



HE'S BACK: AC Milan's Brazilian forward Ronaldo sets off the celebrate after scoring one of his two goals against Siena during their Serie A encounter at the Franchi stadium in Siena on Saturday.

O'FENOMENON STRIKES BACK Inter continue super run

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan took a huge step towards the Serie A title on Saturday after they beat Cagliari 1-0 and closest rivals Roma lost by the same score at Empoli.

Inter's victory at the San Siro, sealed by Nicolas Burdisso's first-half header, stretched their lead at the top of the table to 14 points and extended their record run of consecutive Serie A victories to 16 games.

Roma's hopes of catching Inter

were dealt a massive blow at Empoli where Nicola Pozzi's unstoppable

four-minute strike secured three

points for the plucky Tuscan club

dreaming of a place in Europe.

In Saturday's other match,

Ronaldo scored twice and set up a

goal on his first start for AC Milan in

their last-gasp 4-3 win at Siena,

which moved them up to fifth place.

Inter, the reigning champions,

remain

way

out

in

front

with

63

points

from

their

23

matches

played,

followed

by

Roma

on

49

and

third-

placed

Palermo,

who host

Chievo

on

Sunday,

42.

Empoli are fourth on 35 points, two ahead of AC Milan who were deducted eight points for their role in the Italian match-fixing scandal.

Inter seem set to retain the

Scudetto,

but Roberto Mancini

refused to admit that the title was in

the bag.

The championship is definitely

not over,

the Inter coach, a former

player with Sampdoria and Lazio,

told Sky Sport Italia.

"It's going to be very difficult

for Roma as we have a very good

advantage over them, but I have

had direct experience of comebacks

in the final rounds of the champion-

ship in my career, one in favour and

one against.

"We have to be careful and make

sure we keep our foot on the acceler-

ator."

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti

said his team paid for their slow start

There is only one Ronaldo

AFP, Rome



AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti hailed the contribution made by Ronaldo on his first start for the club in Saturday's last-gasp 4-3 win at Siena.

Ronaldo, who made his debut as a substitute in last week's 2-1 victory against Livorno, scored twice and set one up for Ricardo Oliveira as Milan snatched the points in the fourth minute of stoppage time.

The winning goal was originally

credited to Milan substitute Massimo Ambrosini, but was later amended to a Christian Mlinaric own goal.

The win lifted Milan up to fifth,

boosting their chances of a

Champions League place next

season.

Ronaldo has been struggling

for fitness since joining Milan from Real

Madrid at the end of last month, so

Ancelotti put him on the bench last

week.

But on Saturday the Milan coach

FA rebuff Beckham recall talks

AFP, London

The Football Association dismissed out of hand a report that England manager Steve McLaren held talks with senior players about a recall for former captain David Beckham.

A Sunday newspaper claimed McLaren is considering including the 31-year-old Real Madrid player in his squad for the vital Euro 2008 qualifier in Israel on March 24.

That came despite McLaren saying last Wednesday that he had no plans to speak to Beckham although he has also said in the past that he would never close the door on any player regarding selection.

And the FA stressed that McLaren has not consulted players on the possibility of a return for Beckham, who was sent off in Real Madrid's La Liga clash with Real Betis on Saturday.

FA director of communications Adrian Bevington said: "I have spoken to Steve McLaren regarding this story and he is categoric that there is no truth whatsoever in this."

Beckham stood down as England captain on July 2 of last year after England's exit from the World Cup finals and on August 11 McLaren dropped him from the England squad for friendly against Greece, his first match as manager.

Boulahrouz dislocates shoulder

AFP, London

Chelsea defender Khalid Boulahrouz will be out of action for several weeks after dislocating a shoulder in his side's 4-0 FA Cup fifth round win against Norwich on Saturday.

Boulahrouz suffered the injury just before half-time at Stamford Bridge in his first start since recovering from a knee ligament problem that had kept him out for six weeks.

The Dutch international's injury could hardly have come at a worse time as Chelsea prepare for crucial matches against Porto in the Champions League and Arsenal in the League Cup final next week.

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BECKHAM EJECTED ON RETURN

Dull draw for Real

AFP, Madrid

David Beckham's return to Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium on Saturday when the former England captain was sent off in the dying seconds of the 0-0 draw with Real Betis.

Beckham was recalled last week after a month being frozen out by Real coach Fabio Capello and scored on his comeback, but this time was shown a red card three minutes into injury time in his first game in the Bernabeu for 58 days.

After falling on the edge of the area and claiming a penalty, Beckham was dismissed for the fourth time in La Liga since he joined Real Madrid in 2003 after persistently scything away the legs of Betis' Jose Isidoro.

Beckham then aimed a bad-tempered kick at the tunnel leading to the dressing rooms as he left the field.

"I thought it was a foul in favour of Beckham and that precipitated the red card. I've seen it (Beckham's foul) on television and I don't think it was so serious," said Capello.

It was a bad end to an indifferent game for Beckham who couldn't

match his performance of six days ago when he helped Real win 2-1 at Real Sociedad.

His most important contribution was when he provided the service for Ruud Van Nistelrooy but the Dutchman couldn't get over the ball and sent his half-volley against the bar after 64 minutes.

Three minutes later it was the turn of Betis to hit the woodwork when defender Nano Rivas struck the post.

Madrid were also given another big let off after 75 minutes when a shot by Betis' Fabrice Pancrate evaded the outstretched arms of Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas but his shot just missed its target.

The Frenchman's near-miss was the signal for the first white hankerchieves, the traditional sign of discontent at Spanish football matches, to start being waved by Real's supporters.

By the whistle, the Real fans

were once again loudly calling for the head of Capello and Madrid president Ramon Calderon.

Beckham will definitely miss next

Saturday's local derby against Atletico Madrid and also raises

questions about whether he will start for Real in their Champions League last 16 first leg match against Bayern Munich on Tuesday.

The 29-time Spanish champions

remain in third place, four points

behind leaders Barcelona, but will

slip

back

a

place

if

Valencia beat

Barca on Sunday.

By contrast, Real Betis are now

unbeaten in six games and slowly clawing their way out of relegation trouble.

Barcelona fans will be hoping that some of the dressing room wounds that have been exposed this week will have healed by the time they face Valencia on Sunday as they bid for their third successive Spanish title.

The reigning European champions have a three point lead at the top of the table, but Valencia have only lost one game at home this season, won seven of their last nine games, and lie fourth in the first division.

Three-time African Footballer of the Year Samuel Eto'o has been left out of the Barcelona squad that will make the trip down the Mediterranean coast.

Barca coach Frank Rijkaard said on Saturday that Eto'o had been left out of the squad to face the 2002 and 2004 Spanish champions at the player's own request.

"Eto'o has told me he feels his fitness is improving but that he would prefer to stay in Barcelona to continue working to achieve his peak form," said Rijkaard.

Second-placed Sevilla, who started the year at the top of the

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Real Madrid midfielder David Beckham (R) gets into a scruff with Real Betis goalkeeper Antonio Doblas during their Primera Liga clash at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Saturday.

Jose ready for crunch

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho turned his attention to a decisive week in his side's season after an FA Cup stroll against Norwich.

Goals from Shaun Wright-Phillips, Didier Drogba, Michael Essien and Andriy Shevchenko clinched an easy 4-0 win at Stamford Bridge on Saturday and put Chelsea through to the quarter-finals.

And the London club will now focus on a Champions League first knock-out stage tie at Mourinho's former team FC Porto on Wednesday, before next Sunday's League Cup final against Arsenal.

"This was a good win, but I think the four-goal scoreline was a bit harsh on Norwich," said Mourinho, who took Porto to the 2004 Champions League title before leaving for Chelsea.

"As soon as I knew the match was won I took off Didier Drogba and Frank Lampard, as they are important and I am always a bit afraid of these matches."

"I want them to be protected, and this week we have two finals. Porto is like a final, and Arsenal is a final."

"When I go to Porto I think I will see a crowd with two faces. Some

people will understand why I left, some won't.

"There will be whistles and boos, but you can not delete history, and I won the UEFA Cup and Champions League there."

Championship side Norwich started well, but it seemed it may not be their day from the moment goalkeeper David Marshall twisted his ankle, and had to be replaced by Paul Gallagher.

And when Dickson Etuhu hit the post on 17 minutes, and Khalid Boulahrouz cleared Lee Croft's follow-up shot, Norwich manager Peter Grant was certain this would be a tough afternoon.

It took until the 38th minute for Chelsea to open the scoring, as Wright-Phillips hit a shot from the edge of the penalty area which deflected past Gallagher.

The victory was virtually confirmed as Drogba scored his 26th goal of the season on 51 minutes after Chris Brown failed to clear his own area.

There was concern for Chelsea when Boulahrouz was forced out of the match with a dislocated shoulder, but his replacement, Essien, was immense.