



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Marouane Fellaini, second left, celebrates after scoring his sides second goal of the game during the English League Cup semifinal, 1st leg, soccer match between Manchester United and Hull at Old Trafford stadium. —AP

PREMIER LEAGUE PREVIEW

UNITED BRACING FOR LIVERPOOL CRUNCH, CHELSEA EYE RECOVERY

LONDON: Manchester United have a golden opportunity to haul themselves into the Premier League title race at the expense of bitter rivals Liverpool this weekend, while leaders Chelsea will look to steady their nerves at Leicester. United go into the Old Trafford showdown in fine fettle after beating Hull in the League Cup semi-final first leg in midweek to extend their winning streak in all competitions to nine matches.

Jose Mourinho's sixth-placed side still trail Chelsea by 10 points and lag five behind second-placed Liverpool. But victory on Sunday, with Mourinho calling for United fans to raise the roof, would be a significant statement of intent. Zlatan Ibrahimovic has been a key figure in United's recent surge and despite his team's current position the Swedish striker has set his sights on adding a Premier League medal to the league titles he won in Spain, Italy, France and Holland.

"I'm chasing the head trophy, the Premier League, that is my aim," said Ibrahimovic, who has 13 league goals this season. "I try to help the team and do what I'm best at—scoring goals, playing good and creating chances for my team-mates." In contrast to United, Liverpool—after emerging as title contenders thanks to a four-match winning run in December—have suffered a dip.

A draw at Sunderland in the league was followed by an FA Cup stalemate

against fourth-tier Plymouth and a 1-0 defeat in the League Cup semi-final first leg at Southampton. Manager Jurgen Klopp will hope the return against Southampton of Brazil forward Philippe Coutinho after seven weeks out with an ankle injury provides a timely boost for his team, who were held to a 0-0 draw by United in October.

Unhappy return?

By the time Liverpool kick off at Old Trafford they could be eight points behind Chelsea, who face struggling champions Leicester at the King Power Stadium 24 hours earlier. Chelsea's 2-0 defeat at Tottenham last week halted their 13-match winning run in the league, but the west London club received a welcome boost in midweek with the news that their plan to redevelop their Stamford Bridge stadium into a 60,000-capacity arena has been approved.

On the field, midfielder N'Golo Kante will make a first appearance at Leicester since his £30 million pre-season transfer. Kante was the driving force behind Leicester's incredible title triumph and his absence has been felt as the Foxes have slumped to within six points of the relegation zone. Leicester boss Claudio Ranieri called on the club's fans to salute Kante, but he hopes his side can make it an unhappy

return. "I hope our fans give to Kante a warm welcome as he was our champion. It's important to remember what he gave to us," Ranieri said. "We respect Chelsea a lot but we are ready to fight and ready to try to win." Third-placed Tottenham can extend their winning run in the league to six matches when they host West Bromwich Albion, but boss Mauricio Pochettino isn't getting carried away by that impressive success against Chelsea.

"Today it's about maturity and learning from this period. It doesn't mean that we will win every game," he said. "It's important to show that maturity we did against Chelsea, that is important for trying to be more realistic and fighting for a bigger objective." Manchester City, in fourth, look to maintain the momentum from their FA Cup thrashing of West Ham when they travel to Everton, while fifth-placed Arsenal, eight points behind Chelsea, can't afford a slip at second-bottom Swansea.

It will be an emotional day at Vicarage Road as Watford pay their respects to former manager Graham Taylor following his death on Thursday aged 72. Taylor, who suffered a suspected heart attack, led Watford into the top flight twice in two spells lasting a combined 15 years and the club plan a minute's applause and other tributes before their home match against Middlesbrough. —AFP

MILAN SET JUVE CLASH

MILAN: Juraj Kucka and Giacomo Bonaventura struck in four second-half minutes to fire AC Milan to a thrilling 2-1 Italian Cup win over Torino and a quarter-final tie with Juventus on Thursday. It means one of this season's Cup quarters will be a repeat of the 2015 Cup final, when Juventus beat Milan on their way to a second successive league and Cup double.

Milan, who recently beat Juventus in Doha to claim the Italian Super Cup, won their home league fixture with the Serie A champions earlier this season. But Vincenzo Montella's resurgent Rossoneri initially struggled to settle at a rain-lashed San Siro, and seemed destined to suffer an upset when Italy striker Andrea Belotti pounced from close range to beat Gianluigi Donnarumma down low on 27 minutes.

Torino rejected a reported bid of 65m euros from Arsenal recently for Belotti, and he underlined the reasons why by coming close to claiming his second moments later with a deflected effort from Adem Ljajic's smart cutback. Milan's best effort prior to the end of a mediocre first half was a stunning volley from Kucka that shaved Joe Hart's post. But a head injury to England 'keeper Hart, which left him requiring a headband wrap following a clash with Gianluca Lapadula early in the second half, gave the hosts a spur.

Lapadula left his foot trailing over the 'keeper's head and face minutes after the restart and there was worry initially as Hart lay motionless on the ground. After treatment, Hart was soon back up smiling and happy to see a glancing header by Suso go wide of his upright on 55 minutes. Milan had sniffed the chance of a fightback and after a brief period of pressure Suso dribbled his way past two players before forcing Hart to parry low at his far post.

The 'keeper could only push the ball into the path of Bonaventura, who found Kucka at the far post for the midfielder to fire high into the net from a tight angle. Three minutes later Suso provided his second assist of the game, finding Bonaventura on the edge of the box with a crisp cross that Bonaventura fired past Hart. Donnarumma did well to deny Belotti twice in the space of five minutes, although Milan spurned several chances at the end when Bonaventura and Lapadula, twice, fired wide of the target. — AFP

Live		Matches on TV (Local Timings)	
African Nations Cup			
Gabon v Bissau	beIN SPORTS		19:00
Burkina Faso v Cameroon	beIN SPORTS		22:00
English Premier League			
Tottenham Hotspur v Albion	beIN SPORTS		15:30
Sunderland v Stoke City	beIN SPORTS		18:00
West Ham United v Crystal Palace	beIN SPORTS		18:00
Watford v Middlesbrough	beIN SPORTS		18:00
Hull City v Bournemouth	beIN SPORTS		18:00
Burnley v Southampton	beIN SPORTS		18:00
Swansea City v Arsenal	beIN SPORTS		18:00
Leicester City v Chelsea	beIN SPORTS		20:30
Spanish League Primera Div. 1			
Leganes v Bilbao	beIN SPORTS		15:00
Barcelona v Las Palmas	beIN SPORTS		18:15
Atletico de Madrid v Real Betis	beIN SPORTS		20:30
Deportivo La Coruna v Villarreal	beIN SPORTS		22:45
Italian Calcio League Serie A			
Crotone v Bologna	beIN SPORTS		20:00
Inter Milano v Chievo Verona	beIN SPORTS		22:45