

# C'Ron's lucky escape

## Star unscathed in horror crash

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo walked away unscathed Thursday despite writing off his Ferrari in a spectacular car crash near Manchester airport.

His luxury sports car's front end was smashed to pieces and it lost a wheel as he collided with a roadside barrier while driving to training, the morning after a disappointing defeat for his team.

Ronaldo's teammate Edwin van der Sar, United's goalkeeper, was following in his Bentley at the time of the crash but was not involved in the collision, said police.

Skid marks were clearly visible leading up to the crash scene, and a photographer who arrived shortly afterwards described the 23-year-old Portugal winger's bright-red car as a "terrible mess."

But Greater Manchester Police said no one had been injured. "Officers attended and discovered a Ferrari had collided with a barrier," a statement said. "No one is believed to have been injured."

Witness Jody Lomax was driving behind Ronaldo when the collision occurred.

"The Ferrari went straight into the wall, his front left-hand wheel came off and then Ronaldo

got out of the car," he said, according to the BBC. "I was shocked. Anyway he was all right, he was walking -- he was a bit shaken... Obviously I was stunned at seeing a Ferrari go in the wall and seeing Ronaldo."

A spokeswoman for United said Ronaldo, the 2008 winner of the prestigious Ballon d'Or award, had not required treatment for shock or any other injuries and would be fit to play in Sunday's Premier League showdown with Chelsea.

"Cristiano is fine," the spokeswoman said. "It was on his way to training. He did not receive any treatment. He has trained this morning with the team and is OK."

Police officer Nigel Snell said that, given the damage to the car, it was "fortunate" that Ronaldo was not injured.

"We are trying to establish exactly what happened and I would appeal to anyone that may have witnessed the collision to contact police," he said, cited by the BBC.

Ronaldo played as a second-half substitute in United's 1-0 defeat away to Derby County in the first leg of the League Cup semifinal on Wednesday.

Barring any delayed reaction to the crash, he will be back in the starting line-up for Sunday's match at Old Trafford as United seek to overcome one of their major rivals in the battle to retain the Premier League trophy.



Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo's crashed Ferrari is pictured in a tunnel near Manchester Airport on Thursday. Ronaldo escaped unhurt from the car crash that left his Ferrari a mangled wreck and will be fit to play in Sunday's Premier League showdown with Chelsea.

PHOTO: AFP

# Rome braces for Becks

AFP, Rome



Former England captain David Beckham is set to make his Italian league

debut for AC Milan in Sunday's match at AS Roma following a midweek friendly and weeks of anticipation as teams return from the winter break.

The former Real Madrid and Manchester United midfielder, due to return to parent club Los Angeles Galaxy in March following a short-term deal in Italy, played the first 45 minutes in a friendly against Hamburg in Dubai on Tuesday.

Although pre-match hype has surrounded Beckham, a victory for AC Milan has been billed as a springboard towards challenging for the title while a Roma win would help them dream of Champions League qualification after a dreadful start to the season.

Milan beat Udinese 5-1 in their last match before

Christmas with Beckham watching from the sidelines and they will want to wipe away the memory of defeats to arch rivals Juventus and Palermo and look to make up the nine-point deficit behind leaders and arch rivals Inter Milan.

Roma, who play at Arsenal next month as the Champions League knockout stage starts, are way back in 11th spot and Luciano Spalletti's men have work to do to reach the fourth spot necessary to qualify for next year's event.

Juventus, six points behind Inter Milan in second spot, on Sunday host lowly Siena who caused a shock by beating the Turin giants earlier this year.

## FIXTURES

(times in GMT)  
Saturday  
Genoa v Torino (1700), Inter Milan v Cagliari (1930), Sunday, Bologna v Chievo, Fiorentina v Lecce, Juventus v Siena, Napoli v Catania, Palermo v Atalanta, Reggina v Lazio, Udinese v Sampdoria (all 1400), AS Roma v AC Milan (1930)

Jose Mourinho's Inter Milan may be many people's tip for the title, but Claudio Ranieri's Juventus are considered strong contenders following their recent good league form after an uninspiring start.

Cristiano Zanetti, Claudio Marchisio and David Trezeguet all look available for selection after being injured.

As for Inter, demanding coach Mourinho has urged his team not to show overconfidence at home to Cagliari in Saturday's late game.

"In 2009 we need to improve everything, psychologically and tactically," he said. "We are halfway through a season which could be positive, negative or exceptional."

Former Arsenal star Patrick Vieira will not appear for Inter and nor will the suspended Douglas Maicon though star striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic will be playing.

Cagliari meanwhile have central defensive problems due to the absence of Paolo Bianco and Diego Lopez.

# Sentence, but no jail for Moggi

AFP, Rome

Luciano Moggi, the man at the centre of the 2006 Italian match-fixing scandal, was sentenced to a year and a half in prison by a Rome court on Thursday.

The former Juventus director general, whose son Alessandro was also given a one-year, two-month sentence, was punished for his dealings in GEA, the largest football agent company in Italy, as well as his role in the match-fixing.

GEA had 41 top flight Italian league players on their books, plus three Serie A presidents and several well-known coaches.

The court heard that Luciano Moggi and his son were guilty of coercion and strong arm tactics, particularly in the recruitment of Emanuele Biasi and Nicola Amoroso by GEA, presided over by Alessandro Moggi though prosecutors believe it was in fact Luciano who ran it covertly.

A separate match-fixing scandal came to light after telephone conversations revealed how selection of referees for league matches were being manipulated.

However, David Lippi, the son of Italy coach Marcello, was exonerated from the match-fixing affair though prosecutors had initially recommended a one-year, four-month sentence.

Neither Luciano nor his son Alessandro will serve their sentence however because the evidence which found them guilty came from a period in 2006 when an amnesty had been declared.

# UEFA rejects Real bid

AFP, Madrid

European football's governing body UEFA on Thursday night rejected a bid by Real Madrid to have both new signings Lassana Diarra and Klaas-Jan Huntelaar eligible for Champions League action.

"The European body confirms that this was rejected in accordance with regulations which state that only one player who has played UEFA club competition matches for another competing club in the current season may exceptionally be registered," said a UEFA statement.

Earlier Spanish media reports suggested the defending Spanish champions would appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) should they have their request turned down. Earlier this week Real's new coach Juande Ramos said he was unaware of the rule.

UEFA added they would look into any appeal lodged with them next week.

Frenchman Diarra has played for Portsmouth and Dutchman Huntelaar for Ajax in Europe this season so only one of them would be eligible to play against Liverpool in the first knockout stage of the Champions League on February 25 and March 10.

# Barca looking ominous

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona are back to league action on Sunday looking to continue

their perfect start to 2009 with a win at bottom side Osasuna after demolishing Atletico Madrid 3-1 in the Spanish Cup in midweek.

A sizeable 31 points separates the two teams but Barca struggled against Osasuna last season, drawing 0-0 away and needing an 85th minute winner to seal a 1-0 victory at Camp Nou.

However this season Barcelona look a completely different team under Pep Guardiola and Lionel Messi's form will be giving the Osasuna defence nightmares.

The Argentine scored a hat-trick against Atletico and received a standing ovation from the Atletico fans at the Vicente Calderon.

"It was a very special moment for me to be given a standing ovation," explained Messi. "It's something unexplainable and a beautiful experience for any player."

Barca lead second-placed

Valencia by 11 points in the standings but Unai Emery's Valencia can close that gap by three points as they are in action against Villarreal on Saturday night.

Villarreal's season is threatening to fall apart with the Yellow Submarine losing their last three league matches against rivals Sevilla, Barcelona and Real Madrid.

The club are still in the Champions League, where they will face Panathinaikos in the last 16, but have fallen down to seventh in the league 15 points behind Barca.

"I do not believe we can start talking about a crisis, because the football is there, and in the last two games we did not deserve to lose," said French midfielder Robert Pires. "However, we cannot afford to drop so many points. After these results there is certainly more pressure."

Villarreal must also do without captain Marcos Senna for the Valencia game due to suspension.

After losing his first match in charge 2-0 against Barcelona new coach Juande Ramos has guided Real Madrid to back-to-back 1-0 wins.

Clean sheets were a rarity

under former manager Bernd Schuster, whose last two matches ended in 3-1 and 4-3 defeats, and Dutch international Arjen Robben is happy to grind out the wins.

"It does not matter if you win 1-0 or 3-0, it's still three points. They do not give you more points for scoring more goals," said Robben. "It was important against Villarreal that we did not concede any goals again. The defence did an excellent job and they kept a cool head."

Real, 12 points behind Barca in third, travel to struggling Real Mallorca on Sunday. Elsewhere former Real striking legend Hugo Sanchez aims to make it two wins out of two with new club Almeria when they travel to Espanyol on Sunday.

Mexican Sanchez, 50, guided the club to a 1-0 win over Real Betis in his first match in charge as the club climbed away from the relegation zone.

Atletico Madrid coach Javier Aguirre is another Mexican managing in a Spanish top flight and is having to deal with fresh calls for his head in the wake of the 3-1 defeat to Barca on Tuesday.

Atletico could still overturn

that deficit in the second leg at Camp Nou and president Enrique Cerezo claims Atletico are in good shape having qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League while they are just three points behind Valencia going into Sunday's home match against Athletic Bilbao.

Sevilla were also in cup action defeating Deportivo La Coruna 2-1 on Wednesday in the last 16 first leg and the two face off again on Saturday in the league only this time at Depor's Riazor Stadium.

Sevilla lie fourth, a point behind Valencia, but Depor, who finished last season with a terrific late run, have surged up to sixth and are just two points behind Sevilla.

## FIXTURES

Saturday  
Deportivo La Coruna v Sevilla, Valencia v Villarreal  
Sunday  
Real Mallorca v Real Madrid, Numancia v Getafe, Racing Santander v Recreativo Huelva, Sporting Gijon v Valladolid, Real Betis v Malaga, Atletico Madrid v Athletic Bilbao, Espanyol v Almeria, Osasuna v Barcelona

# Rivals be warned: Rafa

AFP, London



Manchester United head into their summit meeting with Chelsea this

weekend with a warning from Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez ringing in their ears.

The two sides who contested last season's Champions League final kicked off this campaign as joint favourites for the 2008/09 Premier League title.

But it is Benitez's Liverpool who enter the business end of the season at the top of the table and the Spaniard is confident his side have the necessary reserves to keep their noses in front of rivals with deeper resources all the way to the end of the season.

Benitez will be in the dug-out at Stoke on Saturday for the first time since undergoing surgery to remove kidney stones last month and he is looking forward to seeing how his side respond to the return of both Fernando Torres and Martin Skrtel following their recovery from, respectively, hamstring and knee injuries.

"We can still improve," Benitez stressed, playing down suggestions that Liverpool's lack of real strength in depth could prove their undoing.

"Skrtel has not been playing, Javier Mascherano has been playing much better in the last few games, Steven Gerrard is improving and Torres is coming back now."

"So I think we will have more options and more competition for places, which can be important. Clearly we are in

a much better position than in previous seasons although we know that a mistake now can be massive."

With United entertaining Chelsea at Old Trafford on Sunday, Liverpool can pull six points clear of the Londoners with a win at Stoke on Saturday, although Benitez will be mindful of how effectively the Premiership newcomers frustrated his side to earn a point at Anfield earlier in the season.

United's build-up to the meeting with Chelsea has been far from ideal with Sir Alex Ferguson's side having suffered a surprise 1-0 defeat by Derby in the League Cup semifinal first leg in midweek.

Then, in the early hours of Thursday, United superstar Cristiano Ronaldo escaped unhurt from a spectacular car crash near Manchester airport in which his Ferrari was written off.

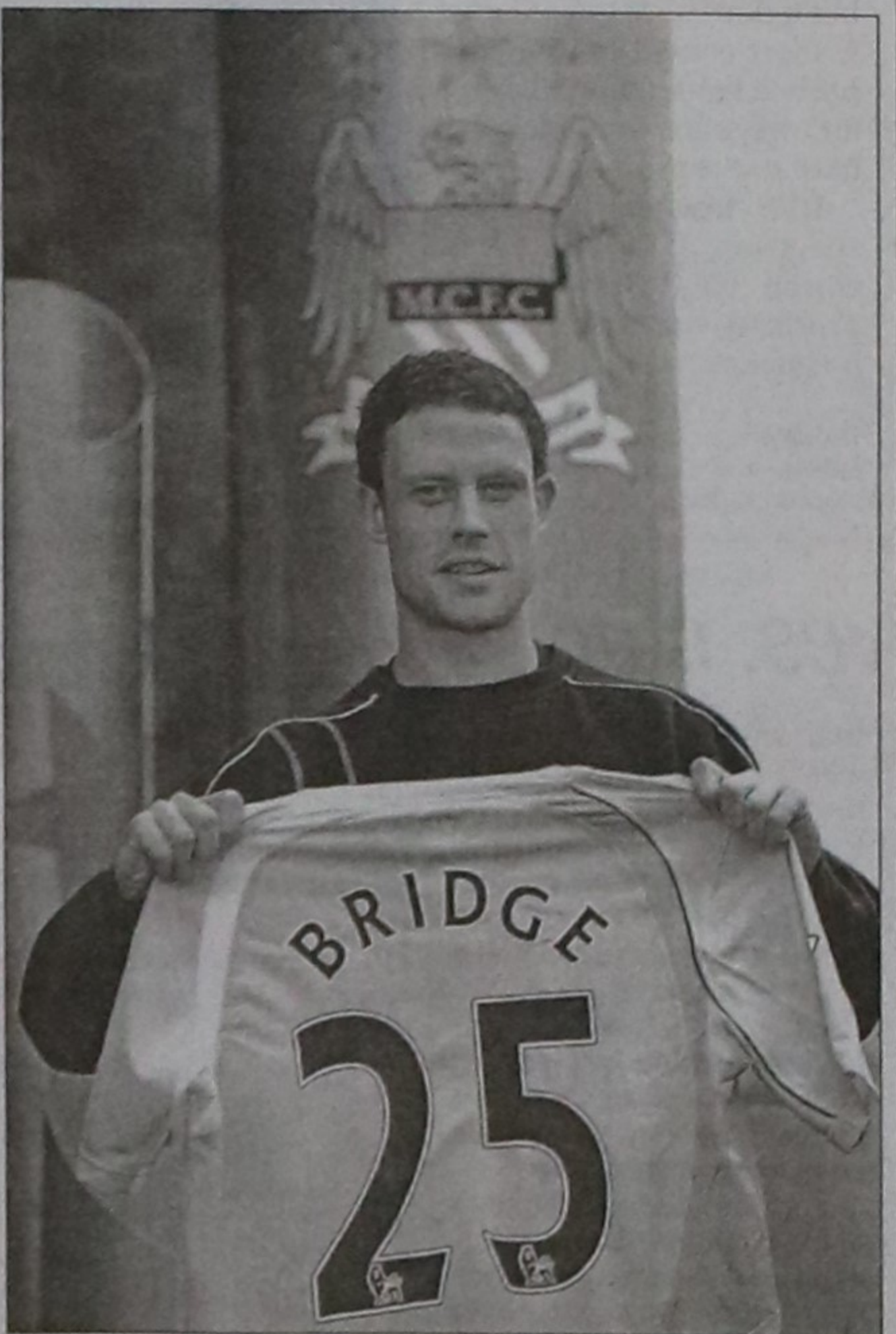
Serbian centreback Nemanja Vidic played down the significance of United's first defeat in 15 matches.

"Maybe in the back of our minds we always recognised we would have a second chance (in the second leg)," he said. "Maybe that is why we didn't perform as we can and Derby took advantage of the fact we played badly."

"But the Premier League is different. We know what it means for both teams and we are looking forward to it."

Despite Arsene Wenger's defiantly bullish tone, the focus of Arsenal's season must now be ensuring a top-four finish.

Wenger's men are unbeaten in six matches but remain three points adrift of Aston Villa, the side currently occupying the final qualifying spot for next season's Champions League.



Manchester City's new signing Wayne Bridge holds his club's jersey at the Carrington training centre in Manchester on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla striker Frederic Kanoute (L) celebrates by lifting his shirt and displaying a t-shirt with the word Palestine written in various languages after scoring against Deportivo La Coruna during their Spanish King's Cup encounter at the Ruiz de Lopera Stadium in Seville on Wednesday. Seville won 2-1. Kanoute is a practising Muslim who has supported various humanitarian causes in the past.

# Derby shock Man Utd

Football

AFP, Derby

Championship strugglers Derby County, with new manager Nigel Clough watching from the directors' box, beat Manchester United 1-0 in the semifinal, first leg of the League Cup here on Wednesday.

Kris Commons 30th minute left foot shot past United keeper Tomasz Kuszczak was enough to claim victory against the World, European and Premiership champions in Derby's first major semifinal since 1976.

It ended the Red Devils' 14-match unbeaten streak dating back to November 8 when Arsenal beat them 2-1 at the Emirates stadium.

Clough chose not to walk on the pitch and acknowledge supporters at Pride Park before kick off. A publicist he is not, but he surely played a part in creating what he hopes to be the second Clough dynasty at Derby County after his new team embarrassed the might of Manchester United.

Only eight months ago, Derby were relegated from the Premier League with a miserable 11 points.

Clough will not meet his squad of players until Thursday but he "popped" his head around the door of the home dressing room to wish them well and he clearly has a touch of his father's magic and sense of occasion.

Without the calming influence of Rio Ferdinand, Vidic and Tomasz Kuszczak were subjected to early moments of discomfort as United were unable to find any of their customary rhythm and it was hardly against the run of play when Derby deservedly broke the deadlock.

Reaching the semifinal stage cost Commons almost 1,000 pounds in purchasing tickets for his friends, but the fulminating 25-year shot he guided beyond United's Polish 'keeper after 30 minutes was pure gold dust for David Lowe, elevated from youth team coach to temporary Derby manager for the evening.

United were so unconvincing that Ferguson's plans to rest all his key players ahead of Sunday's Premier League meeting with title rivals Chelsea at Stamford Bridge had to be abandoned after an hour.

They had barely registered a shot against their former 'keeper Roy Carroll's goal when Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo were introduced to cure the lethargy that gripped the overwhelming favourites.

# Another probe into Tevez affair

AFP, London

The English Football Association and the Premier League on Thursday announced a new investigation into the terms of Carlos Tevez's employment by West Ham in the 2006/07 season, raising the possibility that the club could face further sanctions over the affair.

West Ham were fined 5.5 million pounds at the end of that season for breaching league rules on the ownership of players but escaped a points deduction which could have resulted in the club being relegated.

An FA-appointed tribunal has since ruled that the illegally-employed Tevez was instrumental in keeping West Ham in the Premier League, opening the door to Sheffield United, who were relegated on the final day of the season, to claim substantial compensation.

The new investigation is to re-examine evidence which the second tribunal concluded would have resulted in Tevez, now at Manchester United, being suspended from playing before the end of the 2006-07 season, which would have prevented him from playing a central role in helping the Hammers avoid relegation.

West Ham said in a statement that club officials would cooperate with the new inquiry.

"We have acted in good faith throughout the various inquiries and investigations into this matter and fulfilled the undertakings given to the Premier League following the initial penalty," a statement said.

"We have nothing to hide and will ensure that this is once again reflected in our evidence to the FA and Premier League."

## FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)  
Arsenal v Bolton, Aston Villa v West Brom (1245 GMT), Everton v Hull City, Fulham v Blackburn, Middlesbrough v Sunderland, Newcastle v West Ham, Portsmouth v Manchester City, Stoke City v Liverpool (1730 GMT)  
Sunday  
Manchester Utd v Chelsea (1600 GMT), Wigan v Tottenham (1330 GMT)