



WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS: Manchester United players spray champagne after being presented with the English Premiership trophy after their final game of the season against West Ham at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Ferguson in bullish mood

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson backed Manchester United to retain the Premiership next season as his side's title celebrations got into full swing on Sunday.

United skipper Gary Neville lifted the league trophy together with Ryan Giggs following the champions' 1-0 defeat against

West Ham at Old Trafford.

Ferguson's team is confident the experience of winning the English crown for the first time in four years will breathe new life into the likes of Paul Scholes and Giggs and boost the confidence of his young stars.

"We have got a young squad and we can definitely win it again," he said. "Winning is a fantastic elixir of life. It's gives you something extra and I think they will go on and do more next year."

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PREMIERSHIP TABLE 06/07

Club	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Man United	38	28	5	5	83	27	89
Chelsea	38	24	11	3	64	24	83
Liverpool	38	20	8	10	57	27	68
Arsenal	38	19	11	8	63	35	68
Tottenham	38	17	9	12	57	54	60
Everton	38	15	13	10	52	36	58
Bolton	38	16	8	14	47	52	56
Reading	38	16	7	15	52	47	55
Portsmouth	38	14	12	12	45	42	54
Blackburn	38	15	7	16	52	54	52
Aston Villa	38	11	17	10	43	41	50
M'brough	38	12	10	16	44	49	46
Newcastle	38	11	10	17	38	47	43
Man City	38	11	9	18	29	44	42
West Ham	38	12	5	21	35	59	41
Fulham	38	8	15	15	38	60	39
Wigan Athletic	38	10	8	20	37	59	38
Sheffield Utd	38	10	8	20	32	55	38
Charlton	38	8	10	20	34	60	34
Watford	38	5	13	20	29	59	28

Champions: Manchester United.

Champions League qualifiers: Chelsea, Liverpool, Arsenal.

UEFA Cup qualifiers: Tottenham, Everton, Bolton.

Relegated: Sheffield United, Charlton, Watford.

Rijkaard puts brave face

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard insisted that his side were not falling apart despite being held to a 1-1 draw by struggling Real Betis on Sunday.

The result leaves the Spanish first division title race wide open with just four games to go.

Ronaldinho scored from the penalty spot after just five minutes to give Barca the lead but his Brazilian compatriot Rafael Sobis equalized for the visitors a few seconds before the end of regulation time.

"Draw, win or lose; you can't lose your pride. What made the difference was that we failed to find the net and in the end that led to the draw," said a clearly tense Rijkaard at a press conference after Sunday's game.

"Betis didn't create many opportunities so to lose a goal like that in the last minute is like getting a blow to the head. Everybody is disappointed, everybody is in pain."

"We lost concentration and were just kicking the ball around (when Betis scored). But our heads will not drop. Now we have to recover our pride and go forward," added Rijkaard.

"The overall performance was good, it is just a shame that we didn't

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BETIS HOLD BARCA

Title race opens up

AFP, Madrid



Reigning champions Barcelona stumbled badly and were held to a 1-1 draw by struggling Real Betis on Sunday to leave the Spanish first division title race wide open with just four games to go.

Barca now lie second behind their eternal rivals Real Madrid, who beat Espanyol 4-3 on Saturday.

Both teams have 66 points but the Catalan club are behind because of their inferior head-to-head record with Real.

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"What made the difference was that we failed to find the net and in the end that led to the draw," reflected Barca coach Frank Rijkaard.

"Betis didn't create many opportunities so to lose a goal like that in the last minute is like getting a blow to the head," added the

under-fire Dutchman.

Ronaldinho opened the scoring with a penalty, his 18th goal of the season, after Betis defender Melli Andreu had tripped Deco.

Andres Iniesta and Samuel Eto'o had chances to give Barca a more convincing lead at the break but their failure to find the net led to the whistles of derision growing ever louder during the second half.

Second half substitute Sobis then added to the Barca fans' misery - they had already endured their team crashing out of the Spanish Cup with a 4-0 defeat at Getafe on Thursday - when he connected with a cross from Assuncao.

Sevilla stay in third place, two points behind the leading pair, after beating Recreativo Huelva 2-1 on Saturday.

Valencia are still not out of the title race and the 2002 and 2004

TOP SIX

Club	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Real Madrid	34	20	6	8	55	34	66
Barcelona	34	19	9	6	64	30	66
Sevilla	34	19	7	8	59	32	64
Valencia	34	19	5	10	49	32	62
RZaragoza	34	15	10	9	47	34	55
AMadrid	34	15	9	10	40	29	54

Prso's career maybe over

INTERNET, undated

Dado Prso choked back tears as he admitted his career may be over when he walks away from Rangers at the end of the season.

The striker, 32, will quit Ibrox after persistent knee problems robbed him of one final season with the Glasgow giants.

The Croatian had hoped to play on at a less demanding level elsewhere, perhaps in the Far East or the United States, but says he is now likely to hang up his playing boots for good.

The fans' favourite was denied the opportunity to go out on a high when an ankle ligament injury sustained in training on Friday meant he was unable to play in the final home game of the season on Sunday, which Rangers lost 1-0 to Kilmarnock.

Instead Prso - along with Stefan Klos and Gavin Rae, who also leaves Rangers in the summer - hobbled on to the Ibrox pitch with the help of crutches after the Bank of Scotland Premier League clash.

And a clearly emotional Prso said: 'At this moment it looks as though I will leave football altogether.'

"You can never say never and maybe I will go somewhere else for something a bit easier."

"In terms of playing at the top, it's over, and at this moment in time it will probably be over for good."

Tevez saves Hammers

AFP, London



Carlos Tevez earned West Ham the points they needed to stay in the Premiership but their great escape from the financially calamitous consequences of relegation could yet be challenged through the courts.

Tevez's winner against Manchester United made things simple in footballing terms, the Hammers completing a remarkable run of seven wins in their last nine matches to finish the season three points clear of the drop zone, while Sheffield United were consigned to the drop by their 2-1 home defeat by Wigan.

But the controversy over whether West Ham should have been docked points for breaching the league's transfer rules when they signed Tevez and fellow Argentina star Javier Mascherano last August showed no sign of dying down.

Wigan, Fulham, Sheffield United and Charlton have all explored the possibility of a legal challenge to the decision by an independent disciplinary panel to only fine West Ham for their breaches of the rules.

Despite his side surviving, Wigan chairman Dave Whelan said he would support legal action, despite

the league's insistence that any challenge would be bound to fail because the clubs themselves all signed up to the disciplinary procedures that produced the decision.

Sheffield United chairman Kevin McCabe called on league chiefs to review the decision not to take points off West Ham.

"The fans of one club are in despair because their club has been relegated," he said.

"To have the kick in the teeth of losing our (Premiership) status because we have played by the rules when another club hasn't... it ain't cricket."

"We have played to the rules and one club hasn't played by the rules and the FA Premier League should do something about it."

West Ham boss Alan Curbishley insisted his squad had earned the

right to stay up.

"Let's be fair about it. Whatever the circumstances, to come to Manchester United on the last day of the season and win is fantastic."

"I hope I never have to go through it again and I hope West Ham never have to go through it again."

At Bramall Lane, a penalty converted by former Sheffield United player David Unsworth just before half-time proved enough to earn Wigan a 2-1 win after Blades striker Jon Stead had cancelled out Paul Scharner's opener for the visitors.

The home side twice hit the woodwork in a frantic second half and Wigan had to cling on desperately for over 20 minutes at the end of the match after Lee McCulloch received his second yellow card of the afternoon.

But Neil Warnock's side were unable to produce the equaliser that would have kept them in the top flight, instead dropping back to the Championship after just one season because their goal difference was inferior to Wigan's.

"It is such a cruel game sometimes," said Warnock. "We just could not climb the final hurdle and we will suffer the consequences. To go down on goal difference ... you just feel very bitter."

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SHARPSHOOTERS

- 20 - Didier Drogba (Chelsea)
- 18 - Benni McCarthy (Blackburn Rovers)
- 17 - Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United)
- 14 - Darren Bent (Charlton Athletic), Wayne Rooney (Manchester United), Mark Viduka (Middlesbrough)
- 13 - Kevin Doyle (Reading)
- 12 - Dimitar Berbatov (Tottenham Hotspur), Dirk Kyut (Liverpool), Aiyegbeni Yakubu (Middlesbrough)



Betis midfielder Johann Vogel (R) executes a textbook slide tackle on Barcelona star Lionel Messi during their Primera Liga clash at the Nou Camp on Sunday.

Curbishley amazed

AFP, Manchester



West Ham manager Alan Curbishley celebrated one of the most incredible relegation escapes in the history of the Premiership as Carlos Tevez's first half goal secured an unexpected 1-0 victory at Manchester United.

And not even the fact that the controversy surrounding the illegal signing of Tevez in August refuses to disappear could detract from the enjoyment Curbishley took from avoiding a relegation that would have cost his club an estimated 35 million pounds in lost revenue.

Having been fined 5.5 million pounds by the Premier League for illegalities surrounding the signings of Tevez and Javier Mascherano, West Ham ended the season with a remarkable run of form, although their rivals still maintain they should have been docked points for their transgressions.

"We pulled off an amazing escape," said Curbishley. "To win seven out of our last nine, considering the opposition we've played, is incredible."

"A few months ago I had fans shouting 'four letter word' back to Charlton at me because they couldn't work out what had happened to their club. This time last year they

had had a great season and were playing in the FA Cup Final."

"All the things that went on were before I got there in December. The Premier League had their inquiry, they gave their verdict and we have got on with it like we have got on with it the last six or seven weeks."

"We have been public enemy number one and that has been ramped up a bit this week but we have just got on with it. Now it is over. The Premier League say it's over and I've got to look forward to next year."

Whether the Tevez affair is over remains to be seen, with even survivors Wigan talking about the injustice of West Ham's survival after the striker's 45th minute goal.

But Curbishley countered: "First of all, I don't think there will be an over-turning of the decision and, secondly, as has been the case since I've been at the club, it's out of my hands."

"There has been a lot of talk the last few weeks but we have kept our counsel and that is how we are going to be now."

Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, Cristiano Ronaldo and Nemanja Vidic all watched the opening hour from the bench before the first three of those regulars were thrown into the action by Sir Alex Ferguson, who moved quickly to dispel any

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West Ham forward Carlos Tevez (top) hurdles the challenge of Manchester United defender Gabriel Heinze (bottom) during their Premiership clash at Old Trafford on Sunday.