

Queen meets 'King Henry'

Football

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth II hosted Arsenal footballers in a teatime fixture at Buckingham Palace on Thursday to make up for her having to forfeit opening their new ground last November because of a bad back.

The 80-year-old monarch invited the English Premiership club's players and staff to the palace for a tour of the State Apartments before their gathering in the Bow Room.

Gunners captain Thierry Henry, the club's record goal scorer, swapped his red and white kit for a smart dark suit and tie for the occasion.

"We had a chance to come here and have a look around and meet the queen. What a pleasure," said the France striker, dubbed "king Henry" by fans.

League Cup finalists Arsenal booked an FA Cup clash with Blackburn by beating Bolton 3-1 after extra time in a fourth round replay epic on Wednesday - but missed two penalties in the process.

LOSING START FOR RANIERI

Sevilla turn on style

REUTERS, London

Sevilla striker Frederic Kanoute continued his prolific season with another goal as the UEFA Cup holders underlined their class with a 2-0 victory over Steaua Bucharest in Romania on Thursday.

Mali international Kanoute, whose 16 goals make him the top scorer in Spain and have fired Sevilla's challenge for the domestic title, came off the bench to net a 77th minute penalty.

"Our defence was perfect this evening," Sevilla coach Juande

"We had some questions about the penalties yesterday," Henry said.

"The queen congratulated us with the win and that was amazing, the lads inside were over the moon. "Even not being an Englishman, what a privilege to see the queen and come here."

Arsenal are playing their first season in Emirates Stadium in north London, just around the corner from Highbury, which was their home since 1913. The queen's husband Prince Philip took her place at the opening ceremony three months ago.

Henry's new stomping ground is a giant concrete and gleaming glass construction, but he was overwhelmed by the Buckingham Palace architecture.

"So beautiful, the way it has been maintained is just out of this world. I would feel a bit lost here," he said.

It is rare for Queen Elizabeth, known for her robust health and stamina, to pull out of engagements.

But she sustained a back injury months before the Emirates Stadium date and had been advised by her doctors to cut down her

workload.

A Buckingham Palace spokesman said: "The queen was disappointed about not being able to officially open the new Arsenal stadium due to her back strain, especially as so much effort had been put in by so many people behind the scenes."

Her majesty therefore decided to host a tea at Buckingham Palace to thank those involved in the project for all their hard work and to have a chance to meet some of those she would have seen on the day."

Arsenal have some royal credentials themselves - and not just because they count Queen Elizabeth's youngest grandson Prince Harry among their fans.

The club was formed as Dial Square when workers at the Woolwich Arsenal Armament Factory decided to form a football team in 1886. Later that year they switched the name to Royal Arsenal before becoming Woolwich Arsenal in 1891.

Woolwich was dropped from the name when they moved from south-east London to Highbury.



PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal captain Thierry Henry (R) introduces the Arsenal squad to Queen Elizabeth (C) at Buckingham Palace on Thursday.

Humble Casillas

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid keeper Iker Casillas said if Barcelona were in crisis following the controversial comments of Barcelona star Samuel Eto'o then Real Madrid were really in trouble.

Barcelona's three-time African footballer of the year Samuel Eto'o criticised coach Frank Rijkaard and Brazilian team-mate Ronaldinho on Tuesday after the Dutch coach said in a post-match press conference the Cameroonian had refused to come on as a substitute in Sunday's 2-0 victory over Racing Santander.

Eto'o was also upset at post-match comments by Ronaldinho that he should be more of a team player.

Casillas said on Thursday there were problems in all football dressing rooms.

"This is more of a media affair than a player's one," Casillas said. "There are problems in every dressing room."

He refuted the idea that there was a crisis at Barcelona, who top the Spanish league by three points from Sevilla. "If Barcelona are in crisis, then we have really fallen off the edge," he joked. "Their crisis makes me laugh."

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Bayern keen on Raul

AFP, Madrid

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has said that he is a huge fan of Spanish international striker Raul and would like to sign the Real Madrid captain.

"If I had to recruit a Real Madrid player, I would recruit Raul. For me he is the best, a great professional and a great person," he said in an interview published Friday in sports daily Marca.

"If he wanted to sign for Bayern, I would personally go get him," the coach of the German club added.

Raul, 29, has spent his entire professional career at Real Madrid but is no longer guaranteed a place in the club's starting line-up given the huge array of attacking talent available.

Bayern Munich face Real Madrid in the Spanish capital on Tuesday in a Champions League last 16, first leg tie.

Barca seek internal healing

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona fans will be hoping that some of the dressing room wounds that were exposed this week will have healed by the time the Spanish league at Valencia on Sunday.

The Spanish giants have opened up a three point lead at the top of La Liga but they started the week not by celebrating but instead by having a spectacular bout of public bickering.

The war of words between coach Frank Rijkaard and Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho on one side and three-time African Footballer of the Year Samuel Eto'o on the other, especially about the commitment of the Cameroon striker, appeared to have cooled by Thursday.

"I don't think that Samuel's comments were so serious and he doesn't need to apologise to the squad," said Barcelona's Brazilian defender Belletti.

"Everyone knows Samuel's like

that. He's a tough character but he's also a good team mate of everyone," added the hero of the Catalan club's Champions League triumph in May.

Nevertheless, Rijkaard must be wishing that he had an easier opponent ahead of him than Valencia, against whom his men can carry on their bonding.

Barcelona have won three out of their last four visits to the 2002 and 2004 Spanish champions but the games have been uncompromising affairs.

Valencia have only lost one game at home this season and currently lie fourth in the Spanish first division.

They have also been on a roll recently and have won seven out of their last nine games although they did suffer a shock 3-0 defeat at Getafe last Sunday.

Second-placed Sevilla, who started the year at the top of the table, have floundered badly since the start of the year and will not relish the visit of Atletico Madrid on Sunday.

The 2006 UEFA Cup winner's recent struggles have been mirrored by the difficulties suffered by their striker Fredi Kanoute.

Kanoute is still the Spanish first

division's leading scorer with 16 goals but may not be by the end of the weekend.

In the first three months of the season, the French-born Malian international was scoring almost every game but, partly hampered by a groin problem, he has only found the net twice in 2007, though, he warmed up for Sunday's match by scoring from the penalty spot in Sevilla's 2-0 away win over Steaua Bucharest in their UEFA Cup round of 32 first leg clash on Thursday.

In addition to their other concerns, Sevilla will be without their impressive Brazilian right back Daniel Alves, who is suspended.

FIXTURES

Saturday (Kick off in GMT)
Real Madrid v Real Betis (1900), Real Zaragoza v Villarreal (2100)
Sunday

Athletic Bilbao v Getafe (1600), Deportivo La Coruna v Levante (1600), Espanyol v Real Mallorca (1600), Osasuna v Celta Vigo (1600), Racing Santander v Gimnastic Tarragona (1600), Recreativa Huelva v Real Sociedad (1600), Valencia v Barcelona (1800), Sevilla v Atletico Madrid (2000).

Real Madrid lie two points further back in third and play host to Real Betis on Saturday.

After having to eat a double dose of humble pie last weekend, firstly by being forced to recall David Beckham and then having to praise him after the former England captain's goal at Real Sociedad, Real coach Fabio Capello has no choice but to keep Beckham in a starting role.

The return of Beckham to the Bernabeu and Betis could take advantage. We seem to be able to play two good games and then mess up big time," admitted Spain's number one goalkeeper on Thursday.

"Yes, our scoring capacity has declined. You can tell because of our low-scoring matches of late. However, we have improved a lot defensively and what matters is that we're still up there, fighting for the title," added Casillas.

An added factor, which Casillas acknowledged, is that Real are looking for revenge after Betis ousted them from the Spanish Cup last month.

Betis have edged out of the relegation zone on the back of going unbeaten for five games under the stewardship of coach Luis Fernandez, who took over at the helm during the winter break.

"We may now play ugly football but it is effective," confessed Fernandez earlier this week.

Rijkaard set for Barca exit?

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard is to quit the team he led to the Champions League only last May, as sports daily said on Friday, quoting "very well informed sources."

Rijkaard led the Catalan club to the Champions League and Spanish League double last season.

He won the domestic title the season before that and has produced a side renowned for attacking flair with the likes of Ronaldinho receiving support from players the Dutchman signed such as Portugal's Deco and Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o.

But this season, his fifth in charge, has been more difficult even though the club are top of the table once again and through to the last 16 of the Champions League, where they host 2005 winners Liverpool next week.

In recent days, Rijkaard has fallen out with three-time African footballer of the year Eto'o, who hit out at his coach on Tuesday for saying he had refused to come on as a late substitute during Sunday's 2-0 victory at home to Racing Santander.

Eto'o also slammed Ronaldinho for saying he should be more of a team player, and although the Cameroon international moved

PHOTO: AFP
Sevilla striker Freddie Kanoute strokes home a penalty kick to put his team two-up during their UEFA Cup encounter against Steaua Bucharest on Thursday.

Totti not giving up

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan have won their last 15 league matches and hold an 11-point lead at the top of the table, but Roma captain Francesco Totti refuses to accept that the Italian title race is a foregone conclusion.

Second-placed Roma face a potentially troublesome trip to Empoli on Saturday, while Inter will be looking to extend their Serie A record of consecutive victories to 16 when they host Cagliari at the San Siro.

Some Italian bookmakers have already started paying out on Inter retaining the championship, but Totti

feels there could still be a twist in the Scudetto chase.

"There are no certainties in football, and in the last few years the team that has been out in front has had a blip and that's something we have to keep reminding ourselves of," Totti told the Corriere dello Sport.

"We have a stronger squad here

FIXTURES

(all 1400GMT kick-off)

Saturday

Empoli v Roma, Inter Milan v Cagliari, Siena v AC Milan

Sunday

Ascoli v Udinese, Catania v Fiorentina (at Rimini), Lazio v Torino, Livorno v Messina, Palermo v Chievo, Parma v Sampdoria, Reggina v Atalanta

Italy okays late kick-offs

AFP, Rome

The Italian interior ministry on Thursday sanctioned evening kick-offs for a handful of Serie A matches on February 24-25.

Chevo will play Torino and Atalanta will face Palermo at 1700 and 1930GMT on Saturday, February 24, while kick-off for the match between AC Milan and Sampdoria has been set for 1930GMT a day later.

Matches during the league's two days of fixtures before that weekend will all kick off at 1400GMT, in line with strict security measures adopted by the Italian government in a bid to combat football hooliganism.

The move came after police

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PHOTO: INTERNET
Barcelona's under scrutiny striker Samuel Eto'o surges past midfielder Deco during a training session at the Nou Camp on Thursday.

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