

Party pooped!

Football

AFP, Liverpool

An 18th birthday party thrown by England and Everton star Wayne Rooney for his girlfriend Colleen McLoughlin ended with the police being called in when a fight broke out.

Staff at the Devonshire House Hotel in Liverpool called police in



WAYNE ROONEY

the early hours of Sunday morning. A Merseyside Police spokeswoman confirmed they were called to the hotel, but there were no arrests.

"Officers were called to a disturbance at a private party at the Devonshire House Hotel at around 3.30 on Sunday morning," she said.

"Officers attended but no offences were reported and nobody was arrested."

Rooney's agent Paul Stretford said the brawl had distressed the footballer and his wife-to-be.

"We are aware an incident took place and obviously it was very upsetting for Wayne and Coleen as she was celebrating her 18th birthday," he said.

"Neither Wayne nor Coleen were injured during the incident, nor were they or any members of their immediate family involved in the incident."

Rooney was joined by teammates and around 200 family and friends for the party.

The Sun newspaper reported that Rooney's parents got into a fight with his girlfriend's family.



PHOTO: AP

YUPPPY! Barcelona's Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho slides into a huge puddle on a rain-soaked pitch at the Manuel Ruiz de Lopera stadium in Seville on March 28. Barcelona's game here against Real Betis was called off at the last moment due a waterlogged pitch.

Primera Liga Real entertainment

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid withstood the pressure from second-placed Valencia and retained top spot in the Primera Liga on Sunday when they powered their way to a stunning 5-1 win over mid-table Sevilla at the Bernabeu.

The victory enabled the reigning champions to retain their narrow one-point lead over Valencia, who claimed a no less impressive 3-0 win over Racing Santander earlier on Sunday.

Goals from Real's Santiago Solari and Ronaldo, both coming after top quality passes from a rejuvenated David Beckham, gave the leaders a comfortable 2-0 cushion at the break.

But they moved up a gear in the second half, completing an authoritative win with a classy strike from midfielder Zinedine Zidane, a powerful shot from defender Michel Salgado and a mesmerising solo effort from striker Ronaldo.

Deportivo Coruna are a distant third, eight points behind Real Madrid, after a last-gasp own goal gifted them a 2-1 win at Real Sociedad on Saturday.

Fourth-placed Barcelona were frustrated in their hope of extending a winning run of 10 league

matches after their game at Real Betis was called off due to a waterlogged pitch.

Valencia midfielder Vicente produced a virtuoso performance, scoring twice and making another goal as he steered his side to victory over Racing.

The Spain international saw his angled cross ricochet off Racing defender Ayoze's knee into the net in the ninth minute and extended their lead on the stroke of halftime by drilling home after a lofted pass from midfielder David Albelda.

Vicente completed his masterclass 14 minutes from time when he picked up a long pass from goalkeeper Santiago Canizares, cut inside two defenders and fired in low at the nearpost.

Real Madrid made light of the pressure from Valencia at the top, though, as they got off to a flying start against Sevilla.

Solari, in the team for the suspended Luis Figo, gave his side the lead on six minutes with a firm strike after Beckham had threaded a pinpoint pass through the Sevilla defence.

The England captain, playing his best game for Real since the turn of the year, also set up his side's second goal on the stroke of halftime.

His trademark swirling cross from the right was perfectly placed for Ronaldo to nod home with a fine

glancing header at the nearpost.

Sevilla pulled one back 14 minutes into the second half when Brazilian striker Julio Baptista scored from the penalty spot after Maranon had been pushed in the back by Solari.

But the visitors barely had time to scent a comeback before Real had restored a two-goal lead, Zidane dinking the ball over Sevilla keeper Esteban after latching on to a great through-ball from Guti.

Defender Salgado made it 4-1 when he smashed high into the net after Esteban had palmed a Ronaldo shot into his path on 75 minutes.

However, it was left to the outstanding Brazilian to close the show with a cheeky fifth as he mesmerised Esteban with the merest hint of a shimmy and then slotted the ball past him into the net to score his 24th league goal of the season.

TOP SIX					
Spanish league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):					
Real	30	19	7	4	63 36 64
Valencia	30	19	6	5	60 21 63
Deportivo	30	17	5	8	48 28 56
Barcelona	29	16	7	6	48 32 55
Athletic	30	12	9	9	36 35 45
Osasuna	30	10	14	6	31 26 44

Serie A Shevchenko to the rescue

Football

AFP, Milan

Andrei Shevchenko's header in the seventh minute of stoppage time gave league leaders AC Milan a last-gasp 2-2 draw against Chievo on Sunday as the European champions recovered from being two goals down at half-time to earn a precious point at the San Siro.

Milan's surprise slip-up gave title-holders Juventus a tiny glimmer of hope of retaining the Scudetto as they defeated struggling Modena 3-1 in Turin to leapfrog Roma into second-place.

Roma fell to third after losing 2-1 at home to Bologna, but they do have a game in hand on Milan and have to play the European champions.

Milan have 68 points from their 27 matches played, nine more than Juve and 11 ahead of Roma, who have played a match less than their two championship rivals.

Shevchenko admitted the busy fixture schedule was taking its toll on weary legs.

"We were a bit tired and not our usual brilliant selves, but it is normal after so many games," he said.

"The important thing is that we never gave up and managed to come back and take a point. It was a very difficult game, but Milan showed great character."

Milan president, Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, applauded Chievo for giving his star-studded team many awkward moments.

"The result was fair as Chievo played a great match," he said.

"They showed great technique and tactical sense, but credit to my

players for not giving up hope. "In certain moments we failed to do the easiest things, but it is a good draw."

Milan, so impressive in their 4-1 win over Deportivo La Coruna five days ago, struggled to contain the Verona minnows whose quick counter-attacks brought them two first-half goals from Giuseppe Sculli and Simone Perrotta.

The home side threw everything at Chievo in the second-half and were rewarded 10 minutes from time as Andrea Pirlo's 30-yard screamer found the top corner.

With Chievo clinging on desperately, Milan's last throw of the dice was a high ball into the box from Manuel Rui Costa, and Shevchenko rose above a posse of players to head in his 20th goal of the campaign.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti made just one change to the team that was so impressive in defeating Deportivo La Coruna 4-1 in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final with Danish striker Jon Dahl Tomasson replacing Shevchenko in attack.

Milan may have been irresistible against the Spaniards but they looked disjointed in the early stages against a Chievo side who love nothing more than upsetting the odds and the visitors took a deserved lead in the 22nd minute.

Brazilian winger Luciano broke down the left and delivered a low ball into the box for Federico Cossato whose clever dummy set up Giuseppe Sculli and his fierce shot gave Milan keeper Nelson Dida no chance.

Worse was to follow for Milan six minutes before half-time.

Luciano played in Simone Perrotta on the right-hand side of

the box and he cut inside Milan captain Paolo Maldini to fire an unstoppable left-foot shot high into the net.

Just as it seemed as if it was going to be one of those days for Milan, Pirlo's piledriver nearly broke the net before Shevchenko, who had replaced Tomasson at half-time, completed the comeback with almost the last touch of the game.

French striker David Trezeguet scored twice as Juve overcame struggling Modena at the Delle Alpi stadium, while Albanian striker Igli Tare netted a 78th minute winner as Bologna won at Roma.

Lazio and Parma ensured the battle for the fourth and final Champions League place will go right down to the wire with victories over Perugia and Empoli respectively.

Inter Milan, the only Italian survivors in the UEFA Cup, continued their improving form with a 2-0 victory at relegation-threatened Reggina.

Cedric Konan scored a late equaliser as Lecce drew 2-2 at Sampdoria, while an early Tore Andre Flo goal gave Siena the edge over Udinese.

Bottom club Ancona were thrashed 5-2 at Brescia for whom Roberto Baggio scored twice.

TOP SIX					
Italian football league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, for, against, points):					
Milan	27	21	5	1	55 18 68
Juventus	27	18	5	4	54 31 59
Roma	26	17	6	3	56 13 58
Lazio	26	13	5	8	38 28 44
Parma	27	12	8	7	42 37 44
Inter	27	12	7	8	44 27 43

Residents fear the worst

Football

AFP, Lisbon

More than one in two residents of Portugal, 55 percent, feel their country will not be able to guarantee security at the European football finals this summer, a poll published Sunday found.

Only one in three were confident in the country's ability to ensure the championship will take place without incident with the rest undecided, according to the survey reported by daily newspaper Diario de Noticias and private radio station TSF.

Young people and women were far more likely to say the country will not be able to provide adequate security at Euro 2004, the largest sports event ever held in Portugal, than men, the poll found.

Portugal has canceled all police leave during the June 12-July 4 tournament and has spent 16.5 million euros (20 million dollars) on new police equipment, including the country's first water cannon vehicles, to prepare for the event.

Until the March 11 commuter train bombings in neighbouring Spain which killed nearly 200 people, Portuguese security plans for the championship had focused primarily on the risk of hooliganism.

But since the Madrid attacks officials in Lisbon have revised their security plans for the 16-nation tournament to take greater account of the risk of a terrorist strike.

Prime Minister Jose Manuel Durao Barroso said last week that Portugal would ask NATO for radar surveillance planes and logistical aid to help bolster security during the football finals.

Lisbon also announced shortly after the attacks in Madrid that it would reinstate border checks along its frontier with Spain in late May to beef up security for Euro 2004.

Passport checks at borders between 15 mostly EU countries were eliminated under the 1995 Schengen agreement, which was intended to speed up travel and trade within Europe.

The border controls will remain in place until the end of the tournament, which will be played at 10 stadiums across the country.

Portugal, like Spain, was a vocal supporter of the US-led war against Iraq, and the bombings in Madrid have heightened fears that the country could also become a target for Islamic extremists.

The Marktest telephone poll of 807 people was carried out between March 16 and 19, just days after the Madrid bombings.

Premiership Gunners' mark at MU's expense

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal's eclipse of Manchester United as the dominant force in English football was underlined here on Sunday as Arsene Wenger's side extended their unbeaten start to the season to a record 30 matches.

Louis Saha's late equaliser ensured United came away with their dignity intact after Thierry Henry had given the Gunners the lead five minutes after the break.

But the 1-1 scoreline could hardly have been further removed from the overall pattern of a match

that left no one watching in any doubt about Arsenal's belief that they are the masters now.

"This week we have given everything," said Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger whose team are also favourites to make the Champions League semi-finals after their 1-1 draw at Chelsea in midweek.

"We wanted to win this game because we are so hungry. We had chances to go 2-1 but it is a remarkable achievement to get to 30 games unbeaten."

"As a manager, you would say that the most difficult thing is to get consistency. It means a lot to get to the record, not as much as winning trophies but winning trophies is a consequence of consistency."

"I think this team is more about winning trophies than making records."

United manager Alex Ferguson admitted that the title race was as good as over for this season.

"I think they will go on and win the league now," he said.

"But we have taken a lot of credit out of the game. We played with a lot of tenacity. We have shown we have got good players and I think people have forgotten about that."

"I think we have shown we are not dead."

The London club's superiority was such that they were able to afford the luxury of squandering a series of good first-half chances before Henry finally found the net with a strike of imperious authority.

An exchange of passes with Jose Antonio Reyes nearly 30 yards out was followed by the Frenchman unleashing a shot that beat Roy Carroll for sheer pace as it swerved into the net in the middle of the United goal.

Ferguson could rightly demand to know why his defenders had not closed down Henry in such dangerous territory. But the reality was that United's back four had performed creditably well to prevent Arsenal taking the lead much earlier in the match.

Even after Saha had tapped in a cross from fellow substitute Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Arsenal could and should have clinched all three points when Lauren fired straight at Roy Carroll's legs from eight yards.

As it was, they had to settle for a single point that leaves them seven points clear of Chelsea and, with games against Liverpool and Newcastle up next, a little bit of work still to do to clinch the title.

From a United perspective, the omens for Saturday's FA Cup semi-

final between the two sides are not encouraging.

Henry's unrivalled ability to create as many goals as he finishes might have seen the Gunners take the lead inside the first ten minutes.

Twice in the space of a minute, deft passes from the Frenchman put Freddie Ljungberg into enticing shooting positions inside the United box; the Swede thwarted first by a superb Wes Brown tackle then by goalkeeper Roy Carroll's block when he might have done better to square the ball rather than shooting from a tight angle.

United responded immediately. Eric Djemba Djemba chested down a clearance on the edge of the area, flicked the ball over Sol Campbell and struck a sweet left-foot volley that drew a good save from Jens Lehmann diving low to his right.

With the exception of a laughable attempt at a dive from Gary Neville, that was to prove United's only moment of real menace in an opening period which accurately reflects the chasm that currently separates the two sides in terms of confidence.

Reyes was twice denied his first Premiership goal by Carroll and the young Spaniard received a back-handed compliment for his efforts in the form of a scything tackle from behind from Neville.

The England full-back was lucky to escape a booking and United were spared further punishment when Henry curled the free-kick into the arms of Carroll.

Edu lifted an equally inviting free-kick high into the stand but it was Henry who spurned the clearest opportunity before the break.

Ljungberg's perfectly weighted through ball from the half-way line split the United centre-backs and left Henry with only Carroll to beat from 14 yards.

Nine times out of ten, the Frenchman would have struck a first-time shot. Instead, on this occasion, he attempted to cut inside Carroll and Mikael Silvestre, letting the chance slip away with a poor first touch. Realising his error, Henry tumbled to the turf but referee Graham Poll correctly ignored the Highbury crowd's screams for a penalty.

The home supporters did not have to wait long for their idol to resume normal service. Within five

minutes of the restart he had blasted in his 104th Premiership goal, equalling Ian Wright's club record.

United had a penalty appeal of their own turned down minutes after the goal when Ryan Giggs got away from Sol Campbell on the right hand side of the box. The England defender slipped and appeared to clip the Welshman's heels. Poll again waved play-on and television replays suggested any contact had come outside the box.

THE GUNNERS JUGGERNAUT

AFP, London

Arsenal drew 1-1 against Manchester United at Highbury on Sunday to set a new record (30 matches) for an unbeaten start to a league season.

Here, AFP Sport presents the Gunners' match-by-match path to their new record (H-Home, A-Away):

- Aug 16: H bt Everton 2-1
- Aug 24: A bt Middlesbrough 4-0
- Aug 27: H bt Aston Villa 2-0
- Aug 31: A bt Man City 2-1
- Sept 13: H drew Portsmouth 1-1
- Sept 21: A drew Man Utd 0-0
- Sept 26: H bt Newcastle 3-2
- Oct 04: A bt Liverpool 2-1
- Oct 18: H bt Chelsea 2-1
- Oct 26: A drew Charlton 1-1
- Nov 01: A bt Leeds 4-1
- Nov 08: H bt Tottenham 2-1
- Nov 22: A bt Birmingham 3-0
- Nov 30: H drew Fulham 0-0
- Dec 06: A drew Leicester 1-1
- Dec 14: H bt Blackburn 1-0
- Dec 20: A drew Bolton 1-1
- Dec 26: H bt Wolves 3-0
- Dec 29: A bt Southampton 1-0
- Jan 07: A drew Everton 1-1
- Jan 10: H bt Middlesbrough 4-1
- Jan 18: A bt Aston Villa 2-0
- Feb 01: H bt Man City 2-1
- Feb 07: A bt Wolves 3-1
- Feb 10: H bt Southampton 2-0
- Feb 21: A bt Chelsea 2-1
- Feb 28: H bt Charlton 2-1
- March 13: A bt Blackburn 2-0
- March 20: H bt Bolton 2-1
- March 28: H drew Man Utd 1-1

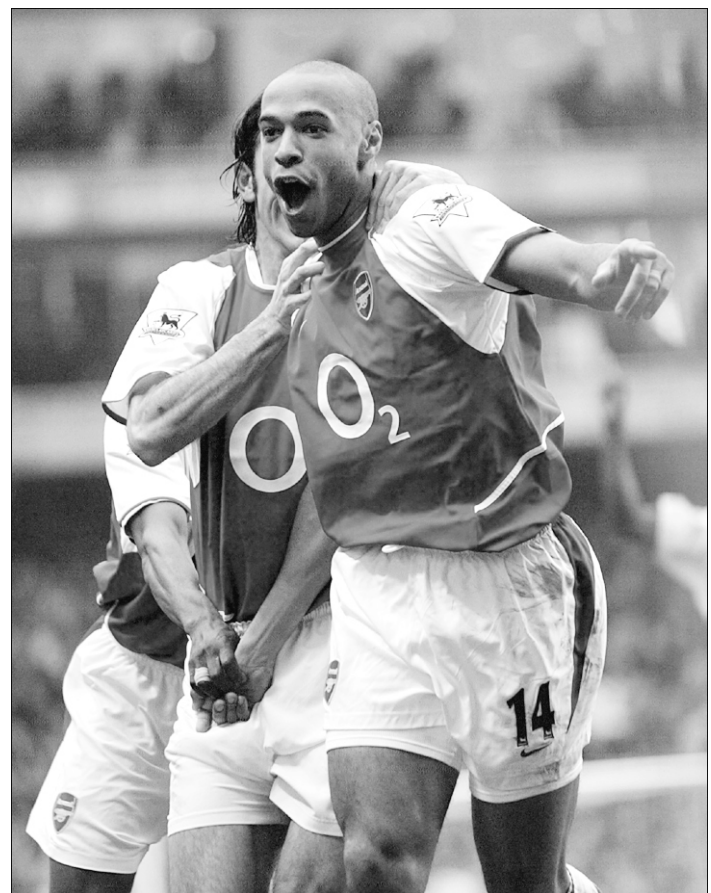


PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal superstar Thierry Henry is euphoric after his stunning long-range goal against Manchester United at Highbury on March 28.

TOP SIX					
English Premiership standings after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):					
Arsenal	30	22	8	0	58 20 74
Chelsea	30	21	4	5	57 24 67
Man Utd	30	19	5	6	56 30 62
Liverpool	30	12	10	8	42 31 46
Newcastle	30	11	12	7	41 31 45
Birmingham	30	12	9	9	37 36 45



PHOTO: AFP

WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU ARE GOING? AC Milan captain Paolo Maldini (L) tackles Chievo forward Giuseppe Locri at the San Siro stadium in Milan on March 28.