



Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o unleashes a left foot volley as Real Sociedad defender Mikel tries to charge down his shot during their Primera Liga clash at Anoeta in San Sebastian on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldinho guides Barca

AFP, Madrid



League leaders Barcelona threw down the gauntlet to their main rivals for the Spanish title, and pushed Real Sociedad closer to relegation, with a 2-0 win over the Basque side on Saturday.

Spanish international playmaker Andres Iniesta and Samuel Eto'o, last season's top scorer in the Spanish first division, got second half goals to edge the Catalan club closer to their third successive La Liga crown.

"This was an important victory not just because we stay on top of the league but also after our recent bad results away from home," said Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard, whose team now have a four point lead with five games to go.

Rijkaard was well aware that Barca had lost four of their last five away trips prior to their win on Saturday, which has left the door open for their nearest rivals Sevilla and Real Madrid.

"What also pleased me was the

way we played. Every player was deserved a hug and to celebrate this victory," added Rijkaard.

Nevertheless, the Dutchman will know in his heart that despite his diplomatic words the main plaudits should go Ronaldinho whose vision and creativity made both the Barca goals.

After dominating the first half, Iniesta ended the deadlock barely a minute after the break.

Ronaldinho showed just why he has twice been voted as the World Player of the Year with an outstanding pass from just outside his own box, the Brazilian spotting Iniesta was lurking unmarked on the edge of the opposition area.

The midfield playmaker ran onto the long pass and then went around Sociedad goalkeeper Claudio Bravo before slotting the ball home.

Barcelona nearly went further ahead just after the hour but Eto'o was judged to be offside and last season's top scorer in the Spanish first division had his goal annulled.

Lionel Messi and Ronaldinho also nearly added to the Barca tally before Eto'o notched up his 10th goal of the season two minutes from the whistle.

Ronaldinho, who put behind him some mediocre performances recently, provided a defence-splitting pass for Eto'o to latch on to and the Cameroon striker was deadly accurate with a right foot shot from the edge of the area.

"Barcelona were worthy winners but we are not down-and-out. We didn't play like condemned men," reflected Real Sociedad coach Miguel Angel Lotina, whose team remain second from bottom.

Real Sociedad have not been outside of the top flight of Spanish football for 40 years, since they won the Spanish second division in 1967.

Second-placed Sevilla have a game in hand over Barca as they play at Real Madrid on Sunday.

Real are in third place, one point further back.

"Every game is now a final for us. We have to keep going game-to-game and keep on winning but we are finishing the season in good shape, both in terms of team spirit and what we are doing on the field," said Real coach Fabio Capello earlier on Saturday.

Controversially, former England captain David Beckham is expected to start.

The Spanish football association's competitions committee decided on Thursday to cancel the yellow card that Beckham had picked up during Real's 4-1 win at Athletic Bilbao last Sunday.

"In European football the rules are serious but in Spain it is a joke. Everyone else has to obey the rules so I don't understand why Real Madrid don't have to do the same," Sevilla's angry coach Juande Ramos said on Friday.

Valencia stay in fourth and on course to return to the Champions League next season with a 2-1 win at Deportivo La Coruna.

The only Spanish team in this season's Champions League drew first blood after 39 minutes when David Silva's shot spun off the back of Deportivo defender Alberto Lopo and Hugo Viana was on hand to score from close range.

Sebastian Taborda equalised for Deportivo after 68 minutes, the Uruguayan striker sliding in to score from a corner with his first touch of the game after coming on as a substitute.

Silva then got Valencia's winner five minutes later after combining on a fast-moving counter-attack with Miguel Angel Angulo.

BUNDESLIGA Schalke still top

AFP, Berlin

Kevin Kuranyi kept Schalke 04 on course for a first Bundesliga crown since 1958 with the winning goal in a 1-0 victory over Nuremberg on Saturday.

Stuttgart, however, are keeping close to the German league leaders, a 2-0 victory over Mainz 05 leaving them just a point adrift and well on target for automatic qualification for the Champions League group stages.

Werder Bremen, knocked out in the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup on Thursday, lie five points behind Schalke in third spot but have a chance to reduce their deficit at Hertha Berlin on Sunday.

Bayern Munich meanwhile could only draw 1-1 at relegation-bound Borussia Monchengladbach, that result leaving the reigning champions in fourth spot, which would prove enough for UEFA Cup football next season, 11 points behind Schalke.

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Fergie wants Mourinho stay

AFP, London

Alex Ferguson admits he would be sorry to see the back of arch-rival Jose Mourinho despite the two managers' recent war of words.

Mourinho's future has been thrown into doubt at Chelsea following the London club's exit from the Champions League and failure to keep track with Ferguson's Manchester United in the Premiership title race.

Failure to beat Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium 24 hours after United beat neighbours City in the Manchester derby will bring an end to Chelsea's two-year reign of champions ahead of Ferguson's side's visit to face Mourinho and his players on May 9.

Chelsea's recent slips have been accompanied by a growing number of Mourinho outbursts that

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EPL to probe Utd-Everton tie

AFP, London

English Premier League bosses are set to investigate an "arrangement" between Manchester United and Everton which left goalkeeper Tim Howard on the sidelines for their clash at Goodison Park.

League leaders United came back from a two-goal deficit to win last week's match 4-2, thus stretching their lead over reigning champions Chelsea and boosting their bid for the league title.

Howard, whom United sold to Everton in February after an initial loan deal, did not play in the match and it was later revealed by the

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United hold off celebrations

AFP, Manchester



Sir Alex Ferguson has slapped an alcohol ban on his players until after Wednesday's trip to Chelsea, regardless of whether they have clinched the Premiership trophy by then.

Saturday's 1-0 victory over derby rivals Manchester City at Eastlands meant Chelsea had to beat Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium on Sunday to keep the title battle alive.

But after watching Cristiano Ronaldo notch his 23rd goal of the season with the match-winning penalty on Saturday, Ferguson informed his players that he did not want any celebrations ahead of the trip to Stamford Bridge.

The Scot, who cancelled a trip to Spain in favour of spending the rest of the bank holiday on the golf course, said: "Hopefully Arsenal can do us a favour now and we can get the result we want. A draw would be fine.

"If we have to go to Chelsea and get a result then we'll look forward to it, but we have a great chance (of winning the title)".

United, meanwhile, will ask the Premier League and the Football Association to launch an investigation into a crude challenge by Michael Ball on Ronaldo in the second minute of the game.

Ball waited until referee Rob Styles had turned his back before stamping on the chest of the Portugal international.

Ferguson was furious that the incident went unpunished and is keen for the matter to be dealt with this week.

Ronaldo left the field with a stud

mark across his stomach and Ball will now face a trial by video.

If charged with violent conduct and subsequently found guilty, the former Everton and Rangers defender will face a ban for the start of next season.

City manager Stuart Pearce said: "People have mentioned this tackle to me but I've not seen it. These things can happen in football matches like this one.

"We will review the incident by video and take a decision from there. I'm also sure the authorities will do what they have to do."

Provided Pearce remains in charge for next season he will be desperate to clear-out some of his strikers and make new signings in the wake of a poor season.

Georgios Samaras, Paul Dickov, Bernardo Corradi and Darius Vassell could all find themselves surplus to requirements this summer.

City have set a new club record for the lowest number of home league goals scored in a season with just ten, including just one since New Year's Day.

Pearce could be handed a significant transfer kitty should chairman John Wardle sell the club to a Thai consortium and he said: "Scoring goals has been our Achilles heel all season. We haven't had enough cutting edge in attack and this is something we will have to look at."

Ferguson, meanwhile, has warned Ronaldo that he wants a chance to win his money back from the bet he lost to him over how many goals he would score this season.

Ferguson added: "I want my money back so it all depends on what I set my target at for next season, but he's had a wonderful campaign."

Clijsters announces retirement



AFP, Brussels

Belgian tennis star and former world number one Kim Clijsters has announced her immediate retirement from the sport, according to a statement on her personal website on Sunday.

Clijsters, who has won 34 WTA singles titles in her career including the US Open in 2005, had already announced that this would be her final year on the circuit.

On Sunday she said in the statement that battling injuries and the constant effort to stay at the top had finally taken their toll.

"It has been more than beautiful. But it's time to hang up my racquet for good," said Clijsters, who had already announced this season would be her last.

takes to warm up tired muscles ... make it all the more difficult to continue"

The 23-year-old Clijsters won her last WTA crown at Sydney in January and was eliminated from the Warsaw WTA event this week in the first round by Ukrainian qualifier Julia Vakulenko in straight sets.

In early April 2006, Clijsters - who was formerly engaged to Australian tennis ace Lleyton Hewitt - announced her engagement to American pro basketball player Brian Lynch who now plays in Belgium.

She is due to marry Lynch in July.

"I am now going to devote my time to organising my wedding on July 14," she said.

"With all that going on it will become increasingly difficult to focus on tennis."

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Kalle hits back at Kaiser

AFP, Berlin

German football icon Franz Beckenbauer was told on Sunday to cease criticising the management of fallen German champions Bayern Munich by the club president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

Beckenbauer, a World Cup winner both as a player and a manager with the then West Germany, is president of the surveillance council for Bayern but has made some heavy hitting remarks aimed at Rummenigge and general manager Uli Hoeness of late as Bayern lost all hope of retaining the title.

However on Sunday Rummenigge hit back.

"His (Beckenbauer's) criticisms don't only irritate me but also the financial directors and administrators of the club," Rummenigge told Die Welt.

Beckenbauer, known as the 'Kaiser' and who was roundly applauded for his presidency of the World Cup organising committee last year, has attacked the manner in which the management team did not replace German captain Michael Ballack, who left on a free transfer for Chelsea last summer, or the dressing room rift with former coach Felix Magath, who was sacked in January.

Bayern are having their worst season for 10 years, with no trophies and struggling to even make the top three in the league which would see them miss out on a Champions League place.

FERGIE PLAYING IT COOL

Tevez beats Bolton

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson has the Premiership title in his sights but the Manchester United manager is more concerned about his next round of golf.

United will be crowned champions if Chelsea fail to win at Arsenal on Sunday, so it would have been entirely understandable if Ferguson spent his afternoon watching the match on television.

It has been four long years since Ferguson last got his hands on the Premiership trophy, but the wait is nearly over after Cristiano Ronaldo's penalty secured a 1-0 win at Manchester City that opened up an eight-point gap over second-placed Chelsea.

However, instead of keeping track of a potentially decisive clash at the Emirates Stadium, the Scot will take his mind off the title race drama by playing golf.

"I won't be watching the game on TV," Ferguson said. "I was going to Spain but there has been a problem with the flights, so I will go for a game of golf instead."

"Hopefully Arsenal will get the result we want tomorrow but if we have to go to Chelsea to get something on Wednesday, we will look forward to it."

Ronaldo's spot-kick and a late penalty save from Edwin van der Sar gave United the win over their

bitter local rivals at Eastlands.

The league leaders went in front in the 34th minute when Ronaldo scored from the spot after being fouled by Michael Ball.

City hadn't scored a home league goal since New Year's Day, but they had a glorious chance to end that barren run in the 81st minute when Ball won a soft penalty after colliding with Wes Brown.

Darius Vassell took the spot-kick, but his shot struck van der Sar's legs and deflected to safety.

At the other end of the table, West Ham moved out of the relegation zone thanks to a match-winning display from Carlos Tevez, who has been at the centre of a bitter row over his eligibility to play for the Hammers.

West Ham's relegation rivals are considering legal action against the Premier League after the London club were only fined rather than handed a points penalty for playing Tevez even though he was not registered properly.

So it was inevitable that Tevez would play a major role in his side's 3-1 win over Bolton at Upton Park. The Argentina striker opened the scoring with a 10th minute free-kick and added a second in the 21st minute.

Mark Noble got the third and Gary Speed's second half strike couldn't stop Alan Curbishley's side edging closer to a great escape with their sixth win in eight matches.

Curbishley, whose team face Manchester United next week,

said: "It's given us a great opportunity and we've got to grab it. We've come this far and not to grab it would be devastating. We couldn't wish to go to a tougher place but we are full of confidence."

West Ham's victory plunged Wigan into the bottom three after Paul Jewell's side lost 1-0 against Middlesbrough thanks to Australia striker Mark Viduka's 29th minute goal at the JJB Stadium.

Clint Dempsey virtually secured Fulham's Premiership status as his second half goal snatched a vital 1-0 win over Champions League finalists Liverpool.

Dempsey turned in Liam Rosenior's cross after 69 minutes at Craven Cottage to give Lawrie Sanchez's side, who had Papa Bouba Diop sent off in the last minute, their first win in 12 matches.

The American match-winner said: "We have put ourselves in a good position and hopefully it will be the goal that keeps us up."

"The manager has come in and he is a man on a mission. He wants to get the job done and we have to believe in him."

Sheffield United missed a chance to confirm their survival as they slumped to a 3-0 defeat at Aston Villa.

Gabriel Agbonlahor gave Villa the lead in the 25th minute before goals from Ashley Young and Patrick Berger either side of half-time.

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KIM CLIJSTERS