

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 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 Albelda.

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 club off the 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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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 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 to book their place in the Champions League knockout stage by beating Dynamo Kiev at Old Trafford on November 7.

That would bring blessed relief for Neville, who has grown increasingly frustrated at his lack of action.

"The worst part about it has been going into the gym every day,"

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.



Porto's Bruno Alves (L) and Leixoes's Brazilian Roberto Ballesteros challenge for the ball during their Portuguese Super League match at the Dragao Stadium on Monday. Porto won 3-0.

PHOTO: AFP

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.

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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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 in 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 managers 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 Sky Sports 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

to the San Siro with the only other team defending an unbeaten record this campaign, third placed Fiorentina, hosting Napoli.

Juventus, controversially beaten 3-1 by Napoli at the weekend, are at home to Empoli.

Napoli's win was controversial because of their two penalties with both spot kicks judged to be the result of dubious decisions by the referee.

Uruguayan striker Marcelo Zalayeta was handed a two match ban for tricking the referee into awarding one of those penalties but Napoli announced Tuesday they planned to appeal his penalty.

FIXTURES

Wednesday (all 1930 GMT)
Atalanta v Cagliari, Fiorentina v Napoli, Inter Milan v Genoa, Juventus v Empoli, Palermo v Parma, Reggina v Livorno, Roma v Lazio, Sampdoria v AC Milan, Siena v Catania, Udinese v Torino

Lebanon last to reach second round

AFC ONLINE, Goa

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 Goa.

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 Chetri drew first blood for India on the half hour. Substitute Mohamad Ghaddar 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 Salem Mughel.

Ghaddar put Lebanon ahead three minutes from time but captain Baichung Bhutia levelled the scores for India on a Steven Dias corner 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 Dubai, South Africa,

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FIFA to ban third-party deals

Football

INTERNET, undated

FIFA are set to outlaw third-party player ownership deals such as that which resulted in the protracted Carlos Tevez transfer saga.

The rules currently allow players to be owned by a body or individual separate to the sporting club holding his playing registration, which has allegedly led to agents and sports management companies touting athletes as commercial entities and breaching local regulations as footballers move between countries.

Tevez and former West Ham and Santos team-mate Javier Mascherano were both brought to West Ham by Kia Jorabchian's MSI group, who were preparing a take-

over of the club. But after a different consortium bought the Hammers - who were embroiled in a relegation struggle not befitting two Argentina World Cup players - Jorabchian orchestrated the transfers of Mascherano and Tevez to Liverpool and Manchester United respectively.

The Mascherano move was straightforward, as the midfielder was not getting into the West Ham starting eleven, but Tevez's was complicated by West Ham's insistence on receiving a full transfer fee despite Jorabchian's (correct) insistence that he, and not the club, owned the player's commercial rights, something which is banned in England.

The case was eventually settled - and West Ham fined over \$5 million for breaching Premier League rules in signing Tevez - but the practise,

which is commonplace in South America, will no longer be allowed.

FIFA are also to ban the purchase of club licenses by lower-league clubs to "buy" promotion into higher divisions, prompted by Granada 74's buyout of Ciudad de Murcia, which took a Tercera Division side into Spain's Segunda Division, the level just below the Primera Liga.

Spain's FA tried unsuccessfully to block the move - the Court of Arbitration for Sport ruling in Granada's favour - but FIFA have acted to ensure a similar incident does not happen again.

"We are not happy with that decision which goes against the principles of our game where promotion and relegation is the essence," FIFA boss Sepp Blatter said. "So we have changed the regulations and the new rules will be enforced at the end of the year."



PHOTO: AFP

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 FIFA 2014 World Cup at the FIFA headquarters in Zurich on Tuesday. Later Brazil were announced as hosts.

Spotlight on Wenger's kids

Football

AFP, Sheffield

Arsene Wenger will give another chance to Arsenal's younger stars in Wednesday's League Cup tie at Sheffield United.

Wenger's policy has always been to give some of his lesser-known players an opportunity to shine in the competition, and Wenger is unlikely to change for the fourth-round tie at Bramall Lane.

Goalkeeper Lukas Fabianski, defender Justin Hoyte, midfielders Alexandre Song and Denilson and forward Nicklas Bendtner should all feature against the Championship club.

Wenger could decide to bolster his line-up with the introduction of experienced players who have not

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

Wenger.

Bendtner said: "The League Cup is good for the young players to play in because we can show the manager what we can do."

"I can play in the typical hectic cup tie away from home because I am big and strong, but I would rather play in a proper footballing game."

"There is a big togetherness here and the spirit is very good: we show respect to each other and that is one of the reasons we are doing so well this season."

"So far, things could not have gone much better. As a striker, you always want to play as much as possible, but as the season goes along, I hope to play more and more often."

"I will keep showing the manager what I can do. It is difficult to

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FIXTURES

Tuesday
Coventry v West Ham (1945 GMT)
Wednesday
Bolton v Manchester City (2000 GMT), Chelsea v Leicester (1945 GMT), Liverpool v Cardiff (2000 GMT), Luton v Everton (1945 GMT), Portsmouth v Blackburn (1945 GMT), Sheffield United v Arsenal (1945 GMT), Tottenham v Blackpool (2000 GMT)

Kewell to make return

Football

AFP, London

Harry Kewell is set to make his belated seasonal return for Liverpool's first team in Wednesday's League Cup clash with Cardiff.

The Australian winger has been sidelined since suffering a groin injury while playing for his country in the Asian Cup in the summer.

But he made a goal scoring return to action for the reserves at the weekend and now looks set to start his campaign to prove he has a future on Merseyside following the summer acquisition of Dutch winger Ryan Babel and Israeli playmaker Yossi Benayoun, both players who offer Liverpool the kind of creative spark that Kewell provides.

Liverpool are expected to rest a

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 dismayed to see his fellow Spaniards Xabi Alonso and Fernando Torres sidelined after suffering recurrences of existing injuries in Sunday's 1-1 draw with Arsenal, and admits the setbacks could hardly have come at a worse time.

Liverpool must beat Besiktas at Anfield next week to survive in the Champions League and they cannot afford to lose any more ground 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

line.

"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 Argentinian 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 sanctions apply 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.