

Charlton hails Giggs

AFP, Manchester



Sir Bobby Charlton insisted he was delighted to see Ryan Giggs equal his Manchester United appearance record.

Giggs, 34, drew level with Charlton on 758 appearances when he came on as a second half substitute in United's title-clinching 2-0 win at Wigan on Sunday.

The Wales winger capped his memorable day by scoring the late goal that ensured United would retain the English league crown.

Charlton, who starred for United from 1954-1973, was at the JJB Stadium to see Giggs's achievement and admitted he couldn't have been happier to see his record equalled by such a dedicated player.

"I don't mind Ryan taking the record. If I could choose someone for it to go to, it would be Ryan," Charlton said.

"The day he came to Manchester United, I knew he was special. He is a great athlete, a great person and a great footballer. Nobody deserves to break records like he does.

"You need to be here for a length

of time to understand this club and the strength of feeling that underpins it.

"His record with Manchester United is unbelievable and I'm really proud of him. I have forgotten about my record already."

Charlton, 70, was a member of the United team that won the club's first European Cup in 1969 and he believes Sir Alex Ferguson can deliver United's third triumph in the competition.

If United do beat Chelsea in the final in Moscow on May 21, Charlton will be able to give himself a pat on the back.

Back in 1990, Ferguson was struggling to win over United fans after several seasons of underachievement and it was suggested the Scot could be sacked, but United director Charlton was adamant he would come good and he has proved right time and again over the last 18 years.

"Sir Alex is just phenomenal. It would be fantastic to win the Champions League as well," Charlton said.

"It will be hard but we will give it our best shot. We will be ready that's for sure."



Manchester United's Welsh midfielder Ryan Giggs lifts the Premier League trophy while his teammates celebrate after their 2-0 win over Wigan Athletic at the JJB Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

No question of retirement

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson has insisted retirement is the last thing on his mind as he savours the tenth Premier League title at the helm of Manchester United.

Pushed to the wire by Chelsea, United were crowned champions of England for the 17th time in the club's history after a 2-0 win over Wigan on Sunday and few would bet against them drawing level with Liverpool's 18 titles at the end of next season.

Ferguson turns 67 on December 31 and there has been speculation he could opt to go out on a high if his players beat Chelsea in the Champions League final in Moscow on May 21.

But as he celebrated victory in what has been an intriguing title battle, the Scot insisted nothing could be further from his mind.

"Retire? That wife of mine just bullies me, so she'd throw me out of the door at seven o'clock in the morning! So that's a definite no."

Ferguson added: "I am proud to have survived for so long, but it is easier for me than the rest because I am at such a great club. How would I be without this? Please tell me."

Ferguson believes the euphoria of the league triumph can carry his side to glory in Moscow. "The great thing is we are bouncing into the final," he said.

Fergie feels like bouncing

AFP, Wigan



Sir Alex Ferguson claims Manchester United will be 'bouncing' all the way to Moscow for next week's Champions League final after a 2-0 win at Wigan secured the club's 10th Premier League title.

Goals from Cristiano Ronaldo and Ryan Giggs -- on the day he equalled Bobby Charlton's 758-game all-time appearance record for the club -- clinched the league for United ahead of the European clash against Chelsea in the Luzhniki Stadium on May 21.

And Ferguson insists that Premier League success can now provide a launchpad for more glory in Moscow.

Ferguson said: "We are bouncing into the Champions League final. If we had lost the title at Wigan, it

would have been difficult because when we lost the title at West Ham in 1995, we went into the FA Cup final and we were dead.

"The team was flat the following Saturday and we lost 1-0 against Everton. But we are not dead this time -- we are alive.

"It was always a fear, though. Not just to lose the title, but looking forward to the Champions League Final, after losing the title, would have been hard for us.

"But we are relaxed about it now. Cup finals are supposed to be difficult anyway and it won't be easy, but there is a good feeling about this team."

Welsh midfielder Giggs can now break Charlton's record if he faces Chelsea in the Russian capital and Ferguson admitted it was fitting that the veteran scored the crucial goal that wrapped up the victory.

He said: "It was fantastic for Ryan to get the goal that matters, but maybe it was fate. He deserves it

because he's been a credit to the game and having known him for 20 years, to equal Bobby's record on the day he scores the goal for us, well it's just fantastic.

"It was amazing. As soon as it started raining, I was thinking, 'how am I going to get Giggs into this game?' because he is fantastic on soft ground with his balance and ability to beat a man."

With Ferguson approaching his 67th birthday in December, there have been suggestions that he could retire if United win the European Cup against Chelsea. But the Scot insisted that he has no intention of walking away from Old Trafford.

Ferguson said: "Retire? That wife of mine just bullies me, so she'd throw me out of the door at seven o'clock in the morning! So that's a definite no. Oh no, I dare not risk the wrath of that lass from the Gorbals. She's quite a formidable person!"

"I am proud to have survived for

so long, but it is easier for me than the rest because I am at such a great club. How would I be without this? Please tell me."

Wigan manager Steve Bruce, who captained United to their first two Premier League titles in the early-1990s, had seen the motivation of his team questioned ahead of the game due to his United connections.

But he claimed that questions should now be asked of referee Steve Bennett following his failure to dismiss Paul Scholes for two yellow cards and award Wigan a penalty prior to handing United the first-half spot-kick from which Ronaldo scored the opener. Bruce said: "You should ask the referee about his integrity, not ask me about the integrity of my team!"

"Thankfully there was nothing riding on it for us, but there were three decisions in the first-half that were unbelievable. They were three big decisions."

Just short of target

AFP, Vienna

Over 1,800 men and women posed nude for US photographer Spencer Tunick Sunday in Vienna's Ernst Happpel stadium, less than a month before it hosts the European football championship final.

The photo-shoot, which lasted several hours amid warm weather, drew precisely 1,840 participants, although it fell short of the symbolic and "at least 2,008" Tunick had hoped to get, ahead of the Euro 2008 tournament.

The subjects of the artwork never made it onto the pitch but posed in the stands, as the newly refitted stadium was to be presented to the European football association on Monday.

The action was organised by Vienna's Kunsthal museum as part of a cultural programme running alongside Euro 2008.

The participants were not paid, but were to receive signed pictures of the photo-shoot.

The photographs are also to be displayed at the Kunsthal, starting June 23.

New York-born Tunick is famous for large-scale nude projects, having created several installations from Mexico City to the Netherlands, Barcelona and Newcastle.

A bitter end for Eriksson

AFP, Manchester

Sven Goran Eriksson will fly to Thailand on Tuesday to discover if his brief reign as Manchester City manager is over.

Eriksson's side suffered a humiliating 8-1 at Middlesbrough on Sunday as the Swede's first season with the Premier League club ended in dismal fashion.

The former England coach has guided City to ninth - their best final position since 2005 - but already appeared certain to be forced to leave Eastlands in the close-season after the club's Thai owner Thaksin Shinawatra expressed his displeasure at City's disappointing form in the second half of the season.

Now Eriksson's assistant Tord Grip has revealed that the Swede is set to meet Thaksin in Thailand after travelling there for the club's post-season tour, which includes games in Thailand and Hong Kong.

Grip told BBC Sport: "Sven has not heard any more. He will go to Thailand on Tuesday and meet Dr Thaksin there."

Benzema the best in France

AFP, Paris

Lyon striker Karim Benzema has picked up the award of France's Player of the Year awarded by his fellow professionals accepting the trophy from former winner Zinedine Zidane.

The 20-year-old French international has played 35 league games for the reigning champions this year with one match remaining next weekend to decide the title between Lyon and Bordeaux and four games in the Champions League.

He has scored a total of 23 goals total from both competitions and will be one of the key players for his country at next month's Euro 2008 Championships in Austria and Switzerland.

May his wish be Grant-ed

AFP, London



Chelsea coach Avram Grant insisted his side can bounce back from losing out on the Premier League title and get revenge by beating Manchester United in the Champions League final on May 21.

United regained their English crown with a 2-0 victory over Wigan on Sunday that capped a memorable last day of the season, leaving Chelsea to settle for the runner's-up spot after a stuttering 1-1 draw at home to Bolton.

Chelsea must now lick their wounds, regroup and hope that captain John Terry, who was stretched over by a dislocated elbow after just 15 minutes of action on Sunday, will have recovered for the trip to Moscow.

Grant said the all-English showdown -- Chelsea's first appearance in Europe's showpiece final -- was a

"dream."

"It is a game we have been dreaming about being in," he said. "When you come to the final you want to win. We wanted to win the league as well but it wasn't ever in our hands."

Grant said he would adopt a "wait and see" approach on Terry, despite the fact the England centre-back vowed after the match that he would make a full recovery in "three or four days."

"I am waiting to see the day that John Terry is not confident," Grant said with a smile.

"If you look at it from the point of view of character I am sure (he is OK), but we also need to wait to see if he is fit to play. But we have time, we have 10 days."

Andriy Shevchenko will have high hopes of playing a role in the Champions League showdown after the Ukrainian came on as a substitute and scored Chelsea's only goal, stabbing in

from close range.

"I was happy for him because maybe we will need him in Moscow," Grant said.

He admitted Shevchenko, who has rarely started a match in the 2007-2008 campaign and appeared at times a fading force, had experienced "a strange season."

Despite being pipped to the post by United, the four Israeli reflected that he felt "proud" after his first season in charge at Chelsea, a role he took on mid-campaign from Jose Mourinho in an appointment greeted with disdain by most Chelsea supporters.

"It was not easy this season," there were many, many good things... we had a very difficult time sometimes.

"We didn't start very good and then we played good football and then our big players got injured. We recovered very well with very good football so we can be proud."

C'Ron now targets 50

AFP, Manchester



Cristiano Ronaldo believes he could score 50 goals for Manchester United next season after striking 41 times during his side's current campaign.

Ronaldo's penalty against Wigan on Sunday helped United win the English title and took his league tally to 31 - equalling Alan Shearer's Premier League record for a 38-game season.

The Portugal star's impressive total this term, boosted by another 10 in the Champions League and FA Cup, has played a key role in United's title success and their Champions League final appearance.

It is even more remarkable considering Ronaldo often plays as a winger rather than a striker but he sees no reason why he can't reach a half-century of goals next year.

"Fifty? I don't know. I'll try my best. I don't look for goals. I look to play well and if the goals are coming, it's good," he told MUTV.

"I think I've not just improved this season; I try to improve every year. I'm better now than five years ago."

"I think at the right club, playing with the right players, you learn all the time. This season has been good for me because I've scored many goals and the team have played fantastically to win the Premier League."

United's victory at the JJB Stadium was part of a perfect day for Ronaldo, who was voted the club's Player of the Year by their fans and his team-mates at an awards ceremony at Old Trafford later on Sunday.

His stunning free-kick against Portsmouth was also voted the club's goal of the season.

Ronaldo admitted the feeling when the final whistle confirmed United as champions was unforgettable.

"Sometimes you don't have the words to say what it feels like to be a champion. It's amazing," he said.

"I would have preferred it if it was at Old Trafford because the

atmosphere would have been brilliant but we won at the JJB and it's very good to be champions."

With the title retained, Ronaldo is focused on winning the Champions League for the first time. United have pipped Chelsea in the league and now face Avram Grant's side in Moscow on May 21.

Ronaldo knows United have the momentum after their domestic success and he can't wait for his first appearance in Europe's showpiece match.

"It's going to be fantastic if we win the Champions League. The feeling is going to be amazing if we win," he said.

"In the final you never know, it is 50-50. I'm very happy and proud to play in the final, this is my first time."

"I feel very excited, the lads have belief and it is a great opportunity for all of the players. The lads want to win and of course I want to win as well."

"We have a great opportunity. Why not? I'm sure in this game that if you have the opportunity to win, you win."

Inter in 2002 proposition

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan will go into the final week of the season feeling decidedly jittery and haunted by the nightmare of six years ago when they threw away the title on the final day.

They will travel to the Emilia-Romagna region to face Parma in a match that has become must-win, with Roma having closed to just one point behind the champions.

What makes the situation all the more intriguing is that Parma's coach is none other than the Argentine Hector Cuper, who was in charge of Inter back in 2002.

Back then Inter went into the final game of the season on May 5, 2002 with a one-point lead over Juventus and a two-point gap to then reigning champions Roma.

Facing them on that day were Lazio, whose own supporters in Rome's Stadio Olimpico actually cheered for the opposition such was their desire to avoid the horrendous

scenario of their team denying Inter the title to the benefit of hated city rivals Roma.

But what happened has become the stuff of legend at Inter, who lost 4-2 and saw both Juve and Roma, who enjoyed victories, leap-frog them. Six years on and a similar situation presents itself.

Just as they had back in 2002, Inter have headed the title race almost all season long and are regarded as the best team in the league.

But Roma have doggedly stuck to their task and despite trailing by six points with three matches to play, they have reduced that to just one as Inter lost 2-1 at AC Milan and were then held 2-2 at home by little Siena.

Roma produced a great performance to win 3-0 at Sampdoria and then edged out Atalanta 2-1 at home in the same period. Now the man whose team cracked in 2002, will try to bowl over the new Inter with his desperate struggles Parma.

What makes the match all the more dangerous for Inter is that Parma must win or they will be relegated.

"We can still save ourselves, it also depends on Roma's result," said Cuper following his team's 3-1 defeat at Fiorentina.

His team are 18th and trail Catania - in 17th, the last position of safety - by two points.

Just to make things more interesting, Catania also face Roma in an incredible championship-relegation double header on Sunday.

"We never thought the last day could throw up so many permutations. We have to concentrate on ourselves, we'll see what happens on Sunday," added Cuper.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini is just trying to stay calm and prevent his team from crumbling under the pressure.

"While there are still points to play for, nothing is decided," he said. "We had the chances to win the match and finish the title race. Unfortunately we have to go and win at Parma but there's no fear about anything."

Inter should have secured their third title in a row and 16th in total but despite twice taking the lead

through Patrick Vieira and Mario Balotelli, they were pegged back by Massimo Maccarone and Houssine Kharja.

Meanwhile in Rome the chasers took the lead through Christian Panucci and doubled their advantage through Daniele De Rossi before holding on in the final nervous minutes after Giampaolo Bellini pulled one back for the visitors.

It all left Roma coach Luciano Spalletti, who on Saturday had rated his team's chances of landing the title as one in a hundred, feeling like he'd had a lucky rabbit's foot all along that he didn't know about.

"We deserve this chance to play for the title for what we have achieved throughout the season," said Spalletti. "We've been by far the best team during the second half of the season."

That may or may not be the case but they have certainly proved themselves durable and if Inter crack on Sunday, few would bet against Spalletti's men taking full advantage.

Forlan fires Atletico into Europe

AFP, Madrid



Diego Forlan repaid back a huge chunk of his 21 million euro transfer fee as he fired Atletico Madrid into the money-spinning Champions League for the first time in over a decade with a 1-0 win over Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday.

Uruguayan international Forlan was bought as a replacement for Fernando Torres, now at Liverpool, and his 16th goal of the season seconds before half-time helped Atletico qualify for the Champions League for the first time since the 1996/97 season.

"It was a great pass from Maxi (Rodriguez) and we are delighted to be in the Champions League where we want to be," said Forlan.

Sevilla defeated neighbours Real Betis 2-0 in the derby but it was to no avail as Atletico, three points ahead, take fourth courtesy of their superior head-to-head record.

Atletico are also level on points with third-placed Barcelona who lost 3-2 to Real Mallorca in Frank Rijkaard's final match at Camp Nou.

"We set the target to reach the Champions League and I am so pleased for our fans who have waited so long," said Atletico coach Javier Aguirre.

"Talk about my future is inevitable but I would rather discuss it at the end of the season. I am going to celebrate tonight by having a meal with my wife and three children."

A UEFA Cup spot is already guaranteed for Sevilla but that may not be enough for Manolo Jimenez to keep his job or for the club to hold onto stars such as Daniel Alves, Christian Poulsen and Luis Fabiano.

"We have had a great season and we are in Europe again," said Jimenez. "It is a shame we couldn't make the Champions League but we pushed hard for it."

Atletico could also face a fight to hang onto prized asset Kun Aguero but for now they are celebrating reaching the Champions League although they had a real scare

against Depor who hit the post in the closing stages.

Aguirre can now focus on the two-legged qualifier which Barcelona must also endure while Villarreal and Real have the luxury of direct entry to the Champions League.

Rijkaard's last home match as Barcelona coach ended in a disappointing 3-2 defeat to Mallorca after going two goals up.

"It has been an honour to work at this club," Rijkaard said. "I have worked here for five years and I have given my all in the work that I did."

Rijkaard, cheered by fans during the Mallorca game, has been in charge of Barcelona for five seasons but a second campaign without silverware has persuaded the board to axe the Dutchman and reserve team coach Pep Guardiola will replace him.

"What Rijkaard has done is extraordinary," said Guardiola. "He is an example to us all."

Mallorca striker Daniel Guiza said it would be a dream to one-day play for Barcelona and he scored a last-minute winner to take his tally

to 26 goals and is in line for the Pichichi award and possibly a big summer switch.

Mallorca are a point behind Racing Santander after five straight wins and still have a chance to snatch the final UEFA Cup spot.

Sevilla's Fabiano is Guiza's nearest competitor lying two goals behind after netting against Betis.

At the wrong end of the table four teams will fight to stay in the Spanish first division on the final day of the season.

Zaragoza, sixth last season, fell into the bottom three after a 2-2 draw against champions Real Madrid on Sunday.

Ruud van Nistelrooy and Robinho were on target for Real and Zaragoza are now a point behind Osasuna with their fate now in the hands of their rivals.

Osasuna will be grateful to Real for the help as they moved out of the relegation zone with a 2-1 win over Real Murcia.

Recreativo Huelva are also one point above Zaragoza after a 2-0 win at Almeria. Valladolid are two points above the drop after a 0-0 draw with Getafe who are now safe.

AFP, London



Chelsea are close to signing Portugal right-back Jose Bosingwa after

Porto announced they have accepted the Premier League club's 16.2 million pounds (20.5 million euros) offer.

Bosingwa, 25, has flown to London with his agent Jorge Mendes for contract talks over a five-year deal and Chelsea confirmed he was having a medical on Monday, with the transfer set to be completed in the next 48 hours.

"Chelsea can confirm it has reached agreement with FC Porto for the transfer of Jose Bosingwa. The player is now in England to discuss personal terms and undergo a medical," a statement on the club's website said.

After missing out on the English title to Manchester United on Sunday, Chelsea have gained a small measure of revenge by beating United in the race to sign Portuguese

who was also attracting interest from Liverpool and Aston Villa.

Juliano Belletti's brief stay at Stamford Bridge could be ended by Bosingwa's imminent arrival after a series of mediocre performances from the Brazilian.

Bosingwa was born in Congo but moved to Portugal with his parents when he was a child.

His performances for Boavista convinced Jose Mourinho to sign him for Porto in 2003 and he has helped continue the club's domestic dominance as well as winning six caps for Portugal.

He was also involved in a serious car accident three years ago when his jeep skidded off a motorway and rolled down an embankment before bursting into flames. The defender was with four other players at the time, but all survived.

Porto announced a deal was done in a statement to the Portuguese Stock Exchange: "We inform the market that we have an understanding with Chelsea for the rights to our player Jose Bosingwa

"More information on the relative agreement of the transfer will be legalised once the player concludes the medical examinations that he is now having with the permission of Porto football club."

Ups and downs

AFP, London

Ups and downs in English football following Sunday's final round of matches in the Premier League: Champions: Manchester United

Champions League direct entry to group stage: Chelsea

Champions League final qualifying round: Arsenal, Liverpool

UEFA Cup: Everton

Relegated: Derby, Birmingham, Reading