

Gunners visit Old Trafford

AFP, London

Chelsea will welcome Didier Drogba back from African Nations Cup duty this weekend and club captain John Terry believes the Londoners are ready to put their foot down in the Premier League title race.

could only draw, so we have to win there," Terry said.

"When we play Arsenal at home in February wins against Burnley and Hull (next Wednesday), if we can achieve them, would have opened a healthy gap for us. But to achieve that, it's got to be champion form."

Chelsea's status as favourites to deny United an unprecedented fourth consecutive title has been bolstered by the way in which they have thrived in the absence of their African stars for the last month, and England midfielder Frank Lampard believes that underlines the strength of their squad.

"We didn't say we'd struggle this month, everyone else did," Lampard said. "We have a lot of belief. I just think the loss of Didier was talked about too much."

"Didier is a big loss but the way Nicolas Anelka plays, he's one of the best out there as well. We've got the players who can come in. Maybe some needed to step up and everyone has done."

"We have gone up another gear this month. We had a bad run in December, dropped some points and we've worked hard to get that back."

Arsenal will also be boosted by the return of their African stars with Alex Song and Emmanuel Eboue both available for the United clash, although Belgium centreback Thomas Vermaelen is doubtful with a leg injury.

United will be without the suspended Rio Ferdinand but the loss of the England centreback is offset by the return to fitness of Nemanja Vidic, who will partner Jonny Evans in a match manager Sir Alex Ferguson admits could be crucial to the club's chances of retaining their title.

"That is a big game for us," the Scot said. "We need to win." The title tussle now looks set to remain a three-club affair with Tottenham,

Manchester City, Liverpool and Aston Villa involved in the fight for fourth place and the final Champions League qualifying place.

Tottenham currently occupy the coveted slot but City, who entertain bottom side Portsmouth on Sunday, are arguably better-placed courtesy of their two games in hand over Spurs and Liverpool.

Spurs are hoping to have tied up Eidur Gudjohnsen's loan signing from Monaco in time for their Saturday's trip to Birmingham, who had gone 15 games unbeaten prior to their defeat at Chelsea on Wednesday.

Liverpool entertain Bolton with captain Steven Gerrard insisting that the club is close to turning the corner after a disastrous first half of the season.

"Confidence is slowly coming back and once confidence is back, results will follow," said Gerrard, who returned from injury in the goalless draw at Wolves in midweek.

Villa travel to Fulham on Saturday, which also sees Hull entertain Wolves, in an important encounter for both clubs' survival prospects, and West Ham take on Blackburn.

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match details. Includes Saturday (Birmingham v Tottenham, Burnley v Chelsea), Sunday (Manchester City v Portsmouth), Monday (Sunderland v Stoke).



Egypt midfielder Hosny Abd Rabo (R) celebrates scoring the opening goal against Algeria during their Africa Cup of Nations semifinal at the Ombaka Stadium in Benguela on Thursday.

Barca to keep up pressure

AFP, Barcelona

League leaders Barcelona head into the second half of the season unbeaten and their imperious form shows little sign of subsiding to allow Real Madrid to close the five-point gap at the top.

Hernandez's performances have been instrumental.

He joined the debate this week about the sending off of Cristiano Ronaldo against Malaga that will see the Portuguese suspended for the next two matches.

Ronaldo swung his arm at Patrick Mitiga which led to his dismissal but there are strong claims from Madrid that he was unfairly treated as a similar incident involving Barcelona's Leo Messi against Sevilla went unpunished.

The loss of Ronaldo is a major blow for Real, who now take on Deportivo la Coruna, as they have become dependent on the Portuguese, who grabbed the two goals in the victory over Malaga.

Real are set still to be without Rafael Van der Vaart and Gonzalo Higuain for what will be a difficult match against a rejuvenated Deportivo side.

The Galicians will be missing Felipe Luis, who suffered a horrendous broken ankle last weekend against Athletic Bilbao and will lose the rest of the season.

Despite only managing a draw away to lowly Tenerife, Valencia are well placed to qualify for the Champions League but they face a crucial game against fellow aspirants Sevilla, who have dropped off the pace since Christmas after losing three of their last four matches.

Mallorca continue to be the real surprise this season as they fight among the top four in the championship.

They showed their resilience to draw with Espanyol after going a goal down and now will be looking for victory

against bottom side Xerez, who are really struggling to pick up any points at the moment.

In fact the only point they have won in recent weeks was against Zaragoza who are in similar straits and are now suffering internal strife with captain Roberto Ayala having rescinded his contract.

They face a relegation battle against third-from-bottom Tenerife.

Getafe and Athletic Bilbao, who take on Racing Santander and Espanyol respectively, are in the hunt for a place in Europe but also coming into the frame are Villarreal, who had a poor start to the season, and they play Osasuna.

Atletico Madrid face Malaga with the pressure on coach Quique Sanchez as the side has failed to show any real signs of improvement since he took over and the club is firmly rooted in mid-table.

There will be plenty of anxiety also in the clash between Valladolid and Almeria as they both lie on the fringes of the drop zone.

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match details. Includes Saturday (Espanyol v Athletic Bilbao), Sunday (Villarreal v Osasuna).

Zaccheroni replaces Ferrara

AFP, Rome

Juventus on Friday named Alberto Zaccheroni as their new coach in place of Ciro Ferrara, who was sacked after a string of poor results.

It is Zaccheroni's first job since he was fired as coach of Torino in February 2007, and he takes charge of Juve in time for Sunday's Serie A home clash with Lazio.

The 56-year-old has previously coached Udinese (1995-98), AC Milan (1998-2001) -- with whom he won the 1999 scudetto -- Lazio (2001-02) and Inter Milan (2003-04).

Ferrara's departure had long been predicted after the Turin giants slipped to sixth in the league standings following five losses in their last six games.

They have also been knocked out of the Champions League and exited the Italian Cup, for a record of nine losses in 12 games played since the end of November.

Ferrara, a former Italy and Juventus defender, had been handed the job despite his lack of experience just before the end of last season after current Roma coach Claudio Ranieri was fired.

Mutu tests positive

AFP, Rome

Fiorentina's Romanian striker Adrian Mutu tested positive for a banned stimulant after a Serie A match against Bari earlier this month, the Italian Olympic Committee (Coni) announced on Thursday.

Mutu, 31, tested positive for sibutramine after the 2-1 victory over Bari in which the Romanian scored, Coni said. The 31-year-old, who risks a ban of between one and four years, is already facing off-pitch problems also related to drug abuse.

Mutu was fired by Chelsea after a positive test for cocaine in 2004, not long after joining the English Premier League club.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport last year upheld the 17.17-million-euro fine handed to Mutu by FIFA as a punishment for breaching his contract with Chelsea.

The Romanian says he is unable to pay the fine but has offered to make a donation to a charity in its place.

Egypt crush Algeria

AFP, Benguela



Defending champions Egypt thrashed bitter rivals Algeria 4-0 to reach the Africa Cup of Nations final on Thursday and stay on course for an unprecedented seventh title.

In a stormy semifinal clash, Algeria ended the game with just eight players as Egypt avenged their painful World Cup qualifying defeat against their North African rivals last November.

Victory also extended Egypt's unbeaten run in the championship to 18 games.

Egypt took the lead in the 39th minute through a penalty by Hosni Abdrabou after Emad Motaeb was brought down by Rafik Halliche inside the box.

The big Algeria defender saw red for his second booking of the night.

Mohamed Zidan extended Egypt's lead in the 65th minute when he let fly from 15 metres beyond a diving goalkeeper Paouzi Chaouchi.

Soon after Nadir Belhadj became the second Algerian player to be sent off after a vicious two-footed tackle on Ahmed Al-Muhammadi.

Substitute Mohamed Abdel Shafi put the game beyond the Desert Foxes of Algeria on 81 minutes when he found the back of the net from a very tight angle on the left.

Algeria's woes were compounded in the 86th minute when goalkeeper Chaouchi was also sent off after he launched a wild kick at a goal-bound Mohamed 'Gedo' Nagy.

Supersub Nagy made it 4-0 in stoppage when he slammed the ball past replacement goalkeeper Lamine Zemmamouche.

After a rather cautious first half, Algeria tried to come out of their defensive shell and attack Egypt.

Belhadj now began to attack from the left but it was Egypt who came close to doubling their first-half lead when Sayed Moawad got to the end of a loose ball, raced into the box only to be denied by a timely tackle by an Algerian defender.

On the hour mark, Essam El-Hadary pulled off a splendid save off Mourad Meghni, whose free kick was heading into the top corner before the veteran goalkeeper stretched full length to push it away for a corner.

Egypt's response was quick as three minutes later, several players including Ahmed Hassan, failed to connect home from inside the 18-yard box, before Zidan broke his goal scoring duck at this tournament with a superb effort from just inside the box.

In the 76th minute skipper Ahmed Hassan would have got his name on the scoresheet in his 171st international, but his shot from inside the box missed its target with the Algerian goal at his mercy.

Ferrara facing sack

AFP, Rome



Ciro Ferrara's troubled reign as Juventus coach could end this weekend, even before Sunday's Serie A home clash against Lazio.

Ferrara's position has looked increasingly untenable in recent weeks as his side have slipped to sixth in the standings after losing five of their last six league games.

They have also been knocked out of the Champions League and exited the Italian Cup. Some commentators even used the term "dead coach walking" to describe his situation ahead of Thursday's Italian Cup quarter-final at league leaders Inter Milan, which they lost 2-1.

The former Italy and Juventus defender, who was handed the job despite his lack of experience just before the end of last season when Claudio Ranieri was fired, has accepted his time in charge may be up.

"This experience will be useful for me in the future," he told a press conference. "Six months at Juve are worth 10 years elsewhere. When and if, someone says something (about my position) I'll accept it serenely. Even if the club bring in another coach, I'll always be grateful to them."

Former Italy under 21 coach Claudio Gentile is the favourite to take over until the end of the

season, when the Turin giants reportedly hope to lure Rafael Benitez from Liverpool.

Whoever is in charge on Sunday will have to cope with a long list of injured players, including forward David Trezeguet and Italy winger Mauro Camoranesi, while keeper Gianluigi Buffon and defender Fabio Grosso are suspended.

Lazio are also in the doldrums after last weekend's 1-1 draw with Chievo left the Roman club just two points above the relegation zone in 15th.

It is a big change from the build-up to the early-season fixture between the sides after two league games, when they both had perfect records before a match that Juve won 2-0.

Second-placed AC Milan are looking for a response against Livorno on Sunday after their title ambitions suffered a massive blow with last weekend's 2-0 defeat to Inter.

They also went out of the Italian Cup with a 1-0 loss to Udinese on Wednesday.

Brazil forward Pato is still

unavailable with a thigh problem while influential centre back Alessandro Nesta, badly missed against Inter, is fighting to shake off a leg muscle strain.

Struggling Livorno will visit the San Siro under Serse Cosmi, who made peace with club president Aldo Spinelli on Tuesday having resigned as coach after Sunday's 2-0 defeat by Napoli.

But they cannot count on first-choice goalkeeper Alfonso De Luca and Brazilian midfielder Mozart because of suspensions.

Inter, who are nine points clear after having played one game more than their city rivals, will be without Dutch playmaker Wesley Sneijder and Brazil defender Lucio at Parma on Sunday after their red cards in the derby.

But coach Jose Mourinho may be able to field Samuel Eto'o, who has returned from the Africa Cup of Nations with Cameroon, if an ankle knock is not too bad.

AS Roma, who are two points behind Milan in third, face Siena at home on Sunday.

Fourth-placed Napoli, who, like Roma, are in excellent form, entertain Genoa on Saturday with fifth-placed Palermo visiting Bari earlier that day.

Fiorentina, who have slipped down to ninth after some poor recent performances, are unlikely to be able to field Adrian Mutu at Cagliari after it was announced on Thursday that the Romania striker had failed a drugs test.

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match details. Includes Saturday (Bari v Palermo), Sunday (AC Milan v Livorno).

Gyan sinks Nigeria

AFP, Luanda



Ghana are into the Africa Cup of Nations final for the first time in 18 years after a 1-0 defeat of Nigeria at the 11 November stadium here on Thursday.

Nations Cup on home soil.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter and a regiment of Angolan soldiers were among the 10,000 plus crowd to watch Ghana given a scare seconds after kick off when Peter Odemwingie crossed to Martins, who was unable to do the pass justice.

Nigeria were looking a good deal more energised than they had done in the quarter-finals with Martins menacing the Ghana back line repeatedly in the first quarter of an hour.

But it was Ghana who took the lead in the 21st minute against the run of play when Kwadwo Asamoah fired in a corner from the left for Gyan to outjump his marker, Nwaneri, and head past Vincent Enyeama.

That was the in-form Rennes' striker's third goal of the competition, putting him joint top of the scoring charts.

Ghana, with their sprinkling of youngsters and smattering of experienced stars, almost doubled their lead shortly after only for Gyan's dipping shot to go over Eneyeama's crossbar.

Nigeria's front men Odemwingie of Lokomotiv Moscow and Martins were combining well and their double act would have produced an equaliser if it hadn't been for Ghana captain and skipper Richard Kingson's athletic save on 26 minutes.

Ghana coach Milovan Rajevic was forced into an unscheduled substitution on the half hour when Draman was introduced into the fray in place of injured Opuku Agyemang.

Seconds after the break Kingson was at full stretch to keep out a shot inadvertently sent in his direction at an alarming rate of knots by defender Lee Addy.

On 63 minutes Rajevic switched Hans Adu Sarpei for Zamalek Ibrahim Ayew, who was joining his younger brother Andre in midfield.

Nigeria then strung together a slick three-cornered move involving Sani Kaita, Chelsea's John Obi Mikel and Martins but Wigan stopper Kingson was having a great game, and kept Ghana in front by chesting Martin's close range shot out of danger.

Under-fire Nigeria coach Shaibu Amodu then took off Odemwingie, who handed the captain's armband to Yakubu Ayegebeni.

The Everton forward was barely on the pitch when he was set up in front of goal by Elderson Echiejile, but his shot though cannoned wide.

Ghana would need all their tenacity and luck to hold on in the dying minutes but they did it to leave the Nigerians' title hopes in tatters.



Ghana striker Asamoah Gyan (R) scores the all-important goal against Nigeria during their Africa Cup of Nations semifinal in Luanda on Thursday.

'Bayern must keep winning'

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich striker Mario Gomez believes the German giants will need to win all of their remaining Bundesliga games to be sure of the title - starting with Mainz on Saturday.

Bayern are second in the table, two points off leaders Leverkusen who host strugglers Freiburg on Sunday.

Having let a 2-0 lead slip to a 2-2 draw against Bochum last weekend, third-placed Schalke will be hoping to take advantage of Hoffenheim's

slump in form when the sides meet on Saturday.

The fate of this season's Bundesliga title could well be decided when Bayern visit Leverkusen on the second weekend of April, but until then Gomez says Bayern must keep winning.

Louis van Gaal's team suffered a shock when they were beaten 2-1 at Mainz last August, but with Bayern locked in a fierce battle with Schalke and Leverkusen, Gomez says only consistent victories will put them top.

"I think we'll need to win nearly all our games to take the title," said Gomez, who is set to travel to June's World Cup with Germany, with 15 league games left to go. Mainz beat Hanover last

weekend to pick up their first Bundesliga win in seven games, but Bayern boss van Gaal will want three more points with his side having won all of their last eight games in all competitions.

Bayern have a good chance of making the Champions

League's quarterfinals as they play Fiorentina in the last 16 next month, but the men from Munich are focused on the German league for the time being.

"The only thing which can stop us now is ourselves," said midfielder and rising star Thomas Mueller who was called into the Germany squad for fitness testing last week.

But unbeaten Leverkusen continue to resist Munich's march up the standings from eighth place after 12 matches.

"Bayern have overtaken us twice but we've hit back on both occasions. We've shown real durability," said Toni Kroos, who is on loan from Bayern to Leverkusen.

Table with 2 columns: Day, Match details. Includes Saturday (Borussia M'gladbach v Werder Bremen), Sunday (VfB Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund).