

# Ruud's boots are Real gold

AFP, Madrid



Ruud van Nistelrooy will be aiming not only to clinch the Spanish title for Real Madrid next Sunday but also to get sole possession of the European Golden Boot award.

The Dutch striker has 26 goals to his name and is level with Roma's Francesco Totti but, with one game left in the last major European league to finish, van Nistelrooy has a chance to claim the prize for himself.

He scored both of Real's goals in their 2-2 draw at Real Zaragoza on Saturday to move level with the Italian striker.

The result leaves league leaders Real with just mid-table Real Mallorca to beat at home in their Santiago Bernabeu stadium if they are to win La Liga for a record 30th time.

"I've never known anything like it in my life. I can't describe how I feel," said the normally articulate Van Nistelrooy on Sunday.

"Against Mallorca we have to play much better than we did against Zaragoza. We had a lot of luck against them," he added.

"We played with a lot of spirit and determination and things worked out when Espanyol got an equaliser, but this is a team that never gives up."

"What's happened this season isn't normal though but we have a great opportunity now and we have to take advantage of it."

"However, we have still one game remaining so we'll have to see whether we will be champions," added van Nistelrooy, sounding a note of suitable caution.

Despite regularly finding the net during his five seasons at Manchester United, he didn't make the European top three while at Old Trafford.

However, he has found a new lease of life at Real since moving to the Spanish capital last summer, especially during the second half of the season.

The departure of Brazilian superstar Ronaldo for AC Milan in

January has made Van Nistelrooy the sole focus of attention for Real's service providers like David Beckham.

At one point he scored in seven consecutive games, equaling the best streak in La Liga history.

"Van Go" saves Madrid again. Without him it would not have been possible," commented Spain's leading sports daily Marca on Sunday, in the wake of his heroics in Zaragoza.

However, Van Nistelrooy knows that the dice fell in Real's favour on Saturday.

Espanyol's Raul Tamudo deprived Real's second-placed rivals Barcelona of two crucial points with an equaliser 20 seconds before the whistle in the 2-2 draw between the two Catalan clubs.

"I couldn't believe it. I was watching our fans celebrating and running towards the centre spot, because I didn't want to lose any time, and when I saw them still celebrating I looked up at the scoreboard (to see Espanyol had scored)," said van Nistelrooy.

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PHOTO: AFP

DELIGHT AND DESPAIR: (L) Born-to-score Real Madrid striker Ruud Van Nistelrooy celebrates his late and crucial strike against Real Zaragoza as (R) Barcelona captain Carles Puyol and fellow defender Lillian Thuram walk off the pitch dejected after being held by a last gasp equaliser by Espanyol in their respective Primera Liga fixtures Saturday night.

## Capello cautious

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello continued to sound a note of caution on Saturday, despite the Spanish giants only having to beat Real Mallorca on June 17 to clinch the La Liga title.

"I've never thought that we've got the league and I'm still not thinking that it's in our hands," said Capello, after Madrid's 2-2 draw at Real Zaragoza left them as the clear favourites for the Spanish title.

Both Real and bitter rivals Barcelona have 73 points but Madrid have the advantage due to a better head-to-head record in their two league encounters this season.

However, Real had their supporters constantly biting their fingernails and had to come from behind twice before salvaging a point with a Ruud Van Nistelrooy goal a minute from the whistle.

"This was a unique game. In the first half we were very untidy but improved after the break," added the Italian coach.

"In the second half we were looking to get back into the game

and you saw how strong was our will to win, the heart and spirit of the team. A draw was fair."

Capello's unwillingness to take the title for granted even at this stage was also reflected by his players.

"The squad is still cautious because there is one game to go and we have to continue working hard. We've got to keep our mind on the job," said Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

"Some people say that we've been lucky this season but they haven't seen the work that has been done behind the scenes," added Spain's number one man with the gloves.

"I'm confident that we'll win the title because we are going to fight so hard for it in the remaining game," commented fellow Spanish international Sergio Ramos.

If Real's players are continuing to take nothing for granted, the same cannot be said for their supporters in the Spanish capital on Saturday.

Hundreds made their way to the Cibeles fountain, the traditional gathering place for Real celebrations after winning a trophy, for what could be a rehearsal for the festivities next week when as many as a million people could take to the streets.

## Maradona to kick off Copa America

AFP, Buenos Aires

Troubled Argentine football legend Diego Maradona has said that he will kick-off the Copa America in Venezuela on June 26, Argentine agency Telam reported on Saturday.

The 46-year-old, recently hospitalised with alcohol related problems, guided Argentina to World Cup victory in Mexico in 1986 and to the 1990 final.

## Milito firm on joining Juve

INTERNET, undated

The new Juventus is shaping up as Zaragoza star Gabriel Alejandro Milito makes it clear he wants a move to Turin.

The Bianconeri have already been tracking the defender for several months, but the arrival of Coach Claudio Ranieri and Gianluigi Buffon's decision to remain significantly bolstered their appeal.

According to Spanish newspaper 'As', Milito has already gone to

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

## HIGH DRAMA ON PENULTIMATE NIGHT

# Real-ity bites Barca

AFP, Madrid



The Spanish title race will go right down to the wire after league leaders Real Madrid drew 2-2 at Real Zaragoza while their bitter rivals Barcelona were also held 2-2 draw by Espanyol on Saturday.

Both teams have 73 points but Real remain on top due to better head-to-head record in their meetings this season.

Victory for Real at home to Real Mallorca next week will secure them their 30th La Liga title. Barcelona travel to already-relegated bottom club Gimnastic Tarragona but have to hope that Real slip up.

The man who Real have to thank for keeping them in pole position is Ruud van Nistelrooy, who got both their goals and whose left foot shot just a minute from the end secured them possibly their most vital point of the season.

Zaragoza took the lead through a Diego Milito penalty after 32 min-

utes following a foul by Ivan Helguera on Pablo Aimar.

Former Real Madrid goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez then produced a brilliant save to deny Ruud van Nistelrooy an equaliser in the dying seconds of the first half but could do nothing to stop the Dutchman's header from a Sergio Ramos pass after 58 minutes.

Milito then put Zaragoza back in front six minutes later when he danced through the Madrid defence before unleashing a left foot shot that gave Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas little chance.

However, Real refused to give up and, with the title at stake, showed the fighting spirit that has brought them back into contention over the second half of the season.

Van Nistelrooy's last gasp effort takes his tally to 26 league goals for the season and gives him at least a half-share of the European Golden Boot award with Roma's Francesco Totti.

Barcelona's Lionel Messi has often been called The New Maradona and he emulated his hero and compatriot with a goal similar to the Argentine striker's famous Hand of God effort against England in the

1986 World Cup.

Barca's Italian international Gianluca Zambrotta lofted a pass into the area and Messi lifted up his left arm to nudge the ball into the net just before half time.

Espanyol, who had taken the lead against the run of play thanks to Raul Tamudo after 30 minutes, protested long and hard but to no avail and referee Julian Rodriguez Santiago let the highly dubious goal stand.

His second goal was far less controversial, with him being left unmarked and having the space to run on to a Deco pass on the right side of the box before slotting the ball home after 58 minutes.

However, a lapse of concentration could have cost them the title

## TOP SIX

Team	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
R Madrid	37	22	7	8	63	39	73
Barcelona	37	21	10	6	73	32	73
Sevilla	37	21	8	8	64	34	71
Valencia	37	20	5	12	54	39	65
Zaragoza	37	16	11	10	54	42	59
Villarreal	37	17	8	12	47	44	59

leaving Tamudo to get an equaliser just 25 seconds before the end of regulation time.

Sevilla stay in third and still have an interest in the title race after their 0-0 draw at Real Mallorca but are two points behind the leading pair.

The UEFA Cup winners were sorely missing their injured strikers Fredi Kanoute and Alexander Kherakov and had to survive the last 10 minutes with one man less after defender Ivica Dragutinovic got two yellow cards in less than a minute.

At the other end of the table, four clubs are still involved in the relegation battle.

Athletic Bilbao went down 3-1 at Villarreal while Real Betis crashed 5-0 at home to Osasuna to keep them both just one point above the relegation zone.

Atletico Vigo pulled off a surprising 3-2 win at Atletico Madrid to keep their hopes alive although they stay third from bottom.

Maxi Rodriguez hammered home a Fernando Torres from the

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

## Stoner wins in Catalunya

AFP, Barcelona

Australian rider Casey Stoner won the Catalunya MotoGP here on Sunday to record his fourth victory in seven races this season.

The Ducati rider beat home Italian star Valentino Rossi while Spaniard Dani Pedrosa was third.

"There was a lot of overtaking going on out there," admitted Stoner.

"It was a thinking race and one had to plan what to do next as Valentino was passing me all the time. It was really really hard."

Stoner and Rossi - winner last Sunday in Italy and a seven-time world champion - fought out an enthralling battle throughout the last half of the race with the lead swapping hands on several occasions.

However, Stoner emerged the leader entering the final lap and held his nerve to hold off Rossi to take the chequered flag while Pedrosa was a close third - reigning champion Nicky Hayden's disappointing defence of the title continued as he could only finish 11th.

Stoner's victory sees him hold a 14 point lead over Rossi - 140 to 126 points - with Pedrosa third on 98.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

## Inter or nothing, says Figo

INTERNET, undated

Luis Figo has ruled out joining David Beckham at LA Galaxy. "Either I play for Inter or I retire from football."

The Portuguese legend has been considering his future ever since the termination of his agreement with Saudi Arabian side Al Ittihad.

With the Nerazzurri trying to convince him to play on for another season, Figo had stated he would not play for a different European team - leaving the door open for a U.S move.

LA Galaxy general manager

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

## Allardyce fears Owen exit

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle boss Sam Allardyce admitted Sunday that he feared Michael Owen would quit the Magpies.

Two injury-hit years have restricted the England striker to little more than a handful of games for the club since his 17-million-pound move from Real Madrid in the summer of 2005.

Allardyce arrived at St James'

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5



French legend Zinedine Zidane (L) and Portuguese icon Luis Figo shake hands before "Luis Figo All Stars" charity match at Alvalade XXI Stadium in Lisbon on Saturday.

## Bayern make Klose bid

AFP, Berlin

Big-spending German giants Bayern Munich revealed on Sunday they have made a "generous" bid for Werder Bremen's World Cup top-scorer Miroslav Klose. The Bundesliga powerhouse have already splashed out a reported 36 million euros this summer for French midfielder Franck Ribery and Italian World Cup winner Luca Toni alone.

Talented 21-year-old German defender Marcell Jansen has also joined Bayern, but the Munich side are very keen to get his national team-mate Klose.

The 29-year-old top-scorer at last year's World Cup has already admitted he will join Bayern when his Bremen contract expires in June 2008, but Munich want him in their squad when the new Bundesliga season starts in August.

"We've made Werder Bremen a formal offer for Miroslav Klose, a generous offer too. The final decision is now entirely up to Werder," said Bayern general manager Uli Hoeneß on the Bayern website.