

TOTTENHAM V ARSENAL

A season-defining tie

AFP, London



Any meeting between Tottenham and Arsenal carries an extra edge but Wednesday's latest edition of the north London derby has become a season-defining fixture for both sides.

Arsenal's crushing defeat to Barcelona at the Camp Nou last week brought an end to their Champions League ambitions, ensuring the Premier League title now represents their last chance of ending a five-year wait for a major trophy.

Tottenham, meanwhile, suffered an even more unexpected blow when they were beaten in Sunday's FA Cup semifinal by a Portsmouth side who had been relegated into the Championship 24 hours earlier.

That meant there is no chance of new silverware appearing in the Spurs trophy cabinet this season and the club's primary aim now is to finish fourth and claim a place in next season's Champions League.

Defeat for either side at White Hart Lane could all but end their respective hopes of ending the season on a high, while a draw will suit no-one.

There's little doubt, though, that Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp faces the bigger job in trying to lift his players following a painful defeat.

By the time the derby kicks off, Arsenal will have had more than a week to get over the lesson handed out by Lionel Messi and the rest of his Barca team-mates.

For Spurs, though, the shock of failing to secure an FA Cup final meeting with Chelsea will still be raw.

Redknapp insisted the Arsenal clash was the ideal game for them after the shock of being humbled by Portsmouth and his task is to make sure that message sinks in to his squad.

While Spurs were on cup duty, Manchester City were tightening their grip on fourth place, beating Birmingham 5-1 to extend their advantage over Redknapp's side to four points having played a game more.

"We are all very down because we expected a

lot from the FA Cup," Tottenham defender Sebastien Bassong said.

"We are still in the race for fourth spot and this will be a big game against Arsenal, which we need to win.

"Obviously this game is coming straight after the defeat to Portsmouth which means we can get that result out of our minds very quickly.

"We know it will be difficult but we have been strong at home this season and must believe that we can get a result."

Arsenal face similar pressure, sitting in third place three points behind leaders Chelsea, who face Bolton 24 hours before the north London grudge match.

Gunners goalkeeper Manuel Almunia has no doubts about the need for victory and believes the atmosphere Arsene Wenger's side will face at White Hart Lane will be even more intense than in Barcelona.

"It's a crucial game," he said. "We have five games and if we drop points we are out of the race.

"That's how we have to approach the game against Spurs. We must have in mind if we lose or draw we are out. It's final.

"I'm convinced that the other two teams (Chelsea and Manchester United) are going to drop points. You have to be convinced that if we win the five games we have a chance to win the title.

"At Tottenham it's going to be tougher and harder. Barcelona's stadium is massive and there are a lot of people in the crowd but there is not the same pressure.

"The people are gentler and they love to watch football and enjoy their team. But the rivalry with Tottenham switches the people on and it's more serious.

"The atmosphere is tougher at Tottenham but we have played them many times and we know what to expect."

Spurs will be without midfield anchorman Wilson Palacios, who is suspended for two games after picking up his tenth booking of the season at Wembley, while creative midfielder Niko Kranjcar is out with a leg problem.

Arsenal, meanwhile, will definitely be without injured trio Cesc Fabregas, William Gallas and Andrey Arshavin.

Tevez unhappy with training

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City's Argentina striker Carlos Tevez on Tuesday questioned manager Roberto Mancini's tough training regime.

Manchester City players are training twice a day in the run-in to the end of the season as Mancini bids to steer them to fourth and a Champions League qualification place.

But Tevez believes that is too much at the end of a long campaign and, with a key derby against city rivals Manchester United at Eastlands this Saturday, has said his team-mates agree with him.

"The players are not happy with this. We are at the end of a long season, we have big matches, we are tired but there are still double training sessions, morning and afternoon," he told the Daily Mail.

"Then, the next day, we train for two hours. I do not understand. But, please, he is the coach and I am the player. He is in charge. I am

OK with him."

Tevez's comments come after his former United team-mate Rio Ferdinand claimed the 26-year-old had not been the most energetic during training sessions when he was at Old Trafford.

The Argentina international has scored 22 Premier League goals since his move to City, but England defender Ferdinand has suggested that the energy Tevez shows on a matchday is not reflected in his attitude to training.

"Carlos is an interesting character. When he was at United, he saved all his energy for the games - he didn't really go over the top at training," Ferdinand told the Sun.

"He worked hard in the gym - he was a professional in that sense - but everything he did was geared towards the match at the weekend.

"You could see him conserving his energy during the week and then laying it all on the line out on the pitch.

"That's not the way I operate, I have to train at a high level every day. But it works for Carlos and he can be a real handful to defend against."



PHOTO: AFP
Juventus's former general manager Luciano Moggi (C) sits during his Calciopoli match-fixing scandal hearing at the Naples Court Palace on Tuesday.

Domenech warns of shooting players

AFP, Paris



France coach Raymond Domenech has warned that he would "shoot" any players unable to put aside their egos for the sake of the French team at the World Cup.

"The lesson is that they must be intelligent and leave their egos behind and think that it is the team that counts, not them," Domenech told L'Equipe newspaper.

"If they haven't understood that, I'll shoot! The final list must be unveiled on June 1."

Domenech also warned that a player named in his initial 23-man squad on May 11 could be jettisoned before the World Cup should he show a bad attitude in training.

"It's possible," he admitted. "The real problem, once again, is that everyone leaves their ego behind. I've already told them, I can say it

again, insist on it."

France play warm-up games against Costa Rica in Lens on May 26, Tunisia away in Rades four days later, and China on the Indian Ocean French territorial island of Reunion on June 4 before disembarking in South Africa.

Their Group A pool matches see the French facing Uruguay in Cape Town on June 11, Mexico in Polokwane six days later, and hosts South Africa in Bloemfontein on June 22.

Domenech said his goal was now to craft together a squad that could "perform the best possible on June and go through until July 11", the date of the World Cup final.

"We will do everything to do it (win the World Cup)," he said. "But that will come from the inside. The players must be persuaded of that.

"The players are the motor and it's them who will advance the machine.

"It's for that reason that selection is vital."



PHOTO: AFP
UEFA president Michel Platini (R) hands the Europa League trophy over to Hamburg mayor Ole von Beust in a ceremony on Tuesday. The Europa League final will take place in Hamburg on May 12.

Iniesta out for a month

SOCCERNET

Barcelona midfielder Andres Iniesta is likely to miss most of Barcelona's season after sustaining a hamstring injury in training that is set to keep him sidelined for a month.

Iniesta suffered a tear in his right hamstring, having only just recovered from injury to play some part in the 2-0 win over Real Madrid in the league.

According to the Catalan club's website, the injury is likely to keep Iniesta out for four weeks, in which case he would miss most of Barca's final seven league matches of the season (the Primera Division finishes on the weekend of May 15/16) and both legs of the Champions League semifinal against Jose Mourinho's Inter Milan.

Barca, who are currently three points clear of Real Madrid at the top of La Liga, will be hoping that Iniesta will be fit in time for the Champions League final on May 22, if they get that far.

Prosecutor to call Ancelotti

AFP, Rome

The public prosecutor in Naples on Tuesday postponed proceedings in the match-fixing case against former Juventus supremo Luciano Moggi for a week when Chelsea coach Carlo Ancelotti should be called as a witness, the Ansa news agency reported.

Moggi, who has already been convicted by the sporting justice in Italy for match-fixing, is being tried in a criminal court for sporting fraud relating to the 2006 Calciopoli scandal.

He was previously convicted on the evidence of numerous telephone conversations that were tapped by investigators in which he is heard discussing referees with the refereeing commission.

But his lawyers on Tuesday requested that 75 more conversations dating back to 2006 and before also be transcribed, leading to the postponement of proceedings until April 20.

Ancelotti was the AC Milan coach at the time of the scandal but despite being called as a witness there is a big chance he will not show, especially as his current team is involved in the English Premier League title race.

High altitude solution for Japan

INTERNET, undated

Japan coach Takeshi Okada has ordered his players to use oxygen tanks ahead of the World Cup to build up their high-altitude resistance.

Local media reported that Okada, whose team play two of their Group E games at more than 1,000 metres above sea level in South Africa in June, would ask his players to use the apparatus daily.

"After the squad is named I will get the players to use oxygen masks in small doses for an hour a day," Okada told the Nikkan Sports.

"They can use the tanks while watching TV."

Barca aim to consolidate

AFP, Madrid



After outclassing Arsenal and Real Madrid in the space of five days treble winners Barcelona are on for a league and Champions League double and aim to build on their three-point lead over Real at the top of La Liga when they host Deportivo La Coruna on Wednesday.

Barcelona had a week to cherish crushing Arsenal to reach the semifinals of the Champions League and then beating Real 2-0 in 'El Clasico' at the Santiago Bernabeu to seize the upper hand in the title race.

The champions look to consolidate that Real win by beating Depor at Camp Nou while Real must pick themselves up for a trip to Almeria on Thursday.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola watched his side end Real's perfect 15 home wins in the league and maintain his flawless record in the Clasicos winning all four since taking charge.

"There aren't any secrets, I work hard, work long hours and I've got good players," said Guardiola. "They know that if they don't run, I'll let them know and since they know that they all work harder.

"It was an honour to go to Real and win but it will only be worth something if we end up champions - we're not there yet as there are games left to play."

Depor have garnered just two points from the last 18 with their European hopes fading fast as they have fallen five points off the top six.

Real Madrid coach Manuel Pellegrini has come under a barrage of criticism following the Barcelona defeat and must dust himself down and rally his troops for the trip to Almeria.

Statistics show Pellegrini in a good light with 77 points from 31 games but the Real board are notoriously demanding and Real have come up short against the big teams losing to Sevilla, AC Milan, Lyon and twice against Barcelona.

The league is still a possibility if Barca slip up but early elimination from the Champions League and Kings Cup combined with two Clasico defeats has reportedly persuaded Real to look at possible replacements.

Cristiano Ronaldo came to Madrid to win trophies and the Portuguese star has not given up hope on trying to lift the league title.

"Barcelona were far superior but we have to pick ourselves up because there are seven games left," said Ronaldo.

"If we win the league it can't be talked of as a failure and we have to believe it is possible."

"It is never nice to lose but we have to learn from the defeats and we can't give up on the league."

Real had been on a 12-match winning streak in the league before being beaten by Barcelona and Almeria can expect a backlash.

Third-placed Valencia have never been in the title race, lying 24 points behind Barcelona at present, and need to just focus on securing third and the automatic Champions League spot after a recent dip.

Valencia lost 3-2 at rivals Real Mallorca on Sunday but are still five points ahead of Sevilla and Mallorca going into Thursday's home match against Athletic Bilbao.

Bilbao are sixth and still in the running for a Champions League spot just three points behind fourth-placed Sevilla.

Buoyed by their win over Valencia, Mallorca look to improve their poor away form with victory at Real Zaragoza on Wednesday.

Mallorca have won just two of their 16 away matches this season but 39 points from a possible 45 at home have them pushing hard for a Champions League berth.

Elsewhere bottom side Xerez, eight points from safety, travel to Atletico Madrid on Wednesday as they bid to beat the drop.

Atletico appear to have given up on the league lying eight points off the top six in 10th although they have another route into Europe having reached the Kings Cup final as well as the Europa League semifinal.

FIXTURES

Wednesday
all 1800 GMT unless stated
Atletico Madrid v Xerez, Racing Santander v Espanyol, Osasuna v Malaga, Real Zaragoza v Real Mallorca, Barcelona v Deportivo La Coruna (2000 GMT)

Thursday
Almeria v Real Madrid (1800 GMT), Valencia v Athletic Bilbao (2000 GMT)

Adebayor quits Togo

Football

AFP, London

Manchester City and Togo striker Emmanuel Adebayor retired from international football on Monday, saying he was "still haunted" by the attack on his country's team bus at the African Nations Cup.

Adebayor looked on in horror as bullets riddled the bus in an attack that killed an assistant coach and the squad's spokesman and led Togo to pull out of the tournament in January.

The former Arsenal star later admitted he feared his life was about to end during the assault in the northern Angolan province of Cabinda and he has been unable to shake off the mental scars of the incident.

"Following the tragic events during January's African Cup of Nations, in which two of my fellow countrymen were killed by terrorists in Angola, I have made the very difficult decision to retire from international football," Adebayor told his club's website.

"I have weighed up my feelings in the weeks and months since the attack, and I am still haunted by the events which I witnessed on that horrible afternoon on the Togo team bus.

"We were just footballers going to play a football match and represent our country, yet we were attacked by people who wanted to kill us all. It is a moment I will never forget and one I never want to experience again."

The 26-year-old scored 16 goals in 38 appearances for Togo and helped his team reach the 2006 World Cup in

Germany. He insisted he will always have a special bond with the team-mates who were on the bus in Cabinda.

"The people who were on that coach together will forever be joined by a special bond - we are all brothers," he said.

"I will always have the team and the people of Togo close to my heart and wish them every success in the challenges that they will face in the future.

"For nine years I have played for the Togo team and,

action after the tragedy and struck twice in Sunday's 5-1 win over Birmingham as Roberto Mancini's side consolidated fourth place in the Premier League.

The club, backed by their Abu Dhabi-based billionaire owners, has already spent millions in an attempt to secure qualification for the Champions League and Mancini's men are within touching distance of reaching that goal.

Whatever Adebayor



EMMANUEL ADEBAYOR

despite the events in Angola, I have some very good memories of my international career.

"I feel very proud to have been trusted with the position of captain of the Togolese football team. Leading your country in international competition is the ultimate honour for any player."

With his international career now over, Adebayor will turn his focus to helping City become one of English football's superpowers.

Adebayor has scored seven times for City since returning to

achieves at City, he admits he will always retain fond memories of his time with Togo and he hopes the team can make their country proud in the future.

"Togo have some very talented players, and I dearly hope the players who remain will be able to put their memories of Angola behind them and go onto to be a success for the nation," he added.

"I have enormous belief in each and every one of them, players, coaches, staff and their families."

IN BRIEF

L'pool wait on Torres report

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool will have to wait until later in the week to discover the full extent of Fernando Torres's knee injury after the Spain striker was examined by a specialist.

Torres missed Sunday's 0-0 draw against Fulham to travel to Spain for an assessment of the problem, which has bothered him for several weeks.

The former Atletico Madrid star received treatment in his home country but tests were inconclusive and he will be reassessed later in the week.

Giovinco's season over

AFP, Rome

Juventus's hopes of clinching fourth place in Serie A and Champions League football next season were dealt yet another blow on Tuesday as attacking midfielder Sebastian Giovinco was ruled out for the rest of the season.

The 23-year-old suffered a pulled muscle in his left leg in training and after undergoing tests the diagnosis was not good.

"He will need 40-45 days to recover and hence his season is considered over," Juve said on their website.

Juve currently sit sixth in Serie A, three points behind fourth placed Palermo but they still have trips to Inter and AC Milan to come before the end of the campaign.