

What to WATCH

TEN CRICKET

Sri Lanka v Pakistan

First ODI

Live from 10:30am

STAR SPORTS2

English Premiership

Aston Villa v Newcastle

Live from 5:45pm

STAR Sports4

English Premiership

Chelsea v Leicester City

Live from 8:00pm

Everton v Arsenal

Live from 10:30pm

NEO PRIME

Bundesliga

Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia

Dortmund

Live from 10:30pm

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Bundesliga kicks off

REUTERS, Berlin

Last season's runners-up Dortmund have a tough first game against Bayer Leverkusen who will be buoyed by their midweek 3-2 win at Copenhagen for the Champions League qualifying round first leg. They have winger Marco Reus back from an injury that saw him miss the World Cup as well as central defender Neven Subotic, who missed most of last season with a cruciate ligament tear.

But coach Juergen Klopp will miss injured Marcel Schmelzer, Oliver Kirch and midfielder Ilkay Guendogan, still working on his comeback after missing last season due to a back injury.

"In Dortmund they are talking about troubling Bayern and we in turn want to trouble Dortmund," said Leverkusen sports director Rudi Voeller.

Leverkusen boosted their squad with striker Josip Drmic, hugely talented midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu and Brazilian Wendell and their attacking spirit was more than evident against Copenhagen on Tuesday when they came from 2-1 down to win.

Schalke 04, third last season, want to make amends for their shock German Cup exit this week against third-tier Dynamo Dresden, with coach Jens Keller already under pressure even before they face Hanover 96 in their season opener.

3-way dogged fight



JAMES RODRIGUEZ

REUTERS, Madrid



While Real Madrid and Barcelona have once more spent vast sums to win back the La Liga crown, they are set to face dogged competition again from champions Atletico Madrid who have a side built on a fraction of the cost.

Atletico became the first team since Valencia in 2004 to knock Real and Barca from top spot, breathing new life into the Spanish championship that had become a two-horse race.

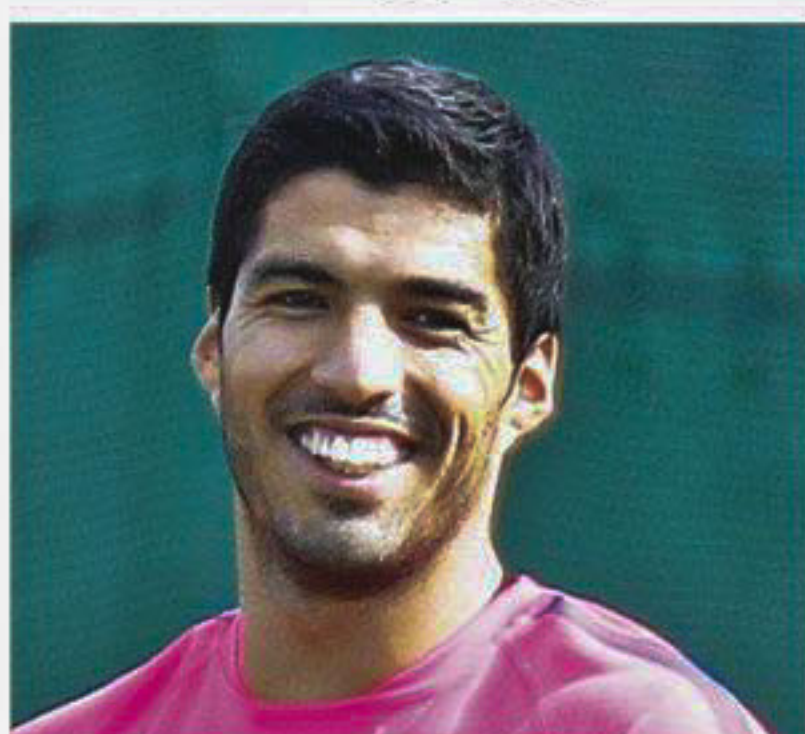
Diego Simeone found success by building a side based on a strong team ethic and the belief that through hard work they could come out on top.

Unsurprisingly, with Atletico winning the league and reaching the Champions League final, their playing stocks have been raided by richer clubs and talisman Diego Costa has left for Chelsea.

But Atletico have also made some shrewd buys ahead of the new season and replaced Costa with the accomplished Mario Mandzukic from Bayern Munich.

The last time Atletico won the championship in 1995-96, they quickly went downhill and ended up relegated four years later but this time the club is better managed.

The key to the side's prospects, though, is again set to be their com-



LUIS SUAREZ

packness and defensive frugality.

They have conceded just one goal in seven pre-season friendlies and in the first leg of the Spanish Super Cup against Real Madrid they gave away little space to earn a 1-1 draw ahead of the decisive leg back at the Calderon on Friday.

"We are looking forward to the season and we know that there will be a lot of expectation placed on us,"

FIXTURES

(all times GMT)

Saturday

Malaga v Athletic Bilbao (1700), Sevilla v Valencia, Granada v Deportivo la Coruna (both 1900), Almeria v Espanyol (2100)

Sunday

Eibar v Real Sociedad (1700), Barcelona v Elche, Celta Vigo v Getafe (both 1900), Levante v Villarreal (2100)

Monday

Real Madrid v Cordoba (1800), Rayo Vallecano v

Atletico midfielder Gabi Fernandez told Spanish paper As.

"It is difficult to say whether the team is better or worse with the changes."

As Atletico lost key players, Real and Barcelona once again reinforced with the cream of the market in the close season.

Last year, the marquee signings were Gareth Bale and Neymar for Real and



MARIO MANDZUKIC

Barca respectively. This year, James Rodriguez and Luis Suarez have been brought in, both for a figure close to 65 million pounds (\$108 million).

Real are brimming with confidence after comfortably winning the European Super Cup against Sevilla and have set their sights on all six trophies available during the season.

Real have made adjustments to the side that won the Champions League against Atletico, with midfielder Toni Kroos and keeper Keylor Navas coming in after shining at the World Cup.

Barcelona, however, have made major changes.

Following the Catalan side's first season without a major trophy in six years, Barca have brought in Luis Enrique as coach and strengthened the squad in many areas of the pitch.

While the signing of Suarez has captured the attention of fans, the addition of defenders Jeremy Mathieu and Thomas Vermaelen was badly needed and they could make the difference in Barcelona's title hopes.

The defence has been Barca's main weak point in recent seasons and they are the first centre-halves to be signed by the club since Dmytro Chygrynskiy in 2009.

Coach Enrique is also set to reintroduce Barca's trademark short passing game following the unsuccessful experiment under Tata Martino who tried a more direct approach.

MU aim to rebound

AFP, London



Manchester United will go in search of their first Premier League win under manager Louis van Gaal when they travel to Sunderland on Sunday.

If there was any doubt about the scale of the task facing the Dutchman, it was demonstrated by last weekend's 2-1 opening day defeat at home to Swansea.

Sunderland, who started the season with a 2-2 draw at West Brom, will fancy their chances at the Stadium of Light despite the fact United signed Argentina World Cup defender Marcos Rojo from Sporting Lisbon in midweek.

But with United having finished a lowly seventh in the table last season, former Old Trafford favourite Paul Scholes believes it will take more than one big-name signing to revive their fortunes.

"The situation now has become ever more desperate for my former club," ex-England midfielder Scholes wrote in his column for the Independent newspaper. "They have to sign some quality players."

"I am scared for United. Genuinely scared that they could go into the wilderness in the same way that Liverpool did in the 1990s."

He added: "What do United need? Five players. Not five players with potential. Five experienced players... for now. Five proper players who can hit the ground running and turn around a situation that looks desperate."

Meanwhile United's Marouane Fellaini suffered suspected ankle ligament damage in training.

Fellaini has joined a lengthy injury list that includes Michael Carrick, Jonny Evans, Danny Welbeck, Antonio Valencia, Luke Shaw and Tom Cleverley, all of whom missed the Swansea defeat.

But star striker Robin van Persie is nearing full fitness and could feature against Sunderland.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated)

Saturday

Aston Villa v Newcastle (1145GMT), Chelsea v Leicester, Crystal Palace v West Ham, Everton v Arsenal (1630GMT), Southampton v West Brom, Swansea v Burnley

Sunday

Hull v Stoke (1230GMT), Sunderland v Manchester United (1500GMT), Tottenham v QPR (1230GMT)

Monday

Neymar suffers ankle sprain

AFP, Barcelona

Brazilian superstar Neymar has suffered an ankle sprain in training, Barcelona announced Friday, adding to the club's injury woes just two days before opening their new La Liga campaign.

Neymar complained of pain in his left ankle at the end of Thursday's training session and tests confirmed he had suffered a mild sprain, Barcelona reported as they prepared to face Elche at home on Sunday.

"His return to training will depend on the development of the injury," the club said in a statement.

The Brazilian had looked to be in fine form Monday when he scored two of Barcelona's goals in their 6-0 destruction of Mexican side Club Leon in a friendly.

Neymar's new injury comes just four days after he had received the all-clear to play for the first time since suffering a broken vertebra in his back during the World Cup.

The 22-year-old missed out on his country's disastrous 7-1 semifinal defeat to Germany on home soil after suffering the injury when he was clattered by Juan Camilo Zuniga towards the end of Brazil's 2-1 quarterfinal win over Colombia.

Barcelona's new signings Marc-Andre ter Stegen and Thomas Vermaelen are also both sidelined by injury, while Luis Suarez continues his four-month ban for biting Italian defender Giorgio Chiellini during the World Cup.

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