

# Real prevail in a thriller

AFP, Madrid



Sunday.

Barcelona now have a two point lead over their eternal rivals after beating Real Sociedad 2-0 on Saturday with Sevilla two points further back in third.

"I told you that this team was recovering it's spirit, now you can see it for yourselves," Real coach Fabio Capello boasted to journalists at the post-game press conference.

"The first half was good in itself but in the second half we had quality, speed, determination. It was very, very good," added the delighted Italian.

Sevilla were 1-0 ahead at half time after Enzo Maresca hammered an almost unstoppable left foot volley into the corner of the net five minutes before the break.

Real got back on level terms after 62 minutes when an inch-perfect long pass by Jose Maria Gutierrez out of his own area sent Ruud van Nistelrooy clear for his 20th goal of the season.

"Guti's been decisive in the last three games, each time when he's come on as a second half substitute," acknowledged Capello.

Robinho put Real ahead with 12

minutes to go, following another outstanding pass from Guti but the Brazilian's extravagant celebrations lead to two absurd yellow cards in a matter of seconds to leave the home side a man down.

However, Sevilla were to have one of their own men dismissed within three minutes when Aitor Ocio saw red after a clumsy challenge on Mahamadou Diarra.

Van Nistelrooy then clinched three points with a header five minutes from the whistle although a lack of concentration allowed Uruguayan striker Ernesto Chevanton to get one back for Sevilla three minutes into injury time.

"I don't think we've lost the league, just an important opportunity to beat a direct rival," reflected Sevilla coach Juande Ramos.

Real Zaragoza stay fifth after their 0-0 draw with Racing Santander.

A frantic final 10 minutes saw Zaragoza almost grab a late winner with Diego Milito, Ewerthon and Pablo Aimar all going close.

Atletico Madrid remain in sixth place going down 2-1 at UEFA Cup finalists Espanyol.

Moha El Yaagoubi put Espanyol

ahead from the edge of the six yard box after nine minutes and slack marking gifted Walter Pandiani their second goal with 16 minutes to go before Martin Petrov got an injury-time consolation strike for Atletico.

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PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid striker Ruud Van Nistelrooy (L) goes round Sevilla 'keeper to score during their Primera Liga match at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

# The Ferguson masterplan

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson rarely allows himself to dwell on his success.

By his own account, he has never even watched a video of the 1999 Champions League final that represents the pinnacle of his two decades at the helm of Manchester United.

As his 20th anniversary at Old Trafford approached last November, the Scot publicly fretted that the associated celebrations would distract him from the task in hand, wresting the Premiership trophy back out of Chelsea's grasp.

But there can be little doubt that, when he finally decides to call time on his managerial career, Ferguson will look back on his ninth Premiership title with particular fondness.

Not only has he finally got the better of Jose Mourinho - an objective he has surely nurtured ever since the Portuguese's famous sprint down the Old Trafford touchline in celebration of Porto's elimination of United on their way to glory in the 2004 Champions League - he has also defied all those who, barely 18 months ago, had been writing his footballing obituary.

In doing so, Ferguson has pulled off the remarkable feat of constructing the third great team of his time in charge of United, following in the footsteps of the Eric

Cantona-inspired side that, in 1993, secured the club's first title since 1967 and the home-grown generation that delivered the treble three years later.

It is an achievement few would have predicted at the end of 2005. Out of the Champions League before Christmas, United were blowing hard as they laboured to keep pace with Chelsea domestically and suggestions that Ferguson might be replaced did not appear completely ridiculous.

An unseemly row over a race-horse with one of the club's major shareholders, the acrimonious departure of club captain Roy Keane and the sidelining of Ruud van Nistelrooy all suggested that, as he neared his 65th birthday, Ferguson's judgement was beginning to fail him.

Instead it was those who sought to judge him that got it wrong. In offloading the prolific van Nistelrooy to Real Madrid last summer, Ferguson was gambling that there were more goals to be had by getting more players into scoring positions.

On that point, he could hardly have been vindicated any more resoundingly. When Chris Eagles rounded off a 4-2 win against Everton last month, he became the 20th member of the United squad to have found the net this season.

In 36 league outings, the Red Devils have plundered 83 Premiership goals as the youthful thrust of Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney has dovetailed with

the guile and experience of Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes.

In defence too, Ferguson has proved that he has not lost his touch when it comes to judging a player.

Nemanja Vidic and Patrice Evra did not look like the most astute of buys as they settled into English football last year but they have emerged in this campaign as cornerstones of a back four as good as any Ferguson has had at United.

Having emerged from one of the most difficult phases of his professional life, it is little wonder that Ferguson has appeared more relaxed during this season than at any time in his career.

Even Mourinho has found it impossible to get seriously under his skin for long and all the signs are that the battle of wits will be resumed next season with a rival who, it is often suggested, resembles Ferguson in the days when he was forging his reputation by building the Aberdeen team that broke the Old Firm monopoly in Scottish football.

"Sometimes with Jose there is a continual dialogue that you quite enjoy having a wee go back," Ferguson admitted last week, before adding that he fully expects Mourinho to be in charge of a strengthened Chelsea bid to reclaim the title next season. It is a safe bet that, after a few glasses of his beloved red wine to celebrate, Ferguson will be starting work on ensuring that does not happen.

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## Roeder steps down

AFP, London

Newcastle United confirmed on Monday that coach Glenn Roeder has resigned and the club has started the search for his successor.

The 51-year-old former defender ended his 15 months in charge on Sunday one day after the 0-2 home loss to Blackburn Rovers in the Premiership, but there was no official confirmation until Monday.

A statement issued through the club's website said: "Newcastle United today announced that Glenn Roeder has offered his resignation as team manager with immediate effect and this has been accepted by the Newcastle United board."

The loss to Blackburn had left Newcastle languishing in 13th position in the Premiership and they have not scored a goal at home for over eight hours, their worst run since 1951.

Speculation has been rife that Roeder will be succeeded by former Bolton manager Sam Allardyce who turned down the Newcastle job before Graeme Souness, Roeder's predecessor, was offered it in 2004.

Allardyce resigned as Bolton boss a week ago after seven-and-a-half years at the helm amid rumours he could also be appointed Manchester City boss in the summer.

It was not immediately clear who would take charge for Sunday's final Premiership fixture at Watford, but at least one bookmaker has stopped taking bets on Allardyce getting the job.

While Allardyce is now available, he still has two and a half years remaining on his Bolton contract and that would mean a sizeable compensation payment.

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## 'A terrific achievement'

INTERNET, undated



Sir Alex Ferguson says Manchester United's 16th league title is the finest achievement in the club's history, and has warned Chelsea his young team will get even better.

Given Ferguson's 20-year reign as Old Trafford manager encompasses the 1999 Treble-winning campaign, his assessment of what his side have achieved this season will be viewed by some as little more than hyperbole.

Such a view would be to overlook not only the state his team were in 18 months ago when, in the wake of Roy Keane's departure, United crashed out of the Champions League at the group stage, but also the multi-millions Chelsea have spent in an effort to secure a championship hat-trick.

Ferguson admitted he never lost faith, either in himself or his team. But there were times when he wondered if United would ever be able to match their cash-rich rivals from Stamford Bridge.

"It was a difficult task given the amount of money Chelsea have," said Ferguson. "They were also the most resilient opponents we have ever come across."

"But I thought the signings of Michael Ballack and Andriy Shevchenko were designed to win them the European Cup and I just kept hoping that is what they were concentrating on."

"I knew we had to reach 90 points, which is a hell of a total. But we tried to instil into the players' minds that we needed to get off to a good start and stay with Chelsea. It

was something no-one else had done in the previous two years.

"Not only did we do that, we got in front of them and stayed there, which was a fantastic achievement, possibly the club's greatest achievement simply because it is a relatively new team which will hopefully get better."

"It is this team's first attempt at it. That is why we are all encouraged."

Ferguson has already spoken of how he felt re-energised by United's challenge. And while he said he will not still be in charge by the time he reaches his 70th birthday, at 65 the Glaswegian still has the fire to fight a few more battles yet.

"Age creeps up on you," he said. "I still think of myself as being in my 50s. All of a sudden you read in the paper you are 65 and think 'that can't be right'."

"I don't see any dramatic changes in myself from five or six years ago, although there must be some."

"I will not carry on until I am 70 but I have enjoyed this season."

"There have been moments when my nerves were jangling or it was a bit tense. But you can have that anywhere if you care about things."

Ferguson switched his telephone off as last night's celebrations got into full swing and woke up this morning to 75 text messages, but was unable to say whether Jose Mourinho was one of those to extend their good wishes.

However, after the recent bad blood which has spilled between the title protagonists, the United manager was full of praise for the way Mourinho handled his side's failure to overcome Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium yesterday, a result which ended the Londoners reign.

"I am sure Jose understands winning and losing are twins in a way," said Ferguson.

"You have to deal with them in the same way. When you win, you don't need to gloat, when you have a defeat you don't gobananas, you accept it."

"He was very complimentary after the match yesterday and I will bring him a decent bottle of wine to make sure his tastes are looked after."

Ferguson said he was more satisfied with the title success, his ninth as United manager, because of the manner in which it was achieved.

At times, the Scot admitted his side's attacking intent went a little too far. But there is no doubt United were the most watchable side in the Premiership, with Ferguson picking out the four-goal, second-half display against Blackburn on March 31 as his particular highlight.

"There is a lot of satisfaction in the way we have won it," he said.

"When we are in full flow, we are quite potent and there were a few performances like that; Bolton away, Liverpool at home, Tottenham away. The goal threat was always there, although the second-half against Blackburn was probably the best 45 minutes we have played all season."

Ferguson also said veteran Swedish striker Henrik Larsson, whose 10-week loan spell helped United out at a time when they were struggling badly for fit forwards, would be a guest of honour at the FA Cup final with Chelsea at Wembley on May 19.

"I promised Henrik he would be at the Champions League Final or the FA Cup final if we got there and I am pleased to say he will be at Wembley with his wife," said Ferguson.

## Maradona released from rehab clinic

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine football legend Diego Maradona has been released from a Buenos Aires rehab clinic after a more than two-week stay for alcohol abuse, media here reported, quoting his personal physician.

The Clarin newspaper reported that Maradona left the clinic Sunday. His physician, Alfredo Cahe, told the paper that the former football star would continue to be treated on an outpatient basis three times per week.

"He no longer has to spend the night there," said Cahe, who said that round-the-clock treatment at the rehab clinic for his famous patient would be "counterproductive."

A source at the facility where the football star had been treated since April 21 also confirmed that Maradona had been cleared to leave.

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## Costacurta to assist Ancelotti

AFP, Rome

Veteran defender Alessandro Costacurta has been appointed assistant to AC Milan's head coach Carlo Ancelotti, the Champions League finalists confirmed on Monday.

"Costacurta will be the second assistant coach to Ancelotti, alongside Mauro Tassotti," AC Milan vice president Adriano Galliani said.

Centre-back Costacurta, 41, has played just 10 matches for AC Milan this season, two in Serie A, three in

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# My players are heroes: Jose

INTERNET, undated



Manchester United with their heads held high despite handing over their Premiership title to the Old Trafford outfit.

Chelsea's failure to beat Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium on Sunday ended their two-year domination of the English game and condemned the Blues to form a guard of honour to acknowledge the achievement of Sir Alex Ferguson's men when the pair meet at Stamford Bridge.

Having won the Portuguese title in successive seasons with Porto before he moved to England, finishing second is a relatively new experience for Mourinho.

But, if he was going to end the campaign as a runner-up, he believes the Blues have done so in the right way.

"I have to say maybe I'm prouder now than when we were

champions," said Mourinho. "All season my players have been heroes against everything."

"This was a game to remember and showed how big Chelsea are as a club."

"Sometimes, when you win a lot of trophies, you can reach a point when you do not give everything," he said.

"The commitment and ambition are not the same or you are not hungry enough to win again, or you lose something mentally."

"Exactly the opposite has happened for us. The players have given us more this season than they did in the previous ones when we didn't have any injuries or other problems."

"Everything was nice and easy and we were winning all the time."

"That has not been the case this time and any player who joins us needs to look at the video of this match to see what it takes to succeed."

Even without Didier Drogba,

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PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho makes a gesture to fans to keep their chins up (to not be disheartened) after their 1-1 draw at the Emirates Stadium against Arsenal that handed Manchester United the Premiership title on Sunday.

## 2006-07 TIMELINE

AFP, London

How the 2006/07 English Premiership season unfolded:

**AUGUST:** Having sold their main goalscorer, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Manchester United kicked off the season with most pundits suggesting they were ill-equipped to challenge Chelsea's bid for a third straight title. By the end of the month they had played three, won three and scored ten with the goals coming from every section of the side: the tone for their season had been set while there was an unexpected early stumble by Chelsea, beaten 2-1 at Middlesbrough in their second match.

**SEPTEMBER:** Arsenal belatedly kick their season into life by winning 1-0 at Old Trafford, ending United's perfect start to the season with a flawless display of 'pass and move' football. That allows Chelsea to get back to the top of the table by the end of the month but Jose Mourinho's men again show vulnerability as they are held at Aston Villa. Liverpool are the big losers: A third successive away defeat, at Bolton, knocks their pre-season status as second favourites behind Chelsea. A

superb solo goal at Reading brings the first suggestions Cristiano Ronaldo could be emerging as the world's best player.

**OCTOBER:** A Wayne Rooney hat-trick inspires United's most exhilarating display of the season to date, a 4-0 win at Bolton, and keeps them neck-and-neck with Chelsea at the top. Arsenal begin to hit form but Liverpool's title hopes are effectively ended when they lose 2-0 at Old Trafford, a win that prompts Sir Alex Ferguson to declare that his reshaped squad have begun to believe they can bring the Premiership trophy back to Old Trafford. Chelsea suffer major blow with loss of goalkeeper Petr Cech, who suffers fractured skull in collision during win at Reading.

**NOVEMBER:** United outplay Chelsea at Old Trafford but are forced to settle for a point after Ricardo Carvalho cancels out Louis Saha's goal, prompting Mourinho to claim his side's rivals had blown a "big, big chance," to open up a six-point gap at the top of the table. The champions' defeat at Tottenham at the start of November had handed the initiative to United as Ferguson cele

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