

Manchester United FC - Villarreal CF

MATCH PREVIEW

Old Trafford, Manchester

Wednesday 17 September 2008 - 20.45CET

Group E - Matchday 1



Manchester United FC will be boosted by the return of Cristiano Ronaldo when they open the defence of their European crown against Group E rivals Villarreal CF.

'Magnificent player'

Sir Alex Ferguson, the United manager, confirmed on the eve of the game that Ronaldo was back ahead of schedule from an ankle operation in July and would take his place in the squad – "more likely on the bench" – for the first time since May's UEFA Champions League final triumph against Chelsea FC. "You're talking about a truly magnificent player and we're delighted he's back," said Sir Alex, who praised the Portugal attacker for his attitude since returning to Old Trafford after United refused his wish for a summer move to Real Madrid CF.

Fillip for United

"He is a young man and has been tempted by the lure of the money, but since we gave him our decision he has accepted it well and his training has been absolutely fantastic; he's probably been one of the best patients I've ever seen," the manager said, adding: "He has shown fantastic maturity. There's been no pettiness, no throwing toys out of the pram." Ronaldo struck 42 goals for United last term, including eight in the UEFA Champions League, and his availability provides an undoubted fillip for a team who suffered a first Premier League defeat by arch-rivals Liverpool FC in four years last weekend.

No Rossi reunion

It was a disappointment compounded by the injuries sustained by midfielder Michael Carrick – facing four to six weeks out with a cracked bone in his right foot – and new forward Dimitar Berbatov. Sir Alex, who is also missing the suspended Paul Scholes, described the Bulgarian as "very doubtful" because of a knee problem. For Villarreal, former United striker Giuseppe Rossi did not fly to Manchester having failed to overcome a sprained ankle, although Robert Pirès, another player well-known at Old Trafford after six years at Arsenal FC, has travelled having appeared for the first time this season as a substitute in Sunday's 1-0 win against RC Deportivo La Coruña.

Stalemates

This is the visitors' first UEFA Champions League game since their 2005/06 semi-final against Arsenal, the conclusion of a memorable campaign which included two group-stage stalemates with United – results that contributed to the English side's unexpectedly early demise that year. Recalling those meetings with United, Villarreal coach Manuel Pellegrini, who turned 55 on Tuesday, said: "There are only three players remaining from then – Javi Venta, Marcos Senna and Gonzalo Rodríguez – but it does help us in terms of experience."

No compromise

Villarreal secured a historic second-placed finish in Spain last term, when they were widely regarded as the Liga's most attractive team. Pellegrini said that while it was important to be "solid at the back" on Wednesday, his charges would not compromise their positive approach. "We cannot change our style of play. If we continue to be who we are, and don't change, then we have a chance." His United counterpart will certainly not be underestimating the visitors after the "low point" of 2005. "Villarreal are a very experienced team," said Sir Alex. "They all know their jobs, they've got a consistency and are a difficult team to beat."



Tévez tips United to reign again

History suggests it will not be easy but Carlos Tévez is confident that Manchester United FC have the quality to become the first team since Arrigo Sacchi's AC Milan in 1990 to retain the European Champion Clubs' Cup.

Repeat performance

English titleholders United begin the defence of their continental crown at home to Villarreal CF on Wednesday, and Tévez said: "In football the most difficult thing is to do it again the following year. We've won the league and the Champions League and the difficult thing now is to do it again, but I think we have the players and the ability to go and do that."

Early setback

United have made a stuttering start to the Premier League season, taking just four points from a possible nine after Saturday's 2-1 loss at Liverpool FC. Yet Tévez insists they have the quality to bounce back from that setback in their Group E opener against Villarreal. "I think the squad is strong – we've shown this many times when after losing a game we always came back," the Argentinian international said. "We showed it last season by winning two major titles and I think we have the team and the players to be able to pick ourselves up."

Ronaldo lift

It will help to have Cristiano Ronaldo available for selection for the first time this term as he steps up his recovery from ankle surgery, with Tévez noting: "Cristiano is a massive player for us, and to have him at our side is like having an extra player. He is one of the best players in the world and it gives a lot of problems to the opposition when Ronaldo is on the right wing for Manchester United."

Settled

Tévez knows something himself about troubling opposition defences. He scored 19 times in his debut campaign at Old Trafford and opened his 2008/09 account with United's goal at Anfield. Sir Alex Ferguson recognises his value and spoke confidently on Tuesday about Tévez signing a new contract next summer, when the 24-year-old's two-season loan arrangement will end. The player himself would be only too happy to do just that. "I feel very happy with the club and would be very happy if the chairman came and put a contract on the table. I would sign it straight away," he said.

Willing Senna to tangle with Red Devils

After touching the European summit with Spain in June, Marcos Senna has turned his sights to continental success with Villarreal CF in this season's UEFA Champions League.

Bullish mood

One of the stars of Spain's UEFA European Championship triumph, Senna was in bullish mood as he looked ahead to Villarreal's opening Group E match at Manchester United FC on Wednesday, predicting they were capable of achieving "something big". "For me, it is another special moment to have the opportunity to play in this competition," said Senna, who was voted into the UEFA EURO 2008™ team of the tournament. "We want to put in a good performance, as we did in 2006, and I think we have a good squad this year. We are going to do something big. We are playing the holders but anything is possible. We're relaxed but have a lot of hope."

Eyeing surprise

The 32-year-old is one of only three survivors from the Villarreal side that got the better of United at this stage three years ago – the teams' two 0-0 draws helping Manuel Pellegrini's men take top spot in the group, with United finishing bottom. Senna warned that Villarreal, eventual semi-finalists in 2005/06, were now an even better side. "The squad we have today is more complete," he said. "Perhaps we can win or lose tomorrow but we are well-prepared and what we want to do is go forward. We don't know how to sit back and we want to spring a surprise."

'We can win the group'

"Of course we can win the group. We had a great experience in 2006. Each season is something new but we start out with a lot of hope. We know it will not be easy but anything can happen in football," added Senna. The midfielder's previous efforts against United prompted interest from the Premier League champions, yet he is happy to have stayed at El Madrigal, where he signed a contract extension this summer. "There was contact between the club and my agent. The truth is I wanted to stay at Villarreal for many reasons. This year too I had the chance to leave but I've been here a long while and am happy."