

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 mid-fielder Gutierrez called on his team-mates to up the ante.

"We have to improve a lot of things defensively and offensively," Gutierrez 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 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

'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."

standings.

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

"We are leaders with a point advantage over Villarreal and two over Real so I am happy," explained Unai Emery's outfit travel to Getafe on Sunday and striker David Villa -- already in double figures with ten goals to his name -- said the club would continue their attacking approach.

"Maybe if we were more balanced Racing would not have caught us on the counter, but our philosophy is to always attack and take the game to our opponents," said Spain's Euro 2008 hero.

Sevilla are three points behind Valencia in fifth with their next match at home to struggling Recreativo Huelva.

"It is a delicate situation for us at the moment as we have lots of injuries," said Sevilla goalkeeper Andres Palop. "Any team would find it difficult under these circumstances."

Atletico Madrid, four points adrift of Sevilla, have a great chance to close the gap on Sunday when they travel to an Osasuna side that still haven't won this season.

Atletico have spent the whole week complaining about Steven Gerrard's 94th minute penalty that helped Liverpool rescue a 1-1 Champions League draw at Anfield on Tuesday.

"The linesman apologised to me. He kept saying, 'sorry, sorry' because he could have corrected and changed the decision, yet he didn't," fumed defender Mariano Pernia.

FA charges

Fergie

INTERNET, undated

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.

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.

PHOTO: AFP

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.

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.

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 is keen to convince to accept an offer of being captain of the national team.

Mutu out for two weeks

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.

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 Gomezlate 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 from 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.

Goals talking for Ibisic

Football

INTERNET, undated

The working day was not over for Vedad Ibisic 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 Ibisic, who has five goals more than the next players on the list, Artur Wichniarek of Arminia Bielefeld and Patrick Helmes of Bayer Leverkusen.

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

At the age of 16, Ibisic'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

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 him up while claiming they have a youth concept.

Ibisic 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 home life.

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

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

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

Ibisic 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, Ibisic was given an opportunity and took it.

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

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

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Owen targets Europe

INTERNET, undated

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 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

INTERNET, undated