



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona sensation Lionel Messi (top) celebrates after scoring a hatrick to salvage a draw in their Primera Liga clash against rivals Real Madrid at the Nou Camp on Saturday.

Fergie intends to stay put

INTERNET, undated

Sir Alex Ferguson has no intention of quitting the Old Trafford hotseat for at least a couple of years.

The Manchester United manager comes face to face with old rival Marcello Lippi on Tuesday as the 'Theatre of Dreams' plays host to a star-studded UEFA charity match to commemorate the 50th anniversary of both the Red Devils' entry into Europe and the Treaty of Rome - which established the European Economic Community.

With Lippi currently enjoying a year out of the limelight after guiding Italy to World Cup glory last summer, many pundits have predicted he will be the man who eventually replaces Ferguson.

However, even after spending over two decades in one of the most pressurised jobs in football, Ferguson has no intention of relinquishing his duties - no matter how much some of his arch-enemies within the media would like him to. 'I know some people want to get rid of me - but they won't,' he laughed.

'A lot of people have been talking about my successor but they will have to put up with me for a while yet.

'I have a couple of years left in me. Another couple of songs. 'I have a bit of time. When you are fit and healthy that is the only thing you can think of. If you are not, that is a different issue.'

Instead, Ferguson thinks Lippi will resume his career in Italy at the start of next season, believing the former Juventus coach will not eventually end up in England, as many pundits have predicted.

By that time, the Scot hopes to have added to his already impressive trophy collection.

With 16 major honours to his name, plus a host of others, including the World Club Championship and European Super Cup, Ferguson is currently the most decorated manager Britain has ever produced.

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Carragher wants Benitez stay

INTERNET, undated

Jamie Carragher expects manager Rafael Benitez to stay at Liverpool despite him being linked with Real Madrid again.

Benitez won the Champions League and FA Cup in his first two seasons at Anfield, and after leading the Reds into the last eight in Europe once again this week, rumours persist of interest from the Spanish giants.

However, Carragher told his club's website that he believes that the boss is here to stay - and that he can build a dynasty at Anfield.

'Rafa wouldn't get anything better than Liverpool, or I wouldn't think so,' Carragher said of the tabloid rumours that Real may be interested.

'He can buy his own players here. He's one of the best managers around. He proved that at Valencia, and he's already proved it here. Hopefully we can go on again over the next few years and win more things.

'All the players enjoy working with him. I'm sure you can see the difference he's made over the last few years, especially in Europe. Next season we want to push on and do well in the Premiership as well.'

MESSI SETS CATALUNYA ALIGHT

Classic *El Clasico*

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona teenager Lionel Messi hit a spectacular hatrick to save the Catalan club's blushes in the 3-3 draw with bitter rivals Real Madrid on Saturday.

The Argentine winger, who does not turn 20 until June, salvaged a point for 10-man Barca with a wonderfully taken goal a minute into injury time.

'Scoring all our goals, it was a special game for him. He's a magnificent talent. His goals saved us,' acknowledged Barca coach Frank Rijkaard.

The reigning Spanish champions looked well on their way to their first La Liga defeat at home this season until Messi produced a move of individual brilliance before finding the net with his left foot.

'I said before the game that a draw would be two lost points but when you see what happened during the game you have to think that we had a success.

'I've got to applaud the team for showing such character in difficult circumstances to come back and get that third goal,' added Rijkaard.

Derbies between the two Spanish giants, who both crashed out of the Champions League in midweek, are never short of entertainment but there was more than

the usual ration of drama on Saturday even before Messi's final contribution.

A freak goal from Sergio Ramos had put Real ahead after 73 minutes after an astonishing first half hour which saw four goals, two apiece for Messi and Real's Ruud Van Nistelrooy.

An error by Barca defender Lillian Thuram helped Real take the lead after five minutes.

A quick counter-attack saw Gonzalo Higuain send the ball into the box but Thuram fell over while trying to clear the Argentine striker's cross and the mis-hit ball went straight to Van Nistelrooy's feet.

The Dutchman had no problems opening the scoring and, with a clear view of the goal, hammered the ball home from the edge of the area.

Real only hung onto their advantage for six minutes before Messi took advantage of the visitors' defensive frailty to sidefoot home a Samuel Eto'o pass from the edge of the six yard box.

However, just two more minutes elapsed before Real were back in front again.

Van Nistelrooy got his second goal of the night, and 14th of the season, from the spot after Oleguer Presas had fouled Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez.

Messi then brought Barca back level again added to his tally by clinically taking his second goal after 28 minutes, mopping up after Ronaldinho had his effort parried

away by Casillas.

Barca were then reduced to 10 men when Oleguer got his second yellow card in the dying seconds of the first half.

With Barca coach Frank Rijkaard having ambitiously opted to play a 3-4-3 formation from the outset, he was forced to shore up his defence at half time with Eto'o being replaced by the Brazilian defender Sylvinho.

Barcelona managed to slow the game down but Van Nistelrooy nearly got his third goal after 64 minutes when he was set free by Higuain but was thwarted by Valdes, who got an outstretched hand to the ball.

'We had several clear opportunities to get more goals but the Barcelona goalkeeper made many important saves,' reflected Real's under-fire coach Fabio Capello.

Sergio Ramos put them back in front, the ball spinning backwards off his head from a Guti free kick and the Spanish international's expression clearly showed that it was a fluke.

In addition to Oleguer's dismissal nine other players were booked including Real's Malian midfielder Mahamadou Diarra, who misses next Sunday's game at home to relegation-threatened Gimnastic Tarragona.

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Jose reveals Roman rift

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho admits he did clash with Blues owner Roman Abramovich over the club's refusal to enter the transfer market in January, but insists the conflict has only served to motivate him on to further success.

The former Porto chief made no secret of his desire to bring in reinforcements during the transfer window with his side crippled by a defensive injury crisis.

A proposed move for Bolton's Tal Ben Haim failed to materialise and Mourinho ultimately had to rely on the players with which he started the season.

Abramovich's refusal to open his chequebook patently rankled with the Portuguese tactician, but he claims it was a decision he respected.

'I admit that there were differences with Abramovich over not signing players in January,' he told Portuguese newspaper Correo da Manhã.

'The team was stretched to the limit and needed new players, but that was a challenge and an extra motivation for me.

'I accepted Roman's decision because he is the club's owner.'

Indeed, the dispute prompted speculation that Mourinho would quit Stamford Bridge at the end of the season, but he has again moved to reiterate that he intends to see out his present contract that runs for a further three seasons.

'I want to continue my deal with Chelsea until it finishes in 2010,' he

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Ronaldo scores but Milan lose derby

SPORTS REPORTER

Two timely pieces of intervention from Argentina forward Julio Cruz overshadowed Ronaldo scoring against his old club as Inter Milan recorded a come from behind 2-1 victory over AC Milan in the Milan derby at the San Siro on Sunday.

Cruz scored with his first touch after coming on and set up the other for Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic as Inter rallied after falling behind to an inspirational Ronaldo in the first half.

The Brazilian, playing for the first time against his old club, rolled back the years in an eye-catching first half display as he combined well with fellow countryman Kaka to set up a string of chances and prove a thorn in the Inter defence.

His perseverance finally paid off as he scored with a left foot effort on 40 minutes.

Milan went into the break on a one-goal lead but Inter came out looking determined and were soon back on level terms thanks to Cruz. The journeyman striker, on for Hernan Crespo, hit the back of the net after Ibrahimovic's cross had been palmed onto his path by Dida. He then returned the favour after catching the Milan defence napping and set up the tricky Swede to slot home from inside the area and ensure that Inter do the double over their city rivals this season.

C'Ron saves United

AFP, Middlesbrough



Middlesbrough on Saturday.

Premiership leaders United, who are also in the last eight of the Champions League, went ahead through a first half strike by Wayne Rooney before Lee Cattermole equalised on the stroke of half-time.

George Boateng headed the home team in front within a minute of the restart, but the Dutch midfielder was penalised for handball 22 minutes from time and Ronaldo converted from the spot to set up a replay at Old Trafford later this month.

Boateng was furious with Rob Styles' penalty decision and said: 'I'm devastated. I thought we deserved to be win and I really feel the referee has robbed us.

'When a shot is coming in you try to protect your face. If you look at the tape you will see I didn't deliberately handball it.'

Middlesbrough manager Gareth Southgate backed Boateng and added: 'He is a yard away when it is flicked, so I'm not sure what he can do to adjust his position. You tend to get those given against you against the bigger sides.'

United boss Alex Ferguson added: 'We dominated the first half and had a lot of chances. It was one

of our best performances for quite a while in the first half.

'We gave away a bad goal after half-time but we never gave in as Manchester United teams are supposed to do. We kept going and got what we deserved.'

United were forced into an unexpected change prior to kick-off when experienced Netherlands goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar suffered a calf injury in the pre-match warm-up.

Pole Tomasz Kuszczak replaced Holland's most capped player in an otherwise full-strength team but, without a third senior goalkeeper in the squad, Alex Ferguson was forced to name five outfield substitutes.

Middlesbrough went into a third FA Cup quarterfinal in six seasons seeking to stretch their unbeaten home record in the competition to 10 years.

Arsenal were the last team to win a tie on Teesside, when the Gunners completed a 2-1 fourth round victory in 1998, and Gareth Southgate's players, backed by a capacity crowd, faced their Manchester rivals in fine form following a run of just one defeat in 14 league and cup matches since the turn of the year.

Kuszczak had been afforded only eight minutes to get his bearings in front of the massed ranks of United supporters when Middlesbrough's England international Stewart Downing forced the former West Bromwich Albion player into a fine save.

But van der Sar's understudy inspired a typically fluid United move and a succession of rapid passes culminated in Rooney striking a firm volley two feet wide of

goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer's right hand post.

The England international's radar was, however, perfect in the 23rd minute after Middlesbrough's left back Andrew Taylor conceded possession inside his own half.

Giggs claimed the loose ball and played a short pass to his left, where United's number eight was lying in wait. Rooney stepped inside two defenders before drilling a right footed shot beyond Schwarzer from the edge of the area.

Nine minutes before the break Giggs struck the post from a Gary Neville pass but Cattermole forced the clash to life when he levelled for the home team in the 45th minute.

Middlesbrough were in the ascendancy and the 1997 finalists took the lead within a minute of the restart when Boateng headed his first FA Cup goal for eight years.

However, the Netherlands international went from hero to villain in the 67th minute when referee Rob Styles spotted his penalty area indiscretion.

Giggs floated in a corner from the right and, with England defender Rio Ferdinand in his line of vision, both of Boateng's hands made contact with the ball.

Ronaldo comfortably converted from the spot for his 17th goal of the season but both teams had chances to seal a semi-final place during a thrilling conclusion to a memorable match.



PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan striker Ronaldo (2nd L) jubilates his strike in their derby encounter against Inter Milan at the San Siro in Milan on Sunday.

Memorable draw at the Bridge

INTERNET, undated



Hart Lane.

The Premiership champions' defence was put to the sword in the first 45 minutes as free-scoring Spurs ran riot, with Dimitar Berbatov, Hossam Ghaly and a Michael Essien own goal helping them to a 3-1 lead at half-time.

However, Chelsea went for all-out attack after the break and Frank Lampard netted his second of the game after 71 minutes to bring the score back to 3-2, before Salomon Kalou grabbed a dramatic late equaliser.

Radek Cerny replaced the injured Paul Robinson in the Tottenham goal but it was his esteemed opposite number Petr Cech who was picking the ball out of his net after just five minutes as a Chelsea defence still without John Terry was clinically cut apart.

Jermain Defoe cut in from the left and his intended pass to Ghaly was intercepted by Aaron Lennon, who controlled the ball and helped in on to Berbatov through the centre.

Cech rushed out to narrow the angle but the Bulgarian's instinctive finish on the turn flew past him into the roof of the net.

The goal failed to snap Chelsea

out of their lethargy and Tottenham had opportunities to add to their lead as they dominated the first 20 minutes.

Lennon nearly got on the end of Defoe's dangerous cross from the left, before Berbatov's delivery from the right just evaded Defoe.

Chelsea levelled against the run of play after 22 minutes as Didier Drogba's cross spilled out to Michael Ballack on the edge of the area and the German's mis-hit shot turned into a perfect pass for Lampard, who stretched out a leg to turn the ball home from six yards.

Tottenham's lead was restored after 28 minutes as Essien panicked and poked Lennon's seemingly harmless pass across goal into his own net.

Spurs nearly gifted Chelsea another equaliser with an own goal of their own as Michael Dawson inadvertently touched Arjen Robben's cross towards the line, but Paul Stalteri raced back to clear the ball to safety.

In the midst of all the goalmouth drama Essien and Drogba both sustained injuries, but Mourinho surprised onlookers as he made a hasty substitution by leaving both on the pitch and replacing Paulo Ferreira with Shaun Wright-Phillips.

Drogba and Essien recovered from their knocks but disaster struck again for Chelsea in the 36th minute as Ghaly fired Tottenham 3-1 in front.

After sprinting from deep inside his own half, Ghaly's attempted pass out to the right was cut out by Ashley Cole but, as it ballooned high in the air, the Egyptian beat three

Chelsea defenders to the ball and coolly slotted past Cech from 12 yards.

Andrei Shevchenko drilled a thunderous shot over the crossbar from distance as Chelsea hunted a lifeline before half-time, while Essien headed Robben's free-kick wide with the goal gaping before him.

Chelsea started the second half much more positively and Cerny had to be alert from two Ballack set-pieces, before saving well from Lampard.

Tottenham almost clinched their place in the semi-finals with a fourth goal on the counter-attack, but Cech darted out to parry Lennon's low shot and Defoe could not find the target with his header after Ghaly had swung the ball back in from the right.

Spurs looked threatening every time they ventured forward and Lennon was cynically chopped down by Cole on the edge of the area.

Mourinho looked to have realised his backline needed shoring up after 57 minutes as he brought on Khalid Boulahrouz for Lassana Diarra, but he then replaced Cole with Kalou to leave just two recognised defenders on the pitch.

Chelsea's aggressive approach paid dividends as they pumelled Spurs back into their own half, and

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Dida extends Milan contract

AFP, Rome

AC Milan goalkeeper Nelson Dida ended speculation about his future on Saturday by signing a contract extension with the Italian Serie A club.

The 33-year-old, whose original deal was due to run out at the end of the season, has put pen to paper on a new deal that will keep him at AC Milan until June 30, 2010.

Dida, a Brazil international, joined AC Milan from Corinthians in 2000. He established himself as a first-team regular in the 2002/03 season and has kept the keeper's jersey ever since.

Cole targets comeback

AFP, London

Injured midfielder Joe Cole could be fit to return for Chelsea in time for the Champions League quarterfinal clash with Valencia next month.

The England international has been out for most of the season with a stress fracture of the foot and underwent surgery in a bid to cure the problem.

'Joe Cole told me that he will be ready for Valencia. The fact that he is saying that will push him. So if not for Valencia maybe for the next week after that. Now he has a target and for me that is good,' said Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho.

'Joe was a key player last season. It was the best season of his life and he was crucial from the first moment to the last. He had an unbelievable season. This season he has had five minutes here and there, and finally surgery and out for a long time.'



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard (R) jumps in joy after his goal alongside striker Andriy Shevchenko during their pulsating FA Cup tie at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.