

# Showdown in London

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger has billed Saturday's showdown between Arsenal and Manchester United as one of the summit meetings between England's big four that will decide this season's Premier League title battle.

That assertion is backed up by the stats that show United took 13 points out of a possible 18 from their meetings with Liverpool, Chelsea and the Gunners last season -- a haul that effectively kept the trophy at Old Trafford.

With Wenger's Arsenal having lost three times already this season -- leaving them six points adrift of leaders Chelsea -- they would appear to be the side with most to lose in Saturday's lunchtime encounter.

But United's most seasoned campaigner, Ryan Giggs, believes Arsenal will still be a threat regardless of whether or not United emerge from the Emirates with three points.

"When you look at the quality Arsenal have, I don't think we can finish off their title hopes on Saturday," said the Welshman, who effectively booked United's place in the last 16 of the Champions League with his late equaliser at Celtic on Wednesday.

Giggs recognises that Arsenal have been hit hard by the combination of injury and suspension that

have deprived them of strikers Emmanuel Adebayor and Robin van Persie for Saturday's match, as well as making Theo Walcott a doubtful starter.

But he insisted: "They have got a few players out at the moment - but all four top teams, if they are there or thereabouts, are capable of going on a run. That has always been the case."

"I expect us all to be involved at the end. We are going to have losses of form and not get the results we want. Hopefully we have had our poor spell."

None of the top four have been entirely convincing of late: Liverpool's unbeaten start in the league ended at Tottenham last week while leaders Chelsea were well-beaten by Roma in midweek.

Luiz Felipe Scolari's men will seek to pick up the pieces at Blackburn on Sunday with scathing criticism from skipper John Terry still ringing in their ears.

Terry is hoping the Roma setback

## FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)  
**Saturday**  
Arsenal v Man Utd (1245 GMT), Hull City v Bolton, Liverpool v West Brom, Sunderland v Portsmouth, West Ham v Everton, Wigan v Stoke (1245 GMT)  
**Sunday**  
Aston Villa v Middlesbrough, Blackburn v Chelsea (1330 GMT), Fulham v Newcastle (1600 GMT), Manchester City v Tottenham

# Real look for form boost

AFP, Madrid



After dropping two points at Almeria and losing to Juventus in the Champions League midweek, champions Real Madrid need to get back to winning ways against Malaga at home on Saturday.

The Bernabeu fans applauded Alessandro Del Piero after his brace helped Juve to a 2-0 win Wednesday -- a result which leaves Real struggling to reach the last 16 -- but they hope to be applauding their own players this weekend.

Real are two points behind leaders Barcelona and experienced midfielder Guti called on his teammates to up the ante.

"We have to improve a lot of things defensively and offensively," Guti said. "We are at 50 per cent at the moment and we need a morale boost."

"This squad has won two successive league titles and with the team we have we should aspire to win the championship again. We have to come out of this difficult situation together."

Dutch winger Arjen Robben will be out for five to six weeks after injuring his right foot in the warm-up to the Juventus game, giving manager Bernd Schuster another headache.

Barcelona, who qualified for the knockout stage of the Champions League with a 1-1 draw against FC Basel on Tuesday, have won seven straight league games to lead the

standings.

But manager Pep Guardiola continues to apply the "take each game as it comes" mentality going into Saturday's home match with Valladolid.

"We are leaders with a point advantage over Villarreal and two over Real so I am happy," explained Guardiola.

"We have done something right to get to the top but we can't forget that there are 87 points to play for and it's a long title race."

An injury to key midfielder Andres Iniesta was the black spot from their Champions League outing against Basel with the Spanish international expected to be out for up to six weeks with a leg injury.

"Iniesta is the best player in the world in his position and we are going to miss him," said teammate Samuel Eto'o. "He is unique as a footballer and person."

Iniesta is now likely to miss the first 'El Clasico' of the season against arch rivals Real Madrid in mid-December.

Villarreal, a point behind Barca, are the only team in the league yet to

## FIXTURES

**Saturday**  
Real Madrid v Malaga, Barcelona v Valladolid  
**Sunday**  
Deportivo La Coruna v Espanyol, Racing Santander v Sporting Gijon, Real Mallorca v Athletic, Osasuna v Atletico Madrid, Numancia v Real Betis, Villarreal v Almeria, Sevilla v Recreativo Huelva, Getafe v Valencia

will serve as a "kick up the backside" for a squad he accused of lacking fight and desire in the Italian capital.

"We just sort of strolled and went there thinking we were better than them when clearly we were not," he said. "The quicker we forget about it and wipe the slate clean the better."

Liverpool, who needed a stoppage time penalty to salvage a Champions League draw at home to Atletico Madrid in midweek, will expect to return to winning ways when West Brom visit Anfield on Saturday.

Rafael Benitez would never admit it but it is highly likely that Liverpool's Spanish manager will be breathing a sigh of relief over the anticipated return from injury of Fernando Torres, whose absence for the last few weeks has severely blunted the Reds' cutting edge.

Tottenham's quest to escape the relegation zone has been boosted by a haul of seven points from their three matches since Harry Redknapp took charge last month.

But Spurs remain rooted to the bottom of the table and Sunday's trip to Manchester City will provide a stiff test of the extent of the revival engineered by Redknapp.

Despite his extraordinary start to life at White Hart Lane, Redknapp is taking nothing for granted given that just six points currently separate his side from Everton in seventh place.

"I've never seen a tighter league and it might take more points than usual to stay up," he warned this week.

# Maradona meets with Messi

INTERNET, undated

New Argentina coach Diego Maradona admitted he had a "very positive" meeting with Lionel Messi but was unable to speak to Barcelona president Joan Laporta about releasing the forward for the upcoming friendly against Scotland.

A pre-existing agreement between the Argentina Football Association (AFA) and Barcelona means Messi is unable to play in friendlies for his country apart from very special occasions.

Even though Maradona said he will respect the verbal agreement when he was officially unveiled as the new coach of the national team on Tuesday, he is still keen to recruit Messi for his first game in charge against Scotland on November 19.

"We are very happy with the meeting with Leo because it was very positive," said Maradona. "It's great that he wants to play all the matches in the national team. We are satisfied by that."

This meeting was only the first step of a European tour where Maradona will meet most of the players he has called up to play Scotland at Hampden Park in Glasgow.

However, the 48-year-old was unable to meet Laporta where it is believed he was keen to ask about releasing Messi to play at least this friendly - his first match at the helm - but the president of the Catalan side postponed the meeting because of a flight to Brussels.

Maradona later travels to England to speak to Manchester United forward Carlos Tevez and Liverpool midfielder Javier Mascherano, who he is keen to convince to accept an offer of being captain of the national team.

# Mutu out for two weeks

AFP, Rome

Fiorentina have suffered a blow to their title challenge as Romania forward Adrian Mutu faces two weeks on the sidelines with a groin injury.

"The tests done on Adrian Mutu this morning showed a tear in the groin muscle," said a Fiorentina statement.

"Physiotherapy has already begun to allow Mutu to return to action in two weeks."

The news cannot have come at a worse time for La Viola who have just welcomed back Mutu's strike partner Alberto Gilardino from a two-match suspension.

The pair have struck up a formidable partnership but the loss of Mutu means Fiorentina will have to find a new foil for Gilardino, the top scorer in Serie A.

# FA charges Fergie

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson was charged Thursday with improper conduct by the Football Association.

The charge concerns an incident after English and European champions United's hard-fought 4-3 Premier League victory against Hull at Old Trafford on Saturday, when Ferguson remonstrated with referee Mike Dean.

Ferguson has been given until November 19 to respond to the charge.

The Scot was clearly unhappy with Dean's display during a match where he did not send-off Hull's Michael Turner when the defender up-ended United and England midfielder Michael Carrick, having previously shown the defender a yellow card.

Dean also awarded a penalty against United for a foul by Rio Ferdinand on Bernard Mendy.

As Premier League new boys Hull fought back from 4-1 down against the English champions, United's players became increasingly petulant and England striker Wayne Rooney was considered fortunate by some observers to escape with just a booking for challenges on George Boateng and Andy Dawson.

Last season Ferguson, whose fierce verbal blasts at players have become known as "the hairdryer", served a two-match touchline ban and was fined 5,000 pounds for a finger-pointing rant at referee Mark Clattenburg during a defeat at Bolton after Patrice Evra came under a heavy challenge from Kevin Davies.

That same campaign also saw Ferguson label referee Martin Atkinson a "disgrace" after eventual winners Portsmouth knocked United out of the FA Cup with a 1-0 quarterfinal victory at Old Trafford in March.



PHOTO: AFP

Tottenham striker Darren Bent (L) scores his hat-trick goal against Dinamo Zagreb during their UEFA Cup encounter at White Hart Lane on Thursday.

# Easy ride for big boys



INTERNET, undated

There were victories for most favourites in Thursday's UEFA Cup group games, with Serie A clubs AC Milan and Udinese being two of six club with two wins from two matches.

Former Champions League winners Milan needed a goal four minutes into injury time from substitute Ronaldinho to break down the Sporting Braga defence.

The other Group E game saw German Bundesliga club VfL Wolfsburg come from behind to beat Dutch club Heerenveen 5-1 in the so-called Group of Death.

With Premier League side Portsmouth also in the group, Wolfsburg went into the game knowing that they could not afford to lose at home.

Finnish midfielder Mika Vaermyren gave the visitors the lead just after the half hour, but Edin Dzeko equalized just three minutes later. Grafite gave his side the lead six minutes from the break.

In the second half, Wolfsburg proved far too strong for Heerenveen as Dzeko, Zvezdan Misimovic and Jacek Krzynowek added goals to give the Bundesliga side a convincing 5-1 victory in their first match in the group phase.

Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath said that he was impressed with his side's performance in the second half.

"Heerenveen looked strong in the first half, but we then took control in the second," he said. "It was a

good game for my side."

There was a good win for Udinese, who won 2-1 at Spartak Moscow to register their second win from two games and move atop Group D with six points. Fabio Quagliarella scored twice for the Italian club.

The other group game saw Harry Redknapp take his Tottenham Hotspur side to an excellent 4-0 victory against Dinamo Zagreb in his first UEFA Cup game in charge of the London club.

Darren Bent scored a hat-trick for the struggling Premier League side.

Aston Villa was another Premier League side securing a victory with a 1-0 win at Slavia Prague to take them to six points in Group F from John Carew's first-half deflection into the Slavia goal.

Ajax Amsterdam beat MSK Zilina 1-0 to put their UEFA Cup campaign back on track in the same group.

VfB Stuttgart, who lost their first Group C game in Sevilla, Spain, bounced back with a 2-0 win against Partizan Belgrade.

Both goals for the home side were scored by Germany striker Mario Gomez late in the game.

Stuttgart coach Armin Veh said that even though they had scored only in the second half, they had dominated proceedings throughout: "We were the better side and had many chances. It was a good game for my team."

Gomez, who has now scored five goals in the UEFA Cup, said that the team was much better in the second half. "We were rewarded for our efforts in the second half."

With Standard Liege beating Sevilla 1-0 in the other group game, Liege, Sevilla, Stuttgart and Sampdoria all have three points,

while Belgrade are left struggling without a point from their two games.

In Group A, Manchester City beat Dutch club Twente Enschede 3-2, while Schalke 04 drew 1-1 at Racing Santander.

Former Spanish striker Fernando Morientes gave Valencia the lead on the hour in their Group G game in Spain against FC Copenhagen, but Brazilian midfielder Cesar Santin levelled for the Danish team four minutes from the end.

St Etienne beat Rosenborg Trondheim 3-0 in the other group G game, while former UEFA Cup winners Galatasaray Istanbul won 2-0 at Benfica Lisbon in Group B.

In the same group, Bundesliga side Hertha Berlin managed to play to a goalless draw at Metalist Kharkiv to move second in Group B with two points from their two matches.

With the top three advancing from the five-team groups, Hertha coach Lucien Favre accentuated the positive: "I look at it this way: we won a point, rather than losing two."

He did, however, add that at times the last pass was missing from the team.

Berlin captain Arne Friedrich said that the team did well at the back. "But upfront we should have done more," he said.

AS Nancy and CSKA Moscow took control of Group H.

The Russian club won 3-1 at Feyenoord Rotterdam for their second victory from two games, while AC Nancy drew 2-2 at Polish club Lech Poznan to take them to four points. Poznan is third in the group with one point.

# Owen targets Europe

AFP, London

Newcastle striker Michael Owen believes qualification for Europe at the end of what may yet prove a turbulent season for the club is a realistic goal.

Newcastle's revival under Joe Kinnear - which has seen the north-east club move out of the relegation zone - remains at an early and vulnerable stage, although the signs look promising. Ahead of this weekend's trip to fellow Premier League strugglers Fulham, Newcastle sit in 14th place after registering only their second successive victory of the season on Monday at home to Aston Villa.

With only one win from their previous nine games, Owen believes Monday's win has provided much-needed belief that they can finish among the qualification places for next season's UEFA Cup at least.

"We know we're a decent team and we were in a temporary position," Owen told BBC Radio 5 Live.

"If we have a decent run to the end of the season - and we'd expect that with the players we have - then fifth, sixth or seventh is by no means impossible."

Owen sees Sunday's trip to Craven Cottage as another winnable opportunity.

"With our back-to-back wins, we're going there thinking we're capable of taking something from the game," he added.

"It's still early in the season, and a couple of wins shoots you up the table. The last two results have shown that - and we are confident we can continue to climb."

After Kevin Keegan's shock departure weeks into the new season, Newcastle are still looking for stability.

Club owner Mike Ashley, who decided to sell the north-east giants after fans rounded on him in the wake of Keegan's departure from St James' Park, is said to be weighing up "two very serious" offers.

# Hammers invite Obama

AFP, London

President-elect Barack Obama has been invited to watch a match at English Premiership club West Ham, it was revealed on Thursday.

Family members took Obama to watch a match at Upton Park in 2003 and he is now believed to be something of a fan.

The east London club are sending him a message of congratulations and an invitation to renew acquaintances with the Hammers on his first visit to Britain.

A club source told PA Sport: "We are delighted that Barack Obama has an association with West Ham and are sending him our congratulations and an invitation to attend a match whenever he is in Britain."

Obama is well known in the States for his liking for 'soccer' - his older daughter Malia, 10, is a regular for a girls' team in Chicago.

West Ham's American defender Jonathan Spector, who is from Obama's home state Illinois, said he would love to host a visit from the new president.

Spector said: "From a personal perspective it certainly would be something special to welcome him to West Ham."

# 'I am finally settling'



INTERNET, undated

Ronaldinho revealed he is finally starting to settle at AC Milan after playing a starring role in their UEFA Cup success over Braga on Thursday.

The Brazilian, who moved to Italy from Barcelona in the summer, came off the bench to score deep in stoppage time and hand the Rossoneri a 1-0 triumph against the Portuguese side at the San Siro.

The result saw Milan retain top spot in Group E, three points clear of Wolfsburg and Braga.

"It was a difficult game," admitted Ronaldinho. "Sporting had not conceded a goal in seven European games and we knew it was going to be a challenging encounter. I am delighted to have contributed to this success."

"Every day that goes by I feel more at home in Milan. This is my new home and I feel very good here."

Thursday's result was Milan's 11th victory in a row in all competitions.

Ronaldinho also struck the winner in last Sunday's 1-0 triumph over Napoli as the Rossoneri climbed to the top of the Serie A standings for the first time in four years.

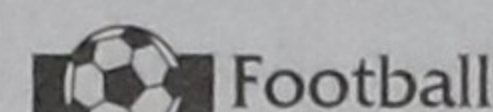
"We really deserve these results," Ronaldinho added. "We are working very hard and in a serious manner."



PHOTO: AFP

Milan forward Ronaldinho celebrates with a dance after scoring the all-important goal against Braga during their UEFA Cup match at San Siro on Thursday.

# Goals talking for Ibisevic



INTERNET, undated

The working day was not over for Vedad Ibisevic after he had scored twice in the 4-1 rout of Karlsruhe to take his goal tally for the season to 13. First he had to acknowledge the ovation given to him from Hoffenheim fans and to sign his first autographs. Then the Bosnian - fluent in English, German and French - was on hand to translate into German for his team-mates Demba Ba and Chinedu Obasi in an interview with the pay-TV channel Premiere.

For the Bundesliga's leading scorer, the goals are doing all the talking.

Even the legendary Gerd Mueller might have to start worrying that his record of 40 goals in a season could be under threat. The former Bayern Munich and Germany striker had only six goals at the same stage of 11 games played in the 1971/72 season.

"At the moment everything is going well for me," says Ibisevic, who has five goals more than the next players on the list, Artur Wichniarek of Arminia Bielefeld and Patrick Helmes of Bayer Leverkusen.

It hasn't always been that way for the 24-year-old who, according to Hoffenheim general manager Jan Schindelmeyer, has "had to work hard for everything" and can be proud of his achievements.

At the age of 16, Ibisevic's family left Bosnia and Herzegovina for a new life in Switzerland, but unable to obtain a permit to stay sought their fortune in the United States.

The youngster's performances on the college fields soon attracted the attention of scouts, leading to a contract with French side Paris St Germain. After only a year he was on his way to Dijon, and then found himself in May 2006 heading for



VEDAD IBISEVIC

Germany and Alemannia Aachen.

The powerful striker, strong in the air, managed six goals in 24 games at Aachen, and former coach Guido Buchwald did his best to retain the player when Hoffenheim made an approach after Aachen were relegated from the top flight.

However the player had an option in his contract allowing him to leave, and Hoffenheim were prepared to pay around 1 million euros (1.28 million dollars) for the striker to Buchwald's chagrin.

"He was a central player. Hoffenheim signed him up while claiming they have a youth concept. That annoys me," he said.

At Hoffenheim things did not go smoothly initially. He was quickly confronted with two new rivals for a place in the forward line when Hoffenheim signed the Nigerian Obasi and the Senegalese Ba.

Yet Ibisevic went out of his way to help the two Africans settle into the side.

"When Demba came he didn't speak any German so I helped him with French and we have become really good friends," he said.

Schindelmeyer said: "The way he behaved was great. It's something I really appreciate."

Ibisevic hardly set the second division alight last season, scoring five goals to help Hoffenheim gain promotion for the second successive season.

Before the current season, he was by no means a certain starter. But with Obasi playing for Nigeria at the Olympic Games, Ibisevic was given an opportunity - and took it.

Hoffenheim coach Ralf Rangnick admits to being surprised at the player's development.

"If Chinedu had been available I'm not sure Vedad would have got this chance," he said.

Ibisevic doesn't seem the type to get carried away by his current goalscoring success, especially in view of the civil war in his country when he was growing up and the disruption in his life.

"It makes you stronger and more grown up. You learn that there are more important things in life than football," he said.