

Spurs test for L'pool

AFP, London



Fernando Torres admits Liverpool face an early test of their Premier League title credentials in Sunday's match at Tottenham.

Rafael Benitez's side are expected to mount a strong bid to end Manchester United's three-year reign as champions this term, but Torres knows the Reds must win tricky matches like this weekend's trip to White Hart Lane if they are to improve on last season's second place finish.

Despite taking maximum points from four matches with United and Chelsea last term, Liverpool still ended up four points behind Sir Alex Ferguson's team.

Their Achilles heel was an inability to grind out victories against lesser opposition when either Torres or captain Steven Gerrard were injured.

With Gerrard a doubt for the Tottenham match with an ankle problem, Liverpool could get a chance to show they can cope without their talismanic leader.

Torres, who signed a new contract improving his wages to over 100,000 pounds a week on Friday, said: "We don't need to improve a lot on last season to win the title."

"There is only a slight improvement needed to give the fans and players the title they have wanted for so many years now."

"This is the best Liverpool team there has been in years. That is what many of the experienced players are saying. And now is our time. Second-best is just not going to cut it with me anymore."

Liverpool's hopes of laying down an early marker in the title race haven't been helped by injuries to centre-backs Jamie Carragher, Daniel Agger and Martin Skrtel.

Benitez hopes Skrtel and Carragher will be

able to start on Sunday, but new signing Alberto Aquilani, brought in to replace Xabi Alonso after the Spain midfielder's switch to Real Madrid, is out for several weeks after ankle surgery.

When all his walking wounded are fit, Benitez believes Liverpool will be right in the title mix again and he said: "We had 86 points last season to finish second, and we have more or less the same squad, so maybe we can do the same again or better."

"As for our title chances, the players know we were very close last season and they want to improve. We know what this team can achieve and they will be ready."

Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp is convinced Liverpool have as good a chance as anyone of taking advantage if United stumble.

"Liverpool are a terrific side. Last year they were outstanding. Only losing two games but not winning the league was an amazing statistic," Redknapp said.

"They'll be there this year pushing for the championship, along with Manchester United and Chelsea and Arsenal. It's a big test to see what we are made of."

Redknapp must decide whether to hand Peter Crouch a debut alongside Jermain Defoe or Robbie Keane, but he could be without Jermaine Jenas, who has a calf problem, while defenders Gareth Bale, Jonathan Woodgate and Michael Dawson are all sidelined.

Cameroon defender Sébastien Bassong, who joined from Newcastle for eight million pounds last week, is available after clarification of his suspension from last season.

"When we played Newcastle last year I spoke to Alan Shearer after the game," Redknapp said. "He said 'if I stay at the club there is no way Bassong will leave'."

"Alan didn't get the job and he (Bassong) was the first person we went for. He's a young player with a fantastic future."



PHOTO: AFP

World number one Dinara Safina of Russia hits a forehand against Kim Clijsters of Belgium during the Western & Southern Financial Group Women's Open in Cincinnati on Friday.

Chelsea launch Aguero bid

AFP, Madrid

Chelsea have offered Spanish side Atlético Madrid nearly 50 million euros for their Argentine international striker Sergio Aguero, a news-paper reported Saturday.

The English Premiership side would be willing to pay Atlético up to 57m euros if the deal included another Argentine player, Maxi Rodríguez, sports daily Marca said.

Atletico has consistently said that it does not want to let Aguero go.

The 21-year-old son-in-law of Argentina manager Diego Maradona has a rescission clause in his contract with Atlético worth 60 million euros.

He joined Atlético in 2006 from Argentine side Independiente and is under contract with the Spanish team until 2012.

Aguero scored in Argentina's 3-2 friendly victory over Russia on Wednesday.

If he plays for Atlético during the club's Champions League qualifier against Panathinaikos next week, he will not be able to play in a European competition for any other team at a top level.

While she was away, Clijsters watched one player improve more than any other: Safina.

"I really felt today that Dinara played some of her best tennis that I've seen," said Clijsters, who won six of their seven previous matches. "I think by far that's the best she's ever played against me."

No mother has knocked off a No. 1-ranked player since Evonne Goolagong Cawley beat Chris Evert in the finals of the Virginia Slims of Boston in 1978. Thirty-one years later, Clijsters got a good start at it, pushing the pace and

Dinara snaps Kim run

Tennis

AP, Ohio

Kim Clijsters' comeback ran into a No. 1 problem. Playing her first tournament in more than two years, the Belgian couldn't keep up with the world's top-ranked player on Friday. Dinara Safina repeatedly broke her serve during a 6-2, 7-5 victory to reach the semifinals of the Cincinnati Open and finish Clijsters' uplifting week back on the court.

With both Williams sisters gone, Clijsters' return became the talk of the 2-million-dollar Western & Southern Financial Group Women's Open. The former No. 1-ranked player took a break in 2007, married basketball player Brian Lynch, gave birth to daughter Jada, then set about returning to the game at a top level.

Same beginning, similar ending. Safina broke her serve three times in a row, the last on Clijsters' double fault to take a 6-5 lead. When Safina served it out, Clijsters calmly removed her black wristband and visor, walked to the net, shook her hand, packed quickly and headed out.

Disappointing, but not discouraging. Clijsters played well overall in her four matches during the week, surpassing her expectations in some ways.

"Obviously so far, it's working," she said. "I had really good results, and feel my level here has risen."

So much that she was already aching for another shot at No. 1.

"I kind of feel like I want to go out there and do it all over again," Clijsters said.

Fourth-seeded Elena Dementieva also advanced with a 6-2, 6-1 win over Caroline Wozniacki. It's the fifth semifinal this year for the Russian, who lost to Serena Williams at the Australian Open and at Wimbledon in semifinal.

It won't happen again this week. Serena and Venus Williams were bounced from the tournament on Thursday.

Dementieva will play Serbia's Jelena Jankovic, who beat Sybille Bammer 6-0, 6-3 in only 62 minutes. Bammer knocked Serena Williams out of the tournament on Thursday, but managed to win only 10 points while getting swept in her opening set against the fifth-seeded Jankovic.

A day after she upset Venus Williams, Italy's Flavia Pennetta reached the semifinals with a 6-3, 6-3 victory over Daniela Hantuchova of Slovakia. The win set up a semifinal against Safina and assured Pennetta of becoming the first Italian woman to move into the Top 10. Two Italian men, Adriano Panatta and Corrado Barazzutti, were ranked in the Top 10 in the 1970s.

"It means a lot," said Pennetta, currently ranked No. 12. "Everyone expected something like that from the beginning of the year, so everyone talks about it all the time. You know, it's a dream come true for me. I always hoped to be one of the best players in the world, and now I'm there. So it's crazy."

IN BRIEF

Kasper heads for Sven's County

AFP, London

Sven-Goran Eriksson has overseen his first major acquisition as Notts County's new director of football by signing Manchester City goalkeeper Kaspar Schmeichel for a club record transfer on Friday.

The 22-year-old son of former Manchester United star Peter played under Eriksson at Eastlands and has now moved to the League Two side for a fee which is believed to eclipse the 685,000 pounds County paid to buy Tony Agana from Sheffield United in 1991.

Manager Ian McParland told the club's official website: "We're very pleased that Kaspar has chosen to come to Meadow Lane."

"He is a significant part of the jigsaw puzzle we're trying to complete before the transfer window closes."

"We look forward to strengthening the team further in the next couple of weeks."

Schmeichel added: "I am very happy to sign with a club with such a long and rich history and such great support."

"I am joining a very ambitious team which is building for the future and it is a very exciting time for us."

"I'm looking forward to working with Ian and the rest of the lads, settling in and getting on with the season."

Wigan land Amaya

AFP, Wigan

Premier League club Wigan signed Spanish defender Antonio Amaya from Rayo Vallecano on a three-year contract on Friday.

Amaya is not expected to be available for Saturday's season-opener at Aston Villa as the deal cannot be completed until international clearance is secured.

Wigan manager Roberto Martinez said: "Antonio is someone I have admired from a distance for a long time, and I am very happy we have convinced him to come to us."

"He is a really powerful lad, technically excellent, with good pace and he will fit in well to our system. I have no doubts about him adjusting to English football."

"He has been the captain of his club for three years, which shows you his leadership qualities."

Amaya, 26, added: "To play in England is a big dream for me. I want to do everything I can to show Roberto Martinez and the people of Wigan they have made a good choice."

'Cesc not for sale'

AFP, Manchester



Rafa Benitez might claim that Sir Alex Ferguson is worried by Manchester City's incredible spending spree but the man himself appears unconcerned ahead of Manchester United's Premier League opener against Birmingham on Sunday.

Many, including Liverpool boss Benitez, are tipping City to challenge for the Premier League crown currently held by United in the wake of their 100 million pound spending spree during the close-season.

United manager Ferguson, however, insists clubs like City who want to break the stranglehold the top four have had on the English game in recent years will face a tough challenge.

Ferguson, who will hand a debut to new signing Antonio Valencia at Old Trafford this weekend, said: "This is where the interest lies. They (City) have taken us off the back pages and I'm quite happy about that because sometimes I get fed up with reading about us."

"What's going to happen? Well, the only thing that matters is the results on the pitch."

"I don't think there is a threat to the top four. They are all well established. These will be the teams we have to beat."

"I mean the top four have been well established and have got all the right criteria, experience, quality, good stadia, good squads, to me that top four will still be hard to beat."

Ferguson is still without long-term injury victims Edwin Van der Sar, Owen Hargreaves and Nemanja Vidic, but could welcome back

Toure's exits, Wenger maintains his squad is stronger than this time last year and can win the Premier League for the first time since 2004.

"We are young and have developed. Why should we not be better in August than we were in March?" he said.

"The competition is of a high level and many aspire to that, so let's continue to play the game the way we want to play it and I believe we can show that we have made big steps forward."

"We have players who develop very well and are

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CESC FABREGAS

Arsene Wenger insists Cesc Fabregas is not for sale at any price after Barcelona were once again linked with a bid for the Spain midfielder.

Fabregas left Barcelona as a

teenager to join Arsenal but he has repeatedly been a target for the Catalan club over the last three years.

The close-season departures of Emmanuel Adebayor and Kolo Toure to Manchester City and Wenger's struggle to find top-class replacements has left many experts predicting Fabregas will be the next to leave for more ambitious clubs.

But Wenger, whose side start their Premier League campaign at Everton on Saturday, said on Friday: "Do you really think we sell now our players one day before the championship starts, players who are basic players of the team? There is no chance."

"You cannot stop people from having a lot of creative imagination during their sleepless nights, but that does not mean we will do it."

"I believe that in life you are committed to clubs with contracts and in no contract is the colour of your blood described."

"We are the beginning of a new season now, and it is important that everybody focuses on me, Fabregas everybody else, just on being successful for the club we love, and the best way we can do that is to do well."

Despite Adebayor and

Moyes fumes at Huges

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Everton manager David Moyes has launched an astonishing attack on Manchester City after losing patience with their attempts to prise Lescott from

Goodison Park.

Moyes is furious that City boss Hughes has made public his interest in Lescott as well as suggesting that the Toffees boss won't have the final say in whether the centre-back remains on Merseyside.

City have had two bids of 15 and 18 million pounds (24.7 and 29.7 million dollars) rejected for Lescott, while the former Wolverhampton star has handed in a written transfer request which has been turned down by Moyes.

Reports claim Hughes is likely to make a further bid of over 20 million pounds (33 million dollars) before the transfer window shuts on August 31, but Moyes, speaking on Friday, made it clear that only he decides who stays and who goes.

"He (Hughes) said they were talking to people who make the decisions here. Well he knows who makes the decisions at Everton and it is me," Moyes said.

"There is no dialogue between us and Manchester City as far as I know. He (Hughes) has never once picked up the phone and given me a call, so he is not going to get the answer. I am the one who makes the decisions here, not like other clubs."

"It has disrupted us. They have been talking about it and we have not been talking about the start of the season that has been disruptive. So maybe that is what the overall plan was."

"I look back and see how Real Madrid did their business with Manchester United when they signed Cristiano Ronaldo. It was done at the tail end of the season, and it was done quickly to allow United to buy if they wanted to do so."

"We cannot be getting offers a week or two to go before the end of the deadline. And the offers they made shows that we value Joleon Lescott far higher than they do."

"Joleon is a massive player for us, we think so much of him and do not want to lose him."

Moyes admits City's huge financial offer to Lescott has left the player in turmoil about his future.

The Everton boss is yet to decide whether to play Lescott in Saturday's Premier League opener at home to Arsenal, but he knows the Goodison faithful could give the defender a rough time.

"He has been distracted, he is in turmoil with the situation and you can see how things have gone," Moyes said.

"He has been consistently told by the manager that he will not be sold so he should get his head around that and get on with the job."

"His head has been twisted and I cannot say the way things have been done is right, it is not how we do things at this club."

"But maybe their football club is different, I control things here, maybe it is not quite the same there."

"It has not been handled correctly from over there (City). We do not do our business in public, we would go to the right people to find out what is happening."