

# Serie A in slump

## Football

AFP, Rome

World champions they may be, but Italy is feeling a chill in its domestic game as the country's glamour clubs suffer a potentially devastating slump.

Last week's European action brought home a very uncomfortable truth that the Italians, considered the continental driving force in the 1990s, are no longer sitting at the head of the table.

In three clashes against English opposition, Italy's three Champions League representatives failed to score a goal, suffered two defeats and only some profligate Manchester United finishing, coupled with heroic goalkeeping from Julio Cesar, allowed Inter Milan to buck the losing trend.

To make matters even worse, three of Italy's four UEFA Cup sides went crashing out with AC Milan, Fiorentina and Sampdoria eliminated, leaving only northern side Udinese to progress to the last 16.

If Udinese fail to get past holders Zenit St Petersburg in the next round, Italy could well find itself without a single team in the quarterfinals of either European competition.

It's a far cry from the glory days of the 1990s.

First, the Spanish and now the dominant English, thanks to the mega-rich Premier League, have streaked past.

For the second year in a row, every Italian team that made it through to the Champions League knockout stages faces elimination by an English foe.

And once again, it has been the failure to score goals that has cost them dearly.

Last year AC Milan lost 2-0 on aggregate and Inter Milan 3-0 to Arsenal and Liverpool respectively at this stage.

Roma made it into the last eight but they lost home and away to Manchester United for a 3-0 aggregate defeat.

Taking those clashes between English and Italian teams from the knockout stages last year and the first-leg ties this year, that makes nine matches played, two drawn, seven lost, one won and one lost.

# Guus being realistic

AFP, London



Guus Hiddink admits Chelsea are likely to fall short in their bid to catch Premier League leaders Manchester United.

Hiddink's side are seven points behind United and have played a game more than the reigning champions.

United's ability to grind out narrow wins this season continued on Sunday as they won the League Cup final against Tottenham on penalties and Hiddink concedes it would be extremely surprising if they squandered such a big advantage.

"I am not naive. They have a very good squad, but as long as there is a possibility, you never know. However, realistically, it will be difficult," Hiddink, speaking at a press conference on Monday, said.

"I like a team that does not give up. I liked the way the team reacted against Wigan after we conceded the goal, and that is just like I see the championship as well. We have to go as long as it is possible."

"We have the ambition to go and be at the top in the end of the May, so we have to stop them."

"They have always been classical clashes between two powerhouses, but let's make a few steps first."

Hiddink admits United's strength in depth has been the crucial factor in maintaining their bid to win all five trophies they are competing for this season.

Ferguson was able to leave out Wayne Rooney, Edwin van der Sar, Michael Carrick and Dimitar Berbatov against Tottenham, while Ryan Giggs and Nemanja Vidic only came on as substitutes.

"Sir Alex Ferguson has the right blend," Hiddink said. "You have to be keen on the balance of the squad as well."



Bayern Munich coach Juergen Klinsmann plays with the ball during a training session in Munich on Monday.

no goals scored and 10 conceded for the Italians.

It makes for sorry reading.

But it used to be so different in the 1990s, particularly when there were three European competitions.

From 1989, when Italy had a team in all three finals - winning the European and UEFA Cups but not the European Cup Winners' Cup - they embarked on a decade of domination.

A year later four of the six European finalists were Italian and they carried home all three trophies.

In the European Cup/Champions League, Italy had a finalist in nine of 10 finals from 1989 to 1998, winning four and losing five.

In the UEFA Cup, which was occasionally deemed a tougher competition because up to four clubs from the same country could compete in it, Italy's domination was even more apparent.

In the 11 seasons from 1989 to 1999, Italian teams won the competition eight times, providing four all-Italian finals and failing to make the final only once.

However, since 1999, when the Cup Winners' Cup was ditched with Lazio as the final winners and Parma beat Marseille in the UEFA Cup final, it has been a steady decline for Italian teams.

Having dominated the UEFA Cup from 1989 to 1999, they have failed to qualify a single team for the final ever since, and with only Udinese left in it this season, that run looks likely to continue for another 12 months.

In the Champions League, their decline has been less profound, although only thanks to AC Milan.

They have reached three finals in the last decade, winning two of them while Juventus lost the 2003 final to Milan on penalties.

But in the same period four different English teams, and three Spanish, have reached finals.

And perhaps more significantly, English teams have been in the finals in each of the last four seasons, including last year's all-English affair between Manchester United and beaten finalists Chelsea.

# Abahani, Russel play on first day

## Super Cup logo unveiled

SPORTS REPORTER



Defending two-time B. League champions Abahani will play on the opening day of the Citycell Super Cup which kicks off in the city on March 11.

Abahani meet Rahmatganj, a side who had defeated the eventual professional league winners of this season in the B. League opener, in the day's second game after the opening match between potential group contenders Sheikh Russel and Chittagong Mohammedan.

Apart from the six teams

### FIXTURES

GROUP STAGE
March 11: Russel v Ctg Mohammedan, Abahani v Rahmatganj
March 12: Brothers v Farashganj, Mohammedan v Ctg Abahani
March 13: Russel v Rahmatganj, Abahani v Ctg Mohammedan
March 14: Brothers v Ctg Abahani, Mohammedan v Farashganj
March 15: Rahmatganj v Ctg Mohammedan, Abahani v Russel
March 16: Farashganj v Ctg Abahani, Mohammedan v Brothers
SEMI-FINALS
March 19: Cup 1st semifinal
March 20: Cup 2nd semifinal
March 21: Plate 1st semifinal
March 22: Plate 2nd semifinal
March 23: Cup return 1st semifinal
March 24: Cup return 2nd semifinal
FINAL
March 25: Plate final
March 27: Cup 3rd place play-off and Final

from the capital, Abahani and Mohammedan from Chittagong are competing in the Tk2-crore event for the top eight finishers of the B. League.

Mohammedan, two-time runners-up of B. League, are pitted in Group B along with sponsor Citycell's DGM Tanjin Haque yesterday at the BFF Bhaban, tournament committee chairman Harunur Rashid told that they believe the timing will inspire the office

The kick-off times of the group stage matches are 4 and 6pm.

Although the time schedule is not convenient for proper media coverage, the organisers defended the decision.

Talking with the press after unveiling the logo of the Citycell Super Cup along with sponsor Citycell's DGM Tanjin Haque yesterday at the BFF Bhaban, tournament committee chairman Harunur Rashid told that they believe the timing will inspire the office

goers and real football fans to come and watch the matches.

BFF vice-president and tournament committee secretary Shawkat Ali Khan Jahangir, Atique Akbar, DM of Citycell, were also present.

"We have invited the top teams of the professional league and I hope that the best four will move to the Cup competition," Harunur Rashid told that they believe the timing will inspire the office

The top two teams from each group will play in two-legged semifinals for a place in the Cup final where the winners will take away Tk one crore.

The runners-up will get Tk 20 lakh and many believe that the difference of prize money between the first and second teams would inspire the clubs to go all out for being the best in the competition.

There would be consolation for the bottom four who, after a knockout round, will play in the Plate final.

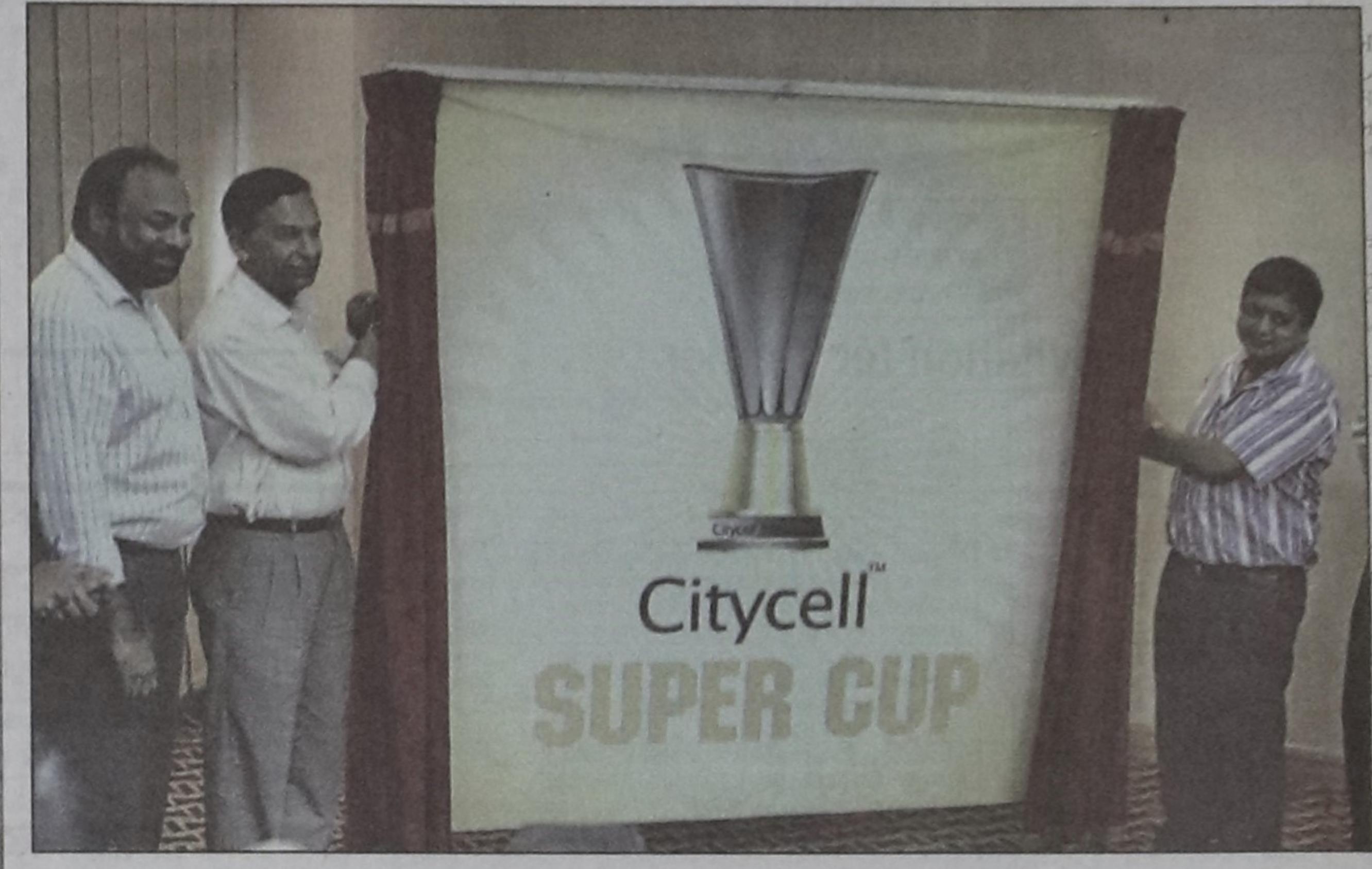


PHOTO: STAR

Tournament committee chairman Harunur Rashid (2nd from L) and Tanjin Haque (R), DGM of Citycell, unveil the logo of Citycell Super Cup at the BFF Bhaban yesterday.

## Ribery slates teammates

AFP, Berlin

France international midfielder Franck Ribery has criticised his Bayern Munich teammates over on-pitch tactics, the German media reported on Tuesday.

"I complained to the coach (Jürgen Klinsmann) about the fact that I never have enough support when I want to attack on the left side," Ribery told the tabloid daily Bild. "The coach said I had a point."

Ribery, who has been repeatedly linked with a big-money move away from the club, was speaking in reference to Bayern's disappointing 0-0 draw against Werder Bremen on Sunday, which left the reigning champions fifth in the Bundesliga table.

His remarks come at a time when speculation about his future is mounting, with his agent having recently suggested that he could be set for a move to Spanish league leaders Barcelona.

German football legend and former Bayern hero Franz Beckenbauer has expressed his frustration with the situation.

"It's always a problem when a player wants to leave and holds a gun to his club's head because he has only a slim chance of leaving," Beckenbauer told Bild.

## MU look to consolidate

AFP, London

Manchester United can take another step towards an unprecedented clean sweep of five trophies in one season with a victory in Wednesday's Premier League clash at Newcastle.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side have already won the Club World Cup and lifted the League Cup against Tottenham at Wembley on Sunday, making the dream of winning every competition they have entered an increasingly distinct possibility.

While Ferguson continues to play down United's chances of sweeping the board, the Scot will know only too well that the next seven days could put his team in an even stronger position.

A victory at St James' Park could open up a 10-point lead if Chelsea, in second place, and Liverpool, in third, come unstuck in their matches on Tuesday against Portsmouth and Sunderland respectively.

After their trip to Newcastle, United face Fulham in the FA Cup

quarterfinals on Saturday, then host Inter Milan in the Champions League last 16 second leg next week.

United, who are on a 15-match unbeaten run, have won five of their last six visits to St James' Park, scoring 20 goals in the process.

Ferguson is likely to bring back Michael Carrick, Dimitar Berbatov and Nemanja Vidic after all three were left out of Sunday's starting line-up, while Wayne Rooney could recover from a virus.

Rio Ferdinand, who captained United at Wembley, warned his team-mates they still have room for improvement despite their remarkable winning run.

"The momentum is with us but there are still loads of improvements to make," he said.

"We did well in parts against Tottenham but they

### FIXTURES

Wednesday

Blackburn v Everton (2000GMT), Fulham v Hull (2000GMT), Man City v Aston Villa, Newcastle v Man Utd, Stoke v Bolton, Tottenham v Middlesbrough (2000GMT), Wigan v West Ham

managed to get through to our back line too easily on occasion so we need to cut that out.

"It is down to us really. If we win the rest of our games, obviously we will be champions and the way the results have panned out has been quite good.

"But it is not over. We still know Chelsea and Liverpool can go on unbeaten runs until the end of the season. We have to make sure we do as well as them."

Elsewhere on Wednesday, Aston Villa will attempt to consolidate their place in the top four at inconsistent Manchester City.

Villa have stumbled in recent weeks and were forced

to settle for a 2-2 draw against Stoke on Sunday after blowing a two-goal lead in the final minutes.

"The momentum is with us but there are still loads of improvements to make," he said.

"We did well in parts against Tottenham but they

goals in 12 matches.

Wenger believes such consistency at the back is a solid foundation on which to build.

"We want to keep the focus on that strength. We are in the final sprint of the season and you can see that it's vital and very, very important," he said.

"You can only make results everywhere if you feel strong defensively."

Wenger will, however, be forced into a defensive change for the trip to The Hawthorns, with William Gallas needing to rest a niggling ankle injury.

The Frenchman has been a consistent performer in the past few months, in stark contrast to when he grabbed the headlines earlier in the season for all the wrong reasons following some outspoken comments and was eventually stripped of the captaincy.

"His future is here and it is bright. I believe he has shown that the only answer in football is quality performances," Wenger added.

"William has had a little ankle problem for a while and we want to cure it. He will be back for Sunday (against Burnley) probably."

Should the Gunners be able to get their league campaign on course once again, then they should be able to welcome back reinforcements for the run-in.

England winger Theo Walcott has resumed full training following a shoulder problem which needed an operation, while fellow long-term absentees captain Cesc Fabregas and Tomas Rosicky could both be back in action by the start of April.

Wenger revealed: "Theo is well, he just needs to get used to contact in training, but it looks positive."

"Eduardo has a small chance to be back for Burnley, even (Emmanuel) Adebayor has a small chance, maybe Burnley will be too tight, but a small chance."

# Wenger stays positive

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger believes Arsenal can rescue a Champions League place from their disappointing season if his players start to think positively.

The misfiring Gunners face West Bromwich Albion on Tuesday after a dismal run of four successive goalless draws in the Premier League.

That barren spell has left Arsenal in fifth place and six points behind Aston Villa, who hold the last Champions League spot.

Wenger's side could have been in an even worse position but for Villa's late meltdown that forced them to settle for a 2-2 draw against Stoke on Sunday.

But the Arsenal manager refuses to contemplate the prospect of finishing outside the top four. He is convinced they can get back on track by following Manchester United's confident approach.

"They (United) don't think about it. The trophies flow in for them at the moment, so it is all natural for them," Wenger told Arsenal TV Online.

"Even on Sunday in the League Cup final they were so convinced they would win it