

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 73rd 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 medallist 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 fallout 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.

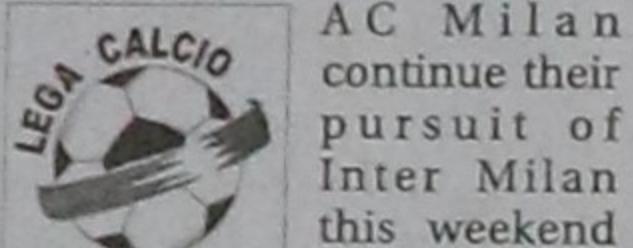
But several other sponsors, including apparel manufacturer Speedo and watchmaker Omega, have stood by Phelps.



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

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.

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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

FIXTURES

Saturday

Schalke 04 v Werder Bremen, Karlsruhe v Hamburg, Bayer Leverkusen v VfB Stuttgart

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

Dortmund