



Spanish tennis star Rafael Nadal signs autographs for fans at the Open Seat Godo tennis tournament in Barcelona on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Essien arrested

AFP, London

Chelsea's Ghanian midfielder Michael Essien was arrested for drunk driving in the early hours on Monday after leaving a nightclub. The Sun reported.

Citing a Chelsea insider and a witness, the tabloid said that the 24-year-old was pulled over by police in his black Range Rover, and took a breathalyser test. When the result proved positive, he was arrested.

A spokeswoman for London's Metropolitan Police declined to confirm whether Essien was arrested, as per police policy not to name individuals arrested, but told AFP that at approximately 5:10 am (0410 GMT) on Monday, "officers in Southwark (south London) stopped a vehicle driving in Old Kent Road."

"Officers spoke with the driver and subsequently arrested the 24-year-old man on suspicion of drink driving. He was taken into custody and later bailed to return pending further inquiries -- next due on a date in July."

Essien, who was named the BBC's African Footballer of the year in January in a poll in which 12,000 listeners voted, reportedly went clubbing in south London with his friends on Sunday night, before being arrested Monday morning.

His arrest comes as Chelsea chase an unprecedented clean sweep of all three domestic trophies and the Champions League.

"This could not have come at a worse time. The last thing we need are any distractions," a Chelsea insider told the Sun.

An unidentified witness, meanwhile, told the tabloid: "They'd only driven a short distance on the Old Kent Road when a police car pulled them over."

Essien's spokeswoman was quoted as saying that the "police allowed Michael to drive home in his own car."

"He is very upset and does not believe he was over the limit. Michael is a responsible person who would never drive if he thought he would be impaired by alcohol."

Johnson twists ankle

AFP, Liverpool

English Premiership highfliers Everton's hopes of maintaining their place in the UEFA Cup next season suffered a blow on Monday when it was confirmed England striker Andy Johnson had suffered a sprained ankle. The 26-year-old suffered the injury in the 1-0 defeat by relegation threatened West Ham on Saturday - which still sees them in fifth position and on course for the UEFA Cup next term -- and it was confirmed following a scan on Monday.

However, head physiotherapist Mick Rathbone has refused to predict when the seven-times capped Johnson -- who has scored 12 goals in 35 matches in all competitions for Everton this season -- will be fit to play again.

"It's too soon to estimate recovery time but the good thing is that the player normally heals quite quickly," Everton are presently ahead of Bolton on goal difference while Reading are just three points off the pace.

They have three games remaining and will next face Manchester United at Goodison Park on Saturday.

Nadal hot as ever on clay



AFP, Barcelona

Rafael Nadal has momentum on his side as he crushes all in his path on clay.

And the Spanish world number two is fully confident of maintaining his torrid pace at this week's Barcelona Open.

Nadal had little time for celebration after lifting his third consecutive Monte Carlo Masters title at the weekend over Roger Federer.

While the Swiss will spend this week in closed-door training with coach Tony Roche, Nadal has a trophy at home to defend.

As it now stands, the bull-like youngster will play the full clay season -- Barca and Masters Series events in Rome and Hamburg in the run-up to Roland Garros, where he has won the last two editions.

The Spaniard feels he has timed his season almost perfectly.

"I started to play well in Dubai (quarter-finals) then very well in Indian Wells (title), then in Miami (quarters) and again last week.

"I hope I can keep my game at this level."

Nadal has a bye in the opening round at the Real Club, then starts on Wednesday against either Italian veteran Davide Sanguinetti or Belgian Kristof Vliegen.

The massively popular star was due at a book signing later before his tournament week moves onto court.

Nadal knows that his fitness is everything on the clay. And top players may find they have been helped by new ATP rules mandating three-set finals instead of the former five.

The theoretical reduced workload might prevent pullouts from Nadal and Federer from Hamburg the week after Rome, which occurred in 2006 after Nadal won a five-set, five-hour marathon over the Swisss in the Italian final.

"If I'm physically well, I'll play Rome, Hamburg and Roland

Garros," said the 20-year-old Spaniard.

Nadal will have a lot on the line with each match, with his win streak on clay now standing at 67 in a row.

The Spaniard said he has been blending more attack into his already formidable clay game.

"Last week, I tried to play more forward on the court, more aggressive."

"I've also been working on my backhand. But I wasn't so happy last week with my serve."

In first-round matches on Monday, Czech Radek Stepanek became the first seed to fall as the number ten was put out by Romanian Andrei Pavel 4-6, 6-3, 6-4.

Italian Andreas Seppi, a second-round victim last week of Federer, felled giant Croatian Ivo Karlovic 6-7 (2/7), 7-5, 6-3 while Vince Spadea became the first American to play a match on European clay this spring.

The part-time Florida rapper produced a victory over Russian Teimuraz Gabashvili 6-3, 3-6, 6-1.

Record prize money at Wimbledon

AFP, London

Wimbledon has announced record prize money will be handed out at this year's All England Club Championships, BBC reported on Tuesday.

Prize money will be up nine percent on last year with the men's and women's singles champions receiving 700,000 pounds each (1.4 million dollars).

The total prize money fund for the two-week tournament from June 25-July 8 will be 11,282,710 pounds (22.6 million dollars).

It has been boosted by Wimbledon's decision in February to finally offer equal prize money to the men's and women's champions.

"No tennis tournament has ever offered higher prize money than Wimbledon in 2007," said Tim

Phillips, chairman of organisers the All England Club.

Hawk-eye technology will also be used on Centre Court and Court One at this year's championships, with existing Cyclops equipment used on other courts.

Wimbledon organisers have also changed the format for wildcard entries to this year's championships.

Previously the winners of a special wildcard tournament gained wildcards to the main draw but now those will be selected on world rankings instead.

"It will be based on results over the year and I feel very happy with that," said Paul Hutchings, head of men's tennis at the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA).

"Wimbledon is just two weeks of the year and the players are playing over 12 months.

"So if any player is slacking, not at it 100 percent or not playing enough tournaments, then he would not get put up on the wildcard list of the top eight.

"I want to strengthen the mental toughness of our players.

"That means they have got to go and play in far-off places in difficult conditions, preferably on slow clay, where mentally it is very, very tough.

"We have just come back from a tour of South America where one of our players played 45 matches in seven weeks.

"It is these sort of mental toughness ideas that we want to try and bring in much more with our younger players."

Wimbledon reserves 16 wildcards, eight each for the men and women, to distribute mostly to young British players.

Malaysia venue till 2015



AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia has won the right to keep hosting a Formula One Grand Prix until 2015, despite concerns about its course and talk of a bid from Singapore, the head of the Sepang circuit said Sunday.

"We have secured a five-year extension from 2011 to 2015," Mokhzani Mahathir, chairman of the Sepang International Circuit (SIC), told AFP.

The announcement comes just weeks after Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone took SIC to task, saying the Sepang facility was "shabby" and needed to be upgraded.

"There is rubbish all over the place and it's not really a good sign for Malaysia. We're on worldwide television and it needs to look good, much like in the beginning," Ecclestone said.

Mokhzani said there were plans for a major upgrade that would include building an "auto-

motive-related theme park with bike and go-kart tracks."

It was not immediately clear what effect the announcement would have on hopes of neighbouring Singapore securing the rights to host a Formula One race.

But Malaysian Sports Minister Azalina Othman said earlier this month that while there was "no concern" about Singapore hosting an F1 race, there should only be one race in Southeast Asia.

Singapore is keen to host a Formula One race and the government has already given its blessings pending ongoing negotiations between Singaporean tycoon Ong Beng Seng and Ecclestone.

Ong is bidding for the right to host an F1 race in Singapore which would be a city circuit, unlike Malaysia's purpose-built Sepang race track.

"If it comes to Singapore, it will be a complementary relationship with the F1 in Sepang," Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo said earlier this month.

"Ours would be a city circuit, and I believe because we are spaced apart, the two races should be able to energise each other and help develop the F1

market in Southeast Asia."

Meanwhile Sepang has been mulling the possibility of night races as early as next year, and Mokhzani said he was waiting to hear from Forumla One about the lighting standards that would be needed.

"With race cars running at speeds above 320 kilometers, you need lights close to daylight," he said.

Ecclestone has spoken of including night races in Asia on the F1 schedule as early as next season to boost TV audiences, especially in Europe.

Top drivers including world champion Fernando Alonso have opposed the plan, citing safety fears.

But others have given their qualified support.

"For me it is okay as long as there is enough lighting," Ferrari driver Kimi Raikkonen said on the sidelines of the Malaysia Grand Prix in early April.

His teammate Felipe Massa said: "As long as we can see and as long as it is safe, why not?"

Madrid interested in Diego

AFP, Madrid

Spanish giants Real Madrid are tracking in-form Werder Bremen playmaker Diego, according to Marca on Tuesday.

The 22-year-old Brazilian has been in stunning form for his club this season, having moved from Porto in the close season, scoring 12 times including a 50-yard effort against Aachen last week.

Madrid are looking at Diego as a replacement for now departed and retired French star Zinedine Zidane, said Marca.

If Diego does join, he would team up with former Santos teammate Robinho, now in his second season at Real.

The pair formed a dynamic and fresh-faced partnership at Santos, helping the team win the Brazilian title in 2002 and 2004 and reach the Copa Libertadores final in 2003.

Marca said that it would be difficult for Real to tempt Werder into parting with their playmaker. Bremen sit second in the German league and are in the UEFA Cup semifinals.

Thaksin eyes Man City

AFP, Bangkok

Deposed Thai prime minister and football fan Thaksin Shinawatra, who once tried to purchase Liverpool, may be considering buying another English Premier League team, his lawyer hinted Monday.

Noppadol Pattama would not confirm local press reports that the billionaire Thaksin, in exile in Britain since his September ouster, would try to buy a stake in Manchester City.

But he said Thaksin was considering a stake in an English club.

"He is looking to do some business, and it is possible that he will buy a team because he loves football," Noppadol said. "But I cannot confirm or deny it yet. It will be more clear in the next few weeks."

Local media reported that Thaksin had already bought Manchester City, currently languishing at the bottom of the premiership, for six billion baht (184 million dollars) with the help of investors in China and the Middle East.

Thai-language papers said that Fulham owner Mohammad Al Fayed, a friend of Thaksin, had also helped with the purchase.

But Noppadol denied that Thaksin had bought any team yet.

In 2004, Thaksin led a Thai consortium that tried to purchase a 30 percent stake in Liverpool, angering fans who wanted to keep the team in British hands.

The bid eventually fell through, though Liverpool now has American owners.

United fans seek Italian apology

AFP, Manchester

A Manchester United supporters group have demanded an apology from Italian police over their treatment at the recent Champions League quarterfinal in Rome.

United fans in the Stadio Olimpico were baton charged by police after trouble stirred in the stands between the home Italian fans and the visiting supporters.

United officials condemned the police for over-reacting and lodged a complaint with European football's governing body UEFA over the treatment of their fans by police.

Now the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) is demanding a formal apology and threatening legal action if they do not receive it.

Legal papers are due to be lodged later this week and IMUSA are warning they will pursue the case vigorously until they get a satisfactory outcome.

"Our supporters were struck with batons and sticks for no good reason and we want an apology," said IMUSA spokesman Colin Hendrie.

"The authorities in Rome have already admitted too much force was used and confirmation Italian grounds will have stewards instead of police in charge just emphasises something went wrong.

"We have photographic evidence, not only of beatings, but also of police using the butt-end of their batons to hit supporters, turning them from an object of restraint into an offensive weapon.

"Those who were injured should be compensated financially and there should be a formal apology. We are prepared to take this matter to court in order to get them."

Nakamura pondering transfer



AFP, Tokyo

Japan midfielder Shunsuke Nakamura, who has powered Celtic to the Scottish Premier League championship, says he is feeling old at 28 and pondering a transfer.

"Celtic are a great team," said Nakamura whose two free-kicks in a 2-1 win over Kilmarnock at home on Sunday -- one in injury time -- sealed the second straight national title for the Glasgow side.

"We have a coach with solid ideas and our supporters are wonderful," the left-footed player told Japanese journalists in Glasgow, as heaps of praise for him continued at home.

"If I were young, I'd want to stay at Celtic a little longer and then play in Spain before returning to Japan at last. But I'm getting old," Nakamura said, according to the business daily Nikkei.

"I want to focus on the remaining matches now and I want to take my time in the off season and think about a transfer."

Nakamura was voted the Player of the Year by the Scottish Professional Footballers' Association hours after Celtic's title triumph and also won the Goal of the Season honour.

The former J-League Yokohama Marinos star was the first Japanese to win a top-playing award in any European league.

His tone contrasts with an interview he gave to Celtic's official website on which he said: "I'll definitely be at Celtic Park next season, hopefully to lift my third championship in a row."

"It has been a good season, playing well in the Champions League and we've won the league again. Now our aim is to win the Scottish Cup," added the hero of Japan's second straight Asian Cup win in 2004 and who is key for efforts to clinch a third straight title in July.

Nakamura, who played three years at Reggina before joining Celtic in 2005, told Japanese reporters he had not heard about any transfer offers.

"Certainly, I will feel comfortable staying at Celtic next season," he

said. "But, to grow as a player, it may be better for me to put myself in a tougher environment.

"It would be difficult to jump into a new environment when I am over 30. I want to make the best choice by taking into consideration the coach, teammates, the chance of playing and all the other aspects."

Nakamura had also made remarks to the Japanese press in January suggesting returning to Japan, which were quickly denied in Scotland.

Saburo Kawabuchi, head of the Japan Football Association, said in Tokyo that Nakamura had caught up with fellow midfielder international Hidetoshi Nakata in global fame.

Nakata, a veteran of three World Cup finals who played at Serie-A clubs and Bolton, retired after Japan's winless, early exit from the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany. Nakamura was hit by injury and fitness problems in Germany.

"Nakamura will top Hide (Nakata) if he does well next year," Kawabuchi told reporters. "I hope he will stay in top condition until the 2010 World Cup in South Africa."

Arsenal's royal seal of approval



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 November due to a bad back.

"It seems the queen follows football and she told us she was an Arsenal fan," the Gunners' Spain midfielder Francesc Fabregas, 19, was quoted as saying.

"She appeared to definitely know who I was and we exchanged a few special words."

As the crow flies, Chelsea is the nearest club to Buckingham Palace, the queen's official London residence.

However, the queen considers Windsor Castle, west of London, to be her home -- which would make lowly Wycombe Wanderers and Brentford her nearest league clubs.

Palermo sack Guidolin

AFP, Rome



Francesco Guidolin was sacked as coach of Serie A highfliers Palermo on Monday after failing to win their last 11 matches which has seen

them slip down the table.

The end for the 52-year-old came at the weekend when Palermo lost 4-3 to relegation-threatened Parma and left them in sixth place and in danger of missing out on European football next season.

Guidolin, who had already had a spell with Palermo from January 2005 to the end of the 2005-06



FRANCESCO GUIDOLIN

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP

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S X D G V G L I I C S W T Q S K D L C.
Yesterday's Cryptquip: THIS KEYBOARD INSTRUMENT COSTS ONLY A THOUSAND BUCKS, SO PEOPLE MIGHT CALL IT A GRAND PIANO.
Today's Cryptquip Clue: M equals Y