

MARTINEZ AIMS FOR EUROPE DESPITE HEAVY SCHEDULE

SINGAPORE: Everton manager Roberto Martinez admitted that last season's disappointing campaign was impacted by the side's run to the last 16 of the Europa League but the Spaniard wants nothing more than to compete in the tournament again.

In his first season on Merseyside, Everton finished an impressive fifth but were mired in the bottom half of the table for much of the last campaign before they moved up to 11th on a run of good form after their European exit to Dynamo Kiev.

"If the question is 'does playing in the Europa League have an impact on the league?' then the answer is clearly 'yes'," Martinez told reporters on Tuesday in Singapore, where the club are playing in the Premier League Asia Trophy.

"It's different when you are playing in Europe season after season, you get that mentality and habits and into a position where you can cope with it a lot better," added the Spaniard ahead of today's opening game against Stoke City.

Arsenal and a Singapore Select XI are the other teams in the lucrative pre-season event. "Psychologically it's very tough... like having to go to Russia on a Thursday and arriving back on a Friday afternoon to face Manchester United at Old Trafford on an early Sunday kickoff is a physical aspect that will affect you," he added.

"It is a lesson that we have learned, we matured and we got better. But that is our aim. We want to be in those situations, to be playing in Europe year after year but that is something that is becoming harder in our league as you can imagine. "There are probably five teams preparing this

season to try and win the title and there's another three or four teams with financial backing to get into Europe so it becomes harder and harder. But it is still our aim and one of our targets."

Martinez has brought in a few new signings since the transfer window opened but does not expect any acquisitions similar to the club record 28 million pounds (\$43.30 million) they paid for Belgian striker Romelu Lukaku a year ago.

"We are trying to build on what we have done in the last four windows and sometimes you need to spend big to bring in specific players," he added.

"Now we have a strong group with some of the most exciting youngsters you will see in the league. I think the mixture is perfect and rather than talking about what we need, we are more concerned with how good we can be with the players we have."

Club captain Phil Jagielka agreed. "Obviously we spent a lot of money last year getting in the striker we needed but if you look around the squad, it's really well balanced," the England defender said. "Previously we have aimed for a Champions League slot at the start of the season and see how we get on. The manager would love us to win something and so would the players."

"We have really high standards at the club and we let ourselves down and never really got the momentum we needed last season. A lot of people are blaming the Europa League but we want to finish in the European positions in the coming season. "Hopefully we can start well and achieve that. That can only be a good thing." — Reuters



Petr Cech

ARSENAL HOPEFUL GOALKEEPER CAN CECH MATE TITLE RIVALS

SINGAPORE: The arrival of goalkeeper Petr Cech has given Arsenal's unfairly criticised defensive unit a welcome boost and could be the missing piece in the title puzzle, his new side have said.

Pundits and fans have frequently cited last line weaknesses as the reason why Arsenal have not won the Premier League since 2004, with David Ospina and Wojciech Szczesny both culpable for errors last term as the side finished third, 12 points behind champions Chelsea.

But the signing of the renowned Czech international, who enjoyed a trophy-laden decade at Chelsea before being usurped by Belgian Thibaut Courtois last term, has spurred belief of bridging the gap. The goalkeeper is in line to make his first Arsenal appearance when the FA Cup winners kick off their pre-season in the Asian trophy against a Singapore select on Wednesday but his impact on the squad has already been felt.

"From day one you felt his presence, he is the type, he communicates well on and off the pitch, speaks several languages so I think he can add that extra we may miss at the moment," German defender Per Mertesacker told reporters in Singapore on Tuesday.

"We are very happy with him and I think he has a good feeling as well about joining us and contributing to our team. "We had already a good structure, but with him we feel much stronger." Mertesacker knows more than most the problems that Arsenal have faced at the back in recent years as they have struggled to put together a consistent 38-match title challenging campaign.

The World Cup-winner, though, believes Arsenal's issues were overstated and that the backline were already strong before the arrival of the 33-year-old goalkeeper.

"It gives you a lift when you have someone

with that presence and record in our back," he said. "We feel quite confident at the back. There were many doubters out there but we feel we are stronger." One reporter suggested to Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger that the arrival of Cech had solved the goalkeeping problem that existed since the departure of Jens Lehmann over seven years ago. "Look it's quite simple if you go back to the numbers. We have no obvious goalkeeping problem," said the Frenchman, whose side had the third best defensive record last term behind Chelsea and Southampton.

"In the last 19 games we conceded 13 goals and we want to maintain that record or improve it but that would be very, very difficult.

"That means 26 goals conceded in a season, that is exceptional. We have improved our record during the season last year, we want to maintain that and stabilise and if possible improve that." — Reuters

VAN PERSIE SIGNS FOR FENERBAHCE

ISTANBUL: Dutch international striker Robin van Persie yesterday signed for Fenerbahce from Manchester United, the Turkish Super Lig giants announced.

Van Persie's signing and introduction ceremony took place at the club's Sukru Saracoglu stadium in Istanbul attended by over 10,000 jubilant fans.

The Dutch international is believed to have put pen to paper on a three-year deal worth 4.7 million euros (3.4m, \$5.2m) although financial details have yet to be disclosed.

"I am now part of the Fenerbahce family," van Persie told fans who created a deafening atmosphere and lit flares around the stadium. "I am happy to see so many great fans." "I promise I will do everything in my power to make Fenerbahce win as many trophies as possible to make these fans happy." His signing draws the curtain on three up-and-down years at Manchester United which began in a blaze of promise but ended in injury problems and faltering form.

Van Persie, 31, made 105 appearances and scored 58 goals at Manchester United after joining in August 2012 fol-

lowing his eight-year stint at Arsenal.

But his last season was marred by an ankle ligament injury and speculation of tension between himself and Manchester United boss Louis van Gaal, who had guided van Persie and his countrymen to third place in the World Cup.

Fenerbahce have given their new flagship signing-one of the best known players to arrive in Turkey in years-the red carpet treatment and he was given a hero's welcome by hundreds of fans at the airport on Sunday. Fenerbahce-runners up to hated Istanbul rivals Galatasaray last season in the championship-have gone on a spending spree in a bid to dominate the Super Lig and be a real contender in Europe.

Last week they signed Portuguese star Nani also from United for six million euros (4.26m, \$6.7m) and in June bought Danish centre-back Simon Kjær from French side Lille. Fenerbahce's flurry of transfer market activity is being masterminded by its well-respected new Italian sporting director Giuliano Terraneo who arrived in May on a mission to make the club a European football force. — AFP



ISTANBUL: Robin Van Persie of Netherlands waves to Fenerbahce fans during his presentation at the team's Sukru Saracoglu Stadium. — AP

RUNNING OF THE BULLS ENDS

PAMPLONA: Pamplona's famed San Fermin festival held its last bull run yesterday with no fatalities in the nine-day event, but officials said a French tourist died after being gored by a bull in a small town festival in eastern Spain.

A statement from the town hall of Pedreguer said the 44-year-old man died around 1 a.m. after being gored during a bull-running event held as part of the town's summer festival.

It was the third death from a goring in festivals in recent weeks around Spain. Ten people, including four Americans, were gored in this year's festival in Pamplona, the country's most celebrated such event, but no one was killed. Fifteen people have died from gorings in the Pamplona festival since 1924. Bull runs are a traditional part of summer festivals across Spain. Dozens are injured each year, mostly in falls.

In Pamplona's final run, hundreds of people raced alongside six fighting bulls from the renowned Miura ranch,

considered among the fiercest in Spain.

One bull charged into a bunch of runners, knocking around 10 people to the ground.

The San Fermin press office said five people were treated in city hospitals for bruises suffered in falls or from being trampled on by the beasts or other runners but none was in serious condition. No one was gored yesterday. The July 6-14 fiesta, named after the northern city's patron saint, dates back to the late 16th century. It was immortalized in Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel "The Sun Also Rises" and attracts thousands of tourists.

The 8 a.m. runs see people dashing with six bulls and their guiding steer along a narrow 930-yard (850-meter) course from a holding pen to the city's bullring. Tuesday's run lasted 2 minutes, 5 seconds, the fastest of the eight held in the festival. The bulls are killed by professional matadors in bullfights each afternoon during the festival. — AP

FROOME CRUSHES TOUR RIVALS

FRANCE: Chris Froome savagely ripped the heart out of his Tour de France competition yesterday by streaking to victory on the first mountain stage of this year's race.

The 30-year-old Briton, who started the day in yellow, blitzed one rival after another before coming home alone at the end of the 167km 10th stage from Tarbes to la Pierre-Saint Martin.

The Sky team leader made his attack with a little over 6km left on the brutal 15km climb to the finish. At that point, reigning champion Vincenzo Nibali had already been dropped and two-time former winner Alberto Contador was struggling.

They came home respectively 21st at 4min 27sec and 11th at 2min 51sec to see their overall title hopes shredded. Only Colombian climber Nairo Quintana, and American Tejay Van Garderen to a certain extent, managed to limit their losses. Quintana finished third on the stage at 1min 04sec, suffering the insult of Froome's domestique Richie Porte beating him to the line for second place to deny him a pair of bonus seconds. The Colombian moved up to third overall, though he's now 3min 09sec behind Froome, albeit with several mountain stages to come.

Van Garderen rode a solid race to come home 10th at 2min 30sec and hold onto second overall at 2min 52sec. But it was a miserable day for French hopes Jean-Christophe Peraud, Thibaut Pinot and Romain Bardet who were dropped on the lower slopes of the final climb.

In the first half of the race, a two-man breakaway of Pierrick Fedrigo and Kenneth Van Bilsen built up a 15-minute lead on the peloton.

But by the time they reached the foot of the final climb to the summit finish, their lead was down to just 2min 30sec, and their time in the sun was almost up.

Several of the favorites' teams pushed the pace as their leaders fought to start the climb at the front of the peloton. Van Bilsen gave up the ghost 13km from the end while Fedrigo lasted



FRANCE: Britain's Christopher Froome, wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the tenth stage of the Tour de France cycling race. — AP

another 1.5km before the battle for the stage victory overtook him.

By that point the peloton had been shredded under the pace set by Quintana's Movistar team to just 25 riders. But already for the hosts it made miserable view as Peraud, runner-up to Nibali in 2014, Pinot, third last year, and Bardet, sixth 12 months ago, were amongst the debris.

As Fedrigo was caught, Dutchman Robert Geesink counter-attacked alone. But incredibly it was Nibali next to crack more than 10km out from the finish.

Spaniard Rafael Valls had set off after Geesink and the two formed a tandem at the front with a 30sec lead. Joaquim Rodriguez, the winner on

the stage three Mur de Huy climb, and last year's king of the mountains Rafal Majka were the next to be dropped.

Sky took up the pace-setting but Quintana's teammate Alejandro Valverde attacked and the reaction from Froome's team reeled in Valls as only a dozen riders were left in the yellow jersey group. Porte took over pace-setting and Contador was next to feel the pace and drop off, with Valverde following shortly afterwards.

Van Garderen also cracked as Geesink was caught, leaving only Froome and Quintana in Porte's wheel. But when Froome launched his decisive attack, he dealt a crushing blow to his rivals. — AFP

NASCAR TAKES POSITIVE STEPS TOWARD FUTURE

CHARLOTTE: What a different NASCAR we have now. The sport so married to a dictator-style reign, so resistant to meaningful change and so slow to take a stance on anything that might alienate its fan base has seemingly been turned upside down in a matter of days.

In just the past month alone, chairman Brian France has taken a strong stance on a pair of social issues, including his desire to eliminate the Confederate flag at NASCAR events. His position is in stark contrast to NASCAR's Southern roots, and will be slow to be totally embraced by fans. And last week when Ben Kennedy, great-grandson of NASCAR founder Bill France Sr., was involved in an accident at Kentucky Speedway, nearly every replay featured a shot of "The Stars and Bars" waving at the bottom of the screen. So it may take some time for NASCAR's position to make a meaningful difference, but France is strongly in favor of separating his series from the negative connotation of the flag regardless of how long it takes. Same goes for improving the on-track product, which, by the way, looked a much improved Saturday night at Kentucky.

The race was the first for new rules packages that have been earmarked for trial at four different tracks. This package of lower downforce was specifically recommended by the drivers, who somehow persuaded NASCAR to allow them to form a panel that has engaged in meaningful discussion with series leaders. Don't confuse the driver council with unionization, something NASCAR has never allowed.

Curtis Turner and Tim Flock in 1961 were both banned for life - Turner's was eventually lifted - for trying to form the Federation of Professional Athletes and second-tier drivers were used at Talladega Superspeedway during a one-week boycott in 1969 as drivers tried to form the Professional Drivers Association. But times have clearly changed, with three-time NASCAR champion Tony Stewart even positioning present day NASCAR in "kind of a crisis situation" because of the uninspired racing. So NASCAR allowed the drivers to create a panel that they selected themselves by vote. Drivers were grouped in tiers and every manufacturer had to be represented. The first meeting, last month at Dover, put in motion the lower downforce package that was used at Kentucky.

A second meeting at Daytona a week before the race opened the door for the use of a similar rules package at Darlington next month, one that features higher drag at Indianapolis and Michigan, and a new tire at Richmond.

Drivers seemed genuinely pleased with the open dialogue with NASCAR, but cautioned not to expect much from Saturday night's race at Kentucky. At issue was Goodyear's delay in being able to produce a tire to match the lower downforce package, and driver council member Dale Earnhardt Jr. warned: "I'm not expecting Kentucky to reveal a lot of obvious answers on the direction we need to go." It's not clear why Earnhardt tried to temper the waters for Kentucky, but it seemed as if NASCAR expected the

driver-driven rules package to fail. That's not a surprise because it's an opposite path than the one taken by the series leaders tasked with improving the racing.

The data from Saturday night - data are always open to interpretation - suggested the drivers have been right all along in what creates the best racing. There were 2,665 green-flag passes throughout the field, compared with 1,147 last year at Kentucky. There were also a record 22 green-flag passes for the lead, up from the record of 19 set in 2011.

The racing drew raves from winner Kyle Busch. Before you say "of course the winner liked it," remember he's the guy who widely panned the Car of Tomorrow when he won in the debut race of that car. Denny Hamlin, one of the drivers credited for the push to create the driver council, was down two laps at one point Saturday night and finished third. "This is what race car driving's all about. I feel like now it's back in the driver and crew chief's hands to get their car handling like it's supposed to," he said. "It's not just an arms race of who can build the fastest cars in the shop."

Even Clint Bowyer, stuck in a miserable season, seemed pleased after a 19th-place finish. "I hope the fans enjoyed that because I sure did," Bowyer said. This is a new era in NASCAR, a time when NASCAR is committed to doing the right thing. France made the right decision with his stance on the Confederate flag, and collecting driver input is a very strong step in the right direction. — AP