

Van Persie out for the season

AFP, London

Arsenal striker Robin van Persie is likely to miss the rest of the season as he struggles to recover from the foot injury he suffered against Manchester United in January.

Van Persie has been sidelined since breaking the fifth metatarsal in his right foot while celebrating scoring against United at the Emirates Stadium and Gunners manager Arsene Wenger has confirmed he does not expect the Dutch star back this season.

It had been thought van Persie might be fit for the final matches of the season but, with Arsenal having only a top-four finish in the Premiership to play for, he won't be rushed back.

"The end of April now looks optimistic," Wenger told Arsenal TV Online on Thursday. "It is likely he will be out for the season.

"We have spoken to the doctors and they told us that the longer you keep this kind of fracture without playing the less chance you have of a recurrence. So if he can play only one or two games then we will not take a gamble."

Williams, Henin in final

AFP, Miami

Australian Open champion Serena Williams ousted Shahar Peer in straight sets here Thursday to book a clash with world number one Justine Henin in the final of the 6.9 million-dollar Sony Ericsson Open.

Williams, seeded 13th, downed Israel's 14th-seeded Peer 7-6 (7/4), 6-1 in a rematch of their epic quarterfinal clash in Melbourne in January, when Williams triumphed en route to her surprise Aussie Open championship.

Henin, seeded second here, had already advanced with a 6-2, 6-3 victory over ninth-seeded Russian Anna Chakvetadze.

The Belgian, who took over the world number one ranking earlier this week, improved to 15-1 in 2007.

She'll be meeting Williams for the first time since the Wimbledon semi-finals in 2003, when the American posted a straight-set victory.

"It's a long time we didn't play each other," Henin said. "She looks like she's healthy now -- that's the biggest difference -- and very focused on her tennis."

Williams is 14-1 this season, displaying a renewed commitment to the sport after over a year of injuries and distractions.

Playing in her first event since winning the Australian Open, she clearly has not missed a beat, posting straight-sets victories in each of her first four matches.

"I wasn't really surprised the way she came back in Australia," Henin said. "When she's healthy and really focused, she's a great champion. She has nothing to prove to anyone. She did it in the past."

Fergie believes in Rooney

AFP, Manchester

Alex Ferguson claims Wayne Rooney is equipped to cope with the burden of carrying the hopes of a nation, despite extending his goalless run for England to 15 competitive games against Andorra in midweek.

The Manchester United striker has failed to score in a competitive international for his country since Euro 2004 and his recent performances for the national team have been well below the standards he has set with his club this season.

Rooney's failure to produce the goods at international level has coincided with England's dismal form under beleaguered coach Steve McClaren.

But after arriving at Old Trafford in a 30million pound deal from Everton as a teenager, United boss Ferguson insists that Rooney has already proved his ability to cope with the expectancy and pressure.

Ferguson said: "The expectancy that Wayne has to put up with as England's best player shouldn't be a burden for him because he has had the same thing at United ever since he joined us.

"He has had to carry a weight on his shoulders here because ever since the day he arrived, people have been talking of him as being one of our greatest players. He has handled it, so I don't see the England pressure being a big problem for him.

"You cannot put all the responsibility on one player, though, because the team isn't playing well. I think they have all put their hands up to that.

"Obviously, playing alongside players every week as he does here at United helps him play better, without question. But he is still a young lad and we have to remember that. We are trying to develop him.

"But Wayne is back with us now and he will play against Blackburn on Saturday. Playing games all the time is no problem for him because he is as strong as a bull and he could play every day."

Ronaldinho world's richest footballer



AFP, London

Barcelona star Ronaldinho has overtaken David Beckham as the best paid footballer in the world, according to annual listings published in Forbes magazine Friday.

Brazilian Ronaldinho earned 23.5 million euros (31.3m dollars) for 2006 with former England captain Beckham earning 23.2 million

euros (30.9m dollars).

But Real Madrid player Beckham should recapture the top spot next year after his move to Los Angeles Galaxy this summer in a five-year deal worth 250 million dollars.

Manchester United remain the richest club in the world ahead of Real Madrid with Arsenal moving up to third at the expense of AC Milan who drop to fifth.

Of the 25 biggest earning clubs in the world, 10 are English.



Ronaldinho

HIGHEST PAID FOOTBALLERS

Player	Earning (million euros)
1. Ronaldinho (BRA)	23.5
2. David Beckham (ENG)	23.2
3. Ronaldo (BRA)	18.6
4. Wayne Rooney (ENG)	13.7
5. Michael Ballack (GER)	13.4
6. Thierry Henry (FRA)	12.6
7. Zinedine Zidane (FRA)	12.4
8. Fabio Cannavaro (ITA)	11.6
9. John Terry (ENG)	11.4
10. Steven Gerrard (ENG)	11.3

RICHEST CLUBS

Clubs	Earning (billion euros)
1. Manchester United (ENG)	1,137
2. Real Madrid (ESP)	811
3. Arsenal (ENG)	716
4. Bayern Munich (GER)	655
5. AC Milan (ITA)	644
6. Juventus Turin (ITA)	443
7. Inter Milan (ITA)	434
8. Chelsea (ENG)	420
9. Barcelona (ESP)	418
10. Schalke 04 (GER)	369

Barca look to pull ahead

AFP, Madrid



Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday.

The reigning Spanish champions have not always looked convincing in their quest for a third successive crown but are still unbeaten at home in the league this season while Deportivo have only won two of their away games.

Nevertheless, hardly a day goes by without Barca coach Frank Rijkaard having to respond to speculation of dressing room disharmony.

This week has been no different with rumours that Ronaldinho will leave in the summer, perhaps for AC Milan, circulating in the Catalan capital and beyond while the player has been on international duty with Brazil.

"I desire with all my heart that Ronaldinho continues here and he's always told me that he's happy here," said Rijkaard.

"Ronnie is a player who has allowed people at this club to dream, and our supporters as well. I also think he knows how much he's appreciated.

"But, like all the players, he's got a contract (until 2010) to comply with," added Rijkaard, reminding the former World Player of the Year as well as his agent and brother Roberto de Assis of the situation.

Ronaldinho earlier on Thursday

had sought to smooth things out but only succeeded in adding to the doubts about his future.

"I only think about playing, the rest I leave to my brother. The only thing I'm worried about is the rest of this season," said Ronaldinho, although his words were rather less than a whole-hearted statement of commitment to the club.

The distraction over the future of Ronaldinho is hardly what Rijkaard wants as he takes stock of the bumps and bruises acquired by his men while playing for their countries in the last week.

One man definitely missing against Deportivo is the Barca's suspended Portuguese winger Deco.

Barcelona lead Sevilla on goal difference with both clubs having 53 points from 27 games.

Sevilla have a tricky trip north to Osasuna on Sunday with the Pamplona-based club an always intimidating opponent in their own Reyno de Navarra stadium.

"We know we are going to be treated with hostility there. I'd just like to remind their supporters that it's a football match not a war," said Sevilla midfielder Antonio Puerta.

The 2006 UEFA Cup winners could be without their dynamic Brazilian international right back Daniel Alves, after he twisted his right ankle playing in the 1-0 win over Ghana on Tuesday.

Real Madrid are a distant third, five points adrift of the leading pair, but hope to keep up the pressure with a victory at struggling Celta Vigo on Sunday.

Celta are only one place and one point above the relegation zone although they inflicted a humiliating 2-1 defeat on Real in their Santiago

Bernabeu stadium back in November.

"I don't know which Real Madrid will be coming here and which one will be playing," said Celta coach Fernando Vazquez, expressing the same thoughts that have frequently crossed the minds of many Real supporters this season.

"This is a team which recently has kept changing. I don't know whether they will be like in the Nou Camp (the 3-3 draw with Barcelona earlier this month) or like the one we saw in the Bernabeu," added Vazquez.

Real have World Player of the Year Fabio Cannavaro suspended and David Beckham is not yet match-fit despite returning to training this week after straining knee ligaments four weeks ago.

Jose Antonio Reyes, who suffered a similar injury to Beckham in the same match against Getafe on March 4, has made better progress than the former England captain and could play against Celta.

FIXTURES

Saturday (Kick-off times in GMT) Real Betis v Villarreal (1600), Real Sociedad v Levante (1800), Valencia v Espanyol (1800), Barcelona v Deportivo La Coruna (2000) Sunday Atletico Madrid v Real Mallorca (1500), Getafe v Real Zaragoza (1500), Gimnastic Tarragona v Recreativo Huelva (1500), Racing Santander v Athletic Bilbao (1500), Celta Vigo v Real Madrid (1700), Osasuna v Sevilla (1900)
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Hitzfield demands win against Schalke

AFP, Berlin



European quarterfinal with AC Milan just three days later.

Fourth-placed Bayern host Schalke on Saturday at the Allianz Arena, desperate to close the nine-point gap with Hitzfeld demanding a win -- or the German giants can forget picking up their 21st Bundesliga title.

Hitzfeld has key midfielders German international Bastian Schweinsteiger and aggressive Dutchman Mark Van Bommel fit to face Schalke and will pick his best side, despite the Champions League showdown in Milan on Tuesday.

Saturday's game at the Allianz Arena is crucial for Bayern's aspirations, but they need to leap-frog VfB Stuttgart into third to guarantee a Champions League berth next season.

"We're not making any concessions to the Milan game," said Hitzfeld.

"The three points are utterly vital. We want to play in the Champions League again next

year.

"Schalke is a decisive match, like all our matches at the moment. Every match is a final for us. We need a place in the top three as soon as possible."

Having lost at Eintracht Frankfurt and drawn with second-placed Werder Bremen in the last two games, Hitzfeld lamented his side's lost points.

"The points we've thrown away in the last two weeks is just incredible, we are in a critical situation and we must be in the Champions League next season, every single player is clear on that."

Bayern welcome back French centre-back Valerien Ismael who is set to make his first appearance since breaking a leg in training last August.

While all eyes will be on the result in Munich, second-placed Werder Bremen travel to mid-table Energie Cottbus, hoping to close the three-point gap on Schalke.

Coach Thomas Schaaf is still waiting to see if he will hold onto German internationals Miroslav Klose and Torsten Frings, with Klose out of contract at the end of the season.

Third-placed VfB Stuttgart, in the last crucial automatic Champions League spot, are at home to ninth-placed Alemannia Aachen after a disrupted week of

training with eight of their squad involved in internationals.

Coach Armin Veh is still without key defender Serdar Tasci and the Bundesliga's joint top-scorer Mario Gomez who has a knee injury.

And at the bottom of the table, Germany's international striker Oliver Neuville and head coach Jos Luhukay both announced this week they have re-signed for Borussia Moenchengladbach until 2009.

"Gladback are at home to Eintracht Frankfurt, while relegation candidates Arminia Bielefeld entertain Borussia Dortmund on Friday night.

And VfL Bochum, who are also in the bottom three, host seventh-place Hanover, whose goalkeeper Robert Enke made his debut for the German side in their 1-0 defeat at home to Denmark on Wednesday.

FIXTURES

Saturday Energie Cottbus v Werder Bremen, Bayern Munich v FC Schalke 04, Mainz 05 v Bayer Leverkusen, Nuremberg v Hertha Berlin, Borussia M'gladbach v Eintracht Frankfurt, VfB Stuttgart v Alemannia Aachen Sunday VfL Bochum v Hanover, Hamburg v VfL Wolfsburg
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Morientes out of Chelsea clashes

AFP, Palma de Mallorca

Valencia striker Fernando Morientes will miss his club's Champions League quarterfinal matches against Chelsea with a shoulder injury, the Spanish federation announced here Thursday.

Morientes dislocated a shoulder when he fell awkwardly just before halftime during Spain's 1-0 win over Iceland in their Euro 2008 qualifier on Wednesday.

"His shoulder will be immobilised for 15 days and he'll be out of action for three to four weeks, said Spanish team doctor Genaro Borrás.

"The problem is more serious than normal because his shoulder is unstable due to previous dislocations," added Borrás.

Valencia play their first leg against the English champions at Stamford Bridge next Wednesday with the second leg at home in their Mestalla stadium on April 10.

Further layoff for Neville

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United captain Gary Neville faces a further three weeks on the sidelines after suffering ankle ligament damage two weeks ago.

The England full-back had been expected to return in time for the trip to Portsmouth next weekend, but Sir Alex Ferguson ruled that out on Friday.

He told Manchester United Radio: "The swelling has only just gone down on his ankle so the injury was maybe a bit worse than we thought in terms of the swelling.

"But he's been doing some good work in the gym and I expect him to be back in the first team in three weeks time."

Goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar and striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer have however both been declared fit to return against Blackburn on Saturday.

Kaiser receives Laureus award

AFP, Berlin

German football legend Franz Beckenbauer will receive the Laureus Award for Lifetime Achievement in Barcelona on Monday, according to the organisers of the event.

The 61-year-old Bayern Munich president, who won the World Cup with Germany both as a player in 1974 and as coach in 1990, will be presented with the award for his football career and helping to organise the 2006 World Cup.

Beckenbauer will be the seventh sportsman to receive the award after Brazilian football legend Pele, Holland's Johan Cruyff, British rower Steven Redgrave, New Zealand yachtsman Peter Blake, South African golfer Gary Player and Norwegian mountaineer Arne Naess.

The prize is a "special honour for prominent sportsmen and personalities who have substantially made their mark on international sport," organisers of the Laureus Awards said in a statement.

Alcohol ban for Roma, United clash

AFP, Rome

An alcohol ban will be enforced for Roma's Champions League quarterfinal first leg against English Premiership leaders Manchester United next Wednesday in an attempt to prevent crowd trouble.

Rome police chief Achille Sera said on Thursday that the sale of alcohol to fans in the Italian capital will be prohibited from midday on the day of the match until three o'clock the following morning.

Three fans of English Premiership side Middlesbrough were stabbed in Rome last year when rival fans clashed before a UEFA Cup match.

Riise declared bankrupt

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool's Norwegian defender John Arne Riise was declared bankrupt by Liverpool County Court on Friday for an unpaid debt of around 100,000 pounds (196,000 dollars).

Riise, who earns an estimated 50,000 pounds a week, is involved in a legal battle with his former agent, Einar Baardsen, whom he has accused of swindling him out of three million pounds (5.9 million dollars).

Riise's legal team are reported to be preparing to go back to court to have the bankruptcy order annulled.

Scholes primed to fire

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson believes Paul Scholes is ready to give fresh impetus to Manchester

United's treble challenge.

United midfielder Scholes will return to action against Blackburn on Saturday after three weeks on the sidelines while he served a suspension for his red card at Liverpool.

Scholes, in self-imposed exile from England duty, was given an additional break by the recent international fixtures and Ferguson expects the 32-year-old to make up for lost time as the Premiership leaders resume their bid to win the title for the first time since 2003.

Only the magnificent form of United's imperious winger Cristiano Ronaldo have overshadowed Scholes' impressive contribution this season and he is certain to play a major role in his side's push for a triple trophy haul.

As well as trying to maintain their six-point advantage over Chelsea, the Premiership leaders also face a Champions League quarterfinal against Roma and an FA Cup semi-final against Watford next month, so Scholes' rest was perfectly timed.

Ferguson said: "Paul regards family life as very important. He knows what the travelling with the international team is like and, com-

ing to his age, I think he felt it was time to give more time to his family. That is the reason he gave up international football.

"His form this season has been absolutely fantastic and now we are getting him back fresh after a little break."

A United victory over Rovers would pile the pressure back on Chelsea, who travel to struggling Watford in Saturday's late game knowing they can't afford a single slip in their final eight matches.

But Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho just wants his players to focus on their own game and not worry about United.

"I keep saying to the players that we have to do our job," Mourinho said. "The only three points of Manchester United that we can control is the game we have against them.

"After that we don't have a direct relation with them. We have to do our job and win every game. Hopefully we can then play against them when we have chances."

Liverpool winger Jermaine Pennant believes victory against Arsenal would be enough to ensure his side finish third in the Premiership.

Rafa Benitez's team will kick-off against Arsenal at Anfield a point behind the third-placed Londoners, who have a game in hand, but Pennant is convinced the match will effectively decide who ends up directly behind United and Chelsea.

Pennant wants to finish above Arsenal to gain a measure of revenge for the FA and League Cup defeats, as well as a 3-0 league beating, that Arsene Wenger's side inflicted on the Reds earlier this season.

"Whoever wins this game will finish third," he told Liverpool's website. "For that reason this is one of our biggest games of the season.

"They have beaten us a few times this season so it's time for us to get a victory."

History could be made at Craven Cottage, where Portsmouth goalkeeper David James will try to get the one cleansheet he needs to break David Seaman's Premiership record of 140 shutouts.

Charlton's hopes of avoiding relegation will get a massive boost if they can beat fellow strugglers Wigan at The Valley. Alan Pardew's third-bottom side have shown signs of mounting a sustained fight for survival and a win would close the gap on Wigan to three points.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT kick-off unless stated)

Saturday Bolton v Sheffield Utd, Charlton v Wigan, Fulham v Portsmouth, Liverpool v Arsenal (1245), Manchester Utd v Blackburn, Newcastle v Manchester City, Watford v Chelsea (1715), West Ham v Middlesbrough Sunday Tottenham v Reading (1600)
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Maradona swapping addictions?



AFP, Buenos Aires

Doctors said Thursday they were concerned football legend Diego Maradona, who was rushed to hospital a day earlier and stabilized, may have traded cocaine addiction for alcohol abuse.

The 46-year-old former football icon is being treated at Guemes Hospital in Buenos Aires, where he was taken against his will late Wednesday.

Guemes Hospital director Hector Pezzella said Maradona did not currently have acute heart trouble or other system failure, that he was stable, and his life was not in danger.

Voted one of the best players of the 20th century and venerated like a god in Argentina, Maradona has a history of drug addiction and was hospitalised in 2000 and 2004 for cocaine overdoses.

While both Pezzella and Maradona's personal physician Alfredo Cahe denied Maradona's treatment was related to use of any illegal drugs, they said it was likely he had replaced a dependency on cocaine with alcohol.

Though there was no new heart trouble, Pezzella said, "alcohol can contribute to (system) imbalances, especially when excess is involved. In this case, there was (excess). There were several (medical) imbalances, and that is what (Maradona) came to get back in order."

Pezzella also said Maradona was being treated with sedatives "because that is part of the tactics and (treatment) regime for patients (...)" so they do not develop withdrawal symptoms."

Argentine television said Maradona was rushed to the hospital after feeling ill at his parents' house.

His ex-wife, daughters and Cahe later arrived at the hospital, and police threw up a line outside to hold back fans and well-wishers.

Cahe later emerged to tell report-

ers that Maradona's life was not in danger.

"He didn't have a very consistent lifestyle, in his eating habits, his drinking and the amount of cigars he smoked," Cahe said.

"This, in addition to stress, was a logical reason to hospitalise him, and against his will," Cahe said.

The "stress" Cahe mentioned may well be linked to the star's legal problems -- in early March Argentina's central bank began collecting information about Maradona's bank accounts, suggesting the football great was under investigation for tax evasion.

Born October 30, 1960 just outside Buenos Aires, Maradona shares the FIFA title of the 20th century's best player with Brazil's Pele after a stellar career with Boca Juniors, Barcelona and Napoli.

He scored 50 goals in 115 games for Argentina during his 21 years as a football star. He proved his genius in the 1986 World Cup finals in Mexico, with a series of brilliant displays that led Argentina to the title.

But like much of his career, even that star turn was dogged by contro-



PHOTO: AFP

A fan of Argentine legend Diego Armando Maradona shows an album with pictures of the star as he maintains a vigil at the entrance of the Guemes private hospital in Buenos Aires on Thursday where the former Argentine football star was admitted.

Inter seek quick wrap-up

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan will sense the chance to move closer to the Serie A title this weekend with the runaway leaders at home

to struggling Parma and second-placed Roma facing a tough test against AC Milan.

Inter, who finished third last season but were awarded the Scudetto after Juventus and AC Milan were found guilty of match-fixing, have a massive 18-point lead over Roma with just 10 games left.

Still unbeaten in Serie A, Inter can fully concentrate on the league following their exit from the Champions League while Roma, together with AC Milan, are still involved in Europe's premier competition.

Roma are unlikely to go all out for three points at home to AC Milan on Saturday with the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal against English Premiership leaders Manchester United coming up four days later.

Fifth-placed AC Milan, whose need for a victory is perhaps greater than Roma's as they try to secure a Champions League place for next season, face Bayern Munich on

Tuesday.

The top two clubs in Serie A go automatically into the Champions League group stages, while the teams finishing third and fourth have to play in the two-legged third qualifying round.

With Juventus relegated to Serie B for their match-fixing crimes and AC Milan docked eight points, Inter's championship challenge has felt like a procession.

But their in-form striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who will be suspended for the Parma match due to a one-game ban, can't wait to crack open the champagne and get the Scudetto party started.

"We're not tired of winning and we want the title as soon as possible," said the 25-year-old Sweden international who has netted 15 league goals.

"The fans have been patient, but we are in a hurry."

AC Milan are determined to make the best out of a difficult season and veteran captain Paolo Maldini believes Ronaldo is the man who can help them finish the campaign on a high.

The 30-year-old Brazilian striker, a January transfer window signing from Spanish giants Real Madrid, struggled with injuries and poor form in his last six months in Spain.

But Maldini believes 'The Phenomenon' is getting back to his

best.

"Ronaldo is a champion and unlike any other player we've had at the club," said the 38-year-old Maldini.

"He came here after a fairly inactive six months, but he has trained very hard and his presence can be the turning point in helping us get fourth place."

Third-placed Lazio, docked three points for their match-fixing involvement, will be looking for their seventh consecutive win when they visit Udinese.</