

MANCHESTER UNITED V BARCELONA

Battle Royale in Rome



(L) Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo arrives with his team in central Rome on Monday. (R) Policemen protect Barcelona star Lionel Messi as he walks to the hotel upon his team's arrival in Rome on Tuesday.

When two of the world's best players face-off in Wednesday night's Champions League final, the men charged with stopping Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi know there is no room for error.

Defending champions Manchester United will walk out at Rome's Olympic Stadium for Wednesday's show-case final to face a Barcelona side who have already humiliated European giants Bayern Munich and Real Madrid this season.

It promises to be a battle royal between two teams at the peak of their powers and includes a sub-battle between arguably the world's best two attacking players who can terrorise defences on their day.

United's Ronaldo currently has the upper hand having won both the world player of the year crown and the Ballon d'Or in 2008 while his side aim to retain their Champions League title by beating Messi's Barcelona side.

Dead-ball specialist Ronaldo hit a staggering 42 goals in all competitions last season, but his winner away to Porto and two at Arsenal in this season's Champions League campaign have gone some way to answering criticism of his big-game tempera-

ment.

Barcelona centre-back Yaya Toure admits the Spaniards can ill-afford to allow Ronaldo the freedom to control the midfield if they are to fulfil their ambition to win the competition they last claimed in 2006.

"They are physically very strong, they have a truly great footballer in Cristiano Ronaldo and they won the Champions League last year, so we know it will be very difficult," said the 26-year-old Ivory Coast international.

"It will be a great game and it's important that we play at 100 per cent because anything less and you cannot beat this team."

While Ronaldo can strike fear into the heart of any goalkeeper with the deadball, Messi can give defenders nightmares with his ability to beat opponents with the slightest of touches from his favoured left-foot.

United defender Patrice Evra, 28, insists there is no special preparation for facing the Argentinian winger, but feels that coming up against

the likes of Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney every day in training is adequate.

And the knowledge he would have to face the wrath of United manager Sir Alex Ferguson in the event of a poor display is an added incentive when dealing with Messi who came second in the voting for the world player of the year.

"Messi is a great player. I might stop him 10 times, but if on the 11th he goes past me and scores, people will say I have played badly against him," said the French international.

"I need to concentrate for all the game and win every challenge. Last year the boss told me I could win the game for United. I was very proud about that."

"The boss (Ferguson) trusts you but he likes to say things that will give you confidence. I don't want to disappoint him or my teammates."

Ronaldo and Messi faced each other in last season's Champions League semifinal when Messi shaded the contest by proving the more dangerous of the pair although United progressed 1-0 thanks to Paul Scholes's wonder strike at Old Trafford.

United defender Rio Ferdinand looks likely to play in Wednesday's final having come through the weekend's training with no ill-effects on his calf injury which has kept him out for the last three weeks and Sunday's 1-0 win at Hull.

Jonny Evans, impressive at

the back for United throughout the season, is on stand-by to partner Nemanja Vidic at the heart of United's defence in case Ferdinand fails to recover.

Barcelona star striker Thierry Henry and midfielder Andres Iniesta appear to have overcome their injuries after training on Monday.

Henry, who played against Barca on the losing Arsenal team in the 2006 final, has had a ligament problem since beating Real Madrid 6-2 on May 2, while Iniesta has been struggling with a thigh injury.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola has several options at full-back with first-choice pair Dani Alves and Eric Abidal both missing out through suspension.

Captain Carles Puyol and former United defender Gerard Pique are almost certain to start.

Meanwhile local authorities in Rome have issued a total ban on alcohol from 22:00 GMT on Tuesday to 05:00 GMT on Thursday in the Italian capital in a bid to prevent crowd trouble around the final with more than 67,000 fans expected.

Perez faces no contest

Former Real Madrid president Florentino Perez will automatically take charge of the club again on June 1 because the only other candidate still in the race for the job will not qualify to run, sports daily AS reported Tuesday.

Little-known Eduardo Garcia will be unable to lodge a bank guarantee of 57.4 million euros with the club which is needed to be able to run for president by a May 31 deadline, the newspapers said.

The only other candidate who had announced his intention to run, former Real vice-president Juan Onieva, withdrew his candidacy over the weekend, saying his proposed programme had not been well received in the Spanish media.

According to the club's rules, if there is only one candidate for president, he will be appointed to the post on June 1, otherwise a vote will be held on June 14.

Perez led Real from 2000 to 2006, when it earned the nickname "Los Galacticos", winning the Primera Liga twice and European Champions League with such stars as Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo, Luis Figo and David Beckham.

But the 62-year-old has already hinted at the return of Zidane and former coach Jorge Valdano of Argentina as possible advisors to him.

While the club normally holds elections every four years, it faces the prospect of holding a ballot a year early due to the resignation of former president Ramon Calderon in January.

That followed allegations he rigged voting at the club's last general assembly in December, which approved its financial accounts.

Messi praises C'Ron

Barcelona star Lionel Messi will have the chance to watch Cristiano Ronaldo at close quarters on Wednesday after admitting the Manchester United winger is the one player he would pay to see in action.

Along with Ronaldo, Argentina forward Messi is widely regarded as one of the top two or three players in the world, and the duo will be the centre of attention in Wednesday's Champions League final in Rome.

But it is the Portuguese playmaker's flamboyant skills that most excite Messi when he sits down to watch a match

on television.

"Manchester United have quality everywhere," Messi told the Daily Mail. "So many good players. But if I had to pick one out it would be Ronaldo. He is a player I would pay to watch."

"He and I are very different players but he is unbelievable, very special, and it will not be easy to stop him."

"But we must not pay all attention to him and forget about Berbatov, Rooney and Carlos Tevez."

"Manchester United have players all over the pitch who can punish you in the same way we have."

Messi also reaffirmed his loyalty to Barcelona and insisted he wants to remain with the club for the rest of his career.

The 21-year-old has been

KEY BATTLES

Rio Ferdinand v Samuel Eto'o
If Ferdinand is fit to play United's chances of success are vastly improved with his strength, pace and reading of the game more than a match for the direct goal threat that Eto'o poses. Twenty-nine goals in 35 league matches in Spain this season tells you all you need to know about the Cameroonian's predatory instinct but Ferdinand will relish the challenge.

Lionel Messi v Patrice Evra
Barcelona are anything other than a one-man team but in Messi they possess the best player on the planet. The gifted Argentinian will be stationed out on the right, but prone to cut inside onto his left foot as he dribbles or looks for short passing movements, so Evra will need to be on his game for the full 90 minutes to shackle him. He did it last year in the semifinals, though Messi has become even better since then.

Cristiano Ronaldo v Sylvinho
Sir Alex Ferguson may elect to deploy Ronaldo as a winger rather than a centre forward in Rome to exploit the weakness on Barcelona's left side of defence. The former Arsenal defender Sylvinho is long past his best and in a straight duel between these two you would expect Ronaldo to come out on top almost every time.

SHARPSHOOTERS

Goals
8 Lionel Messi (Barcelona)
7 Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Miroslav Klose (Bayern Munich)
6 Lisandro Lopez (Porto)
5 Alessandro del Piero (Juventus), Karim Benzema (Lyon), Thierry Henry (Barcelona), Robin van Persie (Arsenal)

HONOUR ROLL

2008 - Manchester United (ENG)
1 Chelsea 1 (United win 5-4 on penalties)
2007 - AC Milan (ITA) 2 Liverpool (ENG) 1
2006 - Barcelona (ESP) 2 Arsenal (ENG) 1
2005 - Liverpool (ENG) 3 AC Milan (ITA) 3 (Liverpool win 3-2 on penalties)
2004 - Porto (POR) 3 Monaco (FRA) 0

Gomez joining Bayern

Stuttgart striker Mario Gomez is joining Bayern Munich in a deal believed to be worth 30 million euros (41.7 million US dollars) after Germany's Far East tour.

The 23-year-old confirmed on Tuesday, shortly before he flies to Asia for Germany's summer tour of China and the United Arab Emirates which starts on Friday, that he will sign for Bayern on his return.

"I look forward to joining Bayern Munich and I want to help the club attack the German championship next season and look forward to playing in the Champions League," said Gomez, who has 23 caps for Germany, in a statement.

Gomez scored 24 goals last season and has regularly led Stuttgart's attack.

"The club is really happy that Mario Gomez has decided to join us," said chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

"He is a first-class striker who has scored around 20 goals per season in each of the last three years to prove he is one of the best strikers and we look forward to having him with us."

Juve seal Diego signing

administrative delegate Jean Claude Blanc said the Brazilian was an important part of that process.

"Due to his technical characteristics Diego is a fundamental part of the rebuilding of our team," he said.

"We've always said that we want to build a team of young players and talented ones and Diego exudes both qualities."

"Despite his age of 24 years he's a player of great experience with having already played at the highest level for seven years."

Diego started his career at Pele's old club Santos where as a teenager he formed a formidable attacking partnership with Robinho, now of Manchester City.

He moved to then Champions League holders Porto in 2004 as a replacement for the Barcelona-bound Deco.

However, his Porto experience soon turned sour as he found himself out of favour with Dutch coach Co Adriaanse and he signed for Bremen two years later for six million euros.

He won league titles with Santos in 2002 and Porto in 2006 as well as two Copa America titles with Brazil in 2004 and 2007.

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ASSISTS

Assists
6 Franck Ribery (Bayern Munich), Xavi (Barcelona)
5 Cesc Fabregas (Arsenal), Lionel Messi (Barcelona), Frank Lampard (Chelsea)

Vieira, Malouda recalled

France captain Patrick Vieira and Chelsea midfielder Florent Malouda were recalled to the national squad by coach Raymond Domenech on Monday for the June friendlies with Nigeria and Turkey.

Vieira has had an injury-wracked season and had already missed France's unhappy Euro 2008 campaign because of injury while Malouda was last selected for the friendly with Tunisia last October - and then he only came on for six minutes as a substitute.

However, the 44-times capped former Lyon star - who has voiced criticism of Domenech - has rediscovered his form at Chelsea since Guus Hiddink took over in February as interim manager following the sacking of Luiz Felipe Scolari.

Domenech insisted that his recalls of Malouda and Vieira - who won the last of his 106 caps last November in the friendly against Uruguay - did not represent a turn on his behalf.

"I recalled them because one has to be logical, and I am," said Domenech, who many consider fortunate to still be in the job after crashing out of the Euro 2008 without winning a game and then a slow start to the 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

"If certain players were not included of late it was because their performances were not good enough and those of their rivals were - that was the case of Malouda."

"And Vieira has started playing again after a difficult season. He is the captain of the

national side, and if I did not pick him for these two friendlies, then I am not being logical."

Domenech, who guided France to the 2006 World Cup final penalty shootout defeat to Italy, said that he had recalled Malouda despite the player's doubts about him.

"It is imperative always to be clear with people, I thought I was clear, I will be even more so, with a player who plays for the French side, who does not play just for himself, but that is for us to deal with behind closed doors and stays between us," commented Domenech.

"But it is important to say things to one's face. At each meeting, I have discussions to

point out what pleased me and what didn't."

The other recalled player to the squad which is without several established first choice players such as the injured William Gallas is that of Lyon midfielder Sidney Govou, who has made a remarkable recovery after suffering a ruptured Achilles tendon in January.

Mourinho extends with Inter

Jose Mourinho put an end to rumours linking him with taking over as coach of Real Madrid on Monday when it was announced he had extended his contract with Serie A champions Inter Milan.

The Portuguese - who had suggested that he wasn't 100 per cent certain of staying in Italy last Thursday before denying he was going anywhere on Saturday - was originally contracted to Inter till June 2011 but his extension will see him stay there till June 2012.

"This extension is in response to the willingness of the coach to pursue his project that he panned out a year ago, which is a sign of attachment to the club and a spirit to always win," read a statement from the club.

Principal among Mourinho's aims will be to end Inter Milan's Champions League drought - they won the last of their two titles in 1965 - and add to the trophy he won with Porto in 2004.



DIEGO

Shearer to get new deal

Alan Shearer is set to be offered a four-year contract to stay on as manager of relegated Newcastle, according to reports in England.

Shearer's spell as interim manager ended with Newcastle's final game of the season at Aston Villa, but owner Mike Ashley was reportedly due to meet with the former England striker on Tuesday to discuss the terms of a permanent contract.

Ashley knows that Shearer's popularity among Newcastle fans and his standing in the game will be major assets as the long slog to restore the club's credibility and Premier League status begins in the close season.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Cedric Carrasso (Toulouse), Hugo Lloris (Lyon), Steve Mandanda (Marseille)

Defenders: Eric Abidal (Barcelona/ESP), Jean-Alain Boutsong (Lyon), Julien Escudé (FC Sevilla/ESP), Patrice Evra (Manchester United/ENG), Rod Fanni (Rennes), Philippe Mexes (AS Roma/ITA), Bacary Sagna (Arsenal/ENG), Sebastien Squillaci (FC Sevilla/ESP)

Midfielders: Abou Diaby (Arsenal/ENG), Alou Diarra (Bordeaux), Lassana Diarra (Real Madrid/ESP), Yoann Gourcuff (Bordeaux), Sidney Govou (Lyon), Florent Malouda (Chelsea/ENG), Franck Ribery (Bayern Munich/GER), Jeremy Toulalan (Lyon), Patrick Vieira (Inter Milan/ITA)

Forwards: Nicolas Anelka (Chelsea/ENG), Karim Benzema (Lyon), Andre-Pierre Gignac (Toulouse), Thierry Henry (Barcelona/ESP), Loic Remy (Nice)