

36-team finals FIFA to decide in June

AFP, Zurich
FIFA said Saturday it was delaying a decision on whether to increase the number of teams competing at the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany until next month.

World football's governing body, which is considering an increase from 32 to 36 countries, was due to rule on the matter here Saturday.

According to a suggestion put forward by the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL) the four extra places would be filled by two teams from Europe and one from South America.

For the fourth slot the existing play-off between Asia and the North American football confederation Concacaf will be scrapped with both federations gaining an extra place.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter said that the idea of extending the World Cup to 36 teams was an acceptable plan but "on condition of an adequate schedule being established."

"The final ratification of the 36 teams will be made in Paris at the end of June at the next executive committee meeting on condition that a solution can be found to integrate extra teams in the schedule of the final phase.

"I can say that the South American proposal is an acceptable number. But we must find an adequate schedule."

However, German footballing great Franz Beckenbauer criticised FIFA for putting off a decision.

"They want an increase only if it's feasible in relation to the calendar, but there's no such possibility. This is a weak compromise," said the president of the German World Cup organising committee.

"I fear they won't be any further advanced in June," ventured Beckenbauer.

"To go from 36 teams to 16 for the quarter-finals is impossible, it won't work," added the dual World Cup winner.

But Ricardo Teixeira, president of the Brazilian federation, told AFP: "It's a first step to enlargement."

CONMEBOL's idea is to split the 36 teams into nine groups of four, with the leaders in each group winning through to the quarter-finals joined by the seven best runners-up.

To avoid any massaged results like the infamous occasion in the 1982 World Cup when Germany and Austria, who only needed a draw, played out a false match resulting in Algeria's elimination, CONMEBOL suggests the final 18 first round matches (two in each group) should be played simultaneously.

That arrangement however is a practical impossibility given the restrictions in the number of venues and television schedules.

CONMEBOL, the umbrella body for ten South American countries, has never accepted the new distribution of places decided in Madrid last December.

They estimate that that new arrangement cost them at the very least half a place.

Despite this delay insiders suggest an enlargement is on the cards as long as a credible qualifying format can be found.

Women's World Cup relocated

AFP, Zurich
The women's football World Cup, which was due to be staged in China from September 23, must be played in another country because of the outbreak of SARS there, FIFA said on Saturday.

World football's governing body said in a statement that its executive committee took the decision after examining advice from its medical committee during a meeting.

Australia and the United States have shown an interest in staging the event, the statement added.

However FIFA's Executive Committee announced that the 2007 women's World Cup would be awarded to China.

Best prefers gambling to booze!

AFP, London
Football legend George Best, who last year underwent a life-saving liver transplant operation after years of alcoholism, has become hooked on gambling, a British newspaper said Sunday.

The former Manchester United and Northern Ireland star, 56, spends up to five hours a day betting on horses and fruit machines. The People tabloid reported on its front page.

"George knows he can never drink again so perhaps his gambling is a substitute - providing the excitement and pleasure he used to find in the pub," a friend of Best was quoted as saying.



Mallorca players celebrate one of their five goals against Real Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium in Madrid on May 3.

Primera Liga Mallorca make 'em remember

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's preparations for next week's Champions League semi-final clash against Juventus, as well as their assault on a 29th Spanish league crown, suffered an embarrassing setback on Saturday when they crashed to a 5-1 home defeat to Mallorca.

It was the European champions' first defeat at their Santiago Bernabeu stadium since November 2000 and, to add insult to injury, it was Mallorca who inflicted that loss - 49 matches ago.

Later, Real Sociedad cut Madrid's lead at the top to just one point when midfielder Xabi Alonso scored in the 31st minute in their 1-0 win over Sevilla.

"It is really sad to have lost like this," said Real Madrid's Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos who scored an own-goal in the game at the Bernabeu.

"It's also a pity that we lost our home record in such a way but they made things very difficult for us in

the second half.

"But now it's important that we don't let this affect us for Tuesday's match against Juventus because it is the Champions League and we must give it everything we have."

The Real Madrid players were booed off by their fans after the defeat, the club's heaviest since a 5-1 loss to Real Zaragoza in 1999 which led then to the dismissal of former coach John Toshack.

"We had a very bad day," admitted Real coach Vicente del Bosque.

"But we are still the league leaders and we are in the semi-final of the Champions League. We will take stock at the end of the season."

TOP SIX

Standings in the Spanish championship after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Real	32	18	10	4	71	38	64
Sociedad	32	18	9	5	59	40	63
Deportivo	31	18	6	7	52	36	60

Premiership Di Canio with the Midas touch

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson hailed Ruud van Nistelrooy as "one of the best strikers ever" after the Dutch international's hat-trick against Charlton left United within a whisker of the Premiership title.

United's 4-1 win put the Old Trafford side eight points clear to leave Arsenal without the slightest room for error.

Arsene Wenger's team must beat relegation-threatened Leeds on Sunday to keep them in the hunt, but whatever happens United will be champions if they beat Everton on May 11.

After van Nistelrooy's third

71st minute winner against Chelsea.

The win left the Hammers level with Bolton on points but still in the relegation zone because of their inferior goal difference.

Caretaker coach Trevor Brooking, who stepped in when manager Glenn Roeder suffered a mini-stroke, said: "I said to Paolo that if we were level or behind he would get at least half an hour.

"He got very emotional in the dressing room afterwards and the lads wound him up by saying it had to be him who scored, but it has been a good day and we march on for another week."

Bolton kept their noses just in front of holding FA Cup finalists Southampton to a goalless draw at St Mary's.

Newcastle, 1-0 winners over

entertain Liverpool at Stamford Bridge. The pair are tied on 64 points but Chelsea's superior goal difference means a draw will be enough for them.

Liverpool were just seconds away from a home draw against Manchester City that would have given them the edge going into the final fixture.

But Nicolas Anelka, who had earlier converted a penalty to cancel out Milan Baros's 59th minute strike, came back to haunt his former club with an injury-time winner that lifted City into the top half of the table.

Fulham and Aston Villa both ensured they will remain in the top flight next season with wins over Everton and Sunderland respectively, leaving West Ham, Leeds and Bolton in a three-way fight to avoid the drop.



Chelsea's Jodi Morris (C) is sandwiched between West Ham's Trevor Sinclair (R) and Les Ferdinand in London on May 3.

hat-trick on his 100th appearance for United Ferguson said: "I can pay Ruud no greater tribute than to say he is one his way to becoming one of the best strikers ever.

"He has been absolutely fantastic for us this season. His recent form is unbelievable.

"He is improving in every aspect of his game - you can see it all the time. We are really pleased with him."

It was the ninth successive game in which the Dutchman had scored and he took his tally for the season to 43. He has now scored a phenomenal 79 goals since arriving at Old Trafford at the start of last season.

If he conjures up another three goals against Everton on the final day of the season, he will equal Denis Law's United record for goals in a single season.

It was an equally significant day at the bottom of the table where Paulo di Canio made a dramatic return to the West Ham side with a

Birmingham, ensured Champions League football next season as both their nearest rivals, Chelsea and Liverpool crashed to defeats.

"It's been a long season but quite fantastic in many, many ways," a relieved Magpies boss Sir Bobby Robson admitted after seeing his side finally clinch third place after a nervous run-in.

The fourth and final place in Europe's top competition will now be decided on May 11 when Chelsea

TOP SIX

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

Man Utd	37	24	8	5	72	33	80
Arsenal	35	21	9	5	73	38	72
Newcastle	37	21	5	11	61	46	68
Chelsea	37	18	10	9	66	37	64
Liverpool	37	18	10	9	60	39	64

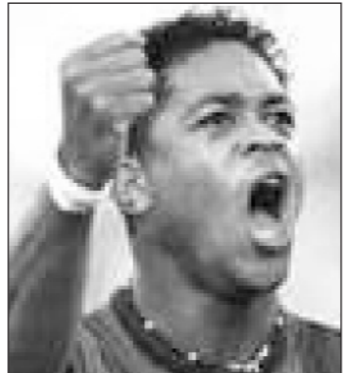
Dutch delight!

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United striker Ruud van Nistelrooy told Sunday's News of the World newspaper he would welcome fellow Dutch striker Patrick Kluivert with open arms should he move to United.

Van Nistelrooy scored his third hat-trick of the season for United on Saturday in the 4-1 win over Charlton which gives them a commanding eight-point lead over Arsenal in the title race.



PATRICK KUIVERT

He insisted afterwards that he would relish linking up with Kluivert - currently with Barcelona - at club level as well as for Holland.

He said: "I have heard Patrick is coming to Manchester United - and I will be waiting there to welcome him to Old Trafford with open arms.

"He is the greatest attacking talent in Europe. So far we've only played 18 internationals together but when we play together and train together every day, we will become even better."

Liverpool wary of SARS

Football

AFP, London

English Premiership side Liverpool are thinking about giving their trip to China this summer a miss over fears of the SARS virus in the country.

The Anfield club are due to visit Hong Kong and China in July as part of their pre-season preparations, but chief executive Rick Parry admits the likelihood of going to China in its current state is "very, very remote".

Neighbours Everton have already pulled out of a similar trip because of the outbreak of the disease, and the Reds will announce their decision in the next two weeks.

Parry said: "Obviously we are concerned about the problems that the SARS outbreak has caused and we're monitoring the situation daily. We're due to be going to Hong Kong and China but at the moment I would say the likelihood of going to China is very, very remote.

"We're not rushing into making a decision but we'll have to make one by the middle of May because we need some certainty. We are clearly not going to do anything that will put any of the players at risk."

Ligue 1

Lyon's timely fire

Football

AFP, Paris

Lyon regained the lead in the French first division with a 4-0 drubbing of Strasbourg on the day the Alsace club changed hands.

Sold off by Mark McCormack's sports marketing giant IMG, Strasbourg were never at the races against the reigning champions.

Brazilian Sonny Anderson's fourth minute effort opened the floodgates, with French international Eric Carriere, Democratic Republic of Congo's Peguy Luindula and Philippe Violeau adding to the visitor's tally in the second half.

The runaway win put Lyon top with 64 points, two clear of Marseille who did their title ambitions no harm at all with a 2-1 win at Bastia with three matches remaining.

But Monaco, three points adrift, can displace Lyon at the summit if they beat Paris Saint Germain at the Parc des Princes on Sunday.

A win would leave Didier Deschamps' men level on points with Lyon but holding the advantage thanks to a superior goal difference.

Marseille's victory, which ended a two match losing run, came at a price for defender Manuel dos Santos, who fractured his left shin after a 28th minute collision with Bastia's Nicolas Penneteau which earned the Corsican keeper a red card.

With Bastia down to ten men and Ali Boumijn stepping in to keep goal in place of Penneteau, Marseille had a golden opportunity

TOP SIX

French league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Lyon	35	18	10	7	60	36	64
Marseille	35	18	8	9	37	30	62
Monaco	34	17	10	7	55	27	61
Bordeaux	35	16	9	10	52	35	57
Sochaux	35	15	12	8	39	28	57

Santa Cruz's season over?

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich's Paraguay international Roque Santa Cruz is doubtful for the rest of the season with a left knee injury, the club said on Sunday.

The German champions may have to do without their 21-year-old striker for the three remaining games and the German Cup final after he hurt his knee and went off in the first half of their 1-0 victory over Kaiserslautern on Saturday.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said Santa Cruz, who has already injured ligaments in his left knee twice this season, would have further tests on Monday.



ROQUE SANTA CRUZ

to run off with the three points.

And Alain Perrin's team duly took the lead on the stroke of half-time when Fabio Celestini fed Dmitri Sytchev who headed past Boumijn.

After the break Marseille again dominated without any tangible results until Belgian defender Daniel Van Buyten put the game beyond doubt with four minutes left.

Bastia got a stoppage time consolation goal after Laurent Battles scored with a header.

Elsewhere Bordeaux took water in fourth, five points adrift of Marseille, despite going down 1-0 away to Auxerre, the only goal of the encounter scored by Djibril Cisse.

That left Auxerre on 57 points, the same total as Bordeaux and fifth placed Sochaux, 2-0 winners at bottom club Troyes.

Second from bottom Ajaccio picked themselves up off the floor after last week's 6-1 thrashing by Bordeaux and at the same time gave themselves a glimmer of hope of staying in the top flight with a vital 1-0 victory over Le Havre.

Serie A Lazio keep Juve waiting

Football

AFP, Rome

Juventus will have to wait another week to wrap up the Italian title after they were held to a goalless draw at Lazio on Saturday.

Juve would have secured their 27th championship had they won at the Olympic stadium in Rome as closest rivals Inter Milan failed to win at Atalanta.

But despite fielding their strongest side ahead of the Champions League semi-final first leg against Real Madrid on Tuesday, title-holders Juventus drew a blank against a Lazio side seeking a top four finish.

Lazio could have completed a prestigious league double over the Italian champions had Stefano Fiore's 84th minute penalty not been saved by Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

Juventus, who hold an eight point lead over Inter with three games to go, play at home to Perugia next Saturday.

Juve coach Marcello Lippi

admitted his side were second best against the defeated UEFA Cup semi-finalists.

"Lazio were excellent," he said. "We had to work very hard to deny them space, as when they had it they were very dangerous.

"It wasn't easy coping with the situation, especially as we play in Madrid in three days."

Lazio coach Roberto Mancini said Juventus won't have to wait long to crack open the champagne.

"I don't think they will have any difficulty. They will celebrate the championship in Turin," he said.

Asked about his team's chances of qualifying for the Champions League next season, Mancini replied: "I believe we will reach 59 or 60 points. We have a three point advantage over Chievo and qualification is almost ours.

"It's a shame because we could have won today."

Buffon was Juventus' hero in front of a capacity crowd in the capital, making splendid saves to deny Lazio's South American duo Cesar and Claudio Lopez in the first-half, before outwitting Fiore six minutes from time.

Inter failed to reduce Juventus' advantage by drawing 1-1 in Bergamo.

After the hosts had spurned two excellent chances in the opening stages, Inter broke swiftly to take the lead in the 13th minute.

Domenico Morfeo played a short pass through the middle for Obafemi Martins to run onto, and the Nigerian youngster sped clear of the home defence before steering the ball wide of Alex Calderoni for his first Serie A goal.

But Atalanta, struggling to stay in the top flight, fought back and deservedly drew level 19 minutes from time.

Tira Vugrinec's weak right-foot shot was spilled by Francesco Toldo, allowing Carmine Gautieri an easy tap-in at the far post.

Inter president Massimo Moratti refused to concede the title, even though his team need to win their three remaining matches and hope Juventus will slip up.

"Until it is mathematically impossible we won't say farewell to the championship," he said.

Moratti, whose side play local rivals AC Milan in the semi-finals of

the Champions League on Wednesday, was unhappy that Inter were unable to make the most of a handful of chances.

"In the first-half we were good, well organised and tight at the back," he said.

"But in the second-half we played too deep and lacked something in attack."

Moratti voiced his displeasure at coach Hector Cuper's decision

TOP SIX

Italian football league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Juventus	31	20	8	3	57	22	68
Inter	31	18	6	7	59	35	60
Milan	31	17	7	7	50	24	58
Lazio	31	13	15	3	51	29	54

not to bring on a striker in place of teenage forward Martins, who was substituted late in the second-half.

"Martins went off because he was tired, but I thought we would bring on another forward," he added.

Third-placed AC Milan moved

four points clear of Lazio after beating Como 2-0 at the San Siro, a defeat that sent the visitors back down to Serie B.

Filippo Inzaghi's first-half penalty, his 16th league goal of the season, gave Milan the lead, before Alessandro Nesta converted Rivaldo's corner to condemn Como to their 16th defeat of a torrid campaign.

Torino were also relegated after losing 1-0 to Udinese, Vincenzo Iaquinta's goal nine minutes from time securing three valuable points for Luciano Spalletti's men, who are hoping to clinch a UEFA Cup spot.

Chievo improved their chances of pipping Lazio to the final Champions League spot with a 3-1 home win over strugglers Piacenza, while Parma, also in the hunt for fourth place, crashed 2-1 at home to Bologna.

Southerners Reggina, fighting for their Serie A survival, lost 3-2 at home to improving AS Roma, the 2001 champions.

In the day's other matches, Modena drew 1-1 with Empoli and Perugia were held to a 0-0 draw by Brescia.



Juventus custodian Gianluigi Buffon (R) saving a penalty from Lazio's Stefano Fiore at Rome's Olympic Stadium on May 3.