

Iran greet Daei appointment

AFP, Tehran

Iran's sports press on Monday hailed the naming of a former star striker Ali Daei as new coach of the national football team after a months-long search for a trainer of an Asia heavyweight side.

Daei who is the leading international scorer in football history, was given the helm of Team Melli (national team) on Sunday in a shock move after he had been mooted last month as an outside choice for the post.

His main task is to lead the national squad to the South Africa 2010 World Cup. Daei will now be in charge of preparing the team for Iran's next qualifier which is against Kuwait on March 26 in Kuwait City.

The national side made a disastrous start to their World Cup campaign last month by only drawing with minnows Syria in a performance that betrayed the effects of the lack of a coach.

"...and Daei became the coach," a satirical headline pointing to several months of waiting for the announcement of the coach.

Iran nearly signed up the Spaniard Javier Clemente, but a row over his persistence to remain home and only come to Iran near the beginning of a match dissolved the agreement.

"Mr World Goal, has become Iran's Team Melli coach," the Navad newspaper referred to Daei's 109 international goals scored in 148 appearances, outstripping greats like Pele and Ferenc Puskas, although admittedly against less demanding opponents.

In his first reaction to the appointment, Daei was quoted in the Iranian state television as saying that, "With Honour I accept the post. With honour I will serve the Team Melli."

"This (coaching) bench was his right," the Goal daily headlined an overly excited picture of Daei.

"Become a legend again," headlined Iran-e Vazeshi newspaper over Daei's laughing photo clad in a designer suit.

Daei, whose career includes spells at Bayern Munich and Hertha Berlin, only retired fully from playing last year and until now has coached Tehran club side Saba, who he led to the Iranian league title last year.

Three-match ban for Bommel

AFP, Frankfurt

Bayern Munich's Dutch midfielder Mark van Bommel has been hit with a three match ban and fined 15,000 euros (22,770 US dollars) for making an obscene gesture at a referee, the German Football Federation (DFB) announced on Sunday.

The 30-year-old was sent off in the 1-1 draw with Hamburg on February 24 after making the rude gesture and the Dutchman has accepted the sanction, the DFB said on its website.

The DFB's disciplinary committee had initially slapped a four match ban on van Bommel, but the midfielder contested the decision.

India manager blasts EPL

AFP, London

India manager Bob Houghton believes English Premier League clubs who try to establish links with Asian football are damaging the region's own leagues.

Houghton is convinced the widespread coverage of the Premier League in Asia has already taken its toll on the development of domestic football in the region.

The former China coach was horrified when the Premier League revealed their plan to play a 39th round of fixtures in cities across the world.

Although the proposal is unlikely to go ahead after heavy criticism from the sport's governing bodies, Houghton is desperate to ensure fans concentrate on the local product rather than watching the likes of Manchester United and Liverpool on television.

"To be honest, we're fighting quite hard to keep the Premier League out of India," Houghton said.

"The Premier League is responsible for the crushing of many successful leagues in Asia. In Thailand, Indonesia and Hong Kong the Premier League has engulfed them."

"Now, if they start playing games here as well, I just can't see anything that commends it other than the possibility for the Premier League to make more money. What else could it be to do with?"

"Let me tell you something that was absolutely dreadful. Last October, Manchester United had 5,000 kids in the Nehru stadium here in Goa to select 11 boys to go Manchester for a week's training," Houghton told the Observer.

"It was horrendous, because they were all believing that they'd end, after three days of judgement, playing for United. That sort of marketing thing is in nobody's interests."

MILAN-ARSENAL MARQUEE TIE

Elan up against guile



AFP, Paris

Arsenal and Manchester United, separated by just a point in the Premiership title race, return to European battle on Tuesday with the Gunners needing to fire in Milan if they are to reach the quarter-finals.

While United have the comfort blanket of an away goal in Lyon to give them as good as a goal start at Old Trafford, Arsene Wenger's men have no such room for manoeuvre as they head to the San Siro to face holders AC Milan.

A goalless draw at the Emirates had the benefit of ensuring the Italians did not return home with a priceless away goal in their pockets and two Champions League wins in nine attempts on their travels is not a statistic that makes happy reading in North London.

In addition, no English side has defeated Milan at the San Siro.

Both sides will be missing key personnel with rossoneri coach Carlo Ancelotti admitting he is concerned having had to do without centre-back Alessandro Nesta as well as midfielders Andrea Pirlo and Kaka for the weekend draw with Lazio - though the latter pair are set to return Tuesday.

During that encounter experienced Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf had to go off with a leg injury while Brazil striker Ronaldo is out for the season with a ruptured knee tendon.

Arsenal, whose title charge

suffered a blip with Sunday's home draw with Aston Villa, have lost Croatian forward Eduardo after his horrific injury suffered against Birmingham and will be doubly hoping that Dutch flyer Robin Van Persie, out since January, can make it.

"He might be in the squad but certainly won't start. We will assess him on Monday morning," was all Wenger would say on the subject, preferring to dwell on the need to be able to switch from the high velocity of their English game to the cat-and-mouse style of Europe.

"We will have to adapt to that because we like to play always at a high pace," said Wenger, who will hope that Emmanuel Adebayor, scorer in ten straight domestic matches, chooses Tuesday to break his European duck.

Ancelotti just hopes he can patch up his injury-hit men.

"The match with Arsenal is definitely causing me worries because we're not coming into it in optimal condition," Ancelotti acknowledged, urging his players to summon up "character, courage and desire to get to the next round."

"We're tired but at this time of the year all the teams are."

FIXTURES

At Nou Camp, Barcelona
Barcelona (ESP) v Celtic (SCO)
At Old Trafford, Manchester
Manchester Utd (ENG) v Lyon (FRA)
At Sanchez Plazan, Seville
Sevilla (ESP) v Fenerbahce (TUR)
At San Siro, Milan
AC Milan (ITA) v Arsenal (ENG)

Fatigue is hardly a problem for United, meanwhile, as it was virtually Sir Alex Ferguson's reserve side which strolled past Fulham on Saturday, where Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney were spectators while Michael Carrick, Nemanja Vidic and Ryan Giggs were also rested.

Lyon, who must attack to cancel out the Carlos Tevez's first-leg strike, can at least do so in the knowledge that central defender Cris will be back in harness having come through Saturday's win for the French table-toppers in the 1-0 win over Lille after six months on the sidelines.

Jean-Alain Boumsong, who generally shackled Rooney well in the first leg, was left out for the Lille match and faces competition from Sebastien Squillaci to partner Cris while fellow defender Anthony Reveliere is suspended.

Tuesday's other two matches are similarly poised, although Barcelona will expect to progress having come away from Glasgow with a 3-2 win over Celtic, who can welcome back midfielder Scott Brown following suspension.

With Real Madrid fighting to get back on terms Wednesday in their tie with Roma, Seville will try to keep alive a Spanish dream of three sides in the last eight by overturning a 3-2 deficit against Turkey's Fenerbahce.

Seville warmed up by squandering the lead to suffer their 12th La Liga loss of the campaign, 2-1 at Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday, a reverse which did nothing to suggest they will return to the Champions League fray next season.

Everton defend Cahill

INTERNET, undated

Everton have defended Tim Cahill after his controversial goal celebration against Portsmouth.

The Australian midfielder crossed his wrists as though he had been handcuffed and later revealed he was dedicating the goal - Everton's second in a 3-1 win at Goodison Park - to his older brother Sean, who was jailed for six years in January for partially blinding a man.

It is the first time that Cahill, 28, has publicly acknowledged the sentence.

He told Sky Sports: "Basically, it's for my older brother. Everyone knows my situation and I am just proud that he is happy and I am happy and I'm thinking of him always."

"My family means a lot to me and so does this football club. It's been a bit emotional but it's good."

An Everton spokesman defended Cahill from criticism that the celebration might be seen as inappropriate.

Saying that he knew some would not be in favour of the celebration, he said: "Goal celebrations are a personal matter and up to the player to decide - no-one dictates what the player can do as long as he stays within the laws of the game, as long as it doesn't result in a caution."

"It clearly was a very personal thing for Tim Cahill."

"Anyone who saw the pictures will see he was emotional and it meant a lot to him."

"As long as he keeps getting the opportunity to score goals, that is important."

"Tim is a highly intelligent young man and makes his own decisions and saw fit to send a message to his brother, if that's what he was doing."

"He is a very articulate young man and will have weighed up the pros and cons and decided to do it because it was a personal and emotional matter."

"I am sure Tim was fully aware that some people would not be in favour of what he did before he did it."

The midfielder also punched the corner flag several times - his trademark celebration.

Hubb happy with team

AFP, Berlin

Hamburg coach Huub Stevens was a happy man as his side enjoyed a 4-1 romp against Eintracht Frankfurt on Sunday to reclaim third in the Bundesliga while rivals Bayer Leverkusen were shocked at VfL Bochum.

Hamburg took the lead at home when Peru striker Jose Paolo Guerrero scored with a header as early as the fifth minute and Dutch midfielder Nigel de Jong made it 2-0 when he headed home a Rafael van der Vaart cross on 57 minutes.

Greek defender Sotirios Kyrgiakos reduced the deficit in the 70th minute for Frankfurt, but Guerrero added his second before Egyptian striker Mohamed Zidan scored the fourth seven minutes from the final whistle.

Hamburg are now on 41 points, six behind leaders Bayern. "I think that we took our chances well and produced some good attacking football," said Hamburg coach Stevens.

"It was important that we got three points and moved back up the table."

Also on Sunday, Bayer dropped to fourth after they were humbled 2-0 by Bochum, who lie a lowly 12th, when Polish midfielder Thomas Zdebel smashed home a left-footed shot on 66 minutes.

And midfielder Christoph Dabrowski made sure of the three points when he netted two minutes from time to seal the win.

"In terms of effort, I can't criticise my team, but we never found our rhythm and we had a few chances to get a better result," said Bayer coach Michael Skibbe.

Poker for Becker!

AFP, Berlin

Former world number one tennis star Boris Becker has begun a career as a professional poker player, according to a report in Sunday's edition of Germany daily newspaper Die Welt.

"I have already been playing intensively since last year," said the 40-year-old who won Wimbledon three times and has signed a sponsorship contract with an internet poker company.

"What fascinates me about poker is the psychology: what is my opponent thinking of me and what do I think of him," added Becker, who retired from tennis in June 1999.

Becker says he learned to play the card game while on the ATP circuit, especially at Wimbledon during the rain breaks.

And the German big-hitter says he is keen to recruit other former tennis stars to the poker table.

"I would like to know how people like Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras, John McEnroe, Stefan Edberg, Ivan Lendl or even Jimmy Connors, manage to keep their cool at poker," said Becker.

Becker is hoping to take part in Europe's grand final this April which will bring together 800 professional players in Monte Carlo.

LIVERPOOL THRASH BOLTON

Everton hold fourth spot

REUTERS, London



Everton beat Portsmouth 3-1 at Goodison Park on Sunday to move back into fourth place in the Premier League after their Merseyside rivals Liverpool briefly moved into the position earlier in the day.

Liverpool also won 3-1, at relegation-threatened Bolton Wanderers, in Sunday's early kick-off and briefly moved ahead of Everton until David Moyes's men scored an emphatic win over Pompey.

Yakubu Aiyegbeni put Everton ahead after 47 seconds against his former club and scored his second of the game to make it 3-1 nine minutes from time.

He has now scored six goals in his last three games since returning from Nigeria's African Cup of Nations campaign.

Jermain Defoe had pulled Portsmouth level after 38 minutes but Tim Cahill's well-taken 73rd-minute header restored Everton's advantage.

Arsenal, who drew 1-1 with Aston Villa on Saturday, lead the standings with 65 points from 28 matches, followed by champions

Manchester United (64 from 28), Chelsea (58 from 27), Everton (53 from 28) and Liverpool (50 from 27).

The race for the fourth Champions League spot will take another twist on Wednesday when Liverpool take on West Ham United at Anfield.

Liverpool went ahead at Bolton when Wanderers keeper Jussi Jaaskelainen conceded a bizarre own goal after 12 minutes.

Diving to his right to stop a Steven Gerrard shot that appeared to be going wide, the ball spun off the keeper's body and bounced back into the net.

Liverpool increased their lead after an hour when Ryan Babel scored with a low shot after Bolton failed to clear a Dirk Kuyt effort that bounced back off a post.

Brazilian Fabio Aurelio scored his first goal for Liverpool on his 46th appearance for them with a well-controlled left-foot volley after 75 minutes.

Tamir Cohen, whose father Avi played for Liverpool from 1979-81, headed a consolation for Bolton in the closing minutes but the home side were totally outplayed as they went down to a third successive league defeat.

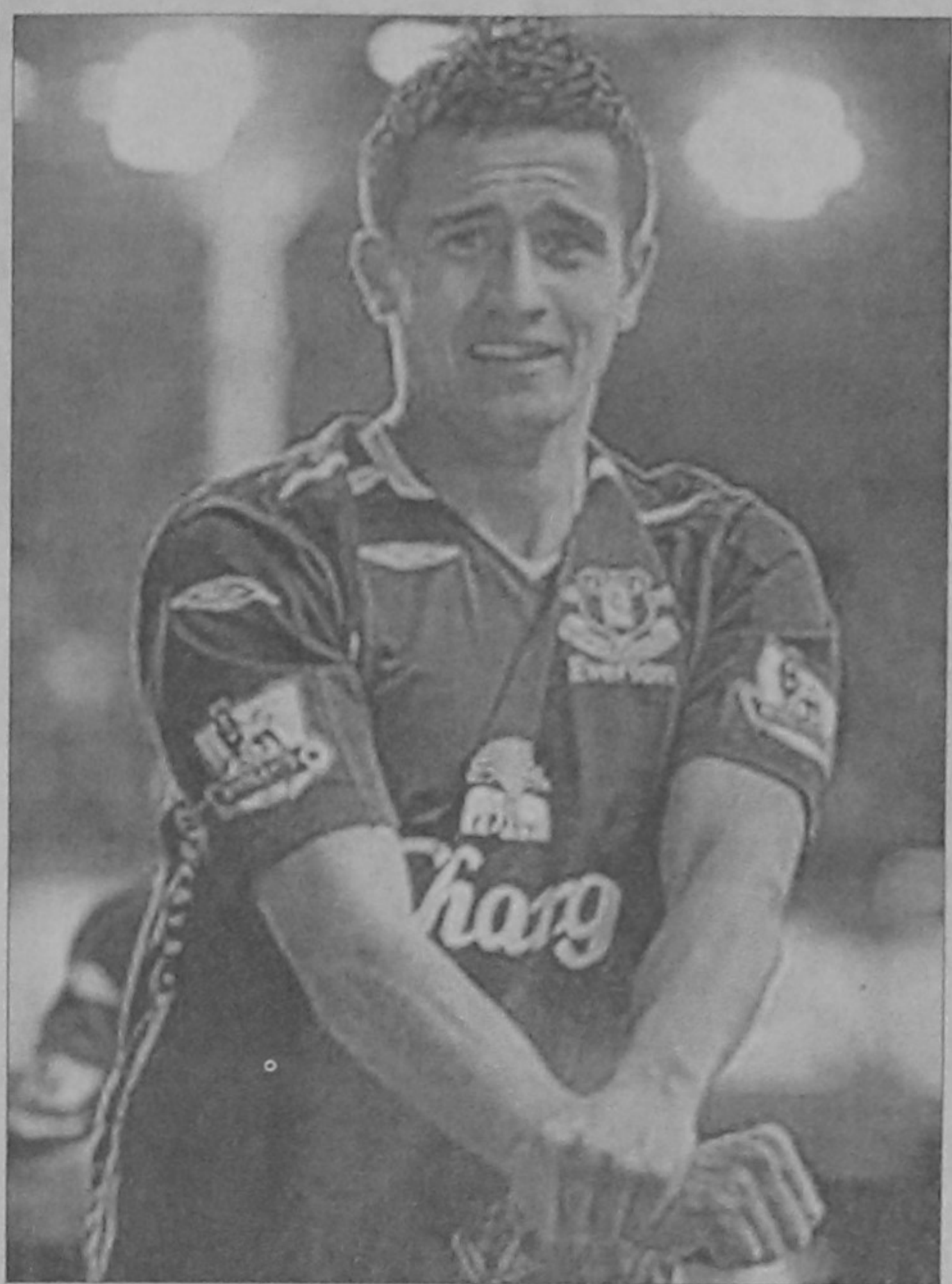
Bolton stay 17th, one place above the relegation zone with 25 points from 28 matches, the same as Reading, who have an inferior goal difference.

Arsenal ended a difficult few days on a high note on Saturday when Nicklas Bendtner equalised seconds from the end to secure a 1-1 draw against Aston Villa which kept the Gunners in first place.

The point came a week after striker Eduardo's season was ended by a gruesome broken leg injury in the draw at Birmingham City.

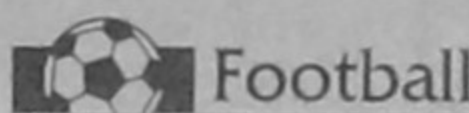
Villa went ahead when Arsenal defender Philippe Senderos put through his own net after 27 minutes.

Manchester United closed the gap on Arsenal to a point with their 3-0 win at Fulham, while Chelsea bounced back from their League Cup final defeat to Tottenham Hotspur last weekend with a 4-0 win at West Ham United on Saturday.



Everton midfielder Tim Cahill mimics handcuffs as part of his celebration after scoring during their Premiership match against Portsmouth on Sunday.

Eduardo thanks physio



REUTERS, London

Arsenal striker Eduardo said the quick work of physio Gary Lewin after he had broken his leg against Birmingham City last week could have saved his career.

The Brazilian-born Croatia international suffered a fractured left fibula and an open dislocation of his ankle joint after a tackle by Birmingham City defender Martin Taylor.

Eduardo, 25, is likely to be out for nine months but Arsenal expect him to make a full recovery.

"The injury was so grave I could have lost my foot," he told the News of the World.

"So I will always be grateful to Gary for what he did in lowering the

risk to my leg. That was decisive. I do not remember too much about the blow."

"I remember the pain, seeing that my foot had rotated, but I only recaptured my senses in hospital."

Eduardo was visited in hospital by Taylor and has accepted his apologies for the tackle which has ruled him out of the Euro 2008 finals in June.

"All I could do was look at his face I was totally pre-occupied," said Eduardo.

"I wanted to believe what Taylor said and to think that what happened was an unfortunate accident."

"I had to look at him. I could not understand how anyone could make a tackle like that in only the third minute of a game."

"But in the end I believed that

Taylor was sincere and I accepted his excuses."

"Even though he had destroyed my season it would be incredible to think that what he did was premeditated."

Eduardo said not being able to represent Croatia in Euro 2008 was "the worst blow" but he was heartened by the many messages of support from his club and international team mates.

"I will miss Arsenal's race for the title and the Champions League campaign but, most of all, my first European Championship with Croatia. That is the worst blow," he said.

"Euro 2008 was a big dream. To qualify was one of the best moments in my life but I am only 25 and I can play in other Euros. That's what is in my head."

Lay-off for Robben



AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Arjen Robben will be out of action for between three and six weeks with a severely sprained ankle, the Spanish club's doctors said on Monday.

The injury-prone Dutch international winger suffered the injury to his left ankle in the 67th minute of Real's 3-2 win at Recreativo Huelva on Saturday following a wild challenge by the home side's Quique Alvarez.

Robben will miss Real's crucial Champions League last 16 second leg match against Roma on Wednesday.

The nine-time European champions had to come from behind in their legendary Santiago Bernabeu stadium after losing 2-1 to the Italians two weeks ago.

He will also miss at least three of Real's next league matches, his absence coming at a crucial time for the club who lead La Liga by five points with 12 games to go.

Alvarez, who was subsequently sent off for the tackle, was repentant for his reckless lunge at Robben.

"It's the worst day of my professional career. It was a serious error. I was wrong and I feel terrible although I never had any malicious intentions," Alvarez told Spanish sports daily Marca on Monday.

Robben was the reigning Spanish champion's most expensive pre-season signing at 36 million euros (53 million dollars) when he moved from English Premiership side Chelsea last summer.

However, the Dutchman has been a costly luxury at times despite his excellent form since the start of the year.

He has only started six league games this season, and played in another six as a substitute, out of Real's 26 so far this season.

Among his various injuries, Robben suffered a torn thigh muscle while away on national team duty in a Euro 2008 qualification match in mid-October and was out of action for a month on that occasion.

Fiorentina beat Juve

AFP, Rome



Napoli produced a stunning display to inflict the first league defeat of the season on champions Inter Milan on Sunday and breathe new life into the Serie A title race.

Coupled with AS Roma's 4-0 thrashing of Parma on Saturday the gap between the top two in Italy is down to six points.

The 1-0 loss was only Inter's second defeat in their last 65 league matches, the previous one being back in April at home to Roma.

It was also Inter's third match in a row without a win and suggests that some cracks are finally starting to show in their previously impenetrable armour.

Napoli even missed a second half penalty, giving coach Edy Reja some worrying moments.

"Between the penalty and the

many chances we had we should have closed out the match," he said.

"It's a great satisfaction for us and our fans. Tonight there were 60,000, this public deserves a lot."

"The team found the right spirit and the right physical condition."

Napoli came flying out of the traps and unsettled the champions who gifted their hosts the lead, and the only goal of the game, on three minutes.

Brazilian goalkeeper Julio Cesar needlessly came out of his area to meet a long through ball and took on Ezequiel Lavezzi but his touch was too heavy and he gave the ball to Marcelo Zalayeta who scored with a sumptuous first-time chip.

Julio Cesar turned villain to hero towards the end of the first half as he dived full length to keep out a sliced attempted clearance from Marco Materazzi as Napoli finished the half the way they began it.

Julio Cesar's erratic afternoon continued with a quarter of an hour to play as he was penalised for bring-

ing down Walter Gargano, although replays proved he got a touch on the ball before tripping the Napoli man.

But he got up to dive the right way and beat out Zalayeta's spot-kick.

Substitute Pablo Osvaldo scored an injury time winner as Fiorentina came from behind to beat Juventus 3-2 in Turin and close in on third place.

Senegal forward N'diaye Papa Waigo scored his second goal in two weeks and set up the late winner after he too came off the bench.

Massimo Gobbi had given Fiorentina the lead in the first half but goals from Momo Sissoko and Mauro Camoranesi put Juve in the driving seat until the Viola substitutes turned things around.

Fiorentina trail third-place Juventus by just one point now and moved four points clear of fifth-placed AC Milan, who drew 1-1 at home to Lazio on Saturday.

The result means Juve have picked up only one point from their last three matches.

"We've paid dearly for two moments of naivety," said Juve coach Claudio Ranieri.

"It's the first time that we've only picked up one point from three matches, we need to look ourselves firmly in the eyes and manage to react."

Ranieri praised Papa Waigo for the difference he made to the match.

"Papa Waigo's introduction made them stronger down their right, we struggled in that area," said the former Chelsea and Valencia boss.

On 19 minutes the visitors were deservedly in front.

Gobbi broke down the left and played a one-two with Martin Jorgensen before finishing left-footed low past Gianluigi Buffon.

But on 29 minutes a mistake from French goalkeeper Sebastien Frey allowed Juve to level.

Frey flapped at a Camoranesi free-kick and former Liverpool and Valencia midfielder Sissoko acrobatically turned the ball home from the edge of the area.

The second half was more even than the first but Fiorentina fell behind on 57 minutes when Camoranesi was left unmarked at the back post to volley home a deep cross by Christian Molinaro.

Waigo took a pass from Giampaolo Pazzini and fired home through Molinaro's legs on 75 minutes.

Then deep into stoppage time Waigo crossed for Osvaldo to head home from six yards to give the visitors the three points.



Inter Milan defender Cristian Chivu (front) falls under the challenge of Napoli midfielder Emanuele Blasi during their Serie A match at the San Paolo Stadium in Naples on Sunday.



Villarreal striker Guillermo Franco is upset after missing another chance in their goalless draw against Primera Liga rivals Osasuna at the El Madrigal on Sunday.