

MU aim Chelsea victory

AFP, London

Cristiano Ronaldo has warned Chelsea that Manchester United are determined to end the Premier League title race by winning their decisive showdown on Saturday.

Sir Alex Ferguson's league leaders can effectively wrap up their 17th English title by beating second-placed Chelsea at Stamford Bridge.

A victory for the reigning champions would open up a six point gap over Avram Grant's team with only two games to play and United's vastly superior goal difference makes it impossible for Chelsea to overhaul them.

If United do retain the crown they will owe a huge debt of gratitude to Ronaldo. The Portugal winger has an incredible 28 league goals this season and even his penalty miss against Barcelona in midweek couldn't shake his confidence ahead of the trip to west London.

"It will be a tough game but we have a great chance as the team is

very confident," he said. "We do not want to drop any points at Chelsea, so it is important we go for the victory."

Even a defeat wouldn't be a disaster for United as they would stay top thanks to their goal difference, but Chelsea deserve credit for keeping up the pressure after trailing by eight points earlier this year.

When the Blues were beaten 2-0 at Old Trafford in Grant's first match back in September, they looked anything but a title contender. Now they have one last chance to make United sweat and Petr Cech is relishing the challenge.

"Every game now is like a final. Personally I play football to play in the big games and this is an exciting time for everyone," Cech said.

"The Premier League is getting towards the end and after Saturday we can be neck-and-neck with Man United."

"Of course, United score the most goals in the league - they have got the attacking threat. But we have got a pretty good record at Stamford Bridge, so we hope to keep that going."

The death of Frank Lampard's mother Pat after a short battle with

pneumonia on Thursday cast a shadow over Chelsea's preparations. Lampard could be missing but United also have a worry over Nemanja Vidic, who is struggling to recover from a stomach bug.

While the title fight is top of the bill this weekend, an equally fierce battle is taking place at the bottom as seven teams try to avoid relegation.

Fulham, who face Manchester City, are odds-on to fill one of the two remaining places in the bottom three, but Birmingham still believe they can climb out of the drop zone.

Alex McLeish's side could be

FIXTURES

Saturday
(all 1400 GMT unless stated)
Birmingham v Liverpool, Chelsea v Man Utd (1145 GMT), Man City v Fulham, Sunderland v Middlesbrough, Tottenham v Bolton, West Ham Newcastle, Wigan v Reading
Sunday
Everton v Aston Villa (1500 GMT), Portsmouth v Blackburn (1230 GMT)
Monday
Derby v Arsenal (1900 GMT)

helped by Liverpool, who are likely to rest a host of stars for their trip to St Andrews as they prepare for the Champions League semifinal second leg against Chelsea.

"It's a fantastic challenge lying ahead for the boys," McLeish said. "They are very keen to be in the Premier League again. But to do that, it means pitting yourselves against fantastic players every week and a club like Liverpool have so much depth to their squad."

If Birmingham slip up Reading can edge towards survival with a win at Wigan. But Royals boss Steve Coppell is concerned that Wigan's sub-standard pitch, labelled a disgrace by Latics manager Steve Bruce, could prove more of a problem than the home team.

"The only thing that could benefit Wigan is that they know that teams don't like playing on a surface like that and they are almost frightened by it," Coppell said. "We will have to deal with that."

Successive wins over West Ham and Middlesbrough have given Bolton a lifeline but Gary Megson's team can't afford a slip when they meet Tottenham.

Real almost champions

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid celebrated as if they were champions last weekend and they can clinch a 31st Spanish title on Sunday if they defeat Athletic Bilbao at home and Barcelona and Villarreal both fail to win.

With five games left Villarreal are ten points behind Real while Barcelona are eleven points adrift and Real's celebrations after the Racing win showed the players think they have done enough to retain the title.

Last year Real secured the championship on the final day of the season in a nerve-wracking comeback win at Real Mallorca so wrapping the title up with a few games to spare would be welcome relief for the players and supporters.

It would be a first managerial title for German coach Bernd Schuster in his maiden season after replacing the sacked Fabio Capello in the summer.

"You can't sound the victory bells just yet, although we're only a small step away," said goalkeeper Iker

Casillas. "We have everything going for us, but we can't count our chickens before they hatch."

"We've been on top from the very start and I think we deserve to win the title again."

With the title looking a big ask Barcelona have switched their attention to their Champions League semifinal with Manchester United with the first leg ending 0-0 on Wednesday night.

On Saturday they travel to a resurgent Deportivo La Coruna trying to claw back second place from Villarreal.

Ten draws have undermined Barcelona's title hopes and there could be some departures in the summer with Ronaldinho, Thierry Henry and coach Frank Rijkaard all tipped to go for different reasons.

Villarreal are targeting a best ever league finish this season as they try to fend off Barca, one point behind, and hold onto second place, starting with an away match at Real Betis on Sunday.

"We are in second place and that's got to be our objective because it would beat all our previous records. We've got just five games to play and the advantage is ours," said Villarreal coach Manuel Pellegrini.

The battle for fourth looks set to

go down to the wire with Atletico Madrid clinging onto the final Champions League spot.

Atletico are one point ahead of Racing Santander and three in front of Sevilla going into Sunday's derby against cup runners-up Getafe.

Mexican manager Javier Aguirre is feeling the heat and Atletico fans voiced their disapproval last weekend.

"The players are to blame and the fans need to be calmer," said Atletico goalkeeper Leo Franco.

"It is wrong to jeer Aguirre because he is the coach that got us into Europe last season and now has us in the Champions League places."

Sevilla coach Manolo Jimenez is also struggling for confidence as he

FIXTURES

Saturday
Deportivo La Coruna v Barcelona (1900 GMT), Real Murcia v Sevilla (2100 GMT)
Sunday
(all 1600 GMT unless stated)
Espanyol v Real Zaragoza, Valladolid v Almeria, Valencia v Osasuna, Getafe v Atletico Madrid, Real Mallorca v Racing Santander, Recreativo Huelva v Levante, Real Betis v Villarreal (1800 GMT), Real Madrid v Athletic Bilbao (2000 GMT)

desperately tries to step out of Juande Ramos's giant shadow.

Sevilla take on Real Murcia on Saturday while Racing travel to freescoring Real Mallorca 24 hours later.

Ronald Koeman has been under pressure for months at Valencia and the board finally lost patience when they sacked the Dutchman on Tuesday just five days after he won the Kings Cup.

A 5-1 drubbing by Athletic Bilbao was the final straw with the 2004 champions now just two points clear of safety.

"I leave here with the pride of having achieved a prize as important as the King's Cup," said Koeman.

In 22 league games in charge Koeman collected a meagre four wins, six draws, and 12 defeats.

Caretaker boss Voro takes charge for a crucial six-pointer against Osasuna, who are one point better off than Valencia.

Fourth from bottom Recreativo host basement boys Levante on Sunday and there is an added twist as Levante players are threatening to carry out a strike due to unpaid wages.

If they go through with the strike they will forfeit the match and also be relegated.

Rangers hold Fiorentina

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers will need to carry out a successful Italian job in Florence next week after they failed to score against Fiorentina in a nervy UEFA Cup semi-final, first leg goalless draw here on Thursday.

The Glasgow side will travel to Italy next Thursday knowing they will almost certainly need to net a crucial away goal if they are to make it to the final at the City of Manchester Stadium on May 14.

Fiorentina had the better of the chances at Ibrox but Cesare Prandelli's men couldn't get that crucial away goal to leave the tie on a knife-edge.

"It was always going to be a tough game but give credit to our defence, I thought we were superb," Rangers keeper Neil Alexander told ITV4.

"They've got some fantastic individuals. But I think we played well tonight and I think maybe they didn't reach their full potential. Our record in the away games has been fantastic. We know we can go there and score."

Rangers assistant manager Ally

McCoist was also happy with a 0-0 result.

"That's fine with me," said the former Scotland striker. "This may be ironic coming from an ex-centre forward, I thought the most important thing was keeping a clean sheet."

Yet again Rangers could pay tribute to the defensively-sound 4-5-1 system deployed by their tactical astute coach Walter Smith.

Some of European football's most fancied names have fallen by the wayside when encountering this solid and effective Rangers side this season.

Spanish giants Barcelona couldn't score at Ibrox, VfB Stuttgart went home defeated with fellow Germans Werder Bremen, Portugal's Sporting Lisbon and Greece's Panathinaikos were all overcome as the Gers made it through to the last four against the predictions of many pundits.

The prize for dishing out the same sort of treatment to Serie A side Fiorentina? Well, one carefully worded banner behind Alexander's goal summed it up at kick-off time.

"This is your chance. This is your time. Become legends," it read.

However, for those ten words to inspire Rangers to reach their first European final for 36 years, they needed a special performance to seal a meeting with the winners of the other semifinal between Bayern

Munich and Zenit St Petersburg.

Against a side who reached the UEFA Cup final 18 years ago, many of the players needed no introduction to the passionate 50,000 home crowd.

And it was the biggest name on the 'Viola' side that rose to the occasion - former Chelsea striker Adrian Mutu.

Mutu has had a challenging time to rekindle his career after he was banned for seven months after testing positive for cocaine in 2004.

Sacked by Chelsea, the Romanian rebuilt his reputation at Juventus before moving to Fiorentina two years ago and he revelled in the chance to prove himself on the big stage of a major European semifinal.

He was gifted the chance to show what he could do as nervy Rangers defender Kirk Broadfoot mis-kicked a clearance straight to Mutu on nine minutes.

However, Giampaolo Pazzini, lurking dangerously inside the penalty area, couldn't get his head on Mutu's cross and Rangers survived the early scare.

Three minutes later Pazzini had another close range attempt blocked by experienced Scotland defender David Weir on the goal-line.

Then, in the 15th minute, Rangers had their first chance.

Steven Whittaker sent talisman Jean-Claude Darcheville racing clear on the left flank but the man nicknamed The Rocket for his blistering pace ran out of fuel at the key moment and drove a tame 15 metre strike into the hands of Sebastian Frey.

Whittaker then curled a 20-metre effort over Frey's crossbar before Alexander denied Denmark international Martin Jorgensen from a similar range at the other end.

Mutu then had one final chance before the break as his 31st minute downward header was saved by Alexander.

The second period saw a far more adventurous looking home side, with Spaniard Nacho Novo getting forward more to support the attack.

Novo's 55th minute cross almost set up the opening goal but Steve Davis couldn't get his header on target.

Then it was Novo's turn to have a shot on goal as he used his pace to beat the offside trap before driving low into the side-netting.

However, as the clock ticked it was Fiorentina who looked most likely to score with Alexander having to be sharp to prevent a Mutu 35 metre strike from finding the top corner in the 75th minute.

And he (Hicks) agreed with me that we must talk together. If we want to go forward and sign players, we have to all work together.

"Everything is positive. We have talked about targets to sign, that is my aim."

"I do not doubt we will achieve those targets. I have a scouting department that is working and progressing. Now I have told the owners how we need to progress."

"Clearly I expect agreement on recruiting players for the summer. We are ready now for going forward."

"George knows about what was said, everybody knows. Everyone has the same information."



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich star Franck Ribery points to the home fans after scoring the opening goal against Zenit St Petersburg during their UEFA Cup semifinal in Munich on Thursday.

Henry still loves Arsenal

REUTERS, London

Thierry Henry, who has had a difficult first season with Barcelona, says he is happy in Spain but if he did return to England he would only play for former club Arsenal.

Henry, 30, who has scored seven goals in 25 appearances for Barca in an injury-hit season, tells the BBC's Football Focus in an interview to be broadcast on Saturday that he did not regret leaving England.

"I'm happy -- I don't regret leaving Arsenal," said the Frenchman. "But there's only one team in England for me. Everybody knows the love and affection I have for Arsenal. I was so into it, I became a fan."

His comments were carried on the BBC Web site (www.bbc.co.uk) on Friday.

The France striker left Arsenal, where he scored a club record 226 goals in 370 appearances, in a 16.0 million pounds move last June but has failed to make the impact he would have liked for the Catalan giants.

He was on the substitute's bench when Barcelona played Manchester United in the first leg of their Champions League semifinal on Wednesday.

Newcastle have been linked with a move to bring Henry back to England, but when asked if he would like to return he replied: "I don't know. I'm happy here at Barcelona. I still have three years of my contract left with Barcelona."

"There has been since I arrived here a lot of speculation from day one but, hey, go back where? There's only one team for me in my heart. It took me a while to understand what that club, Arsenal, meant."

'Beckham could play at 2010 WC'

REUTERS, Madrid

David Beckham could play for England at the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa if he looks after himself, coach Fabio Capello has said.

"The door is open. He played the last game, and did well against France. I see him play for Los Angeles Galaxy every now and then," the Italian told sports daily Marca on Friday.

"It depends. There are players who are 33 or 34, who look after themselves very well. They understand that physically they aren't what they used to be and take more care. A lot depends on this."

However, the former Real Madrid boss refused to make any predictions before the start of England's World Cup qualification campaign in September.

Capello said he was settling well in England and felt the side had made progress despite only five days training together and last month's 1-0 friendly defeat to France.

"I told the players after the France defeat that I was pleased and that I had seen a step forward. We have to take it step by step," he said.

"First we have to qualify (for 2010) and then we'll see what happens. I think I have a good team, although we need to work a little so that they all understand what I want."

With England's players having to watch Euro 2008 on television despite having three teams in the Champions League semifinals, Capello was asked if the Premier League's success in luring players from overseas was hurting the national team.

"This isn't the problem. The problem is that we only have 38 per cent of the players," Capello said. "There are Welsh, Scottish, Irish. In Spain and Italy for example, they have around 70 per cent of the players available."

Lucio own-goal deny win

AFP, Munich



Bayern Munich defender Lucio headed into his own net to give Zenit St Petersburg a crucial away goal ahead of next week's return match in Russia after Thursday night's UEFA

Cup semifinal, first leg ended in a 1-1 draw.

After the drama of Luca Toni's 120th minute equaliser which sealed a 3-3 draw in Getafe in the quarterfinals to put the Germans in the last four, Bayern will now have their work cut out.

French midfielder Franck Ribery put his side ahead with an 18th minute penalty until Brazilian Lucio turned the ball into his own net in the second-half.

"It will be difficult next week, but it is still possible," admitted Bayern striker Lukas Podolski. "We don't need to have any fear, because we are the better team."

"We played a decent game today, but we conceded a stupid goal."

After winning the German Cup in Berlin by beating Borussia Dortmund last weekend -- and the League Cup earlier in the season -- Bayern are still aiming to lift their third cup this season, but Dick Advocaat's side will give them a stiff test on home turf.

Bayern were without suspended Italian striker Toni, who has scored 10 UEFA Cup goals in the campaign so far including the two crucial efforts in extra time in Getafe which put his side in the semifinals.

It took just 18 minutes for Bayern to go ahead when midfielder Ze Roberto was fouled in the penalty area by St Petersburg's Dutch midfielder Fernando Ricksen and Ribery converted the penalty.

After his first effort was saved, Ribery smashed home the rebound to give his side the lead over the Russian champions who humiliated Bayer Leverkusen 4-1 at home in the quarterfinals.

But the Russians were back on level terms on the hour mark when midfielder Viktor Fayzulin whipped in a cross and Bayern defender Lucio headed the ball past his own

goalkeeper Oliver Kahn.

A thigh injury saw Kahn make way for Bayern's reserve goalkeeper Michael Rensing on 66 minutes and his forlorn figure trudging off the pitch summed up the home side's mood.

With Kahn set to retire at the end of the season, he faces a race against time to be fit for Thursday's second leg while striker Miroslav Klose is also struggling after breaking his nose in the game.

"It is too early to know the gravity of Kahn's injury," said Hitzfeld.

Lucio went close on 78 minutes when he unleashed a fierce drive, but Russian goalkeeper Vyacheslav Malafeev tipped the shot over the crossbar.

Having won Bayern the early penalty, Ze Roberto then kept his side in the game when he cleared a shot off the line after the ball trickled through Rensing's legs.

Germany striker Lukas Podolski had a golden chance to snatch the winner in the 90th minute but his shot went just wide of the post.

And the Russians finished the game the stronger to leave Bayern with a huge task in St Petersburg next Thursday.

Stuttgart test for Bayern

AFP, Berlin



The champagne is on ice and the league title within their grasp, but Bayern Munich boss Karl-Heinz Rummenigge insists his side are battling fatigue despite their ten-point lead.

Having already lifted the German League Cup and German Cup titles this season, Bayern are hoping to make a clean sweep of Germany's domestic titles and are set to capture the league long before the season ends on May 17.

Now only a disaster can stop them being crowned German champions for the 21st time, but Sunday's opponents VfB Stuttgart are one of only two teams to have beaten them in the league this season.

But with their UEFA Cup campaign still yet to be concluded, Rummenigge says the competition's extra games are taking their toll on his side.

"The only worry I have is the fact we've played twice a week for the last three months," said Rummenigge. "We looked a little heavy-legged last Saturday against Dortmund, espe-

cially in the second half, although that was to be expected."

"On the other hand, success boosts morale. The players want to win three trophies. The league is the most honest of all titles. Across 34 games in the league, the best team comes out on top."

"And if we occupy top spot from start to finish, it would be fair to say no-one deserves it more than Bayern Munich."

But Stuttgart will not be coming to the Allianz Arena to make up the numbers - they are fifth which guarantees them a UEFA Cup place, but they are just three points from a Champions League berth.

Bayern are set to be without captain Oliver Kahn who injured his thigh in Thursday night's UEFA Cup semifinal first-leg 1-1 draw with Zenit St Petersburg, while Miroslav Klose broke his nose and is also doubtful.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Hamburg v Schalke 04, Karlsruhe v Werder Bremen, Hanover 96 v Hertha Berlin, Nuremberg v Arminia Bielefeld, Energie Cottbus v Hansa Rostock, VfL Bochum v Duisburg
Sunday
Bayern Munich v VfB Stuttgart, Bayer Leverkusen v VfL Wolfsburg

C'Ron not worried

Football

AFP, London

Cristiano Ronaldo insists he will have no qualms about taking another penalty for Manchester United despite his spot-kick misery against Barcelona.

Ronaldo hit a post with his penalty early in United's goalless Champions League draw in the Nou Camp on Wednesday, but the Portugal winger has no intention of hiding from the responsibility should his team be given another.

"Next time I get a penalty, I will try and put things right. I am not scared," he said.

"I am always confident. I have 38 goals this season. It is not a problem if I miss one or two. I try to do my best in every game."

"Since I have been in Manchester I have scored 15 or 16

penalties. I think, and missed two. "No-one has said anything to me because I always try to score, to play well."

Ronaldo, who won the penalty when his header was handled by Gabriel Milito, is convinced he should have had a second after being fouled by Rafael Marquez and he was unhappy with referee Massimo Busacca's display.

"While you have to respect the decision of the referee, he did not make the best decisions," Ronaldo said. "Too many decisions went to Barcelona, he gave us nothing."

United were unable to find much attacking rhythm against Barca and now must win at Old Trafford in the second leg next Tuesday as a score draw would eliminate them on away goals.

Ronaldo is convinced the Spanish club will see a much more aggressive United in the return.

"It wasn't the best game in

Barcelona but in Manchester we will try to win," he said. "I'm sure the return game will be totally different."

"Barcelona won't keep the ball like they did in this match and we'll create more chances."

"It will be a different game and I'm sure we're going to play better. We are at home, we will have 75,000 people behind us. We will try to play good football and try to win."

Owen Hargreaves filled in impressively at right-back on Wednesday and the England midfielder agrees that United will rise to the occasion.

"We are optimistic as we will play a lot differently than we did at the Nou Camp," Hargreaves said. "We will attack Barcelona and see how they deal with it."

"They had a lot of possession but did not really penetrate us. We had a strategy and played really well."

End your battle: Benitez

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Rafa Benitez has called on Liverpool's feuding owners to resolve their differences so he can plan for the future.

American co-owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett have been at loggerheads for months and Benitez is worried he will miss out on transfer targets if there is a lack of direction from the board.

The Spanish coach talked with Hicks at Liverpool's Melwood training ground before Tuesday's Champions League semifinal against Chelsea and told the

tycoon what he needs to make the team into title challengers.

"We have two owners and a chief executive. I need to progress, I have a responsibility as manager to prepare the squad for the future, to improve the squad," Benitez said.

"I had to talk to them (the owners). It was a good, positive meeting. We have talked about targets in the transfer market and how this club must progress."

"I have not spoken to them about the ongoing situation, only how to improve and how to progress."

"It is important to sign the right players for the future that was what I wanted to talk about."

"Now we have started to progress with some of our targets. It is okay, last week and this week it is the same. We are progressing so I believe we will be stronger next season."

"You need to keep going if you want to improve that is what is really important."

Benitez wants funds to move for Aston Villa midfielder Gareth Barry and Blackburn's David Bentley and hopes the meeting with Hicks will be the start of