

LIVERPOOL V CHELSEA

Torres sure of success

AFP, Liverpool



Fernando Torres believes his lethal partnership with Steven Gerrard will help Liverpool hand Chelsea another dose of misery in Wednesday's quarterfinal first-leg.

After watching Robbie Keane struggle to gel with Torres earlier this season, Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez decided to move England midfielder Gerrard into a move advanced position just behind Spain striker Torres.

The switch has transformed Liverpool as an attacking force. For much of Benitez's reign they have focused on a safety-first philosophy that delivered results but few thrills.

But with Gerrard in tandem with Torres, Liverpool's two best players have formed a formidable double act which has provided the firepower to keep the Reds hot on Manchester United's heels in the Premier League title race and set up yet another European showdown with Chelsea.

The two English powerhouses will be meeting in the Champions League for the fifth successive season and, for once, it is Benitez's men who have painful memories to avenge.

After eliminating Chelsea twice at the semi-final stage in 2005 and 2007, it was

Liverpool's turn to suffer the heartache of a last-four exit when the Blues won 4-3 on aggregate last season.

That narrow victory kept up the pattern of tight ties between the increasingly bitter rivals and Torres knows it will be hard to separate them again, making the potency of his partnership with Gerrard even more important.

"Stevie has been getting a lot of praise from some of the best players in the world," Torres said.

"That is quite right because I think he is the best in the world. He is a great team player but he can also win a game on his own when maybe we are not playing so well.

"I cannot think of a player I would rather be playing with. We know it is not going to be easy against Chelsea but both Stevie and I are happy with our form."

While Manchester United's dramatic victory over Aston Villa on Sunday took some of the wind out of Liverpool's sails following their own late win against Fulham on Saturday, Benitez's side still have a realistic chance of winning the title.

For Chelsea, who sit four points behind United with a game more played, Europe represents their best chance of a memorable campaign.

Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard, who scored in Saturday's 2-0 victory at Newcastle, is convinced his team are in the right frame of mind to cope with the sound and fury of a European night at

Anfield.

"We know how tough Liverpool is going to be. It is going to be a very tight game, both legs, and we are ready. We are in the right mood for it," Lampard said.

Chelsea's hopes of taking a positive result back to Stamford Bridge for next Tuesday's return would be improved if Didier Drogba can recover from the ankle injury that kept him out of the Newcastle match.

Drogba, who terrorised Liverpool in last season's semifinal second-leg, has been in fine form of late after an inconsistent season and Blues boss Guus Hiddink was relieved to see the Ivory Coast striker play a full part in training on Monday.

If Drogba features on Merseyside it will be his first game since he played in the Ivory Coast's traumatic World Cup qualifier against Malawi, when the collapse of a stadium wall caused the deaths of 19 fans in Abidjan.

Like all of his Ivory Coast team-mates, Drogba has found it hard to come to terms with the tragedy, but Hiddink believes he will be able to put it out of his mind for a while and concentrate on Chelsea's challenge.

"We've talked about the tragedy in Abidjan with the whole squad," Hiddink said. "Winning and losing are very important but this showed there are other things in life to put them into some kind of perspective."

Robinho cleared

Football

AFP, Leeds

Manchester City and Brazil striker Robinho will not face charges following allegations of a serious sexual assault made in January, police announced here on Monday.

Robinho always denied any wrongdoing relating to an alleged incident at the Space nightclub in Leeds, northern England, and a spokesperson for West Yorkshire police said: "Following a report of a serious sexual assault that occurred at a nightclub in Leeds on January 14, 2009, the matter was investigated and a man was arrested and released on police bail."

"A file was submitted to the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) who decided that no further action should be taken."

Robinho's advisor, Chris Nathaniel of NVA

Management, issued a statement saying: "I am pleased to announce that Robson de Souza (Robinho) has been cleared of all allegations of rape."

"He has maintained his innocence throughout the police interview process and I am delighted that no further action will be taken."

"Robinho is a hard-working family man, who is extremely passionate about football. He now wishes to focus his attention on Manchester City to help create a successful end to the season."

"Robinho will be making an official statement at a later date, in the mean time he wants to pass on his sincere thanks to all his family, friends, fans and Manchester City colleagues who have supported him through this terrible ordeal," Nathaniel added.

Britain's Sun newspaper reported at the time that a teenage university student

had alleged she was raped by Robinho in the VIP area of Space.

The report said Robinho, who is married and has a son, had gone there for a night out with his team-mates.

Last month Robinho threatened to sue Pele, widely considered to be the best footballer of all time, over claims made by the Brazil hero that he had taken recreational drugs.

Robinho, 25, joined City for a British record transfer fee of 32 million pounds in September from Real Madrid.

In January, he angered City manager Mark Hughes by leaving the club's warm weather training camp in Tenerife without permission.

The occasional brilliant display at home apart, Robinho so far has failed to live up to his price tag and City are currently in the mid-table position of tenth in the 20-team English Premier League.

Lazio angry at MU over Macheda

AFP, London

Manchester United have been accused by Lazio of snatching away their star youngster Federico Macheda, who made a sensational Premier League debut when scoring the winner against Aston Villa on Sunday.

The 17-year-old became an instant Old Trafford hero when coming off the bench to score a stunning injury-time winner in the 3-2 victory, sending United back to the top of the table.

But Lazio, who first groomed the young striker before he moved to Manchester, have been angered by the loss of Macheda.

"All these players are robbed as a matter of course by this club," Lotito told Tuesday's Daily Mail.

"They are always outside what is normal in terms of etiquette."

"They go to the parents and give them money and important jobs. These are boys who come from poor families. The families base their choices on economic interests."

"It's not moral. It is like a cattle market. The young players are treated like cattle."

Macheda himself has described his majestic debut as "the day of my dreams".

Sheva wants Milan stay

AFP, Rome

Ukrainian striker Andrei Shevchenko, on loan at AC Milan from Chelsea, said on Monday that he hoped to prolong his stay at the Italian giants beyond the end of the season.

"I feel good at the moment," he said during an event organised by the club.

Despite his optimism, Shevchenko has endured a less than spectacular return to the San Siro and has failed to pin down a first-team place.

He came on with 15 minutes remaining in Milan's 2-0 victory over Lecce on Sunday and laid on the second goal for Italian forward Filippo Inzaghi in injury time.

"I want to continue in this vein and do my best between now and the end of the season," Shevchenko said.

"My wish is to stay at Milan next season. But on that subject, no decision has yet been taken."

After two forgettable years at Chelsea, the 32-year-old was loaned to Milan, the club where he shone between 1999 and 2006, firing them to a Champions League title in 2003 and the Italian championship in 2004.

But with Inzaghi, Marco Borriello and the Brazilian trio of Kaka, Ronaldinho and Alexandre Pato ahead of him in the attacking pecking order, Shevchenko has had to get used to spending time on the sidelines.

He has played 14 times in Serie A this season, but has started just twice and is yet to score in the league.



Liverpool striker Fernando Torres controls the ball during a training session at their Melwood training ground on Tuesday ahead of their tonight's Champions League quarterfinal first-leg match against Chelsea.

Lucas set to play

AFP, Liverpool

Lucas is set to take the place of the suspended Javier Mascherano in Liverpool's Champions League quarterfinal first leg tie with English rivals Chelsea at Anfield here on Wednesday.

Argentina international Mascherano has been ruled out of the first leg after collecting a booking against Real Madrid and Brazil youngster Lucas is now set to play in midfield.

Yossi Benayoun, who came off the bench to score the winner at Fulham despite a calf injury sustained while playing for Israel last week, expected to be among the substitutes against Chelsea.

Central defender Sami Hyypia, who suffered an injury playing for Finland last week, is in line to return to the squad.

Fernandes breaks his leg

AFP, Madrid

Valencia's Portuguese international defender Manuel Fernandes will miss the rest of the season after he broke his left leg during a weekend Spanish league match, the club said on Monday.

The 23-year-old played more than 75 minutes of Valencia's 4-1 win over Getafe on Sunday with the injury, which was only confirmed on Monday after he underwent medical tests, it said in a statement.

"I could finish the game because it was not hurting a lot," Portuguese media quoted him as saying.

Fernandes, who has spent spells on loan to English Premiership sides Everton and Portsmouth, will undergo surgery on Tuesday.

He is the second Spanish league player to be sidelined for the rest of the season after breaking a leg over the weekend.

Grafite eyes Brazil WC spot

Football

AFP, Berlin

Should Brazil coach Dunga be looking for an alternative to strikers Kaka and Robinho at next year's World Cup, Wolfsburg forward Grafite confidently believes he's the man for the job.

AC Milan's Kaka and Manchester City's Robinho have been Dunga's first-choice strikers in the South American zone of the World Cup qualification so far.

But Grafite's six goals in his last three Bundesliga games have brought some Brazilian colour to the German league and could lead to him adding to his single international cap.

Edinaldo Batista Libano - Grafite for short - is the German league's top-scorer with 20 goals in 17 games this season. He scored twice in Saturday's 5-1 hammering of Bayern Munich which put Wolfsburg top of the table.

The 30-year-old, who won his only cap for Brazil and scored on his debut in April 2005 in a 3-0 friendly win against Guatemala, is currently enjoying a purple patch and all his goals have a touch of typical Brazilian flair.

"I am a Brazilian, just like the others, but perhaps I play a bit like a German," said Grafite

whose final goal against Bayern was straight from the samba textbook.

Having effortlessly beaten three defenders, Grafite rounded Bayern goalkeeper Michael Rensing and casually back-heeled the ball into an empty net.

"The fact he pulled that goal off immediately shows his quality," said Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath.

"He is a disciplined player who plays each match at 100 percent and he is important for team spirit, because he's always positive."



GRAFITE

Grafite has just eight league games left this season so is unlikely to hit the extra 20 goals he needs to equal Gerd Muller's phenomenal record of 40 set in the 1971/72 Bundesliga season which few have ever got near breaking.

But although injury has restricted him to just 17 league games this season, Grafite has scored a goal on average every 70 minutes; Muller only managed one every 76.5 minutes.

"The Bundesliga suits me perfectly both in terms of its physicality and mentality," said the Brazilian. "For example, they expect attackers to attack and defenders to defend."

Grafite signed a four-year contract with Wolfsburg from French side Le Mans for 7.5 million euros (10m US dollars) in the summer of 2007.

The Brazilian has forged an exceptional strike-force alongside Bosnia forward Edin Dzeko, who has 15 goals, and playmaker Zvezdan Misimovic, who has 16 assists in 25 games and six goals of his own.

"Without the team around me, I wouldn't be so successful," said Grafite. "And anyway, at the end it doesn't matter who scores the goals."

"I am experiencing something good at the moment, we can even think about the Bundesliga title, the Champions League or the UEFA Cup."

BARCELONA V BAYERN MUNICH

Barca start favourites

AFP, Madrid



No Spanish side has ever won the treble of league, Kings Cup and Champions League but Barcelona have it in their sights with German powerhouse Bayern Munich the next obstacle on Wednesday.

Barcelona start as favourites for the Champions League quarterfinal match-up and hope to make home advantage count against a Jekyll and Hyde Bayern team.

Pep Guardiola's side lead the Spanish league and face Athletic Bilbao in the Kings Cup final on May 13, meaning Europe is the final part of their treble bid.

Barca, semi-finalists last season and winners in 2006,

have been unplayable at times this season with Lionel Messi, Xavi, Samuel Eto'o and Thierry Henry ripping sides apart at home and abroad.

Henry has won the English Premier League, FA Cup, European championships and World Cup leaving the Champions League as the only medal missing from his collection.

"I want to win the Champions League. It is a competition I am passionate about and I have never won it," said Henry.

"Bayern are a tough team and have a lot of players that can make a difference in a game like Luca Toni or Bastian Schweinsteiger."

Henry singled out French international team-mate Franck Ribery, who has been linked with a summer move to Barca, as the German giant's

danger man.

"Franck Ribery is Bayern's Lionel Messi," said Henry. "When there seems to be no space to move, Franck can still do things. With his talent he can hurt Barca, Real Madrid, Manchester United or any team you care to mention."

Ribery is a slight doubt with a foot problem and faces a race against time to be fit for the Camp Nou duel, as does Brazilian centre-half Lucio who picked up a thigh injury against Wolfsburg.

Bayern whacked Sporting Lisbon 12-1 on aggregate in the last round while free-scoring Barca beat Lyon 6-3 over two legs, so goals are expected from two attack-minded sides.

German international Miroslav Klose is joint top-scorer in the competition with

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PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona captain Carles Puyol (L) practices with teammate Thierry Henry (R) during a training session in Nou Camp on Tuesday, on the eve of their Champions League quarterfinal first-leg match against Bayern Munich.

Football

AFP, Tehran

Less than 10 days after sacking its national football team coach, Iran on Monday named Mohammad Mayelikohan as its new coach to try and revive their faltering 2010 World Cup finals qualifying campaign, the ISNA news agency reported.

Iran's former coach Ali Daei was sacked following its defeat against Saudi Arabia in an Asian 2010 World Cup qualifier, seriously harming their chances of reaching a fourth successive World Cup finals.

"Mohammad Mayelikohan has been appointed by the Iranian football federation's management," the chairman

of the Iranian football federation Ali Kafashian was quoted by the agency.

Mayelikohan first's challenges will come against North and South Korea in away matches and United Arab Emirates in Tehran in its qualifying campaign.

Group B is currently topped by South Korea with 11 points from five games, trailed by their northern neighbour who has bagged 10 points from six games and in third place is Saudi Arabia who also has 10 points from six games but with a few goals.

"We should not lose faith in our football, there is winning and there is loss. If we do not make it to the World Cup then we will plan for the next four years," Kafashian said when asked who will be held respon-

sible if Iran fails to make it to South Africa 2010.

"Mayelikohan has exerted his efforts in the past and currently he has been appointed to the post by the federation management board's decision," Kafashian said defending the federation's pick.

Mayelikohan was sacked from the Iranian national football team coach in 1997 when they were struggling to qualify for the 1998 World Cup finals - they eventually did make it.

"After Saipa's games are over in the league in early May he will commence his work but for the time being he will embark on his primary task," Kafashian added without giving any details.

Mayelikohan is currently Iranian football club Saipa's

coach which stands tenth in the country's premier football league comprising of 18 clubs.

The federation chairman said that Mayelikohan's paycheque was not discussed and that he accepted the post to fulfil his "national duty."

The announcement of Daei's dismissal who is the world record-holder scorer in international matches, came after his lacklustre performance as coach for the 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

Iran, is fourth in Group B with six points from five games managing only a win and three consecutive draws.

Iran has appeared in the 1978, 1998 and 2006 World Cup finals. Team Melli's best results in the World Cup was in France 98 when Iran beat its archrival the United States 2-1.