

Real test for Valencia

AFP, Madrid



Valencia's new coach Oscar Fernandez faces a baptism of fire in his first top flight game as his men entertain league leaders Real, and reigning Spanish champions Real Madrid on Wednesday.

Fernandez was promoted from being the Valencia reserve team coach, which plies its trade in the regional fourth tier of Spanish football, to his current position in the wake of the sacking of Quique Flores on Monday.

"We've overcome much more difficult situations even though doubts remain about how things will go. But the players know they can't afford to fall off the train," said team captain David Albeida.

Fernandez will be hoping that Valencia's Spanish international striker David Villa, who has scored 40 goals in the league in the last two seasons, will be available after missing their last two games with a sprained ankle.

He will also have to resolve who wears the gloves for Valencia as neither Timo Hildebrand nor Santiago Canizares have impressed in recent games, with Flores

switching between the two goalkeepers.

Nevertheless, despite losing two of their last three league games, Valencia still lie in fourth place and are only four points behind league leaders Real, who themselves have come in for criticism with their erratic form.

"We are on top because we deserve to be," said Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas, defending his pitch as well as on it.

"I'm not worried about our critics, win or lose there are always going to be some."

"Everyone is entitled to their opinion but there are always going to be people who enjoy when we lose and, when we win, they will say we failed to convince," added this season's safest goalkeeper in the Spanish first division.

FIXTURES

Wednesday (all kick off times in GMT)

Almeria v Real Zaragoza (1900), Real Betis v Osasuna (1900), Deportivo La Coruna v Real Mallorca (1900), Espanyol v Murcia (1900), Getafe v Athletic Bilbao (1900), Recreativo Huelva v Racing Santander (1900), Villarreal v Levante (1900), Valencia v Real Madrid (2000), Atletico Madrid v Sevilla (2100)

Thursday

Valladolid v Barcelona (2100)

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Barcelona are two points adrift of their eternal rivals after rising to second place in the wake of their controversial 2-0 win over Almeria on Sunday, which has seen the critics of coach Frank Rijkaard also start to queue up.

Thierry Henry looked to be offside prior to scoring and Lionel Messi's penalty had a whiff of being dubious earned so Rijkaard's team will have a point to prove at struggling Valladolid on Thursday.

A bid to shake up his misfiring team, the Dutch coach could be about to do what would have been unthinkable not so long ago and drop his two-time former World Player of the Year Ronaldinho.

The Brazilian has struggled to recover his form after a calf injury last month.

Trips home for international duty also appear to have taken their toll.

"I don't think being on the bench will be a problem for Ronnie.



PHOTO: AFP

Neville's comeback sees light

Football

AFP, Manchester

Gary Neville has been given a green light to make his long-awaited comeback from injury with an appearance for a second-string Manchester United side on Thursday.

The club captain has been sidelined with ankle and muscular injuries since March and his absence has allowed Wes Brown to establish himself as United's regular right-back while Manchester City's Micah Richards has displaced him as England's first-choice in his position.

Brown's fine form in an unfamiliar role makes it unlikely that, after such a long lay-off, Neville will feature in the top-of-the-table clash with Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium on Saturday.

But the 32-year-old made it

clear that he is desperate to be back in the first-team squad sooner rather than later.

"Missing the end of last season was bad enough but then for it to go into this season is doubly frustrating," he said. "Hopefully it's over now and I can get back into the team."

"I've made myself available but with the way Wes is playing it might be a case of easing me back in over the space of a couple of weeks."

Provided Neville comes through the planned outing against Stockport on Thursday, the experienced defender may return to the first-team squad when United seek the blow of learning that Paul Scholes needs a knee operation that will keep him out until February.

United are also currently without midfielder Michael Carrick and French duo Louis Saha and Patrice Evra.

he said. "It's okay for a couple of weeks but after that it's just mundane and boring. The physios try to make it as exciting as possible for you, but there's only so much excitement you can get out of a rowing machine or a bike. Most of all, I miss going out on the pitch."

"An hour and a half on the training pitch flies by, but an hour and a half in the gym can feel like three days."

"I'm seeing the lads playing well and they're getting good results and I want to be part of it."

Having Neville available again will come as a welcome boost for United boss Sir Alex Ferguson after the blow of learning that Paul Scholes needs a knee operation that will keep him out until February.

United are also currently without midfielder Michael Carrick and French duo Louis Saha and Patrice Evra.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson revealed on Friday that a first scan proved inconclusive, but a second examination on Monday has confirmed ligament damage.

A club spokesperson told

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Scholes out for three months

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United midfielder Paul Scholes will have a knee operation on Thursday that is expected to keep him out of action for three months.

Scholes, 32, sustained the injury during training ahead of his side's Champions League win over Dynamo Kiev last Tuesday and is unlikely to play again before February.

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Pele absence bemuses Platini

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

UEFA president Michel Platini

expressed surprise Monday at the absence of the legendary striker Pele from Brazil's delegation after they presented their candidacy to host the 2014 World Cup.

"How come Pele hasn't come to an event like this and isn't directly involved in the promotion of the World Cup in Brazil?" the head of European football's governing body asked Brazilian journalists.

"He is Brazilian football!"

The Brazilian journalists told

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Milan happy to hit the road

AFP, Rome

AC Milan, toiling in Serie A due to no small part to their poor home form, will be happy to hit the road on

Wednesday when they travel to Genoa to take on Sampdoria.

Sunday's 1-0 loss to Roma at the San Siro left manager Carlo Ancelotti's European champions in the unfamiliar surroundings of the bottom half of the table, just three points off the drop zone and a yawning 11 behind leaders Inter.

Ancelotti wasn't pulling any punches in his frank assessment of Milan's plight after this reverse.

"Unfortunately it's a bad moment but we have to find a solution as soon as possible. The league position isn't the best, but we have to consider that this performance wasn't bad at all," the manager said.

He added: "Now we have to

start from scratch again, already from Wednesday in Genoa against Sampdoria.

"We must not lose our enthusiasm, our calmness, we have to play like we know, that's the best way to get out of this moment."

Roma moved into second at the weekend and aim to keep up the pressure on Inter when they host 14th placed Lazio in the Rome derby.

In form striker Vucinic, who produced the decisive goal against Milan, is optimistic ahead of the Stadio Olimpico clash.

"I've already scored a hat-trick against Lazio for Lecce," the Montenegrin told SkySports Italia.

"It is a sweet memory because my brother and my father were in the stands and I dedicated my third goal to my mum, who was watching on TV."

"Roma v Lazio is a great spectacle and a great derby, but we will win and if I score I'll be over the moon."

Unbeaten Inter welcome Genoa

Lebanon last to reach second round

AF ONLINE, Goteborg

Lebanon moved into the next round of the 2010 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign when they held India to a 2-2 draw here on Tuesday.

The match was scheduled to be played in Chennai on Sunday but heavy rains in the southern Indian city forced the organisers to move the tie to Goteborg.

Going into the match with a 4-1 victory at home, Lebanon started cautiously as India, needing a three-goal win to go through, went on the offensive.

Sunil Chhetri drew first blood for India on the half hour. Substitute Mohamad Ghadhar restored parity for Lebanon from the spot in the 72nd minute as the hosts were reduced to 10 men when goalkeeper Subrata Paul was given marching order by Jordanian referee Saleh Muqhef.

Ghaddar put Lebanon ahead three minutes from time but captain Baichung Bhutia levelled the scores for India on a Steven Dias corona in the last minute.

From the 19 teams that clear the first round, the lowest eight based on ranking move on to the second round and the other 11 to round three. The five top seeds -- Australia, Korea Republic, Saudi Arabia, Japan and Iran -- join the qualification process in the third round.

The draw for the third round will take place in Durban, South Africa, on October 9.

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Spotlight on Wenger's kids

Football

AFP, Sheffield

featured regularly in the Premier League campaign, such as Brazilian World Cup-winner Gilberto Silva and Croatia forward Eduardo.

Bendtner, a Denmark international, scored in Arsenal's victory over Newcastle in the last round, and is relishing another opportunity to demonstrate his talent to

FIXTURES

Tuesday

Coventry v West Ham (1945GMT)

Wednesday

Bolton v Manchester City (2000GMT), Chelsea v Leicester (1945GMT), Liverpool v Cardiff (2000GMT), Luton v

Everton (1945GMT), Portsmouth v Blackburn (1945GMT), Sheffield United v Arsenal (1945GMT), Tottenham v

Blackpool (2000GMT)

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Kewell to make return

Football

AFP, London

string of first-choice players, including goalkeeper Jose Reina, who has branded the injury crisis threatening to overwhelm the club's season as a "pain in the backside."

The Reds number one was recovering and coming back into the side and then they get injured again, it is always difficult."

Liverpool must beat Besiktas at Anfield next week to survive in the Champions League and they cannot afford to lose any more ground to Arsenal and Manchester United in the Premier League title race.

"The injuries are a big problem," Reina admitted ahead of the visit of Cardiff, who will have former Anfield favourite Robbie Fowler at the head of their forward

"We have had far too many in the last few months. Now we have another injury to Fernando and another to Xabi - it's a pain in the backside."

"When important players are recovering and coming back into the side and then they get injured again, it is always difficult."

Liverpool are still waiting to hear how long they will be without midfielder Alonso, who has suffered a metatarsal fracture, while Torres is expected to be sidelined for three weeks with a torn adductor muscle.

The only consolation for under-pressure Reds boss Rafael Benitez was that the foot injury suffered by Javier Mascherano on Sunday was not as serious as first feared, the Argentinean having suffered only bruising rather than a fracture.

Benitez however is already

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FIFA bans Kuwait

AGENCIES, Zurich

FIFA yesterday suspended Kuwait Football Association with immediate effect from all international football activities until further notice on account of government interference in the association's affairs and for infringing its own statutes as well as for failing to comply with a decision passed by the FIFA Executive Committee.

As a result of this suspension, Kuwait are banned from any international sporting contact until any further decision taken by FIFA's competent bodies to lift such suspension.

FIFA chief Sepp Blatter said the action applies because the country's federation had twice flouted FIFA directives.

"Kuwait are suspended for twice failing to apply FIFA directives. If Kuwait do not apply these directives quickly, they will be eliminated from qualifying for the 2010 World Cup," said Blatter.

FIFA is apparently hitting out at perceived "interference" within the Kuwait football federation.

World football's ruling body also criticised the country's federation for not following a conciliatory "road map", which was drawn up by FIFA and the Asian confederation.

FIFA regard the elections for the Kuwait football federation, held on October 9, as being a "direct contradiction" of the road map.



Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (L) arrives with FIFA President Sepp Blatter to support the bid presentation of the Brazilian Football Federation (CBF) for the 2014 World Cup at the FIFA headquarters in Zurich on Tuesday. Later Brazil were announced as hosts.

PHOTO: AFP