



(L-R) Chelsea captain John Terry, Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo, Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard and goalkeeper Petr Cech hold their awards during the draw ceremony for the 2008/2009 Champions League in Monaco on Thursday.

Real, Juve pitted together

INTERNET, Monaco

Real Madrid and resurgent Italian giants Juventus are set to meet in what looks like the toughest group of the forthcoming Champions League campaign following Thursday's draw in Monaco.

The two also confront current UEFA Cup champions Zenit St Petersburg - now another high-spending outfit - in a Group H which has Belarus champions Bate Borisov as a fourth challenger.

Defending champions Manchester United meanwhile confront Scottish champions Celtic in what will yield two great clashes between the British clubs, with Spain's Villarreal and Danish champions Aalborg the other Group E representatives.

Last season's runners-up Chelsea face AS Roma, Bordeaux and Romanians CFR Cluj in Group A, while Inter Milan and Werder Bremen will do battle in Group B along with Greek champions Panathinaikos and the first ever Cypriot outfit to contest the Champions League, Anorthosis Famagusta.

Liverpool face Dutch champions PSV Eindhoven, Marseille and the difficult Atletico Madrid in Group D, while in Group F the other French side in the draw Lyon are up against German giants Bayern Munich, Steaua Bucharest and a resurgent Fiorentina.

The fourth English side in the draw, Arsenal, are up against FC

Porto, Turkish champions Fenerbahce and Ukrainian champions Dynamo Kiev in an awkward-looking Group G, while Group C pits Barcelona and Sporting Lisbon against Basel and Shakhtar Donetsk.

Juve's administrator, Jean-Claude Blanc, said of his side's tough-looking group: "For us it's great to be welcomed back to the Champions League with a classic encounter against Real Madrid."

"But there's also Zenit, who represent the progression of East European teams. Our players need to remember that they are playing at the highest level and that Juve are back."

The all-British duel between Manchester United and Celtic repeats an encounter in the

Champions League group stages in 2006/07.

Celtic won 1-0 at home but Manchester United were 3-2 winners in the return leg at Old Trafford.

"It was a great event the last time we played," said United chief executive David Gill.

"Both clubs have passionate fans and we are looking forward to it. Last time they won (at Celtic) to qualify and we went down to the last game to ensure we went through."

"The players and the fans will already be looking to that fixture on the calendar."

Celtic chairman John Reid said: "It's fabulous for Celtic fans. There are no easy groups, there are no free passes in Europe."

"We are just proud to be Scotland's representative in there and to be playing the European champions."

Arsenal director Danny Fiszman had mixed feelings about his side's draw.

"One of the big issues for (manager) Arsene (Wenger) is the distances we have to travel. They are long trips and that's the most disappointing aspect of the draw," he said.

"But we are optimistic and confident we will get to the knockout stages."

Bayern Munich coach Juergen Klinsmann said the meeting with Fiorentina would be special for the club's Italian striker Luca Toni who joined Bayern from the Florence side in the summer of 2007.

Bayern have also unhappy memories of Lyon who beat Bayern 3-0 in 2001, although the Germans recovered to win the European title that season.

"This is a tough group and Lyon are a hard opponent. Fiorentina are attractive because of Luca Toni and Steaua Bucharest are strong on the ball," he said.

Match dates are September 16/17, September 30/October 1, October 21/22, November 4/5, November 25/26, December 9/10.

The eight group winners plus the runners-up go through to the knockout stages of the competition. Teams finishing third go into the UEFA Cup.

Rome's Stadio Olimpico will stage the Champions League final next May 27.

GROUPS

Group A Chelsea (ENG) AS Roma (ITA) Bordeaux (FRA) Cluj (ROM)	Group E Manchester United (ENG) Villarreal (ESP) Celtic (SCO) Aalborg (DEN)
Group B Inter Milan (ITA) Werder Bremen (GER) Panathinaikos (GRE) Anorthosis (CYP)	Group F Lyon (FRA) Bayern Munich (GER) Steaua Bucharest (ROM) Fiorentina (ITA)
Group C Barcelona (ESP) Sporting Lisbon (POR) FC Basel (SUI) Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)	Group G Arsenal (ENG) FC Porto (POR) Fenerbahce (TUR) Dynamo Kiev (RUS)
Group D Liverpool (ENG) PSV Eindhoven (NED) Marseille (FRA) Atletico Madrid (ESP)	Group H Real Madrid (ESP) Juventus (ITA) FC Zenit St Petersburg (RUS) BATE Borisov (BLR)

Real to keep Robinho

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid president Ramon Calderon has decided to keep Chelsea target Robinho at the club, a Spanish sports newspaper said Friday.

"He is staying in Madrid and there is no possibility of going back on that," Calderon said, according to AS.

Calderon made the decision after a plea by Real's German coach Bernd Schuster, who is counting on the Brazilian for this season.

Chelsea's Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has been keen to tie up a 27 million pounds (33.7 million euros) swoop for Robinho before the transfer window shuts on Monday and reports have said the deal would go through before the weekend.

AS published pictures of Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon and the Robinho's agent, Wagner Ribeiro, leaving a restaurant near Real's Santiago-Bernabeu stadium Wednesday night.

Real this week were unsuccessful in signing two strikers as possible replacements for Robinho - Santi Cazorla from Villarreal and David Villa from Valencia.

Real also failed in their bid to recruit Manchester United's Portuguese playmaker Cristiano Ronaldo.

The Spanish league season starts this weekend, and the transfer window closes on Monday.

Inter the team to beat

AFP, Rome



Serie A kick-off this weekend.

Inter have won the last three titles but AS Roma pushed them to the wire last season and AC Milan have recruited well during the off season, bringing in Ronaldinho, Andrei Shevchenko, Gianluca Zambrotta and Mathieu Flamini, as well as Swiss defender Philippe Senderos on loan.

But Inter insists that with Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho at the helm, Inter will still finish top of the tree.

Asked if Milan, Juventus and Roma would present the toughest opposition this season, Inter told Gazzetta dello Sport: "I also like Fiorentina but everyone will finish behind us. Inter are still the best."

Inter open their campaign with a tricky trip to Sampdoria on Saturday night and are sure to be caused problems by Italy forward Antonio Cassano.

Milan have a less demanding challenge in a home match against newly-promoted Bologna while Roma host Napoli.

Both sides will be desperate to get off to a winning start to ensure

they don't cede any early ground to Inter.

Milan scuppered their own title hopes last season by failing to win any of their first seven home league matches.

That, coupled with their participation in both the European Supercup and Club World Cup, meant that by Christmas they were already more than 20 points off the pace and with a fixture backlog facing them in January and February.

Roma's title hopes the last two seasons, in which they have finished both as bridesmaids, have been dented by dropping points against so called lesser teams so Luciano Spalletti will be hoping his new signings Julio Baptista and Jeremy Menez gel quickly, particularly with talisman Francesco Totti out of their Serie A opener.

The match of the weekend will take place in Florence where Juventus will be the visitors to Fiorentina.

Both sides have been in early

action this season as they have already played two Champions League third qualifying round matches, with both securing their passage to the lucrative group stages.

Both sides will have to readjust quickly, though, as they were celebrating midweek.

Juve have strengthened their ranks by signing Brazilian forward Amauri and Danish midfielder Christian Poulsen while Fiorentina's major activity in the transfer market was to fend off interest from Roma for their Romanian striker Adrian Mutu.

Five teams will begin the season believing they can challenge for the title but Ibrahimovic insists that with Mourinho leading them Inter are going to be even more difficult to beat than before.

"He's the most complete coach I've ever had, on the pitch and off it," said the Swede. "He's meticulous about every little detail, with us and it seems also with journalists."

"I heard him talking when he was at Chelsea and after one and a half months of knowing him I've only positive things to say."

"You can see straight away the difference to other coaches. Now there's a new spirit, the team has more confidence in itself."

Newly-promoted Chievo host Reggina while fellow newboys Lecce face a trip to Torino.

FIXTURES

Saturday Sampdoria v Inter, Udinese v Palermo	Sunday AC Milan v Bologna, AS Roma v Napoli, Atalanta v Siena, Cagliari v Lazio, Catania v Genoa, Chievo v Reggina, Fiorentina v Juventus, Torino v Lecce
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Spurs test for Chelsea

AFP, London



Frank Lampard has warned Chelsea's Premier League rivals that the Blues' combination of style and substance is potent enough to regain the title.

Luiz Felipe Scolari's side demonstrated their flair with an opening weekend rout of Portsmouth and proved they aren't afraid to mix it as well by grinding out a hard-fought victory at Wigan.

Scolari will sample the frenetic atmosphere of a London derby for the first time on Sunday when Tottenham visit Stamford Bridge, but Lampard has already seen enough to know Chelsea can cope with any challenge.

"It has been very good, with two different performances," Lampard told Chelsea's website. "Against Portsmouth I think everyone sat up and took notice of that, and Wigan was one where we had to dig in a bit more against a very physical team, who I think will cause a lot of problems for teams at home this year."

"I think it's important to take a lot from both games. Not every game in the Premier League is easy to play great, flowing football in."

Chelsea's bid to end Manchester United's two-year reign as champions is being driven by the most formidable midfield in Europe and Lampard has been blown away by the contribution from Deco, a pre-season signing

from Barcelona.

"Deco has been brilliant," he said. "Against Portsmouth he scored a great goal and then the free-kick he hit the other day (at Wigan) was a match-winning moment, it's what you want players like him in your team for. I expect more of the same from him."

Liverpool will aim to stay level with leaders Chelsea when they travel to Aston Villa on Sunday.

Rafa Benitez's side have won both their league matches so far and reached the group stages of the Champions League in midweek.

Alvaro Arbeloa believes the Reds are reaping the rewards of the fierce competition for places that ensures every player has to maintain peak form.

"You can never say that you are a first choice at this football club," Arbeloa told LFC Magazine. "If you start to think like that then you can just about guarantee that you are about to lose your place."

"It's a big fight to get into the team, it's a bigger fight to stay there."

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated) Saturday Arsenal v Newcastle (1630 GMT), Bolton v West Bromwich, Everton v Portsmouth, Hull v Wigan, Middlesbrough v Stoke, West Ham v Blackburn Sunday Aston Villa v Liverpool (1500 GMT), Chelsea v Tottenham (1230 GMT), Sunderland v Manchester City
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After three lacklustre performances to open the season, Arsenal were reinvigorated by the return of Cesc Fabregas in their midweek win over FC Twente.

Arsene Wenger's side, who host Newcastle on Saturday, dispatched the Dutch team with the kind of fluid display that has been their hallmark for the last two years.

Gael Clichy, the club's French left-back, insists the Gunners have a duty to win playing that kind of entertaining football every week.

"Of course we have to win things. That is the main objective - to win something this year," Clichy said. "But if we can do it the way we play, it is even better because football is to entertain people and to take pleasure and that's what we are doing at Arsenal."

Fulham showed us last weekend that you have to be up for every game, game after game because English football is so different than many other football in Europe.

"That was a big blow and we learn from this and hopefully it won't happen again."

Elsewhere, Bolton manager Gary Megson faces his former club West Bromwich Albion desperate for some good news after a shock League Cup exit against Northampton and serious injuries to Johan Elmander and Matt Taylor this week.

Shaun Wright-Phillips should make his second debut for Manchester City at Sunderland on Sunday after the England winger rejoined Mark Hughes's side from Chelsea.

A Hoffenheim surprise

AFP, Berlin



Shock early Bundesliga leaders Hoffenheim are looking for their third straight league win on Saturday when they tackle Bayer Leverkusen to continue their dream start to life in Germany's top tier.

Hoffenheim won their second promotion in two years after finishing as runners-up in the Bundesliga's second division last season and have caused a stir by topping the table after two rounds.

Backed by German multi-millionaire Dietmar Hopp, Hoffenheim have climbed from the lower regions of Germany's league system to take their place in the Bundesliga.

They humbled perennial strugglers Energie Cottbus 3-0 on the opening weekend, before beating fellow new-boys Borussia Moenchengladbach 1-0 last weekend.

But they face far tougher challenges in the next few weeks starting with Leverkusen on Saturday before taking on Dortmund, Stuttgart and

Werder Bremen in the following weeks.

Leverkusen are without their injured Germany goalkeeper Rene Adler who is out until the middle of September with a damaged shoulder.

But Bayer are hoping to have defender Michal Kadlec in the side after signing the 23-year-old from Sparta Prague, while Germany striker Stefan Kiessling is expected to shake off a midweek cold.

Having been signed for a reported eight million euros (11.8 million US dollars) from Bayern Munich, Hamburg's new defender Marcel Jansen is expected to make his debut on Saturday against Arminia Bielefeld.

"He has trained well with Bayern

and he could make an appearance," said Hamburg coach Martin Jol.

Less than 24 hours after Jansen left for Hamburg, Bayern announced on Thursday they had signed Italian World Cup winner Massimo Oddo on loan from AC Milan, who will train with Jurgen Klinsmann's side on Monday.

Having led the Bundesliga from start to finish last season, Bayern Munich are in the unusual position of being midtable after two draws so far this season and take on Hertha Berlin at the Allianz Arena on Sunday.

In midweek, Stuttgart played against Hungarian side Győr, while Hertha Berlin played Slovenia's Ljubljana in the UEFA Cup.

On Sunday, Stuttgart play Hanover, who have got off to a poor start with a defeat to Schalke and draw with Energie Cottbus, while Hertha are at Munich and will expect a hard battle from the German giants chasing their first league win.

Wolfsburg entertain Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday and are hoping to have 20-year-old Brazilian Cauby in their side.

The striker from second division Brazilian side Sao Caetano arrived in Germany on Thursday and Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath wants to pay 2.5 million euros for his services.

FIXTURES

Saturday Schalke 04 v VfL Bochum, VfL Wolfsburg v Eintracht Frankfurt, Bayer Leverkusen v 1899 Hoffenheim, Energie Cottbus v Borussia Dortmund, Arminia Bielefeld v Hamburg, Borussia M'gladbach v Werder Bremen Sunday Bayern Munich v Hertha Berlin, VfB Stuttgart v Hanover 96
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Barca in Real's way

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona and Real Madrid stars united to help Spain win the European championships this summer but club allegiances now come first as Xavi, Sergio Ramos, Andres Iniesta, Carles Puyol and Iker Casillas gear up for this season's title duel.

After back-to-back titles Real are targeting a third successive league crown for the first time since 1988 but old foes Barcelona have recruited a new manager and fresh faces in a desperate bid to prevent the hat-trick.

Barcelona were the last side to achieve that feat -- winning four championships in a row between 1990 and 1994 -- and new manager

Pep Guardiola was part of three of those title successes.

Guardiola has no top-flight managerial experience having just worked with the Barca B team but Barca have loosened the purse strings with 59 million euros shelled out for Alexander Hleb and Sevilla duo Daniel Alves and Seydou Keita.

With Puyol marshalling the defence and a creative midfield of Iniesta and Xavi, voted best player at the Euro 2008, Barca look strong particularly when you see their frontline of Samuel Eto'o, Thierry Henry and the mesmerising Lionel Messi.

Messi was on duty with Argentina at the Olympics so should be sharp for the season's opener at promoted Numancia on Sunday.

Real hoped Portuguese wing wizard Ronaldo would be their answer to Messi but Manchester United refused to play ball and

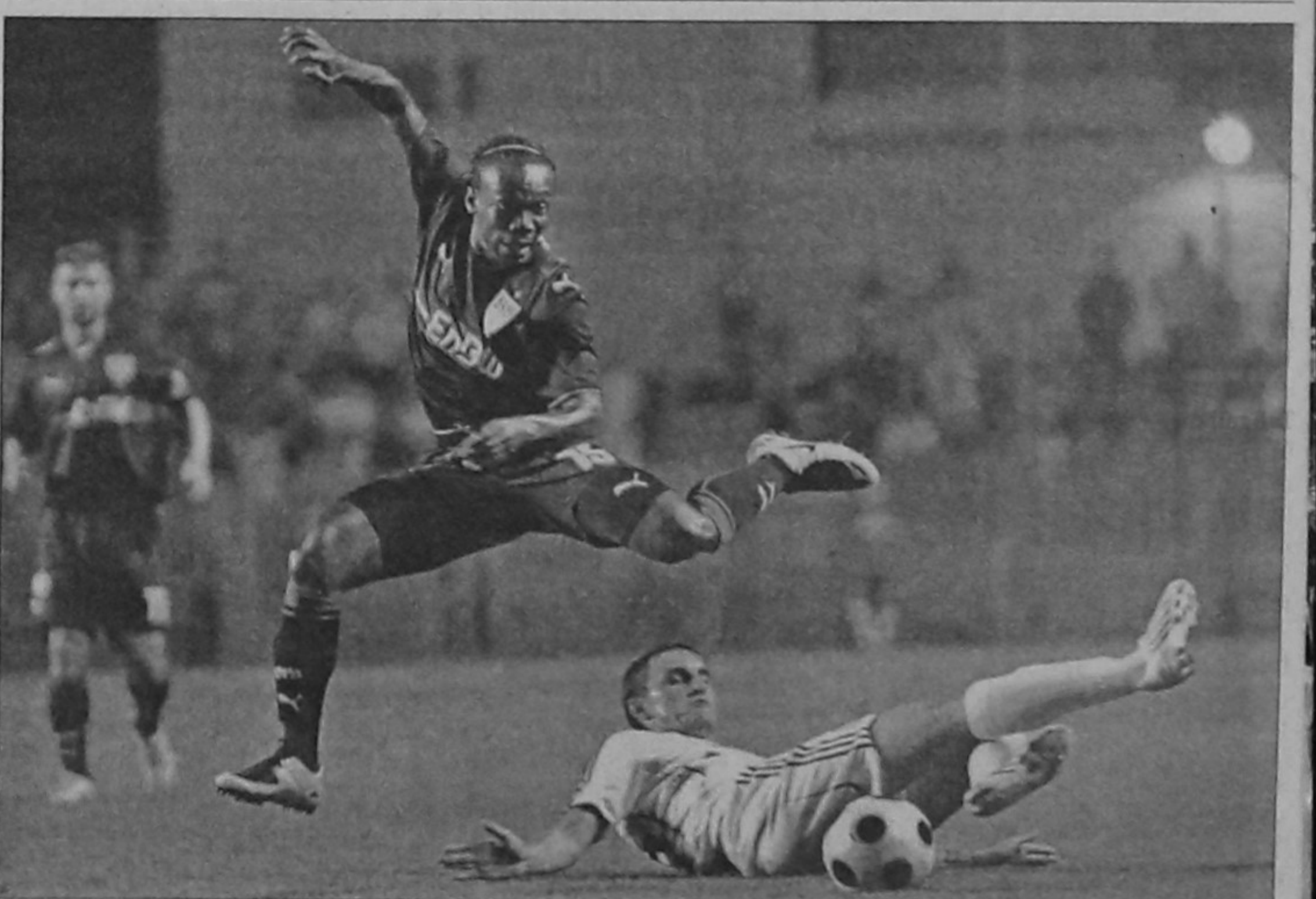
midfielder Rafael van der Vaart is their only major signing from SV Hamburg for 13 million euros.

Van der Vaart can expect to start as compatriot Wesley Sneijder is out for three months with knee ligament damage.

It is difficult to look past Real and Barca for the title but Villarreal could be considered a dark horse after they claimed the runner-up spot last season - the highest finish in the club's history.

FIXTURES

Saturday Espalyol v Valladolid 1900 GMT, Valencia v Real Mallorca 2100 GMT Sunday - all 1800 GMT unless stated Athletic Bilbao v Almeria, Atletico Madrid v Malaga, Real Betis v Recreativo, Sporting Gijon v Getafe, Racing v Sevilla, Numancia v Barcelona, Osasuna v Villarreal, Deportivo La Coruna v Real Madrid 2000 GMT



Stuttgart's Arthur Boka is slide tackled by Gyöeri Eto's Balazs Nikolov during the UEFA Cup qualifying second leg match in Győr, Hungary on Thursday. Stuttgart won 4-1. The UEFA Cup draw was held on Friday.