

# BARCELONA BEGIN TITLE DEFENCE AGAINST ROMA



SPAIN: Barcelona's Lionel Messi (right) celebrates with team mates after scoring in this file photo. —AP

**ROME:** AS Roma supporters may be looking ahead to Barcelona's Champions League visit with some trepidation and coach Rudi Garcia certainly does not seem to be bursting with optimism.

Roma have finished second in Serie A for the last two seasons but still there is still a clear gap between themselves and Europe's top clubs, despite the addition of Edin Dzeko and Mohamed Salah.

Barcelona's visit to the Stadio Olimpico today, which kicks off their Champions League title defence, comes just under a year after Roma lost 7-1 at home to Bayern Munich in the same competition. The Bavarians sliced through the Roma defence almost at will as they scored five goals in a bewildering half hour spell in the first half.

Roma went on to finish third in the group after taking one point in two games off Manchester City while domestically they have come up short in matches against Juventus, with three defeats in their last four league meetings.

With that in mind, Garcia has already made it clear that he would be happy to finish second in a group that also includes Champions League regulars Bayer Leverkusen and Belarus champions BATE Borisov. "The target in the Champions League is to get past the group stage and to the round of 16," Garcia said in an interview last week with Radio Monte Carlo. "Behind Barcelona, it is an open group."

There was just a hint of optimism when he said: "Everybody is convinced that they will get 18 points, so that implies getting six off us, but sometimes miracles happen in football."

"We've got nothing to lose and we've got to do all we can to upset the odds." The match takes Barcelona coach Luis Enrique back to the club where he spent an unimpressive season in 2011/12, when Roma were clearly in transition.

The two sides last met 13 years ago, again in the Champions League second group stage, when they drew 1-1 in Barcelona and Roma won the return 3-0 with Luis Enrique in the Barcelona side.

Incredibly, there is one playing survivor from those games - Roma playmaker Francesco Totti who will 39 at the end of the month.

"I want to win at least one title with my captain, Francesco Totti," said Garcia. "I don't know if Totti or the Pope are more important in Rome, but I can certainly say that for Francesco, the Roma shirt is like a second stint. "He's an extraordinary player, on and off the field, and we are just pacing him in training, but he never asks for any special favors." —Reuters



Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho

## CHELSEA'S CHANCE TO PULL OUT OF SLUMP

**LONDON:** Out-of-sorts Chelsea have a golden opportunity to restore battered self-confidence when they face Maccabi Tel Aviv in their opening Champions League Group G match yesterday.

The Premier League champions slumped to their fourth defeat in six games when they lost 3-1 at Everton on Saturday. Manager Jose Mourinho said he was under no pressure after the match but, according to media reports, he swore at Everton counterpart Roberto Martinez after being made to wait for his post-match news conference.

Earlier, Mourinho admitted the poor run of results were the worst of his career but added he was the man to lead Chelsea out of their hole.

The Portuguese has also fallen out with club doctor Eva Carneiro and had another public spat with old adversary Arsene Wenger after losing to his Arsenal side in the Community Shield season curtain-raiser at Wembley. Chelsea take on the Israeli double winners on Wednesday having lost their last two league matches. The Londoners will again be without injured keeper Thibaut Courtois who was outstanding when they won the Premier League last season.

Maccabi are back in the competition for

the first time since 2004-05 after coming through the qualifying rounds, thanks almost entirely to forward Eran Zahavi who has scored 12 goals in total this season. Although 2012 European champions Chelsea and Maccabi have never met, visiting coach Slavisa Jokanovic and defender Tal Ben Haim know all about the Stamford Bridge club.

Jokanovic, who was manager when Watford were promoted to the Premier League last season, had a two-year playing spell at Chelsea.

He made 53 appearances in midfield, playing in the same side as a young John Terry, while Ben Haim also had a stint at the Bridge, featuring 23 times for the Blues.

Although Chelsea are vastly more experienced than Maccabi and should win, seasoned campaigner Gal Alberman says his team are not coming to London simply to make up the numbers.

"We are fully aware of the difference in levels between us and Chelsea but we are not going there to surrender with our hands up," said Alberman.

"We will do all we can to get a good result," he told reporters after Maccabi drew 1-1 with Hapoel Kiryat Shmona on Saturday. Dynamo Kiev and Porto meet in the other Group G match today. —AFP

# BAYERN READY TO STEP ON THE GAS AGAINST OLYMPIAKOS

**PIRAEUS:** German champions Bayern Munich will be stepping on the gas against Olympiakos in their Champions League group stage opener in Piraeus today, hoping to kick off their European campaign with a performance worthy of a title contender. Bayern coach Pep Guardiola, in his third season in charge and still chasing his first European crown with the Germans, was unhappy with his team's last-gasp 2-1 win over Augsburg in the Bundesliga on Saturday, pledging for a quicker, more focused game against the Greek champions.

The Bavarians needed a 90th minute penalty from Thomas Mueller, a controversial decision that referee Knut Kircher admitted later was a mistake, to edge past their opponents and maintain a perfect start to the season.

"We cannot allow that to happen," said forward Robert Lewandowski. "It will not be an easy game in Greece and the atmosphere there is fiery. We have to play very well from

the start and not from the 46th minute as we did against Augsburg. "We need to step more on the gas," the Poland striker said, with Bayern also due to play Dinamo Zagreb and Arsenal in Group F. Bayern, who won the last of their five European Cups in 2013, will be without winners Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery.

Douglas Costa, in fine form since joining them in the close season, is again expected to start on the left, with teenager Kingsley Coman also an option after the talented Frenchman came on as a substitute for his Bayern debut against Augsburg.

Central defenders Medhi Benatia and Holger Badstuber will also miss the game through injury with Javi Martinez likely to be included in the squad after recovering from a year-long ligament injury.

The Spanish holding midfielder was an unused substitute against Augsburg. "We should learn our lessons from the Augsburg match because that should not happen," said

Bayern captain Philipp Lahm. "We need to be able to turn on the switch."

Bayern's big name absences mean little for Olympiakos, who are well aware of the monumental task ahead. "I do not think we should talk too much about the players missing because it makes no difference. There is so much quality in their squad," said Olympiakos defender Omar Elabdellaoui.

The Greek title holders, who have won their last six home fixtures in the Champions League, have also reinforced their squad, bringing in experienced former Argentina midfielder Esteban Cambiasso.

They are also on an 11-match unbeaten run in all competitions stretching back to April, which also included three wins out of three games in the Greek league this season.

"We need to focus on our work. We believe we can get something out of it because if you don't believe then you have already lost even before the game," said Elabdellaoui. —Reuters



ATHENS: Bayern's Philipp Lahm controls the ball during a training session at the Georgios Karaiskakis stadium. Bayern Munich will play against Olympiakos today in a Champions League Group F soccer match. —AP

## VALENCIA HOST ZENIT

**BARCELONA:** Andre Villas-Boas and Nuno Espirito Santo both experienced victory at the highest level under former boss Jose Mourinho. Now the Portuguese managers of Zenit St. Petersburg and Valencia will face off as their teams start their Champions League campaigns today.

Zenit's Villas-Boas was an assistant to Mourinho when the current Chelsea manager guided FC Porto to the Champions League title in 2004.

As a coach in his own right, Villas-Boas has since had success at Porto, failed at Chelsea and lived through some highs and lows in Russia.

Espirito Santo was a reserve goalkeeper for that great Porto side in 2004. He will be making his debut as a coach in the Champions League after guiding Valencia to a fourth-place finish in Spain last season and a tough playoff win over Monaco to reach the group phase.

"Andre and I are friends. We have talked a lot about football, but in this game he is my opponent," Espirito Santo said. "We know our opponents, their players and their style. They will be very competitive. They have great players. We are humble and respect them." Belgian club Gent will make its debut in the competition when it hosts Lyon in the other group match.

Valencia's fans long for the time when it reached consecutive Champions League finals before Rafa Benitez led the club to Spanish league and UEFA Cup titles more than a decade ago.

And after two years of failing to reach the Champions League, Singapore tycoon Peter Lim bought the club and charged Espirito Santo with the task of taking Valencia back to Europe's biggest stage.

Now there, the team has had a fortunate draw and should be favored to be one of the two teams to advance from the group. "We believe that once again we can be one of the important teams in Europe," Valencia forward Rodrigo Moreno said.

Villas-Boas won the Russian Premier League title less than four months ago, but already things have turned sour. He was given a six-game ban in the domestic competition earlier this month for striking a match official in apparent frustration during a 3-1 loss to newly promoted Krylya Sovetov Samara.

He has since vowed to depart at the end of this season, but there's speculation he may not last that long. Zenit's troubles in Russia mean European competition could be a welcome relief for Villas-Boas.

Zenit's first game is perhaps its toughest, away to Valencia. While Zenit has no injury worries, the club has lost all seven prior trips to Spain.

When it visits Gent, Lyon will be hoping star striker Alexandre Lacazette finally lives up to his lucrative new contract. The 24-year-old Frenchman was voted the French league's best player last season, scoring 27 league goals as Lyon finished second in the league to qualify automatically for the Champions League. But he has failed to score so far, and has even looked sluggish in recent games.

Lyon desperately needs him to find his scoring touch because Nabil Fekir, Lyon's other star forward, faces up to six months on the sidelines after rupturing his right knee ligaments. Lacazette is without a goal in his past nine games for club and country. —AP



### UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Dynamo Kyiv v Porto	21:45
beIN SPORTS 6 HD	
Bayer 04 v Bate Borisov	21:45
beIN SPORTS 7 HD	
AS Roma v Barcelona	21:45
beIN SPORTS 1 HD	
KAA Gent v Lyon	21:45
beIN SPORTS 4 HD	
Chelsea v Maccabi	21:45
beIN SPORTS	
Olympiakos v Bayern Munich	21:45
beIN SPORTS 2 HD	
Dinamo Zagreb v Arsenal	21:45
beIN SPORTS 3 HD	
Valencia v Zenit	21:45
beIN SPORTS 4	

## LEVERKUSEN BID TO BRUSH OFF POOR START AT HOME

**BERLIN:** Bayer Leverkusen are looking for a European fillip to their domestic troubles when they open their Champions League campaign at home to Belarus' BATE Borisov today.

Leverkusen have a strong record at this stage of the Champions League and with holders Barcelona also in Group E they know that starting with three points at the BayArena is crucial against the pool's minnows. Bayer have reached the last 16 stage of the competition for

the last two seasons and qualified for their third straight campaign by winning a play-off.

Despite beating Lazio over two legs to book their group stage place, Leverkusen have struggled for form at in the Bundesliga with two wins and two defeats, including Saturday's shock 1-0 loss at home to newly-promoted Darmstadt.

The defeat left them 13th in the table while BATE are top of their domestic

league. Finalists in 2002, Bayer's key new arrival is Mexican striker Javier Hernandez, snapped up from Manchester United-the side they ousted in the 2002 semi-finals-after the sale of South Korea striker Son Heung-Min to Tottenham Hotspur. The Mexico forward made his debut in the second-half of the Darmstadt defeat, but left the field disgruntled.

"I was delighted to make my debut, but not with the result," Hernandez

admitted. Leverkusen are set to be without Germany defender Roberto Hilbert after the right-back injured his knee in the Darmstadt defeat. BATE may be European minnows but their form is been strong in 2015, having lost just three times in 33 matches, while goalkeeper Sergei Chernik has kept 14 clean sheets in 18 league appearances. They are eight points clear at the top of the table after 19 matches.

BATE came through three qualifying

rounds to reach the Champions League group stages, beating Ireland's Dundalk FC, Hungary's Videoton and Serbia's Partizan Belgrade.

Aleksandr Yermakovich's side won all three home games in those ties, but are still seeking an away victory. BATE have one player well-known outside his homeland in ex-Arsenal and Barcelona forward Aleksander Hleb, 34, who is winding down his career back in his native country. —AFP