

# Gerrard pleads not guilty

Football

AFP, London

England and Liverpool midfielder Steven Gerrard pleaded not guilty Friday to being involved in a nightclub fight.

Gerrard, 28, denied a charge of affray when he appeared at Liverpool Crown Court.

He is accused of being part of a group that injured businessman Marcus McGee, 34, at the Lounge Inn nightclub in Southport near Liverpool, northwest England, in December last year.

The Reds captain appeared in court on the day he signed a two-year contract extension which will keep him at Anfield until 2013.

Gerrard, wearing a dark blue suit, appeared alongside six other men who also denied affray in a case allegedly stemming from a confrontation as Gerrard was celebrating Liverpool's 5-1 defeat of Newcastle United.

There had been rumours that the trial would be moved

out of Liverpool because of Gerrard's position as the club's captain.

But Judge Henry Globe ruled the case would remain in the city and said careful consideration would be given to jury members' interests.

The judge asked the lawyers involved whether his own interest in football -- and visits to Liverpool's Anfield stadium -- could prejudice the trial, but they had no objections.

He said: "I want to make it quite plain, my own position, I want it to be clearly understood."

"I am not a season ticket-holder, nor regular attendee at Anfield, but it would be right to say I have been a visitor at Anfield as a guest on occasions."

"I have a general interest in football and watched many football matches, though not live, with many different clubs not just Liverpool."

Gerrard and the other defendants were given bail with conditions and were ordered not to contact witnesses nor enter the Lounge Inn unless accompanied by a legal representative.



Liverpool star Steven Gerrard (L) leaves Liverpool Crown court in Liverpool on Friday. Gerrard pleaded not guilty to the charge of being involved in a nightclub fight.

# MU facing injury crisis

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson could be forced to do without more than half of his first-choice line-up for what has become a pivotal Premier League fixture with Aston Villa this weekend.

Back-to-back defeats by Liverpool and Fulham mean that United could have slipped to second place by the time they kick off against Martin O'Neill's side on Sunday.

For that to happen, Liverpool have to avoid defeat at Fulham at Craven Cottage on Saturday evening and United start the weekend with the advantage of a game in hand over their biggest rivals as well as a single point lead.

But it is clear that the champions' nerve is set to be tested far more robustly than anyone would have imagined a couple of weeks ago and Ferguson's

preparations for the arrival of Villa have been anything but ideal.

Recent red cards for Nemanja Vidic, Paul Scholes and Wayne Rooney mean all three are suspended while Vidic's centreback partner, Rio Ferdinand, faces a battle to recover from a groin strain that caused him to depart early from England's midweek win over Ukraine.

In addition, Dimitar Berbatov has been ruled out with an ankle injury, midfielder Anderson suffered a knee injury on World Cup duty with Brazil and Carlos Tevez will be coping with a cocktail of jet lag and shock after featuring in Argentina's 6-1 thrashing in Bolivia on Wednesday.

Like United, Villa have lost momentum of late, taking just one point from their last five matches to concede their place in the top four to Arsenal.

Villa striker Gabriel Agbonlahor had not been

born the last time Villa won at Old Trafford (in 1983), but he sees no reason why that cannot change this weekend.

"Our away form has been good overall this season," he said. "Too many teams go to Old Trafford and just give up without even trying. But teams like Everton, who went there with a positive attitude, almost got something."

Alan Shearer's attempt to save Newcastle from the drop kicks off when Chelsea visit St James' Park on Saturday.

FIXTURES	
(1400 GMT unless stated)	
Saturday	Arsenal v Manchester, Blackburn v Tottenham (1145 GMT), Bolton v Middlesbrough, Fulham v Liverpool (1630 GMT), Hull City v Portsmouth, Newcastle v Chelsea, West Brom v Stoke City, West Ham v Sunderland
Sunday	Everton v Wigan, Man Utd v Aston Villa (1500 GMT)

Given that the west London club still harbours hopes of getting back into the title race, Shearer could scarcely have had a more testing start to his managerial career.

Cesc Fabregas is expected to be involved against Manchester City in what will be the Arsenal captain's first appearance since he suffered a serious knee injury against Liverpool on December 21.

Arsenal will also have Theo Walcott and Emmanuel Adebayor back from injury as they seek to extend their 16-match unbeaten run in the league.

West Brom boss Tony Mowbray has acknowledged that his side, currently propping up the league, must beat Stoke at home on Saturday if they are to have any realistic prospect of avoiding relegation and Middlesbrough, who are away to Bolton, find themselves in a very similar position.

# Ireland fan found in bar toilet

AFP, Rome

An Ireland fan was found in the toilet of a bar in Bari the morning after the Italy-Ireland World Cup qualifier in the city having spent the entire night there.

The 34-year-old was discovered on Thursday morning, still sleeping off the previous day's drinking marathon, by the bar owner, who called the emergency services.

Italian news agency Ansa reported that no-one had noticed the Irishman's presence in the bar's toilet when it closed up for the night.

Irish fans had been celebrating after captain Robbie Keane scored a late equaliser in the 1-1 draw against the reigning world champions.

# Jens extends with Stuttgart

AFP, Stuttgart

Ex-Germany goalkeeper Jens Lehmann has extended his contract to stay with Bundesliga club Stuttgart next season.

"Stuttgart is a well-led club with great supporters and a positive atmosphere where it's very nice to play," the 39-year-old Lehmann said on Friday.

Stuttgart's sporting director Horst Heldt added: "Jens Lehmann's decision is an important sign for the club because it shows that we have big ambitions."

Lehmann arrived at Stuttgart on a one-season contract from English Premiership club Arsenal last summer and enjoys a salary of around 2.5 million euros a year, with bonuses should the German club qualify for the Champions League.

# Diouf quits int'l football again

AFP, Dakar

Senegal striker El Hadji Diouf quit international football for the second time on Thursday, the country's national federation (CNF) said.

"(In a letter to the CNF) El Hadji Diouf explained that he was no longer available for international competition and that he is suspending his career," said spokesman Ndeye Dome Thiouf.

"He has retired from internationals, but will continue to play club football in England."

El Hadji Diouf, who plays for Blackburn in the English Premier League, said in October 2007 that he was calling time on his international career after falling out with the management of the national team.

The 28-year-old later changed his mind.

# Maradona's back to the wall

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

After leading his country to their worst defeat in six decades - a 6-1 World Cup qualifier pasting in Bolivia - Argentina coach Diego Maradona has his back to the wall.

Having only taken over last year, as a surprise successor to Alfio Basile, the 1986 World Cup winner started off with friendly wins in Scotland and France and then last week the two-times world champions hammered Venezuela 4-0 in his first competitive match in charge.

But Wednesday's humiliation in La Paz - to his credit Maradona did not blame the high altitude - ramped up the temperature of the hot seat, even if qualification for next year's finals in South Africa should still present a formality with the team still only two points behind second-placed Brazil.

Four sides go through to the finals automatically and there seems little chance of Argentina missing out, but Maradona candidly admitted his men's shortcomings.

"We just have to start again and hope that nothing like this ever happens again," said Maradona, who praised Bolivia as the better side.

The thin air of the Bolivian capital had already done for group leaders Paraguay but the manner of the Argentines' humbling 3,650 metres above sea level was more than enough to bring the albiceleste down to Earth with a bump.

The likes of Lionel Messi and Carlos Tevez cut disconsolate figures after the loss at the Hernando Siles stadium, which rocked with joyous home fans as a tide of Bolivian green ran the visitors ragged.

The scale of the beating will up the pressure on a coach who has yet to prove himself in the job despite Maradona's lingering cult status from his playing days.

Anything less than a win against Colombia in the next qualifier on June 6 in Buenos Aires would be a further blow to his credibility. After

that, the Argentines have to make another difficult trip to Quito to play Ecuador.

Playing at only 750 metres lower than La Paz the Ecuadoreans have held Brazil and Paraguay, the top two sides in the group, over the past week to prove they are no pushovers on their own patch.

Despite the residual feeling of fan warmth towards him from his playing days Maradona is already coming under pressure from the media.

"Diego as leader and strategist is the main person responsible for the tsunami in Bolivia because, as a prisoner of his love for Bolivia, his commitment (to Bolivian president and personal friend) Evo Morales, he ended up believing the altitude would have neither cause nor effect," wrote sports daily Ole, firmly pointing the finger of blame.

Other papers complained that Maradona had little attacking potency to call on from the bench while suggesting that his side had likely underestimated the Bolivians, who are second bottom of the group.

Maradona has, however, bounced back from crisis before and received tacit backing from Messi on Thursday when the Barcelona starlet insisted: "It's impossible to play in La Paz."

Messi accepted Maradona had sought to play down the altitude issue but told reporters in Buenos Aires that "while I don't want to contradict Diego, it is impossible to play in La Paz. That's my opinion after playing there and some of my teammates think the same."

FIFA has tried to ban matches from being played more than 3,000 metres above sea level but Bolivia argued that traditionally they have played in their capital city perched high up in the Andes mountains and Maradona was one of their most vociferous supporters.

"We don't want to make excuses but everything came off for Bolivia and we couldn't do anything," lamented Messi.

Teammate Javier Zanetti joined Maradona in praising Bolivia's performance but said the high altitude was a problem.

"Some of us had a terrible headache - though we don't want to use that as an excuse," the midfielder told reporters.

# Barca fighting jet-lag

AFP, Barcelona



League leaders Barcelona sparked talk of a treble playing Europe before the international break, but this weekend Valladolid will be primed to take advantage of their jet-lagged players.

Barca have lost three out of the four matches played after internationals so far this season and Valladolid have had two weeks to prepare for the game.

Real, meanwhile, will look to keep the pressure on against Malaga, who were beaten 6-0 by Barcelona in their last match.

Youth product Dani Parejo, who is being gradually brought into the first-team frame by coach Juande Ramos and will be fighting for a midfield place, has not given up on winning the league.

Sevilla, who face Recreativo Huelva, are sitting comfortably in third but coach Manolo

Jimenez still has Real Madrid in his sights: "I am confident we can improve on where we are at the moment and I would not sign now to finish where we are."

Fourth-placed Villarreal are themselves well situated for Champions League qualification.

They have a five-point cushion following the inconsistent form of their main challengers Atletico Madrid and Valencia, whose best chance of European football now appear to be through the UEFA Cup.

FIXTURES	
(1800 GMT unless otherwise stated)	
Saturday	Recreativo v Sevilla, Valladolid v Barcelona, Almeria v Villarreal, Real Betis v Numancia, Athletic Bilbao v Mallorca, Malaga v Real Madrid (2000 GMT)
Sunday	Espanyol v Deportivo La Coruna (1500 GMT), Atletico Madrid v Osasuna (1500 GMT), Valencia v Getafe (1700 GMT), Sporting Gijon v Racing Santander (1900 GMT)

Villarreal face a tricky away match against Almeria, while Atletico and Valencia take on Osasuna and Getafe respectively.

The battle for the UEFA Cup berths is intense though, with Deportivo La Coruna and Malaga also level with Atletico and Valencia on 43 points.

Depor, looking to return to the elite of the game after several years of mediocrity, travel to bottom-placed Espanyol, whose future looks more bleak by the week as they are now eight points from safety.

Numancia, also in trouble, face a vital game against Real Betis who are on the verge of the relegation zone after drawing their last four matches.

Athletic Bilbao have one point more than Betis but they too face a difficult game against in-form Mallorca.

The battle against the drop is very much open and even mid-table Racing Santander and Sporting Gijon, who meet this weekend, are just four points above the relegation zone.

# Dunga keeps counsel on Argentina

AFP, Porto Alegre

Brazil coach Dunga preferred Thursday to salute a 3-0 romp over Peru in their World Cup qualifier which left the five-time champions in second spot in the continental group rather than gloat at rivals Argentina being battered 6-1 in Bolivia.

"Argentina have their problems and we ours - but the altitude does very much muddy the waters and we saw as much," remarked Dunga, reflecting on a round of matches which saw the samba stars move within three points of leaders Paraguay with Chile third a point further back but one clear of Argentina.

The Paraguayans have 24 points from 12 games after their last-gasp draw in Ecuador - who similarly had held Brazil last Sunday, while the latter are on 21 to 20 for Chile and 19 for Argentina.

The top four sides go through automatically and Uruguay, still two points behind Argentina after a draw away to the Chileans on Wednesday, appear destined only for a playoff against a rival from the North, Central American and Caribbean group.

Neither Brazil nor Diego Maradona's Argentines have really hit their stride to date but Dunga said he was happy to keep oiling the machine in the knowledge that in recent years his nation has often allowed itself some inconsistency in the qualifiers before some fine-tuning at the finals.

"We're drawing away and winning at home and that's good. That's more or less what we've been counting on," he told reporters, dubbing the win over Peru achieved with a double from Sevilla's Luis Fabiano and another from Fiorentina's Felipe Melo as "a normal result."

Brazil travel to Uruguay for their next match in the first week of June.

# Mexico sack Eriksson

Football

AFP, Mexico City

Former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson was sacked as Mexico national coach on Thursday following a disappointing 3-1 loss to Honduras in a World Cup qualifier.

Wednesday's defeat was Mexico's second loss in three matches in the final phase of qualifying in the region coming hot on the heels of a reverse to the United States sandwiched by a home success over Costa Rica at the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City.

Eriksson had acknowledged before the Costa Rica encounter that he knew he was under pressure to deliver with media predicting his days were numbered after just 13 matches at the helm.

"The decision was made because we could not risk Mexico's participation in the World Cup," said federation president Justino Compean, who, noting poor away form, added it was not sufficient to rely wholly on winning home matches.

The midweek loss in San Pedro Sula was only the latest in a series of poor showings on the road.

"This morning we had a meeting with

Eriksson and we told him his spell with the Mexican team had come to an end," added Compean.

Eriksson, who angered supporters by bringing four foreign-born players into the squad, said he regretted not having longer to prove his credentials.

"I enjoyed the work, the country, everything. Sooner or later patience runs out," said Eriksson, who won a swathe of honours with IFK Gothenburg in his homeland before further successes with Portugal's Benfica and then in Italy with AS Roma, Sampdoria and Lazio, with whom he won Serie A prior to taking the England job.

"It's a shame because I always thought I would be in the Mexico dugout for a World Cup as Mexico are going to qualify," said the Swede, who readily admitted that poor away showings were to blame.

"We did not play well away from home and this is my responsibility."

Compean said a replacement would be lined up within days with the media quickly putting their money on former incumbent Javier Aguirre, who recently left Atletico Madrid, with Jose Manuel de la Torre of Mexican champions Toluca another name in the frame.



Newcastle United's interim manager Alan Shearer (C), his assistant Iain Dowie (L) and managing director Dereck Liambias arrive for a press conference at St James' Park in Newcastle on Thursday.

# High stakes for Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich coach Felix Magath, Wolfsburg are a strong unit and have won all bar one of their games at home this season.

In strikers Grafite and Edin Dzeko they have the league's most dangerous pairing with 21 goals between them.

With his side facing a huge test at the Nou Camp, Klinsmann says it is also important his side get a good result to gain valuable confidence before heading to Spain.

"Wolfsburg will be a factor whether we go with our heads held high to Barcelona," he said.

Bayern will welcome back Italian pair striker Luca Toni and defender Massimo Oddo for the Wolfsburg trip.

League leaders Hertha need to bounce back from their 2-0 defeat at Stuttgart

"The Wolfsburg game will be a test of our strength and character in the fight for the championship and Champions League qualification for next season - a lot is at stake," said Klinsmann.

"We could only prepare for such an important game as early as Friday. The time is damned short, but Bayern

Munich is used to this situation.

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FIXTURES	
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Sunday	Cologne v Bayer Leverkusen, Werder Bremen v Hannover 96, Karlsruhe v Borussia Moenchengladbach

last time out as they look to hold their position at the top of the table when they host Borussia Dortmund.

Hertha are waiting to see if their hot-shot striker Andrei Voronin will be fit after he broke his nose playing for the Ukraine against England in a World Cup qualifier on Wednesday.

Hamburg are level on points with both Bayern and Wolfsburg, but are only fourth on goal difference and they host fifth-placed Hoffenheim who are now four points off leaders Hertha.

Hamburg coach Martin Jol is waiting on the fitness of both forward Malen Petric and defender Guy Demel, who are struggling with injury.

Jerome Boateng is out with the flu while midfielder Marcell Jansen, who left the German squad on Wednesday suffering with the same illness, is hopeful of playing.

Stuttgart travel to Bochum on Saturday hoping goalkeeper Jens Lehmann will have signed an extension to his contract which expires in the summer.

Seventh-placed Bayer Leverkusen are at Cologne on Sunday with Germany goalkeeper Rene Adler insisting he will play despite suffering with an elbow injury.