

Messi expects Ronaldinho will stay

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Argentine striker Lionel Messi said Thursday he hopes Ronaldinho, who is being courted by AC Milan, will remain at the club next year.

"At Barca, we want everyone to remain at the club. If he goes, I will be sad," he said.

"He has helped me a lot to integrate into the team. Any team would like to have him. I still hope that he will stay."

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani said on Sunday that the reigning European champions have come to an agreement with Ronaldinho over a possible summer transfer.

Former twice world player of the year Ronaldinho 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.

Chelsea stay in the hunt

AFP, Liverpool



Michael Essien kept Chelsea's Premier League title hopes alive as Avram Grant's side all but ended Everton's hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League with a 1-0 victory at Goodison Park here Thursday.

Essien's second goal in as many games saw the London club move two points behind leaders Manchester United with three games to play.

Reigning champions United will re-establish a five-point lead at the summit if they win at Blackburn Rovers on Saturday and this was a crucial win for Chelsea, who face the leaders at Stamford Bridge on April 26.

Essien struck four minutes before half-time as he capped off a fine move involving Shaun Wright-Phillips.

Chelsea just about did enough to deserve all three points on an evening when they suffered much frustration at the hands of an Everton side which started with hopes of securing a top four finish.

Yet David Moyes's side can forget about Champions League football for another season with

neighbours Liverpool now clear favourites to secure the fourth and final qualifying spot on offer to England's leading quartet.

Having surprisingly been held to a 1-1 draw at home to lowly Wigan on Monday, the pressure was well and truly on Grant and his side.

Yet they responded with a performance which keeps the title race bubbling for another week at least. Chelsea did not have it all their own way.

Indeed it required a fine save by Petr Cech to deny Portugal's Manuel Fernandes, on loan from Valencia, from giving the hosts an early lead after Nicolas Anelka had conceded a free-kick on the edge of his own area after fouling Everton captain Phil Neville.

For long periods the visitors looked as though they were still suffering a hangover from Wigan, a game which badly damaged their title hopes after Chelsea conceded a stoppage-time equaliser.

One of their best chances on Thursday fell to Wright-Phillips, but the England international dithered long enough for Phil Jagielka to make a goal-saving challenge after Salomon Kalu's defence-splitting pass.

Then came the goal which breathed new life into Chelsea's season.

Essien started the move deep and after a neat one-two with the industrious Wright-Phillips, the Ghana star buried the ball beyond Everton's United States keeper Tim Howard.

The goal revitalised Chelsea, Jon Mikel Obi going close to doubling the lead a minute with a stinging long-range effort which brought an excellent finger-tip save from Howard.

Everton have enjoyed an exceptional season by their standards, pushing neighbours Liverpool all the way in the race to finish fourth.

Yet one win in their previous five outings suggests they have finally run out of steam.

They were toothless for much of the game with Nigerian striker Aiyebeni Yakubu, who has been a revelation since his 11.25 million pounds (£22.50 million dollars) move from Middlesbrough earlier in the season, particularly ineffective.

Instead it was Fernandes who proved to be the home side's most threatening player, Everton's No 23 going close to equalising from a 67th minute free-kick.

It was the nearest Everton came to levelling the match yet the way Chelsea's players celebrated at the final whistle proved how relieved they were to emerge with three points.



Chelsea forward Salomon Kalou (R) tries to get past Everton defender Joseph Yobo during their Premiership encounter at Goodison Park on Thursday.

Real look to get closer

AFP, Madrid



La Liga leaders Real Madrid could move one step closer to winning a record 31st Spanish title if they can win at Racing Santander on Sunday.

The failure of their bitter rivals Barcelona to take advantage when they've dropped points has meant Real have established a nine-point lead at the top of La Liga with just six games remaining.

"I think we can wrap up the league title when we play Barcelona (on May 7) with three games to go. I'd love to win the league by beating Barca," said Real's rejuvenated Dutch winger Wesley Sneijder on Thursday.

After struggling with niggling injuries since the start of the year, Sneijder has returned to his best form in recent games.

His superb strike to give ten-man Real a 1-0 win over Murcia last Sunday could, in retrospect, be viewed as a pivotal point in the season when Madrid mentally clinched the league in their own minds and the heads of their rivals.

However, despite Sneijder's bubbling optimism at the prospect of Real soon being crowned champions, club captain Raul Gonzalez erred on the side of caution.

"Each day we are getting closer (to the title) but we still have to take each game as it comes. We've got a big lead but the run in is also complicated and Racing will be out to win," commented Raul on Thursday.

One issue that should calm any chance of Real getting carried away as they travel to the north of Spain is that coach Bernd Schuster has a number of suspension and injury problems to deal with.

Real will be without the services of defender Miguel Torres and influential playmaker Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez who are both suspended.

Training sessions on Thursday suggested Schuster is about to spring a surprise and ask Raul to drop back into Guti's role and, in the absence of the still-injured Ruud van Nistelrooy, start with the unsettled Javier Saviola.

The Argentine international has only started three previous league games for Real this season.

In addition, Schuster may be unable to call on the services of Saviola's compatriot Fernando Gago due to a left knee knock picked up against Murcia.

If Gago is unfit, Malian international Mahamadou Diarra is expected to reclaim his place in the midfield after having to be relegated to the bench in recent weeks.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off times in GMT)
 Almeria v Real Betis (1800),
 Barcelona v Espanyol (1800),
 Real Zaragoza v Recreativo Huelva (1800),
 Sevilla v Almeria (2000)
Sunday
 Levante v Getafe (1500), Osasuna v Athletic Bilbao (1500), Villarreal v Valladolid (1500), Murcia v Real Mallorca (1500), Racing Santander v Real Madrid (1700), Athletic Bilbao v Valencia (1900)

Racing have ambitions of their own and will be determined not to let Real run riot.

They currently lie in fifth place and want to ensure that they capture a place in European competition for the first time in their 95-year history.

Second-placed Barcelona entertain Espanyol in a local derby on Saturday, a match described by Spanish sports daily AS on Thursdays as, "a depression derby."

Both sides have struggled over the second half of the season to match the expectations engendered in the first.

"We are playing for our dignity. For us the derby is perfect. We've got nothing to lose," said Espanyol coach Ernesto Valverde on Thursday.

Espanyol have slipped from being in Champions League contention to eighth place, with UEFA Cup qualification also now probably being beyond their reach.

The club's fans left the players in no doubt what they thought of their team's decline over recent months when they unfurled a huge banner at training on Wednesday.

"Pride, honour, courage, fighting spirit... what don't you understand," questioned the banner.

One factor in Espanyol's favour is that Barca coach Frank Rijkaard may well have his mind on Wednesday's Champions League semi-final first leg against Manchester United and rest several players.

At the other end of the table, bottom club Levante could be relegated on Sunday if they lose at home to Getafe and Recreativo Huelva have managed to get a point at Real Zaragoza 24 hours earlier.

Talks start on Nedved return

AFP, Prague

A top Czech football association official said Thursday that he believed national manager Karel Bruckner had begun talks to bring back Juventus midfielder star Pavel Nedved into the national squad for the Euro 2008 championships.

"I believe that some communication is going on there... But the situation is not so advanced that I could say that Nedved is returning to the national squad," first deputy president of the Czech and Moravian Football Federation Vlastimil Kostal said in an interview with radio station Frekvence 1.

The Juventus midfielder, with 18 goals from 91 caps to his name, called time on his international career after the 2006 World Cup.

But pressure has mounted for the 2003 European Footballer of the Year to return to the national fold especially in the light of doubts whether Arsenal midfielder star Tomas Rosicky will recover in time for the championships from a long term injury.

"Of course there is a chance that both of them could play in the European Championships," Kostal added.

Chelsea keeper Petr Cech added to growing calls for Nedved's return on Thursday. He told the Dnes newspaper: "Pavel is part of the team, he's always made an important contribution to it. We're in real need of a player with such experience and blessed with such skills."

"His presence at the Euro would naturally be welcome, that's obvious," noted Nuremberg's Czech striker Jan Koller.

The Czech Republic start their Group A campaign against co-hosts Switzerland on June 7, with Portugal on June 11 and Turkey four days later.

Raul awaits Euro call-up

AFP, Madrid

Veteran Real Madrid striker Raul Gonzalez said Thursday he was waiting for a Euro 2008 call-up for Spain despite not featuring for his country for two years.

"I am up for it. I am ready for inclusion. The coach has not closed the door on me and I am working towards being in the squad," Raul said.

"I think my form has been good this season and I want to be in the Euros as I think playing for Spain is a privilege and it would be great to be in the squad," added the three-time European Cup winner whose form in recent seasons has been patchy.

"The coach will decide and we all have to back the team and his decision. I still want to be in there though I know it's complicated," said Raul, whose 16 goals this season have made him Real's second highest goalscorer ever behind Carlos Santillana.

Despite 44 goals in the national shirt he last played for his country in September 2006 in a qualifying defeat by Northern Ireland in Belfast.

Coach Luis Aragones said last week: "I will select those who are on their best form."

He also recognised that Raul "has been one of the most important players in the squad (in the past) and very possibly will continue to be so."

But he added he had to decide how to go about injecting new blood into the squad ahead of the finals.

Raul's recent lean streak has coincided with the rise to prominence of the likes of Liverpool starlet Fernando Torres and Valencia's David Villa.

Win to take MU nearer

AFP, London



Manchester United will take a giant stride towards retaining their Premier League title if they beat Blackburn Rovers at Ewood Park on Saturday.

United's lead at the top was cut to two points by Chelsea after the Blues won 1-0 away to Everton on Thursday.

But an away win against a Rovers side managed by Mark Hughes, the former United striker, would see Sir Alex Ferguson's Champions League semi-finalists go five points clear with three games left in the season.

If the contest for the title is now a two-horse race, the battle to avoid the drop is less clear-cut.

Basement club Derby have long been doomed but there are several other sides which could yet fill the two remaining relegation places.

And second-bottom Fulham will hope history repeats itself when they face Champions League semi-finalists Liverpool, who continue to have to cope with the ongoing row between co-owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

Liverpool's 1-0 defeat at Fulham

this time last season angered then-Sheffield United manager Neil Warnock, whose side went on to be relegated on the last day of the season.

Rafael Benitez used the fixture to give regulars a rest ahead of more important Champions League games and Bolton manager Gary Megson has already voiced fears the Spaniard will do the same at Craven Cottage on Saturday.

Fulham bolstered their survival hopes with a 2-0 win over Reading, themselves now just three points above the drop zone.

Reading manager Steve Coppell did his best not to be distracted by Benitez's possible team selections ahead of the Royals' game against Arsenal.

"There is nothing I can do about it so why should I be concerned? You trust in the integrity of the league and I see no reason to doubt that."

Fulham defender Aaron Hughes said: "Last season Liverpool was the game that kept Fulham up. We know it's going to be very tough because Liverpool are a very good side."

"But the win at the weekend gives us good confidence and we will see where we can go tomorrow (Saturday)."

Wigan took a giant step towards top-flight survival after Emile Heskey's injury-time goal secured a 1-1 draw away to Chelsea on Monday.

But they are not yet absolutely safe ahead of Saturday's game against Derby and manager Steve Bruce hopes fans, who haven't exactly been flocking to the JJB this season will be enticed back for Saturday's game at home to Tottenham.

"It's up to me to try and produce a team that the people of Wigan will come out and support in force."

Birmingham are two points above the bottom three heading into Sunday's second city derby against Aston Villa.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated)
Saturday
 Arsenal v Reading (1145GMT),
 Blackburn v Manchester United (1615GMT), Fulham v Liverpool, Middlesbrough v Bolton, West Ham v Derby, Wigan v Tottenham
Sunday
 Aston Villa v Birmingham (1100GMT),
 Manchester City v Portsmouth (1500GMT),
 Newcastle v Sunderland (1230GMT)

The match sees Birmingham boss Alex McLeish, once manager of Rangers, again facing Villa manager Martin O'Neill, previously in charge of Celtic, in a derby clash.

"It is a tough game for us but I also say it is the occasion where people can become heroes overnight," said McLeish.

Newcastle and Sunderland head into Sunday's north-east derby with both sides looking increasingly likely to stay up.

Kevin Keegan had to wait nine matches before overseeing a victory in his second spell as Newcastle manager but wins over Fulham, Tottenham and Reading, as well as away draws at Birmingham and Portsmouth, have seen the Magpies climb up the table.

"The confidence now is where you would like it to be," said Keegan of a match which sees Sunderland striker Michael Chopra up against his hometown club.

Sven-Goran Eriksson, like Keegan a former England manager, insisted Thursday he had was not about to be sacked by frustrated owner Thaksin Shinawatra.

A win for the Swede at home to high-flying FA Cup finalists Portsmouth on Sunday would not do Eriksson's cause any harm.

Torres backs Benitez

Football

INTERNET, undated

Fernando Torres has rubbished rumours that Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez could be sacked.

Torres said he could not imagine Anfield without his compatriot, and credited Benitez for his fast start in English football.

"I have learned a lot with him, he is someone with whom you can learn a great deal," he told Eurosport.

"He has a lot of experience in football and a great CV, and we all hope to do better for him. And I have to thank him because he helped me take the first step."

"I don't know about rumours Benitez will be sacked. I know that everything is magnificent here, and you can interpret that in whatever way you want. But for the moment I can't see Liverpool without Benitez."

The 23-year-old has enjoyed a remarkable first season in English football, scoring 30 goals and earning himself a nomination for the PFA Player of the Year award.

The former Atletico Madrid skipper admitted he was surprised at his instant success.

"I am experiencing some very good moments. When I signed for Liverpool, it was to experience moments like that," he said.

"But I just thought that I would need more time; that it would take some time to adapt. I didn't think I would get there quickly, and luckily everything has worked in the first year, and I have profited from that."

Torres revealed that his Spanish colleagues, especially goalkeeper Pepe Reina, helped him adapt, and that he was able to win the fans over

by scoring on his Anfield debut.

"When I signed here, I knew that people expected a lot from me. The club paid a lot of money, it was a big investment. I knew the requirements that people would have; the spectators, my team-mates and the manager," he said.

"But I have to say that everybody helped me. When you arrive at a club and everyone does all they can for you to integrate, to make the transition easier on and off the pitch, it's not so hard."

"I have to thank Pepe, who helped me a lot, all my compatriots and the coach who is also Spanish, and who has been important for me."

"Above all, the love of the people from the first day. I was lucky enough to score at Anfield in my first game, and from that day the fans were behind me, and that still continues today."

Torres has terrorised defences with his electric pace, and said the speed of the English game has played into his hands.

"I think the main difference is the speed. It is a very quick style of football, with a high tempo. There are few interruptions."

"Maybe there is not as much tactical work as matches in Spain, including matches between the 'Big Four'. And that allows you more space, to play quickly with players who know how to take advantage of that space and who can give me scoring chances."

While other Spanish imports such as Jose Antonio Reyes and Antonio Nunez have failed to adjust to life in England, Torres relishes the relative privacy afforded to players.

"It's a much calmer life. People respect your private life a lot, they don't hassle you in public places. It

is a totally normal life - or nearly normal," he said.

"You can think about football when you need to, and you can go to a shopping centre knowing that you can walk around peacefully. At the end of the day, football is your job and you can concentrate on it more easily."

United trio agrees new contracts

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United defenders Rio Ferdinand and Wes Brown, along with midfielder Michael Carrick, have agreed new contracts with the club.

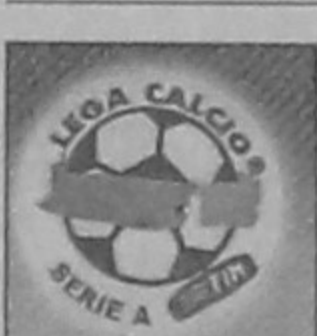
The 29-year-old Ferdinand is enjoying the form of his life at United, his central defensive partnership with Nemanja Vidic galvanising a miserly defence that has conceded just 18 Premier League goals all season.

Fellow England defender Brown, who has started 41 games in all competitions this season, could have left the Old Trafford club on a free transfer when his current deal ends in June.

The Manchester-born Brown made his United breakthrough as a right-back in the club's 1998-1999 Treble-winning season, and was quickly rewarded with a call-up to the England squad.

Naturally a centre-half, he has been deployed at right-back this season in place of the injured Gary Neville, and it is at full-back that he started England coach Fabio Capello's first two games in charge.

AFP, Paris



Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini has refused to allow a bitter war of words with Italian league title rivals AS Roma to overshadow his team's push towards another Scudetto.

Inter, the defending champions, have a four-point lead over Roma with five games left but the build-up to this weekend's trip to Torino has been shunted down page following Mancini's outburst over Roma talisman Francesco Totti.

Mancini claimed that officials are "scared" to red card the striker, a belief sparked by seeing Totti only booked for allegedly swearing at the referee in last week's 3-1 win over Udinese.

The Inter coach insisted that Totti should have walked but on Thursday he was trying to defuse the row.

"I was asked a question and I responded politely without want-

ing to offend anyone or cause a problem," said the Inter boss.

Inter go to Turin still without star striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic whose knee injury has kept him out since March 29 while his team was seeing its once seemingly impregnable 11-point lead being whittled away.

The 15-goal striker is set to miss the visit of Cagliari on April 27 while the 26-year-old could also be a doubt for the Milan derby on May 4.

Inter saw off Champions League hopefuls Fiorentina last week with Esteban Cambiasso and Mario Balotelli on target in a 2-0 win while French skipper Patrick Vieira dominated midfield.

The Cambiasso-Vieira partnership is crucial to Inter - of the 18 games they have started together, Inter have won 15 times. However, Vieira misses Sunday's game through suspension.

Torino will have a new coach for Sunday's match after Walter Novellino was sacked to be replaced by Gianni De Biasi who

arrives from Spain's Levante.

Torino have only managed six wins this season in Serie A and are perched just four points above the drop zone following a run of five defeats in six games.

De Biasi has already coached Torino twice. In 2006, he took the club to promotion only to be sacked on the eve of the following season.

He returned in February last year and kept the side afloat but then had to move aside, this time for Novellino.

Roma will be able to cut the gap to one point, for 24 hours at least, when they welcome rock-bottom

FIXTURES

Saturday
 Fiorentina v Palermo, AS Roma v Livorno
Sunday
 AC Milan v Reggina, Atalanta v Juventus, Cagliari v Empoli, Catania v Lazio, Parma v Napoli, Sampdoria v Udinese, Siena v Genoa, Torino v Inter Milan

Livorno to the Stadio Olimpico on Saturday.

Coach Luciano Spalletti has placed the pressure back on Inter by insisting the title is the champions' to lose.

"The championship is still open with regards to what Inter manage to do," said Spalletti.

Roma beat Catania 1-0 in midweek in the Italian Cup semi-final, first leg where several first-choice players were rested with Saturday's game in mind.

Alberto Aquilani and Matteo Ferrari are still sidelined, but Totti, who scored in the cup tie, is back to full fitness after his performance against Udinese ended a three-week stint on the sidelines.

Third-placed Juventus kept up their push for a Champions League place with a 3-0 win over Parma in midweek and they go to Atalanta protected by an eight-point gap on fourth-placed Fiorentina.

AC Milan are fifth, four points behind Fiorentina, and are home to Reggina.

Kahn warns of overconfidence

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich's high-profile keeper Oliver Kahn warned of overconfidence ahead of Saturday's German Cup final against Borussia Dortmund, the first trophy towards a possible treble this season.

Bayern, 10 points ahead in the German league with five games to go and already into the UEFA Cup semi-finals against Zenit St Petersburg, are looking more and more likely to take all three titles provided they can beat Dortmund.

Bayern beat Dortmund 5-0 on Sunday but Kahn said that result

could spell over-confidence.

"It's a final and anything which happened before will have no bearing on it even if we recently beat them 5-0 and they are having a poor season," said Kahn who will be playing his last German Cup match before retirement at the end of the season.

"We shouldn't think it will be a walk in the park."

Dortmund, the 1997 European Champions League winners under Bayern's current coach Ottmar Hitzfeld, are only 13th in the league and have nothing to lose.

"In a final such as this they (Dortmund) have absolutely no pressure on them and in these circumstances they could easily

put in an incredible performance. We have to be really focused," added Kahn.

Kahn did not play in Wednesday's 3-1 victory at Eintracht Frankfurt but comes back into the side for this cup final at Berlin's Olympic stadium where Bayern hope to capture their 13th title.

As for the treble, general manager Uli Hoeness was full of optimism for Bayern's season run-in.

"This team is remarkable for the fact they can always find another gear, and never give up even after falling behind. They stay focused and keep going, and more than anything else, they keep looking for goals right to the end," said Hoeness about their Frankfurt performance. Hoeness was particularly

impressed at the quality shown by a clutch of second-string players with limited match practice behind them this season.

"We've proved the team comprises more