

'Mourinho is amazing'

SOCCERNET

Sir Alex Ferguson has hailed Jose Mourinho as one of the best coaches in the world ahead of Manchester United's UEFA Champions League clash with Inter Milan on Tuesday.

United travel to the Giuseppe Meazza for the first leg of their last 16 tie, and Ferguson cannot wait to again lock horns with Mourinho.

"He's one of the best coaches in the world, amazing," said Ferguson after seeing his side clinch a 2-1 win over Blackburn on Saturday evening. "I knew of him when we played Porto in 2004 but it wasn't until Jose went to Chelsea and called himself the Special One that I began to take notice of him."

"But don't forget he was self-anointed! When he called himself that people sat up and I did too. But his achievements were there to be recognised."

"I don't know everything about Jose or what he does on the training ground, but you can't deny his success to win the UEFA Cup with Porto as well as two or three domestic titles in Portugal."

"Then he won the Champions League with them and that takes some doing at a club like Porto."

Fergie also had praise for Mourinho's domestic success as both clubs currently top their respective leagues.

"After that he won the two titles at Chelsea. It will be good going, too, if he wins the title in his first season at Inter - so he has made his mark alright," he said. "He came in and said he was the Special One and we were thinking, 'who is this?'. After that his team were thinking they'd better win and they got off to a start like nothing on earth."

"Everyone was chasing their tail for two seasons so we had to do something about it - and that's what we did."

"Jose was the instigator of the Chelsea team without question. He gave them a resilience and a winning mentality that has put them onto that higher level and it made it hard for us to compete against them."

BUNDESLIGA

Jansen double lifts Hamburg

AFP, Berlin

Germany defender Marcell Jansen scored both goals to put 10-man Hamburg back on top of the Bundesliga on Sunday in a 2-1 win at Bayer Leverkusen.

Jansen's goals means Hamburg now lead Hoffenheim by two points with Hertha Berlin dropping to third while Bayern Munich are fourth - four points behind Hamburg - with Bayer Leverkusen fifth and six points behind the leaders.

It was the first time Jansen has scored twice in a league game in his career.

"I'm delighted," said the 23-year-old, who has 28 caps for Germany. "Hopefully we can keep our place at the top of the table and build on this."

Ex-Bayern Munich star Jansen put his side into the lead with his first goal of the season when he fired home from the edge of the penalty area after just 11 minutes with a superb strike which gave Bayer goalkeeper Rene Adler no chance.

Striker Patrick Helmes equalised for Bayer, with his third goal in two games after a pair last week at Hoffenheim last Friday, on 29 minutes and the game looked to be heading for a draw.

But Jansen volleyed home on 66 minutes after a header from Jose Paolo Guerrero and gave Martin Jol-coached Hamburg the three points they needed to usurp Hoffenheim.

Seedorf fires Milan

AFP, Rome

AC Milan got back to winning ways and gave themselves a boost ahead of Thursday's UEFA Cup last 32 second-leg clash against Werder Bremen with a 1-0 home victory against Cagliari on Sunday.

Clarence Seedorf scored the only goal of the game with a simple tap-in midway through the second half of a match in which the visitors were the better side for long periods.

The win allowed third-placed Milan to narrow the gap between themselves and table-topping city rivals Inter Milan, who won 2-1 at Bologna on Saturday, to 11 points; Juventus are second after beating Palermo 2-0 on Saturday.

But more important, perhaps, is the fact the victory will have restored Milan's confidence ahead of the return leg against Bremen, with the tie delicately poised at 1-1 from the opening match in Germany.

Cagliari came into this game as one of Serie A's most in-form sides and they cer-

tainly had the better of the first-half at the San Siro.

Their first chance came on 16 minutes when diminutive Brazilian Jeda fed Robert Aquafresca in the box but the Italian hot-shot was a little slow in turning to shoot from seven yards and his effort lacked power, allowing Christian Abbiati in the Milan goal to kick the ball away.

On 22 minutes veteran striker Filippo Inzaghi found the net for Milan but he was narrowly offside from Seedorf's pass.

David Beckham was having a largely quiet game on the right flank but one devilish cross almost earned a reward on 34 minutes but Marek Jankulovski and Inzaghi just failed to get a decisive touch on the ball.

Just before half-time Jeda tested Abbiati's reactions with a venomous shot from just outside the area, but the Milan goalkeeper tipped it over the bar.

Cagliari were still in the ascendancy early in the second half as Andrea Cossu hit a howitzer from distance that beat Abbiati with ease but crashed back off the post with the goalkeeper looking

relieved.

But on 65 minutes a horrendous mix-up in Cagliari's box allowed Seedorf to stroke home a simple goal.

Running back towards his own goal, Uruguayan Diego Lopez received a shove in the back from Inzaghi and headed the ball against goalkeeper Federico Marchetti before colliding with him for good measure.

The ball fell to the Dutch veteran who couldn't miss from 15 yards.

Fiorentina moved back up to fourth place, and the final Champions League qualifying position, as Romania captain Adrian Mutu scored a last-gasp winner in a 2-1 home success against Chievo.

The 'Flying Pigs' had taken an early lead through Santiago Morero but Alberto Gilardino started the La Viola fightback 17 minutes from time and Mutu struck four minutes into injury time to secure the three points.

Genoa moved above Roma, who beat Siena 1-0 on Saturday, into fifth with a 1-0 success at Napoli courtesy of Bosko Jankovic's second half strike.

ARSENAL V ROMA

Gunners face acid test

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger admits Arsenal's Champions League showdown with AS

Roma will provide the acid test of his young team's ability to compete at the highest level.

The Gunners face Roma in the first leg of their last 16 tie at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday and Wenger knows his gamble of fielding so many youngsters this season could come back to haunt him against the Italians.

Long-term injuries to Cesc Fabregas, Theo Walcott, Abou Diaby and Tomas Rosicky have left Wenger especially short of options in midfield.

That lack of experience is a major concern against a Roma team who can flood the midfield battle-ground with a potent mix of skill and power.

To make matters worse for Wenger, new signing Andrei Arshavin is ineligible after

playing for Zenit St Petersburg earlier in the competition.

Wenger has little choice but to put his faith in the likes of Alexandre Song, Denilson and Aaron Ramsey and hope they can rise to the occasion.

"When you play against Roma you know there is one battle you cannot lose and that is in midfield because that is their strong point," Wenger said. "They play with a congested midfield and with a lot of short passing on the ground. If you lose that battle, you will be second best."

With a daunting trip to the Stadio Olimpico for the second leg awaiting the Gunners, anything less than a victory will leave them in danger of elimination.

Wenger, who is likely to be without strikers Emmanuel Adebayor and Eduardo against Roma, concedes his team's spluttering form is taking its toll on their morale and making them rush at key moments.

"The attitude is very good among the players but in the final third we are not as efficient as we could be," Wenger said.

"Our passing is sometimes not incisive enough. Maybe the strikers are not alerted quickly enough. We were not quick or relaxed enough and, overall, it's difficult."

Roma qualified for the knockout stages top of their group ahead of Chelsea, who they beat 3-1 at home.

Despite that, Luciano Spalletti's side, who defeated Siena 1-0 at the weekend, are 16 points behind Serie A leaders Inter Milan and regarded as outsiders for success in Europe.

Yet Wenger has no intention of underestimating any side containing the likes of Francesco Totti, Philippe Mexes and Daniele De Rossi.

"They're a strange side," Wenger said. "They like to do well against the good teams in Italy, so we must be cautious."

Another familiar face in the Roma line-up could be Brazil's Julio Baptista, who spent part of last season on loan at Arsenal.

Baptista knows how hard it will be to get past Arsenal. "The game against Arsenal is going to be tough but we will be ready."

LYON V BARCELONA

Battle of the hotshots

AFP, Lyon



Lionel Messi and Karim Benzema, top scorers in this season's

Champions League, hold the key to Tuesday's second round, first leg clash between Lyon and Barcelona which should be an attacking feast.

Both men have five goals in this year's competition to share top spot in the goal charts with Liverpool's Steven Gerrard and Miroslav Klose of Bayern Munich.

Argentine ace Messi lies coming up against the seven-time French champions.

Last season, he scored in both group games which finished 2-2 in France and a comfortable 3-0 win in Barcelona as the Spanish giants, twice European champions, made it as far as the

semifinals.

However, Barcelona did not have the best preparation to Tuesday's clash, losing 2-1 to city rivals Espanyol. It was their first defeat since the opening day of the season, ending a 22-match unbeaten run.

"Nobody said this was going to be easy," said Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola. "It was a demanding match and we need our players to recover from it."

Like Barcelona, Lyon are on top of their domestic league, but coach Claude Puel believes his side have the toughest assignment of the entire Champions League second round draw.

"It's the most difficult draw we could have faced, given that Barcelona is the best team in the world at the moment," said Puel.

"It'll be difficult for us, but I think we have a chance if we play as a team and produce

good football. Barcelona have some great individual players, but we have a great team."

"We can produce some great football, and we need to play as a team in order to win."

Lyon, for whom the sought-after Benzema hit his 12th league goal of the season in Saturday's 2-0 win over Nancy, will need to shore up a leaky defence having conceded ten goals in the group stage, more than any other side left in the last 16.

In stark contrast, no other team scored as many goals as Barcelona in the group stage with 18 in six matches.

Barcelona will be without French international defender Eric Abidal, a former Lyon star, for the both legs of the tie after injuring his leg in Saturday's defeat.

Barcelona paid Lyon 15 million euros for Abidal in June 2007 after the player made his mark for France at the 2006 World Cup finals.

Liverpool pick Gerrard for Madrid clash

AFP, Liverpool

Steven Gerrard has been included in Liverpool's squad for their Champions League clash with Real Madrid on Wednesday, the English club confirmed on Monday.

The hugely influential club captain underwent a light training session with his teammates on Monday morning and is set to travel to the Spanish capital, although a decision on whether he starts the first leg of the last-16 tie will be left until the last minute.

"Steven will be in the squad," manager Rafael Benitez told the club's website. www.liverpoolfc.tv "He was okay in training this morning."

"It was a special training session so we were not testing him 100 per cent, but he trained okay so we will see."

Gerrard has been out of action for almost three weeks with a hamstring injury and Benitez decided against risking him in Sunday's 1-1 draw with Manchester City.

The draw with City means Liverpool are now seven points adrift of leaders Manchester United in the Premier League, leaving the Champions League as their best chance of silverware this season.

Benitez's men went out of the FA Cup to Everton on February 4 in the match in which Gerrard suffered his injury.

If the England midfielder does get a green light to play in the Bernabeu, Liverpool should be at full strength with Xabi Alonso also due to return after missing the City match through suspension.

Inter lose Samuel

AFP, Milan

Argentina defender Walter Samuel will miss Inter Milan's Champions League clash against Manchester United on Tuesday, Italian news agency Ansa said Sunday.

Samuel missed Saturday's 2-1 win at Bologna in Serie A with a calf injury.

With veteran Italian centre-half Marco Materazzi struggling for fitness, Jose Mourinho is likely to pick two from Ivan Cordoba, Cristian Chivu and Nicolas Burdisso to play in the heart of his defence against the reigning European champions.

However, Mourinho's problems pale into insignificance next to Sir Alex Ferguson's as he has only one fit central defender for the match.

Villa goes from hero to villain

AFP, Madrid

Spanish international David Villa went from hero to villain as Valencia's away day blues continued with a 1-1 draw at Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday.

Villa scored his 19th goal of the season on 24 minutes with an accomplished finish but was then sent off in the 76th minute, collecting a second booking for a late challenge on goalkeeper Daniel Aranzubia.

Deportivo's Adrian Lopez punished the ten-man visitors equalising three minutes later.

Valencia had lost their last five away league matches but the draw will still frustrate manager Unai Emery with his team now two points behind fourth-placed Villarreal.

New Numancia coach Jose Rojo Martin 'Pacheta' had a forgettable debut as his side lost 2-0 at Osasuna in a vital bottom of the table clash in Spain.

Goals from Jaroslav Plasil and Masoud Soleimani sealed victory for Osasuna to keep them out of the relegation zone while Numancia are rooted to the foot of the table, four points from safety.

Pacheta replaced the sacked Sergio Kresic this week and had a real baptism of fire with a relegation battle against Osasuna.

Cup semifinalists Real Mallorca stay third from bottom despite a last-gasp 1-0 win over Racing Santander with Jose Jurado scoring an 88th minute penalty.

Malaga were expected to be fighting for survival following their promotion last season but are knocking on Europe's door following a 3-1 victory at Valladolid.

Malaga climb to sixth, level on points with Valencia, with the win and are just four points behind Villarreal and the Champions League spots.

Malaga have tough games coming up against Barcelona, Sevilla, Real Madrid and Villarreal.



Liverpool striker Dirk Kuyt celebrates scoring the equaliser against Manchester City during their Premier League encounter at Anfield on Sunday.

Kuyt rescues a point

AFP, London



Manchester City handed arch rivals Manchester United a significant advantage in the Premier League title race after earning a 1-1 draw at Liverpool on Sunday.

Liverpool could have closed the gap on league leaders United to five points with a victory over City at Anfield, but instead they needed Dirk Kuyt's late equaliser to rescue a draw that left them seven points adrift of Sir Alex Ferguson's champions.

A day that started with the news that Liverpool boss Rafa Benitez is still refusing to sign a new contract got even worse in the 51st minute when Alvaro Arbeloa deflected Craig Bellamy's shot into his own net.

Kuyt at least stopped Liverpool suffering their first home defeat when he poked home from close-range in the 78th minute.

Benitez insisted Liverpool

can still catch United but even he was forced to concede the task is a lot harder now.

"I have confidence that we can still win it, but we must win our next two league games against Middlesbrough and Sunderland and then win against Manchester United at Old Trafford," Benitez said.

"Then we may have a different situation. But I just accept that this has been a bad result and it clearly makes it more difficult for us to win the title."

"We clearly have to win our games and see where that takes us. And clearly Manchester United are playing well and winning games."

Elsewhere on Sunday, Newcastle held on for a 0-0 draw at home to Everton despite playing the entire second half with 10 men after Kevin Nolan's dismissal.

The hosts were reduced to 10 men in the 44th minute when Nolan launched into an ugly studs-up lunge on

Everton striker Victor Anichebe, leaving referee Lee Mason with no option but to show a red card to the midfielder.

But Everton, who had Spanish midfielder Mikel Arteta stretched off in the first half, lacked the cutting edge required to prise open Newcastle's defence.

A point was a good result for both sides though as it moved Newcastle five points clear of the relegation zone and cemented Everton's position in sixth place.

Fulham striker Bobby Zamora scored for the first time in 21 league matches as the Cottagers defeated struggling West Bromwich Albion 2-0.

Zamora, who cost five million pounds from West Ham last year, last hit the net in the Premier League in September and he was finally back on the scoresheet with a close-range finish in the 61st minute.

Andy Johnson added the second 11 minutes later after Zamora's shot was blocked by Scott Carson.

Rock bottom Albion's misery was complete when Roman Bednar's stoppage time penalty was saved by Australia goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer.

INTER V MAN UTD

Defensive crisis for Fergie

AFP, Milan



Manchester United face a defensive injury crisis ahead of

Tuesday's crucial Champions League round of 16 first-leg clash away to Inter Milan.

Sir Alex Ferguson is already deprived of Serbia centre-back Nemanja Vidic through suspension while veteran Gary Neville and Wes Brown are both definitely out.

Northern Ireland centre-back Jonny Evans also picked up an ankle injury during Saturday's 2-1 Premier League victory over Blackburn, while fellow defender John O'Shea missed that game with a heel problem sustained in the 3-0 win over Fulham last Wednesday.

It means that Ferguson could be left with only one recognised senior centre-half in Rio Ferdinand, while the only other defender at his disposal to have played first-team football before this season is France's Patrice Evra.

It has all left Ferguson a bit worried ahead of the most eagerly anticipated tie of the round.

"We've got some injury issues of course and I just hope we can get two centre-backs out there on Tuesday," he said.

"At this moment in time, it's very doubtful. Jonny Evans is unlikely to be playing, he's looking very doubtful and I'm just hoping to

have John O'Shea available because we don't have Gary Neville and we don't have Wes Brown.

"We're having a nightmare with defenders this season. Hopefully we can patch it up for Tuesday because this does leave us very, very short."

It means at least one of twin teenage full-backs Rafael and Fabio Da Silva is sure to play and maybe even both.

Otherwise Ferguson will have to look at the possibility of throwing a midfielder into his backline although there are few feasible options.

Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes have always been attacking players while Darren Fletcher has had the odd run-out at right-back but never in the heart of the defence.

Then there is Michael Carrick but his form in midfield has been one of the main reasons behind United's stunning recent run and his passing would be sorely missed if he had to step back.

It is probably the worst possible part of the team to be depleted ahead of the trip to the San Siro.

In Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Adriano, Inter have one of the best strike pairings in Europe and the two forwards always provide a stern test for any central-defensive partnership, let alone a make-shift one.

United may well have to resort to a dogged defensive display, aiming to hit their hosts on the break.

That is something that

Inter coach Jose Mourinho is most concerned about.

"I don't want my players to feel under pressure. I want them to enjoy themselves and the first thing I will tell them is that I have great belief in their ability to win it," said the Portuguese boss.

"I've known Manchester since 2004, they're the best counter-attacking team in the world and can kill their opponents in transition (from defence to attack)."

"They have (Dimitar) Berbatov, who has fantastic technical qualities and then (Cristiano) Ronaldo, (Wayne) Rooney, (Carlos) Tevez or Park (Ji-sung) who can make the difference, give them width and pace. Our concentration will have to be spot on."

If anyone can instil confidence in his players it is Mourinho himself who has only lost once to Ferguson in 12 previous encounters.

As coach of Porto he earned a win and a draw at the same stage of the competition in 2004 before leading the Portuguese side to the title.

And with Chelsea he only lost once in 10 games against Ferguson, winning four times and drawing five.

However, United have the edge in previous meetings between the two teams as back in the 1998-99 season United eliminated Inter 3-1 on aggregate in the quarterfinals on their way to lifting the title.

Three United players, Neville, Giggs and Scholes, survive from that tie as well as Inter's captain Javier Zanetti.



Valencia star David Villa (R) celebrates after scoring the opening goal against Deportivo Coruna during their Primera Liga tie at the Riazor Stadium in Coruna on Sunday.