



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich star Franck Ribery takes part in a training session in Munich on Tuesday on the eve of their Champions League semi-final against Olympique Lyon.

Bayern warily confident

AFP, Munich



Fresh from squeezing past Manchester United in the quarterfinal, Bayern

Munich are cautiously confident ahead of Wednesday's semifinal, first leg, Champions League clash against Lyon.

But despite being near full strength and thrashing Hanover 7-0 on Saturday in the Bundesliga, plus Lyon having to travel 750 kilometres by bus because of volcanic ash grounding most European flights, the Germans are still cautious.

"We shouldn't underestimate Lyon, whatever we do," Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said. "This team saw off Liverpool in the group phase and Real Madrid in the last 16."

Bayern's French midfielder Franck Ribery, who coach Louis van Gaal is confident will play despite injury concerns, said his compatriots would be no walk in the park to beat.

"It will be very difficult against Lyon because they have a very good team. We shouldn't allow ourselves to think about the final," said Ribery, who has been linked to European giants Real Madrid and Barcelona this season.

Lyon are "very well organised, very aggressive and physically very strong," van Gaal agreed. "They have players who are quick to counter-attack, all their players are strong dribblers."

"It's always hard to play against teams like that."

Bayern will also be without captain Mark van Bommel and defender Holger Badstuber, whose form this season has taken him to the verge of the Germany team, both suspended after picking up yellow cards.

But Bayern are no pushover themselves. The Bavarians' win over Hanover leaves them top of the Bundesliga with three games left, and with the treble of German league, cup and Champions League titles in their sights. They last won the Champions League in 2001.

The two aces in van Gaal's pack are Arjen Robben, fresh from his hat-trick against Hanover, while striker Ivica Olic also scored two last Saturday. Both scored at Old Trafford to stun Sir Alex Ferguson's United in their fateful second leg quarterfinal.

Robben, who says he is playing "the best football of my life", has been dubbed "Bayern's Messi" by Lyon daily Le Progres, in reference to Barcelona's Lionel Messi, who take on Inter Milan in the other Champions League semi.

Bayern's Argentinian defender Martin Demichelis is also likely to play for Bayern despite injury worries. Lyon have problems of their own getting to Munich with cancelled flights across Europe due to Iceland's volcanic ash cloud meaning the French had to endure a bus trip to Bavaria via Zurich.

"It'll be a total of 10 hours on the bus, which is hard," said Lyon captain Cris.

"But there's no choice and we have to accept it."

Lyon drew 2-2 with Girondins Bordeaux on Saturday night in the third meeting between the clubs in the space of three weeks - they met in the Champions League last sixteen. The result effectively knocks both sides out of the Ligue 1 title race.

With five to play, Lyon are nine points off leaders Marseille.

Coach Claude Puel chose to start without top-scorer Lisandro Lopez, who only came on in the second period, but took a knock on the ankle and missed Sunday's light workout.

Puel said the striker is "doubtful" for the clash in Munich with Lyon bidding to win their first Champions League title.

Centre-half Jean-Alain Bounsang has been out for two weeks with a calf strain, while Jean II Makoun (groin), Mathieu Bodmer (back) and Dejan Lovren (knee) were all absent in Bordeaux.

But midfielder Jeremy Toulalan says Lyon might be good for another surprise.

"Sometimes a team goes all the way even when no one thinks they will. Porto has done it before.

"Maybe it's our turn now."



Duo hit the road

SOCCERNET



Liverpool and Fulham's hopes of flying to their Europa League games appear to be in tatters with airports in the south of England almost certain to remain closed on Tuesday.

Rafael Benitez's squad had hoped to avoid a gruelling 24-hour, 2,600-mile journey by land to Madrid for Thursday night's semifinal at Atletico Madrid, but reports now suggest there is a fresh cloud of ash heading to the United Kingdom following the eruption of the Eyjafjallajokull volcano in Iceland.

Although airports in Scotland and Northern Ireland had tentatively resumed flights, the planned reopening of airports in southern England has been shelved. Glasgow airport has already announced it will close again at 1300 BST while remaining flights due out of Edinburgh have been cancelled.

Fulham had chartered their own flight to Hamburg, but the Cottagers have now confirmed that has been cancelled and they will set off for Germany by road on Tuesday afternoon. They will travel by coach via the Channel Tunnel with the 600-mile journey taking 12 hours.

Liverpool were hoping to fly out from Stansted airport, which is just north of London, but with doubts over available flights resurfacing the club will have no choice but to set off from Runcorn just after 1pm on Tuesday to guarantee they can make it to their Spanish destinations in time.

Fans of the Merseyside club have been angered by UEFA's dithering over a possible postponement of the match, though the uncertain nature of natural conditions hardly made things easy for European football's governing body.

Les Lawson, of the club's official supporters' club, told the Times: "Where UEFA is concerned football supporters are always bottom

of the list and the last to be thought of. What has happened is obviously exceptional circumstances, but no one has thought of how the fans will get there."

And Garreth Cummins, international officer at the Football Supporters' Federation, told the newspaper: "The main thing that rankles is that it got to Monday and we were still waiting for official confirmation whether or not the match will go ahead. An earlier announcement would at least have allowed fans and the clubs to make arrangements in plenty of time, rather than a scramble for trains, coaches or boats.

"Similarly an early decision to cancel would have allowed all parties more time to make the best possible rearrangement of fixtures/travel etc."

Liverpool are set to set off at 1.04pm by train from Runcorn bound for London Euston, where they will transfer to St Pancras for the 4.32pm Eurostar to Paris. From the French capital, where they will arrive at 7.47pm and have an overnight stay, they will get an early train to Bordeaux and a coach transfer to the airport. A 12.15 flight will land them in Madrid for 1.30pm, just over a day after departing Merseyside.

The squad will then face the same journey in reverse in order to be back in England in time for Sunday's away game at Burnley. There is no chance of rearranging the Burnley game with Liverpool having to play the return leg against Atletico next week.

Benitez spoke at his frustration at the travel chaos following Monday night's home win over West Ham. He said: "We will not have too many days to be ready for an important game but hopefully the journey will be good. We can try to prepare plan A and plan B. Everything is ready and we will go tomorrow."

"There are not too many options (for postponing the game). We have to manage now. We have to go and it depends on the airports; if they are open we can fly and it will be easier. But we have to go by train to London just in case and then we will see. It is well organised. We have to be there early but it is not a problem."

IN BRIEF

Moyes wants Pienaar to stay

AFP, Liverpool

Steven Pienaar has been warned he would be making a mistake if he decided to leave Everton.

Tottenham are among a number of clubs reported to be monitoring the South African midfielder's situation following an impressive season with David Moyes's side.

Pienaar has just over a year left on his contract at Goodison Park and cash-strapped Everton would find it hard to resist a sizeable offer this summer, if the player decides he wants to move.

Moyes however is convinced that would not be in the player's best interest.

"Steven Pienaar is at a club that really suits him and sometimes a player has to decide what is best for them," Moyes told the Liverpool Echo.

"Everton has been good for Steven. If anybody wanted to leave, they'd be poorer for it. Most people that have left here, it's not tended to work out for them."

Pienaar has been at Everton since 2007, having initially moved from Borussia Dortmund on a loan deal.

Red Star given stadium ban

AFP, Belgrade

Red Star Belgrade must play five matches behind closed doors after a fan suffered a gunshot wound during a cup match ten days ago, the Serbian Football Federation (FSS) said on Monday.

The FSS held the club, former European champions, responsible for "the presence of fireworks and firearms in the stadium" when it hosted the match against city rivals OFK Belgrade on April 14.

A 21-year-old Red Star supporter was seriously injured when he suffered gunshot wounds during the game.

Serbian authorities have vowed to crack down on violence at football grounds after the death in the capital of French fan Brice Taton, who had come to watch Toulouse play Partizan Belgrade in a Europa League match. A total of 15 people are due to stand trial in connection with Taton's death from Wednesday.

AFP, Liverpool



First-half strikes from Yossi Benayoun and David Ngog and a second-half own goal from Robert Green earned Liverpool a 3-0 win Monday over struggling West Ham.

The Reds are still five points off fourth-placed Tottenham, who also have a game in hand, but they extended their unbeaten run at Anfield to 10 matches and this was a simple warm up for Thursday's Europa League semifinal first leg at Atletico Madrid.

Efforts from Benayoun and Ngog gave them a comfortable advantage at the interval and Green's own goal completed a comfortable evening.

West Ham have not won away from home since the opening weekend of the season and remain just three points above the relegation zone with three matches remaining.

But coach Gianfranco Zola denied the defeat would damage morale, telling ESPN: "We just had a chat in the changing room and I am not concerned at all. No problem."

"We started well. We were quite comfortable on the pitch. We suffered on dead balls - normally we are very good defending against them but not today."



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool striker David N'Gog (R) scores past West Ham United goalkeeper Robert Green (L) during their Premier League encounter at Anfield on Tuesday.

Aguero eyeing Chelsea

Football

SOCCERNET

Atletico Madrid striker Sergio Aguero has suggested he would welcome a move to Chelsea in the close season after lavishing praise on Blues stars Didier Drogba and Frank Lampard.

Aguero has been linked with a big-money move away from the Vicente Calderon for some time and has his fair share of big name suitors. Both Manchester clubs, Inter Milan and Real Madrid have also been strongly linked with a move for Aguero, with 'Kun', as he is nicknamed, telling Premium Calcio just two weeks ago that he was "very happy that a club like Inter" were interested in signing him.

But having reportedly been close to sealing a move to Stamford Bridge last summer, it would seem that Chelsea again look to be in pole position to secure the Argentina striker's signature.

After hailing Lampard and Drogba as world leaders in their respective positions as he assessed the possibility of moving to London, it would seem that Aguero would be happy playing for Carlo Ancelotti's side.

"Chelsea are a great club," he was quoted as saying in the Daily Express. "They have become one of the most feared in Europe over recent years. I look at players like Didier Drogba and Frank Lampard and they have been - and still are - the best players in their positions in the world. I could really learn from players like that, there is no doubt."

"London would be a really amazing city to live in as well, myself and my wife could be really happy there. Carlos Tevez is doing really well at Manchester City but, for me, it is about joining a club who are ready to challenge for honours. City are not ready yet."

"Inter are a great club, but it is agreed that over the last five years the Premier League has been the strongest."

Ribery's Real move unlikely

AFP, Madrid

The prospect of a transfer by Bayern Munich's France international Franck Ribery to Real Madrid has dimmed because of the allegations that he had relations with an under-age call-girl, a newspaper reported Tuesday.

Sports daily Marca, without citing sources, said the scandal swirling around the 27-year-old midfielder, had "warded off almost definitely" the chance of his joining the Spanish giants.

During police questioning Ribery, who is married and has two daughters, admitted having relations with the prostitute but said he did not know she was underage, a French judicial official told AFP on Monday.

It is now up to the judge presiding over the case to decide whether or not to bring charges against him. If charged and found guilty Ribery could face a maximum sentence of three years in prison and a fine of 45,000 euros (60,000 dollars).

Last week Ribery, who was a Real target last year, said he planned to make a decision on his future "within 10 days".

His Bayern deal expires next year but he hinted last month that he would favour a move to Spain if he opted to leave Bavaria, but insisted no decision had been taken.



PHOTO: AFP

(L-R) South Africa's Brazilian coach Carlos Alberto Parreira, Herbert Hainer, CEO of Adidas and German legend Franz Beckenbauer pose with South Africa national team players during the presentation of the Jobulani football in Herzogenaurach on Tuesday.