



Aston Villa defender Martin Laursen (R) goes airborne to score the opening goal during their UEFA Cup match against Ajax at Villa Park on Thursday. Villa won 2-1. PHOTO: AFP

More misery for Spurs

UEFA CUP

English Premiership tailenders Tottenham found no respite from their domestic woes Thursday in going down 2-0 at Italy's Udinese in their opening UEFA Cup group match.

Udinese won through with goals from Antonio Di Natale - who scored from the penalty spot after a foul by Spurs' keeper Heurelho Gomes - and Simone Pepe as the Italians emerged victorious to pile more pressure on the Londoners' coach Juande Ramos.

Ramos elected to leave playmaker David Bentley out of his squad following a magazine article in which the player described the club's start to the campaign, comprising two draws and six defeats in eight games, as "shocking".

Making matters even worse was a dismissal for Jamie O'Hara, who was booked twice in a minute.

Already reeling from the worst league start in their history Spurs, who won the maiden UEFA Cup

tournament in 1972, hardly needed Gomes making a hash of a backpass before bringing down Fabio Quagliarella after 24 minutes.

Di Natale put away the spotkick and Pepe then belatedly sealed the points for a side whose main creative spark was Arsenal target Gokhan Inler in midfield.

Spurs looked like a side short on confidence and were left to rue a Darren Bent header which he sent too close to home keeper Samir Handanovic, who then did well to stop an Aaron Lennon drive before saving one more from Bent.

How long ago it must feel for Ramos that he twice took Sevilla to the trophy in 2006 and 2007.

His old side beat Germany's VfB Stuttgart 2-0 in their encounter Thursday.

"I'm very angry because I don't like to lose," said Ramos, whose England defender Jonathan Woodgate blamed a lack of concentration and a team which he said was collectively not pulling its weight.

"We have the losing mentality - we've got to start learning quickly," he reflected.

As Ramos again tasted defeat the man he replaced at White Hart Lane, Martin Jol, emerged triumphant as his new side Hamburg, top of the Bundesliga, won 2-1 at Slovakian side MSK Zilina.

Mladen Petric, back after a virus, scored the opener on 15 minutes and his fellow Croatian international Ivica Olic bagged a second just before the break before Emil Rilke netted a consolation.

In the same group, Aston Villa edged Dutch giants Ajax 2-1 in a meeting of former European champions with Gareth Barry scoring the winner.

But England's other representative, Portsmouth, slumped to a 3-0 loss away to Portugal's Sporting Braga, the hosts' Latin American trio Luis Aguiar, Wason Renteria and Alan on target.

In the same group, David Beckham's future side AC Milan won 3-1 at Dutch outfit Heerenveen helped by a Calvin Jong-A-Pin own goal and further strikes from Gennaro Gattuso and Filippo Inzaghi.

"I am very satisfied - we did everything well, especially at the

back," said Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti.

Schalke 04 gave further cheer to German fans as they beat Paris Saint Germain 3-1 in Group A.

Kevin Kuranyi, discarded by Germany coach Joachim Loew for walking out on the squad following their World Cup qualifier against Russia, was smiling again as he scored one and made one.

Schalke, tournament winners in 1997, went 3-0 up through a Larrys Mbabiala own goal, a Kuranyi howitzer and then a Halil Altintop clincher prior to Clement Chantome's consolation.

Also off to a flier were Russia's CSKA Moscow, who swamped Group H rivals Deportivo La Coruna 3-0 with Alan Dzagoev netting twice inside three first half minutes before Brazilian Wagner Love made the win safe with the third on the hour.

Turkey's Galatasaray beat Olympiakos with former Liverpool man Harry Kewell scoring while Dutch outfit FC Twente, coached by former England boss Steve McClaren, edged Spain's Racing Santander 1-0 in Schalke's group.

Matthaus wants Ballack disciplined

Former Germany captain Lothar Matthaus said Thursday die Mannschaft coach Joachim Loew must discipline current national skipper Michael Ballack for his recent criticisms of Loew in the media here.

"Ballack's public criticism cannot be ignored by the coach of the national team," Matthaus, who captained Germany to their 1990 World Cup triumph, told website ZDF online.

"Such a thing does not belong in the public arena. I do not understand why the captain has done this."

In an interview with daily newspaper the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) on Tuesday, Germany captain Ballack criticised Loew claiming he showed a lack of respect and loyalty to his senior players.

Loew responded on Wednesday by demanding a meeting with Ballack in Germany as soon as possible for an explanation of his comments.

But Matthaus, 47, says Ballack has broken the team's unwritten code of conduct and such comments should be made within the confines of the squad behind closed doors.

"Every discussion between a senior player and the coach should happen behind locked doors," said midfielder Matthaus who won 150 caps for West Germany and Germany over 20 years.

"But Ballack does not seem to adhere to a code of conduct anymore."

"He runs everything past the media."

"The trust in him has been lost." But as the only player in the Germany team of world-class standing, Matthaus acknowledges Ballack is important to die Mannschaft's chances of winning the next World Cup in South Africa.

"Ballack at the moment is the only Germany player of world-class," said Matthaus.

"If we want to achieve something big, we can't do it without him."

"Ballack makes the difference. But what he is doing at the moment harms his position and that of the team."

And Ballack's Germany teammate, defender Arne Friedrich, says the captain should not have used the media to highlight problems within the team.

"That was not professional," the Hertha Berlin captain told the Berliner Morgenpost.

"Problems should be discussed internally, not in the media."

Kinnear extends with Magpies

Newcastle United's interim manager Joe Kinnear will sign a one-month extension to his short-term contract as owner Mike Ashley continues to seek out buyers for the club, reports said Friday.

Kinnear's reign was scheduled to end after Tuesday's home game against West Bromwich Albion. But the former Wimbledon manager said: "It's a monthly situation because I know they are in talks - who with, I have no idea."

"It is just like a rolling contract, one month after another month and then take it from there."

Kinnear, who weeks ago became embroiled in an explosive-laden rant with journalists during a first press conference for the club, says he is trying to ignore the steady stream of reports naming longer-term candidates for the job.

He added: "During the week, there were three or four managers mentioned. Gerard Houllier - there were so many, I lost count. Sven-Goran Eriksson was in there as well."

And despite early criticism of his appointment, Kinnear - revealed he is revelling in life on Tyneside.

He said: "I love it. It's the best thing I have ever done, it really is." "This is a fantastic opportunity for me to let everybody know I am back in the business."

Villarreal test for Atletico



Atletico Madrid ended a run of three consecutive defeats with the 1-1 Champions League draw against Liverpool on Wednesday and Javier Aguirre's team must now put Europe on the back burner to improve their league position, starting with Sunday's tough trip to Villarreal.

After losing to Sevilla, Barcelona and Real Madrid in their last three outings Atletico have fallen to eighth in the standings and already trail leaders Valencia by a full ten points.

The poor results have seen Atletico's Mexican manager Aguirre come under extreme pressure with speculation that Tottenham Hotspur's struggling boss Juande Ramos, who won two UEFA Cups with Sevilla, was being lined up as his replacement.

Villarreal, sitting third and still unbeaten, are a tough proposition at El Madrigal and Atletico striker Diego Forlan admits his ex-club will be a big obstacle to overcome.

"Villarreal are doing well in the league and the Champions League," said Forlan. "You notice that the coach and the players have been together a long time."

"They are also at home and that gives them an advantage as they are strong in front of their own fans."

Goals have been in short supply in the league with Villarreal scoring

just nine times in their seven games but coach Manuel Pellegrini will hope the 6-3 Champions League win over Aalborg is the start of a goal rush.

"We do not want to let this opportunity pass because it is a great chance to distance ourselves from a great team and a direct rival, that will be up around the top at the end of the season," said Villarreal midfielder Santiago Cazorla. Real Madrid were the only Spanish team to lose in the Champions League this week, tasting a 2-1 defeat at the hands of Juventus on Tuesday, and manager Bernd Schuster is hoping for home comfort when they host struggling Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

"Athletic are a strong team and they look a lot like an English team," said Dutch midfielder Wesley Sneijder. "But if we play well as we did against Juventus we won't have any problems."

Real lie fifth three points off the summit after an indifferent start to the season but Schuster has chosen

to attack match officials rather than his inconsistent stars.

The former Getafe coach tore into the referee after the Atletico game for disallowing two Real goals and Sunday's match referee Alvarez Izquierdo could come in for similar treatment.

Barcelona have the honour of being the only team in the Champions League with a maximum nine points from three matches after a 5-0 crushing of FC Basel on Wednesday.

Pep Guardiola's team are not in bad shape in the league either just three points behind pacesetters Valencia heading into Sunday's home game against Almeria at Camp Nou.

Barcelona are targeting a ninth successive win in all competitions as Guardiola stamps his mark on the team after taking over from Frank Rijkaard in the summer.

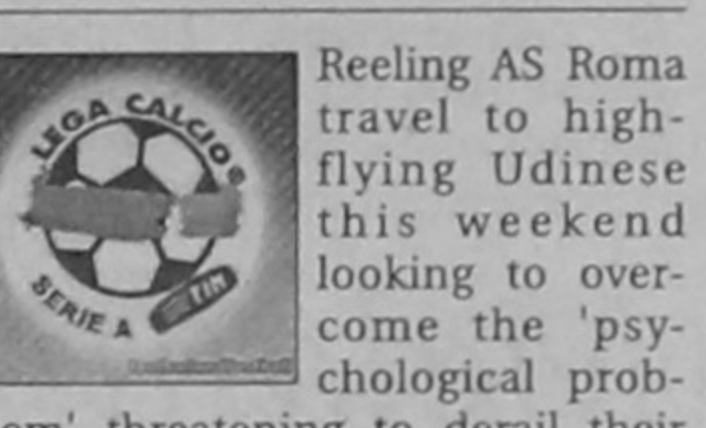
"Our focus is now on the league game at the weekend and to continue moving up the table," said Argentine star Lionel Messi. "We know what we want and we play for that in every game and never make presumptions."

Valencia have taken advantage of a kind fixture list - they have yet to play any of the top teams to surge to the summit and hope to stay there with victory over Recreativo Huelva on Saturday.

Second-placed Sevilla, two points back from Valencia, host promoted Malaga on Sunday. Malaga have recovered from a bad start and sit seventh, a point better off than Atletico.

FIXTURES	
Saturday	Osasuna v Real Betis 1800 GMT, Barcelona v Almeria 2000 GMT
Sunday	all 1500 GMT unless stated
	Recreativo Huelva v Valencia, Getafe v Valladolid, Sevilla v Malaga, Real Mallorca v Espanyol, Deportivo La Coruna v Sporting Gijon, Numancia v Racing Santander, Villarreal v Atletico Madrid 1700 GMT, Real Madrid v Athletic Bilbao 1900 GMT

Roma look to bounce back



Reeling AS Roma travel to high-flying Udinese this weekend looking to overcome the 'psychological problem' threatening to derail their season.

The capital based club are down in 14th place in Serie A after winning just two of their first seven matches and suffering the humiliation of a 4-0 thumping at home to Inter Milan last weekend.

And while they showed good signs in their Champions League clash at Chelsea on Wednesday, they still lost that 1-0, their second defeat in three European matches.

Roma's French centre-back Philippe Mexes, who is suspended for the trip north to Udine, said after the Chelsea defeat that Roma's problems were mental.

"In the last half hour we were afraid, I don't know why. Maybe it's a psychological problem," he said.

"Despite everything we're on the right path. We played well in the first half but after the break we were too negative."

"This is a bad moment but we have a lot of belief and after a first half such as that we can only believe."

Roma did play well before the break against Chelsea but they have played well in fits and bursts all season.

Their problem has been largely at the back, where they can't keep the ball out of their own net.

Only rock-bottom Reggina have conceded more goals than them in Serie A.

It is still unthinkable that Roma coach Luciano Spalletti would be replaced after guiding his team to second in the table and Coppa Italia success in each of the last two seasons, despite having no money to spend.

But the memories of Italian chairmen and presidents are notoriously short and Roma need to start producing some results, quickly.

They are already nine points off champions and leaders Inter and look unlikely to produce a championship challenge.

Not so their hosts Udinese, though, who sit second in the table, just two points off Inter and looking strong in both attack and defence.

They warmed up for the match with a 2-0 win over Tottenham in the UEFA Cup on Thursday.

Another struggling team desperate for three points is Juventus, who host Torino in the Turin derby on Saturday.

Juventus have not won in four matches in Serie A but earned a highly impressive 2-1 success over Real Madrid in the Champions League on Tuesday.

Torino for their part have lost their last three league matches and sit only a point above the drop zone.

Under fire Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri insists that he can guide his side through the minefield despite them sitting down in 12th in Serie A.

"The lads believe in their coach even in difficult times," he said. "I know the club and the players are behind me, together we can get out of this situation."

Meanwhile, an unlikely top of the table clash takes place in Rome on Sunday as fourth-placed Napoli visit fifth-placed Lazio with either side capable of taking top spot with victory.

Lazio would be top but for a dire 3-1 defeat at lowly Bologna last time out while Napoli are coming off a stunning comeback 2-1 win over Juve.

"The beauty of football is that on Sunday there's another opportunity," said Lazio's Macedonia striker Goran Pandev.

"We're disappointed (with the Bologna defeat) but now we have Napoli coming up and we're not afraid of them."

In other games Inter host Genoa while AC Milan travel to Atalanta.

FIXTURES	
Saturday	Juventus v Torino (1930 GMT), Siena v Catania (1700)
Sunday	(1400 GMT unless stated)
	Atalanta v AC Milan, Cagliari v Chievo, Inter Milan v Genoa, Lazio v Napoli, Reggina v Lecce, Sampdoria v Bologna, Udinese v AS Roma, Palermo v Fiorentina (1930)

L'pool mull Torres gamble



Rafael Benitez is contemplating one of the biggest gambles of his career as he mulls over whether to throw Fernando Torres into battle in the Premier League summit meeting with Chelsea this weekend.

The Spanish striker has been sidelined for over a week with a slight tear in his hamstring but he is close to a full recovery and Benitez could be tempted to risk him for a clash he believes could be critical to his side's aspirations to claiming their first English title in 18 years.

The midweek draw with Atletico Madrid underlined the extent to which the absence of Torres blunts Liverpool's cutting edge and Benitez also has concerns over the fitness of Robbie Keane, who had to come off with a groin injury in the Spanish capital.

Liverpool go into Sunday's clash unbeaten this season and level on points with their London rivals at the top of the Premier League table.

But Benitez is acutely aware of how important matches between England's big four are in deciding the destiny of the title.

Anfield victory over United has raised morale -- and expectations -- on Merseyside.

Chelsea have injury problems of their own with Didier Drogba, Michael Ballack and Michael Essien all sidelined, although Joe Cole and Ashley Cole may have emerged from the treatment room in time for Sunday.

The injury problems have not prevented Luiz Felipe Scolari's side from putting together a run of six consecutive clean sheets and goalkeeper Petr Cech believes his side's confidence at Stamford Bridge, where Chelsea are unbeaten in 74 matches, will give them a vital edge.

"Liverpool did not play well at the beginning of the season but they kept winning and that shows their strength," the Czech international said.

"At the moment they have some momentum with but we are controlling games well and we're at home, which I think could be the key."

Manchester United will aim to close the gap on the top two on Saturday, when Wayne Rooney goes back to his old club Everton in search of his 100th goal in club football.

The England forward, who turned 23 this week, has been in stunning form of late and his midweek strike against Celtic made it nine goals in seven matches.

"To reach 100 there, with my Everton background, would be a sweet moment," Rooney admitted.

Newcastle will be without the injured Michael Owen again as they seek to give their fans something to cheer about in their north-east derby clash at Sunderland.

Midfielder Joey Barton could make his first start since serving 74 days in prison for assault as the Magpies go in search of three points that could lift them out of the relegation zone.

Blackburn, who may hand Benni McCarthy his first start of the season, entertain Middlesbrough while West Brom battle fellow top-flight newcomers Hull, currently sitting third in the table, in Saturday's other match.

Fourth-placed Arsenal are not in action until Sunday, when they make the short trip to West Ham.

North London rivals Tottenham meanwhile go into their home clash with Bolton knowing that even a victory will not be enough to lift them off the bottom of the table.

Bayern hunt Wolfsburg



Bayern Munich attempt to prove their win over Fiorentina in the Champions League was no fluke when they take on Wolfsburg this weekend while surprise package Hoffenheim aim to down leaders Hamburg.

Defending champions Bayern picked up their first win in four league games last Saturday when they poached a late 1-0 win at Karlsruhe before beating Fiorentina 3-0 at Munich's Allianz Arena on Tuesday.

But captain Mark van Bommel says the team now need three more points against Wolfsburg in Munich on Saturday to improve on their lowly position of 11th in the

Bundesliga.

"We are playing again like we did last year," said van Bommel recalling how Bayern finished undefeated in the league last season.

"Everyone knows what he has to do and the spirit has raised in the team."

Defeats to both Werder Bremen and Hanover in September had seen Bayern slide down the table and coach Jurgen Klinsmann came under fire.

But Wolfsburg - coached by former Bayern boss Felix Magath - will not make life easy as they are fifth in the table.

"We must try to beat Wolfsburg, but it will not be an easy game for us," said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

"Wolfsburg have improved dramatically in the last year and invested heavily, they are a team to be taken seriously."

Bayern will be without defender Philipp Lahm who is in a plaster cast after damaging his ankle against Fiorentina.

While Wolfsburg will be missing Italy World Cup winner Cristian Zaccardo who also has an ankle injury, but his Azzurri teammate Andrea Barzagli should be fit to play in the defence.

On Sunday, high-flying league leaders Hamburg face second-placed Hoffenheim, who were only promoted to the Bundesliga last season.

Senegal striker Demba Ba, who has five goals from eight games so far this season, is struggling to shake off a bout of flu.

While Martin Jol will review his side after Thursday night's UEFA Cup tie against MSK Zilina, while Stuttgart coach Armin Veh will do the same after his side play FC Sevilla ahead of Sunday's league visit of VfL Bochum.

Sixth-placed Schalke 04 have less than 48 hours between their UEFA Cup clash with Paris St Germain on Thursday and Saturday's visit of third-from-bottom Arminia Bielefeld.

Both midfielders Carlos Grossmueller and Gustavo Varela were demoted to the reserve team in midweek for disciplinary reasons while Germany defender Christian Pander is still struggling with a calf injury.

Referee Michel ends career

Slovak referee Lubos Michel, who was in charge of the 2008 Champions League final between Manchester United and Chelsea, has decided to retire for personal and health reasons, the Slovak Football Association said on Thursday.

The 40-year-old underwent Achilles tendon surgery after long-standing problems, which ruled him out for last week's World Cup qualifier between Belgium and Spain.

The referee, whose international career started in 1994, took part in the Euro 2008 despite a planned three-month break due to health problems, after appearances at the 2002 and 2006 World Cups.

Michel's name also appeared on the list of referees for the next World Cup in South Africa in 2010.

The teacher by profession was in charge of 50 Champions League clashes, including two semifinals, and of the UEFA Cup final between Porto and Celtic in 2003.

'I deserve Ballon d'Or'

Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo believes he deserves to win this year's prestigious Ballon d'Or.

Speaking in an interview published in Italy's Gazzetta dello Sport on Friday, the Portuguese pin-up said he should be the favourite to land both the Ballon d'Or and FIFA's world player of the year award.

Last season Ronaldo was in stunning form, scoring 42 goals in all competitions and winning the Premier League and Champions League double with United.

He also finished as the European Golden Boot winner -- having scored 31 Premier League goals -- and scored in the Champions League final in Moscow.

"Honestly, I feel calm," he said. "Two or three others deserve the Ballon d'Or. But if you evaluate what each one did over the course

of the whole season I believe I did more than everyone else."

"What else do I have to do to win for the Ballon d'Or and FIFA award?"

The Ballon d'Or is voted for by



CRISTIANO RONALDO

As well as Ronaldo, Barcelona's Argentine wizard Lionel Messi is also being touted to succeed AC Milan's Kaka as the holder of both titles.

Ronaldo has already replaced Kaka as winner of the UEFA Cup footballer of the year prize.

Now the Portuguese flyer is looking forward to even more club success with United, having agreed to stay at Old Trafford despite intense interest from Real Madrid during the close season.

"Until now no team has retained the Champions League, sooner or later that has to change, it could happen this time," he said.

"Manchester United have the potential to do it again."

When asked about United's most likely rivals this season, Ronaldo upset the Italian newspaper by failing to mention Italy's top side.

Having listed Chelsea, Real Madrid, Arsenal and Juventus, he was asked about Inter Milan.

"Ah yes, also Inter," he replied.