



Tottenham Hotspur striker Peter Crouch (R) vies with playmaker Luka Modric (C) during a training session at their Spurs Lodge training complex in Chigwell yesterday ahead of their Champions League clash against FC Twente.

Spurs look to VDV

AFP, London



Tottenham Hotspur's Rafael van der Vaart is determined to use his vast Champions League experience to help his club earn their first win in Group A on Wednesday.

The Netherlands international midfielder is expected to play against the Dutch champions FC Twente at White Hart Lane, with Spurs manager Harry Redknapp looking to attack as he has injury problems in defence.

"I have a lot of experience in the Champions League," van der Vaart said.

"I have played with Ajax in the Champions League, and Hamburg and Madrid. I hope I can help the team and I'm sure I can."

The 27-year-old has made a positive impact in his four appearances since signing from Real Madrid just before the transfer window closed.

"He will do well for us," said Redknapp. "I have been really impressed with him. He is a good lad, he wants to play, he wants to win and has had a good attitude."

"He's got 80 caps for his country and you don't get them if you are a mug do you?" Redknapp added.

Van der Vaart is similar in style to Spurs' Croatia playmaker Luka Modric but feels the two can play in the same team.

"He is a great player," van der Vaart said. "I always like to play with good footballers. He plays a little bit in the Dutch way, with good technique, he is fast and I think it is going to fit well."

Van der Vaart and Modric have seen their roles increase in importance as Tottenham's Aaron Lennon has suffered a slump in form that has seen him lose his place in the England squad.

"I think it's about confidence," Redknapp said. "You've got to keep working with him because, when he's on his game he's a top-class

wide player, so we need to get him back to doing that again."

Lennon's pace could be important against Twente as Redknapp looks to solve his defensive problems by attacking.

Younes Kaboul, William Gallas, Michael Dawson and Jonathan Woodgate are all out and Ledley King is struggling.

Both Tottenham and Twente drew their opening group game 2-2, in Spurs' case 'throwing away' a two-goal lead away to Werder Bremen while Twente managed a creditable point at home to reigning champions Inter Milan.

"We have to go for it," Redknapp said. "Getting a win is all important, if we get a win it sets us up nicely. The group is wide open on one point each at the moment."

"Inter Milan are obviously the favourites but after that it is wide open. Twente have some good players, we have looked at a couple of their games on video and they have one or two really good players."

"But at home, the crowd are up it will be an intimidating atmosphere like we did against Young Boys (the Swiss side Spurs beat to reach the group stage proper) we attacked them and got after them from the start."

"That is what we have to do in these (home) European games, especially in this group," Redknapp insisted.

"In Milan you might set up differently. If you play some teams you would not be playing 4-4-2 or you would get ripped to pieces but we are at home this week."

Jermain Defoe is out of action with an ankle injury, with Redknapp admitting Spurs are missing the England forward's movement in the penalty area.

"We haven't really got that player at the moment," he said. "Someone sharp whose going to make little runs away from defenders for them to play people in. But I think the squad's strong."

Fan heckles Beckham

Football

AFP, Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Galaxy have decided not to take any action against David Beckham who confronted a supporter who heckled him after Friday's loss to the New York Red Bulls, the club said Monday.

The former England captain approached the fan saying "Say it to my face" after the fan taunted him about allegations Beckham had sex with prostitutes.

The incident, caught on camera, took place under the stands in the tunnel area near the Galaxy dressing room.

"We have reviewed the incident internally and determined that no action is required," said Patrick Donnelly, the Galaxy director of communications.

The fan yelled "stop with the prostitutes", prompting an angry Beckham to turn around before responding "Do you want to say it again? Want to say it again? You got a Galaxy shirt on."

The incident was captured on a camera and posted on the News of the World tabloid website.

League officials are also reviewing the matter as standard procedure says Dan Courtemanche, MLS' executive vice president

of communications.

Last year, Beckham was fined 1,000 dollars for gesturing to a fan who had been taunting him from the stands.

Galaxy fans were angry that Beckham, who is the highest paid player in the league at 6.5 million dollars, had missed the first 17 games of the MLS season so he could play for AC Milan.

On Friday, Beckham filed a lawsuit against a US celebrity weekly that published allegations that he slept with prostitutes.

The suit was filed in a Los Angeles court and accuses the magazine In Touch of slander, libel and infliction of emotional distress.

Asked following Friday's game if the legal action is a way of making a strong statement, Beckham told AFP: "Without a doubt. That's why we have done the legal action and we will see."

The suit also names 26-year-old Irma Nici who bills herself on her website as "the world's most sought-after call girl."

Nici alleges she slept with Beckham several times, including in a New York hotel soon after he joined the Galaxy in 2007.

Beckham has been married for 11 years to former Spice Girl Victoria Beckham. The couple and their three sons live in an 18.2 million dollar mansion in Beverly Hills.



DAVID BECKHAM

Cazorla lifts Villarreal

REUTERS, Madrid

Two goals from Spain winger Santi Cazorla helped Villarreal climb to second place in La Liga with a 3-2 comeback win away to 10-man Malaga on Monday.

All five goals came in a topsy-turvy opening 33 minutes with the game settling down only after Malaga's Portuguese forward Eliseu was sent off in the 41st, allowing the visitors to take control.

Villarreal continued their strong start to the campaign, racking up their fourth consecutive league win to move on to 12 points from five matches, one short of leaders and near neighbours Valencia.

Barcelona are third on goal difference, with Real Madrid fourth on 11 points.

Eliseu gave Malaga a fourth-minute lead after a free kick but two goals in three minutes turned the game on its head, Cazorla firing in a deflected shot and Italy's Giuseppe Rossi netting a fine solo effort in the 24th.

Jose Rondon headed Malaga level in the 30th after good work from Quincy Owusu-Abeiyee down the left, but the score changed again after only a few minutes.

Cazorla, who missed out on Spain's World Cup finals squad because of an injury-interrupted season last year, proved he was back to his best with a superb winner cracked in from outside the area.

Just before the break, Spain defender Carlos Marchena got Eliseu sent off after theatrically falling to the ground clutching his face as the two went forehead to forehead.

FIGC donates €100,000 to Pakistan

AFP, Rome

The Italian Football Federation on Monday donated 100,000 euros to the flood relief effort in Pakistan.

Federation president Giancarlo Abete handed over a cheque to Italian Red Cross president Patrizia Ravaioli in the presence of Pakistan's Ambassador to Italy Tasnim Aslam.

"This is an opportunity for the whole football world to show our support for the Pakistani population," said Abete.

Nearly 21 million people have been affected by the floods in the north of the country and officials say eight million people are reliant on handouts.

The donation will only make a small dent in the 120-million euros the UN High Commission for Refugees recently said it still needs to buy tents and other supplies.

United battling injuries

AFP, Paris



Manchester United will be without Ryan Giggs and Wayne Rooney when they

seek to kick-start their Champions League campaign at in-form Group C rivals Valencia on Wednesday.

Welsh veteran Giggs, 36, has been ruled out after picking up a hamstring injury in United's 2-2 Premier League draw at Bolton Wanderers on Sunday.

"It is a hamstring and I am afraid he will be out for a couple of weeks," said United coach Sir Alex Ferguson, after seeing his side register their third draw in three away league matches this season.

Rooney was also withdrawn early against Bolton and television cameras later showed him holding an ice pack against his ankle.

The England international has struggled for form this season, scoring just one goal for United since the start of the campaign as rumours swirl in the tabloid press about his private life.

It led former England coach Kevin Keegan to assert that Rooney's "confidence is shot"

and his absence from the trip to Spain will only serve to fuel speculation that he is not in the right frame of mind to play.

Ferguson had already been deprived of Antonio Valencia's services after the Ecuador winger sustained a serious ankle injury in the disappointing 0-0 draw at home to Rangers in United's opening group game.

Owen Hargreaves (knee) and Michael Carrick (Achilles) are also missing.

Valencia assumed early control of Group C with a 4-0 thrashing of Turkish outfit Bursaspor and the trip to La Mestalla will be United's most challenging assignment of the group phase.

Unai Emery's side lost Spanish internationals David Villa and David Silva in the summer, but after four wins from five matches they currently top the Spanish top flight.

"The players are grasping that the most important thing is the team and not the individuals and that is the key to the good start," said Emery after his side's 2-0 win at Sporting Gijon on Saturday.

Barcelona are a point behind Valencia in La Liga and the Catalan giants received an unexpected fillip on Monday when Lionel Messi was named

in the squad for their Group D

trip to Russians Rubin Kazan.

The gifted Argentine forward, who scored 45 goals in all competitions last term, had been expected to be sidelined for longer after damaging ankle ligaments against Atletico Madrid on September 19.

France international defender Eric Abidal has also been included in Pep Guardiola's 19-man squad, but utility player Adriano misses out with a torn thigh muscle.

Barca, European champions for a third time in 2009, opened their campaign with a superb 5-1 thrashing of Panathinaikos.

They will, however, be just wary of Rubin, who pulled off a shock 2-1 win at Camp Nou in the group phase of last season's competition.

Defending champions Inter

FIXTURES

Wednesday

(1845GMT unless stated)

Inter Milan (ITA) v Werder Bremen (GER), Tottenham Hotspur (ENG) v FC Twente (NED), Hapoel Tel Aviv (ISR) v Lyon (FRA), Schalke 04 (GER) v Benfica (POR), Valencia (ESP) v Manchester United (ENG), Rangers (SCO) v Bursaspor (TUR), Rubin Kazan (RUS) v Barcelona (ESP) (1630GMT), Panathinaikos (GRE) v

Milan host Werder Bremen in Group A, having slumped to the first league defeat of the Rafael Benitez era at the weekend.

The nerazzurri went down 1-0 at Roma in Serie A and are likely to be without last season's top scorer Diego Milito due to a thigh strain.

Bremen, meanwhile, must forego the services of influential trio Clemens Fritz, Torsten Frings and Claudio Pizarro, all of whom succumbed to injury in Saturday's 3-2 defeat of Hamburg in the Bundesliga.

"This is a harsh blow to us, a huge loss of quality ahead of a difficult trip," said Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf.

Inter kicked off the group with a 2-2 draw at competition debutants FC Twente and the Dutch side pursue their Champions League adventure with a visit to Tottenham.

In Group B, Lyon will look to put their abysmal domestic form behind them when they travel to Hapoel Tel Aviv.

Claude Puel's side, Champions League semifinalists last season, are 18th in Ligue 1 after losing at home to local rivals Saint-Etienne on Saturday.

Schalke, who lost 1-0 at Lyon in their group opener, host Portuguese champions Benfica in the night's other Group B fixture.

Rafa brushes off crisis talk

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan coach Rafael Benitez brushed off talk of a crisis at the European and Italian champions ahead of their Champions League clash against

Werder Bremen at the San Siro.

Inter entertain the Germans on Wednesday in their first home clash following a 2-2 draw away to FC Twente in their opening Group A match.

All four teams -- are level after both opening games finished in four-goal stalemates.

Inter also sit atop the Serie A table but on Saturday suffered their first defeat of the season, a 1-0 reverse at AS Roma.

And with a mounting injury list, some in the press had suggested last season's treble winners were in trouble.

"Crisis? I look at the league table and I can't see where the crisis is," said Benitez on Tuesday in response to a question from a German journalist, before insisting the Roma defeat was barely a blip.

"Tactically there are things we can improve on but this team has a lot of attacking players and it's not always easy to find the right balance," he admitted.

"But I watched the match against Roma again and we played well, if we played that same game 100 times we would win 99 of them."

Benitez hauled off strike pair Diego Milito and Goran Pandev due to injury during that match, although both have been included in the squad to face Werder.

If the pair miss out Benitez's resources up front will look bare but he refused to question the club's decision to sell young talent Mario Balotelli to Manchester City in the summer.

"Do I regret Balotelli (leaving), when you make a choice it's always better not to look back," said Benitez.

One player who may get his chance is Brazilian Mancini, widely regarded a flop since his move to Inter from Roma two years ago.

He has barely played and was loaned out to AC Milan at the back end of last season.

"He's a player with experience who could bring quality to the starting line-up, he's an extra resource," said Benitez.

The former Liverpool and Valencia boss also denied he had any problems with Romanian full-back Cristian Chivu, who aimed an angry outburst at his coach on the pitch on Saturday.

"The issue with Chivu was resolved in the changing rooms, these things happen

on the pitch," added the Spaniard.

"For me the most important thing was to understand whether or not he had a point. We've spoken about it in training and now everything is fine."

"It's absolutely not a disciplinary question. Maybe it's not the best way to discuss tactics but at least we've solved it."

"All teams have internal problems, you need only look at the team that beat us (on Saturday)."

"I've read that (Samuel) Eto'o could be a problem but I believe he could be the solution more than the problem."

While both teams are beset by injuries, both will be able to call on their main playmakers -- Inter's Wesley Sneijder and Werder's Marko Marin -- an area in which Benitez believes his team has the advantage.

"Werder are a good, experienced team, they have injuries but so do we, something which is normal in modern football given the great intensity," he said.

"But it will be a tough match, all the teams drew in the first week so we're all in the same situation."

"It's true that Marin is a great player who can play in two or three different positions but right now I prefer Wesley because he's playing for us and tomorrow (Wednesday) I think he'll play better."



Inter Milan striker Samuel Eto'o controls the ball during a training session in Appione Gentile yesterday on the eve of their Champions League encounter against Werder Bremen.

Minnows take centre-stage

Football

AFP, Paris

Unheralded Mainz top the table in Germany, Cesena have led Serie A, Saint-Etienne are back at the summit of the French first division and Barcelona were beaten, at home, by minnows Hercules.

Strange things are afoot in European football.

Over the early weeks of the season, in every major league on the continent, the big guns have struggled and the lesser lights have seized their chances.

Mainz beat reigning German champions Bayern Munich 2-1 on Saturday to record their sixth win in six league matches.

Their completely unexpected form has taken them to the top of the Bundesliga for the first time in their history, while Bayern are already 10 points off the pace in ninth.

"We don't feel bigger than we are," said Mainz coach Thomas Tuchel, whose charges are just one win short of the league record for consecutive wins at the start of a season.

Last season's German runners-up Schalke, meanwhile, opened the campaign with four straight defeats and sit second from bottom with a single win to their

name.

An almost identical fate has befallen Roma, who are also in the relegation zone despite having finished second in the Italian top flight last term.

Lyon, second in France last season, are currently 18th with just one win from seven league games, while five-time European champions Liverpool are only three points off the bottom of England's Premier League.

For the teams bucking the trends in the early weeks of the 2010-11 campaign, the common denominators are belief, heart and good old-fashioned hard work.

"There's no particular secret to our game. We are playing with team spirit," said Cesena coach Massimo Ficcadenti, whose promoted side briefly topped the Italian standings after three matches.

"We are not looking at the table. We just want to stay up."

A similar refrain resounds in France, where 10-time champions Saint-Etienne have returned to the Ligue 1 summit for the first time since February 1982, despite having finished in 17th place for the past two seasons.

Les Verts forward Bakary Sako credits coach Christophe Galtier with the turnaround.

"Since his arrival, he's tried to create a team spirit," said Sako prior to his team's 1-0

win at neighbours Lyon on Saturday.

"He told us that, if we wanted to stay up, we'd only achieve it by collective effort."

The biggest shock of the season's early weeks was Barcelona's 2-0 loss at home to Hercules in their second league game.

It was the heaviest home defeat of Pep Guardiola's tenure and the Barcelona coach was full of praise for the La Liga newcomers, who are sitting snugly in mid-table after beating Sevilla 2-0 at the weekend.

"I congratulate Hercules," he said. "They came here and played well. They made it difficult for us and they got their reward."

Making life difficult, in the form of aggressive pressing, is increasingly the buzz tactic for unfancied teams taking on star-studded opposition.

Arsenal fell to a 3-2 defeat at home to promoted West Bromwich Albion in the Premier League on Saturday and victorious coach Roberto di Matteo credited a high-octane defensive effort for his side's unlikely triumph.

"We pressed them very high, in their half, all over the pitch," said the Italian. "We managed not to let them play their usual way."

It is a recurring theme. Mainz striker Adam Szalai said his side's "mission" against Bayern had been "to put the bench on."