

Rafa: Bring on Man United



RAFA BENITEZ told Manchester United to be afraid as his side have the Torres Factor again.

Fernando Torres hit his second double of the week to fire Liverpool into today's Europa League quarter-final draw.

And boss Benitez insists the striker is ready to terrorise United in the Prem on Sunday.

He said: "Fernando is confident and there is still some match fitness to come so he can still improve. It makes a big difference when Fernando is playing well and scoring goals.

"He's been working hard with the physios and I'm very pleased with the job they have done.

"How fit is he? I'd like to say only 50 per cent but it is clear he's close to his best.

"Steven Gerrard also played well and when they play like this, the whole team feels more confident."

Torres followed up his two goals in Monday's 4-1 league win over Portsmouth to steer the 'sinking ship' safely past French side Lille.

Gerrard hit an early penalty as Liverpool showed no signs of the unrest winger Alert Riera said was rife at Anfield.

The Spanish winger has been sent home after his comments ahead of show-down talks on Monday.

Benitez added: "The timing of the remarks was not best for the team."

Skipper Gerrard said: "Rafa is the manager and HE has the right to criticise us at the right time.

"But the reaction has been superb, we thoroughly deserved to go through. We need to take this into the United game."

Frank Rijkaard once appeared on the touchline at Stamford Bridge wearing a black suit jacket with a sponsor's name embroidered into the shoulders in large, gold lettering.

On Tuesday, the visiting manager might as well have had 'Jose For Hire' emblazoned across the back of his designer overcoat.

In the end, Jose Mourinho settled for dropping a grenade into his post-match comments. 'Who knows?' he wondered aloud to hundreds of reporters. 'In future I may coach another English team and come here again as an opponent.'

The Portuguese coach has been plotting ever since December 18, when the draw for the last 16 of the Champions League pitted his Inter Milan side against Chelsea, the club who fired him despite unprecedented success.

Winning the tie would be vital in preserving the legend constructed around the Special One and he would give it the attention it deserved.

First, on the attack: flying into London to watch Chelsea's derby at home to Fulham, he explained he had attended in order to dilute the emotion of his competitive return a couple of months later. Smart forward thinking.

Then a defensive move: a reminder this was roughly the same team he had left behind at Stamford Bridge in September 2007: same players, same system, same set-plays, same warm-up even. Ensure a share of the credit either way.

Positive again: emphasising his powers of preparation with details of how he watched the first leg seven times, frame-by-frame.

All of which would be useless without the killer touch: a tactical switch to prove those hours spent with the DVD player and a thumb poised over the pause button had been well spent.

He beat Chelsea, well and truly beat them, on their own ground.

Beneath all the gloss, Mourinho is a very good manager and, if anyone had missed his stroke of genius, he explained how he changed Inter's formation to use three strikers spread across the width of the pitch and make life uncomfortable for Chelsea full backs.

'Our full backs were blocked,' said Michael Ballack as he searched for reasons why Inter had been so dominant.

There are those in Italy who suspect he let matters drift on the domestic front while planning Chelsea's downfall. Inter have won just one of their last five Serie A games, although their lead was so impressive they remain a point clear at the top, seeking a fifth title in a



Could Man City be lured by Jose Mourinho's seduction line?

row.

More intriguing is the fact that Mourinho's 2010 has been littered familiar skirmishes with referees, the Italian FA, the media and rival coaches. He received a three-match touchline ban for a handcuffs gesture in a game against Sampdoria, thought to infer he was being victimised by officials. Two Inter players were sent off during the game and two more were later banned for a rumble in the tunnel.

It will trigger flashbacks for those at the FA who remember the regular disciplinary stories surrounding Chelsea and their players intimidating referees.

The dark side of Mourinho was in evidence on Tuesday, as he and his team put the officials under pressure with a stream of appeals, complaints and careful body language.

Inter's fans adore him — they sang his name long into the night. So do the players.

'The coach did a wonderful job by choosing the best possible tactics to beat them,' said

keeper Julio Cesar. 'We went on the pitch without fear and showed everyone how strong and united our group is.'

Club president Massimo Moratti will not let Mourinho go without a fight after removing Roberto Mancini at great expense to take the Portuguese to the San Siro.

'I hope he can continue with us for a very long time,' said Moratti after the victory at Chelsea.

The rest of Italy, however, is growing tired of his posturing and suspect that he is manoeuvring for the exit by employing his seduction techniques on the English and Spanish press through the medium of the Champions League.

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez was quick to deny any interest in luring him to the Bernabeu Stadium. This may change but the Barclays Premier League have the look of his favourite destination this summer.

The idea of reviving Liverpool as a world power appeals, but not at a time when the club is

riddled with problems and, although Manchester United is a job he covets, it is across the city at Eastlands where Mourinho could soon find himself following again in the wake of Mancini.

He does not come cheap, but that is not a problem for Manchester City owner Sheik Mansour.

If he can win Inter's first European Cup for 45 years and walk away from the club, as he did after winning the same trophy with Porto, it would play to Mourinho's sense of theatre.

On the eve of his return to Stamford Bridge, he confessed his only regret was not walking out on his own terms after winning the FA Cup in 2007, his fifth major trophy in three years at the club.

After the events of the last few days, plenty at Chelsea would have him back. As the dust settled on his triumphant return, even some of those employed by the club could be heard bemoaning the decision to let him leave.

Sometimes Mourinho is hard to resist.