

Fight for top spot

AFP, Paris

Manchester United and Barcelona complete the formalities of the Champions League group phase on Tuesday, desperately playing down their roles as favourites but also keen to get their mathematics right.

United face fellow second-round qualifiers Valencia at Old Trafford with the only issue at stake being who finishes top of Group C.

The Spanish side are three points behind but to take top spot they must become the first team to score against Sir Alex Ferguson's men in Europe this term.

Ferguson will play a competitive side as he wants to make sure United finish top and avoid the likes of Real Madrid and Barcelona until the latter stages of the competition.

"We will be playing a strong side because we want to top the group," said Ferguson. "Real Madrid are top of their group, Barcelona are top, Bayern (Munich) are top.

"It's not that you're afraid of them but you want to keep them out of the road until later."

Owen Hargreaves and Antonio Valencia remain long-term absentees for United, although Michael Owen is close to making a comeback from a hamstring injury.

Barcelona, buoyed by their 5-0 demolition of Real Madrid and Saturday's 3-0 win at Osasuna, have already ensured top spot in Group D.

Fringe players such as Bojan Krkic, Jeffren and Thiago Alcantara could be drafted in for the home clash with Rubin Kazan, who can grab the runners-up spot.

"We have managed to take first place in the group, which is very important," said

Barcelona star Pedro Rodriguez.

"However, it's far too early to talk about winning the Champions League."

Rubin Kazan, who stunned Barcelona 2-1 at Camp Nou last season, have six points to Copenhagen's seven, with the Danish side finishing their first stage fixtures with a home game against Panathinaikos.

In Group A, Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp admitted he is also desperate for his side to secure top spot with a victory over FC Twente because that would ensure they avoid facing Barcelona in the first knockout round.

Spurs have already qualified for the last 16 but Redknapp isn't taking their trip to Holland lightly because he knows failure to win could see them surrender first place to defending champions Inter Milan, who currently trail the Londoners on goal difference.

"Inter Milan will go to Germany (to face Werder Bremen) looking to win because that top position is important," said Redknapp, who saw Barcelona demolish

FIXTURES

Tuesday (1945GMT):

FC Twente v Tottenham, Werder v Inter Milan, Benfica v Schalke 04, Lyon v Hapoel Tel-Aviv, Bursaspor v Rangers, Man Utd v Valencia, Barcelona v Rubin

Real Madrid last week.

"I think anyone wants to avoid Barcelona. It (the win over Real) was just amazing; it was as good as I have ever seen. I don't think I've ever seen a better performance."

In Group B, Schalke and Lyon are also already assured of qualification with the German side a point ahead.

To overhaul the leaders, Lyon must beat Hapoel Tel-Aviv and hope Schalke fail to win at Benfica.

Schalke travel to Portugal buoyed by their 2-0 win at home to defending Bundesliga champions Bayern on Saturday, with goals from Spain midfielder Jose Manuel Jurado and defender Benedikt Hoewedes.



XAVI



MESSI



INIESTA

Barca trio on Ballon d'Or shortlist

AFP, Paris

Three Barcelona players -- Andres Iniesta, Xavi and Lionel Messi -- have been shortlisted for the FIFA Ballon d'Or award for 2010.

Iniesta and Xavi played for Spain's victorious World Cup team, while Messi played for Argentina in South Africa.

The winner will be announced in Zurich on January 10.

Last year the trophy went to Messi for his outstanding play at Barcelona.

World governing body FIFA released a first shortlist of 23 players in October 26 with seven members of Spain's World Cup winning squad in the running for the prestigious Player of the Year award.

The revamped award is a combination of the FIFA World Player of the Year award and the France Football Ballon d'Or trophy, which have been run separately until now.

Italian sports daily Gazzetta Dello Sport reported in its Sunday edition that the award would go to Iniesta, who scored the winning goal in the World Cup final against the Netherlands in July.

Dutch playmaker Wesley Sneijder had been considered a strong candidate for the award, but he failed to make the shortlist.

Javier Zanetti, Sneijder's Inter Milan team-mate and captain, expressed his anger at Sneijder's snub and said he was also annoyed that Inter striker Diego Milito, last season's top scorer, was overlooked for the original list of 23.

"It's absurd. Wesley's a fantastic player and if we won the treble (of league, cup and Champions League) last season, it was also thanks to him," said the Argentine.

"But for me it's even more serious that Diego Milito wasn't even considered amongst the candidates.

Nilmar sinks Sevilla

AFP, Madrid

Villarreal reclaimed third place in the Spanish first division with a 1-0 home win over Champions League rivals Sevilla on Sunday with Brazilian striker Nilmar's ninth league goal of the season sealing victory.

Nilmar, the club's record signing at 11 million euros, struck on 29 minutes as Villarreal made it 19 points from 21 at home and climbed back into third after Espanyol had temporarily gone a point ahead than with a 1-0 home win over Sporting Gijon.

For Sevilla it was a third successive league defeat and the club trail Villarreal by 10 points in the standings and are eight points off the Champions League places.

"We deserved more from the game and we should have got a draw," said Sevilla coach Gregorio Manzano. "The goal allowed them to be more relaxed and play their game."

Espanyol sit two points behind Villarreal, maintaining their 100-percent home record with a 1-0 win over Sporting Gijon at the Cornella-El Prat Stadium.

Espanyol were reduced to 10 men with midfielder Jose Baena sent off on 52 minutes but that did not stop forward Luis Garcia scoring a 69th-minute winner to move four points clear of fifth-placed Valencia.

It was a third consecutive league victory and a perfect seventh win from seven at home for

RESULTS

Espanyol 1 (Luis Garcia 69) Sporting Gijon 0

Malaga 4 (Eiseu 27, Recio 43, Rondon 52, 54) Racing Santander 1 (Rosenberg 45)

Getafe 3 (Rios 19, 27, Parejo 78) Real Mallorca 0

Almeria 1 (Piatto 77) Real Zaragoza 1 (Gabi 67-pen)

Villarreal 1 (Nilmar 29) Sevilla 0

Real Sociedad 2 (Prieto 26-pen, San

Sunday.

After failing to score in their last two matches Malaga went goal crazy with Venezuelan international striker Jose Rondon scoring twice in as many minutes as the club moved out of the relegation places with Sporting Gijon taking their place.

Elsewhere promoted Real Sociedad defeated Athletic Bilbao 2-0 to win the first Basque derby since the 2006/07 season.

A Xabi Prieto penalty on 26 minutes and a Mikel San Jose own goal handed Sociedad the derby spoils and they climb to sixth.



Villarreal striker Nilmar (L) controls the ball under pressure from Sevilla defender Alexis Ruano during their Primera Liga clash at the El Madrigal on Sunday.

Ronaldo having DNA test

AFP, Sao Paulo

Star Brazilian footballer Ronaldo said Monday on his Twitter feed that he is undergoing a DNA test to determine whether he is the father of a five-year-old boy living in Singapore.

"Life is full of surprises. After the sadness over yesterday's game (when his Corinthians team lost), today I got to know Alex, a beautiful, polite and healthy boy," the 34-year-old player wrote.

"Now we are waiting for the results of the test and will take on the responsibilities and pleasures that the results give us," he said.

The mother of Alex, Michele Umezu, has been trying since 2009 to have Ronaldo recognized as the father and is demanding child support.

She says she met Ronaldo in a party in Tokyo in 2002 celebrating Brazil's championship in the World Cup that year.

Ronaldo, she says, returned to Tokyo in 2004 during a tour of Real Madrid, who he was playing for at the time. She said she became pregnant by him at that time.

Reports said Michele Umezu was a 28-year-old Brazilian living in Singapore.

Ronaldo, nicknamed the "Fenomeno," already has three children: a 10-year-old son with his ex, and two younger daughters, one aged one year and the other eight months, with his current wife Bia Anthony.

L'pool plan Indonesia academy

AFP, Jakarta

English football club Liverpool FC is planning to set up its first Southeast Asian academy for young players in Indonesia next year, its coordinator said Monday.

The proposal will be pushed this week when the Reds' legendary former striker Ian Rush on Thursday visits the country of 240 million people, where football is hugely popular.

Rush, 49, will "give impetus and assess developments", said Chris Wren, executive director of the British Chamber of Commerce in Indonesia, which acts as a bridge to the club.

"This is the first formal academy pilot in Southeast Asia. It does not necessarily follow that a full academy will materialise," he told AFP.

"However, if this pilot is successful, as we believe it will be, then it makes the establishment of a permanent academy more likely" in 2011, he added.

The academy is likely to be set up in Jakarta, with its Football Association-accredited coaches coming from England, The Jakarta Globe newspaper reported on Monday.

Juve stroll past Catania

AFP, Rome

Fabio Quagliarella suffered a Frank Lampard moment on Sunday when he had a perfectly good goal ruled out in Juventus's 3-1 win at Catania when officials failed to spot his shot had crossed the line.

Quagliarella unleashed a 43rd-minute drive from a Milos Krasic pass which crashed against the crossbar before bouncing behind the line and back into play in a replay of Lampard's effort in England's World Cup defeat to Germany.

Juventus had already opened the scoring in the 35th minute when Vincenzo Iaquinta set up Simone Pepe to volley home.

Catania struck back immediately when Fabio Grosso misjudged a cross and Japanese star Takayuki Morimoto tucked the ball away from close range.

Quagliarella did get on the scoresheet just before the break after being freed by Iaquinta and he made it 3-1 on the hour mark as Juventus moved on to 27 points, six behind leaders AC Milan.

"I don't look at the table, but I am happy because Catania hadn't lost at home for a year," said Juventus

coach Luigi Delneri.

"We deserved this win. I saw my team play with lots of character."

On Saturday, Milan went three points clear of second-placed Lazio cruising to a 3-0 win over lowly Brescia at the San Siro with all of their goals coming in the first half.

Kevin Prince Boateng scored his first Milan goal on four minutes, and, in a two-minute spell either side of the

half-hour mark, Robinho grabbed a fifth and Zlatan Ibrahimovic an eighth goal of the season.

Lazio's 3-1 win over Inter Milan on Friday had seen them join Milan at the summit of Serie A, but Massimiliano Allegri's side betrayed little anxiety against a Brescia side who had gone 10 games without a win.

"I'm pleased we started with the right attitude and

RESULTS

Parma 2 (Crespo 24-pen, 55) Udinese 1 (Di Natale 35)

Lecce 1 (Ofere 45+2) Genoa 3 (Toni 55, Rafinha 76, Rossi 90+4)

Fiorentina 1 (Mutu 52) Cagliari 0

Cesena 0 Bologna 2 (Di Vaio 31, Britos 87)

Sampdoria 3 (Pazzini 17-pen, Guberti 56, 61) Bari 0

Catania 1 (Morimoto 37) Juventus 3



Juventus forward Fabio Quagliarella celebrates one of his two goals against Catania during their Serie A encounter at the Massimo Stadium on Sunday.

PSG leapfrog Marseille

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint-Germain climbed to second place in the French first division with a 3-1 defeat of Brest on Saturday, as champions Marseille crashed to a last-gasp 1-0 loss at Nice.

Marseille were bidding to take over at the summit from Lille, 6-3 victors over Lorient earlier in the day, but they were undone by a goal in the second minute of injury time from Nice midfielder Emre Sozer.

The champions had dominated the game at the home of their Mediterranean neighbours but struggled to create clear chances.

Nice goalkeeper David Ospina saved bravely at the feet of Lucho Gonzalez in the first half, while Ghana starlet Andre Ayew had a header ruled out for offside with just over 20 minutes to play.

The hosts made Marseille pay with almost the last kick of the match as Chaouki Ben Saada wriggled down the right before finding Anthony Mounier, whose cutback was side-footed home from 10 yards by the unmarked Fae.

"We had chances, but if you don't score, you're never safe," said OM coach Didier Deschamps after his team's fourth defeat of the season.

"At worst, we could have had a 0-0. They scored with their only shot on target."

Deschamps's side slipped to fourth as a consequence and even more galling for their fans will be the sight of fierce rivals PSG two places above them in the table -- and just a point behind Lille.

Paris took a fifth-minute lead at Parc des Princes when Nene slammed home a volley but they failed to capitalise on their ascendancy and Nolan Roux drew Brest level eight minutes into the second half.

PSG quickly re-assumed control, however, with Mathieu Bodmer restoring their advan-

tage four minutes later before Ludovic Giuly sealed victory in the 76th minute when he converted crisply from Guillaume Hoarau's flick-on.

"We can't allow ourselves to say that we're playing for the title, when we know all the slip-ups we've had in the past," cautioned PSG coach Antoine Kombouare. "Marseille and Lyon can do it, not us."

In Sunday's late game, an 89th-minute header by Fernando earned Bordeaux a 2-2 draw at Saint-Etienne that prevented the hosts from recording their first win in nine matches.

Bordeaux climb two places to eighth, while Les Verts remain 11th.

Earlier, Senegal striker Moussa Sow claimed a hat-trick as Lille returned to the top of the standings with an extraordinary 6-3 win at home to Lorient in their rearranged game.

The game had been postponed due to snow on Saturday and it was the visitors who struck first at Stadium Lille Metropole, as Kevin Gameiro raced away from France team-mate Adil Rami before beating Lille goalkeeper Mickael Landreau.

Gameiro claimed a second in first-half injury-time, lashing home at the back post from a corner, but Lille had by that stage scored two goals of their own through Sow and a Maxime Baca own goal.

Sow restored Lille's lead three minutes into the second half when he headed in Florent Balmont's cross, but Lynel Kitambala made it 3-3 shortly afterwards when he converted Gameiro's centre with a close-range volley.

Lorient were level for just a minute, however, with Gervinho quickly restoring Lille's lead before Sow completed his hat-trick with a curler from the edge of the box and Pierre-Alain Frau tapped in late on for number six.

It was sweet revenge for Rudi Garcia's side, who were denied a place in this season's Champions League by a 2-1 defeat at Lorient on the final day of last season, and leaves the Brittany side 12th in the standings.

No alcohol, no kissing

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Fans at the FIFA Club World Cup in Abu Dhabi on December 8-18 will have to abstain from drinking alcohol and kissing in public, in keeping with Muslim sensitivities, a newspaper said on Monday.

"The FIFA World Cup organising committee has issued a long list of prohibitions which will be circulated among fans from outside the country, including the ban on drinking alcohol and kissing on the streets," said Emarat Al-Yom.

The rules, printed on leaflets and to be distributed to fans upon arrival in the United Arab Emirates, also warned that using drugs whether in public or private areas would result in prosecution.

"We are a Muslim country that has its own customs and traditions which should be preserved. Something like this should not anger the supporters," the organising committee's spokeswoman, Shaza al-Rumaythi, told the daily.

World football governing body FIFA "supports" such measures by any country hosting an international championship, she said.

Italy's Inter Milan and South Korea's Seongnam are among the clubs taking part this year in the tournament for the winners of the world's continental championships.

Spy scandal an alibi

AFP, Moscow

A Russian woman working in the British parliament who faces deportation on suspicion of espionage has been targeted as revenge for England's failure to land the 2018 World Cup, a paper alleged Monday.

Katia Zatuliveter faces deportation after being detained in London on Thursday in what is thought to be the first time since the end of the Cold War someone working in Britain's parliament has been accused of spying for Russia.

"If the English had not received a slap in the face in the elections for the 2018 World Cup, there would have been no spy scandal," commented the mass circulation and staunchly pro-government Komsomolskaya Pravda daily.

"The proof is zero, otherwise a court, rather than deportation would have awaited the Russian girl. All this looks like a petty act of revenge on Russia," it added.

"Gentlemen! This is not sporting." England's bid for the 2018 World Cup, awarded to Russia on Thursday, ended in humiliation after it won just two of 22 FIFA executive committee votes leaving many questioning the voting process.

The pro-Kremlin Komsomolskaya Pravda daily described Zatuliveter, 25, as a "sex bomb" and compared her to the glamorous Anna Chapman who was expelled from the United States along with nine other Russian "sleeper" spies this summer.

"It seems the British were offended that Anna Chapman was working in the United States and not in Britain," it wrote. "And now they have a chance to catch up on what they missed."

The 25-year-old was arrested after British domestic intelligence agency MI5 decided she was working for the Russian intelligence service as a "sleeper" agent, The Sunday Times newspaper reported.