



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid striker Ruud Van Nistelrooy (L) and winger Jose Antonio Reyes share a joke during a training session in Madrid on Wednesday. Real can tie up a record 30th Primera Liga triumph if they beat Mallorca in their final day tie at the Santiago Bernabeu.

France up to second

AFP, Paris

Former World Cup winners France have moved up two places in the FIFA rankings, released by world football's ruling body on Wednesday.

World Cup champions Italy remain top on 1653 points, with France - thanks mainly to two consecutive wins in the Euro 2008 qualifying campaign - moving up to second at the expense of Brazil, who moved one place down to third.

Germany moved one place up to fourth - their best FIFA ranking in four years - at the expense of Argentina, who drop two places to fifth.

RANKINGS

1. Italy 1653 pts
2. France 1585 (+2 places)
3. Brazil 1484 (-1)
4. Germany 1467 (+1)
5. Argentina 1373 (-2)
6. Portugal 1323 (+1)
7. Spain 1273 (+2)
8. England 1240
9. Netherlands 1220 (-3)
10. Czech Republic 1096

Robinho misses decider

INTERNET, undated

Brazil and Real Madrid have been unable to arrive at an agreement that would have seen Robinho play a part in Sunday's La Liga decider.

The Brazilian Federation (CBF) have reiterated that they will not authorize Robinho to play with Real Madrid on Sunday, and have announced that they await his arrival in Brazil for the training camp later today.

Wagner Ribiero, Robinho's agent, had travelled to Spain on Monday, but has been unable to solve the situation.

It was understood that the forward could have been allowed back if he had willingly reported for training in the Camp, but Real Madrid do not want him to leave.

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McLaren teammates on collision course

TIMES ONLINE



Lewis Hamilton's brilliant victory in the Canadian Grand Prix has split the McLaren Mercedes team wide open. Days after the young Briton recorded his maiden win in Formula One, Fernando Alonso, the world champion, has said that he has never been comfortable with his new teammate.

Alonso endured a dreadful race in Montreal, during which he went off four times, once in an attempt to pass Hamilton on pole position, and finished seventh. Up until now the 25-year-old Spaniard, the sport's youngest back-to-back world champion, has denied paddock rumours

that he is unhappy at McLaren and speculation that his advisers have been convinced for some time that the team's heart is with their young British superstar.

In an interview with Spanish radio, Alonso said that he had never felt 100 per cent comfortable at McLaren but claimed that he had expected this to be the case as soon as he knew, last December, that Hamilton, 22, was going to be his teammate. "Well, right from the start I've never felt totally comfortable," he told Cadena Ser radio station.

Then, addressing the question of where the main effort at the team is going, he said: "I have a British team-mate in a British team and he's doing a great job and we know that all the support and help is going to him and I understood that from the

beginning. But I'm not complaining. I've won two races out of six and I've finished on the podium four times and I have those 40 points that will allow me to fight for the title in the end."

Alonso's remarks set the alarm bells ringing at McLaren, where media strategists have been spending more and more of their time trying to downplay the increasing signs that the battle for superiority between the drivers is escalating, as first Hamilton and then Alonso use interviews with their respective national media to advance their case.

Ron Dennis, the team principal, is the man in the middle trying to balance the ambitions of the experienced Spaniard, who is struggling to find his rhythm in a new team

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Bung payments can't be checked

AFP, Madrid



Spain's football federation said Tuesday that it could do little to stop so-called "motivational payments" allegedly paid by one club to another to beat certain

opponents, which are illegal.

Allegations that the payments are dishied out - usually to teams which no longer have anything to play for that are facing a well-placed squad still in the race for a title - have swirled around Spanish football for years.

But with the approach of the end

of an especially tight La Liga championship season this weekend, Spain's sports media have in recent days thrown the spotlight on the practice.

"We know this exists but as long as no complaint is filed, we can't do anything," a spokesman for the Spanish football federation told AFP.

"Several inquiries have been opened in recent years following complaints but we have never managed to prove that these payments were made so no penalty has ever been handed out," he added.

Sports daily Marca has reported that Real Mallorca have been promised two million euros (2.7 million US dollars) if they defeat or draw against Real Madrid on Sunday.

Real Madrid, which is tied with

arch rivals Barcelona on 73 points with one round left, need to beat Real Mallorca to win La Liga for a record 30th time.

The newspaper said each Real Zaragoza player received 50,000 euros following their side's 2-2 draw against Real Madrid on Saturday.

The players would have received double that amount had they defeated Real Madrid, it added.

"Everyone talks about bonuses but nobody sees them. Our dream is only to win the title, for us and our fans," Real Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas told a news conference Tuesday when asked about the reports.

"The most important bonus is winning La Liga," he added.

Mallorca digs at Real

INTERNET, undated

Mallorca have accused Real Madrid's celebrations after drawing with Zaragoza as "disrespectful" and stated that Real president Ramon Calderon is serving as a motivation for them in the final Liga game of the season.

Real celebrated as if they had just won the title after Ruud van Nistelrooy's late equaliser - and Espanyol's immediate leveller against Barcelona - put Fabio Capello's men back on top and only needing to equal Barcelona's performance at Nastic next weekend to seal the title.

But Real's opponents on Sunday are furious that Los Merengues

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Inter stake Tevez claim

INTERNET, undated

Internazionale have staked their claim for West Ham star Carlos Tevez. The Argentinian forward claimed on Monday that Inter were interested, and club president Massimo Moratti has confirmed his desire to snap up the inspirational 23-year-old.

Tevez has been linked with a £30 million move away from Upton Park after saving the Hammers from relegation almost single-handedly.

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Real strike BWin shirt deal



Football

INTERNET, undated

Vienna listed online betting group Bwin Interactive started the week with the positive news that starting on 1 July 2007 it will become the official main sponsor of Real Madrid, the top Spanish football club. The agreement has initially been concluded for a period of three seasons.

In addition to displaying the Bwin logo on the shirts of the Real Madrid team at national and international matches, the cooperation agreement extends to prominent branding of the stadiums and Real Madrid's training ground.

A spokesperson for Bwin said that the partnership should be seen against a background where several EU member states have yet to accept the freedom of establishment and services in the area of online gaming. This is despite the fact that both the European Commission and the European Court of Justice are of the opinion that the offering of online gaming is

subject to the free movement of services and the freedom of establishment laid down in the Treaty on European Union.

"In the future, Bwin will therefore be investing its available sponsoring resources in markets that have adopted an enlightened attitude to the subject of gaming regulation," the spokesperson said.

The Bwin group has over 11 million registered customers (including 7 million "play money" customers) in over 20 core target markets. Operating under international and regional licenses in countries like Gibraltar, Kahnawake (Canada), Belize and Germany, Italy, Mexico, Argentina, Austria and the United Kingdom, the group is an important destination for sports betting, games and entertainment via digital distribution channels. The Group offers sports betting, poker, casino games, soft and skill games, as well as audio and video streams on top sporting events such as the German Bundesliga.

Leadership, dynamism and technological innovation are values that Real Madrid and Bwin share, a

joint press release on the sponsorship deal said. "The agreement presented today at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium by Manfred Bodner, Co-CEO of bwin, and Ramon Calderon, President of Real Madrid CF, represents a milestone in the international ties between the two institutions," the announcement continues.

"The two brands share a commitment to maintain and foster sports as well as values such as leadership, dynamism and technological innovation. These shared values and business strategies will allow Real Madrid and bwin to connect emotionally with millions of fans throughout the world."

Real Madrid President, Ramon Calderon said: "With this alliance we are taking one more step towards our goal of partnering leading international companies. bwin is a world-wide reference thanks to its experience and involvement in sports sponsorship. Among other characteristics, it is a creative, dynamic, young company seeking greater proximity to all the fans in the world of sport".

Much to ponder for Henry



Football

TIMES ONLINE

Thierry Henry flew to Cleveland, Ohio yesterday for the NBA Finals with much of the football world attempting to penetrate his innermost thoughts, which is the way he likes it. As he showed when ostentatiously running from the stands to celebrate Emmanuel Adebayor's goal against Tottenham Hotspur last December, the Arsenal striker enjoys being the centre of attention, where he will remain for much of the summer after reports in France that he has agreed a three-year contract with Barcelona.

Jerome Anderson, the player's agent, is suing France Football, the French magazine, after unsubstantiated claims he went as far as to say "lies" that he met Txiki Beguiristain, the Barcelona sporting director, in the South of France last week, but Henry's denial was ambivalent. "Last season people were announcing all over the place that I was leaving, but at the end of the day I stayed at Arsenal," he said. "It could be the same this year." To add to the intrigue, there have been suggestions that Anderson has been cut out of the deal.

Some of the uncertainty over Henry's future can be traced back to the day before that London derby and a row with Arsène Wenger from which the pair's strong relationship has not recovered. The Arsenal captain stormed out of the training ground after being told that he was not fit enough to take his place in the team. The manager chose to exert his authority over a player who commands huge influence in the dressing-room and he could do so again in a more dramatic fashion this summer, by selling him to Barcelona.

Much has changed in the 12 months since Henry pledged to end his career at Arsenal after signing a four-year contract worth £110,000 a week, but to outsiders many things appear to be exactly the same. Arsenal have almost become a byword for close-season instability, with "will he, won't he" sagas involving Henry, Wenger and Patrick Vieira dominating much of the past decade, although after a disappointing winter, this is shaping up to be a summer of discontent.

Less than a year after the grand opening of the £360 million Emirates Stadium that was meant to safeguard the club as a Champions League force, Arsenal's future is up for review. The positions of the manager, captain and even the board are under threat, with Stan

Kroenke, the American sports entrepreneur, considering launching a hostile takeover bid.

With Wenger committed to seeing out the remaining year on his contract and the board having pledged to hold on to their shares until next April at the earliest, Henry's situation is only the most immediate of many key decisions that will shape Arsenal's future.

Henry's attachment to the club remains as strong as ever, although he has been left shaken by recent events on and off the pitch. With a series of injuries limiting him to 27 appearances, he watched much of last season from the sidelines and was unimpressed, with Arsenal's young players failing to perform consistently. The club's failure to invest in new players has been a source of irritation and with little spending planned for this summer, Henry has fresh doubts about their ambition. The fact that Wenger spent last weekend checking up on an unnamed Norwegian centre back will have done little to reassure him.

With problems developing in Henry's relationship with Wenger, the resignation of David Dein in

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City searching new boss

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City have stepped up their search for a new manager in a move that casts further doubt on whether Thaksin Shinawatra's planned takeover of the club will go ahead.

The former Thai premier had insisted that he should be consulted on the identity of Stuart Pearce's successor and was behind an unsuccessful approach to former Chelsea boss Claudio Ranieri, who opted instead to take up the vacancy at Juventus.

But with Thaksin's ability to finance a takeover now in doubt as a result of moves by anti-corruption investigators to freeze his assets, City are pushing ahead with efforts to persuade Sevilla boss Juande Ramos to move to England.

Former Alkmaar and Porto coach Co Adriaanse, currently out of work, appears to be the most likely back-up option as Ronald Koeman has indicated that he will see out the remaining year on his contract at PSV Eindhoven.

There has also been speculation about a possible bid to lure former Manchester United striker Mark Hughes away from Blackburn. Capturing Ramos would represent a major coup for City. Under his management, Sevilla have won back-to-back UEFA Cup titles and

he could yet claim a domestic league and cup double this season.

A City source said a decision on the new manager could come within days as the club desperately attempts to avoid a scenario in which players return for pre-season training with no manager in place.

"There is a need now to move quickly," the source said. "We could even see an announcement within the next seven days."

City chairman John Wardle is meanwhile expected to give the Thaksin camp several days to provide assurances that the proposed deal can go ahead.



PHOTO: AFP

The final qualifying draw for the 2008 Beijing Olympics football is displayed on screen at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday.

Mittal eyeing Birmingham?

THE INDEPENDENT

A Russian set the trend, numerous Americans followed and yesterday an Indian emerged as the latest billionaire to show an interest in taking over a Premiership club when Lakshmi Mittal - the world's fifth-richest man - became a contender to buy newly promoted Birmingham City.

The steel magnate, who is worth £19.25bn, has made an inquiry about the possibility of taking over the club from David Sullivan and David and Ralph Gold, and with that sort of wealth behind them Birmingham could contemplate a season aiming for Europe rather than fighting relegation.

Mittal, who is based in Great Britain, has not so far followed up his initial interest in the club, who

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PHOTO: AFP

Bolivia president Evo Morales traps a ball on his chest during a friendly football match played on the snow at the Sajama mountain, 6000 meters above sea-level on Tuesday. Morales and a team from the government took on a team of mountaineers to demonstrate that football can be played at any altitude; in light of FIFA's ban on high altitude matches.