



Real Madrid superstar Luis Figo (C) is under pressure from two Deportivo La Coruna players during their Primera Liga fixture at Riazor Stadium, in Coruna on Saturday.

Primera Liga

Real face doom

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid crashed to a potentially crucial 2-0 defeat against a second-string Deportivo La Coruna to leave the way clear for Valencia to win the Spanish title.

Real's rapidly deteriorating season got worse after a defeat in northern Spain against a team which chose to rest many of their first-choice players for Tuesday's Champions League semi-final

second leg match against FC Porto. Real had Zinedine Zidane sent off just before half-time and hit the woodwork three times while Diego Tristan scored in the 29th minute and Joan Capdevila added a second goal on 69 minutes to give the home side victory.

Real remain one point behind league leaders Valencia who can open up a four-point lead if they win at home to Real Betis on Sunday. Real started well, David Beckham's pass releasing Esteban Cambiasso but his shot hit the post.

Zidane picked up his first yellow card after a quarter of an hour before Deportivo took the lead. Djalminha started the move and Sergio streaked down the wing but was blocked by Real keeper Iker Casillas. The ball landed at the feet of Diego Tristan who stroked it through the legs of Raul Bravo and into the net.

Real were unlucky ten minutes later when Ronaldo hit a post but they went down to ten men three minutes before the break after Zidane tripped Djalminha from

behind and received his second yellow card.

Ronaldo wasted a header after the break and Diego Tristan was twice foiled by Casillas before Capdevila applied the killer touch from a free kick, leaving Real's season in tatters.

Chasing a Spanish Cup, League and Champions League treble, they could now be left with nothing to show for the tens of millions spent on players.

In the night's other match, Atletico Madrid beat Celta Vigo 3-2

Come and get Ronaldo!

INTERNET SOURCE

Real Madrid have reportedly told Chelsea they can forget about David Beckham, but Ronaldo is available if they're prepared to meet their asking price.

On Beckham, Real Madrid sports director Jorge Valdano told the Observer, "Nothing has changed. I have spoken to him and he is calm.

"It is this time of the year where there are more rumours than real stories. The fact remains that Beckham has signed a five-year contract with us and there is a buy-out clause in it [of £126 million] that anybody interested in signing Beckham must pay."

He also said, "We know Ronaldo has a price, the £126 million of his buy-out clause. To us Ronaldo has a huge strategic importance - but so does £126 million."

Rivaldo likes Bolton attitude

AFP, London

Rivaldo, in South America thinking over a deal with Bolton, said he was very impressed with the Premiership side.

The News of the World reported Sunday that the 1999 FIFA World Player of the Year and 2002 World Cup winner said discussions with manager Sam Allardyce and chairman Phil Gartside won him over.

The 32-year-old Rivaldo said: "I do not want anyone in Bolton to think that, if I play there, I am doing it for the wrong reasons.

"I am grateful to Sam Allardyce for the chance they want to give me and all I can say is how impressed I am with their whole set-up.

"The seriousness of the Bolton officials I met - Sam and Phil Gartside - won me over. I know I've played for big clubs in the past but it won't be a problem for me to adapt.

"I will be busy playing, getting in shape and learning English and being in a smaller town will help me do that. And I want the challenge of trying to get Bolton into Europe for the first time in their history. It is an exciting time."

Scoring against death

Football

AP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona said Friday he feared for his life during his 12-day hospital stay for heart and lung problems, making his first public comments after leaving intensive care.

The 43-year-old soccer great at times rambled in slurred speech during a one-hour interview with Argentine talk show host Susana Gimenez and offered thanks to his fans for their support during his ordeal.

"I want to thank the people who prayed for me," he said. "I saw death up close and I wanted them to cover me, to caress me."

His eyes welling with tears, Maradona added: "When God decides its time, I guess he'll come for us."

Maradona spoke hours after his father, who is also named Diego, was hospitalized.

The elder Maradona checked into the Institute Sacre Coeur in downtown Buenos Aires with a respiratory infection, said a hospital spokesman, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

During his first full day out of the hospital, Maradona played golf and walked on a secluded country estate on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

It remained unclear what steps the soccer idol would take next with his medical care after he unexpectedly checked out of the private Suizo-Argentina Clinic on Thursday afternoon.

When he left the hospital, Maradona's medical team said he would seek "more personalized treatment" with help from his own doctor.

But Maradona didn't say whether he intended to keep up his treatment in Argentina or return to Cuba, where he moved four years ago to undergo drug rehabilitation for cocaine addiction.

He instead said he planned to spend the summer in Italy. "I have some work there," he said.

Maradona returned to Argentina on personal business more than a month ago and was hospitalized on April 18, complaining of chest pains and fever.

He spent much of last week listed in critical condition, breathing with the help of a respirator and under heavy sedation.

Maradona's family has said drugs had nothing to do with the hospitalization.

His departure from the clinic came after a string of upbeat medical reports - but just one day after his medical team said he would remain in intensive care for at least a few extra days "to help speed up his recovery."

It was his second emergency hospitalization in recent years.

In January 2000, he was hospitalized in Uruguay and diagnosed with a severe heart condition and later sought medical help in Cuba.



Diego Maradona

Fergie's Ruud & Roy theory

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson has hit out at speculation surrounding star players Ruud van Nistelrooy and Roy Keane, saying unfounded gossip has become "silly and dangerous."

Both players and Ferguson all appeared together in a show of unity in an attempt to make it clear the players would be staying at Old Trafford beyond this season.

United normally do not comment on transfer rumours but, according to Ferguson, the magnitude of the "gossip" meant something had to be done.

"When I first came to Manchester United 17 years ago, I was linked with 112 players in a single year," the Scot said late Friday.

"I am experienced enough to know that this club makes news on the front and back pages. That doesn't surprise me. What annoys me is that the increasing crescendo of unfounded gossip is becoming silly and dangerous.

"You wonder if people are trying to dismantle the spirit in the club or if they are trying to unbalance us before the FA Cup final.

"Whatever the reasons, it's important that we clarify the situation for the benefit of everyone concerned."

Ferguson and his two stars unequivocally spelt out the situation - both players are staying where they are.

Some of the other "gossip" was also explained by the trio.

Van Nistelrooy did have a minor training ground argument with David Bellion last week, but it was no more ferocious than the normal day-to-day spats at any club.

Ferguson has not fallen out with

him with Madrid are emanating from Real themselves in the hope speculation will help them land a player who has scored 106 times in less than three seasons since his 19-million-pound move from PSV Eindhoven.

The tactic has worked in the past, notably with Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldo and van Nistelrooy's agent Rodger Linse is known to have held high level discussions with Real officials.

However any movement towards a transfer has now been stopped by the Dutchman.

"Rodger is my agent, he works for me," said the 27-year-old forward. "I told him I want to stay. He knows that and he is not talking to anybody else about me."

"I signed a new contract in January and I said in the past I am going nowhere. I want to stay and be part of the club over the next four years and I will keep reminding everybody that is the case."

"We are building a new team at Manchester United and I want to be part of it. I want to be successful at this club."

One of the major reasons previous denials have been dismissed so swiftly, even by fans, is they are so reminiscent of the ones produced 12 months ago to head off transfer talk linking David Beckham with the move to Real Madrid that eventually went through in July.

Old Trafford officials have been quick to point out that since then, David Gill has replaced Peter Kenyon as chief executive, while director of communications Paddy Harverson has also departed.

Keane is still troubled by the hamstring problem that forced him out of Ireland's midweek trip to Poland, while van Nistelrooy missed last weekend's disappointing home loss to Liverpool with a thigh strain.

Keane added: "Without a doubt, I will be here next season and beyond that probably. I have two years left on my contract and I see this as being my last club."

As for van Nistelrooy, he said: "The rumours haven't been unsettling for me because I know the situation and I know what really is going on - I am going nowhere."

"But I can imagine that people will read things and think about it. That is why I want to clear it for everybody else."

It is thought the stories linking



Alex Ferguson

Premiership

Foxes' brief honeymoon over

Football

REUTERS, London

Leicester City were condemned to relegation after one season in the premier league despite a 2-2 draw at Charlton Athletic.

With two games remaining, Leicester, who have endured a tough season on and off the pitch, cannot catch fourth-bottom Manchester City, who beat injury-hit Newcastle United 1-0 with a Paulo Wanchope header on Saturday.

Wolverhampton Wanderers will need a mathematical miracle if they are not to join Leicester in an immediate return to the English first division despite coming from behind to beat Everton 2-1.

Leeds United, who visit Bolton Wanderers on Sunday, look favourites to join them in going down but still have an outside chance of survival.

At the top, Chelsea consolidated their grip on second place with a 4-0 home win over Southampton. With two games remaining they are four points ahead of Manchester United, who lost 1-0 at Blackburn Rovers.

Arsenal, crowned champions almost a week ago, remained on course to go through the league season unbeaten after a 0-0 home draw with Birmingham City.

The champions have 83 points from 35 games. Chelsea, who face Monaco in the second leg of their Champions League semi-final on Wednesday, look certain to claim automatic qualification for the group stage of the competition next season as they moved on to 75 points from 36 games.

Manchester United, who put out almost a reserve side at Blackburn, have 71 points, also with two games left.

Bundesliga

Six star Bremen

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen retained their six-point advantage at the Bundesliga summit with a resounding 6-0 win over SV Hamburg and can dethrone Bayern Munich as champions in next Saturday's showdown in Bavaria.

"We scored some great goals and gave the fans something to enjoy," enthused Bremen chief Thomas Schaaf.

Werder effectively need one point against Bayern to seal the title as they have a far superior goal difference - 12 goals better than Bayern - with just three games remaining.

Bayern have not waved the white flag but needed all their resilience to defeat Cologne 2-1 and cling to Bremen's coat tails.

FIFA WC 2010

Egypt to fight till end

Football

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt says it is far from certain which African country will host the 2010 World Cup finals and the battle will continue up until FIFA's executive committee votes on the issue on May 15.

Although Morocco and South Africa are widely considered as the neck-and-neck favourites to win the vote with Libya and Tunisia the outsiders, Egypt's minister for Youth and Sports Ali el din Hilal says Egypt has the experience and popular support to host the finals.

He added too that most of Egypt's stadiums would be ready by 2006 for the African Nations Cup to be held in the Arab state.

"With the exception of possibly two members of FIFA who have already made their positions known, most of them say: we will keep our final decision until May 14 when we will review the situation," Hilal told Reuters in an interview.

Michel Platini of France and Angel Maria Villar Llona of Spain have publicly backed four-time bidder Morocco, but the other 22 members of FIFA's executive have, in the main, kept their cards more firmly to their

chests. But Hilal said the major deciding issue was the reports of the inspection teams.

"One major factor which has not been released yet is the reports of the inspection group. Some people say we have a guarantee of six...seven votes. I think it's all part of the psychological warfare. No one can be guaranteeing anything," he said.

He said when Egypt hosted the under-17 Junior World Cup in 1997, the event enjoyed the largest attendances in its history, with about 75,000 fans packed into the Cairo stadium for the opening and closing matches.

In Egypt, the Arab world's most populous nation with more than 70 million people, football has a huge following with most fans supporting not just a local team but also at least one other team from the English premier league or elsewhere in Europe.

Hilal said FIFA would be looking at security and stability as major concerns in its decision where to hold the World Cup.

"You are hosting some 2.5 to three million visitors. You cannot have soldiers on the streets everywhere, isolating the public and not allowing the public to join in," Hilal said.

Egypt is seen as a haven of stability and security in a region stricken with

violence with the U.S.-led war in Iraq and growing tensions in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The minister added Egypt received some six million tourists last year, amply showing its ability to deal with the influx of fans during the competition.

When asked if the jammed streets of the Cairo metropolis could cope with the added traffic, Hilal said the finals would also be staged in seven other cities to alleviate concerns about the capital's already straining streets.

"In our bid we make a number of commitments such as the extension of the metro to the airport," he said.

He added Egypt was the only bidding nation to have two TV satellites, and said this was important as FIFA's main revenues from the World Cup would come from television rights.

Hilal also said Egypt's reputation as a warm and welcoming nation would influence FIFA's decision.

"We say 2010 Egypt is the family World Cup. Egypt will host not just football fans but their families and children."

Egypt were the first African nation to take part in the World Cup finals in 1934 and qualified a second time in 1990.



WILL THE PHARAOHS SMILE: Egyptians wave flags as they gather at the ancient Pyramids in Giza to attend a promotion rally for their 2010 soccer World Cup bid on April 30.

PHOTO: AFP