

Gerrard out for 4 weeks

AFP, London

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard faces a four-week injury lay-off after undergoing surgery on a groin problem, the Premier League club confirmed Friday.

Gerrard, who missed Thursday's Europa League defeat against Braga, will now miss around four of Liverpool's remaining league fixtures and is also out of England's Euro 2012 qualifier against Wales on March 26.

"LFC can today confirm that Steven Gerrard has undergone successful surgery on his groin and will be out for up to four weeks," a Liverpool statement confirmed. "The decision was made following consultation with a specialist."

Gerrard has had niggling problems with his groin throughout his career, most notably in 2002, when he was forced to withdraw from England's World Cup squad over the problem.

Nani out till month's end

AFP, London

Portuguese winger Nani will be out of action until late March, Manchester United Manager Sir Alex Ferguson has said, to complete his recovery from the injury he picked up in the 3-1 defeat at Liverpool on Sunday.

That was caused by a brutal first-half tackle by Jamie Carragher which many felt should have brought him a red card instead of the yellow he was handed.

The Liverpool player later made a personal apology for this action.

In his first comments on the injury, having declined to comment to the press after the match, Ferguson said he was reasonably happy with the way Nani was responding to treatment.

But he said that he would not be fit for Saturday's FA Cup quarterfinal with Arsenal, Tuesday's Champions League clash against Marseille or next Saturday's Premier League meeting with Bolton.

"We have managed to stitch the injury, which is good news," said Ferguson.

"We need to guard against infection and swelling."

"It is difficult to say exactly when he will be ready to return but we won't get him back for the Bolton match next Saturday."

Fergie calls on character

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson says his Manchester United side will draw on all their experience and character to get them over the finishing line this season.

United face Arsenal in an FA Cup quarterfinal showdown at Old Trafford on Saturday after back-to-back Premier League defeats that have eroded their lead at the top of the table in the closing stages of the campaign.

Ironically it is Saturday's visitors Arsenal who are best placed to capitalise on United's failure to hit top gear.

But Ferguson backed his players to keep their heads and demonstrate their resilience in the run-in.

"We have that experience to recover. It's happened a few times," Ferguson told reporters on Friday.

"At any club you never go through a period of the season where everything is rosy. When you get the bad moments you have to recover from it. It's another day in the history of Manchester United."

"That's what it is and you take that history into games. The ability to do so over the years is a tremendous credit to every team we've had here."



PHOTO: AFP

Sporting Braga forward Alan Silva (L) scores the all-important goal from a penalty past Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina during their Europa League encounter at the Municipal Stadium on Thursday.

Braga stun Liverpool

AFP, Paris



Liverpool were brought down to earth in the Europa League on Thursday after losing 1-0 at Sporting Braga in the last 16, while big-spending Manchester City crashed 2-0 at Dynamo Kiev.

Liverpool, rejuvenated under interim coach Kenny Dalglish and 3-1 victors over arch-rivals Manchester United on Sunday, will have to turn their tie around in the March 17 return leg if they are to reach the quarter-finals.

Braga took the lead in the 18th minute in Portugal, with Alan guiding an emphatic penalty into the bottom-left corner after Mossoro had been sent sprawling by Sotiris Kyrgiakos.

Full-back Silvio came within inches of doubling the hosts' advantage 20 minutes later but his magnificent left-foot half-volley from 25 yards crashed back into play off the crossbar.

With Liverpool toiling, Dalglish introduced striker Andy Carroll for his European debut just before the hour and the burly former Newcastle man had an immediate impact.

A Carroll knock-down obliged Braga goalkeeper Artur to save as Dirk Kuyt's feet before Carroll saw a deflected left-foot shot fall narrowly wide of the left-hand post.

Kuyt then drew a sharp stop from Artur with an instinctive half-volley from the edge of the box but Braga, Champions League debutants earlier this season, withstood the pressure to claim a memorable victory.

City completed an underwhelming evening for the English sides as they went down 2-0 amid freezing conditions in the Ukrainian capital.

Former AC Milan and Chelsea striker Andriy Shevchenko

gave the hosts a 25th-minute lead when he diverted Andriy Yarmolenko's left-wing cross past Joe Hart to claim his 67th goal in European competition.

City introduced Carlos Tevez from the bench in the second half but to no avail, as Oleh Gusev doubled Dynamo's advantage by controlling a clearance on his chest and volleying home.

Portuguese champions Benfica had to dig deep as they fought back from a goal down to beat Paris Saint-Germain 2-1 at the Estadio da Luz.

Peguy Luyindula put PSG ahead before Mevlut Erding struck the post for the French side, but Maxi Pereira slammed in an equaliser shortly before half-time and Franco Jara lashed home a low shot to claim victory in the 81st minute.

Dutch champions FC Twente took a sizeable step towards the last eight after Luuk de Jong claimed a brace in a 3-0 win at home to 2008 champions Zenit Saint-Petersburg.

Spartak Moscow struck a blow for their country in the night's other Dutch-Russian encounter, however, by prevailing 1-0 at Ajax. Earlier, Villarreal asserted control of their tie against Bayer Leverkusen as a neat individual goal in the fourth minute of injury time from Nilmar earned them a last-gasp 3-2 victory in the away leg.

Michal Kadlec's fine 30-yard opener for the hosts was cancelled out by Giuseppe Rossi before Nilmar put Villarreal ahead in the 70th minute.

Gonzalo Castro drew Leverkusen level immediately but Brazil international Nilmar had the final say in added time to put his team firmly in the driving seat.

Elsewhere, a powerful 70th-minute effort by Colombian midfielder Fredy Guarin gave Portuguese league leaders Porto a 1-0 win at CSKA Moscow, while Scottish champions Rangers' visit to PSV Eindhoven finished goalless.

RESULTS

Sporting Braga (POR) 1 (Alan 18-pen) **Liverpool (ENG) 0**
PSV Eindhoven (NED) 0 **Rangers (SCO) 0**
Bayer Leverkusen (GER) 2 (Kadlec 33, Castro 72) **Villarreal (ESP) 3** (Rossi 42, Nilmar 70, 90+4)
CSKA Moscow (RUS) 0 FC Porto (POR) 1 (Guarin 70)
FC Twente (NED) 3 (De Jong 25, 90+2, Landzaat 56) **Zenit Saint-Petersburg (RUS) 0**
Benfica (POR) 2 (Maxi Pereira 42, Jara 81) **Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) 1** (Luyindula 14)
Ajax (NED) 0 Spartak Moscow (RUS) 1 (Alex 57)
Dynamo Kiev (UKR) 2 (Shevchenko)

Milan aim to bounce back

AFP, Rome



AC Milan will aim to put Champions League heartbreak firmly behind them this weekend when they focus on maintaining a five-point lead atop Italy's Serie A against lowly Bari at the San Siro.

Milan gave a much improved performance from their first leg efforts as they dominated possession, albeit far from Tottenham's goal, at White Hart Lane on Wednesday.

Even so, they failed to breach Spurs' stubborn rearguard as they paid for their 1-0 first leg defeat three weeks earlier.

It means Milan have only the league and Cup to concentrate on now as they have failed to reach the Champions League last eight for the fourth year in a row since triumphing in 2007 -- in 2009 they did not even qualify for the competition.

Milan will be expecting to see their five-point lead shaved as Inter are due to travel to second-from-bottom Brescia on Friday night.

And the players recognise they must quickly overcome their European disappointment.

"We went there (to Spurs)

to qualify but it didn't happen. We're all a bit sad, we gave a lot but we couldn't find a goal," said French midfielder Mathieu Flamini. "Now we have to look forward and go and win the title. The Champions League was one of our objectives but it went badly."

"We have another big aim and that's to win the title, our number one priority."

Milan are in great shape in that respect having beaten rivals Napoli two weeks ago, all but knocking them out of contention for the league title before earning a hard-

fought 1-0 success at fellow giants Juventus last week. That loss hit Juve's Champions League hopes hard, leaving them in seventh but 10 points off fourth-placed Lazio with just 10 games to play.

Juve have lost their last three games and seven of the last 11, virtually ruling them out of contention for Champions League football next

season. They face a trip to Cesena on Saturday night with their hosts looking to keep their heads above water as they sit only goal difference above the drop zone.

In Juve's absence, the fight for a top four spot will be played out as Roma's Stadio Olimpico as Roma host Lazio in the capital derby.

Having recovered a little of late, in the league at least, following four straight defeats Roma managed three games on the trot without loss before their Champions League capitulation at Shakhtar Donetsk on Tuesday.

That 3-0 reverse saw Roma eliminated 6-2 on aggregate and Lazio president Claudio Lotito is wary that his side will be up against a wounded lion as they try to defend their five-point lead over their city rivals.

History is on Roma's side, however, having won the last four derbies and Lotito says his team must avoid getting caught up in the hysteria of the occasion.

"It's always a special match against Roma but we need to try to consider it like any other," he said.

"The lads need to show determination, humility and unity, that's the only way we'll be able to give our best

against a wounded opponent."

In other games third placed Napoli travel to Parma while fifth-placed Udinese can move into a Champions League qualification position if Lazio slip up and they win away to Cagliari.

A free lesson

FROM PAGE 16 broke a 13-over boundary-less spell between the seventh and 20th over) especially the drives coming down the track off Rubel, Shakib and Mahmudullah Riyad were exquisite, and underlined his presence in the England team.

Trott and Morgan have a lot in common apart from their origins, Morgan being Irish and Trott having been born and bred in South Africa. Their roots and the subsequent entry in the England team should be accredited to mental strength, truly reflected in the way they managed a tricky wicket to score half-centuries.

It should be a lesson that is digested well by the Tigers who encircled them and it is hoped that the nightmare of 58 all out is forgotten and they can build from this game.

Caceres fears Barca

AFP, Madrid



Martin Caceres, on loan to Sevilla from Barcelona, knows that his current side will need a fair share of good fortune if they are to prevail against his all-conquering parent club on Saturday.

League leaders Barcelona came through a controversial Champions League tie against Arsenal in mid-week, winning 3-1 for a 4-3 aggregate victory after visiting striker Robin van Persie was harshly sent off at Camp Nou.

Arsenal were drawing 1-1 when van Persie received a second yellow card for kicking the ball away, but Caceres does not believe their tactic of defending deep and inviting pressure is an advisable strategy for Sevilla to adopt.

"The key is to be concentrated for 90 minutes and to try and impose our own football but it won't be easy as all their players have tremendous ability," said the Uruguayan, who is competing with Alexis and Federico Fazio for a starting place at centre-back.

"We will have to run a lot to beat them, be lucky and also play with the right mentality to win the match."

"Whoever starts in the centre of defence will go out and do their best. We obviously want to win but it is going to be very tough."

Sevilla are in the hunt for a place in Europe but they suffered a set-back with defeat at Athletic Bilbao and now face a Barca side led by the magical feet of Lionel Messi, who has scored 27 goals so far in the league.

Real Madrid, seven points behind Barca, continue to wait for a slip-up but are likely to face Hercules without Cristiano Ronaldo,

recovered from injury but expected to be rested ahead of the Champions League visit of Lyon.

Esteban Granero could keep his place in midfield despite the return of Lassana Diarra from suspension after an impressive performance in the 3-1 win over Racing Santander.

"(Granero) is a great player who does everything well. He knows how to read the game and his positioning is good. He will be an important player," said team-mate Xabi Alonso, who is happy with Real's progress this season.

Valencia may be riding high in La Liga but an early exit from the Champions League by

Schalke has put the pressure on coach Unai Emery, whose side visit Real Zaragoza on Saturday.

For the first half of the season, Villarreal managed to keep on the heels of the top two but they prepare to meet Sporting Gijon having lost their consistency, partly due to injuries.

The battle for a Europa League place has opened up, with Espanyol having lost six out of their last seven games and Bilbao ending a four-game losing run by beating

Sevilla. Espanyol host Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday, while Bilbao travel to Getafe in the Monday night game.

It means the door has opened up for Sevilla and Atletico Madrid, who are away to second-from-bottom Almeria.

Malaga's outlook is bleak as they sit at the foot of the table following two straight defeats, including a 7-0 thrashing by Real Madrid.

They face a difficult away trip to Real Sociedad, one of the surprise packages this season, who still have an outside chance of qualifying for Europe.

Lahm blames stars

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich captain Philipp Lahm says his team-mates must take responsibility for the three straight defeats that cost coach Louis van Gaal his job, ahead of Saturday's clash with Hamburg.

Van Gaal was told on Monday that his contract will be terminated in May, a year early, after his team suffered back-to-back league defeats and were dumped out of the German Cup at home to Schalke.

Last Saturday's 3-1 defeat at Hanover left defending champions Bayern fifth in the league and a massive 19 points behind league leaders Borussia Dortmund.

With the Bundesliga title out of their reach, Bayern must close the seven-point gap behind second-placed Bayer Leverkusen to be sure of a Champions League place next season.

Lahm says his star-studded team must take responsibility for their situation if they are to avoid a fourth straight defeat at home to Hamburg.

"We're gutted about the three defeats in a row," admitted Lahm, whose side host holders Inter Milan in the second leg of their Champions League round of 16

tie on Tuesday.

"We'll do everything we possibly can to take the three points. It's up to us now. Every individual player has to take responsibility."

"Our sole priority now is qualifying for the Champions League. It's where we want to be and it's where Bayern belong."

Runaway leaders Dortmund are set to be without hot-shot striker Lucas Barrios for Saturday's clash with Hoffenheim.

The 26-year-old Paraguayan striker, Dortmund's top scorer with 11 goals in 24 games this season, has a calf problem and sat out training on Thursday.

Dortmund have a 12-point lead at the top of the table and are chasing their 20th win of the season from 26 league games.

Second-placed Bayer Leverkusen face a tough battle on Sunday when they host fourth-place Mainz.

Ex-Germany captain Michael Ballack will again sit the game out, having told coach Jupp Heynckes he is not prepared to be used from the bench as he continues to work his way back to fitness after a leg injury.

Heynckes, who is out of contract at the end of the season, has delayed any negotiations with the club until the international break at the end of the month. He has been linked to the soon-to-be vacant job at Bayern.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Almeria v Atletico Madrid (1700GMT), Real Madrid v Hercules (1900GMT), Real Zaragoza v Valencia (2100GMT)
Sunday
(1600GMT unless otherwise stated): Osasuna v Racing Santander, Real Sociedad v Malaga, Espanyol v Deportivo La Coruna, Levante v Real Mallorca, Villarreal v Sporting Gijon (1800GMT), Sevilla v Barcelona (2000GMT)
Monday
(2000GMT):

FIXTURES

Saturday
(1430GMT unless otherwise stated): Bayern Munich v Hamburg, Schalke 04 v Eintracht Frankfurt, VfL Wolfsburg v Nuremberg, Hoffenheim v Borussia Dortmund, Kaiserslautern v Freiburg, Werder Bremen v Borussia Moenchengladbach (1730GMT)
Sunday
Mainz 05 v Bayer Leverkusen (1430GMT), St Pauli v VfB Stuttgart