



Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs (R) scores a stunning equaliser against Fulham during their Premiership encounter at Craven Cottage on Saturday.

MU survive Fulham scare

INTERNET, undated



A late goal from Cristiano Ronaldo handed Manchester United a barely deserved 2-1 win at Fulham.

The Cottagers were much the better side for long spells of the contest and led through Brian McBride's goal on 17 minutes.

Ryan Giggs netted a leveller on 29 minutes and the points looked set to be shared, only for Ronaldo to pop up with a deflected finish three minutes from time to take The Red Devils nine points clear of Chelsea.

Fulham came out like a side looking to shake off the effects of last week's defeat to Tottenham and Alexei Smerlin and Papa Buoba Diop laid down early markers with shots on goal.

Simon Davies looked filled with purpose as he made a number of decent runs down the right early on and sent a dipping volley just

wide of goal with Edwin van der Sar beaten.

The Premiership leaders took 11 minutes to fashion an opening, but Nemanja Vidic's header from a corner was no threat to Jan Lastuvka's goal.

Manchester United's early efforts were extremely lacklustre and Fulham secured the opening goal their play merited on 17 minutes.

United contributed to their own downfall as Vidic and Van der Sar got their wires crossed and McBride showed excellent composure to slot a shot in off a post from ten yards with the retreating Vidic and Rio Ferdinand unable to effect a clearance.

United were in dire need of some inspiration and after Cristiano Ronaldo had fired a shot just wide they found some from their captain Giggs.

The Welshman, who was handed the armband due to Gary Neville's absence, was picked out superbly by Wayne Rooney and

he did justice to the fine cross by volleying home from a tight angle.

Fulham's response was positive, as McBride headed wide and Carlos Bocanegra shot weakly towards goal after a loose ball fell his way in the box.

Despite being way below their optimum, United should really have had their noses in front before the break as Patrice Evra dragged a shot wide of goal after latching onto a loose ball in the area.

Fulham's start to the second half mirrored their efforts of the opening 45 minutes and it took a fantastic one-handed save from Van der Sar to deny Davies who had shown great skill to turn and volley towards the bottom corner.

Van der Sar was a spectator on 52 minutes as Michael Brown whipped in a superb cross to the far post and Tomasz Radzinski thudded a header against the crossbar.

United were cut open just past the hour mark as Davies collected

a neat pass and strode into the box, but the Welshman found Van der Sar the equal of his powerful drive and the Dutch keeper was also able to clasp the follow-up effort.

Van der Sar certainly merited his match fee against his former club and McBride was the next Fulham player to find the keeper in excellent form, as his low shot which was destined for the bottom corner was clasped by the big Dutchman.

United finally exerted some pressure on the Fulham goal in the final 15 minutes and Cristiano Ronaldo nicked a winner with two minutes left on the clock.

The Portuguese collected a ball on the left and skipped inside Philippe Christanval and fired a shot beyond Jan Lastuvka with the aid of a deflection.

There was still drama in the last minute as Van der Sar appeared to fell Heidar Helguson in the box, but referee Peter Walton waved away Fulham's appeals.

Battle for 11-yr old

AFP, Buenos Aires

Spanish giants Barcelona and Real Madrid are among the clubs battling to sign an 11-year-old striker, seen as a rising star in his native Argentina.

Laureano Luduena, who hails from Pozo del Molle in the central province of Cordoba, has scored 160 goals in 75 official games played between 2005 and 2006.

Despite being targetted by Argentinian outfits River Plate and Boca Juniors, the boy's father Walter said he believes his son's future is overseas, so the entire family are planning to travel to Spain in March where Laureano has trials with Real Madrid, Barcelona and Espanyol.

"We're going to be 15 days in Spain, but then I'll return to Cordoba to decide what I'm going to do and for what club I'm going to play," explained Laureano.

"I'm calm, training and playing a little to arrive in my best form.

"I'm preparing all my newspapers cuttings, looking for the videos of my goals and some magazines to be able to show in Spain," he added.

Boca youth coach Ramon Maddoni, who trained the young Juan Roman Riquelme, Fernando Gago and Juan Pablo Sorin, said they had been keen to sign the youngster.

But Laureano insisted: "I had one practice session with Boca and I did well. They wanted to sign me but I wanted to play in River."

Cambiasso faces month out

INTERNET, undated

After losing Patrick Vieira for a month, Inter will also have to do without Esteban Cambiasso for four weeks with a thigh injury.

The Argentine limped off after scoring a goal in Wednesday's 2-2 Champions League draw with Valencia at San Siro.

On Friday evening the official club website confirmed that the initial fears over his condition had been founded.

Cambiasso has suffered a right thigh strain and is expected to be out of action for around a month.

It is the latest in a long line of injuries this season for the former Real Madrid midfielder, who has made just 12 Serie A appearances this season and two in the Champions League.

The timing of the problems for both Vieira and Cambiasso leaves Inter without their first choice central midfield partnership.

It looks as if both players will miss out on the second leg of the Valencia tie on March 6 and the Milan derby on March 11.

Drogba claims new honour

AFP, Abidjan

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba has added a new award to his bulging trophy cabinet after being named best Ivorian player playing abroad.

Drogba was one of several people honoured during an Ivorian Federation prize night on Thursday in Abidjan.

Ivorian champions ASEC Mimosas were well represented in the awards with Didier Ya Konan (now at Rosenborg in Norway) named top player and Frenchman Patrick Liewig given the top coach award.

Zizou's future stars

AFP, Chiang Mai

Former French captain Zinedine Zidane on Saturday tipped Samir Nasri, Yoann Gourcuff and Karim Benzema as future stars of the national team.

Zidane, who played a charity match here, said the trio were "players with future and talent."

When asked by reporters who were the rising stars of the French national team, he replied: "They are not yet in the French team."

"There has always been talent in this team and there will always be," he said.

"But it is true that today when we look at players like Nasri, Gourcuff and Benzema, we don't know... if these players will be included in the French team, but in any case they are players with future and talent."

He also singled out Marseille's Franck Ribery as someone who was "bringing good things to the French team."

AC Milan's Gourcuff, 20, is already known as "Little Zidane" for his similar playing style to the three-time World Player of the Year.

Nasri and Benzema, aged 19 and 20, have caught the eye at Marseille and Lyon respectively.

Mourinho pledges Chelsea stay



REUTERS, Cobham

Jose Mourinho will stay at Chelsea next season unless he is sacked, the Portuguese coach said on Friday.

Speaking after a training session for Sunday's League Cup final against Arsenal, Mourinho scotched rumours that have circulated since the new year that he might resign.

"No chance," he said. "I would not do that to Chelsea supporters."

"There are two ways for me to leave Chelsea, one is in June 2010 at the end of my contract, the second way is for Chelsea to sack me."

The 44-year-old manager was in relaxed mood, suggesting much publicised tensions between his coaching staff, owner Roman Abramovich and the Chelsea board over players he wanted to sign and roles within the hierarchy, had eased.

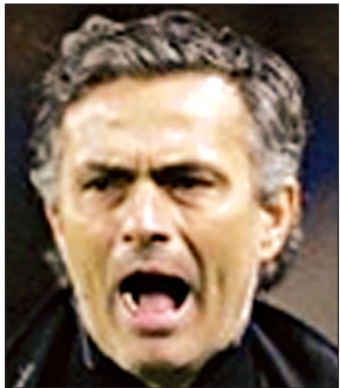
Chairman Bruce Buck said last week he wanted the outspoken Portuguese to stay.

Mourinho said Chelsea's injury woes, including long periods without inspirational captain John Terry, had made his job tougher than in the

last two seasons when they won the Premier League.

But, paradoxically, he found the situation had been in some ways more rewarding.

"It's enjoyable," he said, adding that after Terry twisted his ankle in the Champions League against Porto on Wednesday, he had to



JOSE MOURINHO

think fast and change tactics completely. "From a manager's point of view, the experience was very rich for me."

Terry will be fit to return next weekend. On Sunday Mourinho welcomes back defender Ashley Cole after a cruciate ligament injury

and winger Arjen Robben, who was substituted in Porto with a muscle strain.

Midfielder Joe Cole (foot) and defender Khalid Boulahrouz (shoulder) are on the long-term injury list.

Mourinho, who has a history of niggling disagreements with Arsene Wenger, was full of praise for his Arsenal counterpart on Friday, especially of his ability to bring on the young players who have taken the team to the League Cup final.

But he added that in Arsenal's case the "young boys" were also top players.

He said he agreed with Wenger that winning the Champions League as Mourinho did with Porto, did not make a great manager.

There were great managers such as the Arsenal coach who had not won that trophy.

But, with echoes of his famous "special one" declaration on arrival from Porto in 2004, he placed himself alongside Wenger at the top of the game.

"Not many have done what I have done... I'm not saying I'm the best, I'm saying I'm among the eight, 10, 12, 14 who have done similar things."

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Zidane hails Asia's 'step forward'



AFP, Chiang Mai

French star Zinedine Zidane praised Asian football's "big step forward" on Saturday as thousands of excited fans turned up to watch him play a charity match here.

Zidane said players like Japan's Shunsuke Nakamura, who has earned rave reviews with Scottish league-leaders Celtic, were helping to inspire a generation.

"Asian football is in the process of making a big step forward," Zidane, speaking in French through a translator, said before the match.

Zidane, 34, who retired after the World Cup, will play 20 minutes for both teams of Southeast Asian players in northern Thailand's biggest city.

who are here among us today, who could make this step forward and play in a big European team."

The former French captain delighted local reporters by greeting them in Thai, and said he had come for a holiday with his family as well as the charity match.

"Today sports and even life, it's more than a game," he said.

"I wanted to share time with these children, to try to do certain things which could bring happiness to the people," he added.

Crowds of supporters queued for hours to see the three-time World Player of the Year, whose image was blemished by his infamous headbutt in last year's World Cup final.

Zidane, 34, who retired after the World Cup, will play 20 minutes for both teams of Southeast Asian players in northern Thailand's biggest city.

About 10,000 fans watched the match, which will raise money for children with HIV/AIDS and started at 4:15 pm (0815 GMT).

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to watch a superstar," gushed nursing student Tirada Haengkoat, 20, who had queued since 9:00 am (0200 GMT) for tickets.

"I love Zidane, he is my hero. I am very excited," said 13-year-old Ittiphol Buachom.

Entrance to the game was free, with donations going to Chiang Mai HIV/AIDS charity Keuydaroon, which helps hundreds of HIV-infected children like 11-year-old Ton, who will accompany his hero on to the pitch.

"I am very excited when I found out that the foundation chose me to accompany him on the pitch. Zidane inspired to me to become a

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Eto'o recalled

REUTERS, Madrid

Striker Samuel Eto'o returned to the Barcelona squad on Saturday after missing out on the team's back-to-back defeats against Valencia and Liverpool.

The Cameroon international, who is recovering fitness after a four-month absence following knee surgery, was named in an 18-man squad for Sunday's match at home to Athletic Bilbao.

Eto'o returned to action at the start of the month when he played the last five minutes of the 0-0 draw against Osasuna, but he refused to come on as a late substitute the following week against Racing Santander saying he needed a longer warm-up.

He was then left out of the squad for the matches against Valencia and Liverpool at his own request.

"Samuel told me he is ready to play and that means he is feeling good again," coach Frank Rijkaard told a news conference.

"Personally I think we'll have to wait and see tomorrow. He still needs time to recover full fitness."

Gallas pleads for final berth

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal defender William Gallas believes he should play in Sunday's Carling Cup final.

The 29-year-old Frenchman is set to be left out against his former club as manager Arsene Wenger sticks with the youngsters who won their way through to the Millennium Stadium showpiece.

But after recent injury problems, Gallas insists he should feature from the start.

"I want to be in the starting 11," he told The Sun. "Not because we are playing Chelsea but because I'm suffering from a lack of playing time after three months out."

"It strikes me as natural I should play in this game, so I can return to peak form. But the decision is down to the manager."

"I see it as a chance to get back the rhythm I lack."

Gallas does, however, admit that the experience of playing in such a big game can only benefit the young Gunners who look set to play a major role in the club's future.

He added: "I think it is a good idea of the manager to give the youngsters their chance. It is a good thing for them to get to play in a final."

"It will allow them to learn about the pressure of such big events."



AFP, Madrid

Barcelona players defended their Brazilian international team-mate Ronaldinho on Friday against media allegations that he is under form this season because of his expanding waistline.

"I think he is fine. He has scored 16 goals in the league this season so I don't understand why there are complaints about his performance level," said Argentine striker Lionel Messi.

"As long as he plays well I don't think there is a problem with his weight," added his fellow Argentine striker Javier Saviola when asked about the issue at a news conference.

Ronaldinho did not train with the rest of his Barcelona team-mates on Friday opting instead to train in the

gym, club officials said.

Earlier on Friday sports daily As published two contrasting photos of the bare-chested midfielder taken four years apart on its front page under the headline: "Ronaldinho loses his figure".

The photo on the left depicted a muscular Ronaldinho and was taken after Barcelona's 3-3 draw against Real Sociedad in November 2003 while the one on the right, taken after the club's 2-1 Champions League loss to Liverpool on Wednesday, shows his more plump recent state.

The Catalan daily El Periodico published similar contrasting photos on its front page and blamed the 2004 and 2005 World Player of the Year's recent slump in form on his weight gain.

"He has lost his explosiveness and velocity," it said in an article on the player's physical state, before adding the 26-year-old was "worn

out".

An active social life, personal problems, too many advertising commitments and unhappiness over his contract still not being renewed beyond 2010 when it expires were all cited by the press as possible reasons for Ronaldinho's weight gain.

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard defended the player last month after As reported that the Catalan club were thinking of selling the Brazilian striker.

"Ronaldinho is a key player. Ronaldinho is also part of the team and we have to look at that (issue) together," he said, referring to the player's recent under-performance.

"Leave us in peace to carry on working, I have confidence in everything he's done and I'm sure he will return to what he was," he added.

UEFA chuck Lille appeal



AFP, Nyon

UEFA on Friday rejected Lille's protest about Manchester United's controversial winning goal in their Champions League clash on Tuesday.

Lille players initially seemed to storm off the pitch following Ryan Giggs's 83rd-minute cheeky quick-free-kick goal while the French team were still lining up their defensive wall.

Lille came under heavy criticism for their players' actions and UEFA said it would investigate, but the French club responded by making their own protest against the goal.

"The UEFA Control and Disciplinary Body has rejected a protest lodged by LOSC Lille Metropole following Tuesday's UEFA Champions League first knockout round first-leg match against Manchester United FC in France," said a UEFA statement.

Lille had claimed the referee made a technical mistake in allowing the free-kick to be taken without having blown his whistle beforehand and asked for the game to be replayed.

However, the appeal seems to have backfired with Lille's players now facing an investigation follow-

ing their protests which greeted the goal which gave United a 1-0 win.

"Having examined the official referee's report, the television evidence at hand as well as the Laws of the Game, the UEFA Control and Disciplinary Body decided to reject the protest, as there was no proof of a technical error," continued the UEFA statement.

"As a result, the body declared that the goal was perfectly valid. Furthermore, the Control and Disciplinary Body decided to instigate proceedings against Lille for the improper behaviour of their players immediately after the goal."

Lille management said they were shocked and outraged by UEFA's decision.

"The neutrality of the referee does not even feature in the rules of football, Lille's central argument has not been considered," the team said in a statement.

"We regret that UEFA ... chose not to analyse this issue to finally promote the idea that it should be the game which is the winner of the competitions they organise."

"Hence we are left with an image of this incident tainted by money, violence and a power

game We can't recognise ourselves in the mirror."

Lille can still appeal against UEFA's decision and have until Monday to do so.

They received some good news, though, as a meeting to investigate the behaviour of their players and security arrangements at the game will not take place until March 22, long after the second leg is played in Manchester, which at least rules out the possibility that Lille be thrown out of the competition.

UEFA announced on Wednesday that it was investigating possible violations of safety and security instructions by the host club, as well as the alleged improper conduct of both sets of supporters.

The match was played at the home of French league rivals Lens as Lille's own stadium is considered not to meet UEFA safety standards.

Some United fans scaled a fence when a crush developed in their end after 5,000 people crammed into a stand built for 3,500 fans.

Lille fans responded to the goal by hurling missiles onto the pitch, one of which struck United captain Gary Neville on the head as he was waiting to take a throw in.



PHOTO: AFP

France legend Zinedine Zidane gives a traditional Thai greeting before taking part in a friendly football match in his honour at the hilly province of Chiang Mai in Thailand on Saturday.