

SOCCER

MCMENEMY BACKS SAINTS TO TRIM IBRAHIMOVIC DOWN TO SIZE

LONDON: Despite harbouring some reservations about his hairstyle, Lawrie McMenemy knows Zlatan Ibrahimovic is the man his old club Southampton must stop in Sunday's League Cup final against Manchester United.

As Southampton manager, McMenemy led the south-coast club to their greatest success when they produced a huge upset to beat United 1-0 in the 1976 FA Cup final.

Forty-one years on, they are back at Wembley this weekend and McMenemy says the pony-tailed Ibrahimovic, 24 goals and counting in his maiden United season, could prove the difference.

"I'm not sure about his haircut. If you were a centre-half, you'd want to sneak a pair of scissors on. Maybe that could weaken him!" he told AFP in a telephone interview from his home in Hampshire, southern England on Wednesday. "But he's proved to be a fantastic player and he looks like he's a character. He will lap it up, the big stage. You've got to watch him.

"If he can go to Wembley and be the match-winner, he'll never be forgotten.

But nor will ours, as Bobby Stokes proved. "You haven't got to be a legend to start with. Little Bobby wasn't, but he certainly has been ever since." Stokes, who died of bronchial pneumonia aged 44, was the hero of Saints' shock win over United in 1976, scoring their 83rd-minute winner with a left-foot shot from Jim McCalliog's lobbed pass.

Southampton had finished sixth in the old Second Division and, in McMenemy's words, "everybody expected us to get hammered". But after surviving an early onslaught from top-flight giants United, with young goalkeeper Ian Turner repelling everything Tommy Docherty's side threw at him, they prevailed through Stokes's goal.

McMenemy describes the time that elapsed between Stokes's shot skidding past United goalkeeper Alex Stepney and the final whistle as "the longest seven minutes of my life".

SHEARER AND BALE

Preparing for a celebratory night out at the Royal Garden Hotel in west London after the match, McMenemy received a congratulatory phone-call from tearful beaten manager Docherty. Less than a year later, United claimed revenge of sorts by beating Southampton in the fifth round of the FA Cup before going on to overcome Liverpool in the final.

Parading the cup around the pitch after the game, Docherty spotted McMenemy on Wembley's television gantry and raised the silver trophy in his direction. "It was as if to say, 'I've got it now!'" McMenemy recalls. Nothing, however, could tarnish the memory of the golden Wembley day the previous year and when Southampton paraded the cup on their return home, they were greeted by a crowd of over 250,000 people. "Clubs like Man United, Arsenal, Chelsea, Tottenham, they all expect to go to Wembley every few years," McMenemy says. "But at Southampton it was a terrific event. It's the only bit of silverware the club's ever won." —AFP

PREVIEW

EMERY'S PSG FACE MARSEILLE FIGHT

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain must win their Ligue 1 grudge match at resurgent Marseille with the club's Qatari owners demanding nothing less than the successful defence of their title.

Such are the demands at PSG that should they lose to their bitter southern rivals on Sunday and drop six points behind leaders Monaco it would be considered a crisis.

The four-time reigning champions also face pressure from Nice who host Montpellier in Friday's early match and could overtake PSG and pull level with leaders Monaco before their trips to Marseille and Guingamp respectively.

PSG and Nice both have 56 points from 26 games—three points behind leaders Monaco. A pale PSG drew 0-0 at home with lowly Toulouse last Sunday and bouncing back at Marseille, where new signings Patrice Evra and Dimitri Payet have now settled, will be a real test of their pedigree.

Away fans are barred for security reasons and a 65,000 famously raucous sell out crowd will be baying for their first league win over PSG since November 2009. Key PSG defender Serge Aurier said Sunday's slip was down to tiredness after thumping Barcelona 4-0 in the Champions League the Tuesday before.

"It's not easy to repeat that immediately afterwards. We will stay positive. Now we will start preparing for Sunday's match and keep picking up points," the Ivorian promised.

His defensive partner Marquinos was equally assured for the Marseille match.

"Starting with Sunday's game, we will come back stronger," the Brazilian said. Spanish coach Unai Emery is in the Qatari good books after the crushing of the Catalan giant, but he knows the domestic title is also indispensable.

"We have to fully focus on Marseille, the most consistent team will win the league and we will keep working," said Emery, who has an injury free squad.

Free scoring table toppers Monaco take the long trip north to mid-table Guingamp with every hope of going six clear of PSG tomorrow, although they will have mixed feelings about their 5-3 defeat at Manchester City in their Champions League last-16 first-leg on Wednesday.

The last three league meetings between Monaco and Guingamp have all been high scoring too and produced 15 goals with a 3-2 win for Monaco squeezed between a 2-2 and 3-3 draw.

Fans will also be keen to get a fresh view of the 'New Thierry Henry' in the form of Monaco's 18-year-old striker Kylian Mbappe, who scored against City and has ten goals in his last 19 games. Mbappe, Falcao and Monaco's 76 league goals so far this season will be giving Guingamp nightmares.

Third-placed Nice host Montpellier without star striker Mario Balotelli, sent off for a third time this season last weekend for dissent to the referee. — AFP



Wayne Rooney

SOCCER

ROONEY'S AGENT IN CHINA FOR TRANSFER TALKS

LONDON: Wayne Rooney's agent Paul Stretford held talks in China yesterday amid mounting speculation over the Manchester United captain's future, British media said.

Rooney, 31, has been sidelined by manager Jose Mourinho heightening expectations he could leave United for the mega-rich Chinese Super League. Guangzhou Evergrande, Beijing Guoan, Jiangsu Suning and Tianjin Quanjian are said to be among those interested in United's all-time top scorer.

British media have reported that he could earn up to \$1 million a week, making him the world's best paid player. However it remains unlikely that any move would be complete before the transfer window shuts next Tuesday.

Rooney missed Wednesday's Europa League last-32 second leg in Saint-Etienne through injury, but dominated conversation in France.

Mourinho said that Rooney's future was in his own hands in comments at his pre-match press conference that only fuelled the speculation. "You'll have to ask him," Mourinho said. "You have to ask him.

"Of course I can't guarantee (he will be here). I can't guarantee that I'm here next week, how can I guarantee that a player is here next season? "What I can guarantee is that if Wayne one day leaves the club it is not because I want him to leave the club. That's the only thing I can guarantee.

"I would never push - or try to push - a legend of this club

to another destiny. "So you have to ask him if he sees himself staying in the club for the rest of his career or if he sees himself moving. "It is not a question for me because I am happy to have him." Pushed on whether it was possible Rooney could leave in the next week, Mourinho retorted: "You have to ask him, not me.

"I was very open with you in the answer. I don't want him to leave." Rooney's deal at Old Trafford runs until mid-2018, with United holding the option to extend it by a further year.

He is United's record goalscorer and has won five Premier League titles and a Champions League trophy since joining as an 18-year-old for £27m from Everton in 2004.

A return to boyhood club Everton and move to Major League Soccer could be other avenues for Rooney, but are unlikely to offer wages anywhere near that available in China.

Former United team-mate Carlos Tevez, ex-Chelsea midfielder Oscar and former Watford striker Odion Ighalo are among those to have recently made big-money moves to the Far East.

However, a switch to China could bring Rooney's England career to an abrupt end. The country's all-time top scorer has won 119 caps and is closing in on Peter Shilton's record of 125 appearances. Rooney has already announced plans to retire from international football after the next year's World Cup in Russia. — AFP