

## NORTHERN GIANTS CLASH WITH EPL RETURN IN SIGHT

**MANCHESTER:** It will be a Premier League game in all but name when Newcastle United face Leeds United at St James' Park today, with two of the traditional powers of northern English football seeking a return to the top flight. Newcastle, relegated from the Premier League last season, are second in the Championship and well placed for an immediate return, while Leeds, in fifth place, will look to get through the play-offs and end their 13 years in the lower divisions. The two clubs have histories that make them known well beyond their passionate local support bases.

Both are both former champions of England, with Leeds having won the last title before the creation of the Premier League in 1992. They have both won European trophies - Leeds twice capturing the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup, the forerunner of today's Europa League, while Newcastle won the same competition in 1969. In more recent years, the clubs have featured in the Champions League, which Newcastle's Spanish manager Rafa Benitez won as manager of Liverpool in 2005. While Benitez and Newcastle have quickly healed the pain of relegation with a strong challenge for direct promotion this season, life outside the Premier League has been tough for Leeds.

The financial troubles which caused the team's relegation from the top flight in 2004 were also to blame for a slump into the third tier (League One) for three seasons, until they returned to the Championship in 2007. It has hardly been smooth progress since, with instability at both boardroom and managerial level reflected in lower half finishes in the past five campaigns. But manager Garry Monk has succeeded this year in keeping the team well within the play-off positions throughout the campaign, even if he is wary of raising expectations of promotion this season.

"That will always be the ambition of the club, it's a huge club. The ambition will always be to get this club back in the Premier League. But it doesn't just happen," he said this week. "That's what we are trying to do. But we are not thinking about that, we are only thinking about this weekend. Overall we have exceeded expectation, the group has improved massively." Newcastle won the corresponding fixture at Elland Road in November 2-0 thanks to two goals from their impressive striker Dwight Gayle, who misses today's match due to injury. The match drew the first sell-out crowd for Leeds in several years and Monk believes his team were overawed by the occasion.

"Maybe we played the occasion a little bit and didn't have our full focus on the football. We want to go up there and make sure we don't make the same mistake," he said. Newcastle are well used to playing in front of their capacity 52,000 home crowd and their squad still has plenty of top-flight experience. Benitez knows the job has to be finished off but believes Newcastle have a bright future ahead of them. "The fans are incredible, the stadium is superb, the staff, everything is in place to allow this club to achieve great things," he said recently. "But first we have to reach the target, we have to remain focused on only one thing and that is securing promotion". —Reuters



**MANCHESTER:** Manchester United's Portuguese manager Jose Mourinho (left) walks away as his players take part in a team training session at their Carrington base in Manchester, north west England. —AFP

## FIRED-UP MOURINHO RENEWS BATTLE WITH CONTE'S CHELSEA

**LONDON:** By the time Chelsea walk out at Old Trafford on Sunday their Premier League lead may again have been cut to a slender four points. For the second weekend running, Antonio Conte's side kick off after their main pursuers Tottenham Hotspur but, unlike last Saturday when they were always odds-on to restore their advantage by beating Bournemouth, real danger lurks in the form of Manchester United - and ex-manager Jose Mourinho. When the teams last met the Portuguese appeared unusually relaxed, eschewing the regulation collar and tie he always wore as Blues manager for gilet and trainers. But he still ended up squaring up with Conte on the Stamford Bridge touchline during a fractious FA Cup quarter-final that saw Ander Herrera sent off.

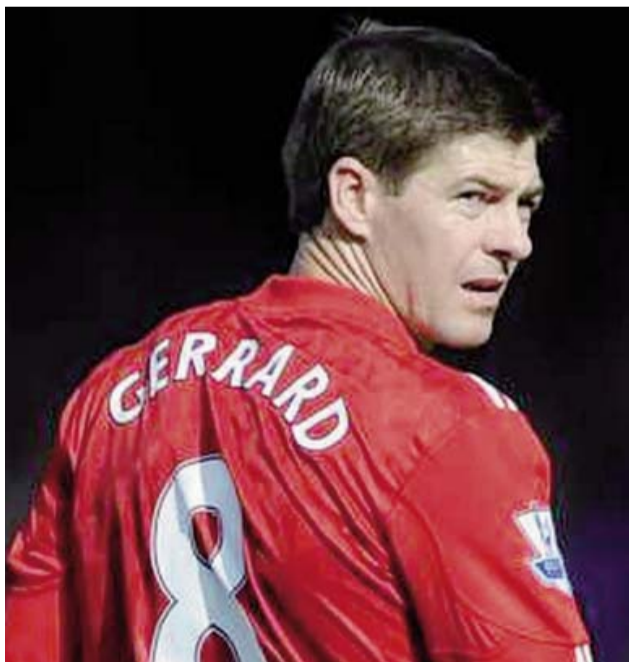
Chelsea's 1-0 win was their second over United this season and although the result was much closer than the 4-0 league drubbing, the chasm that has opened between the teams was clear. Sunday marks the start of a testing period for United with fixtures against City, Arsenal and Spurs looming, alongside their continuing Europa League campaign. Mourinho will respond to the workload by rotating his squad. In the process he will highlight one of the big differences between United and Chelsea this season: while the Portuguese has made 85 team changes in his Premier League line-ups, Conte has switched personnel just 31 times, an average of one per game and the fewest in the league.

That consistency has provided the bedrock of their title challenge and Conte can approach Sunday's game knowing it is Mourinho's United who must take the initiative on a ground where they have already drawn nine times this season. Even their wins have often been scratchily unimpressive

and Chelsea will set up to play on the counter-attack with N'golo Kante prowling and ready to pounce in midfield. Much has been made of Kante's impact this season, when he has perfected the art of perfect tackling at a time when referees punish the slightest aberration. He is expected to be named on the PFA player of the season shortlist along with Eden Hazard later this week.

You can probably bet Paul Pogba's transfer fee on United's midfielder not joining them on the six-man shortlist because despite costing 59 million pounds (\$73.77 million) more than Kante, he has made a fraction of the impact. Sunday provides Pogba with the perfect opportunity to make the big-match statement that has been lacking for United, who are unbeaten in 21 league games but still 18 points adrift of the leaders in fifth place. Nothing irks Mourinho more than suggestions that Conte represents the future while he encapsulates the past, a once great manager out of tune with current sensitivities.

But his recent public criticism of Luke Shaw and David de Gea has added to the narrative and he too has something to prove on Sunday. If his brain is really big enough to do Shaw's thinking for him, as he bizarrely claimed recently, then surely it can come up with a plan to outwit Conte? Success would hand a huge boost for Spurs, who entertain Bournemouth in Saturday's early kickoff knowing they can again pile the pressure on Chelsea. Third-placed Liverpool travel to West Bromwich Albion on Sunday while Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger must wait until Monday's match against Middlesbrough for the chance to silence his detractors and check a disastrous run of four away defeats. —Reuters



Steven Gerrard

## TALENTED LIVERPOOL MISSING A 'GERRARD'

**MUMBAI:** Liverpool have some amazing talent but are missing a leader cast in the same mould as Steven Gerrard, the Premier League side's former attacking midfielder Luis Garcia said. The Merseyside club dominated English football for two decades from the 1970s and are one of the world's most successful clubs but have found winning trophies much harder to come by since claiming their last league title 27 years ago. Former Spain international Garcia was part of the Liverpool side that won one of the most memorable Champions League finals, against AC Milan in Istanbul in 2005, when the English side came from 3-0 down at half-time to win the trophy on penalties.

That, however, remains five-time winners Liverpool's last success in Europe's elite club competition and they have failed to even qualify for the tournament in the last two seasons. Under German manager Jurgen Klopp, Liverpool are currently third in the Premier League standings and well positioned with six matches remaining to claim a

Champions League berth with a top-four finish. Garcia feels that while captain Jordan Henderson is doing a good job, Liverpool need someone with world class leadership qualities to guide a squad he believes is brimming with talent.

"This Liverpool side lacks players with character like Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher, or even Kenny Dalglish in the past," Garcia said in an interview. "We don't see leaders like them much on the pitch. We have amazing talent like (Phillippe) Coutinho, (Roberto) Firmino, (Adam) Lallana, (Daniel) Sturridge... so much talent. "I haven't been in that dressing room but I am sure a Steven Gerrard-like character would be amazing. He would lead the team when things were not going well." Liverpool's former talismanic captain Gerrard made 710 appearances for his boyhood club during a 17-year spell at Anfield and returned to his roots in February as part of the coaching set-up at the academy.

He scored 186 goals for Liverpool, helping them win two FA Cups, three League

Cups, a UEFA Cup and the Champions League, and remains idolised at the Merseyside club. He was also capped 114 times for England, 40 as captain. According to Garcia, it was imperative for Liverpool to qualify for the Champions League, not just to keep hold of their best players but also to attract the highest quality transfer.

"If Liverpool qualify, I'm sure all the top players will stay. Because it's a special club. Playing Champions League for Liverpool, it's very special," Garcia added on the sidelines of the Champions League Trophy tour by sponsors Heineken. "Champions League qualification is very important. Not because of the players who stay but because of the players who want to come. Top players want to play Champions League, all of them." Liverpool are unbeaten in 10 games against top-six teams this season, having won five and drawn five, claiming seven more points than closest rivals Chelsea in that mini-league but they have struggled to dispatch teams further down the table. —Reuters