

# World sings Ronaldo song

Football

INTERNET, Milan

Brazilian superstar striker Ronaldo woke up Monday morning feeling on top of the world after a weekend that proved a milestone for him.

Ronaldo admitted it was a dream come true to score after just 19 minutes of his latest comeback match for Inter Milan.

There had been much expectation about the partnership between Ronaldo and Christian Vieri, but twice this season the Brazilian's plans to return to action have been scuppered by injury.

Grounds around the country celebrated, however, when news filtered through of Ronaldo's strike against Brescia, his first competitive goal since November 1999.

"A goal after two years was so important," Ronaldo was quoted as saying on Italian news wire ANSA. "I have dreamt of this. It's a moment of few words and great happiness."

"I tried that play with Vieri a couple of minutes before scoring. I asked him the ball, and he placed it there where I certainly wanted. I've seen the goalkeeper coming to me

and I've made a right-foot shot. When I've realized I had scored, I've felt like a happy baby."

But Inter coach Hector Cuper, finally able to pick his first-choice forward line, adopted a more cautionary approach.

"When a player is feeling well to play, I call him up. Ronaldo still needs to reach his optimum fitness conditions to play all ninety minutes. Today he had a good start and played very well. I knew he was ready and concentrated. I'm happy about his excellent play and goal."

The 90th presence with black and blue t-shirt, the 53rd goal scored. The numbers of Ronaldo were and still are exceptional. "It's been wonderful to enter in such a compact team. I want to thank Cuper who trusts me and has made me play from the very beginning. It is easy to play in a team like this. We need to organize ourselves."

Ronaldo lasted 61 minutes of the game before being withdrawn as he builds up his match fitness, having limped out of action twice this season in attempted comebacks.

He was set up by Vieri, suggesting their partnership will be as lethal as expected.

"Ronie and I have been dreaming of scoring a goal like this for



AN UNFORGATABLE DAY: (L) Ronaldo in full cry against Brescia. (C) Trademark celebration after the goal. (R) Teammates as delighted as he is.

PHOTO: INTERNET

three years," Vieri said. "Now we will need to improve and continue like this."

Ronaldo said: "Vieri and I could always create dangerous opportunities to score. I'm very happy about these three points. Brescia will put many teams in trouble."

Brescia coach Carlo Mazzone had mixed emotions about the goal but was generous in his praise for the Brazilian.

"I am very happy for Ronaldo and for football as a whole to have him back," Mazzzone said. "He looked good out there and I hope this goal convinced him that he is really back to his best. If we really had to concede a goal then I'm glad it was scored by Ronaldo."

Even Gabriel Batistuta, a rival domestically with AS Roma and internationally with Argentina, was glad to see Ronaldo back.

"I was very happy when I heard he scored because Ronaldo is football," Batistuta said. "Fans of every team, players, everyone, is happy to have him back."

The overwhelming sentiment around Italy was one of delight for Ronaldo who finally started to turn the page on two injury-blighted years.

Ronaldo's previous goal in the Italian First Division was on

November 21, 1999 when he scored his side's fifth goal in a 6-0 victory over Lecce from the penalty spot.

Ronaldo's goal was not only celebrated at Brescia. At Rome's Olympic Stadium fans of Lazio and Fiorentina both rose to their feet and applauded for a minute when informed by the electronic scoreboard that the Brazilian had scored.

Most Italian papers showed a

front-page photo of the Brazilian's famous gap-toothed grin as he celebrated his landmark strike.

"Ronaldo, your joy is the joy of the whole of football," said Gazzetta dello Sport. "Ronaldo's joy, Inter flying with him and Vieri," said Corriere dello Sport.

Inter's 3-1 win over Brescia kept them top of Serie A with 28 points, two ahead of Chievo and Roma.

As for Chievo their president Luca Campedelli, a self-confessed Inter fan, was one person who could not look on the bright side of Ronaldo's return from the footballing dead.

"It's typical of Ronaldo to star scoring again the week before we play Inter again," quipped Campedelli in the morose voice that has made him something of a cult figure in Italy.

# Serie A Inter's perfect day

Football

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan's big guns blasted the Italian First Division leaders to a 3-1 victory at Brescia on Sunday, ensuring they remain two points ahead of closest challengers Chievo and AS Roma who also took maximum points.

Brazilian Ronaldo opened the scoring for Inter with his first Serie A goal in two years and after Iglu Tare had equalised for Brescia it was Christian Vieri, playing alongside the Latin American for the first time in two years, who sealed victory with two second-half strikes.

Minnows Chievo, however, kept up the chase with a 2-1 home victory over Lecce at Verona, boosting their morale after losing top spot last week largely because of controversial refereeing decisions in their 3-2 defeat by AC Milan and Inter's 4-2 win at Atalanta. Both referees concerned were suspended this week.

Joint second with Chievo are champions Roma who owed their comeback 2-1 victory at Parma to goals from Assuncao and Diego Fuser after a Marco Di Vaio strike looked set to give the crisis club the points.

Roma coach Fabio Capello said: "We are really in winning mode again and we played good football and did not do much wrong - we must keep this up for the rest of the season."

In the big evening clash at the San Siro it was honours shared as AC Milan and Juventus drew 1-1.

AC Milan took the lead after 23 minutes against the run of play when their Ukrainian striker Andriy Shevchenko scored his 10th of the season with a fierce angled shot which deceived goalkeeper



Alessandro Del Piero gestures toward the fans after equalising against AC Milan at Milan on December 9.

PHOTO: AFP

## Serie A's top six

Italian league table after matches played Sunday (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Inter Milan	13	8	4	1	24	12	28
Chievo	13	8	2	3	26	15	26
AS Roma	13	7	5	1	20	9	26
Lazio	13	6	5	2	18	7	23
AC Milan	13	6	5	2	22	15	23
Juventus	13	5	6	2	20	12	21

Gianluigi Buffon but Juve's Alessandro Del Piero equalised shortly after the interval from a penalty.

Juve coach Marcello Lippi said: "I am very pleased with the way my team played especially in the first half - we deserved the penalty."

Shevchenko confirmed he was indeed going for goal saying: "I was definitely aiming for goal but I wish I had scored twice because I felt good today."

Earlier at Brescia Inter coach Hector Cuper had caused a stir with his team selection, picking his big three of Ronaldo, Christian Vieri and Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba together in the starting line-up for the first time.

And Ronaldo repaid the Argentinian with a well-worked goal after 19 minutes, linking up with Vieri before scoring a goal that was celebrated also by neutral fans in other stadia as the Brazilian ended two injury-blighted years without a goal.

But just two minutes later Albanian Tare headed Brescia back on terms.

After the break Vieri headed a 63rd-minute goal before finishing off Brescia with another to take his tally in three matches to seven.

Cuper said: "Inter played very well. We have a very difficult match with Chievo coming up but I think it will be a great game."

"I am very happy - it's been a wonderful day," said Ronaldo.

At Verona, Chievo striker Massimo Marazzina put his side ahead against Lecce with his seventh goal of the season.

Shortly after the interval Slovenian Sebastjan Cimirotic levelled the score for Lecce but a penalty from Chievo's Eugenio Corini settled the match to put them in good heart ahead of tough fixtures with Inter, Lazio and Roma.

Lecce's veteran Romanian defender Gheorghe Popescu was sent off in injury time.

In-form Lazio got off to a flyer when Czech winger Karel Poborsky gave them an early lead at home to crisis club Fiorentina and after the interval Argentinians Hernan Crespo and Claudio Lopez ensured a healthy 3-0 margin of victory in a match where Fiorentina's Roberto Baronio, a former Lazio player, was sent off.

Lazio coach Alberto Zaccheroni, whose decision to drop Spanish midfielder Gaizka Mendietta has proved the turning point of his club's season, said pointedly: "The players I have entrusted with the job continue to deliver the goods and things are looking very good for us."

Defender Fabio Galante gave Torino an early lead at home to Atalanta who replied shortly before the interval through recent Italy debutant Cristiano Doni who scored his 10th Serie A goal of the season.

Corrado Colombo put the side from Bergamo ahead after 70 minutes and they held on for a 2-1 victory.

Goals from Greek striker Zisis Vryzas and Iranian Rahman Rezaei ensured Perugia prevailed 2-0 against bottom club Venezia who are still winless.

Udinese pulled off a comeback 2-1 victory at home to Verona who took the lead through Massimo Oddo in a melee after Udinese goalkeeper Luigi Turci had saved a penalty from the same player.

But after Verona's Croatian-born defender Anthony Seric had been dismissed Roberto Muzzi levelled from the penalty spot for Udinese with his 10th of the season before Giampiero Pinzi came up with the winner.

Bologna's Cameroon international Pierre Wome was sent off Saturday in his side's 2-0 defeat by Piacenza whose veteran striker Dario Hubner extended his lead at the top of Italy's goalscoring charts with both goals, taking his tally to 12 in a match ruined as a spectacle by thick fog.

# Premiership Hero Henry

Football

AFP, London

Thierry Henry scored a last-gasp winner as Arsenal staged an amazing second-half comeback to beat Aston Villa 3-2 and stay in touch with leaders Liverpool at the top of the Premiership.

Arsenal had trailed 2-0 at half-time but an Henry double after second-half substitute Sylvain Wiltord had struck saw the Gunners climb to second in the table, three points behind the Merseysiders who have a game in hand.

Earlier in the day title hopefuls Leeds United edged Blackburn 2-1 at Ellwood Park to remain third, a point behind Arsenal.

Newcastle remained in the leading pack with a hard-fought 1-0 win at bottom club Ipswich as do Chelsea who drew 0-0 at Sunderland.

At Highbury former Arsenal star Paul Merson took advantage of Matthew Upson's hesitation to lob goalkeeper Russell Taylor for Villa's opening goal.

Winger Steve Stone pounced to double their lead after the home defence had failed to clear their lines, leaving Arsene Wenger's with a mountain to climb.

But Wiltord halved the deficit a minute after the break with a close-range effort before Henry poked in the equalizer from six yards.

Arsenal completed a superb turnaround by grabbing the winner in stoppage time.

Robert Pires' brilliant through ball opened up the Villa defence, allowing Henry to slide the ball past Peter Enckelman.

Merson blamed "schoolboy errors" for squandering the points on his return to Highbury.

"My little boy played in the under-eight's today, and it would not have happened there," he said.

"When the ball should have been cleared we tried to play too much football."

"Patrick Vieira - one of the best players in the world - boots the ball into Row X when he has to. That is what you have to do."

Henry said Wiltord's goal a minute after half-time was a turning point in the game which Arsenal could ill afford to lose in the race for the title.

"We came back and scored an early goal (in the second half), which was important."

"We had a little bit of a lack of concentration at the start - but there is an unbelievable character and quality in this team."

"When we got our momentum it looked like we could score at any moment."

The only sour note for Arsenal was the booking of influential midfielder Patrick Vieira who will now miss the crunch Premiership clash against Liverpool in a fortnight.

Leeds United's Australian international striker Harry Kewell gave manager David O'Leary the perfect answer to midweek criticism when he fired the two goals that gave his side a vital win at Blackburn.

Kewell, who scored a magnifi-

cant strike in Thursday's 2-2 draw with Grasshoppers in the UEFA Cup, had come under fire from O'Leary for his second half performance in that match.

But he responded in style on Sunday as he struck in the 55th and 62nd minutes to clinch the three points at Ellwood Park and move the Yorkshiremen to within four points of Premiership leaders Liverpool.

O'Leary had told the Aussie star that he had been disappointed in his second half performance against the Swiss side on Thursday after a stunning contribution in the opening 45 minutes.

Both Kewell's goals on Sunday were scored after good work down the right by Gary Kelly.



Arsenal's French ace Thierry Henry exults after his winner against Aston Villa at Highbury on December 9.

PHOTO: AFP

## Premiership's top six

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

Liverpool	14	10	2	2	25	11	32
Arsenal	15	8	5	2	33	17	29
Leeds	15	7	7	1	18	9	28
Newcastle	15	8	3	4	25	18	27
Chelsea	16	5	9	2	19	12	24
Aston Villa	16	6	6	4	21	18	24

# Primera Liga Alaves remain in charge

Football

AFP, Madrid

Alaves continued their remarkable fairytale rise to the top of Spanish football Sunday when a double from Ruben Navarro saw them beat Real Zaragoza 2-0 to retain their lead at the top of the league.

The Basque outfit regained the lead off champions Real Madrid, who had gone top Saturday after beating Tenerife 2-0, while Deportivo La Coruna also moved back above Real and a point behind Alaves when they edged Valencia 1-0 thanks to a penalty from Diego Tristan.

Navarro's second was the best of the two as the 23-year-old, who joined from Numancia in the summer as a replacement for former favourite Javi Moreno, lobbed the Zaragoza 'keeper Juanmi to keep last season's UEFA Cup finalists flying high.

In Sunday's late match,

Barcelona threw away a 2-0 lead and were held to a 2-2 draw by Celta Vigo at the Nou Camp.

Gabri gave Barca the perfect start by scoring after just two minutes while Javier Saviola added the second by heading in a corner although Celta claimed that the Argentinian striker had used his hand to push the ball across the line.

Celta hit back in the 72nd minute when Edu scored although it seemed that Sergi got the final touch knocking the ball past his own goalkeeper.

There was no doubt, however,

about Edu's claim to the equaliser seven minutes later when he headed in a cross from Russian international Valeri Karpin.

The match finished in dramatic fashion with Barcelona's Swedish defender Patrick Andersson being stretched off the pitch after a clash with Catania before Karpin was sent off for the visitors for his second bookable offence in stoppage time.

Real Betis' hopes of collecting three easy points at struggling Real Sociedad ended in disappointment with a 0-0 draw though the visitors were lucky to escape with even a

point. Sociedad remain four points above bottom side Rayo Vallecano, who drew 0-0 at home to Las Palmas.

Rayo's players, bizarrely banned from using chewing gum last week as the club launched a cost-cutting drive, failed to come unstuck against Las Palmas.

However Rayo were unable to capitalise on their opponents being reduced to 10 men for the second-half when Angel received his marching orders.

The visitors might even have taken all three points but Sequeros sent his penalty crashing against the bar.

Real Madrid put their poor league form earlier in the season firmly behind them as they beat Tenerife 2-0 Saturday to record their sixth successive win in all competitions.

Saturday's other match saw Basque outfit Athletic Bilbao miss out on the chance of going top as they came from behind three times to pull off a 3-3 draw at Sevilla.

## Primera Liga's top six

Standings in the Spanish Championship after Sunday's matches (played, won, drew, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Alaves	16	9	3	4	19	9	30
Deportivo	16	9	2	5	29	21	29
Real Madrid	16	8	4	4	29	19	28
Real Betis	16	8	4	4	18	13	28
Athletic Bilbao	16	7	6	3	24	22	27
Celta Vigo	16	6	7	3	31	20	25