

MU squeeze thru'

AFP, Paris

Manchester United squeezed through to the Europa League last 16 on Thursday despite losing 2-1 to Ajax at Old Trafford while former champions Atletico Madrid became Spain's third team in the next stage.

Sir Alex Ferguson's United went through 3-2 on aggregate and will face Athletic Bilbao in the next round.

Mexican star Javier Hernandez scored his 10th goal of the season after six minutes but Ajax threatened to spoil the party when Aras Ozbiliz levelled in the 37th minute and Toby Alderweireld headed a 87th-minute second leg winner.

Valencia joined Bilbao and Atletico, who saw off Lazio 4-1 on aggregate, in the next round when a 1-0 win over Stoke City gave them a 2-0 aggregate win.

Brazilian Jonas struck the only goal in the 24th minute which was never challenged by the English Premier League side.

The Spanish side now face PSV Eindhoven, who should prove formidable opponents after a 4-1 hammering of Trabzonspor for a 6-2 aggregate over the Turks.

Already trailing 2-1, Trabzonspor's task got even tougher as early as the 15th min-



Manchester United striker Javier Hernandez (R) scores the opening goal against Ajax during their Europa League second round encounter at Old Trafford on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Test of credentials

AFP, Madrid

Defending champions Barcelona attempt to hang onto the coattails of run-away leaders Real Madrid on Sunday with Pep Guardiola's team insisting they do not deserve to be 10 points behind their bitter rivals.

All eyes will be on the Spanish capital on Sunday when the race for the title continues with Real making the short journey to neighbours Rayo Vallecano while Barcelona visit Atletico.

Barcelona captain Xavi Hernandez believes the gap is not a fair reflection of the league so far.

"If we compare the play of Madrid and ours the gap is too big, but we have not had the best of luck. Football is like that, sometimes it's the smallest details that matter and we have not been able to control those as much this season," he said.

"We won the World Club Championship and without realising it probably lost a bit of rhythm due to that, but we are keen to win back those 10 points.

"I watch most Madrid matches but I don't follow what (Jose) Mourinho says. I'm more interested in the football," he continued,

FIXTURES

Saturday

Betis v Getafe (1700 GMT), Racing Santander v Sporting Gijon (1700 GMT), Malaga v Zaragoza (1900 GMT), Espanyol v Levante (2100 GMT)

Sunday

Villarreal v Athletic Bilbao (1100 GMT), Rayo Vallecano v Real Madrid (1500 GMT), Valencia v Sevilla (1700 GMT), Osasuna v Granada (1700 GMT), Real Sociedad v Mallorca (1700 GMT), Atletico Madrid v Barcelona (2030 GMT)

perhaps in a bid to increase the tension between the two rival clubs.

Madrid have been criticised in the last week for their decision to not offer their Santiago Bernabeu stadium as a stage for the Spanish Cup final that Barcelona will contest with Athletic Bilbao in May.

Although work on the stadium is the official reason given as to why the game cannot be played in the Bernabeu, it is thought that Madrid's management do not want to run the risk of Barcelona lifting a trophy on their home ground.

Two key players for Madrid this season, Angel Di Maria and Karim Benzema, are unavailable for the game at Rayo Vallecano.

The absence of Benzema gives Gonzalo Higuain, recently linked with a summer move to Manchester City, the chance to establish a place in Mourinho's start-

ingeleven.

The Argentine international enjoyed Mourinho's faith at the beginning of the season but has since had to battle with Benzema for the chance to lead the forward line.

Rayo have won their last three games and sit in eighth position, only two points behind a potential Champions League place next season.

Priest backs Pep to stay

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona fans worried coach Pep Guardiola will decide not to extend his contract beyond the end of this season were given reassurance on Thursday when his home town priest said he was sure the former Barca and Spain midfielder would stay.

Jean Hakolimana, a Rwandan who has run the local church in Santpedor where Guardiola was born since 2007, told Spanish radio he thought the 41-year-old was highly unlikely to leave as he had such strong links to the Catalan club.

"If anyone has doubts and that is their faith then they can pray for it but I think he will stay," Hakolimana said, adding that he last saw Guardiola three months ago and that the coach's parents attend his church regularly.

"You could not understand today's Barcelona without Guardiola and you could not understand Guardiola without Barca, they are so strongly connected and that's why I think he will extend his contract," he said.

Table toppers clash

AFP, Rome



AC Milan suffered a blow ahead of Saturday's crunch top-of-table clash against Juventus as Zlatan Ibrahimovic has been ruled out through suspension.

The big Swede was sent off against Napoli on February 5 for slapping Salvatore Aronica and handed a three-game ban.

Milan appealed in the hope of having one match knocked off the ban which would have freed Ibrahimovic to play against Juve.

And the reigning champions reacted with fury when their pleas fell on deaf ears.

"The Federal Justice Court's decision is unjust because they have applied a punishment due for violent acts to an act that wasn't violent," said a Milan statement.

"This is a serious judicial mistake."

Given Ibrahimovic had been sent off for slapping an opponent in the face it may seem strange to some that Milan would appeal his ban on the grounds they deny it was violent conduct.

However, last year they were successful with a similar appeal after Ibrahimovic had thumped Bari's Marco Rossi in the ribs.

He had one game taken off his ban but

was then dismissed on his return to action for abusing a linesman.

Now Milan will have to do without their top scorer and star player for what could prove their biggest game of the season.

Milan lead Juve by one point having played a game more.

However, in their previous two games without Ibrahimovic they showed no ill effects, beating Udinese 2-1 and Cesena 3-1.

In fact, a look at last year's statistics showed Milan actually earned more points per game without the target man than they did with him.

This season, on the other hand, they have actually earned more points per game with him in the team, although only just.

Perhaps more worrying than those statistics is the fact that Milan's other strikers are struggling to find the net.

Robinho has just four goals in 19 league games,

Pato one in 10, Stephan El Shaarawy two in 13 (although he's been used mostly as a substitute) and new signing Maxi Lopez has one in four.

Without Ibrahimovic's 15 goals from 19 games, Milan would not be looking down on the rest of Serie A.

However, centre-back Thiago Silva has been buoyed by the club's recent form, not least the Udinese success and a 4-0 thrashing of Arsenal in the Champions League.

Podolski back in training

AFP, Berlin

Germany striker Lukas Podolski returned to training with relegation-haunted Cologne on Thursday, three weeks after injuring his left ankle.

However, he refused to reveal if he was fit enough to face Bayer Leverkusen on Saturday.

"Now I will see how the ankle reacts," said the 26-year-old, who has scored 15 times this season.

"Perhaps I could play 10 or 15 minutes, but we don't want to take any risks because the injury was more serious than we had anticipated."

Cologne, who have lost their last two matches, are 14th in the table, just two places above the relegation zone.

Podolski, who has 95 caps, had already been ruled out of Germany's friendly international against France next Wednesday.

SPORTS POLL

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Spain drop Torres

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Chelsea striker Fernando Torres was dropped from the Spain squad for the world champions' friendly international against Venezuela by coach Vicente Del Bosque on Friday.

Spain, who will defend their European crown later this year, face the vastly-improved South Americans in Malaga next Wednesday and while Del Bosque stressed there could still be changes to the squad before this summer's European Championship in Ukraine and Poland, Torres looks a long way from making his squad of 23.

Del Bosque said he wanted to reward players who had been performing well. Torres has been doing anything but that for more than a year.

"He is a lad we appreciate a great deal and it pains me to leave him out but I wanted to be fair," Del Bosque told a news conference.

Torres has endured a woeful time since he joined Chelsea from Liverpool for a British record fee of 50 million pounds (\$78.51 million) just over a year ago.

He scored one goal for Chelsea in 18 appearances last season and this season he has been just as unimpressive.

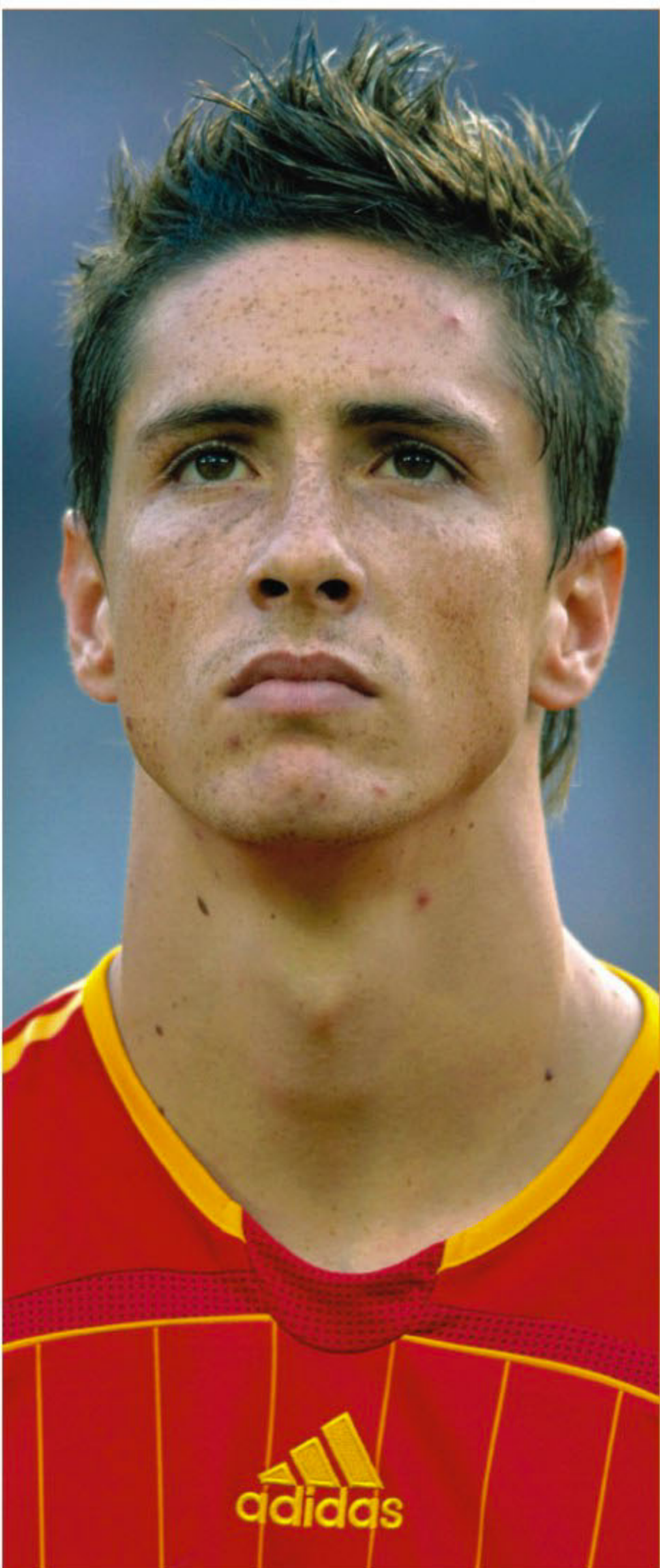
In 29 appearances he has scored four times and has not found the net since October 19 when he scored twice against Genk of Belgium in a Champions League match.

He scored his last Premier League goal five months ago in a 4-1 win over Swansea on September 24 - and was then sent off minutes later.

Torres is unrecognizable from the player that was beloved for his scoring exploits at Liverpool and before that at Atletico Madrid.

His winning goal for Spain in the Euro 2008 final against Germany in Vienna seems like it was scored by a different player.

He last scored for Spain in a European Championship qualifier against Liechtenstein in a 4-0 win in September 2010 when he scored twice but has not found the net for his country in three appearances since then.



Turmoil in London

AFP, London



The Premier League title duel between Manchester United and Manchester City could be relegated to side-show status this weekend as all eyes descend on the turmoil bedevilling Arsenal and Chelsea.

With Manchester City facing lowly Blackburn on Saturday and United travelling to Norwich 24 hours later, few will be surprised if City's two-point lead at the top of the table remains intact come Sunday night.

Yet the stakes could not be higher for Arsenal and Chelsea, whose campaigns are teetering on the brink following a series of poor results which have left their managers Arsene Wenger and Andre Villas-Boas facing stinging criticism.

Arsenal followed their 4-0 thrashing at AC Milan week-end with a dismal FA Cup exit at Sunderland last weekend, a result that effectively ensured the Gunners' trophy drought would enter an eighth year.

While conventional wisdom suggests Wenger has built up enough reserves of goodwill during his 15 years at Arsenal to be the author of his own exit strategy, the recent chorus of criticism directed at the Frenchman will become deafening if Tottenham prevail in Sunday's north London derby at the Emirates.

Spurs, who beat Arsenal 2-1 at White Hart Lane earlier this season, have not done the double over the Gunners for nearly 20 years.

A victory for Harry Redknapp's side would see Spurs open up a 13-point lead over Wenger's men, a vast gulf between third and fourth place that underscores the acute sense of two clubs heading in opposite directions.

Arsenal defender Johan Djourou has challenged his team-mates to prove that the

club remain "the kings of London."

"When you play (Tottenham), you forget the table; it is a battle and the best team will win," Djourou said.

"They are in great shape this season, they have been playing a lot better than before but you have to forget about that and go to war."

"At the start of the season some people wrote them off because they lost a few games but since then they have been unbelievable. But it is up to us to show that we are the kings of London."

While Wenger is expected to weather the current storm, Villas-Boas's position at Chelsea remains shrouded in uncertainty despite the Portuguese manager's insistence that he retains the full backing of owner Roman Abramovich.

The 34-year-old Chelsea boss lurched into another crisis this week as his team slumped to a 3-1 loss at Napoli which has left the Londoners staring down the barrel of Champions League elimination.

Villas-Boas's selection for the match has come under severe scrutiny following the decision to omit Frank Lampard and Ashley Cole from his starting line-up.

Several reports have suggested Villas-Boas is struggling to get a grip on a full-scale dressing room mutiny, with headlines this week such as "Bench warfare" and "Battle at the Bridge" highlighting the strained relationship between the coach and his players.

Failure to beat relegation-threatened Bolton on Saturday could prove fatal to Villas-Boas, who has won just four of his last 14 games.

Serbian defender Branislav Ivanovic is adamant that the club needs to unite behind the manager to have any chance of saving their season.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated):

Saturday

Chelsea v Bolton, Newcastle v Wolves, QPR v Fulham, West Brom v Sunderland, Wigan v Aston Villa, Man City v Blackburn (1730)

Sunday

Arsenal v Tottenham (1330), Norwich v Man Utd (1330), Stoke v Swansea (1500)



Channel 9 & STAR Cricket

BPL T20

Barisal v Dhaka

Live from 2:00pm

Chittagong v Sylhet

Live from 6:30pm

NEO Cricket

New Zealand v South Africa

First ODI

Live from 7:00am

TEN Cricket

England v Pakistan

Second T20

Live from 10:00pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership

Newcastle v Wolves

Live from 9:00pm

ESPN

English Premiership

Chelsea v Bolton

Live from 9:00pm

Man City v Blackburn

Live from 11:30pm

TEN Action+

La Liga

Malaga v Real Zaragoza

Live from 1:00am (Sunday)



BPL T20

Barisal v Dhaka

Time: 2:00pm

Chittagong v Sylhet

Time: 6:30pm

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