



Hamburg players Ivica Olić 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.

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 Salonika.

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 Huande 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 beneficiaries 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 Olić drew two Rennes defenders close in before slipping the ball off to 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 Spartak Moscow forced their hosts Sparta Prague into accepting a scoreless draw, but there was arguably more drama off the pitch than 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 Web site (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.

Cesc shadow over Gunners

AFP, London



In a week where the managerial merry-go-round took several spins, Arsene Wenger - one of the Premier League's longest-serving bosses - will hope his youthful Arsenal side can bounce back from their first defeat of the season when they travel to Aston Villa.

The Premiership leaders' 3-1 reverse away to Sevilla in the Champions League on Tuesday ended Arsenal's 28-match unbeaten run.

Worse still was the hamstring injury sustained by Cesc Fabregas which looks likely to rule the Spanish international midfielder, who has scored 11 goals this season, out of the trip to Villa Park.

"We are very pessimistic for him, but he is still thinking he has a good chance," Wenger said of Fabregas.

"We will make a test tomorrow (Friday), we think he will be short for Saturday," added Wenger as he prepared his side to play a Villa team that beat Blackburn 4-0 on Wednesday.

Both club captain William Gallas and striker Emmanuel Adebayor are set to return after Wenger, conscious of Arsenal's busy December programme, rested the pair in midweek.

Victory would see Arsenal go six points clear of Manchester United ahead of their second-placed rivals' match against Fulham on

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 fliers to victory over Everton.

Whatever the truth of the allegations surrounding him, the mere fact he's been questioned by police may have soured 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 Rosenborg 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

his side.

"When you play a top-four team you need a few things going for you. You also need your players to all be on form, you cannot carry anyone."

Manchester City's rise to third in the table has been one of the most unexpected achievements of the season thus far, transforming both the club's reputation for self-inflicted wounds and reminding England fans of the ability of Sven-Goran Eriksson, whose spell in charge of the national side was marked by a series of controversies over his salary and private life, as a club coach.

The Swede's side are away to Wigan on Saturday in what will be Steve Bruce's first game in charge of the drop candidates since his arrival from Birmingham.

City's start to the season means that Eriksson doesn't plan to be spending too much more of Thai owner Thaksin Shinawatra's

money during the January transfer window.

"It won't be like August when we took in eight players. It will be very few."

"We are not going to gamble. We have a good squad and a good base." Brazil midfielder Elano has already been ruled out of the trip to the JJB Stadium with a hamstring injury.

Bottom-of-the-table Derby, under new boss Paul Jewell, are away to Sunderland who are sure to have been told a few home truths by boss Roy Keane.

Meanwhile struggling Middlesbrough are set to be without injured Australia goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer for their match with Reading.

Saturday's other match sees Blackburn at home to Newcastle with visiting manager Sam Allardyce facing criticism from some fans despite the north-east club's best start to a league season in 10 years.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez, whose side brought him some breathing space in his row with the club's American owners after their midweek Champions League success against Porto, takes the Reds on Sunday to Bolton, who will look to build on their surprise win over Manchester United.

Sunday's late kick-off match will see Birmingham, in former Scotland coach Alex McLeish's first match in charge of the Blues, away to Tottenham with Manchester United at home to Fulham on Monday.

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 side's Web site (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 collaboration 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



After two dismal away performances in the last week, Spanish league leaders Real Madrid will be glad to be back in their Santiago Bernabeu stadium to face Racing Santander on Saturday.

The Spanish giants have a 100 per cent record at home this season, in both La Liga and the Champions League, however their visitors can also boast of the best defensive record in the Spanish first division.

Racing goalkeeper Tono Rodriguez has conceded only nine goals this season, and been beaten just twice in their last eight games.

"When you walk out onto the pitch at the Santiago Bernabeu it can be intimidating, but once the whistle goes you realise it's only 11 men against 11," said Tono on Thursday.

However, the 11 men that Real will field are collectively the most lethal strike force in the Spanish first division with 30 goals to their name this season.

Dutch striker Ruud Nistelrooy and club captain Raul Gonzalez have six goals apiece and Robinho is not far behind, the Brazilian having found the net five times.

"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

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 Alfilico Madrid (1800), Valencia v Athletic Bilbao (2000)

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

Thierry Henry and Sylvainho 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 Lilian 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.

Kaka a shoe-in for Ballon d'Or

REUTERS, Paris

There is little doubt that Kaka will be awarded the 2007 Ballon d'Or on Sunday.

AC Milan's Brazil playmaker is the hot favourite to receive the former European footballer of the year prize, now extended to players in other countries around the world.

Italian media reported that the Ballon d'Or jury had told the 25-year-old attacking midfielder to prepare for the awards ceremony on Dec. 2 in Paris.

French magazine France Football, which organises the vote, refused to confirm this, saying only that Kaka would definitely be in the top 10.

Until last year, when Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro won the award after leading his side to World Cup glory in Germany, 52 European journalists voted for a player from a European club.

For this year's award, 96 journalists from around the world voted and the shortlist of 50 featured players based in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, the United States and Qatar. The elegant Kaka is already the winner of the FIFA Pro world player of the year and UEFA European club player of the year awards and is the big favourite for FIFA's world player of the year to be announced later this year.

His 10 goals in guiding Milan to their seventh European Cup triumph in May set up this flurry of awards in a year without a World Cup or European championship.

Ronaldo is likely to end up just behind Kaka with Argentina and Barca virtuoso Lionel Messi and Ivory Coast and Chelsea forward Didier Drogba other strong contenders for a top-three finish.

Cesc Fabregas, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Andrea Pirlo, Robinho, Francesco Totti and Ruud van Nistelrooy are the other players in the top 10, according to France Football.

Riquelme completes return

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Juan Roman Riquelme completed his transfer back to Boca Juniors from Villarreal on Thursday.

The 29-year-old Argentine playmaker told reporters at the team's Bombonera stadium he was pleased to be back after signing a 30-month contract to stay with Boca until 2010.

"I'm having a really good day... I've come back to my home, my club and I'm going to be lucky enough to put on the shirt that I've missed a lot for several months," he said.

Riquelme, the fulcrum of the Argentina side that reached the 2006 World Cup quarterfinals, fell out with Villarreal coach Manuel Pellegrini last year and has not played in the Spanish league this season.

However, he has featured strongly in Argentina's four 2010 World Cup qualifying games, scoring four goals.

Riquelme helped Boca win the Club World Cup in 2000 and the player is hoping to take part in this year's tournament in Japan from Dec. 7-16.

"I'm excited about being in this World Cup; the first time an Argentine team will get the chance to take part. It's not just our club, it's for Argentine football," said the midfielder.

There is, however, doubt about whether Riquelme will be eligible to play.

Can Milan fix home jinx?

AFP, Rome



AC Milan's Dutch midfielder 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."

Juventus's away fans have been barred 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 know they really want to break that series but we don't want to be their sacrificial lamb," said Buffon.

"Milan are European champions and will soon head off to the Club World Championship, so it's obvious we have a tough challenge ahead of us."

"But we have a lot of confidence in our abilities as long as we continue to work as a team."

Juventus came into the match second in the table and in fine form following their 5-0 demolition of Palermo a week ago, a result that cost Stefano Colantuono his job as coach of the Sicilians.

Palermo have now turned to twice former coach Francesco Guidolin to guide them and his first task will be the Sicilian derby at Catania.

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

'Expect emotions'

AFP, Lucerne



For a few minutes on Sunday the attention of Europe's major footballing powers, England apart, will be focused on 16 small balls being plucked out of an urn on the

banks of Lake Lucerne.

The occasion is the UEFA draw for the Euro 2008 finals.

England, having failed to make enough waves in qualifying, will be conspicuous by their absence but on the guest list for Sunday's Swiss lottery are official mascots Trix and Flix, opera icon Jose Carreras, the

Vienna Boys Choir, and no fewer than eight former European champions.

Euro 2008, co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland, kicks off on June 7 with matches staged in eight cities - Basel, Zurich, Bern, and Geneva, Salzburg, Innsbruck, Klagenfurt, and the 50,000 seater Ernst-Happel stadium in Vienna, host of the final on June 29.

The official motto for next year's tournament is "Expect Emotions" and there should be plenty of that around at Lucerne's Culture and Convention Centre as the nervy business of picking the four groups of four teams takes place.

Among those waiting anxiously to see who they're pitted against in the opening round are World Cup victors Italy, dual European titleholders France, and three-time winners Germany.

Also in Lucerne are a couple of Euro debutants in Poland, who qualified as winners of their group, and Austria, who along with fellow hosts Switzerland qualified automatically.

Greece, who made a mockery of their billing as minnows by claiming the title in 2004, ensured they'd be around to defend their crown by winning 10 of their 12 qualifying games to top their group ahead of Turkey.

And Otto Rehhagel's big hitters, along with Austria and Switzerland and the Netherlands, have been granted top seed status for the draw which is due to start at 1100 GMT.

The other dozen teams have been segregated according to their results in qualifying for not only Euro 2008 but also the 2006 World Cup.



Argentine midfielder Juan Riquelme (L) poses with his Boca Juniors jersey beside club president Pedro Pompilio during a press conference in Buenos Aires on Thursday.