



Real Betis winger Juan Carlos Perez (R) is challenged by Sevilla defender Jorge Andujar Coke during their Primera Liga tie at the Benito Villamarin Stadium on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Real stay cautious

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid assistant boss Aitor Karanka has dismissed suggestions that his side got lucky in Friday's Champions League semifinal draw by being paired with Borussia Dortmund.

Madrid only managed one point from six against the 2011/12 German champions when they met in the group stages earlier this season and Karanka believes they can learn from their 3-2 defeat to Galatasaray in the second-leg of the quarterfinals, despite still progressing 5-3 on aggregate.

"They said Galatasaray was easy and then you saw how hard it was in the return-leg," he told a press conference on Saturday. "We weren't able to beat Borussia in the group stages and anyone who thinks it will be easy is mistaken."

Before concentrating on the Champions League though, Madrid face their last ever trip to San Mames to face Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

The Basques are moving to a new ground next season and having spent the majority of his own playing career with Athletic, Karanka knows how special a venue it is for football.

Betis battle back

REUTERS, Madrid



city neighbours on Friday.

Substitute Nosa nodded home in the 89th minute at Betis's Benito Villamarin stadium, setting off wild celebrations among the home fans desperate for success against their bitter rivals.

The draw leaves Betis in sixth place on 48 points with seven games left, still in with a good chance of qualifying for Europe, while Sevilla's bid for continental competition looks to be all but over as they remain stuck in 10th on 42 points.

"In the first half we just couldn't get into the match and they were clearly better than us," Betis defender Antonio Amaya said in an interview with Spanish television broadcaster Cuatro.

"But we were able to come back from three down and we are coming away feeling very pleased with that," he added. "The fans were incredible and really gave us a boost."

Sevilla had thumped Betis 5-1 at their Sanchez Pizjuan stadium in November but had to repel some early pressure before Ivan Rakitic fired them ahead with a clever finish from a tight angle in the seventh minute.

The Croatia midfielder added a second 12 minutes later, his first double since moving to Spain in January 2011, and Alvaro Negredo made it 3-0 in the 33rd minute when he clipped a Jose Antonio Reyes cross into the roof of the net.

Betis were reeling but pulled a goal back two minutes before the break when Dorlan Pabon punished a defensive error and clipped the ball over Sevilla goal-keeper Beto.

The match turned early in the second half when Ruben Castro struck from the penalty spot to make it 3-2 and Sevilla midfielder Gary Medel was dismissed for violent conduct in the 55th minute after a clash with Jose Canas.

With a man extra and the crowd roaring them on, Betis laid siege to the Sevilla goal and got their reward with a minute left when Nigerian Nosa leaped to head the winner.

Betis, who beat champions Real Madrid 1-0 at the end of November, last took part in European competition in 2005-06 when they finished third in their Champions League group behind Liverpool and Chelsea.

They are one of many Spanish clubs to have suffered severe financial problems after years of living beyond their means and were relegated in 2008-09 before winning promotion back to the top flight two years later.

Sevilla have also fallen on hard times since blazing a trail in Europe and winning the UEFA Cup, the predecessor to the Europa League, in 2006 and 2007.

Diego visits Hugo tomb

AFP, Caracas

Argentine football legend Diego Maradona visited the tomb of his friend Hugo Chavez on Friday and urged Venezuelans to elect the late leftist leader's designated successor in this weekend's presidential election.

Wearing a white shirt and donning diamonds in each ear, Maradona called on Venezuelans to vote for acting President Nicolas Maduro on Sunday. "Continue the struggle," Maradona said on state-run television after visiting the marble tomb in an old military barracks perched in a hillside Caracas neighbourhood.

"He's no longer here physically but we will continue with Nicolas, we will continue the legacy of not letting ourselves be trampled by anybody," he said. "In the ballot box on Sunday, people must reaffirm Chavez's ideas through Nicolas."

Maradona apologized to the Chavez family for missing the late president's funeral in March.

Fitness race for Messi

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona assistant manager Jordi Roura has said he is hopeful Lionel Messi will be fully fit for the first-leg of his side's Champions League semifinal against Bayern Munich in 10 days time.

The World Player of the Year was forced into action on Wednesday night against Paris Saint-Germain, despite carrying a hamstring injury, to help his side into the last four for the sixth consecutive season.

Messi has been left out of the squad for Sunday's league match away at Real Zaragoza to allow him to recuperate, but Roura is hopeful he will return to face the German champions.

"We will see how Messi's injury evolves," he told a press conference on Saturday.

"Fortunately, the injury has not worsened. We hope that between now and the 23rd he can get back to full condition."

Sergio Busquets will also miss the trip to Zaragoza due to a pelvic problem, whilst Andres Iniesta and Jordi Alba have been left out to give them a rest.

And their absence provoked Roura to join the increasing band of club coaches to criticise the impact that participation in international fixtures has had on his players.

"The calendar has been terrible. On top of all the competitions, we have had many internationals for Spain.

"Moreover, unfortunately, we have had a lot of injuries. If you combine all of this, it is true that we are a little squeezed.

"But the squad is big, despite all the difficulties we have overcome it and look where we are; first in the league and in the semis of the Champions League."

Despite missing a number of key players though, Roura is determined for Barca to consolidate their 13-point lead at the top of the table this weekend.

"It is true that we are coming from a difficult game in Champions League and with a lot of players out, but the squad has shown it has a great level.

"They are playing for a lot and the game will be at six o'clock when it will still be warm and the pitch might not be great. All these things will make it more difficult."

Finally, Roura also gave his thoughts on drawing four-times European champions Bayern in the Champions League semifinals.

"All the opponents that we could have faced were difficult. I think the two best teams in Europe over the past few years are facing each other.

"We have both got to two finals in recent times and I am not going to discover Bayern, we have already seen how the beat Juventuss. They are very strong."

"In the majority of ties, Barcelona are used to being favourites. This time it might not be the case.

"This is conditioned by the previous game. Bayern won with ease and we suffered against PSG.

"I think it will be a well-balanced tie that will be decided by fine details."

Freiburg on course

REUTERS, Berlin



Freiburg boosted their chances of European football next season by easing past visitors Hanover 96 3-1 on Friday to tighten their hold on fifth spot in the Bundesliga with five games left.

The win puts Freiburg level on 45 points with Schalke 04, who occupy the fourth and final Champions League qualifying place, and takes them three points ahead of Eintracht Frankfurt who visit lowly FC Augsburg on Sunday.

An early own goal by Hanover's Christian Schulz and strikes by Max Kruse just before the break and Jonathan Schmid late in the game earned Freiburg the points.

Schulz's bizarre own goal, after Hanover keeper Ron-Robert Zieler fluffed a seemingly harmless cross, put Freiburg in the driving seat after 24 minutes.

Zieler completely misjudged the ball and the surprised Schulz, standing at the far post, watched the ball bounce off his foot into the net.

Freiburg, outstanding this season under 2012 coach of the year Christian Streich, had been the better side from the start but 12 minutes later it was their turn to give away a goal.



Freiburg midfielder Jonathan Schmid (L) scores the third goal against Hanover during their Bundesliga encounter in Freiburg on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP



What to WATCH

SET Max

Indian Premier League

Kolkata v Hyderabad

Live from 4:30pm

Rajasthan v Punjab

Live from 8:30pm

Monday

Chennai v Pune

Live from 8:30pm

ESPN

FA Cup

Chelsea v Man City

Live from 9:00pm

Serie A

AC Milan v Napoli

Live from 12:45am (Monday)

STAR Sports

English Premiership

Newcastle v Sunderland

Live from 5:00pm