

Early exits beckon for Champions League big guns

The Champions League group stage could prove an early graveyard for European champions present and past unless results go their way Tuesday and Wednesday.

Barcelona need to win if they wish to avoid becoming the first defending champions not to qualify for the knockout stage the following season.

Premier League side Liverpool and Germany's Bayern Munich are two previous champions who could be among the early casualties.

Barcelona are working round the clock to get several important players fit and well for Tuesday's crucial clash at home to Inter Milan.

Josep Guardiola's troubled team are third in tight Group F with just five points, level with Rubin Kazan but one point behind leaders Inter.

'The only result Tuesday that can benefit us is a win,' said Barca captain Carles Puyol.

The Barca doctors are working hard to get star strikers Lionel Messi and Zlatan Ibrahimovic fit, but Guardiola does not want to rush them back into action because his mind is also on next Sunday's home game against Liga leaders Real Madrid.

In addition, Rafa Marquez, Eric Abidal and Yaya Toure have all been laid low by swine flu.

Inter need three points to secure qualification in the last two games, a booty that coach Jose Mourinho said he would not mind securing already in Spain.

Russians Rubin Kazan could ensure qualification if they defeat Dynamo Kiev and Barcelona lose to Inter.

Captain Steven Gerrard will have a pain-killing injection in his groin to play Hungarians Debrecen in a game in Budapest Tuesday that Liverpool have to win - while hoping Fiorentina fail to beat Lyon - if they are to qualify for the last 16.

'The mood in the camp is really good, although we know our position in the table isn't good enough,' Gerrard said after Saturday's 2-2 draw against Manchester City.

'But we have faith in our ability. We know we can put things right.'

In Group C, Real Madrid will finally welcome back Cristiano Ronaldo, who has now apparently overcome his badly sprained right ankle.

The Portuguese winger is likely to come off the bench in the second half in the match at home to FC Zurich Wednesday.

Real are second in the group behind group leaders AC Milan who take on Olympique Marseille. Victory in the Estadio Bernabeu will virtually guarantee Real a place in the knockout stage for the

12th consecutive year.

Bordeaux, who have already secured progress from Group A, welcome Juventus, who can secure qualification provided they at least match Bayern Munich's result at home to Maccabi Haifa on Wednesday.

Last year's champions Manchester United greet Besiktas Wednesday in Group B having already booked their place in the last 16, while German champions Wolfsburg need a point at CSKA Moscow to join them.

Arsenal need a point at home to Group H rivals Standard Liege Tuesday to make sure of qualifying for the last 16 for the 10th successive season, while AZ Alkmaar meet Olympiakos.

Sevilla, who have already qualified for the second round need a draw in Romania against Group G rivals Unirea Urziceni on Tuesday in order to finish top of the group. Glasgow Rangers entertain VfB Stuttgart in a match both teams need to win.

Group D qualifiers Porto and Chelsea meet Wednesday to contest top spot in the group, while Atletico Madrid are away to Cypriot side APOEL needing a win to at least secure third place and a berth in the Europa League.

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