

Primera Liga

Real owe Ronaldo two



AFP, Paris

A last-gasp goal from Brazilian star Ronaldo, the second of a double for him, sent Real Madrid top of the Spanish table on Sunday, completing a 3-2 win at Valladolid after his side had been two goals down at the break.

Real were pedestrian early on and fell two goals behind after a sterile opening period before Ronaldo put them back in the hunt to leave the meringues two points clear of Valencia, 6-1 winners on Saturday at Malaga.

England skipper David Beckham, who had one of his quieter games for Real before leaving the action 10 minutes from time, said the league leaders had shown great character in turning their fortunes around.

"It's nice to be in another team that can come back from 2-0 down. As soon as we started the second half I knew we had a chance of coming back," said Beckham in allusion to fightbacks pulled off during his time with former club Manchester United.

Regarding his late substitution Beckham, who faces a gruelling month as Real prepare to take on Bayern Munich in the Champions League as well as face Portugal with England, said "I was tired - but there's no injury."

Coach coach Carlos Queiroz said Real had come through a stiff test.

"Valladolid's attitude was brilliant. They gave us a lot of problems. But we created a lot of chances in the second half when our movement was very good.

"We had to give our last drop of energy to pull off a very tight victory so we are very happy with these three points."

Valladolid went in front after 34 minutes.

Fernando Sales, finding space in a Real rearguard shorn of Roberto Carlos, crossed for Oscar, who drove low past Iker Casillas in the Real goal.

Four minutes before the break Oscar then rose to head in a Losada cross as the visitors once again left a void on their defensive left flank.

Real were lacking a cutting edge

but the second half saw a swift turnaround in their fortunes.

Within three minutes of the restart, Ronaldo nudged a Zinedine Zidane effort over the line to claim his 17th league goal of the season and a controversial case of what appeared to be ball to hand by Pena on the hour allowed Figo to blast home a penalty past Valladolid keeper Albano Bizzarri for 2-2.

Losada then skewed an effort

Valladolid were out to avenge a 7-2 drubbing at the Bernabeu earlier in the campaign and for a time it appeared they would do so hand-somely.

Yet Real had arrived with their tails up, boosted by a Spanish Cup success over Valencia which followed below par league showings at Real Sociedad and Betis.

The five points dropped in those outings had briefly handed Valencia

John Toshack, veteran of two spells coaching Real Madrid, took charge of his first home match since answering the distress call of tailenders Murcia against Real Zaragoza and saw his new charges sneak only their second win of the whole campaign with a 1-0 victory.

Murcia's only previous win came against Albacete in the opening week of October.

Barcelona, knocked out of the Spanish Cup in midweek, moved up to fifth place following a 5-0 thrashing of Albacete with goals from Xavi, Javier Saviola, Ricardo Quaresma, Edgar Davids and Luis Enrique.

Barca achieved the Nou Camp result without the suspended Ronaldinho and Michael Reiziger as well as the injured Patrick Kluivert.

And Deportivo La Coruna cemented their third place with a 1-0 home win over Sevilla thanks to a Diego Tristan penalty.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid superstar Ronaldo is jubilant as he celebrates his winning goal against Valladolid at the Jose Zorrilla stadium in Valladolid on February 1.

against Casillas' bar as Valladolid scented victory again and Beckham had a late effort blocked before giving way to Juanfran.

Just when it seemed Real would settle for the draw Ronaldo smashed home a poacher's strike and set the seal on a tremendous fightback.

Fernando Vazquez's midtable

the initiative which the latter regained with Saturday's superlative showing in Malaga, where Brazilian striker Ricardo Oliveira notched a hat-trick.

But it was fellow samba star Ronaldo who had the final say with his brace.

In other early Sunday action, former Liverpool and Wales star

Beckham picks Zidane

AFP, Madrid

David Beckham has described Zinedine Zidane as the greatest player in the world and nominated the French playmaker as the Real Madrid teammate with whom he links best.

Beckham told Cope radio station on Tuesday that he loved playing alongside Zidane, who in December was voted World Footballer of the Year for the third time.

"Zidane is the greatest player in the world," said Beckham. "I get on well with him and he is the one who understands me best.

"He is the sort of player who makes special things happen on the field.

"Ronaldo is also special because every time he has the ball you know that he could score."

The England captain also fuelled the rumours that Real will



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

re-enter the transfer market at the end of the season to add one of the world's top strikers - his former Manchester United teammate Ruud Van Nistelrooy, Thierry Henry, Michael Owen or Francesco Totti - to their formidable squad.

"For me, van Nistelrooy is one of the best strikers in the world," Beckham said. "I'd say Henry comes narrowly behind Ruud and Ronaldo.

"I've played with Owen for England and he is an extraordinary player and Totti is also very good. But it's not me who does the recruiting."

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English League Cup

Boro show Gunners the door



AFP, Middlesbrough

Jose Antonio Reyes's first start in an Arsenal shirt ended in tears as the 17-million-pound forward's own goal helped Middlesbrough complete a League Cup semi-final double over the ten-man Gunners.

A 2-1 victory at the Riverside on Tuesday, sealed by Reyes's 85th minute own goal, was enough to send Boro into a February 29 final against Bolton 3-1 on aggregate.

Steve McClaren's side are now just 90 minutes away from ending the club's 128-year wait for a major trophy.

While Boro celebrated, Arsenal were once again left to contemplate the price of their indiscipline as Martin Keown's sending-off fatally undermined their chances of overturning a one-goal first leg deficit.

With skipper Patrick Vieira back in midfield and Reyes making his first start, Arsenal had significantly strengthened their starting line-up from the one which suffered the club's first domestic defeat of the season in last month's first leg.

But after Keown was given a straight red card for a professional foul on the stroke of half-time, the Premiership leaders were always going to be vulnerable to the kind of counter-attacking in which Boro specialise.

Keown received his marching orders a minute before the break after his misjudgement of a Juninho pass resulted in the ball bouncing off his back to leave Massimo Maccarone with a clear run at goal.

The centreback's instinctive reaction took the form of a passable impersonation of Jonny Wilkinson, leaving referee Dermot Gallagher with no choice about brandishing the 54th red card of Arsene Wenger's reign at Arsenal.

Having enjoyed the better chances when competing on level terms, Boro appeared curiously shy of exploiting their numerical advantage and Arsenal twice

Ireland friendly

No room for Rivaldo

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Sevilla midfielder Julio Baptista was called up by Brazil for the first time on Tuesday for the friendly against Ireland in Dublin on February 18.

However, striker Rivaldo has been left out of the squad as he will be playing in the Libertadores Cup for his Brazilian club Cruzeiro.

Coach Carlos Alberto Parreira picked 20 European-based players and only two playing in Brazil -- World Cup-winning goalkeeper Marcos of Palmeiras and forward Luis Fabiano of Sao Paulo.

The absence of Rivaldo, the former world player of the year who recently returned to play in Brazil for the first time in seven years after being released by AC Milan, will disappoint Irish fans.

The squad does include midfielders Kaka of AC Milan and Kiebertson of Manchester United, Barcelona forward Ronaldinho and Real Madrid striker Ronaldo.

The game in Dublin is part of Brazil's preparations for the World Cup qualifier against Paraguay on March 30.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Dida (AC Milan), Marcos (Palmeiras)

Defenders: Belletti (Villarreal), Cafu (AC Milan), Edmilson (Olympique Lyon), Juan (Bayer Leverkusen), Junior (Siena), Lucio (Bayer Leverkusen), Roberto Carlos (Real Madrid), Roque Junior (Siena)

Midfielders: Emerson (AS Roma), Gilberto Silva (Arsenal), Kaka (AC Milan), Kiebertson (Manchester United), Julio Baptista (Sevilla), Juninho Paulista (Middlesbrough), Juninho Pernambucano (Olympique Lyon), Ze Roberto (Bayern Munich)

Forwards: Adriano (Inter Milan), Ronaldinho (Barcelona), Ronaldo (Real Madrid), Luis Fabiano (Sao Paulo)

O'Neil in, Fergie out?

AFP, London

Irish racing tycoon John Magnier is reportedly trying to get Celtic manager Martin O'Neill to replace Alex Ferguson at Manchester United.

Magnier, United's biggest shareholder with business partner JP McManus, is determined to remove Ferguson after he sued the pair over stud rights to the champion racehorse Rock Of Gibraltar, The Times reported Wednesday.

And regardless of any settlement that may be reached they have decided that Ferguson will go either at the end of this season or next.

Celtic's multimillionaire owner Dermot Desmond owns just under three percent of United and is regarded as an ally by Magnier and McManus, the Times reports.

Ferguson paid the price of his feud with Manchester United's biggest shareholder last week when the most successful manager in British football was forced to settle for a drastically scaled down new contract.

Instead of a four-year deal that would have netted him a total of 25 million pounds, the 62-year-old Scot instead put pen to paper on a new rolling 12-month contract that means he will be guaranteed only one year's employment after his current deal expires on June 30, 2005.

And Magnier and McManus, who have demanded an investigation into Ferguson's transfer dealing and use of his son Jason as an agent, believe Ferguson can be forced out if United fail to win the Premiership this year after spending 130 million pounds on players since 2001.

United chief executive David Gill held a breakfast crisis meeting with Ferguson on Monday as the pressure mounted to end the feud with Magnier.

Gill and the United board are desperate for Ferguson to drop his legal action against Magnier, who owns 25.49 per cent of the club along with McManus.

But Jason Ferguson hit out at the Irish pair's attempts to discredit his father.

"I am very proud of what my father has achieved and I am proud of the way he has done it. He has sweated blood to put Manchester United where it is but I am disappointed to say blood is now being spilt over what is a private matter," he told The Sun.

"What has been said about me I know is part of a wider campaign to discredit my dad but I will not let that happen.

"It has been suggested that I am going to walk away because of what has gone on in recent weeks. But I can categorically state that I will not and want to say so to end any rumours that might destabilise this company.

"In all his years at the club nothing has been said about any transfers until now because of a private matter."

Lions, Algeria in last eight



AFP, Tunis

Defending champions Cameroon spluttered into the quarter-finals of the African Nations Cup after a drab 0-0 draw with Egypt on Tuesday as the Pharaohs, four-time champions, were eliminated.

Algeria clinched the runners-up spot in Group C behind Cameroon despite losing 2-1 to Zimbabwe.

Hocine Achiou's 73rd minute goal was enough to send Algeria through to the next stage at the expense of Egypt courtesy of having scored more goals than their north African rivals. Both sides finished level on points and goal difference.

With his team eliminated, Egypt coach Mohsin Salah immediately said he was resigning.

"When I signed my contract I had three objectives - to qualify for the African Nations Cup, to win the Cup and to qualify for the World Cup 2006," said Salah who was in his second spell in charge of the national team.

"I was successful in my first objective, but in the second I failed."

The results mean that Cameroon will face the runners-up of Group D, likely to be Nigeria, in the last eight, while Algeria look destined to take on neighbours Morocco for a place in the semi-finals.

In Monastir, Cameroon, bidding for a third successive African Nations title and fifth in all, looked lacklustre and struggled to carve out chances knowing that a point would be enough to see them through.

Patrick Mboma, the leading scorer with four goals, missed the first clear chance when he hurried his shot from inside the Egyptian box in the ninth minute.

At the other end, Ahmed 'Mido' Hossam, upon whom so much was expected here, was beaten to the ball by Cameroon goalkeeper Idriss Kameni.

Mido, who plays for Marseille, earned a booking for dissent on 23 minutes after he crashed into the diving Kameni and the game was held up for a couple of minutes to allow for the goalkeeper to be treated.

In the 40th minute Ibrahim Ahmed came closest to giving Egypt a much deserved lead but his drive missed the target by a few metres.

Egypt continued to push in the second half but couldn't find the goal that would have saved them.

"We are delighted we are through to the next round," said Cameroon coach Winfried Schafer.

"It is almost unimaginable that Cameroon should be eliminated by the first round."

Ironically, the goal which was Algeria's salvation in Sousse was scored by Hocine Achiou - the same man who had hit the spectacular winner to beat Egypt on the same ground last week.

"It is a great achievement to qualify," said Algeria coach Rabah Saadane.

"We knew it would be very difficult. Our preparation for the tournament was not great but we have compensated for this by a lot of hard work and by being combative."

Achiou found the net in the 73rd minute to send his team through. Despite losing the match to the already-eliminated Zimbabwe, the

goal was enough to boost Algeria's goals scored tally to four compared to Egypt's three after the two could not be separated on goal difference or on points as both finished on four each.

The Algerians, like Cameroon, started the day knowing that a point would guarantee a quarter-final place and they were content to defend in numbers.

They were punished for their lack of ambition when they fell behind in the 64th minute.

Zimbabwe won a corner and Adam Ndlovu, the brother of team captain Peter, headed in from Joel Lupahla's cross.

Six minutes later, Zimbabwe were 2-0 ahead when Lupahla picked the ball up on the counter-attack to score from just inside the box.

At that point, Egypt, would have qualified on goal difference had the scores remained the same, but Algeria pulled back the decisive goal through Achiou.



PHOTO: AFP

Cameroon players Rigobert Song (L), Jean-Joel Perrier-Doumbe (C) forward Samuel Eto'O wave to the fans in Monastir, after their match against Egypt on February 2.