

CHELSEA stare at abyss

AFP, Paris



Defending champions Chelsea face the ignominy of becoming the first title-holders to fail to advance to the Champions League knockout stage as the final round of group fixtures takes place on Wednesday.

A comprehensive 3-0 defeat at Juventus a fortnight ago left Chelsea's title defence hanging by a thread and the Blues' destiny out of their hands, as a draw between Group E frontrunners Shakhtar Donetsk and Juventus in Ukraine would consign Rafa Benitez's side to the Europa League.

The pressure is already mounting on Benitez after an inauspicious start as Chelsea manager following his appointment in the wake of Roberto di Matteo's dismissal, with the team yet to record a victory under the Spaniard's tutelage and the fans quickly losing patience.

"We have to improve on the pitch and the fans will be happy," said Benitez following Chelsea's 3-1 defeat at West Ham on Saturday, with the match against Denmark's FC Nordsjaelland looming.

After starting the campaign in impressive fashion, Chelsea's form has plummeted drastically as the west Londoners are without a win in seven Premier League outings, their worst stretch in the top-flight in 17 years.

"The positive thing is that Shakhtar has a lot of good players and everybody is talking about them, so they have to show the rest of the world that they are really good players," said Benitez, who guided Liverpool to Champions League glory in 2005.

"They might finish second and have to play against one of the top sides in Europe and it will be more difficult, so I think they will try to win," he added, hopeful of a favour from Mircea Lucescu's side who boast an unblemished home record in all competitions this campaign.

Meanwhile Juventus midfielder Claudio Marchisio, who is suspended for the trip to eastern Europe, insisted the Italians had no intentions of just playing to secure the point they need to progress.

"A draw is not what we're after. It's a risk for both teams to play for a draw. We have to go there to play our

own game and try to win the match."

Victory for Juventus would see the Italians clinch top spot. However, Shakhtar would still claim second ahead of Chelsea should both sides finish level on 10 points as the Ukrainians have a head-to-head advantage.

Celtic go into their final Group G fixture against bottom side Spartak Moscow needing to earn a better result than Benfica achieve at Barcelona, who are already assured of first place.

The Scottish champions were held to a frustrating 1-1 draw with third-tier Arbroath in the fourth round of the Scottish Cup

FIXTURES

Wednesday

(all 1945 GMT kick-offs):

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

over the weekend, but manager Neil Lennon said Saturday's disappointment would have no bearing on the midweek outcome at Parkhead.

Manchester United are qualified as winners of Group

H, with Alex Ferguson likely to field another youthful side against CFR Cluj but one that may feature Nemanja Vidic.

The Serbian defender has been sidelined since mid-September after undergoing knee surgery, and his presence would be a welcome return to a porous United backline that was brutally exposed in the club's 4-3 win over relegation candidates Reading at the weekend.

An inexperienced line-up could play into the hands of the Romanians, who must better Galatasaray's result at already eliminated Braga on Wednesday to usurp the Turkish outfit for a spot in the round of 16.



PHOTO: AFP
Chelsea striker Fernando Torres (R) runs with the ball alongside playmaker Juan Mata during a training session in Cobham yesterday on the eve of their Champions League match against FC Nordsjaelland.

No refuge for Rafa

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Chelsea's Rafael Benitez goes into the Club World Cup desperate for results and silverware but he will be acutely aware of the 2010 edition, when he was sacked just days after leading Inter Milan to glory.

After two draws and a loss critics are circling Benitez, who replaced the popular Roberto di Matteo last month and whose team also face the prospect of becoming the first Champions League holders to exit at the group stage.

Benitez will take a full-strength squad to Japan, where the intercontinental contest kicks off on Thursday with a preliminary match between Oceania title-holders Auckland City and Japan's J-League winners Sanfrecce Hiroshima.

Chelsea, who won Europe's Champions League for the first time under di Matteo, and Copa Libertadores winners Corinthians of Brazil enter at the semifinal stage starting on December 12. The London side will play either

Mexican club Monterrey or Asian champions Ulsan Hyundai, while Corinthians will face the winners of Egyptian outfit Al Ahly's game against Auckland or Hiroshima.

But the bitter experience of 2010 puts Benitez in an unenviable position in Japan, knowing that even victory is unlikely to turn around his fortunes at Stamford Bridge, while defeat will inevitably crank up the pressure.

Comparisons are striking with two years ago, when Benitez joined European champions Inter after the departure of Jose Mourinho but struggled to convince their fans and went into the Club World Cup under pressure.

A 3-0 victory over Tout Puissant Mazembe in the Abu Dhabi final should have earned him credit, but Benitez used the post-match press conference to call for "respect and assistance" from the club -- and was sacked five days later.

Now Benitez, hired on an interim basis by Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, finds himself targeted by boos and speculation about the sack.

Youths kill Dutch linesman

REUTERS, Rotterdam

A Dutch prosecutor will announce on Tuesday what charges will be brought against three teenaged players after the death of a linesman during a youth soccer competition.

Richard Nieuwenhuizen, 41, died on Monday after an incident following an Under-17 match in Almere on Sunday.

Police arrested three members of the Nieuw-Sloten Amsterdam youth team after the incident, in which the linesman fell to the ground.

Nieuwenhuizen collapsed hours after the match and was taken to hospital where he fell into a coma. He died the following day.

Carlo not worried

AFP, Paris



Paris Saint Germain's beleaguered Italian coach Carlo Ancelotti says he is unaware of media reports that say the former Champions League winner could be out of a job by Christmas.

"I haven't read the papers," said the 53-year-old former Juventus, AC Milan and Chelsea boss.

"I don't know what they are saying," he added after a poor run of domestic form that has seen them slip to fourth spot in the table and five points behind pacesetters Lyon following a 2-1 defeat away to Nice on Saturday and a midweek League Cup elimination at Saint Etienne.

The Qatari-backed club and their president Nasser al-Khelaifi are growing increasingly impatient with their management team led by Leonardo, who is also in danger of dismissal after the Brazilian hand-picked his friend and former colleague to take over on December 31 last year.

Names mentioned as possible replace-

ments are Real Madrid's equally under-pressure coach Jose Mourinho as well as former Barcelona boss Pep Guardiola or Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

Ancelotti can take comfort from the fact that he will be paid 11.3 million euros if his contract is terminated with 19 months to run.

Ancelotti insisted at the press conference ahead of Tuesday's Champions League home match with Porto that his players can turn their poor run around.

"Sometimes, criticism is deserved. Everyone at PSG are disappointed by our start to the season which hasn't been good. We have lost three matches and we are five points behind Lyon.

"We're all sorry but everyone is convinced that things are going to change. When you build a new team, you are going to have problems. The championship is not finished and PSG will be very competitive but it's true we have to improve.

"It's normal to be criticised but I am very focussed on finding a solution and I am sure we're going to find it. It might take 10 days, 15 days or a month but we will be competitive in the championship that is sure."

Valladolid eye Europe

REUTERS, Madrid

Two early goals gave promoted Valladolid a 2-1 victory at Sevilla that moved them up to seventh in La Liga and the brink of the European places on Monday.

Miroslav Djukic's side have 21 points from 14 games, one behind Malaga in fifth and Getafe in sixth who are tied on 22 points.

Valladolid's German winger Patrick Ebert netted on a break away after only two minutes and midfielder Oscar squeezed a shot over Diego Lopez for the second in the 12th.

Sevilla struggled to react until visiting striker Manucho headed into his own net.



Channel 9
Bangladesh v West Indies
Third ODI (D/N)
Live from 2:30pm
STAR Cricket
India v England
Third Test, Day 1
Live from 9:30am
ESPN
Sportscenter India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm
TEN Sports
UEFA Champions League
Man United v CFR Cluj
Live from 1:45am (Thursday)
TEN Action
UEFA Champions League
Chelsea v Nordsjaelland



PHOTO: AFP

Newcastle United striker Demba Ba (L) scores the opening goal during their Premier League encounter against Wigan Athletic at St James Park on Monday.

Ba sinks Wigan

AFP, Newcastle



Newcastle climbed away from the relegation zone as Senegal striker Demba Ba scored twice to inspire a 3-0 win over 10-man Wigan at St James' Park on Monday.

Alan Pardew's side ended a dismal run of four successive Premier League defeats thanks to Ba's first-half double and referee Mike Jones' controversial decision to send off Wigan defender Maynor Figueroa.

Figueroa was dismissed for a shoulder charge on Ba that led to the penalty which the former West Ham star converted to open the scoring early in the first half.

Ba added his second goal soon after and teenage midfielder Gael Bigirimana completed the rout as Newcastle cruised to their first win in eight games in all competitions and moved five points clear of the relegation zone.

The only downbeat note for Newcastle was a hamstring injury to Ba that forced the forward off in the closing minutes.

Wigan have now lost four of their last five matches and they lie only two points above the bottom three.

Pardew had overseen just one win in nine league matches since signing his new eight-year contract with the club in September, so this was a welcome success for the Magpies chief.

It needed a fine save from Tim Krul in the opening minutes to avoid a nightmare start as the Newcastle goalkeeper palmed away a stinging long-range drive from Franco Di Santo.



Bangladesh v West Indies
Third ODI (D/N)
Time: 2:30pm
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National