

Spurs test for MU

City take on Gunners

AFP, London



Manchester City and Tottenham's credentials as potential new members of English football's Champions League elite go under the microscope this weekend.

Both clubs have made perfect starts to their campaign but, with Manchester United due at White Hart Lane and City entertaining Arsenal, life is suddenly about to get a whole lot tougher for both clubs.

After spending around 120 million pounds on players in the close season, City have made a promising start to the new campaign with wins over Blackburn, Wolves and Portsmouth in their opening matches.

But with Carlos Tevez and potentially Robinho missing through injury, City will have to step up a level to take the points against an Arsenal side that will have a point to prove after being identified as the club most likely to make way if City are to be accommodated within the top four.

For City, the visit of Arsenal is followed by a meeting with Manchester United in one of the most keenly awaited derbies of recent years and Stephen Ireland, the Irishman who has forged a promising midfield partnership with Gareth Barry, says he and his new team-mates will relish the challenge.

"Against Arsenal and United, they will both be games of football and that will

suit our style," Ireland said.

"In the league games so far other teams have either flooded midfield or fired the ball over our heads and it has been a case of battling for the scraps but these next two matches should be full of passing, moving and combinations that will suit us.

"You want to test yourself against the best teams and the next two we face are in that category."

Ireland readily admits that City have not set the world alight yet but argues that the hard-fought wins augur well for the future of Mark Hughes's newly-built squad, who are to be captained by former Arsenal defender Kolo Toure following the move of Richard Dunne to Aston Villa.

"We have gelled well and that is down to the calibre of the player that the manager has brought in," Ireland said.

"All of the signings have been very good ones not just in terms of ability but also personality wise. They are all determined characters each of whom has a winning mentality."

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated):

Saturday

Blackburn v Wolves, Liverpool v

Burnley, Manchester City v

Arsenal, Portsmouth v Bolton,

Stoke City v Chelsea,

Sunderland v Hull, Tottenham v

Manchester Utd (1630 GMT),

Wigan v West Ham

Sunday

Birmingham v Aston Villa (1100

GMT), Fulham v Everton (1515

GMT)

Arsenal will be without Russia's Andrey Arshavin but Cesc Fabregas, who made a scoring return to action for Spain in midweek, is back for the Gunners.

Manchester United will be bolstered by the return of Rio Ferdinand, who has yet to play in the league this season as a result of a thigh injury, while Croatia midfielder Niko Kranjcar could make his debut for Spurs at White Hart Lane.

A visit to league leaders Chelsea gives Stoke the chance to improve on last season's performance at Stamford Bridge, which saw Tony Pulis's side leading with two minutes to go only to end up on the receiving end of a 2-1 defeat.

Chelsea have had 20 players away on international duty this week but Pulis does not expect any easing off from a squad he regards as the title favourites.

"Our aim will be to stay in the game for an hour and, if we can do that, I think we will have a great chance of getting something," Pulis said.

"We've looked at videos of the games they've played this year and they have been fantastic. They have hit the ground running and, with Manchester United losing Cristiano Ronaldo and Tevez and Arsenal losing a couple of players, I think they are the best." Having lost twice already this season, Liverpool have no room for error at home to Premier League newcomers Burnley, for whom on-loan striker David Nugent is expected to make his debut against the club where he started his career.

Tevez out for several weeks

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City forward Carlos Tevez has been ruled out of Saturday's Premier League clash against Arsenal and could also miss his reunion with former club Manchester United.

Tevez suffered a knee injury during international duty with Argentina last weekend and could be sidelined for two to three weeks, according to City manager Mark Hughes.

The 25-year-old is desperate to face United, who he quit to join City in the close-season, but it looks unlikely he will recover in time for the match at Old Trafford on September 20.

"The Argentine medical people said it would be two or three weeks," Hughes said.

"We think it might be less than that but he is a doubt for the derby next week.

"However, we will do everything in our power to get him fit because, for obvious reasons, he would love to play in that match."

Meanwhile, City will wait for the results of scans on Robinho's ankle injury before deciding whether the Brazilian will face the Gunners.

"He had a little bit of swelling on the ankle," Hughes added. "We do not think there is a significant injury there but it is best to check to make sure there is no stress fracture."

"Once we get the results we can decide whether he plays on Saturday or not."

Thais line up Robson

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's Football Association said Friday it expected former England captain Bryan Robson to take up an offer to replace Peter Reid as coach of the national team.

Association chairman Worawi Makudi said on the body's official website that he had contacted the former Manchester United skipper and is waiting for a reply.

"We have already contacted Robson. He seems interested and it is likely that Robson will accept our offer," Worawi was quoted as saying on the web site.

"I expect we will know the final answer no later than next week and if he agrees Robson will travel to Thailand by October," Worawi said.

Former Sunderland and Manchester City boss Reid's contract as Thailand's national coach was terminated on Wednesday after just a year.

Reid said earlier this week that he was sad to be leaving Thailand but cannot wait to start work again in the Premier League after being appointed number two at Stoke City.

SA WC excites Federer

AFP, New York

World number one Roger Federer, a Swiss tennis superstar who still has a passport from his mother's homeland of South Africa, is excited for the nation about the approaching 2010 FIFA World Cup.

But Federer, who advanced to his 22nd consecutive Grand Slam semifinal by beating Sweden's Robin Soderling on Wednesday night, made it clear that he wants to see Switzerland making the trip for the global football showdown.

"I think it's wonderful that South Africa got the World Cup, first of all," Federer said. "I remember seeing them win into the World Cup for rugby. It was a great thing for the nation, as well."

"Of course I hope that Switzerland is going to be there too so I can support Switzerland and South Africa, too."

The Swiss are in a strong position to come through, topping the table in their group from European qualifying with two matches remaining.

Federer also operates a charitable foundation in his mother's homeland.

"The foundation is something that's very close to my heart with my mom. I mean, I still have the South African passport," Federer said.

"But it's something that I enjoy doing. I wish I had more time, but I know I'm going to have plenty of time after my playing days are over."

"We try to generate as much money as we can. And it's not only South Africa that we are helping kids, but also in other countries in Africa, so obviously the continent is very close to my heart."



PHOTO: AFP

Everton's new signings (L-R) Dutch defender John Heitinga, French defender Sylvain Distin and Russian midfielder Diniyar Bilyaletdinov pose at the Club's Finch Farm training complex in Liverpool on Friday.

Spotlight on Milan

AFP, Milan



The glare of the Italian media will be on AC Milan and their coach Leonardo on Saturday as the seven-time European champions travel to minnows Livorno.

Such a match against a newly-promoted team would normally be a stroll for a team of Milan's stature and resources but things have not been going smoothly at the San Siro recently.

Milan began their season well following a troubled pre-season campaign that featured eight defeats in 11 matches and the loss of their best player, Kaka, to Real Madrid.

A win at Siena seemed to be a positive start to the new season but that proved a false dawn just a week later as champions and bitter city rivals Inter Milan handed their neighbours a footballing lesson in an embarrassingly one-sided 4-0 thumping.

That kind of blow can be fatal to already fragile confidence but while Milan's hopes of winning a first Serie A title since 2004 have received a big reality check, they will be desperate to bounce back.

Leonardo insists they will continue along their path but it could prove to be a short journey for the Brazilian World Cup winner and former Milan player unless he turns things around quickly.

The one saving grace for Milan has been the two-week international break, which

will have allowed the Inter wounds to heal, and Milan defender Luca Antonini is convinced that Leonardo will come good.

"We've started from scratch because we changed coach, we lost players such as Kaka and (Paolo) Maldini and hence we had to start all over," he said.

"The boss has imposed a different type of work, even athletically. We'll definitely now see the fruits of that labour."

While Milan look to rebound, Inter will be hoping for more of the same as they seek to erase memories of their disappointing opening home match of the season, a 1-1 draw against newly promoted Bari.

They host another promoted team on Sunday in the shape of Parma, whose former Milan forward Alberto Paloschi will be looking to do his old team-mates a favour.

Inter were lacklustre in their draw against Bari and will need to find the motivation they lacked in that encounter to avoid another slip-up, but Paloschi believes his team can cause them problems.

FIXTURES

Saturday

Lazio v Juventus, Livorno v AC

Milan

Sunday

Atalanta v Sampdoria, Bologna v

Chievo, Fiorentina v Cagliari,

Genoa v Napoli, Inter Milan v

Parma, Palermo v Bari, Siena v

AS Roma, Udinese v Catania

Diego stares into abyss

AFP, Buenos Aires



Argentina coach Diego Maradona was accused of making fatal errors in selection and tactics on Thursday as the soccer-mad country contemplated the humiliating prospect of missing out on the World Cup.

Wednesday's 1-0 defeat to Paraguay sent the former double champions slipping out of the four automatic qualifying places for the 2010 finals in South Africa with just two games in the South American zone left to play.

It was the fourth defeat in six qualifiers since Maradona took the reins.

The La Nacion newspaper said: "These are hard times for the coach who had multiple errors."

"Edge of the abyss," headlined Clarin, the country's biggest-seller which added that Maradona can't afford any more slip-ups against Peru, who are already eliminated, and then Uruguay, who trail the former champions by just one point.

Sports daily Ole commented that Maradona, who captained Argentina to the 1986 World Cup title, "had made all the mistakes that a coach can commit and which demotivated the players."

After Wednesday's defeat, Maradona, who

took charge in November last year, was in defiant mood.

"Since I was 15 years old, I have feared nobody. I am 48 now and I will continue to fight against them," said Maradona, in reference to the country's demanding media.

Maradona is paid 100,000 dollars a month, but his appointment was widely criticised because of his lack of experience as a coach.

His salary is thought to be twice that earned by predecessors Daniel Passarella, Marcelo Bielsa, Jose Pekerman and Alfio Basile.

Maradona's coaching CV is waver-thin.

While he served a doping suspension, he trained low-levels clubs Mandiyu de Corrientes (October to December 1994) and Racing Club de Avellaneda (May-September 1995).

In his 23 matches in charge, his teams drew 12 matches, lost eight and won just three.

When Maradona succeeded Alfio Basile, who quit in October 2008, Argentina were in third spot in the qualifiers.

But Maradona's Argentina have lacked direction, conceding 14 goals in six matches while star players Lionel Messi and Carlos Tevez have failed to take their club form onto the international stage.

Argentine media have also criticised the constant changes in personnel.

Three goalkeepers have been used in nine games while 60 players have been called up.

Barca get Iniesta boost

AFP, Madrid



Champions Barcelona have received a massive boost with the return to fitness of Spanish international Andres Iniesta as the travel-weary Catalan side visit high-flying Getafe on Saturday.

While many Getafe players watched the international games on television, Barcelona's array of jet-setting stars played twice inside a matter of days and must now raise themselves again.

Barcelona can, however, count on the services of fit-again Iniesta, who has not played since the Champions League final win over Manchester United at the end of May, after suffering a torn thigh muscle.

"It's very important for the team to get Iniesta back because he's a unique player with great qualities," said Brazilian defender Maxwell.

"He makes it all look so easy on the pitch and he can decide a game on his own."

"It's difficult to work when there are so many players away (on international duty) and maybe Getafe have the advantage but we aren't looking for excuses."

Getafe, who narrowly avoided relegation last season, currently lead the 20-strong table after a 4-1 win over Racing Santander, while Barcelona are second making it an early top of the table clash, although only Barcelona are expected to be

near the top come May.

As well as vital league points the game is preparation for Barcelona's eagerly-anticipated Champions League group match at Inter Milan on Wednesday.

While Barca head to Madrid to face Getafe, Real go the opposite way to Barcelona to take on Espanyol.

It is the first competitive game at Espanyol's new Cornellà-El Prat stadium and it should be one to treasure against Spain's most successful team.

"We are not going to change our style of play despite the quality of Real Madrid," promised Espanyol coach Mauricio Pochettino.

"We have to be solid at the back although it is difficult to stop the likes of Kaka, Cristiano (Ronaldo) and (Karim) Benzema because they have the individual quality and are capable of the unexpected."

Real's multi-million euro Galacticos laboured to a 3-2 win over Deportivo La Coruna

FIXTURES

Saturday

Getafe v Barcelona (1600 GMT),

Athletic Madrid v Racing

Santander (1600 GMT),

Espanyol v Real Madrid (1800

GMT), Sevilla v Real Zaragoza

(2000 GMT)

Sunday

(all 1500 GMT unless stated)

Deportivo La Coruna v Malaga,

Villarreal v Real Mallorca, Tenerife

v Osasuna, Sporting Gijon v

Almeria, Valladolid v Valencia

(1700 GMT), Xerez v Athletic

Bilbao (1900 GMT)

in the season curtain-raiser that showed Real's attacking threat but also a defensive fragility that was often exposed last season.

"We have only just started and the squad has once again, undergone a large metamorphosis and there have been a lot of changes," explained goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

"It is normal that we have still things we need to work on, however, as we play more games, I am certain that we will become more coordinated," he said.

No-one knows how long it will take Real to really click but expectations are sky high and patience is not the forte of the demanding Madrid fans.

Athletic Madrid supporters already appear to have lost their patience just one game into the new season and are planning a protest at their lack of activity in the transfer market during Saturday's home match against Racing Santander.

Athletic ended last season on a high with Champions League qualification but failed to follow it up with any big name signings and lost their opening game 3-0 at Malaga.

Sevilla were another Champions League participant to get off to a bad start with a loss against rivals Valencia so they look for their first points of the season at home to promoted Real Zaragoza on Saturday.

Valencia's trio of David Villa, David Silva and Juan Mata all played a key role in Spain's recent World Cup qualification and Valencia hope they can maintain their stellar form for Sunday's trip to Valladolid.

Klose hopes for recall

AFP, Berlin



Miroslav Klose is hoping his two World Cup goals for Germany in midweek will open the door for a return to the Bayern Munich team ahead of Saturday's game at Borussia Dortmund.

The 31-year-old, who was the top scorer at the last World Cup, was left out of Bayern's squad for the 3-0 win over defending champions Wolfsburg last time out when Munich coach Louis van Gaal used Mario Gomez as the lone striker in a 4-3-3 formation.

Klose hit two goals for Germany in Wednesday's 4-0 win over Azerbaijan in the World Cup qualifier in Hanover to become the joint third highest German goalscorer of all time.

But despite his success, the hot-shot forward is not optimistic about his chances of facing Dortmund with Munich eighth in the league and Dortmund down in 12th.

"I don't think I will play on Saturday, because Louis van Gaal has not seen me for the last ten days," said Klose.

After Holland midfielder Arjen Robben made a spectacular debut with two goals to see off Wolfsburg a fortnight ago, Bayern need to build on their improved form with

another win.

Despite playing together for only 45 minutes, Robben and French midfielder Franck Ribery showed signs of a fruitful partnership and the German media has dubbed the pair "robbery" after they unlocked the Wolfsburg defence.

Dortmund have problems in defence with former Germany defender Sebastian Kehl suffering a groin injury and van Gaal needs to see how much his squad has been weakened by international call-ups.

Bundesliga leaders Hamburg were dealt a blow on Thursday ahead of the match with Stuttgart when they lost Peru striker Paolo Guerrero and Namibia defender Collin Benjamin to injury.

The pair are both expected to be out for several months after picking up knee injuries while on World Cup duty.

Guerrero's injury is a particular blow for the north

German club as he has scored four goals in four league games to put Bruno Labbadia's team top of the table by virtue of goal difference from Bayer Leverkusen.

Sweden's Markus Berg is expected to take Guerrero's place alongside Croatia's Mladen Petric in attack, while Stuttgart coach Markus Babel has virtually a full-strength squad to choose from.

Defending champions Wolfsburg are at home to Bayer Leverkusen with Brazilian striker Grafite alongside Nigeria's Obafemi Martins up front with Edwin Dzeko on the bench.

Leverkusen, who are second, but level on points with Hamburg, welcome back goalkeeper Rene Adler from international duty after he kept two clean sheets for Germany while coach Jupp Heynckes is expected to play the same side for the fourth time in five games.

On Sunday, third-placed Werder Bremen are home to Hanover with play-maker Mesut Ozil back having raised his profile with eye-catching performances for Germany.

Schalke play Cologne on Sunday with Germany midfielder Jermaine Jones set to miss out again having only recently returned to training after a hairline fracture of the shin.

IN BRIEF

Kaiser regrets Lucio departure

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer on Friday regretted the departure of Brazilian captain Lucio, saying the German club's defence was a cause for concern.

"It's important that the defence sorts itself out. The problem is the defence and I hope that (coach) Louis van Gaal will find the solution," Beckenbauer said.

"The triangle that the goalkeeper and central defenders form must perform better and if not, we will have problems in the Bundesliga."

According to Beckenbauer, the defence has been particularly hit by the transfer of World Cup winner Lucio to Inter Milan.

"With hindsight, the decision to let Lucio go was perhaps a mistake," he said. "We're currently missing a player like him who has been the spine of our defence."

Kilimanjaro too high for Roman

AFP, Dar Es Salaam

The Kilimanjaro was a mountain too high even for billionaire Chelsea boss Roman Abramovich and his 113 porters, an official from the Tanzania National Parks Authority told AFP Friday.

Pascal Shelutete said the 42-year-old Abramovich turned around after scaling 4,600 metres of Africa's highest peak, which culminates at 5,892 metres (19,330 feet).

"We were not given a reason for his failure to reach the peak, but there are reports from his team that he developed some breathing problems," he said.

Shelutete added that members of Abramovich's expedition were happy with the achievement and promised to make a new attempt in the near future.

Klasnic accuses Terry

AFP, London

Croatia striker Ivan Klasnic has accused England captain John Terry of punching him in the kidneys during Wednesday's World Cup qualifier.

Terry claimed Klasnic spat at him during the closing stages of England's 5-1 win at Wembley and the Croatian has responded with an allegation of his own.

Klasnic had a double kidney transplant in 2007 and the forward, currently on loan at Bolton from Nantes, feels Terry was deliberately trying to cause damage to that area.

"He hit me with a fist exactly in the place where I've been operated," he told The Sun.

"I was lucky to be wearing a protective belt. He is the first player who has tried to hit me with purpose in the kidney. He insulted me first then hit me."