

CONTE WANTS CHELSEA TO UNDERLINE TITLE CREDENTIALS

LONDON: Antonio Conte has called on Chelsea to underline their status as favourites for the Premier League title with an dominant display against West Bromwich Albion today.

Conte's side are three points clear at the top after a blistering run of eight successive victories including last weekend's impressive triumph at title rivals Manchester City.

The Blues have scored 22 goals and conceded just two in their winning streak, but Chelsea boss Conte believes he will have a clearer picture of his team's title chances at the end of the busy Christmas programme.

Pointing out to his players that Chelsea started the season as also-rans in the title race according to many pundits, Conte called on them to prove they

can cope with the pressure of leading from the front by seeing off Albion at Stamford Bridge.

"It's difficult to accept (being favourites) because we have played only 14 games," Conte said. "We started as underdogs this season, but I suppose it's normal if you're playing good football and winning a lot of games.

"It's important to continue, that from this win we don't lose our hunger." On paper, Chelsea have a golden opportunity to cement pole position heading into the new year as their fixtures after the West Brom clash are against Sunderland, Crystal Palace, Bournemouth and Stoke City. But Conte stressed the importance of focusing only on the next opponent and demanded his players show their commitment by playing with high inten-

sity in training. "It's always difficult to say if these five games are a great opportunity," Conte said. "This league has taught me that every game is very tough. "If you don't face every game with great concentration and preparation you can find yourself in trouble.

"Today is the type of game we can find difficult if we don't put the same concentration, the same focus, that we had in the previous games.

COMPPELLING

"The best reply from my players is to be focused every day during the training session. "If you have a good training session you show me that you are focused for the game. "It's important to talk with the players, but the reply in training and on the pitch is important."

Conte insisted "January is far away" as he fended off transfer window questions amid speculation of an audacious bid for Arsenal forward Alexis Sanchez.

Chelsea midfielder Cesc Fabregas has been linked with a move, but the Spaniard produced a compelling performance against City and Conte has been delighted with his recent improvement after a poor start to the season.

Asked if Fabregas provided an example for the whole squad with his composure in bidding his time then taking his chance, Conte said: "For sure, I want this.

"If there is good competition, great competition, this is very important. "If I haven't a problem for the decision and it's always the same line-up, that's not good. "It means that our level, our squad is improving. It's important to continue

this challenge."

Albion shouldn't be underestimated by Conte's men as Tony Pulis's side will arrive in west London in confident mood after winning three of their last four matches. Pulis, known for his conservative game-plans, has sparked the Albion surge by playing a more expansive style of late. But that attacking philosophy will be tested by fixtures against Chelsea, Manchester United and Arsenal in the next few weeks.

"Let's get through the tough Christmas period, with difficult games coming up, starting with Chelsea on Sunday," Pulis said.

"Then we've got Swansea, Man United and Arsenal too. They're really tough games, great games to play, full houses over the festive period." — AFP

MAN UNITED AND SPURS IN SCRAMBLE TO STAY IN TOUCH

LONDON: The threat of a long, dark winter hangs over Jose Mourinho's Manchester United as they prepare to welcome Tottenham Hotspur to Old Trafford in the Premier League today.

Without a home win in four league games, United trail fifth-place Tottenham by six points and will be left with a chasm to bridge just to secure a Champions League place if they lose.

Their preparations have been disturbed by Thursday's Europa League trip to Ukraine, where they beat Zorya Luhansk 2-0 to secure a last 32 slot, but Paul Pogba says it cannot serve as an excuse.

"When you're playing those competitions, you're playing every three days," the France midfielder told MUTV. "We have the team to change and be ready. We have to be ready for those games. When you prepare in pre-season, it's to play those games every three days.

"We know how hard it is to play against Tottenham. We're playing at home, where we didn't win for four games, with four draws, so we just want to win this game and get to the top of the league."

Although its transport implications have provided unwelcome complications for Mourinho, the Europa League has given United some rare moments of positivity in recent weeks.

It has been particularly kind to Henrikh Mkhitaryan, who temporarily disappeared from view following his close-season switch from Borussia Dortmund. The Armenian playmaker shone in the 4-0 win over Feyenoord and opened his account for the club with a fine goal on Thursday, having inspired United to a 4-1 League Cup win over West Ham United in between.

With United having scored just seven goals in their last eight league games a run that has yielded a solitary win-he seems increasingly integral to Mourinho's hopes of salvaging the season.

"We know how good he is," Pogba said. "You just have to be confident and now he's playing more, he has more games in his legs. "He is just getting going."

MOURINHO 'STILL SPECIAL'

Having recently endured a sequence of one victory in 10 matches in all competitions, Tottenham can sympathise with United's struggles.

Their sticky patch ended their Champions League campaign before it had really begun and saw them slip seven points below leaders Chelsea in the title race. But they will travel north energised by two handsome victories, having crushed Swansea City 5-0 last weekend before sinking CSKA Moscow 3-1 in mid-week to join United in the Europa League.

The stunning form of Mourinho's former club Chelsea under Antonio Conte has only deepened the gloom surrounding the Portuguese, but Spurs manager Mauricio Pochettino remains an ardent admirer.

"For me, he is the Special One and will always be the Special One," said Pochettino, who saw his side outclass United 3-0 at White Hart Lane when the teams last met in April. "For me, he was a reference when I started my career at Espanyol. He was always very kind to me and opened his door. "I always assess my colleagues and try to be objective. I really believe he is one of the best.

"Sometimes you struggle a bit. It's not easy to arrive at a new club, set up ideas and philosophy, but for me he was, is and will be one of the best managers in football history." Pochettino will once again be without winger Erik Lamela, who remains in Argentina attending to his hospitalised brother, while striker Vincent Janssen has an ankle injury. But defensive lynchpin Toby Alderweireld is in line to make his first start in eight weeks following a knee problem, having come off the bench against CSKA at Wembley on Wednesday.

United are also expected to welcome back a key central defender after Eric Bailly made his return from a knee injury in Ukraine. Bailly's centre-back partner Chris Smalling and Luke Shaw remain out, but Michael Carrick and Antonio Valencia could feature after being rested for the trip to Odessa. — AFP

KLOPP BACKS KARIUS TO SILENCE CRITICS

LIVERPOOL: Jurgen Klopp has urged Liverpool goalkeeper Loris Karius to "close his ears" to criticism ahead of today's Premier League clash with West Ham.

Bournemouth clinched a dramatic 4-3 victory over Liverpool last weekend after Karius fumbled a shot from Steve Cook in stoppage-time which allowed Nathan Ake to bundle the ball into the net. Karius, who joined Liverpool from Bundesliga outfit Mainz in May, displaced Simon Mignolet as Klopp's first choice and is set to keep his place at Anfield this weekend despite the costly mistake.

"I heard the criticism was very harsh. When we analysed the game I found eight players who could have defended the goal before Loris was involved," Klopp said.

"He made a mistake too. Even the best goalkeepers in the world still make mistakes. We know we have to deal with pressure. "There is no perfect recipe for development but close your ears helps a lot. I am quite good at this actually. Hopefully he can adapt to my skills." Liverpool are boosted by the return of centre-back Joel Matip, who missed the defeat to Bournemouth with an ankle injury. But England striker Daniel Sturridge will miss the fixture against the Hammers after he was ruled out of Liverpool's next two matches with a calf injury. Sturridge has not featured for the Reds since a 12-minute cameo in the goalless draw with Southampton on November 19. No specific timescale has been put on the 27-year-old's

return by Klopp, although the German hinted he may be available for the Merseyside derby on December 19.

Sturridge has frequently struggled in December and has not started a single Premier League match for the Reds in the month since he joined in January 2013. The England international's last start in the month came for Chelsea on New Year's Eve 2011 against Aston Villa.

"He won't be with the team. I have no idea when he will be back. What can you do? Nothing. Wait. That is my job," said Klopp. "He is not in training with the team at the moment so we don't have to think about him for the team with West Ham and Middlesbrough, but maybe after then."

Meanwhile, Slaven Bilic admits he felt humiliated after last weekend's 5-1 home defeat to Arsenal left West Ham hovering one place above the relegation places.

Hammers boss Bilic has so far struggled to maintain the progress from last season, but he maintains he has the full support of the club. "I feel the support, I have said it so many times," he said. "In the conversation we had this week, I felt the support. "I spoke a few times about it, with my squad, and I know what we achieved last season and it is time for us to turn it around. "We had meetings with the squad and individually and the only way we can get out of the situation is to train hard and hope the luck comes on our side. Keep going and keep working. — AFP



CLEVELAND: Miami Heat's Derrick Williams, right, passes around Cleveland Cavaliers' Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love in the first half of an NBA basketball game Friday, in Cleveland. — AP

JAMES MOVES INTO 9TH ON NBA SCORING LIST AS CAVS TOP HEAT

CLEVELAND: P LeBron James scored 27 points to move into ninth place on the NBA scoring list, and the Cleveland Cavaliers beat the Miami Heat 114-84 on Friday. James passed Elvin Hayes on a driving layup with 6:58 remaining and has 27,315 career points. The four-time MVP was removed about a minute later and received a loud ovation from the Cleveland crowd. Kevin Love, a game-time decision because of back spasms, scored a team-high 28 points and had 15 rebounds for the Cavaliers. He missed the morning shootaround but was in the lineup after warming up on the court about an hour before tip-off. Kyrie Irving added 23 points for the Cavs. They have won three straight after losing three in a row. Derrick Williams scored 17 points to lead the short-handed Heat. They have lost four straight.

ROCKETS 102, THUNDER 99

James Harden scored 21 points, and the Houston Rockets overcame Russell Westbrook's seventh consecutive triple-double to beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 102-99. Harden also had 12 assists and nine rebounds to help the Rockets win their fifth straight. Houston withstood Harden's 6-for-23 shooting effort. Westbrook finished with 27 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists. He has the longest triple-double streak since Michael Jordan had seven straight in 1989. The most in a row is nine by Philadelphia's Wilt Chamberlain in March 1968. It was Westbrook's 12th triple-double this season and the 49th of his career. He is the NBA's active leader in the category and ranks sixth overall. The Thunder had won the previous six games during Westbrook's triple-double binge.

RAPTORS 101, CELTICS 94

Kyle Lowry scored 21 of his season-high 34 points in the second half for Toronto. Toronto erased an eight-point halftime deficit and led by as many as 11 in the fourth quarter. Boston pulled within four in the final minute, but Al Horford fouled Lowry on a 3-point attempt with 30 seconds to play. Lowry made all three free throws to help close out the victory. DeMar DeRozan added 24 points, and Norman Powell had 20. Horford and Avery Bradley each had 19 points to lead Boston. Celtics point guard Isaiah Thomas sat out his second straight game with a strained right groin.

PISTONS 117, TIMBERWOLVES 90

Andre Drummond had 22 points and 22 rebounds for his second straight 20-20 game and Detroit cruised past Minnesota. Marcus Morris had 15 points and seven rebounds and the Pistons had their way with Minnesota's struggling defense, hitting 14 of 29 3-pointers. Andrew Wiggins scored 16 points and Karl-Anthony Towns had 14 points and 12 rebounds

for the Wolves. They have lost seven of their last eight games.

MAVERICKS 111, PACERS 103

Wesley Matthews matched a season high with 26 points, Harrison Barnes had 25 and Dallas beat Indiana for just its third win in 15 games. Two nights after a listless second half in a 31-point home loss to Sacramento prompted a team meeting, the Mavericks started the third quarter with a 10-2 run that gave them a double-digit lead. Matthews outscored the Pacers by himself during a 32-11 spurt that turned a 50-42 deficit into a 74-61 lead. The shooting guard had 16 points during the run, capped by a 3-pointer. Paul George had 22 points for the Pacers.

HAWKS 114, BUCKS 110

Dennis Schroder scored a career-high 33 points and Atlanta rallied from 20 down in the second half to beat Milwaukee. Paul Millsap added 23 points and 14 rebounds, and Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 18 points. The Hawks ended a seven-game losing streak Wednesday night with a win over Miami. Jabari Parker scored 27 points for Milwaukee.

HORNETS 109, MAGIC 88

Nic Batum and Michael Kidd-Gilchrist each had 16 points, and Charlotte routed Orlando for its third straight victory. Kemba Walker had 15 points in limited action, and Ramon Sessions and Jeremy Lamb each scored 12 off the bench. Batum missed out on a chance at a triple-double because Charlotte's starters didn't play in the fourth quarter with the game out of hand. He had nine rebounds and seven assists. Evan Fournier had 14 points for Orlando.

SUNS 119, LAKERS 115

Eric Bledsoe had 30 points and nine assists, Leandro Barbosa added 21 points and Phoenix ended its three-game losing streak with a victory over slumping Los Angeles. Devin Booker had 15 points before fouling out for the Suns, who hit a season-high 13 3-pointers and withstood a late rally by the short-handed Lakers. Lou Williams hit six 3-pointers and scored 35 points in another monster game off the bench for the Lakers, who have lost five straight after a promising start to their first season since Kobe Bryant retired. Los Angeles has faltered during a busy portion of its December schedule while playing without four injured regulars: D'Angelo Russell, Nick Young, Tarik Black and Jose Calderon. Alex Len had 14 points and 13 rebounds, but the Suns blew most of an 18-point lead in the second half. Phoenix hung on for just its seventh victory of the season after losing five of its previous six.

KNICKS 103, KINGS 100

Carmelo Anthony scored 33 points, including two free throws with 14.8 seconds remaining, and New York held on to beat Sacramento for its fifth victory in six games. Kristaps Porzingis added 17 points and 10 rebounds for New York. Brandon Jennings scored 13 in place of injured Derrick Rose, and the Knicks beat the Kings for the second time in six days. The Kings missed multiple shots in the waning moments, including an uncontested driving layup by DeMarcus Cousins with 22 seconds left that would have given Sacramento the lead. Rudy Gay missed a potential tying 3-pointer with 3.9 seconds remaining, and Cousins also missed a desperation heave from beyond midcourt that hit the rim at the buzzer. Cousins finished with 28 points, 11 rebounds and six assists. — AP

NBA results/standings

Dallas 111, Indiana 103; Atlanta 114, Milwaukee 110; Houston 102, Oklahoma City 99; Detroit 117, Minnesota 90; Cleveland 114, Miami 84; Toronto 101, Boston 94; Charlotte 109, Orlando 88.

Eastern Conference					Western Conference				
Atlantic Division					Northwest Division				
	W	L	PCT	GB					
Toronto	16	7	.696	-	Oklahoma City	14	9	.609	-
Boston	13	10	.565	3	Utah	14	10	.583	0.5
NY Knicks	13	10	.565	3	Portland	12	12	.500	2.5
Brooklyn	6	15	.286	9	Denver	8	15	.348	6
Philadelphia	5	18	.217	11	Minnesota	6	17	.261	8
Central Division					Pacific Division				
Cleveland	16	5	.762	-	Golden State	20	3	.870	-
Chicago	12	10	.545	4.5	LA Clippers	16	7	.696	4
Milwaukee	11	10	.524	5	LA Lakers	10	15	.400	11
Detroit	13	12	.520	5	Sacramento	8	14	.364	11.5
Indiana	11	12	.478	6	Phoenix	7	16	.304	13
Southeast Division					Southwest Division				
Charlotte	14	9	.609	-	San Antonio	18	5	.783	-
Atlanta	12	12	.500	2.5	Houston	16	7	.696	2
Orlando	10	14	.417	4.5	Memphis	16	8	.667	2.5
Washington	8	13	.381	5	New Orleans	7	16	.304	11
Miami	7	16	.304	7	Dallas	5	17	.227	12.5



SUITA: Club America's Oribe Peralta, right, and team head coach Ricardo La Volpe, left, attend the official press conference at the FIFA Club World Cup soccer tournament at Suita City Football Stadium in Suita, western Japan, yesterday. Club America will fight against Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors today. — AP