



Paris Saint-Germain midfielder David Beckham (R) and French legend Zinedine Zidane signs autographs in a store on the Champs-Elysees on Thursday. Beckham and Zidane autographed balls and jerseys for thirty fans selected via Twitter.

MU juggle priorities

AFP, London

Manchester United must weigh the prospect of a 15-point Premier League lead against the importance of next week's Champions League clash with Real Madrid when they entertain Norwich City on Saturday.

United go into the weekend with a 12-point advantage in the league and with second-place Manchester City not in action until a trip to Aston Villa on Monday, they can strike another blow in the title race by defeating Norwich.

However, with such a commanding points cushion beneath them, the priority is likely to be Tuesday's encounter with Madrid, which United will approach in a strong position following a 1-1 draw in the first leg.

With the title race seemingly a foregone conclusion, the keenly contested battle to secure Champions League qualification can expect to garner an increasing share of the headlines.

City's 2-0 defeat of Chelsea on Sunday gave them five points' breathing space in second place, while the Blues now find themselves in fourth place after being leapfrogged by in-form Tottenham Hotspur.

Fifth-place Arsenal, who visit derby rivals Tottenham on Sunday, now trail Chelsea by only two points, while Everton are five points further back in sixth.

Chelsea welcome West Bromwich Albion to Stamford Bridge on Saturday, when attention is sure to focus on home manager Rafael Benitez after he criticised the club's fans on Wednesday for their continued protests against him.

With Chelsea having picked up just 11 points from a possible 24 in the league, winger Victor Moses says his side cannot afford to take their eye off the ball against a West Brom team chasing a third consecutive win.

"We've got an important game coming up on Saturday," said the Nigerian.

FIXTURES

Saturday
(1500GMT unless otherwise stated):
Chelsea v West Bromwich Albion,
Everton v Reading, Manchester
United v Norwich City, Southampton
v Queens Park Rangers, Stoke City v
West Ham United, Sunderland v
Fulham, Swansea City v Newcastle
United, Wigan Athletic v Liverpool
(1730GMT)

Sunday (1600GMT):
Tottenham Hotspur v Arsenal

Monday (2000GMT):

PHOTO:
AFP

Robben ready to return

AFP, Berlin

BUNDES LIGA
Dutch star Arjen Robben is prepared to return to Bayern Munich's bench for Sunday's Bundesliga match at Hoffenheim even though his thunderbolt goal in midweek knocked holders Dortmund out of the German Cup.

Robben's first-half strike clocked 70mph (115km/h) when it hit the net to give Bayern a 1-0 home win over the holders in the quarter-final of the German Cup on Wednesday.

It broke Bayern's six-game winless streak against Dortmund in the league and cup with Robben claiming his third goal in the last four games ahead of Sunday's trip to south-west Germany to face struggling Hoffenheim.

With France star Franck Ribery now available after his cup suspension, Robben has said he is happy to go back to the bench if coach Jupp Heynckes opts to leave him there for a game that will see Hoffenheim chase a first win over Bayern at the tenth attempt.

"I'm waiting quietly to hear who'll play, we all depend on the coach -- ultimately it's his decision," said Robben after training on Thursday.

FIXTURES

(kick-offs 1430 GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Borussia Dortmund v Hanover 96, VfL Wolfsburg v Schalke 04, Werder Bremen v Augsburg, Nuremberg v Freiburg, Hamburg v Greuther Fuerth, Bayer Leverkusen v VfB Stuttgart (1730)
Sunday
Hoffenheim v Bayern Munich, Fortuna

on top and the best team in Germany" after beating Dortmund, it is now back to business at Hoffenheim.

With Dortmund out, Bayern are firm favourites to lift the German Cup in the final on June 1 and are 17 points clear of the defending champions atop the Bundesliga.

They are also still in the frame to become the first German team to win an historic treble after impressive

displays in the Champions League including the 3-1 win at Arsenal in the first leg of their last 16 clash.

While Bayern are chasing their 20th league win from 24 games so far this season, Hoffenheim have just four Bundesliga victories to their credit and lie second from bottom.

Hoffenheim have won only one of their last 13 games while Bayern are on a nine-game winning run.

"Perhaps this is the right time for our team to play this game," said Hoffenheim general manager Andreas Mueller.

"It's a good chance to test ourselves against presently the best team in Europe, but three points are still at stake."

Second-placed Dortmund host Hanover as they prepare to face Shakhtar Donetsk next Tuesday in the second leg of their Champions League last 16 tie, which is level at 2-2 after the first match in Ukraine.

Dortmund have won their last four home games against Hanover and ran out 5-1 winners in December when the teams met at the Signal Iduna Park in the cup.

Borussia are waiting on the fitness of Germany centre-back Mats Hummels, who missed the Bayern defeat with flu, while Hanover, seventh in the table, are waiting on striker Mame Diouf.

Man of the moment

Football

APP, London

Tottenham Hotspur's man of the moment Gareth Bale is flattered by comparisons with Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, but says he is determined to forge his own identity in the game.

The 23-year-old winger has been in scintillating form in recent weeks, scoring eight times in six games as Spurs have climbed to third place in the Premier League and reached the last 16 in the Europa League.

The Welshman's goals have taken his tally for the season to a career-high 19 and prompted comparisons with Real Madrid star Ronaldo, whose pace, power and free-kick prowess are echoed in Bale's own style of play.

British media pundits have started to ask whether Bale could stand comparison with Ronaldo and his Barcelona rival Messi, but the man at the centre of the fuss says he tries to ignore the hype.

"I think anybody would love to be mentioned along best in the world," Bale said in an interview with British magazine Sport.

"I think it's something that's good to learn. We've done well this year and I think that's down to our defending as well as attacking."

Spurs host Arsenal on Sunday, bidding for a victory that would give them a seven-point lead over their north London rivals in the Premier League.

to be published on Friday.

"It's flattering, but I don't really look too much into it. I don't get the newspapers or read too many reports, so I don't really know how much hype there is."

"Obviously my friends tell me things, but I just treat every day as normal and focus on my job."

"I don't model my game on Ronaldo's. I have my own way of playing and it's not exactly the same but we do have similar attributes."

"I just like watching the best players: seeing Messi and Ronaldo. I've watched Ronaldo in the past and you do take things from other people's games to try to improve as a player, which I have -- hopefully."

Bale also paid tribute to Spurs manager Andre Villas-Boas for adding a new dimension to his game since succeeding Harry Redknapp at the White Hart Lane helm.

"Harry was more 'Go out there and play how you feel and express yourself,'" Bale said. "With Andre, there's a certain shape and a style we play."

"I think Harry was more free and let you do what you want. Andre does that too, but there's a lot more tactical work."

"I think it's something that's good to learn. We've done well this year and I think that's down to our defending as well as attacking."

Balotelli will miss AC Milan's Serie A match with Lazio on Saturday (1945 GMT) after picking up a knee injury in the Milan derby, club manager Massimiliano Allegri said on Friday.

Criscito out for months

REUTERS, Moscow

Zenit St Petersburg left back Domenico Criscito will be sidelined for several months after undergoing surgery to repair knee ligaments, the Russian champions said on Friday.

"The injury looks very serious," Zenit coach Luciano Spalletti told the club's website in reference to the 26-year-old, who was taken off on a stretcher late in Thursday's friendly against Serie A side Siena.

Criscito, who missed several weeks after injuring the same knee in November, later confirmed the bad news.

"Unfortunately, I injured my knee. Now I'll need surgery," he wrote on his Twitter account on Friday.

Milan lose Balotelli

REUTERS, Rome

Mario Balotelli will miss AC Milan's Serie A match with Lazio on Saturday (1945 GMT) after picking up a knee injury in the Milan derby, club manager Massimiliano Allegri said on Friday.

"Balotelli won't play against Lazio, he has internal bruising and he isn't available," Allegri told Milan's official TV station Milan Channel. "He's been out of action for a week and can't play."

Allegri later told reporters that the striker was "99.9 per cent" certain to not play.

What to WATCH

ATN Bangla
afc challenge cup qualifiers
Bangladesh v Palestine
Live From 2:15pm
Star Cricket & Star Sports
2nd Test Day 1
India v Australia
Live From 10:00am
ESPN
Premiership
Man Utd v Norwich
Live From 9:00pm
Wigan v Liverpool
Live From 11:30pm
Serie A
Milan v Lazio
Live From 1:45am (Sunday)
Star Sports
La Liga
Real Madrid v Barcelona
Live From 9:00pm
Deportivo v Vallecano
Live From 11:00pm
Osasuna v Bilbao
Live From 1:00am (Sunday)
TEN Cricket
First T20

GoalControl approved

AFP, Lausanne

Germany company GoalControl became the fourth supplier of goal-line technology (GLT) to receive its FIFA licence, world football's governing body announced Friday.

The GoalControl system utilises 14 high-speed cameras installed around the pitch that continually track the position of the ball in three dimensions -- using X, Y and Z co-ordinates -- once it nears the goal-line.

Once the ball crosses the goal-line, an encrypted signal is then immediately sent to the referee's watch.

FIFA has put the system out to tender and last month announced that two providers -- Britain's Hawk-Eye and GoalRef of Germany -- had already been licensed under its Quality Programme for GLT.

German company Cairos, whose system is also centred around a magnetic field similarly to GoalRef, then became the third licensee on Monday as part of efforts to reduce controversial refereeing decisions.

One or more successful GLT systems will be in use for the Confederations Cup in Brazil in June.

Giggs signs new deal

APP, Manchester

Ryan Giggs, who is set to make his 1,000th appearance in senior football this weekend, has signed a new one-year contract at Manchester United, the club announced on Friday.

The English Premier League leaders said the deal keeps the 39-year-old Wales winger at Old Trafford until June 2014 and sees him complete a 23rd season as a first-team player.

Coach Alex Ferguson told manutd.com: "What can I say about Ryan that hasn't already been said? He is a marvellous player and an exceptional human being. Ryan is an example to us all, the way in which he has, and continues to, look after himself."

"He has fantastic energy for the game and it is wonderful to see. Ryan seems to reach a new milestone every week and to think that he now has 23 unbroken years of league goals behind him is truly amazing in the modern-day game."

"His form this year shows his ability and his enjoyment of the game are as strong as ever and I am absolutely delighted that he has signed a new contract."

Giggs signed professional forms with United in 1990 and made his debut on March 2, 1991. He has made 931 appearances for the club -- a Manchester United record -- and scored 168 goals.

He has been capped 64 times for Wales and played four times for the British Olympic men's football team at last year's London Games.

During his impressive storied career, he has won 12 Premier League titles, four FA Cups, three League Cups, two Champions Leagues, one Super Cup, an

Intercontinental Cup and a FIFA Club World Cup.

Giggs said he was "delighted" to have signed a new contract and despite his advancing years said he was "feeling good, enjoying my football more than ever and, most importantly, I feel I am making a contribution to the team".

He added: "This is an exciting team to be part of, with great team spirit, and we are again pushing for trophies as we head towards the business end of the season."

Ferguson told a news conference later that he believed Giggs will stay at Manchester United in a coaching capacity when he finally hangs up his boots, which could help him if he eventually decides to take on a managerial role.

"Several players are still involved in the club. It is important we install players who have been involved here. It is important if anyone has ambitions to be a manager you should take on various roles before you get there," he added.

Giggs' landmark 1,000th game comes against Norwich City on Saturday, which could see United move 15 points clear at the top of the league before rivals Manchester City face struggling Aston Villa on Monday night.

"Norwich is an important one," Ferguson told reporters. "Tuesday (against Madrid in the last-16 of the Champions League) will look after itself, it's an occasion on Tuesday."

"Norwich is where our concentration is on. The players will not be thinking about Tuesday because all week we have been talking about Norwich."

Robin van Persie returned to training this week and is available for both games, Ferguson said. The striker injured his hip when he collided with a camera man during their win over Queens Park Rangers last weekend.



GARETH BALE