



Roma star Francesco Totti is about to score the equalising goal from a penalty during their Europa League encounter against FC Basel in Rome's Olympic Stadium on Thursday.

EUROPA LEAGUE Roma in last 32

Football

AFP, Paris

Roma, Athletic Bilbao, PSV Eindhoven and Sporting Lisbon qualified for the knockout phase of the Europa League on Thursday.

At Rome's Stadio Olimpico, Roma beat Basel 2-1. Midfielder Benjamin Huggel headed the Swiss side into an 18th-minute lead but Roma quickly drew level via a Francesco Totti penalty.

The Serie A heavyweights went ahead when Mirko Vucinic finished a sweeping move with a low, left-footed strike just before the hour but there was a huge scare for Claudio Ranieri's men with three minutes to play when Basel's Swiss international striker Alexander Frei flicked a shot against the bar.

Roma now lead Basel by a point in Group E, with Premier League representatives Fulham a point behind the Swiss side after overcoming CSKA Sofia 1-0 in west London through Zoltan Gera's first-half effort.

Roma visit Sofia, who are now eliminated, in their final group match, with Fulham travelling to Basel, meaning the Italian side will qualify as one of the group's two top sides.

Goals in either half from Fernando Llorente and Mikel San Jose earned Bilbao a 2-0 win at Austria Vienna, taking them into the last 32 alongside Group L leaders Werder Bremen, who beat Portuguese side Nacional 4-1.

An injury-time own goal from Tomas Repka gave PSV Eindhoven a 1-0 victory over Sparta Prague after a niggly match at the Philips Stadium, enabling the Dutch club to secure top spot in Group K.

FC Copenhagen moved level on seven points with Sparta by beating CFR Cluj 2-0,

thereby eliminating the Romanians from the competition, and the Danish side will go through if they avoid defeat at home to Sparta in their last game.

Group D leaders Sporting Lisbon needed just a point at home to Heerenveen but they had to wait until the first minute of injury time for Leonardo Grimi to cancel out Oussama Assaidi's 47th-minute opener and secure a 1-1 draw.

Grimi's goal enabled Hertha Berlin to climb above Heerenveen into second place after they won 1-0 at Latvian outfit FK Ventspils despite having goalscorer Raffael sent off for two bookable offences late on.

Hertha are six points adrift at the bottom of the German first division but will host Sporting in their final group game knowing a draw would take them through.

Toulouse maintained their hopes of a berth in the next round with a 1-0 home win over Partizan Belgrade in Group J.

The Ligue 1 side won thanks to a 54th-minute strike from Norwegian forward Daniel Braaten and moved a point behind second-placed Club Brugge in Group I.

The Belgian club drew 0-0 at already-qualified defending champions Shakhtar Donetsk and will host Toulouse in a winner-takes-all final group match.

Panathinaikos could have progressed with a draw at already-qualified Galatasaray in Group F but lost 1-0 and now need to draw at home to Dinamo Bucharest, 2-1 winners at home to Sturm Graz, to join the Turkish side in the next stage.

Everton, Benfica, Hamburg, Fenerbahce, Red Bull Salzburg and Villarreal all confirmed their places in the knockout phase on Wednesday.

Capello fears Spain, Brazil

AFP, Cape Town

Fabio Capello on Friday identified Spain and Brazil as England's main threats at next year's World Cup, but also said an African team could surprise.

England have been resurgent under Capello and qualified easily, doing enough to be one of eight seeds in Friday's draw for the group stages, meaning there is no danger of a first round meeting with Spain or Brazil.

But they could be drawn against an African team.

"If you want to win then you have to play the great sides but I have confidence in my team," Capello said on the sidelines of England presenting its bid for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup.

"We have played all the top teams. For me, Spain is good and Brazil is very, very good."

"But I think the teams from Africa could surprise. I saw Ivory Coast and they really surprised me. And Cameroon are one of the best teams from the continent."

England are expected to base themselves in Rustenburg, about two hours drive from Johannesburg, for the tournament from June 11-July 11 next year although Capello is concerned about the quality of the training pitches there.

"The pitches at the grounds are very good and the facilities are fantastic, but the training pitches are not great. But we have time," he said.

"Rustenburg is one of our options."

Real aim to rebound

AFP, Madrid



Still reeling from their painful derby defeat at Barcelona in 'El Clasico', Real Madrid will hope for some home comfort on Saturday when they entertain Almeria at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Real claimed a moral victory from the Barcelona loss with many citing it as their best display of the season, but it was Barca who took the points and the Catalans now lead their rivals by five points after winning 2-0 at Xerez in Wednesday's rescheduled match.

"We showed we were at Barcelona's level at Camp Nou and this is the path we want to follow," said Real defender Pepe. "We didn't come away with any points but took lots of confidence."

"We are going to fight for the title right until the death because both sides will drop points. The important thing is to be strong physically and mentally right until the end."

Almeria coach Hugo Sanchez, the former Mexico star, won five league titles as a Real Madrid player and is likely to field a defensive lineup in a bid to frustrate his former employers.

Real have struggled to take the game to opponents this season, although the return of Cristiano Ronaldo will certainly help and the Portuguese sensation is expected to play more than the hour he managed against Barcelona.

Barcelona are still unbeaten in the league this season but face a tough trip to high-flying Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday in what is their third game in a week.

The champions had to dig deep to defeat Xerez in a match brought forward due to their participation in the FIFA World Club Cup in mid-December.

The recovering Lionel Messi, buoyant after winning the Ballon D'or, and Zlatan Ibrahimovic were second-half substitutes against Xerez but could return to the starting line-up at the Riazor stadium.

Ibrahimovic followed up his winner against Real by coming off the bench again to score a delightful chip against Xerez and is the club's top scorer with nine goals.

Depor are going strong in fifth and Brazilian left-back Filipe Luis faces Barca for the first time since they tried to sign him in the summer, with the move collapsing over what Guardiola felt was an inflated transfer fee.

Sevilla, who were drawn against holders Barcelona in the King's Cup, are seven points off the top of the table with a game in hand and host Valladolid on Saturday.

Valencia are on the up but have a tough trip to Athletic Bilbao on Sunday and must do without Spanish international midfielder David Silva, who is out until the New Year with a knee injury.

Valencia are fourth, three points behind second-placed Real, after going 14 games unbeaten in all competitions.

Elsewhere, Atletico Madrid coach Quique Sanchez Flores will hope his side build on their 4-0 win over Espanyol and continue to move away from the relegation zone when they travel to basement boys Xerez.

FIXTURES

Saturday (1700GMT unless otherwise stated)
Sevilla v Valladolid, Xerez v Atletico Madrid, Real Madrid v Almeria (1900GMT), Deportivo La Coruna v Barcelona (2100GMT)
Sunday (1600 GMT unless otherwise stated)
Tenerife v Sporting Gijon, Espanyol v Racing Santander, Real Mallorca v Real Zaragoza, Malaga v Osasuna, Villarreal v Getafe (1800GMT), Athletic Bilbao v Valencia (2000GMT)

Gago wants out

AFP, Madrid

Argentine international defender Fernando Gago wants to leave Real Madrid because he has been little used this season but the Spanish giants do not want to let him go, sports daily Marca reported Friday.

The 23-year-old, who joined Real at the end of 2006 from Argentine side Boca Juniors, needs more time on the pitch to be considered for Argentina's 2010 World Cup squad and has asked his agent to negotiate his move to another club in the winter transfer window, it said.

But Real is counting on the player to make up for the absence of its midfielder and Mali captain Mahamadou Diarra who is scheduled to play for his national team during the 2010 African Cup of Nations between January 10-31.

Gago started for Real during all but two of the club's 26 Spanish league matches in the 2008-09 season but his time on the pitch has been sharply reduced since Chile's Manuel Pellegrini took over as coach in July 2009.

Last chance for City

AFP, London



Any lingering hopes Manchester City entertain of getting involved in a Premier League title race in their first full season of being bankrolled from Abu Dhabi will be extinguished if they fail to beat Chelsea on Saturday.

The league leaders arrive at Eastlands with a 14-point advantage over City, who have slipped to seventh after a run of seven consecutive draws.

It already looks like a virtually unbridgeable gap and Chelsea have acquired a distinct air of champions-elect after following up wins over Liverpool and Manchester United earlier in the season with last weekend's 3-0 victory at Arsenal.

United, who trail Chelsea by five points, travel to West Ham while Arsenal will seek to get their campaign back on track at home to Stoke.

Steven Gerrard makes his 500th appearance for Liverpool at Blackburn while third-placed Tottenham travel to Everton on Sunday.

Despite a blip in midweek, when a second string side was knocked out of the League Cup by Blackburn, the confidence in the Chelsea camp was underlined by Portugal defender Ricardo Carvalho, who described the current squad as stronger than the one which won the club's first title in 50 years in 2004-05.

Carvalho was a key figure in what was Jose Mourinho's first season in charge, during which Chelsea lost only one league match and conceded only 15 goals.

City's spirits were lifted by a 3-0 win over Arsenal in the League Cup in midweek and manager Mark Hughes insists

there is no reason for his squad to feel overly dissatisfied at being so far off the pace being set by Chelsea.

"We are at a point now where we are reasonably pleased with where we are," Hughes said. "You can't deny we are going in the right direction."

"Comparisons are always made between ourselves and Chelsea. We started from a lot further behind. We need a little bit of time."

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson must decide whether to retain Darren Gibson, who scored twice as a youthful United side beat Tottenham 2-0 in the League Cup in midweek, for the trip to West Ham.

The likes of Wayne Rooney, Darren Fletcher and Ryan Giggs are expected to return but Ireland midfielder Gibson made a compelling case for promotion to United's first-choice line-up.

Arsenal's frustration over the way their challenge has unravelled following back-to-back defeats by Sunderland and Chelsea has deepened after Theo Walcott was ruled out of Saturday's match with a hamstring injury.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday
Arsenal v Stoke City, Aston Villa v Hull, Blackburn v Liverpool, Manchester City v Chelsea (1730 GMT), Portsmouth v Burnley (1245 GMT), West Ham v Manchester Utd, Wigan v Birmingham, Wolves v Bolton
Sunday
Everton v Tottenham (1600), Fulham v Sunderland

Bayern look to close gap

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal has ordered his side to forget next week's Champions League clash at Juventus and concentrate on closing the gap to Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen.

Bayern must beat Juventus at Turin's Olympic Stadium next Tuesday to ensure they reach the Champions League knockout stages, but Friday's German league clash with Borussia Moenchengladbach is far more pressing for van Gaal.

Munich are six points behind Leverkusen and the Dutchman is ordering his side to focus on their next game.

"The mark of a top professional is the ability to concentrate on the next game, which is Gladbach. Juventus has to wait," said van Gaal on the eve of the Allianz Arena clash.

"The really decisive match is against Moenchengladbach. By the mid-season break, I hope we're no more than six points behind Leverkusen, and perhaps fewer."

Van Gaal's side has climbed to fourth in the table behind Leverkusen, Werder Bremen

and Schalke 04.

After Gladbach, who have won just once in 41 league visits to Munich, Bayern play relegation-threatened Bochum away and bottom club Hertha Berlin at home before the winter break starts on December 20.

On current form, Gladbach appear to pose the most serious threat.

Borussia are the team of the moment in the Bundesliga with eleven points from their last five games, including victories in Hamburg and at home to Schalke in their most recent outings.

"They're on a roll," acknowledged Van Gaal.

"They're very well organised, and they defend by closing down space, which is something we've always had trouble with. I hope we find the key to

unlock their defence and surprise them."

An important factor will be current strike pairing Mario Gomez and Ivica Olic, scorers of four of Bayern's last five goals.

"The feeling you should never write Bayern off has returned," said Gomez.

"You play very different football when you're confident."

Dutch winger Arjen Robben will be on the substitutes bench and van Gaal expects to give him around 30 minutes of game time after four weeks out following surgery.

Robben last played a half of football back in early November in a 1-1 draw with Schalke, but has been sidelined by persistent knee problems ever since.

Leaders Leverkusen are waiting on the fitness of ex-Germany defender Manuel Friedrich, who is struggling with a calf strain, ahead of their match at Hannover on Saturday.

"It would be a pity (if he can't play), he has had an excellent season," said coach Jupp Heynckes. "We will see how he is closer to the game."

Third-placed Schalke have Brazilian defender Marcelo Bordon back after suffering from the flu as the Royal Blues prepare to host bottom side Hertha Berlin, who are six points adrift.

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IN BRIEF

Kalou out for two weeks

AFP, London

Chelsea's Salomon Kalou has been ruled out for "around two weeks", the Premier League leaders said on Thursday, after sustaining a thigh tear in Wednesday's League Cup loss to Blackburn Rovers.

Chelsea's statement said the Ivory Coast star had "sustained a minor tear to his upper left thigh" and that the injury would sideline him for "around two weeks".

The Blues, five points clear at the top of the table from champions Manchester United, are away to Manchester City in the league on Saturday.

Police scare at draw venue

AFP, Cape Town

Police explosives experts using sniffer dogs were called in to the World Cup draw venue here on Friday briefly snagging last-minute preparations for the ceremony.

"We have a situation inside. There is a police action at the moment," one police officer told AFP.

Some 20 minutes later after another police officer said that "the situation had been resolved" and that further details would be made available later.

A police spokesman told AFP: "It's not confirmed but there is a person who allegedly made a threat."

AFP, Cape Town

David Beckham took centre stage in England's campaign to host the 2018 World Cup on Thursday, using his star quality to bolster a bid that has recently appeared to be floundering.

Visiting a football development project in the Khayelitsha township, Beckham told reporters that England could stage a hugely successful World Cup next week if necessary.

But the LA Galaxy midfielder also acknowledged there was still a lot of hard work to be done to convince FIFA's executive committee to award one of the world's biggest sporting events to the home of football.

England remain the favourites to host the 2018 tournament but the bid has been hit recently by internal divisions which culminated in Premier League chairman Sir Dave Richards resigning from the board, as well as by criticism from influential FIFA vice-president Jack Warner.

But Beckham, who had what he described as a positive meeting with Warner on Wednesday, insisted the bid was now firmly on track.

"We can win the campaign with hard work," he said. "Nothing in life is easy, you have to work for special things to be given to you."

"England is one of the few countries with its stadia and its infrastructure that could host a World Cup almost immediately, next week."

Beckham, who helped his home city, London, win the 2012 Olympics, also talked up

the multi-cultural nature of contemporary English society, the global popularity of the Premier League and the important legacy that would be left by the World Cup.

"There are not many countries where you can have Brazil and Portugal and so on coming to our country and for there to be lots of their fans already there," Beckham said.

"That's a special thing for us."

"We have one of the biggest leagues in the world but you can't get over-confident that just because we have that we will automatically be given the World Cup. It takes more than that to win a World Cup. The positives are there but there is

still a lot of hard work to be done."

Beckham added: "Football is in our culture, in our DNA, it's in us from the moment we are brought into this world, from when we are born and that's something we will always have."

England's bid team are hoping Beckham can do what Franz Beckenbauer did for Germany when they won the right to host the 2006 tournament and the 34-year-old is aware of how much is resting on his ability to impress and charm key decision-makers.

"My experience of being involved in the Olympic cam-

paign was something that I really enjoyed being part of that was very special but that was not my sport," he added.

"Now it's a chance to help my sport and being involved in the World Cup which for me is the biggest event in the world. To be asked to be an ambassador and do as much for my country as I can is very special so hopefully I can play an important role."

FIFA will decide on the 2018 hosts next year. England faces competition from Australia, Indonesia, Japan and Russia as well as from joint bids from Belgium and the Netherlands and Spain and Portugal.



English midfielder David Beckham arrives at the England stand at the bidding countries media expo for the 2018 World Cup in Cape Town on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP