

Premiership

Gunners too hot to handle

Football

AFP, Middlesbrough

Arsenal went top of the English Premiership on Sunday following a French-fuelled 4-0 drubbing of Middlesbrough at the Riverside stadium on Sunday.

Liverpool meanwhile, are still looking for their first three points of the season after a dramatic but goalless draw with Aston Villa at Birmingham in which both goalkeepers played starring roles.

The Gunners' win moves them up to joint top in the table on points with reigning champions Manchester United, with Chelsea, in third, the only other team to boast a 100 percent record after the first two games of the season.

French forward Thierry Henry picked up the man of the match award for his huge contribution to the match - scoring a goal and providing for another - despite him not being 100 percent fit.

"It's only the beginning (of the season) but it's nice to win games like this," Henry told Sky Sports.

Henry was instrumental in Arsenal's display of class on their

way to a ruthless domination of Steve McLaren's side, which was lacking recent acquisition Gaizka Mendieta.

Going on this performance, the Spanish international - whose international registration has not yet arrived - will know that a Middlesbrough's work will be cut out against the Premiership big boys this year.

The hosts started positively enough.

But following Slovakian striker Szilard Nemeth's near goal in the first minute - his close-range shot flying inches over Jens Lehmann's crossbar - Arsenal took command of the game.

Henry scored their first goal after just five minutes of play.

Swede Freddie Ljungberg did well to control in midfield before unleashing a shot that Mark Schwarzer could only tip away with his right hand, and the keeper could do nothing to stop Henry's tap-in from the rebound.

Schwarzer was under threat constantly in the first half and was at full stretch to parry a wicked 25-yard drive by Sylvain Wiltord in the 12th minute.

Seconds later his France team-

mate Robert Pires was given plenty of time to prepare the Gunners' second goal of the game.

Pires was given time to stop on the left flank and look up before crossing the ball towards Brazilian midfielder Gilberto Silva, who ran in unmarked to volley the ball home for his first goal in the Premiership.

Arsenal defender Sol Campbell even came close to getting his name on the scoresheet after his header from a corner flew just wide of Schwarzer's post.

The Gunners' took a virtually unassailable lead in the 22nd minute with a piece of play that is likely to have the pundits clapping for lavish adjectives throughout the rest of the season.

Henry was given space down the left before he chipped a delightful and perfectly-weighted ball through three defenders towards Wiltord, which the Frenchman simply volleyed into the net.

Wiltord claimed his second goal of the match in the 60th minute.

Ljungberg found space on the right after a pass from Campbell and crossed for Wiltord who tapped the ball high into the net in the 60th minute from close range.

Following last week's 2-1 defeat

at home to Chelsea, Liverpool had everything - at least on paper - to go in search of a win on their second game of the season.

But after a spirited performance by Villa, and their Danish keeper Thomas Sorensen, in the second half of a game that was initially dominated by Liverpool, Gerard Houllier will be happy to have come away with a point.

Liverpool had the lion's share of chances in the first half with Norwegian forward John Arne Riise unleashing a shot after just six minutes that Sorensen caught.

Villa striker Juan Pablo Angel then had Dudek in a flap with a 25-yard drive that forced the big keeper on his back after he punched the ball away.

Then on the hour mark a curling right-footed free kick by Angel from 25 yards had Dudek beat but failed to make it past the keeper's left-hand post and rebounded.

In the closing stages Liverpool came close after Michael Owen met a corner with power and precision at Sorensen's left post but the ball was soon bundled out for another corner which eventually came to nothing.



Thierry Henry (L) netting Arsenal's first goal against Middlesbrough at the Riverside Stadium on August 24.

PHOTO: AFP

Spanish Super Cup first leg

Mallorca make 'em pay

Football

AFP, Palma de Mallorca

England star David Beckham blew hot and cold on his introduction to the competitive world of Spanish football when he set up a goal before being substituted in Real Madrid's 2-1 Spanish Super Cup first leg loss here to Real Mallorca.

Beckham, widely praised for the way he has knuckled down to the challenge of a new career in Spain after his summer move from Manchester United, started all four pre-season matches in Asia, only to be slated for a poor showing in last week's friendly goalless draw at Valencia.

On Sunday, he began well enough, despite being deployed in the centre of midfield with Portugal's Luis Figo outside him on the right flank.

Pre-season, Beckham had largely featured on his favoured right with Figo switching to the opposite flank.

Both men combined well for the opening goal of the game before a 20,000 crowd at the Estadio Son Moix, a Beckham corner from the left travelling all the way through to Figo, who chested down and drove home on 19 minutes.

But Real then took their foot off the pedal and were punished for their sloppiness, leaving them with work to do at the Bernabeu in the return leg on Wednesday.

And by the time Real coach Carlos Queiroz reacted by withdrawing Beckham for want-away French star Claude Makelele after 53 minutes Mallorca were leading 2-1 through goals from Dutch striker Arnold Bruggink and Cameroonian international Samuel Eto'o.

Real's Brazilian forward Ronaldo had had a chance to make it 2-0 in the 38th minute, curling the ball just wide after a breakaway.

But gutsy Spanish Cup winners Mallorca showed no sign of being overawed by Real's superstar ensemble and after several near misses they levelled seconds before the interval.

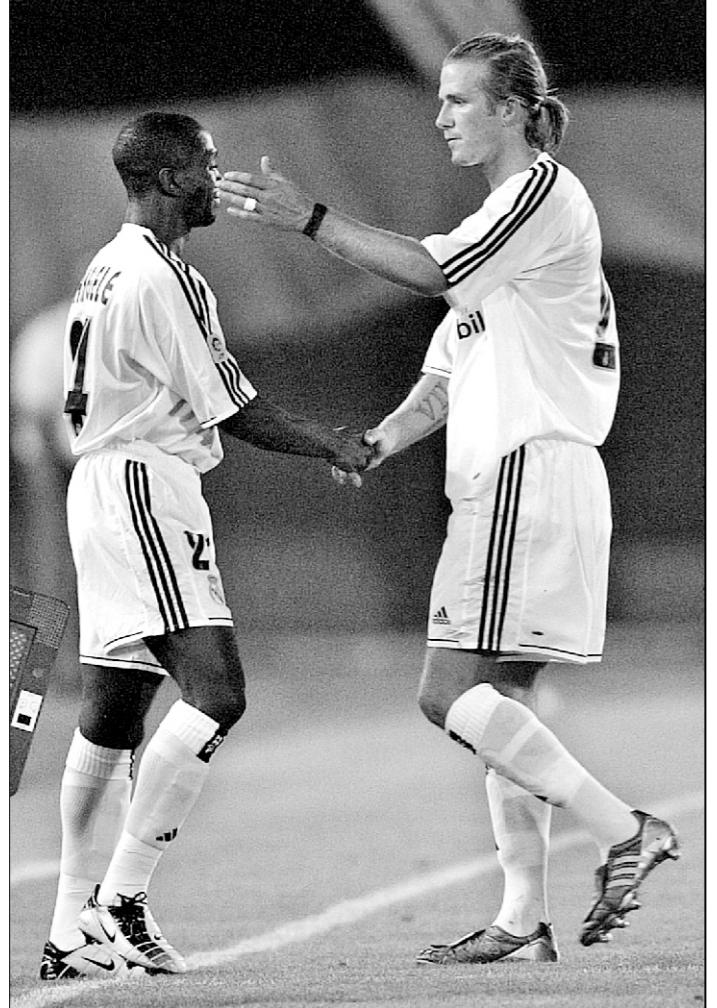


PHOTO: AFP

MAAN IT'S TOUGH OUT THERE! David Beckham (R) gives way to Real Madrid's French international Claude Makelele during their Spanish Super Cup first leg match against Real Mallorca at Palma de Mallorca on August 24.

Beckham and company were largely being overshadowed by Mallorca's Argentine midfield dynamo Ariel Ibagaza, and he held off Zidane and Esteban Cambiasso, then played the ball through the legs of Francisco Pavon for Bruggink to level.

It's once of Real, put the hosts ahead three minutes after the restart, cracking a right-footed effort over the advancing keeper Iker Casillas as a flat-footed Real back four gave him yards of space.

Poor galaxy!

AFP, Madrid

In recent years which have seen global superstars arrive by the van load, it has not been often that the Madrid media come to bury, rather than praise, nine-times European champions Real Madrid.

But a week before the league season begins poison pens were targeting the club on Monday in an attempt to bring Real's galacticos back into orbit.

Sunday's 2-1 Spanish Super Cup first leg loss to Real Mallorca scarcely registers on the Richter scale of sporting humiliations and Real will be hot tips to overturn the deficit on Wednesday at their own imposing Bernabeu stadium.

However, even the most desultory of glances at the headlines would not have made happy reading for coach Carlos Queiroz, England star David Beckham or ambitious club president Florentino Perez.

Beckham, who cut a disconsolate figure when Queiroz hauled him off after 53 minutes and sent on want-away French international Claude Makelele to add some much-needed bite and shape, may have some linguistic progress still to make as he traverses the settling-in phase.

Yet fluency in the language was barely a requirement to understand the vitriol which surfaced in the AS sports daily as a paper normally rather more flattering to the club blasted the team's "galacticos."

"There was a galaxy (of stars on show). But there was no team. It was a galactic debacle," AS stormed as Real contrived to squander a lead handed them by Luis Figo from a Beckham corner.

The Barcelona media have been known to ignore Real altogether in times of triumph by the 'meringues' - and not just those achieved at Catalunian expense.

But the Madrid scribes took the gloves off as they laid into the side for its poor showing.

"There's tactical chaos in Queiroz's team. The doubts are creeping in and are contagious," AS said in a biting analysis which was damning throughout.

"Madrid have the same old problems which can be summed up by an absolute lack of competitive tension - with the exception of glamour games at Old Trafford, Munich and the Nou Camp."

The Marca daily was more succinct, but no less negative in its assessment.

"Mallorca laid bare Real's deficiencies and drew first blood."

Last hurdle to cross

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Paris

English Premiership sides Chelsea and Newcastle United, four-times winners Ajax Amsterdam, Scotland's Celtic, Italy's Lazio and French side Marseille can look confidently towards their final Champions League hurdle.

But German side Borussia Dortmund, Spain's Deportivo La Coruna and Scotland's Rangers face tricky second leg ties in the final qualifying round matches spread over Tuesday and Wednesday.

The losers will miss out on a minimum 10 million euros from playing in the Champions League group matches.

Chelsea, whose 120 million dollar splash on new players has brought three wins in a row, tackle Slovak side MSK Zilina with a two-goal advantage from the away leg.

Chester completed the signing of Bordeaux's Russian midfielder Alexei Smertin on Monday to take the London club's spending to almost 126 million dollars under new Russian billionaire owner Roman Abramovich.

Another 28 million dollars is expected to go on Inter Milan's Hernan Crespo after their Champions League qualifier.

Ajax, knocked out by eventual

winners AC Milan in last season's quarter-finals, drew 1-1 away to Austrian side Graz AK two weeks ago.

But they have to play better than they did in Saturday's 1-0 defeat at Cologne.

Rangers, held 1-1 in Glasgow by Copenhagen, could face an early switch to the UEFA Cup if they lose in Denmark.

They gave themselves a boost with a 5-2 win over Hibernian at Ibrox on Saturday with a brace of goals from Dutch striker Michael Mols.

But they may be without midfield star Barry Ferguson who is on the verge of signing for English Premiership side Blackburn.

La Coruna, after a goalless draw away to Rosenborg, have to find their rhythm against the Norwegian side without the benefit of having played any football in their own league which kicks off next weekend and without Dutch striker Roy Makaay.

Last season's leading scorer was sold to Bayern Munich in the close-season.

Galatasaray SK striker Umit Karan will miss his side's return leg with PFC Sofia after undergoing a groin operation but the Turks are already 3-0 up from the first leg.

The winners go into Thursday's draw for the first round group stage of the Champions League.

Mind you
Language
Sir!

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson, knighted by Queen Elizabeth, face a three-match ban for accusing a soccer official of cheating.

Sir Alex has admitted using the 'F' word in United's 2-1 win over Newcastle at St James' Park but an English Football Association disciplinary panel is more concerned he accused the linesman of cheating after he refused to signal Newcastle's Andy O'Brien had fouled United's Ryan Giggs.

The FA will view the reports of referee Uriah Rennie and fourth official Jeff Winter before deciding on what action to take against Ferguson, who was sent off 24 minutes into Saturday's match.

Ferguson has already promised to try to curb his temper in future.

"I suppose I will have to curb my behaviour in the future," Ferguson said.

But the promise is unlikely to save him from a three-match touchline ban which will probably include the September 21 home game with arch-rivals Arsenal.

Ligue 1

Nonda injury spoils the night

Football

AFP, Paris

goal of the season during a 1-1 draw to Metz Saturday, with the Riveria outfit ahead of Nantes and Marseille on goal difference.

But the win was overshadowed by the news that Congolese striker Nonda will be out of action for the rest of the season after seriously injuring his left knee five minutes into the game.

Nonda, who looked set to match his

feet as the top French league scorer last season by heading the list with three goals in as many games this time, collided during a tackle with PSG defender Jose Pierre-Fanfan, who fell on the Congo striker's left

leg resulting in an immediate injury to the kneecap.

The 26-year-old Nonda was stretchered off to the applause of the packed Parc des Princes stadium and was later hospitalised.

"According to the first tests the internal and external ligaments are affected, he will be out for the rest of the season," said Deschamps.

"My joy at winning this evening is small compared to the immense sadness that I feel at losing Nonda," said the Monaco coach, who laid the blame on the referee.

"This evening it was more than

aggressiveness and when a player loses a year of his career, it's sad. Shabani was struck down in full action. It was a violent action, even if the intention to injure wasn't there.

"A year is a lot in a career. It's going to be a heavy handicap for us. We've lost an important weapon."

PSG coach Vahid Halilhodzic defended Pierre-Fanfan's tackle.

"I'm sad for Nonda, but there was no intention to injure on the part of the player, above all against one of his former teammates. But Monaco also provoked us," said Halilhodzic.



Bundesliga

Bayern thank Latin duo

Football

AFP, Hamburg

Reigning champions Bayern Munich celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Bundesliga with a 2-0 win over ten-man SV Hamburg at the AOL Arena Sunday.

Peruvian striker Claudio Pizarro, who scored twice in Bayern's 3-0 win here last season, headed the opener with 14 minutes gone before Brazilian substitute Giovane Elber scored late on 78 minutes, after only being on the pitch for 120 seconds, and staked a claim for a place in the Bayern first team.

"We spoilt Hamburg's plans with the first goal," declared Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld. "It was to our advantage that Hamburg were so nervous."

It was sweet revenge for Bayern who lost on penalties to Hamburg in the League Cup semi-final, as Hitzfeld's side moved ominously

onto the second rung of the German ladder level on points with leaders Werder Bremen.

The defeat leaves Hamburg, reduced to ten men after the dismissal of Collin Benjamin after 52 minutes, still yearning for their first victory of the 2003/04 season and the UEFA Cup hopefuls now sit second from bottom of the 18-strong Bundesliga with the pressure increasingly on coach Kurt Jara.