



Real Madrid's Brazilian forwards Robinho (R) and Baptista chat as they jog during a training session in Madrid on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Milan, L'pool in crisis

AFP, Paris



Last season's finalists AC Milan and Liverpool face disturbing crises ahead of the third round of Champions League group phase matches on Wednesday.

Champions Milan have hit a worryingly poor spell of home form in their domestic league, losing once and drawing three times in their four games so far this season at the San Siro.

Their only saving grace was a 2-1 victory over Benfica in their opening Champions League match last month.

And with a home match against Ukraine champions Shakhtar Donetsk looming, the pressure is on Carlo Ancelotti's side, particularly as they trail Wednesday's opponents by three points in the group D table.

Vice-president Adriano Galliani admitted that AC Milan were in crisis following the 1-0 home defeat to Empoli at the weekend that has left them 11th in the table and 10 points behind champions and city rivals Inter.

"To say 'chaos' (Italian newspaper headline) is incorrect," said

Galliani. "I think crisis is more accurate."

"It's a very difficult time but we are not going to dramatise it. We will get back on track as we always do."

"The players are not to blame. They are doing their best just the same as when they are winning but we will need to do what is necessary so this situation changes."

Liverpool's problems are entirely confined to the Champions League group A where they have picked up only one point from their two games.

A draw in Porto was followed up by an embarrassing 1-0 home defeat to Marseille, leaving Liverpool with a must-win game at Benfica in Istanbul to salvage their hopes of staying in the competition.

And the mood in the camp hasn't been helped by a rift between coach Rafael Benitez and captain Steven Gerrard.

Benitez hauled Gerrard off during Saturday's 2-1 Merseyside derby victory over Everton, a move that clearly angered the England midfielder, although Benitez claims the pair have made up.

"When you are a manager you need to make decisions, not just

think about them," he said.

"You must think how you can win the game. Every player is the same for me when you are trying to win a game."

"We have talked because every player would be disappointed, especially Gerrard because it was a derby. He wanted to score the winning goal, but he is okay."

"After some time he'll understand that it was an idea and I was thinking about the best for the team."

"You know when you change a player he must show that he wants to play, but I think he was okay at the end."

In Madrid, Real will be hoping to bounce back from their first

defeat of the season, at Espanyol on Saturday, with a victory over Olympiakos in group C.

Despite topping the Spanish table and trailing Olympiakos at the top of their Champions League group only on goal difference, Real have come in for a lot of criticism this season, something veteran right-back Michel Salgado insists is unfair.

"There's been a lot of talk that Madrid have not been very convincing this season and everybody seems to have been worried about the change of coach in the summer and that the team is playing one way rather than another."

"But I don't think we are doing that badly," said Salgado.

In the same group both Werder Bremen and Lazio are in trouble having picked up nought and two points respectively in their opening two games. They meet in Germany knowing that a defeat for either will render their qualification task almost impossible.

In group B Valencia will be looking to bounce back from their home loss to Chelsea last time out as they travel to Norwegians Rosenborg, while the Londoners will be looking to stretch their lead at the top as they host Germans Schalke.

FIXTURES

GROUP A
Besiktas v Liverpool
Marseille v Porto
GROUP B
Rosenborg v Valencia
Chelsea v Schalke
GROUP C
Werder Bremen v Lazio
Real Madrid v Olympiakos
GROUP D
Benfica v Celtic
AC Milan v Shakhtar Donetsk

Platini gets Euro support

AFP, Paris

The presidents of the major European leagues, who met in Paris on Monday, have agreed in principle to the Champions League reforms proposed by UEFA president Michel Platini, but have asked for some time before their implementation.

The bosses of the English, Italian, Spanish, German, French and Portuguese leagues agreed to Platini's wishes to cut the number of clubs from any individual country to no more than three, and also to the inclusion of cup winners in the competition. The French football federation (FFF) said in a statement that the federations "support the principle of opening up the Champions League to an increased number of national champions, a principle which forms the basis of the reforms desired by Michel Platini."

"We share the desire expressed by the UEFA president to re-evaluate the national cups and open up a direct route for their winners into the Champions League."

However, the six federations asked UEFA for a reasonable delay before implementing the changes so they could have time to reflect and drum up support from across the continent.

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Low's contract extended

AFP, Frankfurt

Germany is set to extend the contract of coach Joachim Low, president of German Football federation, Theo Zwanzinger, said Tuesday.

"On the major questions we have reached an agreement with Joachim, but that has not been formalised yet. Before it becomes official we have to answer certain questions raised by him," Zwanzinger told the German sports news agency SID.

Low, whose contract expires after Euro 2008, is expected to prolong his time as national coach to 2010, the year of the next World Cup.

Former assistant to Jurgen Klinsmann from 2004 to 2006, Low, 47, took over as coach after the 2006 World Cup and under his direction the German side was the first nation to qualify for Euro 2008, winning 12 of its 16 matches.

Jankulovski out for Milan

AFP, Rome

AC Milan were hit with a blow ahead of their crunch Champions League clash against Ukraine champions Shakhtar Donetsk as left-back Marek Jankulovski was ruled out.

The Czech player injured his knee in the dismal home defeat to Empoli on Saturday and Milan said Monday that he would not be fit for Wednesday.

Milan face a crisis having picked up only three points from four Serie A home games this season, leaving them trailing leaders Inter Milan by 10 points in the title race.

They also lost their last Champions League clash 2-1 at Celtic, after which goalkeeper Dida was hit with a one-match suspension for feigning injury.

Chelsea look beyond win

AFP, London



Avram Grant has a chance to show Roman Abramovich that Chelsea's style makeover is well underway when his side face Schalke 04 in the Champions League on Wednesday.

Winning was everything when Jose Mourinho ruled the roost at Chelsea, but the London club's success now has to come with sprinkling of stardust and Grant is doing his best to live up to Abramovich's expectations.

Chelsea's Russian owner fell in love with football after watching Manchester United beat Real Madrid 4-3 at Old Trafford in 2003 and that night of Champions League drama had a profound affect on what he expects from his own team.

While the majority of Chelsea fans were more than happy to tolerate Mourinho's no-frills approach if it meant they could savour league and cup success, Abramovich had other ideas.

Not entirely unreasonably, he

wanted a taste of fantasy football for his multi-million pound investment and when Mourinho was unable, or even unwilling, to supply it, he was living on borrowed time.

Abramovich installed Grant as Mourinho's replacement last month and it seems a gentle reminder of the owner's preferences has sunk in. Ever since taking over, the Israeli coach has repeatedly emphasised the need to entertain as well as win.

After several weeks when the club appeared on the verge of imploding, Grant has managed to steady the ship and Chelsea have won their last three matches.

With results back on track and Dutch coach Henk ten Cate settling in as Grant's assistant, the change in philosophy can now be more easily implemented.

So Wednesday's Group B clash against organised but mediocre German opposition offers an opportunity to put on a show.

Ten Cate helped coach a fabulously entertaining Barcelona team to Champions League glory in 2006 and he makes no secret of the blueprint for bringing similar stylish

success to west London.

"I think this change in attitude is huge," he told Chelsea's website. "It is bigger than everyone imagines."

"You enter the field with it in the back of your mind that today we are not going to lose, or you enter and you say I am going to win today. And we have to work on that."

"It will cost a lot of energy and effort working on the training ground, trying to convince the players there is also another way of playing football that is fun to do and which pleases the crowd."

"I think you can play a certain way of football that is very similar to Barcelona but you need the players for that and Chelsea doesn't have (Andres) Iniesta, doesn't have Deco, doesn't have Xavi, which are players with a certain quality."

"But I think it is not the style of Barcelona players, it is the way they play that is attractive and with Chelsea we can play attractive football that is fun to watch, with the intention of winning the game, not with the intention of not losing the game."

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Wembley may host CL final

AFP, London

England's recently rebuilt Wembley stadium could host the European Champions League final in 2010 or 2011, the Football Association said.

And Arsenal's Emirates Stadium and Dublin's rebuilt Lansdowne Road are in the running to host the final of the second-tier competition, the UEFA Cup.

Wembley has been short listed by European football's governing body UEFA alongside four other stadiums, Berlin's Olympiastadion and the Allianz Arena in Munich and in Spain, Madrid's Bernabeu and the Metastall in Valencia.

A UEFA delegation will visit Wembley before the end of this year with a decision expected in March next year.

At the same time the Emirates Stadium and Lansdowne Road, which is undergoing a huge renovation, will compete with Arena AufSchalke in Gelsenkirchen, Espanyol's Estadi Montjuic in Barcelona, the Arena Hamburg and the National Stadium in Bucharest.

Romario interim Vasco coach

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil World Cup star Romario has taken over as temporary coach of top club Vasco da Gama after the resignation of Celso Roth, the club said.

The 41-year-old Romario, a star striker in Brazil's 1994 World Cup winning team, has not played for the club for several weeks, but on Monday started his new role by taking training.

Club president Eurico Miranda said: "He (Romario) will lead the team for this match (Wednesday against Mexican club America in the South American Cup), but I would like to say very clearly that, whatever the result, we will be looking for a new coach on Thursday."

Socceroos set Nigeria date

AFP, Sydney

Australia's Socceroos will play a friendly against Nigeria in London next month, Football Federation Australia (FFA) said Tuesday.

FFA chief executive Ben Buckley said the November 17 match at Craven Cottage, home of Premiership side Fulham, would be Australia's final warm-up before its World Cup qualifiers begin in February.

"Nigeria are the number one ranked team in Africa and will

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Mauri out of Werder clash

AFP, Rome

Lazio's Italy international midfielder Stefano Mauri hurt his left thigh in their 1-0 victory at Livorno at the weekend and will miss Wednesday's Champions League clash at Werder Bremen.

Mauri's absence is a harsh blow for Lazio as he is one of the key elements in their attacking strategy. "Tests on Monday have shown he will not be back in training just yet," said a Lazio club statement without giving further details on the length of his unavailability.

End of the road for Jol?

AFP, Newcastle



Martin Jol's Tottenham tenure looks a lot more certain to be coming to an end following his team's 3-1 loss at Newcastle on Monday night.

Sam Allardyce's side may have hammered the final nail in the Dutch manager's coffin with a dominant display and deserved victory.

Nigeria striker Obafemi Martins opened the scoring on the stroke of half-time and soon after the break Brazilian centre-back Claudio Cacapa doubled the hosts' advantage.

Robbie Keane pulled a goal back for Spurs but Newcastle were not to be denied and James Milner completed an impressive victory.

Allardyce praised his side's attacking flair.

"It's the third game on the trot we've scored three," he said on Setanta Sports 1. "Not only are we

winning but scoring three to boot, you can't ask for any more than that."

"It's great. Sometimes we have frailties, we lose possession, but we have to sacrifice that at home to break the opposition down."

"We are doing that terrifically well with the goal scoring."

The Magpies stayed eighth despite the three points but they have a game in hand on most of the teams above them and remain in contention not only for a European place but also Champions League

football next season.

Tottenham, though, are stuck in the relegation zone having won only one of their opening 10 games and chairman Daniel Levy's patience with Jol must surely be wearing thin.

But Jol remained defiant despite the increasing pressure.

"I feel we have had a pretty good spell (three successive draws), the only thing we needed was more wins. A win today and we would have been fine," he said.

"We lack a bit of leadership (in defence). Someone has to stand and pull the strings at the back. Hopefully Ledley King will be fit in a couple of weeks. He was not there and wasn't there for the last seven months so we have to get results without him."

"I'm already used to it (pressure), even before the season started. The only thing that counts is results. We're still in a good position in the cups and hopefully, on Thursday (in the UEFA Cup) we can get a result."

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Football

AFP, London

US sportswear giant Nike ventured further into the British football market on Tuesday after agreeing to buy rival Umbro, maker of the England soccer strip, for 582 million dollars (408 million euros).

The cash bid, worth 195 pence per Umbro share, values the British group at 285 million pounds, a joint statement said.

In afternoon London trade Tuesday, Umbro's share price stood at 188.75 pence, up 14.39 percent. The offer represents a premium of about 61 percent to the closing price of 120 pence per Umbro Share on October 17.

"We are fully committed to helping Umbro reach its full potential and we are delighted that Umbro's board is unanimous in its support of our offer," said Nike president and chief executive Mark Parker.

Nike, which makes football kit for the Brazil national team and English Premiership teams Manchester United and Arsenal, is purchasing a group which also provides sportswear for the Norway, Republic of Ireland and Sweden football squads.

High profile players endorsing the Umbro brand include England and Chelsea captain John Terry and his national team-mate Michael Owen.

"This is an excellent deal for all our stakeholders," Umbro chief

executive Steve Makin said of the Nike offer.

"It provides great value for shareholders and exciting prospects for our colleagues, partners and customers around the world."

Nike's offer is subject to approval by Umbro shareholders and regulatory bodies. The US group's approach already has the backing of English football's governing body, the Football Association, which has worked with Umbro for more than 20 years.

FA chief executive Brian Barwick said: "Nike has provided firm assurances that the FA relationship with Umbro will be protected and enhanced, and we look forward to working closely with both companies moving forward."

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A file photo combination shows Slovakian tennis player Daniela Hantuchova (L) wearing a pair of shorts with a Nike logo and England and Chelsea footballer John Terry (R) modelling an Umbro Performance Perfected shirt.

PHOTO: AFP



Newcastle United's Nigerian striker Martins (L) celebrates as a dejected Tottenham Hotspur goalkeeper Radek Cerny looks on during their Premiership encounter at Saint James' Park on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

SA President wants nickname changed

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

South African President Thabo Mbeki has called for the national football team to drop its Bafana Bafana (The Boys) nickname, saying it was unsuitable for the hosts of the 2010 World Cup.

With Mbeki's governing African National Congress (ANC) party wanting the Springbok rugby team to lose its nickname, the president said in a radio interview there should be a rethink about the names of all the national teams, including the women's football team Banyana Banyana (The Girls).

"What kind of a name (Bafana Bafana) is it? I don't think it is fit for a senior national team or for the

hosts of the 2010 FIFA World Cup," Mbeki told Metro FM.

"We need to revisit the names of teams like Bafana Bafana, Banyana Banyana, Amaglug-lug (the under-23 football team)."

All the national sides used to be known as the Springboks during the whites-only apartheid era which ended in 1994, but most of the teams have since adopted new monikers such as the Proteas in cricket.

The one notable exception has been the rugby team but even their name is under threat after the ANC passed a resolution at a conference earlier this year for the Springbok title and emblem to be scrapped.

Mbeki's call received support from former Bafana Bafana coach Jomo Sono who agreed the name was inappropriate and also urged a rethink on the team's strip which

has changed colour on a number of occasions since apartheid.

"I support the president 100 percent. We also need to change the colours of the team and get something close to, or similar to the Boks, which is a source of national pride and represents the country," Sono told AFP.

"Everyone knows the Springbok is an African animal, and green is our grass in the fields here. But what does Bafana Bafana mean?"

"The name came from a journalist as a nickname in an article (when South Africa was readmitted to world football) and it stuck. It was relevant then, but now we need a name that is representative of the country."

However Banyana Banyana's manager Fran Hilton Smith was cooler on the idea.

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