



Manchester United forward Wayne Rooney (C) surges between the challenges of Europe XI defender Marco Materazzi (R) and midfielder Genaro Gattuso during their charity football match at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

Charity stays at home

Football
AFP, Manchester

A double from England striker Wayne Rooney inspired Premiership leaders Manchester United to an exciting 4-3 win over a star studded Europe XI side here at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

A near capacity crowd looked on as both sides contributed to the entertaining clash which will have done a power of good for the funds which will go to the official Manchester United Foundation, funding community projects locally and further afield, also marks 50 years of the club's involvement in European football competitions.

A highly-entertaining first-half

had seen a pretty much full strength Manchester United first team take command.

Rooney struck the first soon after the start -- set up by Paul Scholes -- and also rounded off the scoring in the first-half when he tapped in.

In between Wes Brown had also notched one up for United, only for France international Florent Malouda to get one back for Marcello Lippi's side but the 2-1 deficit was soon extended when the Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo scored with a superb free-kick which left the opponents' goalkeeper Santiago Canizares rooted to the spot.

The second-half showed a number of changes to both sides but it was Lippi's side that got on

the scoresheet first as Senegalese international striker El Hadji Diouf headed home -- his first goal in 12 matches -- after a sweet move of seven passes.

The changes included the bizarre but nostalgic sight of former United favourite Andy Cole -- now at Portsmouth -- wearing the red shirt again while a brief but more recent darling of the 'Red Devils' Henrik Larsson played 63 minutes for the Europe XI before being replaced and exiting to tumultuous applause by Robbie Fowler.

Somewhat ungraciously the Liverpool and former England legend was greeted with a crescendo of boos by the Old Trafford crowd.

More warmly received was the swap of Smith going off to be

replaced by the first Chinese player ever to play for the senior team Dong Fangzhou.

The 22-year-old striker got his first chance with United after having been signed three years ago from Dalian Shide but having spent most of that on loan with Belgian outfit Royal Antwerp.

Indeed Dong had a glorious opportunity to make it 5-2 with less than 10 minutes remaining only for France international 'keeper Gregory Coupet -- who had replaced Canizares -- to make a stunning save.

Diouf then added a second with a cheekily taken penalty -- it bounced twice before crossing the line -- after United's Argentine defender Gabriel Heinze had handled in the area.

Juve bite back

AFP, Rome

Italian second division leaders Juventus put their promotion bid back on track with a slender 1-0 home win over Treviso on Tuesday.

Raffaele Palladino scored the only goal in the 71st minute as the fallen Turin giants bounced back from last Saturday's 3-1 defeat to Brescia to stretch their lead at the top of Serie B to three points.

Alessandro Del Piero set up the goal with a quickly-taken free-kick, rolling the ball wide for Palladino whose angled shot found the bottom corner. Second-placed Napoli could only manage a goalless draw at home to Vicenza.

Juve coach Didier Deschamps said he never expected his side to roll over Treviso.

"I expected a game like this," said the Frenchman. "It was partly down to the opposition, and maybe because Saturday's defeat had a negative effect on us."

"I was worried that it would leave it's mark and we did suffer a bit, but in the end it turned out alright."

"I wanted a positive response from the players and I got it. It wasn't our best performance, but it was three points."

Juventus have 52 points, followed by Napoli on 49 after 27 matches played.

Bridge undergoes knee surgery

REUTERS, London

Chelsea defender Wayne Bridge underwent knee cartilage surgery late on Tuesday, putting him out of action for several weeks, the Premier League champions said.

Bridge had been struggling with pain in his knee for about three weeks and "a scan confirmed that he had a tear in the meniscus," the club Web site quoted club doctor Bryan English as saying.

The operation not only affects Chelsea but also England, who will now be without their first and second choice left backs for a Euro 2008 qualifier away to Israel on March 24.

Bridge's Chelsea team mate Ashley Cole is suspended for the Group E match in Tel Aviv, which England must win to keep in touch with group leaders Croatia.

Croatia have 10 points from four games, two ahead of Russia and three in front of England and Macedonia. England also play bottom nation Andorra in Barcelona on March 28.

English added: "We thought we may be able to leave it to the end of the season but it got to the stage where (Bridge) was struggling to do a flat-out sprint so we thought it would be best to get it done."

English said former Chelsea winger Damien Duff had the same operation and was back playing in three weeks.

Abramovich in second split

Football
AFP, London

Russian tycoon and Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich has divorced his second wife Irina, but insisted his businesses will not be hit despite reports Wednesday that the split could cost him a fortune.

The English Premiership football club chief's divorce was confirmed in a statement issued late Tuesday, following reports about his relationship with a 25-year-old former model.

"Mr and Mrs Abramovich have divorced in Russia on a consensual basis and have agreed terms in respect of arrangements for their children and a financial settlement," the 40-year-old businessman's spokesman John Mann said.

"Mr Abramovich's corporate interests, including Chelsea Football Club, are not affected by the divorce proceedings."

The British press indulged in feverish speculation about why the couple had split after 15 years of marriage.

With no immediate details about any financial settlement, newspapers suggested Irina Abramovich, 39, may have received the world's biggest divorce pay-off.

Tabloids The Sun and the Daily Mirror claimed the former Aeroflot air stewardess may have received 5.5 billion pounds (8.0 billion euros, 10.5 billion dollars) -- about half of

Abramovich's fortune.

Both also said she could have taken her pick of the luxury yachts, cars, aircraft and homes around the world.

But an unnamed source close to the businessman was quoted as saying by The Sun: "Abramovich is an intensely private and secretive man who would never have dreamed of washing his dirty linen in public when it came to divorce."

"But his wife and (five) children will be incredibly well provided for and will want for nothing."

The two newspapers said Irina was seen at a London legal firm last October, which led Abramovich to deny publicly that anyone in his family was filing for divorce.

The tabloids said the tycoon was seen this week with former model Daria Zhukova in Paris.

Photographs of Abramovich and Zhukova, the ex-girlfriend of Russian tennis star Marat Safin, were offered to the newspapers by a photo agency but then withdrawn.

Abramovich bought west London side Chelsea in a 140-million-pound deal in 2003 and he has bankrolled their transformation into European heavyweights, winning two Premiership titles already.

However, his investment in the Blues is only a small slice of his vast wealth.

Last week, Forbes magazine ranked the 40-year-old former oil magnate as the 16th-richest man in the world, with an estimated per-

sonal wealth of 18.7 billion dollars.

He is the richest Russian and the second-richest man in Britain.

Legal experts said Abramovich could have saved himself billions of dollars by settling his divorce in Russia rather than Britain.

A landmark British ruling in 2006 changed the divorce landscape and was declared a victory for ex-wives. Since then, many women have chosen to end their marriages in Britain.

Solicitor Helen Howard of The Howard Partnership said that a Russian settlement would have been far quicker and cheaper.

"He (Abramovich) is an arch negotiator. It would be sensible of him to use these skills to solve it quickly, cleanly and efficiently and that is what appears to have happened in Moscow," she said.

Jeremy Levison of divorce law firm Levison, Meltzer, Pigott, said it was highly unlikely that Abramovich would want his assets recorded formally in a British court.

"Very rich people can name their terms because it is very difficult to find the assets and meaningfully deal with them," he said.

"We will never ever know the amount unless she chooses to tell us."

"She is obviously happy with it and for her to go and demand a higher award from an English or Russian court would be completely senseless."

Italian stars in paparazzi scam

REUTERS, Rome

An Italian paparazzi photographer has been arrested on suspicion of blackmailing Serie A footballers with compromising photographs.

Fabrizio Corona was arrested by magistrates in the southern city of Potenza on allegations that he took photographs of Italian celebrities, including footballers, then threatened to sell the photographs to the press unless they gave him money.

On Wednesday La Gazzetta dello Sport devoted a full page to what it said were transcripts of interrogations between the investigators and four footballers, three of them well-known internationals, in which the players described their dealings with Corona. The investigation threatens to dig up more dirt on a sport that is still reeling from last year's match-fixing scandal and the death of a policeman during rioting at a Serie A match last month.

Argentina on top of the world

REUTERS, Zurich

Argentina have moved into top spot in FIFA's world rankings list for the first time, dislodging world champions Italy whose reign at the top of the table lasted just a month.

Argentina climbed from third to first place partly as a result of their 1-0 win over France in February and partly because older results have expired and are no longer used for the points evaluation.

Apart from Argentina moving into first place, Italy slipped down to second and Brazil, leaders for four and a half years until January, slipped to third. There were no other changes in the top 10.

The biggest movers in the top 50 were Finland, the surprise leaders of Euro 2008 qualifying Group A, who have climbed 15 places to 33rd. Panama have climbed 20 places to 54th and are the biggest movers of the month.

Cameroon are the highest placed team from outside Europe or South America. The Africans are 18th on 893 points, ahead of 19th place Ghana and Ivory Coast, a further place back.

LATEST RANKINGS		
Pos.	Country	Pts
1.	Argentina	1616
2.	Italy	1592
3.	Brazil	1557
4.	France	1515
5.	Germany	1390
6.	England	1339
7.	Netherlands	1313
8.	Portugal	1288
9.	Czech	1195
10.	Spain	1161

Navarro gets lengthy ban

REUTERS, London

Valencia's David Navarro has been banned for seven months for sparking the brawl at the end of the Champions League match with Inter Milan eight days ago.

Both clubs have been fined 250,000 Swiss francs (205,400 dollars) by UEFA's control and disciplinary committee. Five other players have also been punished, Europe's governing body said.

Inter defenders Nicolas Burdizzo and Maicon have been banned for six UEFA club competition matches and Valencia defender Carlos Marchena for four.

Inter defender Ivan Cordoba and striker Julio Cruz have received three and two-match bans respectively.

Navarro, 26, prompted extraordinary scenes at the end of Valencia's Champions League first knockout round victory on away goals at the Mestalla.

The Valencia substitute defender has said he was ashamed by his behaviour after running on to the pitch and punching Inter's Burdizzo in the face and breaking his nose.

He was then chased by Milan players as pandemonium ensued.

UEFA said in its ruling posted on its Web site (www.uefa.com) on Wednesday that it would ask world football's governing body FIFA to extend the suspension imposed on Navarro to international level.

It would then apply to all competitions -- including domestic leagues and national team fixtures -- on top of UEFA club competition matches.

Ramos's assailant arrested

AFP, Madrid

A Real Betis fan alleged to have thrown a bottle which knocked Sevilla coach Juande Ramos unconscious during a recent Spanish Cup derby was arrested by police here on Wednesday, said Spanish media.

The 30-year-old man, who has denied the allegation, was reportedly identified from television pictures of the match and several witness statements.

Ramos was knocked unconscious by a bottle thrown from the crowd during the quarterfinal Cup tie against Real Betis after Sevilla had taken a 1-0 lead on a 56th-minute goal by Frederic Kanoute.

He stumbled on the pitch before falling to the ground and was then carried off on a stretcher but regained consciousness minutes later although the game was called off.

Real Betis were recently handed a three-match stadium ban, and will also have to replay the remaining 33 minutes of the tie return leg behind closed doors at first division side Getafe, who are based in the Madrid suburbs, Spain's football competition committee ruled.

The body also decreed that disciplinary proceedings should be launched against Jose Maria del Nido and Pepe Leon, chairmen of Sevilla and Betis respectively, whom they accused of whipping up longstanding bad feeling between the two clubs beforehand.

Milan close in on Ronaldinho

Football
INTERNET, undated

Ronaldinho has moved closer to a sensational Milan switch after his brother and agent met Rossoneri officials on Tuesday.

Roberto Assis, who also represents Ricardo Oliveira, flew into the Italian city to officially speak with Oliveira after his kidnapped sister was found safe and well.

However, Assis also dined with Milan Vice-President Adriano Galliani and sporting director Ariedo Braida where they are understood to have discussed his brother's future.

The Corriere dello Sport reports that the two parties involved are

close to reaching an agreement over personal terms, even if convincing Barcelona -- who have 'Dinho under contract until 2011 -- to sell is a different matter.

Nevertheless, the newspaper suggested that Assis and Galliani have agreed on a pact which would guarantee Ronaldinho's move to Milan if he were to leave the Blaugrana.

"Barcelona deserve all our respect, there are no problems and we have an excellent relationship with them," said Assis.

"My brother, however, cannot deny that he likes Milan. There are many Brazilian players here who form a family and always welcome him warmly, how could you not do the same?"

Galliani, though, is playing it cool and is keen to avoid the kind of

confrontations he had with Real Madrid in the summer after they openly courted Kaka through the media.

"I don't want to put pressure on anyone, Ronaldinho still has three years on his contract and I don't think there are any problems with the club," he stated.

"If he decides to change he knows that Milan are here, ready to welcome him, but I do not want another Kaka situation."

President Silvio Berlusconi, who has made no secret of his wish to see 'Dinho wear Milan's jersey, also confirmed that his dream might be close to coming true.

"Ronaldinho could join us and there is a good chance that this will happen," underlined the former Italian Prime Minister.

Loew rocked by injuries

Football
AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew will on Friday unveil an injury-hit squad for a crucial Euro 2008 qualifier against the Czech Republic later this month.

Germany play the Czechs on March 24 and Loew, who had the unenviable job of taking over from Jurgen Klinsmann after last year's World Cup, was on Thursday poring over his striking options following a number of injury setbacks.

Loew has already been robbed of first-choice striker Mario Gomez, leaving his options to partner Schalke 04's Kevin Kuranyi thin on the ground.

The Stuttgart striker, the Bundesliga's top-scorer and who

has scored 13 goals this season, picked up a knee injury and will miss the next six weeks, including Germany's friendly with Denmark on March 28 in Duisburg.

His possible replacements, Werder Bremen's Miroslav Klose (back injury) and Borussia Moenchengladbach's Oliver Neuville (hip) will be missing in Prague.

It means Bayern Munich's Lukas Podolski and Kuranyi virtually pick themselves on form, with promising young talent Jan Schlaudraff of Aachen, who will join Bayern next season, waiting in the wings.

Germany only lead the Czech Republic by virtue of goal difference, so the showdown in Prague could well decide who will top Group D, which includes the Republic of Ireland and Wales.

"It's a concern and we have to do

everything we can to get the players fit for the game in Prague," said Loew.

There is some good news for Loew.

Bayern midfielder Sebastian Schweinsteiger, striker Podolski and defender Philipp Lahm were a key factor in their side's 2-1 win which knocked Real Madrid out of the Champions League and are all available.

"It's good news they are playing well. Schweinsteiger in particular was superb for Bayern in their recent draw with Bremen, it's important for us that he is in good form," said Loew.

But Germany's fringe players will have a chance to stake their claim against Denmark after Loew revealed he will experiment in the friendly, four days after the Prague clash.



David Beckham, alongside his wife Victoria, watches from the stands as his former club Manchester United take on an Europe XI in a charity encounter at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

Beckham cherishes United days

Football
AFP, London

Former England captain David Beckham told tens of thousands of jubilant Manchester United fans on Tuesday that his time at the club was "the best of my career."

Beckham, who did not play in the match between Manchester United and a Rest of Europe XI squad, also told the 74,343-strong crowd -- a

record for a friendly match at Old Trafford -- that Sir Alex Ferguson, Manchester United's manager, was the "best manager in the world."

Real Madrid, and future Los Angeles Galaxy, star Beckham, spent the night in the directors' box with his wife Victoria, addressing the crowd only at half-time.

Beckham played for Manchester United from 1994 to 2003, and has played with Real Madrid since. He is set to join the LA Galaxy this summer.

The match marked 50 years of the Treaty of Rome, which set up the modern-day European Union, as well as a half-century of the Red Devils' involvement in European competitions, with all proceeds going to the Manchester United Foundation charity.

England striker Wayne Rooney scored two goals, guiding Premiership leaders Manchester United to a 4-3 victory over the Europe XI side.

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 "Planet of the —"

5 Urban transport

8 Analgesic target

12 Emotion-lessness

14 Discour-teous

15 Aussie critter

16 Earthen-ware pot

17 Third-party abbr.

18 "Cabaret" composer

20 Poolroom necessities

23 Fourth canonical hour

24 Summer-time desserts

25 Frog-dissection class

28 Bikini half

29 Musical transition

30 — the ramparts

32 Bewitch

34 Old coot

35 Ostenta-tious display

36 Tiny fly

37 Dorothy's home

40 Author Fleming

41 Send forth

42 Illinois city

47 Admoni-tion

48 Over-bearing

49 Despot

50 Writer

51 Shoulder band

DOWN

1 Request

2 Bake-sale

3 A billion years

4 Magical symbols

5 Robin, e.g.

6 GI enter-tainers

7 Force into the public eye

8 Now

9 "— Lang Syne"

10 "Spama-lot" creator

11 Approach

13 Super-market stack

19 Wheel-base

20 Chest grp.

Solution time: 24 mins.

B	L	A	H	O	T	T	O	U	M	F
O	V	E	R	C	H	E	W	E	E	A
G	A	N	G	U	S	E	T	H	O	G
J	I	T	T	E	N	E	S	P	A	N
U	S	A	G	E	V	E	A	L	I	N
S	M	U	T	T	I	H	A	N	D	L
P	A	U	L	E	S	E	A	F	G	
I	N	N	P	R	O	S	I	D	E	A
A	N	I	L	E	U	L	V	I	E	D
T	O	T	P	Y	L	L	E	T	N	A

CRYPTOQUIP

Q K H O Y B C Q Z J " H O Y V Q P T I G

E B E P, " Z E W C G N E W R T N

E K Y E B G E I E H O N ' R

B I Q Y K G R V T R H Q K - R J Q K K Y G ?

Saturday's Cryptoquip: IF YOU'VE GOT NO MONEY SAVED UP TO SPEAK OF, IT MIGHT BE SAID THAT YOU HAVE A BLANK ACCOUNT.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: H equals T