



Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath (C) signs an autograph at the club's training session on Thursday.

Set for historic finale

Four teams can win title

INTERNET, undated



History will be made in Germany on Saturday, as four teams go into the final round of Bundesliga matches still in with a chance of lifting the title. VfL Wolfsburg, who are on 66 points, are clear favourites to lift a first-ever Bundesliga title and will - in all probability - need just a draw at home against Werder Bremen.

The side from northern Germany are two points and seven goals ahead of Bayern Munich and face a team that on Wednesday lost the UEFA Cup final against Ukrainian club Shakhtar Donetsk.

The defending champions Bayern Munich, meanwhile, are facing a difficult winter-take-all match at home against VfB Stuttgart.

Stuttgart are also on 64 points and a victory for them would see them leap-frog Bayern into second place, which would give them an automatic place in the Champions League, unlike the third-placed team, who have to go through a qualifying campaign.

Even fourth placed Hertha Berlin still have a theoretical chance of taking the Bundesliga title. They are on 63 points and need a victory at struggling Karlsruhe SC, but also need 24 goals!

But even if nobody in the capital believes that they will win the title, they know that a victory at Karlsruhe will take them into the Champions League, either as second-placed team (if Bayern or Stuttgart draw) or as third-placed team (if Bayern or Stuttgart win).

Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath, who previously coached both Werder and Bayern, said that he will certainly take nothing for granted in the northern German derby. "We certainly took a massive step towards claiming the title with the win in Hanover (last weekend), but nothing has been decided just yet."

"Bremen have a top team. They made that very clear during the German Cup quarter final in Wolfsburg. We certainly won't be playing for a draw, we don't know how to do that."

"We have a fantastic record at home. With our own fans behind us, we want to take the decisive step and clinch the German championship," Magath said.

He can again count on his striking duo of Grafite and Edin Dzeko, who are chasing the record set twice by Gerd Mueller and Uli Hoess, who scored 53 goals between them.

The Wolfsburg strikers have scored 51 goals and need just two more to equal the record.

If, at the end of the day, the trophy will be handed out in Munich, it would be the first time that a team 'gives away' the title on the last day of the season.

In 1986, Bremen went into

the final round two points ahead of Bayern, but lost their final game in Stuttgart, while Bayern won theirs and won the championship on goal difference.

In 2000 Bayer Leverkusen were in a similar situation, but lost their last game, while Bayern Munich beat Werder Bremen to take the championship on goal difference.

Stuttgart have also once benefited from a turn-around. In 1994, they went into the final round two points behind Frankfurt, but ended up winning the title.

But if the going is tough at the top of the table, it is similar at the bottom, where four clubs are in danger of relegation.

Borussia Moenchengladbach are in 15th place on 30 points and face Borussia Dortmund at home. A draw will ensure they avoid relegation, but a draw might not be good enough for Dortmund, who are fighting for a place in the Europa League.

Dortmund are on 58 points, as are SV Hamburg who could take the final Europa League place from Dortmund if they win at Eintracht Frankfurt and Dortmund slip up.

Arminia Bielefeld are currently 16th - a place which ensures them a play-off against the third-placed team from the second division. Bielefeld are at home to Hanover 96, while 17th-placed Energie Cottbus are at home to Bayer Leverkusen.

Cottbus are also on 27 points, while Karlsruhe are on 26 points.

The only two matches with nothing at stake but pride and a better place in the table are in Cologne, where the home side faces VfL Bochum and in Gelsenkirchen, where Schalke are at home to Hoffenheim.

FIXTURES

Saturday
VfL Wolfsburg v Werder Bremen, Eintracht Frankfurt v Hamburg, Bayern Munich v VfB Stuttgart, Energie Cottbus v Bayer Leverkusen, Arminia Bielefeld v Hanover 96, Karlsruhe v Hertha Berlin, Cologne v VfL Bochum, Borussia M'gladbach v Borussia Dortmund, Schalke 04 v Hoffenheim

Mourinho staying at Inter

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho on Thursday dampened rumours linking him with a move to Real Madrid by saying that he was "99.9 per cent" sure of remaining at the newly-crowned Italian champions.

Florentino Perez, favourite to win the race to become Real's next president, is reportedly keen to lure Mourinho to the Bernabeu stadium next season.

Perez has singled out the former Chelsea boss as his number one target to take over from Juande Ramos should he succeed in winning the June 14 presidential election, according to Thursday's Gazzetta dello Sport.

But Mourinho, speaking to Sky Sports, said: "I'm 99.9 per cent sure to stay at Inter."

"But the person who'll coach Real next season will be a very lucky man."

"Personally, the most important thing is that my president knows everything and knows everything about me, not the media or because someone told him. The first to know if there was something (happening) would be my president."

Mourinho, who has repeatedly stated his intention to remain at Inter next season, has already been contacted by Perez's advisors and has notified Inter president Massimo Moratti of the interest from Spain.

According to La Gazzetta, Mourinho has a five-to-six-million-euro get-out clause in his contract which runs until 2011.

Mourinho said that while a move to Real was tempting, his goal in life was to be happy at work.

"The great temptation is to be happy, happy to work, to wake up every morning and go to (Inter's training ground) Appiano with happiness and satisfaction, and to work."

"As a coach said a few years ago, 'Where there's a ground, players and some balls, you're happy.'"

"But of course, Real is Real and you can say it is a little tempting."

Alves out for season

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Brazilian right-back Dani Alves has been ruled out for the rest of the season after injuring his right foot during training, the newly-crowned Spanish league champions said Thursday.

The injury will sideline the 26-year-old player for three weeks, the club said in a statement posted on its Internet site.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola was already preparing to face Manchester United in the Champions League final in Rome on May 27 without Alves as the player was suspended.

The injury means Alves will also miss the final two Spanish league matches of the season against Osasuna and Deportivo La Coruna.

Fight for survival

AFP, London

Newcastle's hopes of avoiding becoming the biggest Premier League casualty since Leeds were relegated from the top flight in 2004 have been hit by an injury crisis that could have catastrophic consequences for the club.

Alan Shearer's side go into their final match of the season, at Aston Villa on Sunday, needing to secure at least a point while hoping that a second-string Manchester United side is good enough to beat Hull, who kick off the final weekend in the last survival spot and with a one-point edge over the Magpies.

With full-backs Habib Beye and Jose Enrique both very doubtful and centreback Sebastien Bassong suspended, Shearer could have only one member of his first-choice back four, Steven Taylor, available to contain a Villa side that is adept on the counter attack and still has a chance of finishing in fifth place.

Villa goalkeeper Brad Friedel has warned Newcastle they will have to work extremely hard for what could be the most important victory in the club's history.

"I know we've already qualified for the Europa League but we are professionals and we do want to do the

best we can all the time and we do want to secure that fifth spot," the American said.

With West Brom already condemned to a return to the Championship, Newcastle are one of four clubs who will enter the final day in danger of filling the two other relegation places.

Of the four, Middlesbrough have the toughest task with Gareth Southgate's side obliged to win at West Ham, hope that champions United beat Hull by a big enough margin for them to make up a four-goal deficit in terms of goal difference.

Sunderland are the best-placed in terms of points but Ricky Sbragia's side have arguably the toughest final fixture with Chelsea, the visitors to the Stadium of Light, looking to sustain their recent form ahead of the following weekend's FA Cup final.

The Black Cats will do down if they lose and both Hull and Newcastle win but Sbragia, a former member of Manchester United's coach-

ing staff, will field a squad capable of winning at the KC Stadium.

The likes of Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney are expected to be rested for a match that takes place barely 72 hours before United take on Barcelona in the Champions League final in Rome.

But this season has provided plenty of evidence regarding the depth of United's squad and Sbragia is confident his old boss, Sir Alex Ferguson, will not let him down.

"Whatever team they put out will believe they can win the game and that is all we can ask for," Sbragia said.

Chelsea boss Guus Hiddink has promised that he will field all his top stars at Sunderland. "I don't want to rest a lot of people because they need to maintain their physical shape and - also the way we want them to play," the Dutchman said. "If I rest too many people then I don't think it's good preparation for Wembley."

With Liverpool virtually assured of second place, the only unresolved issue in the top half of the table is the battle for seventh spot and the final slot in next season's Europa League, the successor to the UEFA Cup.

Fulham, who entertain Everton at Craven Cottage, are in pole position but could yet be caught by Tottenham, who finish their season at Liverpool.

Real denies C'Ron deal

AFP, Madrid

Spanish giants Real Madrid denied Friday persistent media reports that it has a pre-agreement to sign Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo from Manchester United.

"Real Madrid wishes to deny news that have appeared in several media regarding an alleged signing of Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo. No pre-agreement exists between the club and the player, his agent or Manchester United," it said in a statement.

"As everyone knows, Real Madrid tried to sign the player last summer, but Manchester United firmly stated he would not be transferred," it added.

Spanish sports dailies AS and Marca on Friday reported Ronaldo's pending transfer to Real on their front pages while top-selling daily El Pais said last week the player and United had both signed agreements.

Under those, Manchester would let the 24-year-old 2008 FIFA World Footballer of the Year leave for July for a minimum of 80 million euros (110 million dollars), El Pais said.

Former Real vice-president Juan Onieva told Spanish radio on Wednesday that the pre-agreement regarding Ronaldo's transfer did in fact exist but he said signing the player for tens of millions of euros would be "madness".

Onieva, who was Real's vice-president from 1995 to 2000, on Wednesday announced that he will be a candidate for president of the club in elections slated for June 14.

He will face off against former Real president Florentino Perez, who ran the club from 2000 to 2006 and is the runaway favourite to win the elections.

Ronaldo, who is under contract with United until 2012, has dismissed the reports linking him with a move to Real, saying he is happy at the English club.

Ronaldo picks up calf injury

AFP, Sao Paulo

Double World Cup winner Ronaldo has picked up a calf injury that will likely see him miss the next Brazilian league match and the Brazil Cup semifinal, his Corinthians club said Thursday.

The 32-year-old Brazilian striker, who missed almost a year of action because of a serious knee injury, complained of pain in his calf during Corinthians' 2-2 Cup quarterfinal draw with Fluminense on Wednesday.

The 1994 and 2002 World Cup winner, and two-time European footballer of the year, tore his left knee tendon while playing for AC Milan in February last year.

But his return to Brazil has been triumphant, the striker having scored 10 goals in 14 games for the Sao Paulo-based club.

Cesc cleared

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas has been cleared over allegations he spat at Hull assistant boss Brian Horton, the English Football Association announced on Friday.

Hull launched a complaint over the incident, which was alleged to have taken place after the FA Cup quarterfinal tie between the clubs at the Emirates Stadium on March 17, which the Gunners won 2-1.

However, Spain midfielder Fabregas, who was not playing at the time because of a knee injury, always maintained his innocence and an independent commission found there was not enough evidence on two charges of improper conduct.

While the outcome of the investigation was concluded last week, the FA had not wanted to make any public statement until after the end of the Premier League season on Sunday, when Hull will face champions Manchester United needing victory to guarantee their top-flight status.

But the report was leaked to newspapers in England, forcing the FA to bring forward the announcement.

Hull manager Phil Brown, who made the spitting allegation live on television in a post-match interview, was also charged by the FA following his outburst at referee Mike Riley, and has requested a personal hearing into that matter.

A statement from the FA read: "The FA can confirm that, at a regulatory commission hearing, two charges of improper conduct against Arsenal midfielder Cesc Fabregas were found not proved."

"The charges related to Fabregas's conduct following the FA Cup match between Arsenal and Hull at the Emirates Stadium on 17 March."

"One charge concerned his conduct after coming onto the pitch following the final whistle. The second charge related to an allegation of spitting."

Neither referee Riley nor any of the other match officials mentioned anything of such an incident in their report to Soho Square.

Horton, though, had contacted the League Managers Association to lodge a complaint before Hull, and subsequently Arsenal, were asked by the FA to submit their observations.

Chelsea face UEFA hearing on June 17

AFP, Geneva

UEFA said Friday that Chelsea as well as Didier Drogba and Jose Bosingwa will face European football's disciplinary body on June 17 following incidents in the Champions League tie against Barcelona.

The governing body said it had started disciplinary proceedings against the London club over the "improper conduct of players and the throwing of missiles by their supporters".

Drogba and Bosingwa also face proceedings "for being in breach of the principles of sportsmanship by insulting the referee by making offensive comments," UEFA added in a statement.

Drogba faces potentially severe sanctions over his confrontation with Norwegian referee Tom Henning Ovrebo after Barcelona's injury-time goal sent the London side crashing out of the Champions League semifinal last month.

His case was further aggravated by him screaming into a television camera that the official had been a "f**king disgrace."

UEFA examined both the referee's and the delegate's reports before it decided to refer the case to its disciplinary and control body.

The club and both players have until May 29 to file their submissions in the case.

Osasuna look to exploit

AFP, Madrid



With the league title now assured, Barcelona can be forgiven for turning their attention to the Champions League final but for Osasuna, their opponents this weekend, it remains a crucial match.

Barcelona became champions without even taking to the field as second-placed Real Madrid lost away at Villarreal last Saturday.

The following day coach Pep Guardiola sent out a team largely of reserves against Mallorca but while they lost that did not dampen the celebrations.

This Saturday, Guardiola will be without Andres Iniesta and Thierry Henry, who he hopes will be fit for the Champions League final next Wednesday against Manchester United, while he is also likely to rest a number of others including Lionel Messi.

For Osasuna they dropped into the relegation zone after drawing with Sevilla and now they face the monumental task of saving themselves against Barcelona and Real Madrid in the last two weeks of the season.

Real Madrid, who take on Mallorca next, have second place assured the battle for European places below them is rife.

Sevilla are keeping their fingers crossed that their talismanic striker Frederic Kanoute will be fit to face Deportivo la Coruna, who are pushing hard for a place in the Europa Cup. Depor are two points adrift of sixth place but know that with Valencia and Villarreal also going head-to-head they have a good chance of making up ground.

It is set to be a crucial Valencia derby and Villarreal come into the match in better

form on the back of beating Real Madrid.

"There is no margin for error now, it is a final. Whoever wins will be assured of a Uefa Cup place and to get into Europe by beating Valencia would be very nice," said defender Diego Godin.

Comparatively, fourth-placed Atletico Madrid have what appears to be an easier task as they take on an Athletic Bilbao side which is already safe from relegation and low in morale after losing the Copa del Rey final.

At the other end of the table the battle is as fierce as ever.

Defeat by Numancia has all but sealed the fate of bottom-side Recreativo Huelva who now take on Racing Santander four points adrift of safety.

Numancia's own hopes remain bleak but if they can beat fellow strugglers Getafe then that would considerably improve their outlook going into the final match.

Sporting Gijon, who travel to Valladolid gave themselves a life-line with victory against Malaga but they remain deep in trouble, level on points with third from bottom Osasuna.

Espanyol and Real Betis also recorded important wins last weekend but remain very much in danger and cannot be complacent when they play away at Almeria and Malaga respectively.

FIXTURES

(all 2000GMT)
Saturday
Athletic Bilbao v Atletico Madrid, Barcelona v Osasuna, Sevilla v Deportivo, Valladolid v Sporting Gijon, Almeria v Espanyol, Getafe v Numancia, Villarreal v Valencia, Malaga v Real Betis, Recreativo Huelva v Racing Santander
Sunday
Real Madrid v Mallorca

England lose Wright-Phillips

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City winger Shaun Wright-Phillips has been ruled out of England's World Cup qualifiers against Kazakhstan and Andorra with a knee injury.

Wright-Phillips was expected to be named in Fabio Capello's squad for the June double-header, but City manager Mark Hughes said on Friday the former Chelsea star is due for a knee operation that will sideline him for several months.

Hughes had hoped Wright-Phillips would play in City's clash against Bolton on Sunday to prove his fitness for England. Instead he is set for a "wash-out" of his knee in the hope he can return for the start of next season.

"Shaun trained earlier this week but he got a reaction," Hughes said. "Now he will have to see a specialist."

"He is not going to be available at the weekend and he may well have a wash out of his knee in the close-season that would enable him to be fit for the start of pre-season training."

"He has worked really hard trying to get fit but this problem needs to be addressed and we must look at it."

Group Six leaders England face Kazakhstan on June 6 and host Andorra at Wembley on June 10.

Wright-Phillips' absence is the latest blow to Capello, who has already lost injured goalkeepers David James and Ben Foster for the qualifiers.

Akram signs with Twente

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi football star Nashat Akram has signed a three-year deal with Dutch club FC Twente, runners-up in this year's league title, according to his website.

The promising midfielder with 75 international caps is the first Iraqi player to join the Dutch league and only the second to play in Europe after Hawar Mulla Mohammed Taher Zeebar joined Cypriot club Anorthosis Famagusta.

Akram, 24, a key playmaker in Iraq's dramatic victory in the 2007 Asia Cup, previously played for Qatari club Al-Gharafa and last year was on trial at Manchester City but was denied a work permit by the British government.

After a year with United Arab Emirates club Al-Ain in 2007, he was linked to Sunderland before signing this month with former England manager Steve McClaren's side.

"This is a dream come true, to play in Europe. FC Twente is a good club with a big coach," Akram said.



NASHAT AKRAM