mask needs to fit properly or another blow will just knock that piece of bone back.'

'The mask will be taken on the plane with us whether he is going to play or not.'

There was other good news for under-pressure manager Avram Grant, with a handful of the club's other injury doubts also receiving good news.

Winger Shaun Wright-Phillips and Michael Essien both suffered leg complaints in the Carling Cup win at Hull last week, while England midfielder Frank Lampard is still recovering from

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Celtic face Milan test

AFP, Glasgow



Celtic will have to do it the hard way as they try to get their Champions League campaign back on track against AC Milan on Wednesday.

Gordon Strachan's side desperately need a victory over the European champions at Parkhead after losing their opening Group D fixture against Shakhtar Donetsk.

It might be premature to call the second game of the group stage a make or break clash, but the Scottish champions have such a

bad record on their travels in the Champions League that, with visits to Milan and Benfica to come, a defeat on Wednesday would leave them clinging to the slenderest hope of reaching the knockout stages.

With so much at stake, Strachan must be cursing the injuries that threaten to deprive him of two key players.

Japan midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura has missed the last three matches with a knee problem and is doubtful, while Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink limped off with a hamstring injury against Dundee United on Saturday.

If Vennegoor of Hesselink is

sidelined, Chris Killen will come in to partner Scott McDonald, scorer of hat-trick in the weekend win over United.

The Australian concedes Celtic's hopes of qualifying will suffer a major blow if they fail to beat Milan.

"It would be hard to come back from not winning, but there would still be four games left and it would depend on what the other results were," he said.

Milan eliminated Celtic en route to winning the tournament for a seventh time last season. That first knockout round triumph was achieved by the narrowest of margins.

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PHOTO: AFP

German World Cup winners Birgit Prinz (L) and Kerstin Stegemann pose with the trophy on the balcony of Frankfurt's City Hall on Monday where the team was welcomed after their triumph. Scores of supporters welcomed the team back home after it won the title defeating Brazil 2-0.