

San Siro awaits Real

AFP, Paris



Jose Mourinho's return to the San Siro will highlight Wednesday's Champions League action which could see his Real Madrid advance to the last 16 with a win over AC Milan as Arsenal, Chelsea and Bayern Munich also bid to seal their place in the knock-out stages.

Mourinho led city rivals Inter Milan to the title last season and with three games left in the group stages his star-studded side, who currently have nine points and sit top of Group G, have a chance to qualify for the last 16.

Real Madrid have never won at the San Siro but will sew up qualification with a second straight win over the Rossoneri, and could do so as group leaders if Dutch side Ajax fail to win at bottom-placed French team Auxerre.

Midfielder Sami Khedira believes a solid defence will be key on the night.

"You need a good defence to win titles and if we can keep a clean sheet in Milan then we will win," said the German star.

"The great teams who have gone a long way in the Champions League have almost always been the ones who conceded the least goals. That's the key."

"Our goal in the San Siro will be to go and get all three points and move into the knockout phase."

A win would also be enough to put English giants Arsenal, Chelsea and Bayern Munich of Germany through.

Bayern, last year's runners up, travel to Romanian club CFR Cluj in Group E with a draw enough if there is a winner between FC Basel and AS Roma.

Carlo Ancelotti's Chelsea will guarantee top

spot in Group F with victory over a Spartak Moscow side they swept away 2-0 at the Luzhniki Stadium two weeks ago.

Should second-placed Spartak lose, French side Marseille, in third, will hope to make the most of the situation by seeing off point-less Slovak outfit MSK Zilina.

The build-up to the Stamford Bridge clash has, however, been overshadowed by ugly scenes which followed Spartak's win over rivals Zenit St Petersburg last week.

Over 100 fans were held after chairs were thrown onto the pitch and Spartak manager Valery Karpin had to be restrained after clashing with a Zenit player.

Defeat could see Spartak drop to third but they will be boosted by the fact that Chelsea's Frank Lampard will be out as he continues his recovery from hernia surgery.

Ancelotti can count on the return of defenders Jose Bosingwa and Alex, but he could opt to stick with Serb Branislav Ivanovic, who has performed well at centre-half and right-back during the pair's absence.

In Group H, Arsenal will be hoping to carry their battling Premier League form through to Europe after Alex Song's late header denied struggling West Ham a share of the spoils and kept the Gunners five points behind leaders Chelsea at the weekend.

Cameroon international Song scored in his third consecutive appearance, having also been on target against Shakhtar Donetsk and in the 3-0 win at Manchester City.

With Dutch striker Robin van Persie also on the comeback trail, Gunners boss Arsene Wenger could soon be spoilt for choice up front, as FC Shakhtar Donetsk look to avenge their 5-1 drubbing at the Emirates Stadium.

Group H tailenders FK Partizan bid for their first points at home against third-placed Sporting Braga of Portugal.

FIXTURES

Wednesday

(1945GMT unless otherwise stated):
Basel (SUI) v AS Roma (ITA), CFR Cluj-Napoca (ROM) v Bayern Munich (GER), Chelsea (ENG) v Spartak Moscow (RUS), MSK Zilina (SVK) v Marseille (FRA), AC Milan (ITA) v Real Madrid (ESP), Auxerre (FRA) v Ajax (NED), Partizan Belgrade (SRB) v Sporting Braga (POR), Shakhtar



Chelsea striker Didier Drogba (C) fights for the ball with defender Branislav Ivanovic during a training session at Surrey yesterday on the eve of their Champions League encounter against Spartak Moscow.

PHOTO: AFP

VDV and Sneijder in twitter battle

SOCCERNET



Tottenham's Rafael van der Vaart and Inter Milan's Wesley Sneijder have already started their Champions League battle: off the pitch on Twitter.

The two Dutchman, who are good friends and began their careers together at Ajax, have begun the banter with some amusing exchanges on the site, ahead of their clash at White Hart Lane on Tuesday.

Sneijder kicked off the battle with a message for Van der Vaart, who missed the first match through suspension, saying: "I'm cleaning the Champions League trophy with a Tottenham shirt." But Van der Vaart replied: "Thanks for cleaning it up for me. I'm already creating space in my cup cabinet."

Sneijder has since upped the ante, claiming: "We're gonna [sic] give you a football lesson in

London." But Van der Vaart retorted: "I met your defence in Milan, it didn't look good. It was like cheese with holes in it."

Inter scored four goals in the first match and Sneijder used that fact for the next barb, joking: "I found a good goalkeeper on eBay. Shall I send you the link?" But Van der Vaart replied: "We don't need him, you won't come into our penalty area!"

Sneijder also mocked English football claiming it is all about power and athleticism not skill and technique and took the mickey out of Van der Vaart's goal from a few inches out against Everton.

He said: "In that country football is a game where you have to run as hard as you can from the one end of the pitch to the other, isn't it?... Nice goal, but even my six year old cousin would have scored this one."

And Van der Vaart responded: "These goals also count but at White Hart Lane against you guys I will score from every angle."

Argentina set to appoint Batista

AFP, Buenos Aires

Interim Argentina coach Sergio Batista, who succeeded Diego Maradona in July, is set to be confirmed in his post by the Argentine Football Federation (AFA) on Tuesday.

The AFA executive committee are expected to make the announcement the day after a meeting at which Batista assisted, according to AFA sources on Monday.

Batista was asked for "a summary of his interim role and to explain what he expected to do if appointed," AFA spokesman Andres Ventura said after the meeting.

Batista, who led Argentina to the 2008 Olympic title, has the backing of the AFA's powerful president Julio Grondona.

The 1986 world champion has also the support of 2009 Ballon d'Or winner Lionel Messi.

"I want him to stay because we feel comfortable with him, the group is working well and I love our style of play," said Barcelona striker Messi.

Appointed after Argentine legend Maradona's side exited the World Cup after a heavy 4-0 quarter-final defeat to Germany, Batista has had mixed fortunes. After a 1-0 win in Ireland, and a 4-1 success against a depleted Spain, Argentina fell 1-0 to Japan.

Maradona, however, remains bitter towards his former teammate.

"If Batista says that Messi is now happy it's because he disguised himself as 'Pinon Fijo' (a clown in a television show), because 'el Checho' (Batista's nickname) cannot make anyone happy."

Argentina have failed to win a title since the 1993 Copa America.

They are set to play an important match against Brazil on November 17 in Doha.

Harry threatens boycott

REUTERS, London



Tottenham Hotspur manager Harry Redknapp has threatened to boycott post-match television interviews if he is punished for criticising the referee involved in Nani's controversial goal in the 2-0 defeat at Manchester United on Saturday.

"If I can't come out and answer the questions in a truthful manner...don't expect me to come out and talk to TV after the match, ever," Redknapp told a news conference on Monday ahead of his side's Champions League game against Inter Milan.

After referee Mark Clattenburg had ruled play on instead of awarding an expected freekick on Saturday, Nani nicked the ball from bemused Spurs goalkeeper Heurelho Gomes to score the second goal.

A fuming Redknapp said after the Old Trafford match: "Clattenburg is responsible for

one of the worst refereeing decisions ever. He's had a nightmare.

"The officials will come up with a story that makes it look right. That's the way it happens. He made a cock-up, but he'll come up with some excuse."

Although the Football Association will decide on Tuesday whether to charge Redknapp with misconduct for his comments he was in no mood to back down on Monday.

"It was a farcical situation and if they try to make an issue of it then I'll make some issues," Redknapp said.

"Doing those interviews, three or four minutes after a game, it's not something we enjoy and when we get beat it's the last thing you want to do but it's part of the job and the public has a right to know."

"But there's no point in me saying 'Mark handled it jolly well'. If we can't tell it as it is, we'll have to tell it as it wasn't and say we didn't see it."

Navas to have ankle surgery

REUTERS, Madrid

Sevilla winger Jesus Navas will have surgery on his troublesome left ankle after aggravating a previous injury in training on Monday.

The Spain international had been making good progress but hurt himself when attempting a cross and surgery was recommended by medical staff, the La Liga club said on their website (www.sevillafc.es).

Navas will miss Sevilla's match at home to Valencia next Monday and could be out for several weeks.

Cesc misses Shakhtar tie

AFP, London

Spanish midfielder Cesc Fabregas has a hamstring injury and will miss Arsenal's Champions League match with Shakhtar Donetsk in Ukraine on Wednesday, manager Arsene Wenger revealed.

The Frenchman though believes that Fabregas will be available to play against Newcastle in Sunday's Premier League action.

"He has a good chance to play on Sunday but tomorrow night is too risky," Wenger said.

"He has no real strain, just a bit of pain. I don't know what it's down to but we cannot take a gamble as he has had injuries before. There's still a bit of reluctance to push it 100 per cent."

Wenger also has fitness concerns over three of his other midfielders, with Alex Song, Andrey Arshavin and Denilson all struggling.

"Alex Song has a problem with his calf which we will assess today, he has a chance not to travel," Wenger said.

Ronnie denies censure

SOCCERNET



AC Milan playmaker Ronaldinho has moved swiftly to deny newspaper reports claiming that he criticised his side's tactics in the aftermath of their 2-1 home defeat to Juventus on Saturday.

Italian daily La Gazzetta dello Sport reported on Monday that Ronaldinho was overheard in a local bar questioning Rossoneri coach Massimiliano Allegri's decision to play Zlatan Ibrahimovic as a lone striker.

But the two-time FIFA World Player of the Year dismissed the latest press reports about his supposed criticism of the team as a total fabrication.

"In general I don't like to speak after the games when I do play, and especially when I don't play," Ronaldinho told Sky Italia.

Asked if the newspaper allegations were true, he said: "No. There is nothing to all this. I have been here for three years and all the people at Milan know me."

"I don't allow myself to judge the coach's decisions and the condition of my team-mates.

There is nothing true in what I read this [Monday] morning."

There has been regular speculation in recent months that Ronaldinho, who did not feature against Juventus as he continues his recovery from a thigh injury, is unhappy in Milan and is seeking a move to either Major League Soccer side LA Galaxy or a return to Brazil with Flamengo.

But after being rewarded for some impressive recent displays with a recall to the Brazil national team after an 18-month exile last week, Ronaldinho revealed his main focus is now on being fit to face Real Madrid in the Champions League on Wednesday, a match he is desperate to be involved in.

"I feel good and I have a lot of enthusiasm," Ronaldinho said. "We are going into an important game. I have the desire to play, help out and do my best. The last two training sessions are important for me and for the team."

"In the first game the two goals that we conceded at the beginning made life difficult for us. Now we must only think about doing what our Coach asks of us to get the three points."



Referee Michael Oliver (C) sends off West Bromwich Albion defender Gonzalo Jara (2nd from R) after a foul on Blackpool forward Luke Varney (R) during their Premier League clash at Bloomfield Road on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Arsene sings Jack praise

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said Jack Wilshere could become a top-class player after the teenage England midfielder committed himself to an extended contract with the club on Monday.

Wilshere, who has been with the Gunners since he was nine years old, has become a first-team regular this season, making eight Premier League appearances and featuring in all three of Arsenal's Champions League matches.

Wenger, who loaned Wilshere to top-flight rivals Bolton last season, now expects the promising playmaker to go on to even greater heights with north London side Arsenal.

"It's such great news that Jack has committed his long-term future to the club," Wenger said after Arsenal, who confirmed the new contract, refused to say how long Wilshere would now be staying at the Emirates Stadium.

"Jack is a fantastic footballer with a huge amount of potential, and we have all seen with

his performances so far that he is a very gifted player who could be an extremely influential player at the top level of the game.

"At still only 18 years of age, there is still so much more to come from him and we're all excited by the fact that Jack Wilshere will be an Arsenal player for years to come."

Wilshere became Arsenal's youngest league player when he faced Blackburn in September 2008 aged 16 years and 256 days and their youngest European player against Dynamo Kiev in the November of that year.

He made his full England debut against Hungary in August and now, having shown a young English player can come through the ranks at Arsenal, a club that relies heavily on imported talent, Wilshere is eager to go on to greater things.

"I've got a long way to go before I can become the player I dream of becoming and I'm sure I'll keep making the odd mistake, but it is a massive help for me having a special manager like Arsene Wenger and so many quality team-mates and the unbelievable Arsenal fans around me," he said.

"I believe there is a lot more to come from me."

Blackpool on the rise

AFP, Blackpool



Blackpool's impressive start to life in the English Premier League saw them rise to ninth in the table after a 2-1 victory at home to nine-man West Bromwich Albion gave them a first top-flight win at Bloomfield Road this season here on Monday.

Goals either side of the break from Charlie Adam and Luke Varney secured the Tangerines' victory on a rain swept night but the course of the match was all but decided when 25-year-old Michael Oliver, the Premier League's youngest referee, sent-off Baggies duo Pablo Ibanez and Gonzalo Jara inside the opening half hour.

However, a superb solo effort from West Brom's Youssuf Mulumbu, who scored five minutes from time with a brilliant shot into the top corner after beating several Blackpool defenders, set up a dramatic finish.

Austria international Paul Scharner then went close to an equaliser for Roberto di Matteo's side, who remained sixth despite this defeat, when he headed narrowly wide from a free-kick before Steven Reid blasted over the top.

Both promoted sides had chances to score further goals and, in the final minute

of the four added on at the end of the game, West Brom forced a corner only for Blackpool to catch them on the counter-attack.

But DJ Campbell shot wide to fray Blackpool manager Ian Holloway's nerves.

Oliver's decision to show red card to 'last man' Ibanez, who brought down Campbell in the box in the 11th minute, was questionable as Jara was still in close attendance.

But Oliver had no hesitation in pointing to the spot and Adam scored from the ensuing penalty, despite former England goalkeeper Scott Carson getting a hand to the ball.

"I think the game as a spectacle, with the rules the referee has got to apply...I'd prefer a yellow card (to Ibanez) and the penalty," Holloway told Sky Sports.

"It's a great move, probably the best of the game, a great ball from Charlie to DJ Campbell, who has turned him. But is it really a sending-off?"

"I thought that really ruined the game as a spectacle."

Holloway added: "We are trying to learn to play at this level. I've never had that (playing against nine) as a manager before but I'm delighted we've won at home, even though we've had only four home games this season."

"That's 13 points we've got now and 13 points at this stage of the season, I'd like to say to the people who said we'd only get 10, 'you are wrong again'."

"We are going to improve and get better."

West Brom have won plaudits for their passing game this season but there was no denying the brutality of Jara's two-footed challenge on Varney near the corner flag that saw the Chilean defender sent off in the 29th minute.

"It would have been nice to see a good football game but that was destroyed by the events on the night," said West Brom boss di Matteo.

"The first incident was a penalty but, in my opinion, it was not a sending-off as we had a player who was close enough," the former Chelsea and Italy midfielder added.

"The second one, he got it right the referee, it was a sending-off."

"Our player (Jara), he lost it a bit in the head with the first decision and he made a terrible tackle. Then we just had to try not to concede another goal and hit them on the break."

Despite their seemingly insurmountable handicap, West Brom continued to press and there was a sense of relief among home fans when Varney turned in a cross from Elliot Grandin past Carson just after the hour mark.