



Hamburg players Ivica Olic and Rafael van der Vaart (C) hug each other as they celebrate the latter's goal during their UEFA Cup match against Rennes at the AOL Arena in Hamburg on Thursday.

## Cesc shadow over Gunners

AFP, London

Monday.

On the south coast, Portsmouth manager Harry Redknapp will look to end a week where he was arrested as part of an ongoing police probe into football corruption by guiding the high-flyers to victory over Everton.

Whatever the truth of the allegations surrounding him, the mere fact he's been questioned by police may have scuppered any hope the 60-year-old Redknapp had of replacing Steve McClaren as England coach.

Redknapp is likely to receive a hero's welcome at Fratton Park with Pompey seventh in the table. But the hosts face an Everton side which thrashed Sunderland 7-1 last time out.

Chelsea manager Avram Grant has been happy to let the club's results speak for themselves since he replaced the charismatic Jose Mourinho in the hotseat at Stamford Bridge.

The Blues, who thrashed Rosenberg 4-0 in the Champions League on Wednesday, have gone 13 games unbeaten since the Israeli took charge and head into Saturday's match with London rivals West Ham just five points off top spot.

"He is a little bit reserved and different to what they had. He has gone about his business quietly," said West Ham manager Alan Curbishley.

The Hammers, under the equally understated Curbishley, are unbeaten in six matches but their boss was under no illusions about the scale of the task facing

### FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday

Aston Villa v Arsenal (1715GMT), Blackburn v Newcastle, Chelsea v West Ham (1245GMT), Portsmouth v Everton, Reading v Middlesbrough, Sunderland v Derby, Wigan v Manchester City

Sunday

Liverpool v Bolton, Tottenham v Birmingham (1600)

Monday

Manchester United v Fulham (2000GMT)

## Real favour G14 replacement

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid favour the creation of a new body to represent Europe's clubs in place of the G14, the Spanish champions' president Ramon Calderon said on Thursday.

"In previous times the great differences in opinions between UEFA and the top clubs gave rise to the body known as the G14, to defend the interests of those clubs," Calderon told the Primera Liga's website. "www.realmadrid.com".

"But the gradual improvement in relations between UEFA and the clubs, especially since the arrival of their new president Michel Platini, makes it necessary to reconsider the need for a parallel organisation."

"Real have confidence in the current governors of UEFA and believe that through it we will be able to reach the best solutions for the problems within European football."

"If this new climate continues... we don't think the existence of an organisation like the G14 will be necessary and we would be happy to contribute actively to the creation of a true European association of clubs."

"It would be independent but recognised by UEFA, and would allow us to resolve problems within this great family of clubs assuring coordination and stability."

The G14 said in September that it would expand from 18 to around 50 members by the end of the year to try to resolve differences with soccer's governing bodies over issues such as the calendar and release of players for international duty.

The group includes powerful clubs such as Manchester United, Real and AC Milan.

## Racing look to brake Real

AFP, Madrid

Maria Gutierrez, who has made many of his teammates' goals this season but who was sent off in the 1-1 draw at Murcia last Saturday.

The reigning Spanish champions have 29 points from 13 games and a one-point advantage over second-placed Villarreal while Real's eternal rivals Barcelona are one point and one place further back.

Villarreal will be looking to continue keeping the pressure on Real, and could take over at the top if they slip up with three points at struggling Valladolid, who have only won once at home this season.

"We are all disappointed that we squandered the chance to go top last weekend when we were held to a draw by Almeria. We are determined not to make the same mistake at Valladolid," said Villarreal's Joan Capdevila on Wednesday.

"Not having UEFA Cup commitments this week means that we can relax and focus fully on Sunday's game," added the Spanish international defender.

By contrast, Barcelona had a taxing 2-2 draw against Lyon in the Champions League on Tuesday

### FIXTURES

Saturday

(all kick off times in GMT)

Almeria v Sevilla (1900), Real Madrid v Racing Santander (1900), Espanyol v Barcelona (2100)

Sunday

Deportivo La Coruna v Osasuna (1600), Getafe v Levante (1600), Real Mallorca v Murcia (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Real Zaragoza (1600), Valladolid v Villarreal (1600), Real Betis v Atletico Madrid (1800), Valencia v Athletic Bilbao (2000)

"Yes, Real are probably the best team in the world... but we are not going there with a defeatist attitude," added the Racing goalkeeper.

Real will be without their suspended midfield playmaker Jose

and the fixture pile up is starting to take its toll on the Catalan club.

Thierry Henry and Sylvain are definitely out of action for the local derby at Espanyol on Saturday, with a back strain and left knee injury respectively.

There are also question marks over the fitness of defenders Oleguer Presas and Lillian Thuram as well as their Icelandic striker Eidur Gudjohnsen.

However, the biggest worry for Frank Rijkaard is the plummeting form of one-time superstar and two-time World Player of the Year Ronaldinho.

Against Lyon, Rijkaard decided to leave the Brazilian among the substitutes for the first time in nearly three years and he could be relegated to the bench again on Saturday.

Another factor which could also count against Ronaldinho starting for Barca is the possible return of their prolific Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o.

Eto'o has been out of action since early September with a thigh injury but he has almost fully recovered and may be in the squad to face Espanyol.

"If I play this week, then great, but if I have to wait a week, it's not important. I'm ready, I've been working hard to get back," said Eto'o earlier this week.

Espanyol have been one of the revelations of the season and currently lie fourth, just two points behind their neighbour.

"At the start of the season we were just thinking about avoiding relegation but now we've set our sights a lot higher," said Espanyol coach Ernesto Valverde, who used to play for Barcelona.

## Bayern drop points

AFP, Paris



Tottenham Hotspur and Bolton gave their fans a UEFA Cup night to remember Thursday as Bayern Munich were held to a draw by Portuguese minnows Sporting Braga.

Spurs, a goal down after just two minutes, fought back to beat Danish side Aalborg 3-2 at White Hart Lane, while Bolton scored a dramatic last-minute equaliser at home to finish 1-1 with Aris Salomika.

Bolton manager Gary Megson acknowledged the draw, a drab affair, was a case of "after the Lord Mayor's Show".

Bolton beat Manchester United in the Premier League on Saturday and Megson reflected: "Sometimes it's a case of after the Lord Mayor's Show. There are no excuses for us - it was a big game and although it was not a full house or Manchester United it was still a very important game."

"We didn't start right and when you don't do that it's hard to pick yourself up."

"Our performance overall was a poor one - we didn't get out of second gear and in the end we played lot of hit-and-hope balls with players who can't play in that manner."

Tottenham, who were stretching their new coach Juande Ramos' unbeaten run to six games, are top

of group G while Bolton are third in group F on three points behind leaders Bayern Munich.

Bayern remain top despite eking out a 1-1 draw in Portugal, their second draw of the competition but a result which nonetheless leaves the German giants clear on five points, one ahead of Aris and two ahead of Bolton.

High-flying German side SV Hamburg were among the early benefactors as the battle for the UEFA Cup's latter stages continued Thursday.

Hamburg appeared not to need the benefit of home advantage as they brushed off the threat of French pretenders Rennes, winning 3-0 to seal their place in the last 32.

Rennes have failed to win their past five matches, and were out of their depth against a side who, in the German Bundesliga, are only a point behind leaders Bayern Munich.

Dominated in the midfield and with their defence unable to keep up with Hamburg's attack, the Germans had little difficulty in scoring.

On the half hour Croatian Ivica Olic drew two Rennes defenders close in before slipping the ball off Rafael van der Vaart who made no mistake from near the penalty spot.

Van der Vaart then turned provider for Eric Choupo-Moting in the 83rd minute, and Hamburg grabbed their third goal from a Mohamed Zidan penalty seven minutes later.

Coach Huub Stevens, simultaneously celebrating his 54th birthday, said: "I'm really happy about how the players achieved this result - it's a great birthday gift."

"After a slow start we effectively

shut Rennes down. They didn't really give us any threat at all."

In Prague meanwhile Sparta Prague forced their hosts Sparta Prague into accepting a scoreless draw, but there was arguably more drama off the pitch on it.

After scuffles between rival fans in the city centre, Czech police were forced to brandish and use their batons against fans of the Russian side attacked stadium stewards, according to Czech public television reports.

Violence erupted just before half time and Czech police were forced to keep the Spartak fans in the stadium for more than half an hour after the final whistle.

And in Spain 11 people were injured when supporters of Aberdeen and Atletico Madrid clashed Thursday before their UEFA Cup Group B match which Atletico won 2-0.

Police intervened to separate the rival supporters who pelted each other with bottles and other objects in the Vicente Calderon stadium, radio Cadena SER reported.

It said 11 people were injured, most of whom suffered bruises.

Another Russian club, Zenit St. Petersburg, missed the chance to go top of Group A after a late equaliser in a 2-2 draw at home to Nuremberg.

Angelos Charisteas gave the visitors a first-half lead before two goals in four second-half minutes from Pavel Pogrebnyak and substitute Aleksei Ionov put Zenit ahead.

Leon Benko then came off the bench to head home five minutes from time and level the scores.

## Ronaldo a fitness doubt

REUTERS, Rome

AC Milan striker Ronaldo is unsure whether he will be able to play at the FIFA Club World Cup in Japan next month because of a new injury scare.

The Brazilian pulled up with a calf pain while warming up to come on as a substitute for the European champions during Wednesday's 1-1 draw at Benfica in the Champions League.

After the match Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said that the problem was not serious and that he expected Ronaldo to be able to play in Saturday's Serie A clash with Juventus.

But the striker was much less optimistic on Thursday.

"I still feel a little pain. I don't think I'll recover for the Juve game," he told La Gazzetta dello Sport's website (www.gazzetta.it).

"I still don't know what happened yesterday. Tomorrow I'll have to do tests, so it is necessary to wait."

When asked if he expected to be ready for the Club World Cup, he replied: "I don't know".

Ronaldo had only just returned from a nagging leg injury, making his first appearance of the campaign in Sunday's 2-1 league win at Cagliari.

The away fans have also been banned from the San Siro in a measure that has become commonplace in Serie A following recent crowd violence, which has at times led to fatalities.

But Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon is more concerned about not being the first team to come away from the San Siro with a defeat to Milan.

"I hope it will be a derby played with lots of passion but in the right way," he said. "Right now the hooligans are doing no good for the league nor for Sicily."

He also pledged that the players would perform better for Guidolin, having let down Colantuono.

"We're all happy to work with the boss again but the players must feel guilty because if you change the coach it's because the players have not been performing the way they should have."

"Now we have to forget about it and start working hard again because we're working with someone who has had some great results with Palermo."

Champions and league leaders Inter Milan face a tough trip to Fiorentina on Sunday, although their hosts have struggled recently, dropping to fifth place in the league and in danger of seeing their early season promise fade away.

Roma, in third, host fourth-placed Udinese in a match that could go some way to showing whether or not either side can last the distance in the title race. Defeat for either could confine them to the battle for a Champions League place next season. Fixtures

REUTERS, Paris

## Kaka a shoe-in for Ballon d'Or

AFP, Rome

A

AC Milan's Brazilian midfield Clarence Seedorf is hoping the visit of title rivals Juventus this Saturday will help them banish their unforgettable home form.

The European champions have played six league games at the San Siro this season, and each time Milan have headed to the dressing room shaking their heads after being held to four frustrating draws and two embarrassing defeats.

Despite flourishing on their travels, Milan are struggling to score at home having hit the net only three times in six matches.

But Seedorf believes that unenviable statistic could be put to bed by the fact they are playing one of their title rivals rather than a team they are expected to beat.

"Juventus are physically strong, they're high up in the standings and it's going to be a full-on clash and one of the best matches of the season," he said.

"Milan are also playing well and we need to see a great Milan performance so we can beat Juventus and get that first home victory."

"Regarding the other games played at the San Siro it will be different because the small teams come to keep things tight but against Juve I think we'll have more space because they are a team with many champions and many individuals."

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