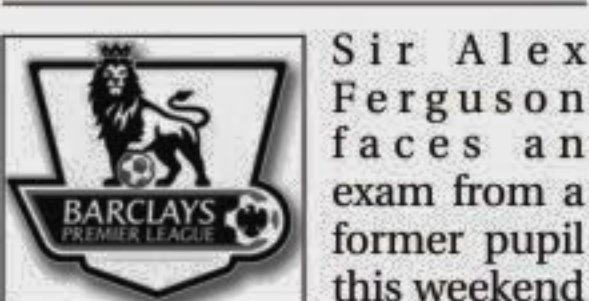


MU look to rebound

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson faces an exam from a former pupil this weekend as Manchester United seek to bounce back from their FA Cup exit at the hands of League One leaders Leeds United by beating the Premier League's form team.

Alex McLeish's Birmingham have confounded pre-season predictions they would struggle with an 11-match unbeaten run in the league that has left them in a battle for European places rather than the scrap against relegation that so many had predicted for them.

United meanwhile have had to endure an extended inquest into the Leeds defeat at a time when there is a renewed focus on the level of the club's debt and the restrictions it imposes on manager Sir Alex Ferguson's ability to strengthen a squad that, at times this season, has been severely weakened by injuries.

Ferguson will relish the challenge presented by McLeish, whom he managed as a player for both Aberdeen and Scotland, and veteran winger Ryan Giggs played down suggestions that the defending champions are on the verge of a crisis.

"It has always been the same here, one defeat and it is a disaster," Giggs said. "That is never going to change. But we don't get carried away with that, just the same as we wouldn't get carried away if we had won 10 on the bounce."

United emerged from the festive season having cut Chelsea's lead at the top to two points heading into a month in

which the Londoners will have to do without Didier Drogba, Salomon Kalou, Michael Essien and John Mikel Obi, who have flown to Angola for the African Nations Cup.

Carlo Ancelotti's side travel to Hull for a lunchtime fixture on Saturday with Michael Ballack arguing that, despite a recent blip in form, the Italian coach is doing a good job.

"We have had too many coaches during my time at Chelsea and that is not a good idea if you want success," the German captain said.

"Jose Mourinho, Avram Grant and Luiz Felipe Scolari all came and went before Guus Hiddink had some time with us last season, but it feels like Carlo is here to stay and that has to be good news.

"This team has been connected with Ancelotti and all the players believe he is a man who can work for us, which is a tribute to him because he has come into a dressing room full of highly experienced players who all have their own opinions and beliefs."

Arsenal will again be without injured skipper Cesc Fabregas for Everton's visit to the Emirates, but manager

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match. Includes fixtures for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.

Arsene Wenger can call upon fit-again Czech midfielder Tomas Rosicky, who signed a new contract at the club earlier in the week.

Everton could hand a debut to American star Landon Donovan, who has joined the club on loan from LA Galaxy until the end of season.

Arguably the most significant fixture at the weekend is Sunday's meeting of Liverpool and Tottenham at Anfield.

Spurs travel north knowing a win could represent a fatal blow to Liverpool's hopes of clawing their way back into the top four, having bolstered their own place in the Champions League qualifying spots with a run of five consecutive clean sheets.

Tottenham are also looking to complete a home-and-away double over Rafael Benitez's men and Croatian midfielder Niko Kranjcar admitted: "It's a six-pointer. If we win the game we'll get a nice lead in front of them."

"Nothing will be decided this weekend but we really want to send out a message and keep proving that we can achieve that top-four spot."

Spurs could have been ejected from the top four by the time they kick off on Sunday - if Aston Villa win at Wigan 24 hours earlier.

Manchester City, who are two points behind Spurs but have played a game less, are not in action until Monday evening, when Blackburn visit Eastlands.

Bolton will hope to finally have Owen Coyle finally installed as their new manager in time for Saturday's trip to Sunderland while Coyle's former club, Burnley, entertain Stoke with first team coach Steve Davis in temporary charge.



Indonesian youths dance as they attend a ceremony to welcome the FIFA World Cup trophy tour to Jakarta on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

IN BRIEF

Arsenal to pay Bolton fans

AFP, London

Arsenal are to pay the travel costs incurred by Bolton fans who made the journey south to London for Wednesday's postponed Premier League match, Britain's Press Association reported on Thursday.

Although the Emirates Stadium pitch was playable, the game was called off with less than five hours before kick-off after local police said approach roads, many of them covered in snow, had made conditions dangerous for fans.

Bolton supporters who'd come down from the north-west wondered why, given that bad weather had affected the south of England since the start of Wednesday, the match was not called off sooner.

Arsenal insisted they did all they could but have agreed to pay the travel costs of Bolton fans as a goodwill gesture.

Big freeze hits Premier League

AFP, London

Three of Saturday's English Premier League fixtures have been postponed because of concerns for the safety of spectators making their way to grounds in freezing conditions.

The Fulham v Portsmouth, Sunderland v Bolton and Burnley v Stoke matches were all called off on Friday.

Liverpool recommended that their encounter with Tottenham at Anfield on Sunday should also be called off and were awaiting confirmation from the league authorities before confirming the postponement.

Although London has escaped the heavy snowfall experienced by other parts of the country, sub-zero temperatures have left the streets around Fulham's ground in the west of the capital covered in ice, making access to the ground hazardous for supporters.

Eto'o targets goal scoring record

AFP, Luanda

Cameroon superstar Samuel Eto'o hopes to break the individual scoring record of nine goals at an African Nations Cup when Angola stages the 2010 tournament this month.

Mulamba Ndaye from Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) set the mark at the 1974 finals and Egyptian Hossam Hassan and South African Benni McCarthy came closest to matching him with seven each 12 years ago.

"My first objective is to score the highest number of goals at a single Nations Cup tournament," Eto'o told reporters in Kenya, where his team is preparing for the African football showcase.

Eto'o, who joined Inter Milan last year from Barcelona in a high-profile move, has been leading scorer in the previous two editions of the biennial Nations Cup with five goals each time.

Barca eye 1st win of 2010

AFP, Madrid



It has been a stuttering start to the new year for all-conquering Barcelona

and the treble winners hope for their first win of 2010 on Sunday at promoted Tenerife.

Barcelona were let off the hook last weekend when their 1-1 home draw against Villarreal went unpunished - as Real Madrid drew 0-0 at Osasuna - so they still hold a two-point lead over their rivals but confidence was dented further by Tuesday's 2-1 Kings Cup first leg defeat to Sevilla at Camp Nou.

"We have had an unlucky start to 2010 failing to win either match, but there is no need to panic," said midfielder Sergi Busquets. "The results will start coming very soon and we'll be playing for all the titles at stake."

Barca must do without top-scorer Zlatan Ibrahimovic through suspension but Argentine Lionel Messi will be back.

The club are also boosted by the return of Argentine centre-back Gaby Milito who played his first competitive match since April 2008 against Sevilla after cruciate knee ligament injuries threatened to end his career.

Tenerife have a decent home record losing just two of their eight matches and are the only promoted side not in the bottom three although they are only two points above the drop zone.

Real had a midweek rest

having already exited the Kings Cup and after a scoreless draw at Osasuna the league's top-scorers hope to get back on the goal trail with a home victory over high-flying Real Mallorca on Sunday.

"The point against Osasuna left a bitter taste in our mouth but now we have to focus on getting three points against Mallorca," said Real striker Gonzalo Higuain.

Real boss Manuel Pellegrini must do without the suspended duo of Lass Diarra and Sergio Ramos for the Mallorca visit but Brazilian Kaka may return as he recovers from a groin injury.

Mallorca have won eight out of eight at home to move fourth in the table but are poor travellers with just one win on the road although coach Gregorio Manzano pointed to the fact that the islanders won 3-1 at the Bernabeu last season.

"I can see us winning at the Bernabeu just like we did last year and other times before," said Manzano. "I dream of winning there again."

If Mallorca can get a point or pull off another big win in

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match. Includes fixtures for Saturday and Sunday.

Madrid it would leave them as the team with the only perfect home record in the league.

Sevilla may have beaten Barca in the cup but they have lost their last two league matches and surrendered fourth spot to Mallorca falling to fifth ten points behind leaders Barcelona.

Sevilla host an improving Racing Santander on Saturday with a mounting injury list while Frederic Kanoute and Didier Zokora are on international duty for the African Cup of Nations.

Valencia, six points behind second-placed Real Madrid, have taken advantage of Sevilla's troubles to steal into third and are at bottom side Xerez on Sunday.

Xerez are eight points from safety having won just one game all season and over-worked goalkeeper Renan Brito, on loan from Valencia, hopes to get one over on his old side.

"It is going to be strange for me because it is the first time I have faced my old teammates," said Brito. "We need to end this run and be strong to try and hurt Valencia."

Elsewhere Atletico Madrid need to put in a good display at Valladolid on Saturday to win over their disgruntled fans who watched 10-man Atletico crash to a 3-0 first leg defeat at second division Recreativo Huelva on Wednesday in the last 16 of the Kings Cup.

"I want to ask for forgiveness from the fans for this huge disappointment," said manager Quique Sanchez Flores. "I have to look for players that are not going to disappoint me anymore."

Vieira seals City move

AFP, Manchester

Inter Milan midfielder Patrick Vieira on Friday completed his move to Manchester City.

France international Vieira, who becomes new Blues boss Roberto Mancini's first signing, has signed a six-month deal with an option for a further year.

The 33-year-old's deal at Inter was due to expire in the summer and the former AC Milan and Arsenal is desperate to secure first-team football as he bids for a place in France's World Cup squad.

Mancini, who worked with Vieira at the San Siro, told the club's website, www.mcfc.co.uk: "Patrick is a world class midfielder with a winner's mentality and will fit into this group very well."

"He knows me and my staff well, and importantly he also knows what the Premier League is all about. He will not need much time to settle in."

"Patrick is one of the great players of his era with every almost every honour in the game against his name. I am sure City fans will welcome him warmly and appreciate the contribution he will make."

Vieira joined Arsenal from AC Milan in 1996 and went on to become a pivotal figure as the Gunners landed three Premier League titles and four FA Cups.

He moved to Juventus in 2005, spending one season there during which time the club claimed the Scudetto before being stripped of the crown due to the match-fixing scandal and consequently relegated to Serie B.

Milan's Juve test

AFP, Rome



A revitalised AC Milan side will be looking to keep some pressure on city rivals and Serie A leaders Inter Milan when they travel to third-placed Juventus on Sunday in a match that neither side can really afford to lose if they are to have any aspirations to wrest the title from Inter.

While Inter should pick up another three points at home to bottom-placed Siena on Saturday, AC Milan will be keen to keep up the momentum even if they trail the leaders by eight points, though, they have a game in hand.

AC Milan coach Leonardo was under pressure earlier in the season after an uninspiring start to the campaign but his side have suddenly shown a flair and more importantly a winning mentality to turn around their season and look the likeliest club to give Jose Mourinho's Inter a run for their money.

Their impressive 5-2 victory over Genoa on Wednesday left them with a record of eight wins, two draws and just one defeat since October and their run could not be in starker contrast to Juventus, who have totally lost the run of things.

Victory over Parma on Wednesday, albeit an unimpressive display, was welcome news for the 'Old Lady' after a run of five defeats in their last

six matches of 2009 including a home defeat to German giants Bayern Munich in the Champions League which saw them crash out of the competition.

Juventus coach Piero Ferrera conceded that while he was happy with the commitment of his players in the win over Parma, taking on Milan was an entirely different matter.

"All that commitment will not be enough against Milan," admitted Ferrera.

"We have to improve, notably in our strategy."

However, Ferrera's hopes of beating Milan have taken a serious blow with their leading scorer David Trezeguet being sidelined for over five weeks with a sprained ankle he suffered in the Parma match.

The seven goal striker joins a growing injury list which also includes World Cup winning trio goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, winger Mauro Camoranesi and striker Vincenzo Iaquinta, while on-loan defender Martin Caceres

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match. Includes fixtures for Saturday and Sunday.

is suspended after being sent-off against Parma.

Milan have less problems on the personnel front with just fullback Gianluca Zambrotta, veteran Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf and Alexandre Pato out through injury with the latter's absence likely to see former England captain David Beckham start his second successive match since returning on-loan from LA Galaxy.

Beckham put up an impressive showing on his return and Milan's outstanding captain Massimo Ambrosini was singing his praises.

"David is a great champion and like all great champions he knows how to adapt to different situations in a hurry," the 32-year-old was quoted as saying on the Football Italia website.

Ambrosini, whose form could well see him make Marcello Lippi's World Cup finals squad, said that even with Juventus coming up he had not conceded the title to Inter.

"The road is the one we are travelling down now and it is a long one," he said. "We know it. But things were going well at the end of the year as well."

Elsewhere fourth-placed Napoli will be looking to take advantage of any slip-ups by either Juventus or AC Milan when they host Sampdoria on Sunday while relegation-threatened Atalanta start life without Antonio Conte, who resigned as coach on Thursday, away at Palermo.

Pompey to clear wages

AFP, London



Portsmouth's players were due to be paid their December wages on Thursday after squad salaries at the English Premier League crisis club had been delayed for the third time this season.

"As far as I am aware, everything is going through to their accounts today," Portsmouth chief executive Peter Storr told Sky Sports on Thursday.

"Payment should be there, I am pleased to say. Obviously it is not the best scenario in the world to have this situation happening but obviously finance is a major problem in the world market at the moment."

He added: "I am told funds were received this morning so therefore it's a question of the process, and however long that takes to go through, but I'm told it should all happen today."

to cope with Portsmouth's mounting debts, with Gaydamak alone saying he is still owed nearly 30 million pounds by the club.

Portsmouth, who in November appointed Israeli Avram Grant as their manager in succession to the sacked Paul Hart, have also been threatened with legal action by HM Revenue and Customs over unpaid tax bills.

Meanwhile, with the January transfer window now open, Pompey cannot currently sign any new players as they remain the subject of a Premier League transfer embargo regarding unpaid fees on previous deals.

But Storr insisted Thursday players would not leave Fratton Park on the cheap just to raise some ready cash.

"I've had one or two calls and I think one or two people think there is some sort of fire sale going on. That is not the case," he said.

"If we have to sell players we'll sell them for their market price and not what people think is a knockdown price."

The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) told Portsmouth warned the integrity of Premier League fixtures was at stake unless the club's financial position improved.

"When two teams take the field, it's 11 versus 11 and you would expect all 22 players to have been paid," PFA senior executive Nick Cusack said Thursday.

Advertisement for Bangladesh Tait Board featuring a table with columns: Rank, Name, Points, Age, and Remarks. Includes text about the board and contact information.