



Valencia manager Ronald Koeman (2nd from R) oversees his players during a training session on the eve of their Champions League match against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

Koeman not worried yet

AFP, London



Valencia manager Ronald Koeman insists he isn't concerned by the goal drought that threatens to end his side's European ambitions.

The Spanish club have failed to score in their last four matches and face Chelsea in the Champions League on Tuesday knowing they must end that barren run to reach the UEFA Cup.

Koeman's team are already out of the running to reach the Champions League knockout stages but can clinch a place in Europe's secondary competition if they better Schalke 04's result in the other Group B match against Rosenborg.

Beating Chelsea is a daunting proposition considering that woeful lack of goals - it is the first time in three years Valencia have been unable to score in four successive games - but Koeman sees no reason to panic.

"I don't think it's something to worry about," Koeman said. "If you analyse the games in the Spanish League and look at the amount of chances created by Barcelona and Real Madrid you

see you are coming up against organised defences.

"In our game against Osasuna we created two or three opportunities. However much we talk about it won't change the situation.

"Once we score I feel the goals will begin to flow. We can only put it right on the field."

Any team including David Villa should be guaranteed to terrify opposing defences, but the Spain striker has struggled as much as anyone.

It is a situation he admits has left the Valencia players confused and frustrated.

"You're right to say we are down and frustrated to be out of the Champions League, but we've got to be positive and see this as an opportunity to turn things around," Villa said.

"It's true to say none of us are used to being in this situation. We haven't scored for four matches but Tuesday night might be a chance to lay that particular ghost.

"It's not happened a lot in the past but we just have to work hard to put it right."

Koeman has only been in charge at Valencia for a matter of weeks but is already under-fire following his side's miserable run of eight defeats in 13 matches, which has left them 10 points

behind La Liga leaders Real Madrid.

The former Benfica and PSV Eindhoven concedes he will be a target for the fans and press until he manages to get his new team back on track.

He said: "We know it is all part and parcel of being at a big club like Valencia. We know if things don't go right you can be open to criticism. All we can do is try to improve and put the situation right.

"The most important thing is to stay alive in the UEFA Cup if we can better the result of Schalke. It is very important for the club."

"The greatest importance is to play well against Chelsea and stay in European competition."

Koeman has a good record against English clubs after eliminating Arsenal during his time at PSV and dumping out Manchester United and Liverpool when he was at Benfica.

"They are good memories and as a manager you are hoping they will continue," he said. "It is always a pleasure to play against an English team at a packed English stadium. There is always a great atmosphere."

"You can get a chance against English teams and I'm confident our team can take something from the match on Tuesday."

Drogba to return in 3 weeks

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Avram Grant expects Didier Drogba to be back in action in three weeks after his successful knee operation.

The 29-year-old went under the knife on Saturday to cure the long-standing problem and it was expected he would be sidelined until the New Year.

But Grant revealed the Ivory Coast striker's surgery went well and he is hopeful of seeing him in a Chelsea shirt before the African Nations Cup, which starts in January.

"The operation went well. It looks like it will be three weeks or something like this," Grant said.

"We just have to wait and see. First I want him to feel good with his knee. He didn't play at 100 per cent in his last games."

Drogba has been a formidable force again this season, scoring nine times, and his absence will leave a massive void in Chelsea's attack during the busy Christmas programme.

Grant has confidence that Andriy Shevchenko and Claudio Pizarro will fill Drogba's boots but he knows he can't afford to be without his talismanic forward for long.

"I have confidence in these players but I would feel more confident if he (Drogba) would come back," Grant said. "You know his quality. I don't need to say it again."

"He is a very important striker for us. I would prefer him to be fit and play."

"But he is not here. That is a fact. We cannot fight it but we want him back as soon as possible."

Kahn handed punishment

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich have surprisingly suspended captain Oliver Kahn for their final Bundesliga game of the year and fined him 25,000 euros (36,600 US dollars) for "disciplinary reasons".

The 38-year-old misses the game at Hertha Berlin on Saturday, on top of the fine handed out by Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld, with no explanation given as to what Kahn did to warrant such sanctions.

A press release issued by the German giants on Tuesday simply stated Kahn had been suspended, fined on "disciplinary grounds" and the matter had been dealt with internally.

But possibly the reason behind Hitzfeld's tough stance can be linked to Kahn's comments on Monday.

After Bayern drew 0-0 with strugglers Duisburg on Saturday, Kahn was typically harsh with a thinly-veiled attack on his colleagues' French midfielder Franck Ribery, who joined from Marseille, and Italian striker Luca Toni, who joined from Fiorentina.

"There are one or two here who need to realise that two or three

Crunch time in Europe

AFP, Paris



It's crunch time in the Champions League on Wednesday as four teams attempt to secure the two remaining tickets into the knockout stage of Europe's top club competition.

With Spanish giants Barcelona already qualified as group E leaders and German champions Stuttgart out of contention at the bottom of the pile, Rangers and six-time French champions Lyon are left to scrape it out at Ibrox for second place.

Rangers need only to avoid defeat against Lyon to book a place alongside their domestic league rivals Celtic in the last sixteen but Walter Smith will hope for a repeat performance of their impressive 3-0 win over Alain Perrin's men at the Gerland stadium in October and has no intention of sending his side out to secure a draw.

Smith said: "I don't know how you'd set out to play for a draw. Never in my whole career as a manager have I considered trying to play for a draw so I won't change now."

"If you set your team out to simply avoid defeat what would happen if you lost a goal in the last minute? Obviously the draw suits us, but we will approach the game like any other and try our best to win."

Lyon's preparation for the do-or-die game was far from perfect

showing some defensive frailties as they lost to eighth-placed Caen 1-0 in the domestic league on Saturday under the watchful eyes of Smith, who had made the trip to size up his opponents.

In contrast Rangers were allowed to postpone their Scottish Premier League fixture against Gretna on Sunday and will be fresh for the encounter.

Despite Rangers' 3-2 defeat away at Stuttgart in October, Gers boss Smith believes the nature of Wednesday's fixture will help concentrate minds against a Lyon team very capable of dashing his side's qualification hopes.

"We have to make sure that the levels of concentration are as high as they possibly can be," he told the League Managers' Association website, www.leaguemanagers.com.

"Against Stuttgart they weren't and I don't know whether it was just because of the fact that we had

a margin of error there or that it didn't matter if we won, lost or drew the game, as long as Lyon took a point against Barcelona we were always going to go to the last game anyway."

"So I don't know whether that was the case, because over the European campaign the attitude and levels of concentration have been terrific."

"The one thing that the Stuttgart game did show was that if we do slip a little bit then teams will definitely take advantage of that."

There's nothing to play for in Group F apart from pride as English champions Manchester United and Italian giants Roma have already booked their spots in the knockout stage qualifying first and second respectively.

The two teams will face each other in the group's ultimate match in the Italian capital and officials will be looking to avoid a repeat of last season's violence when a number of United fans were taken to hospital after clashing with Italian police outside Rome's Olympic stadium.

Sir Alex Ferguson's Red Devils go into the game on a high having used bottom of the Premier league table, Derby, for target practice at the weekend, winning 4-1, while Roma slipped up in the Italian championship drawing 1-1 with lowly Livorno.

In group G, Serie A leaders Inter have already clinched top spot leaving Turks Fenerbahce, on eight points, and Dutch giants PSV Eindhoven, on seven points, to

Saha fears racism

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United striker Louis Saha fears players could be subjected to racist abuse when the English giants face Roma during Wednesday's Champions League match in the Italian capital.

In the past black players such as England striker Emile Heskey have been the victims of racist taunting when playing in Rome.

But black players within Roma's ranks have also found themselves on the receiving end of such abuse during matches against capital rivals Lazio.

Saha, himself a black France international, speaking during a conference on racism and bullying at Old Trafford here Monday, said that racism was still an issue within football.

"You will see it on Wednesday, I think. We are travelling to Italy, and in those kind of places it seems like they are used to it. They don't fight it like we have done in England."

"They are starting to recognise it and think about it, but not very strongly - whereas England is a good example of where it has been tackled."

Saha, 29, said he had personal experience of racist abuse. "In football I've had many things thrown at me - but I've always been a very calm person. I try to keep everything inside," he said.

"Away from football it did happen once. I was 12 years old when I was with my father at a game

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

McClaren gets 'Foot in Mouth'

AFP, London

Former England football boss Steve McClaren has at last won something, bagging the Plain English Campaign's 'Foot in Mouth Award' for a priceless piece of sporting wisdom, the group said Tuesday.

McClaren, sacked last month after England's failure to qualify for next year's European Championships, won the award for his assessment of Manchester United and England striker Wayne Rooney's considerable abilities.

"He is inexperienced, but he's experienced in terms of what he's been through," he said.

McClaren takes the title from supermodel Naomi Campbell, who won last year with her patriotic declaration: "I love England, especially the food. There's nothing I like more than a lovely bowl of pasta."

The Plain English Campaign, a pressure group campaigning for clarity in the written and spoken word, organises annual awards to recognise clear language from public bodies and the media.

There were seven winners this year of the "Golden Bull" category, which highlights impenetrable or inappropriate use of jargon or as the Plain English Campaign puts it: "The worst examples of written tripe."

They included a sign from the British airports operator at London Gatwick stating: "Passenger shoe repatriation area only."

Boca set to attack

AFP, Tokyo



Argentina giants Boca Juniors insist they will play with their usual attacking flair when they take on Tunisian surprise package Etoile Sahel in the Club World Cup semifinals here on Wednesday.

"We're not going to do something different against them. We will do what we have always done," Boca's coach Miguel Angel Russo said ahead of their opening match in the tournament of continental champions, which also features AC Milan.

"We will score goals no matter what and win. That is our style and I'm not going to change it against any opponents."

Etoile, the African champions who are packed with young talent, upset the odds to beat Mexico's Pachuca 1-0 in their opening match with an 85th-minute goal from midfielder Moussa Narry.

Etoile's French coach Bertrand Marchand said they had nothing to lose in the match of their life against Boca.

"They are a big club and have different potential," Marchand said of the Argentinians. "They are highly technical and a more offensive team than ours."

But he admitted that the likely scenario in the final would be South America against Europe.

"I think the final showdown will be fought between South American and Europe clubs. Boca and Milan are at a high level. We feel happy just being able to fight such a team," he said.

Milan, the European Champions League and Super Cup holders, play on Thursday against Asian champions Urawa Reds of Japan, who whipped Iran's Sepahan 3-1 on Monday.

Boca coach Russo pointed to

Etoile's defensive game with four players deep in midfield.

"In any way, we will shake them off balance and turn their errors into our goals," he said.

Russo added that all his players were fit with some having recovered from injuries sustained in the domestic league, where Boca are currently second to Lanus.

"Every player is ready to go out onto the pitch," he said.

Marchand pinpointed Boca captain Martin Palermo as a key

threat, but is also wary of their defensive strengths.

"He is a star indeed. He has headed in many goals. We need to check him thoroughly," he said of striker Palermo.

"Boca are full of experienced players who have played on the big stage of the world. They are totally different from us."

He said adding though that his side were drawing strength from "faith as a team."

"Those who fight in earnest win," he said.



Boca Juniors striker Rodrigo Placio heads the ball during his team's practice session in Tokyo on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

Focus shifts to Capello

AFP, London

Football

British newspapers turned their focus to Italy's Fabio Capello on Tuesday after Jose Mourinho decided he would not seek the position of England manager.

That did not stop some of them from criticising Mourinho, however, for what they saw as an attempt by the former Chelsea boss to raise publicity in an effort to seek out offers from European clubs, after his resignation from the Premier League side following a fall-out with Russian owner Roman Abramovich.

Among the critics was Des Kelly of the Daily Mail, who wrote in his column that Mourinho "just wanted a bit of attention."

"The tell-tale signs were there last week when he was asked if he would like the job."

"Mourinho sat back smugly as newspapers, columnists; phone-in hosts all screamed he was 'perfect', while the Football Association boss Brian Barwick was roundly accused of being a

complete idiot for not immediately climbing over Jose's garden gate and forcing him to sing up there and then."

The Guardian's Kevin McCarrra highlighted some positives for England arising from Mourinho's rejection, noting that the Football Association would have had "to wonder about the ensuing furore when Mourinho dealt with defeat in his normal manner, by accusing someone of something."

"The Special One might have needed a special unit at the Foreign Office to deal with the damage to international relations."

McCarrra pointed to Capello as the likely successor to Steve McClaren, who was sacked following England's 3-2 defeat against Croatia at Wembley that ensured they failed to qualify for next year's European Championships.

"Old school as he seems, Capello's command of the contemporary scene is never in question," he wrote.

"In Capello ... the FA have a candidate who craves the mission and is certain he can fulfil it tri-

umphantly."

Capello, one of European football's most successful club coaches, has expressed an interest and replaced Mourinho as favourite with leading British bookmaker Ladbrokes following the withdrawal of the 'Special One'.

Marcello Lippi, who guided Italy to the 2006 World Cup title, is another possible contender.

Both men fit the FA's bill for a "world-class" coach.

The Daily Mirror tabloid backed Capello, plastering him across a two-page spread under the headline, "The Godfather: England will make 'Don Fabio an offer...let's hope he can't refuse'."

Its tabloid competitor The Sun, Britain's best-read daily, also backed Capello, writing in its editorial that in "the absence of Mourinho, legendary Italian Fabio Capello looks like the next best thing."

"But the FA must hear our words: To allow ONE great manager to get away may be misfortune. To let TWO escape would seem more like serious incompetence."



AC Milan's Brazilian forward Ronaldo entering the training ground in Yokohama on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldo not giving up hope

AFP, Yokohama

Injury-plagued AC Milan striker Ronaldo said Tuesday he was still hoping to play in the Club World Cup, amid mounting sympathy from teammates over his injury woes.

The 31-year-old Brazilian joined the team's training for the first time since the European Champions League winners arrived here last Thursday as they gear up for their first match against Japan's Urawa Reds.

"I feel fine," Ronaldo told reporters before working out alone with 30 minutes of light jogging.

The star forward is unlikely to take part in Thursday's match, but asked if he would be fit should AC Milan reach the final on Sunday, Ronaldo replied: "I will see. I will be trying in the next days."

Ronaldo has featured in just one match this season, starting against Cagliari two weeks ago in his return from a thigh problem, before injuring his calf in training.

Fellow Brazilian and playmaker Kaka earlier said Milan teammates had been talking to Ronaldo here "because we want him to feel" part of the team.

The 25-year-old Kaka said

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8