



Manchester United captain Rio Ferdinand (front L) warms up during a training session at Carrington on Monday. United will take on Arsenal in the Champions League semifinal second leg tonight.

## Rio returns to training

AFP, London



Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand has given a welcome boost to the club ahead of their Champions League semifinal second leg with Arsenal by returning to training on Monday.

United had feared the England defender could miss Tuesday's decider at the Emirates Stadium after suffering damage to his ribs and a bruised lung at Old Trafford last week.

But the presence of Ferdinand on the Carrington training ground Monday morning suggests he will be fit to face Arsene Wenger's men.

Ferdinand had to be sidelined for Saturday's trip to Middlesbrough because he was left coughing up blood in the United dressing room last Wednesday following a collision with United keeper Edwin van der Sar.

He spent the night in hospital, although scans revealed the England international had not suffered any extensive damage to his

ribs. Given the importance of Tuesday's game, when United will attempt to defend a single goal lead, Sir Alex Ferguson wants the former West Ham defender to play if at all possible.

Ferdinand's presence would be even more crucial if Patrice Evra did not play at Arsenal.

The France full-back limped off at the Riverside with a leg injury and although Ferguson did claim Evra should be fine for Tuesday he did not train in the open part of United's session.

If Evra was ruled out, Ferguson might consider switching last week's goalscoring hero John O'Shea to left-back and bring Rafael Da Silva into the right-back slot.

However, another option could be Gary Neville, who was also at training Monday after a recent foot injury.

Wes Brown is out of contention so Ferguson's only other alternative would be to move Jonny Evans, the man likely to be replaced by Ferdinand, to left-back where he has won a number of caps for Northern Ireland.

## ARSENAL (0) V MANCHESTER UNITED (1) MU in pole position

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson believes titleholders Manchester United are perfectly placed to take advantage of the pressure on Arsenal in Tuesday's Champions League semifinal second leg as the holders aim to return to the final of Europe's elite club competition.

Ferguson's side travel to the Emirates Stadium in the ascendancy after John O'Shea's goal secured a 1-0 win in the first leg last week.

A draw would be enough for United to reach the final for the second successive season. The Premier League leaders could even lose and still go through on away goals if they score and are defeated by just a one-goal margin.

Arsenal's young, injury-hit team were struck by stage-fright in the first leg and the tie could have been beyond rescue but for a series of superb saves from Manuel Almunia.

With the final at Rome's Stadio Olimpico tantalisingly close, Ferguson expects United to prey on Arsenal's nerves again in north London.

The United manager is convinced United are in pole position because Arsenal's failure to score at Old Trafford

means they now have to play a more open game, leaving the way open for Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney and company to wreak havoc on the counter-attack.

"They must be worried about us scoring. Any team who goes to play the second leg at home when they haven't scored in the first must worry about losing that goal. That's a fact of life," Ferguson said.

Key to United's success in the first leg was the dominance of Darren Fletcher, Michael Carrick and Anderson in central midfield.

The tigerish trio hounded Arsenal from the off and, with Spanish playmaker Cesc Fabregas denied the time to find his rhythm, United had complete control for much of the match.

Ferguson rested all three midfielders for Saturday's 2-0 win at Middlesbrough and Fletcher admitted United's gameplan will again focus on knocking Arsenal out of their stride.

"Our game plan in the first leg was to get about them and press them and do it at a high tempo and then try and break with the quality attacking players that we've got," Fletcher said.

"It seemed to work. Arsenal are a great passing side and if you stand off them, they will pass anyone to death.

"So it was important that we got at them and got in their faces. We need more of the same in the second leg."

"The pressure is on Arsenal now, they are at home and will have to come out and win the match."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger insists his players won't be so timid in attack this time and he takes heart from the obdurate form of their defence at the Emirates.

The Gunners, who won 3-0 at Portsmouth despite resting eight players on Saturday, haven't conceded a home league goal since Robbie Keane scored for Liverpool on December 21.

They have already beaten United at the Emirates this season, although a repeat of that 2-1 win wouldn't be enough to reach the final.

"We have a good defensive record at the Emirates, and in the Premier League Manchester United have suffered in away games," Wenger said.

"We can have an attacking style at home without conceding goals and that is what we want on Tuesday.

"I believe in the strength of character in this team and there, desire to go through - that will certainly be a huge motivation.

"We were unable to penetrate and create clear-cut chances in the first leg but the positive is that Manchester United had chances to win by more than one.

"We feel we will perform better on Tuesday and are still completely in it."

## Persie boost for Gunners

AFP, London

Robin van Persie has handed Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger a fitness boost ahead of Tuesday's Champions League semifinal clash against Manchester United.

Van Persie returned to training on Monday after missing Arsenal's last four matches with a groin injury suffered during his club's FA Cup semifinal defeat against Chelsea in April.

The Dutch international is expected to partner Emmanuel Adebayor in Wenger's forward line as the Gunners try to overturn the 1-0 deficit from the first leg at Old Trafford.

"Robin van Persie is available and back in squad," Wenger said at his pre-match press conference on Monday. "You want everybody in a game like that to be available. He gives me an opportunity to make a decision about our selection."

With van Persie back, Wenger's only other fitness issue concerns French defender Mikael Silvestre, who is struggling with a groin injury.

Silvestre is in the squad but Wenger admitted he will have to wait until the last minute to decide if the former United star can feature at the Emirates Stadium.

"Mikael Silvestre is in squad as well but he still has a little groin problem. We will assess that on Tuesday."

## Corinthians unbeaten champions

INTERNET, undated

Corinthians drew 1-1 with Santos at the Pacaembu stadium on Sunday to become the first unbeaten Paulista State Champions in almost 40 years.

The Timao had won the first leg of the decider 3-1 last weekend, with two spectacular goals from Ronaldo, and only needed a point or a narrow defeat to clinch the title.

But Corinthians went behind to a Kleber Pereira penalty kick in the 28th minute, after the veteran was impeded in the area by Corinthians goalkeeper Felipe.

However, Andre Santos levelled the scores five minutes later with a quick snapshot inside of the area.

Ronaldo may not have made as much of an impact as in the first leg of the final, but the three-time FIFA World Player of the Year was very lively during the encounter.

With the draw, Corinthians extended their unbeaten streak at the Pacaembu stadium to 25 matches.

## Ramos fears for future

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Juande Ramos admits the Spanish champions are no longer one of Europe's elite clubs following their 6-2 drubbing by Barcelona on Saturday and the result casts further doubt on whether he will be entrusted with the task of restoring Real to past glories.

The league now looks over for double champions Real as Barca are seven points ahead with just four games left and the Barca humiliation, coupled with the embarrassing 5-0 aggregate loss to Liverpool in the last 16 of the Champions League, have put a question mark over Ramos.

The former Sevilla coach was handed a six-month contract in mid-December after replacing Bernd Schuster and has won 17 out of his 20 league games but that may still not be enough to persuade the club to keep him on.

"I think Barcelona are a cut above and showed that they were superior," said Ramos. "I am not frustrated at not beating Barca, Liverpool or Atletico Madrid. Those results tell us the level we are currently at."

"The big European teams have overtaken us and we have to recognise this although obviously it hurts."

Real may have won back to back league titles but since 2004 the record nine-time European champions have failed to get past the quarterfinal stage of the Champions League and were outclassed by Liverpool this season.

It is back to the drawing board for Real and there could be some departures in the summer with some deadwood shifted and new faces brought in.

The presidential elections are scheduled for this summer, with June 14 put forward as a possible date, and the victor is likely to decide the direction of the club in terms of coach and players.

Former president Florentino Perez has been one name mentioned - although he has still to confirm if he will run in the election - and has cited Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger as his ideal coach.

Wenger has given no indication of his desire to swap London for Madrid and Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez, who used to work as a youth coach at Real, has said that he couldn't work at Real as the coach doesn't have a major say on transfers.

Ramos, rebuilding his reputation after a disastrous spell at Tottenham Hotspur, has so far refused to talk about his future saying it will be decided at the end of the season but will know Real's penchant for changing coaches.

In the last six seasons Real have had eight coaches while Barcelona have had just two in Frank Rijkaard and Pep Guardiola.

## Espanyol stun Valencia

AFP, Madrid



In-form Espanyol boosted their survival hopes and at the same time put a huge dent in Valencia's Champions League hopes with a convincing 3-0 victory on Sunday.

Second half goals from Roman Martinez, Nicolas Pareja and Nene made it 16 points from 18 for Espanyol who climb four points above the relegation zone.

For Valencia it was a major setback as they missed a golden opportunity to pull away from Villarreal, a point behind in fifth, who lost 2-0 against Sevilla on Saturday.

Atletico Madrid capitalised on Valencia's slip with a 2-0 win over Real Betis to move a point behind their rivals.

Uruguayan international Diego Forlan scored both goals to take his season's tally to 25 just two behind the league's top-scorer Samuel Eto'o.

Deportivo La Coruna are still in with an outside shot of Champions League football

defeating Valladolid 1-0 on Sunday to move three points behind Valencia.

New Getafe coach Michel tasted defeat in his first match in charge losing 2-1 to Real Mallorca on Sunday to leave the club staring relegation in the face.

A disastrous mistake from Serbian goalkeeper Vladimir Stojkovic, on loan from Portuguese giants Sporting Lisbon, gifted Mallorca the winning goal on 68 minutes with Aritz Aduriz pouncing on his slack goalkick to slot home.

Recreativo Huelva scored a crucial late winner to down relegation rivals Osasuna 2-1 on Sunday and are now just a point from safety.

Defender Nasief Morris scored a brilliant volleyed winner in the dying seconds of the match to boost Recre's chances of staying up. Osasuna stay two points above the bottom three after the defeat.

Sporting Gijon were frustrated by a late equaliser in a 1-1 draw with Athletic Bilbao on Sunday. Incredibly it was Sporting's first draw of the season and they are now level on points with Getafe who occupy the final safety spot.

## AZ Alkmaar rule out Van Gaal switch

AFP, The Hague

Louis Van Gaal, the coach of newly crowned Dutch champions AZ Alkmaar, will not be joining German giants Bayern Munich, the AZ president Dirk Scheringa declared on Monday.

"Louis is under contract until 2010," Scheringa told the website of Dutch magazine sportweek.nl. "A departure to another club is not negotiable."

"I'm not worried about anything as Van Gaal is a man of principle who always respects his contracts. And we've not been contacted by Bayern."

Bayern's general manager Uli Hoeness claimed on Sunday that the reigning German champions were close to an agreement with Van Gaal, having sacked Jurgen Klinsmann last week.

Van Gaal, who has previously coached Ajax and Barcelona, would sign "a two-to-three-year contract", Hoeness told the Munich press.

But Scheringa was adamant Van Gaal would not be leaving AZ.

"We want to play in the Champions League with Louis," he said.

Van Gaal refused to comment on the matter during the press conference that followed AZ's 3-0 league defeat at second-placed FC Twente on Sunday.

## Milan stay in hunt

AFP, Rome



AC Milan kept their slim title hopes alive with a comfortable 2-0 victory at Catania on Sunday courtesy of goals from Filippo Inzaghi and Kaka.

Veteran Inzaghi's strike took his record to 11 goals in his last eight matches while Kaka's strike was his 15th of the season in Serie A and followed up a pair of penalties last weekend against Palermo.

The victory reduced Inter Milan's lead at the top of Serie A to seven points but, with just four matches left, second-placed Milan would need their city rivals to suffer a spectacular collapse to win a first scudetto since 2004.

Third-placed Juventus's hopes all but mathematically ended as substitute Jose Ignacio Castillo scored an equaliser deep into injury time for relegation-threatened Lecce in a 2-2 draw in Turin.

In Sicily it was plain-sailing for Milan who opened the scoring on 27 minutes after former world player of the year Kaka burst into the area and then teed up Inzaghi for a typical poacher's finish.



Milan star Ricardo Kaka celebrates after scoring the second goal against Catania during their Serie A clash at the Massimino Stadium on Sunday.

Milan then sealed the match seven minutes into the second period as Kaka swept home the loose ball after Lecce goalkeeper Tomas Kosicky pushed out David Beckham's header.

It was Milan's fifth win in a row and also took their tally to 21 goals in their last eight matches.

Florentina maintained their grip on fourth place and the final Champions League qualifying position as Peruvian full-back Juan Manuel Vargas scored the only goal of the game in a 1-0

win over Torino.

Fifth-placed Genoa are just a point behind La Viola after they won a bad-tempered city derby against Sampdoria 3-1.

Argentine Diego Milito was the hattrick hero but three players were sent-off and nine more booked as the game descended into carnage at the end.

AS Roma fell out of the running for a top four finish as they were held 0-0 at home to Chievo, leaving their eight points behind Fiorentina with just 12 more points up for grabs.



Brazil legend Ronaldo (L) of Corinthians celebrates with teammates after their Paulista Championship second leg derby final against Santos at the Pacaembu Stadium in Sao Paulo on Sunday.