

BIG DISAPPOINTMENT: A combo photo showing Real Madrid's David Beckham (L) and Javier Saviola of Barcelona after their respective Primera Liga encounters ended in defeats on Saturday.

Primera Liga

Champs-elect Valencia

Real, Barca both tumble

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona and Real Madrid as good as handed the Spanish title to Valencia when they both lost on Saturday.

Barcelona went down 1-0 at Celta Vigo while Real Madrid lost 3-2 at home to perennial bogey team Real Mallorca.

Valencia have a four-point advantage and if they win at Sevilla on Sunday, the UEFA Cup finalists will secure their second Spanish title in three years with two games left to play.

"The end of the season has been terrible," bemoaned Real Madrid striker Ronaldo, the Spanish first division's leading scorer.

Real have only won once in their last five league matches, including three consecutive losses at home.

"We tried but nothing has gone right for us," added the Brazilian World Cup winner, who had a goal disallowed against Mallorca.

Mallorca's Samuel Eto'o opened the scoring against Madrid after just 11 minutes after latching onto a long pass from the midfield, his fourth consecutive visit to the Santiago

Bernabeu when he has scored. Francisco Pavon then took just another six minutes to level the score, the defender rising above the Mallorca defence to head home the first league goal of his professional career from a David Beckham corner.

However, Mallorca constantly pressed the fragile Real defence and Eto'o found their weak spot again after 37 minutes.

Picking the ball just inside Real's half, the Cameroon international and African Player of the Year dashed past three Real players before slotting the ball home from just inside the edge of the area for his 17th goal of the season.

Alejandro Campano then added to Madrid's misery by getting Mallorca's third, from a direct free kick, three minutes before the break.

Luis Figo narrowed the gap six minutes after half time from the penalty spot after the referee Eduardo Iturralde Gonzalez ruled that Sasa Delibasic had pushed Portugal's captain, but television replays left a lot of doubt about the decision.

Ronaldo had the Santiago Bernabeu on its feet shortly afterwards when he had the ball in the

net but Iturralde Gonzalez's eyes were sharper on this occasion and spotted the Brazilian had handled to ball.

Ronaldo picked up a yellow card into the bargain and will miss next week's trip to bottom club Murcia. Barcelona lost their first game in more than four months at struggling Celta Vigo earlier on Saturday.

"The league has slipped out of our hands," conceded Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard.

"It's sad because we had a good effort to get back in contention but in the end I think the three points we lost here now make it too far away.

"We had plenty of possession and were not short of ambition but Celta out-thought us with three central defenders," added the Dutch coach.

The only goal of the tense game, in which both sides had chances but neither shone, came two minutes before the break.

Celta's Juan Velasco sent in a cross from wide on the right and Alexander Mostovoi laid it back for Edu to find the net.

Edu proved to be a constant thorn in the side of a lacklustre Barca, who had been unbeaten in their previous 17 games.

The Brazilian nearly put Celta

further ahead after 67 minutes only for Oleguer Presas to drag him down in the box but French midfielder Peter Luccini had his penalty saved by Barca keeper Victor Valdes.

Barcelona almost grabbed a late equaliser four minutes from time when Javier Saviola unleashed a shot that had to be headed off the line by Spanish international defender Juanfran Garcia.

Celta's win means they are out of the relegation zone for the first time in 10 weeks but all the other six teams that can still fill the remaining two relegation slots play on Sunday.

Murcia, last year's second division champions, are at the foot of the table and already assured of going straight back down.

TOP SIX

Spanish league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points): Valencia 35 22 8 5 68 24 74; Real Madrid 36 21 7 8 70 48 70; Barcelona 36 20 9 7 61 37 69; Deportivo 35 19 8 8 56 32 65; Bilbao 35 14 10 11 49 42 52; Madrid 35 14 9 12 44 46 51

Bundesliga

Brilliant Bremen

Football

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen lifted their first German championship in 11 years with a sensational 3-1 win over reigning champions Bayern Munich at the Olympic Stadium on Saturday.

Bremen move nine points ahead of holders Bayern, who suffered their first home defeat of the season,

REVIOUS WINNER

AFP, Berlin

After Werder Bremen won the Bundesliga title on Saturday here is a list of the last 10 winners of the German league title: 2004: Werder Bremen; 2003: Bayern Munich; 2002: Borussia Dortmund; 2001: Bayern Munich; 2000: Bayern Munich; 1999: Bayern Munich; 1998: Kaiserslautern; 1997: Bayern Munich; 1996: Borussia Dortmund; 1995: Borussia Dortmund

with two games left to play.

It is Bremen's fourth championship win in all following their triumphs in 1965, 1988 and 1993 and will taste all the sweeter as it was clinched on Bayern's own patch.

"I think it is sensational what this team has achieved," said a jubilant Bremen manager Thomas Schaaf. "The fact that Uli Hoeness (Bayern general manager) congratulated us shows there is a mutual respect."

Bremen now have the chance of a league and cup double if they can defeat Second Division outfit Alemannia Aachen in the German Cup final on May 26 in Berlin.

A first-half goal blitz did the damage for Bremen with Croat Ivan Klasnic, Frenchman Johan Micoud and Brazilian Ailton scoring inside 35 minutes.

When the title contenders were being discussed in pre-season, Bayern, Borussia Dortmund and VfB Stuttgart came to the fore, but not many pundits would have wagered on a team eliminated in the

Intertoto Cup by Austrian minnows SV Pasching.

However, Bremen have gone 23 games unbeaten to defy the odds and topple Bayern -- who they finished 23 points behind last season -- with some adventurous football this term.

"Sometimes you have lows in football," said Bayern chief Ottmar Hitzfeld.

"It cannot just be running around celebrating all the time.

"I have congratulated Thomas Schaaf as Bremen played the best football this season."

Schaaf claimed Bremen would

attack from the first whistle in Bavaria and he was good to his word as the visitors swamped Bayern in the opening exchanges.

Bayern captain and goalkeeper Oliver Kahn insisted Bremen were feeling the pressure before the match but those words came back to haunt him on 19 minutes with a calamitous error.

Brazilian Ailton fed strike partner Ivan Klasnic but Kahn seemed to have the situation in hand reaching the ball first before inexplicably fumbling, allowing Croat Klasnic to slot home into an empty net.

"It is ironic that Kahn -- one of our

best players this season - made the mistake," pointed out Hitzfeld.

It has been a difficult time for the 34-year-old international keeper, who conceded five goals in Germany's 5-1 thrashing by Romania in Bucharest, and things did not improve.

French international Johan Micoud lobbed him magnificently seven minutes later to make it 2-0.

"We dedicate this title to our fantastic fans," added Micoud.

Then in the 35th minute Ailton notched his 27th goal of a productive campaign, curling a 25-yard shot into the top corner past the despairing Kahn.

The travelling contingent of Bremen supporters were in a state of delirium.

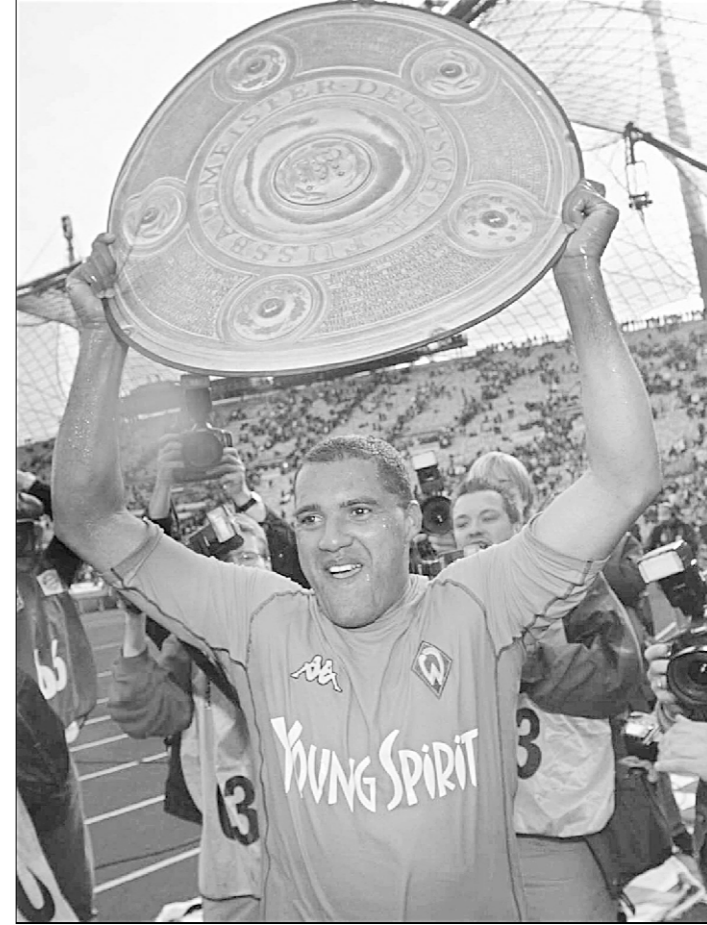
Dutch international Roy Makaay reduced the arrears on 56 minutes after Bremen switched off but it was just a momentary lapse as Bremen held their nerve and dethroned Bayern as German champions.

The only consolation for Bayern, who have ended the season empty-handed, was that third-placed Stuttgart did not take advantage of their slip-up tasting a 2-1 defeat at SV Hamburg.

Felix Magath's side will be kicking themselves as they could have moved to within one point of Munich with victory.

Borussia Dortmund's chances of playing European football in 2004/05 suffered a blow following a surprise 6-2 thumping by struggling Hertha Berlin in the capital.

Champions just two seasons ago, Dortmund remain fifth but VfL Bochum can leapfrog them into the final UEFA Cup spot with a draw against SC Freiburg on Sunday.



THIS WILL DO: Bremen's Brazilian striker Ailton's celebrates with a replica of the Bundesliga trophy after defeating reigning champions Bayern Munich 3-1 at the Munich Olympic stadium on May 8.

TOP SIX

German league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points): Werder Bremen 22 8 2 76 29 74; Bayern Munich 32 19 8 5 67 36 65; VfB Stuttgart 32 17 10 5 49 21 61; Leverkusen 32 17 8 7 65 37 59; Dortmund 32 15 6 11 55 46 51; VfL Bochum 31 13 11 7 49 35 50

Premiership

Houllier can smile

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea got the point they needed against Manchester United to secure second place in the Premiership on Saturday as it emerged that their manager Claudio Ranieri might not be sacked this summer after all.

Gerard Houllier's chances of still being in charge of Liverpool next season also increased significantly after his side won 3-0 at Birmingham to tighten their grip on pole position in the race for fourth place and the final qualifying place for the Champions League.

Goals from England trio Michael Owen, Emile Heskey and Steven Gerrard earned Liverpool a convincing win that effectively ended Aston Villa's chances of finishing fourth.

There has been speculation that Heskey will be on his way out of Anfield in the summer, but Houllier had nothing but praise for the big striker.

"Emile had a fantastic game. But it's not just the goals, it's the fact he contributed to the team play. There was lots of flow, lots of movement," said the Frenchman.

Villa, who were held to a 1-1 draw

at Southampton, are only three points behind the Reds with one match left but their inferior goal difference means they have no realistic chance of overhauling them.

Liverpool's win also piled the pressure on Newcastle, who must beat Wolves on Sunday and Southampton on Wednesday to go into their final game, at Anfield next Saturday, level on points with their rivals.

Ruud van Nistelrooy scored a late equaliser for Manchester United after Jesper Gronkjaer had given Chelsea the lead at Old Trafford.

Van Nistelrooy's equaliser, which came after Chelsea were reduced to ten men by the sending off of Robert Huth, ensured United avoided their tally of losses this season rising into double figures.

But manager Alex Ferguson said he had been resigned to finishing third even before the match.

"After losing to Liverpool and Blackburn it was going to be very tough today. Chelsea only needed a point and they got it."

Things might have turned out differently had van Nistelrooy not had a penalty well saved by Carlo Cudicini just before half-time.

"After they scored the goal we

played some excellent stuff and we were unlucky that we did not capitalise on that," Ferguson said.

"Ruud has not had the best season with penalty kicks which is unusual for him but you have to give credit to the goalkeeper -- it was a really good save."

Aston Villa's European dreams were dealt a major blow when Kevin Phillips cancelled out Juan Pablo Angel's penalty opener.

"I'm shocked we have even been involved in this race for the Champions League," admitted Villa boss David O'Leary. "But even if we finish sixth it will be an amazing achievement."

"The top five clubs have much bigger budgets, bigger crowds and bigger revenues, so to take the honour as 'best of the rest' would still represent a good season for us."

Elsewhere it was a day for consolation prizes with relegated Leicester beating Portsmouth 3-1 in their final home game in the top flight and Leeds, who are also doomed to the drop, treating their fans to a 3-3 thriller with Charlton.

Youri Djorkaeff scored twice for the second time in a week as Bolton beat Everton 2-1 at Goodison Park, where the home side were booed off the pitch at

the end.

Tottenham striker Jermain Defoe did his chances of making the England squad for Euro 2004 no harm with the goal that earned his side a 1-0 win over Blackburn. It was Spurs' first win since March 14 but it was not enough to prevent angry fans venting their anger on caretaker boss David Pleat.

Goals from Massimo Maccarone and Szilard Nemeth gave Middlesbrough a 2-1 win over Manchester City, for whom Paulo Wanchope was on target. City, who started the season looking like Champions League contenders, look set to finish it one place above the drop zone.

TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Saturday's late match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points): Arsenal 36 24 12 0 70 25 84; Chelsea 37 23 7 7 66 30 76; Man Utd 37 22 6 9 62 35 72; Liverpool 37 16 11 10 54 36 59; Aston Villa 37 15 11 11 48 42 56; Newcastle 35 13 14 8 47 35 53

Rivaldo rekindles interest

Football

AFP, London

The deal to bring World Cup winner Rivaldo to Bolton next season is back on track after the Brazilian faxed the English Premiership club to say that he still wants to move to the Reebok Stadium, club chairman Phil Gartside revealed Sunday.

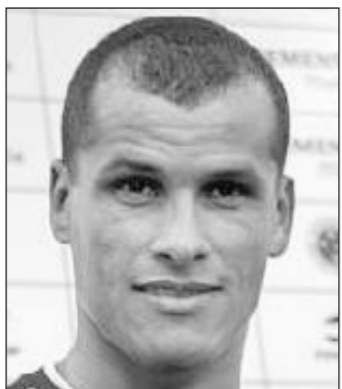
The Trotters' plan to sign Rivaldo looked over after Scottish champions Celtic showed their interest.

But Gartside said that he has received a fax from 32-year-old Rivaldo stating that he wants to complete the move to the Lancashire club.

"I have a fax in my pocket which arrived this morning saying he wants to come to us," Gartside told the club's website.

"It also says he doesn't want to play in Scotland, so we are still

hoping to do something with him. "We've offered him a deal which he's accepted financially and it's just



RIVALDO

a case of getting together with him to put pen to paper."

The news comes as a surprise

after Bolton manager Sam Allardyce said the deal was dead and Rivaldo's agent indicated the player would prefer to join Celtic with the chance to play Champions League next season.

But Gartside revealed that Rivaldo has been back in contact and had accepted terms with the Premiership outfit, who look set to finish seventh in the table following their win at Everton Saturday.

The 1999 FIFA World Palyer of the Year is a free agent after playing just 11 games for Brazilian club Cruzeiro, following his release by Milan in November.

If the contract is signed it would be the biggest signing for Allardyce who has already brought Youri Djorkaeff, Jay-Jay Okocha and Ivan Campo to the northern club.

'Give Ranieri a break'

AFP, London

The agent of Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri has called on the club to end ongoing speculation over the Italian's future at Stamford Bridge and talk linking Porto coach Jose Mourinho to his job.

After Chelsea's dreams of Champions League glory were shattered by Monaco in Wednesday's semi-finals, Ranieri admitted that his days could be numbered.

But after a 1-1 English Premiership draw at Manchester United on Saturday gave them an automatic Champions League place next season Ranieri believes that his departure from the big-spending London club is not certain.

"It is up to Chelsea now," his Italian-based advisor Vincenzo Morabito told BBC Radio Five Live's Sportsweek programme.

"They need to tell him whether they want to keep Claudio. We don't need to ask whether they like him or not because he still has three years left on his contract.

"We are not living in a another world to everyone else. We know Mourinho had talks with Chelsea before the first leg of the Monaco game and he was at Stamford Bridge for the second.

"Chelsea probably do have another plan but it is down to them to tell Claudio."

Morabito said that whoever took over from the former Atletico Madrid coach would have a tough task.

"Whoever replaces Claudio will have to win the Premiership and the Champions League because it looks like he will be replaced even though he has finished second in the league and reached the semi-finals of the European Cup," said Morabito.

"Claudio has got a good reputation and he doesn't deserve to be sacked.

"If Chelsea do decide to go in another direction, they should just say he is being replaced. Some people might say it is the same thing but the sometimes the use of words is quite important."

Thai PM goes shopping

Football

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's billionaire premier Thaksin Shinawatra on Monday will purchase 30 per cent of English Premier League football club Liverpool for 115 million dollars, an official said Sunday in Thai newspapers.

The Siam Sport daily quoted Deputy Commerce Minister Pongsak Raktapongpaisal as saying the board of the Merseyside squad had agreed to sell off 30 per cent of its stake to Thaksin.

"The negotiation is complete, and Liverpool will sell a 30 per cent stake worth about 4.6 billion baht (115 million dollars)," Pongsak was quoted as saying.

"The signing ceremony will take place in Thailand on Monday," he added.

Thaksin, an avowed football fan who has long expressed interest in buying into a Premiership squad, was to pay for the stake out of his own pocket along with a group of unnamed private investors.

"The purchase does not involve the government," Pongsak said.

Mass circulation Thai Rath reported similar news but did not directly quote Pongsak, who had been appointed by Thaksin to represent the premier in the negotiations.

The deal would also see Thailand manage Liverpool's copy-right agreements in Asia for merchandise and team tie-ins, including the training academy, the papers added.

Thai news outlets quickly latched onto the story and speculation mounted as to whether Thaksin would indeed buy into the fabled Premiership side.

Thai broadcaster iTV said it

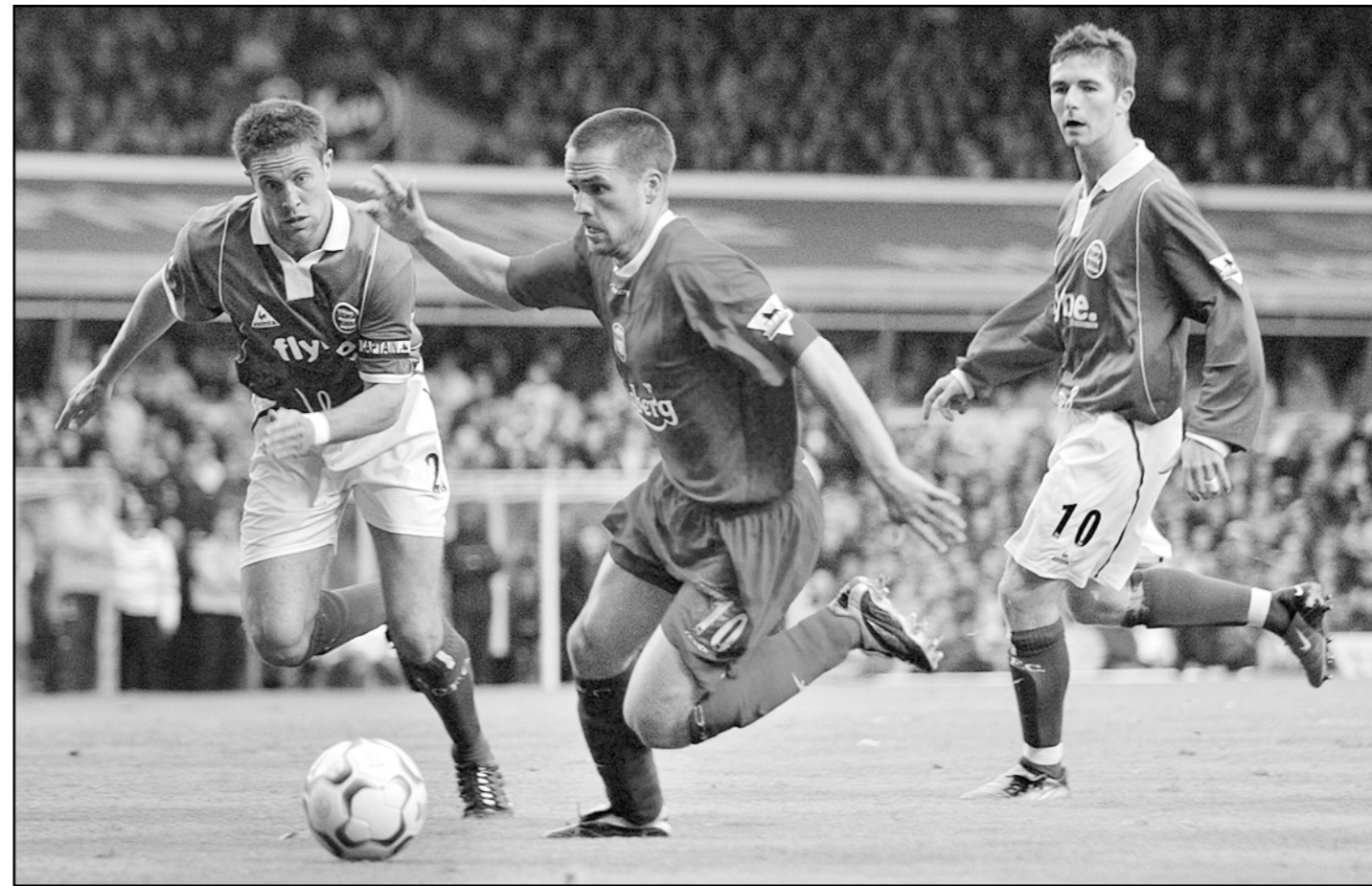
learned the share purchase was near completion and that a Liverpool team representative would meet with the premier Monday for final talks on the deal.

The channel aired footage of Thaksin at a Bangkok area golf course where he declined to divulge any details and said only that more would be revealed in the week ahead.

Neither Pongsak nor Thai national team coach Thawatchai Sajakul, an MP in Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai political party who was assigned to look into taking over a club, were available for comment.

Thaksin, a self-made billionaire who founded a telecommunications empire before entering politics, caused a stir last October when he held talks with Fulham owner Muhammed Al Fayed about buying the London squad.

Al Fayed quickly denied the club was for sale.



Liverpool striker Michael Owen (C) is about score against Birmingham City in their Premiership match on May 8.

PHOTO: AFP