



Barcelona's Argentine superstar Lionel Messi (L) keeps away from a sliding tackle by Pascal Cygan of Villarreal during their *Primera Liga* clash at El Madrigal Stadium in Villarreal on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Maradona having mental treatment

AFP, Buenos Aires

Football legend Diego Maradona on Sunday marked his first day in a mental health unit where he is fighting alcoholism, his physician said.

Maradona, 46, was hospitalized last week suffering from hepatitis-related pain, but entered a psychiatric clinic in Buenos Aires for extended rehab, said his personal physician, Alfredo Cahe.

"Diego has become aware of the seriousness of his situation," Cahe told Uno radio earlier. "From now on, the main treatment will focus on his addiction to alcohol."

Now, "Maradona's treatment (for alcohol abuse) should last the rest of his life," Cahe added.

Maradona was earlier treated at the Clinica de los Arcos, where officials said the former player's health continued to improve.

The ex-Argentina World Cup captain and Barcelona star was rushed to the clinic complaining of severe abdominal pain, just two days after being discharged from a different clinic where he had undergone two weeks of treatment for illness caused by excessive drinking.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Barca leave it wide open

AFP, Villarreal



The see-saw season at the top of the Spanish first division continued with league leaders Barcelona going down 2-0 at Villarreal on Sunday.

Barcelona saw their lead at the top of La Liga cut back to one point after Sevilla beat Athletic Bilbao 4-1 earlier on Sunday while Real Madrid are just one point further back in third after beating Valencia 2-1 on Saturday.

The man who will have to take the blame for both of Villarreal's goals is Barcelona defender and former French international Lilian Thuram who, in this game at least, confirmed his critics' view that he is now too slow for top class football.

Against the run of play, Barcelona having had much the better of the first half, Robert Pires opened the scoring after 56 minutes, running free after Thuram had failed to properly execute Barca's off-side trap.

Barcelona continued to press but Thuram failed to contain Villarreal's Diego Forlan on one of

the home side's counter-attacks and Marcos Garcia was left with a clear shot on goal five minutes before the end.

Ronaldinho nearly got a consolation goal for Barca in injury time but his shot hit the cross bar and their defeat leaves La Liga wide open with seven games to play.

Sevilla had thrashed Athletic Bilbao earlier on Sunday to keep up the pressure on Barca and continue their pursuit of an unprecedented treble.

"It's going to be a frantic end to the season," commented Sevilla coach Juande Ramos.

In addition to challenging for their first La Liga crown since 1946, Sevilla are also in the Spanish Cup and UEFA Cup semifinals.

"We don't have any order of priority, we can only take one game at a time," added Ramos.

After Luis Fabiano had put a penalty against the post in the first half, Sevilla sprang to life after the break.

Fabiano made up for his miss quickly after the break when he provided a superb defence-splitting pass for Sevilla's Russian striker Aleksander Kerzhakov to score from 15 yards after 49 minutes.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Queen an Arsenal fan

AFP, London

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has secretly been a lifelong supporter of English Premiership football giants Arsenal, The Sun newspaper said Monday.

"Her Majesty has been fond of Arsenal for over 50 years," a senior royal source told the tabloid, adding that Queen Elizabeth, the queen mother was also fond of the north London club.

"Her late mother was a self-confessed Gooner, due largely to her admiration of their former player Denis Compton," the source said.

The monarch has presented a string of top football trophies, including the 1966 World Cup, but her club allegiance had never been revealed until now.

The Sun printed a mock-up picture of how the monarch would look in a Gunners scarf and with a red-and-white home jersey pulled over an evening dress.

The sovereign, who turned 81 on Saturday, hosted Arsenal players and officials at Buckingham Palace in February to make up for her having to forfeit opening their new Emirates Stadium last

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

Lara worries over Tests

Cricket

AFP, Bridgetown

Brian Lara spent his first day in international retirement on Sunday fretting over the future of Test match and first class cricket.

The 37-year-old West Indies batting great made a tearful exit from the game on Saturday as his side lost an epic World Cup match by just one wicket to England.

But Lara's concern now is lobbying for the preservation of Test cricket in the face of an increasingly packed one-day calendar as well as the advent of the Twenty20 World Cup to be held in South Africa in September.

"You are asking someone who likes Test cricket more than anything else," said Lara when asked for his thoughts on the growing influence of limited overs matches.

"So to go to even the shortest version of the game now and say that it is going to dominate in a few years is hard for me to say. I hope not. What I would like to see is a turnout like this for a Test match in the Caribbean."

Lara was referring to the 22,500-crowd which packed the Kensington Oval on Saturday to

witness his last match.

With one or two exceptions -- Ashes series and India v Pakistan encounters in particular -- stadiums for Test matches are rarely full and it is that steady decline that vexes Lara.

"The Twenty20 game is around now and it is three hours, and people like that. It has brought out spectators who have actually never come to cricket before, and they love it.

"But I hope we don't lose any form of the game -- we don't lose the 50-over game or Test cricket because of it."

Lara, who has played county cricket for Warwickshire and has not ruled out a return to the English game despite his 38th birthday falling on May 2, believes the longer version of the game is being devalued.

"I know the first class game has suffered -- the Sheffield Shield and even here in the Caribbean. In county cricket, a lot of the international players are not playing," Lara explained.

"If there is one thing I would like to see improve in cricket, it is the first-class level. I think that should be raised a level where it is very competitive and very attractive."

"If you look at football, interna-

tional football is big. But when you talk about club football, that's on par. The coaches and managers don't want their players to play for their country because they have a big cup match or something like that.

"I would like to see county cricket or Sheffield Shield, or cricket in South Africa or the West Indies come to a level very close to Test cricket that you're going to have a wider base of players and maybe more fans coming out to support that level of the game."

"At present, that is where cricket is struggling. Our first-class level is not that great and maybe this is the end product where our Test cricket isn't very good, our one-day game isn't very good. Maybe we need to lift the standards of our one-day game."

Despite those fears, Lara has praised world champions Australia, who are bidding for a third successive World Cup title here, for constantly raising the bar when it comes to standards.

"Australia have really grabbed hold of the game, both at the Test level and one-day game. They have gone in front and set the standards."

"A lot of people have tried to get to them but haven't been able to."

Milan wary of United

AFP, Manchester



When Manchester United knocked seven goals past AS Roma in the last round of the Champions

League, the Italian press was

moved to voice concern over the humiliation Cristiano Ronaldo and

co might inflict on the 'dinosaurs' of AC Milan's ageing back four.

As it turns out however, it is the

depletion of United's defensive

resources that represents the most

significant element in the backdrop

to Tuesday's semifinal first-leg at

Old Trafford.

Already deprived of club captain

Gary Neville and Nemanja Vidic,

United must also do without Vidic's

centre-back partner Rio Ferdinand

as a result of the groin strain the

England international suffered in

Saturday's 1-1 draw with

Middlesbrough.

Defensive solidity has provided

the foundation for the revival of Sir

Alex Ferguson's side this season

and there is no doubt that he will

regard the loss of both Vidic and

Ferdinand just as the season

reaches its climax as hugely unfor-

unate.

But although the Scot will readily

admit that his squad has been

reduced to the "bare bones", he

refuses to accept that Milan, who

have recently struck a rich vein of

form, will start the semifinal tie as

favourites.

"It's not a time for feeling sorry for

ourselves. It's time to show what we

are made of," Ferguson said. "It's

been well documented in the history

of our football club that we do it the

hard way and we have to get the

players' energy energies right for

Tuesday, because it is a massive

game for them and it's a game they

should enjoy."

Ferguson's opposite number,

Carlo Ancelotti, has admitted that a



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United's Portuguese midfielder Cristiano Ronaldo during training at Carrington yesterday.

Inter insist title is legitimate

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan have insisted their latest Serie A title success is legitimate despite the lack of serious competition after

the fall-out from last summer's Italian match-fixing scandal.

The 'Calciopoli' furor, which began after police intercepted telephone calls made by senior club officials to referees, resulted in Juventus being relegated.

AC Milan, meanwhile, were allowed to stay in the top flight due to their lesser involvement in the scandal but with a handicap of eight points.

In addition Inter were awarded the 2005-06 league title despite finishing third behind Juventus and AC Milan that season as Juve were stripped of the Scudetto.

On Sunday Inter retained the championship after they won 2-1 at Siena and nearest rivals Roma to Atalanta by the same score. Inter's victory left them on 84 points, 16 ahead of Roma with five games left to play.

With Juve taken out of the title equation and AC Milan shackled by

their points deduction, Inter encountered few difficulties this season with Roma the only club offering any kind of threat.

Many feel Inter's title is worthless, but their coach, Roberto Mancini, believes it's every bit as valuable.

"I don't think there will be any intercepted phone calls over this Scudetto," said the 42-year-old who was offered a four-year contract extension by club president Massimo Moratti after Sunday's championship clincher.

"Everything is in order. This is a valid title, above all from a moral point of view," Moratti echoed the sentiments of his coach.

"It's the second title that we have won without stealing," he said, suggesting that Juventus had cheated their way to the championship in the previous two seasons.

Despite its questionable worth, Mancini was proud of his players' achievement.

"It's an immense emotion," he said.

"The squad have been extraordinary. To win the championship with five games to go is incredible. The team have shown great character."

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

C'Ron's delightful double

AFP, London



Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo was on Sunday named the PFA Player of the Year and Young Player of the Year.

The 22-year-old Portugal winger is the first player to win both awards in the same season since Andy Gray in 1977.

Ronaldo has been in incredible form for United who remain on course for a Premiership, FA Cup and Champions League treble.

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba was second and Manchester United midfielder Paul Scholes third in the senior award.

Manchester United veteran Ryan Giggs, last year's winner Steven Gerrard of Liverpool and 19-year-old Arsenal midfielder Cesc Fabregas also made the shortlist.

Ronaldo, who has scored 16 Premiership goals so far this season, said it was a big honour to be singled out by his peers.

"It is a special night. It is amazing and a big honour for me to win trophies like this in the English Premier League. I am very proud."

"My colleagues have voted for me and that is fantastic because the players know the qualities of play-

ers.

"I want to keep working hard and getting better because these trophies have now given me more motivation."

"At this moment, I am consistent. I am more mature now and I am playing better. "Everything is right this season and I am really enjoying it. I am still young and I am learning more every day."

Fabregas finished runner-up in the young player category as well, with 20-year-old Tottenham winger Aaron Lennon third.

Ronaldo's teammate Wayne Rooney was also short-listed, as were Reading striker Kevin Doyle, 23, and 18-year-old defender Michah Richards of Manchester City.

Manchester United took centre stage with eight of their players making it into the Premier League team of the year and manager Sir Alex Ferguson being honoured with the PFA Special Merit Award.

Ferguson paid tribute to Ronaldo, who joined United from Sporting Lisbon in August 2003 on a 12.2 million pound deal.

"At this moment in time, I think he is the best player in the world and his season has been incredible," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Inter Milan players are greeted by fans as they arrive at the Duomo Square in Milan on top of a bus on Sunday after winning the 15th Italian Serie A title.