



Reading midfielder Steve Sidwell (number 4) celebrates his goal with teammate Stephen Hunt and their mascot during their Premiership encounter at home to Aston Villa at Reading on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

# Sidwell steers Reading home

AFP, Reading



Steve Sidwell scored twice as Reading kept their bid for an unlikely European place on course with a 2-0 victory against Aston Villa on Saturday.

Reading manager Steve Coppell has been playing down talk of his newly-promoted side qualifying for the UEFA Cup, but Sidwell's double at the Madejski Stadium clinched a fifth successive win to keep the dream firmly alive.

Sidwell was on target in either half to consolidate sixth place for Reading, while Villa remain marooned in the bottom half of the table.

Martin O'Neill spent big money in the January transfer window but his team remain frustratingly inconsis-

tent and have now lost six successive away matches.

Shaun Maloney was making his Villa debut after his one million pounds move from Celtic and the winger was quickly into the thick of the action.

He made a driving run into the Reading half before being brought down by Sidwell. Maloney picked himself to take the free-kick himself but was unable to test Marcus Hahnemann.

O'Neill's side had the better of the opening stages and Villa forward John Carew served notice of their attacking intent when he cut into the area and drove a shot just wide.

Carew's strike partner Ashley Young should have done better than glance a header wide from Gareth Barry's corner moments later.

Those misses were to prove costly. It took a fine save from

Thomas Sorensen to keep out James Harper's strike, but Villa's reprieve was short-lived.

Stephen Hunt's 16th minute corner to the near post wasn't dealt with by Villa and Sidwell stole in to score with a header that deflected in off Phil Bardsley.

Leroy Lita has been in superb form recently, scoring nine in nine matches, and the Reading striker was close to another goal as Sorensen pushed away his low effort.

Villa were always a threat going forward and Maloney showed promise again when he forced Hahnemann to concede a corner with a fierce long range strike midway through the half.

Carew tested Hahnemann as well with a low strike that would have crept in at the far post if the American keeper hadn't got down well.

Reading had to ride their luck at the start of the second half as Villa searched for an equaliser.

Young created a half chance with a neat piece of skill on the edge of the Reading area but, despite tricking his way past Nicky Shorey, he could only drive wide.

Coppell's side were breathing a sigh of relief again when Young's shot deflected off Carew and, with Hahnemann beaten, looped onto a post.

Hahnemann quickly got to his feet to keep out Gabriel Agbonlahor's follow-up effort and that save proved decisive.

Sidwell put the result beyond doubt in the 90th minute as he played a one-two with Dave Kitson before slotting past Sorensen to ensure the hosts claimed a first win over Villa since 1912.

## Inter fans threaten to travel

AFP, Rome

Fans of Inter Milan are threatening to travel to Chievo for Sunday's behind closed doors match against Chievo.

Professional football resumes this weekend after being suspended last Friday following the death of a policeman during crowd violence at the Sicilian derby between Catania and Palermo.

But on Sunday, five Serie A grounds will be closed to the public as their security arrangements do not meet legal requirements, including Chievo's Bentegodi stadium.

Some Inter fans' websites have called for supporters to go to Verona in defiance of the ban but only as a peaceful protest.

A message posted on 'Curva Nord Interista' said: "With our presence in Verona, the Curva Nord wants to show its contempt for the new legislation on banning fans rather than cause public disorder."

The threats to travel to Verona prompted Milan council to issue a statement appealing to fans to stay at home.

# Ronaldo set for debut

INTERNET, undated



Carlo Ancelotti has called Ronaldo for Sunday's Livorno game and confirms he could make his Milan debut.

"He will start from the bench. If the opportunity arises, then he will play," explained the Coach in his Press conference.

"Ronaldo has been doing well in training. He really wants to make the most of this opportunity to get back to the highest levels."

When he first arrived from Real Madrid in January, club doctors warned that Il Fenomeno would require around a month of training before he was ready for Serie A football.

However, the Brazilian has impressed with his tenacity and the fitness levels mean he could make his bow against Livorno this weekend.

"He is very motivated, disciplined and eager to prove himself."

Now above all he has to understand his teammates' movements and gel with them, but with the qualities he possesses, I doubt that will be difficult."

Milan are still awaiting the verdict from this morning's inspection on the Stadio Giuseppe Meazza, as the installation of 28 new turnstiles overnight could allow the presence of the season ticket holders on Sunday. If the new measures were rejected, then Ronaldo would be greeted by empty stands.

"I think some things weren't dealt with competently after the Catania riots," insisted Ancelotti. "It was right to clamp down on hooligans, but closing the stadiums completely puts the blame on an entire sport that is in reality the victim of these delinquents."

"It is true that we must all change our attitude and grow in terms of respect for our opponents, but without the crowd there, it's just not football. It is a virtual game and in my view not really worth playing."

With Marco Borriello suspended for failing a drugs test and

Pippo Inzaghi injured, Ronaldo's arrival is just in time to help the push for a Champions League place.

"Inzaghi has started running again and should be ready in the next few games. Serginho must not be rushed, but he is doing much better. Kakha Kaladze will be on the bench on Sunday and Alessandro Nesta is still in the States for specialist treatment, but should be completely healed by the time he returns."

It was strongly rumoured that Real Madrid had requested Ricardo Oliveira as part of the Ronaldo move, but the Brazilian has stayed at San Siro.

"He is in good shape and I really hope with all my heart he can express that potential," continued Ancelotti.

"So far his form in training hasn't yet transferred to the match day. As Ronaldo is Cup-tied, Oliveira will be very important for us in the Champions League."

## PSG slam Cisse decision

INTERNET, undated

Paris St Germain chairman Alain Cayzac has slammed the league's discipline commission for not suspending Djibril Cisse. Marseille striker Cisse broke Mario Yepes' ankle in a challenge during a Ligue 1 fixture last weekend, ruling the PSG defender out for the rest of the season.

Cayzac had called for Cisse to be handed a similar punishment to that dished out to PSG striker Pierre-Alain Frau, who was banned for eight weeks for a tackle on Sedan's Stephane Noro earlier in the season.

"This is an enormous scandal," Cayzac said, "and PSG won't stay quiet."

"In the same circumstances, for a similar tackle, Frau had been suspended for two months."

"That proves the sanctions were disproportionate and constituted an enormous damage to PSG."

"I will wait until I have more information until I say more, but it would seem that PSG have been mistreated by the authorities."

"I want explanations. There has been an error."

PSG are fourth from bottom in Ligue 1, just one point above the relegation zone.

# Arsenal tie Rapids knot



REUTERS, London

Arsenal became the latest English Premier League club to forge ties across the Atlantic when they announced a new partnership with Major League Soccer (MLS) club Colorado Rapids on Friday.

The deal with Kroenke Sports Enterprises (KSE), owners of Colorado, was made with the main aim of building Arsenal's brand in the U.S., helping to improve the quality of football at the Rapids and supporting grass-roots soccer in North America.

It will also include the development of a Centre of Excellence in Colorado, the transfer of coaching ideas and the launch of the Arsenal Cup, a club tournament open to teams from all over the U.S.

"This is a very important step for Arsenal as this becomes our first venture into the United States marketplace," managing director Keith Edelman told the club's Web site.

"We are approaching this as a

long term development partnership that will benefit both clubs significantly."

Edelman's views were echoed by Rapids managing director Jeff Plush.

"This groundbreaking partnership with Arsenal... is one of the stepping stones to continue pushing our sport on to the next level," said Plush.

"In today's international business community, soccer is the only true global sport that transcends ethnicity, culture and language and with this type of relationship we are making sure our company is expanding this vision."

American billionaire Stan Kroenke, a property magnate, is the man behind KSE.

The deal comes just days after the takeover of Liverpool by American tycoons George Gillet and Tom Hicks, and represents an increasing trend of American businessmen buying into English soccer.

Manchester United and Aston Villa are also owned by American business tycoons.

Arsenal manager Arsene

Wenger dismissed the idea the deal was a takeover.

"Unless I am completely naive it is not a takeover," Wenger told reporters. "I have never heard about a possible takeover and I don't think that is at all behind our partnership."

Wenger said the link-up might help Arsenal recruit new young players.

"We develop a few partnerships sometimes with football schools and sometimes with clubs," said the Frenchman. "We are trying to extend our brand."

"We are also trying to extend our technical cooperation because the Americans might produce some players at some stage and that's why we are doing it. We are always trying to develop young players."

The Rapids will come to London to use Arsenal's facilities for six days while they continue training ahead of the MLS season which starts in April.

Arsenal are involved in various other partnerships, notably with the Belgian club Beveren and an academy set up in the Ivory Coast.

# World class Rafalution

INTERNET, undated



Rafael Benitez accepts that life will be easier for him in the transfer market under Liverpool's new American owners.

But although he claims the club will never be the same again, he insists he does not feel any extra pressure working for owners who do not know his qualities and track record intimately.

And the Anfield chief believes the club is in for a major transformation following the midweek takeover by new co-chairmen George Gillett and Tom Hicks.

However, at the moment very little has changed. The American circus has returned across the pond and former chairman David Moores, still a director, will be in his usual seat in the directors' box when Liverpool face Newcastle on Tyneside in a crucial Premier League match.

Benitez sees only good in the future and, even if he has not been told how much money he will have to spend, he does reveal that he "will only now be looking to signing top class players."

Benitez, who will be missing the suspended Xabi Alonso at St James Park but expects to have Mohamed Sissoko finally back

from injury, said: "It has been a very important week and something that will change everything."

"We talked about the future of the club, not money or this player or that player. We talked about who we had in the squad and ideas for the future."

"They were nice people and good businessmen. That is a good mix, they can then do the right things for the club in terms of money and how we grow."

"They will try to do the things they are doing in the States with regard to marketing. That is what they are really good at. We can grow and improve."

He added: "It could be a problem of inflated fees now, but I am happy with my scouting department and we are doing a good job now without any big money."

"We have enough money to do business now and if we have more in the future it could be easier. If we have two players we like and one is more expensive, maybe now we can consider signing him."

"We are doing the right things now and maybe we will not need to spend big money in the summer."

Benitez, who takes his squad to Portugal on Monday for a five-day warm-weather training camp, dismisses talk of extra pressures on him, saying: "I do not feel under any more pressure. When you sign for a new club they may know

something about you but they do not really know you."

"So this situation is no different. They know enough about us, they are clever, certainly not stupid."

"They know how important it is to keep the same things, the players, the manager. They will be calm and give us support."

"Everything is positive, the future of the club is brilliant and I had a very good meeting with the new investors."

"They will do their best for club. Not just with money for signing players, they will try to improve everything."

"They know they do not have experience in football, but they are people who know about sport. That is important."

"We talked a lot about the ideas for the club, they will do the right things. They understand the passion of this club and our supporters."

"We have not talked about budgets, more ideas and how to keep the team at the top of the table to remain contenders."

He added: "But I will have more money, normally that will make things easier. But I have said to them that it is not a problem of money, more to do the right things at the right moment."

"I have no figures in mind. But we have always been watching top class players, who we believe can improve the squad. We have a

really good squad now, but to make the next step higher we can only sign top class players."

"More money will make it better for us. Manchester United have spent big money on key players, and now we have the spine of a team maybe we can approach the market like they have done. But it is not going to be a Chelsea-situation here."

Benitez said: "We have plans to improve everything. The stadium, the squad, young players, everything that can be really good for the club."

"If we get a bigger stadium we will have more fans supporting us in every game and that will help. It will also bring in more money, and that is very positive."

"What we must do is to take the atmosphere from Anfield to the new stadium."

"We will continue doing the same things. I am talking to (chief executive) Rick Parry every day, we cannot stop doing what we have always done."

"First it is Newcastle, then the rest of the season and then what we will do in the summer."

"I read that I will have 100million pounds in the summer, I know nothing of that. At the moment we do not have any money. We are just preparing for the future."

## Wenger apathetic to int'l football

REUTERS, London

International soccer has become boring, according to Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

"If you leave national pride aside, you have to accept international games are of no interest at all," Wenger told reporters on Friday.

"National football is boring, you have to accept that. For me, there are two reasons, club football has moved forward and national football has gone backwards."

Wenger was responding to comments by Middlesbrough chairman Steve Gibson, who criticised the structure of domestic football and said the likes of Arsenal and Liverpool were not doing enough to help England.

The Arsenal manager said officials needed to do something to halt the slide of international football.

"I think football has moved on and has moved more towards the clubs," said the Frenchman. "It is more exciting to watch club football now than it is to watch national football, and that's the same for England, France, Argentina, Brazil."

"Games are becoming boring. If you go to England against the Faroe Islands, no one will really be interested apart for the love of the country."

Wenger, whose Arsenal side host Wigan Athletic in the Premier League on Sunday, backed his foreign policy at the London club and said it was no hindrance to England.

"When I sign a player nationality doesn't come into it, it's all about quality," said Wenger. "If I give you a good wine, first you taste if it's good then you ask where it comes from."

"You have to accept we live in a world that is down to quality. The only thing I can say is that whenever England do not win it is always my fault, even when I am not at the game."

Spain beat England 1-0 in a friendly in Manchester on Wednesday.



Football

INTERNET, undated

John Obi Mikel claims he was forced to disobey Jose Mourinho -- after his family received death threats.

The Chelsea star went against his manager's orders to play for Nigeria on Tuesday night.

Mikel said: "Nigerian fans were threatening my family back home."

"They believe I have started picking the games I play for my country."

"People are still angry that I didn't play in Lesotho for the 2008 African Championship qualifier in October."

"Only a few people know what I have been through at home in the past due to this situation."

"It was just too much for me to handle or control."

"It's a shame that things turned out this way but only God knows what would have happened to my family if I had stayed away from this game."

# Fergie out to keep C'Ron



Football

REUTERS, Manchester

In-form Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo is playing his football at the best place possible, manager Alex Ferguson said on Friday.

Media speculation continues to link the Portugal international with a return to Europe with Real Madrid and Barcelona being widely tipped to launch bids for the 22-year-old.

Ferguson remains unconcerned at what he regards as just newspaper talk and is convinced Ronaldo, who has netted 15 league goals this season, could do no better than continue his career at Old Trafford.

"It's always an attraction, a better climate. But when you think about what you can get at Manchester United -- every week 76,000 people," Ferguson told a news conference.

"You are not going to get that

anywhere. I know that the Spanish giants of Madrid and Barcelona, and also Milan, when they have got big games they can fill the place without question. But they don't fill it every week."

"Old Trafford is full every week, which is fantastic. He's at a good club and he knows he's at a good football club."

Ronaldo has played a huge role in helping United gain a six-point lead at the top of the Premier League.

United, at home to relegation-threatened Charlton Athletic on Saturday, reinforced their advantage over Chelsea with an emphatic 4-0 win at Tottenham last Sunday and Ferguson wants no dropping of standards as his side chase a first title for four years.

"I think keeping our feet on the ground is important," he said. "I think the realisation that every game is important between now and the end of the season must register with us, no matter who we are playing."

"Most people expect us to beat Charlton tomorrow. Fine, that's what Manchester United are about in that way."

"Fans are dreaming sometimes about what can be achieved in a couple of month's time but we have to be professional enough to know that they are difficult games also and we have to approach them in that vein."

"If we keep our feet on the ground and keep playing the way we are playing I think we have a good chance."

Ronaldo is a slight doubt after missing training on Friday with a cold and goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar (broken nose) and John O'Shea (neck) are definitely out.

However, striker Wayne Rooney is available after regaining full fitness following a hip injury which kept him out of England's midweek defeat by Spain.

## CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

**ACROSS**

1 Shea athlete

4 Couric's employer

7 Sworn statement

8 This list

10 Boredom

11 Popular disco

13 Last-one-wins game

16 Work with

17 Eccentric

18 Young pooch

19 Rayburn or Roddenberry

20 Stupefied (Var.)

21 Animal

23 Poison

25 Salver

26 George Herman Ruth

27 Author Fleming

**DOWN**

3 Area of shrubbery

4 Hen's comment

5 In need of tweezing?

6 Unruly haircuts

39 Formerly, formerly

40 Actor

41 Born

1 Minister's home

2 Needle case

10 Ostrich's cousin

12 Burst forth

29 Repaired a chair, maybe

30 Heavily populated

31 Tendrils

32 Big Apple letters

34 Terrible leader?

35 Former filly

**Solution time: 21 mins.**

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**CRYPTOQUIP**

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**Yesterday's Cryptquip:** AT THE OPERA, DO THE SINGERS OUT TO GREET ONE ANOTHER WITH "HOW ARIA DOING TONIGHT?"

Today's Cryptquip Clue: M equals R