

VAN GAAL BACKS UNITED TO SALVAGE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE PLACE

MANCHESTER: Louis van Gaal is convinced Manchester United are on track to claim a Champions League place from the wreckage of one of Old Trafford's most difficult seasons in recent memory. Van Gaal's job as manager, in his second campaign at the club, has been the subject of widespread speculation since United's early exit from the Champions League group stage in December.

That failure was compounded by United's defeat in the second-tier Europa League by arch-rivals Liverpool last month. However, van Gaal, who has been tipped to make a summer departure to make way for Jose Mourinho, the former Chelsea manager, will lead his team into next Sunday's game against Tottenham at White Hart Lane in confi-

dent mood following their 1-0 win over Everton at Old Trafford on Sunday. That was United's fourth win in five domestic league games and left them just a point behind fourth-placed Manchester City, currently occupying the final Champions League spot on offer to English clubs. "I said in the dressing room after the match that it was very important to win today, otherwise the victory against (Manchester) City was worthless," said van Gaal.

"We keep in touch with City, one point behind, and we keep in touch with Arsenal, five points behind," the veteran Dutch boss added. "We have to play Tottenham (next), not an easy match, but normally we are playing very well against the top teams. If we continue

like that, I am very happy."

Van Gaal has been under fire from critics and fans alike, yet he can make great strides with his young squad in what will be a critical month of April. Home matches against doomed Aston Villa and struggling Crystal Palace offer six points to a team that has grown in stature at Old Trafford in recent weeks, while Van Gaal can steer United into the FA Cup Final by first winning an admittedly tough replay with West Ham and then a Wembley semi-final against Everton.

Van Gaal now needs to manage his players wisely at the stage of a season where fatigue can creep in, especially with international demands thrown in as well.

BLIND FAITH

Daley Blind, who was superb in policing the menace of Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku at Old Trafford, is a case in point. "Daley Blind has played nearly all the matches, so I need to give him rest," said van Gaal. "I don't want to, because he is playing very well. I shall give him two days off, so then he is alright, I think." Anthony Martial, who scored United's lone goal against Everton on Sunday, has also been a willing workhorse in United's cause. "I have already said that Anthony Martial, with his age (20) is an exception, because he has also played every match," said van Gaal. "To play every match then you have to be very strong and consistent, because every week I shall compare

every player with his competitor, so it is fantastic what he is doing."

Everton manager Roberto Martinez, meanwhile, has to ponder a fresh round of criticism from Toffees fans as he prepares for the weekend trip to Watford. Told that many of Everton's 3,500 following at Old Trafford had booed at the final whistle because they were "fed up", Martinez replied: "We all are. You can hear our boos in the dressing room."

Martinez wants to take 12th-placed Everton forward without panicking. "We are a club where there has been a bit of a change of generation," he said.

"A lot of players have come in. Incredible young talent needs know-how and lessons, and to develop," the Spaniard added. — AFP

BAYERN OUT TO REACH 5TH STRAIGHT SEMIFINAL

MUNICH: Bayern Munich hosts Benfica for the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal today, aiming to leave the second leg a mere formality in reaching the club's fifth consecutive semifinal.

Confidence is high among Bayern's players and fans of getting past the Portuguese league leader and moving another step closer to repeating the 2013 feat of Champions League, Bundesliga and German Cup victories.

Benfica is bidding to reach the final four for the first time since 1990. "Benfica is a team that you simply have to beat," former Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said. "I can't imagine that Benfica can put Bayern in danger. Bayern will pass this test with flying colors."

The sides met three times before in European competition. Bayern prevailed on the three occasions. The German powerhouse has won all nine of its previous two-legged knockout ties against Portuguese opposition.

Some things to know ahead of Tuesday's game in Munich:

STEP UP NEEDED

Bayern survived a close shave against Juventus in the previous round on Thomas Mueller's injury-time equalizer and two more goals in extra time to progress in dramatic fashion.

The side will hope to avoid such excitement against Benfica by claiming another comprehensive quarterfinal victory over a Portuguese side at home. At the same stage last season, Bayern defeated Porto 6-1 in Munich to recover from the 3-1 loss in the first leg.

Bayern seemed to be conserving energy in Saturday's 1-0 home win over Eintracht Frankfurt in the Bundesliga. Franck Ribery's acrobatic scissors kick was enough to maintain the side's five-point lead but the players will need to step up against the Portuguese league leader. "The quality won't be enough for Tuesday," Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said. "We'll have to play much better. We'll need two concentrated outings to then hopefully reach the semifinals."

GUARDIOLA'S MILESTONE

Pep Guardiola will be in charge for his 150th competitive game at the helm of Bayern. The Spaniard so far has overseen 115 victories, 14 draws and 20 defeats

since taking over from Jupp Heynckes in 2013.

Guardiola, who is leaving at the end of the season to join Manchester City, is bidding to repeat Heynckes' feat of winning the treble in his last season in charge.

Guardiola led Barcelona to 14 trophies in a hugely successful four-year spell but his tenure at Bayern will be judged on success in the Champions League, where semifinal defeats to Real Madrid and former club Barcelona represent his biggest disappointments at the club.

Despite claiming back-to-back Bundesliga titles and being on the verge of leading Bayern to an unprecedented fourth successive league title, Guardiola needs to match the mark set by his predecessor to leave on a high note.

BENFICA'S BOUNCE

After a rocky start to the season under new coach Rui Vitoria, Benfica has found its form in the final third of the season. The players have finally clicked and the team has surged into lead of the Portuguese championship and its first Champions League quarterfinal in four years.

Benfica overwhelmed fourth-place Braga 5-1 last Friday to keep its two-point league lead with six rounds to play though it travels to Munich as the underdog in its biggest game of the season.

"We've got past a lot of obstacles this season. Some of them appeared impossible," said Vitoria, who is making his debut in Europe's top-tier tournament this season.

EYES ON JONAS

Benfica striker Jonas is top-scorer in the Portuguese league with 30 goals in 28 games, earning him a recall to the Brazil team though he hasn't been able to reproduce that form in the Champions League, where he has found the net just twice.

Jonas's partner in attack, Konstantinos Mitroglou, has 17 league goals but may be sacrificed in Munich if Benfica looks to strengthen its defense. Ljubomir Fejsa and Andreas Samaras could form a duo in front of the back four with Argentine playmaker Nicolas Gaitan just behind Jonas. Lisandro Lopez could be back in central defense after a thigh injury but first-choice goalkeeper Julio Cesar is out with a groin injury. — AP



BARCELONA: Atletico Madrid's coach Diego Simeone, front center, controls the ball during a training session at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona, Spain, yesterday. FC Barcelona will play against Atletico Madrid in a Champions League soccer match today. — AP

ATLETICO TOUGHER THAN REAL MADRID, WARNS PIQUE

BARCELONA: Barcelona defender Gerard Pique believes Atletico Madrid pose an even greater threat to his side than Real Madrid, who ended Barca's 39-game unbeaten run in El Clasico on Saturday.

Atletico travel to the Camp Nou today for the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final, but are also Barca's closest challengers in La Liga as they sit six points behind the European champions with seven games to go in La Liga.

"They don't scare us, but they are having an spectacular season. At the moment they are the second best team in Spain, as the league shows," Pique said yesterday.

"It will be more difficult than Saturday because they are a team that sits deep and breaks well on the counter-attack. "In the end it depends on us. If from the first minute we want the ball, move it quickly, the fans are with us like they were on Saturday, and it all comes together, I think we are almost unstoppable."

Often keen to spice up the rivalry between Barca and Real Madrid, Pique had put the hosts in front at the weekend before goals from Karim Benzema and Cristiano Ronaldo turned the game around.

Barca paid homage to legendary former player and coach Johan Cruyff before the game and Pique claimed the Dutch great's legacy had been to turn the rivalry between Madrid and Barca around as the Catalans go in search of a second consecutive treble.

"We need to be confident in ourselves. If we

talk about Cruyff, he arrived in 1988 (as coach) when I was one-year-old," added Pique. "When he arrived, beating Madrid saved Barcelona's season, it was our goal."

Now we are in 2016 and the roles have changed." Indeed, despite a first defeat in six months, Barca are still well-placed to repeat their treble feat as they also face Sevilla in the final of the Copa del Rey on May 22.

WINNING LA LIGA

"The game on Saturday is forgotten. What concerns me is winning La Liga, the Champions League and the Copa del Rey," Pique continued. "Everything is well-set and I am convinced we are going to win. We lost a game, we congratulate them and move on. This team is capable of winning everything."

"We have all the ingredients to play a great game tomorrow." Barca boss Luis Enrique insisted he has "blind faith" in his players and his side's style of play despite being consistently caught out by Real's prowess on the counter-attack even when Barca were leading at the weekend.

Atletico knocked Barca out at this stage of the competition two years ago on their way to the final. However, Enrique has won all six of his meetings as coach against Diego Simeone's men since taking charge at the start of last season.

"Atletico Madrid are a top team with a clear style of play," said Enrique. "That is why they are where they are, competing with Barca and Madrid despite not having the same financial

conditions. "It doesn't matter what happened on Saturday, they are an opponent that will make our lives difficult." Enrique is expected to make only one change with Marc-Andre ter Stegen replacing Claudio Bravo in goal.

Atletico boss Diego Simeone confirmed Fernando Torres will start up front for the visitors after scoring in a 5-1 rout of Real Betis on Saturday. However, Atletico have big problems at the centre of their normally rock-solid defence.

Diego Godin is expected to shrug of a hamstring injury to start, but with Stefan Savic and Jose Maria Gimenez doubtful, 20-year-old Lucas Hernandez looks set to face Barca's fearsome front three of Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Neymar. — AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Barcelona v Atletico de Madrid	21:45
beIN SPORTS 1 HD	
Bayern Munich v SL Benfica	21:45
beIN SPORTS 2 HD	



MUNICH: Benfica players warm up during a training session prior to the Champions League quarter final soccer match between FC Bayern Munich and Benfica Lisbon in Munich, Germany, yesterday. Benfica will face Bayern today. — AP

NIGERIANS IWObI AND ENYEAMA STAR IN EUROPE

PARIS: Nigerians Alex Iwobi and Vincent Enyeama had cause for satisfaction with their club performances in Europe at the weekend.

Rising star Iwobi scored the second goal as Arsenal routed Watford 4-0 while a string of fine saves by veteran Enyeama helped Lille triumph 3-0 at Nantes.

African Footballer of the Year Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang of Gabon ended a month-plus league goal drought by scoring for Borussia Dortmund in a 3-2 win over Werder Bremen.

ENGLAND

DIEUMERCI MBOKANI (Norwich)

The Democratic Republic of Congo striker, who was outside the airport terminal in Brussels when two terrorist bombs killed 26 people last month as he was preparing to fly to Kinshasa for an Africa Cup of Nations qualifier, put Norwich 2-1 up in a dramatic 3-2 win over relegation rivals Newcastle that eased the Canaries' fears of the drop when, 16 minutes from time at Carrow Road, he drove into the left side of the area and smashed a powerful shot high into the net.

CHEIKHOU KOUYATE (West Ham)

His dismissal proved the turning point as West Ham's charge towards a Premier League top-four finish was slowed in a 2-2 draw with Crystal Palace. After Damien Delaney had punished a mistake by Adrian to put Palace ahead in the 15th minute, West Ham equalised through Manuel Lanzini and went ahead courtesy of another glorious free-kick from Dimitri Payet. But Senegal international Kouyate was shown a straight red

card by referee Mark Clattenburg for a high foot on Dwight Gayle in the 67th minute and eight minutes later Gayle pounced on an error by Angelo Ogbonna to equalise.

ALEX IWObI (Arsenal)

The Nigerian teenager was on target with the second of the Gunners' goals in a comfortable 4-0 win at home to Watford that kept the north London club's slim title hopes alive. Iwobi struck in the 38th minute at the Emirates Stadium when he got on the end of a low cross toward the penalty spot, where he connected with a first-time effort that beat Heurelho Gomes.

SPAIN

THOMAS PARTEY (Atletico Madrid)

Ghanaian Partey came off the bench to round off Atletico's 5-1 rout of Real Betis with a simple finish in stoppage time to register his first goal since January.

PAPE DIOP (Espanyol)

Senegalese midfielder Diop scored his second goal in as many games with a powerful header from close range as Espanyol edged closer to survival with a 1-1 draw at Malaga.

ITALY

KWADWO ASAMOAH (Juventus)

Juve won 1-0 at home to Empoli and Asamoah made a rare appearance off the bench for the champions, the Ghanaian replacing injured defender Giorgio Chiellini on 54 minutes. The lengthy break appeared to charge Asamoah's bat-

teries. He was enterprising in a solid second-half display, firing a speculative volley just wide of the upright from the edge of the area, then narrowly missing a possible tap-in.

MOHAMED SALAH (Roma)

Salah was his energetic self for Roma on their way to a convincing 4-1 derby defeat of Lazio that reinforced their Champions League qualifying bid, and led to the sacking of Lazio coach Stefano Pioli. Salah failed to get on the score-sheet but his pace and movement were a constant problem for the hosts in Lazio's final third. The Egyptian forward's best chances of personal glory came in two second-half minutes when he fired a right-footed shot wide from a corner, then was off target again from Miralem Pjanic's delivery.

KALIDOU KOULIBALY (Napoli)

If Napoli end a 26-year wait to win the Serie A title, the defensive qualities of Koulibaly will get a mention in the victory plaudits. But the big Senegal defender had a match to forget as Napoli slipped to a shock 3-1 defeat at Udinese that left them six points adrift of champions and leaders Juventus. He was notably at fault in the 13th minute, barging into Ghana midfielder Emmanuel Agyemang-Badu and earning the hosts a penalty that Bruno Fernandes converted. Algeria defender Faouzi Ghoulam gave away a second spot-kick to Udinese and, although it was saved, Napoli never recovered from Fernandes' second goal on the stroke of half-time and a second-half drive from Cyril Theureau. — AFP