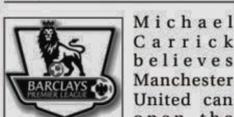


## MU face L'pool test

AFP, London



Michael Carrick believes Manchester United can open the door to an unprecedented fourth consecutive Premier League title by slaying their recent Liverpool jinx this weekend.

Liverpool have won the last three meetings with their biggest rivals, and despite struggling this season, will travel to Old Trafford on Sunday buoyed by memories of how they took United apart in a 4-1 win at the Theatre of Dreams last season.

Buoyed as well from trouncing Lille 3-0 on Thursday to qualify for the Europa League quarterfinals.

Rafael Benitez's side desperately need to take something from the match as they battle Tottenham, Manchester City and Aston Villa for the final Champions League qualifying spot.

United also have virtually no margin for error in a three-way title race with Chelsea and Arsenal but Carrick insists that Sunday's showdown will be approached with relish rather than nerves.

"The confidence is there," the England midfielder said. "We are playing some good stuff and have been on quite a good run lately. There are still eight games to go in the league

and we need to carry our present run of results right to the very last game.

"I am sure it is going to go right down to the wire, so there is no way we will be taking our foot off the gas just yet."

United expect to have veteran midfielder Ryan Giggs available following his recovery from a broken arm but South Korean star Park Ji-Sung will expect to retain a starting role following some sparkling recent performances, including a key central-midfield cameo in the Champions League destruction of AC Milan last week.

Chelsea will seek to bounce back from their Champions League exit at the hands of Inter Milan when they travel to Blackburn on Sunday.

Tuesday's home defeat by an Inter side managed by former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho will take some digesting, but Didier Drogba insists it will only fuel

Chelsea's determination to reclaim a trophy Mourinho last claimed in 2006, Mourinho's last full season in charge.

Arsenal will be counting on fit-again skipper Cesc Fabregas to spearhead their push for their first title since the 2004 'Invincibles' campaign, but the Gunners will once again be without centreback William Gallas for West Ham's visit to the Emirates on Saturday.

Elsewhere, Aston Villa could further strengthen their hand in the battle for Champions League football by beating local rivals Wolves in a Saturday lunchtime derby clash. But on-form Tottenham will retain the coveted fourth place if they can take all three points from a tricky trip to Stoke later in the day.

Manchester City, arguably the best placed of the four clubs involved in this particular battle, are at Fulham on Sunday.

Relegation-threatened Hull begin life under new manager Iain Dowie by entertaining bottom side Portsmouth, whose survival chances disappeared with the imposition of a nine-point penalty for going into administration earlier this week.

Burnley are now regarded as the favourites to join Hull and Portsmouth in dropping out of the top flight but that could change if they can take something from Saturday's short trip to Wigan.

### FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)  
**Saturday**  
 Arsenal v West Ham (1730 GMT), Aston Villa v Wolves (1245 GMT), Everton v Bolton, Portsmouth v Hull, Stoke City v Tottenham, Sunderland v Birmingham, Wigan v Burnley  
**Sunday**  
 Blackburn v Chelsea (1600 GMT), Fulham v Man City, Manchester Utd v Liverpool (1330 GMT)



Fulham midfielder Clint Dempsey exults after scoring the fourth goal against Juventus during their Europa League encounter at Craven Cottage on Thursday.

## Europa League Tricky tie for Liverpool

AFP, Nyon

Three-time winners Liverpool face a tricky Europa League quarterfinal against Benfica after the draw made here on Friday.

Rafa Benitez's team, who last won the UEFA Cup in 2001 after two previous successes in 1973 and 1976, will start as favourites in their bid to claim some silverware after missing out on the FA Cup, Champions League and almost certainly the English Premiership title this season.

Fulham, stunning victors over Juventus in the last 16 phase, face German club Wolfsburg, while Hamburg play Belgian outfit Standard Liege.

The fourth quarter-final pitches Valencia against fellow La Liga club Atletico Madrid, with the winner playing either Benfica or Liverpool in the semi-final.

The other semifinal will see the winner of the Hamburg v Standard Liege tie playing either Fulham or Wolfsburg.

The inaugural Europa League final takes place in Hamburg on May 12.

**DRAW**  
 Benfica (POR) v Liverpool (ENG)  
 Fulham (ENG) v Wolfsburg (GER)  
 Hamburg (GER) v Standard Liege (BEL)  
 Valencia (ESP) v Atletico Madrid (ESP)  
 1st leg - April 18  
 2nd leg - April 29  
 Semi-finals (ties to be played April 22 and 29)  
 Hamburg/Standard Liege v Fulham/Wolfsburg  
 Valencia/Atletico Madrid v Benfica/Liverpool  
 Final: May 12, Hamburg

## Fulham stun Juve

AFP, Paris



Unfashionable Fulham stunned mighty Juventus to reach the Europa League quarterfinals on Thursday where they were joined by seasoned campaigners Liverpool.

Fulham, 3-1 down from the first leg in Turin, staged a stunning fightback to clinch a 4-1 victory on the night against nine-man Juventus for a 5-4 aggregate triumph.

Roy Hodgson's Premier League side's European adventure looked over when David Trezeguet gave Juventus an early lead at Craven Cottage.

But Bobby Zamora's strike gave the hosts hope and, after Juve's World Cup winning defender Fabio Cannavaro was sent off, Zoltan Gera struck twice to draw Fulham level on aggregate.

Juventus, twice European champions, gave a dismal display and American forward Clint Dempsey came off the bench to score a superb late winner before Jonathan Zebina was dismissed for kicking Damien Duff.

"I'm on top of the world," said 62-year-old Hodgson with the quarterfinal draw to come on Friday.

"I don't know if it is the biggest night in the club's history but it must come close."

Fernando Torres struck twice as Liverpool stormed back to overturn a first leg

deficit against Lille to book their place in the last eight at Anfield.

Trailing 1-0 from the first leg, Steven Gerrard marked his 300th appearance as captain

Fulham (ENG) 4 (Zamora 9, Gera 39, 49-pen, Dempsey 82) Juventus 1 (Trezeguet 2)

Fulham win 5-4 on aggregate Standard Liege (BEL) 1 (Mbokani 45+2) Panathinaikos (GRE) 0

Standard Liege win 4-1 on aggregate Marseille (FRA) 1 (Niang 70, Benica (POR) 2 (Pereira 75, Kardec 90+1)

Benfica win 3-1 on aggregate Werder Bremen (GER) 4 (Almeida 26, Frings 57-pen, Marin 62, Pizarro 84) Valencia (ESP) 4 (Villa 2, 45, 65, Mata 15)

5-5 on aggregate - Valencia win on away goals

Liverpool (ENG) 3 (Gerrard 9-pen, Torres 49, 89) Lille (FRA) 0 Liverpool win 3-1 on aggregate Anderlecht (BEL) 4 (Lukaku 44, Suarez 45-pen, Biglia 59, Boussoufa 66) Hamburg (GER) 3 (Boateng 42, Jansen 54, Petric 75)

Hamburg win 6-5 on aggregate Sporting Lisbon (POR) 2 (Liedson 19, Polga 45+1) Atletico Madrid (ESP) 2 (Aguero 3, 33)

2-2 on aggregate - Atletico win on away goals

Wolfsburg (GER) 2 (Martins 58, Gentner 119) Rubin Kazan (RUS) 1 (Kasaev 21) after extra time

Wolfsburg win 3-2 on aggregate

by levelling the scores on aggregate from the penalty spot in the ninth minute.

Torres's first goal in European competition this season doubled his side's lead early in the second half before the Spanish striker made it 3-0 in the last minute.

The 3-1 aggregate success keeps Liverpool's season alive as Rafael Benitez's stuttering side battle to avoid a fourth successive season without winning silverware.

David Villa hit a hat-trick as Benitez's former club Valencia drew 4-4 at Werder Bremen that ensured the Spaniards a quarterfinal place on the away-goals rule after the tie finished 5-5 on aggregate.

Benfica won the battle of former European champions with a 2-1 victory at Marseille for a 3-1 aggregate victory with Alan Kardec hitting a 90th-minute winner on the night.

Belgium's Standard Liege also went through with Dieudonne Mbokani scoring in first-half injury time for a 1-0 win over Panathinaikos for a 4-1 aggregate win.

Anderlecht were unable to make it two Belgian sides in the last eight despite beating Hamburg 4-3. The German side went through 6-5 on aggregate.

Fernando Torres's former team Atletico Madrid also qualified when a 2-2 draw at Sporting Lisbon gave them victory on the away goals rule.

Wolfsburg joined Hamburg in the last eight with a 2-1 extra-time win over Russian side Rubin with Christian Gentner grabbing the decisive goal.

### IN BRIEF

#### Defoe out for a month

AFP, London

Jermain Defoe will be sidelined for up to a month after tearing one of his hamstrings in a blow to Tottenham's hopes of finishing fourth in the Premier League and securing a place in next season's Champions League.

Defoe is Spurs' leading scorer this season with 23 goals in all competitions.

His injury, confirmed by manager Harry Redknapp on Friday, means he joins an injury list already including Tom Huddlestone, David Bentley, Aaron Lennon, Ledley King and Jonathan Woodgate.

Spurs do have cover up front however with Russian striker Roman Pavlyuchenko currently in a rich vein of form and Defoe's England team-mate Peter Crouch also available.

#### Honda's big dream

AFP, Moscow

Japan midfielder Keisuke Honda, who helped steer CSKA Moscow into the Champions League quarterfinals for the first time, said Thursday he had always dreamed of scoring in Europe's elite competition.

The 23-year-old grabbed the winning goal in the last 16 win at Sevilla on Tuesday, and believes that the Russian side should fear nobody in the last eight.

"Of course, our goal is to win the (Champions League) title," said Honda.

#### Global crisis affects WC ticket sales

AFP, Cape Town

The world economic downturn has forced World Cup organisers to review initial projected ticket sales, but host South Africa on Friday was confident of full stadiums.

"I suppose everybody should be worried about the ticket sales when they are not sold at the rate they expected," sports minister Makhoseni Stofile told journalists ahead of June kick-off.

"When the World Cup was awarded to us in 2004, the economic situation was completely different to what it is today. We have to revisit those projections and be realistic. That is how we see the issue of tickets being sold."

Two thirds of three million tickets were sold by February, ahead of the June 11 start.

The economic situation had forced world football body FIFA, which last month upped the number of cheap seats to get more South Africans into stadiums, to review its ticket pricing, said Stofile.

"We are dealing with a very difficult economic situation," he said.

"But even then, we are absolutely satisfied that the tickets that have been sold to date and the tickets that will be sold will not embarrass FIFA, will not embarrass South Africa.



Argentina coach Diego Maradona (C) takes his seat before the start of the Europa League match between Liverpool and Lille at Anfield on Thursday.

## Milan in summit push

AFP, Rome



AC Milan could end a tumultuous week which saw two of their star turns

end up under the surgeon's knife by sitting atop Serie A for the first time this season.

On Sunday AC Milan are at the San Siro to play Napoli with the Serie A summit in sight - an unlikely scenario given they were ten points adrift of Inter Milan less than a month ago.

Leonardo's side moved to within one point of long time leaders Inter following last Sunday's 1-0 win over Chievo in which David Beckham ruptured his Achilles tendon.

Beckham underwent surgery in Finland on Monday which wiped out the rest of his loan period with Milan and his dreams of appearing in a fourth World Cup.

The same day the club's veteran central defender

Alessandro Nesta had an operation to repair his injured right knee.

Midfielder Clarence Seedorf, who scored the stoppage-time winner against Chievo, said: "We hope their absences will give us more strength to repay their efforts with many more wins this season."

Defending champions Inter suffered just their third loss of the campaign as they fell to a surprise 3-1 reverse at Catania last weekend.

And Jose Mourinho's team face a rigorous examination of their title defence capabilities at fourth-placed Palermo on Saturday.

### FIXTURES

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

But any title nerves should have been allayed after their triumphant trip to Mourinho's old stomping ground, Stamford Bridge, to dump his former club Chelsea out of the Champions League on Wednesday.

Mourinho's presence has been missing from the dug out in Inter's last three league games as he served a touchline ban, and his side have suffered, picking up four points from a possible 12.

Roma, lying third, five points shy of second-placed Milan, will fancy their chances of picking up a precious three points to keep the top two teams on their toes against lowly Udinese.

Fifth-placed Juventus, sent crashing out of the Europa League by Fulham on Thursday, travel to Sampdoria hoping to give their fight for fourth-place and Champions League action next term a shot in the arm.

Down at the other end bottom clubs Siena and Atalanta, both on 22 points, host Bologna and Livorno respectively.

## Becks has WC role

AFP, London

Fabio Capello has confirmed that he has asked David Beckham to join the England squad at the World Cup, despite the midfielder being ruled out of the tournament with an achilles injury.

England's head coach believes Beckham's experience of having played in three previous World Cups means he could offer valuable advice to other members of the squad, while the 34-year-old's star appeal will be used to bolster England's campaign to host the 2018 tournament.

Prior to Beckham tearing his achilles tendon, there had been speculation that he might not make Capello's final 23-man squad, but the Italian made it clear the veteran had been very much in his plans.

"He is an important player for us," Capello said.

"Whether he played 10, 15 or 20 minutes, he always had the same attitude and he was always ready."

Speaking to a Spanish television station, Capello added: "He was an important man in the dressing room. In fact, we have asked David to be with us in South Africa. If he wants to, he can come. It depends on how he feels with his achilles."

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona's fight for the title with Real Madrid depends more than ever on the form of superstar Lionel Messi who has scored eight of their last ten goals.

The champions have not been playing at their best and it is largely thanks to Messi that they are still neck and neck with Real with just goal difference separating the bitter rivals at the top of the Spanish first division.

As they prepare to face Real Zaragoza this weekend, the Argentine's teammates have been quick to praise him with keeper Victor Valdes claiming he has the potential to be the greatest footballer ever.

Coach Pep Guardiola, though, has emphasised the importance of the team as a whole playing well from now until the end of the season.

"When I talk about the team I am not trying to downplay Messi at all. There is no doubt that Leo is very important to us because he is the best player in the world, and he is like Michael Jordan was to basketball," he said.

"The aim is that he is involved as much as possible in the game and that he gets the ball in dangerous areas as that is where he likes to be."

win balls and this is contagious for the rest of the players. We can do something special this year but we need to be all at our best."

Messi was on target twice as Barcelona beat Stuttgart to reach the Champions League quarterfinals in midweek while, last weekend, he hit a majestic hat-trick in the 3-0 defeat of Valencia.

Meanwhile, Real take on Sporting Gijon and defender Alvaro Arbeloa says that the quality of Barcelona gives them an extra motivation to beat them to the title.

"Barcelona have been playing at a high level since last year and so when your performance drops people talk about crisis but I don't believe this and we are still talking about one of the best teams in the history of the game," he said.

"It is going to be difficult to win the league against this team but that is what gives us an extra incentive."

Adding to the incentive factor is the Champions League final taking place at

### FIXTURES

**Saturday**  
 Xerez v Tenerife, Deportivo La Coruna v Valladolid, Athletic Bilbao v Getafe, Real Madrid v Sporting Gijon, Espanyol v Sevilla  
**Sunday**  
 Malaga v Villarreal, Mallorca v Atletico Madrid, Osasuna v Racing Santander, Valencia v Almeria, Zaragoza v Barcelona

## Bayern's vital 3 weeks

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich begin their 'three weeks of truth' on Saturday against Eintracht Frankfurt with the Bundesliga leaders still bidding for three trophies.

Bayern face Frankfurt in the Bundesliga, then title-rivals Schalke 04 twice in ten days first in the German Cup, then the league, as well as tackling their Champions League last-eight opponents.

It means Bayern have seven matches in the space of three weeks, including head-to-head showdowns with title rivals Schalke and Leverkusen, the cup semifinal trip to Schalke, and the last-eight tie in the Champions League.

Bayern hope French midfielder Franck Ribery will

be able to take some part in the next few weeks with the playmaker struggling with an ankle injury.

Ribery could be a vital ace to help Bayern alongside Dutch winger Arjen Robben and Munich are also hoping Hamit Altintop (flu), Mario Gomez (ruptured muscle) and Martin Demichelis (facial injury) will recover soon.

Bayern had to come from behind to beat relegation-threatened Freiburg 2-1 last Saturday and only two sec-

ond-half goals from Robben got them out of trouble.

Bayern welcome back Germany midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger from a one-match suspension while Frankfurt's Maik Franz is out after being red-carded last weekend against Hannover.

Second-placed Schalke are bidding to win their first German league title since 1958 and they travel to fifth-placed Hamburg on Sunday.

Schalke's Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi has scored three goals in the last four league games and is joint second in the top-scorer table with 14 alongside Wolfsburg's Edin Dzeko while Bayer Leverkusen's Stefan Kiessling has 16.

Third-placed Leverkusen are at fourth-placed Borussia Dortmund on Saturday with Bayer desperate to stay in the title race while Dortmund are chasing their third-straight win.

### FIXTURES

**Saturday**  
 Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayern Munich, Nuremberg v Hoffenheim, VfB Stuttgart v Hannover 96, Werder Bremen v VfL Bochum, Freiburg v Mainz 05, Borussia Dortmund v Bayer Leverkusen  
**Sunday**  
 Hamburg v Schalke 04, VfL Wolfsburg v Hertha Berlin