

## Top spot up for grabs

AFP, Paris

The carrot of qualifying for the last 16 of Europe's premier club competition is dangling in front of some of the biggest teams involved in this year's Champions League.

But finishing top of their groups is another incentive enticing the likes of Chelsea, Liverpool, Inter Milan and Atletico Madrid ahead of Wednesday's penultimate round of group games.

Of the 16 teams in action, only two - Barcelona and Sporting Lisbon - have qualified for the lucrative knockout phase where drawn rival teams play each other home and away once in a bid to make the quarterfinals.

For the teams in the three other groups, things are more open.

Chelsea lead Roma and Bordeaux by just a point in group A. Cypriot surprise package Anorthosis are hoping to pip Panathinaikos to join virtually qualified Inter Milan from group B and Liverpool and Atletico have virtually sealed the top two spots in group D.

With 10 points from four games Barcelona need only a

draw away to Sporting Lisbon to retain the lead of Group C ahead of their final group game at home to Shakhtar Donetsk on December 9.

Pep Guardiola's Barcelona beat Sporting 3-1 in their opening group fixture, but the possible absence of injured Argentine Lionel Messi and Barcelona's unexpected 1-1 Spanish league draw at home to Getafe may have given hope to Sporting.

While Shakhtar host FC Basel hoping to hold on to third place and a UEFA Cup spot, Guardiola says he can cope with losing a key player such as Messi.

"He is a special player that is key for us but I have others," said Guardiola.

Atletico and Liverpool are also battling for top spot, in Group D - and it could all come down to who scores the most goals.

Both sides are eyeing victory on Wednesday with Atletico, who lead Liverpool only on goal difference, welcoming PSV Eindhoven while Rafa Benitez's Reds host UEFA Cup-bound Marseille.

Liverpool will be keen to avoid another slip-up, 13 months after the French side secured an unlikely 1-0 win at Anfield. However recent statistics go in their favour.

This season Liverpool have

beat the French side twice at the Stade Velodrome.

And Marseille's away results - losing at Atletico and PSV as well as going down to Liverpool - have been far less tasty than the famous 'bouillabaisse' fish soup which is the south coast side's gastronomic pride and joy.

"You are always worried when you play Liverpool," admitted Dutchman Boudewijn Zenden, who rescued Marseille with a late strike in a 2-2 home draw against Lille on Sunday.

"They are a team in the top two in England. It'll be very difficult, but we are not afraid."

Group A is far more open and Bordeaux coach Laurent

Blanc will be hoping for an off-night from Chelsea striker Nicolas Anelka, his former France teammate during 'Les Bleus' triumphant Euro 2000 campaign.

Defeat for Chelsea would be prove disastrous for Luiz Felipe Scolari's Blues, who have qualified for the knockout phase for the past six successive seasons, and, with Roma travelling to CFR Cluj, would split the group wide open.

But Scolari is taking heart from his side's solid form away from home, albeit in the Premier League.

"It is easier for us to win away from home," said Scolari. "We will go to Bordeaux for the victory and we need a win in France to qualify for the next round."

In Group B victory for Inter against resurgent Panathinaikos in Milan would guarantee they go through as group winners.

Panathinaikos are living more in hope than expectation having only revived a stuttering group campaign with a 3-0 away defeat of already eliminated Werder Bremen on their last outing a fortnight ago.

Gifts coming from Inter will be a rarity for the Greeks, who could nonetheless be doubly motivated by securing qualification, and avoiding losing out to Anorthosis.

### FIXTURES

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

## Cesc proud to be captain

### Football

AFP, London

Cesc Fabregas said it was a "proud moment" and a "great honour" after being handed the captaincy of Arsenal.

The 21-year-old Spain midfielder was chosen by Arsene Wenger on Monday to lead the Gunners in succession to William Gallas after the France defender publicly criticised his teammates last week.

Fabregas, who will lead the side out in their Champions League match against Dynamo Kiev at the Emirates Stadium here Tuesday, told Arsenal's official website: "It is a great honour for me to captain one of the biggest clubs in the world."

"It is a proud moment. I know it's a big responsibility

but together with my teammates, I know we have the spirit and commitment to get back to winning ways and fulfil our potential."

Meanwhile Wenger, whose side have lost three of their last four matches, said the burden of responsibility should not fall on Fabregas's shoulders alone.

"A successful team has a shared leadership inside the dressing room and he will be one of the leaders but not the only one," the Frenchman said. "It is very important that we share that leadership inside the dressing room."

Gallas, who is set to play against Kiev, was stripped of the club captaincy, fined two weeks' wages and dropped from the squad that lost 3-0 away to Manchester City on Saturday after making several scathing comments about his fellow Arsenal players.

Despite Gallas's demotion, Wenger insisted he hadn't lost respect for the former Marseille star after his outburst and claimed the player still has a future at the club.

"William is a player that I rate and a man I rate," Wenger said. "I have a big respect for him. He was working as captain in a very difficult media environment."

Last week Gallas, whose side are now 10 points behind Premier League leaders and London rivals Chelsea, riled his teammates by echoing the oft-repeated criticism that Arsenal are not physically strong enough to win the title.

"We are not brave enough in battle," the centre-back said. "I think we need to be soldiers. We have to be warriors. There are teams who can do it well against us, and we have to be able to face up to these attacks."

## Camara sinks Everton

AFP, Wigan

Senegalese international Henri Camara's goal gave Wigan a much-needed 1-0 win over Everton here on Monday in their Premier League clash and lifted them out of the relegation places.

The 31-year-old - a hero for Senegal in the 2002 World Cup when they reached the quarterfinals after his golden goal beat Sweden in the round of 16 - struck in the 51st minute to give his side a welcome three points.

His goal means that Wigan gain a bit of breathing space in the relegation battle and that Premier League giants Newcastle descend back into the bottom three.

However, despite the victory Wigan manager Steve Bruce was not happy.

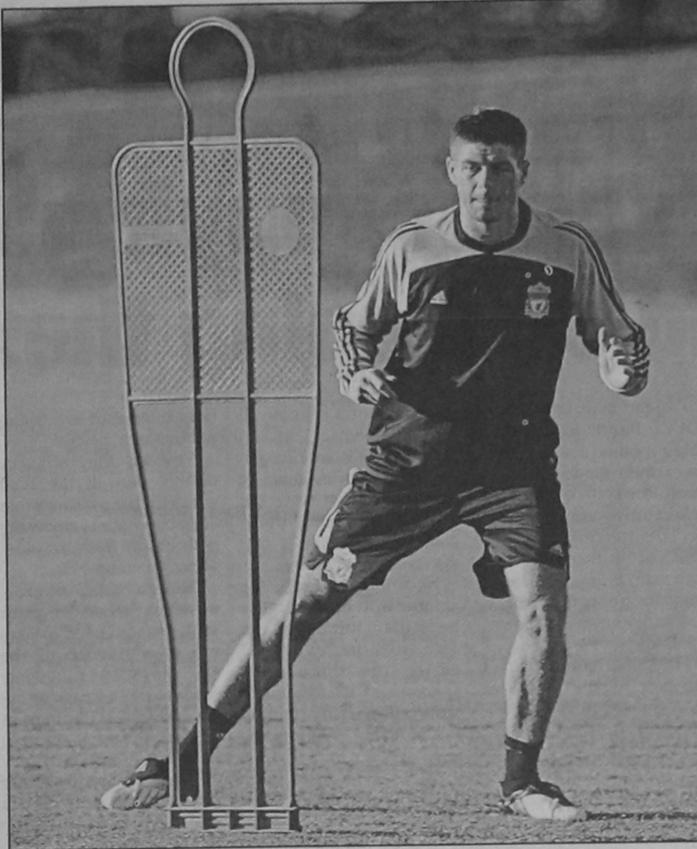
"It was arguably one of our worst performances this season - we have played better and lost," said the former Manchester United stalwart.

His Everton counterpart David Moyes held his hands up for a really dreadful performance by his side.

"I was hoping for more from us but it was a poor performance," said the ever frank Scot.

Camara - has been limited to cameo appearances this season under Bruce mainly because he had not scored for 28 Premier League matches going back to December 2006 - but he showed that his goalscoring instincts have not been diminished when he got on the end of Luis Valencia's pass to break the deadlock.

Everton also had their chances to extend their run of five games without defeat and their surge up the table, but both Nigerian striker Yakubu and Australian star Tim Cahill missed great opportunities to score.



Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard warms up during a training session at Melwood on Tuesday ahead of their tonight's Champions League match against Marseille.

## FIFA bans Peru

AFP, Geneva

Football's world governing body FIFA said Tuesday it has suspended Peru's Football Association (FPF) with immediate effect over a row with the government over alleged political interference.

The suspension covers "all international sporting contact for its clubs, national teams, referees and officials," FIFA said in a statement.

FIFA President Sepp Blatter had warned last week that the FPF had one week to resolve its conflict with the government or face suspension.

Lima says it does not recognise FPF head Manuel Burga, who it accuses of not respecting the law.

Burga was re-elected in 2007 although the Peruvian Institute of Sports (IPD) had banned him from any post of responsibility for five years for alleged non-compliance with the country's laws regarding the running of sporting institutions.

FIFA regards the government's stance as undue political interference.

"FIFA wishes to make clear that the FPF will only be allowed to return to the fold of the world and South American football communities on the basis of negotiations with the President and Board of the FPF who were elected in October 2007," it said.

## Mourinho agent meets Drogba

AFP, Rome

Chelsea forward Didier Drogba has been in talks with the agent of Inter Milan boss Jose Mourinho, the Gazzetta dello Sport website reported on Tuesday.

The report claims Drogba and one of his representatives had dinner at a Fulham restaurant with Mourinho agent Jorge Mendes and Inter general manager Marco Branca on Monday night.

Drogba was a firm favourite of Mourinho's when the Portuguese coach worked in west London and the Ivory Coast star was said to have burst into tears when Mourinho announced his departure.

Drogba initially claimed he would leave Chelsea and there were rumours that Mourinho would try to lure him to the San Siro when he took over from Roberto Mancini in the summer.

But despite publicly declaring his interest in Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard during the off season, Mourinho made no move for Drogba.

However, the former Marseille forward has had a difficult campaign this term due to injury, suspension and the loss of his automatic starting role to the in-form Nicolas Anelka.

Mourinho has an embarrassment of riches up front with eight forwards at Inter but he has stated he wants to let some of them leave.

He has also had problems with Brazilian forward Adriano's discipline and the suggestion that Mourinho is targeting Drogba could spell the end of Adriano's time at the club.

## Velappan slams Hammam

### Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Asian Football Confederation is becoming increasingly authoritarian, a former top official said Tuesday, urging member nations to block an "insulting" plan to shift its headquarters from Malaysia.

Peter Velappan, who served as AFC secretary-general for 30 years, said the controversial move would "shred the fabric of Asian football" just as it was entering a successful new era.

"Sadly, the AFC looks to be moving away from democracy and instead it is leaning, towards authoritarianism, which is rocking the stability of this institution," he said in an open letter to its ruling body, seen by AFP.

Velappan ridiculed demands laid out by AFC president Mohamed bin Hammam, who has called for proposals from member nations to host the headquarters, saying that his request for diplomatic status for AFC staff was "ridiculous".

In a last-ditch appeal ahead of the AFC executive committee's meeting in Shanghai on Wednesday, he said that neither the world football body FIFA nor the International Olympic Council enjoyed such privilege.

"I would respectfully request the potential bidders to withdraw their bids if they are seriously committed to safeguarding the stability

and future of Asian football," he said.

"The history and culture of Asian football should not be subject to an auction to the highest bidder. This is an insult to all... who laid the foundation and nurtured Asian football to its present pride and dignity."

Malaysia has hosted the AFC since 1965. It is currently housed at a sprawling eight-year-old facility on the outskirts of the capital Kuala Lumpur.

Velappan has said that Bin Hammam's move was aimed at punishing Malaysia for inviting Manchester United to play a friendly there during the AFC's Asian Cup tournament last year.

The AFC strongly criticised Malaysia's plan, which it saw as drawing attention away from its premier event. Sir Alex Ferguson's team eventually dropped the Kuala Lumpur match from their schedule.

"The AFC president's proposal to relocate AFC House is, among other things, a travesty to everyone who has given so much to put Asian football on the map," Velappan said.

"I believe that this move will undoubtedly threaten the stability, prosperity and future development of Asian football."

In response to Velappan's attacks, Bin Hammam insisted he has nothing against Malaysia and would be happy to keep the governing body's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

However, the Qatari said the government must formalise their relationship.

## Records tipped to tumble

### Swimming

AFP, Paris

Revolutionary starting blocks are expected to send world swimming records tumbling again in 2009, after an Olympic year when hi-tech suits helped competitors go faster than ever.

The newly designed platforms - whose forward-leaning wedge shape allows swimmers to propel themselves further into pools - are to be introduced at next year's World Championships in Rome.

Developed by Omega, the Swiss watchmaker responsible for time-keeping at world competitions, the innovation won the backing earlier this year of FINA, global swimming governing body.

The "adjustable slanted footrest allows swimmers to use a crouch start with the rear-positioned leg at a 90-degree angle at the knee, generating an optimal starting profile," the company said at the time.

The blocks were already tested at the warm-up pool for the 2007 World Championships in Melbourne and a "test event" for the Beijing Olympic Games in January this year.

European swimming experts say their inclined plates and steeper, five-position rear footholds are similar to those already used in track and field events.

"This will obviously bring better performances," said Claude Fauquet, head swimming coach of the French national team.

"With the rear support, the speed at which one can leave the block will be much more important," said Fauquet.

"If a swimmer has more speed at the beginning, he will go further into the water. So there will be less swimming

and more energy available for the entire race."

Alain Bernard, the 100m freestyle champion in Beijing who broke four world records in 2008, said the "advantage of these blocks is swimmers can push a bit longer and more towards the back than towards the bottom of the platform."

For his coach Denis Auguin, these platforms will "change quite a lot" in the sport.

"The necessary power that a swimmer could transmit from existing blocks was previously sufficient only in regard to the fact that there was no support for the rear of the foot," he said.

Auguin raised concerns that the platforms will prove to be as controversial as the tight-fitting swimsuits that helped competitors like US sensation Michael Phelps break new ground in 2008.

However the blocks were likely to cause the sport "less damage" than the suits, he said, even though "those with more strength will have an advantage."

"Really it would be a mistake to once again take such a rearguard stance, but maybe all the talk once again will revolve around the equipment and not the swimmers," he said.

Better performances were also due to hard work and improvements in training, said Auguin. "These boys and girls train a lot," he said.

"It would be much better to talk about them and not about starting blocks, swimsuits and pools," he insisted.

The platforms were to have been installed at pools for the Beijing Olympics, but the move was cancelled as it was not possible for national federations to obtain them in time for the swimmers to get used to them in training.

"FINA will consider this criterion in order to validate the blocks by mid-March at

## Fatigue worries O'Neill

### Football

AFP, London

Aston Villa's bright start to the season could be undermined by fatigue, coach Martin O'Neill has said.

The Birmingham outfit reported back for pre-season training at the start of July because of their involvement in the Intertoto Cup.

And O'Neill, aware that he must make do with one of the smaller squads in the Premier League, admits he may have to "prioritise" in terms of his targets and ease the schedule for some of his squad during

the remainder of the season.

"We have been at it, playing competitively since July, because we were involved in the Intertoto Cup," he said.

"At some stage or another, it will probably catch up and then we have to go and prioritise."

"I am delighted with the progress we have made in the UEFA Cup, which is what we set out to do, but at some stage around Christmas time I am going to have to sit down and think about this."

"We have eight more games to play before January. I am delighted with the progress but the boys have put a big effort in."

"Someone pointed out that we by Christmas we will have played nine or ten more games than by the same stage last season."

"Against Manchester United on Saturday, you saw Gareth Barry, having played in mid-week for England, trying to kick one clear on the edge of our penalty box in the 93rd minute of the game."

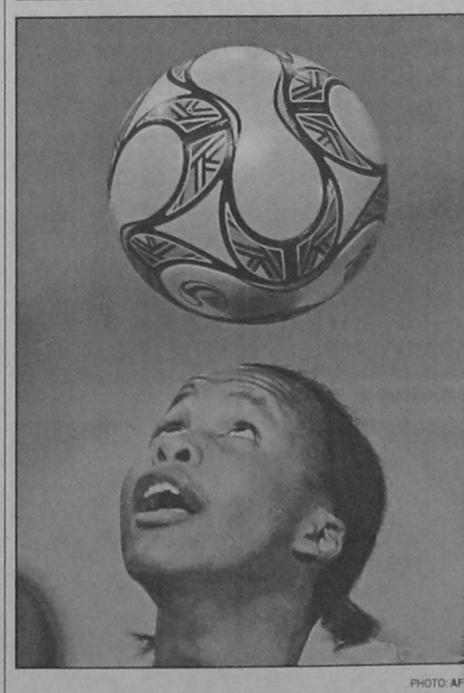
"It was a fantastic effort but that eventually takes its toll."

O'Neill insists, though, his players are currently relishing the hectic schedule.

"If we have a chance of making progress, I'll see about things but at the moment players love to play," he added.



Wigan Athletic striker Henri Camara (R) celebrates with teammate Wilson Palacios after scoring the all-important goal against Everton during their Premier League encounter at the JJB Stadium on Monday.



The new ball to be used in the 2009 Confederations Cup is presented at a ceremony in Johannesburg on Saturday. The opening game of the tournament, which runs from June 14 to 28, will feature host South Africa against Iraq.