

Fergie salutes C'Ron



AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson saluted Cristiano Ronaldo after the Manchester United winger's two-goal blast against Arsenal in Tuesday's Champions League semifinal sent the holders back to the final with a 3-1 win on the night and 4-1 on aggregate.

Ronaldo was at his formidable best at the Emirates Stadium as the Portugal winger set up United's opener for Park Ji-Sung and then embarrassed Arsenal keeper Manuel Almunia with a blistering free-kick.

Not content with that, Ronaldo started and finished the move of the match in the 61st minute to put the result beyond doubt and seal United's place in the final against Chelsea or Barcelona.

"I thought they couldn't handle Ronaldo. That made a big difference," Ferguson said.

"The midfield was working its socks off, we had good shape and the defensive positions were covered but we needed someone to give them real problems and Ronaldo in that form, he's a fantastic player.

"We weren't overcome by Arsenal's start to the game - they were moving and the crowd were going but we kept playing our football. Once we transferred the ball to Ronaldo, it was a big problem for them.

"We got a good start and that made the difference. Two quick goals like that against a young team, I don't think, wherever you play, you can recover from that. It was a mountain to climb, especially as it was 1-0 from the first game.

"The third goal was marvellous. At that point, Arsenal were throwing everything forward and we caught them really. The speed of the play was fantastic."

The only dark cloud over United's triumph

was Darren Fletcher's late red card for a foul on Cesc Fabregas, which rules the Scotland midfielder out of the final.

Italian referee Roberto Rosetti awarded the penalty for Fletcher's challenge even though he appeared to take the ball first.

"He's disappointed and he should be. He's one of the most honest players in the game and to miss the final, it's a tragedy," Ferguson said.

"I haven't spoken to the referee. I respect him. He may look at it himself but we shouldn't ask him. He's confident enough and fair enough to look at it himself, possibly. We can't appeal and that's disappointing for the boy."

While Ferguson savoured a victory that added further lustre to an already glittering CV, Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger admitted his side's defeat was the most disappointing moment of his career.

"It's the most disappointing defeat. The fans were up for a big night and to disappoint people, it hurts really," Wenger said. "The most difficult thing for me is that we have the feeling that we never played in the semifinal.

"We started quite well but the most disappointing thing was that the game was over before it started. That is hard to swallow.

"We can only look at ourselves. It's very disappointing to fight such a long way and then to give the game away like we did.

"We don't blame individuals but it's like that. We conceded two in three minutes and that's too much against a side that defends well and which likes to counter attack."

Patrice Evra, United's France left-back, rubbed salt into Wenger's wounds as he claimed the tie had been a walkover.

"It was 11 men against 11 babies," Evra said. "If you look at their 11 players and our 11 we were better everywhere.

"We keep hearing that Arsenal play good football but that is not everything. You have to win titles, at Manchester we play good football and win titles."

Van Basten steps down

AFP, The Hague

Marco van Basten has stood down as coach of Ajax after failing to guide the Dutch giants into next year's Champions League, the club announced Wednesday on its website.

The former star striker for the Dutch national side "had reached the conclusion that he had failed to achieve the goals he had set at the start of the season and that he would be unable to do any better next season," a club statement said.

The 44-year-old Van Basten took over at his former club last July after being Dutch national coach for four years, notably at the 2006 World Cup finals and Euro 2008.

The former European club champions are currently lying third in the Dutch first division behind unfashionable AZ Alkmaar and FC Twente and with just one game to go cannot grab one of the two spots available for next season's Champions League.

The final straw was a 4-0 defeat away at Sparta Rotterdam last weekend.

Their last game of the season on Sunday against FC Twente will see assistant coach John van't Schip in charge on an interim basis.

'Park will play final'



AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson has hinted South Korea winger Park Ji-Sung will play in the Champions League final as a reward for his heroic display in Manchester United's semifinal win over Arsenal.

Ferguson is determined to give Park his moment in the spotlight because he believes the 28-year-old is one of his most under-rated players.

Park emphasised his value to United with a typically energetic and effective performance at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.

He gave United the perfect start with an alert finish after Kieran Gibbs slipped while trying to clear Cristiano Ronaldo's cross.

Then he played a key role in United's third goal with a sweeping cross-field pass to Wayne Rooney, who centred for Ronaldo to score.

Park, who also scored in Saturday's win at Middlesbrough, suffered the worst moment of his career last season when Ferguson couldn't even find him a place on the

bench for the Champions League final victory over Chelsea in Moscow.

But, speaking after United's 4-1 aggregate victory over Arsenal, Ferguson revealed that the former PSV Eindhoven star is set to get his wish to play in Europe's showpiece final in Rome's Stadio Olimpico.

"He's one of the most under-rated players," Ferguson said. "He came back from South Korea tired last month but we gave him a break for two weeks. He's refreshed and you saw the results of that against Arsenal.

"If you watch the game again, you will see the running of Park and Darren Fletcher. They were star men."

Then he played a key role in United's third goal with a sweeping cross-field pass to Wayne Rooney, who centred for Ronaldo to score.

Park never stopped running and his movement and use of space was very good. I don't think he'll be disappointed (in the final) this time."

Fletcher, though, will play no part - a substitute in the last final though he didn't get on the pitch - as he was sent off and despite not seemingly touching Cesc Fabregas in the penalty area there is no recourse for an appeal under UEFA rules.

Arsenal fan commits suicide

AFP, Nairobi

An Arsenal fan in football-mad Kenya hanged himself following his team's 4-1 aggregate drubbing by arch-rivals Manchester United in the Champions League semifinal, police said Wednesday.

Suleiman Alphonso Omondi, a 29-year-old Kenyan living in the capital Nairobi's Embakasi neighbourhood, hanged himself in his Arsenal shirt late Tuesday after the match, police said.

"We were watching the match at Bamba 70 pub, and when Arsenal was defeated, Suleiman just walked out in protest and he was crying," Calvin Otieno, one of his friends, told AFP.

"We didn't know he was going to hang himself until this morning when we received the reports and came here to find his body at the balcony," Otieno said outside the deceased's home.

Arsenal slumped to a 3-1 defeat at home in the second leg of the Champions League semifinal, capping a disappointing season for the Gunners who were already out of the Premier League title race early in the season.

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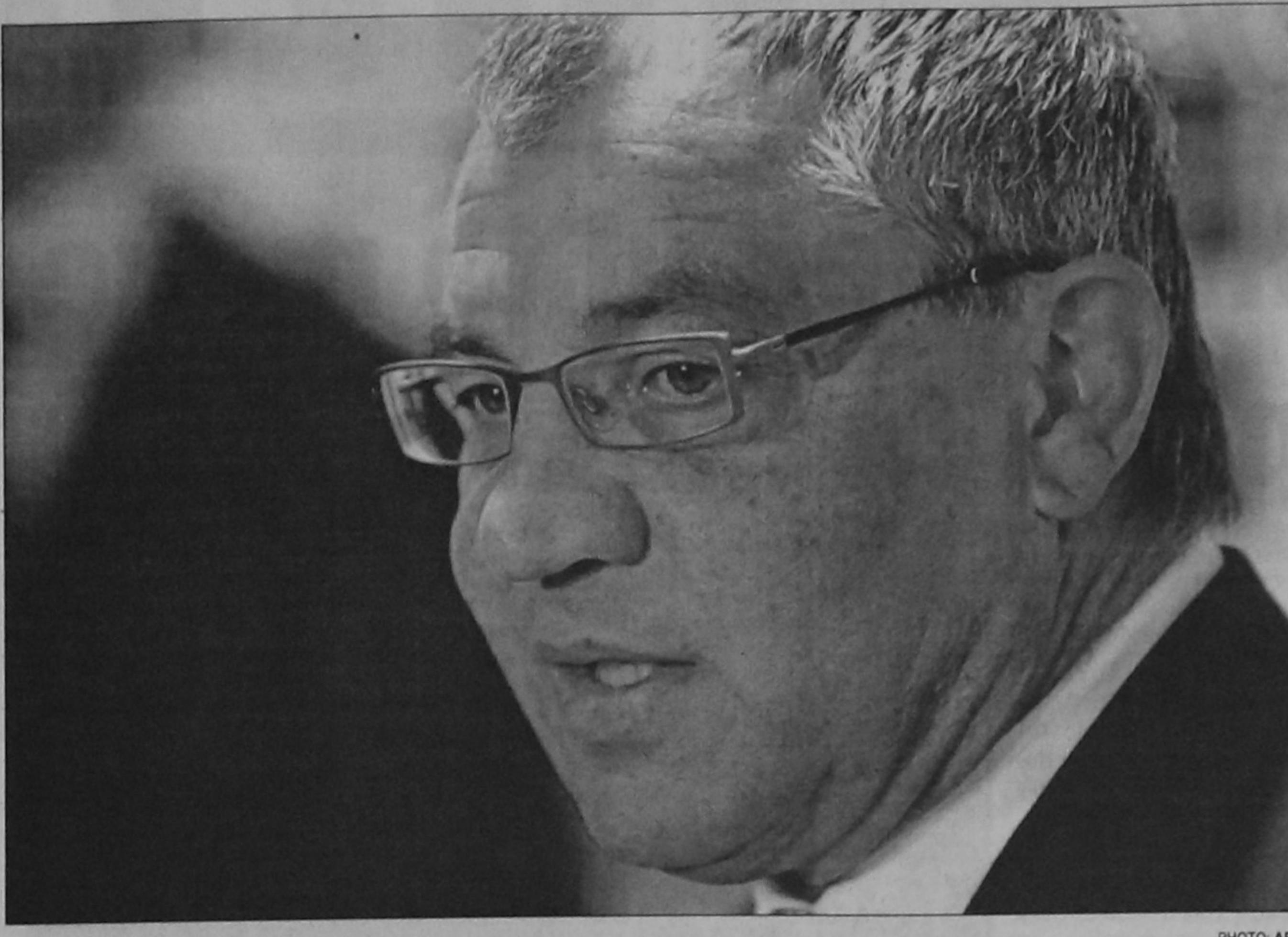
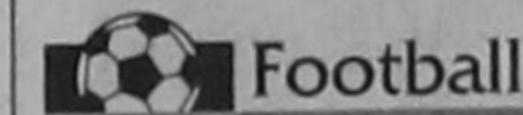


PHOTO: AFP

Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath addresses a press conference in Wolfsburg on Wednesday. Magath is leaving Wolfsburg for Schalke at the end of the season.

Schalke unveil Magath



AFP, Berlin

Felix Magath, coach of current Bundesliga leaders Wolfsburg, will join rivals Schalke 04 at the end of the season, he confirmed on Wednesday.

Wolfsburg announced Wednesday the 55-year-old will leave them when the season ends on May 23 and hours later Schalke confirmed Magath will take on the dual role of team manager and coach for them next season.

Neither the lure of taking Wolfsburg into the Champions League for the first time, nor leading them to their first Bundesliga title - imminent with his side three points clear with four games remaining - could tempt Magath to stay.

And after speculation first flew around the German media last week, Magath admitted he was revealed to finally make his future plans known - albeit poorly timed with his current side chasing the league title.

"I am glad that the decision is finally out, even if I am not really happy about the circumstances," said Magath in a press conference in Wolfsburg on Wednesday having taken charge of the Bundesliga team in the summer of 2007.

"After discussions with Wolfsburg's supervisory board, we had already decided week ago I would leave, but I regret the timing."

Magath told the Wolfsburg squad on Wednesday morning and says he leaves with his head held high.

"I believe there are good reasons behind my decision," he said.

"From my point of view, the goals which I agreed on at the beginning of my commitment

with Wolfsburg's board have been reached.

"It was planned to take the team to a higher level and nobody thought we would achieve that within two years.

"I don't believe someone can work in professional football, on a long-term basis, based on promises."

"And I was fortunate to get a good start to my time here."

Former Bayern Munich coach Magath has a four-year contract at Schalke and says he leaves Wolfsburg in rude health having used the early exit clause in his contract to take charge at Schalke.

Magath will take over from both Dutch coach Fred Rutten and team manager Andreas Mueller who were sacked from their roles by Schalke earlier this year.

"We have already reached our sporting targets substantially faster than we planned in the summer of 2007 when I took charge," added Magath.

"This team is young and is bound to develop more in the future."

Magath has steered Wolfsburg to the top of the German league this season, while Schalke are up to seventh in the table after an indifferent season, and Hans-Dieter Poetsch, chairman of Wolfsburg's board, paid tribute to his work.

"We would like to offer our thanks to Mr Magath for his help over the last two years and for his extraordinary achievement in such a short period of time," he said.

Magath was sacked by Bayern in February 2007 despite leading them to the Bundesliga and German Cup double in both of the two seasons before, but has turned midtable Wolfsburg into table leaders.

Ferguson's grandchildren hurt in crash

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson's daughter-in-law and grandson were seriously injured in a car crash, according to police and press reports Wednesday.

Nadine Ferguson, 30, estranged wife of Ferguson's son Darren, was airlifted to hospital after the accident on Tuesday, while their 10-year-old son Charlie and six-year-old daughter Grace were also hospitalised.

"The young boy ... is in a very serious but stable condition," said a spokesman for Cheshire police, adding that the six-year-old girl was treated for minor injuries.

Their mother's condition was also described as "serious" after the accident near her home in Cheshire, northwest England, the spokesman added.

The Sun newspaper described the Manchester United manager as "shaken" by the crash, although he showed no signs of the family concern Tuesday night, when his side beat Arsenal 3-1 in a Champions League semifinal at the Emirates stadium in London.

2010 WC tickets in high demand

AFP, Johannesburg

The second phase of 2010 World Cup ticket sales reached 185,000 in eight hours as fans vied for seats at next year's showpiece event in South Africa, FIFA said Tuesday.

Some 100,000 tickets are available for the phase which ends in November, excluding the two semifinals and the final, and will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

More than 1.6 million requests for tickets were recorded in the first ticket sales phase between February 20 and March 31.

The global football governing body said some 24,000 Confederations Cup tickets had sold in South Africa within the first 24 hours of direct sales for the tournament which begins next month.

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