

Giggs remains confident

AFP, Manchester



Ryan Giggs has warned Bayern Munich to expect a ferocious assault

from Manchester United in Wednesday's Champions League quarterfinal second leg at Old Trafford.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side trail 2-1 from last week's first leg in Munich and only a 1-0 victory or a two-goal winning margin will be enough to book a semi-final showdown with Lyon or Bordeaux.

After Saturday's home defeat against Chelsea surrendered the initiative in the Premier League title race, the Champions League could be United's only hope of adding more silverware to the League Cup won in February.

With leading scorer Wayne Rooney in a race against time to recover from an ankle injury suffered in Germany, it would be understandable if an air of despondency had descended on United's training ground this week.

But veteran midfielder Giggs has seen United emerge unscathed from similar predicaments before and the Welsh star is confident his team will thrive on the do or die nature of the clash.

While Old Trafford can be a subdued stadium for mundane league matches, on big European occasions it is a far more hostile arena. Giggs knows United have often fed off the extra energy of a raucous capacity crowd and he expects a repeat on Wednesday.

"You have to give credit to Bayern who made it very difficult for us," Giggs said. "But I am confident that we can raise our game at home. We have done it many times before and we'll have to do it again."

Bayern surprised United with their unrelenting pressing game last week and Scotland midfielder Darren Fletcher believes the key to eliminating the Germans will be matching their work-rate.

"It's not insurmountable. Although we were disappointed to have lost two late goals, 2-1 isn't the worst result in the world. We now know what we have to do at home," Fletcher said.

"You don't play any bad

sides in the quarterfinals of the Champions League. We learned a lot about Bayern and about ourselves and we'll take all that into the match at Old Trafford.

"The Bayern midfielders pressed the ball quite quickly and got numbers behind the ball. It was difficult in there but you expect that when you go away from home in Europe.

"We knew Bayern would have a lot of possession and we'll be looking to do the same next week. We're confident against anyone at Old Trafford.

"We know what to expect from Bayern Munich and we'll be ready for their challenge."

United's cause would be helped massively if 34-goal

striker Rooney is able to return ahead of schedule from his ankle injury.

Ferguson admitted last week that he expected to be without Rooney for up to three weeks after the England international suffered minor ankle ligament damage in the final moments at the Allianz Arena.

But Rooney has responded well to intensive treatment and Ferguson is considering risking the 24-year-old against Louis van Gaal's team if he makes it through training on Tuesday.

It would be a major gamble if Rooney broke down with a recurrence of the injury but, bearing in mind Dimitar Berbatov's underwhelming display as Rooney's stand-in against Chelsea, Ferguson may feel it is a risk worth taking to keep alive United's bid for a third successive Champions League final appearance.

Bayern travel to Manchester boosted by Arjen Robben's return to the squad after he missed the first leg and Saturday's league win at Schalke with a calf injury.

Along with France playmaker Franck Ribery, Dutch winger Robben is Bayern's best bet of snatching a priceless away goal and van Gaal is keeping his fingers crossed that the former Chelsea man declares himself fit.

"I hope he will be able to play. But we must wait as his muscles are tired," van Gaal said.

Bayern's Dutch coach is also hoping Daniel van Buyten recovers in time to start after the centre-back suffered an injury against Schalke.



Manchester United winger Nani (R) takes part in a training session at their Carrington training ground on Tuesday ahead of their Champions League encounter against Bayern Munich.

IN BRIEF

Rooney ruled out of Bayern decider

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney has been ruled out of the Champions League second leg, quarterfinal against Bayern Munich by manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

Ferguson said Tuesday that he was "not prepared" to risk Rooney's ankle injury on Wednesday against Bayern, who won the first leg 2-1 in Munich last week.

Rooney opened the scoring for United last week but suffered ankle ligament damage after landing awkwardly on his ankle in the final minute of play.

He was expected to be out of action for two to three weeks. However recent reports claimed the England international had responded well to treatment, giving fans hope that he could make a shock return to the United bench for the decider against Bayern.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson has said he would not risk using Rooney if he was not 100 per cent fit, and reports late Sunday said the club's medical staff had given the striker only a 40 per cent chance of playing.

In Rooney's absence United suffered a 2-1 defeat to Premier League title rivals Chelsea at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Footballers union in Spain calls strike

AFP, Madrid

Spain's football players union on Monday called a strike for April 16-19 that would affect matches in La Liga's top four tiers unless an agreement over unpaid wages is reached before then.

The Spanish Footballers Association (AFE) said it wants to continue talks with a view to reaching a "Grand Pact for Spanish Football" which would satisfy players' demands but if this is not possible the strike would go ahead.

It also did not rule out further strikes or other forms of protest.

"The demands made by AFE have the backing of all footballers and their sole purpose is to ensure the compliance of contracts and collective agreements which have already been signed," it said.

"We wish to underscore that the demands underlying the strike are of extreme urgency and necessity," it added.

'Joe Cole will stay'

AFP, London



Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti insists England winger Joe Cole will agree to stay at Stamford Bridge before his contract expires at the end of the season.

Talks over a new deal for Cole have so far failed and reports have claimed the former West Ham player is being targeted by Manchester United and Tottenham, who would be able to sign him on a free transfer once his current contract runs out.

Cole had been out of favour with Ancelotti after struggling to find peak form since his 18-month lay-off due to injury. But he was back in the spotlight Saturday as he opened the scoring in Chelsea's crucial 2-1 victory over Manchester United at Old Trafford with a clever flick from Florent Malouda's cross to lift the Blues two points clear at the top of the table.

Ancelotti admitted there is an 'economical problem' in discussions with Cole, but fully expects the 28-year-old to extend his stay and win a place in England's World Cup squad.

The Italian said: "Joe Cole has the same

focus as the rest of the team. He wants to play well and wants to win the title.

"For him, there is also a desire to go to the World Cup and if he carries on like he did here he will be there.

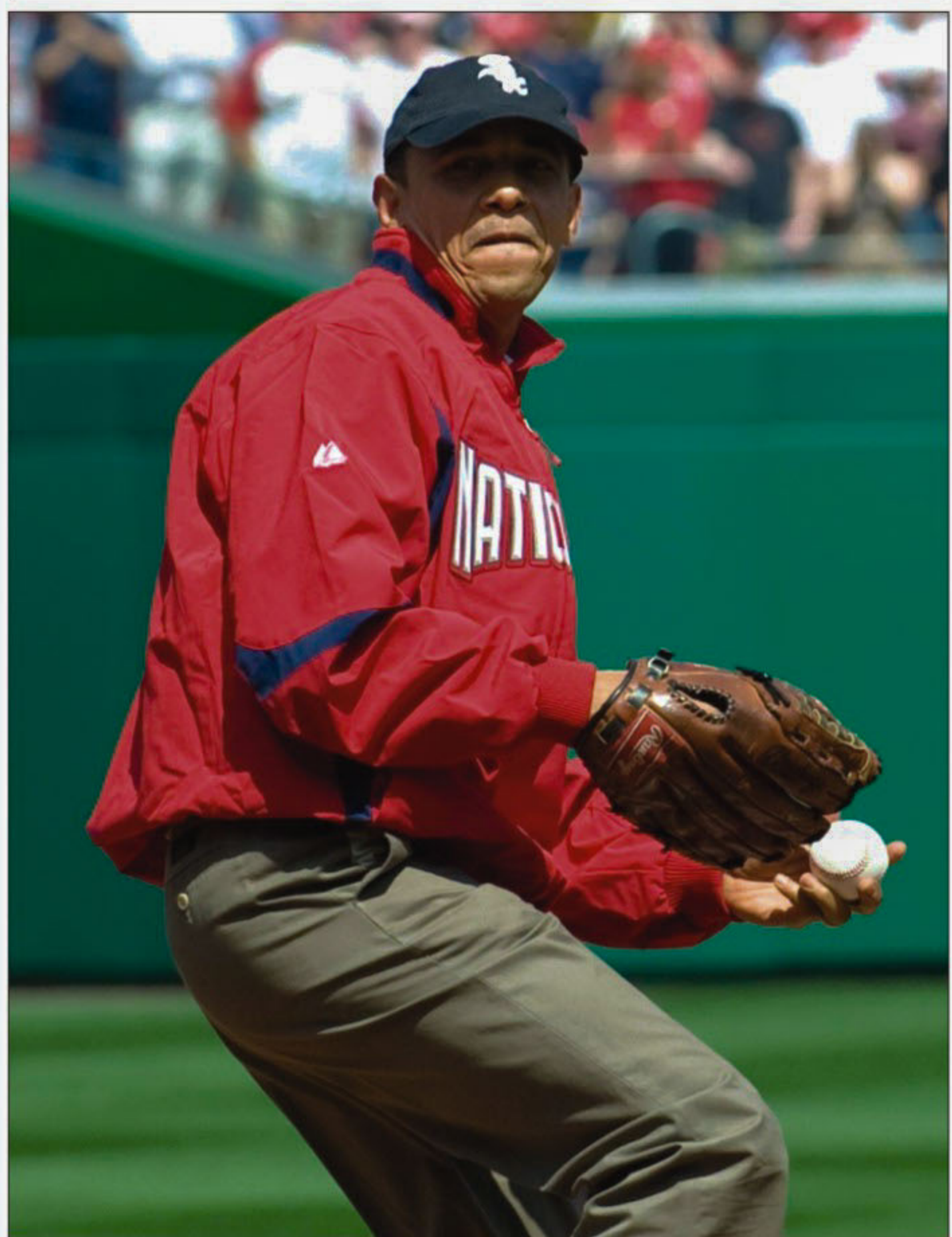
"Now he has some consistency in his game and that is good for him. He will definitely sign a new contract. There is no problem, don't worry.

"I've spoken a lot about Joe Cole with my club and everyone has a desire for him to stay at Chelsea and so does he. There is not a problem, it is an economical problem, nothing else."

Cole's strike has put Chelsea in pole position to win the Premier League for the first time since 2006 and Ancelotti believes his side received a massive boost when United striker Wayne Rooney suffered ankle ligament damage which ruled him out of the Old Trafford clash.

Ancelotti believes United without Rooney are a less fearsome prospect and he said: "They're not the same team without him. Rooney is a fantastic player who is difficult to replace with another player. (Dimitar) Berbatov is good but Rooney is totally different.

"Rooney can sometimes come back to receive the ball and use it for all the team and then he can attack in any direction. He is an unbelievable player."



BARACK 'LEFTY' OBAMA: US President Barack Obama winds up to throw out the first pitch at Nationals Park in Washington DC on Major League Baseball's opening day prior to the game between the Philadelphia Phillies and the Washington Nationals. It was the 100th anniversary of the first Presidential Opening Day ceremonial first pitch of the baseball season. Obama, wearing his beloved Chicago White Sox's cap, threw it wide and to the left of Nationals' third baseman Ryan Zimmerman.

Bordeaux seek salvation

AFP, Bordeaux



Bordeaux approach the second leg of their Champions League quarterfinal with Lyon on Wednesday looking to salvage something from a season that is threatening to unravel before their eyes.

Three successive defeats have seriously dented their three-pronged quest for silverware, with the 3-1 first-leg loss in Lyon last week bookended by defeat against Marseille in the League Cup final and a surprise 2-1 loss at home to Nancy on Saturday that saw Bordeaux slip from the Ligue 1 summit.

Les Girondins now lie fourth in the French top flight, albeit with two games in hand, while a mounting injury list has left gaping holes in Laurent Blanc's previously imperious defence.

Goalkeeper Cedric Carrasco urged his team-mates to "take a good look at themselves in the mirror" after the defeat to Nancy and Blanc conceded that the reigning French champions have lost their way.

"In certain areas we were good (against Nancy), but in a very important area in top-level football - the defensive aspect - we're very ordinary at the moment," he said. "There weren't many positive signs for the match on Wednesday."

Bordeaux must beat Lyon by two goals at the Stade Chaban-Delmas to stand any

chance of reaching the Champions League last four.

Their cause was further hindered when defensive midfielder Fernando sustained a fractured cheekbone against Nancy that is likely to keep him out for the rest of the campaign.

Fernando joins young midfielder Gregory Sertic (fractured toe) on the sidelines, but Bordeaux are hoping that centre-back Marc Planus will be able to return from a knee ligament problem that has kept him out since March 13.

"We have some glaring weaknesses at the moment and our opponents are taking advantage," said Blanc, who will also be able to call upon influential skipper Alou Diarra after he missed the first leg through suspension.

"It's up to us to rectify the situation and not let things drop. It's at moments like this that you see the worth of the men and the worth of the group.

"To be honest, I can't wait for the match on Wednesday. It will allow us to throw ourselves back into a match, and what a match."

Lyon put themselves firmly in the driving seat with a clinical first-leg performance at the Stade Gerland, in which a brace from striker Lisandro Lopez and a Michel Bastos goal put Les Gones within reach of the Champions League semifinals for the first time in their history.

Coch Claude Puel rotated his team at the weekend but Lyon still managed to

secure an impressive 2-1 victory at hard-to-beat Rennes that took them to the top of the table on goal difference from Montpellier and Auxerre.

"There was a certain amount of risk but we had to do it if we want to accomplish our objectives," admitted Puel, who left Cris, Jeremy Toulalan, Anthony Revellere, Cesar Delgado and Bafetimbi Gomis on the bench at Rennes.

"I imagine you (the media) would have called me up on it if the result hadn't been the one we wanted."

Puel revealed, however, that centre-back Mathieu Bodmer was "probably out" with a thigh injury, while Cameroonian midfielder Jean Makoum (adductor muscle) has also been ruled out.

Fit-again Jean-Alain Boumsong (calf) will deputise for Bodmer, with Gomis likely to replace the suspended Lisandro up front and Bastos expected to continue in place of Sidney Govou, who is also banned.

"When you receive a setback, you want to re-assess yourselves immediately and produce big performances. That's where Bordeaux are at the moment," Lyon's French international goalkeeper Hugo Lloris told his club's website.

"We're expecting a very complicated match and we'll have to be just as rigorous as in the first leg, if not more so.

"The first 20 minutes will be decisive because Bordeaux will do everything to turn the score around in front of their fans."

Valladolid appoint Clemente

AFP, Madrid

Spanish Primera Liga side Valladolid have appointed former Spain coach Javier Clemente as their new manager until the end of the season, the club said Tuesday.

Clemente, who managed the Spanish national team between 1992 and 1998, replaces Onesimo Sanchez, who was sacked on Monday after just over two months at the helm of the club which is at risk of relegation.

The 60-year-old has coached other Spanish league sides including Athletic Bilbao, Espanyol, Getafe and Real Betis.

He took over the Serbian national team in July 2006 but was let go in December 2007 after the country failed to qualify for Euro 2008.

Valladolid are 19th and second to bottom in La Liga with 43 points, just one point above Xerez, following their 2-0 defeat to Villarreal on Sunday.

Gerrard rues bad form

SOCCERNET



Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard has conceded that he has

struggled to perform to his usual standards in a season which looks set to ultimately end in disappointment.

While Liverpool are still in the hunt for silverware when they look to overturn a 2-1 first leg deficit against Benfica in the Europa League on Thursday, their ultimate aim of the Premier League title is a dim and distant memory with a place in next season's Champions League looking increasingly unlikely.

Gerrard's goal against Birmingham in Sunday's 1-1 draw was his first away from Anfield in the league since August, underlining how he has struggled to hit the heights of previous seasons.

He told LFC Weekly magazine: "I'm always honest with myself, first and foremost. I always know when my form is

there, or when it's slightly under what it should be at. Whenever I come off a football pitch I know straight away.

"The challenge for me now is to finish the season strongly. It has been frustrating at times this year with injuries and dips in form. I haven't been reaching the level I want to play at, but it can't always be possible. I've got to accept that."

Gerrard also bemoaned the club's poor away form which

looks destined to cost them a top-four finish. The Reds have won just four games on the road all term, scoring a mere 14 goals. All the teams currently in the top four have scored more than 30 goals away from their home ground.

He said: "If leagues and trophies were won on just home form, it would be a successful season. But we haven't been good enough on the road; if you look at the stats, they don't lie."



STEVEN GERRARD