

DC United hold Real

AFP, Seattle

European power Real Madrid and United States league-leading D.C. United played to a 1-1 draw in an international football friendly here Wednesday.

Antonio Cassano scored in the 22nd minute to give Real Madrid a 1-0 lead but Alecko Eskandarian equalized for D.C. United in the 25th minute.

The teams battled goal-less from there, although two United defenders made saves from near the goal-line to deny the European side in the second half and Emerson put a shot off the post in the final seconds for Real Madrid.

D.C. United, with the best record in Major League Soccer, returns to league play next week.

Real Madrid will continue its pre-season US tour on Saturday against Major League Soccer's Real Salt Lake, named in homage to the Spanish side, before returning to the start of league competition.

Record ticket sales for United

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United have recorded massive season-ticket sales for the coming campaign, a club spokesman confirmed Thursday.

The Red Devils claim the existing number of tickets sold, including those in executive areas at Old Trafford, has now reached 64,000, ahead of the Sunday evening deadline for sales.

When the normal allocation reserved for away supporters is included, it would take the club to within touching distance of the 67,500 capacity of previous campaigns.

Capacity now stands at 76,000 with the opening of new quadrants.

The sales figure, way in excess of any other Premiership club's ground capacity, has come in the face of continued opposition among more militant groups of United fans to the ownership of Malcolm Glazer.

"This is fantastic news," said a club spokesman.

"We have almost sold as many tickets for every game before the start of the season than we had as an entire capacity last year."

"It is a record figure, not just for us but for English football as a whole and something we are very proud of."

"It shows that United fans are continuing to support the team at Old Trafford in huge numbers."

Supporters who want season tickets but fail to meet Sunday's deadline will be placed on the waiting list created by the club when they confirmed they were launching a special one-year season ticket earlier in the summer.

U-21 callup for Walcott

AFP, London

Arsenal's untried 17-year-old striker Theo Walcott received his first England Under 21 call-up on Wednesday ahead of next week's opening European Championship qualifier against Moldova at Portman Road.

Walcott, despite never having figured for his club in the Premiership, was the surprise package in Sven-Goran Eriksson's World Cup squad, but returned from Germany without kicking a ball.

He was joined in Peter Taylor's 23-man squad by Scott Carson, the Liverpool keeper who was summoned by Eriksson to stand in for Robert Green after the Norwich player was ruled out of the finals with injury.

Charlton striker Darren Bent, who was on standby for the World Cup, also figures in Taylor's list.

England head coach Steve McClaren said: "I wanted Darren, Scott and Theo to have the chance to play some competitive under-21s friendly."

"Darren has just come back from injury, Theo has not yet played a Premiership game and Scott faces stiff competition for games at Liverpool. The Moldova match will be very positive for all three of them."

"They are all still very much in my plans. I see the under-21s as a very important stepping stone to the senior team and I will keep a close eye on them this season."

Taylor's team face Moldova on Tuesday.

Karimi blow for Iran

REUTERS, Tokyo

Iran will be without injured playmaker Ali Karimi for next week's Asian Cup qualifier against Syria, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said on Thursday.

The Bayern Munich midfielder picked up a thigh strain while training with the German club last week, ruling him out of Iran's Group B clash in Tehran on Aug. 16.

Iran's coach Amir Ghalehnoee is also sweating over the fitness of striker Vahid Hashemian, who has yet to fully recover from a back injury suffered during the World Cup.

Iran are drawn with South Korea, Syria and Taiwan in a tricky qualifying group for the 2007 Asian Cup.



Ajax forward Klaas Jan Huntelaar (R) celebrates after scoring the opening goal against FC Copenhagen in Copenhagen on Wednesday.

Huntelaar fires Ajax

REUTERS, Copenhagen



Striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar scored both goals as Ajax Amsterdam beat Danish champions FC Copenhagen 2-1 away on Wednesday to edge towards the lucrative Champions League group stage.

Huntelaar opened the scoring in the third qualifying round first leg match after 38 minutes by diverting Thomas Vermaelen's header past Tobias Linderoth.

The goal raised Danish hopes of

having a manageable task in the return match in the Netherlands in two weeks' time, but Huntelaar struck again six minutes from the end by driving the ball past Christiansen from close range.

That goal all but dashed FC Copenhagen's chances of becoming the third Danish team ever to qualify for the group stage of the Champions League since the Danes will have to score at least twice in Amsterdam on Aug. 23 to go

early in the match and tired as the game wore on.

FC Copenhagen's Norwegian defender Brede Hangeland equalised in the second minute of added time at the end of the first half when he headed home a free kick from Tobias Linderoth.

Ajax coach Henk ten Cate was confident his club, which won the 1995 Champions League, would qualify for the next stage.

"They (Copenhagen) made a great effort today, but in the end we beat them 2-1 and that's what counts," he said.

Last season Ajax finished fourth, a massive 24 points behind champions PSV Eindhoven, but reached the Champions League third qualifying round after winning a domestic playoff competition.

It's going to be difficult but I believe we can do it in Amsterdam in 14-days' time," FC Copenhagen's Norwegian coach Stale Solbakken told a news conference.

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Lyon launch Ribery bid

Football

AFP, Lyon

French giants Lyon have made a 22 million euro bid for Marseille's unsettled international midfielder Franck Ribery, the five-time champions disclosed Wednesday.

Ribery has repeatedly expressed his desire to quit Marseille, with Lyon heading the list of clubs interested in acquiring the 23-year-old World Cup star's talents.

And a source at Lyon confirmed to AFP: "We have indeed made Marseille an offer of 22 million euros for the transfer of Ribery."

Marseille, desperate to keep hold of the player touted as the next Zinedine Zidane, denied having received Lyon's offer and reacted quickly to the news.

Club president Pape Diouf, speaking in Switzerland on the eve of his side's UEFA Cup preliminary round tie against Young Boys Berne,

said: "This comes the day before an important game for us, and is part of what we consider a concerted destabilising manoeuvre by Lyon and their president."

"They can go about this as they want but for us it doesn't change our position nor our determination one bit."

Meanwhile reports from Rome suggest Juventus' Mauro Camoranesi could also be moving to the Stade Gerland.

Sergio Fortunato, the Italy international's agent, says his client is keen to quit Juventus, relegated to the second division for their part in the Serie A match-fixing scandal.

"Mauro is almost 30, he's always fought throughout his life and it's not right that he should have to pay for the sins that he didn't commit by playing in the second division," Fortunato told the ANSA news agency.

According to Fortunato talks have already taken place with Lyon prepared to bid five million euros for the midfielder.

A stumbling block to any move involving Ribery has been the new

contract that he signed in March that was meant to keep him at Marseille until 2010.

Marseille boss Diouf has insisted that the club intends to hold on to Ribery for at least one more season.

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Battle of Britain ends equal

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Chelsea may have introduced Andriy Shevchenko and Michael Ballack to their supporters here last night but all thoughts turned to the club's tortuous pursuit of Ashley Cole as Wayne Bridge, at the moment the club's only senior left-back, made the mistake that allowed Celtic to take the lead in this high-profile pre-season friendly.

Bridge was easily outmuscled by Gary Caldwell after a 10th-minute Celtic corner, the centre-half brushing past the England international to volley the visitors in front. Bridge was left helpless on the floor.

It provided clear evidence why the Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has pursued Cole, widely regarded as one of the best players in his position, so vigorously.

Mourinho may have to play a game of patience in his efforts to land Cole, but he was able to take some positives from last night's performance and in particular the fitness of the team, something he puts down to the work of the fitness coach Rui Faria.

Faria's contribution has clearly been valued by the players, who celebrated Shaun Wright-Phillips's equaliser on the stroke of half-time by holding a shirt bearing the name "RUI" and the number "1".

Mourinho was also particularly pleased with the performance of Ballack and his midfield understanding with Frank Lampard, one which some critics thought would not work when the German was signed before the World Cup.

"With every touch you can see Ballack's class; his position on the pitch, his relation with Frank looks like they have played together for a long time," said Mourinho. "After

keeper Artur Boruc into a fine reflex save when deflecting a swerving free-kick from Lampard towards goal, while at the other end Kenny Miller went close for Celtic as did the former Chelsea midfielder Jiri Jarosik. But it was the home side who posed more of a threat and their equaliser finally arrived when Wright-Phillips unleashed a low drive into the bottom corner after cutting in from the left.

After the shock of conceding the opening goal Chelsea soon found their rhythm with another new purchase, John Obi Mikel, showing some neat touches and good vision. He forced the Celtic goal-

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