

'Worst ever' Man Utd turn to Europa League as saving grace

AFP – Branded possibly the worst Manchester United team in the club's storied history by manager Ruben Amorim, the Red Devils' redemption for a shocking season rests on Europa League success.

A 3-1 home defeat to Brighton that drew Amorim's stinging criticism of the current state of affairs at Old Trafford left United marooned in 13th in the Premier League and with little hope of a return to the Champions League next season.

However, winning the Europa League in Bilbao come May is a gateway that United crave back to Europe's elite competition and would transform the miserable mood that has surrounded Amorim's early months in the job.

The English side sit seventh in the 36-team Europa League table ahead of Thursday's at home to Scottish giants Rangers.

A place in the top eight would secure direct passage to the last 16 and give Amorim some much-needed time on the training ground to embed his style of play.

"Without training it is really hard," said Amorim, who has faced a relentless schedule since taking charge in early November.

"I knew it was going to be hard to put a completely new idea in the moment, but when you lose games and don't win three games in a row it becomes really hard."

Amorim has won just five of 15 games so far but two of those have come in his two Europa League ties against Bodø/Glimt and Viktoria Plzen.

– 'Something really special' –

Rangers take the short trip south as underdogs given the huge financial disparity between the English and Scottish game.

But Philippe Clement's side have saved their best this season for the European stage, thrashing Nice 4-1 in France and holding Tottenham to a 1-1 draw at Ibrox last month.

The 2022 finalists sit just one point and one place behind United in the table with two games of the league phase to go.

"The team has worked really hard to be in a good position," said Clement.

"We know what Manchester United is. We know their level. But we're going to go there to fight and to show ourselves and to do something really special."

Tottenham boss Ange Postecoglou is desperately in need of a win when they travel to Hoffenheim to ease speculation over his future.

Spurs have lost seven of their last nine Premier League games to slip down to 15th in the table.

Postecoglou pledged to end a wait since 2008 for silverware in his second season in charge and his tenure is likely to be defined by whether he can deliver in the Europa League, FA Cup or League Cup in the coming months.

A mounting injury list has been at the heart of Tottenham's troubles and Postecoglou is determined to get through in the hope his returning stars will make the difference in the knockout stages.

Spurs are ninth in the table, outside the top-eight only on goal difference.

"I've got great motivation to get through this so when we do get our players back, we can get something significant out of our season," said the former Australia boss.

Europa League leaders Lazio host Real Sociedad in the pick of Thursday's other ties.

Meanwhile, Jose Mourinho's Fenerbahce are in need of a win when they host high-flying Lyon to avoid an early exit.

AFP