

MU aim to steal march

AFP, London



Premier League champions Manchester United will try to put the pressure on leaders Manchester City when they face bottom of the table Blackburn Rovers at Old Trafford on Saturday.

A draw or better will see United go top ahead of City's New Year's Day trip to Sunderland.

United will be firm favourites to give long-serving manager Sir Alex Ferguson a 70th birthday present of a victory against a Blackburn side that has won just twice in the league so far this season. But while beating Rovers would be no surprise, ending the calendar year on top of the table would be a boost to a United team beaten 6-1 in the league by City, knocked out of the League Cup by second tier Crystal Palace and no longer involved in the Champions League following a shock loss to Basel.

"You are going to get setbacks," long-serving winger Ryan Giggs told www.manutd.com. "It's about how you react to them.

"Thankfully we've come back strong. They can help in a way. I've experienced that throughout my career - you might hit bad form or miss a good chance, and you can't wait for the next game so you can rectify it.

"I'm sure all the lads felt like that after the City game and after Basel, which was a big disappointment too."

Many had predicted Blackburn boss Steve Kean would have been out of a job by now but Venky's, the Indian-based poultry firm that owns Rovers,

are standing by the Scot.

And Kean himself revealed he'd had words of support from compatriot Ferguson among a host of consoling words from fellow Premier League managers.

"We had a good chat," said Kean. "For him to take the time out to phone me with a message of support shows the stature of the man. I was really impressed by that.

"What he said was very encouraging. When you are getting managers like Sir Alex, Harry Redknapp, David Moyes and Alan Pardew saying hang in there, you are doing the right things,

wait until you get your lads out of the treatment room and you will be fine, it gives you confidence.

"They have been in the game a long time and been in similar situations. I listen and take their advice because they have been round the block."

Third-placed Tottenham travel to Swansea with all eyes on Gareth Bale after the Spurs star's scintillating display in their 2-0 win at Norwich.

Now the Wales international will look to carry on from where he left off at Carrow Road against Welsh club

Swansea and Brendan Rodgers, the promoted side's manager, knows what to expect from the "perfect" left winger.

"He is perfect," said Rodgers. "His size, his pace, his power and his touch on the ball mean he is a wonderful, wonderful talent.

"If he was on the market any of the top teams in the world would take him."

Fourth-placed Chelsea may be all but out of the title race -- they are 11 points behind the top two -- but they will look to cement their grip on a Champions League spot at home to Aston Villa.

Arsenal, looking to break into the top four, head into their London derby at home to QPR with speculation surrounding the possible return of Gunners great Thierry Henry on a short-term loan move.

The 34-year-old France international scored a record 226 goals for the Gunners from 1999 to 2007 and has been training with Arsenal while the New York Red Bulls, his current club, enjoy the Major League Soccer off-season.

"When I see him training, I am teasing him, 'You could still play with us you know'," said Arsenal midfielder Alex Song.

"But he has never replied and just smiles."

At the bottom of the table, Bolton face Wolves in the proverbial six-pointer for both clubs while Norwich play Fulham and Stoke take on relegation-threatened Wigan.

Mid-table sides West Brom and Everton meet on Sunday.

FIXTURES	
(1500GMT unless stated)	
Saturday	
Arsenal v QPR, Bolton v Wolves, Chelsea v Aston Villa, Manchester United v Blackburn (1245GMT), Norwich v Fulham, Stoke v Wigan, Swansea v Tottenham	
Sunday	
West Brom v Everton (1230GMT), Sunderland v Manchester City	

PSG appoint Ancelotti

AFP, Paris

Italian Carlo Ancelotti was on Friday named the new coach of Paris Saint-Germain on a two-and-a-half year deal, but former England captain David Beckham has still not committed to the big-spending Qatar-backed French club.

The 52-year-old former AC Milan and Chelsea boss takes over from Antoine Kombouare, who stepped down earlier Friday, and his first competitive game will be a French Cup last-64 tie away to Brittany amateur outfit Locminé on January 8.

Ancelotti is now in place to fly out to the Middle East with the first-team squad on Sunday for a four-day winter training camp in Qatar and Dubai.

It has been reported that Ancelotti, twice a Champions League winner in his time with Milan, would become the best-paid coach in the history of the French game with an annual salary of between six and seven million euros (\$7.8m-\$9m).

The club left it late to confirm the sacking of Kombouare, a former player who has been in the dug-out since the summer of 2009.

"After two years during which he carried

out his duties as PSG head coach with passion, Antoine Kombouare leaves Paris Saint-Germain as from today," the Parisian club said in a statement shortly before unveiling Ancelotti.

Kombouare, 48, thanked "all the people who offered him support over these last days".

"I leave Paris Saint-Germain with a sense of unfinished business but with the feeling of having given everything."

But Beckham's agent on Friday denied media reports that the former Manchester United star had signed for the Parisian club.

"There is no agreement with PSG at this time, an offer does not make a contract, we continue to hold negotiations with a number of clubs," 19Management said in a statement released by the SEMP public relations company.

"No decision has been made and we do not expect one at the moment."

But PSG's mega-rich owners Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) expressed confidence that Beckham would "soon be a player for PSG".

"We are confident that he will be in attendance for the (friendly) match with AC Milan, and are happy to see David and his family settle into Paris."

Gayle on for BPL

SPORTS REPORTER

West Indian swashbuckler Chris Gayle has confirmed his availability for three matches in the Bangladesh Premier League.

The inclusion of the big-hitter is a shot in the arm for the 6-team Twenty20 tournament, though Gayle will only be available for three games.

The former West Indies captain is the first high-class Twenty20 freelance to have confirmed himself for the BPL.

Amal, Munir, Anwar & Biplob in last four

SPORTS REPORTER

Amal Roy, Munir Hossain, Anwar Hossain and Biplob Ram moved to the men's singles semifinals of the Runner Group Victory Day Open Tennis Competition winning their respective quarterfinal matches at the National Tennis Complex in Ramna yesterday.

Amal beat Mofajjal Hossain 6-3, 6-4; Munir defeated Rustam Ali 6-0, 6-2; Anwar outplayed fourth seed Dipu Lal 6-2, 6-4; and Biplob overpowered second seed Ranjan Ram 6-0, 4-6, 6-4.

In the boys' singles (16 years) event, U Wai Mong Marma, Akhter Hossain, Mamun Bepari and M Delwar Hossain advanced to the semifinals eliminating their respective rivals.

In the girls' singles (16 years) event, Eshita Afroze and Moumita Jannat Mou reached to the semifinals beating their respective rivals.

Feni cricket

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Feni

Roushanabad Cricket Club beat Mohammedan SC by 5 runs in the Beacon Group First Division Cricket League at the Shaheed Salam Stadium in Feni on Thursday. Batting first, Roushanabad were skittled out for 129 runs, with Didarul scoring highest 46. In reply, Mohammedan were bowled out for 124 as Ziku took five wickets for Roushanabad.

Kvitova cares little about ranking

AFP, Perth

Petra Kvitova is closing in on being ranked the best player in women's tennis, but the Czech Republic ace said on Friday that she could not care less about the honour.

Speaking in Western Australia as she prepared for the mixed teams Hopman Cup, where she will face a player whose number one ranking many people expect her to usurp in early 2012, Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki, Kvitova dismissed the top ranking as a personal goal.

"Not really," the 21-year-old said when asked if she had a desire to be number one in the world.

"I am not the one who compares me and Caroline, I focus on my game and improving. My focus is to improve my game, not the ranking.

Harris in for 2nd Test

AFP, Sydney

Australian fast bowler Ryan Harris was Friday named to the 12-man squad to take on India in the second Test in Sydney, the only addition to the side which won the series opener in Melbourne.

Harris, who has been out with a hip injury, comes into the squad but fellow pacesman Mitchell Starc and all-rounder Daniel Christian have been omitted and all-rounder Shane Watson remains sidelined by a calf injury.

National selector John Inverarity said Australia would go into the Sydney game "with confidence and momentum" after their emphatic 122-run victory over the tourists in four days at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"Ryan Harris has been added to the XI that played in the first Test in Melbourne," Inverarity said.

"Ryan has had carefully monitored preparation, which has gone to plan.

"Mitchell Starc and Daniel Christian, who were both in squad for the first Test have been omitted but remain very much in our thinking."

Australian officials hope that Watson will be available to play in at least one Test during India's tour, which follows Australia's humiliating loss to eighth-ranked New Zealand earlier this month.

"Shane has not fully recovered from his right calf injury and is therefore not available for the Sydney Test," team physiotherapist Alex Kountouris said.

"He will continue his rehabilitation and hopefully be available for one of the remaining Test matches."

Australia's pace trio of James Pattinson, Peter Siddle and Ben Hilfenhaus was crucial to the home side's win in Melbourne, snaring 19 wickets between them to limit India's strong batting line-up to a two-innings total of 451.

Harris could be used to aid their efforts in Sydney, with captain Michael Clarke saying Thursday that selectors would consider this possibility.

India, in the ascendancy over Australia as the second-ranked team, have failed in nine previous tours over 64 years to win a series Down Under.

SQUAD

Michael Clarke (captain), Brad Haddin (vice-captain), Ed Cowan, Ryan Harris, Ben Hilfenhaus, Michael Hussey, Nathan Lyon, Shaun Marsh, James Pattinson, Ricky Ponting, Peter Siddle, David Warner.

Laudatory Aussie press

AFP, Sydney

Australian media Friday welcomed the return of the "killer instinct" after their wildly inconsistent team surprisingly humbled India's distinguished batting order to win the first Test in Melbourne.

Australia, condemned as the "lowest of the low" after this month's shock defeat to New Zealand, had "rediscovered their mongrel", or fighting spirit, in fiery pacesman James Pattinson, The Sydney Morning Herald said.

Above a front-page picture of Pattinson celebrating with fellow fast bowler Peter Siddle, the paper declared: "Test team's killer instinct is back, sharpened for the SCG [Sydney Cricket Ground]."

"James Pattinson could not have channelled Dennis Lillee more convincingly without growing whiskers and wearing his shirt unbuttoned to the waist," Chloe Saltu wrote, in reference to the iconic fast bowler of the 1970s and 1980s.

Not only rejuvenated by new talent such as Pattinson, the team also benefited from the direction of skipper Michael Clarke, commentators said.

"Michael Clarke signalled his ruthless intent during Australia's emphatic first Test victory yesterday by encouraging his pacemen to bowl bouncers at the Indian tailenders," Malcolm Conn wrote in the Daily Telegraph.

After a year of turmoil and change, the Australians had finally indicated they could be

on track to regaining their dominance of the sport with their 122-run win over India, he said.

The Australians had made a "giant leap" from Bellerive Oval earlier this month where they suffered the humiliating loss to New Zealand, ranked eighth in the world, to thump the second-ranked Indians, The Australian said.

"Two weeks from humiliation to jubilation as bowlers wreak havoc on Indian demigods," declared the broadsheet in a front-page headline.

"Michael Clarke's men maintained their maddeningly inconsistent recent form by dismantling the might of India to claim an extraordinary 122-run victory inside four days," the paper said.



AC Milan players run during a training session at Mamzar Beach in Dubai yesterday. The team arrived in Dubai for their winter training camp.

PHOTO: REUTERS

MS prefers ump's to DRS

Cricket

CRICINFO, Melbourne

India will not support the DRS until they are convinced that the technology is 100 per cent perfect, captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni has reiterated. Coming to Australia, India were under pressure to agree to the use of the DRS, in part because Channel 9, the host broadcasters, use some of the best technology available in their production of home Tests. However, India did not budge, and Dhoni said his experience in England, where there were several incidents that suggested Hot Spot was not completely accurate, played a part in making that call.

"I still put my money on the umpires because they have been doing the job [for a long time]," Dhoni said. "It is just that the pressure on them is growing with plenty of technology around. We feel the technology is not 100 per cent accurate. At times you see an edge on Hot Spot, sometimes you don't see anything happening. Before the start of the England series I was a big fan of Hot Spot. The way things went in England I don't have the same kind of confidence. If it is not 100 per cent I will still go with the umpires. This is a game in which people commit mistakes. If the bowler doesn't commit a mistake the batsman can't get runs. If the batsman doesn't commit a mistake the bowler doesn't get a wicket.

So we'll make umpires too a part of it."

The DRS refused to die as a topic of debate because in the Melbourne Test there were many potentially match-turning decisions that could have been overturned had they been reviewed. Michael Hussey would not have been dismissed for a golden duck and Ed Cowan could, possibly, have continued batting in the first innings. The decision to adjudge Cowan caught-behind is an interesting grey zone with the DRS because there was a sound at the exact time the ball went past the bat but Hot Spot did not show an edge. In the past the umpires have acted just on the sound.

Ironically, it was India who could have had more decisions reversed than Australia. They could have got Ricky Ponting out early in his second innings, and they had Michael Hussey lbw twice and caught down the leg side once. It is all a matter of conjecture, but India could actually have won the match had they agreed to the use of the DRS, and used it wisely. Dhoni, though, did not want to go down that route.

"What is important is that if a mistake is committed by the umpire, it should not affect him," he said. "If as an umpire you give something out when it's not-out, you don't need to go into your shell thinking you have made a wrong decision. If the next ball the umpire feels it is out, he should boldly give the decision.

"We are happy to go that way because

it is a difficult job for the umpires. We come back to our dressing-room after bowling and only two batsmen go out to bat, but these are the people who stand there for five days. Cricket has been in good shape for long enough with two people in charge. They don't need to worry too much about what technology is going around, about what will show on Hot Spot and what will show on Snicko. We need to back their decisions. If mistakes are not committed intentionally, I am perfectly fine with it."

Dhoni went on to take a dig at the numbers the ICC provides regarding the number of correct decisions made by umpires. "You'll have to see what exactly the ICC sees as correct decisions. Giving a boundary is a correct decision; that also goes in favour of the umpires. You have to categorically say this is what it is."

Dhoni's mistrust of technology would have grown when India appealed for an lbw against Brad Haddin in the first innings and the ball-tracking service failed to show a projection due to lighting issues. That was a pretty adjacent call, but India wouldn't have enjoyed the benefit of the DRS had it been in use. So even if the DRS was a part of this series we would still have had as large, if not larger, a controversy on the first day itself. Hussey would have survived, Cowan's fate would have been decided subjectively by the third umpire, and Haddin would have continued batting.

Furore in Indian media

Cricket

AFP, New Delhi

Indian media on Friday lashed out at the country's famed batting line-up for letting the team down in the opening Test against Australia at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).

Chasing a 292-run target on Thursday, India failed to cope with Australia's pace attack as they were shot out for 169 despite the batting experience of Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, Venkatesai Laxman and Virender Sehwag.

"Melbourne Meltdown" said a Times of India headline after the tourists' 122-run defeat.

"Those expecting India's much-vaunted batting line-up to give Australia a run for their money were disappointed when Dhoni and Co surrendered without even putting up a semblance of a fight," the paper wrote.

Australian fast bowlers James Pattinson, Ben Hilfenhaus and Peter

Siddle all struck it rich on a seamer-friendly track, grabbing 19 of the 20 Indian wickets to lead their side to a crushing victory.

"Foreign fever" returned to grip the Indian team as Pattinson, Hilfenhaus and Siddle tormented them -- much like the English bowlers had done in England -- with a heady cocktail of pace, bounce and movement served with relentless consistency," said the paper.

It was India's fifth successive Test defeat away from home after a 4-0 loss in England.

"Mauled in Melbourne" the Hindustan Times said on its front page and "Bat-erred India fall apart" on its sports page.

"The chase was always going to be an uphill task, considering the recent barren run which has seen the famed batting line-up not cross the 300-run mark in the last 10 away innings," said the paper.

The Hindu newspaper also blamed the batsmen for defeat, saying the "famed batting line-up fails to deliver".

Ravi Shastri, former India all-rounder

and now a noted TV commentator, said the Indian batsmen needed to show grit to bounce back in the four-Test series.

"India need runs from all their main batsmen. Now that bowlers look the part, batters have no business to let them down," he wrote in the Times of India.

"I wouldn't be surprised if this completely turns out to be a bowlers' series. If so, then every run saved or made would count. India have the skills. All they need is resolve," he wrote.

Former India pacesman Javagal Srinath said the tourists could fight back.

"Saddled with the reputation of being poor starters overseas, India did precious little to rectify the anomaly in the Melbourne Test," he wrote in the Hindustan Times.

"Barring England, where nothing went right for them, India have bounced back after first-Test losses. There is no reason, given the experience and quality of the India batting, why they can't do so again in Sydney."

The second Test starts in Sydney on January 3.

SPORTS POLL WEEKLY QUESTION

What was your favourite memory of 2011?

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ESPN
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