



Real Madrid's Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy (R) fires home the all-important goal as Athletic Bilbao's Pablo Orbeliz (L) looks on during their Primera Liga encounter at San Mames Stadium in Bilbao on Saturday.

Real ride on Ruud

AFP, Madrid



Ruud van Nistelrooy showed he is much more than just a penalty box predator scoring a brilliant winner to help Real Madrid move seven points clear at the top of the Spanish championship with a 1-0 win at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

Dutch international van Nistelrooy curled a fantastic 55th minute winner as champions Real opened up a seven-point gap on Barcelona who are under pressure to beat Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday.

Villarreal are also seven points behind the leaders ahead of their home game against Real Betis on Sunday.

Eleven wins from 15 games makes impressive reading for Real who were again indebted to their goal machine van Nistelrooy.

FA denies Jose approach

REUTERS, London

The FA reacted to the latest slew of newspaper speculation on the identity of the next England manager on Sunday by insisting that no approach had yet been made to any potential candidate.

Some British Sunday papers carried stories saying the FA had spoken to former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho and that he was in line to replace Steve McClaren, who was sacked last month after England's failure to qualify for Euro 2008.

Others claimed the Portuguese coach, out of work since leaving Chelsea in September, had ruled himself out after receiving a tempting club offer.

FA chief executive Brian Barwick and head of soccer development Trevor Brooking have been charged with making the appointment and FA spokesman Adrian Bevington said they were making progress.

"They've spoken to various leading figures in the game to canvass some opinions. My understanding is that they've concluded that process now and it's a case now of having conversations with individuals," he told BBC radio 5-Live.

"We've been very transparent following the departure of Steve McClaren but there does come a time when we say 'please let us get on with our work privately now'.

"If you picked up the papers last week it was a variety of managers, it was a different story today. I don't want to dissect every story but we are fully on track here. We are making progress; we want to get the manager of the right calibre."

"There is a lot of work going on behind the scenes and if we have spoken to the representatives of one individual it does not mean we are not speaking to others but neither Trevor nor Brian have met with any of the potential candidates yet."

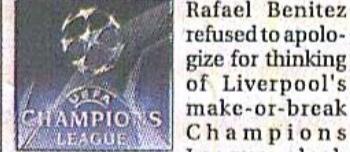
England's next match is a Wembley friendly against Switzerland in February and their next competitive fixture will be in September at the start of the 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign.

"I've seen various managers ruled out on TV and in newspapers but I can assure you we have not ruled anybody out, we have an open mind," he said.

"We haven't got a deadline but when we identify the man there is no reason not to go and get him."

Rafa focused on Marseille

AFP, Reading



Rafael Benitez refused to apologize for thinking of Liverpool's make-or-break Champions League clash with Marseille as the Reds slipped to a 3-1 defeat against Reading - their first loss in the Premier League this season.

Benitez took off club captain Steven Gerrard, defender Jamie Carragher and top scorer Fernando Torres because he could not see a way back into the match for his side.

"I wanted to rest my key players because I did not feel we were going to get back in the game at 3-1," Benitez said.

"We had three or four good chances but could not take them so I decided to take off my key players

to give them a rest.

"We tried to change it with different players with pace and fresh legs. The Champions League is important. Marseille is the target now," the Spaniard added.

"Torres had a kick on his ankle so was at risk. He will be okay."

"There are some big games coming up in the next few weeks and I want the players fresh."

An annoyed Benitez said the penalty awarded by referee Andre Marriner for a foul by Carragher which led to Stephen Hunt's spot-kick opening goal for Reading was harsh.

And he added Torres should be equally deserving of a penalty when he tangled with Ibrahimovic.

"The penalty given against Jamie was outside the box and you have to ask why the referee did not book him for the penalty. Maybe

because it wasn't a penalty," said Benitez.

"Torres was clearly tripped in the box and it is disappointing when decisions go against you."

Reading were given a controversial penalty in the 16th minute when Carragher was adjudged to have brought down Brynjar Gunnarsson on the edge of the box.

Liverpool got an equaliser just before the half hour mark through talisman Gerrard.

Jose Reina's clearance was knocked on by Torres and Gerrard raced through to plant the ball past Marcus Hahnemann.

Reading regained the lead when Kevin Doyle just got his head to a free-kick from Nicky Shorey.

Then, after Gerrard saw a long-range shot come back off the cross-bar, Reading sealed victory in the 88th minute.

"The atmosphere at San Mames is always very powerful and that zone is always like that," Casillas told reporters. "It's a strange way to support your team."

The bus carrying Real Madrid players to the stadium was also hit by objects thrown by rival supporters, resulting in damage to its windows.

SEE PAGE 19 COL 1

Casillas hit by object

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas was hit by an object thrown from the crowd during his side's 1-0 win at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

Objects rained down on the keeper's area during the match and television pictures showed what appeared to be a knife or bottle opener had also landed on the edge of the pitch.

"The atmosphere at San Mames is always very powerful and that zone is always like that," Casillas told reporters. "It's a strange way to support your team."

The bus carrying Real Madrid players to the stadium was also hit by objects thrown by rival supporters, resulting in damage to its windows.

Tevez then put the result beyond doubt on the hour mark.

Steve Howard scored a consolation goal for Derby, their first away in the league this season before Ronaldo made it 4-1 from the penalty spot.

Andriy Shevchenko helped Chelsea make light of Drogba's absence, after his fellow striker was ruled out earlier Saturday following a knee operation, by giving the Blues a 23rd minute lead at Stamford Bridge when he headed in from Salomon Kalou's cross.

Frank Lampard put the result

Verbeek wants Viduka

Football

AFP, Sydney

New Australian coach Pim Verbeek sees convincing Newcastle's Mark Viduka to prolong his international career as a top priority ahead of next February's 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

The Dutchman has taken over the Socceroos and says European-based players are vital to helping Australia overcome Qatar, China and Iraq in their tough World Cup qualifying group.

Verbeek will have to balance the needs of his team against the demands of the European clubs where the majority of Australia's stars play their football.

The 24-year-old, who has won four caps for his country, is likely to pick up a heavy fine from the German Football Association (DFB).

tant to us, especially in the first two games," Verbeek told Sydney's Sun-Herald newspaper.

"But the European players are also absolutely crucial for us and I want to contact Mark Viduka, for one, because I need to know what his thoughts are."

"It's not about the age of players, it's about their quality. He has so much of that and I hope he will stay involved."

Viduka, who led Australia at last year's World Cup and this year's Asian Cup, has been toying with retirement from the international game after 14 years to concentrate on his club career with Newcastle United in England's Premier League.

Viduka, 32, has only scored six goals in 32 internationals, but he has been prolific in club football with 158 goals in 302 league appearances, going back to 1995.

Verbeek, who coached South

Korea to the semi-finals of last July's Asian Cup, has been appointed largely on his record in Asian football.

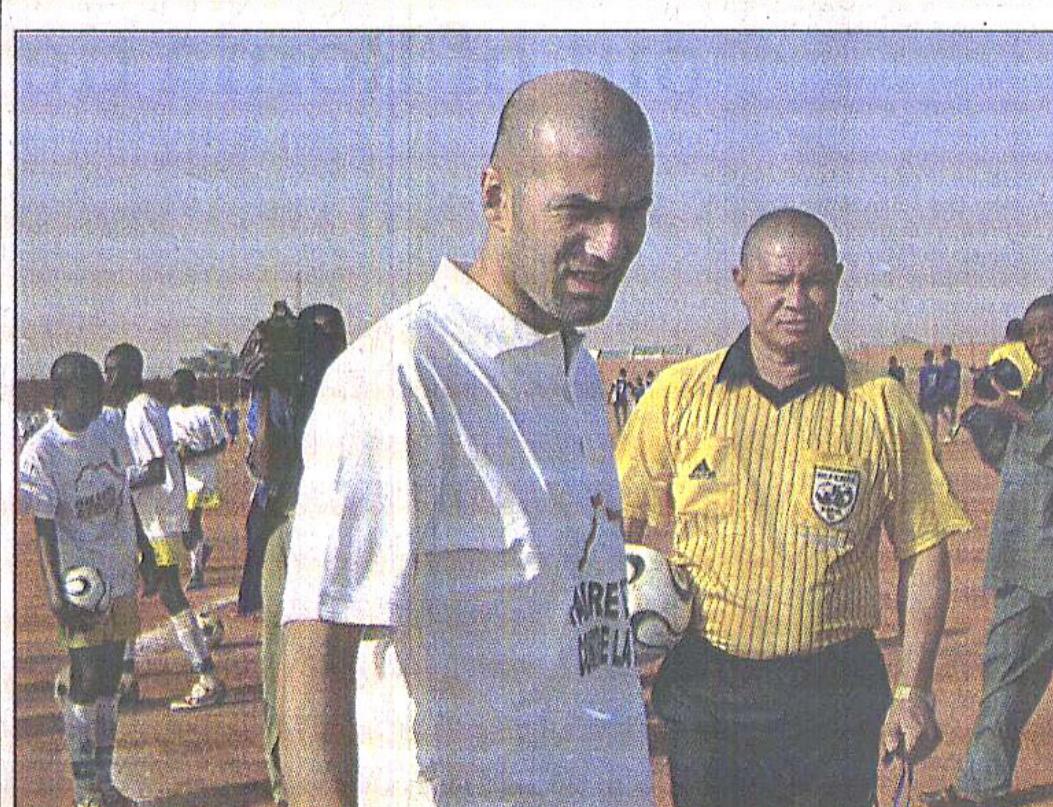
"We are in the hardest World Cup group of all but we must not be afraid. We are good enough to win every game," Verbeek said.

"At the very least we have to win all our home games. That is also extremely vital."

"Fortunately, I know a lot about the countries we are about to face. During my time with South Korea we played against Qatar at the Asian Games and the Olympics."

"Iraq beat us in the semi-finals of the Asian Cup and, of course, also beat Australia, and we also faced them in the Asian Games and a friendly."

"So I am aware of the strengths and weaknesses of both Qatar and Iraq. I have also studied China closely for many years."



French legend Zinedine Zidane visits a football school in Niamey to support United Nations humanitarian project in Niger on Sunday.

Lazio clinch vital win

AFP, Rome

Lazio eased their relegation fears and boosted their Champions League morale with a 2-0 win over Catania on Saturday.

Tommaso Rocchi and Goran Pandev were on target in a timely tune-up ahead of their Champions League trip to Real Madrid on Tuesday where they have to win to have any hope of making the knockout round.

"We have nothing left to lose at Real," said Lazio coach Delio Rossi.

"There are teams far stronger than Lazio in the Champions League, but I know full well my lads will not let their heads drop."

Fabrizio Miccoli and Fabio Simplicio's stunning goals gave Palermo a 2-0 win over Fiorentina who had to play the final 22 minutes with 10 men after Alessandro Gamberini went off injured and all three substitutions had already

been used.

Fiorentina stay in fifth place in the table, 10 points behind leaders Inter Milan.

Inter's star forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic has tried to calm expectation despite his club's flying start to the season.

Inter entertain Torino on Sunday after a stunning opening to the season that has seen them win 10 and draw four of their 14 league matches.

They have also qualified from their Champions League group with game to spare and all that despite a midfield injury crisis.

With players such as Patrick Vieira, Luis Figo and Dejan Stankovic already missing, Olivier Dacourt was this week ruled out for the rest of the season.

But such is the strength of Inter's squad that whoever comes in still proves too strong for their opponents, as Lazio found out on Wednesday as they were chopped down 3-0 by a team that included Portugal under-21 international Pele making his first start of the

season.

Only Roma have managed to hang onto Inter's coat tails so far with the likes of Juventus and AC Milan already eight and 16 points adrift of the champions.

But Sweden forward Ibrahimovic is keen to play down expectation and he denied the title race is already boiling down to a shoot-out between Inter and second-placed Roma.

"The title is not yet decided, there are many games left," he said. "We have to keep winning as we have done up until now. But we have to keep our concentration and play with confidence and that way we'll keep pushing forwards."

The same cannot be said of Roma's trip to lowly but resurgent Livorno, who had a dreadful start to the season but are unbeaten in their last five matches, having won three of them.

Juventus and Udinese will be looking to return to winning ways and boost their own title chances as they entertain Atalanta and Sampdoria respectively.

MU demolish Derby

AFP, London

Ryan Giggs's 100th league goal saw Manchester United on the way to a 4-1 win against bottom-of-the-table Derby County to keep up the pressure on Premier League leaders Arsenal on Saturday.

Victory at Old Trafford, where Carlos Tevez scored either side of half-time, left second-placed United a point behind the Gunners, who travel to struggling Middlesbrough on Sunday.

Chelsea remained third, two points adrift of United, after a 2-0 win against Sunderland, despite being without star striker Didier Drogba.

Liverpool though were level

barely 10 minutes later when Steven Gerrard, their captain, burst into the box and shot past Marcus Hahnemann.

But the Royals regained the lead on the hour mark when Kevin

Doyle flicked-on Nicky Shorey's free-kick.

And seven minutes later, after Gerrard had hit the bar, James Harper made it 3-1 after rounding

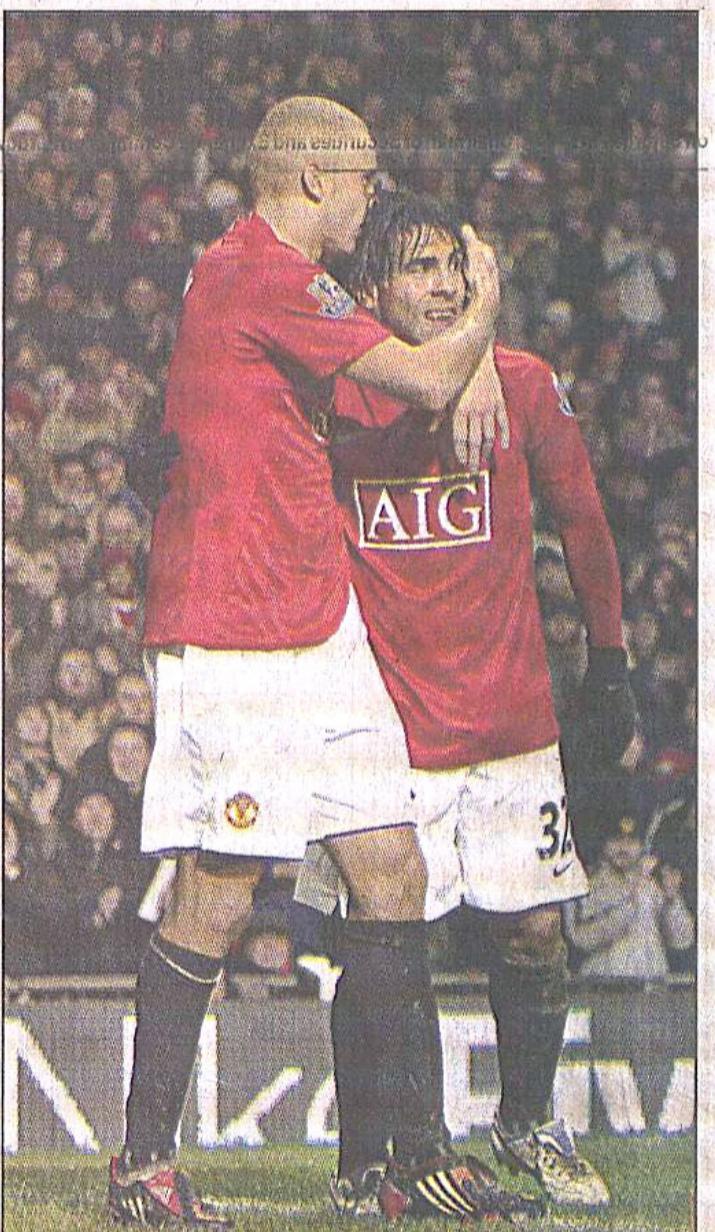
Reina.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez defended his decision to take Gerrard off with 20 minutes to go ahead of next week's must-win Champions League game against Middlesbrough.

"I wanted to rest my key players because I did not feel we were going to get back in the game at 3-1," Benitez said.

Reading manager Steve Coppell, celebrating his team's first win over one of the 'Big Four' since

SEE PAGE 19 COL 5



Manchester United striker Carlos Tevez (R) receives a congratulatory hug from teammate Wes Brown after he scored his first goal against Derby County during their Premiership clash at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Red card from the bench

Football

AFP, Frankfurt

There was a strange dismissal in Frankfurt on Saturday when Schalke 04 substitute Carlos Grossmueller earned himself a red card from the bench while still in his tracksuit.

The Uruguayan international midfielder charged off the bench and onto the pitch in the 86th minute of his side's 2-2 Bundesliga draw here on Saturday and argued - still wearing his warm-up suit and bib - with Eintracht Frankfurt's Michael Thurk.

After a heated argument,

Grossmueller pushed Thurk to the floor and was shown an immediate red card by the referee with the Schalke player not having officially

been part of the game.

The 24-year-old, who has won

four caps for his country, is likely to

pick up a heavy fine from the

German Football Association (DFB).

"It's not about the age of players, it's about their quality. He has so much of that and I hope he will stay involved."

Thurk, who led Australia at last year's World Cup and this year's Asian Cup, has been toying with retirement from the international game after 14 years to concentrate on his club career with Newcastle United in England's Premier League.

Viduka, 32, has only scored six goals in 32 internationals, but he has been prolific in club football with 158 goals in 302 league appearances, going back to 1995.