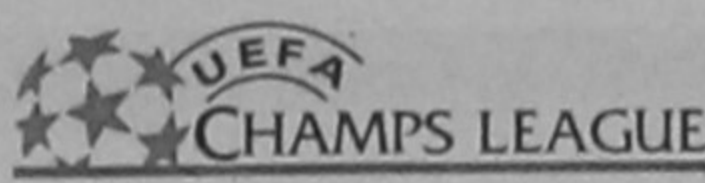




Barcelona players jog during a training session at Nou Camp on Monday on the eve of their Champions League match against Basel.

PHOTO: AFP

Rome awaits Chelsea



AFP, Paris

Both Chelsea and Liverpool can pretty much assure themselves of a place in the Champions League knockout stages on Tuesday with victories over AS Roma and Atletico Madrid respectively.

Victory for Chelsea, who will travel to Italy full of beans after thrashing Sunderland 5-0 at the weekend, would put them on 10 points and even were Bordeaux to beat Romanian side Cluj it would need the latter side to win their final two matches and Chelsea lose both their for the Londoners to miss out.

Liverpool, who will be looking to bounce back after their unfortunate 2-1 defeat to Spurs in the Premier League on Saturday, for their part need a win at Anfield, combined with a PSV Eindhoven loss to Marseille, which would guarantee the top two finish needed to reach the last 16.

Chelsea look to have the easier of the tasks given Roma's appalling form at the moment which has seen them lose six of their first nine Serie A matches and their last four.

Their coach Luciano Spalletti, who has guided them to the runner's up spot in the past two seasons, has also been given the dreaded vote of confidence. "Spalletti is not in discussion."

That's the fact of the matter and that's the result we've arrived at for now," said technical director Bruno Conti.

"But we are united and I always repeat to our lads that we can't forget what we've done over the last three years.

"We need to talk less and concentrate on events. Hence the retreat continues because on Tuesday we have a huge match in the Champions League at home to Chelsea and we can win if we remain united."

The team have been hiding away in a hotel for nearly a week which one could interpret as resembling a siege-like mentality.

That should be good news for Chelsea's unpredictable French striker Nicolas Anelka, who scored a fine hat-trick in the defeat over Sunderland and has got the nod for the Roma clash ahead of fit-again Ivory Coast star Didier Drogba.

"Drogba is back but my decision against Roma is easy," said manager Luiz Felipe Scolari.

"Anelka is in better condition so he plays," added the Brazilian maestro, who will have to do without the injured Ashley Cole.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez looks set to throw Spanish striker Fernando Torres into the fray against his former side after he missed their first clash because of injury.

"Fortunately, Fernando is ready to play," Benitez said. "I don't know

if he will start, but he will definitely be on the bench, barring anything unexpected.

"Clearly he is very important to us. He can win games when we are not playing well. He can change games."

Benitez is clearly hoping that Liverpool can seal the deal on Tuesday and then be able to relax a bit before the knockout stages.

"Clearly we want to be qualified for the knockout stages as quickly as we can and a win on Tuesday will almost certainly settle that," he said.

"But Madrid are a fine side, and away from home they are very dangerous on the counter-attack with some outstanding players of pace and quality."

The hosts will be especially wary of Portuguese international Simao

who has made a habit of scoring against them once for Benfica and then in their first match a fortnight ago, and against a side that the 29-year-old has been linked with in the past.

However despite still wanting to play in England one day Simao realises how important the Champions League is to Atletico after being absent from it for so long.

"It's really important for the club, as it gives us a very positive image," he told ufa.com. "It's a very important competition and all the best players want to play in it."

By contrast to their cross channel neighbours the two French sides in action are in desperate need of victories to keep their hopes of qualifying alive.

Marseille, who are pointless, host PSV on the back of a morale boosting 3-1 win over St Etienne at the weekend and certainly if they play as they did in the opening match against Liverpool then they can think of claiming all three points.

Bordeaux, though, lost to Nancy in the league and coach Laurent Blanc has made it clear to his side what he expects of them when they travel to Cluj - another win over the Romanians.

"The defeat to Nancy was a very negative thing for us," confessed the former France central defender. "Now we have to rebound in the Champions League that is imperative."

FIXTURES

Tuesday
Group A: CFR Cluj (ROM) v Bordeaux (FRA)
AS Roma (ITA) v Chelsea (ENG)
Group B: Anorthosis (CYP) v Inter Milan (ITA)
Werder Bremen (GER) v Panathinaikos (GRE)
Group C: Sporting Lisbon (POR) v Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)
FC Barcelona (ESP) v FC Basel (SUI)
Group D: Liverpool (ENG) v Atletico Madrid (ESP)
Marseille (FRA) v PSV Eindhoven (NED)

Maradona eager to start

SOCCERNET

Argentina general manager Carlos Bilardo has revealed new coach Diego Maradona cannot wait to take over the reins of the national team.

Maradona is set to be confirmed as the new Albicelestes boss on Tuesday after a meeting of the Argentinian Football Association's executive committee.

And former Argentina boss Bilardo, who will assist the 48-year-old, claims he is anxious to start.

"Maradona is fine, he's anxious, as I was when I was named coach in 1983-84," Bilardo told Sky Italia.

"He's anxious to start, to see the players and talk to everyone, both those who play in Argentina and those who play abroad."

"This is Maradona's desire, he has always said that he wants to be Argentina coach."

"Now he has this opportunity and I see he's fine. Time will tell whether he is capable or not."

Bilardo coached Argentina from 1983-90 with Maradona the key man in his side as the Albicelestes won the 1986 World Cup and reached the final four years later.

Leading F1 title winners

AFP, Sao Paulo

Leading Formula One title winners after the conclusion of the 2008 season here on Sunday

7 world titles: Michael Schumacher (GER): 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004

5: Juan Manuel Fangio (ARG): 1951, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957

4: Alain Prost (FRA): 1985, 1986, 1989, 1993

3: Jack Brabham (AUS): 1959, 1960, 1966; Jackie Stewart (GBR): 1969, 1971, 1973; Nikki Lauda (AUT): 1975, 1977, 1984; Nelson Piquet (BRA): 1981, 1983, 1987; Ayrtton Senna (BRA): 1988, 1989, 1991

2: Alberto Ascari (ITA): 1952, 1953; Graham Hill (GBR): 1962, 1968; Jim Clark (GBR): 1963, 1965; Emerson Fittipaldi (BRA): 1972, 1974; Mika Hakkinen (FIN): 1998, 1999; Fernando Alonso (ESP): 2005, 2006

1: Giuseppe Farina (ITA): 1950; Mike Hawthorn (GBR): 1958; Phil Hill (USA): 1961; John Surtees (GBR): 1964; Denny Hulme (NZL): 1967; Jochen Rindt (AUT): 1970; James Hunt (GBR): 1976; Mario Andretti (USA): 1978; Jody Scheckter (RSA): 1979; Alan Jones (AUS): 1980; Keke Rosberg (FIN): 1982; Nigel Mansell (GBR): 1992; Damon Hill (GBR): 1996; Jacques Villeneuve (CAN): 1997; Kimi Raikkonen (FIN): 2007; Lewis Hamilton (GBR): 2008

Toni out of C League

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich will definitely be without star striker Luca Toni when they travel to face the Italian's former club AC Fiorentina in the Champions League on Wednesday.

"The recovery process hasn't gone as quickly as we initially hoped it would," explained Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann, "so Luca Toni is definitely out of the away trip to Fiorentina."

Toni, 31, sustained painful bruising to the ribs and stretched a stomach muscle in Bayern's 1-0 away win against Bundesliga rivals Karlsruher SC on 18 October.

Real lose ground

AFP, Madrid



Reigning champions Real Madrid lost ground on league leaders Barcelona after dropping two points in a 1-1 draw with Almeria on Sunday.

Argentine Pablo Piatti equalised with nine minutes left to deny Real victory after captain Raul Gonzalez had put them ahead shortly before half-time with his fifth goal of the season.

Real now sit third two points behind Barcelona who crushed Malaga 4-1 on Saturday to record their seventh successive league win.

"The draw is okay but we feel that we have dropped two points," said Real coach Bernd Schuster.

"We have the quality to finish off games and had some counter attacks that we didn't take full advantage of. I was happy with the attitude of the team but we failed to get the second goal and that proved decisive."

Valencia are level on 20 points with Real while Villarreal are a point ahead in second after a 4-1 rout of Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

Real's next match is at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday when they host Juventus in the Champions League and Schuster will hope for better defensive concentration.

Real were without Dutch forward Ruud van Nistelrooy, struggling with a knee injury, and Spanish international Ruben de la Red, 23, who was still in shock after collapsing and fainting on the pitch during Real's midweek cup game.

Sergio Ramos was back in the starting line-up after making up

with Schuster who dropped him last weekend for critical comments he made in a newspaper interview.

Under Unai Emery, now coach at Valencia, Almeria had beaten Real 2-0 in the corresponding fixture last season so Real knew what to expect.

Raul produced a great header on 38 minutes from a Gonzalo Higuain cross to put the visitors ahead but Piatti levelled after defensive cock-ups from Christoph Metzelder and Ramos.

Earlier Sevilla were left to rue the sending-off of Brazilian striker Luis Fabiano as the ten-men visitors surrendered a two-goal lead to lose 3-2 at Valladolid as they crashed to a second successive league defeat.

Sevilla looked to be cruising holding a 2-0 lead after 24 minutes following goals from Renato and Jesus Navas but Fabiano, returning after an injury lay-off, was dismissed for two bookable offences just after the hour mark.

It proved the turning point in the match as Valladolid used the extra man to pull level and Uruguayan Nestor Cannobio scored his second

goal of the game on 63 minutes to seal a comeback win. Sevilla coach Manolo Jimenez was furious about the dismissal of Fabiano - his only fit striker at the moment.

"I know refereeing is difficult but the first yellow card was absurd and I don't know what happened with the second caution," said Jimenez.

"How can the referee think Luis Fabiano is wasting time in the 23rd minute while we are winning 2-0? No-one wastes time in the 23rd minute."

Fabiano's second caution was for diving in the penalty area on 34 minutes. Sevilla are now five points behind league leaders Barcelona in fifth.

In fact it caps a miserable week for Jimenez's team who suffered a 1-0 first leg Spanish Cup defeat to minnows Ponferradina in midweek. After nine games it is a surprise that none of the promoted teams are in the bottom three.

Two league newcomers Numancia and Sporting Gijon faced off on Sunday and the latter came out on top with a 3-1 victory that lifts them to 10th spot.

It was a fourth win on the spin for Gijon and coach Manolo Preciado was understandably upbeat. "Who would have thought this would have happened a month ago!" enthused Preciado. "Apart from the top teams how many sides are capable of winning four consecutive matches in this division?"

Osasuna certainly aren't and they continue to prop up the 20-strong table after a 1-0 defeat by Espanyol on Sunday.

A goal from Raul Tamudo after an hour condemned Osasuna to another loss and they are still to win in the league this season.

The Romanians in three days time. Lyon have now put together two victories in a row, following their 2-0 win over Sochaux in midweek, which followed two draws and a defeat.

Puel said afterwards: "We put in a serious and well-executed performance and never let Le Mans play their game. It was important to score the second goal to make sure we kept in charge of the match."

"It also meant players could conserve their energy, particularly for the Champions League match on Wednesday which will come up very quickly. We now need to put an emphasis on recuperation because players have to be able to play one match after another."

Le Mans, who led by two goals before losing 3-2 in the same fixture last season, were holding their own early on till a wonderful solo goal from Benzema.

A jinking run down the right saw him feint to go inside his defender, before he cut out to the right and hit a chipped shot over keeper Johann Pele in-off the far post in a simply sublime piece of skill after 21 minutes.

Juninho, benefiting as the ball spun randomly to him in Le Mans's area, took his time as he aimed and then slotted the ball through keeper Pele's legs for the second goal 11 minutes after the break.

Monaco's Korean star Park Chu-young meanwhile scored his side's final goal in a 3-2 victory at Le Havre in an earlier match on Sunday.

Lyon, on 27 points from 12 matches, lead the league table by four points from Marseille and by six from both Bordeaux, who lost 1-0 at struggling Nancy, and Toulouse, who lost 1-0 at home to Caen.

Adriano left out

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan forward Adriano's punishment for turning up late to training is set to continue as coach Jose Mourinho left him out of the squad for Tuesday's Champions League trip to Anorthosis Famagusta.

The Brazilian had been a regular partner for Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic but has found himself out in the wilderness since turning up late for training at the beginning of the week.

He was left out of the squad for the last two Serie A matches and now also misses the trip to Cyprus for the group B match. On Friday Mourinho had blasted Adriano for his lack of professionalism.

"In the last few months if there's someone who has tried to take care of him, not only as a coach but also as a colleague, it's definitely me," said the Portuguese former Chelsea boss.

"But there comes a time, especially when you are in charge of a group of 29 players, that you can no longer afford to give someone special treatment or more liberties than any of the others."

"In my opinion, the principle of the group is fundamental. The players have to know that."

Argentine forward Julio Cruz, however, is back in the squad after he too was dropped for the last two Serie A matches for failing to follow Mourinho's on-pitch orders.

However, Cruz's return could partly be due to the fact that with Adriano out and both Hernan Crespo and Victor Obinna not figuring among Inter's list of 25 players available for the Champions League, without the Argentine Mourinho would have few options up front.

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AFP, Rome



AC Milan went top of Serie A for the first time in four years after a late own-goal by Argentine forward German Denis

gave them a 1-0 victory against 10-man Napoli at the San Siro on Sunday.

Udinese are a point behind in second after fighting back for a 2-2 draw at home to Genoa while Inter Milan, who beat Reggina 3-2 on Saturday, are third with Napoli dropping to fourth.

The defeat was harsh on visitors Napoli who had Cristian Maggio dismissed and deserved more for a performance full of heart and belief.

But Milan midfielder Clarence Seedorf said it was good to finally be back on top for the first time since May 2004, when Milan last won the scudetto.

"It's been a bit too long since we were top, we've been under pressure for a long time but now we're top," he said.

"Now let the good times roll. However I believe that Juve are coming back strongly and Inter are a class team."

"It's going to be a great title race right to the finish."

Napoli forward Ezequiel Lavezzi had the best chances in the first period but his fierce left-foot drive on 25 minutes was saved by Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati and four minutes before the break, he was again denied by Abbiati before Daniele Bonera whipped the

rebound off his toe before he could slot home.

Napoli's hopes suffered a massive blow just before the break, though, when Maggio was sent off for a second booking.

It meant the visitors would have to play the entire second period a man down and coach Edy Reja sacrificed attacking Slovakia midfielder Marek Hamsik in favour of defender Salvatore Aronica.

As expected Milan dominated the play after the break and Marco Borriello twice came close in quick succession before world player of the year Kaka shuddered the post with a rasping shot on 72 minutes.

And moments later substitute Pato missed a header from four yards out after he was left completely unmarked at a free-kick.

The hosts were piling on the pressure and a deflected shot from Kaka just missed the far post.

Six minutes from time the referee made a shocking decision awarding a penalty to Milan for a handball against Michele Pazienza that was both outside the area and totally involuntary from a ball fired at him from close range.

Justice was done as Gennaro Iezzo brilliantly saved Kaka's penalty but only a minute later Denis flicked a Ronaldo-free kick past Iezzo to break Neapolitan hearts.

In Udine, the hosts got off to a great start after just four minutes as Gaetano D'Agostino scored from the spot following a foul by Domenico Criscito on Antonio Floro Flores.

Genoa were level on 64 minutes as Diego Milito scored from the spot after a soft penalty given

against Aleksander Lukovic when he tangled with Anthony Vanden Borre. Three minutes later a classy finish by substitute Giuseppe Sculli put the visitors in front.

But Italy striker Fabio Quagliarella restored parity by flicking home a cross from international teammate Simone Pepe.

After the match, Udinese coach Pasquale Marino dismissed talk of the title.

"I was enjoying myself whilst it was 1-0 but then once we were behind it's normal that things were more difficult for us," he said.

"We're not thinking about being top because we know that it's impossible for us to win the championship."

In other games Fiorentina failed to move into the top three as they lost 1-0 at Siena.

Siena's Liechtenstein forward Mario Frick had already hit the post with the goal gaping before Moroccan Houssine Kharja sealed the three points 14 minutes from time.

Lazio are just two points off top in fourth now after they beat Catania 1-0 at home courtesy of a Pasquale Foggia strike five minutes from time.

Cagliari continued their resurgence as they came back from a goal down to beat Bologna 5-1 at home.

Since losing their first five games of the season, Cagliari now have 10 points from their last five matches and the five goals were also as many as they had scored in their previous nine games put together.

Matrix accepts libel damages

SOCCERNET

Italian defender Marco Materazzi has accepted substantial undisclosed damages over Daily Mail articles which said that he has used vile racist abuse to insult French captain Zinedine Zidane.

Materazzi, who currently plays for Inter Milan, was not at London's High Court for the settlement of his libel case against Associated Newspapers.

His counsel, Jane Phillips, told Mr Justice Eady that, in July 2006, in its coverage of the World Cup Final, the newspaper published a series of items accompanied by photos, including one of Materazzi being head-butted by Zidane, captioned "Revealed: the insult that made Zidane sear red".

She added that the articles stated quite wrongly that Materazzi, who scored one of the crucial penalties which secured an Italian victory, had used vile racist abuse during the match and called Zidane "the son of a terrorist whore".

From July to December that year, it also published articles on its website which included similar defamatory material.

Ms Phillips said that the newspaper accepted that all of the allegations were wholly untrue and that there was no question of Materazzi having said anything of a racist nature to Zidane such as to goad him.

Jonathan Price, for Associated Newspapers, said that it offered its apologies for the distress and embarrassment caused, and had agreed to pay Materazzi substantial damages and his costs.



Milan forward Ronaldinho (R) controls the ball under pressure from Napoli defender Fabio Santacroce during their Serie A encounter at San Siro on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Gardner inspires Bolton

AFP, Bolton



Jamaican international Ricardo Gardner inspired Bolton to a much-needed win here on Sunday as they beat Manchester City 2-0 in their Premier League clash.

Gardner's first Premier League goal for six years 13 minutes from time and then a Richard Dunne own goal two minutes from the final whistle, which was created by Gardner who had come on as a second-half substitute, saw Bolton move off the bottom of the table and

leave Newcastle as the tailenders.

Gardner struck in the second-half - Bolton's first goal after almost 400 minutes - after Robinho lost possession and Greta Steinsson motored down the flank and delivered a perfect ball into the box which the Jamaican joyfully accepted and tucked it past City keeper Joe Hart.

The hosts then wrapped up the points as the unfortunate Dunne turned Gardner's low cross into his own net to give Bolton's embattled manager Gary Megson a rare experience of not being booed by the home fans.

The points as they had had what they felt valid appeals for a penalty earlier in the half when Matthew Taylor went down after being challenged by Ireland defender Kevin Nolan but their protests were waved aside by Mike Riley.

Neither goalkeeper had been in the action much prior to that though both had when called upon stepped up to the plate with Hart denying Bolton skipper Kevin Nolan when he was clean through on goal.

Bolton keeper Jussi Jaaskelainen had also been firm when denying Bolton Ireland and Ched Evans had had chances in the first-half.

PHOTO: AFP