

Premiership Champions set sail

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal opened the defence of their English Premiership crown with a record-breaking 2-0 victory over newly promoted Birmingham City on Sunday.

First-half goals from last season's top scorer Thierry Henry and French international team-mate Sylvain Wiltord secured the points for the Gunners, who dominated from start to finish at Highbury.

A baptism of fire for Birmingham ended with Senegalese World Cup star Aliou Cisse sent off in his first match for the club for a second yellow card late on.

Henry opened the scoring for Arsenal after just nine minutes, scoring with a curling 25-yard free-kick that City keeper Nico Vaesen fumbled.

Wiltord made the game safe for Arsenal, curling his shot beyond Vaesen after a surging run from near the halfway line following a swift break out of defence.

From then on there was no way back for Steve Bruce's Birmingham, and Arsenal threatened to run riot in the second half.

Two goal-line clearances deprived Arsene Wenger's side of a bigger victory but the champions were satisfied to have notched a record-breaking 14th consecutive win in the league following on from last season.

"It's a good start," Wenger said.

"We created a lot of chances and could have won by more but the most important thing is we didn't concede a goal," said Wenger, acknowledging he was pleased Arsenal had secured the record sequence of wins.

"It means we've got a momentum and the team is playing to a high level," he said.

Arsenal goalscorer Henry commented: "We weren't looking for the record, we just wanted to get back in business."

"We could have scored more goals but we don't want to be



PHOTO: AFP
Liverpool's Norwegian international John Arne Riise takes off his shirt in ecstasy after scoring against Aston Villa at Villa Park in Birmingham on August 18.

greedy. The important thing is we got three points."

Elsewhere Sunday, Liverpool launched their bid for a first league title in 13 years with a hard-earned 1-0 victory over Aston Villa.

A second-half goal on the counter-attack scored by Norwegian international John-Arne Riise decided an entertaining game at a sun-drenched Villa Park.

Liverpool's England striker Michael Owen missed the chance to open his account for the season and make it 2-0 for the Merseysiders in the 78th minute when he saw his penalty saved by Villa's keeper Peter Enckelman.

Owen blasted his spot-kick hard

and straight but Enckelman stuck out a leg to send the ball rebounding back out. The penalty had been awarded after Villa defender Gareth Barry clumsily bundled over Steven Gerrard.

Despite the narrow margin of victory, Liverpool skipper Sami Hyypia was satisfied to see his side off to a winning start.

"One nil is enough. If you win every game 1-0 you are the champions," the Finnish international said. "We missed a couple of chances - the penalty and then El Hadji Diouf's in the first half."

"Enckelman had a great game and it's good to see another Finn doing well. But I'm happy - we got

the three points and a clean sheet.

"Last season we were second - but if we finish second this year we will not be happy."

Riise's 47th-minute winner came after a surging run from midfield by England international Danny Murphy.

Murphy, back in the Liverpool starting line-up after being benched for the Community Shield, powered forward before slipping a pass to Riise on the left.

The 21-year-old fullback made no mistake with the finish, tucking away a low shot beyond Enckelman.

Murphy also went close midway through the second half, thumping a venomous shot from the edge of the area which Enckelman did well to turn around for a corner.

Swedish World Cup player Marcus Allback could have equalised for Villa in the final 20 minutes, but hooked his shot wide to the relief of the back-peddalling Liverpool defence.

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier partnered Senegal's El-Hadji Diouf in attack with Owen, eventually replaced by Emile Heskey 10 minutes from time.

Diouf, who had looked lively throughout, should have put Liverpool ahead midway through the first half.

A pinpoint pass from Gerrard out on the right found African Footballer of the Year Diouf unmarked at the back post but the striker somehow sidefooted over the bar from close range.

Diouf, who earned criticism in sections of the English media last week for allegedly diving in Liverpool's Community Shield defeat to Arsenal, was booed mercilessly by the Villa fans throughout.

The Senegalese livewire was on the receiving end of several rough challenges early on, with Villa's Turkish international Alpay booked for one crude tackle.

Diouf himself was given a yellow for dissent following a challenge by Barry after 17 minutes.

Gunners won't get Carini

AFP, London

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger admitted Sunday that his bid to sign Uruguayan international keeper Fabian Carini from Italian outfit Juventus on loan had fallen through.

Carini, who has been linked with a possible move to Manchester United instead, was photographed wearing an Arsenal shirt last month when the deal looked set to go through.

Wenger revealed that a problem had arisen over personal terms and the Arsenal boss has since been unable to resurrect the deal.

Wenger admitted: "It's over. We will look for somebody else and I will make a decision before the West Ham game next week."

"We have a few players in mind but we don't want to speak about the names as it's too early."

Reports have indicated that United, who are also seeking a third keeper before the transfer window closes on August 31, could turn to the 22-year-old Uruguay international.

Wenger, who joked earlier this weekend that United would have no problem affording the keeper's wages, told Capital Radio: "Maybe you could see him somewhere else in the Premier League."

The Arsenal boss, who could now turn his sights to keepers such as Brazil's Marcos or Tottenham's Neil Sullivan, is determined to ensure that his team start the campaign with extra back-up for David Seaman.

"Stuart Taylor is a great prospect and we also have Graham Stack, but we need a third keeper with experience," he added.

Moratti gives his views

Football

REUTERS/INTERNET, Milan

Ronaldo will almost definitely stay with his Italian club Inter Milan and should be happy with his lot, the president of the Serie A team said.

"Ronaldo is more than 80 per cent certain to stay with Inter. In fact, I would say 100 per cent certain," Inter President Massimo Moratti was quoted as saying by Italian news agency Ansa.

Moratti confirmed that Spanish team Real Madrid had expressed an interest in Ronaldo, but said: "The approach wasn't economically satisfactory. Ronaldo would do well to appreciate what he has going for him here."

"The figure of 100 million Euros is not casual, it's a calculated amount which expresses the full evaluation of the player. There hasn't been such an offer. And in any case, what should have been an approach of a certain type by Real Madrid hasn't happened. I don't think it's a practicable road."

Ronaldo's contract with Inter does not end until 2006 but he has made it clear that he wants to return to Spain -- where he played for Barcelona in the 1996-7 season -- because he prefers the lifestyle there.

The striker is in Brazil for Wednesday's friendly at home to Paraguay, his first game since he scored two goals against Germany in the World Cup final.

Moratti said agents were too eager to jump on the Ronaldo bandwagon in the hope of picking up handsome fees but the player himself was to blame for the current situation.

"Now that he's a world champion, someone suggested to him he could do what he wants ... he will stay with

us. I'm sure he will find enthusiasm again and will play, well, here [in Italy]," Moratti said.

"I don't feel betrayed. He has always been very straightforward with me. With time, Ronaldo has the technical ability to rebuild his relationship with the Nerazzurri."

Inter's president however added Ronaldo's behaviour caused him and Inter fans bitter disappointment.

"I'm disappointed as well as the fans I represent. After the World Cup

relationship, for his attachment to the club and for the example that he has shown to his colleagues."

Moratti's latest remarks came after Ronaldo's agent Alexandre Martins claimed in an interview that his client was about to sign with Real, after weeks of controversy over the Brazilian superstriker's reported desire to leave his Italian club.

"I'm certain that the transfer would be completed in a few days. Inter and Real Madrid already met," Martins was quoted as saying by Italy's largest sports daily La Gazzetta dello Sport on Sunday.

The first reports on Sunday were fed up with playing in Italy outraged Inter officials. But in recent days, club officials had seemed less set on hanging on to Ronaldo.

Any transfer would have to be completed by Aug. 31, which is the deadline for moves in the Italian league.

Both Ronaldo and Martins are currently in Rio De Janeiro, ahead of Brazil's friendly match against Paraguay on Wednesday.

Ronaldo is reportedly keen to leave the Italian team because of his poor relations with Argentine coach Hector Cuper and bad associations with his time in Italy.

Ronaldo, who has been with Inter since 1997, was sidelined for about two years with a torn knee ligament.

A two-time FIFA player of the year before injury, Ronaldo got fresh luster from his outstanding World Cup performances this summer.

He helped Brazil clinch its fifth World title by scoring two goals in the final against Germany for a total of eight in the competition.

He makes about 6 million Euros (US dollars 6 million) a year with the Milan club, which includes such stars as Vieri, Alvaro Recoba and Fabio Cannavaro.



MASSIMO MORATTI

we expected a reaction [from Ronaldo] which went into the wrong direction," Moratti said.

"I know him well. After the World Cup he could have had two reactions. He has chosen one. He's an intelligent lad and can't allow himself to make a mistake. Everyone that approaches me has told me to tell him. This is an understandable reaction in the light of Ronaldo's behaviour. But the club cannot act according to anger. It's not possible to sell a player if there aren't the economic conditions to do so."

Moratti revealed that he was starting to look at his other striker, Christian Vieri, in a new light.

"I now appreciate Vieri, with whom I haven't always had a good

Rivaldo's Milan debut

Football

AP, Milan

Brazilian standout Rivaldo made a much applauded debut with AC Milan in the prestigious pre-season "Luigi Berlusconi" trophy, leading the Milan powerhouse over league champion Juventus in a penalty shootout.

Following a goalless draw in regular time, the home team prevailed 3-1 on penalties as Milan's Brazilian goalkeeper Dida stopped kicks by Marcelo Salas and Ciro Ferrara and allowed only one by Davide Baiocco.

Clarence Seedorf, Manuel Rui Costa and Andrea Pirlo converted the penalties for AC Milan, which had lost the four previous editions to their Turin rivals -- twice on penalties.

Rivaldo, who joined AC Milan a few weeks ago and is still in questionable form, was substituted by Rui Costa after 62 minutes.

He received rousing applause as he started the match and was cheered by about 50,000 fans every time he made a good move and kicked to the net with his magic left foot. He made five attempts and all went wide.

Rivaldo, who helped Brazil clinch its fifth World Cup title earlier this year, joined the Milan team after being released by Spain's FC Barcelona.

"He made good moves. He's getting used quickly to the new teammates and our tactics," coach Carlo Ancelotti said.

Rivaldo was used in the midfield, supporting AC Milan forwards Pippo Inzaghi and Jon Dahl Tomasson against the Juventus defense.

Inzaghi, who scored AC Milan's game-winner in last Wednesday's Champions League qualifier against Slovan Liberec, squandered the best scoring chance in the seventh minute, kicking wide from an angled position after dribbling past Juventus and national team

goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

Buffon made a sensational save on Tomasson in the 73rd while Dida stopped two second-half short-range shots by Alessandro Del Piero.

Although the match was labeled as an exhibition, it was less than friendly with five players cautioned by the referee for rough play. Juventus' midfielder Alessio Tacchinardi got a yellow card for a brutal tackle on Rivaldo.

"Welcome to Italian soccer,

Rivaldo," said an Italian television commentator.

Rivaldo was scheduled to fly to Brazil early Monday to play with his world champion team in an exhibition against Paraguay on Wednesday.

He was expected to rejoin AC Milan for the second leg of the Champions League third qualifying round in the Czech Republic on Aug. 28.

Sunday's match, named after the father of AC Milan's owner and

Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi, pitted the two most successful Italian clubs, which have won 42 league titles together.

The Serie A season is due to begin on September 1 with Juventus starting their title defence at Piacenza while Milan begin their attempt to regain the title they last won in 1999 at home to Udinese.

Spanish Super Cup Advantage Deportivo

Football

REUTERS, La Coruna

Spanish champions Valencia were humbled 3-0 by King's Cup winners Deportivo La Coruna in the first leg of the Super Cup on Sunday.

Deportivo tore through an under-strength Valencia side with three goals in the opening 32 minutes by Juan Carlos Valeron, who was outstanding in the first half, Victor and Nourredine Naybet.

Valencia will have the chance to turn the result round at their Mestalla ground in a week's time but it will be a major surprise if Deportivo do not take the first trophy of the new season.

The visitors did create the first clear chance of the match, with Francisco Rufete only fractionally wide from the edge of the box when a Miguel Angel Angulo effort was half-cleared.

Deportivo were quickly in control, though, and Valeron gave them a deserved lead on 13 minutes after slipping between the center-backs to reach a long through ball from Lionel Scaloni.

The Spanish international midfielder controlled the ball with a neat header and poked a shot past Valencia keeper Santiago Canizares.

Valeron created the second nine minutes later, beating three players near the left touchline before setting up Fran to cross into the area.

Canizares managed to reach Roy Makaay's first-time effort but the keeper spilled the ball and Victor reacted first for a simple tap-in.

Valencia could find no way to combat Valeron and the Depor player was soon setting up the third.

His spectacular through ball found Makaay on the left and the Dutchman beat Canizares and sent in a cross-shot that was finished by defender Naybet.

Deportivo started the second half in the same fluent style and Makaay forced a good save from Canizares with his snap shot five minutes after



PHOTO: AFP
Deportivo La Coruna players Valeron (R) and Scaloni (L) sandwich league teammate Vctor in celebration during their Spanish Super Cup first leg match against Valencia at La Coruna on August 18.

the break.

Valeron's influence was being limited by the introduction of Ruben Baraja as a half-time substitute, though, and Valencia gradually got back into the game.

Baraja had three clear chances in the final 20 minutes but Valencia

could not find a goal to ignite hope of a successful comeback in the second leg.

The Spanish league season kicks off on the weekend of August 31/September 1, when Valencia will begin the defence of their title with an away game at Real Mallorca.

Scottish Premiership Four-star Rangers

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers kept in touch with Celtic on Sunday when they won 4-2 away to bottom club Hibernian to move second in the table, two points behind their neighbours.

With Celtic having thrashed Dundee United 5-0 on Saturday for their third win in three matches of the new campaign it was imperative for Rangers to claim full points and they duly did so with goals from Ronald de Boer, a Barry Ferguson penalty and two from Peter Lovenkrands.

Hibernian replied through substitutes Derek Townsley and Garry O'Connor but rarely threatened to undermine Rangers' domination and the alarm bells are already ringing at the Edinburgh side after three defeats as they lie bottom.

Rangers gave only a handful of minutes at the end to striker Tore Andre Flo, a target for Sunderland, who waved what appeared to be a final farewell to the fans at the end having replaced De Boer.

De Boer had opened the scoring after six minutes after Mikel Arteta fed Lovenkrands and from his pass the Dutch international steered the ball past keeper Nick Colgan.

Shota Arveladze then had an effort disallowed for offside for Rangers before Townsley levelled after 35 minutes from close range at the other end in a melee which followed a Tom McManus corner.

Rangers regained the lead seconds before the break when Mathias Doumbé pulled Lovenkrands back by the shirt just inside the area and Ferguson sent Colgan the wrong way from the spot.

Lovenkrands wrapped up the points in the 65th minute, volleying home from Fernando Ricksen's cross from the right.

Hibs then had the already booked Paco Luna dismissed by referee Hugh Dallas for a Diego Maradona-style handball 'goal' as the Spaniard challenged Rangers keeper Stefan Klos on his goal-line.

Lovenkrands made it 4-1 after Ferguson sent him through before O'Connor pulled back a late consolation.

Stop Kaka at any cost!

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Sao Paulo went top of the Brazilian championship Parana 3-2 at the weekend despite having Kaka, their top player, repeatedly hacked down by the opposition.

The 20-year-old, who was a reserve in Brazil's squad at the World Cup, scored the first goal and set up the other two despite being the victim of some brutal tackling.

Sao Paulo coach Oswaldo Oliveira was livid after two clear red



KAKA

card offences against Kaka were punished with only yellows by referee Leonardo Gaciba.

"The referee allowed violence against our forwards, in particular Kaka, but this made our win all the more impressive," he said.

Kaka was himself booked for handball after he was fouled and his outstretched arm hit the ball as he fell. But he said he would not be intimidated.

"I got kicked again but they're not going to stop me and I'm not going to get riled by their provocations," he said.

The referee's performance brought an avalanche of criticism,

with veteran commentator Armando Nogueiro describing the Parana tackling as "criminal".

Critics say the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) have repeatedly failed to clamp down on violent play and the careers of the country's most talented players are being threatened.

Sao Paulo have nine points from their three games.

Veteran striker Romario scored twice for the second weekend running as Fluminense beat Gremio 3-1. The 36-year-old, who won the 1994 World Cup with Brazil, joined the club two weeks ago.



PHOTO: AFP
Stefan Effenberg the former Bayern Munich captain, is surrounded by the press and fans upon his arrival at the headquarters of his new club VfL Wolfsburg for official presentation yesterday.

Koreas agree to flags, anthems

Football

AFP, Seoul

South and North Korea on Monday agreed not to use their national flags and anthems for their first friendly football match in 12 years next month, organizers said.

Both sides will use flags decorated with the Korean peninsula image and a traditional folk song entitled "Arirang" will be played at the match in Seoul on September 7, they said.

The agreement, reached at inter-Korean talks in North Korea last week, reflected current political sensitivities as national symbols from each side are still strictly banned in each country.

Despite tentative efforts at reconciliation, the two Koreas are still technically at war from their

1950-53 conflict.

The Korean Football Association (KFA) said no national flags would appear on the players' kit.

The North agreed to send a 42-strong delegation, including 20 players, to the South from September 5 to 8, the KFA said.

Their last matches were in 1990 in Seoul and Pyongyang when the rival states had embarked on an earlier attempt to improve relations through sport.

North Korea boycotted the World Cup staged in South Korea and Japan in June and would not answer an offer to stage matches.

North Korea has also agreed to send athletes to the Asian Games to be held in South Korea from September 29.

Amid lingering Cold War antagonism, the communist state has never taken part in an international sporting event in the capitalist South.