

Ronaldo keeps MU on track

AFP, London

Two goals from Cristiano Ronaldo helped Manchester United move back to within a point of Premier League leaders Arsenal after a 2-1 win over Everton at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Everton had looked set to extend their unbeaten run to 14 matches but a rash challenge by Steven Pienaar on Ryan Giggs resulted in an 88th-minute penalty that Ronaldo converted to secure all three points.

The Portuguese winger, who has now scored 16 goals in all competitions this season, had given the champions the lead midway through the first-half with Australian midfielder Tim Cahill equalising five minutes later.

It was Ronaldo who broke the deadlock with a superb curling shot created out of nothing in the 22nd minute.

There seemed nowhere for the Portuguese to go when he was confronted by two Everton defenders after collecting Anderson's pass but a neat sidestep created a space and the winger's left-foot shot found the top corner for his tenth league goal of the season.

Everton's outstanding recent run meant they were never likely to lose heart at falling behind to the champions.

And their response was as quick as it was impressive with Pienaar delivering a dipping cross from United's problem right hand flank towards Cahill, who out-jumped Patrice Evra to head the equaliser just five minutes later.

Everton fought well but when they looked set for the draw Pienaar sent United captain Ryan Giggs crashing to the ground inside the visitors' area with just three minutes remaining and Ronaldo kept his nerve to clinch the points from the penalty spot.

Carlos backs Becks as skipper

AFP, London

David Beckham's former Real Madrid teammate Roberto Carlos believes new England coach Fabio Capello will name the midfielder as the national captain.

The veteran Brazilian, who played under Capello in both his spells at Real Madrid, insists the Italian was not to blame for Beckham's marginalising at the Bernabeu last season after he revealed his plan to join the Los Angeles Galaxy.

Carlos claims Capello was made to carry the can for a decision which was made above his head - and then made a conscious decision to disobey his employers by recalling the midfielder later in the season.

"There were no bad feelings because he (Beckham) knew it wasn't Capello's fault," Carlos told The Observer newspaper.

"Now, I am sure that Capello will select Beckham for England - 100 per cent sure."

"He will call David and I think he will make him his captain."

Carlos believes Capello will get England winning again - but has warned fans not to expect excitement.

"England need victories, results, and that he will give them," he said in The Observer.

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Van Der Vaart fancies Juve

AFP, Berlin

Hamburg's Dutch midfielder Rafael Van der Vaart has said he could imagine playing for Italian giants Juventus and would soon make a decision on where his career will take him.

"I know Juventus are interested in me, they've wanted me since last summer and I can really imagine myself playing for that club," van der Vaart told Saturday's edition of the Bild daily newspaper.

"I'm hesitating on my future but I'll take a decision soon," said the 24-year-old who joined Hamburg in July 2005.

Hamburg, third in the Bundesliga, have offered the Dutchman a two-year extension to his contract which runs until 2010 as well as a salary review.

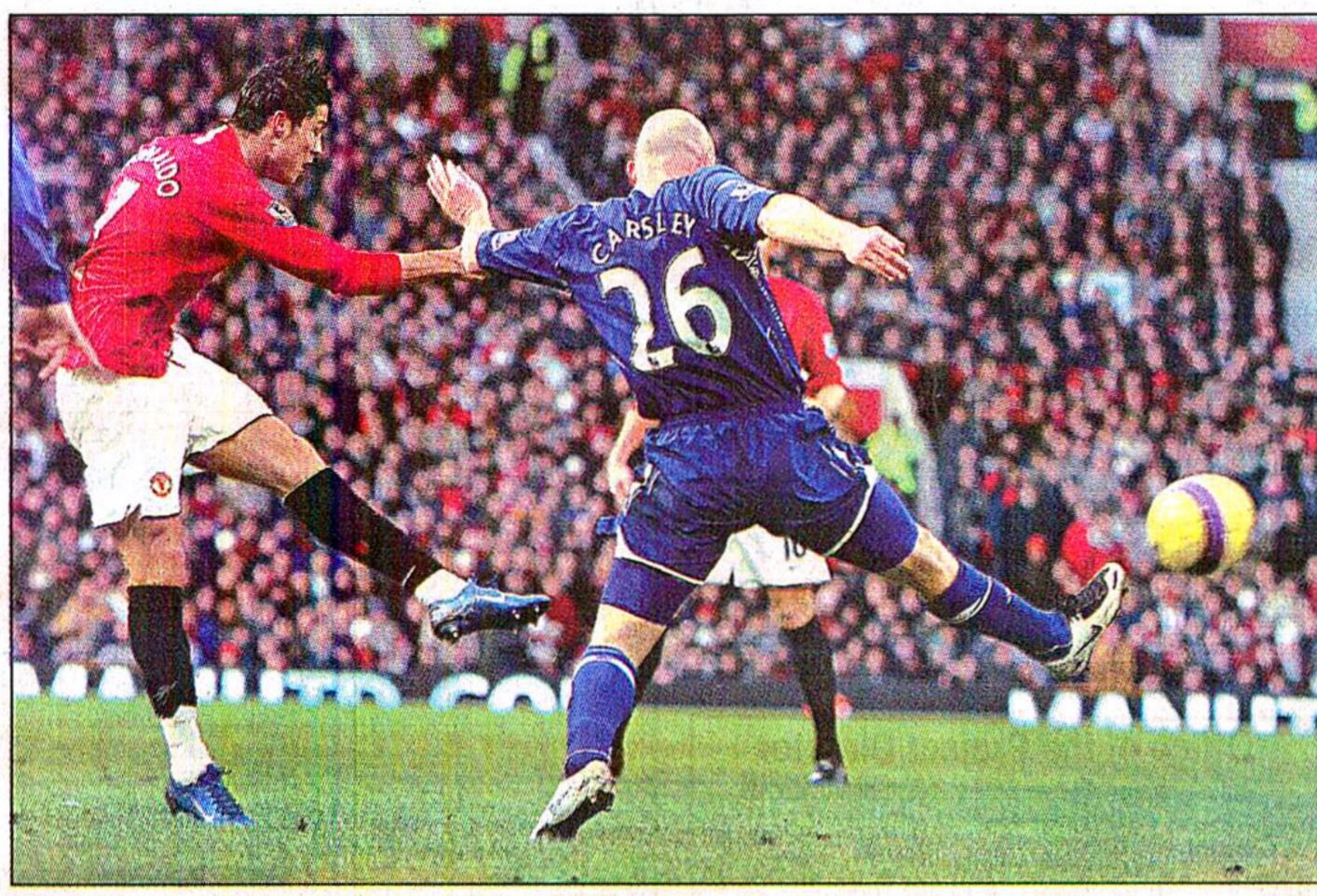
But van der Vaart seems set on finding another club.

The midfielder saw a possible 22-million-euro move to Valencia rebuffed by Hamburg in the summer.

According to Bild, Juventus were prepared to shell out 17 millions euros for van der Vaart for a five-year deal.

Van der Vaart, who has scored seven goals in 45 games for the Netherlands, has knocked in 26 goals in 59 matches for Hamburg and has a clause in his contract that would allow him to leave the German club in 2009 for an indemnity of 1.5 million euros.

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Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo (L) unleashes a superb left-foot effort to score the first of his two goals in their Premiership match against Everton at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Arsenal test for Milan

AFP, Nyon

Defending champions AC Milan were drawn against Arsenal in the last 16, knockout phase of the Champions League here on Friday.

AC's city rivals Inter, unbeaten and flying high in Serie A, will play Liverpool, whom AC Milan beat 2-1 in last season's final.

Arsenal, who missed out on a favourable seed ranking after finishing second in the qualifying group, will host the Italian club on February 19/20 with the return leg in Milan on March 4/5.

The London club will have their work cut out against Milan, who last week were also crowned world club champions after their 4-2 victory over Boca Juniors in Japan.

Despite standing 22 points behind Italian league leaders Inter, AC Milan also boast the FIFA Player of the Year and European Footballer of the Year in Brazilian playmaker Kaka.

AC Milan and Arsenal have only met once before - in 1994 in the European Superclub competition, the Italians coming away with a 2-0 aggregate win.

Arsenal managing director Keith Edelman insisted they won't fear the seven-time Champions League winners.

"It's a great match and I'm sure

the fans will be trying to book tickets already," Edelman said.

"Games don't come much bigger than this. I'm sure it will be highly charged and very competitive."

"I think we would have preferred an easier one. We want to win all four competitions and we've got a big enough squad to compete in all of them."

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti said Liverpool, whom Inter beat in the 1965 semi-final before going on to lift the European Cup, would not prove an easy tie.

"It's interesting because it throws up two teams with lots of tradition: Liverpool have given us great memories," said Moratti in reference to their 1965 triumph over Benfica.

"It will be two difficult matches."

Chelsea apart, the draw was also hard for the three other British

LAST 16

Celtic (SCO) v Barcelona (ESP)
Lyon (FRA) v Manchester United (ENG)
Schalke 04 (GER) v FC Porto (POR)
Liverpool (ENG) v Inter Milan (ITA)
AS Roma (ITA) v Real Madrid (ESP)
Arsenal (ENG) v AC Milan (ITA)
Olympiacos (GRE) v Chelsea (ENG)
Fenerbahce (TUR) v Sevilla (ESP)

(Matches to be played - first leg on February 19/20 with return leg on March 4/5)

Bayern drawn with Aberdeen

AFP, Paris

Scottish Premier League side Aberdeen have their work cut out in the UEFA Cup knock-out stage after being drawn against 1996 winners Bayern Munich on Friday.

The Dons, who last reached this stage of the competition in 1986, beat the German giants during their successful 1983 Cup Winners' Cup campaign under Sir Alex Ferguson.

And despite a confident 4-0 demolition of FC Copenhagen on Thursday to reach the last 32 the club is under no illusion as to the task that awaits them.

"It's a reward for a fantastic achievement by Jimmy and the players," said former Aberdeen captain and current club board member Willie Miller.

Aberdeen welcome Ottmar Hitzfeld's Bayern at Pittodrie for the first leg on February 13/14 with the return leg in Germany on February 21.

Hitzfeld, though, is confident of a positive outcome and already has one eye on a last 16 encounter.

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Ballack backs Lehmann

AFP, Berlin

Germany captain Michael Ballack insisted on Saturday that out-of-favour Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann will be the right man for the national team at June's Euro 2008 tournament.

The 38-year-old lost his place in Arsenal's first-team in August and has been left on the bench ever since with Gunner's coach Arsene Wenger preferring Spaniard Almunia.

Lehmann's lack of match time has caused great concern in Germany with the national side among the favourites to win the tournament.

But as far as Chelsea midfielder Ballack, 31, is concerned, Lehmann has to be German coach Joachim Loew's first choice at next June's tournament.

"For me, there is simply no discussion about who should be Germany's goalkeeper," Ballack told

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Kaka eyes Milan captaincy

AFP, Zagreb

FIFA world player of the year Kaka has said he would like to extend his contract with AC Milan until 2013 as well as becoming captain of the Italian giants.

In an interview with Croatian newspaper Sportske Novosti, the 25-year-old Brazilian playmaker said: "It's true that we've talked about extending my contract until 2013 and we'll do that as soon as the club invites me to sign."

Kaka, who arrived in Milan in 2003, sees his current contract expire in 2011 and enjoys a salary of around six million euros a year, making him the best-paid player in Italy.

"I want to become captain of AC Milan and leave a big impression with this great club," added Kaka, also recently named European Footballer of the Year after starring in Milan's run to the European Champions League title, then the European Super Cup and the recent Club World Cup.

Current club captain Paolo Maldini, 39, will retire at the season's end.

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Spurs gift Gunners win

AFP, London



Arsenal's bid to reclaim the Premier League title passed a significant milestone on Saturday when a derby win over Tottenham ensured Arsene Wenger's men will spend Christmas on top of the table.

On a day that saw Liverpool register an impressive 4-1 win over Portsmouth at Anfield, Arsenal beat their north London neighbours 2-1 to pull four points clear of second-place Manchester United.

Manchester United can cut Arsenal's lead back to a single point on Sunday, when the champions entertain Everton at Old Trafford.

But Harry Redknapp's men soon found themselves on the back foot as a superb volley by Israeli midfielder Yossi Benayoun was quickly followed by an own goal by Sylvain Distin to put Liverpool two up with barely quarter of an hour gone.

Zimbabwean forward Benjani Mwaruwari fired Portsmouth back into the contest 12 minutes after the break but Fernando Torres

guaranteed the win with two late goals to take his tally for his first season in England to 14 goals in all competitions.

"We scored four goals against the team with the best team away record, so that was important for the confidence of everyone," said Redknapp.

"The team was playing with passion and intelligence and they are things that it is important to put

and Arsenal extracted maximum advantage from that reprieve when, three minutes later, substitute Nicklas Bendtner rose unchallenged to head the winner from a Cesc Fabregas corner.

"We had some luck," Wenger confessed. "Almunia saved the penalty and that was the turning point."

Portsmouth arrived at Anfield boasting the best away record in the league.

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together."

Manchester City remain in the top four, just ahead of Liverpool, after a 1-1 draw at Aston Villa. Norwegian striker John Carew earned a point for the home side when a late goal from a Cesc Fabregas corner.

"He's settling in better and better," City boss Sven-Goran Eriksson said of Bianchi, who has begun to pay back some of the 8.8-million-pound he cost the club with three goals in his last four games.

At the other end of the table, Bolton's revival under Gary Megson gathered pace with a 3-0 home win over Birmingham, courtesy of a first-half strike from El Hadji Diouf and a late double from Nicolas Anelka.

Middlesbrough's attempts to edge away from the relegation zone suffered a setback when a late Scott Parker strike allowed West Ham to claim their fifth away win over the table.

Defender David Wheater had given Boro the lead five minutes before the break but Dean Ashton quickly equalised for the Hammers and Parker grabbed all three points right at the end.

It was also a tough afternoon for Sunderland, who slipped back into the drop zone after Stephen Hunt's

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Totti fires Roma

AFP, Rome

Returning Roma talisman Francesco Totti scored a brace to earn the capital's club a 2-1 win over Sampdoria at the Stadio Olimpico on Saturday and keep them in the Serie A title chase.

Second-placed Roma closed the gap on leaders Inter Milan to just four points ahead of Sunday's eagerly anticipated Milan derby with newly-crowned world champions AC Milan.

Totti was making his second injury comeback of the season having missed last week's disappointing 0-0 draw at Torino and he proved he was back to his best with a crucial double, the first a cutie finish from the penalty spot.

"I wanted to finish 2007 in a big way. I'm happy and I want to thank my teammates who let me take the penalty and set me up at the end," he told Sky Sport.

It was the penalty that never should have been, though, as the referee offered Roma an early Christmas present on 18 minutes.

Centre-back Matteo Ferrari, playing in place of the suspended

Frenchman Philippe Mexes, crumpled into a heap in the box under the slightest of challenges from Stefano Lucchini and the official

shockingly pointed to the spot.

Lucchini's bad luck got even worse as he was laughably also booked for his troubles.

That may have been a gift but captain Totti's finish from 12-yards was sublime as he calmly chipped the ball just under the cross-bar as goalkeeper Luca Castellazzi dived to his right.

Just before the hour mark a mistake from Roma full-back Max Tonetto saw Emiliano Bonazzoli set strike-partner Christian Maggio free but Brazilian goalkeeper Doni saved brilliantly from substitute Andrea Caracciolo and then Hugo Campagnaro firing wildly over the bar from the subsequent corner.

But in the final five minutes 10-man Sampdoria almost snatched a leveller with Doni saving brilliantly from substitute Andrea Caracciolo and then Hugo Campagnaro firing wildly over the bar from the subsequent corner.

It was the last minute Totti grabbed his second, tapping home after a brilliant run down the right from Marco Cassetti.

It was Totti's first league goals since October 20, although it was also his second league appearance since then due to injuries.

"It was difficult spending two months on the sidelines because I was playing really well before that," added Totti.

"The championship? It's a marathon, we won't make the same mistakes as last year when we finished 20 points back (from Inter). It will go to the wire."

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