



Real Madrid striker Ronaldo is in pursuit of the ball during their King's Cup match against Ecija at the Santiago Bernabeu on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Benfica enter Guinness book

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese giants Benfica have set a new Guinness world record for the football club with the most paid up members, surpassing the previous record set by Manchester United, Portuguese media reported on Friday.

Benfica president Luis Filipe Vieira and a Guinness World Record official will make the announcement at a press conference later on Friday, sports daily A Bola reported citing club officials.

The Lisbon-based club, founded in 1904, counts over 160,000 members following a membership drive launched earlier this year, compared to 152,000 members for previous record holders Manchester United.

In July Benfica put a "membership kit" on sale at 3,800 locations across Portugal that includes two tickets to a club match, a DVD with match highlights, a visit to the club's stadium and the choice of either a team hat or scarf in addition to a membership card.

Advertising campaigns urged fans to buy the kits, which costs 55 euros (70 US dollars) for adults and 25 euros for those under the age of 18, in order to make Benfica "the biggest club in the world".

Last season Benfica recorded 13 million euros in revenues from memberships, an amount that accounted for 14 percent of the club's total revenues.

Benfica lie in third place in the 16-team Portuguese league with 16 points, six points behind leaders FC Porto.

They are also battling to qualify for the knockout phase of the Champions League. Benfica sit third in group F on four points behind Celtic and leaders Manchester United.

Fergie livid at refs' chief

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has hit out at Premiership referees supreme Keith Hackett over his "absolutely ludicrous" offer to meet with Jose Mourinho in the wake of the Chelsea manager's complaints about match official Graham Poll.

Mourinho and his players were angry with Poll's handling of the London club's defeat at Tottenham Hotspur last Sunday, prompting Hackett's invitation to discuss the referee's performance.

Poll would normally have been expected to take charge when Ferguson's Manchester United side meet Chelsea on November 26th.

But while the United manager has no doubts about the referee's integrity, he doubts whether this would be appropriate in the wake of Hackett's offer to Mourinho.

"Graham Poll is without question the best referee we have got, no doubt about it," Ferguson told his regular Friday press conference.

"Yes he's got an arrogance about him at times and a cockiness about him but when our players have got it we think it's good. When a referee's got it we think he's a big-headed so and so."

"He would be the best to referee

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Forgotten men shine for Real

REUTERS, Madrid

A double from Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy and a goal from David Beckham helped Real Madrid see off third division Ecija 5-1 in the King's Cup fourth round on Thursday, while second division Alaves knocked out Celta Vigo.

Real cut loose in the Bernabeu after halftime with goals from Beckham, Ronaldo, Ruben del la Red and Van Nistelrooy. Ecija, who had held Real 1-1 in the first leg, managed to net a consolation goal through defender Mario.

Earlier Celta, who had beaten

Real 2-1 away on Sunday, fell to Alaves at home with Brazilian midfielder Wesley scoring the only goal of the tie, early in the second half.

Alaves join three other non-Primera Liga sides in the last 16 of the Cup - Rayo Vallecano, Valladolid and Malaga.

Third division Rayo knocked out Cup holders Espanyol 2-1 on aggregate on Wednesday, while second division sides Valladolid and Malaga saw off Gimnastic and Real Sociedad respectively.

One game remains to be played in the fourth round after Levante's second leg with Atletico Madrid on Tuesday was postponed due to the poor state of the pitch. A date for the

rematch has yet to be agreed.

Real coach Fabio Capello put out an attack-minded line up which had Ronaldo and Van Nistelrooy starting up front together for the first time this season, and Jose Antonio Reyes and Beckham on either flank.

But they failed to make much of an impression early on against a well organised Ecija who had two clear chances to take a surprise lead in an otherwise dull first half.

But three minutes after break Van Nistelrooy was foiled in a one-on-one and the ball broke free for former England captain Beckham to drive low into the empty net.

With the visitors forced to come

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Barca, Sevilla neck and neck

AFP, Madrid

A month ago, a Nou Camp test for Barcelona against Real Zaragoza would have been a home banker with the reigning domestic and European champions chugging along in top spot ahead of mouthwatering Champions League dates with Chelsea.

But since then, after a loss and a draw against the Londoners punctured Barca's aura of invincibility abroad and Real Madrid sent them packing in the league, the Catalan club cannot count their chickens ahead of Sunday's meeting.

For a change, Barca and their fans have to crane their necks to look at the top of the table, from where Sevilla deposed them last weekend in beating Osasuna while the titleholders were labouring to a draw at Deportivo La Coruna.

Proving their UEFA Cup victory last season was no flash in the pan, Sevilla are now in the driving seat by a point with 21 points from nine games and an away trip to 14th-placed Santander on Sunday afternoon need not fill them with trepidation.

In contrast Zaragoza will make Barca sweat as they are on a hot streak of four La Liga wins on the trot.

A win would take the central-northern side top on goal difference if Sevilla, whose only league title win came in 1946, only manage a draw.

Barca, struggling to fire on all cylinders whenever Ronaldinho is below his best - which has been as often as not recently - will at least welcome back Eidur Gudjohnsen from injury for their encounter to supplant an attack which craves the return of crooked Samuel Eto'o.

That will not happen before January, as last year's top marksman in Spain is out with a serious knee injury suffered in Champions League action at Werder Bremen in September.

While Gudjohnsen returns after the ankle knock which forced him onto the sidelines last weekend Argentine striker Javier Saviola is a doubt with ankle ligament problems suffered in the midweek Cup stroll over Badalona in which he

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2



Controversial French call-up Gonzalo Higuain (L) holds a ball as he jogs during training for club team River Plate at the Monumental Stadium in Buenos Aires on Thursday.

Mertesacker back in fold

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew called defender Per Mertesacker back to his squad on Thursday for a Euro 2008 Group D qualifier against Cyprus in Nicosia next week.

Mertesacker, a stalwart in the Germany side that reached the semi-finals of the World Cup, has not played since that 2-0 loss against Italy on July 4. He returned to play in the Bundesliga last month but was not included in Loew's squad until now at the request of Werder Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf.

"Per was a bulwark on the team over the last two years," said Loew. "He's got back his good form for Bremen in the Bundesliga and Champions League. But we know that after his severe injury he still has some catching up to do."

But Loew will be without another World Cup star, striker Lukas Podolski.

Rather than replace the Bayern Munich player with one of several young German strikers having good

Real snap up "new" Carlos

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid were looking to the future after snapping up wingback Marcelo from Brazilian side Fluminense for five seasons in a deal worth seven million euros, Marca sports daily reported on Thursday.

According to Marca, Real still have to reach agreement with the Brazilian side for the player to arrive either in January or next June after beating off competition from high-flying Sevilla.

The newspaper touted Marcelo as the "new" Roberto Carlos, his veteran compatriot who has been with the club since 1997.

Last month Fluminense said the 18-year-old Marcelo was not for sale although he said that to play for Real would be a "dream" come true.

Croats, English fined

AFP, Nyon

Croatia and England were both handed fines on Thursday following their stormy Euro 2008 qualifier in Zagreb in October.

The disciplinary committee of European governing body UEFA fined the Croatian Football Association 50,000 Swiss francs (31,370 euros) and the English FA 10,000 francs (6,275 euros).

"The Croatian Football Federation has been fined 50,000 Swiss francs for a serious lack of organisation, selling tickets on matchday without approval of the police, the English FA or UEFA, the throwing of missiles and the setting-off of Bengal lights (flares) at the match in Zagreb on 11 October, between Croatia and England," said a UEFA statement.

"The FA has been fined 10,000 Swiss francs for the improper conduct of their fans at the same match."

The charges came after incidents inside and outside the Maksimir Stadium where Croatia beat England 2-0. Croatian police detained 187 Croatian fans and more than 50 English supporters.

English FA spokesman Adrian Bevington said they were "surprised and disappointed" by the UEFA fine and didn't rule out an appeal.

"We are surprised and disappointed, both at the decision itself and the fact that a verdict was reached today (Thursday), bearing in mind the weight of evidence that we provided to defend our position," said Bevington.

"The evidence we provided demonstrated clearly that England supporters were poorly treated at the stadium, and that extensive security and safety plans agreed with the Croatian authorities in advance for the handling of our fans were not implemented on the night."

"First-hand accounts provided by England fans formed a significant part of our submissions."

"The FA maintains that neither we nor our supporters were responsible for the incidents that occurred."

"We have not yet received written reasons for this decision. Once they have been received and reviewed we will give serious consideration to launching an appeal. Until that time we do not feel that we can make any further comment."

Meanwhile, Germany's Aaron Hunt was suspended for two internationals for gross sporting

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Tough ask for on-fire United

AFP, London



Manchester United will have to hold off the strongest team in Europe if they are to reclaim the Premiership title from Chelsea this season, according to Aston Villa boss Martin O'Neill.

United head for Blackburn on Saturday bolstered by a three-point advantage over Chelsea at the top of the table and there is mounting optimism around Old Trafford about their chances of keeping their noses in front of Jose Mourinho's men for the rest of the season.

But O'Neill believes Chelsea's raw power, epitomised by the lung-bursting runs Michael Essien can produce in the final minutes of matches, will take some resisting over the course of a full season.

The former Celtic boss saw his new charges at Villa overwhelmed by Chelsea in a 4-0 League Cup defeat in midweek and did not hesitate to offer praise for the champions' blend of technical quality and physique.

"They are the strongest team in European football but they have also got a lot of class players."

O'Neill added: "One of the best sides that didn't win the World Cup back in 1982 were Brazil. Italy won it but Brazil were by miles the best side. The Brazilian players were so, so good and strong as well. There is nothing wrong with that, absolutely."

Villa were unfortunate enough to be caught in the backlash from Chelsea's controversial defeat by Tottenham last weekend, their second loss of the season in the league.

Mourinho's men will look to continue the recovery process against struggling Watford, although the Premiership newcomers will have a skip in their step after winning for the first time this season against Middlesbrough last weekend.

United and Chelsea's strong starts to the campaign have piled the pressure on to Arsenal and Liverpool to the extent that neither club can afford to lose Sunday's meeting between them at the Emirates Stadium and still expect to be regarded as credible title challengers.

"It is a must-win game," admitted Arsenal forward Emmanuel Adebayor. "If you hope to win the Premiership, every one is important but this weekend even more so."

"We know that Liverpool are a good team, but we have got our confidence back and know we can score at any moment because we have such a lot of good players."

"Manchester United being so far ahead is a problem and maybe we have had a bit of a poor start, but we know we can catch them."

Sunday's match will see Liverpool striker Dirk Kuyt reunited with former Feyenoord team-mate Robin van Persie, who has established himself as one of Arsenal's first choice stars.

"It is good to see Robin doing well at Arsenal, but I always knew that would work for him," said Kuyt. "He is maturing as a person and a player."

Friendship will be put to one side however as Kuyt and his Liverpool teammates seek to build on their recent recovery in form.

"After four home wins and the League Cup victory (against Birmingham) we have lots more confidence now," added Kuyt. "But we can still produce more, not only me."

"I know there is still a big gap between us and the top sides. But if we can win at Arsenal then things will start to change for us."

Liverpool will be without their ever-present midfielder Mohamed Sissoko. The Malien suffered a dislocated shoulder in midweek and has been ruled out of action for a month.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-offs unless stated)
Saturday
 Blackburn v Manchester Utd (1715 GMT), Chelsea v Watford, Everton v Aston Villa, Manchester City v Newcastle (1245 GMT), Middlesbrough v West Ham, Portsmouth v Fulham, Sheffield Utd v Bolton, Wigan Athletic v Charlton
Sunday
 Arsenal v Liverpool (1600 GMT), Reading v Tottenham (1330 GMT)

Henin moves into semis

Tennis

AFP, Madrid

World number three Justine Henin-Hardenne of Belgium ensured herself a berth in the semi-finals of the WTA Tour Championships here on Thursday with a 6-4, 6-4 win over Russia's Nadia Petrova.

The diminutive Belgian took exactly 100 minutes to see off her fifth-ranked opponent and ensure her progress with a match against world number one Amelie Mauresmo still to come.

Mauresmo got her challenge back on track by beating Switzerland's Martina Hingis 3-6, 6-1, 6-4.

After losing her opening match to Petrova 6-2, 6-2 the Frenchwoman

now needs to beat Henin-Hardenne to qualify for the semifinal.

"It's a great feeling to qualify for the semis," said French Open champion Henin-Hardenne.

"I missed the last two editions of the championships with injury and now I'm coming back from a few weeks off so it's great to be back on top."

If Henin-Hardenne can win her semi then she will end the season as world number one.

But the Belgian insists that grabbing the top spot in the world, which she first occupied in 2003, would not alter her campaign here.

"I enjoy being on the court but I will play the semi-finals with the goal of going to the final, not to be number one," added Henin-Hardenne, who is playing her first tournament since the US Open.

"It will be tough for sure, but I don't even want to look to far. Being back on the court and winning my games is the most important thing for me."

"I missed tennis a lot, and I wasn't sure that I could come. There were lots of doubts, I had a hard time."

Mauresmo, who has occupied the world number one spot for 34 weeks, defeated twice former champion Hingis in an evening battle of day-one losers.

The win left Mauresmo with a chance of reaching the last four - if she can defeat Henin-Hardenne on Friday.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5



Belgian player Justine Henin-Hardenne stretches to make a forehand return during her WTA Tour Championship match against Nadia Petrova at the Rockodromo Arena in Madrid on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Crespo dreaming of Scudetto

AFP, Rome



Hernan Crespo believes Inter Milan can help him fulfill his dream of winning a first Serie A title.

The 31-year-old Argentine striker, whose team are tied for first place with Palermo and face his former club Parma on Sunday, was a league winner with River Plate and Chelsea in Argentina and England respectively.

But despite going close in Serie A on several occasions, Crespo has failed to land the Scudetto in his eight seasons in Italy where he has also played for Lazio and AC Milan.

"My biggest desire is to win the league with Inter," Crespo told the Corriere dello Sport.

"I've come close before but I've never managed to do it. I really hope it happens this time."

Crespo, who rejoined Inter for a second spell after agreeing a two-year loan from Chelsea in July, said his side could not have started the season any better.

"It's been perfect," he said.

"The statistics tell you everything. We won the Italian Super Cup before the league programme began, we are top of the league and back on course to reach the knockout stages of the Champions League."

"We could have played better in some of our matches, but overall we have been superb."

Crespo still has strong feelings for Parma, the club he joined from River Plate as a 21-year-old in 1996 for his first experience of Serie A.

"Parma remain in my heart and every now and again I go back there to catch up with old friends," said the Argentine international who spent four seasons there and helped them finish runners-up to Juventus in the 1996-97 season.

"That's where I learned about Italian football and grew up as a man. It was tough at first, but I came through it."

Inter finished third last season but were awarded the title after Juventus and AC Milan were found guilty of match-fixing.

Palermo, level with Inter on 24 points and four clear of third-placed

Roma, play at home to Torino.

On Saturday AC Milan, beaten in their last two league matches, entertain 2001 champions Roma.

Milan received a much-needed confidence boost on Wednesday when they turned around a two-goal deficit to beat second division Brescia 4-2 in the first leg of their last 16 Italian Cup tie.

Atalanta, whose 2-0 win over AC Milan last week left them tied with Siena and Livorno on 16 points, visit Fiorentina.

Fiorentina are second from bottom on zero points having been made to start on minus 15 points for match-fixing.

FIXTURES

(all 1400GMT unless stated)
Saturday
 Fiorentina v Atalanta (1700GMT), AC Milan v Roma (1930GMT)
Sunday
 Ascoli v Empoli, Catania v Livorno, Lazio v Udinese, Messina v Cagliari, Palermo v Torino, Parma v Inter Milan (1930GMT), Sampdoria v Chievo, Siena v Reggina