

REAL MADRID V BARCELONA

It's judgement day

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona might be just one step from reaching the Champions League final but on Saturday tackle Real Madrid in a mouth-watering 'El Clasico' that could decide this season's La Liga title.

Argentine Lionel Messi won all the plaudits after a spell-binding performance that saw him net all of Barca's four goals in the Catalan club's 4-1 thrashing of Arsenal on Tuesday.

But Real playmaker Guti claimed Barca were not all about the young Argentinian.

"Messi didn't need to score four goals for us to know who he is," Guti said. "We need to have an anti-Barcelona plan because they are not just Messi."

"However, (Real) Madrid are always favourites especially playing at home. Barcelona are a great team with the same points but we don't need to feel inferior because we aren't."

Real have won all 15 of their home matches in the league to edge ahead of Barca on goal difference - both teams are on 77 points - and are targeting a 13th successive win in the league.

Barcelona memorably won 6-2 at the Bernabeu last season on their way to a historic treble with Messi tearing Real apart

and the Argentine is on fire with his quadruple against Arsenal making it 39 goals for the season in all competitions -- 26 in La Liga and eight in Europe.

Barcelona won the first Clasicos 1-0 at Camp Nou and have won the last three clashes between the two sides but Real have been plundering the goals of late and their deadly strike force of Gonzalo Higuain and Cristiano Ronaldo are averaging better than a goal a game of late.

Ronaldo has 11 goals in his last 10 league games while Higuain, on 24 goals for the season, has 13 in his last 10 league matches scoring in each of his last five league outings.

Both Manuel Pellegrini and Pep Guardiola have been playing down the significance of the game - possibly to take the pressure off their players -

but there is no disguising its importance.

A win would put either side three points clear with seven games remaining and that is a healthy cushion when you consider that both teams have only dropped 13 points all season.

Real welcome back Sergio Ramos and Xabi Alonso from suspensions in a big boost while Barcelona could be without Zlatan Ibrahimovic - who volleyed the winner in the 1-0 victory at Camp Nou - with the Swede missing the Barcelona victory over Arsenal due to a leg injury.

Defenders Carles Puyol and Gerard Pique missed that game through suspension but while captain Puyol returns for the Real duel doubts surround the fitness of Pique although Andres Iniesta is back from injury after a late outing on Wednesday.

Elsewhere rivals Valencia and Real Mallorca lock horns at the Ono stadium in a duel for the Champions League places.

Valencia are third a full eight points ahead of Mallorca in 12 out of their 14 home matches this season and hope to make Valencia their latest scalp.

Sevilla, in fourth, are level on 48 points with Mallorca and after a maiden win against Tenerife last time out new coach Antonio Alvarez hopes for another three points at Malaga on Saturday.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Malaga v Sevilla (1600 GMT), Tenerife v Valladolid (1800), Villarreal v Sporting Gijon (1800), Xerez v Getafe (1800), Real Madrid v Barcelona (2000)
Sunday
(all 1500 GMT unless stated)
Deportivo La Coruna v Racing Santander, Athletic Bilbao v Almeria, Osasuna v Real Zaragoza, Espanyol v Atletico Madrid (1700 GMT), Real Mallorca v Valencia (1900 GMT)

Fergie wants response

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson has demanded an immediate response to his side's Champions League heartbreak when Manchester United return to Premier League action at Blackburn on Sunday.

With Chelsea playing Aston Villa in the FA Cup semifinal on Saturday, United can return to the top of the league by beating Sam Allardyce's side.

United are set to be without Wayne Rooney after the England striker aggravated his ankle injury during his unexpected appearance against Bayern Munich in the mid-week European exit.

And although the League Cup has already been secured, there is a real danger of the club's season ending in frustration after last weekend's home defeat by Chelsea handed the Londoners the initiative in the title tussle.

"Three disappointing results in a row isn't some-

thing we're used to," Ferguson reflected.

"But it's happened and we've had to face this many times before. Bouncing back in the nature of our club and is part of our history."

With only five matches left to play, United know any slip-up against a Blackburn side that is usually tough to beat at home could be fatal to their prospects of claiming a fourth consecutive title.

"We've got five games to go and we need to win them," Ferguson admitted.

This weekend could be equally pivotal at the other end of the table with Hull

entertaining Burnley in a meeting of the two sides currently sitting third and second from bottom.

West Ham, who are only a point clear of Hull, entertain Sunderland at the same time, on Saturday afternoon, and have been warned to expect no mercy from the Black Cats' on-form striker Darren Bent, who is chasing both a World Cup place with England and the honour of finishing the season as leading scorer in the top flight.

Bent's 22 league goals to date has left him four adrift of the injured Rooney and three behind Didier Drogba.

Manchester City can tighten their grip on fourth place and edge a step closer to the Champions League football when they entertain Birmingham on Sunday, a day which also sees Liverpool begin their more comfortable run-in with an Anfield clash with Fulham.

Wolves and Stoke, who have both virtually secured their top flight status, meet on Sunday in the final match of a curtailed programme.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Hull City v Burnley, West Ham v Sunderland
Sunday
Blackburn v Manchester Utd (1230 GMT), Liverpool v Fulham, Manchester City v Birmingham (1500 GMT), Wolves v Stoke (1100 GMT)

Bayern shift focus

AFP, Berlin



Fresh from a memorable triumph over Manchester United in the Champions League, German giants Bayern Munich will aim to stretch their lead at the top of the Bundesliga on Saturday with only five games to go.

Louis van Gaal's men play away at third-placed Bayer Leverkusen and, despite beating United over two legs and domestic rivals Schalke, are taking nothing for granted in their pursuit of a 22nd league title and an historic treble.

"We are leading the German championship, we're in the final of the German cup and in the semifinal of the Champions League but we haven't won anything yet," said Bayern captain Mark van Bommel.

"There's no room for dreaming. We can't afford even the slightest slip-up in the Bundesliga," added van Bommel, with Schalke hot on Bayern's heels, only one point behind the Bavarian club.

"If we want to become champions and keep Schalke at bay, then we have to win at Leverkusen."

After a season plagued by injury to his two top stars, French midfielder Frank

Ribery and Dutch winger Arjen Robben, van Gaal has a full squad to choose from as the season nears its climax.

The top contenders have a remarkably similar run-in, with both teams playing Hanover, Borussia Moenchengladbach and Hertha Berlin, the Bundesliga's bottom club.

This weekend, Schalke have a clash against relegation-threatened Hanover, who have won only two games since November.

For their part, Leverkusen are pushing for third place and a spot in next year's Champions League.

At the other end of the table, the capital's only top-flight club, the hapless Hertha Berlin, will hope to continue a rare run of good form as they aim for a great escape from relegation that seemed impossible a few weeks ago.

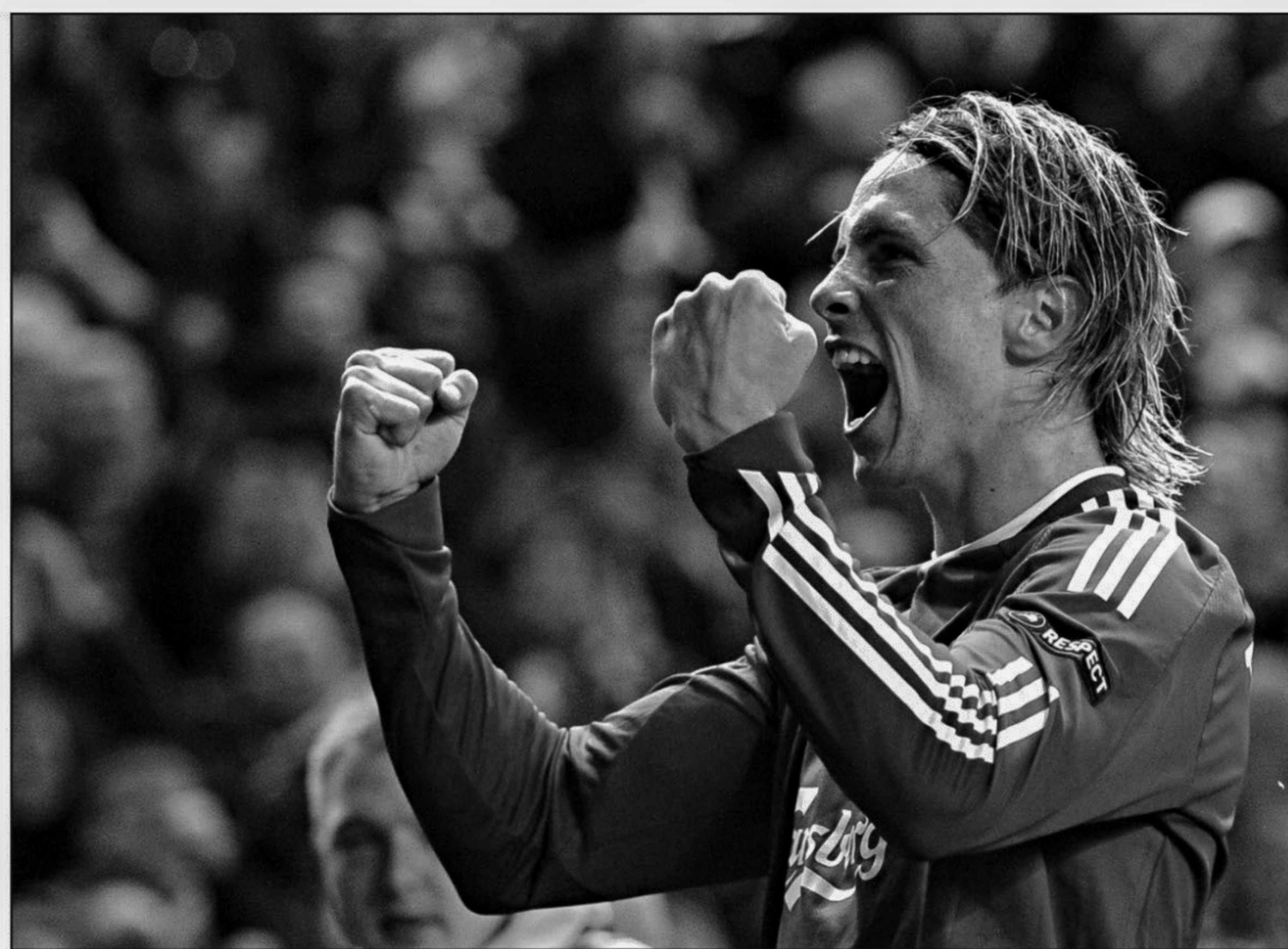
Still six points from safety and seeking their first home win since August, they take on seventh-placed Stuttgart.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Hertha Berlin v VfB Stuttgart, Mainz 05 v Borussia Dortmund, Hanover v Schalke, Hoffenheim v Cologne, Werder Bremen v Freiburg (1330 GMT), Bayer Leverkusen v Bayern Munich (1630 GMT)
Sunday
VfL Bochum v SV Hamburg (1330 GMT), Nuremberg v VfL Wolfsburg (1530 GMT)



Hamburg striker Mladen Petric (R) scores the opening goal against Standard Liege during their Europa League quarterfinal at Sclessin on Thursday.



Liverpool striker Fernando Torres exults after scoring the third goal against Benfica during their Europa League quarterfinal at Anfield on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Fabregas will make WC

AFP, London

Arsenal skipper Cesc Fabregas, whose domestic season was ended by a broken leg, will be fit in time to play for Spain at the World Cup, club physio Colin Lewin said on Thursday.

Fabregas suffered his season-ending injury against Barcelona in the Champions League quarterfinal first leg clash at the Emirates last month.

"Cesc is doing well," Lewin told the club's website.

"He is likely to be out for the rest of the season with a hair-line crack of his fibula. If everything goes well he will comfortably make the World Cup and we will be constantly monitoring him."

Arsenal have been hit by several injuries this season, but Lewin revealed that forward Robin van Persie is close to a return, along with Johan Djourou and Kieran Gibbs.

"Johan Djourou had a difficult problem with the cartilage in his knee joint," said Lewin.

"He has made virtually a full recovery and we expect him to train fully with the squad within the next fortnight, as will Kieran Gibbs. They have both made full recoveries from what could have been career-threatening injuries."

"Robin will be joining the squad for full training imminently. That is a big boost for the club and to see Johan and Kieran training with the team in the next fortnight will give everyone a big lift."

MU snap up Hernandez

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United have completed the signing of Mexico striker Javier Hernandez from Chivas.

Hernandez, known as Chicharito, will join the English champions on July 1, provided he is granted a work permit, and the deal will involve United playing a pre-season friendly to open the new 45,000-capacity Chivas Stadium in Guadalajara.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson, who has also secured the signing of Fulham defender Chris Smalling for next season, said he was delighted to sign, "an exciting young striker, who has been in such prolific form for both his club and his country."

"He will be a great addition to our squad and we look forward to welcoming our first Mexican player in the summer."

"We are equally excited to play our first game in Mexico, opening the magnificent new Chivas Stadium in July."

Chicharito passed a medical in Manchester this week and has an impressive strike-rate at club level, scoring almost once every two games.

However, he has done even better for his country, registering four goals in four appearances.

L'pool thrash Benfica

AFP, Paris



Liverpool and Fulham combined on Thursday to rescue England's European pride which was so badly bruised by the Champions League exits of Manchester United and Arsenal.

Fernando Torres scored twice as Liverpool reached the Europa League semifinals with a 4-1 win over Benfica, 5-3 on aggregate, and a last-four clash with Atletico Madrid, the Spanish striker's former club.

Unfashionable Fulham, who have already knocked out mighty Juventus, were indebted to a 19-second goal from in-form striker Bobby Zamora to see off German champions Wolfsburg 1-0 and a 3-1 aggregate victory.

Roy Hodgson's Cottagers will face another German side Hamburg in the semifinals as the prospects of an all-English final on May 12 were kept alive.

Rafael Benitez's Liverpool, trailing 2-1 from the first leg in Lisbon, were on their way at Anfield thanks to two goals in seven first half minutes from Dirk Kuyt and Lucas.

Torres added a third in the second half before Oscar Cardozo's free-kick put Benfica within one goal of going through on away goals.

But Torres struck again in the closing stages as Liverpool continue their bid for a first

major European trophy since the 2005 Champions League.

"It was a great night," said Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher. "The first 20 minutes they played well, it was important not to concede and to get the first goal was massive."

"In the Europa League we've beaten a very good side, a top team, and it's a very good result."

Zamora, who scored in the 2-1 first leg win in London, bolstered his hopes of an

you get them and Bob did ever so well, his combination with (Zoltan) Gera was magnificent and meant they had to get three to win the tie," said Hodgson.

Hamburg, who will also host the final, saw off Standard Liege in their quarterfinal, winning 3-1 in Belgium for a 5-2 aggregate victory.

Croatian international Mladen Petric scored twice while Paolo Guerrero added a third in injury-time.

It was a rare bright spot for

RESULTS

Liverpool (ENG) 4 (Kuyt 27, Lucas 34, Torres 59, 82) Benfica (POR) 1 (Cardozo 70)
Liverpool win 5-3 on aggregate
Wolfsburg (GER) 0 Fulham (ENG) 1 (Zamora 1)
Fulham win 3-1 on aggregate
Standard Liege (BEL) 1 (De Camargo 33) Hamburg (GER) 3 (Petric 20, 35, Guerrero 90+4)
Hamburg win 5-2 on aggregate
Atletico Madrid (ESP) 0 Valencia (ESP) 0
2-2 on aggregate; Atletico win on away goals

England World Cup call with a goal after just 19 seconds at Wolfsburg as Fulham reached the last four of a European competition for the first time.

His goal was out of the top drawer as he neatly turned inside Jan Simunek to find the target with a sweet left-foot drive.

Fulham boss Roy Hodgson was delighted by Zamora's goal, the striker's 19th of the season.

"You get your goals when

the Peruvian striker who earlier had been banned for five Bundesliga matches for hurling a bottle at a heckling Hamburg fan last weekend.

Quique Sanchez Flores guided Atletico Madrid to their first European semifinal in 11 years after a 0-0 draw against fellow Spaniards Valencia put them through on the away goals rule.

The first game ended in a 2-2 draw.

Inter's Fiorentina test

AFP, Rome



Champions and Serie A leaders Inter Milan face a stern test of their powers of recovery when they travel to face Fiorentina on Saturday, just four days after booking a Champions League semifinal spot.

Jose Mourinho's team lead AS Roma by a single point at the top of the table, but their tough trip to Florence comes in the wake of an emotionally draining trip to Moscow, where they beat CSKA 1-0.

Mourinho has repeated on several occasions his concerns about fatigue as his side is the only one in Italy still engaged in European competition.

"We're very tired," he said following the victory in Moscow before issuing a rallying call.

"The team has grown and matured. That's very important for a team which is now in the semifinals of the Champions League, top of the league and in the semifinals of the Italian Cup. It's another Inter but now we want more."

Inter still have the possibility to win three competitions but the games are coming thick and fast and they have little rest with two matches a week.

But Serbia midfielder Dejan Stankovic insisted they were ready to refocus after their European exploits.

"Now the Champions League is momentarily archived and we're expecting another war, this one in the league," he said.

While Inter battle for a fifth straight scudetto crown, Fiorentina have ambitions of their own as they look to try to earn a spot in next season's Champions League.

They sit eighth and six points behind Palermo in the crucial fourth spot.

This will actually be the first of two games between the teams in the space of a few days as they meet in the Italian Cup semifinal, second leg (Inter lead 1-0 from the first leg) next week.

Teenage Montenegro playmaker Stevan Jovetic believes his team can match Inter for motivation.

"We'll give it our all against Inter. These are (two) impor-

FIXTURES

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

IN BRIEF

Hamburg appeal Guerrero ban

AFP, Hamburg

Hamburg on Friday lodged an appeal against the five-match ban imposed on striker Paolo Guerrero for throwing a bottle at a fan after his side's goalless draw with Hanover last weekend.

The sanction means that the season is over for Guerrero, who had just returned from a serious knee injury, and he may not play in the Bundesliga again with his contract set to expire at the end of May.

The Peruvian reacted angrily after being verbally abused at the entrance to the tunnel as he left the field.

He threw a plastic bottle at a fan, striking him in the face, and has already been punished by his club with a substantial fine.

The 26-year-old has been ordered to pay 20,000 euros by the German Football Federation (DFB).

Kaka, Ibra out of 'El Clasico'

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Brazilian midfielder Kaka and Barcelona's Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic have been ruled out of Saturday's 'El Clasico' showdown between the two Spanish giants.

Kaka is still suffering from a left thigh strain, according to Real Madrid.

Ibrahimovic has not recovered from a right leg problem he picked up during the warm-up to last weekend's tie against Athletic Bilbao, his team said.

Real and Barcelona are both top of La Liga with 77 points.

Van Gaal fancies chances against Barca

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal said on Friday that his German team is capable of beating anyone - even the mighty Barcelona - in a Champions League final, if it gets that far.

"A final against Barcelona would be very nice," the Dutchman told the Bild daily, fresh from seeing off Manchester United on Wednesday to set up a semifinal clash with top-flight French club Lyon.

"Out of 10 games (against Barcelona) maybe we'll lose nine times, but it's that one other that we're looking at."

"I think we can beat anybody in one match." Bayern's French star Franck Ribery said meanwhile that the Bavarian giants have a "good chance" of getting past Lyon to make it into a final against either Barca or Inter Milan in Madrid on May 22.