

Chelsea's City test

AFP, London

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard has promised to lead from the front as the fallen giants of English football bid to recover from the embarrassment of their League Cup defeat by fourth-tier Northampton.

Anfield boss Roy Hodgson admitted making a mistake in fielding a virtual second team in the midweek match Liverpool lost on penalties.

Liverpool have taken just five points from their opening five Premier League matches but are still just three points behind fourth-placed Manchester City.

England midfielder Gerrard and several other first-team regulars are set to return for Saturday's home league match against Sunderland and the player said it was their duty to rally the club.

"Football isn't just about highs," said the 30-year-old. "Throughout my career I have experienced both highs and lows and probably learnt more from the lows because you look at yourself first, look at what went wrong and try to learn from your mistakes."

"The players are allowed to be down today but it's up to players like myself to pick them back up. We need to get everyone's head focused on Sunderland now."

"What I would ask all the supporters is to trust the players and what the players are saying."

"I've been reading and listening to what they've been saying and they've all said we'll get it right in the end -- and we will."

Reigning champions and table-toppers Chelsea are set to face the sternest test of their title credentials when they travel to big-

spenders Manchester City.

Chelsea were once renowned for 'flashing the cash' and aren't exactly poor financially, yet City's 120 million pounds' spending in the latest transfer window was stunning even by the standards of their London rivals.

Both sides suffered midweek League Cup defeats but for Chelsea, four points clear of Arsenal and Manchester United, the league season could hardly have gone better with five wins out of five and 21 goals.

Chelsea and City have several players out injured but the champions are set to have England central defender John Terry in their side after he marked his return from injury by playing in half of the Blues' 4-3 League Cup loss to Newcastle United.

"He played without and problems; it was in the plan to play him for just 45 minutes," Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti said.

Arsenal will be without Cesc Fabregas when they welcome West Brom to the Emirates although the influential Spain midfielder could be back from a hamstring injury for next week's clash against Chelsea.

"I hope that he will be ready for the Chelsea match and that he will be fine," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger. "But at the moment we don't know, it's too early."

Meanwhile bottom of the table West Ham take on Tottenham in a London derby and second-bottom Everton travel to Fulham.

Blackpool, the surprise package of the top-flight, are at home to north-west rivals Blackburn while Birmingham welcome Wigan to St Andrews.

Sunday sees Manchester United make the short journey to Bolton while Newcastle face Stoke and Wolves play Aston Villa.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated)

Saturday

Arsenal v West Brom, Birmingham v Wigan, Blackpool v Blackburn, Fulham v Everton, Liverpool v Sunderland, Manchester City v Chelsea (1145GMT), West Ham v Tottenham

Sunday

Bolton v Manchester United (1100GMT), Newcastle v Stoke (1510GMT), Wolves v Aston Villa

Messi back in training

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Argentine star Lionel Messi returned to training on Friday, five days after injuring his ankle, but away from the first-team squad, the club announced.

"Lionel Messi's road to recovery took a step forward on Friday as he strolled onto the training pitch for the first time to work on his individual programme," Barcelona said on its website.

"He has moved up a gear and moved outside along with a coach and worked away from the rest of the first-team squad as he battles to regain full fitness."

Messi was stretched out in the final minute of Sunday's league match against Atletico Madrid, which Barca won 2-1, following a robust tackle from Czech defender Tomas Ujfalus, who was sent off for the challenge.

Barcelona said Monday that Messi, the reigning FIFA World Player of the Year, would miss at least the next two matches after suffering ligament damage to his ankle.

Ujfalus has apologised to Messi, saying he had "tried to go for the ball", but was "unlucky as my foot stepped on his ankle".

Becks to sue US magazine

AFP, Paris

David Beckham said on Thursday he will sue an American weekly magazine that published allegations that the former England captain had slept with a prostitute.

Beckham's legal representatives said in a statement that the claims were "completely untrue and totally ridiculous, as the magazine was clearly told before publication".

"Sadly we live in a world where a magazine can print lies and believe they can get away with it."

The statement followed a story in the In Touch magazine relating to an alleged relationship in New York in August 2007.

Beckham, who plays for Los Angeles Galaxy in the United States, has been married to pop star Victoria for 11 years and they have three children.

Fergie eyes De Gea

AFP, Madrid

Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson travelled to Spain this week to watch Atletico Madrid goalkeeper David de Gea, Spanish sports newspapers said on Friday.

The Scot was at Valencia on Wednesday to see the club's league match against Atletico.

Valencia are United's next opponent in the Champions League group stage but the sports daily AS said Ferguson was there to watch 19-year-old De Gea.

The paper noted it was rare for Ferguson to travel overseas to watch future opponents, a job normally done by his assistants. In addition, he was accompanied to Valencia by the club's goalkeeping coach.

British press reports have said the English champions are on the lookout for a successor to Dutchman Edwin van der Sar, who turns 40 next month.

De Gea has been in impressive form since the start of the league season in Spain.

"Looking at him, I am reminded of when I started out 11 years ago," said Spain and Real Madrid keeper Iker Casillas.

Mexes given 3-match ban

AFP, Rome

AS Roma's French defender Philippe Mexes has been handed a three-match ban after blasting a match official while being sent off in Wednesday's 2-1 defeat to Brescia.

Mexes had already been yellow carded for a tackle on Brescia forward Eder in the 14th minute, and was sent off for a second booking on the Brazilian just after the hour mark.

On his way off the pitch the Frenchman started remonstrating with one of the touchline officials. Television pictures appeared to reveal that Mexes did not actually make contact with Eder the second time.

The match referee, Carmine Russo, was widely criticised after Wednesday's match.



Juventus forward Vincenzo Iaquinta (R) fights for the ball with Palermo defender Mattia Cassani during their Serie A encounter at the Olympic Stadium in Turin on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Palermo stun Juventus

AFP, Rome

Former European champions Juventus slumped to a second defeat in four matches on Thursday as Palermo grabbed a 3-1 victory to leave the Turin giants sixth from bottom of Serie A.

Juve had beaten Udinese 4-0 last weekend to give their fans some optimism, but that was before Palermo's hit-and-run.

The visitors were ahead after just two minutes thanks to impressive Argentine midfielder Javier Pastore.

Josip Ilicic added a second in the 62nd minute before a superb 30-metre free-kick from Cesare Bovo five minutes from the end put the result beyond doubt.

Vincenzo Iaquinta's 87th-minute strike was just a consolation for Juve.

Pastore, who has been linked with a move to Inter Milan as well as Chelsea, also hit the woodwork in a memorable performance.

Inter Milan returned to the summit of Serie A on Wednesday after two goals each for strikers Diego Milito and Samuel Eto'o

helped the champions to an easy 4-0 win at home to Bari.

Little Cesena, top on goal difference above Inter at the beginning of the evening, conceded for the first time since being promoted, going down 2-0 at Catania.

It was also a night for Italy's most coveted goalscorers to come to the fore as Milito, Fiorentina's Alberto Gilardino and Antonio Di Natale all hit the net for the first time in this campaign.

After four games, Inter are on 10 points, one clear of Brescia and Chievo, who scored impressive wins at home to Roma, 2-1, and away at inconsistent Napoli, 3-1, respectively.

AC Milan and Lazio dropped points after a 1-1 draw in Rome where Zlatan Ibrahimovic opened the scoring only for Sergio Floccari to equalise for Lazio.

While Inter have won all of the last five titles, it is the first time former Valencia and Liverpool coach Rafael Benitez has enjoyed top spot in Italy.

Without Javier Zanetti, injured for the first time in five years, Inter were given a scare after just 20 seconds when Abdelkader Ghezzal crossed for Sergio

Almiron to shoot against the post.

But Wesley Sneijder was among the Nerazzurri ranks and the Dutchman was soon pulling the strings in midfield.

It was Eto'o though who created the first goal, beating his man and then crossing from the left for Milito, rediscovering his predatory instincts, to thump in a header from inside the six-yard box on 27 minutes.

Inter were handed the second goal when Marco Rossi handled an innocuous Sneijder cross four minutes after the restart with Eto'o sending Jean Francois Gillet the wrong way from the resulting spot kick.

Ghezzal almost pulled a goal back for Bari on 56 minutes, firing just wide from the edge of the box, but the game was over seven minutes later when Lucio tumbled in the box to win Inter a second penalty.

Eto'o sent Gillet the wrong way a second time from 12 yards, this time slotting the ball into the opposite corner.

After Julio Cesar turned over a fierce drive from Alessandro Parisi, Milito ran through to grab his second and Inter's fourth with a cool finish with four minutes to go.

No Lionel again for Barca

REUTERS, Madrid

Champions Barcelona will be without the injured Lionel Messi again at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday but team mate David Villa said he suspected the Argentine would be back for next week's Champions League trip to play Rubin Kazan.

"He's very keen to return. I think, at the most, he will miss two games, those against Sporting Gijon (on Wednesday) and Bilbao," the Spain striker told reporters.

The world player of the year is recovering from strained

ankle ligaments picked up against Atletico Madrid last weekend.

For Bilbao, Spain forward Fernando Llorente is working to shake off a knee problem while his strike partner Gaizka Toquero has an ankle injury.

"To beat Barca we have to be at 100 per cent and hope they don't even reach 40 per cent," coach Joaquin Caparros told sports daily Mundo Deportivo.

Real Madrid's Sergio Ramos is likely to return to the centre of defence again with Pepe suspended for the leaders' trip to promoted Levante on Saturday. Kaka, Ezequiel Garay, Raul Albiol, Fernando Gago and Sergio Canales are injured.

"To be top after four games is of little significance at this stage," Jose Mourinho told reporters. "What's important is

that we are winning even under construction which gives the players confidence in what we're doing."

Atletico Madrid hope to have Argentina striker Sergio Aguero back for the home match against Real Zaragoza

on Sunday after he missed the midweek draw against Valencia to recover from an ankle injury.

Sevilla travel to play promoted Hercules on Sunday looking to lift themselves after Thursday's 1-1 home draw with Racing Santander, in which goalkeeper Andres Palop remonstrated with unhappy fans at the final whistle.

There's one fan who has been insulting us from the start of the season," the Sevilla captain told reporters. "Today, without insults and in a polite manner, I asked him to get behind us and said we would try to do better."

Almeria coach Juan Manuel Lillo is under pressure to turn around his side's form when they visit Deportivo Coruna on Sunday seeking a first win this season.

FIXTURES

Saturday

Sporting Gijon v Valencia 1500 GMT, Levante v Real Madrid 1700 GMT, Athletic Bilbao v Barcelona 1900 GMT

Sunday

all 1400 GMT unless stated
Racing Santander v Getafe, Espanyol v Osasuna, Real Mallorca v Real Sociedad, Deportivo La Coruna v Almeria, Hercules v Sevilla 1600 GMT, Atletico Madrid v Real Zaragoza 1800 GMT

Monday

Malaga v Villarreal 1800 GMT



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla striker Alvaro Negredo (L) celebrates his goal with teammate Tiberio Guarente during their Primera Liga clash against Racing Santander at the Sanchez Pizjuan Stadium on Thursday.

FIXTURES

(all times GMT)

Saturday

AC Milan v Genoa (1800), Roma v Inter (2045)

Sunday

(all times 1500 unless stated)
Bari v Brescia, Catania v Bologna, Cesena v Napoli (1330), Chievo v Lazio, Fiorentina v Parma, Juventus v Cagliari (2045), Palermo v Lecce, Sampdoria v Udinese

loaned to Milan on the same day, the fourth player transfer between the clubs in the August window.

English side Portsmouth have said they are unhappy that Genoa have not paid their first instalment of the fee.

Juventus entertain Cagliari on Sunday with coach Luigi Del Neri pulling his grey hair out after Thursday's 3-1 defeat by Palermo following a 4-0 weekend win over Udinese.

This weekend's matches were due to be called off because of a players' strike in a dispute over a collective contract and other matters.

Negotiations led to the walkout being postponed pending more talks but the players' union has won the battle to have matches on the national holiday of Jan. 6 moved.

Serie A bosses have said the Jan. 6 matches will now take place on Jan. 19 rather than Dec. 22 as first announced.