

Ailton's close shave

AFP, Berlin

Schalke 04's Brazilian striker Ailton almost missed a random drugs test on Saturday when he left the Arena Auf Schalke at half-time after being sent off in the 2-0 defeat by Hansa Rostock.

Ailton, 30, was given his marching orders on the stroke of half-time for clashing with two Rostock players and then left the stadium unaware that he had been chosen for a random drugs test after the match.

Schalke general manager, Andreas Muller, called Ailton on his mobile telephone ordering him to swiftly return to the stadium and take the test.

The Brazilian ace, top-scorer in the Bundesliga last season, would have been deemed as having returned a positive result if he had not returned.

"Toni's actions go against club protocol and we will speak to him about that," explained Muller.

After shooting Werder Bremen to the league and cup double last season things have gone awry for Ailton who has struggled to settle at Schalke and has yet to score this term.

Primera Liga

Owen assists Ronaldo winner



Football

AFP, Madrid

Michael Owen made a decisive contribution as he came off the bench on Sunday for his first taste of life in the Spanish league to provide the spade-work for a brilliant Ronaldo finish as Real Madrid opened their season by poaching a 1-0 win at Mallorca.

Owen came on midway through the first half for Raul, who picked up a thigh injury to withdraw on 24 minutes.

A confident run and cross from the right by the England man left Ronaldo with the simplest of tasks to chest home on 52 minutes and the Anglo-Brazilian strike tandem happily embraced.

"I have discovered how difficult it is to win a match in the Spanish league - but the important thing is we did it," Owen told reporters afterwards.

With champions and Super Cup winners Valencia opening their campaign Monday night at home to

Villarreal both Real and last season's runners-up Barcelona had the chance to hog the weekend headlines and did not disappoint.

Barca swept aside Racing Santander 2-0 with new French signing Ludovic Giuly volleying in from close range for their 68th-minute opener before a penalty from Cameroon forward Samuel Eto'o completed a 2-0 away success achieved in the absence of injured playmaker Ronaldinho.

Real coach Jose Antonio Camacho, beginning a second spell at the club, gave Owen, a 12-million-dollar signing from Liverpool, the nod in preference to Spain international Fernando Morientes, who, back from a year loan at Monaco, replaced Ronaldo at the death.

Owen had said beforehand that he would accept having to start his new career behind Raul and Ronaldo in the pecking order - Camacho has warned his squad to approach their work "humbly" after last season proved a

trophyless flop.

Owen's England teammate David Beckham, who scored after just three minutes on his own league debut last season for the Spanish giants, had a quiet night by contrast.

"It was difficult to get into gear tonight," said Camacho afterwards. "But in the end we got the goal, though we would have liked to win by a bigger margin."

Ronaldo's telling contribution settled a Real side who were without new defensive kingpins Walter Samuel, the Argentine brought in from Roma, and Jonathan Woodgate, a surprise new recruit from Newcastle.

In their absence Raul Bravo and Francisco Pavon stepped up to the plate and acquitted themselves admirably.

While Owen enjoyed his Liga baptism, so to did former Leeds man Ian Harte, and he did not take long to make his mark, giving promoted Levante a 42nd-minute lead at Real

Sociedad with a thumping freekick.

But Turkish star Nihat Kahveci equalised with a solo effort just after the restart to save a point for the hosts.

Real and Barca have dominated the league for the past 20 seasons, during which time they have won nine and seven titles respectively since Bilbao snaffled the 1984 crown.

Since then the exceptions have been Atletico Madrid winning in 1996, Deportivo La Coruna tasting glory in 2000 and Valencia seeing off allcomers in 2002 and last May.

In Sunday's other action, former Aston Villa and Parma striker Savo Milosevic saved a point for Osasuna after Joseba Etxeberria had given Athletic Bilbao an early lead.

Brazilian Alvaro netted a double as Real Zaragoza saw off promoted Getafe 3-1 while compatriot Renato scored just after the restart to give Seville a 1-0 home win over modest Albacete.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's latest star signing Michael Owen (L) tries to take the ball through the legs of Mallorca's Hipolito Fernandez "Poli" at the Son Moix stadium in Palma de Mallorca on August 29.

Defoe gets the nod

AFP, London

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson has rewarded Tottenham's young striker Jermaine Defoe for his bright start to the season with a place in the England squad for next month's World Cup qualifiers.

The 21-year-old, who has scored three times in Spurs' first four Premiership games, has been selected along with Manchester United's Alan Smith in favour of Emile Heskey, who missed this month's friendly against Ukraine through injury.

Aside from Heskey other names out of the equation are Phil Neville, Wayne Rooney and Jonathan Woodgate (both injured), and the still suspended Rio Ferdinand.

Chelsea midfielder Joe Cole returns after injury and there was also room for Manchester City's Shaun Wright-Phillips who scored a superb solo goal in the Ukraine friendly.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: David James (Man City), Paul Robinson (Tottenham), Robert Green (Norwich)

Defenders: Gary Neville (Man Utd), Ashley Cole (Arsenal), Wayne Bridge (Chelsea), John Terry (Chelsea), Lesley King (Tottenham), Jamie Carragher (Liverpool), Matthew Upson (Birmingham)

Midfielders: David Beckham (Real Madrid), Frank Lampard (Chelsea), Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Kieron Dyer (Newcastle), Owen Hargreaves (Bayern Munich), Nicky Butt (Newcastle), Shaun Wright-Phillips (Man City), Joe Cole (Chelsea), Jermaine Jenas (Newcastle)

Forwards: Michael Owen (Real Madrid), Darius Vassell (Aston Villa), Jermaine Defoe (Tottenham), Alan Smith (Man Utd)

Ligue 1
PSG still struggling

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain continued their poor start to the 2004/05 season with a 2-2 draw at home to St Etienne at the Parc des Princes here on Sunday.

Two away losses and only home draws against two promoted teams so far is the sum total of Wahid Halilhodzic's side which stormed into second place in the French league last season behind Lyon.

St Etienne's Frederic Piquionne equalised with two minutes to go after a 71st-minute penalty from Pauleta and Bartholomew Ogbeche's strike three minutes later had cancelled out St Etienne's opening goal from Piquionne in the 64th minute.

Reigning champions Lyon had a good Saturday with a 1-0 home victory over Lille at the Gerland stadium and announcing the news young Brazilian international striker Nilmar will be joining the club.

Pierre-Alain Frau scored in the eighth minute of a largely uneventful match under the watchful eye of 20-year-old Nilmar, who scored the final goal of Brazil's 6-0 victory in Haiti 10 days earlier on his senior debut for his country.

Metz had a rousing 3-1 victory at Marseille to go top of the table after four matches mainly thanks to two goals from their Cameroon international Herve Tum.

In other matches, Monaco drew 1-1 at Lens, Auxerre beat Caen 1-0, plus Nantes drew 2-2 with Toulouse and Strasbourg drew 1-1 against first division newcomers Istres.

Metz have 10 points from four matches to lead by a point from Auxerre, and by two points from Lens, Toulouse, Bastia and Lyon.



Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United's Premiership title challenge took a nosedive on Monday when they were held to a 0-0 draw by Everton.

The result leaves Sir Alex Ferguson's side floundering in mid-table, seven points adrift of Arsenal and Chelsea, who have both won their first four matches.

David Moyes Everton produced a defiant display at Old Trafford on the day the Merseysiders are supposed to lose their star striker Wayne Rooney to United.

Whether Rooney is the answer to United's problems remains to be seen, but on the evidence of this display there is no doubt about the need for an injection of imagination if United are to close the gap on their title rivals.

With a bit more luck in front of goal, they would have collected all three points from this rescheduled lunch-time fixture.

But Everton deserved credit for a

disciplined defensive performance that suggests there will still be life in Moyes's side once Rooney completes his expected move.

Cristiano Ronaldo and Alan Smith both came close to snatching victory for the home side with second half shots that beat Nigel Martyn only to come back off the woodwork.

Everton also had their veteran goalkeeper to thank for two fine saves in the closing minutes -- one to tip over a back-header from his own defender Alan Stubbs and another reflex effort that denied Paul Scholes from close range.

But despite the frantic rearguard action towards the end, the visitors did not simply defend in numbers and they might even have come away with a win if referee Dermot Gallagher had spotted an apparent handball by Mikael Silvestre.

Shortly after Ronaldo had skipped past two defenders and thumped his shot off the post, Everton counter-attacked and Silvestre appeared to handle a cross from Lee Carsley.

The visitors had also been the more positive of the two sides in the opening

stages.

Alessandro Pistone sent a fourth minute header over the bar and Tim Howard had to race from his line to prevent Kevin Kilbane from capitalising on an error by teenage defender Jonathan Spector, who lost possession in the middle of the park to allow the Ireland winger a clear run at goal.

United gradually began to come into the match and might have gone ahead when Scholes released Gary Neville inside the area. The England full-back opted to shoot, missing the target when a return pass to Scholes might have yielded a better result.

Everton continued to look threatening on the counter-attack and Leon Osman, who scored twice in Saturday's win over West Brom, was only narrowly wide of the target with a low shot from the edge of the area.

Tim Cahill then tried his luck, forcing Howard to get down quickly to block his effort.

It was United however who carved out the best chance of the opening period, six minutes before the break.

A good run by Kleberson was followed by a cute cross for Louis Saha,

who directed his header from six yards wide of the target.

On Sunday, Liverpool's Spanish debutants failed to shine as, courtesy of a Kevin Davies strike, Bolton continued to prove last season's top-half finish was no fluke with a comfortable 1-0 win at the Reebok Stadium.

Neither Xabi Alonso playing alongside Steven Gerrard in the centre of the Reds' midfield or Luis Garcia were allowed time to settle by Sam Allardyce's hardworking outfit.

Expensively assembled Liverpool left the Reebok stadium in the knowledge that they were outplayed and outclassed in all areas of the field.

Gaining a firm control of the midfield through skipper Jay Jay Okocha, Ivan Campo and the energetic Gary Speed, the Trotters initially stifled the visitors play before establishing themselves as an attacking force.

The goal ten minutes before the interval. A low Henrik Pedersen centre was missed by a clutch of Liverpool defenders and found Davies unmarked by the far post. He had the simplest job of finishing past the exposed Dudek.



PHOTO: AFP

MARTIAL ARTS CLASS! Manchester United's Alan Smith (C) finds himself in the middle of a scramble during yesterday's match against Everton at Old Trafford, Manchester.

Houllier for Robson?



Football

AFP, London

Gerard Houllier was on Monday installed as the early favourite to succeed Sir Bobby Robson as Newcastle manager.

The former Liverpool boss is being tipped to take over with Magpies skipper Alan Shearer, who is due to retire from playing at the end of the season, in some sort of assistant or joint-manager role.

British bookmakers Ladbrokes made Houllier a 2-1 favourite to step into the St James's Park hotseat with Birmingham's Steve Bruce the second favourite at 5-2.

As far as the bookies are concerned, Shearer is third favourite to get the job himself.

The former England striker has begun taking the coaching badges necessary to become a Premiership manager and has long been seen as

Robson's natural successor, although he may also decide to opt for a career in the media.

The club however are seen as reluctant to give Shearer full managerial responsibilities while he is still such an important player for them.

Newcastle sacked Robson earlier Monday, effectively ending the career of one of the most respected and best-loved figures in English football.

Robson, 71, was "relieved of his duties" after a meeting with Newcastle chairman Freddy Shepherd on Monday morning to review what has been a troubled start to the new season for the Magpies, on and off the pitch.

Newcastle have taken just two points from their opening four Premiership matches and Robson's position had been further undermined by insubordination from some players, perhaps fuelled by the club's pre-season announcement that this would be the veteran manager's last in charge.

Matters came to a head on Saturday, when Robson left

Newcastle's talismanic captain Alan Shearer on the bench and had to watch as his side surrendered a half-time lead to lose 4-2 to Aston Villa.

Robson's departure 48 hours after that defeat bears an extraordinary resemblance to the departure of his predecessor Ruud Gullit, who was also sacked shortly after having the temerity to drop Shearer.

Newcastle's directors would have preferred Robson to step down of his own accord.

But the former England, Ipswich, PSV Eindhoven and Barcelona manager is renowned for his stubbornness and had made it clear he would not walk away.

Only on Saturday, he had insisted he would go of his own accord. "I don't intend to change the habit of a lifetime and start breaking contracts," he said. "Walking away from a problem simply is not my style."

Robson certainly had plenty of problems at St James' Park this season; the impact of poor results com-

pounded by an impression that he had lost control of his dressing room.

England midfielder Kieron Dyer's refusal to play out of position in a match against Middlesbrough was followed by striker Craig Bellamy publicly questioning the wisdom of the club's attempts to sign Wayne Rooney.

Both players subsequently apologised but their actions and words only served to reinforce the impression of Robson as a lame-duck manager.

The former England boss also had to grapple with the loss of his best defender, Jonathan Woodgate, who was sold to Real Madrid in a deal he knew nothing about until it was virtually finalised.

Robson failed to bring any silverware back to St James' Park. But he has established Newcastle as one of the top five clubs in England while earning respect in Europe with runs to the second phase of the 2002-03 Champions League and the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup last season.



PHOTO: AFP

NEW PRINCE MEETS THE EMPEROR: Diego Maradona (R) poses with upcoming idol Carlos Tevez for a picture at Boca Juniors' La Bombonera stadium in Buenos Aires on August 29. Maradona, on behalf of Boca Juniors' board, gave Tevez a commemorative plaque in recognition of his performance at the Athens Olympic Games.