

FIVE THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE

LONDON: With the Premier League in the thrilling final third of the season, AFP Sport looks at five storylines to watch out for in this weekend's action:

Can anyone catch Chelsea?

With a remarkable 17 wins from their last 20 league games, rarely has the phrase "runaway leaders" been more apt than when describing Chelsea's seemingly unstoppable march to the championship. Antonio Conte's side, who make the short trip to London rivals West Ham on Monday, sit 10 points clear of second-placed Tottenham with just 12 games remaining, raising the possibility that the title race will reach its conclusion well before the final round of matches. For the chasing pack, and fans of a thrilling finale, there have been dispiritingly few signs that Chelsea might stumble in the final furlong, although West Ham's 2-1 win over Conte's men in the League Cup earlier this season provides a glimmer of hope of another upset when the Blues return to the London Stadium.

Klopp must silence critics

Nothing encapsulates the rollercoaster existence of a Premier League manager better than the waves of opprobrium crashing

down on Jurgen Klopp since Liverpool's 3-1 loss at Leicester on Monday. Heading into 2017, Liverpool were in such rich form that a period of sustained success appeared on the cards. But just two months later Klopp is under pressure for the first time at Anfield after two wins in 12 games—a dismal sequence that saw the Reds crash out of the FA and League Cups and fall 14 points behind Chelsea. The only remaining goal for fifth-placed Liverpool is to qualify for the Champions League, which makes Saturday's Anfield showdown with fourth-placed Arsenal a crucial moment for Klopp, whose overall points total from his first 55 games is less than the amount collected by his predecessor Brendan Rodgers.

Leicester back on track?

When Jamie Vardy raced onto Marc Albrighton's precise long pass and drilled a clinical finish beyond Liverpool goalkeeper Simon Mignolet it was as though the previous eight months of pratfalls and personal agendas had never happened to champions Leicester. In the first match after Claudio Ranieri's shock sacking, Vardy was back to his best as Leicester, at last displaying the controlled aggression that carried them to that fairytale title triumph, ended a five-game losing streak with a 3-1 win over Liverpool. Vardy and several of his team-mates have angrily denied claims they told Leicester's owners to sack Ranieri, but with a point to prove, the Foxes, under the caretaker leadership of Craig Shakespeare going into a crucial clash with lowly Hull, finally have a cause that could carry them out of the relegation zone in the nick of time.

Cup won't suffice for Mourinho

Fresh from Manchester United's thrilling League Cup final success, Jose Mourinho needs the feel-good factor from that 3-2 win against Southampton to spark a push to qualify for the Champions League. Despite becoming the first United manager to win a major trophy in his maiden season, missing out on Europe's elite club competition would be a huge blow for Mourinho, who knows the same failing triggered the sacking of his predecessor Louis van Gaal. United are two points adrift of the top four, in sixth place, but Mourinho's men should be able to inch closer to their target if Wembley hero Zlatan Ibrahimovic inspires an expected victory over struggling Bournemouth at Old Trafford.

Spurs need more than Kane

If title hopefuls Tottenham are to make Chelsea sweat in the closing weeks of the season, Mauricio Pochettino's side will have to find some support for Harry Kane, starting against Everton tomorrow. Kane underlined his credentials as the Premier League's most predatory finisher last weekend, netting his third hat-trick in his last nine appearances in a 4-0 demolition of Stoke. But expecting the England forward to keep up that astonishing level for the rest of the season would be foolhardy, so Pochettino needs to tease more consistency from Dele Alli, who has only one goal in his last seven appearances, and Christian Eriksen, who hasn't scored in the league since December, to ease the burden on Kane. —AFP

TEAMS TO WATCH IN CHINESE SUPER LEAGUE

SHANGHAI: As the big-spending Chinese Super League kicks off a new season this week, here are five new faces to look out for:

Oscar (Shanghai SIPG)

The biggest transfer in Asian football history saw new SIPG manager Andre Villas-Boas sign another Chelsea alumnus, attacking midfielder Oscar, for a whopping 60 million euros. Arriving to a hero's welcome in January, Oscar has already started repaying his hefty price tag with his goals in the AFC Champions League, including in this week's 5-1 rout of Western Sydney Wanderers. Oscar's goal was laid on by last year's 55 million euro man Hulk, who is already showing signs of forming a potent partnership with his countryman and has bagged two goals in two Champions League outings. Carlos Tevez (Shanghai Shenhua)

Shenhua also made waves in Shanghai in January by signing Tevez, the former Manchester City and Juventus striker, from Argentina's Boca Juniors on a reported annual salary of 38 million euros, making him the world's highest-paid footballer. Shenhua on Sunday go up against the equally cash-rich Jiangsu Suning, who themselves splurged 78 million euros a year ago to land Brazilian pair Ramires and Alex Teixeira. But new Shenhua manager Gus Poyet will want better from his Argentine striker than last month's lacklustre display at home to Brisbane Roar, when Shenhua were dumped out of the AFC Champions League play-offs 2-0.

Alexandre Pato (Tianjin Quanjian)

Pato was touted as Brazil's next superstar when, as a twinkle-toed 17-year-old, he shone as part of the Internacional side that beat Barcelona in the 2006 Club World Cup, breaking Pele's record as the youngest scorer in a FIFA competition. A move to European giants AC Milan followed where 18 goals in 42 matches saw the striker win the Serie A 2009 young player of the year award. But after Milan won Serie A in 2010-2011, injuries took their toll and his form hit the rocks. He moved back to Brazil in 2013 for an unsuccessful spell at Corinthians. La Liga side Villarreal picked him up for three million euros last summer and he scored six goals in 24 appearances before they cashed in for 18 million when Tianjin came calling.

Odion Ighalo (Changchun Yatai)

The Nigerian striker seemingly had the world at his feet when he scored 17 goals for Watford last season. But his form dipped alarmingly and he lost his place at the English Premier League club having scored just once before Christmas. Watford sold Ighalo to newly promoted Changchun Yatai on January's Premier League deadline day for a club-record 23.3m euros after two-and-a-half years at Vicarage Road, in which he played 100 times and scored 39 goals.

Fabio Cannavaro (Tianjin Quanjian)

This season the Chinese Super League can boast two World Cup winners as Italy's 2006 captain Fabio Cannavaro takes the reins at promoted Tianjin Quanjian, joining 2002 winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari of Guangzhou Evergrande. Last year's China League One champions are making their debut in the top flight and armed with a considerable war chest, Tianjin tried to land superstars Diego Costa, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Wayne Rooney. Instead Cannavaro ended up with Belgium midfielder Axel Witsel for 20 million euros, out-of-favor former Brazil wonderkid Pato for 18 million and Junior Moraes on loan from Dynamo Kiev. Whether Cannavaro will be still around in June, when the transfer window reopens, remains to be seen. Super League clubs are notoriously impatient, as Cannavaro knows from his brief stint at Guangzhou Evergrande in 2015. —AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

Man United v Bournemouth beIN SPORTS	15:30
Leicester City v Hull City beIN SPORTS	18:00
Watford v Southampton beIN SPORTS	18:00
West Bromwich v Crystal Palace beIN SPORTS	18:00
Stoke City v Middlesbrough beIN SPORTS	18:00
Swansea City v Burnley FC beIN SPORTS	18:00
Liverpool v Arsenal FC beIN SPORTS	20:30

SPANISH LEAGUE

CD Leganes v Granada CF beIN SPORTS	15:00
SD Eibar v Real Madrid beIN SPORTS	18:15
Villarreal v RCD Espanyol beIN SPORTS	20:30
Barcelona v Celta de Vigo beIN SPORTS	22:45

ITALIAN LEAGUE

AS Roma v SSC Napoli beIN SPORTS	17:00
UC Sampdoria v Pescara beIN SPORTS	20:00
AC Milan v AC Chievo Verona beIN SPORTS	22:45

GERMAN BUNDESLIGA

SV Werder Bremen v SV Darmstadt beIN SPORTS	17:30
Dortmund v Bayer 04 Leverkusen beIN SPORTS	17:30
FC Koln v Bayern Munich beIN SPORTS	17:30
FSV Mainz 05 v VfL Wolfsburg beIN SPORTS	17:30
TSG 1899 Hoffenheim v Ingolstadt beIN SPORTS	17:30
Monchengladbach v Schalke 04 beIN SPORTS	20:30

FRENCH LEAGUE

Paris Saint-Germain v Lorraine beIN SPORTS	19:00
FC Metz v Stade Rennes beIN SPORTS	22:00
Montpellier v Guingamp beIN SPORTS	22:00
Bastia v Saint Etienne beIN SPORTS	22:00
Caen v Angers beIN SPORTS	22:00
Dijon v OGC Nice beIN SPORTS	22:00

English Premier League table

LONDON: English Premier League table ahead of the weekend matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Chelsea	26	20	3	3	55	19	63
Tottenham	26	15	8	3	50	18	53
Man City	25	16	4	5	51	29	52
Arsenal	25	15	5	5	54	28	50
Liverpool	26	14	7	5	55	33	49
Man Utd	25	13	9	3	38	21	48
Everton	26	12	8	6	42	27	44
West Brom	26	11	7	8	36	32	40
West Ham	26	9	6	11	35	44	33
Stoke	26	8	8	10	30	40	32
Burnley	26	9	4	13	28	37	31
Watford	26	8	7	11	30	43	31
Southampton	25	8	6	11	28	31	30
Bournemouth	26	7	5	14	36	51	26
Leicester	26	6	6	14	27	44	24
Swansea	26	7	3	16	32	57	24
Middlesbrough	26	4	10	12	19	28	22
Crystal Palace	26	6	4	16	33	46	22
Hull	26	5	6	15	23	50	21
Sunderland	26	5	4	17	24	48	19