

Real's tricky test

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's seven-point lead over Barcelona could come under threat this weekend when Jose Mourinho's side face a potentially tricky fixture at local rivals Getafe.

The team from the south of the capital may be sitting in ninth position but the Dark Blues sit only four points off the Champions League places for next season and are without a defeat in six league games.

Getafe are also the only team to have beaten Barcelona this season -- a significant detail, and also one of the reasons Real currently enjoy such a big gap over the Catalans.

Since being humiliated by a 3-1 home defeat to Barcelona in December, Mourinho's side have a 100 percent record in five league matches -- and that is partly down to on-form German international Mesut Ozil.

Having stated in midweek his desire to stay at the club long-term, the attacking midfielder is clear what the short-term goal is.

"It may that we have a big gap over Barca, but it's not. If we mess up twice they can

LFP

FIXTURES

(all times GMT)

Saturday

Levante v Racing Santander (1700), Mallorca v Real Betis (1700), Athletic Bilbao v Espanol (1700), Getafe v Real Madrid (1900), Barcelona v Real Sociedad (2100)

Sunday

Sporting Gijon v Osasuna (1100), Sevilla v Villarreal (1700), Zaragoza v Rayo Vallecano (1845), Atletico Madrid v Valencia (2030)

Monday

Granada v Malaga (2000)

catch us," said Ozil.

Getafe coach Luis Garcia has duly pinpointed Ozil as one of Real's danger men.

"I think the last few games he has been spectacular and we are now seeing the Ozil we had all heard about. Lets hope he has a bad game on Saturday but I think he has a great future with Madrid," said Garcia, who is nonetheless confident of taking something from the game.

"We are in good form and we'll have our chances, Real have failed to win in the league three times so far this season and we hope to add to that tally," added Garcia.

Apart from the obvious difficulties in facing a consistent Real, Garcia has personal problems.

Centre-halves Rafael Lopez (injured) and Albert Lopo (suspended), together with forward Dani Guiza (suspended) will all be missing.

Also doubtful are midfielders Miguel Marcos Madera, known as 'Michel' (injury), while Pedro Leon -- who is on loan from Real -- will not feature either.

Real have no such worries, with the only uncertainty surrounding midfielder Xabi Alonso. He has returned from injury but if he is on the bench or unselected, Mourinho should continue with ex-Getafe player Esteban Granero.



Real Madrid stars Cristiano Ronaldo (L) and Kaka stretch during a training session in Madrid yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

'Real, Barca favourites'

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint-Germain boss Carlo Ancelotti believes the Champions League trophy is destined for Spain this year, claiming that Real Madrid and Barcelona are "above the rest" of the sides still left in the competition.

"Real and Barca are above the rest," Ancelotti told AFP in an interview on Thursday.

"Below, it's very balanced, like Inter-Marseille will be. It will be hard for everyone. Same for Chelsea who are struggling at the moment," the Italian added, effectively writing off the Blues' chances of winning Europe's top club competition.

Ancelotti also thinks that the Premier League would benefit should Jose Mourinho opt to leave Real and return to England, adding that "it would be a good thing for English football."

City vow to rebound

AFP, London

Manchester City will aim to turn the pressure back on their title rivals on Saturday by re-establishing their slender lead at the top of the Premier League table with victory over Fulham.

City have endured a wobbly start to 2012, exiting both domestic cup competitions while suffering defeats against Sunderland and Everton to leave Roberto Mancini's side level on points with second placed Manchester United.

But with United facing a potentially tricky visit to Chelsea on Sunday, and third placed Tottenham travelling to Liverpool on Monday, City could well finish the latest round of fixtures with their noses back in front.

A dejected Mancini blamed himself for City's latest setback, a surprising 1-0 reverse at Everton on Tuesday which allowed United to go level on points with their bitter cross-town rivals.

Mancini said he had made "several mistakes" in the build-up to the Everton game which would not be repeated as City aim to preserve their remarkable 100 percent home record against the Cottagers.

"I acknowledge my mistake. It is important for me to

know this because, like this, I can't do the same mistakes in the next game," said Mancini, who nevertheless insisted City were still in the driving seat.

"We are on the top again. We have 15 games. It is important next Saturday we win the game at home. We have time."

United meanwhile could welcome back Wayne Rooney, Nani and Ashley Young this weekend for their trip to Stamford Bridge, a venue that has been anything but a happy hunting ground for Sir Alex Ferguson's side in recent seasons.

Although United defeated Chelsea at Stamford Bridge in last season's Champions League quarterfinals, Ferguson is still riled by the memory of his team's recent league meetings at the venue.

Last season a controversial Frank Lampard penalty gave Chelsea a 2-1 win while in 2010 United were left seething by a John Terry winner that Ferguson believed should have been disallowed.

"Games at Chelsea in the last few years have been tough and we've had terrible luck there which has caused us disappointing results," Ferguson said.

The United manager has challenged his players to respond to a series of demanding away fixtures as they bid to overhaul City.

Juve's frozen delight

AFP, Rome

The weather has been playing havoc with football fixtures in Italy all week but Serie A leaders Juventus have survived the big freeze and managed to cement their grip on the standings, without even playing.

Juve's game at Parma was called off leaving them an anxious 24-hour wait to see if they would lose the league leadership.

But AC Milan crashed 2-0 at Lazio meaning Juve held on to top spot ahead of the visit of Siena this weekend.

"The midweek games provided a table that still makes us smile," said Juve captain Alessandro Del Piero.

"With a one-point advantage (over Milan) and a game in hand we have to take advantage of the opportunity to escape, even though it's still too soon to stop and look at the table."

There is still almost half the season to go but there's a feeling that things are falling into Juve's lap.

However, with temperatures of up to minus 10 Celsius expected in the north this weekend, the weather promises to have yet more of a say.

Already three scheduled evening games have had to be brought forward to the afternoon to give them a better chance of going ahead.

What this has done is reopen a raging debate in Italy about the state of stadia in the country.

Juve are the only club to own their custom-built stadium while everyone else rents theirs from the local council.

Those other stadiums are mostly old and out-dated with poor facilities and no contingency plans for icy conditions.

When games are called off in Italy it is rarely because the pitch is frozen but because the areas around the ground used by fans are deemed too dangerous.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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What to WATCH

TEN Cricket

England v Pakistan

Third Test, Day 2

Live from 12:00pm

ESPN

English Premiership

Arsenal v Blackburn

Live from 7:00pm

QPR v Wolves

Live from 9:30pm

Man City v Fulham

Live from 11:30pm

TEN Action+

Serie A

Cesena v Catania

Live from 11:00pm

La Liga

Getafe v Real Madrid

Live from 1:00am (Sunday)

Barcelona v Real Sociedad

Live from 3:00am (Sunday)

DAY'S EVENT

Premier League

Abahani v Rahmatganj

Time: 3:15pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

Bangladesh U-19s v England U-19s

Seventh One-day

Time: 1:30pm

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur



Terry loses armband

AFP, London

John Terry was stripped of the England captaincy for the second time in two years on Friday after mounting concern his ongoing racism court case had made his position untenable.

The English Football Association confirmed in a statement that chairman David Bernstein had contacted Terry to inform him of the body's decision to remove him as captain until the allegations were "resolved."

Bernstein had canvassed opinion amongst members of the FA board on Thursday to discuss the best course action for Terry, who is accused of racially abusing Queens Park Rangers defender Anton Ferdinand during a match last year.

Terry, 31, strongly denies the charges and has vowed to clear his name. However the decision this week to delay his court case until July 9 left FA chiefs with the prospect of the saga overshadowing England's Euro 2012 campaign.

"Following the decision to adjourn the court case against John Terry to July, the Football Association confirm he will not captain the England team until the allegations against him are resolved," the FA statement said.

"This decision has been taken due to the higher profile nature of the England captaincy, on and off the pitch, and the additional demands and requirements expected of the captain leading into and during a tournament."

However the FA statement stressed Terry could still represent England in Poland and the Ukraine this summer.

"The FA Board can confirm that he has not been excluded from the squad and that Fabio Capello is free to select him for the Holland fixture on 29 February and the European Championship," the statement said.

The FA said Bernstein had explained the decision to Terry and Capello, who had reportedly been in favour of keeping the centre-half as captain.

"Fabio Capello has not been involved in the FA Board discussions which reached this conclusion, but understands the FA Board has authority to make this decision," the statement said.

"Fabio Capello will take the decision as to who will be made captain moving forward."

"This decision in no way infers any suggestion of guilt in relation to the charge made against John Terry."

Friday's developments marked the latest twist to Terry's chequered England career following the decision to sack him as captain over allegations about his private life in the build-up to the 2010 World Cup.

'Tevez could return'

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini on Friday refused to rule out a possible return to action for Carlos Tevez, provided he proved his fitness.

Tevez has not played for City since a spat with Mancini during last September's Champions League defeat at Bayern Munich.

The Argentinian striker has been in limbo ever since, having returned to his homeland while attempts to broker a move in the January window fell flat.

Mancini however surprised many by including Tevez in his official updated 25-man squad for the remainder of the Premier League season, and said Friday it was possible the 27-year-old could yet feature this term.

"Carlos is not an option at the moment but it is possible in the future if he comes back," said Mancini.

"I hope for him he has been training in the last three months to help his condition."

"There is only one thing on my mind, the Barclays Premier League. But if he comes back - and he is fit - it is possible."

Mancini meanwhile revealed that the deadline-day swoop for Roma's David Pizarro was a consequence of ongoing concern surrounding the fitness of injury-plagued midfielder Owen Hargreaves.

"Owen always has these little problems," said Mancini.

Ribery slates lack of depth

AFP, Berlin

France star Franck Ribery on Thursday criticised Bayern Munich's lack of spending over the winter break and said the German league leaders missed a chance to strengthen their squad.

Bayern are at Hamburg on Saturday night in the Bundesliga and need a win as rivals Borussia Dortmund and Schalke are level with them on 40 points, with the Bavarians top by virtue of goal difference.

Ribery is expected to play in Hamburg despite suffering with back pains at the start of the week and says Bayern should have strengthened their squad during January's transfer window.

Coach Jupp Heynckes and chief executive officer Karl-Heinz Rummenigge have said the league leaders enjoy enough strength in their squad already, but Ribery disagrees.

"I think it's a big problem for us if two or three players are injured," Ribery told German magazine Kicker.

"(Bayern) have no real good bench and don't have a really good second team. But I'm not the president, nor the manager, just a player."

With sub-zero temperatures expected in Hamburg, Ribery says he is ready to play on Saturday.

Bundesliga

06 days to go...

Starts from 10 February 2012

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