

SEMIFINAL SECOND LEG

Do or die for Barca

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic is confident that if his side are faithful to their style of football then they do not need to be worried about the physical threat from Inter Milan and can turn around their Champions League semifinal tie.

Coach Pep Guardiola has constructed an all-conquering side that swept all before them last season but now they face their toughest European test against Inter after losing the first-leg 3-1.

The showdown at the San Siro was about two different styles of football. The free-flowing open game of Guardiola was pitted against the controlled approach of Jose Mourinho and it was the Inter coach who came out on top.

Inter out-fought their opponents, hassling them out of their stride, leading to several Barca players to complain afterwards that the referee was too lenient.

There is plenty of belief in Catalonia, though, that Barcelona can impose their own passing game on Inter at the Nou Camp on Wednesday and knock out the Italian champions.

"We will have to press but most importantly we must play our own football. They are going to play strongly and aggressively but we have to be concentrated on our own game," said Ibrahimovic.

"We have to be ready for this war. They are going to exploit their virtues but we cannot change our way of playing like we did in Milan. We lost because we did not play our usual football, not because they won with their approach."

"The 3-1 result looks a heavy defeat but in reality it is the same as 1-0. If you look at our last two Champions League games at home, how many goals did we score? Against Stuttgart it was four and then against Arsenal another four.

We are a team that scores a lot of goals which you need to do if you want to get to the final."

The tie has extra spice with Ibrahimovic facing the side he left last summer with Samuel Eto'o moving in the opposite direction, but the Swede denies he can be of any real use in giving advice about the Inter camp.

"This team is very different from the one in which I played as there are four or five new players which have made the team a lot more complete and so I can't really help too much," he said.

"The coach is also very well informed with his scouts but if he asks me anything of course I will do what I can."

Barca remain top of the Spanish table after beating Xerez 3-1 but it was a nervous display

with minds clearly on the Inter match. Afterwards the players wore t-shirts to drum up support for the Champions League game.

Guardiola will be without the injured Andres Iniesta and Carles Puyol, who is suspended. The only real doubt in the line-up is whether full-back Eric Abidal will be fit in time and if not Maxwell will continue in his place.

Inter returned to the top of the Italian table at

the weekend with a win over Atalanta and their main concern is over the fitness of midfielder Wesley Sneijder, a key figure in the first leg.

The Dutchman picked up a hamstring strain but is hoping to be fit. Dejan Stankovic is out, though, through suspension.

Inter president Massimo Moratti believes that the talk coming from Barcelona about the physical side of their game is an attempt to influence officials.

"Barcelona want to arrive at the final at all costs which is normal and they are trying to put pressure on the referee. We are not going to be distracted and are fully concentrated on the game," he said.



Inter Milan players warm up during a training session at La Pinetin in Appiano Gentile on Tuesday on the eve of their Champions League clash against Barcelona.

PHOTO: AFP

IN BRIEF

Duo in Inter squad

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho on Tuesday selected a 25-man squad for Wednesday's Champions League semifinal, second leg away to Barcelona, including both Mario Balotelli and Wesley Sneijder.

Dutch playmaker Sneijder had been a doubt after going off injured at half-time in Saturday's 3-1 win over Atalanta while controversial teenage forward Balotelli was not expected to be called on after angering Inter fans in the home leg by throwing his shirt to the ground at the end of the match.

Balotelli was not even in the squad for the Atalanta match despite issuing a public apology for his behaviour the day before the game but now he seems to have been forgiven his sins.

Schalke sign Metzelder

AFP, Berlin

German international defender Christoph Metzelder, who has had three injury-ravaged years with Real Madrid, is to return to the Bundesliga with Schalke 04, the club said on Tuesday.

The 29-year-old signed a deal with Schalke, currently second in the Bundesliga, from the start of next season until June 2013, following talks in Berlin with coach Felix Magath.

No mention was made of a transfer fee.

Metzelder's contract with the Spanish giants would have expired at the end of the season and his fitness problems mean he has not held down a regular place since his 2007 arrival from Borussia Dortmund.

Metzelder has won 47 caps for Germany and played in the final of the 2008 European Championship, losing 1-0 to Spain.

Solano arrested

AFP, London

Former Newcastle star Nolberto Solano has denied an allegation of rape after being arrested on Tuesday.

Peru midfielder Solano was arrested at a house in the Gosforth area of Newcastle following the rape claim made by a 22-year-old woman.

Solano has been released on bail and Northumbria Police said investigations into the allegation are ongoing.

Solano's solicitor Simon McKay said: "I can confirm that Mr Solano has been the subject of an allegation of rape but denies the allegation fully."

"I have been in contact with Northumbria Police on Nolberto's behalf and we are cooperating fully and assisting them with their inquiries."

Capello's WAGs U-turn

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England coach Fabio Capello is set to do a U-turn and allow his players to mix with their wives and girlfriends at the World Cup finals - and could even sanction family barbecues to foster team spirit.

Capello had said he would be banning the infamous WAGs from spending time with his squad members, bar one day after each game. But now Capello has revealed that he believes he will have a more harmonious squad if the players are treated more leniently.

Four years ago in Baden-Baden there was much criticism over the amount of time players were able to spend with their wives and girlfriends which seemed to create a whole new media circus around the squad. It even led to a TV show called WAGs Boutique. But Capello is looking to recreate the successful model of Italy coach Marcello Lippi in Germany, when he gave players time with their families.

"The spirit of the group is really important," Capello was quoted as saying in the

Independent. "With Lippi we talked about Italy when they won last time, when the players had free days the players and their families stayed together."

"After each game they had a barbeque. It created a great spirit of the group. These are the little differences that can sometimes make the difference when it comes to winning. The managers need to understand what is best."

Capello went on to explain why his own experience at Real Madrid shows why team spirit can be so important in a successful side: "When I went to Real Madrid [in 2006] they had not won anything for three years, which is strange for a club the size of Real Madrid."

"Inside the dressing room there were three different teams - a South American group, Spanish group and the others. I had to work really hard to break these different groups down and bring everyone together. I had to make strong decisions and make sure there was a spirit within the team - when the group found the spirit of the shirt they won. Spirit is one of the most important things for a team. You need to have a good spirit to win."

The coach also underlined his own importance to England's chances of glory: "Leadership is vital, you can't buy it. You need to have it to be successful. The players will follow a strong leader, you need to be able to convince the players of your methods and ideas at all times and you can only do this by being a good leader."

Capello also discussed England's dismal record in penalty shootouts, and how the squad would be practicing spot-kicks ahead of the knockout stages.

"We always practise with the penalties," Capello said. "The problem is that during training the goal seems wide and the goalkeeper seems little; during the actual game the keeper seems bigger and the goals seem smaller."

"The hardest thing to manage is the pressure. It's important to train, you need to practise so they have confidence - but sometimes when it's time to decide who will take the penalties you need to change because players are tired, you need players with confidence who want to take them. I know who will take the good penalties, but sometimes at the final moment you have to change."

Osasuna hold Bilbao

AFP, Madrid



Athletic Bilbao dropped key points in their bid for a place in the Europa League after being held to a 0-0 draw Monday by Osasuna.

It was a hard-fought battle from beginning to end between the two rivals from the north of Spain.

What the game gained in determination and work-rate it lost in finesse with chances few and far between.

While Osasuna, looking to secure their top-flight status, tried to take the game to Athletic they rarely caused any danger and it was the visitors who had the better chances in the first half with Fernando Llorente going closest with a header which was palmed away by the Osasuna keeper Ricardo Lopez.

Osasuna's main threat came from Juanfran Torres down the right wing, and he almost caught out keeper Gorka Iraola with a cross which turned into more of a shot, but Iraola managed to scramble the ball away.

There were even fewer chances after the break and so Athletic will consider it as two points dropped which would have kept them level with Villarreal in sixth place who beat Racing Santander 2-1 on Sunday.

Barcelona remain a point clear at the top of the table after an all-be-it shaky performance in a 3-1 victory over bottom side Xerez. Real Madrid are keeping up the pressure a point behind them with a 2-1 win over Zaragoza thanks to a late goal from super-sub Kaka on his return from injury.

While Valencia consolidated their third position with a 1-0 win over Deportivo la Coruña the battle for the final Champions League place remains intense. First, Mallorca surprisingly only managed a 1-1 draw with Malaga and then Sevilla, with the chance to leapfrog them into fourth, crashed 4-3 away at Getafe.

At the other end of the table a 3-1 defeat for Tenerife against Atletico Madrid meant they missed out on the chance of moving clear of the relegation zone while Valladolid's remarkable recovery continues under new coach Javier Clemente as they beat Sporting Gijon 2-0 away.

Guti heading for Dubai

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's veteran midfielder Jose Maria Gutierrez, more commonly known as just "Guti," is to leave the club at the end of the season to wind down his career in Dubai, Onda Cero radio reported on Tuesday.

"Guti has already signed his release from Real Madrid and will go to Dubai for two seasons for five million euros a season," the station said without mentioning any sources.

Guti came through the ranks at Real and is currently vice-captain behind veteran striker Raul. He is one of the longest-serving members of the squad.

Earlier this month the 33-year-old said he wanted to leave the Spanish giants for a move to England, Italy or the Middle East.

"As it stands there is no possibility of staying. I have a year left (contract) but we hope to reach an agreement," he told Onda Madrid radio.

He started his career at Real in December 1995, winning five La Liga, three Champions League and two Intercontinental Cup titles, as well as 13 caps with the Spanish national side.

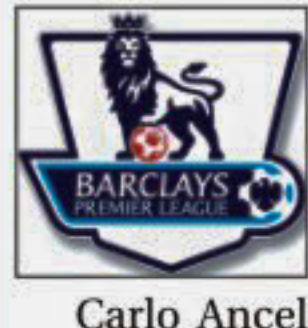


PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid midfielder Guti smiles during a training session in Madrid on Tuesday.

Gerrard won't give up

AFP, London



Steven Gerrard insists Liverpool have no intention of giving Chelsea an easy ride in Sunday's crucial showdown at Anfield.

Carlo Ancelotti's team are one point ahead of Manchester United with two games to play and a victory on Merseyside would move them within touching distance of the Premier League title.

Some Liverpool fans wouldn't be too upset about that as it would almost certainly deny arch rivals United a 19th English crown, which would surpass the Reds' own total of 18.

But Liverpool captain Gerrard knows his side still have an outside chance of snatching fourth place and qualification for the Champions League, so he expects Rafael Benitez's side to give everything to beat the Blues this weekend.

"We have a couple of games left and the idea is to take maximum points and see if we can get into the Champions League through the back door," Gerrard

told The Sun.

"If we take maximum points, who knows? The teams above us might slip up. All we have done is keep the pressure on."

"We won't give up but it would be stupid of me to say this or that is going to happen - it's important to be realistic."

"We are underdogs for fourth position but our fans also know we've got Everton breathing down our necks and we certainly don't want them finishing above us."

Although Chelsea will fancy their chances against a Liverpool team missing star striker Fernando Torres, they know failure to win at Anfield would give United a chance to regain top spot with a win at Sunderland later on Sunday.

Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard, who scored twice in Sunday's 7-0 win over Stoke, is convinced Gerrard and company won't be surrender the three points without a fight.

"There is no chance that 11 Liverpool players can go out and consider United winning the championship on this game," Lampard said.

"They play only to win games and would not be unprofessional. They will

give it everything, there's no doubt about that."

"But the message from us is that we can go to Anfield and get three points."

"If you want to be champions, you have to go to these kind of places and bring back the title."

United striker Wayne Rooney, currently sidelined with a groin injury, will be watching the Anfield clash in the hope that his friend and fellow Scouser Gerrard can do the champions a favour.

Gerrard scored twice in Sunday's 4-0 win at Burnley and Rooney believes his England team-mate will always give 100 per cent for the Liverpool cause.

"I don't need to have a word with Stevie about making sure Liverpool win. You see what a good player and competitor he is even in friendly games," Rooney said.

"He wants to win and I'm sure he will want to win this one. Liverpool are fighting to get into Europe and with the history behind the club I'm sure they are all determined."

"It is the last home game of the season and their fans will not really be too pleased if they don't turn up."

'We are not favourites'

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Deco has claimed that Portugal's inexperience at the highest level means that they cannot be considered favourites for the World Cup in South Africa.

Deco was a part of the squad that struggled through the qualifiers and were forced to battle through a two-legged play-off against Bosnia-Herzegovina to book their ticket for the tournament but, despite their poor record under coach Carlos Queiroz, the Portuguese are still considered to be in with a good chance of reaching the latter stages. Deco, however, has played down their expectations.

"A lot of the players in the Portugal squad in 2006 are no longer part of the set-up, so we've got a lot of players who'll be playing in their first major competition. I think that the quality is just as high, though we don't have the same level of experience we had in 2006," Deco told FIFA.

"The favourites are those national teams with a World Cup pedigree, something that Portugal, who have never won the trophy, don't have. So we can't be considered

among the favourites. That said, we do have a team boasting plenty of quality, with great players and which can go a long way at the finals."

"It's not easy to win the World Cup. After all, there's a good reason why so few countries have done it so far. There are great teams that have never won a World Cup, because often the difference can be made by tiny details, like having a bit of luck at a decisive moment."

Deco also reacted to claims that Portugal were over-reliant on world record midfielder Cristiano Ronaldo.

"We won several games without Cristiano and equally we've won games with him on the field," he said. "Nowadays you just don't get big teams depending on just one player. Manchester United have done very well since Ronaldo left, Madrid have won games without him, as have Portugal."

"Of course you notice the absence of any great player, there's no doubt about that, but the Portuguese national side isn't dependent on him. It's only natural that teams want their best players available and miss them when they're not. That being the case, given he's one of the world's best players, he is important to us."

Brazilians not convinced

AFP, Sao Paulo

With less than two months to go to the start of the World Cup Brazilian supporters are not convinced about their team's chances under coach Dunga, an opinion poll by the Datafolha institute showed Monday.

Although 64 per cent of those polled believed the "Selecao" can bring home a sixth trophy from South Africa that was down from 73 per cent in December.

And whereas 64 per cent of the 2,600 people questioned in December rated Dunga as good or even excellent that figure had slipped to 57 per cent in April.

Nonetheless, the pollsters noted that Brazil had not played in the period between the two polls.

Dunga will name his squad on May 11.