

Gunners go for broke

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger admits Arsenal face a make or break clash against Liverpool on Sunday as the Gunners try to get back in the Premier League title race.

Wenger's side trail leaders Liverpool by eight points ahead of this weekend's crucial match at the Emirates Stadium and a defeat would leave their title challenge in tatters.

But Arsenal have proved adept at raising their game against their main rivals, with Manchester United and Chelsea have already dispatched by the Gunners this season.

Wenger knows another win against one of the big four is essential if Arsenal are to mount a concerted bid to take the English crown from United in the second half of the campaign.

"We are highly-motivated to beat another of the so-called top four and I am convinced we have the quality to do it," Wenger said. "It is an opportunity for us to catch them, which we want to take."

"With our position in the league, we know it is compul-

sory for us to beat the three other teams - Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool and we want to do that on Sunday."

While Arsenal will still be some way adrift of first place even with a win over Liverpool, Wenger takes heart from the unpredictable nature of this year's race.

Liverpool and Chelsea have already dropped several points at home, while United have struggled to win the big games away from Old Trafford.

"At the moment the race is still very tight because it looks for me for the first time in six or seven years that the number of points for the winner of this league will be much lower than usual because everybody drops points against everybody," Wenger said.

"For us, the first step is to get back into the race and to get back into the race, the important thing is for us to beat Liverpool."

While Wenger plots a way to improve Arsenal's title prospects, Liverpool have been on auto-pilot in the absence of Rafa Benitez.

The Liverpool manager has been recuperating at home after a minor operation on a kidney stones problem last weekend, but Benitez's attention to detail ensured a smooth

week at Anfield.

Benitez has been in regular contact with Lee from his sick bed and the assistant manager fully expects his boss to make it to the Emirates on Sunday.

"He has had an eventful few days, it hasn't been the best for him," Lee said. "He was in a lot of pain earlier in the week but he has got better and he will be there on Sunday."

"Obviously when you take a presence like Rafa away from the place it is not going to be easy. But I have phoned him every day to keep in touch and let him know what has been going on."

"The players have done really well, they have focused and concentrated with all the stuff which has been going on in the background."

Benitez's input will be crucial if Liverpool are to halt a poor run of results at Arsenal, with their last win coming in 2000 when the Gunners were still playing at Highbury.

Liverpool's hopes of ending that run won't be helped by the likely absence of Fernando Torres with a hamstring strain.

Arsenal winger Samir Nasri could return from an ankle injury but Kolo Toure and Nicklas Bendtner are both fitness doubts.

Duel bidding for 2018, 2022 WCs

AFP, Tokyo

FIFA announced Saturday that it will hold a simultaneous bidding process for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, with England considered a "strong" candidate.

The decision means that should a bidder for 2018 be unsuccessful then they would be able to enter the vote for 2022 to be held immediately afterwards, so long as the 2018 hosts are not from the same continent.

The bidding is open to everyone, although African and South American countries are not allowed to enter in 2018 as those continents will have held the World Cup in 2010 (South Africa) and 2014 (Brazil).

The hosts for the two events will be decided at the same time, in December 2010.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said countries to express an interest included Japan, China, Qatar, Mexico, the United States, Russia, and Australia, "even perhaps Canada".

Spain could lodge a bid in conjunction with Portugal, he added, while Belgium and Holland are considering joining forces.

But he highlighted England.

"We have a bunch of possible, even I would say very strong candidates," he said. "And everybody knows England will be a candidate, a strong candidate."

Australia too are considered a good bet, with the government in Canberra this month agreeing to spend 30 million US dollars to back their campaign.

Bidding opens in January next year.

FIFA wrapped up their end-of-year executive committee meetings in Tokyo Saturday on the sidelines of the Club World Cup.

'Chelsea don't need Owen'

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Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard believes Michael Owen would be a sound investment in next month's transfer window - but insists he is not required at Stamford Bridge.

England striker Owen is mulling over a contract offer from Newcastle, amid rumours he could leave St James' Park in January rather than see out the remainder of his current deal, which expires in the summer.

The likes of Liverpool, Tottenham and Wigan have all been linked with the injury-plagued 29-year-old.

And Lampard told The Sun: "Obviously it's the manager's decision. Michael's a top player - he showed that with the goal he scored against Portsmouth last week, it was an unbelievable finish, top quality."

"If he is fit, which he's struggled with a bit, he's a top, top player."

"At the right price, whether it's for us or not, he's going to be a good buy for someone for sure."

But with Nicolas Anelka and Didier Drogba fit, I'd look at us and say we've got enough."

Puel unfazed by Barca clash

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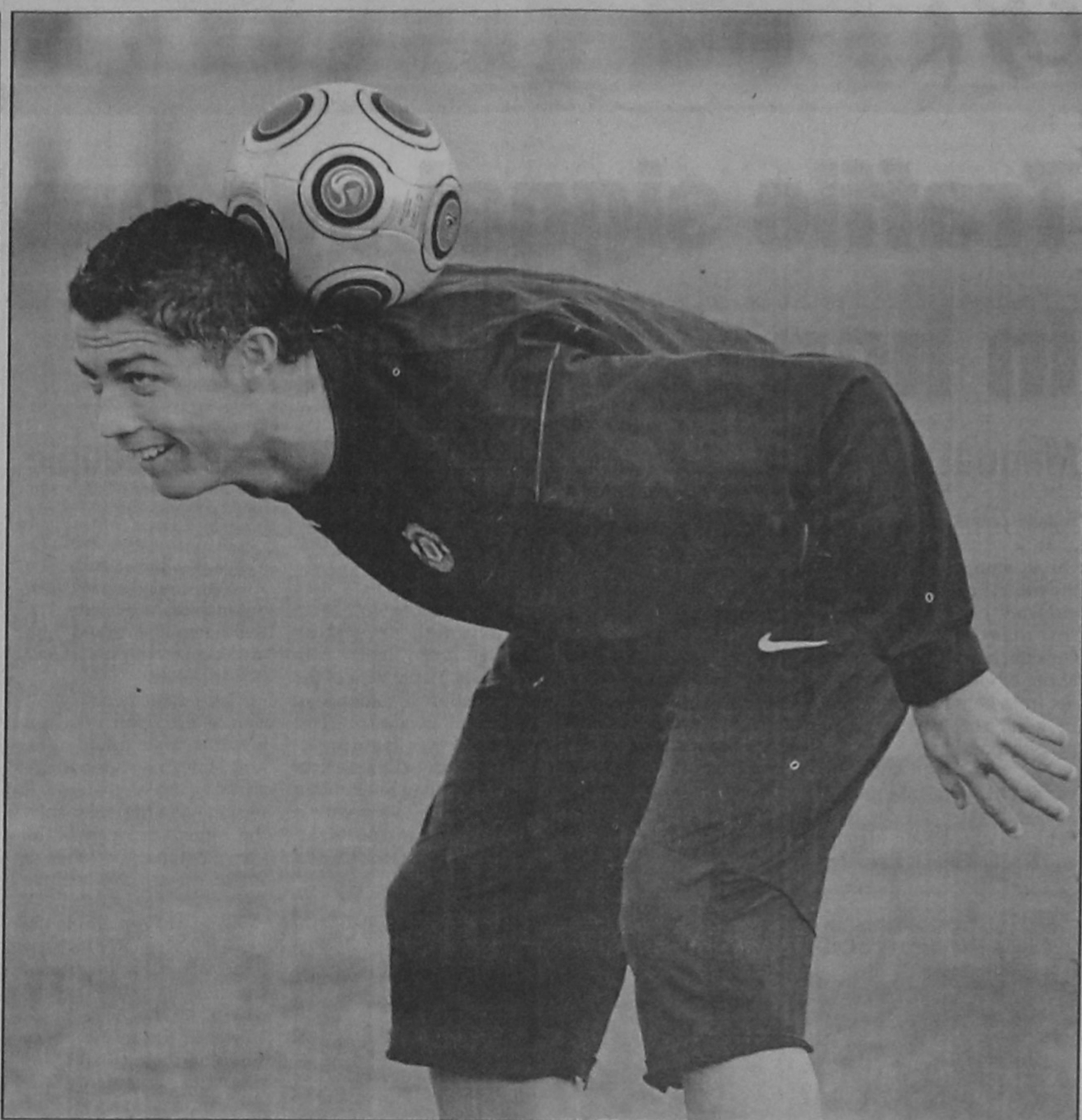
Lyon coach Claude Puel is not concerned about the prospect of facing Barcelona in the last 16 of the Champions League.

Prior to the draw in Nyon, Puel insisted Primera Liga leaders Barca would be the worst possible opponents in the first round of the knock-out stages.

But after being paired with United boss Sir Alex Ferguson during his time at Chelsea but also in the year he guided Porto to the Champions League crown, knocking out United in the second round.

And after Inter's struggles to qualify from a seemingly easy group that included Panathinaikos, Werder Bremen and Anorthosis Famagusta -- Inter finished second behind the Greeks winning only twice, drawing two and losing their last two matches -- Mourinho had said he wanted to draw one of Europe's big guns in the knock-out stages to present a challenge to his players that would motivate them.

"I'm delighted. I wanted the best and we've got the champi-



Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo plays with the ball during a practice session in Kawasaki on Saturday ahead of their Sunday's Club World Cup final against Liga de Quito.

CLUB WORLD CUP History bars MU path

AFP, Yokohama

Manchester United go into the Club World Cup final against Liga de Quito on Sunday driven by their desire to claim more silverware, and the odds are heavily stacked in their favour.

No British team has ever won the tournament, with Liverpool coming closest in 2005 when they made the final but were beaten by Sao Paulo 1-0.

Sir Alex Ferguson had some concerns with his side's defensive lapses against Gamba Osaka on Thursday when they conceded three late goals, and is aware that Liga used lightning counter-attacks to break down Pachuca in their semifinal.

With that in mind, he is taking nothing for granted, knowing through experience that games against South American opponents are never easy.

"I'm very pleased that we're in the final, but we will be facing a stern test, as Liga de Quito are very strong defensively," he said of the Ecuadorians.

"My assistant Mick Phelan and I saw a video of their semifinal against Pachuca and also had them watched by a scout. Quito are a typically South American side -- solid at the back and dangerous in front of goal."

"It will certainly be anything but an easy match, but it is the final of the Club World Cup so you can't expect an easy ride."

Ferguson said Saturday that striker Dimitar Berbatov had still not fully shaken off a virus but will be on the bench, adding that he would likely make changes to the team that played Thursday.

"I've not decided on my team but I may go for fresh legs this time," he said, confirming only that Park Ji-Sung was a definite starter.

The South American champions know they are clear underdogs against their European counterparts, but vowed to pull out all the stops for the biggest match of their lives

Their Argentine coach Edgardo Bauza, who will be in charge for the last time before quitting the team, remains confident.

"It will be the match of our lives," he said.

"Even though we are not favourites we will be at the top of our game and do our best. I don't know how we will handle the best team in England but I know my players will give everything they've got."

Ferguson has repeatedly drummed into his squad the importance of winning this tournament and it seems to be rubbing off, with the players excited about lifting a trophy no British team has ever got their hands on before.

"I really want to win this trophy after the year I have had," said Cristiano Ronaldo.

"Not just for me, but for United. No other British team has won it and we want to be the first to do that. And I believe it will give us extra motivation to win the Champions League and Premier League again."

Patrice Evra, who will be playing his last match before a four-game ban kicks in for his part in a brawl at Chelsea last season, said victory would cap a year to remember with three major trophies in United's possession.

"If we are professional and do our job I think we have a great chance," he said.

"To be named world champions after winning the league and the Champions League would make it an amazing year."

Bauza pinpointed Ronaldo as the main threat, but admitted the whole team was world class.

"You'd need six defenders to keep Ronaldo out so we won't do anything special for him," he said.

"But it's not just Ronaldo. There's Nani on the other wing, and Ryan Giggs and Wayne Rooney in the middle. They also have a very good defence."

"We don't have their attributes but we will attack and hope to win. We have quick and clever players too. The British teams move the ball around a lot so we need to control that and try to keep possession."

Rovers exit on Cruz's mind

AFP, London

Blackburn striker Roque Santa Cruz has admitted that he would consider leaving the Premier League outfit if "a bigger club came in for me" during the January transfer window.

New Blackburn boss Sam Allardyce has insisted he wants the 27-year-old Paraguay forward to stay at Ewood Park, but speculation is growing linking him with cash-rich Manchester City, the club of his former boss Mark Hughes.

"Everybody knows my opinion (regarding a possible transfer), I am happy at Blackburn but also I want to keep improving my football and remain ambitious," Santa Cruz told BBC radio on Friday.

"My contract with Blackburn is clear and for that I need to continue with the club."

"But I am looking to again play in a big side that is in Europe and trying to win their league."

He added: "I have to say the people here at Blackburn are fantastic, I am very happy with the fans."

"But, I don't want to miss the chance of playing with a big side. If a bigger club came in for me then I would like to take that opportunity."

"I want to watch out for myself but I have to think of Blackburn. It is a very hard decision."

Santa Cruz penned a new four-year deal with Rovers before the season, but the poor start to the season which cost the job of manager Paul Ince has re-ignited speculation that he could leave.

In a sign of the club's woes, Santa Cruz has scored just four goals this season compared to 23 times in the last campaign.

FIFA lifts suspensions on trio

AFP, Tokyo

World football body FIFA on Saturday announced it had lifted its suspensions on the federations of Kuwait, Samoa and Peru.

Kuwait was suspended in late October for political interference and the lifting of its ban is only provisional to allow them to play in Asian Cup qualifying starting in January and the Gulf Cup.

Whether the ban returns will be reviewed at FIFA's Congress in March.

In the case of the Samoans, they were suspended for "repeated management problems" in October, but this has been resolved following meetings of the FIFA executive committee on the sidelines of the Club World Cup here.

A row with the government over alleged political interference in Peru saw that federation suspended last month, but they too are now in the clear.

Kalle warns Bayern

AFP, Munich



Bayern Munich avoided a European heavyweight in Friday's draw for the last 16 of the Champions League, but chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge warned against taking Sporting Lisbon lightly.

While the Bundesliga champions avoided the likes of current Champions League holders Manchester United, English giants Chelsea or Spain's Real Madrid, Rummenigge says they must make a good start in Portugal.

The first leg will be played at the Jose Alvalade Stadium in Lisbon on 25 February next year with the return at Munich's Allianz Arena on 10 March 2009.

"I think it's a good draw for us, but I want to caution against underestimating this team," Rummenigge warned.

"I'd like us to lay the groundwork for success in Lisbon."

Although the Portuguese runners-up and domestic Cup winners represent a significant

hurdle for Bayern, the men from Munich were spared a daunting tie against the likes of Inter Milan, Chelsea or Real.

"It could have been a lot harder for us," Rummenigge acknowledged.

The last sixteen draw has thrown up no fewer than three England v Italy clashes, including the meeting between holders United and ex-Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho's Inter.

"We'll take each round as it comes, but we're aiming to make the quarterfinals at the very least," Rummenigge said.

But Rummenigge is refusing to dream about the German giants reaching the final at Rome's Olympic Stadium on May 27.

"It would be fantastic if we could make it to the semifinals again, but I'm not even dreaming of the final just yet," added Rummenigge.

The last team Bayern and Lisbon met in Europe's elite club competition was in the group phase two years ago.

Bayern won 1-0 in the Portuguese capital, with a goalless draw at the Allianz Arena.

Sporting currently lie fourth in their domestic league while Munich are second in the German table.



David Beckham (L) leaves a private clinic in Appiano Gentile in Como on Saturday. The former Manchester United and Real Madrid midfielder is joining Milan on loan from his current club Los Angeles Galaxy and will stay at San Siro until the end of March.