



Manchester United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar (L), Barcelona forward Lionel Messi (2nd from L), Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez and Chelsea defender John Terry (R) pose with their trophies after being awarded during the Champions League group stage draw in Monaco on Thursday.

Sneijder ready for derby

AFP, Rome



derby against fierce rivals AC Milan.

Sneijder has completed a 15-million-euro switch from Real Madrid and will go straight into the first team reckoning as the champions look to bounce back from their opening home draw against Serie A new-boys Bari.

The 25-year-old Dutchman insists he is not taking a step down in his career despite being practically forced out of Madrid by the Real hierarchy.

"I don't feel like it's a defeat leaving Madrid as Inter are one of the biggest clubs in the world and have been champions of Italy for the last four years," he told a Dutch newspaper.

"It will be a pleasure to work with (coach Jose) Mourinho. As for the derby, it's the boss who will decide but I'm ready to start playing right away. I have no fitness problems."

Mourinho signed Sneijder specifically to play the former Ajax man at the tip of his

midfield diamond formation, behind front pair Samuel Eto'o and Diego Milito.

"If he manages to come through all the tests he could be an option and then obviously he'll be in the squad," said Mourinho.

Although this match comes early in the season it is still being seen as the first potential title-decider but also, more importantly, a test of just how good Milan really are following a turbulent summer in which they lost eight of 11 pre-season matches and failed to replace the Real Madrid-bound Kaka with a player even approaching his ability.

Even so, Mourinho expects his team's cross-town rivals to be fired up for the clash.

"I'm convinced that Milan are desperate to play this match,

FIXTURES

Saturday
AC Milan v Inter Milan, Bari v Bologna
Sunday
Atalanta v Genoa, Cagliari v Siena, Chievo v Lazio, Fiorentina v Palermo, Napoli v Livorno, Parma v Catania, AS Roma v Juventus, Sampdoria v Udinese

UEFA charge Eduardo

AFP, Nyon



Croatian could now be handed a UEFA two-match suspension that will rule him out of the Gunners' first two Champions League group games.

Following complaints by Celtic and Scottish football bosses UEFA decided to study video evidence of the incident, which saw Eduardo falling theatrically to the ground despite no evidence of contact being made with Celtic keeper Artur Boruc.

UEFA subsequently opened disciplinary proceedings against the Croatia international for "deceiving the referee".

A statement on Friday said: "Having studied video evidence of the incident in question, the UEFA disciplinary inspector decided to charge the player concerned. The UEFA control and disciplinary body will examine the case on September 1."

It means Eduardo could now be sanctioned in accordance with Article 10, paragraph 1c of the UEFA disciplinary regulations (misconduct of players) which states: "Players may be suspended for two competition matches, or for a specified period, for acting with the obvious

intent to cause any match official to make an incorrect decision or supporting his error of judgment and thereby causing him to make an incorrect decision."

If banned he would miss Arsenal's away trip to Standard Liege on September 16 and the home match with Olympiakos on September 29.

Scottish Football Association chief executive Gordon Smith on Thursday called for UEFA to punish Eduardo for diving.

Smith said: "Eduardo is a terrific player who has battled back from a serious injury to resume playing at the highest level.

"However, on Wednesday he showed disrespect to the game by his actions in winning a penalty against Celtic.

"Since I came into this post, I have raised the issue of simulation time and time again - both here in Scotland and with FIFA and UEFA.

"I don't think that I have received enough support in my efforts to eradicate what I believe to be one of the most serious threats to the integrity of football. Last night (Wednesday) showed exactly why we must take this issue seriously."

UEFA chief Michel Platini said Thursday he was mulling introducing an extra referee to ward off the problem of diving.

"I have been battling for ten years to put in place more referees rather than add procedures following a mistake after it has been seen on the television," the former France star said.

"We have had years of cheating as the referee sees nothing - with an extra referee you would see better what is going on."

O'Neill said: "We should have got through. We should have had the game out of sight before they scored and it was unfortunate.

"They exerted some pressure at 2-0, which you would be expecting, but I thought we had a number of chances to go from 2-0 to 3-0 and that would have sealed the tie.

"I am desperately disappointed that we are not there."

Villa's English Premier League rivals Everton and Fulham survived testing trips to reach the group stages.

Everton drew 1-1 with Sigma Olomouc in the Czech Republic for a 5-1 aggregate win, but they had to play over 80 minutes with 10 men after defender Tony Hibbert was sent off for a professional foul.

The Merseysiders, 4-0 ahead from the first leg, went in front through South African international Steven Pienaar just before half-time with Pavel Sutes' 80th-minute goal a mere consolation for the Czechs.

Real set to relaunch Ribery bid

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid are set to relaunch their bid to sign Bayern Munich's French star Franck Ribery, Spanish sports newspapers said Friday.

They said the transfer of Real's Dutch striker Arjen Robben to the German side has opened the door for the big-spending Spanish club to resume its move for the France international midfielder.

Sports daily Marca said Robben's transfer to Bayern for a reported fee of 25 million euros has eased relations between the two clubs that were soured over Ribery.

And AS sports daily said Real chairman Florentino Perez plans to talk about a deal for Ribery with his Bayern counterpart Karl-Heinz Rummenigge later on Friday.

Real failed to sign the 26-year-old this summer in the face of stiff opposition from Bayern.

And the Spanish giants then said earlier this month that their mega pre-season spending spree was complete with the capture of Xabi Alonso from Liverpool.

AS claimed that Bayern are ready to let Ribery go in the summer of 2010 for around 20 million euros.

But it said Perez will offer a higher price than that -- and include its out-of-favour Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart -- to lure Ribery to the Spanish capital before the end of this summer's transfer window on August 31.

Bayern sign Robben

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich announced on Friday they have completed the signing of Real Madrid winger Arjen Robben for an undisclosed fee.

The 25-year-old Robben, one of several Dutch players being sold by the Spanish giants, signed a four-year deal with the Bundesliga club which has so far failed to make an impact in the league and currently lie 14th.

Robben is set to train with Bayern on Friday afternoon and could face Bundesliga champions VfL Wolfsburg on Saturday, according to the German giants' boss Uli Hoeness on Thursday.

Reports said Bayern paid 25 million euros for Robben.

Rapid KO Villa

AFP, Paris

Aston Villa crashed out of the Europa League on Thursday losing their play-off tie against unheralded Rapid Vienna just three days after handing mighty Liverpool a humiliating Premier League defeat.

In their second leg tie, played at a half-empty Villa Park, Martin O'Neill's team were undone by striker Nikica Jelavic grabbing a crucial away goal 14 minutes from time.

A James Milner penalty and a second-half strike from John Carew had handed Villa a 2-1 aggregate lead and they were well on course for Friday's group stages draw.

But Jelavic, who had also scored in the first leg, had the final say, making the English side rue a first-half penalty miss by Ashley Young.

Barca clash with Inter

Real draw Milan

AFP, Monaco



European champions Barcelona drew Inter Milan, moneybags Real Madrid pulled AC Milan while Manchester United will take on German surprise package Wolfsburg after the Champions League group stage draw was made here on Thursday.

This season sees nine former champions go into action in the 32-team format split into eight groups of four while the quartets of teams from England and Spain will battle for an historic 13th triumph, both countries having polished off a round dozen to date.

Group A pits four-time champions Bayern Munich against two-time holders Juventus, French champions Bordeaux and Maccabi Haifa of Israel.

In Group B, Manchester United, European champions in 1968, 1999 and 2007 and beaten finalists last year, will go up against German champions Wolfsburg, Turkey's Besiktas and CSKA Moscow.

"These are difficult ties, especially the trips to Russia and Turkey," said United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

"CSKA have developed strongly in the last few years and games in Turkey are always difficult."

Former United star Cristiano Ronaldo's nine-times winners, and summer megaspenders, Real Madrid will have to joust with seven-time champions AC Milan in Group C, meaning an early return to San Siro for Brazilian Kaka.

Marseille, the only French side ever to lift the trophy, and outsiders FC Zurich of Switzerland complete the group.

Chelsea, the 2008 finalists and bidding for their first crown under former AC Milan handler Carlo Ancelotti are seeded in Group D where they meet two-time champions Porto, Atletico Madrid and CypriotsAPOEL Nicosia.

"We are always looking to go one step further in Europe," said Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon. "There is not too

much travel and we managed to avoid one of the bigger teams. We've played Porto twice in Europe and we know them better than most."

Liverpool, who humiliated Real last season, will play in Group E along with French side Lyon, who have never been past the quarters, Fiorentina of Italy and Debrecen of Hungary.

"In the Champions League there will always be difficult games and tough teams to play against," said Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez.

"Lyon might not have won the league last season but before that they won it many years in a row, so we know they have lots of good players who can play good football."

"Fiorentina are an historic club and we have experience of Hungarian football because of our relationship with MTK (Liverpool have signed a number of youth team players from the Budapest team), so if Debrecen have won their league then we know it means it's because they're a

good side.

Holders Barcelona will play in Group F along with Italian champions Inter, who won the last of their two European crowns in 1965 and are coached by former Barca assistant and ex-Chelsea handler Jose Mourinho.

Those encounters also mean a swift return to the Nou Camp for Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o, who twice lifted the Cup with the Catalan club.

Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who went the other way, will likewise get to renew old acquaintances back at the San Siro.

Barcelona's vice-chairman Rafael Yuste told Radio Marca he looked forward to seeing Eto'o again.

"Eto'o is a great player, always motivated no matter who he is up against."

But he added: "We are the team to beat, the holders," and vowed Barca would go all out to become the first team to retain the Champions League.

Inter star Javier Zanetti said: "It's a tough group, they will all be difficult games. We've drawn Barcelona and it will be nice to see Ibra (Zlatan Ibrahimovic) again."

"There's going to be a lot sweat but we're in top shape and we can do well."

Dynamo Kiev and Russian champions Kazan complete the group.

Seville of Spain will compete in Group G alongside Glasgow Rangers, Germany's VfB Stuttgart, and Romanian champions Unirea Urziceni.

Arsenal were drawn in Group H alongside AZ Alkmaar of the Netherlands, Greek side Olympiakos and Belgium's Standard Liege, whom the Gunners thrashed 7-0 away 16 years ago in the old Cup Winners Cup.

Arsenal chief executive Ivan Gazidis noted his side's rivals are all their country's respective champions.

"They are three good leagues and there is a reason why they are in the competition. People might see it as a free pass for us but we don't see it that way at all. It will be very tough."

"It is good to have relatively short travel times, that's something that Arsene (Wenger) thinks about a lot."

MU-Gunners showdown

AFP, London



Arsenal's stars have warned Manchester United that Saturday's showdown at Old Trafford will prove that the Gunners are serious contenders for the Premier League title.

The close-season departures of Emmanuel Adebayor and Kolo Toure to Manchester City were seen as a sign that Arsenal were no longer a force to be reckoned with.

But Arsene Wenger's young team have confounded the critics who wrote them off by making a blistering start to the season.

A stunning 6-1 victory at Everton on the opening weekend set the tone and since then Celtic have been brushed aside in the Champions League play-off, while Portsmouth were thrashed 4-1 in the league.

Those impressive results have raised expectations that Arsenal can end their four-year trophy drought, but United represent the acid test of the north London side's title credentials.

It is a challenge that holds no fears for Wenger's men and midfielder Alexandre Song said: "If we play like we played against Celtic, then we know nobody can beat us."

"This is a really important game and when you play against Man Utd it's never easy. It's a big game and we just have to keep on improving."

Thomas Vermaelen, the Belgian defender who has made a significant contribution to Arsenal's winning start, added: "It's the biggest game so far this season and it will be a good test for us. Everyone looks forward to playing these kind of games."

While Arsenal have hit the ground running, United have made an erratic start, winning against Birmingham and Wigan but suffering a shock defeat at newly-promoted Burnley.

That victory at Wigan included a first United strike for Michael Owen and his team-mate Rio Ferdinand expects a flood of goals from the former Liverpool forward.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Blackburn v West Ham, Bolton v Liverpool, Chelsea v Burnley (1145GMT), Man Utd v Arsenal (1615GMT), Stoke v Sunderland, Tottenham v Birmingham, Wolverhampton v Hull
Sunday
Aston Villa v Fulham (1500GMT), Everton v Wigan, Portsmouth v Man City (1230GMT)

"He has been hammered yet he has not even played a full 90 minutes," Ferdinand said.

"I think that goal on Saturday will catapult him towards scoring a few more."

Elsewhere, Liverpool desperately need a positive performance and, more importantly, a victory at Bolton after losing two of their first three matches.

Monday's home defeat against Aston Villa equalled the total number of losses suffered by Liverpool in their entire league campaign last season.

Chelsea will aim to end Burnley's fairytale start in Saturday's early game.

The Claret's upset United then defeated Everton at Turf Moor last week and will travel to Stamford Bridge in the belief they can claim another famous scalp.

Table-topping Tottenham host Birmingham as they try to build on their best start to a season for 49 years.

Harry Redknapp's team have won their first three league matches and their manager believes a top-four finish is not out of the question.

Meanwhile, England defender Joleon Lescott could make his Manchester City debut at Portsmouth on Sunday after finally completing his protracted 24 million pounds switch from Everton.

Wolves test for Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Struggling Bayern Munich know only a decent performance against defending champions VfL Wolfsburg on Saturday will ease their mounting woes, admits captain Philipp Lahm.

Having drawn their first two league games, Bayern were humiliated last weekend when promoted minnows Mainz stunned them with a 2-1 defeat which left Germany striker Mario Gomez admitting they were "taught a lesson".

Wolfsburg also suffered their first league defeat last Sunday when they were beaten at home by Hamburg and they will be hoping to repeat April's 5-1 win over Munich at the Volkswagen Arena which led to the sacking of Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

The defending champions are fourth in the German league, while Bayern are down to 14th after their slump and

badly need some points.

Against Mainz last Saturday, substitutes Ivica Olic and Thomas Mueller were two of the Bayern players to impress and stand-in captain Philipp Lahm says the whole team must improve.

"We knew it could be a bumpy start to the season - and it has been," said Germany defender Philipp Lahm, who is standing in for the injured Mark van Bommel.

"Over the next few weeks, everyone will see us playing a lot better again."

And Bayern fans need to see some evidence of that while French midfielder Franck Ribery and World Cup winner Luca Toni both trained hard this week.

FIXTURES

Saturday
VfB Stuttgart v Nuremberg, Schalke 04 v Freiburg, Bayer Leverkusen v VfL Bochum, Hannover 96 v Hoffenheim, Eintracht Frankfurt v Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich v VfL Wolfsburg
Sunday
Hertha Berlin v Werder Bremen, Hamburg v Cologne

Ribery is expected to get some game time against Wolfsburg who have no injury worries and strikers Edin Dzeko and Grafite will be looking to terrorise Bayern's defence as they did last time.

Leaders Bayer Leverkusen will be looking for another three points against Bochum having hammered Freiburg 5-0 last weekend after Swiss internationals Tranquillo Barnetta and Erin Derdiyok both scored two goals.

After their 4-2 win over defending champions Wolfsburg last Sunday, Hamburg host Cologne on Sunday with German striker Lukas Podolski looking to get the guests' first win of the season.

Third-placed Schalke, who revealed they are 136.6 million euros in debt on Thursday, take on Freiburg at Gelsenkirchen's Veltins Arena on Saturday with the guests licking their wounds from their hammering by Leverkusen.

Fifth-placed Mainz, buoyed by their success over Bayern, take on Borussia Moenchengladbach on Friday.

IN BRIEF

Tevez opens City account

AFP, London

Argentine striker Carlos Tevez scored his first Manchester City goal on Thursday as the big-spending Premier League side defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 in the second round of the English League Cup.

Defender Joleon Lescott also made his City debut after his move from Everton, but City struggled to impose themselves on Championship side Palace in the first half.

Shaun Wright-Phillips settled City's nerves with the opening goal on 50 minutes before Tevez struck 20 minutes later to seal City's passage into the third round of the competition they last won in 1976 - their last major trophy.

Atletico after Fanni

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid are interested in signing France defender Rod Fanni from French side Rennes, a Spanish sports daily said Friday.

Fanni, 27, has reportedly been a target of other European clubs this summer, including English Premiership sides West Ham and Everton.

The Madrid club, which has qualified for the group stages of the European Champions League, hopes to boost its squad before the end of the close season transfer window on August 31.

AS said it is also keen on other players in France, notably Mathieu Chalmé of Bordeaux and Nancy's Moroccan defender Mickael Chretien.

It is also looking for a midfielder, and discussions are ongoing with Argentine club Lanus for Eduardo Salvio, the paper said.

West Ham seal Diamanti deal

AFP, London

West Ham boss Gianfranco Zola solved his striking problem by signing Italian forward Alessandro Diamanti from Livorno on Friday.

The 26-year-old, who joins the Hammers for an undisclosed fee, has signed a five-year contract with the Premier League club.

Diamanti told West Ham's website: "I am very happy to be at West Ham United and to get the chance to play for Gianfranco Zola."