

UEFA ready to consider Reds plea

AFP, Geneva

UEFA said on Monday that it would do its utmost to ensure that Liverpool do not have to play their Champions League quarter final tie on the 20th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster.

"We are aware of the huge significance of the 15 April date for both Liverpool FC and their fans, and that is why we will do our utmost to make sure that the club does not have to play its UEFA Champions League second leg quarterfinal match on that day," said UEFA President Michel Platini.

"I have been in regular correspondence with Liverpool FC on this matter for some time now and fully sympathise with the club's feelings as to the importance of respecting the date of 15 April for those who lost their lives at Hillsborough," Platini added in a statement.

"This being the 20th anniversary of that tragic disaster in 1989 makes it even more relevant and we will take this into account."

Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard on Sunday appealed to UEFA to reschedule the club's second leg tie due on Wednesday, April 15.

Gerrard, who lost a cousin at Hillsborough, told the club's website: "We hope that UEFA show some common sense. You would think they would accept the significance of the date for the people of Liverpool, but unfortunately feelings like that don't always come into it."

"Hillsborough is always on my mind because I lost a member of my family there and any success we get as a club this year will be dedicated to those people who lost their lives."

The date will mark 20 years since 96 Liverpool fans lost their lives at the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield which was hosting the club's FA Cup semifinal against Nottingham Forest.

Abbiati out for season

AFP, Rome

AC Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati has been sidelined for the rest of the season after suffering a freak knee injury in the opening minutes of Sunday's 5-1 Serie A rout of Siena.

In a statement on Monday Milan said Abbiati would undergo an operation on his right knee in the coming weeks, thus ruling him out for the rest of the season.

Milan, who are third in Serie A but 12 points behind leaders Inter Milan and five behind Juventus, said the "complexity" of Abbiati's injury meant he would need three weeks of rehab before going under the knife.

Brazilian keeper Dida, who has been Milan's number two since the start of the season, will step up in place of Abbiati, who injured his knee in a clash with teammate Giuseppe Favalli.



West Ham United midfielder Scott Parker (L) slide tackles West Bromwich Albion striker Marc Antoine Fortune during their Premier League tie at Upton Park on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

Baggies hold Hammers

AFP, London



West Bromwich Albion were left four points adrift at the bottom of the Premier League after an uninspiring goalless draw away to West Ham at Upton Park here on Monday.

The visitors had the best chances of the match. Shelton Martis hit the bar while Manchester United midfielder Jonathan Greening shot over the top from six yards out and James Morrison saw his effort saved by West Ham goalkeeper Robert Green.

West Ham, who remained seventh in the table, rarely threatened to score against Tony Mowbray's basement club in a low-grade contest that seemingly did little for the Baggies' hopes of top-flight survival.

"I think I probably should have put my chance away and got us all three points," Greening told Setanta Sports.

"We knew it was going to be a difficult game, Gianfranco Zola has got them playing well, but I thought we did all right tonight."

"We've been working hard all season. It's difficult coming up from the Championship but the boys have worked hard and we'll give it a good go until the end of the season."

Mowbray said that there had been no difference in their level of performance from recent matches.

"I don't think it was an improved performance - the defence was better but the performance was what we get most weeks."

"We missed some chances and it's a very disappointed changing room there. But it's something to build on."

There was a worrying moment for the already injury-hit Hammers when centre-back Matthew Upson went off in the first-half with a leg problem.

But the good news for manager Gianfranco Zola was that Upson was later seen walking freely after being carried off on a stretcher.

FIFA reveals 11 WC bids

Football

AP, Zurich

FIFA announced Tuesday that 11 bidders are officially in the race to host the World Cup in 2018 or 2022.

The candidates are: Australia, England, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Qatar, Russia, South Korea and United States, plus joint bids from Belgium-Netherlands and Spain-Portugal.

Qatar and South Korea have applied only for the 2022 tournament. The other nine candidates are in both races.

FIFA confirmed the candidates after the deadline to formally register bids passed late Monday.

FIFA's 24-man executive committee will choose the two winning bids in December 2010. "We are very pleased about the fantastic level of interest in our flagship competition, with all initial bidders confirming their candidature," FIFA President Sepp Blatter said in a statement.

"The diversity and quality of the contenders will make this a very interesting selection process. This shows the importance of the FIFA World Cup as a truly universal event."

The World Cup, featuring 32 teams playing over four weeks, generates billions of dollars through television, tourism and marketing deals.

Hosts must also commit billions of dollars of investment to stage the event, by building and upgrading stadiums and adding infrastructure of roads, airports and hotels.

Candidates are supposed to provide about 12 stadiums holding at least 40,000 fans for group matches, with one stadium of at least 80,000 capacity to stage the opening match and final.

Five of the bids come from FIFA's Asian confederation, two from the CONCACAF region of the Americas and four from Europe.

Europe, which currently provides 13 of the 32 teams, is a strong favourite to host in 2018 after the 2010 edition was awarded to South Africa and the 2014 tournament to Brazil.

Five of the bidders have previously staged a World Cup: England in 1966; Mexico in 1970 and 1986; the United States in 1994; and South Korea and Japan as co-hosts in 2002.

Blatter has said that joint bids will likely lose out in favour of a strong proposal from a solo host.

The two co-host candidates from Europe can be converted to a single-nation option up to the May 2010 deadline for candidates to submit their bid book.

FIFA is scheduled to send out more details of bidding and hosting requirements next month, while candidates must send a signed bidding agreement to Zurich by Dec. 11. Candidates will also be visited by FIFA executive members and officials.

Klose to miss C. League quarterfinal

AFP, Munich

Germany striker Miroslav Klose will be sidelined for "six to eight weeks" following an operation on his injured right ankle, his club Bayern Munich said on Monday.

After sustaining ligament damage at the weekend, Klose went under the knife in Switzerland. As he does not need to wear a plaster-cast, he can begin rehab immediately, said the German champions.

The German championship does not finish until May 23 but Klose will miss the lion's share of the race for the Bundesliga title, as well as Bayern's quarterfinal clashes in the Champions League.

Klose should also be sidelined for Germany's World Cup qualifiers against Liechtenstein on March 28 and Wales on April 1.

Wenger backs Walcott

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger marked the 20th birthday of Theo Walcott by predicting there was still more to come from the Gunners forward.

The former Southampton starlet returned to the Arsenal first team last weekend after a spell on the sidelines through injury and looked sharp as the London club put four goals past Premier League rivals Blackburn Rovers.

Thrust into the spotlight by then England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson's shock decision to select him for the 2006 World Cup squad, Walcott has learned to live with high expectations.

A shoulder injury after a fine start to the season was a setback but now a fit Walcott is set to help in their bid to reach the last four of the FA Cup against Hull at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.

Wenger, speaking about Walcott's return to action, said: "He made a very good start and he became stronger and stronger."

"He gives us something that is important as

well when we play home. He goes behind the defenders and creates room and he has a direct game. We need that, especially at home.

"It is important to have him back and he gives you something that can make a difference in any game," the Frenchman added.

"Compared to one year ago there is no comparison that is what people sometimes have problems to accept. At that age, every three months you go higher up but how much, you can never predict."

"But there is still a lot more to come from Theo."

Also making an impact at Arsenal is Russia's Andrei Arshavin who helped create two of the Gunners' goals against Rovers and also scored with a superb solo effort.

Signed from Zenit St Petersburg in January, Arshavin is ineligible for Arsenal's Champions League quarterfinal but could yet become a key figure in their bid for both the FA Cup and a fourth-place finish in the Premier League.

"Arshavin cannot play in Europe but he had a good game against Blackburn and it will be good to have him for the cup games," said Arsenal's Bacary Sagna.

"I think he was outstanding at the weekend."

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Neil may sue West Ham

Football

SOCCERNET

Former Sheffield United manager Neil Warnock is seriously considering whether to pursue a personal compensation claim against West Ham United over the Carlos Tevez affair.

The Blades and West Ham settled the long-running affair out of court on Monday with the Hammers agreeing to pay their rivals an undisclosed fee believed to be as high as £25m following the Sheffield club's relegation in 2007.

West Ham were fined £5.5m by the Premier League for failing to fully disclose the terms of the deal that brought Tevez and Argentinian compatriot Javier Mascherano to England.

Sheffield United claim Tevez's goals kept the Hammers in the top flight at their expense, with Warnock resigning three days after their relegation.

Warnock has long contended that he and Sheffield United's relegated players could sue West Ham for loss of earnings resulting from

their relegation to the Championship.

The 60-year-old, now manager of Crystal Palace, told the Daily Mail: "I'll be looking into this now. I just wanted to see the club's case out of the way first."

"As far as I'm concerned, I should still be a Premier League manager. And I think the players have a case, too."

Warnock is not alone in considering taking matter further with reports in The Times suggesting that as many as 20 past and present Sheffield United's players are considering their own legal action against the Hammers for loss of wages and bonuses.

Referring to the settlement, Warnock continued: "It justifies what we've said all along. We've had a lot of people criticise us for taking it this far - but that's what justice is all about. But this still doesn't make it right for me or the United fans - or anyone else involved."

Warnock reiterated his view that Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore should have resigned over the affair and

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Vidic banned for 2 games

AFP, London

Nemanja Vidic will miss Manchester United's next two games, the Football Association confirmed here on Monday, after being sent off in last weekend's shock 4-1 loss to title rivals Liverpool.

The Serbian centre-back received a red card at Old Trafford on Saturday after denying Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard a clear goalscoring opportunity.

Vidic's second red card of the season - the other was also against Liverpool - in September means he will miss the Premier League leaders and reigning champions' match against Fulham on Saturday and the home fixture against Aston Villa at Old Trafford on April 5.



Former Germany and AS Roma striker Rudi Voeller poses with the official match ball for 2009 UEFA Champions League final in front of the Colosseum in Rome on Monday. The Champions League final will take place at Stadio Olimpico in Rome on May 27. PHOTO: AFP

Pompous versus thin-skinned

Football

TIM VICKERY

There's a story film director Billy Wilder used to tell about the process of shooting *Some Like It Hot*. Some of the crew kept complaining about the difficulties of working with Marilyn Monroe, and in particular her tendency to arrive on the set hours late.

Fair enough, said Wilder, I'll get my aunt to play the part. She lives in Vienna and she's 85, but she always turns up on time. The message was understood - just as well for cinematic history. Beauty and talent have their privileges.

But that's movies. How far can privileges be pushed in a team sport like football?

Diego Maradona and Juan Roman Riquelme have grown accustomed to their respective privileges - one to talk and talk and talk, the other to be defended. And it has put them on a collision course that has culminated in Riquelme's retirement from international football.

This is not a story that shows either of the two great Boca Juniors idols in their best light.

In Riquelme's case because he is so thin-skinned. This has been the great dilemma of his career. His ability to pass the ball, to see the options, to dictate the rhythm of a match inevitably means that if he is going to play he will be the hub of the side. But Riquelme the footballer receives responsibilities that Riquelme the man is not always comfortable carrying.

This is the second time Riquelme has made himself unavailable for Argentina. The first came soon after the 2006 World Cup.

At the time he said that it was to protect his mother, who was hurt at all the criticism that was coming his way. I don't think

that's the whole story. My feeling is that the decision was a response to comments made by Alfio Basile, who had just taken over in his second spell as national team coach.

Riquelme was Basile's captain in the first game Argentina played after the 2006 World Cup, a 3-0 loss to Brazil in London. Riquelme did not have one of his more effective games, and in the press conference Basile made a point of not confirming him as captain for future matches.

This, I believe, was the key to Riquelme's decision - it was



DIEGO MARADONA

JUAN ROMAN RIQUELME

taken with a spirit of "if he doesn't want me then I'm off".

But Basile - a romantic of the old school - did really want Riquelme in his team. A few months later the player had a rethink. He was back on loan at Boca and happy with the world, he had just taken the club to the Libertadores title, and in the run up to the 2007 Copa America he announced that he was available once more. And it was like he had never been away.

Argentina played some sparkling football in the tournament,

only to lose to Brazil in the final. Revenge came a year later when Brazil were beaten on the way to the Olympic gold, but since then things have gone downhill.

A run of poor results forced the resignation of Basile, depriving Riquelme of his great defender, the coach who had been proud to pick the playmaker even while he was in dispute with his club in Spain and out of regular action. In came Diego Maradona.

There had been rumours of a breakdown in relations between Basile and the European-based players (virtually the entire squad, bar Riquelme and a couple of others).

In his first few months in charge Maradona's behaviour has seen to substantiate the gossip - he has flown over the Atlantic as often as a latter-day Dr Kissinger, trying to ensure that channels of communication with his players are kept open.

Perhaps the importance given to Riquelme was part of the problem. Here Maradona has made things very clear - his team is Javier Mascherano (not Riquelme) and ten others.

There has, then, been a change in the pecking order. That doesn't mean, though, that Maradona wanted to lose Riquelme. On the contrary, he saw the Boca playmaker as a key member of his squad, the man who would set up Lionel Messi and Sergio Agüero with passes that put them clean through on goal.

But if Riquelme is absurdly thin-skinned, Maradona has his vanity. He loves to give out his opinions - it is a confirmation of his status. But things have changed.

Now he has a position - his opinions on Argentine footballers are no longer just opinions - they form the background to the team sheet that he pins up on the dressing room wall.

Given Riquelme's history and characteristics, Maradona should have thought a bit more before opening his mouth. He should have realised that comments on Riquelme's form and

fitness might better have been made in a private conversation between the two of them, rather than in a media outburst. He might also have thought that Riquelme's form for Boca was hardly relevant - for a player of his style the quality of the surrounding cast is paramount.

But what's done is done, and in this case a rethink is unlikely. From Maradona's point of view there are few crimes greater than pulling out of the Argentina team. For Riquelme to get back in would take a grovelling apology that is hard to see happening.

And so Argentina must build towards South Africa without the man who has been the fulcrum of their side ever since Jose Pekerman took over as national team coach towards the end of 2004.

Who will step into Riquelme's shoes?

Some in Argentina are pushing the claims of Daniel 'Rolfi' Montenegro of Independiente, but I can't see much future in that option. Thirty later this month, Montenegro has never given signs of being able to tip the balance at the highest level.

I suspect that still more responsibility will be thrust on to Messi, who may now be expected to boss the side in the way that Maradona used to do.

If so then a possible plus of Riquelme's retirement is that without him it becomes easier to accommodate a target man striker into the line-up. This is something that Argentina have been missing since the decline of Hernan Crespo.

For all the wonderful ability of Messi, Agüero and Carlos Tevez, there are times when a back to goal presence in the penalty area is useful - and can help bring out the best in the little guys.

Who that player should be - that's a subject for another article.

But I think we can rule out Billy Wilder's aunt in Vienna.