

Premiership

Jimmy's birthday bash

Football

AFP, London

Jimmy-Floyd Hasselbaink celebrated his 32nd birthday in style with a spectacular late hat-trick as Chelsea kept the English Premiership title race alive on Saturday.

Hasselbaink came off the bench to score his 100th, 101st and 102nd Premiership goals and fire Chelsea to a 5-2 victory over bottom-side Wolves.

The win allowed Claudio Ranieri's men to cut Arsenal's lead at the top back to six points ahead of the Gunners clash with Manchester United at Highbury on Sunday.

Chelsea went ahead inside four minutes after when Dutch defender Mario Melchiot finished off a move down the right that he had started himself.

The Blues had enough chances to kill the match before Henri Camara equalised for Wolves, who went on to take a shock lead through Jody Craddock 12 minutes after the break.

Chelsea's star quality finally

told however, Frank Lampard quickly equalising with a stunning 25-yard strike before Hasselbaink secured the win in stunning fashion with a hat-trick in the last 13 minutes of the match.

"There has always been unity here," said Hasselbaink as he reacted to the ongoing speculation over the future of Ranieri.

"It's a bit hyped up in the press, we just have to keep going and do what we have to do.

"We know Arsenal are strong but if we keep on winning hopefully they will slip up."

Charlton's hopes of Champions League football next season suffered a severe setback when they went down to a 2-1 home defeat by Aston Villa at The Valley.

Darius Vassell caught the eye of watching England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson by equalising for Villa after Carlton Cole had given Charlton an early lead.

Iloyd Samuel, who has been called into the England squad to face Sweden in Gothenborg on Wednesday, then snatched all three points for David O'Leary's

side with a goal nine minutes after the break.

At the bottom, Leeds slipped deeper into the mire after a 4-1 defeat at Birmingham and Portsmouth escaped from the drop zone with a 2-1 win at Blackburn that drags them back into the survival dogfight.

Two goals apiece from Bryan Hughes and Mikael Forssell kept Birmingham's bid for a place in Europe on track after Mark Viduka had given Leeds a third-minute lead.

Things could have been very different if Viduka had taken a simple chance to put his side two up before Hughes equalised, but manager Eddie Gray blamed sloppy defending rather than wayward finishing for the defeat.

Nigerian striker Aiyegbeni Yakubu was Portsmouth's hero, his 82nd-minute strike securing a 2-1 win over Blackburn that was the south coast side's first away win of the season.

The priceless victory came after Turkish midfielder Tugay had cancelled out Teddy Sheringham's early opener for the visitors.

Manchester City also remain dangerously close to the relegation zone after a goalless draw at home to Fulham.

Everton edged a little closer to safety with a 1-1 draw at home to Middlesbrough. But David Moyes's men were left bitterly frustrated having gone ahead through Thomasz Radzinski 12 minutes from the time only to concede an equaliser five minutes later to Joseph Desire Job.

A spectacular Rory Delap strike mid-way through the second half was enough to give Southampton a 1-0 win in their mid-table battle with Tottenham at St Mary's.

TOP SIX									
English Premiership standings after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):									
Arsenal	29	22	7	0	57	19	73		
Chelsea	30	21	4	5	57	24	67		
Man United	29	19	4	6	55	29	61		
Liverpool	29	12	9	8	42	31	45		
Newcastle	29	11	12	6	41	30	45		
Birmingham	30	12	9	9	37	36	45		



JIMMY SPECIAL: Chelsea's Dutch international striker Jimmy Hasselbaink (R) doing a cartwheel as teammate Herman Crespo (L) looks on in appreciation after his hattrick against Wolverhampton at Stamford Bridge in London on March 27.

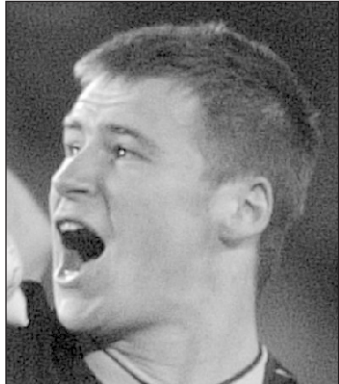
Well done Bhoy!

AFP, Glasgow

David Marshall, the 19-year-old goalkeeper who performed heroics for Celtic in Barcelona on Thursday night, has been rewarded with a new four-year contract at the Glasgow giants.

The teenage rookie, who was standing in for the suspended Rab Douglas, enjoyed a fairytale night as he repeatedly defied Barcelona's strike force to help Celtic hold out for a goalless draw in the Nou Camp which sent them into a UEFA Cup quarter-final against PSV Eindhoven 1-0 on aggregate.

Marshall has now committed himself to Celtic until 2008 and could be in line for a start in Sunday's Old Firm clash against Rangers if Douglas fails to recover completely from an ongoing hip injury.



DAVID MARSHALL

Celtic boss Martin O'Neill joked: "David thinks all games are like the Barcelona one.

"For a young lad to step into the Nou Camp after playing so few games and to have played the way he did was magnificent. But as I said jokingly to him 'it's downhill after that'.

"We've signed him up for the next four years but it was in the pipeline anyway regardless of his performance against Barcelona.

"I've said for the last couple of seasons that he's got great potential and the rest is very much up to him."

O'Neill admitted that even he was surprised at the performance of his young goalkeeper.

"We never had any qualms about putting him in but I don't think anybody would have made up the performance he conjured up for us. It was magnificent.

"I thought his first save in the first minute was a big moment in the game. It wouldn't have been his fault if they had scored but we would have been a goal down within a minute in the Nou Camp.

"So I felt that save was magnificent. It would be great to say we knew he had the ability to do what he did but it was an extraordinary performance."

Marshall insists he was always keen to extend his contract at Celtic Park but admits the excitement in the

last few days has led to some sleepless nights.

He said: "My mind was always on staying. Obviously because of what has happened in Spain the contract's been brought to the fore but as the manager said it was always in the pipeline.

"To sign for the club you supported as a boy is unbelievable but you just have to try not to let it get to your head and keep working hard in training.

"But it's been an exciting week for me and I got a sleeping pill when I came off the plane from Barcelona just so I could get some sleep.

"But I had a job to do in the park and I just had to do it. I've not had much time to think of it but I'll have a look at the game on the video and see what I can improve on because there is always room for improvement."

Eriksson till 2008

Football

AFP, London

England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson on Sunday ended the uncertainty over his future by announcing that he had agreed to sign a new contract which will keep him in the job up until 2008.

Eriksson, whose previous deal ran till the 2006 World Cup, admitted he had been effectively bounced into the extension after being photographed on Thursday night at the home of Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon.

The London club has refused to give current manager Claudio Ranieri any assurances about his future and had been consistently linked with Eriksson since it was bought last summer by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich.

"In an ideal world I would have liked to have waited until after Euro 2004," Eriksson told a hastily-arranged press conference at England's training base ahead of Wednesday's friendly against Sweden in Gothenburg.

"But I think that was more or less impossible with all the speculation, so I think that what we did was the best thing.

"When it came out that I met some people, I think the best thing is to try to kill the thing. So here I am and I'm happy."

Eriksson insisted he had never had a formal contract offer from Chelsea or any other club but admitted he had "listened" to inquiries about his future and likely availability and defended his right to do so.

"I was listening. If you have ambition in life, you listen when clubs come to you with (offers of) other jobs. I think that should be allowed, even if you are England manager," Eriksson said.

"But then you have to take a

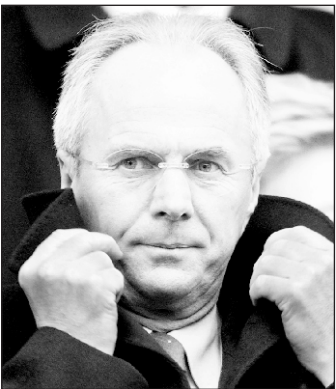
decision and the decision has been taken.

Mark Palios, the FA Chief Executive who forced Eriksson to declare his intentions, described Eriksson's decision as "great news for England fans and the England team."

"I am not surprised with Sven's record that other clubs want to sign him and we are pleased to have a man whom a lot of top clubs want," Palios said.

The FA supremo would not be drawn on whether the new contract included any get-out clauses which could allow Eriksson to leave before 2008.

Eriksson, who had been linked with Real Madrid and Inter Milan as well as Chelsea, was first offered the new contract at the end of last



SVEN-GORAN ERIKSSON

year in what was seen as a move by the FA to force him into a decision on his future.

Eriksson made it clear then he was irritated that the offer had become public knowledge but the strains in his relationship with Palios and the rest of the FA hierarchy do not appear to have reached breaking point.

While Eriksson's conduct in off-the-field affairs has been widely questioned, his performance as

England coach is pretty much beyond reproach.

Having inherited a side in chaos after the resignation of Kevin Keegan at the end of 2000, he quickly turned England's fortunes around in the qualifying campaign for the 2002 World Cup.

England went on to reach the quarter-finals of the tournament where their defeat to Brazil remains Eriksson's only loss in a competitive international.

The Swede has also forged a close bond with the players, notably captain David Beckham, and is popular with England fans, not least because of an unlikely dalliance with a blonde television presenter 20 years younger than him.

He admitted the job came with many frustrations: "It is always difficult to understand that whoever has this job should be a saint, should not earn a lot of money, should not have a private life and should not listen to other possibilities in life."

But Eriksson said those drawbacks were outweighed by the positive side of managing a young English squad with significant potential.

"There are many things which made me take this decision," he said. "One is the team. The team is extremely good. If they are all fit we can do well in the tournament (Euro 2004). Another is the fans. Wherever we go England are well supported and I always get a very good reception from them."

Provided injury-prone players like Steven Gerrard and Michael Owen are fit, England will go into Euro 2004 as one of the favourites.

If he can deliver the country's first major tournament victory since the 1966 World Cup, Eriksson knows his apparent willingness to consider walking out on his job will be quickly forgiven.

Pink Beckham!

AFP, London

David Beckham is considering an offer to play a cameo role in the forthcoming Pink Panther movie, a spokeswoman for the Real Madrid and England stars said Friday.

Film-makers "have approached him to be in the film but he hasn't made a decision yet", the spokeswoman said.

The England captain would play a footballer, the Hollywood Reporter said, in the film that follows the bungling French detective Inspector Clouseau trying to solve the theft of the Pink Panther diamond.

Clouseau was to be played by US funnyman Steve Martin, film-makers have confirmed, in a revival of the "Pink Panther" movies made famously by Peter Sellers.

Production of "The Birth of the Pink Panther" was set to begin in May ahead of its planned July 2005 release.

Shawn Levy is to direct the film, produced by Robert Simonds.



DAVID BECKHAM

Bundesliga Bayern not giving up

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich thrashed Borussia Monchengladbach 5-2 on Saturday to keep alive their slim hopes of retaining their Bundesliga title.

Goals from Sammy Kuffour, Roque Santa Cruz, Roy Makaay, Owen Hargreaves and Michael Ballack left Bayern eight points behind leaders Werder Bremen who play at VfB Stuttgart on Sunday.

Bayern Leverkusen stayed in contention for a Champions

League spot when their 4-1 win over relegation-threatened Hertha Berlin left them in fourth spot and two points adrift of Stuttgart.

At the Munich Olympic Stadium, Kuffour opened the scoring after 20 minutes with a header from Bastian Schweinsteiger's cross, Paraguayan international Santa Cruz added the second six minutes before the break and Makaay made it 3-0 from the penalty spot after a foul on Ze Roberto.

Borussia made a belated comeback with two goals from Vaclav Sverkos before England interna-

national midfielder Hargreaves made the match safe for Bayern and Ballack contributed the fifth goal just before the whistle.

Two goals from each Brazilian striker Franca and Dimitar Berbatov carried Leverkusen to an easy home victory over increasingly desperate Berlin, for whom Marcelinho scored the sole goal.

Berlin are second from bottom, two points behind Hannover who pulled off a valuable 1-1 draw at home to Borussia Dortmund.

Torsten Frings' opener for Dortmund was equalised by first-

half substitute Thomas Christensen.

TOP SIX									
Standings in the German championship after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):									
Bremen	25	19	4	2	61	23	61		
Bayern	26	15	8	3	59	29	53		
Stuttgart	25	13	8	4	33	12	47		
Leverkusen	26	13	6	7	50	34	45		
Bochum	26	11	9	6	41	29	42		
Schalke	26	10	10	6	33	29	40		



Deportivo La Coruna's Uruguayan Walter Pandiani (L) tries to dodge Real Sociedad's Bjorn Kvarme at the Anoeta stadium in San Sebastian on March 27.

Primera Liga

Own-goal escape for Depor

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

A last-minute own goal gifted Deportivo Coruna a 2-1 win over Real Sociedad on Saturday, lifting them to third in the Primera Liga and soothing memories of this week's 4-1 Champions League thrashing by AC Milan.

Depor's second consecutive victory moved them a point ahead of in-form Barcelona, who visit Real Betis on Sunday. League leaders Real Madrid will host mid-table Sevilla defending a one-point lead over Valencia, who travel to Racing Santander.

Deportivo went ahead in the 11th minute with a shot from Uruguayan striker Walter Pandiani but the home side equalised just before halftime when Turkey's Nihat Kahveci shurged off two challenges and drilled the ball into the corner.

In a tight second half, neither team was able to break the deadlock until the second minute of

injury time.

Sociedad defender Aitor Lopez Rekarte tried to clear the ball over the bar under pressure from Deportivo striker Tristan in the penalty area but drove it high into his own net.

In Saturday's other match, lowly Espanyol pulled off a surprise 2-1 victory over fifth-placed Athletic Bilbao thanks to two goals from captain Raul Tamudo, boosting their chances of avoiding relegation.

Aletic, who had beaten Real 4-2 in their previous league match, ended the game with nine men after two red cards. The loss to third-from-bottom Espanyol was a setback to the club's UEFA Cup hopes with only eight matches left to play.

Deportivo troubled Sociedad from the outset and Pandiani, who scored Deportivo's only goal in the mid-week clash against Milan, had two opportunities in the first half.

His goal came from an incisive pass by Spanish midfielder Sergio that left Sociedad's defence stand-

ing while Pandiani crashed the ball past the keeper into the far side of the net.

Controversy surrounded Nihat's 43rd-minute equaliser as the Deportivo players accused him of tripping defender Cesar Martin before running clear on to a deep pass from Lopez Rekarte and driving it home.

Sociedad, already out of this season's Champions League and languishing 14th in the table, will feel unlucky not to have taken at least a point after having the best of the second half, with midfielder Valery Karpin missing a close-range chance.

TOP SIX									
Spanish league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):									
Real	29	18	7	4	58	35	61		
Valencia	29	18	6	5	57	21	60		
Deportivo	30	17	5	8	48	28	56		
Barcelona	29	16	7	6	48	32	55		
Bilbao	30	12	8	10	40	39	44		
Atletico	29	12	8	9	36	35	44		

Barca heads still high

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard insisted on Thursday the confidence of his club would not be damaged seriously by going out of the UEFA Cup to Celtic.

The Catalan club could only draw 0-0 with the Scots in the Nou Camp on Wednesday and so went down 1-0 on aggregate.

"This disappointment is not going to seriously affect us," said Rijkaard.

"Yes, the UEFA Cup was one of the big objectives for the season. The fans, the players, the directors, everyone at the club, all wanted to stay in this competition, but you can't always win at football," added the Dutch coach.

Optimism was high because Rijkaard's men have been winning so regularly in recent weeks.

Barca have strung together a nine-game winning run in the Spanish league, the second longest in club history, to climb to third after a poor start, just six points behind great rivals Real Madrid.

Barcelona-based sports daily Sport summed up the situation on its front page.

"Without a goal and without UEFA. Only the league remains," said the paper, needing no more words to emphasise that there was only one option left if Barca are to pick up their first trophy in five seasons.

The Madrid-based media, as usual, took the opportunity to gloat at Barca's expense.

"Barca skids to a halt. The elimination from the UEFA, an embarrassment," smirked sports daily Marca, Spain's biggest selling newspaper.

The headline was a little unfair given that Barca did everything they could to get a goal and were only thwarted by the brilliance of Celtic's 19 year-old goalkeeper David Marshall.

Marca only begrudgingly acknowledged the part the Celtic's rearguard played in the result.

"The Scots only came to defend their advantage," added Marca.

The Barcelona players themselves certainly didn't believe they embarrassed themselves.

"It wasn't a fiasco. Overall, we played better football than Celtic. It just shows that in a competition like this the best don't always progress," said Barca's Dutch midfielder Philip Cocu.

"The only thing we lacked was a goal and that was because their goalkeeper had the game of his life," commented striker Luis Garcia, who had a myriad of shots saved by Marshall.

"We are going to keep on playing like this though and then let's see what the results look like, especially against Real Betis on Sunday.