

Italian League Preview

ROMA MENTALITY CRUCIAL TO SERIE A RACE, SZCZESNY SAYS

MILAN: On-loan Arsenal goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny has yet to decide his future but has no doubts about Roma's approach when they face Napoli looking to stay in Serie A title contention today. "They will fight for the win and openly challenge us," Szczesny said. "But these are games when mentality makes the difference. I like to think that we don't have to envy our rivals." In what is Francesco Totti's 25th and final season with the capital club, Roma are enjoying yet another tilt at the title Juventus, away to midtable Udinese tomorrow, have won the past five seasons.

But days after Belgium midfielder Radja Nainggolan hit a spectacular brace to embellish a 3-1 masterclass at outclassed Inter Milan, Roma suffered a 2-0 loss to city rivals Lazio in their Cup semi-final first leg. Szczesny does not expect coach Luciano Spalletti to panic for a potent Napoli side still reeling from a shock 2-0 home defeat to 10-man Atalanta which virtually ended their hopes of challenging Juventus for the title. Speaking to Sky Sport Italia, he added: "It's easy to say after a defeat that we have to change things, but our results and performances have been positive for the past few months. There's no point rushing to conclusions," said the Polish keeper.

"My future is the game against Napoli. That's the way it should be, focusing on what we do on the pitch. When the moment comes, you will all know my future." Doubts over the future of Napoli coach Maurizio Sarri have also emerged following a recent spat with owner and president Aurelio De Laurentiis. That has been compounded by negative results in yet another bleak month of February which saw defeats to Real Madrid in the Champions League, Atalanta in the league and Juventus in the Cup on Tuesday.

Napoli endured a similar dip in February 2016 with Europa League elimination to Villarreal, a league loss to Juventus and two draws with AC Milan and Fiorentina. Defeat to Atalanta last week left Napoli 12 points adrift of Juve, virtually ending their chances of challenging for a title they last won in 1990. Sarri is expected to assemble his strongest possible side and that means Dries Mertens, who has hit three hat-tricks while deputizing for Arkadiusz Milik during a four-month injury absence, could get the nod over the now-fit Pole.

Juventus will be without injured midfielder Stefano Sturaro for the trip to Udinese due to an ongoing stomach muscle problem. But with Gonzalo Higuain, Paulo Dybala and Mario Mandzukic all fit, Massimiliano Allegri's men should have little trouble prevailing against a Udinese side who suffered a 4-0 loss in the corresponding fixture last year. High-flying Atalanta, only three points behind Napoli in fourth and sitting ahead of Lazio, Inter and AC Milan, welcome Fiorentina looking to keep fans dreaming of Champions League football for yet another week.

Lazio, one point behind Atalanta, will look to build on their impressive display against Roma away to Bologna, who have suffered two defeats and a draw since their 7-1 home rout by Napoli last month. Inter, now 18 points off the lead, are also six behind Napoli in the third Champions League qualifying spot. But Argentinean striker Mauro Icardi told Gazzetta dello Sport they still believe in a third-place finish. "We're not out of contention and we won't be until it's mathematically impossible for us to qualify," he said. "I firmly believe we can finish third, we all believe that, that's always been our objective." —AFP

Italian Serie A table

MILAN: Italian Serie A table ahead of weekend games (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Juventus	26	22	0	4	55	17	66
Roma	26	19	2	5	57	23	59
Napoli	26	16	6	4	60	29	54
Atalanta	26	16	3	7	42	26	51
Lazio	26	15	5	6	45	29	50
Inter Milan	26	15	3	8	41	27	48
AC Milan	26	14	5	7	37	29	47
Fiorentina	26	11	8	7	44	37	41
Torino	26	9	9	8	48	42	36
Sampdoria	26	9	8	9	31	32	35
Chievo	26	10	5	11	28	34	35
Cagliari	26	9	4	13	35	52	31
Sassuolo	26	9	3	14	35	42	30
Udinese	26	8	6	12	28	35	29
Bologna	26	7	7	12	24	39	28
Genoa	26	6	8	12	28	41	26
Empoli	26	5	7	14	15	37	22
Palermo	26	3	6	17	22	50	15
Crotone	26	3	4	19	21	45	13
Pescara	26	2	6	18	27	57	12

WEST HAM UNITED VS CHELSEA — FANS' VIEW

LONDON: Chelsea can edge even closer to clinching the Premier League title if they take all three points from their game against West Ham on Monday. Antonio Conte leads his side across London with hopes of securing 29 points from the club's remaining 12 fixtures. Violent clashes between supporters marred Chelsea's last visit to the London Stadium and tensions are likely to be running high on and off the field. Here is what the fans have to say about their respective clubs:

Geo Mackie, Hammers Chat

"One defeat in 20 games shows Chelsea are in fantastic form but they have picked up just one win from their last four on the road - which was at Leicester. That tells me that there could be points up for grabs here. I'm expecting a score-draw. "I would like to see Slaven Bilic have a go and aim for a win. We are in the middle third of the table where relegation is not a worry and European football is probably out of reach, so we've got nothing to lose. "As long as the players give 100 percent then the fans will be happy, we can accept a defeat, just as long as both the players and manager have given it their all.

"It would be a huge boost if Andy Carroll is fit and available to play. I think if he had been involved in the last two games then we may have an extra four points on the board. "Carroll's injury record is something we just have to put up with. On his day I think he is a top Premier League striker and he must be an absolute nightmare for defenders. "When you play teams like Chelsea you rely on the big characters in your dressing room." "I think the crowd trouble the last time our clubs met at the London Stadium was all blown out of proportion. There were a small number of arrests from both sets of supporters and I have seen a lot worse at other football grounds around the country. "The stewarding, which was a massive issue earlier in the season, has improved, so I have no concerns heading into the game on Monday night."

Andy Saunders, The Chels podcast

"This is East London v West London. It's a proper London rivalry stretching back for as long as anyone can remember. We see West Ham as the wretched underclass in the East End and they associate us with the Kings Road. "The footballing gap between the two clubs has widened significantly but the undercurrent of bitterness and outright contempt is alive and well. "As we approach the final stretch of fixtures, every game is a big game for us. West Ham haven't had a particularly great season and have dropped a lot of points. "That said, this is a London derby so the atmosphere will be heated and I'm sure they'll raise their game for the occasion. —Reuters

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN THE BUNDESLIGA

BERLIN: Two of the league's best strikers go head-to-head when Cologne host leaders Bayern Munich and Freddie Ljungberg makes his debut as Wolfsburg's assistant coach. Here are five things to look out for in the Bundesliga this weekend:

Hot-shots collide in Cologne

Hot-shot strikers Anthony Modeste and Robert Lewandowski will shoot it out when Cologne host Bayern today. Chinese side Tianjin Quanjian have reportedly offered 50 million euros (\$52.82m) for Modeste, but the Frenchman wrote "I'm staying in Cologne" on Twitter on Monday. Modeste has 17 goals, while Lewandowski has hit 19 in the league, including a hat-trick in last weekend's 8-0 league hammering of Hamburg. The Poland hot-shot is on fire with seven goals in his last four games and has 30 goals in all competitions. Bayern, who start the weekend five points clear in the table, drew 1-1 with Cologne last October in Munich. It has been six years since Bayern lost to Cologne who will have Germany defender Jonas Hector suspended after a fifth booking while Munich are at full strength.

Ljungberg on Wolfsburg bench

Ex-Arsenal star Freddie Ljungberg starts his senior coaching career as Andries Jonker's assistant for Wolfsburg at Mainz today. Head coach Jonker replaced Valerien Ismael who was sacked on Sunday after five defeats in six league games left Wolfsburg two points from relegation. Jonker, previously the head of Arsenal's youth academy, has brought over Ljungberg who was coaching the Gunners' junior teams. "He is interested in the individual development of players. At Arsenal I got to see how good Freddie is at that," explained Jonker. Ljungberg scored 71 times in 318 games for the Gunners, but has his work cut out coaxing goals from Wolfsburg's attack which has netted four goals in their last six games.

Toprak faces future club

Bayer Leverkusen's Turkey defender Omer Toprak faces future employers Borussia Dortmund today. Dortmund announced last month they met the release clause in the 27-year-old's contract and he will sign a four-year deal at the end of the season. Leverkusen lost their last two games, a 4-2 home defeat to Atletico Madrid in the Champions League followed by a lacklustre 2-0 at home to Mainz. Dortmund posted 3-0 wins against both at home to Wolfsburg and at Freiburg, where Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scored twice. The striker is back in form after a dip following Gabon's early Africa Cup of Nations exit. "It's best for us all when 'Auba' doesn't worry too much, looks forward to his next task and has that ease back in his game," said coach Thomas Tuchel.

Frings' Bremen return

Ex-Germany star Torsten Frings, coach of bottom side Darmstadt, returns to Werder Bremen today for the first time since they sacked him. Frings, 40, was shown the door as Bremen's assistant coach when Viktor Skrypnyk was also dismissed in September Frings made 447 appearances for Werder, but three points is his priority in Bremen to close the 10-point gap to safety. Darmstadt are unbeaten in their last six games against Bremen. "This is something special. I played for the club for 20 years and enjoyed a lot of success, also as a member of the coaching staff," said Frings. "I'm happy to come back, but it is important for us to take something."

'100 percent' Kalou

Hertha Berlin coach Pal Dardai says he is '100 percent' sure Salomon Kalou will face strugglers Hamburg on Sunday as his team look to climb into the top three. The 31-year-old Ivory Coast striker missed training on Wednesday with a foot knock, but is set to partner Vedad Ibisevic. The pair have scored 15 goals between them, while Hamburg are back in the bottom three after last weekend's 8-0 pounding by Bayern. Kalou has scored five goals this season produced his fourth assist in last weekend's 2-0 win at home to Eintracht Frankfurt. —AFP

German Bundesliga table

BERLIN: Bundesliga table ahead of the weekend matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Bayern Munich	22	16	5	1	54	13	53
RB Leipzig	22	15	3	4	41	22	48
Borussia Dortmund	22	11	7	4	46	23	40
Hoffenheim	22	9	11	2	39	22	38
Hertha Berlin	22	11	4	7	30	24	37
Eintracht Frankfurt	22	10	5	7	25	22	35
FC Cologne	22	8	9	5	31	22	33
Bayer Leverkusen	22	9	3	10	34	32	30
SC Freiburg	22	9	3	10	28	39	30
Moenchengladbach	22	8	5	9	25	29	29
Mainz 05	22	8	4	10	31	37	28
Schalke 04	22	7	6	9	26	23	27
FC Augsburg	22	7	6	9	21	28	27
VfL Wolfsburg	22	6	4	12	20	33	22
Werder Bremen	22	6	4	12	28	43	22
Hamburg	22	5	5	12	21	45	20
FC Ingolstadt 04	22	5	3	14	19	34	18
SV Darmstadt 98	22	3	3	16	15	43	12