Barca seek home win

AFP, *Madrid*

Champions Barcelona go in search of their first league home win of the season on Wednesday when they host Sporting Gijon at Camp Nou.

Pep Guardiola's side lost 2-0 to promoted Hercules in their first home match in the league but have bounced back with a 5-1 routing of Panathinaikos in the Champions League and a fine 2-1 win at rivals Atletico Madrid on Sunday.

Barca sit sixth, one point behind Real Madrid and three points behind leaders Valencia, but must do without star man Lionel Messi for the next 10 days after the Argentine damaged ligaments in his right ankle in the final minute of the Atletico win.

Messi was the subject of a robust challenge from Czech defender Tomasz Ujfalusi who was sent off for the challenge which left Guardiola seething.

"We are happy with the Atletico win and it could have finished 5-1 with the number of chances we had," said Guardiola. "However, we are sad about the Messi incident. It is not only Cristiano Ronaldo (of Real Madrid) who needs protecting. The referees should protect all the players."

With Messi out the goals burden falls more on the shoulders of Spanish striker David Villa, a 40-million-euro signing from Valencia, who hopes to add to the solitary league goal he scored on his debut.

It will be a special game for Villa who started his career at hometown club Sporting Gijon before becoming a world star with Valencia, Spain and now Barcelona.

Villa's old club Valencia were expected to struggle without his goals but the 2004 league champions top the table on a perfect nine points two ahead of Sevilla and Real Madrid.

Valencia host fourth-placed Atletico Madrid at the Mestalla stadium on Wednesday looking to maintain their flawless start to the campaign.

Atletico have tasted back to back defeats to Aris Salonica in the Europa League and Barcelona in league after a promising start that began with a European Super Cup win over Inter Milan and two league victories.

Both Valencia and Atletico are expected to challenge for the Champions League spots this season and this is a crucial duel as the head-to-head record would count should both sides finish level on points.

Unbeaten Sevilla lie two points behind Valencia on seven points and hope to consolidate their strong start in the league with a home win over Racing Santander on Thursday.

Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid had a brief taste of top spot on Saturday before being replaced by Valencia and hope for another three points at home to Espanyol on Tuesday.

Real were below par in a fortunate 2-1 win at Real Sociedad on Saturday with a deflected Cristiano Ronaldo free-kick gifting them three points.

Mourinho blamed the hectic match calendar for an average performance saying it was unfair to play Ajax in the Champions League on Wednesday and then Sociedad three days later, however, there is no respite for his side as they take to the field again on Tuesday.

"A draw would have been a fair result," admitted Mourinho. "However, a team that plays in the Champions League on Wednesday has to play on Sunday and can't be asked to play on Saturday."

Real conceded their first goal under Mourinho at Sociedad and looked vulnerable at the back which prompted Mourinho to smash a water bottle into the glass in the dug-out.

The Portuguese coach watched his side jeered in their last league outing at the Santiago Bernabeu when they defeated Osasuna 1-0 so a polished display against Espanyol is expected from the hard-to-please Real public.

Elsewhere Athletic Bilbao host Real Mallorca on Tuesday with Bilbao's Spanish international striker Fernando Llorente looking to maintain his goal-a-game record after scoring in all three of Bilbao's league matches.

In other matches, promoted Levante travel to Almeria on Wednesday looking for their first points of the season after losing their opening three games.

FIXTURES

all 1700 GMT unless stated

Wednesday

Barcelona v Sporting Gijon, Real Zaragoza v Hercules, Almeria v Levante, Valencia v Atletico Madrid (1900 GMT)

Thursday

Getafe v Malaga, Villarreal v Deportivo La Coruna, Sevilla v Racing Santander

PHOTO: AFP

World number one Rafael Nadal of Spain smiles during his arrival at the Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok yesterday. Nadal will compete in the Thailand Open tennis tournament which starts on September 27.

Cesc out for three weeks

SOCCERNET

Cesc Fabregas will be out of action for two to three weeks with a hamstring injury picked up in scoring Arsenal's freak opener in Saturday's 1-1 draw with Sunderland.

The Gunners will be hoping that their talismanic captain manages to return within two weeks, meaning he is fit for the crunch showdown with Premier League leaders Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on October 3.

That is the last game before the international break so even if Fabregas fails to face Chelsea he should definitely be ready to return against Birmingham City on October 16.

He is certain to miss Saturday's game at West Bromwich Albion as well as the trip to Serbia to take on Partizan Belgrade in the Champions League.

He joins Theo Walcott, Robin van Persie, Thomas Vermaelen, Abou Diaby, Aaron Ramsey and Nicklas Bendtner on the treatment table.

"Arsenal Football Club have confirmed that Cesc Fabregas will be out for two to three weeks,'' a statement read.

"The Spanish midfielder gave the visitors an early lead at Sunderland on Saturday but then picked up a hamstring injury. He was substituted just before the half-hour. The extent of the injury was discovered after a scan on Monday afternoon.''

Lazio test for Milan

AFP, *Rome*

With a trip to Roma and a match against mighty AC Milan in their opening two fixtures, Cesena could have been forgiven for embarking upon only their 12th season in Serie A with a touch of fear.

But the Emilia-Romagna team, who two seasons ago were playing in Serie C, have defied the odds and sit top of the Italian tree after drawing in Rome and beating the Rossoneri and Lecce at their atmospheric Dino Manuzzi stadium.

On Sunday, Cesena needed all the help from the ground's boisterous 23,000 fans -- a quarter of the city's population -- after playing most of the match against Lecce with 10 men.

Midfielder Giuseppe Colucci was given his marching orders following a second caution after apparently being mistaken for Japanese defender Nuto Nagatomo.

But despite the injustice, Albanian Erjon Bogdani struck his second goal of the campaign to claim all three points and keep his side above Inter Milan on goal difference.

Cesena, who are yet to concede in Serie A this term, will need all that fighting spirit along with Colucci, who is appealing the dismissal, when they take on Catania in Sicily on Wednesday.

"We are not looking at the table. We just want to stay up," said coach Massimo Ficcadenti, whose cosmopolitan squad features a clutch of on-loan players.

"There's no particular secret to our game -- we are playing with team spirit."

Breathing down their necks are champions Inter, who host Bari on Wednesday after entertaining and impressing in equal amounts on Sunday with a 2-1 comeback win at Palermo.

Samuel Eto'o, who grabbed a brace, confirmed his fine form but Diego Milito, last season's goalscoring hero, has been struggling in front of goal and was taken off with some words of advice from new coach Rafa Benitez.

"We talked about (Peter) Crouch, who at Liverpool went 19 games without scoring," said the former Reds boss, who is hoping Dutchman Wesley Sneijder will be able to return from injury.

Fresh from their stunning comeback win at Sampdoria, the unpredictable Napoli host third-place Chievo Verona at the San Paolo stadium.

Fifth-place Brescia, victors at Chievo on Sunday, entertain Roma, who have begun the season in the kind of sluggish form that saw Luciano Spalletti replaced by Claudio Ranieri early last season.

"The defence is not working as it did last year," said Ranieri, whose side is refusing, yet again, to talk to reporters after captain Francesco Totti was quoted as describing Roma's tactics as 'the old ways of catenaccio'.

"We respect the press but someone has not been fair to me and the players."

To add insult to injury, city rivals Lazio have begun the season surprisingly well with two wins out of three and sit fourth in Serie A following Saturday's impressive victory at struggling Fiorentina.

Edy Reja's side entertain Milan in what is shaping up to be a match that will test both sides' credentials.

With a win, a loss and a draw, new Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri has had a chance to weigh up his forward-heavy squad and he is eager to make new striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic a central component of his team's play.

"We need to find him better and not just by throwing up high balls," said Allegri of the Swedish striker.

"If (Alexandre) Pato and Robinho play he can make more mistakes but he, like the others, needs to improve his condition and understanding with team-mates."

Improving Juventus, who enjoyed the luxury of strolling through the second 45 minutes against Udinese after scoring three of their four unanswered goals in the first half, host out-of-sorts Palermo on Thursday.

FIXTURES

Wednesday (1845GMT)

Cagliari v Sampdoria, Lazio v AC Milan, Catania v Cesena, Inter Milan v Bari, Napoli v Chievo, Brescia v Roma, Lecce v Parma, Genoa v Fiorentina, Bologna v Udinese

Thursday (1845GMT)

Berba points to hard training

SOCCERNET

Manchester United striker Dimitar Berbatov has revealed how his summer training regime has transformed his career at Old Trafford.

Berbatov, who joined United from Tottenham Hotspur two years ago, had previously failed to live up to his £30.75 million price tag. He scored nine Premier League goals in his first season and 12 last term.

The former Bulgaria international has finally found his form in the early weeks of this season, culminating in Sunday's superb hattrick against arch-rivals Liverpool. It means Berbatov, 29, has already netted six times in the league this season after only five games.

Berbatov will now hope he has silenced his critics, and he puts it down to a summer of hard running in between World Cup games.

"I have worked hard on my fitness - so hard," he said. "I'm not a weights guy as anyone can see from my body. But I have been trying even to work on that. I ran six miles every day in the close season. My routine was to watch a World Cup match and then go for a run. Then I would watch another game then go out and have another run.

"I was disappointed with myself that I could not please all of the supporters. The people of Manchester United are the judges and that is the way it should be. It is their team. I am a privileged guest.

"I am just so happy and confident. I feel like everything I imagine on the pitch will come true and that feels awesome. The way I feel right now is great. I'm not tired - I feel alive. I have always said I am so lucky to play here.

"I just can't wait for training. How weird is that?"

Milito not happy

Football

SOCCERNET

The agent of Inter Milan's Diego Milito has hit out at manager Rafa Benitez, claiming that the striker does not feel comfortable under his leadership.

Benitez took over from Jose Mourinho at the San Siro this summer and now Fernando Hidalgo maintains that his client does not feel loved at the club, as he is constantly being substituted.

"Diego doesn't feel the trust from his new coach," the agent told Il Corriere dello Sport. "The Portuguese [Mourinho] made him feel indispensable. He made him feel secure and he would transmit tranquillity.

"These things don't happen now. In fact he is always under scrutiny. And when it's time for a player to come off it's always Milito."

Milito has been a shadow of the player who lit up Serie A and the Champions League last term, with Benitez forced to publicly back him, claiming that his goal drought will soon be broken. However, Milito's agent feels that the manager needs to make more effort with his player.

"Diego is not tranquil, but being a professional he knows these things can happen," Hidalgo said. "He wants to come out of this fast even though he doesn't feel the trust he had last season. Someone like Milito needs the support from his coach to be at his best."

Meanwhile, team-mate Esteban Cambiasso has backed Milito to rediscover his form after he failed to shine against Palermo.

"Diego is relaxed and it is only a matter of time before he gets firing again," Cambiasso said. "What remains important is winning and must focus on the results rather than individual performances.

"After three rounds Inter are sitting back on top of the standings, and whilst it's useless to talk about favourites, we certainly want to be there again at the end of May. Winning here in Palermo is never easy. It is still only the beginning of the season but the points are equally as valuable."

Zanetti suffers chest problem

AP, *Milan*

Still feeling the effects of a chest problem, 37-year-old Inter Milan captain Javier Zanetti has been left off the squad for Wednesday's game against Bari.

He will also likely sit out Saturday's match against AS Roma.

Zanetti was taken to the hospital after getting hit by the ball during Sunday's 2-1 win over Palermo. He played a full 90 minutes but felt pain upon reaching the changing room.

It's unclear if he will return for next week's Champions League game against Werder Bremen.

Zanetti recently extended his contract with Inter through to the 2012-13 season.

Sara slams C'Ron

Football

AFP, *Madrid*

The girlfriend of Real Madrid keeper Iker Casillas, Sara Carbonero, has hit out at star striker Cristiano Ronaldo for being "selfish".

"Ronaldo has always been like that, selfish and an individualist on the pitch and Real Madrid signed him like that," Carbonero, a sports journalist, told popular daytime chat show "Ana Rosa" on Telecinco, the private television station she works for.

"The only problem is that he was bought for 96 million euros so when he does things wrong, he can't be forgiven."

The 25-year-old Portuguese international, the world's most expensive player, had a successful start to his first season with Real in 2009 before it was curbed by an ankle injury from mid-October to late November.

Ronaldo still finished the club's second most prolific goalscorer in the league last season, his impressive tally of 26 goals only one behind teammate Gonzalo Higuain's 27.

This season Ronaldo has been slower to get off the mark, prompting reports that all might not be well with the world's most expensive player.

Several wayward shots and complaints to referees have been jeered by home and away fans, prompting the player to appeal for more fan support and "less whistles" at a Real news conference last week.

It took a deflection from a freekick for the Portuguese pin-up to finally register his first goal of the campaign against Real Sociedad last weekend, Real's third game of the season.

Some reports have suggested Ronaldo has personal problems, but Carbonero denied this: "Nothing is happening to him, he is not depressed, he has not consulted a psychologist as has been said in recent days."

Carabonero, 25, shot to international fame during the World Cup when her reports on the Spain squad for Telecinco on live television from behind the net sparked accusations that she was distracting Casillas.

The controversy abated with Spain's first ever World Cup. Casillas, 29, kissed Carbonero on the mouth when she interviewed him for Telecinco just minutes after the victory in a broadcast watched by millions in Spain.

SARA CARBONERO

Dumitrescu quits Steaua

AFP, *Bucharest*

Romanian football great Ilie Dumitrescu has quit his post as Steaua Bucharest manager after just six weeks in the job, according to local reports Tuesday.

Dumitrescu, who took over the Romanian league side at the start of August following the resignation of Victor Piturca, said he was resigning "because I can't stay somewhere I'm not wanted".

A former player with Tottenham Hotspur, FC Sevilla and West Ham, the 41-year-old Dumitrescu took exception to coming under flak from fans after Steaua's 1-1 draw against league side Astra Ploiesti.

He added: "I don't think I deserve to be treated like that by the supporters."

Club owner Gigi Becali has not yet said who will replace Dumitrescu.

Currently third in the Romanian league, Steaua have managed to go through 12 coaches in seven years.

Togo boss banned

Football

AFP, *Lome*

A former manager of Togo has been slapped with a three-year ban for deploying a team of impostors masquerading as Togo internationals in a friendly against Bahrain.

Bahrain took to the pitch in the fixture in Manama on September 7 believing they were taking on the national side from the west African state.

Bahrain won the game, a warm-up for the West Asian Football Federation Championship, 3-0, only for it to later emerge that they had beaten a bunch of fraudsters.

An inquiry was launched last Thursday into the affair by the Togolese football authorities who on Monday identified former national coach Bana Tchanile as the man behind one of the most embarrassing episodes in the country's sporting history.

"After investigations it's clear that the organisation, the preparation and the follow-up was planned by Bana Tchanile without permission, nor agreement from the authorities," a statement announced.

The statement, from the committee appointed on a temporary basis to replace the national federation which has been dissolved by FIFA, added: "Mr Tchanile is banned from all activities relating to football for a period of three years.

"Investigations are continuing to identify all those others implicated in this affair and for subsequent sanctions to be imposed."

A member of the caretaker committee, on condition of anonymity, confirmed that the team that had taken on Bahrain was made up of impostors.

"Togo didn't send its national football team to Bahrain. As proof, the national team was returning from Gaborone after their 2012 Africa Cup of Nations qualifier against Botswana," he stated.

For Tchanile this is the second time in the space of a matter of weeks that he has fallen foul of the Togolese football authorities.

Last month he was suspended for two years for taking part with his youth training group in a competition in Egypt in which his players were kitted out in the national colours without permission.

Mertesacker return delayed

AFP, *Bremen*

Germany defender Per Mertesacker's expected return to action for the Werder Bremen v Hanover derby has been delayed due to a lack of form.

Mertesacker fractured his eye socket playing for Germany a fortnight ago and had expected to play for his Bundesliga side wearing a protective mask on Tuesday.

However a lack of training during his injury lay-off means the 25-year-old centre-back, who feared for his sight after being elbowed in the face in a Euro 2012 qualifier against Azerbaidjan on September 7, is not match fit.

"I had a ten-day layoff without training, and I don't feel ready. I just have to wait for the green light from doctors," he said Tuesday.

It means Werder are without their two main central defenders, as Brazsilian Naldo is also out injured. That means a likely start for Frenchman Mickael Silvestre.

In next month's Euro 2012 matches Germany play Turkey at Berlin's Olympic Stadium on October 8 and Kazakhstan in Astana four days later.

Police questions Edel

Football

AFP, *Paris*

Paris Saint-Germain goalkeeper Apoula Edel was on Monday interviewed by police as part of an investigation into claims he lied about his age and real identity.

Police sources revealed that Edel was questioned as a witness following a complaint made by his former coach and agent Nicolas Philibert, who alleges that he is owed 30,000 euros in unpaid debts.

Edel was quizzed at a police station in Poissy in the Paris suburbs and left late on Monday afternoon without speaking to reporters.

The goalkeeper first hit the headlines last year when Philibert, who says he coached the player in Cameroon, claimed Edel was 29 rather than 24 and was actually called Ambroise Beyamena.

French sport weekly Le 10 Sport on Friday published documents accusing Edel of lying about his age and identity, which were handed to the authorities by Philibert.

PSG subsequently released a statement saying they were "dismayed" by the reports and claiming that the article "added nothing new" to the case.

The club have also made a claim of defamation against Edel's accuser.

The documents published by Le 10 Sport included a copy of a request for a playing licence for the 1998-99 season made under the name Ambroise Beyamena, whose date of birth was given as April 19, 1981.

The request had been validated by the Cameroon football federation and was subsequently authenticated by the Cameroonian authorities in January this year.

Sevilla, beaten 1-0 by PSG in the Europa League group phase on Thursday, said over the weekend that they had complained to UEFA about "a presumed irregularity" concerning Edel's registration with the French club.

Philibert claims he was a mentor to Edel, reportedly lending him money and helping him find a club in Armenia, the country that he went on to represent at international level.