

Ruud to go under knife

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Ruud Van Nistelrooy was Wednesday due to go under the knife following a right ankle injury and is likely to be out until season's end, Marca sports daily reported on its website.

The Dutch hitman, league top scorer last season, has been out of action for almost a month already, although the club did not immediately confirm he was on the point of surgery.

This season Van Nistelrooy has hit a dozen league goals, but has not found the target since January 20. Raul is the club's top marksman this season with 13 in La Liga.

Despite a weekend loss to La Coruna the meringues, who are defending champions, have a seven-point lead over rivals Barcelona.

Game awarded to Bilbao

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish Football Federation's competition commission on Tuesday awarded a league game to Athletic Bilbao after a bottle-throwing incident in Saturday's match at Betis.

The referee cut short the encounter in the 72nd minute after Bilbao keeper Armando was struck by a bottle of water thrown from the stands and had to leave the pitch on a stretcher.

Athletic were leading 2-1 at the time the encounter at the Manuel Ruiz ground was stopped.

The Federation also ruled that Betis should play two home matches behind closed doors but also praised the hosts for tracking down the offender with alacrity.

A similar incident last season in a Cup match against rivals Sevilla forced Betis to play three home games at another venue, the Olympic stadium.

On that occasion, the then Sevilla coach Juande Ramos, now at Tottenham, was knocked unconscious by a bottle.

Blind soccer in Germany

AFP, Berlin

Germany will have a football league for blind and partially sighted players when the Blindfootball-Bundesliga begins at the end of the month - just two years after the sport was first introduced here.

Blind football started in Brazil during the 1960s where there are now 80 teams.

The sport - which caters both for the blind and partially sighted - is played in other European countries such as England, France, Greece, Spain and Russia.

Blind football was only introduced here in May 2006 just before Germany hosted the last World Cup, but now less than two years later Germany will have an eight-team tournament when the league kicks off on March 29.

The teams are scattered across Germany with teams in the capital Berlin, Hamburg-based St Pauli, Stuttgart, Mainz, Dortmund, Marburg, Essen and Chemnitz.

Each team has five players including a partially sighted goalkeeper.

Helpers are positioned behind the goals to guide the players and the ball has a bell inside it to help players locate it.

Wrist trouble for Sania

AFP, Indian Wells

Indian tennis star Sania Mirza bowed out of the Pacific Life Open on Tuesday and said her spell in the California desert had caused a flare up of a recurrent wrist ailment.

"Right now it's very, very painful," Mirza said after falling 6-1, 7-6 (7/4) to defending champion Daniela Hantuchova.

"I don't know how I was playing out there, because, I mean, the ball was just flying out because I couldn't move my wrist."

"Usually it doesn't get this sore, so I'm a little worried right now. It gets sore and then it gets OK when I ice it and do whatever I have to do."

Mirza said she was going to seek an MRI within a few days to try and pinpoint the problem, which she says stems from her grip and wrist action.

Mirza said she would try to avoid surgery, but she was also not keen on the idea of changing the way she grips the racket.

"It's a big step to even change it half an inch because my game is my forehand," she said. "You know, it's not easy to change a grip at the stage where you're, like, 30 in the world. I would obviously like to look at other options before that."

Mirza said the windy conditions at Indian Wells had exacerbated the problem, because the wind wreaked havoc with the timing of shots.

Against Hantuchova, she said, she felt fine until she hit a couple of forehands late. She was hopeful that treatment would get her in good enough shape to continue in doubles.

"I still have a day," she said. "It could be perfectly fine by tomorrow morning. It just depends on the day."



Lyon striker Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring against Sochaux during their French Cup tie at the Gerland Stadium on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

**FRENCH CUP
Lyon ride on Benzema**

Football

AFP, Paris

Lyon and Paris Saint Germain shot into the quarterfinals of the French Cup on Tuesday night with two-goal heroes Karim Benzema and Loris Arnaud respectively.

Benzema score twice in Lyon's 2-1 home victory over Sochaux and Arnaud also found the net on two occasions in their earlier 2-1 victory over Bastia at the Parc des Princes.

Arnaud said after the match the victory, by largely reserve players more used to third division football, was a testament to confidence placed on them by coach Paul Le Guen.

"The coach gave us the chance tonight and we did everything we could to show him we would not let him down. He could count on us for the first division too," Arnaud said.

When asked if he might play in the next match for the first team, Arnaud said: "Why not? It's true it

was a great gift and it was such a pleasure that the coach had confidence in us for the match."

Le Guen said for his part: "I really think these players can get up to the next level with more confidence and experience. I'm happy we went through but there is still some way to go."

As for Lyon's game, Benzema score his 28th and 29th goals of the season all competitions combined.

It was a dramatic end to the match however. Benzema had opened the scoring in the 56th minute with his left foot but it was not until the few remaining seconds of the match that another goal was scored.

Kandia Traore equalised in the 90th minute but Benzema shot home the winner moments later following good work from Abdul Kader Keita to put Lyon into the last eight of the competition.

In other Tuesday night matches, Dijon beat Tours 3-1 and Sedan notched up a 2-0 victory over Angers.

Police raid Birmingham

AFP, London

Police investigating suspected corruption in football transfer dealings on Wednesday carried out a raid on Birmingham City.

The early morning swoop on the Premier League club was carried out by City of London Police, the force charged with investigating irregularities in transfer dealings that were highlighted by an inquiry concluded last year by former London police chief Lord Stevens.

A spokeswoman for the force said: "We can confirm that officers from the City of London Police executed a search warrant at a premises this morning in connection with the ongoing investigation into football corruption."

Birmingham said they were cooperating with the police and that the investigation concerned the activities of a third party unconnected with the club.

"For the avoidance of doubt no-one connected with the club has been questioned or arrested," the club said in a statement.

The Stevens inquiry involved the examination of 362 transfers involving English clubs and found that 17 of them could not be cleared as legitimate.

Reds want to topple MU

AFP, Liverpool



Xabi Alonso believes Liverpool's seven-match winning run has given Fernando Torres the perfect platform to shoot down Manchester United's Premier league title defence at Old Trafford this weekend.

The Easter Sunday clash is looming as one of the key hurdles for Sir Alex Ferguson's side in the title run-in and the Spanish midfielder is confident a Torres-inspired Liverpool can take revenge for the 1-0 defeat they suffered when United visited Anfield in December.

"We are in a good moment, playing well and scoring goals, and now we have to think of the next game against Man United," Alonso said.

"It is going to be a big game, playing at Old Trafford, we know their qualities but we are really looking forward to it."

Liverpool might have won their first meeting with United this season if Torres had managed to take the best of the chances they created.

The Spaniard is not missing much at the moment however and Alonso believes his compatriot's form means he could make the difference on Sunday.

"Fernando has improved," he said. "He is feeling really comfortable playing with his team mates at Liverpool and because of this he is getting better and better each day which is good news for the team."

"He has settled into the Premier League very quickly and that is encouraging because it can be difficult coming into a new league."

"He has shown he is not afraid of the physical contact here, with defenders trying to put him off, and that is really important."

Alonso meanwhile is enjoying his developing partnership with Javier Mascherano at the base of a Liverpool midfield in which Steven Gerrard has been largely freed of defensive responsibilities.

"I enjoy working with Javier and the partnership is working really well at the moment," Alonso told the Liverpool Echo. "He has got great qualities -- he holds his position really well, he is physically very strong when he comes up against another player and he plays well for the team."

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson admits that Sunday's clash could be "pivotal" in the title race, but he insisted he was not looking beyond Wednesday's visit of relegation-threatened Bolton to Old Trafford.

"There are big games coming up and Liverpool is one of them, especially when you consider Chelsea are playing Arsenal on the same day," Ferguson said.

"But when you see what happened at Derby on Saturday, not taking our chances, you realise you can't take anything for granted. Sure, there are big weekends ahead, but the other matches are just as important."

United missed a string of chances against Derby before finally squeezing out a 1-0 win over the bottom side courtesy of Cristiano Ronaldo's late strike.

And Ferguson admits that his forwards' recent profligacy is a source of concern.

"Some of our football recently has been terrific and there's good penetration in the team," he said. "It's encouraging that we're making so many chances -- perhaps the forwards just need to relax a little in front of goal. Then the goals will come."

Ronaldinho left out

REUTERS, Madrid

Ronaldinho has been left out of the Barcelona squad to visit Valencia for their King's Cup semifinal second leg, the Primera Liga club said on Wednesday.

The Brazil forward missed the 2-2 draw away to Almeria in the league on Sunday, with coach Frank Rijkaard saying the player was injured.

After a scan on an adductor muscle in his right leg, the club's medical services said there was no evidence of an injury to the muscle or tendon and that Ronaldinho was suffering from "medical problems".

He returned to train with the rest of the team on Wednesday morning but failed to make the squad.

Yaya Toure and Gianluca Zambrotta returned to the side. Lionel Messi, Deco, Rafael Marquez and Giovanni dos Santos are injured.

Barca enter Thursday's game at the Mestalla with the scores level at 1-1 from the first leg.

'Diego not for sale'

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen chairman Jurgen L Born insists Brazilian midfielder Diego will only leave the Bundesliga club over his "dead body" after reports both Real Madrid and Chelsea are interested in signing the play-maker.

"If somebody wants to buy Diego, he must murder me first. Diego will leave Werder only over my dead body," Born was reported as saying on German agency SID, quoting Spanish media reports.

Diego, 23, is one of the biggest stars of the Bundesliga and has attracted attention from Europe's top sides, but is contracted to Bremen until 2011.

Werder's Germany midfielder Tim Borowski will join Bayern Munich this summer and Born says there is no way he will let Diego follow him out the door.

"No one has rang me from Madrid - neither regarding Diego nor any other Werder player."

"Diego is not for sale. He has a contract with us until 2011 and is the most important player in our team."

With 26 caps for Brazil and three goals, Diego says he has spoken to international teammate Robinho about Real Madrid, but has had no direct contact with the club.

Federer back in form

Tennis

AFP, Indian Wells

World number one Roger Federer looked like his old dominant self Tuesday as he swept aside France's Nicolas Mahut to reach the fourth round of the ATP Pacific Life Open.

Federer, whose uncharacteristic slow start to the season has led to suggestions his position atop the world rankings could be in jeopardy, showed any such prediction was premature as he crushed Mahut 6-1, 6-1 in just 53 minutes.

"I don't know if I can be better than that," Federer said.

Added Mahut: "I had the feeling I was a junior and he was a pro. It was the kind of match that at the end you feel like you want to ask him how much for the lesson."

Mahut won only four points against Federer's serve and his only point against the Swiss' serve in the first set was a Federer double fault.

Perhaps more impressive was Federer's return game, which surprised both Mahut and the Swiss himself.

Federer, who has yet to win a

title in 2008, bowed out of the Australian Open in the semifinals and lost in the first round at Dubai.

He has pinned much of his early-season sluggishness to the effects of mononucleosis, which disrupted his usual training and practice.

"I'm feeling like I'm playing good tennis again. I feel like I did at the Australian Open after my first couple of matches. But this time I'm more sure I'm over the sickness, whereas in Australia it was quite extreme," he said.

Federer acknowledged he enjoyed the feeling of totally dominating an opponent.

"I think this is what you want to do," said the Swiss, who has reigned atop the world rankings for 216 weeks. "You want to try to run over your opponent, not give him a chance anymore. It was a perfect match for me."

In the fourth round, Federer will face Croatian Ivan Ljubicic, a 6-3, 6-4 winner over Spain's Tommy Robredo.

Russian Nikolay Davydenko, the world number four, became the biggest casualty of the event, falling to unseeded American Mardy Fish

6-3, 6-2.

Fish, ranked 98th in the world, broke an eight-match losing streak against top-10 opponents - a run of futility that had stretched back to the 2007 Australian Open.

He earned a fourth-round match against Australian Lleyton Hewitt, who beat Russian Mikhail Youzhny 7-5, 6-1.

Seventh-seeded Argentinian David Nalbandian advanced with a 7-6 (7/1), 0-6, 7-6 (8/6) victory over Czech Radek Stepanek, and next meets Spain's Juan Carlos Ferrero.

Ferrero edged Croatian Mario Ancic 7-5, 4-6, 7-6 (9/7). The Spaniard wasted one match point en route to the third-set tiebreaker, while Ancic was unable to convert two match points of his own in the tiebreaker.

Scottish 11th seed Andy Murray and German Tommy Haas booked a fourth-round meeting.

Murray beat Croatian Ivo Karlovic 7-6 (9/7), 6-7 (3/7), 6-3, while Haas, on the comeback trail after having a third shoulder operation last year, beat Spain's Fernando Verdasco 7-6 (7/5), 4-6, 6-1.

Theo, Becks set for recall

Football

AFP, London

Theo Walcott and David Beckham look set to win recalls to the England squad on Thursday, when Fabio Capello names a provisional 30-man squad for next week's friendly against France.

Beckham, who was watched by Capello's assistant Franco Baldini in a friendly for his club, LA Galaxy, in Dallas at the weekend, is thought to have convinced the Italians that he is fit enough to win his 100th cap in the Stade de France next Wednesday.

Capello, who managed Beckham at Real Madrid, left the 32-year-old midfielder out of his first match in charge, a 2-1 friendly win over Switzerland last month, but insisted that decision had been made purely because of the player's lack of match fitness during the Major League Soccer (MLS) close season.

More surprising is Walcott's likely return to the fold. The 19-year-old Arsenal forward was left out of the England under-21 squad, indicating that he will be named in the senior selection.

Walcott became the youngest England international in history when he made his debut against Hungary in a pre-World Cup

friendly in May 2006.

But that remains his one and only cap and the forward's development has not been as quick as some anticipated when he was included in England's World Cup squad.

Walcott is not yet a first-team regular at Arsenal but has produced some effective performances as a substitute this season, notably when he came on during Arsenal's Champions League win over AC Milan, a match for which Baldini was in the San Siro.

Capello must also decide whether to call up Manchester United goalkeeper Ben Foster, who has just returned to action following nine months out with a knee injury, and whether to continue with Steven Gerrard as captain following John Terry's return to fitness.

Foster, 24, won his first England cap while on loan at Watford last season and is widely regarded as the most promising young goalkeeper in the country.

But Capello may want to avoid placing him under additional pressure so soon after his recovery from a serious injury.

Terry served as England captain under Capello's predecessor, Steve McClaren, but missed the Italian's first match in charge.

Chelsea boss Avram Grant describes himself as a fan of Gerrard, but believes Capello should hand the armband back to

Terry, who also missed out on the defeat by Croatia in November which cost England a place at Euro 2008 and McClaren his job.

"It is a great leader so they don't need to change him," Grant said. "In my opinion, if he had played against Croatia, England would be at the European Championship."

Capello has said he will only decide on a long-term captain prior to the start of England's qualifying campaign for the 2010 World Cup later this year.

England began their bid to reach South Africa away to Andorra on September 6.

Bolivia will sue FIFA

AFP, La Paz

Bolivian president Evo Morales said on Tuesday he intended to take legal action against FIFA for the banning of matches above an altitude of 2,750m.

The head of state did not say however which international bodies he would be resorting to.

"A legal team is going to get to work (on this question). We will take recourse to international bodies and take action against FIFA because of this discrimination," Morales said at a press conference at La Paz.

**GERMAN CUP
Dortmund reach final**

AFP, Berlin

Brazilian midfielder Tinga helped book Borussia Dortmund's place in next month's German Cup final as both goal-scorer and provider in the 3-0 semifinal win over ten-man Carl Zeiss Jena on Tuesday.

The 30-year-old put the home side ahead in the 13th minute when striker Mladen Petric produced a bullet header which was saved by Jena's goalkeeper Vasilii Khomutovski, but Tinga was the first to react and slide the ball home.

And the Brazil international produced a cool pass on 70 minutes which Dortmund midfielder Florian Krings fired home, but when Khomutovski parried his save striker Diego Klimowicz followed up to make it 2-0 on 71 minutes.

Petric made it 3-0 just three minutes from time with a well-taken strike.

The defeat in Dortmund was the end of the road for giants Jena after they put VfB Stuttgart out of the quarterfinals with a dramatic penalty win.

Second-division strugglers Jena, who are just one from the bottom of the table, found themselves down to ten men when Czech midfielder Jan Simak was shown two yellow cards in quick succession which led to the subsequent red midway through the second half.

On Wednesday night, Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich will be looking to join Dortmund in the German Cup final at Berlin's Olympic Stadium on April 19 when they play VfL Wolfsburg.

It promises to be something of a grudge match with former Bayern coach Felix Magath in charge of Wolfsburg making a return to the Allianz Arena to face the man who replaced him, Ottmar Hitzfeld.



Dortmund midfielder Tinga (L) is challenged by Jena counterpart Niels Hansen during their German Cup semifinal at the Signal Iduna Park on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP



Indian star Sania Mirza makes a backhand return against Slovakian Daniela Hantuchova during their Pacific Life Open match at Indian Wells on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Maria extends winning run

Tennis

AFP, Indian Wells

Australian Open champion Maria Sharapova extended her 2008 unbeaten run on Tuesday, booking a quarterfinal showdown with defending champion Daniela Hantuchova at the Pacific Life Open.

Sharapova, the fourth seed, escaped with a 6-2, 5-7, 6-4 victory over Ukrainian Alona Bondarenko, overcoming some erratic play to stretch her match-winning streak to 17.

That run includes her Aussie Open triumph and a victory at Doha.

But she'll likely face her stiffest test of the tournament against fifth seed Hantuchova, who has claimed two of her three career WTA titles at Indian Wells and hasn't dropped a set in three matches this week.

Against Bondarenko, Sharapova was twice up a break in the second

set, but both times she was broken back, and she surrendered her serve in the final game as the match went to a third set.

"I did a solid job of winning that first set and had so many opportunities in the second set to finish it off. I was up a couple of breaks and just couldn't," Sharapova said.

In the final set, the Russian said, "It was just a dogfight."

Sharapova eventually finished it off, after 2hr 45min.

"I felt like I was pretty close to being down and out, because I wasn't able to produce good points for a long period of time. I felt like I was starting from scratch all the time," she said.

Although she managed to capture a second-set tiebreaker, Slovakian Hantuchova had her problems before defeating India's Sania Mirza 6-1, 7-6 (7/4).

After the two traded breaks in the second and third games of the second set, Hantuchova - who won her first WTA title here in 2002 - finally earned her first break of the

set in the 11th game, taking a 6-5 lead.

She couldn't serve it out, however, immediately dropping her serve to bring on the tiebreaker, which she dominated. Hantuchova raced to a 4-0 lead, then finished it off confidently with a service winner and a forehand winner.

Top-seeded Serbian Ana Ivanovic, whose runner-up finish to Sharapova at the Australian Open propelled her to number two in the world, rallied for a 2-6, 7-5, 6-2 victory over Italian Francesca Schiavone.

Ivanovic will play Russian Vera Zvonareva, who ended the run of Australian Casey Dellacqua 6-7 (5/7), 6-0, 6-4.

Second-seeded Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova advanced with a 6-2, 6-3 victory over Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki, lining up a meeting with Poland's Agnieszka Radwanska, a 4-6, 6-2, 6-4 winner over American Ashley Harkleroad.