

Roma deny bid reports

REUTERS, Rome

The majority shareholder of Italian soccer club AS Roma on Monday denied press reports it had begun the process of selling its controlling stake or that it had received an offer to buy the club.

Newspapers reported that Italtelco SpA was considering selling its controlling stake in US billionaire investor George Soros or to the royal family of the United Arab Emirates.

"No offer has been formalised from (the foreign investor) or from others whom the press has suggested as potential buyers," Italtelco said in a statement.

The statement added it had received "no offer from the Arab Emirates royal family," and that all press reports in this regard were "groundless".

Italtelco said on Friday it had held talks with a representative of an unnamed potential investor, but that a sale was not imminent.

Sporadic rumours have also circled about interest in fellow Italian soccer club Juventus.

Juventus Chairman Giovanni Cobolli Gigli told a news conference in Milan that foreign investors were entitled to buy stock on the market but "certainly not a majority stake".

Cobolli Gigli was speaking at an event showcasing Juventus's recent agreement with marketing company Sportfive, part of French conglomerate Lagardere, to sell the naming rights to the club's new stadium.

Shares in Roma gained 11.98 percent to 1.14 euros by 1330 GMT, while Juventus stock was 6.52 percent higher at 1.12 euros.

Schalke roping in Dutch coach

AFP, Gelsenkirchen

Dutchman Fred Rutten looks set to become coach of Bundesliga outfit Schalke 04 it was revealed on Monday.

The 45-year-old is presently coach of Dutch side Twente Enschede but Schalke general manager Andreas Muller admitted that they were close to an agreement over Rutten replacing Mirko Slomka, who was sacked the week-end before last.

"This track is more hot than cold," said Muller.

According to 'Bild' Rutten, who has been in charge of Twente since July 2006 having played there all his career and guided them to fourth this season, would be offered a two year contract with Twente receiving 500,000 euros in compensation.

Schalke are presently being coached by former players Michael Buskens and Youri Mulder, the latter is a former assistant to Rutten.

Slomka guided Schalke to their first ever Champions League quarterfinals this season but a subsequent 5-1 hammering by Werder Bremen was the final straw for club president Josef Schnusenberg.

No fear for Eriksson

AFP, London

Manchester City manager Sven-Goran Eriksson is confident he will emerge from an upcoming meeting with the club's owner, Thaksin Shinawatra, with the backing needed to continue in his post.

Eriksson has been under pressure after the former Thai prime minister revealed he would review the Swede's position at the end of the season.

However Eriksson, a former England manager who took over City at the start of the season, believes he has nothing to fear.

"Am I worried that I still have a job? No, I'm not worried at all, absolutely not," said Eriksson.

"You can't go in life and be worried about things like that - I think I will be sitting here in this chair next season."

"He (Thaksin) said something, if he means it or not I don't know, I will see him next week."

Eriksson saw his side beat Portsmouth at the weekend, leaving them eighth in the Premier League table.

Although they are within kicking distance of a place in Europe for next season, he believes any final position between seventh and ninth would be "a good result" and above that "fantastic".

"This was important for the team, the club, the fans and with three games to play, we still have a small possibility to play in Europe so that's good."

"I remember before the first game of the season I was asked 'what's the target' and we really didn't know as we were bringing in seven players and mixing them together."

"After a while people talked about the Champions League, then the UEFA Cup then it was heads down for a bit but recently we have come back and are playing rather good football."



Liverpool's inspirational midfielder Steven Gerrard dribbles with the ball during a training session at their Melwood training ground in Liverpool yesterday. Liverpool fans across the world would be expecting Gerrard to be fit for the crunch Champions League first-leg semifinal clash against Chelsea at Anfield tonight.

Inter close in on title

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan executed the perfect smash-and-grab raid to win 1-0 at Torino on Sunday and open up a six-point gap at the top of Serie A with just four games left.

Julio Cruz's brilliant diving header on the half hour from Mario Balotelli's corner proved the difference in a game that saw the leaders dominated for large periods.

Torino lacked the finishing touch of their visitors and almost conceded a second minutes after the first when teenage striker Balotelli's deflected volley came back off the post.

Torino's best chance fell to Nicola Ventola seven minutes from time after a mistake by Nicolas Burdisso but the striker shot straight at Brazilian goalkeeper Julio Cesar.

Inter midfielder Dejan Stankovic admitted the champions had been lucky.

"We played really badly but you can't always win and put on a show," he said. "Tonight we had to work really hard for the three points."

World player of the year Kaka scored a hat-trick as AC Milan beat lowly Reggina 5-1 at the San Siro to keep alive their Champions League qualification hopes.

Milan are still four points behind Fiorentina, who beat Palermo 1-0 at home on Saturday, with four matches to play as they chase that crucial fourth place and a slot in Europe's premier competi-

tion next season.

Sixth-placed Sampdoria stayed level on points with Milan as they beat Udinese 3-0 at home, leaving the seventh-placed north-easterners eight points behind Fiorentina and out of the Champions League race.

Third-placed Juventus need only one more point to ensure they play Champions League football next season as veteran striker Alessandro Del Piero scored a hat-trick in a 4-0 victory at Atalanta.

Milan got off to a flying start with Kaka putting them ahead from the penalty spot after he was brought down by Francesco Modesto.

Luca Vigiani brought down veteran Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf on 34 minutes and Kaka held his nerve a second time from 12 yards.

But five minutes before the break, Reggina pulled one back through Edgar Barreto, who sent a fizzing strike into the top corner of Australian goalkeeper Zeljko Kalac's net.

Kaka completed his treble with a low right-footed shot from the left into the far corner and super-poacher Filippo Inzaghi mopped up the loose ball after substitute Pato's shot was turned out by a post by goalkeeper Andrea Campagnolo.

Pato put the final gloss on the result, heading home a cross from French midfielder Yohann Gourcuff.

"For us the motivation is finishing fourth," said Kaka. "We're still in there, we still hope, we believe and we're working for this."

"Fiorentina are having a great season but we can do it and we believe in ourselves."

In Genoa, either Sampdoria or Udinese, or possibly both, had to drop out of Champions League contention.

Two first half goals from the hosts ensured it wasn't them.

On-loan Real Madrid forward Antonio Cassano stooped low to head home a free-kick on 24 minutes and then Claudio Bellucci doubled the lead a minute before the break.

Ten minutes after the restart he then converted a spot-kick after Aleksander Lukovic was penalised for a foul on Cristian Maggio.

Juventus killed off woeful Atalanta inside six minutes with Del Piero starring.

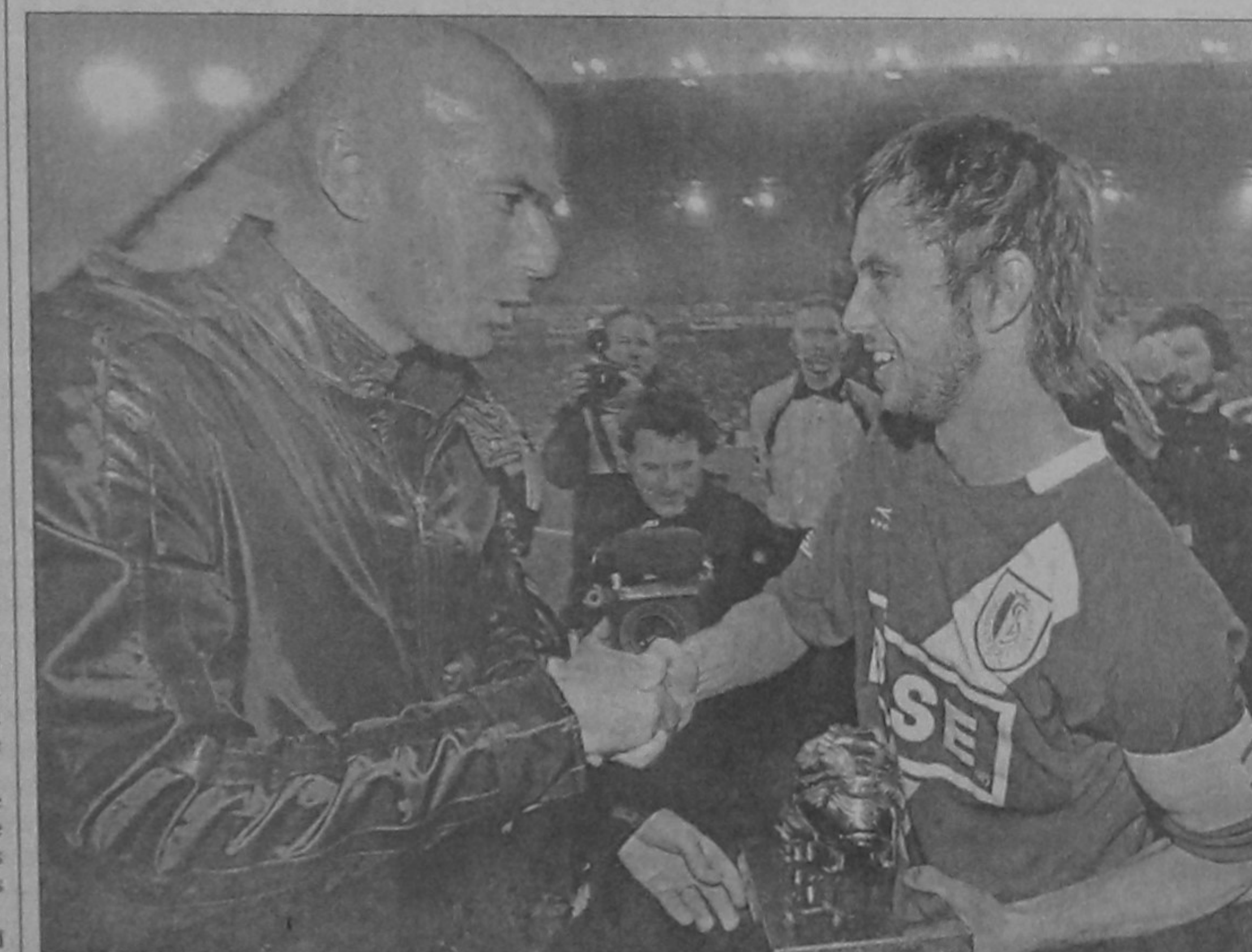
Nicola Legrottaglie headed home the forward's free-kick in the first minute and then Del Piero slotted home a pass from David Trezeguet on six minutes.

On 34 minutes the evergreen striker beat the offside trap to score and midway through the second half he latched onto another Trezeguet flick to coolly slot home past Ferdinando Coppola.

Tempers flared in Parma as the hosts lost 2-1 to Napoli with four players - three from Parma - sent off.

Second-placed AS Roma's Serie A title hopes suffered a blow as they were held to a 1-1 draw by then rock bottom Livorno at the Stadio Olimpico on Saturday.

Roma suffered a double blow when captain Francesco Totti was ruled out for the season following knee surgery on Sunday.



French football legend Zinedine Zidane (L) shakes hands with Standard's Steven Defour after handing over the 'Golden Shoe' to him before the Belgian First Division match between Standard de Liege and RSCA Anderlecht on Sunday. Standard Liege won their ninth Belgian league title, their first in 25 years, after a 2-0 victory over Anderlecht.

Will Liverpool be third time lucky?



AFP, London

Liverpool's Jamie Carragher believes Chelsea will be desperate for revenge when battle commences at Anfield on Tuesday in the Champions League semifinals.

The two English Premier League sides clash at the last four stage for the third time in four years, Liverpool having triumphed on both previous occasions in extremely close and controversial encounters.

Tuesday's first leg on Merseyside looks set to be another classic, with Carragher predicting that the Blues will come out fighting from the first whistle.

"We have beaten them three times in semifinals when you include the FA Cup in 2006, so they will be desperate to turn us over," said the defender.

"Hopefully we can keep that run going. But we realise they are doing well at the moment and it will be difficult to stop them."

"It will be as close as the last two Euro clashes. It's always been that way against them and I wouldn't expect it to be any different."

The 2005 semifinals saw a scoreless draw at Stamford Bridge followed by a highly disputed goal for Liverpool's Luis Garcia in the sec-

ond leg, which many felt William Gallas had prevented from crossing the goal line.

And if that was not thrilling enough, in the 2007 semifinals, Liverpool went through 4-1 on penalties at Anfield, each side having won their home legs 1-0.

Victory for either Reds manager Rafael Benitez or Blues boss Avram Grant in this encounter could be enough to preserve their jobs, with both reportedly under pressure from their respective clubs' owners.

"I don't think Chelsea under Grant are much different than Chelsea with (Jose) Mourinho -- except maybe at a press conference," said Benitez, referring to the Israeli's bizarre near-silence following Thursday's 1-0 win at Everton, a game the Spaniard watched.

"They looked pretty much the same as always," he said.

"When you talk about Champions League or cup competitions it is just one-off games and perhaps the manager can do something with tactics or the style of football to make a difference."

"But when you talk about a competition that lasts nine months you need a big squad and maybe Chelsea, Manchester United and Arsenal are a little bit better than us there."

"Grant is doing his job well if you look at their results."

Grant, for his part, is wary of Benitez's knack of pulling off cup victories, despite Liverpool's perennial struggle to mount a challenge for the Premier League title.

"I know he knows how to play against big teams and I like him as a person and a manager, but we will give him a battle this time," the former Israel boss vowed.

"First we need to score one goal away, it is always a target at this level to score away, because it is more than one goal, but the target is to win the two games."

"If you play the first game at home and make a good result and the other team doesn't score, you can always score away so sometimes it is better with the first game at home," he told the club's website.

Benitez made eight changes for Saturday's 2-0 win at Fulham, resting key players such as Carragher, captain Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres with Tuesday's clash in mind.

Meanwhile, Chelsea's match on Thursday against Everton -- a television-oriented switch which upset many -- gave them more time to prepare for the Champions League.

Both sides could be missing key players.

For Chelsea, striker Didier Drogba and Michael Ballack may

miss out, while the Germany captain's fellow midfielder Frank Lampard has been absent recently due to family matters.

Liverpool skipper Gerrard has a neck problem, though centre-half Sami Hyypia and midfielder Javier Mascherano should shake off injuries sustained Saturday in time for the Anfield clash.

Liverpool have made much of "the Anfield effect" in the pre-match build-up, hailing the electric atmosphere created at their home ground on European match nights.

And their striker Fernando Torres is eager to raise the roof by scoring, having tasted the aura following their 4-2 win over Arsenal in the quarterfinal second leg.

"The emotion I felt after the Arsenal game was very, very strong. I have never felt like that before," the Spaniard said.

"I was almost in tears when the crowd were singing."

"If that was a quarter-final, I can't imagine what it will be like playing Chelsea."

"Without doubt, these are the biggest matches of my career."

"I know football means so much and can give everyone strong feelings but it's still a new experience for me. I scored my first important Liverpool goal against Chelsea -- and I want to do it again on Tuesday."

Eto'o's final warning

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o has said he will leave the club and head abroad if they fail to win any trophies before the end of next season.

"If we continue not to win any trophies next year, then I will go somewhere else," the Cameroonian striker said at a promotional event near Barcelona on Sunday.

"I've done it all in Spain, I've reached the heights here and so if I do leave I will go to another league."

Eto'o made the declarations the day after his side's 0-0 draw at home to city rivals Espanyol effectively ended their already slim hopes of winning the league title.

They are due to take on Manchester United in the first leg of their Champions League semifinal on Wednesday.

The 27-year-old, who joined Barcelona from Real Mallorca in 2004, said his side still held out hope they could end the season on a high by reaching the Champions League final.

"They are a step above us, but let's see what happens on Wednesday," he said. "For me it is a big motivation that they are being classed as the favourites, that makes me even more keen to beat them."

AC Milan backtrack on Ronaldinho deal

AFP, Rome

Vice-president Adriano Galliani admitted on Monday that AC Milan's bid to lure Ronaldinho to Italy was far from a done deal.

Following Milan's 5-1 thrashing of Reggina on Sunday, Galliani claimed that Milan had failed to agree a fee for Ronaldinho with his Spanish club Barcelona.

The news comes just over a week since Galliani had boasted that were Ronaldinho to move from the Catalan giants, it would be to Milan, but he has now backtracked.

"I don't know if a deal will be done," said Galliani. "We have to operate within the framework of market conditions. If it happens, great, if not we'll change our objectives."

It is widely known that Milan's offer for Ronaldinho is a long way below Barca's valuation and there are other teams such as Chelsea and Inter Milan who are interested in the former double world player of the year and who can offer more money than Milan.

While Milan have close contacts with Ronaldinho's brother and agent Roberto de Assis, they seemingly are not on quite such good terms with the Spanish giants.

"I've never said that we are close to Barcelona. It's one thing to be close to Ronaldinho, quite another to be close to the club," added Galliani.

"There are other teams as well as Inter that are interested in Ronaldinho. I've been dipping into the market for many years and there's nothing strange here."

"If Barcelona accept our offer we'll do a deal, if not we won't."

Galliani also admitted that he was hoping for a slip-up from Fiorentina in the race for Champions League football next season.

Real almost there

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid could clinch their 31st Spanish league title next week-end after they beat Racing Santander 2-0 on Sunday, with their goals coming from captain Raul Gonzalez and Gonzalo Higuain.

They need to beat Athletic Bilbao next Sunday and have their nearest rivals Villarreal and Barcelona both drop points but their 10 point lead at the top of La Liga now makes the championship almost certain, whether sooner or later.

"Beating Racing brings the title closer but it's not ours yet," warned Real coach Bernd Schuster, who also won titles with Real as a player in 1989 and 1990.

"However, I've got to be pleased with the way we defended against a very courageous team. They never stopped fighting and they put together some good attacks," added Schuster.

Raul opened the scoring after 13 minutes, his 17th goal of the season, when he managed to get a touch to a swerving cross from the left wing by Robinho and divert the ball under the body of Racing goalkeeper Tono Rodriguez.

Racing immediately tried to respond but their repeated attacks were thwarted by Real's back four of Gabriel Heinze, Fabio Cannavaro, Pepe and Sergio Ramos.



Real Madrid striker Raul Gonzalez celebrates after scoring against Racing Santander during their Primera Liga clash at the Sardinero Stadium in Santander on Sunday.

EURO 2008 BRIEFS

AFP, Vienna

The 2008 European football championships brief:

ROOM FOR THE NIGHT

Some 400 prison inmates in Austria are being forced to move during the Euro to make space for hooligans in the host cities. Local authorities expect to make several hundred arrests daily and need space to house the offenders. A clever alternative for fans who don't yet have a place to stay during the championships?

TRASHY

Austrian rubbish collectors trashed their Swiss counterparts last week... in a football match. Watched by a crowd of 300 and with a FIFA referee overseeing the proceedings, the Austrians defeated their Euro co-hosts 7-2 in Zurich. The second leg match will

be played on May 8 in Vienna but the capital has already found a new star: one of its very own binmen scored six out of the seven goals. Austria's national football team had better watch its back.

SEEING THE SIGHTS

Amateur football players can kick their way into Vienna's Schoenbrunn Palace in June. A small pitch will be set up in the courtyard of the magnificent former Habsburg residence where visitors will be able to challenge each other to games of three against three, with the winners receiving free tickets to the popular tourist sight. There's no mention of visitors still being allowed entry if they break a palace window in the process.

RED CARDS/RED LIGHT

Key service providers will be allowed no time off during the

Euro. That includes police officers, emergency doctors and ... prostitutes. Salzburg's brothels want to be able to count on a full roster of staff in June to cope with the mass of clients expected to come knocking during the championship.

X+Y-(AB/C)

Statistics are useful in football: they can tell us how many times a player has scored from a corner, but they can also prove that watching football will increase your chances of heart failure. On June 26, experts from England, Germany and Austria will discuss these topics and more at a conference in Linz on "Statistics and the Euro". The day's semi-final will then be shown live in the auditorium. Reason enough to sit through all the lectures perhaps.