



MUST BE ON A CAMERA: Manchester United players engage in unique celebration after John O'Shea (4th from R) scored against Everton during their Premiership match at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

Top dogs keep rolling

REUTERS, London

Leaders Manchester United stayed three points clear in the Premier League by beating Everton 3-0 while Michael Ballack steered champions Chelsea to a 1-0 win at Bolton Wanderers on Wednesday.

Portugal winger Cristiano Ronaldo gave United a first-half lead before goals from defender Patrice Evra and midfielder John O'Shea after the break put the game beyond Everton's reach at Old Trafford.

Germany midfielder Ballack headed Chelsea's winner in first-half stoppage time at the Reebok stadium where they won the 2005 League Cup.

Fulham caused the upset of the night with a 2-1 home victory over an Arsenal side who finished with 10

men, Liverpool were held 0-0 by Portsmouth at Anfield and Manchester City were 3-1 winners at Aston Villa.

The title race now appears to be a two-horse race.

United, who drew 1-1 at home to Chelsea on Sunday, have 38 points from 15 games while Jose Mourinho's side are second on 35. Rank outsiders Portsmouth and Bolton follow on 24.

United, who last won the league in 2003, looked comfortable in a game where the captaincies of the two sides were kept in the Neville family.

Gary was skipper of United and brother Phil wore the armband for Everton against his old club.

Manager Alex Ferguson was well-satisfied with United's return to winning ways, telling Sky Sports: "After dropping two points on Sunday this was an important game for us. It's a good result."

It also proved to be valuable

insurance as Chelsea made it four points from six in their extended stay in the north west.

Bolton put up a fight but were caught out by a Frank Lampard corner, with Ballack rising at the near post to score with a glancing header.

"To come to Manchester and Bolton and go home with the same distance (from United) is very positive for us," said Mourinho.

"We're not top of the league, as we want to be all the time, but they were two very difficult matches. If you do it wrongly you could leave Old Trafford six points behind and the Reebok nine.

"I don't think we will take a lot of time to be top of the league."

Pleased with Chelsea's spirit, Mourinho said: "You have to fight for every ball when they dominate the game as they did in the second half and I think we fought like heroes."

Bolton manager Sam Allardyce said: "Our finishing has let us

down...on the second half performance, we are disappointed we haven't nicked a point off Chelsea."

Villa are fifth on 23 points after their first home defeat of the season, at the expense of City's first away win, while Arsenal are sixth with a game in hand on 22 points.

Four days after losing 3-1 at Bolton, Arsenal's title ambitions look over after Fulham accelerated into a 2-0 lead inside 20 minutes through American forward Brian McBride and Canadian Tomasz Radzinski.

Though Arsenal pulled a goal back with a stunning free kick from Robin van Persie, their chances of a comeback suffered a bodyblow when Swiss defender Philippe Senderos was re-dcarded in the 66th minute.

Liverpool missed a chance to move up the table and are seventh, level on points with Arsenal.

Real turn to rugby

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid's president, Ramon Calderon, has continued his charm offensive at the Bernabeu by unveiling plans to take the club brand into rugby as part of an expansion of sporting activities. The move is being seen as the latest in a series of proposals aimed at rejuvenating the club's profile and keeping pace with their main rivals in Spain, Barcelona.

Real are in negotiations about sponsorship with a view to an eventual takeover of CRC Madrid Noroeste, who are currently in fourth place in Division de Honor - the league in which FC Barcelona Rugby also compete. Initially CRC will be sponsored by realmadrid.com and wear the website's logo on their shirts, but it is believed that within two years the first team will be part of Real Madrid's sporting network. No deal has been signed but the two parties are in advanced negotiations.

Calderon also announced that the nine-times European champions are to acquire a private jet for team travel. "In December we will have our own aeroplane with 140 seats," he said. "The Real Madrid emblem will be on the tail. They will call it the Rolls-Royce of the sky and it will not cost us anything because it is sponsored."

Last month Calderon said Real would be sponsoring a formula one racing car in next year's Spanish grand prix in Barcelona. One vehicle, believed to be the McLaren of the world champion, Fernando Alonso, is expected to carry the Real Madrid logo.

Big guns ride easy

REUTERS, London

Holders Sevilla breezed into the last 32 of the UEFA Cup on Wednesday with a crushing 4-0 win at Switzerland's Grasshoppers.

Brazilian Daniel Alves scored twice to seal Sevilla's passage from Group C. They were joined in the knockout stage by AZ Alkmaar, Dinamo Bucharest and Maccabi Haifa. The British quartet of Tottenham Hotspur, Blackburn Rovers, Newcastle United and Rangers, along with Italy's Parma, had already qualified. Alves drilled Sevilla into a 12th-minute lead and added a second eight minutes after halftime with a scorching shot from distance. Uruguayan Ernesto Chevantone made it 3-0 and Blanco Kepa completed the rout. Second-half substitute Julian Jenner scored a last-minute equaliser to earn the point AZ Alkmaar needed to go through alongside Sevilla.

Jenner chipped Slovan Liberec goalkeeper Marek Cech to seal a 2-2

draw, just four minutes after Petr Papousek had appeared to have sent the Czech side into the last 32.

An entertaining game Tomas Zapotocny headed Liberec into a 26th-minute lead from a corner. The Dutch side lost keeper Khalid Sinouh to injury eight minutes before halftime but Icelandic defender Greter Steinsson headed AZ level.

Jenner's goal stretched Alkmaar's unbeaten home streak in European competition to 27 matches since their debut in 1977.

Romanian league leaders Dinamo sealed their progress from Group B, striker Claudiu Niculescu scoring twice to cancel out Sergej Barabarez's opener to secure a 2-1 win at home to Bayer Leverkusen.

In the group's other tie Besiktas overcame Club Brugge 2-1 to move on to three points and the Turkish side will qualify if they avoid defeat at Leverkusen in their final game.

A 1-1 draw at Livorno was enough for Maccabi Haifa to qualify from Group A. Roberto Colautti snatched a stoppage-time equaliser for the Israeli, who had trailed to Cristiano Lucarelli's first-half goal.

Auxerre's 4-1 rout of Partizan Belgrade, with goals from Benoit Cheyrou, Daniel Niculae, Gauthier

Akale and Luigi Pieroni after they had fallen behind, put the French side in pole position to take the final qualifying spot in the group. Auxerre need just a point at home to Livorno next month to progress.

Parma, already through from Group D, scored twice in the last 13 minutes to win 2-1 at Racing Lens, one of three teams now on four points.

Daniel Cousin burst into penalty area to fire Lens ahead after 19 minutes but Parma stunned the hosts when Zlatko Dedic beat keeper Charles Itandje at his near post and then in stoppage time Daniele Paponi ended a jinking run with a fine finish.

Osasuna's 3-1 victory at home to Denmark's Odense, with Patxi Punal netting twice for the Spaniards and once for the visitors, leaves the last two places in Group D still up for grabs.

The top three in each of the eight groups of five teams progress to the last 32 where they are joined by the eight third-placed sides from the Champions League group stage.



Sevilla's Brazilian striker Daniel Alves (R) shoots past a Grasshopper defender to score during their UEFA Cup match in Zurich on Tuesday.

Rooney found not guilty

AFP, London

England striker Wayne Rooney will not be charged following allegations he assaulted a photographer outside a Manchester nightclub.

Rooney, 21, was interviewed by police after a complaint was made that a man had been attacked near the Panacea club in Manchester on 15 October.

But the Manchester United star, who was not arrested, will not face any further investigation because the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decided there was not enough evidence to pursue the case.

A CPS spokesman told the BBC: "The complainant has been informed about the decision."

Crespo slams Chelsea

INTERNET, undated

Inter striker Hernan Crespo has blasted former club Chelsea, insisting that he doesn't understand why any striker would move there.

The Argentine appeared with the Premiership outfit for two seasons, but struggled to adapt to life at Stamford Bridge despite winning the League last term.

The same thing is happening to Andriy Shevchenko after his 30-million-pound move from Milan in the summer, fuelling speculation the Ukrainian could return to the peninsula.

"I had a very unhappy experience at Chelsea. The adventure at first was very exciting but then things changed," Crespo told The Mirror.

"Now it is hard to see why a striker who is happy in Italy would go there. The Premiership is a good League, but my family are much happier in Italy and we would prefer to stay here now.

The 31-year-old is now thriving at Inter and is the club's top scorer in Serie A so far this season with five goals, while the Nerazzurri are four points clear of Roma at the top of the table.

Hiddink hints at Socceros return

INTERNET, undated

Guus Hiddink has hinted that he may yet return to coach Australia into the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Hiddink took control of Australia in July 2005 and led them to the second round in Germany falling to a late penalty from eventual champions Italy, before leaving and taking over the Russian national team.

But speaking to Australian paper The Daily Telegraph, the former Dutch coach has hinted that he would consider a return once his contract with Russia expires after Euro 2008.

"I have ruled nothing out at this stage," Hiddink said.

"I have great thoughts of my time with the Socceros and great respect for the team. Anything is possible because I have a plan to coach at the World Cup in 2010 and, of course, my contract with Russia is until the middle of 2008.

"After that, who knows what will happen. Australia have continued to improve since I have left and that's good to see. I still follow them very closely."

Hiddink also stressed that his focus for the time being was on Russia and steering them towards a Euro 2008 place.

Russia are currently in second in Group E two points behind Croatia and one point ahead of England.

"My job now is with Russia," Hiddink added.

"It is going quite well and they are my priority now. The team is responding well and I'm enjoying it."

Roque ready to leave Bayern

INTERNET, undated

Paraguay international Roque Santa Cruz is disappointed by the lack of action he has seen since joining Bayern Munich and has revealed he could be set for a quick transfer away from the Bundesliga giants.

"The actual situation is not easy," Santa Cruz told German magazine Kicker.

"I want to play as soon as possible. The coach explained to me his state of mind. I play better than the others but I haven't scored and without a goal you cannot be on the starting XI.

"I give 100 percent to the club. If the club isn't satisfied, we are not linked for life. I have to feel backed. If it is not the case, it will be the moment for me to leave."

Oliveira to keep grafting

INTERNET, undated

Milan striker Ricardo Oliveira has expressed his relief after netting a rare goal in the Rossoneri's Coppa Italia win over Brescia on Tuesday.

The Brazilian's strike, coupled with a Davide Zoboli own goal, sent Milan through to the quarter finals of the competition 6-3 on aggregate, and gave his own, and the team's, confidence a much needed boost.

"Winning is fundamental, for the team and for me," Oliveira said. "For a striker, a goal is important. I didn't score for 844 minutes, too much for a striker, and it never came to me."

"I'm satisfied because I scored and I played well, but I must continue working and then I'm sure good times will come."

"Milan made a big investment in me and I want to show I'm able to repay this faith," he continued. "I know to be able to do this."

"I'm here to do important things and I know I can do that, otherwise such an important side as Milan would have never signed me."

Qatari teenager wins Asian crown

Football
AFP, Abu Dhabi

Qatari teenager Khalfan Ibrahim was Wednesday named Asian player of the year while Australia was voted Asian team of the year at a glittering awards ceremony in Abu Dhabi.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter received a special "Diamond of Asia" award for his services to Asian football, and praised the region for its contribution to the game.

"I'm touched," said Blatter. "Our game is about entertainment and passion. It has also become a very big business and you in Asia are responsible for the big business as you have two thirds of the world's population."

"The future is Asia. Diamonds are forever and my friendship for you in Asia is forever."

Ibrahim, who plays for Al Saad, beat off the challenge of Saudi Arabia's Mohamed Al Shihoub and Kuwait's Badr Al Mutawa.

Asia's top European-based stars were overlooked for the award, failing to meet new criteria that is based on playing in Asian Football Confederation (AFC) competitions and attending the gala ceremony.

It meant Manchester United's Park Ji-Sung and Celtic playmaker Shunsuke Nakamura missed out.

"I never thought I would win it. It is a triumph for teammates and club," said Ibrahim, the first Qatari

ever to win the award.

"I would like to thank my parents, especially my father (former Qatari international Ibrahim Khalfan) for their support and guidance."

Ibrahim earned his spurs at the FIFA Under-17 World Championships in Peru last year after scoring a memorable goal against Holland.

The 18-year-old midfielder went on to be a key cog in helping Qatar win five out of their six Asian Cup qualifiers.

Australia won best team in their inaugural year as an AFC nation after abandoning Oceania to join Asia in January.

The Socceros, led by Harry Kewell and Mark Viduka, upstaged the rest of Asia by making the knock-outs of the World Cup in Germany.

They also successfully negotiated the Asian Cup qualifying rounds, becoming the first country to make the finals co-hosted by Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam in July next year.

The AFC tweaked its rules this year, with the player of the year now chosen on the basis of a weighted ranking system which takes into account performances at AFC, and key UEFA and FIFA, tournaments.

This does not include domestic leagues, but instead tournaments like Asian Cup qualifiers, AFC Presidents Cup as well as FIFA events like the World Cup.

The players were previously

chosen by national coaches from the AFC's 45 federations, and AFC executive committee members.

The rules also insist that to win the player must attend the ceremony.

In other awards at the Emirates Palace hotel, China's Ma Xiaoxu clinched both the women's player of the year award and youth player of the year -- the first time a female had won that trophy.

"I know I had a good chance of winning the women's award but never in my wildest dreams thought I would get the youth award as well," said Ma, who will play in the Asian Games on Thursday.

AWARD WINNERS

Player of the year: Khalfan Ibrahim (Qatar)
Team of the year: Australia
Women's team of the year: North Korea Under-20
Women player of the year: Ma Xiaoxu (China)
Diamond of Asia special award: Sepp Blatter
Youth player of the year: Ma Xiaoxu (North Korea under-20)
Coach of the year: Choe Kwang-sok (North Korea under-20)
Futsal player of the year: Kenichiro Kogure (Japan)
Referee of the year: Shamsul Maidin (Singapore)
Fairplay of the year: South Korea Association of the year: North Korea
Club of the year: Jeonbuk Motors (South Korea)

COPPA ITALIA Inter, Roma join Milan

Football
REUTERS, Milan

Last year's finalists AS Roma and Inter Milan both went through to the quarterfinals of the Italian Cup after completing home wins on Wednesday.

Roma enjoyed a 2-0 (4-1 aggregate) victory over Serie B side Triestina while holders Inter defeated Messina 4-0 (5-0 aggregate) to take their place in the last eight.

Roma, 2-1 up from the first leg in Trieste, took the lead at the Olympic Stadium when 20-year-old striker

Valerio Virga drove home a precise shot from the edge of the area in the 22nd minute.

Five minutes later Vincenzo Montella headed in Roma's second to kill off any hopes the visitors had of pulling off a shock.

Inter, defending a 1-0 advantage from the first leg, had no trouble against Sicilians Messina.

Argentine Nicolas Burdisso headed Roberto Mancini's side in front in the 26th minute, rising well to meet a Luis Figuero corner.

After Arturo Di Napoli had an effort for Messina disallowed, Mariano Gonzales made it 2-0 for Inter with a straightforward header at the back post after good work

from fellow Argentine Santiago Solari.

Inter went 3-0 up after the break when Esteban Cambiasso fed Burdisso whose header was cleared off the line only for Marco Andreolli to bundle the ball over the line.

Defender Burdisso added his second and Inter's fourth with an almost identical goal to his opener -- soaring above the Messina defence to head in Figuero's corner.

On Tuesday, AC Milan secured their place in the last eight with a 2-1 win at Serie B club Brescia earning them a 6-3 aggregate victory.



Inter Milan defender Nicolas Burdisso (back to camera) is congratulated by teammates Santiago Solari (R) Adriano after he scored one of his three goals against Messina during their Italian Cup match at the San Siro on Tuesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP
P Z R K D R F F M J P F W
Z Y E D X F R V L K P W L R K . P
K X O O Y K L O L Y O F L M Y X F W M R F F
V J L D J P K V Y V O E Y M L K K L K .
Yesterday's Cryptquip: SINCE SOMEONE STOLE MY EBONY KNAPSACK, I'M REALLY TRYING TO GET MY BLACK BACKPACK BACK.
Today's Cryptquip Clue: O equals P

The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.