

# Ruud full of confidence

Football

AFP, London

Ruud van Nistelrooy believes Wednesday's 2-2 draw at Arsenal has tilted the title race in Manchester United's favour.

Van Nistelrooy put United ahead with a superb solo effort but United ultimately needed a Ryan Giggs equaliser to secure the point after two controversial Arsenal goals.

Despite claiming only one point from a match they could, and should have won, the Dutch striker claimed it was United who would take more from the match.

"This is a big blow for them," he told the Manchester Evening News.

"Arsenal were 2-1 up and probably thinking if we can win this one then it is in our hands. At 2-1 down it looked like it was going to be a very hard game for us.

"You could feel everybody from Arsenal was going mad and crazy about taking a lead. It was important to hit back straight away.

"We reacted to it and now the race is still open. We have to do our job now in the last four matches."

The draw left Arsenal three points adrift of United but with a game in hand and a marginally better goal difference.

Van Nistelrooy however insisted that the momentum was with United, who whittled away their rivals' eight-point

lead before moving clear at the top by walloping Newcastle 6-2 last weekend.

"Confidence matters so much," Van Nistelrooy said. "We have come back from so far away and caught Arsenal up. Now it is up to us if we can finish it. We feel good.

"We can handle disappointment. We were 1-0 down at Newcastle and 2-1 down at Highbury, but we have kept together as a team. We've kept playing and kept doing our jobs. It is great to be a part of a team with spirit like that.

"You can feel the experience coming out at moments like that when you go behind.

"In the last games we have scored a lot of goals. Four against Liverpool, six at Newcastle and two away at Arsenal. That doesn't happen a lot of times to them at Highbury.

"That scoring ability and a solid defence is a good combination and makes us a good team."

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson was upbeat about his side's performance, although he acknowledged that they had missed a chance to virtually seal the title with victory.

Arsenal's first goal came from an Ashley Cole shot that was deflected off Thierry Henry through the legs of goalkeeper Fabien Barthez and television replays suggested Henry was two yards offside when he received the ball for the second.



WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? Arsenal's Cameroon international Lauren (L) looks on as Thierry Henry is submerged by ecstatic teammates after he had scored against Manchester United at Highbury on April 16.

PHOTO: AFP

Premiership

# United get the mental edge

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United grabbed the most marginal of edges in the Premiership title race after a pulsating 2-2 draw with Arsenal here on Wednesday.

A Ryan Giggs header mid-way through the second half secured the point that keeps United three points clear at the top of the table, a minute after Thierry Henry had put Arsenal in front.

Ashley Cole had earlier cancelled out Ruud van Nistelrooy's 37th goal of the season as the home side hauled themselves back into a match which United could and should have killed off by half-time.

Arsenal finished the match with only ten men after Sol Campbell was ordered off for elbowing Ole Gunnar Solskjaer but it was the Gunners who went closest to snatching victory in the final stages, Henry denied by the boot of Fabien Barthez in stoppage time.

The outcome leaves the title race delicately balanced, although United may have a slight edge with only four games to play against Arsenal's four.

"Arsenal have scored more goals than us but we have four tough games and Arsenal have five games left and two or three are difficult games. It's open," said United boss Alex Ferguson.

Arsene Wenger concurred: "I cannot say that anybody is in the driving seat. "We have a big game at Middlesbrough on Saturday and we go from game to

game because it can all change so quickly. The only way to win it is to give yourself all for each game."

The Arsenal manager admitted United had been on top in the second half but claimed his side would have won had they been able to hold their lead for a couple of minutes. "The big regret is that we dropped our concentration straight after scoring," he said. "I think if we had kept the lead for even two or three minutes we would have won easily."

Wenger was also left fuming over Campbell's sending-off, which is set to earn the England centre-back a four-match ban which will rule him out of three of the remaining league matches and the FA Cup final against Southampton.

"Sol's destroyed because he cannot understand it. Everybody knows he did not touch him on purpose. He had no intention of touching Solskjaer."

Arsenal were also left sweating over the availability of their captain Patrick Vieira, who lasted only 34 minutes of Wednesday's clash.

Arsenal retain a game in hand and a fractionally better goal difference but as the players trooped off at the end it was the United contingent who looked happiest with their night's work.

United had knocked ten goals past Liverpool and Newcastle in their two previous league matches but their clinical edge appeared to have gone as first Paul Scholes and then Van Nistelrooy spurned early chances to put them ahead.

Solskjaer, selected ahead of a fit-

again David Beckham, created the first with a whipped cross straight from the England captain's manual. Scholes' run into the gap between Arsenal's centrebacks was impeccable, his skewed header from ten yards out less so.

Scholes quickly made amends for that miss with a deft flick for van Nistelrooy, who managed to lift the ball over Taylor but also cleared the Arsenal bar.

The relief felt by the Arsenal faithful proved short-lived. Three minutes after squandering that gilt-edged opportunity, the Dutchman generated a goal from far less promising beginnings.

After exchanging passes with Ryan Giggs wide on the left, van Nistelrooy skipped round Sol Campbell and accelerated into the box, this time making no mistake in lifting the ball over the advancing Taylor.

With Vieira clearly struggling with the knee injury that had made him a doubtful start, Arsenal were second best by a comfortable margin.

By the time their captain limped off, the Gunners had not managed to create a single clear chance, their openings running up against Roy Keane, protecting the back four the way he did in his prime, or Rio Ferdinand, giving his most commanding performance for some time in a United shirt.

The first hint of an Arsenal revival came in the closing seconds of the first half when Robert Pires saw his shot cannon into his team-mate Edu and spin over the bar with the United defence, for the first time, in disarray. Five minutes after the restart Arsenal

were level thanks to the attacking endeavour of England fullback Ashley Cole.

At the end of a move he had started, Cole wriggled inside Brown in the box before unleashing a right foot shot that was deflected past Barthez off Henry's boot.

Suddenly Arsenal were on top, ping-ponging the ball around with a rediscovered zest that made it no surprise when Gilberto's diagonal pass picked out Henry in a yard of space on the edge of the box.

The French striker's first touch was perfect and his ruthless side-footed finish had all the makings of a killer blow.

Yet within a minute United were level, thanks to Solskjaer's second sublime cross of the evening.

Giggs was the recipient and the winger's downward header at the far post left Taylor with no chance.

That set the stage for a grandstand finish but with the exception of Henry's effort right at the death, neither team went close to claiming all three points.

## TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Wednesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Man Utd	34	21	8	5	63	31	71
Arsenal	33	20	8	5	69	36	68
Newcastle	33	19	4	10	57	43	61
Chelsea	33	17	9	7	60	32	60
Everton	33	16	8	9	43	38	56
Liverpool	33	15	10	8	49	35	55

# AFC bow to SARS!

Football

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said Thursday it has postponed five more Athens 2004 Olympic second round qualifying matches due to the severity of the SARS outbreak in the region.

The AFC has already postponed three first round matches in the Asian zone -- Chinese Taipei-Singapore, Hong Kong-Sri Lanka and Iraq-Vietnam -- because of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which has killed more than 160 people and infected 3,500 worldwide.

Among the five new affected matches, played on a home-and-away

basis, are South Korea versus the winner of the Hong Kong-Sri Lanka game scheduled on May 3 and June 6, the AFC said in a statement.

The others are Saudi Arabia versus winner of Chinese Taipei-Singapore match on May 3 and June 7, North Korea versus winner of Iraq-Vietnam game, Thailand versus winner of the United Arab Emirates-Tajikistan clash and China versus winner of the Syria-Pakistan match.

"In view of the severity of the SARS outbreak, we have decided to postpone these five matches as the players', officials' and fans' health are of utmost importance to us," said AFC general secretary Peter Velappan.

FIFA and the AFC will closely monitor developments before fixing new dates, he said.

# Bookies back MU

AFP, London

Both managers insist the Premiership title race is still wide open but Britain's bookmakers have swung behind Manchester United in their tussle with Arsenal.

A 2-2 draw between the two teams at Highbury on Wednesday leaves United three points clear with four games to play but Arsenal have a game in hand.

Prior to Wednesday's match, Arsenal were slight favourites to retain their title.

But the outcome of the match prompted the biggest bookmakers to offer both sides at 5/6 while smaller players Paddy Power and Skybet made United slight favourites at 8/11 against evens for Arsenal.

# Milan deny Rivaldo rift

Football

INTERNET, Milan

AC Milan dismissed the reports that the club and manager Carlo Ancelotti have fallen out with World Cup winning midfielder Rivaldo, and that his absence for Tuesday night's Copa Italia match against Perugia was due to injury and not him refusing to play.

Milan vice president Adriano Galliani spoke to the Italian press on Wednesday, denouncing reports that Rivaldo did not play due to problems between player and manager. Rivaldo has not started much as of late in Milan's star-studded lineup, and only played ten minutes in the Milan derby last Saturday against Inter.

"Rivaldo didn't feature against Perugia because he has a minor injury,"

said Galliani. "Journalists simply write certain things to fill the papers. There are no problems with him." The Rivaldo injury has been reported by the club as a small knee problem.

The Brazilian turns 31 on Saturday; he joined Milan this past summer after Barcelona released him due to salary concerns. Rivaldo helped Brazil win their fifth World Cup in the same summer, the second for Brazil's current number ten personally.

But he has struggled at times with Serie A play; in 18 appearances, he has scored just five goals, and has missed two penalties. He has also struggled with Ancelotti's shift to a 4-4-2 formation, in which he has not been able to adapt as either an out-and-out striker or midfielder.

Rivaldo had a strong start to the season, but over the past few months has played less to his level of talent.

# Azerbaijan on Trap's mind

Football

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni on Thursday played down the possible implications for his team should FIFA decide to ban Azerbaijan from world football.

On Tuesday world football's governing body announced the suspension of the Azerbaijan football federation (AFFA) following repeated breaches of conduct.

Italy's chances of qualifying for the 2004 European championships would improve if group nine opponents Azerbaijan were expelled from the competition and had their results annulled.

If FIFA were to do so, leaders Wales would be the biggest losers as they have played Azerbaijan home and away and won both matches.

That would reduce Wales' lead over

Italy from five to two points. But Trapattoni, whose job could be on the line if the Azzurri fail to qualify for Portugal next year, was refusing to be drawn on a situation he has no control over.

"It's a problem for the federations," Trapattoni said.

"I am very relaxed. It is a political question which I think can be resolved without too much trouble.

"We must only concern ourselves with what happens on the field and make sure we do not make more mistakes in our remaining matches."

Football in the former Soviet Republic has been in chaos since they signed an agreement with FIFA last September, as a result of a bitter fight for control of the sport between AFFA, and the country's top clubs backed by the government.

The domestic championship was abandoned as a result and the top clubs have prevented their players from playing with the national team.

# Vieira fears the worst

Football

INTERNET, London

Patrick Vieira fears his season could be over, dealing a massive blow to Arsenal's title bid.

The inspirational midfielder was forced off in the first half of the 2-2 draw with Manchester United at Highbury on Wednesday evening after aggravating a knee injury.

He is due to have an X-ray on Thursday and is expected to get the results later on in the day.

But the 26-year-old has already ruled himself out the match with Middlesbrough on Saturday and could miss the remaining four matches of the

title run-in.

Vieira said: "I hurt the knee again when I landed heavily after a challenge. "What I need is a rest to cure the problem. I will definitely not be able to play on Saturday and I am not optimistic for the rest of the season."

"I can just hope for the best." Vieira has been the driving force behind the Gunners' bid to land an historic double Double.

His absence would be a massive setback for Arsenal, who are currently three points behind Manchester United in the league but with a game in hand.

Arsene Wenger's men face Southampton in the FA Cup final on 17 May and Vieira could miss that game too.

# Carlos on sticky soil

Football

INTERNET, Madrid

When Real Madrid star Roberto Carlos lost his appeal against the provisional ban imposed on him for allegedly assaulting referee Alon Yefet in Brazil's 2-1 friendly defeat to Portugal last month it meant that he will be out of all international matches, but not domestic games.

Carlos appealed against the decision, but found out on Tuesday that he has failed. The chairman of FIFA's appeals committee, Rafael Salgado Sandoval, has ruled that the ban must

A FIFA statement said: "Having viewed the video recording of the match and having read the referee's report, the chairman of the FIFA Appeal Committee of the opinion that there is sufficient evidence to support the provisional suspension, and that the regulations have been applied correctly. The player's appeal has therefore been rejected."

He was sent off in the 82nd minute of the match at the Das Antas Stadium. He had been incensed by the Israeli referee's decision to award a free-kick to Portugal, and appeared to barge into Mr Yefet, who showed him a straight red card for the offence. To add insult to injury, the free kick was converted by

stirred up before Real Madrid's Champions League clash with Manchester United when Sir Alex Ferguson complained that Carlos was being given favourable treatment because of Madrid's influence: "I would think they will be trembling in their shoes because if UEFA and FIFA do their job properly Roberto Carlos has to be banned."

"Look at the two Portuguese players - Joao Pinto and Abel Xavier. Pinto got four months for punching a referee in the stomach while Xavier was banned for nine months for allegedly attacking a linesman. Those bans were made immediately, immediately!"

"That just shows you the power of Real Madrid. UEFA and FIFA can't make a decision until they have seen what Perez says in Madrid first," said Ferguson. "That is Real Madrid's power. I am sure Roberto Carlos will play on Tuesday because it is Real Madrid."

If it were any other club he would be banned. "So it turned out, and Carlos will still be able to play in the return leg, but if they were to progress, he could miss out. FIFA may well punish him more firmly when their committee meets, and give him a worldwide ban as they had done with the Portuguese players."

That would rule him out of the end of Madrid's season, missing the crucial run-in to the La Liga campaign and the Champions League from the start of the semi-finals stage. However, Carlos is hopeful that he will not be punished so severely: "I have seen the incident on the television and do not understand why it is causing such a problem," he said.

"I never tried to hit the official and there is no need to apologise. I have no regrets. Anyway, my disciplinary record in the game has always been good. I play and fight for every ball, even if it is a friendly match. I am very sad this led to my first red card for Brazil, but what I did does not deserve so much attention. I'm sure it will not mean a long ban for me. When you look at the evidence, there is no reason for this."



ROBERTO CARLOS

remain until the case is dealt with by the body's disciplinary committee on May 9.

debutant Deco to give Portugal the winning goal.

The issue of his suspension was

# Les Bleus blues?

Football

INTERNET, Paris

There's no doubt who was the star of Real Madrid's performance against Manchester United this week - Zinedine Zidane.

He's just one of many in the current French team who plays outside his country - like Thierry Henry of Arsenal, and David Trezeguet of Juventus.

In fact not one of Les Bleus who took the field against Israel last week play in France.

But the exodus of French talent to other European leagues has led to a paucity of superstars in Le Championnat - and some fans aren't happy.

"We find football in England, Spain and Italy more interesting, because that's where all of our top players are" said one disgruntled fan, upset at the way the domestic game has suffered in the last few years.

But the migration of foreigners is nothing new. Eric Cantona began his career near Marseille. His talent was nurtured at Auxerre, a breeding ground for French talent, before making his name at Manchester United in England.

Yet French innovation has given the game so much. Jules Rimet and Henri Delauney were the men behind the

World Cup and the European Championship. Robert Guerin was co-founder of Fifa, and France was also heavily involved in the setting up of Uefa.

The French also brought us the European Cup and the European Footballer of the Year award, and in 1922 Paris was the setting for the first unofficial women's international. Great administrators and great players then, but three vital ingredients are seriously lacking. City rivalry, continuity - and unbridled passion.

Take a look at any of the world's leading domestic leagues, and the games which stand out are, of course, the derbies. Celtic versus Rangers, River Plate versus Boca Juniors, Galatasaray versus Fenerbache. From Buenos Aires to Belgrade, Moscow to Manchester, derby day stirs sporting passion and generates interest throughout the country. But not in France.

Here it's a case of one city, one club. Ajaccio and Bastia are probably the closest the French first division comes to a derby - both clubs are based on the island of Corsica.

For Zinedine Zidane and Patrick Vieira, now at Real Madrid and Arsenal respectively, the road to glory began at Cannes, a former first division club now playing in the third division.

Other notable clubs to fall from grace are St Etienne, winners of the most

French league titles but now struggling at the foot of the second division. Then there's Stade de Rennes, Caen and Racing Club Paris, which brings me to my next puzzle - continuity.

Almost every country has a club the fans love to loathe - usually the most popular and successful. This is usually born out of jealousy, the success and standing of the club serving as a role model for all but also acting as a guiding light. In France though this is not always the case.

In the last ten years there have been eight different league champions, and more often than not the champions lose their star players overseas and are forced to rebuild.

In a recent survey by magazine L'Equipe, 52 percent of people said they had little or no interest in the game - mostly because of the many top players moving abroad.

Sadly French fans are being denied the chance to see the talent of tomorrow, with home-grown players being lured away earlier and earlier - Jeremie Aladiere joined Arsenal four weeks short of his seventeenth birthday.

The danger is that with more and more fans taking interest in other European leagues because of the massive French influence there, it's difficult to see how interest in the French league can be revived.



PHOTO: AFP

AS Roma striker Vincenzo Montella (L) beats Lazio goalkeeper Luca Marchegiani to score during their Italian Cup semifinal at Rome's Olympic stadium on April 16.