



Indian dancers perform during the opening ceremony of the Indian Premier League Twenty20 tournament at The M.A. Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

All eyes on champs

AFP, Rome

All eyes in Italy this weekend will be back on the San Siro to see how champions Inter Milan react after a nightmare week. Inter host Chievo at the same stadium that was the scene of their two humiliating defeats inside four days that saw them between 3-0 by AC Milan in Serie A and then thrashed 5-2 by Schalke 04 in the Champions League.

Those four days were all it took for Inter's season to unravel right under their noses. They now sit five points behind Milan in the league with seven games left to play while their Champions League hopes are realistically over.

There is still the Italian Cup to play for but that would be a scant consolation for a team that did the treble last season.

Inter will at least welcome back Brazilian centre-back Lucio after he missed both crushing defeats through suspension, but his return will only serve to plug the gap left by Cristian Chivu's ban, both domestically and in Europe as he was sent off in both disastrous encounters.

One player, however, cannot explain the loss of eight goals in two matches, or even more importantly the feeble way such a prestigious team could succumb in two games of such a magnitude.

The soul-searching will have gone on all week for Inter and their coach Leonardo, whose reputation has taken a huge hit.

There is still much to play for, however, even if it is unrealistic to expect to progress in the Champions League.

Five points with seven games to go may seem like a mountain to climb but Milan have the harder run in with trips to Fiorentina, this weekend, Roma and Udinese to come.

A double is certainly not out of the question for Inter, who play Roma in the Cup semifinal.

They have also shown an ability to put lesser teams to the sword under Leonardo as his record of 11 wins in his first 13 league games proved.

The problem was not so much the defeats but the nature of them and the fact that they came in the two most important games of the season.

There is also no denying they've handed league leaders Milan a huge boost in the title run-in.

Milan came into the derby in trouble having drawn at home to rock bottom Bari and then lost at Palermo in their previous two games.

But now they have an extended lead at the top -- Napoli are second, three points back -- and top scorer Zlatan Ibrahimovic will return from suspension against Fiorentina.

The other title contenders, Napoli, face a tough trip to Bologna and without their suspended top scorer Edinson Cavani, although on a three-match winning run.

In other games Udinese host Roma as they look to hold onto the crucial fourth spot while chasers Lazio entertain Parma.

FIXTURES

(1300 GMT unless stated):

Saturday

Inter Milan v Chievo (1600),
Udinese v Roma (1845)

Sunday

Juventus v Genoa (1030), Bari v
Catania, Bologna v Napoli, Cagliari v
Brescia, Lazio v Parma, Palermo v
Cesena, Sampdoria v Lecce,

Bale, Nasri in young player shortlist

AFP, London

Tottenham winger Gareth Bale and Arsenal's French playmaker Samir Nasri have both been nominated for the Professional Footballers' Association Player and Young Player of the Year awards.

Bale and Nasri were among seven nominees from the Premier League for each of their top prizes.

Also nominated for the top prize were Bale's Spurs team-mate Rafael Van der Vaart, Manchester City's Carlos Tevez, Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic, West Ham midfielder Scott Parker and Blackpool's Charlie Adam.

England and Manchester City goalkeeper Joe Hart, Arsenal midfielder Jack Wilshere, Everton's Seamus Coleman and Manchester United duo Nani and Javier Hernandez were nominated for the young player award.

Striking dilemma for Sir Alex

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson faces a striking dilemma as Manchester United seek to turn the screw in the Premier League title race against Fulham on Saturday without the banned Wayne Rooney.

Rooney's superb hat-trick against West Ham last week and the winning goal in the midweek Champions League victory over Chelsea provided hard evidence that the England striker is rediscovering his best form after a protracted slump.

But frustratingly for Ferguson, United will be deprived of Rooney's services against the Cottagers this weekend following the 25-year-old's expletive-laden tirade at Upton Park which led to a two-match ban.

The suspension -- which also rules Rooney out of next week's FA Cup semifinal clash with Manchester City -- means Ferguson will have to juggle his resources once more.

Ferguson could pair Javier Hernandez with Dimitar Berbatov in attack or ask either player to play the lone striker role. Alternatively, fit-again Michael Owen is waiting in the wings.

But whatever permutation he chooses, Ferguson will be buoyed by the fact that United have not found goals hard to come by this season.

Berbatov and Hernandez, along with the suspended Rooney, have all hit double fig-

ures, and could conceivably finish with more than 20 goals apiece.

"I said at the start of the season if we can get two strikers who can score 20 goals we're in with a chance of winning something," Ferguson said.

"I think what's kept us going is that there's been a decent goal threat from us. We have forwards who can win matches."

The fact that United are still fighting on three fronts -- League, FA Cup and Champions League -- has fuelled heady talk of a possible repeat of the club's historic 1999 treble.

A victory for United would give them a 10-point lead over Arsenal, who visit Blackpool on Sunday on the back of a catastrophic sequence of results which has all but extinguished their hopes of ending a six-year trophy drought.

Arsenal's last victory in the league came way back on February 23 against Stoke. Since then the Gunners have lost a League Cup final and

been dumped out of the Champions League and FA Cup.

Three consecutive league draws means that the fate of the title is out of their hands, and another slip up against Blackpool could prove terminal.

With third-placed Manchester City travelling to Anfield to face Liverpool on Monday, all eyes will be on Chelsea and Tottenham on Saturday, who will seek to banish their midweek Euro disappointments in the race for fourth place.

FIXTURES

Saturday

(1500 GMT unless stated):
Blackburn v Birmingham, Bolton v
West Ham, Chelsea v Wigan, Man Utd v
Fulham, Sunderland v West Brom,
Tottenham v Stoke,
Wolves v Everton (1245)

Sunday

Blackpool v Arsenal (1330), Aston Villa
v Newcastle (1600)

Monday

Gary granted send off



Football

AFP, London

Former Manchester United defender Gary Neville will bring the curtain down on his 18-year career with the club with a testimonial against Italian giants Juventus at Old Trafford on Tuesday, May 24.

Neville, 36, had intended to play a testimonial fixture at the start of this season but was forced to put the game back due to the impossibility of finding a suitable date.

He played his final game at West Brom in January, when he was fortunate to escape a red card for the second time this season.

In total Neville, who made his United debut as a 17-year-old against Torpedo Moscow, made 602 appearances for the club he supported all his life, won eight Premier

League titles, three FA Cups, two League Cups and the Champions League in 1999.

In addition, Neville won 85 England caps. "I am delighted to be given this game by the club," he said.

"It is going to be a very emotional night for me, especially as I pull on that red shirt once more in what will be my last game for the club.

"I intend to savour every moment and I hope the fans can share in my special night."

Neville has pledged to use the proceeds to support sustainable projects within the community, an issue close to his heart, and also has plans for supporter initiatives home and abroad.

"Gary has been a loyal servant of Manchester United and this is a fitting tribute to honour Gary and his career," said Sir Alex Ferguson.

Porto, Villarreal show credentials

AFP, Paris



Spanish side Villarreal and Portuguese giants FC Porto put their Europa League-winning credentials on show with 5-1 wins apiece in the first leg of the quarterfinals on Thursday.

Three Portuguese sides -- Porto, Benfica and Sporting Braga -- are among the last eight of Europe's second tier club competition for the first time, boosting the chances of an all-Portuguese final at the Dublin Arena on May 18.

While 2004 Champions League winners Porto impressed with a 5-1 crushing of Spartak Moscow, Madrid-based Villarreal were just as impressive on their way to the exact same scoreline against hapless Dutch side FC Twente.

Another Dutch side, PSV Eindhoven, were on the wrong side of a 4-1 defeat to Benfica while Sporting Braga did well to come away with a 1-1 draw during their visit to Dynamo Kiev.

All three Portuguese sides are now perfectly placed to qualify for the last four following the second leg of the quarter-finals on April 14.

However Villarreal -- showed they won't be easily discounted.

Currently fourth in Spain's La Liga, the 'Yellow Submarine' wasted no time in launching wave after wave of attack on the Dutch league leaders.

The hosts left for the half-time interval 3-0 ahead after goals from Carlos Marchena, Borja Valero and Nilmar, who scored the first of a brace on the stroke of half-time.

Europa League top scorer Giuseppe

Rossi grabbed his ninth of the competition with a 20-yard drive in the 56th minute while Nilmar struck again 10 minutes from full time.

A momentary lapse of concentration on the part of Villarreal's defence allowed Twente striker Marc Janko to head home a consolation goal in injury time.

Benfica joined in the suspense-killing with a 4-1 rout of PSV Eindhoven, winners of the old UEFA Cup in 1978.

Pablo Aimar opened the scoring in the 37th minute, with Eduardo Salvio giving the Lisbon side a huge boost with a quick-fire brace in the 45th and 52nd minutes.

Second half substitute Zakaria Labiyad hit back for PSV in the 80th minute but by then

it was too little too late. Diminutive Argentine forward Javier Saviola added a goal in the fourth minute of injury time.

Braga, who eliminated Liverpool in the last round of the competition, went behind to Andriy Yarmolenko's sixth-minute opener but were back on level terms when Oleh Gusev turned into his own net seven minutes later.

Porto, who are already assured of winning the Portuguese title, won the UEFA Cup in 2003, and went on to win the Champions League a year later under the leadership of current Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho.

The northern Portuguese side staked an early claim for a place in the final thanks to a hat-trick from Colombian forward Falcao, who scored his last two goals in the final 10 minutes.

Earlier Silvestre Varela and Maicon had added one apiece, leaving Spartak Moscow, who scored a late consolation through Kirill Kombarov, virtually out of the competition.

RESULTS

FC Porto (POR) 5 (Falcao 37, 84, 90+2, Varela 65, Maicon 70) Spartak Moscow (RUS) 1 (Kombarov 71)

Benfica (POR) 4 (Aimar 37, Salvio 45, 52, Saviola 90+4) PSV Eindhoven (NED) 1 (Labyad 80)

Villarreal (ESP) 5 (Marchena 22, Borja Valero 43, Nilmar 45+1, 80, Rossi 55) Twente (NED) 1 (Janko 90+1)

Dynamo Kiev (UKR) 1 (Yarmolenko 6)

SPORTS POLL

Who was the best player in the World Cup?

Yuvraj 51.1%
Afridi 22.7%
Dilshan 11.0%

TOTAL VOTES: 436

WEEKLY QUESTION

Do you agree with ICC's decision to restrict the next two World Cups?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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What to WATCH

BTV/Neo Cricket

Bangladesh v Australia

First ODI

Live from 9:30am

ESPN

English Premiership

Wolves v Everton

Live from 6:00pm

Man United v Fulham

Live from 8:00pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership

Tottenham v Stoke City

Live from 8:00pm

Sunderland v West Bromwich

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh v Australia

First ODI

Time: 9:30am

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium

Bangladesh A v South Africa A

(First Four-Day Match, Day-3)



FC Porto forward Radamel Falcao celebrates one of his three goals against Spartak Moscow during their Europa League quarterfinal at the Dragao Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP