

Milla on top

AFP, Cairo

Former Cameroon star Roger Milla has been voted the best African footballer of the last 50 years.

The striker who took the 1990 World Cup in Italy by storm collected 2,246 votes in a public poll by the Cairo-based Confederation of African Football as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations.

Mahmoud al-Khatib, an Egyptian striker of the 1980s, finished second just 81 votes behind and compatriot Hossam Hassan, still playing as he approaches 40, was third with 2,011 votes.

Milla abandoned semi-retirement on the Indian Ocean island of Reunion to play a pivotal role as Cameroon beat defending champions Argentina, Romania and Colombia before bowing out to England after extra time in the 1990 quarterfinals.

The Cameroonian danced around the corner flag after each of his four goals and the celebration is copied by millions of players around the world to this day.

Milla returned to the World Cup four years later, scored the consolation goal in a 6-1 drubbing by Russia in the United States, and created history at 42 by becoming the oldest footballer to play in the finals.

Mancini has contract doubt

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini said Monday there's no guarantee he will extend his contract with the Serie A champions beyond June.

The 42-year-old's current contract runs out at the end of the season and he has so far failed to reach an agreement with club president Massimo Moratti over a new deal.

"The renewal of my contract is not a formality," Mancini said. "At the moment it's not my priority, but there's no problem. It's not vital that we do it now and the relationship between me and the president is good."

Last week Moratti hinted that Mancini was asking for too much money. "I would keep Mancini for many years, but we both have to reach an agreement," he said.

Inter are currently nine points clear at the top of Serie A at the halfway stage of the season and are through to the last 16 of the Champions League.

LJUBICIC FALLS Jittery passage for seeds



The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

Defending champions Roger Federer and Amelie Mauresmo overcame early jitters to negotiate the first round of the Australian Open Monday on a day overshadowed by brawling Serbian and Croatian fans.

Unseeded seven-time Grand Slam champion Serena Williams breezed through her match against Italian 27th seed Mara Santangelo 6-2, 6-1, dispelling doubts about her fitness after an injury-plagued 2006.

But fourth seed Ivan Ljubicic crashed out, unable to get to grips with American Mardy Fish, losing 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4, 6-4 to become the highest profile casualty on day one.

Russia's Marat Safin, the 2005 champion and twice runner-up, teetered on the edge of elimination before winning a five-set thriller against German Benjamin Becker 5-7, 6-2 (7/2), 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 in 3hr 26min.

While the tennis went mostly to form, age-old ethnic rivalries between Serbian and Croat fans boiled over.

Wearing the national colours of the bitter Balkan rivals, the two sides clashed after taunting and hurling insults at each other.

Dozens of police were called in and ejected around 150 of them after confiscating their tickets.

"They were mostly Serbians ejected as they were upsetting the Croatians," Victoria Police spokeswoman Katherine Jess said.

Tennis Australia chief executive Steve Wood said there were no injuries or arrests and praised security staff for acting swiftly to end the trouble.

Unaware of the commotion, the Fed Express, bidding for his third Australian Open title and 10th Grand Slam, stuttered through his first set against German Bjorn Phau before finding his groove to post a 7-5, 6-0, 6-4 win.

It sets up a second clash with veteran Swede Jonas Bjorkman.

Under cloudy skies and with a smoke haze from bushfires in the

air, the Swiss world number one admitted he had to battle hard before getting the upper hand.

"I'm happy to be through because it looked like I was definitely going to head for a first set loss," he said.

"But I came through, that's the most important thing."

Andy Roddick, who beat Federer in the exhibition Kooyong Classic final on Saturday, was also given a fright, losing the first set after a mammoth tiebreak to French wildcard Jo-Wilfried Tsonga before going 2-5 down in the second.

The American pulled himself together and rallied to a 6-7 (18/20), 7-6 (7/2) 6-3, 6-3 victory and will now play another Frenchman Marc Gicquel.

Others through included ninth seed Mario Ancic of Croatia, the evergreen Dominik Hrbaty of Slovakia, seeded 22, and former French Open champion Juan Carlos Ferrero, seeded 24.

Last year's finalist Marcos Baghatis of Cyprus scratched his way to a 6-4, 2-6, 6-3, 6-2 win over

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8



PHOTO: AFP

Last year's runner-up Marcus Baghatis of Cyprus looks up to the heavens after beating Germany's Rainer Schuettler in a closely-fought encounter in the first round of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Monday.

Serena's dress controversy

AFP, Melbourne

Serena Williams on Monday laughed off suggestions her lime-green outfit gave her an unfair advantage at the Australian Open because it is the same colour as a tennis ball.

"I thought about that the whole time I was designing the dress -- I can't beat these girls, I've got to think of every way to cheat," the seven-time Grand Slam champion said after advancing comfortably into the second round.

Williams, whose out-there fashion sense has often set her apart from opponents, noted that her lime-green choice was actually in step with what many other players are wearing this year.

"Actually, a lot of people are wearing a similar colour, I've noticed," she said. "I'm wearing a dress, a lot of the girls are wearing like a top and a skirt."

Fellow players who have opted for fluorescent lime-green include China's Zheng Jie and Russian

Baghatis feeling the heat

AFP, Melbourne

Marcos Baghatis admits he feels under pressure from his family and entourage at this year's Australian Open after his euphoric charge to last year's final.

The charismatic Greek Cypriot took the tennis world by storm last year when he overcame Andy Roddick, David Nalbandian and Ivan Ljubicic on the way to the final, then led Roger Federer in the decider before succumbing.

But it was a different looking Baghatis, fidgety and subdued, after his 6-4, 2-6, 6-3, 6-2 win Monday

SEE PAGE 18 COL 6

Real pounce on slip-ups

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Madrid ended a turbulent week with a morale-boosting 1-0 home win over Real Zaragoza to move within two points of leaders Sevilla in the Primera Liga on Sunday.

Talk of rejuvenating the squad, David Beckham's decision to leave at the end of the season and coach Fabio Capello's decision to discard him dominated the build up to the match.

But a relatively young side rose to the occasion by putting in a spirited performance, with Dutchman Ruud van Nistelrooy scoring the only goal just before the break.

Real are third on 35 points, level

with second-placed Barcelona who were thumped 3-1 at city rivals Espanyol on Saturday but have a game in hand.

Leaders Sevilla lost their 100 percent home record, and the chance to extend their lead at the top, when they lost 2-1 to struggling Real Mallorca.

Mallorca had suffered five straight defeats in all competitions and, against the run of the play, fell behind to a first-half penalty from Mali striker Frederic Kanoute.

Two goals from Fernando Torres helped Atletico Madrid climb to fifth on 32 points after a 3-1 win at Celta Vigo.

There was an air of expectation at the Bernabeu as Real's new youngsters Fernando Gago and Gonzalo Higuain took centre stage.

Dropped from the squad by Capello, Beckham could be seen watching from the stands while among the injured absenteers were Ronaldo, Antonio Cassano and Roberto Carlos.

Defenders Michel Salgado and Sergio Ramos were suspended but

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

TOP SIX

Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Sevilla	18	12	1	5	37	19	37
Barcelona	17	10	5	2	36	16	35
Real Madrid	18	11	2	5	27	16	35
Valencia	18	10	3	5	27	15	33
Atletico	18	9	5	4	24	13	32
Zaragoza	18	9	3	6	30	20	30

Real are third on 35 points, level

with second-placed Barcelona who were thumped 3-1 at city rivals Espanyol on Saturday but have a game in hand.

Leaders Sevilla lost their 100 percent home record, and the chance to extend their lead at the top, when they lost 2-1 to struggling Real Mallorca.

Mallorca had suffered five straight defeats in all competitions and, against the run of the play, fell behind to a first-half penalty from Mali striker Frederic Kanoute.

Two goals from Fernando Torres helped Atletico Madrid climb to fifth on 32 points after a 3-1 win at Celta Vigo.

There was an air of expectation at the Bernabeu as Real's new youngsters Fernando Gago and Gonzalo Higuain took centre stage.

Dropped from the squad by Capello, Beckham could be seen watching from the stands while among the injured absenteers were Ronaldo, Antonio Cassano and Roberto Carlos.

Defenders Michel Salgado and Sergio Ramos were suspended but

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Becks wants early exit

REUTERS, Madrid

David Beckham is seeking an early release from his contract with Real Madrid to join up with Los Angeles Galaxy before the end of the Primera Liga season, Major League Soccer Commissioner Don Garber has said.

"I understand that David's lawyers are working to secure a possible amicable exit from Real because we would not be able to pay the buy-out clause," Garber told Spanish sports daily Marca on Monday.

"We want to him as it is soon as possible so the league and the Galaxy are doing everything we can to make this happen."

"Furthermore, David is keen to come sooner."

The former England captain decided not to renew his contract with Real and has agreed a move to the Galaxy when his contract expires in June.

The five-year deal with the MLS side is worth 250-million-dollars, the biggest in world sport.

Following his announcement, however, Real coach Fabio Capello dropped the midfielder from the squad and said he would not play for the side again.

The Italian said it was not possible to rely on a player who had already committed himself to another club.

The MLS season starts in April.

Vogts to guide Super Eagles

AFP, Lagos

Former Germany boss Berti Vogts has agreed to coach Nigeria, according to the chairman of the Nigeria Football Association (NFA), Sani Lulu.

Lulu said the 60-year-old Vogts has signed an agreement to coach the Super Eagles, as the country's team are called.

"Vogts has signed an agreement with the NFA to coach our national team," Lulu disclosed from London, where top officials have been interviewing several other foreign coaches.

"The actual contract signing ceremony will take place in Nigeria before the end of this month."

Lulu said the NFA chose Vogts as he was best suited for the job.

"We all found him to be very sincere and focussed. He is a complete gentleman who believes in the future of Nigeria football and he is willing to bring his experience to bear on our football," he said.

"Besides working with the Super Eagles, he is equally committed to developing football at the grassroots and updating our local coaches."

The immediate focus of the new coach is qualification for the 2008 African Nations Cup in Ghana.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Chivu howler stalls Roma

REUTERS, Rome

AS Roma lost ground on Serie A leaders Inter Milan when they conceded a late penalty to draw 1-1 at Messina on Sunday.

Roma looked on course for victory after a first-half goal by Brazilian winger Mancini, but with a minute of normal time remaining Cristian Chivu upended Arturo Di Napoli in the box to give Alessandro Parisi the chance to stroke home the equaliser.

The result left Roma on 42 points from 19 matches -- the halfway stage of the season -- nine points behind Inter, who set a Serie A record of 12 wins in a row when they defeated Torino 3-1 on Saturday.

Palermo consolidated third place on 38 points with a 2-0 win over Udinese, Lazio moved up to fourth on 26 points despite being held 1-1 by Siena and AC Milan racked up their third win in succession by beating Reggina 3-1.

Roma's players needed a win to keep up the pressure on Inter in their first game back after Italy's three-week winter break.

They dominated possession in the first half but were let down by a lack of precision in the final third of the pitch.

Roma finally broke through six minutes before halftime when Francesco Totti threaded a pass through Messina's defence for Mancini to go through alone and

chip keeper Marco Storari.

Messina rarely looked capable of getting level, but in the final 20 minutes the speed of their strikers Sergio Floccari and Di Napoli began to trouble Roma's tiring back four.

Defender Matteo Ferrari had already pulled off a pair of last-ditch tackles to rob Floccari of possession, but Chivu was slower to react when Di Napoli burst into the area and the pair went down in a tangle of legs.

Parisi's penalty put a further dent in Roma's title challenge and revealed the scale of the mountain they must climb if they are to catch up with Inter.

Palermo's players looked more at ease on home ground as they cruised past Udinese.

Striker Andrea Caracciolo put the Sicilian side ahead in the 32nd minute when he nodded Fabio Simplicio's cross into the bottom corner of the net.