

# Gunners visit Anfield

AFP, London



Liverpool started this season with hopes of winning their first English title since 1990; they face Arsenal on Sunday desperate to maintain their bid for a top four finish.

Ending the season among the English Premier League's leading quartet will guarantee Liverpool Champions League football next season.

This term's Champions League efforts have been dismal by the five-times European Cup winners' own standards.

Liverpool had already seen their hopes of advancing to the knockout stages disappear before Wednesday's dispiriting 2-1 loss to Fiorentina.

The Reds are seventh in the Premier League, 12 points behind leaders Chelsea, and must now take on third-placed Arsenal, one of their regular 'Big Four' rivals.

"Without a doubt that (finishing in the top four) has to be the main aim this season," said Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard.

"It's obviously important for the club, and having played in the Champions League for such a long time, it's very important."

"We'll be right up for the Arsenal game on Sunday. If we can get three points there and take that into the Wigan game, we can turn a corner."

Liverpool will at least be

bolstered by the return of star striker Fernando Torres, who came on as a second-half substitute against Fiorentina after a month out injured.

"Torres' return is massive for me, massive for everyone," Gerrard insisted.

"He's the main man, he's our top scorer and we need him back firing."

"If that happens I'm sure we'll move back up the league and get in the top four places."

Arsenal, who've lost two of their last three Premier League matches, are likely to deploy a more familiar looking side at Anfield after manager Arsene Wenger fielded a largely inexperienced line-up for this week's 'dead' Champions League loss away to Greek club Olympiakos.

Saturday sees the rest of the Premier League in action with champions Manchester United, now just two points behind leaders Chelsea, at home to fifth-placed Aston Villa.

Injuries mean England midfielder Michael Carrick is likely to start again as a centre-back but, after three straight

wins, the player said confidence at Old Trafford was overcoming United's fitness problems.

"We won't take our foot off the pedal now," Carrick insisted.

Chelsea, looking to return to winning ways after last weekend's loss to Manchester City, will be without injured midfielder Michael Essien (hamstring) for the visit of an Everton side who are three points above the drop zone and have won just once in their last nine league games.

Portsmouth, who on Thursday denied reports they were about to enter administration, will climb off the bottom if they win away to Sunderland and fellow strugglers Bolton are beaten by Manchester City.

Wolves, also in the bottom three, are away to high-flyers Tottenham while West Ham, who are only a point clear of the relegation zone, travel to Birmingham City.

All eyes in Stoke's early kick-off match against Wigan are set to be on James Beattie after the striker was involved in an alleged dressing-room bust-up with manager Tony Pulis last weekend.

In other matches, Hull City manager Phil Brown is up against his mentor Sam Allardyce, back from heart surgery, as the Tigers take on Blackburn, while Fulham will try to bolster their fine home record when Burnley, who've struggled away from Turf Moor this term, come to west London.

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

# Juve need a pick-up

AFP, Rome



The pressure will be on Juventus to bounce back and quickly to avoid damaging their Serie A title chances following their midweek exit from the Champions League.

Juve were not only knocked out and beaten but they were humiliated 4-1 at home by Bayern Munich and looked like a team that can't contain positive opponents and struggles to create anything of their own.

In terms of performance it was a far cry from the one they put in last weekend to beat champions and leaders Inter Milan 2-1 in Turin to re-ignite their championship hopes.

The danger for Juve after last Saturday's high is that they might suffer a European hang-over and drop points away to Bari on Saturday, thus undoing their good work against Inter which brought them to within five points of top spot.

The champions showed no ill-effects from their league defeat as they beat Rubin Kazan 2-0 to qualify for the second round of Europe's premier club competition.

And that is the sort of response Juve coach Claudio Marchisio, the match-winner against Inter, admitted that morale is low in the camp.

"I would gladly give up my goal against Inter if we could replay that match against

Bayern," he told the official Juve TV channel.

"After the great effort to beat Inter we relaxed, partly because we were tired. But we should never have arrived at that last match needing a result to progress."

"We're all angry but we also realise that the only way to respond is on the pitch."

"We've got to win our next two games against Bari and Catania to reach Christmas in the best possible way."

Winning away to Bari will not be easy though, the Serie A newcomers have proved awkward opponents for everyone this season.

Only Inter and Fiorentina have conceded fewer goals than Bari who have developed an effective counter-attacking game based on two speedy wingers.

They have won their last three home games and been beaten only once this season on their own patch while they have twice returned from the San Siro with a point.

Juve have also struggled on several occasions in matches following Champions League games, with their two away defeats coming after a European expedition.

FIXTURES	
<b>Saturday</b>	Bari v Juventus, Cagliari v Napoli
<b>Sunday</b>	AC Milan v Palermo, Alalanta v Inter Milan, Catania v Livorno, Chievo v Fiorentina, Lazio v Genoa, Parma v Bologna, Sampdoria v AS Roma, Siena v Udinese

Ferrara also has a selection headache as he must decide what to do with his two major summer Brazilian signings Diego and Felipe Melo, both looking like flops at the moment.

Those two were supposed to help take Juve onto the next level to be able to challenge Inter, but after a good start to life in Italy Diego has become increasingly ineffective while Felipe Melo is a shadow of the player who performed so well for Fiorentina last season.

Felipe Melo will be suspended after he was sent off against Inter and if Mohamed Sissoko does not recover from injury, Ferrara's central midfield will look somewhat lightweight.

That may tempt the coach to ditch Diego and bring in more aggressive and defensive-minded midfielders while playing a straight 4-4-2.

Inter meanwhile face a trip to struggling Atalanta with some injury worries as both Walter Samuel and Dejan Stankovic, who limped off against Rubin, set to miss the clash.

However, Ivan Cordoba should deputise for Samuel while coach Jose Mourinho can bring Esteban Cambiasso or Muntari Sulley back into the midfield or even push Javier Zanetti into the middle and bring Cristian Chivu back in at left-back.

AC Milan host Palermo and are looking to extend their 13-match unbeaten run in all competitions.

They have won their last five league games to close to within four points of Inter in second place.

# Pizarro back for Bremen

AFP, Berlin



Werder Bremen welcome striker Claudio Pizarro back for Saturday's key Bundesliga clash against Schalke 04 with coach Thomas Schaaf insisting his side must prove they are Bundesliga title contenders.

Unbeaten Leverkusen are three points clear at the top of the table, but second-placed Bremen need to beat Schalke, who are third, to keep the pressure on the league leaders.

Peru's Pizarro, who has scored six league goals in just eight games, has been out for four weeks with a foot injury and is expected to partner Germany's rising star Marko Marin up front in the clash at Bremen's Weserstadion.

"Up until now we have made a good start," said Schaaf with his side having been beaten just once in the league after 15 matches.

"Now we must show that we can win the big games and give a clear signal we are in the competition."

Bremen will also have Germany trio goalkeeper Tim

Wiese, plus midfielders Mesut Ozil and Aaron Hunt back in the side with Leverkusen playing bottom side Hertha Berlin in the capital on Friday night.

Bayern Munich will be looking to pick up at Bochum where they left off in Turin having booked their place in the last 16 of the Champions League with a 4-1 win over Juventus last Tuesday.

After a poor start to the season, the win looks to have secured the future of Bayern's Louis van Gaal's side who are now up to fourth in the table.

Bochum are 15th in the league, but Germany forward Mario Gomez - who scored a stunning goal against Juventus - says the league game is crucial.

"We have another important match on Saturday," said the Bayern striker.

FIXTURES	
<b>Saturday</b>	Hoffenheim v Eintracht Frankfurt, VfL Bochum v Bayern Munich, Borussia M'gladbach v Hannover 96, Freiburg v Cologne, Nuremberg v Hamburg, Werder Bremen v Schalke 04
<b>Sunday</b>	Mainz 05 v VfB Stuttgart, VfL Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund



Lille forward Pierre Alain Frau (3rd from L) is congratulated by teammates after scoring against Saint-Etienne during their League One encounter at the Lille Metropole Stadium in Villeneuve-d'Ascq on Thursday.

## IN BRIEF

### Dominguez joins Sevilla

AFP, Moscow

Argentinian forward Alejandro Dominguez, who was playing with Russian reigning champions Rubin Kazan this year, announced his transfer to the Spanish league high-flyers Sevilla, local media reported Friday.

No details of the deal were disclosed.

The 28-year-old Dominguez, who played in Rubin Kazan in 2004-06 and 2009, was named Russia's Player of the Year by the Russian Football Union earlier this month.

Rubin manager Kurban Berdyev confirmed Dominguez transfer and expressed his regret about the loss of Argentinian striker, whom he called "an universal enterprising player."

"We were trying to hold Dominguez in our team," Berdyev told the press. "But he decided to try his skills in the Spanish league."

### Spalletti takes over at Zenit

AFP, Saint Petersburg

Russia's 2007 champions Zenit St Petersburg confirmed Friday they have appointed Italian Luciano Spalletti as their new manager.

The 50-year-old Spalletti has already signed a three-year deal. No financial details of the contract were disclosed.

Spalletti replaces interim coach Anatoly Davydov, who led Zenit to third place in the Russian Premier League this year.

Former AS Roma coach Spalletti was twice named Italy's Coach of the Year in 2006 and 2007.

### Romario convicted of tax evasion

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Former Brazilian international footballer Romario has been convicted of tax evasion for the second time by a court here on Thursday.

The 42-year-old was sentenced to two and a half years community service and ordered to pay a fine of 391,000 reals (222,000 dollars).

The case relates to Romario's tax returns in 1996 when he played for Brazilian club Flamengo. Romario could still appeal the decision.

Romario was also convicted and sentenced on June 9 to three years in prison and fined 569,000 dollars after accusations he evaded about 500,000 dollars in taxes when he played for Flamengo in 1996 and 1997.

# Lille thrash Etienne

AFP, Paris



France's Europa League representatives Lille and Toulouse both warmed up for crucial matches in the competition with comfortable victories in their rescheduled domestic league fixtures on Thursday.

Lille, who need to beat Slavia Prague in their final Europa League group stage match next week to book a place in the knockout phase, won 4-0 at home to struggling Saint-Etienne.

Toulouse will travel to Club Brugge next Wednesday needing a win to make sure of a spot in the last 32 of Europe's second-tier cup competition and they defeated Sochaux 2-0 thanks to a brace from French international striker Andre-Pierre Gignac.

Both winning sides jumped up the Ligue 1 standings, with Lille climbing from 10th to eighth and Toulouse rising three places to ninth.

Saint-Etienne remain fourth from bottom, three points above the relegation zone, while Sochaux are four points better off in 15th.

Lille dominated the first half against Saint-Etienne in northern France and took a 33rd-minute lead when Pierre-Alain Frau finished a slick move by sweeping home skipper Rio Cabaye's cutback from 12 yards.

Yohan Cabaye made it 2-0 from the penalty spot shortly before the hour mark after Guirane Ndaw felled Gervinho inside the box and Gervinho made sure of the points by thrashing home for a corner with 18 minutes to play.

Visiting centre-back Yohan Benalouane was sent off after receiving a second yellow card for a handball with nine minutes remaining and Adil Rami added the coup de grace by sweetly curling in the ensuing free-kick from 30 yards.

Both sides laboured in a dull first half at Toulouse's Stadium Municipal, but the hosts quickly took control of the game in the early stages of the second period thanks to the alertness of Gignac.

In the 49th minute Jacques Faty allowed a clearance from Toulouse's 17-year-old debutant goalkeeper Anthony Loustallot to roll under his foot and Gignac pounced to beat Teddy Richert with a deft finish.

Within two minutes the 24-year-old, last season's league top scorer, had doubled his tally after latching onto Ivan Stevanovic's wayward pass inside the Sochaux box and tucking the ball between Richert's legs.

All four sides are also in league action on Sunday, with Lille visiting Monaco, Saint-Etienne travelling to Paris Saint-Germain, Sochaux hosting bottom club Grenoble and Toulouse taking on surprise package Montpellier.

# Real's Valencia test

AFP, Madrid



Real must do without 164 million euros worth of talent for Saturday's crucial title duel at Valencia as they bid to slice Barcelona's five-point lead at the top.

Cristiano Ronaldo, the most expensive player in history at 94 million euros, misses out through suspension following his red card for violent conduct against Almeria last weekend while Brazilian Kaka, a 70 million euro signing from AC Milan, is also absent with a sports hernia injury.

"Cristiano is a key player for us and creates a lot of danger," said Xabi Alonso. "However, we intend to be the same without Cristiano. We have to try and be the same team irrespective of who is playing."

Real will certainly miss Ronaldo's goals - he has scored 12 goals in 11 games in all competitions - so Madrid will have to look to their other key performers at the Mestalla Stadium.

Real are three points ahead of third-placed Valencia who have lost just once in the league and are unbeaten at home.

Barcelona are currently five points ahead at the summit - admittedly having played one game more - so this is a pivotal match for Real to win or risk the champions extending their lead further.

Valencia will be without David Silva through a knee injury but David Villa, the league's top-scorer with 11 goals, is fit to face the team that tried to sign him in the

summer.

"(David) Silva is just as good (as Ronaldo and Kaka) and plays in a similar position to those two," said Valencia's David Albelda. "If Ronaldo and Kaka don't come all the better and if there are more of their players out even better."

Barcelona have a tricky game of their own with a derby against Espanyol at Camp Nou on Saturday and can heap pressure on Real ahead of the Valencia game.

Espanyol were one of only two teams to win at Camp Nou in the league last season and a could do with another derby win to improve on their league position of 14th.

Barca's giant Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic has scored in the last three league outings to take his season's tally to 10 and is revelling playing in Barca's attacking-minded side.

"I am scoring so many goals for Barcelona because we are a team that attack a lot," said Ibrahimovic. "We attack with five or six players and the mentality is totally different to Italy where not conceding is more important than scoring."

Ibrahimovic could be without his strike partner

Lionel Messi for the derby after the Argentine picked up an ankle knock in the 2-1 Champions League win at Dinamo Kiev which sent the holders into the last 16 of the competition.

It is Barca's final league match before the upcoming FIFA World Club Championship in Abu Dhabi so the champions will be keen to sign off with victory to at least maintain their five-point cushion.

Elsewhere Atletico Madrid host Villarreal at the Vicente Calderon on Sunday in a match-up between two sides recovering from horrid starts.

Both these sides harboured top four aspirations in pre-season but Atletico had their worst league start in 56 years while Villarreal had their worst start in the club's history.

"Both teams are in a similar situation and we have the squads to be much higher in the table," said Villarreal's Diego Godin.

# Ashton hangs up his boots

AFP, London

West Ham and England striker Dean Ashton on Friday announced his retirement from professional football.

Ashton has suffered from a long-term ankle problem which he initially sustained when training with England in August 2006.

The 26-year-old underwent several operations but concerns for his mobility later in life prompted his decision.

West Ham chief executive Scott Duxbury told the club's official website: "This is a sad day and our thoughts are with Dean."

"I would like to place on record our thanks to him for all his efforts and wish him the very best. I would also like to thank the fans for their patience and understanding during what has been a difficult time."

Ashton made his name at Crewe before joining Norwich in January 2005.

He scored 18 goals in 46 appearances for the Canaries, earning him a then club-record 7.25 million pound move to West Ham.

Ashton failed to land a place in Sven-Goran Eriksson's 2006 World Cup squad but was named in Steve McClaren's first squad, for the game against Greece at Old Trafford, only to be injured in a training ground clash.

He missed the whole 2006/07 season but returned to make 35 appearances in 2007/08. He started the 2008/09 season in goalscoring form but broke down again after just four games because of the ankle injury.

# Yobo out until New Year

AFP, Liverpool

Everton defender Joseph Yobo will be sidelined for the rest of December after aggravating a hamstring injury in last weekend's draw with Tottenham.

Nigeria centre-back Yobo first suffered the injury in Everton's Merseyside derby defeat to Liverpool last month and he was only able to last 15 minutes before limping off with a recurrence of the problem against Tottenham.

The 29-year-old's absence for Saturday's trip to leaders Chelsea is another blow for Everton boss David Moyes, who is already without eight first team players through injury.

"A scan carried out showed that it was a familiar hamstring injury and that I should rest until the end of the year," Yobo told Everton's website.

"The doctors anticipate that I should be fully back at the end of December."

"Unfortunately that will cost me a chance to help out my club at this demanding and crucial stage of the season."

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