

Brazil no longer FIFA's best

AFP, Paris

World and European champions France have dethroned Brazil atop the FIFA world ranking, a position held by the South Americans since the 1994 World Cup finals.

The French are only the fourth side to top the world ranking since its inception in 1993, following Germany, Italy and Brazil. Roger Lemerre's side have a narrow two-point lead, 796-794, over Brazil with Argentina third on 763.

Inspired by midfield maestro Zinedine Zidane, the French have been slowly closing the gap on Brazil, starting with their 3-0 win over them in the final of the 1998 World Cup in Paris.

They then went on to lift the European crown in Rotterdam last summer defeating Italy in the final with a golden goal in extra time and since then they have been in sparkling form in friendly matches in the build up to the defence of their world title in Japan and South Korea next year.

At the same time, Brazil have been in a slump, struggling in their South American zone World Cup qualifiers and sacking their manager Wanderley Luxemburgo.

FIFA Top 10

1. France	796 pts
2. Brazil	794 pts
3. Argentina	763 pts
4. Italy	748 pts
5. Portugal	732 pts
6. Spain	724 pts
7. Czech Republic	722 pts
8. Netherlands	715 pts
9. Germany	711 pts
10. Paraguay	703 pts
11. Yougoslavia	689 pts
12. Romania	683 pts
13. Mexico	680 pts
14. England	673 pts
15. United States	666 pts
16. Colombia	665 pts
17. Norway	663 pts
18. Russia	652 pts
19. Croatia	650 pts
20. Denmark	645 pts

Ronaldinho close to PSG transfer

AFP, Paris

Brazilian striker Ronaldinho could finally complete his transfer to Paris St Germain if a compensation settlement with his former club is reached on Friday.

Ronaldinho, 21, who did some training with PSG last week is on a five-year deal. But the move cannot be completed until a Brazilian court rules on the amount of compensation PSG have to

pay his old club Gremio of Porto Alegre.

"I'll know much more on May 18 when the court issues its ruling," Ronaldinho said at the PSG training camp. "But my mind has been made up for a long time. I want to play with Paris next season."

The Brazilian club originally asked for compensation of 280 million French Francs (dollars 38.34 million) and brushed aside PSG's offer of 15 million French francs (dollars 2.0 million), based on FIFA criteria.

Ronaldinho, who is returning to Brazil for a month, said: "I am looking for a house to rent around here. I feel comfortable with my team mates and I'm keen to resume playing and score goals.

"I hope I will be allowed to play when I come back in June", he added. "This is where I want to be."

Morientes surgery successful

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Fernando Morientes has undergone a successful operation on a persistent groin injury, the club said on Tuesday.

Club doctors described Monday's operation as "a complete success".

Morientes is expected to be out of action for between two and three months, which means he will miss the world club championship at the end of July.

"Our aim is making sure that he is ready to take part in pre-season training alongside the rest of his team mates," said Alfonso del Corral, chief of the club's medical staff.

Morientes had decided two weeks ago against an operation in a bid to help his team's run-in to the end of the season but broke down after just 29 minutes of Sunday's 2-2 draw against Espanyol.

With Real out of the Champions League and enjoying a six-point lead in the Spanish Liga with four matches to play, Morientes' presence in the team was no longer thought to be vital.

"Perhaps we should have operated a little earlier but given the demands of the competition we tried to avoid it," Del Corral.

"We used up all the options available to us and the only course open to us was surgery."

Premiership

Gunners confirm second place

Football

AFP, London

Beaten Cup-finalists Arsenal drew 0-0 at Newcastle on Tuesday gaining the point they needed to assure second spot in the Premiership - for the third year running - and automatic entry into the first round proper of the Champions League.

The third spot - which obliges that team to play in the qualifying round - will be fought out between Arsenal's FA Cup conquerors Liverpool, Champions League semi-finalists Leeds United and newboys Ipswich Town on the last day of the season on Saturday.

Under pressure Newcastle boss Bobby Robson, who had labelled himself a saviour on Monday for rescuing the team from certain relegation last season, had called for his players to give the fans something to cheer about after a dire season but this dull draw will hardly have fans singing on the way home.

Arsenal carved out a good opening within five minutes when Thierry Henry produced a clever flick from Dennis Bergkamp's pass to provide Robert Pires a header just wide with David Seaman scrambling across his goal.

The home side went close again two minutes later when Nolberto Solano, called up to the Peruvian squad Tuesday, rounded the keeper only to find the angle was too tight and his cross was hacked off.

The pace and movement of

French pair Robert Pires and Henry in particular was causing the home side all kinds of problems, but some last-ditch defending by Nikos Dabizas and Aaron Hughes kept them in the game as Arsenal increased the tempo.

Newcastle almost went in front on 24 minutes after Stephen Glass laid off Welsh international Gary Speed's pass to Stephen Hughes, and his inviting cross allowed Carl Cort to send a diving header just wide with David Seaman scrambling across his goal.

Ray Parlour went closest for the visitors 11 minutes from time to produce a fine save from Shay Given, but Newcastle, who also had chances through Cort and Kevin Gallacher, were good value for their point.

Premiership's top six

After Tuesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Manchester United	37	24	8	5	78	28	80
Arsenal	37	20	10	7	61	35	70
Liverpool	37	19	9	9	67	39	66
Leeds	37	19	8	10	61	42	65
Ipswich	37	20	5	12	56	41	65
Chelsea	37	16	10	11	66	44	58

*Manchester United champions, Arsenal qualify for Champions League, Bradford, Coventry and Manchester City relegated

Serie A preview

Milan giants under focus

Football

AFP, Rome

Parma host a humiliated Inter Milan Thursday night in a match that will have a big bearing on who will finish fourth in the Italian First Division this year and win a ticket to the Champions League.

And on the same night Fiorentina travel to the San Siro to tackle a buoyant AC Milan side who are also well in contention for a position to re-enter the competition they have won five times, second only to Spain's eight-time winners Real Madrid.

These two fixtures have been brought forward because of the Italian Cup Final between Parma and Fiorentina - the first leg is played next Thursday (May 24).

And for once the three-way title fight between AS Roma, Lazio and Juventus is overshadowed as the two Milan giants look to overhaul Parma, currently in possession of the fourth place that guarantees a place in the preliminary round of Europe's premier club competition next year.

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Inter's entire squad went to the Milan flat of club president Massimo Moratti on Tuesday to apologise for that abject performance which has raised renewed questions as to whether Marco Tardelli will survive as coach until next season.

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