

Liverpool's MU test

AFP, London



Liverpool manager Rafael Benítez received the dreaded 'vote of confidence' ahead of Sunday's clash against Manchester United but the Spaniard knows kind words alone cannot do much for his side.

The Reds, who last won the English title back in 1990, go into this weekend's Anfield fixture on the back of four straight defeats and are eighth in the table, already seven points behind arch-rivals and Premier League leaders United.

Another defeat will likely spell the end of Liverpool's latest title challenge - a bitter pill for those fans who grew up lauding it over United during the Merseysiders' decades of dominance in the 1970s and 1980s.

And to make matters worse, Liverpool could well kick-off on Sunday without the star duo of Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard, both battling to overcome groin problems.

Liverpool's recent run has inevitably turned the spotlight on Benítez, in charge at Anfield since 2004.

He appears safe in his post for the time being, if only because it would cost feuding American co-owners George Gillett and Tom Hicks too much, at a reported 20 million pounds, to sack the former Valencia manager, who signed a new five-year contract seven months ago.

However, Gillett insisted both he and Hicks were united in their admiration for Benítez, saying: "We have just

entered into a long-term agreement with Rafa.

"Our family is extraordinarily pleased with him, we think he is absolutely as good as there is in the business and I am sure the Hicks' feel the same way. We just extended his contract."

Gillett also told the club website, www.liverpoolfc.tv: "I think the run of results disappoints everybody. Certainly, it disappoints the fans and it disappoints Rafa. We are all disappointed, but we are in this together."

Liverpool were beaten in midweek in the Champions League by Lyon while United won away to CSKA Moscow.

But Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand said recent results would be an irrelevance this weekend.

"I think form goes out of the window in these games," Ferdinand told MUTV. "We all know that when there's a big rivalry between two teams, whether it's a derby or a big cup clash, form doesn't come into it."

"It all comes down to who performs best on the day and that's what we're looking to do," the England centre-back added.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated):

Saturday
Birmingham v Sunderland, Burnley v Wigan, Chelsea v Blackburn (1630GMT), Hull v Portsmouth, Tottenham v Stoke, Wolves v Aston Villa (1145GMT)
Sunday
Bolton v Everton (1330GMT), Liverpool v Manchester United (1400GMT), Manchester City v Fulham (1500GMT), West Ham v Arsenal (1615GMT)

United could find themselves kicking-off in second place if Chelsea win at home to Blackburn on Saturday.

The Blues' form away from Stamford Bridge has been patchy, with defeats away to Wigan and Aston Villa.

But they have been a different proposition back in west London, while a midweek success over Atletico Madrid maintained their winning start to this season's Champions League.

At the other end of the table, basement club Portsmouth travel to fellow relegation candidates Hull City.

The teams have managed just three league wins between them this season, while Portsmouth, who have been beset by ownership problems so far this campaign suffered fresh off-field turmoil on Thursday when it emerged their chief executive, Peter Storrie, was in line to face tax evasion charges.

Birmingham, beaten 3-1 away to Arsenal last time out, welcome Sunderland to St Andrews for the Midlands side's first home match since the club was taken over by Hong Kong businessman Carson Yeung.

Saturday's other matches see high-flyers Tottenham taking on Stoke while Wolves play Aston Villa and Burnley face Wigan.

European commitments mean that, in addition to the Liverpool-United match, there are three other fixtures on Sunday with big-spenders Manchester City at home to Fulham, West Ham up against Arsenal in an all-London affair and Everton making the short journey to Bolton.



Benfica striker Javier Saviola blows kisses to the home fans after scoring the opening goal against Everton during their Europa League encounter at the Luz Stadium on Thursday.

Argentina set Germany date

AFP, Berlin

Germany and Argentina will prepare their bids for the 2010 World Cup with a friendly match on March 3 in Munich, the German Football Federation announced on Friday.

The match will be the Germans' third friendly ahead of the tournament, coming after their fixtures against Chile on November 14 in Cologne and the Ivory Coast on November 18 in Gelsenkirchen.

Germany coach Joachim Loew had specifically requested to play Argentina, world champions in 1978 and 1986, as part of their preparations.

"I'm really delighted that Argentina have accepted," said Loew.

"Even though they had some problems during qualifying in the Lat Am zone they are still among the top teams in the world."

Diego Maradona's side grabbed the final South American qualifying berth for the South Africa tournament with a last-gasp 1-0 win over Uruguay earlier this month.

Three-time world champions Germany qualified from European Group Four with a four-point lead over their only serious rivals Russia, who will go into a play-off with Slovenia on November 14 and 18.

"We have to give everything we have against them. This match in Munich will be a real test before the announcement of the World Cup team," said Loew.

The two countries have already slated another friendly for August 15, 2012 in Germany, the federation added.

The last time they met was in the quarter-finals of the 2006 World Cup in Berlin, with Germany winning a penalty shootout 5-3.

Huth given 3-game ban

AFP, London

Stoke City defender Robert Huth was banned for three matches by the Football Association (FA) here on Thursday after admitting to a charge of violent conduct.

The Germany international was charged following a clash with West Ham centre-half Matthew Upson during Saturday's Premier League match at the Britannia Stadium.

Huth appeared to swing an arm into Upson's face as the pair tried to gain position at a free-kick during Saturday's Premier League match but, with Stoke 2-1 up, the eventual full-time score, the incident went unseen by referee Martin Atkinson.

Now an FA Regulatory Commission hearing has suspended him for the Potters' next three games, away to Tottenham and Portsmouth and at home to Wolves.

EUROPA LEAGUE

Benfica thrash Everton

AFP, Paris

Everton sank to a first Europa League defeat of the season with a 5-0 loss at Benfica on Thursday, while reigning champions Shakhtar Donetsk thrashed Toulouse and Roma rescued a draw at Fulham.

An injury-time goal earned 10-man Lazio a 2-1 win over Villarreal, Spanish heavyweights Valencia were held 1-1 at home to Slavia Prague and struggling Scottish giants Celtic went down 1-0 to Hamburg.

Everton were 1-0 behind at half-time at the Estadio da Luz after Javier Saviola volleyed the home side in front before three goals in seven minutes put the game beyond the visitors.

Paraguayan international Oscar Cardozo scored twice from close range after pin-point left-wing assists from Saviola and man-of-the-match Di Maria, before Brazil centre-back Luisao headed in the fourth.

Saviola touched home his second late on from another Di Maria assist as the hosts drew level with their opponents on six points at the Group I summit.

"I have said to the players that this is a different competition and we have had two wins and a defeat so it's not that bad," said Everton coach David Moyes after his team's worst ever defeat in European competition.

Premier League Fulham took an early lead against their Serie A opponents when Brede Hangeland headed home from a corner before Stephen Kelly was sent off after conceding a 78th-minute penalty for a foul on John Arne Riise.

The assistant official behind the goal mistakenly instructed the referee to dismiss Hangeland, but once the error had been rectified Mark Schwarzer preserved the home side's lead by brilliantly repelling

Jeremy Menez's spotkick.

Fulham looked poised for a memorable victory but defender Marco Andreoli lashed in a half-volley off the underside of the crossbar with the last kick of the game to earn Claudio Ranieri's men a point.

Argentine starlet Mauro Zarate gave Roma's city rivals Lazio the lead in their Group G home game with Villarreal before Sebastian Eguren equalised five minutes before the break.

Midfielder Matuzalem was sent off for the hosts mid-way through the second period but they snatched victory in injury time through skipper Tommaso Rocchi.

Austrian champions Red Bull Salzburg maintained control of the group by beating Levski Sofia 1-0, with a 20-yard drive by Dusan Svento securing their third consecutive victory.

Shakhtar, who won last season's tournament when it was still known as the UEFA Cup, were 3-0 up at half-time against French side Toulouse and went on to win 4-0 as they maintained their perfect start in Group J.

Valencia fell behind to a 28th-minute strike from Slavia's Macedonian striker Riste Naumov before drawing level in the second half through defender David Navarro.

That result allowed Lille to assume a two-point lead over the Spaniards in Group B after they belied indifferent domestic form to beat Italy's Genoa 3-0.

Celtic were sunk by a 63rd-minute goal from Hamburg's Swedish forward Marcus Berg and remain bottom of Group A, with Israeli side Hapoel Tel Aviv level on six points with Hamburg after stunning Rapid Vienna 5-1.

Dutch league leaders FC Twente went down 2-0 at Moldovan outsiders Sheriff Tiraspol, while there were also wins for Ajax, PSV Eindhoven, Athletic Bilbao, Fenerbahce, Galatasaray, Sporting Lisbon and Panathinaikos.

Milan on a high

AFP, Rome



AC Milan look to build on their stunning Champions League win at Real Madrid with Sunday's trip to little Chievo representing a perfect opportunity to continue their recent renaissance.

A week ago coach Leonardo expressed his hope that his team's next two games against AS Roma and Real could act as a springboard to a return to something nearer their expected form.

They beat their Italian rivals 2-1 in Serie A and then stunned the only team to have won more European titles than them, 3-2 in Madrid.

But Leonardo will not be getting carried away. Roma totally outplayed Milan in the first half at the San Siro a week ago and should have led by more than 1-0 at the break and it took a highly controversial penalty to change the flow of the game.

At the Bernabeu, Milan were on the back foot for the majority of the game but were helped out by two uncharacteristic howlers by Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

Add to that the fact that Milan have often been a team

for the big occasion and those two wins weren't such a big shock.

Milan's problem has often concerned more mundane matters, a category into which this weekend's trip to Verona falls.

The seven-time European champions have already lost to Udinese and FC Zurich while failing to beat Atalanta, Livorno and Bari.

And their scoring problems haven't entirely been solved by the five goals in their last two games given that they had a huge helping hand in three of them.

"Every match is an examination, every Sunday. But now we are going into the next match after two good performances," said centre-back Alessandro Nesta.

"We're going to Verona but we have to be careful because we've not done well against the little teams."

FIXTURES

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

Barca look to rebound

AFP, Madrid



Reigning European and Spanish champions Barcelona will aim to put their first dip in form of the season behind them when they host Real Zaragoza in La Liga on Sunday.

After losing their perfect league record with a 0-0 draw at Valencia, the Catalan side suffered a shock 2-1 Champions League home defeat by relatively unknown Russians Rubin Kazan in midweek.

The Kazan loss was Barca's first since the end of May when they lost 1-0 at home to Osasuna having already wrapped up the league title.

"I don't believe in positive defeats, nor that it gives us a reality check," said coach Pep Guardiola, whose side lead Real Madrid by a point.

Real also lost at home in Europe with a 3-2 reverse against AC Milan but have the chance to go above Barcelona as they are in action first on Saturday at Sporting Gijon.

Atletico host high-flying Real Mallorca, currently fifth, at the Vicente Calderon on Saturday aiming to tighten up at the back after leaking eight goals in their last two matches.

Barcelona, in contrast, have the best defence in the league but must do without Brazilian defender Dani Alves, who is out for three weeks with a thigh injury sustained against Rubin, so Carles Puyol may deputise at right-back.

Lionel Messi may be the favourite to win the Ballon d'Or but he has received criticism following some below-par displays for Argentina and Barcelona.

"He is so strong mentally," said Guardiola. "He is the best player in the world and will continue to show that."

Real are still waiting for their Messi equivalent, Cristiano Ronaldo, to return from an ankle injury so will turn to Brazilian Kaka for inspiration in Gijon on Saturday.

Going forward Real have

FIXTURES

Saturday
Atletico Madrid v Real Mallorca (1600GMT), Sporting Gijon v Real Madrid (1800GMT), Sevilla v Espanyol (2000GMT)
Sunday
(1500GMT unless otherwise stated)
Valladolid v Deportivo La Coruna, Getafe v Athletic Bilbao, Tenerife v Xerez, Racing Santander v Osasuna, Almeria v Valencia (1700GMT), Barcelona v Real Zaragoza (1900GMT)

Bayer without Rolfes

AFP, Berlin



League leaders Bayer Leverkusen must make do without injured captain Simon Rolfes on Friday at home to Borussia Dortmund.

Leverkusen and second-placed Hamburg are the only two undefeated teams in the league, but Dortmund are showing signs of recovery after a rocky start to the season.

Wins away to Borussia Moenchengladbach and against VfL Bochum last Sunday have seen Jurgen Klopp's side move up to tenth place in the league and midfielder Nuri Sahin issued a challenge to Dortmund's rivals.

"We've got to put some results together and make up the points we gave away at the start of the season," he said.

Argentina striker Lucas Barrios has been brought to Dortmund to replace Swiss striker Alexander Frei and the 24-year-old striker had to wait

408 minutes for his first Bundesliga goal.

After getting off the mark at Moenchengladbach the second goal came along quickly against Bochum as he aims to score his third in three games against Leverkusen.

Third-placed Schalke 04 take on second-placed Hamburg on Sunday with the Hanseatic City side playing Glasgow Celtic in the Europa League on Thursday night.

Schalke's defender Marcelo Bordon says his side must concentrate to pick up their fourth consecutive win after victories over Dortmund, Frankfurt and Stuttgart.

The last time Hertha won was the opening day of the season when they humbled Hanover 1-0, but since then they have slid down the table and are five points adrift at the foot.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Bayern Munich v Eintracht Frankfurt, Hoffenheim v Nuremberg, Hanover 96 v VfB Stuttgart, Borussia M'gladbach v Cologne, Mainz 05 v Freiburg
Sunday
Hertha Berlin v VfL Wolfsburg, Schalke 04 v Hamburg, VfL Bochum v Werder Bremen

IN BRIEF

Atletico sack Resino

AFP, Madrid

Atletico de Madrid fired coach Abel Resino on Friday after a disastrous start to the Spanish league season.

"Abel Resino is no longer the first team coach of Atletico de Madrid as of Friday," the club said on its website.

He was replaced on an interim basis by his assistant, Santi Denia, Atletico's sporting director Jesus Garcia Pitarch told a news conference.

Spanish media said Denmark's Michael Laudrup had rejected an offer to take over as Resino's permanent replacement.

Other names floated are former AS Roma coach Luciano Spalletti and Quique Sanchez Flores, the ex-coach of Getafe, Valencia and of Benfica.

Resino, 49, has been at Atletico since February when he replaced Mexican Javier Aguirre.

Resino, the first Primera Liga coach to lose his job this season, confirmed his departure at the news conference, with Pitarch.

"This is goodbye, I want to thank the Atletico fans for the support they have given me from day one until today, also to the employees and my closest assistants and to the players, who have tried but things did not work out," he said.

Henry linked to NY move

AFP, Madrid

French striker Thierry Henry may leave Barcelona next summer to play for the New York Red Bulls, a Spanish sports daily said Friday.

Henry, 32, would like to end his career in the same country as his friend and countryman Tony Parker, who plays basketball for the San Antonio Spurs, the daily AS said, without indicating its sources.

Spanish media have previously reported that Henry, who arrived at Barca from English side Arsenal in 2007, does not plan to stay at the Spanish and European champions beyond the summer of 2010.

Makelele hits out

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain skipper Claude Makelele hit out Friday at his one-match ban saying it was "unacceptable," after French football's disciplinary body turned a yellow card into a suspension.

Makelele said he feared that referees would go after him following a squabble between his coach Antoine Kombouare and a rival over the ability of the 36-year-old former French international midfielder.

"It's a shame this ban comes now. It's unacceptable. I just hope there won't be a Makelele case."