

Cesc accused of cheating

INTERNET, undated

Cesc Fabregas stands accused of getting fellow Spaniard Mikel Arteta sent off in an acrimonious Barclays Premier League clash at Goodison Park which saw Arsenal reclaim top spot.

Midfielder Fabregas was caught by Arteta's arm six minutes before the end of the Gunners' 4-1 defeat of Everton and flung himself to the ground clutching his face.

Everton boss David Moyes was furious and the home fans chanted "cheat, cheat" at the 20-year-old as referee Martin Atkinson showed Arteta the red card.

Moyes' after-match condemnation of Fabregas was laced with sarcasm as he said: "Fabregas obviously has a broken jaw or he would not have rolled around like he did."

Moyes' anger was heightened by the fact Arteta will now miss three games while Arsenal youngster Nicklas Bendtner will only miss one for his earlier dismissal for a shocking tackle on Andrew Johnson.

Bendtner had already been booked and was shown only a second yellow card for the lunge at Johnson.

Moyes said: "I don't make the rules, it was probably the wrong decision by the referee to show a yellow for (Bendtner's) tackle, it should have been a straight red."

"It doesn't help our case, but it's over now. I can't do anything about it."

"I have said since the derby (with Liverpool in October) that I will not get involved too much with referees, we will just have to take it."

"But compare the incidents. We lose Mikel for three games while Bendtner only misses one for two yellows, you should see the state of Johnson's shin."

"We won't be appealing, you have seen what happens to everyone else when they appeal these days."

Fabregas and Arteta are known to be good friends who often speak to each other on the phone but the Arsenal man was unrepentant over his reaction to the challenge.

He said: "He is my friend but this is football. It just happened."

"The one thing I am sure about is that he put his elbow in my face."

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Deco hints at Barca exit

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona midfielder Deco has hinted that he would be interested in a move to England if he leaves the Nou Camp.

The former Porto player has indicated he could leave Barca at the end of the season if they fail to enjoy a successful campaign.

Deco has struggled for form and fitness this term and he is believed to be considering his future at Barca.

The Portuguese international has revealed he would like to try his luck in England and he believes Manchester United would be an ideal destination if he does leave Barcelona.

"If we don't win anything this year I will be off," Deco is quoted as saying in The News of the World.

"Playing for Barcelona is a dream that I have realised."

"This is my fourth season and has been a fantastic period in my career but if things don't go well I will be leaving."

"The English league is somewhere I'd like to play."

"You can compare Manchester United to Barcelona."



Tottenham striker Dimitar Berbatov (C) holds off the challenge of Reading midfielder Stephen Hunt (R) during their Premiership encounter at White Hart Lane on Saturday.

GUNNERS RETAKE LEAD

Hammers stun MU

AFP, London

Arsenal reclaimed first place in the Premier League as Arsenal beat Manchester United 2-1 at White Hart Lane on Saturday.

The Gunners moved two points clear of United thanks to Eduardo's double strike and late goals from Emmanuel Adebayor and Tomas Rosicky in a feisty clash that saw both sides finish with 10 men at Goodison Park.

Tim Cahill had given Everton the lead with a close range effort in the 19th minute, but Arsenal turned on the style after half-time. Eduardo equalised in the 47th minute and the Croatian added a second 11 minutes later with a fine finish.

Arsenal striker Nicklas Bendtner was sent off for a second booking after a nasty two-footed lunge on Andrew Johnson. But Adebayor put the result beyond doubt when he punished Joseph Yobo's mistake in the 78th minute.

Everton's Mikel Arteta saw red for an elbow on Cesc Fabregas with six minutes to go before Rosicky struck with a low drive in stoppage time.

At Upton Park, Cristiano Ronaldo's 18th goal of the season looked like being enough for champions United when he headed in a 14th minute cross from Ryan Giggs.

But the Portugal star was made to pay for shooting wide from the penalty spot in the 66th minute following a handball from Jonathan Spector.

Hammers substitute Anton Ferdinand, playing against his brother Rio, drew the home side level in the 77th minute with a header and, with eight minutes to go, West Ham were ahead when Matthew Upson headed in Mark Noble's free-kick.

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said West Ham deserved their win: "I have no complaints. We were beaten by the better team. We were not nearly up to our normal performance."

Dimitar Berbatov scored four goals, including his first hat-trick for Tottenham, as they beat Reading 6-4 in an extraordinary match at White Hart Lane.

It was the second time this season that Reading had lost after scoring four away from home following their 7-4 defeat at Portsmouth.

Chelsea heaped more pressure on Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce with a 2-1 win at Stamford Bridge that meant the visitors had taken just one point from a possible nine. But Salomon Kalou's decisive goal three minutes from time appeared offside.

Sunderland moved out of the bottom three with a 3-1 win at home to Bolton while Middlesbrough won 1-0 away to Portsmouth as the home side went goalless in the league at Fratton Park for the sixth match in a row.

Aston Villa came from behind to beat Wigan 2-1 and Fulham, who finished with 10 men, missed out on their final chance to win away in the league this year after a 1-1 draw with Birmingham.

Spurs took the lead against Reading, when Berbatov turned in Robbie Keane's seventh minute cross, only for their defence to let them down once again as the Royals levelled minutes later through Kalifa Cisse.

Reading went ahead when Nicky Shorey's 53rd minute corner was headed in by Ivar Ingimarsson. But Spurs manager Juande Ramos then saw his decision to bring on substitute Jermain Defoe vindicated when his cross set up Bulgarian international Berbatov's second goal just after the hour.

Dave Kitson regained the lead for Reading before Berbatov completed his treble in the 73rd minute. Kitson then scored again, from 12 yards.

Spurs's Steed Malbranque made it 4-4 before Defoe capped a sequence of five goals in 10 minutes when he followed up after Marcus Hahnemann saved Keane's penalty-kick. Berbatov then scored the winner seven minutes from time.

Sunderland went ahead in the 13th minute against Bolton when midfielder Kieran Richardson, played in by Kenwyne Jones, shot home from 12 yards.

And then Jones himself made it 2-0 when he headed in from a near-post corner in the 32nd minute.

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Ferguson lays down the law

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has warned that he will not hesitate to sell any player who breaches club discipline.

Ferguson has taken a hard line with his players throughout his career and has not been afraid to sell some of the club's biggest stars.

And his latest warning comes after the club's Christmas party ended in rape claims.

The United boss has reportedly fined the players involved in the party a total of one million pounds (1.9 million dollars) - the biggest penalty ever dished out by a Premiership team for a breach of discipline.

And he has also banned any more parties and told his millionaire players there will never be a repeat performance.

The Scot said: "Football has changed but you cannot lose your control. That is why we make changes here at Manchester United when we see anyone interfering with this sense of control."

"When we see this, then it's time for them to go because this club is based on everyone being together."

"When we start going off at tangents you have to assess it - definitely."

Ferguson also expressed his dislike of the celebrity lifestyle now enjoyed by many high-profile players.

"What annoys me about some players today is this personal glory thing," he said. "They score a goal and then knock players out of the road so they can have their own private, personal gratification and praise from the fans. It's ugly seeing these kind of celebrations."

"These present-day footballers need to be noticed, with their car-rings and tattoos. They no longer go to the small Italian restaurants but to the big and bright places."

Berbatov eats Reading

AFP, London



Four goals by Bulgarian international Dimitar Berbatov inspired Spurs to an astonishing 6-4 victory over Reading in their Premiership clash here on Saturday.

Berbatov's quadruple came in a madcap match where Spurs thrice came from behind to level - Dave Kitson scoring twice, taking his total to eight Premiership goals this term, in the second-half for the visitors - and which saw six of the goals come in 14 minutes of the second-half.

The result will hardly surprise the statisticians as both sides had the best record of average goals scored whether it is by them or their opponents per game this term.

Berbatov struck in the seventh minute as the Bulgarian latched on to a pass by strike partner Robbie Keane and slotted the ball coolly past Reading's American goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann.

Spurs had already signalled their intent with a shot on target by Korean star Young-Pyo Lee whose

long range effort was safely gathered by Hahnemann.

However, Reading went level in the 16th minute as Khalifa Cisse - who had picked up an early booking from referee Keith Stroud - struck the ball cleanly past Paul Robinson after the England keeper had beaten away a Nicky Shorey freekick.

Both sides failed to conjure up any real chances for the remainder of the half but it was a different story after the break.

Reading came out all guns blazing and deservedly took the lead in the 53rd minute as Icelandic defender Ivar Ingimarsson headed past Robinson from the centre of the penalty area from Shorey's corner.

Robinson, though, was equal to the task nine minutes later when he stood up firmly to Stephen Hunt's shot and beat it away.

A minute later and Reading counted the cost of that missed effort as Spurs drew level, Berbatov shooting home from close range.

Spurs were galvanised by this and a few minutes later Tom Huddlestone nearly gave himself a belated 21st birthday present but his long range shot was saved by Hahnemann.

Reading made them pay as

Kitson grabbed his first, heading bravely home from the tireless Shorey's corner in the 69th minute. Four minutes later Spurs drew level again as Berbatov secured his hat-trick as he prodded home Jermaine Jenas' corner.

However Reading refused to be deterred and it was Kitson again who turned up to restore their lead with a fine left-footed shot from inside the penalty area after good work by Hunt.

It was Spurs, though, that again found the resources to come back as French midfielder Steed Malbranque - supplied by Huddlestone - curled a delightful effort past Hahnemann.

Three minutes later and the mayhem continued as Jermain Defoe rose to head past a by now shell shocked Hahnemann from Keane's cross - Spurs manager Juande Ramos tried to put up the barricades by replacing Keane a minute later with defensive midfielder Teemu Tainio.

If Hahnemann was shell shocked then he was even worse for wear in the 83rd minute as Berbatov scored his fourth with a fine shot from 18 metres out to give Spurs some much needed breathing space and end the entertainment for both sets of fans.

Maria tunes up for assault

Tennis

AFP, Singapore

Russian star Maria Sharapova plans to use low key matches in Singapore and Hong Kong to fine-tune her game before launching her Australian Open assault.

Sharapova said her Asian strategy was an attempt to go one better

at next month's Australian Open in Melbourne where she lost in the final in 2007 to American Serena Williams.

The world number five plays an exhibition match later Sunday in Singapore against compatriot Anna Chakvetadze and then heads to Hong Kong for the star-studded JB Group Classic.

Six of the world's top 11 women

players will face off in the Hong Kong tournament including sixth-ranked Chakvetadze, world number eight Venus Williams and number four Serbian Ana Ivanovic.

"... I am going to take every single match seriously because it is like I said, my only preparation for the Australian Open," Sharapova said.

The former US Wimbledon champion has beaten Chakvetadze, 20, in all six previous encounters, but Sharapova is not taking anything for granted.

Chakvetadze broke into the top ten rankings for the first time this year.

"It will definitely not be (an easy match) because this will be my first match coming back after an off season," said 20-year-old Sharapova.

"It's always a match that you anticipate because it's kind of like a challenging one because you don't know what to expect yourself," the former world number one said.

The Russian star, who came perilously close to adding this year's Australian Open crown to her grand slam resume, gave the thumbs up to the new Plexicushion surface for the first grand slam of the season which starts January 14.

"Well I heard it's going to be a faster surface and I also heard that it's not going to be as sticky which is going to be beneficial for all players especially in extreme heat. The court gets very sticky and a lot of injuries can occur," said Sharapova.

"So yes, I am very excited about it," she said.

Organisers of the Australian Open have announced the Plexicushion hard court will replace Rebound Ace as the official court surface for this summer's Australian circuit.

Australia's former world number one Lleyton Hewitt was among the most vocal critics of the Rebound Ace hardcourt surface.



Russian star Maria Sharapova attends the 'Maria Sharapova Celebrity Night' at Velvet Underground at Zouk in Singapore on Saturday.

Wenger salutes spirit

AFP, Liverpool



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger praised his players' character after they returned to the top of the Premier League table following a 4-1 victory over Everton here at Goodison Park.

The London club will start 2008 two points ahead of nearest rivals Manchester United at the summit following a gripping game.

Both teams finished with 10 men while Everton manager David Moyes said Arsenal's second goal should not have been allowed.

However, Wenger insisted his players deserved to be where they are and that they had it in them to win the English title for the first time since 2004.

"We have a great spirit in the dressing room as we have shown here," said Wenger. "We have

shown that we can cope with all kinds of problems that come our way," the Frenchman added.

"We started slowly and looked nervous. We gave the ball away too much in the first half but I was pleased with the response after half time."

"If you don't win then people start questioning you and the way that you play. But we have worked hard for this win."

"Everton stopped us from playing our normal game and they played well. The turning point was that we made the most of our set-pieces in the second half. It was important we didn't concede after we went down to 10 men. But when we scored another goal and Everton had a player sent off then I knew we would win."

"Last season Everton played a very physical game when we lost here 1-0. I'm not surprised that they played that way again."

Everton were on "course for their



Concerned teammates and opponents huddle around Motherwell captain Phil O'Donnell (lying on the ground) after he collapsed during their SPL match against Dundee United on Saturday. O'Donnell was later pronounced dead.

Player dies on the field

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Motherwell captain Phil O'Donnell died on Saturday after collapsing during a match against Dundee United.

O'Donnell, 35, fell to the ground as he was about to be substituted towards the end of Motherwell's 5-3 Scottish Premier League win over Dundee United.

He then received some five minutes of treatment on the field before being carried off on a stretcher and was subsequently taken by ambulance to hospital.

"Unfortunately I can confirm very, very sad news that Phil O'Donnell has lost his life," said Motherwell chairman Bill Dickie.

O'Donnell was set to be replaced by substitute Marc Fitzpatrick in a match but fell to the pitch as the change was taking place.

Motherwell manager Mark McGhee said: "I don't want to say

anything more than how devastated everyone at the club is for his wife and his young children. That's what we are all feeling tonight, nothing else matters."

"Obviously from the club's point of view we'll gather round to give his family as much support as they need."

Dickie added the cause of O'Donnell's death has remained unknown. "We don't know what it was but there will be a post-mortem. This is a tragic happening and that's all I can say."

The midfielder's nephew, David Clarkson, who scored twice in the match, was substituted after being alarmed at the sight of his uncle's collapse.

Gordon Smith, chief executive of the Scottish Football Association, said: "This is absolutely devastating news. Phil was not just a wonderful footballer; he was a great human being. My thoughts are with his family at this tragic time."

And Peter Lawwell, the chief executive of Celtic, said: "I am

O'Donnell's former clubs, added: "When the news came through, everyone at the club was obviously shocked. Obviously our thoughts are with his family to whom we offer extreme condolences for a tragic loss of a young life. Everyone at Celtic Park will mourn him."

Tributes also came from beyond the world of football.

Former Scotland First Minister, Jack McConnell, who represents the constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw in the Scottish Parliament, said: "Phil O'Donnell was a great professional who was admired by fellow players and fans alike. As captain he helped transform Motherwell this season."

"Phil will be sadly missed by his family and by football fans but he will be mourned by the whole community."

O'Donnell, who won one Scotland cap, began his career with Motherwell and rejoined the club in 2004 following spells with Scottish champions Celtic, who he joined in 1994, and English League side Sheffield Wednesday.