



PHOTO: AFP

**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 fourth-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, on 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 championship in my career, one in favour and one against.

"We have to be careful and make sure we keep our foot on the accelerator."

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti said his team paid for their slow start

at Empoli.

"We weren't in the fight at the start of the first half," he said.

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti hailed the contribution of Ronaldo who joined the club from Spanish giants Real Madrid at the end of last month.

"Two goals and an assist is an excellent return in 90 minutes," Ancelotti said.

"To make such an impression here in such a short space of time has been a surprise for everybody."

Burdisso struck for Inter in the 11th minute.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic crossed from the right with the outside of his right boot and Argentine defender Burdisso planted a firm header past Marco Fortin.

Dejan Stankovic came closest to adding to Inter's lead when his fierce shot rattled the bar 16 minutes from time.

Only season-ticket holders were allowed into the San Siro under strict security measures brought in

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## There is only one Ronaldo

AFP, Rome



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 Molinaro 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



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 petulantly 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 handkerchieves, 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, despite the public rift between the pair over the last week.

"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 they year at the top of the

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PHOTO: AFP

**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.**

## Eto'o asks not to be picked

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona's three-time African Footballer of the Year Samuel Eto'o has been left out of the Spanish league leaders' team that will play at Valencia on Sunday.

The Catalan club's coach Frank Rijkaard said at a press conference 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.

However, there must now be a question mark over whether Eto'o will be in the Barca squad to face English Premiership side Liverpool in the Champions League last 16 first leg match on Wednesday.

The encounter pits the last two winner's of Europe's top club competition against each other.

With Eto'o not in the Barcelona squad, Rijkaard has recalled his under-performing Icelandic international Eidur Gudjohnsen.

The Cameroon striker's absence for Barca's crucial match at Valencia caps a strange week for Eto'o, Rijkaard and the team as a whole.

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PHOTO: INTERNET

**Juventus forward Alessandro Del Piero is ecstatic after scoring a hat-trick against Crotone during their Italian Serie B match at the Delle Alpi stadium in Turin on Saturday.**

## Del Piero fires hat-trick



AFP, Rome

Alessandro Del Piero scored a hat-trick as Juventus opened up a three-point lead at the top of Serie B with a thumping 5-0 home victory over Crotone on Saturday.

Early goals from Czech midfielder Pavel Nedved and Federico Balzaretti put Juventus in control before Del Piero stole the show with his treble.

A hat-trick for the 32-year-old striker, his first for three years, took his total for the season to 11 goals.

Second-placed Napoli can reclaim a share of top spot if they win at home to Arezzo on Sunday.

Juve coach Didier Deschamps lavished praise on Del Piero but not just for his three goals.

"When he is fit, as he is at the moment, there's no stopping him," said the Frenchman.

"Today he played well even when he didn't have the ball, always willing to help the team. He always makes the difference."

A World Cup winner with Italy last year, Del Piero said it made no difference what division he scored his goals in.

"I never get tired of scoring goals," he said.

Nedved's left-footed shot opened the scoring before Balzaretti's attempted cross sailed over Salvatore Soviero's head and into the net.

Del Piero extended Juve's lead with an angled drive in the 43rd minute before doubling his tally with a cool finish after Nedved had initiated a swift counter-attack.

Del Piero ensured he took the match ball home in the 78th minute, tucking home after good work by David Trezeguet.

Juventus were demoted from Serie A and given a nine-point penalty for their part in the Italian match-fixing scandal.

## 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 Etu 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 in 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.

Norwich did have chances to bring the game to life, but Brown missed an opportunity on 70 minutes, and then Petr Cech made

saves to deny Croft and 37-year-old veteran striker Dion Dublin.

Shevchenko was introduced to give Lampard a rest, and the Ukrainian was instrumental in the final two goals, which came in stoppage time.

First he set up Essien for a simple tap-in, and then with virtually the final touch of the game, Shevchenko headed home from a Solomon Kalou cross.

"I think it was a case of tired minds for our players at the end," admitted Grant.

"I said we would come here and have a go at them, and I think we did that." Now we have to take the form into the league, as we want to play at grounds like this every week."

Chelsea will now re-play the Stamford Bridge pitch, as Mourinho is not satisfied with the surface and wants it in top condition by the time Porto visit for what could be a crucial second-leg in two weeks time.

Blues owner Roman Abramovich witnessed this win, following a five week absence, and Mourinho is pleased to have him back at the club.

Mourinho added: "It is his club and he does not have to give explanations when he is not here. He is very welcome back in our dressing room."