

Celtic ride on Nakamura

Football

AFP, Kilmarnock

Shunsuke Nakamura revealed he achieved a long-held ambition by abandoning his usual reserved demeanour and jumping into the Celtic support to celebrate his league winning goal.

The Japanese international scored with a dramatic injury time free-kick to give Celtic a 2-1 win at Kilmarnock and clinch their second consecutive Scottish Premier League title. Nakamura - who normally celebrates his goals in a dignified and controlled manner - pulled his top off, swung it around his head while running towards the Celtic support before throwing himself into the green and white clad hordes.

During his celebrations with the adoring fans, the little Japanese playmaker received a sore face, but he revealed the pain was worthwhile.

"I've never done anything like that before but I've always wanted to run into the crowd," he said.

"My face is a bit sore now but I'm glad I did it.

"It was probably my most important goal as it meant we won the league, although the one I scored to beat Manchester United in the Champions League was also very important to me.

"Kilmarnock were very good and I made a few mistakes so I wanted to score to make up for them and I'm very happy we are now champions."

Celtic manager Gordon Strachan was equally thrilled to have clinched the SPL title and is now aiming to complete a league and cup double by lifting the Scottish Cup in May.

"I am absolutely delighted we've won the league again," said Strachan. "Luckily for me I have been fortunate to have some great players to work with over the last few seasons.

"We lost a lot of big personalities last year. People such as Stilian Petrov, John Hartson, Chris Sutton and Roy Keane all left and a lot of the players remaining have never won a championship before so this is a big achievement for them.

"It would be great if we can now go on and win the Scottish Cup as it would be fantastic to complete the double.

"We've won the league today but all I keep thinking about is John. To have been out for three years and come back to play the way he did against Kilmarnock is unbelievable."

He said: "It was fantastic to be able to celebrate with the fans. We even picked out a couple of kids from the support to come out and meet their idols so that was good.

"I enjoyed it and it's always great to be appreciated."

In Sunday's game Celtic had opened the scoring in the 23rd minute.

An inswinging corner from Nakamura was met by Dutch international Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink who nodded the ball past Kilmarnock goalkeeper Alan Combe.

The home side levelled in the 49th minute through Colin Nish, setting the stage for Nakamura's injury time winner.

Twenty-yards from goal the Japanese international struck a perfect curling free-kick into the far corner of the net and spark euphoric scenes from the Celtic players, management and fans.



PHOTO: AFP

Celtic's Japanese star Shunsuke Nakamura displays the trophy of the SPFA player of the player at the Park Stadium in Glasgow yesterday.

Japan hails its hero

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese dailies on Monday lauded midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura as history-making after his last-gasp goal gave Celtic the Scottish Premier League title.

"Shunsuke's victory bullet!" ran the headline of the Tokyo-Chunichi Sports newspaper a day after Celtic triumphed 2-1 at Kilmarnock in injury time.

"So Dramatic, Shunsuke," the Nikkan Sports daily said. "Nakamura's name has been engraved into the history of European football."

National newspapers carried Nakamura's achievement as the top item on their sports pages.

"Shunsuke's Historic Free Kick," the Sankei Shimbun said in its headline, with a picture of the 28-year-old swinging his shirt around for joy after his winning goal.

Later in the day, Nakamura was voted Player of the Year by the Scottish Professional Footballers' Association, beating off strong competition from team mates Lee Naylor and Artur Boruc, as well as Aberdeen skipper Russell Anderson.

"I'm very pleased but this isn't something you can get on your own - it's down to the whole team and also the supporters," the modest Nakamura said in Scotland.

"All the players deserved to get this award. For example, a player like Neil Lennon is not really in the limelight but he is so important in the background and without players like him we wouldn't have our style of play."

Nakamura joined the Yokohama Marinos in 1997 and scored 33 goals in 148 games, winning the J-League's most valuable player award in 2000.

He moved to Italy's Reggina in July 2002 and scored 11 goals in 81 Serie A games before joining Celtic in 2005.

Despite his success in Europe, Nakamura said earlier this year that he hoped to return soon to play in Japan.

James breaks record

AFP, Birmingham

David James broke the record for Premiership cleansheets with a superb display that helped Portsmouth earn a 0-0 draw at Aston Villa on Sunday.

Portsmouth keeper James now has 142 Premiership cleansheets, one ahead of David Seaman's previous record, but he had to work hard to remain unbeaten.

Villa dominated from start to finish, but could not find a way past the former England international, who had waited five matches to beat the record since his last cleansheet.

Portsmouth remain in the race for a UEFA Cup place thanks to James's heroics, while mid-table Villa extended their unbeaten run to six matches.

Former Villa keeper James, who admitted he had broken his promise not to shave until he got the record, said: "I'm very proud. It was a tough game and it's nice to keep a cleansheet at my old club."

"I'm pleased to get it out of the way because it's been a constant question. But I had to shave in between even though I said I wouldn't!"

James believes Portsmouth deserve a European place for their efforts and he added: "It would mean everything. We have spent most of the season in the top six."

"We had a bad run recently but we've turned it around and we're in a good position." Craig Gardner, who had scored his first goal for the club last weekend, was close to giving Villa the lead after seven minutes.

John Carew held off Linvoy Primus and whipped in a low cross which Gardner pokked goalwards, only for James to brilliantly block the shot.

James had to be alert again when Wilfred Bouma's cross threatened to dip over him, but the stopper stretched to keep it out.

Carew should have broken the deadlock when Gareth Barry flicked on Stilian Petrov's corner, but the Norway striker made a complete hash of his attempted volley.

Villa were responsible for most of what passed for goalmouth action in a drab first half. Patrick Berger tried his luck with a long-range strike that went over before James produced another good stop to keep out Gardner's low drive.

James was proving a formidable barrier and he repelled a fierce effort from Carew soon after half-time.

Portsmouth harbour ambitions of qualifying for Europe, but this moribund performance hardly made a convincing case. Harry Redknapp's team hardly had a shot on target and were fortunate to find James in top form.

Barry had one last chance to win it and keep James waiting for his record, but the England midfielder scuffed his shot wide.

Refs irk Jose again

AFP, Newcastle



Jose Mourinho took managerial mind games to a new level when he suggested English

football was now governed by a favourbook weighted heavily in the favour of title rivals Manchester United.

Chelsea manager Mourinho turned conspiracy theorist by suggesting his side's bid to retain the Premiership is being derailed by officials conforming to an agenda set against the London club.

And, in the wake of Chelsea's frustrating 0-0 draw at Newcastle on Sunday which left the Blues three points behind United, the Portuguese offered what he firmly believes is conclusive evidence that referees are favouring the league leaders.

"The circumstances are difficult for us with the new football rules that we have to face," said Mourinho.

"It is not possible to have a penalty against Manchester United and it is not possible to have a penalty in favour of Chelsea," he added, referring to two contentious decisions within 24 hours which could yet have a significant bearing on the destination of the English game's top prize.

Middlesbrough's Lee Dong-Gook appeared to be fouled by John O'Shea in the final minute of their 1-1 draw with United at Old Trafford on Saturday but a penalty was not awarded.

After eight minutes of Sunday's scrappy stalemate at St James's Park, Mourinho felt Chelsea should have been awarded a spot kick after Salomon Kalou's cross struck the arm of Newcastle defender Stephen Carr. Again, no penalty was forthcoming as referee Mark Halsey waved away sustained claims from the agitated Chelsea players.

"We should have had a penalty,

involving Stephen Carr," said Mourinho, who insists he has no fear of being sanctioned over his criticisms. "It was a clear penalty.

"I have the right to speak. I think nobody can punish me because I speak the truth and I am not saying the referees are not honest.

"But on Saturday it was a penalty and today it was a penalty. If somebody wants to punish me for that it means the end of democracy and we go back to old times."

Mourinho has never been afraid to speak his mind but the English Football Association will surely come down hard on him after comments which will infuriate and shock in equal measure.

Stopping short of claiming an out-right fix is surely no defence with the implication of unfairness at the root of England's national game bound to bring punishment.

And it is not as if Mourinho made his wild claims knowing he will be long gone this summer. Speaking for the first time since Chelsea's chief executive, Peter Kenyon confirmed there would be no change of management this summer, Mourinho revealed he wanted to stay.

"I opened my heart and told the board that I wanted to stay," he

said. "It feels good and now we are working together for the future."

But what of Chelsea's thinly veiled approach to the former Germany coach Jurgen Klinsmann? "A board is a board and they can do what they want," replied Mourinho. "For a long time I have been telling them I want to stay but they have a right to make their announcement when they want."

"If they had decided they wanted to sack me at the end of the season then that was their right but I am staying and I am looking forward to a fourth season in charge of Chelsea." If Mourinho does stay, he may experience the unfamiliar sensation of kicking off next season without a league title to defend. Chelsea looked tired as they struggled to find any attacking momentum against Newcastle.

While Chelsea had legitimate claims for a penalty when Carr put his arm out to block Kalou's cross, they appear to be paying the price for their strenuous efforts to keep pace with United in recent weeks.

They registered just one shot on target when Didier Drogba headed goalwards but Steve Harper easily saved his effort to put United back in control of the title race.



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea's Portuguese manager Jose Mourinho.

Lyon held at Auxerre

AFP, Paris



Title-holders Lyon had to settle for a goalless draw at Auxerre on Sunday, a day after being crowned French champions for a record sixth time in a row.

Gerrard Houllier's men lifted the title without even kicking a ball on Saturday when Rennes beat Lyon's nearest rivals Toulouse 3-2.

The record for away wins in one season will however have to wait, as Lyon, who are unbeaten in the last ten matches, failed to find a way past a weakened Auxerre who were saved largely thanks to the single-handed efforts of their goalkeeper Olivier Sorin.

Sorin did well to stop a Juninho free kick after 19 minutes and two efforts either half of the break from Milan Baros.

There was no let up in the second half with Sorin holding firm against Hatem Ben Arfa (66) and a Gregory Bettiol shot in the dying minutes of the game.

Houllier insisted that winning the title without playing took away none of the gloss, despite a season where they once again disappointed in the Champions League, and exited both the French Cup and League Cup.

"This title is confirmation in my mind for what we as good as achieved with our win over Nancy (last month)," said Houllier whose side have a massive 18-point lead on second-place Lens with five matches to play.

"It's very satisfying. Last year was a five-in-a-row record, this year

it's a European (big leagues) record."

But if Lyon's being crowned champions has been almost a fait accompli for weeks, the race for Europe remains wide open.

Toulouse suffered a double blow as they also lost second place - and direct entry into the Champions League group stages next season - to Lens who beat Le Mans 2-0 at home. And Bordeaux are hopeful of an historic Champions League place next season after a 2-0 win at Saint Etienne moved them up to third, just one point behind Lens and equal on 52 points but ahead Toulouse on goal difference.

Marseille, three points behind Bordeaux and Toulouse, leaped into a UEFA Cup qualification place with a 2-1 home win over Troyes, who remain third from bottom.

But Monaco all but ended Lille's chances of Champions League football next year with a 3-1 home win.

Meanwhile, a double from Portuguese striker Pauleta lifted Paris Saint Germain to a 4-0 win over lowly Nantes, a victory which could prove vital to the Parisians' bid to beat the drop.

PSG now have 38 points and coach Paul Le Guen believes that his side need 43 points to survive, but the Parisians face a tough end to the season with ties against Toulouse, Lyon, Nice, Troyes and Lorient on the cards.

Rockbottom Nantes, however, look set for the second division next season just six years after they won the last of their domestic titles.

Owen ready to return

AFP, Newcastle



England striker Michael Owen could make his long awaited debut this season in

Newcastle's clash with Reading next Monday, according to his manager Glen Roeder. Owen had been slated for a possible appearance against champions Chelsea on Sunday but the 27-year-old did not even figure on the bench.

But now Roeder is convinced his star forward is ready for a return to first team action and will not play him in the reserves against Bolton on Tuesday.

"If Michael is involved in an 11 v 11 this week, it will be on the training ground against ourselves," he

said.

"In my opinion now, Michael does not need to be playing against any opposition in a friendly."

"The next time we will see Michael Owen, it will be in a competitive game."

After 10 months on the sidelines recovering from the anterior cruciate ligament rupture he suffered at last summer's World Cup finals, Owen is desperate to return and stake his claim for a place in the England squad for the friendly against Brazil and the European Championship qualifier in Estonia in June.

That is the subject of a battle between his club and the Football Association amid a row over World Cup compensation, although chairman Freddy Shepherd is adamant he has no problem with

his record 17 million pounds (34 million dollars) signing playing for England.

Roeder is concentrating solely on the task of getting the club's prize asset back on the field, and that is a process he refuses to rush as Owen attempts to shake off a minor groin strain.

"It is not a problem at all. He is just not fully-fit. It is hardly worth a mention," Roeder said of that injury.

"But he has been out for so long, it is important that when he returns, we know he is 100 percent fully fit."

"We have just got to wait until he is fully fit, and you know how much I am prepared to be patient with all players."

"I have shown that always and I will never change from being a

patient person because I know patience pays off in the long run.

"He has got a full week now ... to the Reading game, and we will certainly know by the middle to the end of the week whether he is going to make that."

While Owen will not line up against Bolton's second string, Shola Ameobi will, a week after scoring in a 5-1 drubbing of derby rivals Middlesbrough at the Riverside Stadium. Ameobi has been out of action for six months after hip surgery but, like Owen, he too could make the Reading game.

Roeder said: "Shola is going to play in the reserves and I am hoping he will be fit for the Reading game, maybe to start, maybe to be involved in some shape or form - and I would not rule Michael out at all."

Al-Ahly's centenary plan

Football

AFP, Cairo

After clinching 99 titles in as many years, Egypt's Al-Ahly - one of the most trophy-laden clubs in world football - is set to celebrate its centennial in style by hosting Barcelona.

For the millions of supporters of the "Red Devils", facing off against the European champions is not just a fitting tribute to an illustrious past but also to their newly-acquired status on the international scene.

"The club will play a game against FC Barcelona on Tuesday, which will be the highlight of a series of celebrations spanning an entire year," Sherif Seif al-Nasr, the club official in charge of centennial celebrations, told AFP.

The only previous encounter between the two clubs took place in 1961 and resulted in a 6-1 drubbing of the Egyptian outfit.

The 67,500 seats for Tuesday's game were snatched up within hours of going on sale, with ticket prices ranging from 4 to 525 dollars.

Barcelona took 1.5 million euros for the jubilee, which comes as the Spanish giants are involved in a thrilling end-of-season tussle with Real Madrid and Sevilla to retain their domestic Liga title, Seif al-Nasr said.

Ahly's target will be to secure a 32nd home league triumph this year, a likely prospect as striker Mohammed Abu Treika and his men have already opened up a 12 point gap at the top of the table.

That would provide the icing on the cake all the fans are hoping for, bringing the club its 100th piece of silverware in its 100th anniversary year.

After winning its second consecutive Africans Champions League trophy last year and clinching an unprecedented third spot in the intercontinental cup, Ahly has been in unstoppable form of late.

Ahly boasts around 100,000 members and a fan base estimated

at 50 million, making it the most popular club in Egypt, despite its bitter rivalry with Zamalek and the largest club on the continent.

The Cairo club's history has always been closely tied to that of Egypt.

"The African club of the century" was founded on April 24, 1907 by Omar Lutfi Bey, a senior official who wanted a purely national club to counter British dominance of the country, which extended to sports.

However the club's first chairman was finance ministry official Mitchell Ince.

"Choosing Ince, a Briton, for this nationalist club was justified. He controlled the country's finances and was therefore able to finance the club. Nobody could have provided stronger support," leading Egyptian sports columnist Alaa Sadek told AFP. "Ahly's victories, especially the early ones against the British, strengthened a feeling

of national pride," said Sadek, whose three-tome encyclopedia on Ahly is to be released in August.

Ahly sporting club has since produced the country's finest athletes, many of whom became the first Egyptians and often the first Africans to win international competitions. Ahly weightlifter Sayed Nasseir won the country's first-ever Olympic gold medal in Amsterdam in 1928. Amr Shabana also added to the club's honours by clinching the world squash title in 2003 and powering on to the top spot in the rankings, which he still occupies.

The football club has had its share of heroes throughout the years, but all eyes Tuesday will be on Abu Treika, whose classy playmaking and ruthless goalscoring skills have earned him the nickname of "smiling assassin".

Red flags have started adorning

balconies and cars in Cairo and the rest of the country ahead of the Barcelona game. The national club kept its colours even when the country's flag switched to green in 1924 after independence.

Among its most famous supporters were Saad Zaghlul, the nationalist leader struggled against British occupation, and Gamal Abdel Nasser, former president and champion of pan-Arabism.

The club experienced a dry patch in the late 1960s to early 1970s but otherwise has dominated national football for much of its existence, together with bitter Cairo foes Zamalek.

"The club has only two weaknesses: a limited budget which currently doesn't exceed 26 million dollars and limited fame in the West," Sadek said.

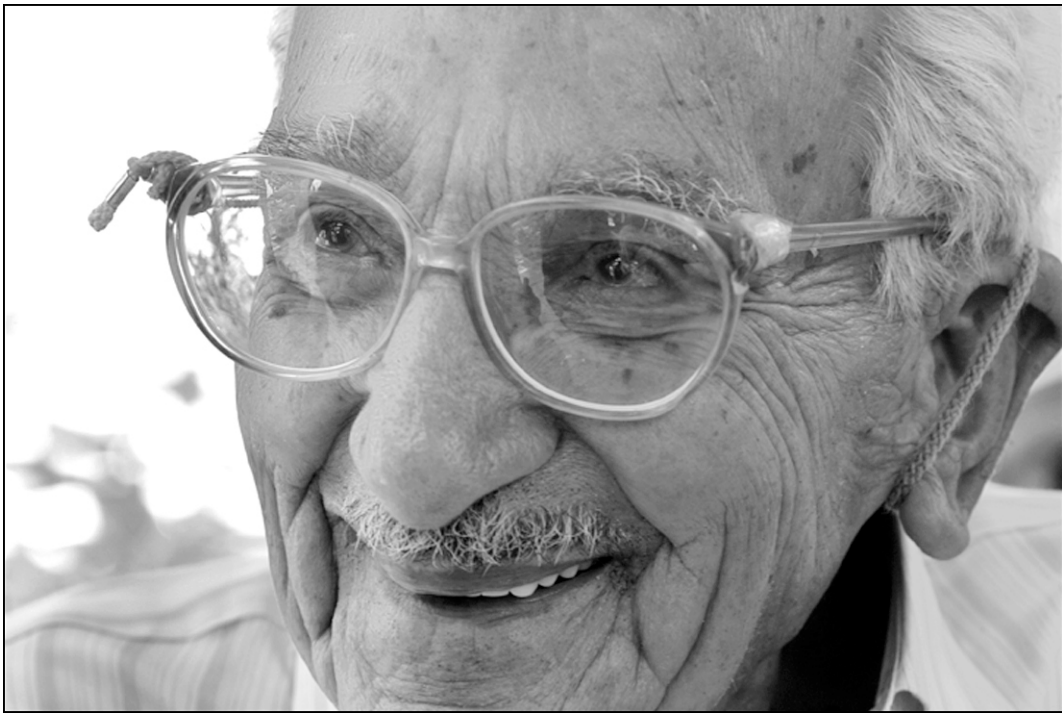


PHOTO: AFP

Longest surviving Al-Ahly member Rashad Sharaf, 98, listens to a question during an interview with this news agency in Cairo on April 21.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	33 Country singer	DOWN	21 Uncortorted
1 With 5-Across, non-eaters of quiche?	Wilson	1 Filers O.H.M.S.	22 Twosome
5 See 1-Across	35 Desire	2 Flight angle	23 Pinnacle
8 Vivacity	36 Help a hood	3 Candle count	24 Trap-shooting variation
12 Plankton component	37 Home of the brave?	4 Most updated	26 Longtime sports-caster
13 Sean Lennon's mom	38 Fall	5 Comedian Jay	27 Pile dir.
14 Pearl Harbor site	41 Fix the sound-track	6 Compass	28 Sea eagle
15 "Murder, She Wrote" heroine	42 Dazzle	7 Boreal	29 Fill till full
17 Colorless	43 Gripped	8 12-member band	31 Cold War weapon (Abb.)
18 Corn spike	48 Get your second wind	9 Deserve	34 Mocks type
19 Pang	49 Wet wriggler	10 Carpet type	35 Online pic transmitter
21 Tic	50 Car	11 Tooth-paste holder	37 Historic boy king
24 What Citi Field will replace	51 Females	16 Neely of hockey fame	38 Venomous vipers
25 Diplomacy	52 Grant counter-part	20 Douses	39 Beehive State
26 Revue segments	53 Vegan's no-no		40 Melody
30 Intention			41 Take out of context?
31 Bakery workers			44 Victory sign
32 Historic time			45 Shade

Solution time: 21 mins.

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Yesterday's Cryptoquip: SINCE THE BRITISH CONSERVATIVE WORKED AS A BANK CLERK, WOULD YOU SAY HE'S A TORY TELLER?
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals P