

Ranieri has an English future!

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri could remain in England even if, as expected, he is sacked by the Premiership club this summer.

The Italian's position at Stamford Bridge has been under a cloud ever since Roman Abramovich took control, with a whole host of big-name managers being linked with the Blues.

However, Ranieri's agent has revealed the former Fiorentina, Valencia and Atletico Madrid chief would not be short of options if the axedoes fall.

Jon Smith told The Sunday Times: "Claudio is on a good contract at Chelsea, and we are not about to jeopardise that, or any future settlement of it, by making any moves now.

"But if he were to be fired, there are clubs at home and abroad who have indicated their interest in him.

"Should the situation arise, I know he would prefer to stay in this country."

Sven-Goran Eriksson, Fabio Capello, Ottmar Hitzfeld and now even Arsene Wenger or Celtic manager Martin O'Neill have been touted as future Chelsea bosses.

Sunday's newspapers suggest that Ranieri will lose his job even if the Blues win the Champions League this season.



PHOTO: AFP

Athletic Bilbao's Asier del Horno is over the moon after scoring against Real Madrid at the San Mames stadium in Bilbao on March 20.

Primera Liga

Real wheels falling off



REUTERS, Madrid

Leaders Real Madrid ended a miserable week when they suffered a morale-sapping 4-2 defeat at an inspired Athletic Bilbao in the Primera Liga on Sunday.

The champions, who lost 3-2 in extra time to Real Zaragoza in the King's Cup final on Wednesday, trailed Bilbao 2-0 at the break but managed to scramble their way back into the match when skipper Raul scored twice early in the second half.

Bilbao, however, refused to give way and punished Real for some poor defending when left back Asier del Horno scored two classy goals in two minutes midway through the second half to ensure his side enjoyed a thoroughly deserved victory.

Real have taken two points from their last three games and their four-point lead at the top could be cut to one if second-placed Valencia win at home to

Real Mallorca on Sunday.

Deportivo Coruna moved into third, eight points behind Real, after they ended their three-match losing run with a 1-0 win over basement side Murcia.

In-form Barcelona could reclaim third spot and move to within six points of Real if they beat Real Sociedad at home on Sunday.

Bilbao's win over Real kept them in fifth place, level on points with Atletico Madrid who beat Real Betis 2-1 at home in Saturday's late match.

After consecutive defeats in their last two league games, Bilbao had the better of a high tempo start at San Mames, stretching the Real defence with some slick passing and creating a couple of half chances in the first 10 minutes.

Real were slow to respond and lacked sting up front without the presence of leading striker Ronaldo, who is still recovering from a thigh injury.

It was no surprise when Bilbao took the lead four min-

utes before the break when their highly rated midfielder Francisco Yesse made the most of some terrible defending to curl a measured shot past goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

Real centre back Ivan Helguera failed to clear from his area and instead gifted the ball to Yesse who took advantage of further hesitation in the defence to pick his spot.

The visitors were still reeling from the blow when former Real youth player Ismael Urzaiz put Bilbao further ahead, outjumping two defenders to send a glancing header inside the far post after Tiko had waived in a free kick from the right.

Real coach Carlos Queiroz had obviously given his side a stern talking to at halftime and they pulled a goal back within 40 seconds of the restart.

Luis Figo chipped in from the right, Zinedine Zidane flicked on with his head and Raul fired in from close range with a first-time shot.

Raul, who had been in poor

form this year, struck again 16 minutes later, this time guiding in unopposed at the far post after Roberto Carlos had dinked in a cross from the left.

But Bilbao hit back less than a quarter of an hour later when left back Del Horno headed in after Tiko had sown panic in the Real defence with a swirling free kick.

The Bilbao defender put the result beyond doubt two minutes later when he dispossessed Michel Salgado 40 metres out, checked past Helguera and drilled the ball under Casillas to make it 4-2.

TOP SIX

Spanish League standings after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Real	29	18	7	4	58	35	61
Valencia	28	17	6	5	52	20	57
Deportivo	29	16	5	8	46	27	53
Barcelona	28	15	7	6	47	32	52
Bilbao	29	12	8	9	39	37	44
Atletico	29	12	8	9	36	35	44

Adu's instant impact



AP, Daniel Island

Fourteen-year-old Freddy Adu scored 11 minutes into his pro debut Saturday, helping D.C. United beat Battery 2-1 in the first game of the Carolina Challenge Cup.

More than 100 fans, mostly children, chanted his name and waited for Adu after the game.

The young star deflected most of the praise to his teammates.

"I'm just trying to fit in right now," he said. "The fans are great, but it's more important that we won."

Although Adu had already played in some preseason games with D.C. United, this was his first professional game. Adu didn't make his first appearance until the beginning of the second

half.

"He changed the game a little bit when he came in," D.C. United coach Peter Novak said. "He had a very tough week



FREDDY ADU

finishing up school in Florida, so he wasn't going to start."

Adu showed that his reputation as a goal scorer was well

deserved in the 56th minute.

D.C. United defender Dema Kovalenko made a run and crossed the ball into the box to Adu. Adu trapped the ball with his left foot and one touched it past Battery goalie Dusty Hudock for the score.

"It was very important for me, it gives me a lot of confidence," Adu said. "It helps the team out because we haven't gotten a lot of goals in the preseason. So, hopefully this jump starts us offensively."

The Battery answered 19 minutes later, tying the game in the 75th minute on Paul Conway's goal off a corner kick.

Adu also had a hand in D.C. United's second goal.

Adu was tackled hard by Andreas Bechmann, who received a red card on the play.

D.C. United forward Bobby Convey scored on a shot that he bent around Hudock.

Gone with the gale

AFP, Leicester

A British football fan was killed Saturday on his way to a Premiership match after he was hit by flying debris carried by gale-force winds, police said.

The 40-year-old man was killed in the central English city of Leicester as he was on his way to watch Leicester City play Everton, a police spokesman said.

"The man's death appears to have been a tragic accident and police are not treating it as suspicious," the spokesman said.

Elsewhere, two other football supporters were injured when winds sent an advertising hoarding crashing into a crowd.

The Third Division match between Northampton Town and Huddersfield Town in Northampton, central England, was abandoned at half time after the accident, police and witnesses said.

Premiership

Unconquerable Gunners



REUTERS, London

Arsenal clocked up a record-

equalling unbeaten start to the season on Saturday with a nervy 2-1 win over Bolton Wanderers that kept them nine points clear at the top of the premier league.

Goals from Robert Pires and Dennis Bergkamp ensured Arsenal matched the feat of Leeds United in 1973-74 and Liverpool in 1987-88 of going 29 top-flight league matches without defeat from the start of a season.

Arsenal, with 73 points, did not extend their lead at the top, though, after second-placed Chelsea beat Fulham 2-1 in the west London derby and champions Manchester United trounced Tottenham Hotspur 3-0 to reach 61 points in third place.

Liverpool went fourth on goals scored after a last-minute header

from Sami Hyypia gave them a 1-0 win over lowly Wolverhampton Wanderers, while Newcastle United are fifth after skipper Alan Shearer scored twice in a controversial 3-1 win over Charlton Athletic.

Leicester City's 1-1 draw with 10-man Everton was overshadowed by tragedy after an Everton fan was fatally injured in a road outside the stadium by a piece of flying debris on a day of high winds. Bergkamp, who is seeking a new one-year contract to keep him at Highbury next season, made one and scored another as Arsenal rattled up a ninth consecutive league win despite an unconvincing second half.

The Dutch forward deftly laid off a flighted pass from Edu into the path of France winger Pires, who had time and space to tuck home a curling shot after 16 minutes.

Bergkamp followed up by meeting Thierry Henry's cross on the break with a half-volley, before Spanish defender Ivan Campo

pulled one back in a goalmouth scramble in the 40th minute.

But Arsene Wenger's treble-chasing side lived dangerously after the break, when Bolton's Kevin Davies and Campo both missed great chances to equalise.

Wenger told Sky Sports News: "I feel that at 2-0 we eased off a little bit in the second half...we had one or two chances but our dominance had gone.

"We had a great first half -- great passing, great movement, great goals and then we thought it was job done."

Chelsea, who host Arsenal at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday in a Champions League quarter-final first leg tie, kept the pressure on their rivals with a workmanlike win over Fulham.

Icelandic striker Eidur Gudjohnsen fired them into a seventh minute lead, Fulham levelled with Mark Pembroke's deflected free-kick but Irish playmaker

Damien Duff, Chelsea's best player, restored their lead before the break.

Though lacking sparkle in the second half, it was enough to move Claudio Ranieri's side on to 64 points with nine league games left to play.

Manchester United, who face Arsenal in an FA Cup semi-final next month, needed a late flurry to see off Spurs and record their first win in five league games.

An inspired Ryan Giggs put United ahead, meeting Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's cross from the right with a clever backheel.

Winger Cristiano Ronaldo put the result beyond doubt with a 20-metre shot in the 89th minute and fellow substitute David Bellion struck a minute later as United emerged from a bleak period in which they also made a Champions League exit.

"We played well and that's what we expect of the team," said manager Alex Ferguson. "Considering the conditions, which were very difficult for both teams, we played some very good football."

Paying tribute to Giggs, he said: "Ryan in that form is a sensational player. You've got to remember, 14 years up and down that line, we maybe expect too much at times, considering what those years take out of you."

Liverpool moved on to 45 points and the coveted fourth slot -- worth a place in the Champions League qualifiers for next season -- for having scored one more goal than Newcastle.

Charlton were 2-1 down but still in the game at St James' Park when the hosts were generously awarded a 77th minute penalty after defender Chris Perry was judged to have tripped Newcastle's French winger Laurent Robert.

Shearer's spot-kick was parried by keeper Dean Kiely and the ball hit the post before the former England captain snapped up the rebound to put the result beyond doubt.

TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Saturday's late match between Newcastle and Charlton (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Arsenal	29	22	7	0	57	19	73
Chelsea	29	20	4	5	52	22	64
Man Utd	29	19	4	6	55	29	61
Liverpool	29	12	9	8	42	31	45
Newcastle	29	11	12	6	41	30	45
Charlton	29	12	7	10	40	37	43

Ailton aghast

AFP, Bremen

Werder Bremen striker Ailton has hit out at the "people inside FIFA" who he claims influenced Germany to implement legislation to prevent him from playing for oil-rich Qatar at the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

Qatar's French coach Philippe Troussier tried to lure the striker - along with two other Brazilians - to help them qualify for the 2006 World Cup, but FIFA stepped in after the complaints mounted.

Under the new rules players require residency for at least two years or a parent or a grandparent must have been born in the country, which ends Ailton's hopes of representing the Gulf state.

"I am really disappointed about this and wanted to leave the country - that is how bitter I feel," Ailton told German television channel DFS.

"People inside Germany put the protest to FIFA and I cannot understand why they did that."

Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder, president of the German football federation, along with Schalke 04, who Ailton will join at the end of the season, had both voiced their disapproval of Ailton representing Qatar.

Serie A

Danish treat for Milan



AFP, Rome

AC Milan remain on course for their first Italian league title since 1999 as the European champions opened up a 10 point lead over second-placed Roma with a 3-1 win over Parma on Saturday.

Two close range finishes either side of half-time from Jon Dahl Tomasson put Milan in control at the San Siro, before the Danish striker rounded off a slick performance by setting up Andrei Shevchenko for his 19th goal of the campaign which quashed Parma's faint hopes of mounting a comeback.

Alberto Gilardino did manage a late consolation goal for the visitors, but could not prevent the league leaders from chalking up their 12th victory in 13 Serie A matches.

Milan, the only Italian club left in the last eight of the Champions League, top the table

with 67 points from their 26 matches played, but Roma can reduce the gap to seven points if they beat city rivals Lazio on Sunday.

Title-holders Juventus are 11 points off the pace in third following their goalless draw away to Udinese earlier on Saturday.

Defeat at Milan for debt-ridden Parma, whose future looks bleak following the collapse of their parent company Parmalat earlier this year, was a major blow to their hopes of clinching fourth place and a place in next season's Champions League.

Parma remain fifth, level on 41 points with Lazio, but the Rome club have two games in hand.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti admitted his side will take some stopping for the championship, but insisted he was taking nothing for granted.

"It was tough early on, but we changed the pace of the game and had the patience to break our opponents down," he said.

"It's a truly an extraordinary moment for Milan - the team are enjoying themselves and the fans are being entertained, but we cannot afford to look any further than the next match."

Ancelotti's counterpart Cesare Prandelli said he was proud of his players for the way they refused to lie down for the Champions League holders.

"It was a good game and we tried to match them stride for stride and we put them under great pressure at times," he said.

"I must compliment my players for giving 100 per cent until the very end. Not many teams have given Milan as many problems as we have this season."

Milan were let off the hook in the third minute when Parma had a perfectly good goal ruled out.

Brazilian goalkeeper Nelson Dida caught a left-wing cross but collided into the back of Gilardino and spilled the ball to Benito Carbone, who slammed the ball into the back of the net.

But as Carbone held his arm aloft in celebration, referee Stefano Farina ruled that Dida had been unfairly challenged and Milan were awarded a free-kick.

The decision was extremely harsh on Parma as it was Gilardino who was hit by Dida rather than the other way round.

Parma looked far from over-awed and almost took the lead in the 24th minute when Simone Barone hit the post with a rasping shot from the edge of the box.

After missing an easy chance from a yard out, Tomasson made amends by giving Milan a 33rd minute lead.

Shevchenko passed to Giuseppe Pancaro out on the left and his clever dummy foxed his marker and allowed him the time to deliver a perfect cross for the giant Dane whose downward header gave Sebastian Frey no chance.

Brazilian midfielder Kaka created Milan's second goal seven minutes after half-time, outstripping the Parma defence from deep inside his own half and crossing low for Tomasson to side-foot home.

Tomasson then turned provider for Shevchenko, setting up the Ukrainian for an equally easy goal before Gilardino stabbed home with eight minutes left.

Earlier Saturday, Juventus' already slim hopes of retaining the Scudetto were practically extinguished after they were held at Udinese.

Desperate to avoid a fourth defeat in 12 days following their Champions League exit at the hands of Deportivo la Coruna, a 3-1 defeat to AC Milan and an Italian Cup upset away to Lazio, Juve dominated the match but always looked vulnerable when Udinese counter-attacked.

And it was the home side who came closest to breaking the deadlock just after half-time when Marek Jankulovski's fierce deflected drive struck the post.

TOP SIX

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

Milan	26	21	4	1	53	16	67
Roma	25	17	6	2	55	11	57
Juventus	26	17	5	4	51	30	56
Lazio	24	12	5	7	35	25	41
Parma	26	11	8	7	38	37	41
Udinese	26	10	9	7	31	28	39



PHOTO: AFP

THANKS MATE: AC Milan captain Paolo Maldini (R) hugs teammate Jon Dahl Tomasson after the Denmark international scored one of his two goals against Parma in Milan on March 20.