



Manchester United midfielder Owen Hargreaves (top) is lifted by his ecstatic teammates after scoring the winning goal against Arsenal during their Premiership match at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Sharapova wins first title on clay

AFP, Amelia Island

Top seed Maria Sharapova won her first claycourt title by defeating Dominika Cibulkova 7-6 (9/7), 6-3 in the final of the 600,000 WTA Amelia Island tournament on Sunday.

The Australian Open champ Sharapova dispatched Cibulkova in just under two hours for her third title of the year and 19th of her career.

It was the first championship on clay for the 20-year-old Sharapova, who had been 0-3 in previous showings.

Despite being a heavy favourite at the tier II event, Sharapova was challenged on the green clay by Cibulkova before earning 95,500 dollars for the win.

The Russian beauty was well rested as she walked over in Saturday's semifinals against American Lindsay Davenport, who could not play due to an illness.

The 18-year-old Cibulkova battled evenly with Sharapova in the first set, one that the Russian won in the tiebreak only when the Slovakian dumped a forehand into the net.

The 34th-ranked Slovak was appearing in her maiden WTA Tour final and it was the first career meeting with Sharapova.

Cibulkova has made an impressive run through the draw with upsets of No. 2 Anna Chakvetadze, 11th-seeded Amelie Mauresmo and No. 14 Victoria Azarenka.

Primera Liga stronger than EPL: Torres

REUTERS, Madrid

Liverpool striker Fernando Torres said on Monday that Spain's Primera Liga was stronger than the Premier League despite the presence of three English teams in the Champions League semifinals.

"In England the top four are better than the ones in Spain, above all when it comes to consistency," the Spain international told Radio Marca. "Apart from that, the rest of the teams in the Primera Liga are stronger as they have more quality."

The former Atletico Madrid forward, who netted his 30th goal of the season in Liverpool's 3-1 victory over Blackburn Rovers on Sunday, said he was enjoying the patience afforded by English supporters.

"The fans aren't on top of you all the time here, they give you time, they get behind you but don't suffocate you. I'm very happy here," he said.

Torres added that he would like to meet Barcelona in the Champions League final in Moscow, if his side can get past Chelsea in the semis later this month.

"The people here would prefer to face Manchester United, but I think it would be great to take on Barcelona," he said.

The Merseysiders knocked out Arsenal 5-3 on aggregate in the quarterfinals last week to make the final four for the third time in four years.

They host Chelsea in the semi-final leg on April 22 with the return leg at Stamford Bridge on April 30.

United take Barcelona, the only non-Premier League side, Barca, in the second semifinal.

Ferguson hails victory

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson hailed his Manchester United side's 2-1 victory over Arsenal here at Old Trafford as a decisive moment in this season's Premier League title race.

With just four league games remaining, Ferguson is convinced his men have now taken a massive step towards the successful defence of their title.

Next up for the Scot's side are Blackburn and victory at Ewood Park will mean United can all but take the title if they beat Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on April 26.

"I said if we win our next three games we would be champions," said Ferguson after seeing United come from 1-0 down to win thanks to Cristiano Ronaldo's coolly-taken penalty and Owen Hargreaves's superbly struck free-kick.

"We have got over a nervous day today (Sunday)," Ferguson added. "We've got a week's rest now, get them freshened up before Blackburn away."

"The players knew this was a massive game today. Arsenal and ourselves have been competing for

trophies for 15 or 16 years and the games are always so emotionally tight and this was another one."

Ferguson agreed his team had been fortunate to beat an Arsenal side who had gone ahead in the 48th minute through Emmanuel Adebayor as they tried to keep their season alive after last week's Champions League exit against Liverpool.

"The quality of this game was outstanding," Ferguson said as he reflected on another compelling United-Arsenal clash.

"There won't be a better game this year. They were the better team in the first-half. I thought we were very nervous and our passing was poor and I couldn't wait to get to half-time."

"When Arsenal scored they forced my hand, and I had to bring on Anderson and Carlos Tevez. That was a pivotal moment and we were fantastic after that, played some good football, and it was just an incredible game."

Victory would have hauled Arsenal back into the title race, moving them to within three points of United.

Instead, Arsene Wenger and his players were forced to admit that, at nine points adrift of top spot, they were out of the race having

been five points in front as recently as February.

Arsenal have been criticised for an inability to turn impressive performances into wins but their French manager insisted there would be no compromising when it came to the Gunners' approach next season.

"I believe the gap between success and failure is very thin and I didn't feel that today we were inferior technically speaking and in terms of quality," he said.

"I feel we have done a lot to promote the Premier League all over the world this season. I'm not an idealist, I want to win trophies and I am sad we haven't won a trophy," Wenger insisted.

"We want to win trophies by playing the way we do but we want to do it better. That will come."

"But we have to go beyond the situation we have now where the praise given to winners is beyond reason while those who don't win are slaughtered beyond reason," he added.

"We feel there is not a big difference between ourselves and the other teams. We play quality football because we think that is the way to win trophies. We have lacked maturity defensively at times this season but that will come."

EURO 2008 BRIEFS

AFP, Vienna

The 2008 European football championship in brief: GOOOOAAA!

All good things require preparation, including screaming at the top of your lungs. With less than two months to go before the start of the Euro, an Austrian voice coach is advising fans to start training their vocal cords now if they want to deliver a pitch-perfect cheer when their team scores its first goal. The method: "don't bray continuously, pause every once in a while, vary the volume," says Ingrid Amon. And drink lots of water.

BANKING ON THE CZECHS #2

After UBS, it's the turn of Austria's Raiffeisen Bank to predict a Czech victory at the Euro. Analysts at the bank said they will narrowly beat the Spaniards in the final, based on calculations that included countries' FIFA ranking, gross domestic product, bookmakers' forecasts...

and beer consumption. Austria could only hope to win if the model added more weight to GDP and lager, while co-host Switzerland would need the calculations to focus more on its anti-corruption record to triumph.

A LITTLE HEAVENLY HELP Austria is certainly hoping the Pope can work miracles. Captain Andreas Ivanschitz and his team, currently ranked 102nd in the world by FIFA, have been granted an audience with Benedict XVI and will travel to the Vatican on May 7th to meet the Pontiff. Whether the German Pope, who has a well-known love for Austria, supports Andreas Ivanschitz and Co. or the Mannschaft, only the cardinals will know.

ECO-FRIENDLY LOO

Come rain or shine, host city Innsbruck is set for an environmentally friendly championship. Its Tivoli stadium will use rain water to water the pitches as well as to supply the visitors' toilets. Meanwhile, solar panels will cover

part of its electricity needs. A lesson in using atmospheric conditions to your advantage.

NO CARLSBERG, NO FOOTBALL

Three cafes in the Swiss town of Basel will be literally walled off from the nearby public viewing area during the Euro because they refuse to serve the official beer. A partition will be installed on the edge of their terraces so their customers will not be able to enjoy a view of the giant screen. The drinking holes have reacted sportingly and decided to decorate the walls as creatively as possible.

TRAITOR IN THEIR MIDST Austria's interior minister Guenther Platter is tipping Portugal to lift the trophy on June 29, after defeating Italy in the final. And this, despite his country's participation in the championship.

Either the minister is showing great sportsmanship or -- since Austria fell to 102nd place in FIFA's ranking -- he is just being realistic.

Dunga considers Adriano recall

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil coach Dunga is considering recalling Adriano after the striker's hot start to the year for Sao Paulo, where he is on loan from Inter Milan.

Adriano, beset by physical and reported alcohol problems in the past 18 months, has only played once for Brazil under Dunga, in last year's 2-0 friendly defeat by Portugal.

"He has evolved, he is improving a lot with Sao Paulo," Dunga said in a television interview on Monday.

"He had a few problems at the start but he is getting back to being the Adriano that we all know."

"Without doubt, if he goes back to being the Adriano that he was before, he will have chances because he is a player with strength, power and he scores goals."

Adriano, known as the "Emperor," has scored 14 goals for Sao Paulo this year, 11 in the Paulista championship and three in the Libertadores Cup.

He scored both goals in a 2-0 win over Palmeiras on Sunday, although the first caused controversy as it seemed to strike his hand on its way into the goal.

Adapting the phrase used by Diego Maradona after his infamous goal for Argentina against England at the 1986 World Cup, Adriano said: "It was the hand of the Emperor."

Adriano appears to have overcome a troubled start with the Brazilian champions.

After signing for Sao Paulo last December, he promised to turn over a new leaf, only to be photographed at a pop concert in Rio de Janeiro holding a beer can two days later.

A week later, he was involved in a car accident in Rio. Although nobody was injured, it happened in the early hours of the morning, raising more suspicions he had been out on the town.

In February he was fined 40 percent of a month's wages after arriving late for training, then leaving early and threatening a cameraman.

Roddick sends US into semis

AFP, Winston Salem

The United States advanced to the semifinals of the Davis Cup with a 4-1 victory over France here on Sunday.

Andy Roddick beat France's Paul-Henri Mathieu 6-2, 6-3, 6-2 in the fourth rubber of their quarterfinal, giving the Americans an insurmountable 3-1 lead.

With the victory, the US next will face Spain in September's semifinal round in the European nation.

Roddick's series-clinching victory follows two singles wins on Friday by the Americans. Roddick beat Michael Llodra 6-4, 7-6 (7/3), 7-6 (7/5) and James Blake defeated Mathieu 7-6 (7/5), 6-7 (3/7), 3-6, 7-5.

"I don't think it would have mattered the way I played today," Roddick said.

Roddick is now a perfect 10-0 when given the opportunity to clinch a tie.

Roddick improved to 3-1 all-time against Mathieu, including a meeting in the second round at Dubai in March.

"He was tough to beat today," Mathieu said. "You know, he played a great match."

Llodra teamed up Arnaud Clement on Saturday to beat Bob and Mike Bryan in doubles, snapping the American duo's nine-match winning streak on home soil.

In 2007, Roddick clinched two series - the first round against the Czech Republic in Ostrava and the semifinal against Sweden in Gothenburg.

In a dead fifth rubber, James Blake topped Richard Gasquet, 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 6-4, to seal a 4-1 win for the US.

Gasquet, the 10th-ranked player in the world, had been unable to play in the first round of singles on Friday due to blisters.

Rosicky will recover

AFP, Prague

Czech captain Tomas Rosicky will recover from a recurring knee tendonitis which has made him doubtful for Euro 2008 in his homeland, the player announced on his website on Monday.

"Tomas Rosicky's rehabilitation, following agreement with Arsenal management, will continue in Prague," the site said of the Gunners' midfielder star.

Rosicky has been sidelined by a painful inflammation at the back of his knee since the end of January.

His continued absence for club and country prompted Czech football federation chiefs and the team doctor to voice concerns last week over whether the key 27-year-old would be fit for June's Euro 2008 championships.

Rosicky sought to calm those worries with the announcement on his website that: "In the last few days I have been feeling a bit better."

Inter maintain lead

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan responded to AS Roma's earlier 3-1 victory at Udinese by beating Fiorentina 2-0 at the San Siro on Sunday to maintain their four-point lead in Serie A.

Goals from Esteban Cambiasso and teenage striker Mario Balotelli earned the champions a deserved victory over Champions League chasing Fiorentina.

The result also gave AC Milan a Champions League lifeline after they lost 3-2 at Juventus on Saturday. The Viola's loss meant Milan remain just four points off fourth place and the final Champions League qualification position.

Inter had the better of the first half chances but French goal-keeper Sebastien Frey was in fine form and denied Javier Zanetti and Julio Cruz.

But he could do nothing 10 minutes after the restart when France captain Patrick Vieira managed to square the ball into the box despite being grounded, finding Cambiasso, who rifled home into the roof of the net.

Seven minutes later rising star Balotelli beat the offside trap and kept his head to coolly slot home from just inside the area.

Earlier Roma had kept their Serie A title dreams alive with a come-from behind victory at in Udine.

But it was a crucial victory for Roma, who welcomed back captain and talisman Francesco Totti to the starting line-up.

Any worries they would still be suffering a Champions League hangover after losing to Manchester United in midweek were dispelled by goals from Mirko Vucinic, Rodrigo Taddei and Ludovic Giuly, cancelling out Antonio Di Natale's opener.

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti was delighted with the result which kept the pressure on Inter with only five matches left.

"We played a great match and really deserved the victory, we also deserved to be ahead before they took the lead," he said.

"Do we have an easier run-in than Inter? Yes, it's ok but it always depends on them because there's still four points to make up and if they don't lose something, tonight's match is vital."

Totti was quickly back in the swing of things and was at the heart of most of Roma's forward momentum, but they created nothing clear-cut in the first 45 minutes, despite persistent probing.

And six minutes after the break the visitors fell behind after a horrendous error from Cristian

Panucci.

The veteran defender ducked away from a far post cross, allowing Di Natale to plant a downward header past goalkeeper Doni. That prompted a furious argument between Brazilian Doni and Panucci.

Roma started to take the ascendancy and Brazilian full-back Cicinho rattled the post.

They were level on 64 minutes as David Pizarro dinked a ball into the area and Macedonia forward Vucinic came off the left wing to take the ball on his chest and fire home in one fluid movement.

The visitors were in control and it was no surprise on 70 minutes when they took the lead, Brazilian Taddei curling home a left footed shot from inside the area after Roma had passed the ball around Udinese's box.

In the last minute substitute Giuly took a pass from Matteo Brihi and shot home left footed.

In other games Sampdoria missed the chance to stake their claim for Champions League football next season as they lost 1-0 at lowly Reggina, who thus climbed off the bottom of the table.

Sampdoria remain sixth while Udinese stay seventh as both remain in the hunt for Champions League qualification next season ahead of their meeting next weekend.

Real show champion spirit

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Bernd Schuster hailed the champion spirit of his team after they ground out a 1-0 win over Real Murcia on Sunday despite

playing 70 minutes of the match with ten men after Miguel Torres was sent off for a crude challenge.

Dutch international Wesley Sneijder scored the all-important goal on 59 minutes as Real surged nine points clear of Barcelona and ten of Villarreal.

"After the red card we still went for the victory and winning with one man less is commendable," said Real coach Bernd Schuster. "It is not easy finding space especially with ten men and I am happy with the result and how my team played."

"We have to take it one match at a time now and try not to lose any of them and then we will see where we end up."

Villarreal lost 1-0 against Almeria to make it a perfect weekend for Real.

"The Yellow Submarine" had goalkeeper Diego Lopez sent off on 16 minutes and fell victim to a late goal as they spurned the chance to go above Barcelona to second.

With Barcelona seemingly incapable of killing teams off - they drew 2-2 with Recreativo Huelva on Saturday after twice going ahead - Real look set to retain the league although it has been far from a high-quality title race.

Murcia started with a 4-5-1 formation to put a bottleneck in front of Real and Schuster responded with Robinho and Arjen Robben on the flanks to supply lone striker Raul.

But Schuster's game plan was ruined on 19 minutes when Torres produced a foolish tackle from behind earning him a straight red card.

Murcia, second from bottom in the standings, made their extra man count at times but were indecisive in front of goal showing why they average less than a goal a game.

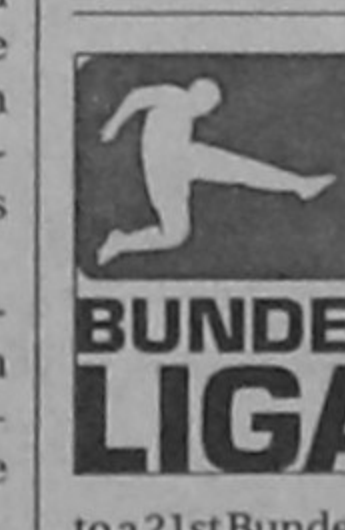
Real were jeered at half-time by their demanding home fans but winning is the most important thing and Sneijder's goal lifted the gloom.



Real Madrid midfielder Wesley Sneijder celebrates after scoring the all-important goal against Murcia during their Primera Liga encounter at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

Bayern destroy Dortmund

AFP, Berlin



League leaders Bayern Munich, freshly qualified for the UEFA Cup semifinals, routed Borussia Dortmund 5-0 on Sunday to edge ever closer to a 21st Bundesliga title.

Bayern stormed into an incredible 4-0 lead after just 22 minutes, thanks to some inspirational play by Italian Luca Toni and Brazilian Ze Roberto against a meek Dortmund defence.

After being taken to extra-time by Getafe in the second leg of the UEFA Cup quarterfinals on Thursday, which they eventually won 3-3 for a 4-4 aggregate win thanks to away goals, Bayern did not waste any time against Dortmund.

Striker Lukas Podolski opened the scoring in the third minute with a 20-metre wonder strike.

Five minutes later, Ze Roberto was played in by Philipp Lahm for a goal for the home side seemingly not missing the presence of France playmaker Franck Ribery in the stands after picking up a foot injury against Getafe and being rested by coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

Bayern, who seemed so laborious against Getafe, monopolised possession against Dortmund, a team they will also meet next Saturday in the final of the German Cup.

Toni, whose late extra time double did it for Getafe, hit a brace within four minutes (18, 22) from Ze Roberto free-kicks, taking to 31 the number of goals scored in all competitions this season - and 18 in the Bundesliga.

Ott held the fifth 27 minutes into the second-half as Hitzfeld rolled on the replacements in a game well won.

With just six games left to season's end, Bayern are now 10 points ahead of second-placed Werder Bremen and can move even closer to the league title at eighth-placed Frankfurt on Wednesday.

Werder Bremen thrashed Schalke 04 5-1 on Saturday to move into second, a loss too many for under-fire Schalke coach Mirko Slomka.

Slomka, whose side were ousted from the Champions League in midweek by Barcelona, stood down on Sunday after the intense pressure that had been building since three successive league defeats in February finally proved to be too much.

Defending league champions Stuttgart continued their erratic form with a 3-0 defeat at Bayer Leverkusen on Sunday to leave themselves in sixth place and 15 points from their likely successors, Bayern.