



Barcelona talisman Ronaldinho (L) celebrates with striker Santiago Ezquerro after the latter put the icing on the cake by scoring the fourth goal in their victory over Primera Liga rivals Mallorca on Sunday.

Gudjohnsen puts Barca atop

AFP, Madrid

A two-goal blast from Icelandic striker Eidur Gudjohnsen drove title holders Barcelona back to the top of the Spanish League on Sunday, cementing a 4-1 win at Real Mallorca which coach Frank Rijkaard thought flattered his men.

Gudjohnsen, signed from English Premiership champions Chelsea in the summer, is proving an away-day specialist for his new club as he has now netted four times in the league, all the efforts coming on Barca's travels.

The win, completed with late strikes from Andres Iniesta and Santiago Ezquerro's after Victor had threatened to make a game of it by netting for Mallorca midway through the second half, propelled Barca on to 26 points from 11 games, one more than overnight leaders Seville.

TOP SIX

Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Barcelona	11	8	2	1	27	10	26
Seville	11	8	1	2	22	10	25
Madrid	11	7	2	2	21	8	23
Zaragoza	11	7	1	3	24	14	22
Atletico	11	6	2	3	16	8	20
Huelva	11	6	1	4	15	13	19

Seville sent Valencia packing 3-0 on Saturday with Malian international Freddy Kanoute among the goals, his effort taking his season tally to an unbroken nine.

Barca promptly barged past them once again with Sunday's impressive win fired by Gudjohnsen.

However, Rijkaard, while saluting the cool finishing of the man nicknamed "Guddy," insisted Mallorca had given almost as good as they got.

"We suffered out there and if 4-1 looks like a canteet it wasn't. They stopped us playing our game in the first half. "But we stuck to our task and we are very happy," said the Dutchman.

Ronaldinho and Deco combined

for the opener as Gudjohnsen slid home from close range five minutes before the break, a lucky bounce not helping keeper Toni Prats.

Then the blond forward's neat

finish 12 minutes after the restart left Barca heading for a fourth league success on their travels.

The only time the Scandinavian striker had netted at the Nou Camp was ironically earlier this month in the Champions League draw with former club Chelsea which left the Catalan outfit with work to do to reach the last 16 as they bid to retain that trophy as well as their domestic crown.

Victor pulled one back on 70

minutes for Mallorca, but the visitors stepped up a gear as Iniesta and Ezquerro produced clinical

finishes to make the margin comfortable for a Barca side supposedly injury-hit with the likes of Samuel Eto'o and Lionel Messi

currently on the sidelines.

Real Zaragoza earlier kept the pressure on the leading trio, a 3-0

drubbing of Gimnastic Tarragona

courtesy of goals from Pablo Aimar,

River turn down Higuain bid

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

River Plate have turned down a €10 million offer from Real Madrid for 18-year-old striker Gonzalo Higuain.

"We're not satisfied with the price nor the idea of handing over the player at the end of the year," River Plate secretary Mario Israel said.

Higuain, who this month turned down a call-up from France where he was born, made his debut for River last year.

He shot to prominence by scoring twice as River Plate beat Brazilian champions Corinthians 3-1 to knock them out of the Libertadores Cup in May and twice more in the 3-1 win over arch-rivals Boca Juniors last month.

"Higuain is only just 18 and still has to grow up," said Israel. "Real Madrid understood that. We've got a lot of games to play and we want him to stay at River at least until June 2007."

Higuain was born in France of Argentine parents and moved to Argentina when he was less than one year old.

Kaka reflective in retrospect

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil midfielder Kaka said on Sunday he was not fully fit in the 1-0 quarterfinal defeat to France at the World Cup and that he should not have played.

Kaka said he had told coach Carlos Alberto Parreira that he was fit to play, even though he was still feeling the effects of a bruised knee which he suffered in the previous game against Ghana in Germany.

"I told professor Parreira that I could play," he said in an interview with Brazilian television. "It was my mistake...I was wrong to have played because when you play with an injury, it limits you."

"In the World Cup, you're amid all that euphoria and you don't know what might happen."

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United, Arsenal sweat on Euro dream

AFP, Paris



English giants Manchester United and Arsenal, who saw their high-speed Champions League campaigns hit the buffers last time out, aim to get back on track on Tuesday.

Premiership leaders United travel to Celtic still smarting from a humbling 1-0 defeat at FC Copenhagen earlier this month but lost. Celtic are a better side now and this will not be an easy game."

Alex Ferguson's team are still overwhelming favourites to make the next stage as they have a three-point lead over Celtic and a five-point advantage over Benfica and Copenhagen with just two games left.

Arsenal, last season's runners-up, boasted two wins from their first two games, but have since taken just a point from two matches with Group G leaders CSKA Moscow.

Arsene Wenger's Gunners, who

take on a already-eliminated Hamburg on Tuesday, face a tight race to the finish. CSKA lead by a point from Arsenal and FC Porto going into the last two matches.

"I want to win at Celtic Park because it is important to finish first

in the section," said Ferguson whose team won the first match 3-2 at Old Trafford earlier in the season.

"But I would also like to see Celtic finish second. It would be great for them and Scottish football."

"I'm keen to finish the job in Glasgow though. We wanted to do it against FC Copenhagen earlier this month but lost. Celtic are a better side now and this will not be an easy game."

Celtic, who have won both their home games so against Benfica and FC Copenhagen, slumped to a 3-0 defeat in Portugal last time out but manager Gordon Strachan believes home support will be crucial.

"There is something magical about these types of games at Celtic Park which has been created

TUESDAY'S FIXTURES

GROUPE

Real Madrid v Lyon

Steaua Bucharest v Dynamo Kiev

GROUP F

Benfica v FC Copenhagen

Celtic v Man Utd

GROUP G

Arsenal v Hamburg

CSKA Moscow v FC Porto

GROUP H

AEK Athens v AC Milan

Lille v Anderlecht

over the years and I want to keep that going by giving the fans a game to remember," said Strachan, a former United player.

United have a full squad to choose from after Ryan Giggs recovered from a knock he picked up on international duty with Wales to play in the 2-1 win over Sheffield United on Saturday.

Celtic have injury worries over striker Kenny Miller, who is struggling with an ankle problem, and central defender Gary Caldwell who limped off with a knee knock during the 3-0 victory of Inverness Caledonian Thistle.

Guinean international defender Bobo Balde is in line to take Caldwell's place.

Arsenal could and should have defeated CSKA at the Emirates Stadium three weeks ago but squandered a host of chances. They had 21 shots but were unable to find a way past CSKA goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev.

"We had enough opportunities to win that game and at one point the CSKA centre-back said to me, 'There's only one team on the pitch'. Sometimes that's not enough, though, and at the end we nearly lost the game," said striker Thierry Henry.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2



CONSPICIOUS BY ABSENCE: Real Madrid stars Ronaldo (L) and David Beckham jog during a training session in Madrid on Monday. Real face Lyon in the Champions League today.

Fiesta battle in prospect

Reuters, Glasgow

Of all the Champions League matches taking place this week, none will generate more passion than the meeting of Celtic and Manchester United.

Two clubs with fanatical support, sizzling form and passionate Scottish coaches will meet at Parkhead with United, as Group F leaders, knowing victory will guarantee themselves top spot and a place in the last 16.

Celtic, who have racked up 11 straight wins in the Scottish Premier League including the 3-0 victory over Inverness Caley Thistle at the weekend, are just three points behind United and can sense a place in the knockout round for the first time.

Despite an apparent thawing in relations between Celtic manager Gordon Strachan and United boss Alex Ferguson, both will be desperate for victory on Tuesday.

Strachan, who played under Ferguson at Aberdeen and then at Old Trafford, knows that ultimately he will be judged on progress in Europe, however dominant his side is at home.

Ferguson, a native of Glasgow and one of the most successful managers in the world game, knows exactly what to expect.

"We will need to show courage

and mental strength to handle the atmosphere at Parkhead (Celtic Park)," said Ferguson, who believes his current side can go all the way.

"I expect the game to be exciting, open and full of attacking football – just the way it was when we beat them 3-2 in September."

Both managers have been critical of each other in their respective autobiographies, Strachan blasting Ferguson's management style and Ferguson saying Strachan "could not be trusted".

The mind games have already started with Ferguson opting to take the pre-match press conference away from Celtic Park.

United will stage the news conference at their hotel on the edge of Loch Lomond on Monday and have also shunned the customary pre-match training session at their opponents' ground.

They will train at their Carrington

TEAMS

CELTIC: 1-Artur Boruc; 2-Paul Telfer, 3-Lee Naylor, 6-Bobo Balde, 44-Stephen McManus; 16-Thomas Gravesen, 25-Shunsuke Nakamura, 18-Neil Lennon (capt), 46-Aiden McGeady, 9-Kenny Miller, 10-Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink

MANCHESTER UNITED: 1-Eduwin van der Sar; 2-Gary Neville, 5-Rio Ferdinand, 15-Nemanja Vidic, 3-Patrice Evra; 7-Cristiano Ronaldo, 16-Michael Carrick, 18-Paul Scholes, 11-Ryan Giggs, 9-Louis Saha, 8-Wayne Rooney.

However, Strachan is happy to have Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink and Thomas Gravesen available.

"It will help us with Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink and Thomas Gravesen coming back because we missed that bit of experience at Benfica," Strachan said, referring to the 3-0 defeat to the Portuguese side in their last Champions League outing.

INTER ON TOP

Roma obliterate Catania

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan opened up a three-point lead at the top of Serie A after scraping a 1-0 home win over bottom club Reggina on Sunday, while third-placed Roma

hammered Catania 7-0.

Hernan Crespo's crisp volley put Inter ahead at the San Siro, but the reigning champions wilted after a perfect start and were fortunate to claim all three points.

Reggina, who would be in midtable were it not for their 15-point match-fixing penalty, hit the woodwork and Brazilian keeper Julio Cesar kept Inter's slender lead intact with a string of outstanding saves.

The Calabrian visitors also had an equalizing goal ruled out in the 77th minute. Luca Tognazzi's shot struck teammate Rolando Bianchi before crossing the line, but Bianchi was judged to be in an offside position by the linesman.

Inter's victory in their 12 matches played left Inter unbeaten on 30 points, three ahead of Palermo who lost 1-0 at Cagliari on Saturday.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini admitted his side rode their luck.

"It wasn't pretty on our part and we took a few risks, but in the end we got the right result," he said.

TOP SIX

Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Inter Milan	12	9	3	0	25	13	30
Palermo	12	9	0	3	26	16	27
Roma	12	8	2	2	26	8	26
Livorno	12	5	4	3	13	11	19
Atalanta	12	4	5	3	19	18	17
Empoli	12	3	7	2	11	9	16

