



FOOTBALL IS MY PASSION: Bangladesh cricket captain Shakib Al Hasan (C) lets loose a fierce shot while playing a game of football with the students of BKSP in Savar yesterday. Shakib, who led the Tigers from the front to complete a 4-0 whitewash of New Zealand on Sunday, made a surprise visit to the country's lone sports institute where he learned his trade.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Holdings' Spurs challenge

AFP, Paris

Having drawn 2-2 at FC Twente and thrashed Werder Bremen 4-0, holders Inter Milan face their most taxing challenge to date in this season's Champions League when Tottenham visit San Siro on Wednesday.

The London side also opened their account with a 2-2 draw -- at Bremen -- but their 4-1 demolition of Twente in their last outing suggests they will be Inter's biggest rivals for top spot in Group A.

"I expect a difficult match against a team that is mentally strong, who push high up the pitch and are good on the counter-attack," said Inter coach Rafael Benitez, a Champions League winner with Liverpool in 2005.

"We're going to have to play very well if we want to win."

A goal from Samuel Eto'o -- his 12th in 11 games this term -- brought the Italian champions a 1-0 win at Cagliari on Sunday, keeping them two points behind early Serie A pace-setters Lazio.

The in-form Cameroon hitman is expected to lead the line in the continued absence of last season's top scorer

Diego Milito, but Benitez has doubts over holding midfielder Esteban Cambiasso and Macedonian forward Goran Pandev.

Tottenham have never competed in the Champions League in its current guise and their only previous appearance in Europe's top club competition dates back to 1961-62, when they reached the semifinals.

A 2-1 defeat of Fulham at the weekend allowed Spurs to hold onto fifth place in this season's English top flight, but coach Harry Redknapp says they will adopt a cautious approach in Milan.

"We'd like to win but we're not going to go out and start swarming all over them," said Redknapp. "They are a top team, so you have to be aware of that. There is real danger. Eto'o is playing fantastically well."

Eto'o's form means he will undoubtedly be the man to watch for Inter, but all eyes will be on Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney for very different reasons when his side host Turkish champions Bursaspor in Group C.

United are joint-top of their pool, after an impressive 1-0 win at Valencia in their last game, but speculation over Rooney's future at the club has dogged them since the weekend.

The out-of-form England star played for just 18 minutes in United's 2-2 draw at home to West Bromwich Albion on Saturday, in which they let slip a 2-0 lead, amid rumours he has fallen out with Sir Alex Ferguson.

The United boss is reportedly unhappy with Rooney over stories in the tabloid media about his private life the semifinals.

FIXTURES

Wednesday (all 18:45 GMT)
Inter Milan (ITA) v Tottenham Hotspur (ENG), FC Twente (NED) v Werder Bremen (GER), Lyon (FRA) v Benfica (POR), Schalke 04 (GER) v Hapoel Tel Aviv (ISR), Manchester United (ENG) v Bursaspor (TUR), Rangers (SCO) v Valencia (ESP), Panathinaikos (GER) v Rubin Kazan (RUS), Barcelona (ESP) v

and if he starts Wednesday's game on the bench, newspaper speculation is bound to intensify.

Of equal concern to Ferguson will be his side's newly acquired habit of throwing leads away, and left-back Patrice Evra has called on his team-mates to address the problem.

"We need to start killing games off," he told club television station MUTV.

"We need to take our chances and score more goals when we can. It's not like we don't have a lot of opportunities."

Rangers, Group C co-leaders, welcome Valencia to Ibrox in Wednesday's other group game.

Barcelona tackle FC Copenhagen at Camp Nou in Group D, with the Danish underdogs travelling to Catalonia in the unexpected position of group leaders.

Barca, champions in 2009, are two points back in second place, having drawn 1-1 at Rubin Kazan in their last game, and have scored just four goals in four home games in La Liga this season.

"We have missed chances but the important thing is to create them," said Barca captain Carles Puyol.

"We have top quality players and the goals will come. We're not worried."

Barca schemer-in-chief Xavi could be rested for the visit of Stale Solbakken's team, after he revealed he was still struggling with tendinitis following the 2-1 defeat of Valencia in the Spanish top flight on Saturday.

In Group B, leaders Lyon will look to prolong their 100 per cent record when they welcome Portuguese champions Benfica to Stade Gerland.

Del Piero gives evidence

REUTERS, Milan

Alessandro Del Piero, the highest profile player to be called so far as a witness in Italy's match-fixing trial, said on Tuesday his Juventus side had deserved the two Serie A titles which were stripped because of the scandal.

The long-running trial, which features former Juventus general manager Luciano Moggi as one of the defendants, is the criminal equivalent of the sporting tribunal which took away the Turin side's 2005 and 2006 scudettos for procuring compliant referees.

Asked by a lawyer how many trophies he had won with Juve, Del Piero told the court: "It depends. I also count the two scudettos taken away. While I have been playing, I believe that every side that have won a championship have deserved it."

The former Italy forward, who has spent almost his entire career with Juventus, equalled Giampiero Boniperti's Juve record of 178 Serie A goals on Sunday and usually avoids controversy.

However, the soft-spoken 35-year-old is backing Juve's campaign for Inter Milan to have the 2006 league title which was awarded to them also stripped after new evidence suggested their rivals could have also been implicated in the scandal.

European champions Inter, bidding for their sixth straight Serie A title this season, deny wrongdoing but the Italian soccer federation has taken fresh phone tap evidence from the criminal trial in Naples which it is examining.

Several other Italian players and referees were heard as witnesses on Tuesday.

'Zidane deal very close'

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho said Monday that a deal to bring France legend Zinedine Zidane onto the coaching staff is very near.

"This seems to me to be too big for me to talk about, it's for the chairman to do," he told a news conference.

"When we've made a decision, we will make it known. But I feel that (Zidane) is near to being linked with the professional team."

Zidane "is part of the heritage of football and of Real Madrid. He should, I believe, be tied to football, tied to Real Madrid and he should be happy."

The former France and Real Madrid star, who retired from football in 2006, currently works as an advisor to the club's chairman, Florentino Perez.

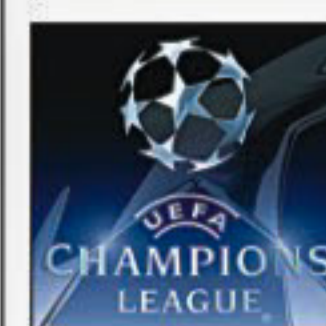
Zidane himself said on Saturday that he is going to start working more closely with Mourinho.

"I can confirm to you that I'll be collaborating with him (Mourinho)," Zidane told Europe 1 radio during a football event at Marseille's Stade Velodrome.

"I'm going to work more with him. It suits me because I wanted to be a bit more involved in the structure of the club."

Fight for top spot

AFP, Madrid



Spanish champions Barcelona hope to make home advantage count when they host FC Copenhagen at Camp Nou on Wednesday bidding to wrestle top spot in Champions League Group D from the surprise Danish leaders.

Barcelona are buoyed by a 2-1 comeback win over Valencia on Saturday and the 2009 winners now turn their attention to Europe knowing a win over unbeaten Copenhagen would move them above the Danes into top spot.

Copenhagen have won both of their opening group games without conceding a goal to stand two points ahead of Barcelona who have four points after drawing 1-1 with Russians Rubin Kazan in their last outing.

Barcelona had been shaky at home in the league but turned in a mesmerising second half to defeat title rivals Valencia thanks to goals from Andres Iniesta and Carles Puyol and leave coach Pep Guardiola a happy man.

"In football a lot is the mental side," said Guardiola. "Nobody can doubt these players and they have shown why again (against Valencia)."

"It was a big step forward and winning this type of game gives you great strength. I thought we did very well."

Spanish World Cup star Xavi returned from injury and played a hand in both goals but the gifted midfielder could be rested against Copenhagen as he is still struggling with the tendonitis that ruled him out of Spain's last two Euro 2012 qualifiers.

"I am well, but the truth is I still feel slight pain," admitted Xavi.

"I expect to recover soon. I started well enough but as the minutes went by I felt the tendon begin to strain slightly. I need to go little by little and be patient."

Another midfield worry for Barca is Mali international Seydou Keita who was forced off late in the Valencia win with a groin strain.

Barcelona thumped Panathinaikos 5-1 in their first European game but have found goals hard to come by in front of their own fans with four from four matches in the league as they continue to spurn chances.

Against Valencia David Villa was particularly wasteful in front of goal but the Spanish star, now his country's joint all-time leading scorer with 44 goals, has scored in each of Barcelona's Champions League matches and hopes to take out his frustration on Copenhagen.

Barcelona have never lost to Danish opposition in European fixtures with five wins and a draw and begin as strong favourites to inflict a first Champions League defeat of the campaign on Copenhagen.

The capital club's most prominent player is speedy Danish international winger Jesper Gronkjaer, 33, who played for Ajax, Chelsea and Atletico Madrid before returning to his homeland in 2006.

Copenhagen's maiden campaign in the Champions League was back in the 2006/07 season and proved forgettable as they lost all their away games and finished bottom of a group containing Manchester United, Celtic and Benfica, however, on this occasion they have a great chance of making the knockout phase for the first time in their history.

Senegalese forward Dame N'Doye has netted in both of Copenhagen's wins over Rubin Kazan and Panathinaikos and believes his side could upset the mighty Barcelona if they can keep it tight at the back and wait for a chance on the counter attack.

"If we play against Barcelona like we usually play then we have a chance of getting a positive result," said N'Doye.

"The important thing will again be to stop them from scoring and if we can do that and get a goal on the break then we will have a great chance of winning."

Hercules stop V'real

AFP, Madrid



Villarreal missed the chance to go top of the Spanish league on Monday after a 2-2 draw away at Hercules which saw three players sent-off.

The visitors will be ruing not taking full advantage of playing against 10-men for most of the second-half after Hercules French striker David Trezeguet was sent-off in the 44th minute.

His red card came minutes after he had put the hosts into the lead for the second time in the match - that was cancelled out by Borja Valero midway through the second-half before he too was sent-off for a dangerous tackle on Dutch international Royston Drenthe.

Their goals came after Hercules Paraguayan international Dely Valdez had given the hosts the lead in the 26th minute only for Spanish World Cup winner Joan Capdevilla to equalise three minutes later.

Trezeguet - cast out into the international

wilderness by disgraced former France manager Raymond Domenech - showed his good and bad sides within four minutes towards the end of the first-half.

First he reacted quickest when a Villarreal defender made a hash of his clearance and the Euro 2000 winning striker volleyed the ball into the net.

However, minutes later he was booked and then after appearing to have said something to the referee in response to the caution, he received a second yellow card.

Hercules put 10 men behind the ball in the second-half trying to protect their slender advantage until Valero - on loan from English Premier League side West Brom - pounced in the 63rd minute when he was found unmarked on the edge of the box and he shot into the right hand corner.

Valero, though, went from hero to villain in the 80th minute as he received a straight red card for a dreadful tackle on Drenthe, and he was followed to the showers by team-mate Argentinian defender Mateo Musacchio three minutes later.



Hercules striker Nelson Valdez is ecstatic after scoring the opening goal against Villarreal during their Primera Liga clash at the Rico Perez Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Stalemate at Ewood

AFP, Blackburn



Blackburn Rovers and Sunderland failed to defy the critics expectations here on Monday as they battled out a 0-0 draw in their Premier League clash.

Both sides had managed just 14 goals in their 14 matches so far this season and Sunderland could not even take advantage of playing against 10 men throughout the second-half after Rovers central defender Christopher Samba was sent off in time added on of the first-half.

The draw - Sunderland's fifth successive stalemate - leaves them only three points clear of third from bottom Wolves.

A dire first-half saw Sunderland go closest to scoring with England international Darren Bent - who had to miss last week's Euro 2012 0-0 draw with Montenegro because of injury - missing on two occasions.

Bent, who just missed out on going to the World Cup finals, failed to beat former England goalkeeper Paul

Robinson when one on one with him in the 23rd minute.

The 26-year-old former Spurs forward went close in time added on in the first-half as his snap shot from outside the area flashed past the right-hand post.

That effort came shortly after Samba had been given his marching orders by referee Lee Probert, who consulted with a linesman before wielding the red card to the Congolese international for bringing down Danny Welbeck when he was in on goal.

Rovers had only the one chance of note in the opening 45 minutes but Nikola Kalinic headed Hadji El Diouf's cross wide.

Bent had the first chance of the second-half but his header from close range went wide when he should have at least forced Robinson into a save while Sunderland midfielder Steed Malbranque saw an effort go over the bar just after the hour mark.

Robinson - who snubbed England manager Fabio Capello by announcing his international retirement shortly after being named in his first post-World Cup finals

squad - was far the busiest of the goalkeepers.

The former Leeds and Spurs guardian made three saves in the final 20 minutes to guarantee the hosts a point as he frustrated first Bent, then substitutes Boudewijn Zenden and Asamoah Gyan.

Mexico hire De La Torre

AFP, Mexico City

Jose Manuel De La Torre was on Tuesday named as the new coach of Mexico with a remit to guide El Tricolor to the 2014 World Cup.

De La Torre, 44, succeeds Javier Aguirre, who stood down following this year's World Cup in South Africa where Mexico lost 3-1 to Argentina in the second round.

Two caretaker managers have taken control since the World Cup - Enrique Meza, who led Mexico to a 1-1 draw with Spain, and Efraim Flores. De La Torre has won the Mexican championship on three occasions, once with Chivas de Guadalajara and twice with Toluca, his present club.



Inter Milan striker Samuel Eto'o (R) and midfielder Sulley Muntari (L) play with the ball during a training session in Appiano Gentile yesterday on the eve of their Champions League encounter against Tottenham Hotspurs.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy slump to 16th

Football

AFP, Rome

Italian Football Federation president Giancarlo Abete has expressed his disappointment with the country's FIFA world ranking but stressed that it was understandable.

Italy have slumped to 16th in the FIFA list due to be released on Wednesday, a drop from 13th last month due in no small part to their woeful showing at the World Cup in South Africa.

"Being 16th in the FIFA ranking is not befitting of Italy," said Abete. "But it's a strange position which takes into account our last results."

"After the terrible result at the World

Cup we've won two and drawn one in our three European Championship qualifiers.

"But this ranking also takes into account the level of our opponents (Northern Ireland, Estonia and Faroe Islands).

"Unfortunately there's a risk that we will stay there for a while but we're convinced and determined to return to the top."

Abete also declined to speculate on what sanctions Italy may face for failing to control Serbian hooligans who disrupted and caused the abandonment of last Tuesday's Euro qualifier against Serbia in Genoa.

Serbia are likely to face punishment as it was their fans who caused the trouble, but Italy may also be penalised for not providing adequate security.

"There's no point in speculating, we're waiting for UEFA's Disciplinary Commission's decision with confidence," he said before suggesting that he was expecting compensation.

"We don't want to make money out of these events but obviously we suffered damages to our image and our territory."

"This has never before happened in the history of the Italian national team."

"But it's clear that a message must be sent out against football-related violence."

Following the violence last week, 16 people were taken to hospital and 36 Serbs were arrested.

Hooligans threw flares onto the pitch at rival Italy supporters at the Marassi stadium before clashing with police outside the ground.