

'Samourai' hotties heat up Madrid

INTERNET SOURCE

Madrid was the place to be on Thursday as Pepsi unveiled its latest blockbuster advert featuring David Beckham pitted against Jennifer Lopez and Beyonce.

The heavily anticipated spot sees the sporting and music worlds face off in a martial arts-inspired commercial entitled "Samourai". It is directed by Tarsem Singh who also directed J Lo in the sci-fi thriller The Cell.

Beyonce, J Lo and Becks were given a two-week crash course in kendo - the Japanese art of sword fighting - before making the new commercial which is set amid the Hong Kong underworld.

The ad begins with a spectacular shot of the former British colony and moves to a martial arts centre where two masked kendo experts are training. The pair remove their masks to reveal they are none other than Beyonce and Jennifer.

Hopping on a pair of motorcycles the dynamic duo speed through the streets of Hong Kong on a special mission to a shady downtown club. Here they are confronted by a group of thugs coordinated by an enigmatic figure lurking in the shadows. When Jennifer and Beyonce swiftly dispatch their opponents, the stranger reveals himself to be none other than David Beckham.

"They're amazing," said the soccer ace of his high-powered co-stars, describing making the slot as "an incredible experience".

Lopez, Beyoncé and Beckham wowed crowds in Madrid at the launch of the commercial which cost a reported £11-million to make. They posed for pictures with their arms draped round each other and the Real Madrid ace spoke of his "honour" at working with "two beautiful women".



HELLO LADIES! Real Madrid superstar David Beckham (C) poses with US actress Jennifer Lopez (L) and US singer Beyoncé as they arrive for the presentation of the new Pepsi-Cola "Samourai" in Madrid on February 23.

The smartest ball

Football

AFP, Cardiff

A microchip-equipped ball designed to end disputes over goal-line decisions could be used at next year's World Cup after world football's rule-making body issued a green light for a trial of the new technology here on Saturday.

At talks here, the International Football Association Board (IFAB) agreed to trial a 'smartball' developed by sports equipment giant adidas which contains a microchip that beeps when it crosses lines fitted with special sensors.

The technology was presented to the Board on Saturday and is to be used for both goal and side lines on an experimental basis at FIFA's under-17 World Championships in Peru in September.

FIFA President Sepp Blatter insisted this was not the first step on the road to introducing video replays being viewed by a fourth official.

"The international board have tried to keep football with a human face and the possible errors and the only technology where the board has said yes is for goal-line technology."

"Now for the World Cup 2006 such a system could and should be applied when and if the results of our test are conclusive."

Adidas spokesman Thomas van Schaik said they were determined to make sure the 'smartball' was 100 percent reliable.

It is hoped the new technology will finally end disputes such as the one over whether England's third goal in the 1966 World Cup final actually crossed the line.

"That Geoff Hurst goal is the point of the technology because you can look at it 100 times and never be sure," added van Schaik.

More recently the need for referees to be given more help was underlined when Manchester United goalkeeper Roy Carroll dropped a long-distance shot a yard over his line in a Premiership match against Tottenham.

No goal was awarded because the referee and linesmen were both unsure whether the ball had crossed the line, something which was perfectly clear on television replays.

The goal that never was denied Tottenham victory in that match and could ultimately prove crucial in determining whether United win the league or secure automatic qualification for next season's Champions League - outcomes in which tens of millions of pounds are at stake.

The microchip ball is attractive to rule makers because it would provide instant decisions, unlike the use of video replays which would result in the flow of the game being interrupted.

Mourinho still smelling a rat

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has confirmed for the first time that he witnessed Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard enter referee Anders Frisk's dressing room during half-time in their fiery Champions League match in midweek.

The Portuguese manager has faced criticism all week after his initial claims about Rijkaard's alleged talk with Frisk were downplayed by the Dutch coach and Barcelona, who branded him pathetic and a liar.

However hours before Chelsea prepare to take on Liverpool in the English League Cup final Mourinho has revived the debate, and has effectively linked Rijkaard's talk with Frisk to the sending off of Chelsea striker Didier Drogba.

Speaking to Portuguese newspaper Record Dez, Mourinho said: "When I saw Rijkaard entering the referee's dressing room I couldn't believe it. And when Drogba was sent off I wasn't surprised."

After leading the Spaniards in the first half, Chelsea lost Drogba after the interval following a second bookable offence and the London club went on to concede two second half goals to lose 2-1.

Mourinho is now hoping that UEFA will appoint respected Italian referee Pierluigi Collina for the second leg tie at Stamford Bridge.

BUNDESLIGA

Deisler's riposte

Football

AFP, Berlin

Troubled German international playmaker Sebastian Deisler hit back at his critics Saturday with a second-half goal which lifted Bayern Munich to a 1-0 win over struggling FC Freiburg.

The win keeps leaders Bayern Munich three points ahead of Bundesliga rivals Schalke 04 who host Hannover on Sunday.

Deisler, who has been frustrated at playing a peripheral role in the team and was advised by Bayern president Franz Beckenbauer earlier in the week to seek out a loan move if he was unhappy, was making his first appearance since the winter break.

And he saved the lethargic Bavarian giants who had got off to a slow start against a side sixteen places below them in the table.

Goalkeeper Oliver Kahn twice came to the rescue of the home side before the 25-year-old Deisler drilled in a cross shot in the 52nd minute for his second goal of the campaign.

Bayern Munich now have 47 points from 23 games, three ahead of Schalke 04, with reigning champions Werder Bremen a further point behind.

Bremen put their humiliating 3-0 Champions League loss to Lyon midweek behind them by scoring

their fifth straight Bundesliga win by hammering relegation-threatened VfL Bochum 4-0.

Hertha Berlin provisionally moved into fourth position with 39 points after a crucial 4-1 win over seventh-placed SV Hamburg at the Olympic Stadium in the German capital.

Also with an eye on Europe, fourth-placed Bayer Leverkusen host VfB Stuttgart, one place below, on Sunday in a real grudge match that dates back to the final day of last season.

Then Leverkusen defeated Stuttgart 2-0 at the BayArena to steal the final Champions League spot and both teams are fighting it out for the same prize this season.

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The News of the World says Ronaldo wants a move to Chelsea after falling out with coach Vanderlei Luxemburgo.

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PRIMERA LIGA

Barca bad, Real worse

Football

AFP, Madrid

Little Numancia, firmly rooted to the foot of the Spanish first division, stunned mighty Barcelona on Saturday by holding the leaders and Champions League contenders to a 1-1 draw.

However, the result meant that Barcelona were still able to increase their lead over bitter rivals Real Madrid to eight points after Real slumped to a 2-0 defeat at Deportivo La Coruna.

On an icy pitch, which had been cleared of 80 lorry loads of snow in the run-up to the match, Barca struggled to impose their slicky passing game and were behind just before half-time.

Juanlu scored with an acrobatic effort past goalkeeper Victor Valdes. However, Barca were back on level terms just after the restart when Xavi's corner was met by Mexican defender Rafael Marquez who got ahead of two defenders to score.

Playing without Michel Salgado, Ivan Helguera, flu-stricken Raul and Ronaldo, with an injured foot, Real Madrid were trailing after just eight minutes at Deportivo.

A cross from the right by Sergio fell for Luque who beat goalkeeper Iker Casillas. Five minutes later, it was 2-0 to Deportivo when Francisco Pavon put through his own goal.

Deportivo could have added to their total but Real were indebted to Casillas who kept the score down with a string of fine saves.

To add to their problems, Real also saw Zinedine Zidane limp off after 28 minutes with a right knee injury.

Barcelona-based Espanyol continued to press their claims to compete in Europe next season when they beat struggling Albacete 2-1.

Espanyol coach Miguel Angel Lotina was confident enough of beating their visitors to the Montjuic Olympic stadium that he employed three men up front from the outset.

His decision was justified after just four minutes when Maxi

Rodriguez opened the scoring by hammering home a Dani Garcia cross for his 10th goal of the season.

Raul Tamudo put Espanyol further ahead after 22 minutes, finding the net after Albacete keeper Raul Valbuena could only push away a Daniel Jarque header.

Espanyol nearly went three up when their Brazilian Fredson hit the post just before half time.

Albacete got one back after 54 minutes when Antonio Pacheco waltzed past the Espanyol defenders before scoring but the goal served to shake Espanyol out of their post-break complacency and they shut up shop for the rest of the game.

Espanyol move up to fourth ahead of Sunday's games.

Llevant came from behind to halt their recent slide and get a useful 2-1 away win at Real Mallorca.

After a torrid first half, both sides stepped up a gear after the break.

Mallorca drew first blood when Luis Garcia drilled the ball past Levante goalkeeper Juan Luis Mora from right on the penalty spot.

Former Barcelona striker Sergio Garcia then equalised for Levante 13 minutes later, after some good work down the right wing by the ever-dangerous Ivorian winger Felix Ettien.

Ettien was again the service provider for Jofre Gonzalez, another Barca old boy, to head home Levante's winner ten minutes from time.

Mark Luliano nearly equalised for Mallorca on the whistle but Mora just managed to turn away the rasping shot for a corner.

The loss leaves Mallorca deep in relegation trouble, second from

TOP SIX

Spanish football league standings after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Barcelona	25	18	4	3	50	18	58
Real	25	16	2	7	43	21	50
Betis	24	11	8	5	39	28	41
Espanyol	25	12	5	8	32	28	41
Sevilla	24	12	5	7	28	25	41
Villarreal	24	11	7	6	41	22	40

Rijkaard's prophecy!

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard commented on Friday that the Spanish title would be won not at the Nou Camp, or Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu, but away against teams like Numancia and Deportivo La Coruna.

The Dutch coach's words proved to be prophetic 24 hours later as the Catalans struggled to a 1-1 draw against bottom club Numancia, a result they still felt positive about given Real Madrid's 2-0 defeat at Deportivo.

World Player of the Year Ronaldinho was less diplomatic about the state of the pitch at Numancia's Los Pajaritos stadium, which had 80 lorry loads of snow shovelled off it in the preceding days.

"For me it was impossible to play on this pitch. You can't play good football under these circumstances so a draw was fine," grumbled the Brazilian World Cup winner, for once losing his near-perpetual smile.

Ronaldinho trod gingerly around the pitch all night and survived unscathed but his fellow Brazilian international Belletti was not so lucky.

The defender skidded and fell on his back on an icy patch and was stretched off.

Scams at a nearby hospital showed no serious injuries but Belletti is doubtful for Tuesday's derby against Espanyol.

Real Madrid coach Wanderley Luxemburgo struggled to find something positive to say on Sunday about their loss in La Coruna, their second successive league defeat.

"There are still plenty of games to go and we still have to play Barcelona at home."

"Eight points are not even three games, we still have a chance to claw back the difference," said Luxemburgo, demonstrating a good grasp of rudimentary mathematics if not football reality.

However, Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas provided what may eventually prove to be the club's epitaph to the season when it comes to an end in May.

"There are no excuses about the ways we played here, we were bad."

"Madrid have to rise to the occasion away from home and we didn't do that," commented Casillas, reinforcing the wise words of Rijkaard that the title this year will be won and lost in far flung corners of Spain rather than closer to home.

PREMIERSHIP

Rooney's night

Football

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson hailed Wayne Rooney as "absolutely magnificent" after the teenager kept Manchester United's bid to catch Chelsea at the top of the Premiership on track with a superb double strike against Portsmouth on Saturday.

A 2-1 win cut Chelsea's advantage back to six points. The London club, who play Liverpool in the League Cup final on Sunday, retain a game in hand.

But by the time they play Norwich next Saturday, United could have reduced their lead to just three points if they beat Crystal Palace earlier in the day.

Ferguson acknowledged his side had been short of their best after a draining Champions League defeat by AC Milan in midweek. But he was unstinting in his praise for Rooney.

"He was by far our best player," the Scot said. "He was absolutely magnificent today. And he's a winner, he was one taking the baton up and making the run for the line. The whole day he was on song."

For most of the second half, after Gary O'Neill had cancelled out Rooney's sweetly taken opener, it looked as if Portsmouth, the last side to beat United in the league back in October, would defy the odds once more.

But Rooney had other ideas. With ten minutes left, the teenager collected a pass from Ruud van Nistelrooy in his stride and surged into the box before finishing with aplomb to make it six league wins in a row for Ferguson's side.

Ferguson revealed that Rio Ferdinand had missed the match with a hamstring injury while skipper Roy Keane was rested and Gary Neville came off injured at half-time.

While United continue to hold out hope that Chelsea will crack, Arsenal's lingering hopes of retaining their Premiership title appeared to have been crushed after a 1-1 draw at relegation-threatened Southampton that left them ten points behind Chelsea.

Everton are looking good to claim the fourth qualifying spot for next season's Champions League, with a 3-1 win at Aston Villa that left them eight points ahead of nearest rivals Liverpool.

Despite taking a point from Arsenal, Southampton were left further adrift of safety as a result of Crystal Palace's 2-0 defeat of Birmingham.

Two penalties from Birmingham old boy Andy Johnson lifted Palace four points clear of the drop zone, a margin that could prove just enough with only ten games left to play.

Southampton will nevertheless take heart from the way they responded against Arsenal after being reduced to ten men just

before half-time, when David Prutton was sent off following ugly tackles on Mathieu Flamini and Robert Pires.

The champions Arsenal exploited their advantage almost immediately when Freddie Ljungberg put them ahead in first half stoppage time.

But the numbers were evened up six minutes after the interval, Robin van Persie receiving his marching orders after incurring a second yellow card with a bad challenge on Graeme Le Saux.

Peter Crouch headed in a well-deserved equaliser for Southampton in the 67th minute and Wenger made it clear he held van Persie responsible.

"When you are playing against ten men, the most important thing is to keep eleven players yourself," Wenger fumed.

"I told him at half-time that when the home team has a player sent off, the referee is under pressure to send off an opposing player who has already been booked."

Saints manager Harry Redknapp was no less forgiving of the "foolish and irresponsible" Prutton, who could be facing a lengthy ban after confronting and pushing the referee following his red card.

"He will get done, that's for sure, and the players are all sick about what he did," Redknapp said.

"Luckily they had a stupid player on their side as well and he obvi-

ously decided he was going to get himself sent off to make it a fairer game for us."

Wenger's mood was unlikely to be helped by the fact that Southampton's equaliser again exposed the defensive deficiencies that have dogged Arsenal this season.

Goalkeeper Jens Lehmann flapped hopelessly at a corner from his right and giant striker Crouch was left with a free header which he directed downwards and into the net of the underside of the bar.

Leon Osman scored twice for Everton while Australian Tim Cahill was also on the mark with Nolberto Solana replying for Villa, whose faint hopes of securing European football are receding fast.

In Saturday's other match, Spurs left it late but finally overcame London rivals Fulham at White Hart Lane with goals from Fredi Kanoute (78) and Robbie Keane (90).

English Premiership table after Saturday's 1500 GMT matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Chelsea	27	21	5	1	50	8	68
Man Utd	27	17	8	2	45	16	59
Arsenal	28	17	7	4	64	32	58
Everton	28	15	6	7	34	29	51
Liverpool	27	13	4	10	41	29	43
Boro	27	11	8	8	41	35	41



THERE GOES OUR LAST CHANCE! Arsenal's Ashley Cole (R) looks towards the giant screen to see a replay of his goal which was disallowed in the dying seconds against Southampton at St. Mary's in Southampton on February 26.