

DEL PIERO TIPS JUVENTUS TO OUTPLAY FIORENTINA

MILAN: Juventus great Alessandro Del Piero said he scored "perhaps the best goal of my career" against Fiorentina, and he expects the Old Lady to continue outplaying La Viola when the sides meet tomorrow. For Del Piero, Juventus v Fiorentina is a "derby" and one in which he struck a superb volley with the outside of his boot to seal a 3-2 win for Juve in December 1994.

It was "perhaps the best and most significant goal of my career," the now retired Del Piero told media in Florence where he was unveiling a new fashion line. In a later fixture between the sides, Del Piero hit a hat-trick to overtake Giampiero Boniperti's 178-goal tally for the club, set in 1961.

"And I also got that hat-trick that allowed me to overtake Boniperti's record," he added. "This fixture is always special. It can be very tough and tense at times. For me, it's a derby." Del Piero, 42, hit a career tally of 290 goals for Juventus in a career that saw him win the World Cup (2006), six Serie A titles and the Champions League as well as three runner-up medals from the competition.

He is fully behind the Turin giants' bid for a record sixth consecutive league title, but urged caution. "Juventus are a step ahead of the rest," said Del Piero. "But the championship isn't over. Roma and Napoli are not far behind and will be the ones worrying Juventus most." Roma, four points adrift, face a tricky trip to Udinese yesterday while Napoli, seven points off the top in third, should have no problem beating rock-bottom Pescara.

Growing exodus

While Fiorentina have been busy playing down reports star striker Nikola Kalinic could join a growing exodus of top players to China, Juventus took another step towards a third consecutive league and Cup double. They showed class during the first half of a 3-2 Italian Cup last 16 win over Atalanta in midweek that saw Paulo Dybala hit a great opening volley and set up strike partner Mario Mandzukic for Juve's second.

With Croatian starlet Marko Pjaca fully recovered following a two-month injury lay-off, Juve coach Massimiliano Allegri was able to rest Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain. Fiorentina have lost their last four league games with the Turin giants, scraping their last point from a scoreless home draw in December 2014, and are 18 points adrift in ninth. But Venezuelan midfielder Tomas Rincon, who signed a three-and-a-half-year deal when he arrived in Turin from Genoa last week, said Paulo Sousa's men can't be taken for granted.

"They're a class side. We have to take them just as seriously as the rest of the league take Juventus," said Rincon. Roma defender Kostas Manolas has called for an end to throwing away points against "smaller" teams as they look to avoid a potential banana skin. Udinese gave Inter Milan a scare before succumbing 2-1 defeat at the Friuli stadium last week, and Manolas warned against a repeat of Roma's trip to Cagliari last August when they threw away a two-goal lead.

"When you're up two-nil away from home you don't finish the match 2-2. We are a top side and shouldn't be drawing games like these," said Manolas. Napoli host struggling Pescara looking for a second home win four days after a sealing their Italian Cup quarter-final spot with a 3-1 cruise over second division La Spezia. Inter Milan, seventh at 12 points behind Juventus, can close the gap with a home win over Chievo while on Monday city rivals AC Milan, nine points off the pace in fifth, face Torino for the second time in four days. Milan beat Torino 2-1 at the San Siro on Thursday to secure their spot in the Italian Cup quarter-final. — AFP



TURIN: Juventus' Paulo Dybala celebrates after scoring during an Italian Cup, round of 16 soccer match, at the Juventus Stadium. — AP



SEVILLE: Sevilla's Argentinian midfielder Matias Kranevitter (R) vies with Real Madrid's Dominican forward Mariano during the Spanish Copa del Rey (King's Cup) round of 16 second leg football match Sevilla FC vs Real Madrid CF at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium. — AFP

LA LIGA PREVIEW

TOP TWO COLLIDE IN LATEST CHALLENGE FOR FLYING REAL

MADRID: Cristiano Ronaldo returns for Real Madrid as the European champions put their Spanish record 40-game unbeaten run on the line for the second time in four days in a top of the table clash at Sevilla tomorrow. Victory for the hosts would blow the La Liga title race wide open with Sevilla closing to within one point of Real, who also still have a game in hand.

Ronaldo was once again rested in the week he was crowned FIFA's Player of the Year for 2016 as Real booked their place in the Copa del Rey quarter-finals on Thursday by surpassing Barcelona's previous best unbeaten run of 39 games. However, Sevilla were just seconds away from inflicting Real's first defeat in eight months as Karim Benzema salvaged a 3-3 draw on the night deep into stoppage time as Real progressed 6-3 on aggregate.

Despite the drama, both sides had an eye on arguably the biggest game of the Liga season so far tomorrow that will fully test Sevilla's credentials as title challengers. "We will have to suffer just as much on Sunday," said Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane. "It is a hard place to go and they have very good players, but it is what faces every weekend and this weekend will be especially difficult."

Jorge Sampaoli's men moved up

Barcelona into second with a hugely impressive 4-0 win at sixth-placed Real Sociedad last weekend and will be back to full strength as Mariano, Steven N'Zonzi and Franco Vazquez were all rested in midweek. Zidane will also be able to welcome back Luka Modric as he too was rested, whilst captain Sergio Ramos, Mateo Kovacic and Lucas Vazquez made their first appearances of 2017 after returning from injury on Thursday.

'MSN' back in form

Sevilla are likely to kick-off at the Sanchez Pizjuan back down in third should Barca avoid defeat when they welcome Las Palmas to the Camp Nou today. The champions have won just two of their last six La Liga games, but did register a first win of 2017 at the third attempt with a 3-1 win over Athletic Bilbao on Wednesday to edge into the Cup quarter-finals 4-3 on aggregate.

"It is important for our confidence. We wanted and needed a result like that," said Luis Suarez, after netting his 100th Barca goal. "We are calm, working hard and know that the results will come." Further goals from Neymar and Lionel Messi, from a third stupendous free-kick in as many games, took Barca's

'MSN' to 302 goals as a trio since Suarez signed in 2014.

However, tellingly it was the first time all three had scored in the same game since September as Neymar ended a three-month goal drought. "We are on a run where the opponents need very few chances to score against us and we are finding it difficult in the final third," said Barca boss Luis Enrique.

"I am sure that will be fleeting because the attitude that in all of the players and now we have to go on a run of victories." Las Palmas demonstrated their ability to spring a surprise with two late goals to win 3-2 at Atletico Madrid on Tuesday despite falling short of the Copa del Rey quarters 4-3 on aggregate. Atletico will look to bounce back and solidify their place in the top four when Real Betis visit the Vicente Calderon today.

The bottom two also clash this weekend as Granada welcome Osasuna with both side having managed just one La Liga win in 17 games so far this season. However, they remain just four and five points adrift of safety thanks to Valencia's woes as, with interim coach Voro confirmed in charge till the end of the season, they go in search of a first league win since October at home to Espanyol tomorrow. — AFP