



Juventus striker Amauri (L) scores one of his two goals past Shamrock Rovers goalkeeper Alan Mannus during their Europa League third qualifying first leg tie in Dublin on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Wenger confident

Football

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger wants Arsenal to use this weekend's Emirates Cup clashes against AC Milan and Celtic to send a warning to their Premier League rivals.

Wenger's side have gone five years without a trophy and finished well behind champions Chelsea last season, but the Gunners boss is convinced the north Londoners are ready to end that barren spell.

Arsenal have an early opportunity to underline their progress in a prestigious pre-season tournament, at their own Emirates Stadium, which includes seven-time European champions Milan, Scottish giants Celtic and top French club Lyon.

After spending most of the close-season fighting off Barcelona's attempts to lure Cesc Fabregas back to the Nou Camp, Wenger is able to focus on assessing the development of his young squad and he expects positive signs.

"I am very confident we'll do better than last season," Wenger said. "We know in England that the Premier League is the biggest league in the world and everybody invests a lot of money."

"We invest in our work, in our beliefs, in the quality of our behaviour and I am confident that will pay off."

"We finished third last year and we hope we can improve on that. But the race will be tough."

Fabregas made it clear to Wenger he wanted to rejoin Barca before the start of the season, but Arsenal are refusing to give in to their captain's demands and there is no sign of the deadlock being broken.

The Spain midfielder will be absent this

weekend as he recovers from helping his country win the World Cup, but Wenger is certain to face further questions about his desire to keep a potentially unhappy player.

With Fabregas missing, Arsenal fans will get a glimpse of how the future could look without their talisman.

New arrivals Marouane Chamakh, a Moroccan forward signed from Bordeaux on a free transfer, and Laurent Koscielny, a French centre-back bought from Lorient for 10 million pounds, are certain to feature for the Gunners.

While Wenger's men head into the season with much to prove, Celtic will use their matches against Lyon and Arsenal to rebuild confidence after a potentially disastrous 3-0 defeat at Braga in the Champions League qualifying round on Wednesday.

Neil Lennon's team travelled to Portugal hopeful of a positive result to keep them on course for a place in the group stages of Europe's elite club competition.

Instead they slumped to a loss that places their progress in severe jeopardy and leaves Lennon with a dilemma over whether to risk his first-team players or rest them for next week's second leg.

Milan, who finished third in Serie A last season, will be without Brazilian star Ronaldinho who has a leg injury.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Celtic v Lyon (1300GMT), Arsenal v AC Milan (1520GMT)
Sunday
AC Milan v Lyon (1300GMT), Arsenal v Celtic (1520GMT)

Balotelli keen on City move

TELEGRAPH

Mario Balotelli's agent says the teenage striker is "anxious" to complete his protracted move to Manchester City.

The Inter Milan forward has long been linked with a move to Manchester City and all parties were hopeful of completing a deal early this week.

However, Balotelli's agent, Mino Raiola, flew back to Italy from Manchester and admitted they are still far from coming to a deal.

"As long as there's hope there's life," Raiola said. "He's calm but anxious to come to an agreement, that's normal for a lad of 19. We're working and we're hoping."

Reports indicate that the sticking point is the 19-year-old's wage demands.

Mancini is keen to be reunited with Balotelli, who he snapped up as Inter coach in 2006, but has insisted they will not pay inflated salaries to anybody.

Inter have repeatedly said they will not sell the Italy Under-21 international for less than £29 million.

Meanwhile, Inter Milan will visit last season's runners-up AS Roma and host traditional rivals Juventus in their fifth and sixth Serie A matches next season the draw was made on Wednesday.

The European champions, who also won the domestic cup last season to seal an unprecedented Italian treble, open their campaign at perennial strugglers Bologna but the game may be shifted from the Aug. 29 date given they face Atletico Madrid in the European Super Cup on Aug. 27.

Hernandez living a dream

AFP, Mexico City

Mexico international striker Javier Hernandez said he is living a dream ahead of Friday's friendly between former club Chivas of Guadalajara and new side Manchester United.

Hernandez, 22 and nicknamed Chicharito (Little Pea), told reporters ahead of the match in Guadalajara that he could hardly wait to show his stuff as he prepared to play one half for both sides.

"It's a real dream. When I was a little boy my dream was to play for a very big club. Today, I am happy," said the youngster who scored twice at the World Cup for his country.

"Chicharito" has already shown his class after scoring in United's 5-2 win over an American MLS All-Star selection in Houston on Wednesday.

Fans lament Diego exit

Football

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

The end of Maradona's tenure at the helm of Argentina's national team has dealt a hard blow to his fans, even though his performance as coach was a far cry from his genius as a player.

Maradona accused Argentine soccer chiefs on Wednesday of conspiring to oust him and many fans think he deserved a more dignified exit despite Argentina's disappointing showing at the World Cup.

"He is an iconic figure and deserved a more graceful farewell," said Federico Garcia, 33, who works in retail.

"Here in Argentina, we love Maradona. I think the heads of the AFA (Argentine Football Association) kicked him out in a dodgy way."

AFA's executive committee voted unanimously not to renew Maradona's contract as coach on Tuesday, citing "unbridgeable differences" with the former player, who led Argentina to World Cup victory as captain in 1986.

A solemn Maradona retaliated the

following day saying he had been "betrayed" by soccer chiefs and that he had not been given enough time to shine.

"You know that my cycle lasted only for one and a half years. It was the shortest tenure in the past 35 years," he said.

In downtown Buenos Aires, many people said Maradona was "stabbed in the back" and that he was not given a proper shot at running the squad.

"He didn't do such a bad job as coach. We haven't been beyond the quarterfinals in a World Cup since 1990, so I don't think he did much worse than others given that the team was in disarray when he took over," said Claudio Yago, 54, who owns a newspaper stand.

Maradona rose to stardom from a Buenos Aires slum, but his rags-to-riches story hit the rocks after he quit soccer in the 1990s and battled drug addiction, obesity and alcohol abuse.

His appointment as coach of the national team in late 2008 was a remarkable comeback, especially as he had little coaching experience.

"To be coach of the national team, you have to work seriously and that's not something Maradona's known for," said

Brazilian-Italian striker Amauri put the Serie A side ahead in the third minute in Dublin, finishing deftly after a sharp one-two with Diego, before netting his second with 15 minutes to play.

"I always felt we could go out and play the way we did and have patches where we could hassle them, but we knew it would be difficult to do that for 90 minutes against a side of their quality," said Shamrock boss Michael O'Neill.

"In the end I couldn't have asked any more of the players."

Bundesliga side Stuttgart emerged from their game at Norwegians Molde with a 3-2 victory, but only after the hosts had twice fought back from a goal down.

Sebastian Rudy's opener was cancelled out in the 65th minute by a fortunate goal from Mattias Moström, who charged down an attempted clearance and sent the ball bouncing past goalkeeper Sven Ulreich.

Zdravko Kuzmanovic restored the visitors' lead with a free-kick in the 74th minute, only for Magne Hoseth to reply two minutes later, before substitute Martin Harnik's back-post header settled the game in the 82nd minute.

Elsewhere, Sporting Lisbon won 1-0 at Norway's Nordsjaelland and French side Montpellier prevailed 1-0 at Gyor of Hungary.

A goal from new signing Dennis Rommedahl gave Greek giants Olympiakos a 2-1 win at home to Israelis Maccabi Tel-Aviv but Galatasaray let slip a 2-0 lead in the last 10 minutes to draw 2-2 against Serbia's OFK Beograd in Istanbul.

Maritimo of Portugal enjoyed the night's biggest victory, winning 8-2 at home to hapless Welsh outfit Bangor City.

The second legs take place on August 3-5, with heavyweights such as Manchester City, Napoli, Borussia Dortmund and Porto all due to enter the competition in the following round.

Fulham appoint Hughes

AFP, London

English Premier League side Fulham on Thursday named former Wales and Manchester City boss Mark Hughes as their new manager to succeed Roy Hodgson.

Hughes, who enjoyed a successful playing career with Manchester United, Barcelona and Chelsea and has also coached Blackburn Rovers, has signed a two-year deal with the London club.

"I am happy to have joined Fulham following much speculation regarding the appointment of a new manager," said Hughes.

"I am joining on the back of two of the most successful seasons in the club's history, and that in itself brings with it the challenges of expectation and ambition."

"I am confident that with some additions to the squad, hard work and commitment, we can move this club forward in the right direction."

The Welshman will take charge for the friendly fixture against Werder Bremen on August 7.

"I hope the Fulham fans will enjoy some special times during this season's campaign and we will work hard to achieve that," added Hughes.

"I'm looking forward to working with the squad as soon as possible, and in mak-



MARK HUGHES

ing sure the on-pitch preparations are complete before the first competitive ball is kicked in August."

Hughes was contacted by Fulham, last year's Europa League runners-up, after the west London club were unable to lure Ajax coach Martin Jol to Craven Cottage.

With the new Premier League season starting in just over two weeks, Fulham officials had been desperate to find a replacement for Hodgson, who left earlier in pre-season to take over at Liverpool.

Hughes, 46, is likely to be given around 15 million pounds (18 million euros) to spend by Fulham chairman

Mohamed Al-Fayed and he will link up again with chief executive Alistair Mackintosh, with whom he worked closely during his time at City.

The former Welsh international first went into management with the Wales national team and was close to guiding them to Euro 2004 but lost out in a play-off to Russia.

He then moved to Blackburn in 2004 and led Rovers to an FA Cup semifinal and UEFA Cup qualification.

Four years later he joined City but despite pushing the club into the top six, expectations had changed when the Abu Dhabi United Group took charge and he was dismissed midway through last season.

Ibrahimovic fears Mourinho

REUTERS, Oslo



LFP

Zlatan Ibrahimovic fears his former coach Jose Mourinho will create a Real Madrid team capable of ending Barcelona's recent dominance of Spanish soccer.

Ibrahimovic, the Barcelona striker who endured a patchy first season at the Nou Camp,

played for Mourinho at Inter Milan between 2008 and 2009.

"Mourinho is one of the best coaches in the world," Ibrahimovic told reporters on Thursday, ahead of Barcelona's pre-season friendly against Norwegian side Valerenga.

"When he comes to a new club he will build it up to be a winning machine. It will be difficult to beat (Real), but we are the best team in the world."

Barcelona won the Spanish league in 2009 and 2010, and the Champions

League in 2009.

Ibrahimovic, the Sweden international who scored 16 goals in his first season at Barcelona, said he expects to improve in his second, and that the arrival of David Villa should not put his place under threat.

He admitted he had discussed his situation with coach Pep Guardiola after Barcelona bought Villa, Spain's top scorer at the World Cup, from Valencia.

"Every time I change clubs, I think the first year is always the (most) difficult

one, and from all the clubs that I've played in, my best first year has been in Barcelona," Ibrahimovic said.

"He (Guardiola) says I'm important, and then I take it as I will play. If you're not important, you don't play."

Ibrahimovic said Villa was one of the world's best players who would help Barcelona next season. "With Villa on the team we will be even stronger and have even better chance to win the Champions League," he said.



Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson (R) poses with Mexican striker Javier Hernandez after a news conference in Guadalajara City on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP