

Injury fears ease for Ferdinand

AFP, London

Manchester United and England defender Rio Ferdinand has been assured that the groin injury he sustained in Saturday's FA Cup win over Watford is less serious than at first feared.

Ferdinand limped off during the first-half of Saturday's match, adding to an injury list that already included Gary Neville, Nemanja Vidic, Michael Silvestre and John O'Shea.

The player expressed fears that he could be out of action for a long spell, but initial examinations have proved otherwise.

Ferdinand is expected to be fully fit in time for Saturday's league game against Middlesbrough, but coach Sir Alex Ferguson has not ruled him out of being involved in the game against Sheffield United at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

The same is also true of John O'Shea, who sat out Saturday's victory with a minor calf injury.

Should neither Ferdinand nor O'Shea make the Sheffield game, Ferguson will face a dilemma over who should fill the right-back slot.

Darren Fletcher is favourite to retain the role after doing well as an emergency replacement for Ferdinand in a back four which saw Gabriel Heinze partner Wes Brown in the middle.

The only other plausible option is to hand 18-year-old Northern Irishman Craig Cathcart the debut.

Normally a central defender, Cathcart has impressed and reserve-team and academy level this term and been a key figure in United's run to the Youth Cup final.

Rooney raring to go

AFP, London

Wayne Rooney admits Manchester United's breathtaking form has reinvigorated him for the decisive final weeks of the season.

United have enjoyed a week to remember with Tuesday's 7-1 Champions League thrashing of Roma followed by a 4-1 FA Cup semifinal win over Watford on Saturday.

Those magnificent displays underlined exactly why Rooney is desperate to play in every game despite the hectic schedule faced by Sir Alex Ferguson's treble chasers.

The England striker, who scored twice against Watford, is convinced he can take the strain of putting his body on the line in so many high-stakes games.

"I have never experienced an end of season like this one before but I don't need a rest," Rooney said.

"I love to play. I feel fit and strong and a match every three or four days is fine by me. That is what you come to a big club for."

"We have not played as well as this during my time at United. Some of our attacking football has been brilliant and I am delighted to be a part of it."

United's win against Watford set up a showdown against Chelsea in the first FA Cup final to be played at the rebuilt Wembley.

Rooney last visited Wembley in its' old guise to see Everton play against United in the 1995 FA Cup final when he was just nine.

Everton won that day but Rooney also has painful memories of the FA Cup final as well after playing in United's penalty shoot-out defeat against Arsenal in 2005.

"People were writing us off not that long ago but we knew we had a lot of young players coming through and the situation would change," said Rooney.

"Now we have made a bit of history by reaching the first FA Cup final at Wembley and hopefully we can go on and win it."

Mourinho-Abramovich hug!

AFP, Manchester

Jose Mourinho hinted at a thaw in his troubled relationship with Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich by revealing that the Russian billionaire had given him a hug after watching his side beat Blackburn in the FA Cup semifinal at Old Trafford on Sunday.

The two men had reportedly not spoken for months prior to the match and Mourinho has been widely tipped to leave Stamford Bridge this summer, even though the club remains in the hunt for a clean sweep of all four trophies they have entered.

But suggestions their relationship has broken down irretrievably appeared at odds with Mourinho's account of their meeting after Sunday's match.

"I spoke to him just here (next to the press conference room)," Mourinho said. "Sure we had a hug. I told him congratulations and he told me congratulations."



PHOTO: AFP

Diminutive Barcelona midfielder Deco (C) skips past a challenge during their Primera Liga encounter against Mallorca at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on Sunday.

Barca sweat to top

AFP, Madrid



League leaders Barcelona left it late but ensured they stayed on top of La Liga thanks to a Fernando Navarro own goal which gave them a 1-0 win over Real Mallorca on Sunday.

"We have got three very important points. We had a lot of luck with the goal," conceded a relieved Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard, whose team were without an ill Ronaldinho.

The luckless Navarro, who was on Barcelona's books himself until two seasons ago, saw the ball rebound off his legs barely a minute before the final whistle after Barca's Argentine striker Javier Saviola had hit the post.

Barcelona had the best of a disappointing game although Mallorca had a chance to open the scoring after 30 minutes.

Victor Valdes brought down Mallorca midfielder Jonas Gutierrez but the Barca goalkeeper, who was lucky to not get sent off, then saved the resulting penalty from Jonas.

In the second half, Saviola, Samuel Eto'o and Lionel Messi all fluffed opportunities to break the deadlock.

Barcelona have 59 points from 30 games and hold a four-point advantage over second-placed Sevilla who went down 2-0 at fourth-placed Valencia later on Sunday, with David Villa getting both goals.

Villa danced around the Sevilla defenders to put Valencia ahead

after 27 minutes.

Sevilla's Enzo Maresca had a save shortly afterwards by Valencia goalkeeper Santiago Canizares but Villa himself made no mistake from the spot five minutes after the break, after being tripped by Andreas Hinkel, who was sent off.

Former Barcelona player Hristo Stoichkov ensured that he will go down in history at struggling Celta Vigo after guiding them to a 1-0 victory over bitter local rivals Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday.

Stoichkov, who won four league titles at Barcelona as well as the 1992 European Cup, was making his debut as the Celta coach after resigning as the Bulgarian national coach on Tuesday.

Brazilian striker Fernando Baiano got Stoichkov off to a winning start by scoring from the edge of the six yard box, deflecting home a shot by his Uruguayan team mate Nestor Canobbio.

"The victory doesn't guarantee anything but I couldn't have asked anything more. They got stuck in, fought and showed a winner's mentality," said a happy Stoichkov.

It was only Celta's second home win this season but helped them to edge out of the relegation zone.

Athletic Bilbao's chances of avoiding relegation improved with a 2-1 win over Espanyol.

Levante slipped into the bottom three after going down 1-0 at Atletico Madrid with Fernando Torres getting the only goal of the game on the hour from just outside the area.

Fifth-placed Real Zaragoza crashed 1-0 at bottom club Gimnastic Tarragona with Javier Portillo heading Gimnastic in front nine minutes before the end, connecting with a Gil corner.

Two penalties in the last 18 minutes by Racing Santander's Ezequiel Garay, the winner coming just seconds before the end of regulation time, handed nine-man Real Madrid a 2-1 defeat on Saturday.

Real, who opened the scoring through club captain Raul Gonzalez after 33 minutes, had defenders Ivan Helguera and Alvaro Mejia sent off in the final minutes of the game.

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MU lead PFA nominations

AFP, London

The Professional Footballers' Association Player of the Year award will be a case of Manchester United against the rest this season.

United dominate the award nominations with three players making the six-man shortlist.

Alongside overwhelming favourite Cristiano Ronaldo are his veteran team-mates Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs as well as Chelsea's Ivory Coast forward Didier Drogba, Arsenal's Spanish playmaker Cesc Fabregas and Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard, last year's winner.

The award will be presented on April 22 when a United player could win it for the first time since Ruud van Nistelrooy was honoured by his peers in 2002.

Ronaldo, 22, or even 19-year-old Fabregas could be in for a unique double as both are nominated for the Young Player of the Year award category as well, alongside Wayne Rooney, the winner the last two seasons.

Reading striker Kevin Doyle, 23, Tottenham winger Aaron Lennon, 19, and 18-year-old defender Michael Richards, of Manchester City, who won his first England caps this season, are the other nominees.

Most observers believe the main award is a straight fight between Chelsea's Drogba and flying Portuguese winger Ronaldo, with the latter the clear favourite.

Ronaldo has been in startling form this season, scoring 21 goals from midfield as he has inspired United to top of the Premiership, the FA Cup final and Champions League semifinals.

But Drogba has already passed the 30-goal mark for the season as Chelsea, who have already won the League Cup, chase an unprecedented treble.

Scholes and Giggs have both come in for high praise in the twilight of the two veterans' careers as both have been instrumental in United's success.

Gerrard has as usual been Liverpool's heart-beat this season with Fabregas rapidly maturing at Arsenal, where he pulls the strings.

With voting among the players themselves now finished, the winners in each category will be revealed at the end of a gala dinner in London on Sunday night.

The PFA Fans Player of the Year, which is polled each month across the season, will also be announced. Football supporters will, meanwhile, get their chance to take part in a public 'Guess The Winners' vote.

Lee Chun-Soo set for Fulham

INTERNET, undated

Ulsan Hyundai Horang-i midfielder Lee Chun-Soo is hoping he can secure a move to Fulham in order to restore his reputation in Europe.

The Cottagers have contacted Ulsan with a view to signing the 25-year-old South Korea international on a year-long loan which would start on July 1.

His previous experience of football away from the Far East came in 2002 when, following an impressive World Cup on home soil, he joined Real Sociedad.

But after an unsuccessful spell in San Sebastian he was farmed out on loan to Numancia before returning to Ulsan in 2005 and helping the Tigers win the league championship.

He is desperate for the Fulham move to come off after seeing possible transfers to the Premiership with Wigan and Portsmouth fall through.

"This is my last chance to restore my reputation and it will be good if Ulsan can accept that," Lee told the Joongang Daily.

"If I go on a loan deal and prove my ability then I expect that the two clubs will be able to do a deal."

"When I went to Spain I had no time to prepare. With Fulham I would have three months to get ready."

Lee, who has made 70 international appearances, was part of the Korea side who reached the semifinals of the 2002 World Cup and also scored his country's first goal in the 2006 tournament in Germany with a trademark free-kick in the 2-1 win against Togo. He has fond memories of Craven Cottage after scoring the winner in Korea's 1-0 victory against Greece in a friendly held at the ground in February, and admits the proximity of the club to the centre of the UK's Korean population, New Malden, is a bonus.

"Fulham is close to England's Korea town so I would be able to adapt to life quickly," he said.

"I heard that the club were interested in me when I played at Craven Cottage."

Fulham are also believed to have watched Lee during Korea's defeat by Uruguay in Seoul in March.

Bremen keep up chase

AFP, Berlin

German striker Miroslav Klose admitted he was delighted to get on the scoresheet and help fire Werder Bremen back up to second in the Bundesliga

with a 2-0 win at Borussia Dortmund on Sunday.

After Bremen defender Patrick Owomoyela robbed Dortmund midfielder Florian Kringe on the half-way line and sprinted to the edge of the penalty area, Klose was on hand to head home his cross on 28 minutes.

And a superb curled free-kick from Brazilian Diego ten minutes later gave Dortmund goalkeeper Roman Weidenfeller no chance and put Bremen into a 2-0 lead. The visitors could even afford to squander several chances to score more after the break.

The defeat leaves Dortmund just one place above the relegation zone.

After the disappointment of their Champions League exit last Wednesday at the hands of AC Milan, Bayern Munich showed they are still in the hunt for their 21st German title after a convincing 2-1 win against Bayer Leverkusen.