



Manchester City players attend a team training session at their Carrington complex on Thursday, prior to their FA cup final against Stoke City at Wembley today.

PHOTO: AFP

Real reject Benzema bid

AFP, Rome

Juventus have had a 30 million euros (\$43m) bid for French striker Karim Benzema rejected by Real Madrid, according to reports in the Italian media on Friday.

Real president Florentino Perez reportedly met with representatives from Juve in Madrid but does not want to lose the 23-year-old France international, who has scored 13 league goals and six Champions League goals this term.

Real coach Jose Mourinho, however, "doesn't have the same ideas as his president" regarding Benzema, according to La Gazzetta dello Sport.

Juventus are also said to be interested in Real's French defensive midfielder Lassana Diarra, who Mourinho has reportedly placed on the transfer list.

Spanish daily Marca claimed earlier this month that Benzema had "had enough" of not playing regularly at Real and was beginning to consider his future at the club.

City's defining moment

AFP, London



Manchester City will attempt to end 35 years of failure on Saturday when they face Stoke in an FA Cup final which threatens to be upstaged by Manchester United's record 19th league title.

Wembley's hosting of the May 28 Champions League final means that for the first time, English football's traditional end-of-season showpiece is taking place alongside a round of Premier League fixtures.

The nightmare scheduling scenario has left City's moment in the sun jostling for attention with United, who require a solitary point at Blackburn to become the most successful club in English history.

Yet even if Manchester United are crowned Premier League champions, City can nevertheless be able to confirm their emergence as English football's rising force with their first trophy since 1976.

Victory at Wembley would be the

perfect end to a week that saw Roberto Mancini's men clinch a Champions League spot.

And for Mancini, winning the FA Cup would be the first step in his mission to change the mentality of City, who have become the highest spending club in world football since their 2008 takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group.

"I'm excited by this and very proud for my players," Mancini said. "I always saw this game on TV in Italy - Manchester United against Chelsea and I watched when Harry Redknapp won with Portsmouth.

"This is a very important moment for me in my career. The FA Cup is very important, it is my first final and the first time Manchester City have been in it for a long time. It will be a special day.

"Our target was the Champions League and after that we wanted to get into one of the finals. We are in the FA final. It's a good moment for us."

Mancini says he will wait until Saturday morning before deciding whether or not to start Carlos Tevez, the Argentinian international who

returned from a one-month injury lay-off as a substitute in Tuesday's win over Spurs.

"Carlos is getting better," said Mancini. "We now have two days to decide if he can play or not. At this stage I still don't know whether he could play or not, we will make a decision on Saturday morning."

The danger for Mancini and City is that they face a Stoke side in superb form who will travel to Wembley comfortable in the knowledge that all of the pressure rests firmly on their lavishly-funded opponents' shoulders.

The Potters thrashed Bolton 5-0 in the semifinals, and head to London fresh from a 3-1 demolition job on Arsenal last weekend.

For Stoke manager Tony Pulis, Saturday is an opportunity to avenge the bitter memory of 1999's second division play-off final, when his Gillingham side led City 2-0 with two minutes to go only to end up losing on penalties.

"It will mean more against City," Pulis said. "We didn't deserve to lose that game and I had never been back to Wembley for a game since

because of it.

"But it made me a stronger person. You take things out of defeat as well as victory."

Pulis is relishing the opportunity of taking on the financial Goliaths of the Premier League.

"I think in comparison of what the clubs have spent, in comparison of the size of the clubs, in comparison of who we're dealing with, it's as big a void as you will get," Pulis said.

"I'm not just saying that because it's Stoke. I think Man City with most clubs, that's going to be what's going to happen. It wouldn't surprise me next year if they go out and buy big again."

While Mancini and City dream of dominating a new era of English football, Pulis and Stoke have more modest goals.

"The greatest achievement is that next year we'll be playing for a fourth year in the Premier League."

"If you have a look at the way we've moved along and what we've done at the football club, on and off the pitch -- it's been a remarkable story."

MU on the brink

AFP, London



Twenty-five years after taking over at Manchester United with the goal of knocking Liverpool "off their perch", Sir Alex Ferguson's long-held dream is likely to become reality on Saturday.

After a magnificent performance at Old Trafford last weekend to dispose of Chelsea, United need only a draw at Blackburn to secure a record 19th title and overtake Liverpool as the most successful club in English history.

In a twist that will delight United fans, the Red Devils can clinch the title on the very day that cross-town rivals Manchester City are hoping to end their 35-year trophy drought in the FA Cup final at Wembley.

United's likely coronation at Ewood Park will come after a season where Ferguson's men have faced persistent and unflattering comparisons with some of the Scot's more celebrated Championship-winning teams.

But Ryan Giggs, the veteran midfielder who is the only player to have been a member of all 11 of United's Championship wins

under Ferguson to date, is unfazed by the criticism.

"To be honest, it really doesn't bother us," Giggs said. "We all concede that, in the first half of the season, we were not playing brilliantly but we were getting results."

"The second half of the season, after Christmas, we've been brilliant. The performances have been brilliant and so have the results."

"We've played some great stuff in both the European games and in the league so we don't really care what people say. We know the quality in the dressing room and so does the manager."

Statistically at least, United's current side stacks up favourably against more celebrated Ferguson teams -- four points from their final two matches would give United a better points tally than the treble-winning squad of 1999.

Ferguson meanwhile has ruled out any possibility of his players falling at the final hurdle.

"Knowing the players they won't muck it up. They'll get their point," Ferguson said. "I would be surprised if we didn't win it now."

"We only need one point from the last two games and the last game is at home."

FIXTURES

Saturday

Blackburn v Man Utd (1145), Blackpool v Bolton (1145), Sunderland v Wolves (1145), West Brom v Everton (1145).

Sunday

Arsenal v Aston Villa (1500), Birmingham v Fulham (1500), Chelsea v Newcastle (1230), Liverpool v Tottenham (1500), Wigan v West Ham (1500).

Hazard and Rossi catch Inter's eye

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti revealed on Friday that his club were interested in Lille's young Belgian star Eden Hazard and Villarreal's Italian striker Giuseppe Rossi.

"It seems to me that Hazard can be a very interesting player," said Moratti of the 20-year-old.

"My son is always telling me that we should sign Hazard but we haven't contacted him."

Moratti told Sky Sport that "Giuseppe Rossi is very strong, but Hazard is more surprising," adding that Inter were interested in both players.

Moratti's son, Angelomario Moratti, is Inter vice-president.

Fight for UCL spot

AFP, Rome



With the Serie A title already wrapped up it is the minor details that need to be ironed out in Italy this weekend, starting with the race for a Champions League place.

Three teams are realistically still in contention for fourth place and a berth in the Champions League qualifying round next season.

Udinese currently hold that crucial fourth place with Roman neighbours Lazio and Roma two points behind and hoping for a helping hand.

Juventus had also been in the running until Monday when they blew a 2-0 lead at home to Chievo to draw 2-2.

They trail Udinese by five points and it would take an

FIXTURES

(1300 GMT unless stated):

Saturday

Lazio v Genoa (1600), AC Milan v Cagliari (1845)

Sunday

Florentina v Bologna (1030), Bari v Lecce, Catania v Roma, Cesena v Brescia, Chievo v Udinese, Parma v Juventus, Sampdoria v Palermo, Napoli v Inter Milan (1845)

extremely unlikely turn of events for them to snatch fourth place now.

However, it is Juve's own recent nemesis Chievo who the Romans will be looking to do them a favour when Udinese travel to Verona on Sunday.

All three teams have one home and one away match remaining so they will be looking for each other to slip up when travelling away. Udinese, however, have the toughest looking home match to come as they finish the season against Milan.

Lazio play at home to Genoa on Saturday so could put the pressure on the others if they win.

Roma, like Udinese, will be on their travels and head to Catania, who like Genoa and Chievo have nothing left to play for this season, being out of both European running and clear of the threat of relegation.

Barca to rest stars

AFP, Madrid



High-flying Barcelona, with a third La Liga title already wrapped up, will rest key stars ahead of the Champions League final when they welcome Deportivo La Coruna to Camp Nou on Sunday.

Barcelona became the first team since 1993 to win three successive Spanish titles when they drew 1-1 at Levante on Wednesday.

They now have the luxury of two 'dead' league games to prepare for the European showpiece against Manchester United at Wembley on May 28.

Depor will provide the traditional guard of honour at Camp Nou on Sunday, but will hope to upset the celebrating home fans with a win to aid their survival bid.

La Coruna, Champions League semifinalists in 2004, are three points above the relegation zone and fighting to extend their 20-year stay in the top flight.

Real Madrid tried to forget about Barcelona's latest title win by parading their Kings Cup trophy and have nothing to play for but pride when they travel to Villarreal on Sunday.

Real have had second place wrapped up for months but Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo insists the team want to finish the campaign with two more victories.

"The coach has asked us to finish the league by winning our games and we will try to do that," said Ronaldo. Ronaldo has scored an incredible seven goals in his last two league outings to take his season's tally to 36 and is on course to win the Pichichi crown for the league's top-scorer.

Ronaldo lies five goals ahead of Barcelona's Lionel Messi and could break the all-time record of 38 set by Athletic Bilbao's Telmo Zarra in 1951 and matched by Real's iconic Mexican striker Hugo Sanchez in 1990.

Villarreal have fourth place secure and trail third-placed Valencia by five points with six points to play for.

FIXTURES

Sunday (all 1900 GMT)

Alicante v Real Mallorca, Villarreal v Real Madrid, Getafe v Osasuna, Sevilla v Real Sociedad, Real Zaragoza v Espanyol, Valencia v Levante, Barcelona v Deportivo La Coruna, Athletic Bilbao v Malaga, Sporting Gijon v Racing Santander, Atletico Madrid v Hercules

Italian legend and United Nations goodwill ambassador Roberto Baggio (L) hands out T-shirts to children at the Oscar Ibanez football academy in Lima on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP



What to WATCH

SET Max

Indian Premier League
Bangalore v Kolkata
Live from 4:30pm
Mumbai v Deccan
Live from 8:30pm

TEN Cricket
West Indies v Pakistan
First Test, Day 3
Live from 8:00pm

ESPN

English Premiership
Blackburn v Man United
Live from 6:00pm
West Bromwich v Everton
Live from 8:30pm
STAR Sports
English Premiership
Sunderland v Wolves
Live from 6:00pm

DAY'S EVENT

National Cricket League

FINAL

(Five-Day Match, Day-5)
Dhaka v Rajshahi
Time: 9:30am
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur
Bangladesh League
Sk Russel v Brothers Union
Time: 4:15pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Soccer Club, Feni v Muktijoddha
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Feni Stadium

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

In this season's EPL, who has been the best player?

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

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