

Fergie, C'Ron win Barclays awards

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson and winger Cristiano Ronaldo were on Friday named Barclays manager and player of the month respectively for March.

United's surge to the top of the Premier League reached a peak in March with Ronaldo playing a key role in their five victories.

Ferguson has now been Premier League manager of the month 21 times, while Ronaldo wins the monthly award for the fourth time.

Babel aims to emulate Henry

INTERNET, undated

Liverpool winger Ryan Babel believes he can become even better than his idol Thierry Henry.

Babel, who scored Liverpool's fourth goal in their midweek UEFA Champions League victory over Arsenal, says he can emulate Henry's success by reverting from a winger to a striker.

The Dutch international has shown glimpses of his undoubted quality at Anfield this season since his big-money move from Ajax last summer.

Babel has been likened to Barcelona star Henry by Holland coach Marco van Basten and the 21-year-old says he is hoping to convince Liverpool boss Rafa Benitez to utilise him in a forward role.

"Henry is an idol for me," Babel told The Mirror.

"I used to watch a lot of him on TV because he plays up front and I like to look at how he plays and what kind of decisions he makes at key moments."

"Like me, he started also as a winger before he joined Arsenal. Babel knows I like to play up front though, and hopefully one day he will give me the chance to play there and for me to focus on my favourite position."

"I'm trying to do the same as Henry by moving from winger to play inside."

"I try to improve my game so hopefully one day I'll be the same or maybe even better than the level Henry reached."

"I hope to give the manager another choice up front and even after training I spend half an hour practising something extra such as my finishing or control to reach that level."

Babel admitted the Liverpool players are focused on winning the Champions League to make up for another disappointing Premier League campaign.

"Our focus is on the Champions League," added Babel. "The title's not possible and we must try to end up in the top four instead. It's disappointing as a lot of people expected a great deal of Liverpool this year but we haven't improved on the last few years."

"If we win the Champions League though, then for a lot of fans the season would be good. But if at the end we have nothing it would be very disappointing."

Spending spree not on Wenger's mind

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal's recent meltdown has failed to convince manager Arsene Wenger he must embark on a northern summer spending spree.

The Gunners face a third successive season without silverware if they fail to beat Manchester United in Monday's AEST crucial Premier League clash.

Critics have suggested Wenger must loosen the purse strings when the transfer window opens, but the Frenchman retains complete faith in his current squad.

"We will continue to do what we've done. I will buy but not too much in the summer," he said.

"My priority is to keep this team together because we are still young, especially in some departments. If we can add one more body we will do so, not one in each department - just one experienced guy."

With the benefit of hindsight, Wenger would have broken the bank to sign Cristiano Ronaldo, whose goals have driven United to the Premier League summit and a Champions League semifinal.

Ronaldo was named the 2007 FIFA World Player of the Year award by Kaka, but Wenger believes the Portuguese winger has now surpassed the Brazilian at the pinnacle of the game.

"Cristiano is the best player in the world at the moment because he has the combination of the two most difficult things in life - style and efficiency," he said.

"I have always loved efficiency and he had that in the goals he has scored. He plays as a winger but he's scored 37 goals. You cannot deny that."

United lie six points above Arsenal with five games remaining and Wenger claims to win the title race from this position would be the finest moment of his career.

MU to end Gunners' season

AFP, Manchester



The feud which once simmered between Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger has long since come off the boil, but Manchester United manager would still find it hard to suppress a smile if he inflicted a final ignominy on his old rival on Sunday.

Meetings between the two English Premier League giants always quicken the pulse, but it is no exaggeration to state that no Arsenal travel to Old Trafford in disarray.

A season which once promised to be Wenger's finest since taking over in North London in 1996 has collapsed around him in the last 10 weeks, during which his side has been knocked out of both domestic cup competitions and seen their hopes of winning back the league title all but extinguished.

Last Tuesday's late Champions League heartbreak at Liverpool represented perhaps the most grievous blow to Wenger, who now faces a Herculean task in restoring morale ahead of the daunting trip to United.

Defeat would effectively end Arsenal's title challenge and, given

the memories of the 4-0 FA Cup thrashing in February are still painfully fresh, Wenger would be forgiven travelling north in trepidation.

Arsenal's players have at least attempted to put on a brave face as they confront D-Day and, if Emmanuel Adebayor is to be believed, Wenger still retains the faith of the dressing room.

"We have the boss to lift us," he said. "He will talk about that for sure. We will meet at the training ground and he will tell us what to do. He has more experience than anyone here and he knows the words to use so that we can come back on the pitch, be more successful and want it more."

"The most important thing now is to stay focused on what we can achieve this season. We are still playing for the title and we still believe we can win something at the end of the season."

"We were so close to the Champions League semifinals but football decided it the other way. As a player, these things are very difficult to take but it is better now to focus on the game on Sunday. It will be another big game for us and we will see what we can do."

Arsenal's problem is how to ruffle the feathers of a United side who currently have the confident

strut and swagger of champions-elect. Ferguson's team marched imperiously into the last four of the Champions League with a routine win over Roma on Wednesday and have not tasted defeat in the league since losing at home to Manchester City in February.

United might have stumbled slightly at Middlesbrough last week but such results remain anomalies and given the confidence coursing through Ferguson's players, it seems inconceivable that they will fail to tighten their grip on the Premier League trophy on Sunday.

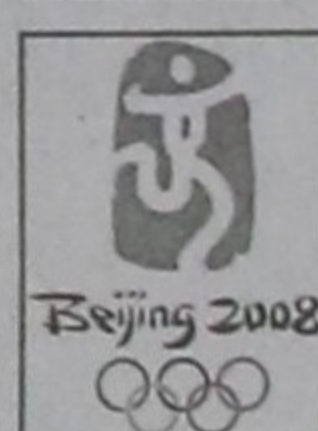
With nearest rivals Chelsea facing the treacherous prospect of two games in four days next week, it is even possible United's trip to Stamford Bridge later this month will be largely irrelevant.

"The games against Arsenal and Chelsea are the two big ones," Ferguson said. "They are fantastic occasions which all the players look forward to. It's best if you go into the games in decent form and I think our form is decent."

"It will be a great game on Sunday. As we know Arsenal have been our main competitor for 13 years or whatever and it's not going to change on Sunday. It will be a hard-fought match and hopefully we will take the spoils."

Trouble free relay in S America

AFP, Buenos Aires



The Olympic torch was run through Buenos Aires Friday under tight security in a relay free of the scuffles that marred earlier legs in Paris and London.

More than 2,500 police and other security personnel lined the 13-kilometer (eight-mile) course through the Argentine capital to keep at bay the few demonstrators denouncing China's crackdown in Tibet ahead of this summer's Games in Beijing.

Few incidents were seen or reported by the police, the most serious being an attempt by two protesters to douse the torch with water bombs. They were hustled away by police but let go after an identity check.

A champion Argentine windsurfer, Carlos Espinola, kicked off the run from the city's port under cloudy skies.

He was a last-minute replacement for soccer legend Diego Maradona who failed to return in time from Mexico as tentatively scheduled.

Thousands of people congregated in the central Plaza de Mayo, in front of the government's Rose House, to cheer the torch, which at one point was also briefly put on a boat and rowed along the city's River Plate.

Former tennis champion Gabriela Sabatini closed the three-hour run, carrying the torch into a horse-racing club's grounds, where it was presented to Jiang Xiaoyu,

executive vice president of the Beijing Olympics organizing committee.

There was no major disruption to the symbol's passage, though just before the relay started, rival pro-Tibet and pro-China demonstrators faced off along the route in the centre of Buenos Aires.

Police separated the opposing groups, each numbering around 50, after the confrontations threatened to degenerate. Around a dozen Chinese residents sang China's national anthem and waved red Chinese flags.

Along the route, placards could be seen decrying Chinese repression, but nothing hindered the torch's procession.

Victor Perez, a 47-year-old clothes salesman in the crowd, said "I didn't want to miss this," gesturing at the generally festive atmosphere of the event.

Torch relay organizers were breathing a sigh of relief, as the flaming symbol was a magnet for demonstrations against China's crackdown in Tibet on its previous stops in Europe and the United States.

In London protesters came close to grabbing the torch, while in Paris officials were forced to snuff it out five times amid security concerns. On Wednesday in San Francisco a massive phalanx of police and a sudden route change all but obscured the relay from public view.

The scenes prompted International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge on Thursday to call the protests overshadowing the relay "a crisis."

He urged China's communist rulers to honour their Olympic commitments to improve their

human rights record, but was effectively brushed off by Beijing, which considers the Tibet unrest a domestic security matter.

In Beijing, IOC spokeswoman Giselle Davies said the body had received assurances from the organizing committee that torch security was in hand for its 135-city tour around the world.

The relay in Buenos Aires was the only Latin American stop for the Olympic torch and the first time it had ever been to Argentina.

"It was a lovely experience," torchbearer Vanina Oneto, a former women's field hockey player on Argentina's silver-medal-winning side in the Sydney 2000 Games, told AFP.

"One dreams of many things but I never envisioned this in my dreams."

A call by Amnesty International Argentina for public figures to condemn Beijing's human rights record went unheeded.

Many governments -- and, in private, Olympic sponsors -- have expressed unease with China's repression of protests in Tibet, the Himalayan territory annexed in 1951.

Leaders including British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have said they will not attend the Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon was also unlikely to make it, his office said, while pressure is piling on US President George W. Bush to skip the event.

Scheduled to head to Tanzania for the African leg of its relay on Sunday.

Brazil won't play in La Paz

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil have reiterated that they will not be going to La Paz at 3,600 metres above sea level when they face Bolivia in World Cup qualifiers, adding to the controversy over a ban on high altitude matches.

FIFA have effectively prohibited La Paz and the Ecuadorian capital Quito from staging World Cup qualifiers because of the altitude, imposing a limit of 2,750 metres above sea level.

But last week, the South American Football Confederation (CSF) issued a declaration opposing the ban which was signed by the president of every member federation apart from Brazil's Ricardo Teixeira.

Chile have already said they are prepared to play Bolivia in La Paz in June but Teixeira said Brazil, who have been left politically isolated in the South American Confederation, would not be following suit.

"Brazil are not playing Bolivia in La Paz on the basis of what has been determined by FIFA's executive committee," he told reporters.

"The decision is not going to be changed and the CBF (the Brazilian confederation) will not take Brazil to La Paz."

"This decision was not made without reason. It has been supported by medical reports," he added. "We cannot place the health of our players at risk. It is a matter which needs to be faced with responsibility."

Brazil, who have lost twice, drawn once and won once in their last four visits to La Paz, are due to face Bolivia away in October next year.

FIFA have said the only exceptions to the high altitude ban would be if visiting players were given one week to adapt to games over 2,750 metres and 15 days for games over 3,000 metres.

However, foreign clubs are obliged to release their players only five days ahead of internationals.

Chile have said they are prepared to undertake the two-week acclimatisation for their match, which takes place in the European close season.

Bolivia and Peru have both complained that they supported Brazil's bid to host the 2014 World Cup but, having been awarded the right to stage the tournament, Brazil have now failed to reciprocate over altitude.

Roddick, Blake lead US charge

AFP, Winston Salem

Andy Roddick and James Blake gave defending champions United States a 2-0 lead over France in their Davis Cup best-of-five quarterfinal tie Friday.

Sixth-ranked Roddick dispatched Michael Llodra 6-4, 7-6 (7/3), 7-6 (7/5) for his eighth Cup win in a row and for his eighth Cup win in a row and for his eighth Cup win in a row and for his eighth Cup win in a row.

Roddick fired 30 aces and won the only service break of the opening match in the first set to hold off Llodra.

"Davis Cup experience had a lot to do with the result," said Roddick. "My results over the last five to six weeks had something to do with it and it has been a long time coming. I believe it's because I am a better Davis Cup player. It's a different kind of pressure and it's a different kind of match."

The Americans, bidding to win the trophy for a 33rd time, would face Spain or Germany in the Cup semifinals, with the Spaniards having seized a 2-0 lead in that best-of-five tie.

No nation has captured back-to-back Cups since Sweden in 1998, but Blake's triumph put the verge of advancing to the semifinals.

"(Mathieu) was serving so well," Blake said. "I wanted to give myself a chance, to get those returns in place and then take advantage of any opportunity that I had. He made an error on one of them and, before I knew it, I was back in it. And once you get that feeling of confidence, you feel like you can do anything. You get a second wind."

"There were so many ups and downs during the match. Against a player of a very similar level - 12 in the world - it came down to one, two points, who is at home, who has the surface that's right for them."

Top-ranked US brothers Mike and Bob Bryan will face Llodra and Arnaud Clement in Saturday's doubles match. Clement and Llodra beat the US duo at the Australian Open and two years ago at Wimbledon.

The French are without Australian Open runner-up Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, out with a knee injury, and 10th-ranked Richard Gasquet, who withdrew due to blisters, as they try to defeat the US men for the eighth time in 15 meetings.

Ronaldinho going to Milan?

AFP, Rome

A report in Saturday's Gazzetta dello Sport claimed that Brazil forward Ronaldinho has reached an agreement with Milan on a possible summer transfer.

The former twice world player of the year has fallen out with Barcelona this season as a dip in

form and frequent off-field indiscretions have seen the love affair between club and player come to a bitter end after five years.

He is currently sidelined with a leg injury that could keep him out of Barcelona's run-in, where they are chasing La Liga and Champions League glory.

But according to Gazzetta: "Ronaldinho to Milan: the ball is in Barcelona's court."

The daily sports newspaper



Barcelon star Ronaldinho is seen during practice in Barcelona on April 3, 2008.

Rafa wants to seal 4th spot

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool boss Rafa Benitez has ordered his players to win the battle for fourth place in the Premier League before thinking about their Champions League semifinal showdown with Chelsea.

Benitez's side are three points ahead of Everton with five games left in the race to finish in the top four.

Liverpool entertain Blackburn at Anfield on Sunday and then travel to Fulham before hosting Chelsea in the Champions League semi final first leg at Anfield on April 22.

And Benitez has told his players that he wants Liverpool to end Everton's hopes of finishing fourth in the next two games.

"That's what we've been telling the players," said the Spaniard. "We want to win every game now if it's possible and then see what happens with Everton."

"We want to make sure we can finish in the top four and then think about the semifinal."

"If we want to be sure about Champions League qualification then we are going to have to win four of our last five games. Maybe that number could be less, though."

Having watched his side's Premier League season fizzle out

on their way to being crowned kings of Europe in 2005, Benitez believes his squad has the ability to reach this year's final in Moscow as well as finish the league season strongly.

"We have the experience to cope with this situation and we know it's important to be focused on the league," Benitez said.

"We are always talking about how important it is to finish in the top four. The players know, the staff know and so we have to be ready for this weekend."

The build-up to Liverpool's penultimate home league game of the season has been overshadowed by a dramatic twist in the power struggle which has enveloped the club for most of the season.

American co-owner Tom Hicks has demanded the resignation of long-serving chief executive Rick Parry - a controversial move which has been condemned by Hicks's business partner George Gillett, who is also co-owner.

Yet Benitez avoided questions about the boardroom split by cancelling his weekly press conference on Friday.

Instead he spoke only to the club's in-house Liverpool FC TV ahead of the Blackburn match, his quotes posted on Liverpool's official website later in the day.

Asked about his reaction to the latest events behind the scenes, Benitez said: "I understand why you have to ask the question but, as

quoted Ronaldinho's agent and brother Roberto de Assis as claiming that only a fee needs to be agreed with Barca to make the move a reality.

"Basically, Ronaldinho and Milan have come to an agreement," he said before insisting that it was not yet a done deal.

"Milan are a great team, Ronaldinho was impressed with his first contact with them."

"The important thing is that he will be happy. When will a deal be finalised? You have to be patient."

Gazzetta claims that the deal worth eight million euros a year to the Brazilian until 2012 has been agreed while suggesting Barcelona would be willing to do business for a sale of 30 million euros.

However, it also claims that Milan don't want to spend that kind of money, looking to spend only 16 million euros, and that higher bids could come in from Inter Milan (25 million euros) and Manchester City (40 million euros).

Gazzetta also speculates about a major transfer merry-go-round this summer, particularly involving Italian and Spanish clubs as they try to catch up with their English counterparts, who have dominated in the Champions League this season.

In eight matches between English and Italian sides this season in Europe's premier competition, Italians lost six times while drawing the other two and winning none.

Spanish teams fared better, getting a win, a draw and two defeats from four encounters with the English.

Strikers seem to top the list of wanted players, according to Gazzetta, with Chelsea's Didier Drogba linked to Inter Milan, Palermo's Brazilian Amauri interesting Juventus and Genoa's Marco Borriello a reported target for Milan.

It also claims Real Madrid want Roma's Miroslav Klose, Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo while Barcelona are after Arsenal's Emmanuel Adebayor, Valencia's David Villa and Stuttgart's Mario Gomez.

I have told the players, we must be focused on football."

"We have an important game on Sunday and we have to concentrate on that."

Blackburn arrive at Anfield with an outside chance of qualifying for Europe next season and with Roque Santa Cruz in red-hot form.

Blackburn's manager Mark Hughes believes Paraguay forward Santa Cruz has proved better value for money than Fernando Torres at Liverpool.

Santa Cruz has netted 18 goals for Rovers, with Torres scoring 29 times in all competitions.

The two strikers are set to go head-to-head at Anfield on Sunday, but with Santa Cruz's 3.8 million pounds price-tag loose change in comparison to the 26.5 million pounds it cost Liverpool to land Torres, Rovers boss Hughes insists that his man has given more value for money.

"Roque and Torres would have to be up there as the two best buys of last summer," Hughes said.

"But pound-for-pound, I'm sure ours was the better buy. Roque was exactly what we needed. Torres always looks like he will score a goal, but I suppose when you pay 20-odd million pounds, that's the minimum you expect."

"We needed a player of Roque's stature and ability to keep us where we are. We got a great deal, we're very happy and we know Roque is as well."

Sharapova reaches semis

AFP, Amelia Island

Australian Open champion Maria Sharapova rallied to defeat Ukrainian Alona Bondarenko 6-7 (9/11), 6-3, 6-2 in a Friday quarterfinal at the WTA Bausch and Lomb Championship.

Top seed Sharapova advanced to a Saturday semifinal at the 600,000-dollar clay court event against US veteran Lindsay Davenport, who eliminated Hungarian eighth seed Agnes Szavay 6-4, 7-6 (7/3).

Russian beauty Sharapova, who turns 21 on April 19, has never reached a clay court final in her career but would also give her a chance to play for the 95,500-dollar top prize.

French teen Alize Cornet, ranked 49th in the world, beat 27th-ranked compatriot Virginie Razzano 6-4, 6-2 to book a spot in the other semifinal against Slovakia's Dominika Cibulkova, who defeated 2001 winner Amelia Mauresmo of France 6-1, 7-6 (8/6).

Davenport has lost five of six

matches against Sharapova, most recently at Melbourne where Sharapova defeated the new mum 6-1, 6-3 on the way to her third major title.

Sharapova improved to 21-1 on the season despite squandering three set points in the opening-set tie-breaker, eventually surrendering the set by netting a forehand, her 27th unforced error.

"Considering a couple of those set points I had, it should have been over in two sets," Sharapova said. "I was really tentative when I had those set points. Somehow I scrambled my way out of it in the second. She looked like she was getting a little tired."

Bondarenko, who broke Sharapova in the second game of the match, could not close the upset, however.

Sharapova smacked a forehand winner to claim the second set and broke Bondarenko in the third and fifth games of the final set on her way to a 5-1 lead before closing out the match with a service winner.

"I was pretty impressed with the way I mentally hung in there," Sharapova said. "I could easily have let it go in the second set with the way I let the first set get away."

Bondarenko dropped her only previous match against Sharapova in three sets last month at Indian Wells.

Sharapova skipped the previous event in Miami after complaining of fatigue following a semifinal loss at Indian Wells to Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova that ended an 18-match win streak.

Sharapova calls the clay surface her biggest challenge and said she is working as much to prepare for the French Open next month as she is to win another title.

"I would have loved to have finished this match off as quickly as I can. But I'm here to learn," Sharapova said. "I want to get as many matches in as I can before the French."

Davenport, 31, has won two titles in 2008 and enters the quarterfinals with a 20-4 record this year. She seeks her fourth Amelia Island crown after crowns in 1997, 2004 and 2005. She has a 33-5 record here with seven semifinal trips.

Szavay, ranked a career-best 15th, has never faced Sharapova before.

"Either one is going to be tough," Sharapova said. "I'm just glad I gave myself another opportunity."



Argentina's former tennis star Gabriela Sabatini (R) carries the flame during the Beijing Olympic Torch relay in Buenos Aires on Friday.