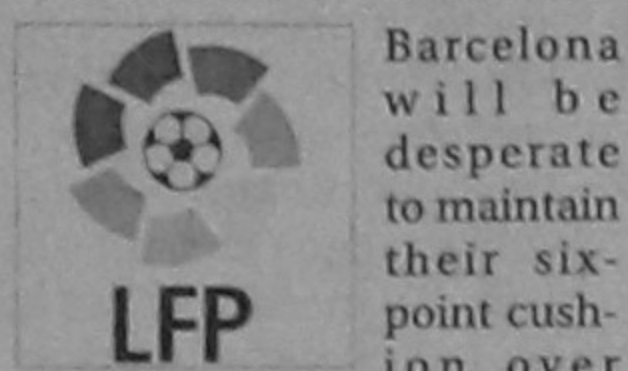


Crunch time for Barca

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona will be desperate to maintain their six-point cushion over Real Madrid on a crucial weekend in the Spanish League before the two giants meet in the 'El Clasico' at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Barcelona have one of their toughest remaining fixtures on Saturday with a trip to Champions League chasing Valencia.

Real also have a difficult task as they travel to the intimidating Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium on Sunday to tackle third-placed Sevilla who defeated the champions earlier in the season.

It is coach Juande Ramos's first return to Sevilla who he guided to back-to-back UEFA Cup wins in 2006 and 2007 before an ill-fated move to Tottenham Hotspur.

"I love the city and the fans were always marvellous with me," said Ramos. "This match is Sevilla against Real Madrid not Sevilla versus Juande Ramos."

Barcelona play first on the Saturday hoping to open a nine-point gap at the top.

It is the clash of the 'Pichichi' contenders as the top two scorers in the league - Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o and Valencia's David Villa - face off at the Mestalla Stadium.

Eto'o leads the goalscoring charts with 27 while Spanish

international Villa, who has been linked with a summer move to Barcelona, has 25.

Barcelona need Eto'o and company at their best with a make-or-break sequence of four games in 11 days.

The Valencia test is followed by two Champions League semifinal legs against Chelsea with 'El Clasico' sandwiched in between.

Valencia were thrashed 4-0 by Barcelona earlier in the season so will want to set the record straight and maintain their Champions League push.

Unai Emery's side are trying to hold onto fourth, but must breach a Barcelona defence that have not conceded in the league since March 1st with Victor Valdes keeping seven clean sheets.

Real fans are still recovering from their rollercoaster 3-2 win over Getafe on Tuesday but coach Ramos has been left with several selection problems ahead of Sunday's trip to Sevilla.

Portuguese centre-back

FIXTURES

Saturday	Malaga v Deportivo La Coruna (1800 GMT), Almeria v Numancia (1800 GMT), Valencia v Barcelona (2000 GMT)
Sunday	(1500 GMT unless stated)
	Getafe v Villarreal, Recreativo Huelva v Real Mallorca, Valladolid v Osasuna, Athletic Bilbao v Racing Santander, Espanyol v Real Betis, Sevilla v Real Madrid (1700 GMT), Atletico Madrid v Sporting Gijon (1900 GMT)

Inter out of Italian Cup

AFP, Rome

Serie A leaders Inter Milan were knocked out of the Italian Cup on Thursday when a 1-0 semifinal second leg win over Sampdoria fell short of overturning a 3-0 deficit from the teams' first meeting.

In the May 13 final in Rome, Sampdoria will face Lazio who completed a 4-2 aggregate win over Juventus on Wednesday.

With three goals to make up, Inter coach Jose Mourinho played three strikers with Mario Balotelli, Julio Cruz and Zlatan Ibrahimovic all starting.

It was Ibrahimovic who was to score the only goal of the second leg with a superb 27th-minute volley although the Swedish international was unfortunate not to have celebrated a second when he saw a 37th-minute lob come back off the post.

Sampdoria had their chances with Antonio Cassano and Giampaolo Pazzini both denied by good saves from Julio Cesar.

Inter can now turn their attentions to clinching the league title.

They have a 10-point lead with just six games left to play.

Spurs want Beckham

AFP, London

Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp has admitted he could be interested in bringing local boy David Beckham back home in the run-up to next year's World Cup in South Africa.

The 33-year-old is on track to make Fabio Capello's squad for the finals and will need somewhere to remain match sharp during Major League Soccer's off season between December and March.

Beckham is spending the second half of this season at AC Milan, who are believed to be keen to repeat the loan deal for part of the 2009-10 season, but Redknapp has indicated that Tottenham could also be an option.

"I have not thought about David Beckham, but it would be disrespectful of me to say I would not be interested in him, were he to become available," Redknapp said.

"David Beckham is a fantastic player, but he is also a terrific role model and a terrific professional. If the opportunity was there to sign him, any club would have to think about it. He would still be a terrific player."



Inter Milan star Zlatan Ibrahimovic reacts after missing a goal during their Italian Cup semifinal against Sampdoria at San Siro on Thursday.

MU face Spurs test

AFP, London



Manchester United can take a huge step towards retaining their Premier League title on Saturday but first they must do what none of their rivals have managed this season -- take all three points from a meeting with Tottenham.

Harry Redknapp's side may have spent the first half of the season struggling near the bottom of the table, but a defeat of Liverpool, a win and a draw against Chelsea and two draws with Arsenal underline their ability to raise their game against top level opponents.

Liverpool's 4-4 draw with Arsenal in midweek has increased United's margin for error.

But although Sir Alex Ferguson's men capitalised with a 2-0 win over Portsmouth 24 hours later, their performance was sufficiently jittery to suggest Tottenham could pose a tougher challenge at Old

Trafford.

Spurs defender Jonathan Woodgate is anticipating a tight encounter and does not expect United to rest any of their big names ahead of Wednesday's Champions League semifinal first leg against Arsenal.

"We haven't been beaten by any of the top sides in the league this season and we have beaten Liverpool and Chelsea," Woodgate said.

"Our record against the top four is impeccable but United will put out a strong side and it will be very tough."

The early evening match will see Michael Carrick come up against his former club and the midfielder believes United just need to hold their nerve for the final month of the campaign.

"Liverpool's draw was a big boost and we're in a decent position now," he said. "Hopefully we can keep the momentum going until the end of the season and put the league to bed as quickly as we can. There are big games coming thick and fast and we need to be at our best in all of them."

Liverpool, who have been

scoring freely but also leaking goals of late, cannot afford to dwell on their midweek setback as they prepare for what is likely to be a ferociously contested meeting with Hull.

Phil Brown's side are fighting for their Premier League lives with only a three-point cushion between them and the relegation zone.

Sunderland, who are only a point better off than Hull, will be desperate to take all three points from their trip to bottom side West Brom, who could be relegated as early as next weekend if results go

against them.

Middlesbrough, who travel to Arsenal on Sunday, could benefit if Arsene Wenger opts to rest some of his big names ahead of the Champions League clash with Manchester United.

With West Ham entertaining Chelsea, Fulham will be hoping for a win over Stoke that could see them leapfrog their London rivals into seventh, the final qualifying spot for next season's Europa League, the successor to the UEFA Cup.

Blackburn will see their home encounter with Wigan on Saturday as a golden opportunity to pull clear of the drop zone at the expense of opponents with little left to play for this season.

Everton's meeting with Manchester City looks to be the match with least at stake this weekend but Everton's on-loan Brazilian striker Jo will at least have a point to prove to the club that paid 18 million pounds to bring him to England before the start of the season then offloaded him in January.

Blackburn will see their home encounter with Wigan on Saturday as a golden opportunity to pull clear of the drop zone at the expense of opponents with little left to play for this season.

Everton's meeting with Manchester City looks to be the match with least at stake this weekend but Everton's on-loan Brazilian striker Jo will at least have a point to prove to the club that paid 18 million pounds to bring him to England before the start of the season then offloaded him in January.

Blackburn will see their home encounter with Wigan on Saturday as a golden opportunity to pull clear of the drop zone at the expense of opponents with little left to play for this season.

Everton's meeting with Manchester City looks to be the match with least at stake this weekend but Everton's on-loan Brazilian striker Jo will at least have a point to prove to the club that paid 18 million pounds to bring him to England before the start of the season then offloaded him in January.

Blackburn will see their home encounter with Wigan on Saturday as a golden opportunity to pull clear of the drop zone at the expense of opponents with little left to play for this season.

Everton's meeting with Manchester City looks to be the match with least at stake this weekend but Everton's on-loan Brazilian striker Jo will at least have a point to prove to the club that paid 18 million pounds to bring him to England before the start of the season then offloaded him in January.

Blackburn will see their home encounter with Wigan on Saturday as a golden opportunity to pull clear of the drop zone at the expense of opponents with little left to play for this season.

Racing destroy Atletico

AFP, Madrid



Atletico Madrid's hopes of a second successive season in the Champions League are fading fast after a thumping 5-1 defeat at Racing Santander on Thursday left them six-points adrift of the top four.

Atletico's defensive frailties were on show again as Racing scored three times in the first half to condemn the Madrid side to their 11th defeat of the season.

Racing centre-halves Christian Fernandez and Ezequiel Garay, on loan from Real Madrid, grabbed a goal apiece inside the first 16 minutes and Mohamed Tchite clinched the game with a 38th minute strike.

It was a morale-boosting win for Racing who moved seven points clear of the drop zone.

The loss is particularly harmful for Atletico as rivals Valencia and Villarreal both won to stay on course for Europe's flagship competition.

Valencia defeated Real Betis 2-1 on Wednesday and Villarreal stayed in touch with their rivals, lying three points behind, but needed a dubious goal to overcome Recreativo Huelva 2-1 at home on Thursday.

Cani scored a controversial 67th-minute winner for Villarreal for their first win in six games, but relegation-threatened Recreativo were furious claiming Cani's chip hadn't crossed the line.

Recreativo took the lead after just 56 seconds following a terrible mix-up in the Villarreal defence and Javi Camunas was alert,

stealing possession before poking home his ninth goal of the season.

Villarreal were struggling but Joseba Lorente raced onto a great pass from Ariel Ibagaza and produced a great chip over the goalkeeper to equalise in the 40th minute.

Giuseppe Rossi almost put the hosts ahead close to half-time but a heroic goal-line block denied the former Manchester United man.

Recreativo threatened to go back in front in the second period but fell victim to Cani's controversial goal.

The winger used his quick feet to get in behind the defence and his chip looked to have been cleared off the line but the referee awarded a goal.

Recreativo, convinced it wasn't a goal, continued to play on and appealing Villarreal players had to wait several seconds before knowing whether the goal had been awarded.

Several protesting Recreativo players were booked as they vented their frustration at the referee who then angered the home players by disallowing an inswinging freekick from Nihat.

Recreativo drop to second from bottom following the defeat with Espanyol climbing above them courtesy of a 3-0 win over relegation rivals Sporting Gijon on Thursday.

Espanyol have put a fine run together at the right time with 10 points from the last 12 and are now just one point behind Sporting, who are clinging to the final safety spot.

Brazilian Nene, on a season loan from Monaco, opened the scoring before Roman Martinez and Jose Callejon scored twice in as many minutes to wrap up the points.

Toni targets title

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni says his side must defend their Bundesliga title or risk being part of a lost generation as they look to over-haul leaders Wolfsburg starting Saturday against Schalke.

"We will only be remembered if we win the title," said Italy's Toni, who has scored 12 league goals this season.

"If we do not do it, it will have been a lost year."

The defending champions are second in the table and level with Hamburg, who are also three points behind leaders Wolfsburg.

They host Schalke, who are sixth in the league and on the verge of a European berth for next season, at Munich's Allianz Arena on Saturday and with six games left Bayern can ill afford to drop any more points.

And with Schalke, Moenchengladbach, Cottbus, Leverkusen, Hoffenheim and Stuttgart as their remaining games, Bayern are targeting a maximum 18 points.

In the preparation for the Schalke game Bayern welcomed back Ze Roberto, Breno, Lukas Podolski and Massimo Oddo while only goalkeeper Michael Rensing (torn finger tendon) and ankle-injury victim Miroslav Klose are still unable to train.

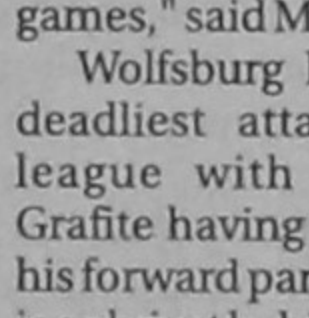
League leaders Wolfsburg are in action on Sunday at relegation-candidates Energie Cottbus.

Energie may be currently in the drop zone but, particularly at home, they are hard to break down and coach Felix Magath is taking nothing for granted.

"I'm neither interested in records which have been seen

Persie blow for Arsenal

AFP, London



Robin van Persie, Arsenal's leading scorer this season, has been ruled out of next week's Champions League semifinal first leg against Manchester United.

The Dutch striker, who has hit the net 17 times in the current campaign, is struggling to recover from the groin injury which forced him to sit out the 4-4 draw with Liverpool this week and manager Arsene Wenger has confirmed he will not be available for Sunday's Premier League match against Middlesbrough or the trip to Old Trafford three days later.

There was better news for Wenger on the fitness of Emmanuel Adebayor. The Togo striker has recovered from a hamstring injury and is set to feature as Arsenal seek to extend their unbeaten league run to 20 matches against relegation-threatened Boro.

First-choice goalkeeper Manuel Almunia and defender Johan Djourou are also ready to return following ankle and knee injuries respectively, which will come as a relief for Wenger who made no secret of his frustration at the defensive errors that contributed to all four of Liverpool's goals in midweek.

"We will rotate a little bit again, but we have no major injuries from the Liverpool match," the Frenchman reported. "Manuel Almunia was in full training on Thursday and we will see how he responds. Djourou was in full training also so we will see how he is too. Both could come back into the squad."

Emmanuel Adebayor should come back into training on Saturday but Robin van Persie is definitely out for Sunday and for Manchester United.

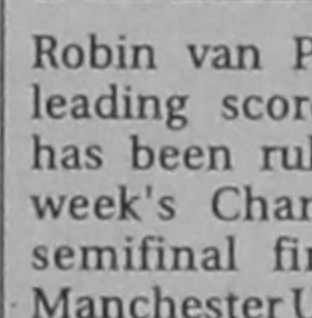
Wenger also revealed that France left-back Gael Clichy will have a scan on his back injury on Monday and could be involved in the Champions League match if the results are positive.

FIXTURES

Saturday	Bayern Munich v Schalke 04, Borussia Dortmund v Hamburg, VfB Stuttgart v Eintracht Frankfurt, Bayer Leverkusen v Karlsruhe, Werder Bremen v VfL Bochum, Hanover v Cologne
Sunday	Energie Cottbus v VfL Wolfsburg, Borussia M'Gladbach v Arminia Bielefeld

Inter so close

AFP, Rome



As Inter Milan chase a fourth straight title in Serie A, the focus has now centred on the battle for Champions League places with a weekend of intriguing fixtures on the agenda in Italy.

Jose Mourinho is on the verge of winning a domestic crown in a third country after Portugal and England as Inter travel to lower table Napoli with a 10 point cushion over AC Milan and Juventus.

While AC Milan stepped into second courtesy of goal difference with a David Beckham-inspired 5-1 win over Torino in their last outing, Juventus have been tipped into turmoil with rumours swirling that coach Claudio Ranieri is once again "dead man walking" and on his way out.

The club were knocked out of the Italian Cup in midweek by Lazio 4-2 on aggregate as angry fans shouted "Get out, Get out" to the beleaguered 57-year-old and some fans even spilled onto the pitch in order to vent their anger with the club's shortcomings.

Juventus have also been ordered to play a match behind closed doors after sections of their home fans abused Inter Milan's black player Mario Balotelli during the 1-1 draw last Saturday.

Mourinho, however, played down the scandal: "It's not racism. It's just an ignorant way to vent their anger against an unpleasant opponent because he scored a goal," said the outspoken Portuguese.

"If I can speak up for Juve, what happened on Saturday wasn't the first time. It's happened in many stadiums and also in our own," he added.

Ranieri was recently given

Inter so close

AFP, Rome



As Inter Milan chase a fourth straight title in Serie A, the focus has now centred on the battle for Champions League places with a weekend of intriguing fixtures on the agenda in Italy.

Jose Mourinho is on the verge of winning a domestic crown in a third country after Portugal and England as Inter travel to lower table Napoli with a 10 point cushion over AC Milan and Juventus.

While AC Milan stepped into second courtesy of goal difference with a David Beckham-inspired 5-1 win over Torino in their last outing, Juventus have been tipped into turmoil with rumours swirling that coach Claudio Ranieri is once again "dead man walking" and on his way out.

The club were knocked out of the Italian Cup in midweek by Lazio 4-2 on aggregate as angry fans shouted "Get out, Get out" to the beleaguered 57-year-old and some fans even spilled onto the pitch in order to vent their anger with the club's shortcomings.

Juventus have also been ordered to play a match behind closed doors after sections of their home fans abused Inter Milan's black player Mario Balotelli during the 1-1 draw last Saturday.

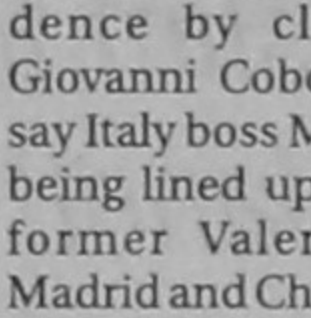
Mourinho, however, played down the scandal: "It's not racism. It's just an ignorant way to vent their anger against an unpleasant opponent because he scored a goal," said the outspoken Portuguese.

"If I can speak up for Juve, what happened on Saturday wasn't the first time. It's happened in many stadiums and also in our own," he added.

Ranieri was recently given

Inter so close

AFP, Rome



As Inter Milan chase a fourth straight title in Serie A, the focus has now centred on the battle for Champions League places with a weekend of intriguing fixtures on the agenda in Italy.

Jose Mourinho is on the verge of winning a domestic crown in a third country after Portugal and England as Inter travel to lower table Napoli with a 10 point cushion over AC Milan and Juventus.

While AC Milan stepped into second courtesy of goal difference with a David Beckham-inspired 5-1 win over Torino in their last outing, Juventus have been tipped into turmoil with rumours swirling that coach Claudio Ranieri is once again "dead man walking" and on his way out.

The club were knocked out of the Italian Cup in midweek by Lazio 4-2 on aggregate as angry fans shouted "Get out, Get out" to the beleaguered 57-year-old and some fans even spilled onto the pitch in order to vent their anger with the club's shortcomings.

Juventus have also been ordered to play a match behind closed doors after sections of their home fans abused Inter Milan's black player Mario Balotelli during the 1-1 draw last Saturday.

Mourinho, however, played down the scandal: "It's not racism. It's just an ignorant way to vent their anger against an unpleasant opponent because he scored a goal," said the outspoken Portuguese.

"If I can speak up for Juve, what happened on Saturday wasn't the first time. It's happened in many stadiums and also in our own," he added.

Ranieri was recently given

Saturday	Chievo v Udinese, Fiorentina v AS Roma
Sunday	Sampdoria v Cagliari, Napoli v Inter Milan, Reggina v Juventus, Lazio v Atalanta, Bologna v Genoa, Torino v Siena, AC Milan v Palermo, Lecce v Catania



Racing Santander striker Pablo Munitis (top) is lifted by his teammates after scoring the fourth goal against Atletico Madrid during their Primera Liga clash at the Sardinero Stadium in Santander on Thursday.