

Roma's Real trial

REUTERS, Rome



AS Roma are seeking to bury a dip in form that may prove fatal to their domestic title hopes when they face Real Madrid in the first leg of their Champions League last 16 tie on Tuesday (19:45 GMT).

Second-placed Roma lost 1-0 at Juventus on Saturday, their trademark slick, fast passing game nowhere to be seen, as they fell to their second consecutive away defeat to drop 11 points behind Serie A leaders Inter Milan.

Coach Luciano Spalletti will be particularly worried about captain Francesco Totti's lack of venom.

Hampered by nagging back and ankle problems, last season's European Golden Boot winner has not been on target since netting his 200th goal for the club in an Italian Cup tie a month ago.

Spalletti's options up front may be limited because Totti's understudy, Montenegrin forward Mirko Vucinic, is a doubt for the game at Rome's Stadio Olimpico with a thigh strain.

Injury-hit Real also have form problems.

The Spanish champions suf-

fered their second defeat in three league games when they surrendered an early lead to lose 2-1 at Real Betis on Saturday, although they still enjoy a comfortable five-point lead over Barcelona at the top of the table.

With defenders Pepe, Gabriel Heinze and Christoph Metzelder all missing, Real's weakness in the air was exposed in both goals which came within four minutes from almost identical far post headers.

But Spalletti found no encouragement from this.

"I know that Real Madrid lost, but I'm not rejoicing," he told reporters after Saturday's game in Turin. "I'm happy when I win, not when others lose. What's more, Betis scored with headers, while we are good at playing with the ball on the ground."

Real coach Bernd Schuster did not expect the Betis defeat to have any influence on the Champions League clash either.

"Tuesday's is different sort of game in a different competition and it will be nothing like the one against Betis. There will be more motivation and more intensity," he said.

Heinze is back in the squad for the clash at a ground where Real have never lost, but Brazilian full-

back Marcelo, Pepe and Metzelder are definitely out.

In-form Brazilian forward Robinho, Dutch midfielder Wesley Sneijder and Argentine striker Javier Saviola will also be missing through injury.

Striker Ruud van Nistelrooy returned to action as a second-half substitute after missing last week's 7-0 win over Valladolid and will be ready to start in Rome, while fellow Dutchman Arjen Robben looks to have put his injury worries behind him.

Brazilian defender Juan is expected to return from a foot injury for Roma and Italy right-back Christian Panucci should be back in the team too after being rested against Juve.

Probable teams:
AS Roma: 32-Doni; 2-Christian Panucci, 5-Philippe Mexes, 4 Juan, 22-Max Tonetto; 11-Taddei, 7-David Pizarro, 16-Daniele De Rossi, 30 Mancini, 20-Simone Perrotta; 10-Francesco Totti.
Real Madrid: 1-Iker Casillas; 4-Sergio Ramos, 5-Fabio Cannavaro, 16-Gabriel Heinze, 22-Miguel Torres or 2-Michel Salgado; 11-Arjen Robben, 14-Guti, 6-Mahamadou Diarra, 19-Julio Baptista, 7-Raul, 17-Ruud van Nistelrooy.



JOGGING AWAY THE MISERY: Liverpool players (front row L-R) Jermaine Pennant, Steven Gerrard and John Arne Riise jog before the start of a training session at Anfield on Monday. Liverpool will take on Serie A leaders Inter Milan as the Champions League resumes tonight.

No friction, insists Spalletti

INTERNET, undated

Roma tactician Luciano Spalletti has denied that there is any friction at Trigroria ahead of tomorrow's Champions League test against Real Madrid.

There have been reports in the peninsula's Press that Giallorossi stars Alberto Aquilani and Christian Panucci exchanged insults after Roma's defeat against Juventus and that tensions spilled over on the training ground yesterday.

However, Spalletti insists that the stories are exaggerations and that his side are calm and focused on defeating the Merengues.

"In three years here there have been few problems because the lads are always well behaved," the Tuscan coach stated.

"This time I don't think that it is necessary to talk about it as a drama. The players were just disappointed after the defeat against Juventus and were a bit tense."

Drogba in, Sheva out

INTERNET, undated

Didier Drogba has been declared fit to face Olympiakos but Andriy Shevchenko has been left out of the squad that travelled to Greece.

Drogba missed training towards the end of last week with a knee problem that also forced him to sit out the 3-1 FA Cup victory over Huddersfield on Saturday.

However, Drogba has now been declared fit for the crucial Champions League clash and is expected to take his place in the starting line-up.

The Blues will however be without Shevchenko, who has stayed in England as he has not fully recovered from the back injury that has been troubling him.

Michael Ballack also travelled with the rest of the squad that arrived in Athens on Sunday night but it remains to be seen if the German international will figure following his recent injury problems.

Barnsley rewarded with Chelsea

AFF, London

Championship side Barnsley have been rewarded for their shock fifth-round victory over Liverpool with a home tie against Chelsea in the FA Cup quarterfinals.

The Tykes beat Liverpool 2-1 in a surprise result at Anfield and on Monday were drawn against Chelsea at Oakwell after Avram Grant's side knocked out Huddersfield in the last 16.

Manchester United were drawn at home to fellow Premier League side Portsmouth, while at least one side from outside the top flight will be in the semi-finals after Bristol Rovers were drawn at home to West Bromwich Albion having knocked out Southampton in the fifth round.

Sheffield United or Middlesbrough will host Cardiff in the remaining match.

The ties are to be played over the weekend of March 8-9.

Quarterfinal draw:
 Sheffield United or Middlesbrough v Cardiff City
 Manchester Utd v Portsmouth
 Bristol Rovers v West Bromwich Albion
 Barnsley v Chelsea

Marquee show returns Crunch for L'pool, Real

AGENCIES, Milan



English Premier League clubs will enjoy the international exposure they crave this week when the Champions League returns with a bang thanks to several mouth-watering clashes.

Europe's premier club competition is out to prove its worth after the Premier League unveiled plans for world domination by introducing an overseas round of matches.

The idea has been widely condemned by fans and football authorities, leaving the Champions League to lighten the mood and show that nothing else can quite compete.

Holders AC Milan travelling to Premier League leaders Arsenal on Wednesday is just one of the delights on offer in the last 16, first-leg matches. The Gunners are reeling from Saturday's 4-0 FA Cup fifth-round defeat at Manchester United.

"Now we will try to recover and prepare properly for our next game - we know we need a top-class performance against Milan to have a chance," Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger said.

English champions United visit French counterparts Lyon on Wednesday with 2006 European champions Barcelona facing a tough trip to the Parkhead cauldron to play Celtic. Outside bets Sevilla travel to Fenerbahce in the night's other contest.

Tuesday's menu is equally delicious with Serie A champions Inter Milan, 11 clear at the top this season, visiting 2005 winners Liverpool, who lost 2-1 to second tier Barnsley in the FA Cup on Saturday.

And manager Rafa Benitez insists that there is no Anfield crisis despite his rocky relationship with the club's American owners.

"When you can't win games the pressure is normal. Everybody is disappointed," said Benitez who took Liverpool to the Champions League title in 2005.

"But we can't change anything now. We have to think about the next game."

"Fernando Torres wasn't fit (to face Barnsley). He wasn't 100 per cent but I think he will be okay for Tuesday."

Inter can boast formidable striking resources not least the skills of Julio Cruz, who has scored 15 times this season.

"People talk about Zlatan

Ibrahimovic or Esteban Cambiasso playing well but Julio Cruz is always there, always scoring," said Benitez of the Argentinian.

For Inter coach, Roberto Mancini, Liverpool's cup reverse was of little significance.

"Cup football is like this, you can lose despite coming close to scoring on many occasions," said Mancini.

Free-flowing AS Roma at home to Spanish champions Real Madrid promises to be a footballing work of art while Chelsea's more direct approach takes them to Olympiakos Piraeus. 2004 champions Porto visit Schalke 04, Germany's last remaining hope.

Several top players will be forced to miss the party through injury.

Milan striker Ronaldo, cup-tied

last season after signing from Real, is out for at least nine months with a knee injury.

The champions are also sweating on the fitness of goalkeepers Zejko Kalac and Dida, who have finger and back injuries, while 18-year-old Brazilian forward Alexandre Pato hopes to make the Arsenal trip after ankle trouble.

Kaka made his comeback from two games out with tendinitis in Milan's 0-0 draw at Parma on Saturday, the latest in a string of disappointing domestic results for the fifth-placed Rossoneri.

Real Madrid midfielder Wesley Sneijder will miss the chance of a Roman conquest because of a broken rib with Robinho, Javier Saviola, Pepe and Christoph Metzelder also out.

Gabriel Heinze is struggling but Raul should shake off a knock picked up in Saturday's surprise 2-1 loss at Real Betis.

Barca are without defenders Carles Puyol and Oleguer while Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o returned from the African Nations Cup with a thigh strain but is hoping to travel to Glasgow.

The second legs take place on March 4 and 5 with Inter entertaining Liverpool a week later to avoid two games in two days at the San Siro.

FIXTURES	
Tuesday	At Gelsenkirchen, Germany Schalke 04 (Ger) v Porto (Por)
At Rome, Italy	AS Roma (Ita) v Real Madrid (Spa)
At Piraeus, Greece	Olympiakos (Gre) v Chelsea (Eng)
At Anfield, England	Liverpool (Eng) v Inter Milan (Ita)

Toni treble fires Bayern

AFF, Berlin



Luca Toni bagged his first Bundesliga hat-trick to fire Bayern Munich back into a three-point lead at the top of the German league as his second-half strikes gave them a 3-0 win at Hanover on Sunday.

The 30-year-old overtook Borussia Dortmund's Mladen Petric to return to the top of the Bundesliga scoring chart with 13 goals as the Italian World Cup winner's treble-killed off Hanover's challenge.

Toni has scored 22 goals in all competitions for Bayern this season since his 11 million euros (16 million US dollars) switch from Italy's Fiorentina last summer and all of his second-half goals were well taken.

"Toni is a quality forward who works tirelessly in front of goal and showed why he is a World Cup winner," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld after the final whistle.

The Italian began his scoring spree with a superb turn on the volley after a header from Dutch hardman Mark van Bommel on 58 minutes and then stabbed home a pass to make it two on 64 minutes before he lobbed the goalkeeper on 82 minutes.

The win puts Bayern on 43 points - three clear of second-placed Werder Bremen - and for Hitzfeld there was the bonus of a good performance from Germany international Bastian Schweinsteiger.

Hamburg went back to third in the table after their 3-0 win at home to VfL Bochum with Czech midfielder David Jarolim scoring two second-half goals.

On Saturday, Bremen sealed a 2-0 win over strugglers Nuremberg after striker Markus Rosenberg scored on the half hour before Croatian forward Ivan Klasnic struck with an

82nd minute header.

After sacking their coach Hans Meyer at the start of the week, ten-man Nuremberg failed to make an impact as Russian striker Ivan Saenko was sent off in the 20th minute.

There was drama at bottom side Duisburg as Germany midfielder Thomas Hitzlsperger scored in the 92nd minute to seal a 3-2 Stuttgart win and deny the hosts their first success in five games.

Hansa Rostock had former Germany midfielder Christian Rahn to thank as his 76th minute header gave his side three precious points at home to Eintracht Frankfurt and the

win takes them up to 14th.

And Hertha Berlin picked up three points as Brazilian striker Rafael struck in the 93rd minute to light up a dull tie at Olympic Stadium in Germany's capital.

There was a battle royal at Karlsruhe as they fought back from 2-0 down against Bayer Leverkusen to share the spoils in a 2-2 draw.

Energie Cottbus' most famous fan - German chancellor Angela Merkel - was in the stands in the former East German city to see her side lose 2-0 at home to Borussia Dortmund after she was presented as an honorary fan before kick-off.



TAKES THREE TO TANGO: Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni is ecstatic after netting his hat-trick in their Bundesliga match against Hannover at the AWD Arena on Sunday.

Thieves can't stop him

Football

INTERNET, Hamburg

Luca Toni is doing his best to pay back Bayern Munich's big investment in him with goals - and not even a burglary in his Italian villa has stopped him. German dailies reported on Monday that thieves entered his new villa on Friday night, stealing some of his trophies and jewellery belonging to his fiancée.

But, according to the reports, Toni's medal for Italy's 2006 World Cup title was not taken, and the Golden Boot for European top scorer in 2006 is also still there.

The incident did not stop Toni from scoring a hat-trick in Munich's 3-0 win at Hanover 96 on Sunday before he flew to Italy to assess the damage.

"Three goals against the shock,"

titled the Bild daily on Monday.

Toni's first hat-trick in the Bundesliga raised his league-leading tally to 13 goals.

"Bayern Munich has invested a lot of money in me and I try to pay that back with goals," said Toni.

Munich splashed out 11 million euros (16 million dollars) to get Toni across the Alps from Fiorentina last summer - giving him the number nine shirt once worn by the club's most famous striker, Gerd Mueller.

Toni was just one of several prominent new signings, along with French star Franck Ribery, German Miroslov Klose and Brazil's Ze Roberto.

The big investment after a mediocre past season appears to have paid off and Toni's goals have been important as Munich have led the standings from the start of the season.

"Will he decide the champion-

ship?" asked Bild on Monday.

That is at least what Toni has in mind: "I want to become top scorer, but more important is the championship with Bayern. I want to score as many goals as possible to achieve this."

Coach Ottmar Hitzfeld praised Toni's "killer instinct," midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger named him "a special player" and even captain Oliver Kahn - who has seen many players come and go during his 15 years at the club - is impressed.

"There are certain players who shine in the first half of the season. But the second half is the key, that's when titles are won. Thank god Luca is scoring in the second half of the season as well and has kept his level," said Kahn.

General manager Uli Hoenes, meanwhile, said dryly: "We did expect that he would have a day like today every now and then."

Pompey survive a scare

AFF, Sheffield



Premier League Portsmouth sneaked into the FA Cup quarterfinals on Sunday after an own-goal in the third minute of stoppage time by Preston defender Darren Carter secured a 1-0 victory at Deepdale.

England goalkeeper David James had earlier kept Portsmouth in the Cup with two superb second-half saves, including one from a penalty.

In Sunday's other fifth round tie, Pompey's top-flight rivals Middlesbrough were forced into a replay after a goalless draw away to Championship side Sheffield

United.

That looked like being the outcome for Pompey against Championship strugglers Preston until Carter put through his own goal as he tried to clear a corner which had appeared to be handled, albeit accidentally, by Portsmouth's Hermann Hreidarsson.

"The Cup's about winning, however you do it, whenever you do it, the last minute is fine for us," James said.

Portsmouth, tipped by some pundits to end the 13-year monopoly on the FA Cup enjoyed by Chelsea, Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool, failed to make the most of their first-half chances.

They were almost made to pay dearly by a side battling to avoid relegation to the third-tier of

English football.

On the hour mark, defender Sylvain Distin clipped Preston's Billy Jones inside the box and the home side had a penalty.

But James, guessing correctly, dived to his right to block Simon Whaley's spot-kick.

It was not the first time this season the in-form 37-year-old James had played a key role in a win for the south coast club, who last lifted the FA Cup way back in 1939.

"When they got the penalty, you were quietly confident he was going to save it, he's that good," said Portsmouth manager Harry Redknapp. "You wouldn't want anybody else in the goal at that time but him."

"I thought whoever is taking this is going to be looking at David James knowing he's got a real job

Bayern wanted me: Lippi

AFF, Berlin

Italy's World Cup winning-coach Marcello Lippi admits he is surprised German giants Bayern Munich have chosen Jurgen Klinsmann as their coach for next season, because of his lack of domestic experience.

Lippi, 59, who led his country to 2006 World Cup success, admitted he was shocked Bayern chose Klinsmann as the replacement for Ottmar Hitzfeld, who is leaving the club at the end of the season.

"Most Serie A coaches have normally worked for three or four years in the B or C leagues before they take a role at a top-flight club," Lippi told the Sunday edition of Die Welt.

"That is a priceless school to get your experience, because it is a good environment to learn your trade."

Lippi stood down as Italy coach after the World Cup and admitted he was approached by Bayern to train their side: "It was a huge honour."

And with Euro 2008 less than four months away, Lippi rates Germany and Italy as amongst the favourites to be crowned European champions at this June's tournament in Austria and Switzerland.

As well as praising the good work done by German coach Joachim Loew, the Italian says Loew's decision to stick with Jens Lehmann as goalkeeper, even though he has struggled for first-team football at Arsenal recently, was the right one.

"Loew has done some good work," said Lippi. "He has created a strong group in the Germany team, which you can't just change, consistency is important."

"If a player in a club team plays badly or lacks game time for whatever reason, it doesn't mean he should just be cut from the national side."

"Loew knows what he is getting with Lehmann, he has masses of experience and you just can't break up the structure, because Lehmann is on the bench."



UNFORTUNATE: Preston defender Darren Carter (3rd from R) puts the ball into his own net during their FA Cup tie against Portsmouth at Deepdale on Sunday.