

Barca see off Mallorca

AFP, Madrid

Thierry Henry and Rafael Marquez shot Barcelona to a 2-0 victory over Real Mallorca at the Nou Camp stadium on Thursday in the Spanish Cup semifinals first leg.

A header from Henry, who has scored 12 league goals for Pep Guardiola's men this season, from a Bojan Krkic cross past Mallorca's Argentinian keeper German Lux put Barcelona ahead in the 35th minute.

Carles Puyol, Xavi Hernandez and Samuel Eto'o were absent, though Cameroonian star Eto'o did come on briefly at the end of the match, while Andres Iniesta, Henry and Lionel Messi, who replaced Henry at half-time, played.

Barcelona, the runaway leaders in the Spanish League, doubled their score in the 73th minute through a superb freekick from Mexican Marquez (73).

On Wednesday, Sevilla beat Athletic Bilbao 2-1 with an injury time winner in the other semifinal.

Ronaldo not fit yet

INTERNET, undated

Fans of the world class footballer Ronaldo will have to wait a little longer for his return. The 32-year-old star who is joining the Brazilian club Corinthians Sao Paulo showed up Thursday evening to talk to the press - in good form, fine mood and minus a few pounds.

But after the injury to his left knee a year ago, he said he still has problems with unequal muscle power in both legs. Tests showed that his left leg has 30 per cent less strength than his right one.

"It's lacking strength, and it would be a huge risk to go back to the game right now. It's more ideal when the muscle strength is equal in both," Ronaldo said.

It's expected that Ronaldo will have his debut in late February or early March, perhaps on March 8 when Corinthians plays Palmeiras. Ronaldo, who wears No 9, asked journalists to stay away from his private life.

That's another reason to get back into play, Ronaldo said, noting that football would then regain its focus for his life.

Ronaldo made headlines recently for dancing through the night in a Sao Paulo discotheque.

Ronaldo backs Phelps

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazil football star Ronaldo has come out in support of disgraced Olympic champion Michael Phelps who was banned for three months on Friday after a published photograph showed him smoking marijuana.

Ronaldo, the former Barcelona, Real Madrid, AC Milan and Inter striker, sympathised with the Olympic gold medalist and thinks that he should be left alone after facing up to what he did.

"There is no need to persecute someone that has faced up to what he has done, having been at the Olympic Games and that has won almost everything that he can in his career," the footballer told reporters here.

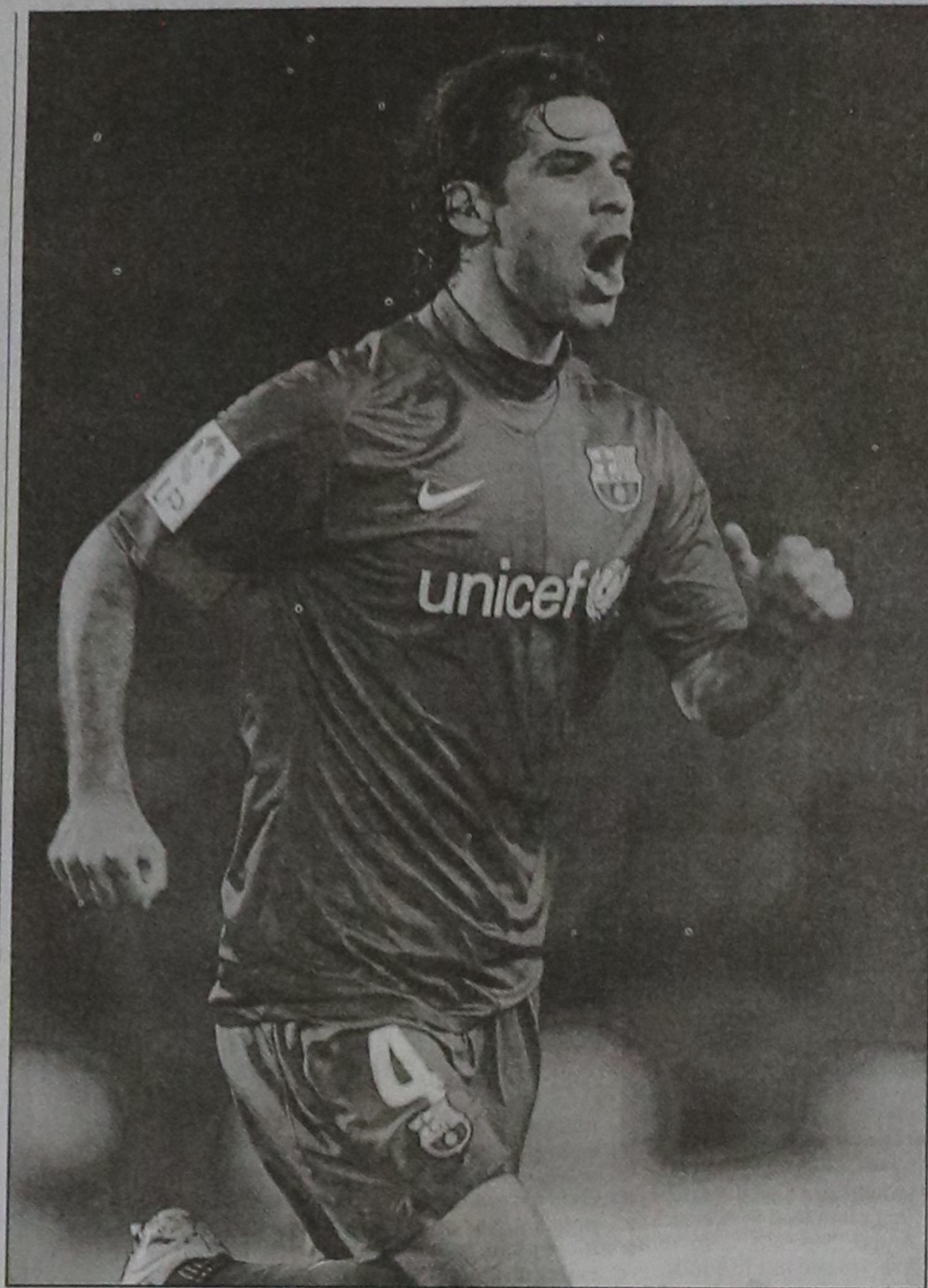
"It is clear that all sportsmen must set young people a good example, but what will be remembered for, winning all his competitions at an Olympic Games?" said Ronaldo who was voted world player of the year three times.

And Ronaldo said it shows how far Phelps has come as a world superstar that journalists want to "snoop" into his private business to sell more of their publication.

"The people buy the newspapers. Not, because I am a good or nice person, but because I am a world champion who has scored lots of goals," said the 32-year-old who won the World Cup with Brazil in 1994 and 2002.

USA Swimming banned Phelps for three months on Friday, but stressed the punishment was not for a doping violation, but said they wanted to send a "strong message" to Phelps about his status as a role model.

Phelps suffered more fall-out on Thursday, when US food company Kellogg's said it would not renew its endorsement deal with the Olympian when it expires at the end of the month. But several other sponsors, including apparel manufacturer Speedo and watchmaker Omega, have stood by Phelps.



Barcelona defender Rafael Marquez runs off to celebrate scoring the second goal against Mallorca during their Kings Cup semifinal at Nou Camp on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Becks boost for Milan

AFP, Rome



AC Milan continue their pursuit of Inter Milan this weekend boosted by David Beckham's admission that he wants to stay in Italy rather than end his loan deal in March.

The former England captain joined Milan from LA Galaxy at the end of December and is due to return to the US on March 9, a day after Milan host Atalanta in Serie A.

But having previously kept diplomatically quiet regarding the subject of staying, Beckham made it clear following Wednesday's 2-2 friendly draw against Rangers in Glasgow that he wants to continue his Italian experience for as long as he can.

"I have enjoyed my time here. I knew I would enjoy it but I didn't expect to enjoy it as much as I have," said the 33-year-old.

"I've expressed my desire to stay here for a while but at the moment I'm still a Galaxy player. I respect the Galaxy and everything they have done for me. They have always been great to me."

"But I hope they can come to an agreement and it's down to the clubs now. To be given the chance again to play at this level at my age is pretty incredible and I've enjoyed it so much."

Hoffenheim wait on Timo

AFP, Berlin



Bundesliga leaders Hoffenheim are waiting on the fitness of ex-Germany goalkeeper Timo Hildebrand as they look to strengthen their position against bottom club Borussia Muenchengladbach on Saturday.

"He still has pain in the groin and we will see how he is in the run up to kick off before deciding if he will play," said Hoffenheim coach Ralf Rangnick after the goalkeeper suffered an eye-watering injury.

Hildebrand, who only joined Hoffenheim during the winter break, was injured during a collision after an hour of the 2-0 win over Energie Cottbus last weekend on his debut as the league leaders opened a two-point gap at the top of the table.

If Hildebrand fails to be fit in time, reserve goalkeeper Daniel Haas will step in.

Hoffenheim have had a bad run of injury lately and 18-goal striker Vedad Ibisevic is out for the rest of the season with a knee injury, but Nigerian forward Chinedu Obasi is back in the squad after a leg injury.

Defender Andreas Beck has

I would like to continue it."

Beckham himself and many others felt that when he left Real Madrid for Galaxy 18 months ago at the age of 32 he was stepping into semi-retirement.

But his desire to keep representing his country and to overhaul Bobby Moore's record 108 England caps for an outfield player has seen him continue to perform at the highest level and to try to keep in England manager Fabio Capello's World Cup plans.

"I want to have a chance of being involved in 2010 and I believe my best chance of doing so is to remain here (at Milan)," he said.

Beckham's continued presence in the Milan team will only help them in the chase to close their six-point gap to city rivals Inter.

Milan are unbeaten in Beckham's five matches, during which time he has already scored twice while last weekend he set up two goals in the 3-0 win at Lazio with trademark crosses.

FIXTURES	
Saturday	AC Milan v Reggina, Lecce v Inter Milan
Sunday	Cagliari v Atalanta, Catania v Juventus, Fiorentina v Lazio, Palermo v Napoli, AS Roma v Genoa, Sampdoria v Siena, Torino v Chievo, Udinese v Bologna

been selected for the Germany team to face Norway next week, but there is no place in Joachim Loew's squad for Marvin Compper or Tobias Weis, who were selected for the 2-1 defeat by England last November.

"That is an indication for both of them to work 100 per cent," said Rangnick.

"It just shows that 80 or 90 per cent is not good enough."

Second-placed Hertha Berlin have the chance to go top of the table on Friday if they beat Arminia Bielefeld with injured striker Marko Pantelic out with a knee and ankle injury.

The Serbian striker has said Berlin can win without him, but they will have a hard time against Arminia Bielefeld who shocked Werder Bremen last Sunday.

Having downed Bayern Munich last Friday, third-placed Hamburg are looking to keep the pressure on Hoffenheim with a win over relegation con-

FIXTURES	
Saturday	Schalke 04 v Werder Bremen, Karlsruhe v Hamburg, Bayer Leverkusen v VfB Stuttgart
Sunday	VfL Wolfsburg v VfL Bochum, Borussia M'gladbach v Hoffenheim, Eintracht Frankfurt v Cologne
Sunday	Energie Cottbus v Hanover 96, Bayern Munich v Borussia Dortmund

Inter, on the other hand, have been inconsistent since Serie A resumed following the winter break, losing 3-1 at Atalanta and being held to home draws by both Cagliari and lowly Torino.

They face a trip to Lecce on Saturday to play a team that has lost only once since the turn of the year while Milan play at home to rock bottom Reggina.

The other team still in the title race are Juventus, who are desperate for a victory to reverse their recent slump.

They have lost their last two league matches against Udinese and Cagliari while on Wednesday they were taken to a draining penalty shoot-out in the Italian Cup by Napoli.

Their trip to Sicily to face Catania on Sunday will be far from straight-forward, particularly for a team jaded from its midweek exertions.

However, they are at least strengthened by the return of Gianluigi Buffon, who has recovered from flu, while former France striker David Trezeguet is pushing for his first start of the season since recovering from a knee problem.

The other significant match this weekend will be in Rome where AS Roma host Genoa in a crucial battle in the race for fourth place and Champions League football next season.

Genoa hold third place just ahead of Fiorentina, who host Lazio, with Roma in sixth.

tenders Karlsruhe.

Having slipped from second to fourth, Bayern Munich are waiting on the fitness of Germany striker Miroslav Klose who has an injury to his left knee before their clash with Borussia Dortmund on Sunday.

If the 30-year-old fails to make it, United States striker London Donovan, on loan from LA Galaxy, looks set to make his first Bundesliga start alongside Luca Toni.

Having been humbled by Hamburg, Munich defender Martin Demichelis promises no such complacency at home to Dortmund.

"In Hamburg, the team didn't really turn up for the first half hour," said the Argentinian.

Fifth-placed Bayer Leverkusen will take on VfB Stuttgart, who are seventh, on Saturday with rising star Tony Kroos expected to feature after he was signed from Bayern Munich on loan.

Having both slumped down to mid-table this season, Schalke 04 will take on Werder Bremen with ex-Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi have said he is committed to the Royal Blues despite a bid from Premier League side Tottenham Hotspurs.

In Saturday's other games, Eintracht Frankfurt face Cologne, while VfL Wolfsburg host Bochum and on Sunday strugglers Energie Cottbus host Hanover.

Reds feeling Gerrard strain

AFP, London



Liverpool's bid for a first English title since 1990 was revitalised by last weekend's win over Chelsea.

But Reds boss Rafael Benitez faces a test of his squad's strength in depth as he seeks to keep the momentum going at Portsmouth on Saturday, less than 72 hours after a gruelling, extra-time FA Cup defeat by Everton.

With Manchester United not in action until Sunday's trip to in-form West Ham, Benitez's men can return to the top of the table -- temporarily at least -- by taking all three points at Fratton Park.

But the required victory will have to be secured without influential skipper Steven Gerrard, who tore a hamstring muscle early in the Everton defeat and is facing a three-week lay-off at least.

Benitez may also feel that star striker Fernando Torres, who looked distinctly weary in that match, may not be up to a third start in the space of seven days, a situation which will inevitably raise further questions about the wisdom of selling Robbie Keane back to Tottenham this week.

Portsmouth, with just two

wins in 15 matches since Tony Adams took over as manager, are hoping for a boost from the arrival of Greek duo Angelos Basinas - who arrived in a deadline-day switch from AEK Athens - and Theofanis Gekas, on loan from Bayer Leverkusen.

First-team coach Johnny Metgod is backing the pair to lift the gloom around the club.

"Gekas has got a very good goalscoring record, not only in Greece but in Germany, and Basinas is a very clever, intelligent midfielder player," Metgod reported.

Chelsea welcome back key defender Ricardo Carvalho from injury as they attempt to put their title bid back on track at home to Hull, and the Portugal centreback believes the Blues will also get a boost from the involvement of his international teammate Ricardo Quaresma.

The winger has been signed on loan from Inter Milan and Carvalho is backing him to provide the imaginative spark Chelsea have lacked of late.

"Quaresma is a very fast and explosive player who is a real warrior on the pitch, so he will be able to handle the physical nature of the Premier League," Carvalho said.

"At the same time he is a very technical player and can

score goals, which will be good for us. He will be a huge help to us at this time of the season."

"He will add more pace, which is important. Nicolas Anelka and Didier Drogba will love playing with him because he gets a lot of assists."

"We have to be strong between now and the end of the season after the defeat to Liverpool and I just want to get back to help out."

A 2-2 draw with bottom side West Brom enabled Hull to halt a run of six successive defeats last weekend but Phil Brown's squad have since lost striker Daniel Cousin and midfielder Jimmy Bullard to injuries.

Any slip-ups from Chelsea could see Aston Villa move into third place provided

FIXTURES

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

Martin O'Neill's side extend their run of away victories to a club record seven at the expense of relegation-threatened Blackburn.

Keane's second debut for Tottenham will come against north London rivals Arsenal on Sunday in a derby that is critical to both Spurs' hopes of pulling away from the relegation zone and the Gunners bid for a return to the Champions League next season.

Tottenham Manager Harry Redknapp has signalled that Keane will be his first-choice striker by naming him as team captain, leaving Roman Pavlyuchenko and Darren Bent to battle for the second forward slot.

With the advantage of a game in hand over their nearest rivals, Manchester United are looking very well placed to claim another Premier League trophy.

That impression will be bolstered on Sunday as their recent injury woes ease with the anticipated return of Patrice Evra and Wayne Rooney from foot and hamstring injuries respectively.

Unbeaten in eight matches, West Ham could hand a debut to loan signing Radoslav Kovac, the experienced Czech Republic midfielder.

C'Ron good, Messi brilliant: Capello

INTERNET, undated

Is Cristiano Ronaldo the best football player in the world, or is it Lionel Messi? England manager Fabio Capello thinks the Argentine has an edge over his Portuguese rival. "No one in the world has the talent that Messi has," Capello said in an interview which Spanish sports daily Marca published Thursday.

For the Italian coach, there are players who are "very good," like Ronaldo of Manchester United, or Real Madrid's Dutchman Arjen Robben.

But Barcelona's Messi is different, according to Capello.

"Messi is football talent," Capello said.

"Ronaldo is a player with great speed, very good, very dangerous, very technical. He has an extremely high level, but it is Messi that is brilliant," he stressed.

The England manager went even further and said that the young Argentine striker could be the successor of legendary compatriot Diego Maradona.

"I think so. He does spectacular things," Capello said of Messi.

He noted that he has been following the forward for many years, and that he even tried to sign him when he was coaching Juventus Turin and Messi was not yet a starter at Barcelona.

"It was not possible," he noted.

Capello also mentioned Argentine striker Sergio Aguero, of Atletico Madrid, as a player who is "brilliant, different."

PSG suspend Kezman

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain on Friday handed Serbian international Mateja Kezman a two week suspension for his temper tantrum in the midweek League Cup loss to Bordeaux.

Kezman reacted angrily to his second half substitution at the Parc des Princes, throwing his shirt to the ground and storming off into the dressing rooms.

The former Chelsea striker made a public apology on Thursday but that was not enough to prevent the club imposing a ban after talks with the player.

PSG, explaining their decision, said in a statement: "During the interview the club management indicated to Mateja Kezman that it planned to suspend him for a fortnight."

"After this period Mateja Kezman must prove to the club's management that he will be able to once again wear PSG's first team shirt."

Kezman had told French television that he deeply regretted his actions.

"I want to make it clear I love the club and I want to apologise to supporters with whom I have always had warm relations. I was annoyed with myself all night," he said.

Atletico turn to Resino

AFP, Madrid



Atletico Madrid may still be in the money-spinning Champions

League, but on the domestic front they are in crisis without a win in 2009 giving them an uphill task to match last season's top four finish.

Mexican Javier Aguirre paid the price for the club's downturn when he was sacked as coach on Monday and former Atletico goalkeeper Abel Resino has been appointed on a six-month contract and takes charge for Sunday's match at Recreativo Huelva.

The 49-year-old Resino, who arrives from second division side Castellon, is seen by many as a stop-gap, but if he can push Atletico into the Champions League places he could make the job his.

"We have a great squad and the logical thing is for us to be in the top four," said Resino.

"We have a lot of quality but need to believe in ourselves again. We need to restore confidence."

Atletico have slumped to seventh with two points from 15 since the turn of the year and trail fourth-placed Valencia by five points.

City neighbours Real Madrid had a similar crisis this season when they sacked Bernd Schuster, but his

replacement Juande Ramos has got the champions back on the right path with six straight league wins.

Despite the impressive sequence, Real still sit 12 points behind pacesetters Barcelona and need to beat Racing Santander at home on Saturday to keep up the chase.

Ramos made his second signing before the transfer window closed and it came as a surprise with few predicting French winger Julien Faubert's loan move from West Ham.

"I have five months to show what I can do," explained Faubert. "It's a once in a lifetime opportunity."

Faubert, 25, joined West Ham from Bordeaux for close to nine million euros but was hindered by injuries during his time in England.

Real captain Raul will hope Faubert can supply more ammunition as he looks to set a new club goal-scoring record after equalling Alfredo di

FIXTURES

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

Stefano's total of 307 goals last Saturday.

Raul, 31, looks as fit as ever but the former Spain international admits he is pondering bringing the curtain down on his career.

"I have two more years on my contract and I think I will have to start thinking about my future when the following season ends," said Raul.

"I get closer to retirement each year but I think I can still play at the level required for another two or three years."

Real may be on a roll with 18 points from their last six matches but they have not made a dent in Barcelona's 12-point lead.

Sporting Gijon are Barcelona's next opponents at Camp Nou on Sunday and they will hope Barcelona's defensive crisis could give them a chance.

Centre-backs Gerard Pique and Rafael Marquez are suspended, following red cards in last weekend's 2-1 win over Racing, while captain Carles Puyol is out injured, leaving manager Pep Guardiola trying to assemble a makeshift defence.

But Barcelona do have a fit and in-form Lionel Messi who took his season's tally to 16 with a brace against Racing despite starting as a substitute.

Elsewhere, third-placed Sevilla host a freefalling Real Betis on Saturday in a hotly-contested derby.



Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp (L) poses with new signing Robbie Keane outside the Spurs Lodge training ground in east London on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP