

DE GEA CHALLENGES UNITED TO AIM HIGH

MANCHESTER: David de Gea has challenged Manchester United to get as close as possible to runaway leaders Chelsea as Jose Mourinho's side battle to finish in the top four. It is one of the Premier League's stranger statistics that United have not moved from sixth position for three months, despite being unbeaten for 15 matches in the competition.

Yet having beaten Leicester 3-0 last Sunday, Mourinho's men could finally climb a place or two should they beat Watford today, as long as Liverpool and Arsenal slip up. United looked to be back to something near their best at the King Power Stadium, after seeing their progress stalled by a run of three successive league draws. With a glut of cup matches coming up, this weekend's game will be their last league fixture for three weeks, so a win is needed to ensure that the top four do not get the chance to pull too far away.

Spain international De Gea knows United are unlikely to win the title, but having the goal of reeling in Chelsea could bring the added benefit of boosting their bid to qualify for the Champions League. "I think we're in good form. We're on a 15-match unbeaten run in the league," De Gea said. "The team are doing well. We must continue down this route to get into the top four as soon as possible.

"Chelsea? The truth is that they're doing really well. I think they're nine points ahead of second place and they have the title in their hands. "We are all going to fight to get as close as possible but they are very well placed." Mourinho is expected to use his usual 4-2-3-1 formation, despite causing a surprise by starting with a 4-4-2 set-up at Leicester.

BUOYANT

United began that game with Marcus Rashford in attack alongside Zlatan Ibrahimovic, but became far more effective when Mourinho reverted to his favoured formation, with the former Sweden striker playing as the lone forward. Rashford moved out to the wing, with Juan Mata on the opposite side, as Henrikh Mkhitaryan took the number 10 role. There is a separate question as to what part, if any, captain Wayne Rooney will play, having missed last weekend's match because of illness.

Rooney did train on Wednesday, as did defender Marcos Rojo, who was substituted at half-time against Leicester after suffering a knock. Fellow centre-back Phil Jones, though, has a bruised foot and is doubtful. Watford head to Old Trafford in buoyant mood after following the unexpected victory at Arsenal with last weekend's home win against Burnley.

The victories have moved Walter Mazzarri's side up to 10th and silenced suggestions the Italian manager's position was under threat after a run of seven league games without a win. The contributions of M'Baye Niang, Mauro Zarate and Tom Cleverley - the club's January signings - have helped turn things around and Mazzarri is confident there is more to come from his players.

"I'm speaking with Niang every day," said Mazzarri. "I treat him as if he were my son. I'm also asking for suggestions and I think he listens to me as well. "With regard to Mauro Zarate, I'm very happy with him as well because also with Fiorentina he didn't play as much and he did very well against Burnley in a game that was very high intensity." — AFP



KINGSTON: Liverpool's English striker Daniel Sturridge (L) reacts after missing a chance during the English Premier League football match between Hull City and Liverpool at the KCOM Stadium. — AFP

FLOUNDERING LIVERPOOL BRACED FOR SPURS TEST

LIVERPOOL: After a miserable start to 2017, Liverpool are in a sorry state ahead of Tottenham Hotspur's visit in the Premier League today. They have won only one of their last 10 matches, were knocked out of both domestic cups in the space of four days and slipped out of the top four after last weekend's 2-0 loss at strugglers Hull City. It has been some fall for Jurgen Klopp's side, who briefly topped the table in November but now find themselves 13 points behind leaders Chelsea and four adrift of second-place Tottenham.

"If you don't collect a lot of points, if you lose a lot of games and if you don't play the way you played before, I think you lose a little bit of confidence," said midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum. "But now we must make sure we get back on track, play like we did before to get more confidence and start winning games." Worryingly for Klopp, Liverpool's home form has dipped alarmingly since an unbeaten run at Anfield of close to 12 months came to an end against Swansea City on January 21.

They were then defeated on their own patch by Southampton in the League Cup semi-finals and, to great embarrassment, Championship side Wolverhampton

Wanderers in the FA Cup. Chelsea would have made it a fourth successive home defeat for Klopp's team on January 31, but goalkeeper Simon Mignolet saved Diego Costa's late penalty to ensure a 1-1 draw.

Despite his side's poor recent form, Klopp made no signings in the January transfer window. He does have a strong first XI, though, and will be hoping he can get close to fielding it against Tottenham. Dejan Lovren missed the defeat at Hull with a knee injury and fellow centre-back Ragnar Klavan was missing through illness, meaning midfielder Lucas Leiva partnered Joel Matip in the middle of a makeshift defense. Sadio Mane should start in attack for a second successive game following his return from Africa Cup of Nations duty with Senegal.

ROSE 'VERY POSITIVE'

Tottenham have emerged as Chelsea's closest rivals, although they still trail the leaders by nine points despite beating Middlesbrough 1-0 last Sunday. Manager Mauricio Pochettino is aware of the need to keep picking up points in the hope that Antonio Conte's side falter, but he is not taking Liverpool's poor run for granted.

"If we win it will be important, to help

us keep putting pressure on Chelsea," he said. "It's not decisive, but it's important. I'm not thinking about the top of the table. That's not the problem today. "They are not in a good run, but they have very good players, one of the best squads in England and Europe. "They will be motivated as this is always a big match. It will be a very tough game. We are not the only realistic challengers. "We are a contender, but there are a lot of contenders. Nine points is a massive gap, but it's not decisive."

Danny Rose will miss the trip to Anfield as he recovers from a knee injury, but Tottenham have allayed fears the England left-back will be sidelined for two months. Spurs are refusing to put a timescale on his comeback date, but Pochettino said: "Danny's very positive, we are very positive. "We are happy after he saw a specialist. It's not a big issue. It's a minor problem, a small problem. "We hope he can be available again as soon as possible. We need to be patient. He is very optimistic. We are happy and you will see." Tottenham are restructuring their scouting system behind the scenes and have appointed Steve Hitchen as their chief scout. Hitchen worked as a scout for Spurs under former manager Harry Redknapp. —AFP

RESTED REAL MADRID WAIT ON BALE RETURN

MADRID: Real Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane hopes to have Gareth Bale back before the second leg of his side's Champions League last 16 clash with Napoli. The postponement of Madrid's visit to Celta Vigo last weekend due to storm damage caused to Celta's Balaidos stadium has allowed Zidane to recover a fully-fit squad bar Bale, who is still working his way back from ankle ligament

damage. The Welshman hasn't featured since late November and whilst Wednesday's first leg against the Italians is likely to come too early, Zidane is confident of having Bale back well before the return in Naples on March 7. "The return isn't till March 7 so hopefully he is with us before then," Zidane said on Friday. "He is back on the field and the only step he has left is to train with the

rest of the team. "He is working very hard and I can see the desire he has."

The suspended Toni Kroos is Madrid's only other absentee for Saturday's visit to rock bottom Osasuna. Marcelo, Luka Modric and Dani Carvajal are among those to return from injury. However, Madrid have only won one of their past six league meetings away at Osasuna and Zidane is not

expecting an easy ride despite the fact the Navarrans are yet to win at home in La Liga this season. "We have had time to work, physically we are good and ready to play," added Zidane. "It is a very difficult place to go and we know that it is top against bottom, which I don't like at all. "It has always been difficult for us at El Sadar and that isn't going to change." — AFP