

Milan derby decisive

AFP, Rome



While many others have been trying to play down the significance of Saturday night's Milan derby between Serie A leaders AC Milan and champions Inter Milan, Clarence Seedorf is not among them.

The veteran Dutch midfielder has won almost every club award in European football with Milan and he knows more than most about what a game such as this means.

Milan lead Inter by two points with just eight games to go and Seedorf knows that whoever emerges from the San Siro triumphant will have a tangible advantage in the scudetto race.

"I say that this derby is decisive. It will have a huge impact on a psychological level and whoever says otherwise is a liar," he said.

"We players know it's decisive but it won't be the end. It doesn't mean that (the losers) won't be able to fight back, but no player on either side wants to go home with no points.

"I remember the derby in 2003-04 that we won 3-2 (Seedorf scored the winner) pushed us on to win the title.

"But the most tense derby of all was the second leg of the Champions League semi-final in 2003."

Milan have happy memories from that day as a 1-1 draw allowed them to progress on the away goals rule and then lift what was at the time their sixth Champions League crown.

In those days Milan were undoubtedly the more noisy neighbour but that has changed over the past few seasons, with Inter on a run of five straight title successes and also holding the Champions League title.

"Inter are a very good team. They're the reigning champions and that's why it's up to us to show that we deserve to win the title," added Seedorf.

"It's been seven years since we won the league and we

haven't won anything yet. But from what I've seen in training, we're in good shape. But they (Inter) are also in very good shape. I expect great opponents.

"But I also know how we'll manage it and in that sense I'm very excited and very confident."

Recent form does not suggest the Dutchman should feel so confident, as Milan drew at home to rock bottom Bari and were then beaten 1-0 away to a Palermo side who had lost their previous five games.

Furthermore, they will be without star forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic, suspended after his red card against Bari.

"We've dropped too many points in the other games but now it's a head-to-head clash and we have to show what we're made of," said Seedorf.

"Everything that's positive in this team has to be on display on Saturday night."

Given recent results, Inter start the game as favourites, but their Serbian midfielder Dejan Stankovic says that's not necessarily an advantage in such a game.

"Looking at our recent results, we could say that we're favourites but derbies don't follow logic," he said.

"Out of those (derbies) I've played in Bergamo, Rome and now Milan, I know there's no guarantee that the favourites will win. In fact often it's the opposite."

Whatever the result, third-placed Napoli will have the chance to take advantage when they host fifth-placed Lazio.

If they win that and Milan fail to do so, Napoli would be just one point off the Serie A summit.

The fourth team involved in the title race, Udinese, face a trip to lowly Lecce.

There is another derby on this weekend as Sicilians Catania and Palermo clash, while strugglers Roma and Juventus face off in the capital with both sides needing a win to boost their chances of European football next season.

FIXTURES

Saturday
(1300GMT unless otherwise stated)
Brescia v Bologna (1600GMT), AC Milan v Inter Milan (1845GMT)

Sunday
Napoli v Lazio (1030GMT), Catania v Palermo, Cesena v Fiorentina, Chievo v Sampdoria, Genoa v Cagliari, Lecce v Udinese, Parma v Bari, Roma v Juventus (1845GMT)



Corinthians' latest signing Brazil striker Adriano (R) is honoured by legend Ronaldo during his official presentation in Sao Paulo on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

AFC U-16 qualifiers

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh U-16 football team were drawn in Group A in this year's AFC U-16 Championship qualifiers last Wednesday.

Total 40 teams have been divided into the seven groups. The young lads will face Iraq, Iran, Qatar, Palestine and Sri Lanka in West Zone qualifiers. Top two teams from each group and third best from West and East Zone will move on for the 16-team finals.

Bangladesh finished fourth out of five teams in the 2010 qualifying round with four points as they defeated Philippines 1-0, drew against Indonesia but lost to Japan 6-0 and Chinese Taipei 2-1.

Bangladesh U-19 in Group A

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh have been drawn in Group A of the AFC U-19 Championship qualifiers along with Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Nepal and Maldives last Wednesday.

As many as thirty-nine teams, split into two zones and separated in seven groups, will play the qualification round and top two teams from each group and third best from two zones will advance into the finals.

Top four sides of the tournament will also qualify for the FIFA U-20 World Cup to be played in 2013.

In the last edition of 2010, Bangladesh finished fourth out of six teams in the qualification with four points.

FIFA suspends Bosnia

AFP, Zurich

Bosnia and Herzegovina was suspended from international and European football Friday after failing to adopt statutes that would lead to a single-member presidency of the country's federation (NSBiH), UEFA and FIFA announced.

European and world footballing chiefs from UEFA and FIFA respectively had demanded that NSBiH's ethnic-based tripartite presidency -- consisting of a Croat, a Muslim and a Serb member -- be replaced by a single president.

FIFA and UEFA released a joint statement Friday which said: "The Football Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FFBH/NSBiH) has been suspended until further notice by FIFA and UEFA as of today, 1 April 2011."

Indian PM to attend final

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA from New Delhi



Taking a time off from his busy election campaign in north-eastern state of Assam, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will be watching the cricket World Cup final between India and Sri Lanka in Mumbai today.

"I will be watching the match but I have to go to Assam", Singh said.

The Prime Minister was hoping for an Indian victory.

"The whole nation should join in wishing the Indian cricket team".

Singh mixed cricket with diplomacy by being present at the high-voltage India-Pakistan semifinal at Mohali along with Pakistan Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani.

The final will be watched by two VIPs -- Indian President Pratibha Patil and Sri Lankan counterpart Mahinda Rajapaksha -- at the Wankhede Stadium.

SL President seeks divine blessings

Ahead of the World Cup final between India and Sri Lanka at Mumbai, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa will seek divine blessings for the success of his team at a famous Hindu shrine in southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

The Lankan President will offer worship at the Lord Venkateswara shrine on a hilltop.

An ardent devotee of Lord Venkateswara, Rajapaksa, after an overnight stay on the hills, will fly to Mumbai to watch the final at the Wankhede Stadium on Saturday.

Win cars with the Cup

A car bonanza awaits the Indian cricket team if they beat Sri Lanka in the World Cup final in Mumbai today.

South Korean auto giant Hyundai Motors announced that it would present all 11 players with their yet to be launched Verna Sedan car if they win the Cup. Hyundai is the official car partner for the ICC 2011 World Cup.

"We will be extremely delighted to felicitate the Indian cricket team with the all-new Verna much ahead of its market launch in the country. This is part of our continuous effort to bring passion to cricket", Hyundai Motor India Managing Director and CEO Hang-Woo Park said in a statement.

"I wish team India all the very best and hope they realise the dream of the nation to win the World Cup," he added.

Sangakkara preaches

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strongly grounded and in the moment and just take things as they come, plan and strategise as much as possible, but things can change out there in the middle, so you know, be fluid and do what we know what we can do," he continued.

It's obvious that the heroics of 1996 under the leadership of Arjuna Ranatunga came to fore when Sri Lanka is on the brink of another historic day but Sangakkara has a different opinion when he was asked whether it will inspire his boys.

"The inspiration has always been there. Everything that's come afterwards has been because of that positive factor. For us, 1996 belongs to that particular team. Since then there've been other teams trying to forge their own way, trying to forge their own path and leave their own legacy for Sri Lanka cricket. I think Sri Lanka has kicked on from that, achieved great heights in cricket and a World Cup's a World Cup, be it in 1996 or 2011. It means the same thing to everyone to win it," explained the Lankan skipper.

Sangakkara dismissed the notion that his side were not tested so far in the competition. He said: "For us, we are happy we are here. We have had to win games, we are pretty confident we are one of the best sides in the tournament. The wicket looks fantastic. But conditions here are totally different to Sri Lanka, the wickets are pretty even, it looks a pretty decent track and we are going to try to adapt to the conditions we have here."

One thing is for certain though. The two best teams in the tournament are going to play the all-Asian final in the cricket's mega event.

Barca's testing trip

AFP, Madrid



Champions Barcelona face one of their toughest remaining fixtures in the title run-in on Saturday with a testing trip to third-placed Villarreal.

Barca, five points ahead of Real Madrid at the summit, have struggled after international games in the past and coach Pep Guardiola will hope his heavy-legged stars can pick themselves up for a key game at El Madrigal.

A proposed strike had threatened to see this weekend's round of games cancelled over a row over broadcast regulations and television money, but a Madrid court ruled in favour of six breakaway clubs to avert the strike.

Barcelona have defensive concerns with Carles Puyol injured and Frenchman Eric Abidal recovering following surgery to remove a liver tumour.

Top scorer Lionel Messi is also doubt with a leg injury that prevented him from playing in Argentina's friendly against Costa Rica.

The champions may not want to risk their star man ahead of Wednesday's Champions League quarterfinal first leg against Shakhtar Donetsk.

MS staying

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momentum for 35-40 days becomes really difficult. We peaked at the right time. The format gave us those extra moments where we could relax a little," he explained when asked about the long duration of the tournament.

Sri Lanka has variety in their bowling attack which can test the strong Indian batting line-up in the final, but Dhoni rated the Pakistan attack highly.

"Pakistan has a more balanced bowling attack irrespective of what the wicket is. If you see the Mumbai track, there is a little pace and bounce for the bowlers. Third seamer can have an impact on the game. With spinners, if you have three spinners you can't manoeuvre. Ashwin has done very well, we have confidence in him but not sure of bowling combination right now," observed Dhoni.

Dhoni hinted that they might play with three spinners although left-arm pacer Ashish Nehra is most likely ruled out due to a fracture on his middle finger on the right hand, and the Indian skipper suggested that right-arm pace bowler Shantakumar Sreesanth was likely to replace Nehra in the team as India expected the pitch at the Wankhede Stadium to help seam bowlers.

Real Madrid have also had a number of stars away on international duty and are without Brazilian Marcelo and French forward Karim Benzema for Saturday's home match against Sporting Gijon.

Benzema, who has seven goals in his last four league matches, picked up a thigh injury on international duty with France and faces a race to be fit for Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal first leg against Tottenham Hotspur at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Real coach Jose Mourinho will not want to take risks ahead of that game and Cristiano Ronaldo is also likely to miss out against Gijon with the hamstring injury that ruled him out of Portugal's recent games.

Real have a 100 per cent record at home but Sporting, three points above the relegation zone, are fighting for their lives and possess a motivated coach in Manolo Preciado.

Preciado had a war of words with Mourinho earlier in the season, calling the Portuguese egotistical after Mourinho said Gijon gave in too easily in their 1-0 league loss against Barcelona in late September.

It is an intense month for Madrid and Mourinho, who face Barcelona twice, in the league and King's Cup final, as well as two Champions League quarterfinal matches against Tottenham.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Real Madrid v Sporting Gijon (1600GMT), Getafe v Valencia (1800GMT), Villarreal v Barcelona (2000GMT)

Sunday
(1500GMT unless otherwise stated)
Real Sociedad v Hercules, Espanyol v Racing Santander, Levante v Malaga, Deportivo La Coruna v Real Mallorca, Sevilla v Real Zaragoza (1700GMT), Osasuna v Atletico Madrid (1900GMT)

Monday
Almeria v Athletic Bilbao (1900 GMT)

Madrid to honour Ronaldo

Football

AFP, Madrid

Brazil legend Ronaldo, who announced his retirement from football in February, will be honoured on Saturday by his former side Real Madrid at the club's home match against Sporting Gijon.

The 34-year-old will take the honorary kick-off prior to the match and will be given a replica of a statue that sits in front of the team's dressing room, the club said in a statement posted Friday on its website.

Ronaldo joined Real from Inter Milan in 2002. He won two league titles, one Intercontinental Cup and one Spanish Super Cup with the club before being sold to AC Milan in January 2007.

"His class and quality will be remembered by generations to come," the Real statement said.

Ronaldo said it was a "great honour" for him as he arrived at Madrid airport from Sao Paulo ahead of Saturday's match.

"I am very keen to see my former teammates and feel the presence of the fans up close, I will always carry Real Madrid in my heart," he added.

Ronaldo announced his definitive retirement from competitive football during an emotional press conference on February 14, citing fatigue and a hypothyroid problem which played havoc with his weight.

He will bid his final farewell to football in a friendly against Romania in Sao Paulo on June 7.

Ronaldo is the highest goal scorer in the history of the World Cup - 15 in total, one more than German player Gerd Muller.

He is one of only two players to win the FIFA Player of the Year award three times, the other being France's Zinedine Zidane, who also played for Real.

ROAD TO FINAL

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out for 189 and had a bit of a fright when they lost four wickets for 30 runs against some disciplined bowling from Netherlands. But it was Yuvraj again who saved the day with an unbeaten 51 that took India home with more than 13 overs to spare.

India vs South Africa, Nagpur: India's only loss of the tournament came against the well-balanced Proteas, who shot them out for 296 after a Tendulkar-Sethega opening burst of 142 runs raised expectations of a total in excess of 350. Tendulkar scored his second hundred, but India lost their last nine wickets for 29 runs, and the South Africans rode on contributions from Hashim Amla, Jacques Kallis and JP Duminy to get home with two balls and three wickets to spare.

India vs West Indies, Chennai: Yuvraj Singh scored an elegant 113 to take a stuttering Indian batting effort to 268 all out, before he combined with Zaheer Khan and Ravichandran Ashwin to skittle West Indies out for 188.

India vs Australia, quarterfinal at Ahmedabad: In the match between the favourites and the defending champions, Australia batted first and posted a challenging 260 with a determined century from captain Ricky Ponting. Crucial contributions from Tendulkar, Gautam Gambhir, Yuvraj Singh and Suresh Raina guided a tense run chase to its completion as India won by five wickets with 14 balls to spare.

India vs Pakistan, semifinal at Mohali: It was dubbed as the mother of all matches, but it fizzled out into a fairly comprehensive 29-run victory for India. Sachin Tendulkar played one of

his worse innings but managed to score 85 courtesy of four dropped catches, as India posted 260. In the face of some disciplined bowling and regular wickets after a promising opening stand, Pakistan lost their way after having promised much in the tournament.

SRI LANKA
Sri Lanka vs Canada, Hambantota: A cakewalk if ever there was one. With a blazing half-century from captain Kumar Sangakkara and an equally electric century from Mahela Jayawardene, Sri Lanka posted 332 for seven. Canada could manage only 122 all out as Nuwan Kulasekara and Thisara Perera grabbed three wickets apiece.

Sri Lanka vs Pakistan, Colombo: A great match, and Sri Lanka's only loss till date in the tournament against a highly impressive Pakistan side. On the back of sparkling half-centuries from Younis Khan and Misbahul Haq, Pakistan scored 277. All the batsmen, except Jayawardene and Thilan Samaraweera got amongst the runs for Sri Lanka, but in the face of Shahid Afridi's fast spinners that earned him four wickets, Sri Lanka finished 11 short.

Sri Lanka vs Kenya, Colombo: Another minnow, another cakewalk. Lasith Malinga took six wickets, including a hat-trick as Kenya were skittled out for 142. Sri Lanka barely broke a sweat as they breezed to the total for the loss of one wicket and with more than 31 overs to spare.

Sri Lanka vs Australia, Colombo: Had the potential to be a classic, but rain played spoilsport as their was only 32 overs and five balls were bowled with Australia reaching 146 for three before

the game was called off.

Sri Lanka vs Zimbabwe, Pallekele: Opens Tilakaratne Dilshan and Upul Tharanga shared a mammoth stand of 282 in less than 45 overs as Sri Lanka piled on 327 runs against an outclassed Zimbabwe. Dilshan was not finished, however, as he took four wickets with his off-spin to speed Zimbabwe's demise to 188 all out.

Sri Lanka vs New Zealand, Mumbai: New Zealand performed no better than a minnow with the bat as they were thumped by 112 runs. Sangakkara and Jayawardene were again to the fore, with the former stroking a century and the latter a fifty as Sri Lanka posted a competitive 165. On the field, when Muttiah Muralidaran started taking wickets -- he finished with four for 25 -- there was only one way the match was going.

Sri Lanka vs England, quarterfinal at Colombo: A match that promised much turned out to be the most one-sided of all. England were bogged down by Sri Lankan spin, riding on the watchful efforts of Jonathan Trott and the carefree bravado of Eoin Morgan to reach an adequate 229 for six. Or so they thought; Tharanga and Dilshan hit twin tons and remained unbeaten to deliver victory by ten wickets.

Sri Lanka vs New Zealand, semifinal at Colombo: New Zealand faced much better than when they faced Sri Lanka in the group stage. Scoring 217, they kept the hosts in check for much of the chase, but the early ground conceded to Dilshan proved fatal for the Kiwis. With a cool display under pressure, Angelo Mathews and Thilan Samaraweera took Sri Lanka home with thirteen balls to spare.