

ZABALETA: RED HOT AGUERO BEST ON THE PLANET

MANCHESTER: Manchester City defender Pablo Zabaleta has warned Everton they will face the best player on the planet in their Premier League clash at Eastlands today.

Zabaleta believes City forward Sergio Aguero is currently the most dynamic force in world football after the Argentine took his goal tally to 19 in 16 starts this season with a brace in a 4-1 win at Sunderland on Wednesday. That victory ensured Manuel Pellegrini's side kept the pressure on unbeaten Premier League leaders Chelsea.

But without Aguero's impressive form, champions City would be struggling to retain the title and his compatriot Zabaleta is more than willing to declare him better than Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo and Barcelona's Lionel Messi.

"I think, on current form, Sergio is the best player in the world," Zabaleta said ahead of this weekend's visit from Everton.

"I've known him a long time and at the moment he's showing the finest form of his career. Long may it continue. "Everything he does, he makes it look so easy. He's sharp, clinical but he also works really hard for the team off the ball. That's something you have to appreciate from Sergio. "Normally strikers want to play with the ball but he works ever so hard for the team, he's been great. "He's the best striker in the world at the moment and we're very lucky to have him in our team." Zabaleta also hailed Aguero's contribution in helping him score his first goal since April against Sunderland at the Stadium of Light as second placed City stayed within six points of Chelsea thanks to a fourth straight win. "I've taken a few lessons in finishing off Sergio," he added. "I told him not to be worried about me scoring my first of the season-I'm only goals 18 behind him!

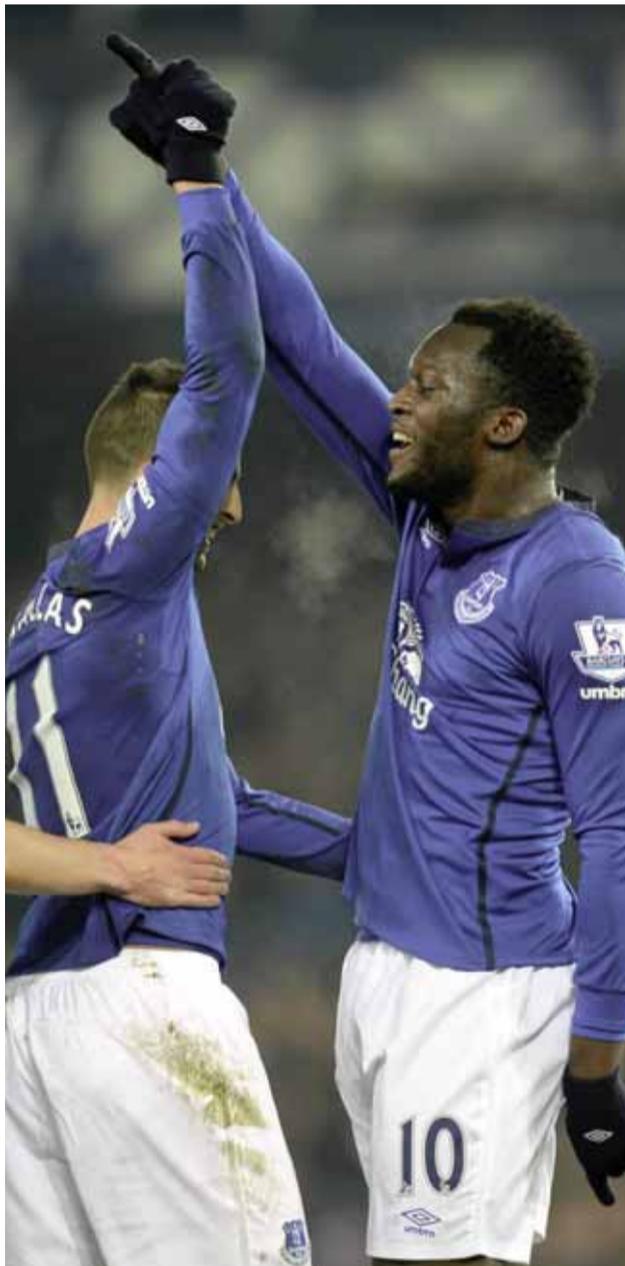
"We are not giving up on the title. We are six behind Chelsea and it's going to be difficult but nothing is done yet. We still have belief."

KEY PERFORMER

Aguero came off against Sunderland, but it is understood to only have been as a precaution, and there are no injury concerns over City's leading scorer. City captain Vincent Kompany remains on the sidelines with a hamstring injury and will miss the visit of Roberto Martinez's side. But the Belgium centre-back has an outside chance of being fit for City's decisive Champions League match away to Roma next week. Everton defender Sylvain Distin believes team-mate Muhamed Besic can become a key performer for the Toffees in the remainder of the campaign. Bosnia international Besic joined Everton from Hungarian club Ferencvaros in the close season but has had to bide his time at Goodison Park. However, recent injuries to midfielders James McCarthy and Gareth Barry have given tough-tackling Besic his chance. And Distin believes the 22-year-old has grabbed it with some impressive performances which should see him keep his spot for the trip to City. "Muhamed's a really good prospect for the club," Distin said. "He is doing great and brings a lot of energy; with the amount of games we have it's always good to have a fresh player coming in.

"He is motivated, young and he's still learning." However, French centre-back Distin admits Everton need a positive result at City to remain in touch with the Champions League places.

"We have had a lot of games and that's going to continue for another month," Distin added. "But we have to move on because it is a big game against City this weekend, then next week, then the following weekend. "That is the Premier League and we want to keep fighting to make the top four." Everton boss Martinez should have midfielder McCarthy and striker Steven Naismith available after hamstring injuries, but midfielder Darron Gibson (knee) is absent along with centre-backs Antolin Alcaraz (shoulder) and John Stones (ankle). — AFP



LONDON: Everton's Romelu Lukaku (right) celebrates in this file photo. —AP

SPANISH COACH GARRIDO EYES CAF CLUB HISTORY

JOHANNESBURG: Juan Carlos Garrido hopes to create history today by becoming the first Spanish coach of an African Football Confederation (CAF) title-winning club.

The 45-year-old former Real Betis and Villarreal manager guides Egyptians Al Ahly, who trail Ivorians Sewe Sport 2-1 after the first leg of the CAF Confederation Cup final.

Ahly have home advantage in the return match and a 1-0 win will give the Cairo Red Devils overall victory on the away-goal rule and a \$660,000 prize in the second-tier African competition. A solitary goal separated Ahly and visiting Sewe in the group stage last July with Walid Soliman converting an early penalty. The narrow win marked the CAF debut of Garrido, the third coach Ahly have used in 11 Confederation Cup games.

Mohamed Youssef quit after a last-gasp play-off victory over Moroccans Difaa El Jadida and caretaker Fathy Mabrouk took charge for three group matches.

Garrido arrived and three wins, one draw and two losses later, Ahly are on the verge of a record-extending 19th CAF title against rivals playing their first African final.

The Red Devils have won the African Champions Cup/CAF Champions League eight times, the CAF Super Cup six times and the now defunct African Cup Winners Cup four times. But neither Ahly nor any other Egyptian outfit has claimed the Confederation Cup-the African equivalent of the Europa League.

Garrido hopes to change that before a Cairo Stadium crowd that will probably be restricted to 20,000 because of ongoing post-Arab Spring security concerns. "It would be a great honour for me to win a CAF competition in my first year at the club," Garrido told reporters.

"I came to Cairo to win trophies and the Confederation Cup is an important one as no Egyptian club has lifted it.

SUSPENDED

"The chance to create more history at this great club is a wonderful motivation for the players and the coaches." Ahly have already surpassed the previous best showing by an Egyptian side ENPPI making a semi-final exit five seasons ago. Garrido has been hampered by injuries, transfers and suspensions during his six Confederation Cup matches. Star goalkeeper Sherif Ekramy and leading scorer Amr Gamal missed the final, and first-leg scorer Mahmoud 'Trezeguet' Hassan is suspended for the return match. He was yellow-carded by the Gabonese referee in Abidjan last weekend for time wasting at a throw-in and the decision infuriated Garrido.

"The match official intentionally cautioned 'Trezeguet' to prevent him taking part in the second leg," alleged the Spaniard. A disallowed goal by midfielder and captain Hossam Ghaly also angered the Spaniard, who claiming it was "legitimate". But Ahly were fortunate to escape with only a one-goal loss as they played second fiddle for long periods against Sewe, who want to become the first Ivorian winners of a CAF club competition in 15 years.

Ace striker Roger Assale, who joins Democratic Republic of Congo and African giants TP Mazembe after the final, gave an outstanding display capped with a late match-winner. "Mazembe is not among my thoughts now-I am focusing solely on winning the Confederation Cup with Sewe," he assured reporters.

"Defeating Ahly in the final will be a farewell gift to my team-mates, my coaches, the officials and all those wonderful Sewe supporters." Coach Rigo Gervais shares the optimism of 21-year-old Assale, whose five goals have played a key role in Sewe reaching the final.

"I was hoping for a bigger first-leg lead, but our destiny is in our hands," said a coach little known outside his West African homeland. "Playing away holds no fears for us-remember we defeated Bayelsa in Nigeria and Etoile Sahel in Tunisia and held Leopards in Congo." Ahly and Sewe started this year in the far richer, more prestigious Champions League only to drop to the Confederation Cup after final qualifying round losses. Whoever succeeds will be the first Champions League 'drop-outs' to raise the trophy since Etoile Sahel eight years ago. —AFP

KUWAIT TO APPOINT TUNISIAN MAALLOUL AS NEW COACH

KUWAIT: Asian Cup finalists Kuwait are closing in on the managerial appointment of Nabil Maaloul after dispensing with the services of Brazilian Jorvan Vieira following a disappointing Gulf Cup of Nations campaign.

Former Tunisian international Maaloul had been identified as the number one target after a wave of interest in the position, Kuwait FA president Sheikh Talal Al-Fahad said in a statement. Terms and a release were being negotiated with Maaloul and his current employers, Qatar Stars League side El Jaish, with the Kuwaitis wanting him in place before they begin their Asian Cup campaign in Australia next month.

Kuwait, Asian champions in 1980, have been drawn in Group A along with the hosts, South Korea and Oman. They opened last month's Gulf Cup of Nations with a 1-0 win over Iraq but were eliminated in the group stage after a 5-0 hammering by Oman. That result proved the end of the line for Vieira, who coached Brazil to the 2007 Asian Cup title, with the much travelled Brazilian mutually agreeing to resign, Al-Fahad said. — Reuters



Matches on TV

(Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

Newcastle V Chelsea 15:45
beIN SPORTS 1 HD
Tottenham v Crystal 18:00
beIN SPORTS 6 HD
Stoke City V Arsenal 18:00
beIN SPORTS 1 HD
Liverpool V Sunderland 18:00
beIN SPORTS 1 HD
Hull City V Bromwich 18:00
beIN SPORTS 7 HD
Man City V Everton 20:30
beIN SPORTS 1 HD

SPANISH LEAGUE

Elche V Atletico 18:00
beIN SPORTS 2 HD
beIN SPORTS 2 HD
Bilbao V Cordoba 20:00
beIN SPORTS 6 HD
Real Madrid V Celta 22:00
beIN SPORTS 2 HD
beIN SPORTS 2 HD
Sunday
Deportivo V Malaga 0:00
beIN SPORTS 6 HD
beIN SPORTS 2 HD FR

ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE

Roma V Sassuolo 20:00
beIN SPORTS 3 HD
beIN SPORTS 2 HD
Torino V Citta 22:45
beIN SPORTS 3 HD

GERMAN BUNDESLIGA

Monchengladbach V Hertha 17:30
beIN SPORTS 4 HD
Stuttgart V Schalke 17:30
beIN SPORTS 3 HD
Bayern Munich V Bayer 20:30
beIN SPORTS 4 HD

FRENCH LEAGUE

PSG V Nantes 19:00
beIN SPORTS 5 HD
Bordeaux V Lorient 22:00
beIN SPORTS 6 HD
Caen V OGC Nice 22:00
beIN SPORTS 8 HD
Rennes V Montpellier 22:00
beIN SPORTS 9 HD
Etienne V Bastia 22:00
beIN SPORTS 5 HD