

Stiff test for Chelsea

AFP, Paris

Chelsea's chances of successfully defending their Champions League crown will be given a stiff early examination when they take on Italian champions Juventus at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday.

Roberto Di Matteo's men will host the Serie A title-holders four months to the day after winning the trophy in a dramatic penalty shoot-out against Bayern Munich in the Allianz Arena, and they would appear to come into the Group E game in great nick.

However, Di Matteo knows the rest of the continent will up their game every time they play the defending champions.

"Every opposition is going to play with extra motivation playing against the holders of the Champions League. So it makes our lives more difficult," said the Italian.

"I'm aware no team has defended the trophy and I'm not surprised because it's such a difficult competition to win.

"To win it twice in a row has proven impossible so far, because it's so competitive."

Juve are making their first appearance in the competition in three years, but they have not lost a Serie A game since the start of last season.

Chelsea, who could only manage a goalless draw at local rivals Queens Park Rangers in the Premier League on Saturday, should be able to call on the services of John Terry despite the England defender suffering a knee injury at Loftus Road.

In addition, Juan Mata trained at the weekend and was hoping to return to full fitness in time to feature.

The other English club in action on Wednesday are Manchester United, who are desperate to put their shock group-stage exit of last season behind them.

The Red Devils entertain old foes Galatasaray, who famously knocked them out of the competition in 1993, and Sir Alex Ferguson has vowed not to repeat the mistakes that cost his side dear 12 months ago.

"If we don't go through, we will be criticised and pilloried for it and quite rightly," said Ferguson, who is expected to field his strongest starting line-up for the Group H encounter, including Robin van Persie and Shinji Kagawa.

"We've had our warning and I don't anticipate going out this time.

"We've had opportunities in the competition. We've lost two finals to Barcelona and won two in the last decade or so but we want to do better. Certainly, we'll do better than last year - no question about that."

Fresh from winning their first four Liga games under Tito Vilanova, Barcelona play host to Spartak Moscow at the Camp Nou in their Group G opener.

The Catalans will be without the physical presence of skipper Carles Puyol, who has been ruled out for at least a month after suffering a knee injury in the 4-1 weekend win at Getafe.

However, they are heavy favourites to beat the Russians, who are now coached by Spanish former Valencia boss Unai Emery but have struggled for consistency in the early weeks of their domestic season.

In the other game in Group G, Celtic make their return to the competition after a four-year absence with a home clash against Benfica in Glasgow.

Last season's runners-up Bayern begin

FIXTURES

Wednesday

Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) v Nordsjaelland (DEN), Chelsea (ENG) v Juventus (ITA), Lille (FRA) v BATE Borisov (BLR), Bayern Munich (GER) v Valencia (ESP), Barcelona (ESP) v Spartak Moscow (RUS), Celtic (SCO) v Benfica (POR), Manchester United (ENG) v Galatasaray (TUR), SC



Manchester United stars Robin Van Persie (L) and Ryan Giggs take part in a training session at Carrington yesterday on the eve of their Champions League group H match against Galatasaray.

Kaiser backs Germans for glory

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich honorary president Franz Beckenbauer expressed his confidence on Tuesday that a German team can win this season's Champions League title.

Beckenbauer believes Bayern can erase the painful memories of May's Champions League final defeat on penalties at their own Allianz Arena against Chelsea when they take on Spanish outfit Valencia in Munich on Wednesday.

But he also thinks that German champions Borussia Dortmund are in with a shot at the top European prize.

"I consider them (Bayern) as strong enough to win the title," Beckenbauer told the regional daily Stuttgarter Zeitung.

"They (Dortmund) have learned from experience. Now they are different. Of course they lost Shinji Kagawa (to Manchester United) but acquired Marco Reus (from Moenchengladbach) and with it, they are even stronger," said Beckenbauer.

Bayern Munich were the last German team to win the European title in 2001. They finished runners-up in 2010 and 2012.

Having won the German league and cup double last season, Dortmund are back in the Champions League for the second year running.

What to WATCH

BTV & STAR Cricket

ICC World T20
Australia v Ireland
Live from 4:00pm
India v Afghanistan
Live from 8:00pm

ESPN

Sportscenter India
Sports News
Live at 12:00am (Thursday)

TEN Sports

UEFA Champions League
Manchester Utd v Galatasaray
Live from 12:45am (Thursday)

TEN Action

UEFA Champions League
Chelsea v Juventus
Live from 12:45am (Thursday)

Maasranga TV

Brazil v Argentina

DAY'S EVENT

GP Federation Shield

Noakhali Football Academy v Rahmatganj
Time: 1:30pm
Rampur Boys v Rangpur DFA
Time: 3:30pm
Venue: Feni Stadium
Uttar Baridhara Club v Jessore DFA
Time: 1:30pm
BKSP v Bangladesh Police
Time: 3:30pm

Serbia want shift of venue

REUTERS, Belgrade

Serbia will try to move their next World Cup home qualifier against Belgium on October 12 to the northern city of Novi Sad to avoid a hostile reception by home fans in Belgrade, coach Sinisa Mihajlovic said on Tuesday.

Serbia were supported by a frenetic 15,000 crowd in Novi Sad in their 6-1 rout of Wales last week and Mihajlovic is optimistic that UEFA and the Belgian Football Association will allow a change of venue.

"It's up to the Belgians to accept the change and UEFA to approve it and if they do we will play in Novi Sad, if not we will have no choice but to stick to Belgrade as originally scheduled," the 43-year old told Belgrade media.

"The players and I have asked our own FA to move the fixture to Novi Sad because we are fed up of being jeered and insulted in Belgrade, where visiting teams feel more at home than we do.

"I don't want our rivals to have that advantage on our own turf because we don't have that privilege when we are away."

Serbia have been given a torrid time by their fans in Belgrade, either in Red Star's Marakana stadium or Partizan's nearby ground, throughout their dreadful Euro 2012 qualifying campaign.

Partizan goalkeeper Vladimir Stojkovic has been especially targeted by Red Star fans during the national team's games, after joining the Serbian champions in 2010

having played for their cross-town rivals in the early stages of his career.

The 29-year old keeper was attacked by Red Star supporters several hours before Serbia's Euro 2012 qualifier against Italy in Genoa, when Serbian fans caused a riot and forced the game to be abandoned after seven minutes by throwing flares at the home crowd and police.

Jeers and insults by 5,000 fans in Serbia's friendly against Ireland in Belgrade last month was the final straw for former international defender Mihajlovic, who had previously suffered three defeats in as many close-season friendlies after taking over in May.

"It's not that we want to close the book on Belgrade but I don't know what can happen to us here," he said.

"We never know how many people will turn up and if they will support us or the visiting team. It affects my young players, especially when the going gets tough and if we are jeered the next time we play in Belgrade, we won't come back here as long as I am in charge.

"If we play against Belgium in Belgrade and all goes well, we will be at home to Croatia here too while we will certainly play the other games outside the capital because fans in other cities crave to see us in action."

Serbia top the group on goal difference with four points from their opening two games after holding Scotland to a 0-0 draw in Glasgow before the drubbing of Wales. They are away to neighbours Macedonia on October 16.

'We have to move on'

REUTERS, London

British football must move on and stop the current handshake row from becoming a "mafia feud", Professional Footballers' Association chief Gordon Taylor said on Monday.

Queen's Park Rangers defender Anton Ferdinand refused to shake the hand of Chelsea's John Terry before a Premier League match on Saturday following allegations of racist comments by Terry to Ferdinand in a game last season.

"We have to move on. These things will separate us and become like some mafia feud," Taylor told BBC Radio Five.

The practice of opposing teams shaking hands before matches was introduced in the 2008-09 season as part of a "Get on with the game" initiative.

But despite the Ferdinand and Terry incident and similar controversial cases including one involving Liverpool's Luis Suarez and Manchester United's Patrice Evra, Taylor feels the goodwill gesture should remain part of the game.

"Owners, managers, chief executives and players said 'yes' (to the idea) and I do not know why we should say 'no' now," Taylor said.

Arsene warns Theo

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has warned Theo Walcott that his contract negotiations could end up affecting team selection if the situation drags on for the rest of the season.

Walcott's current deal with the Gunners expires at the end of this season and negotiations have reached a stalemate, raising fears the England winger could become the latest star name to quit the north London club over the last 12 months.

Wenger has already been forced to let Cesc Fabregas, Samir Nasri and Robin van Persie leave against his wishes and, with Liverpool and Manchester City interested in Walcott, he doesn't want the contract talks to end in a repeat of those departures.

The 23-year-old could potentially sign a lucrative pre-contract agreement with another club in January and Wenger admitted that, should the situation drag on, he may reconsider how best to utilise the player later in the season.

"It can (change selection policy), but at the moment I still hope to extend his contract so at the moment, it doesn't affect me. Of course at some stage..." Wenger was quoted as saying in several English newspapers on Tuesday.

"If in April it (the contract) is not done, you can think it will be difficult to do."

Walcott has not started a match since the opening day 0-0 draw against Sunderland and received a mixed reception from some sections of the Emirates Stadium crowd when coming on to score the final goal in Saturday's 6-1 win over his former club Southampton.

But Wenger called on the fans to lay off Walcott and backed the winger to cope with the boo-boys.

"You want your players to be supported no matter what kind if contractual situation they are in," Wenger added.

"I hope it will not affect him and that it will not affect our fans.

"Theo has gone through a lot at 23 years of age. A lot of positives, a lot of negatives and he is level-headed.

"We are lucky: I don't know what they do at Southampton, but they bring players out, (Alex Oxlade) Chamberlain and him, with their feet on the ground."

Ba rescues Magpies

AFP, Liverpool

Senegal striker Demba Ba rescued a 2-2 draw for Newcastle as his late equaliser left Everton to pay the price for a crucial blunder by the officials at Goodison Park on Monday.

Ba came off the bench at half-time with Newcastle trailing to Leighton Baines' first half goal and he made an immediate impact with the equaliser one minute into the second period.

But Everton were denied a clear goal when Victor Anichebe's header appeared to cross the line after being pushed onto the bar by Newcastle goalkeeper Steve Harper.

David Moyes' side, who had already had a Marouane Fellaini strike harshly ruled out for offside, were understandably furious with referee Mike Jones and his assistants, yet it seemed they would still take the points when Anichebe fired home with only two minutes remaining.

However, Ba had the last word when he bundled in his second equaliser of the night in the 90th minute.

There was more bad news for Everton as Croatia striker Nikica Jelavic hobbled off with a first half knee injury.

While the post-match discussion was all about technology and officials' decisions, understandably the pre-match focus was on recognising Merseyside neighbours Liverpool's fight for justice after the publication of last week's independent report into the Hillsborough disaster.

The club's approach was pitched perfectly as, in addition to two mascots wearing an Everton number nine shirt and a Liverpool

top with the number 6 and ball boys bearing the number 96, the names of all victims of the disaster scrolled across Goodison's television screen accompanied by the Hollies' 'He Ain't Heavy...He's My Brother'.

In an emotionally charged atmosphere, Everton made a strong start which must have made uncomfortable viewing for Magpies boss Alan Pardew, watching from the stands as he served the first of a two-match touchline ban.

Jelavic had an early goal disallowed for offside but the hosts made a deserved breakthrough in the 15th minute when Baines raced onto a clever backheel from Steven Pienaar to fire past Harper.

Belgian striker Kevin Mirallas, Everton's transfer deadline day signing, was impressing on his first league start, while Phil Jagielka shaved the post with a volley from Jelavic's lay-off.

After Jelavic was forced off, Newcastle came into the match more and Ba equalised in the 46th minute with a low strike from Yohan Cabaye's pass.

Fellaini had a goal ruled out for offside, a decision which was marginal at best, midway through the second half.

Then Everton's protests reached fever pitch when Anichebe's 78th minute header was tipped onto the crossbar by Harper and appeared to bounce down over the line before Mike Williamson cleared.

Anichebe finally did get on the scoresheet as he turned in the penalty area to fire home in the 88th minute.

That looked to have won it for Everton, but moments later Ba latched on to Shola Ameobi's knockdown to roll a shot under Tim Howard and snatch a point.



Newcastle United striker Demba Ba celebrates one of his two goals against Everton during their Premier League encounter at Goodison Park on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP