

Benitez won't applaud Fergie

AFP, Birmingham



Rafael Benitez extended his feud with Sir Alex Ferguson by refusing to congratulate the Manchester United manager for his title triumph, following Liverpool's 2-0 victory over West Bromwich Albion which saw the losers relegated to the Championship.

The Spaniard has been daggers drawn with his opposite number at Old Trafford all season in an intriguing side-show to the challenge for the title between the two sides and he remained bitter towards the Glaswegian 24 hours after having to concede defeat to United.

Benitez was asked if he would like to extend his congratulations to Sir Alex Ferguson and Manchester United for winning the title.

"I will say congratulations to Manchester United. I prefer to say that to them," said the Spaniard.

But when pressed further to extend his congratulations to Ferguson in person, Benitez would only say: "They are a big club and a good club. I normally show respect and be polite to other managers at the end of the season."

"But there have been a lot of things I don't like this season. I say congratulations to Manchester United because they have won the title, but that is it."

Liverpool assured themselves of first place and Benitez feels he has laid down a marker this season in extending United to such lengths and he could not resist a further dig at Ferguson when asked to define what have been the deciding factors in the title race.

"They have had better quality on the bench. When they played us they had Scholes, Giggs and Berbatov on the bench. I am really pleased that we have got 83 points with the squad we have. When you are prepared to pay 20 million pounds or 30 million pounds for players it is easier to win the title," he added.

Benitez will not be taking any disciplinary action over the on-the-field row between Alvaro Arbeloa and Jamie Carragher after the pair squared up to each other in the second half.

Carragher and the Spanish defender almost came to blows as a row over positional play escalated on the field.

"I don't like it, but we wanted to keep a clean sheet for Pepe. It also showed that we have a positive mentality and a character not to concede a goal," said Benitez.

Inter close to Milito signing

INTERNET, undated



Inter Milan are already looking to beef up their ranks as they celebrate a fourth title secured at the weekend with two games left to the end of the Serie A season. La Gazzetta dello Sport Monday quoted Inter coach Jose Mourinho as saying that the rumoured signing of Argentine striker Diego Milito is more than likely.

Milto, who turns 30 in June, is the league's third best scorer on 20 goals.

"Now it can be said. Inter are not that far from Milito of Genoa, a striker with an impressive form," the Portuguese trainer said.

"We need a second striker. Then, this year, we had great difficulties in midfield and we need two players with strength and different tactical abilities from those we already have."

"And then a defender, beside two or three from the youth team, whom I like very much."

President Massimo Moratti partly agreed with his coach and brushed aside rumours that Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the team's best scorer, and league's second, on 22 goals, could consider a departure.

"Ibrahimovic will stay on," Moratti said. "Ours won't be a buying campaign with very big names. Milito is not yet an Inter player and the negotiation (with Genoa) is not as advanced as you read on newspapers. Mourinho thinks about a roster with four strikers. I don't think we'll do incredible things (on the market)."

The 27-year-old Swedish striker, however, has displayed increasing impatience on the pitch, bickering with some of his team mates and the fans.

"I can't say anything about my future," Ibra said. "There are two games left and I'll do anything to win. But in football there are no certainties."

"I don't know where I'll be in the future. For sure, I'm not a man who spends all his life in the same club."

Benzema sinks Marseille

AFP, Paris



Bordeaux's hopes of ending their 10-year wait for the French league title were boosted Sunday when defending champions Lyon beat Marseille 3-1 at their imposing Velodrome stadium.

Karim Benzema proved a two-goal hero for Claude Puel's visitors, beating Steve Mandanda from the spot with a first half penalty before coolly slotting past the Marseille keeper after a defence-splitting pass on 42 minutes.

Marseille dominated for periods in the first half with Mahamadou Niang hitting the post with a bullet strike in the 16th minute.

Just how costly his miss was became apparent when Benzema scored from the penalty spot in the 29th minute after he was brought down by Brazilian Brandao.

Benzema's second seemed to take the wind out of Marseille's sails.

The hosts struggled to get back into the match in a somewhat dull second half that was lived up when Benzema pounced on a defensive error to test Mandanda again, only this time the keeper won their duel.

Marseille reduced the arrears in the 80th minute through Sylvain Wilford but despite a late rally by the hosts their brief revival came too late.

In the fourth minute of injury time a superb long-range free-kick from Brazilian Juninho stunned the hosts.

Nevertheless with two games remaining it is still all to play for in a league which, this season, has been incredibly hard to predict.

Bordeaux face Monaco next week at home then Caen away on the final match day while Marseille travel to Nancy next week before hosting Rennes on May 30.

Lyon are already out of the title race but are still battling to secure a Champions League spot for next season.

This latest victory hoists them up to third at the expense of Paris St Germain - who were stunned 2-1 by Auxerre on Saturday - on 67 points, four behind Marseille and seven behind Bordeaux.

Bordeaux, coached by former France international Laurent Blanc, took a major stride towards their first league trophy since 1999 with a crucial 3-2 win over plucky Le Mans on Saturday.

It was the south-west coast side's ninth win on the trot.

On-loan AC Milan midfielder Yoann Gourcuff was inspirational, helping set up Marouane Chamakh's equaliser in the 38th minute before giving the hosts the lead on the stroke of half-time then setting up Marc Planus for the match winner on 76 minutes.

Le Mans, to their credit, came in search of the points and had taken the lead through Anthony Le Tallec in the 24th minute before he scored his second of the game eight minutes after the restart.



PHOTO: AFP

SUCCESS IS SWEET: Inter Milan midfielder Esteban Cambiasso is ecstatic after scoring the opening goal against Siena during their Serie A encounter at San Siro on Sunday.

Hughes will remain City boss

AFP, London

Mark Hughes will stay as boss at Manchester City the club's owners have confirmed.

There had been persistent question marks over his job for most of the season following the takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group.

But club chairman Khalid bin Mubarak was at pains to scotch the rumours ahead of City's last match of the season against Bolton at Eastlands next weekend.

He told the Manchester Evening News: "I have been surprised at all the speculation because I have always been consistent with everyone on the subject of the manager."

"Every time I have spoken I have said we have the highest confidence in Mark and I would like to re-iterate that now. Mark will be our manager next season; nothing has changed."

Huddlestone to undergo knee op

AFP, London

Tottenham midfielder Tom Huddlestone is to undergo surgery on his left knee meaning he will miss his side's final game of the Premier League season.

The 22-year-old was understood to be carrying the slight problem through the last few months and he now faces a race against time to be ready for England's Under-21s European Championship campaign in the summer.

"The operation will rule the midfielder out of our final fixture of the season at Liverpool on Sunday," read a statement from the club.

Ben Foster sidelined

AFP, London

Manchester United goalkeeper Ben Foster has been sidelined for at least nine weeks after undergoing surgery to repair a ruptured ligament in his thumb, the club announced Monday.

It means he will not be involved in the Champions League final against Barcelona on May 27 or the last league game at Hull on Sunday.

Foster, 26, has also been ruled out of England's World Cup qualifiers with Kazakhstan and Andorra on June 6 and 10.

"It is a big blow for Ben as not only will he miss the Champions League final but also England's summer internationals," manager Sir Alex Ferguson told www.manutd.com.

"Ben has tried to continue the season with this injury but it got so critical that an operation was the only way forward."

"It is disappointing for him but the important thing was to get this operation done."

Foster has been desperately unlucky with injuries at United. After initially impressing in two loan stints with Watford he returned to undergo knee surgery.

He has made nine appearances for the United this season, including a match-winning performance in the penalty shoot-out victory against Tottenham in the Carling Cup final.

Inter celebrate in style

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan celebrated their fourth straight Serie A title in style as they cruised to an easy 3-0 win over Siena at the San Siro on Sunday.

The scudetto crown, won in coach Jose Mourinho's first season in charge of the nerazzurri, was wrapped up on Saturday when AC Milan lost 2-1 at Udinese but that didn't dampen the party atmosphere in the San Siro.

Inter began by playing champagne football with tricks and flicks the order of the day until the side started to knuckle down and play the type of game that has brought them success this season.

"It was important to win, there wouldn't have been much point to our party if we hadn't won," said Mourinho.

"This was a serious match, we weren't kidding around. Our strength is that we always play very seriously. Even today I got angry."

Inter opened the scoring with their first real chance on 44 minutes after Siena goalkeeper Gianluca Curci beat out Mario Balotelli's free-kick and Dejan Stankovic's reaction, but he could do nothing about Esteban Cambiasso's second follow-up.

It was a fitting goal for Inter's defensive midfield lynchpin who has been a vital

cog this season.

Just seven minutes after the break the game was over as a meaningful contest as Balotelli beat the offside trap, rounded Curci and rolled the ball into the net with the outside of his boot.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic added the third with his 22nd league goal of his most prolific of five seasons in Italy, shooting through Curci's legs on 76 minutes.

That even allowed Mourinho to give reserve goalkeeper Paolo Orlandoni a run out before the party began.

Meanwhile, under-fire Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri's job slipped further from his grasp after a 2-2 home draw against Atalanta to take their winless streak to seven matches.

Third placed Juve now hold a single point advantage over Fiorentina in fourth and risk missing out on automatic qualification to the Champions League group stages next season.

Only the top three in Italy earn that honour while the fourth placed finisher must negotiate two qualifying rounds to make it to the group stages.

Fiorentina's 1-0 home win over Sampdoria was their sixth win in seven matches and during that period they have made up 12 points on Juve.

This result, in a match played in front of an empty Stadio Olimpico as punishment for racist chants aimed at Balotelli last month, may prove a fatal blow to

Ranieri's future in Turin.

Things started badly as Luca Cigarini gave Atalanta a second-minute lead before Juve replied through Vincenzo Iaquinta and Cristiano Zanetti's spectacular long range volley.

But a minute before the break, Maximiliano Pellegrino scored to earn the mid-table visitors a point.

Fiorentina's victory means they are almost assured of Champions League football for the second year in a row after Genoa were held to a 2-2 home draw by Chievo.

La Viola lead fifth-placed Genoa by five points with two games left but with just a point separating them from Juve, they will have their eyes on a top three place.

At the bottom, Sergio Volpi scored a crucial injury time winner as Bologna beat Lecce 2-1 at home to boost their survival hopes and virtually condemn their visitors to Serie B.

Lecce are now bottom and five points from safety following Torino's 2-1 win at Napoli.

Second bottom Reggina beat Cagliari 2-1, but remain four points behind Torino.

The final relegation position looks likely to be between Bologna and Torino, who are separated by one point. Torino are ahead but Bologna have the better head-to-head record.

Koeman to replace Van Gaal

AFP, The Hague

Ronald Koeman was on Sunday named as the new coach of Dutch champions AZ Alkmaar to succeed Louis Van Gaal who has left to take charge at German giants Bayern Munich.

The 46-year-old Koeman has signed a two-year contract, the club said.

"To succeed Louis, we wanted a top coach and we preferred a Dutchman," said AZ president Dirk Scheringa.

Koeman's last management job was with Valencia in Spain, but he left in April 2008.

The former Dutch international started his coaching career as Guus Hiddink's right-hand man with the national team from 1997-1998.

He was also second-in-command at Barcelona from 1998-2000 before taking over at Vitesse Arnhem in 2000.

Koeman has also coached Ajax Amsterdam (2001-2005), Benfica (2005-2006), PSV Eindhoven (2006-2007) and then Valencia (October 2007-April 2008).

Hiddink bids farewell

AFP, London



Chelsea coach Guus Hiddink bid an emotional farewell to Stamford Bridge on Sunday, but warned his successor he'll need to spend big money if the Londoners are to stop the Manchester United juggernaut.

Since being drafted in to replace Luiz Felipe Scolari, Hiddink has narrowly missed out on a Champions League final spot, guaranteed a top four league finish and could still win the FA Cup.

But the Dutchman insists that Chelsea don't yet have a squad capable of competing with United who retained their English Premier League title on Saturday.

He believes the new manager will need more strength in depth to overhaul the champions.

"When you want to compete, you have to renew your squad almost every year," he said. "To be realistic in the upcoming years we have players who are ageing."

"It is up to the new management. It's my humble advice to bring in even more depth, but people in the club know that."

"For the FA Cup, League Cup, Premier League and Champions League, you need a squad of real depth in quality. You need to be able to use a lot of players, like Manchester United."

Hiddink, who has one more league game at Sunderland next weekend, could have few complaints about the way his team brushed aside Blackburn 2-0 on Sunday in his final home league game.

They took the lead in the fourth minute when Florent Malouda headed home Nicolas Anelka's cross. Anelka doubled the lead in the 59th minute with a low strike from the edge of the penalty area.

He admitted he will be haunted by a nagging sense of regret when he walks away from Chelsea after the FA Cup final.

He will resume his full-time role as Russia coach following the Wembley date with Everton on May 30 and he was afforded an emotional send-off during and after Sunday's game.

Hiddink bowed in acknowledgement of the cheers from the Chelsea fans who chanted his name throughout the victory.

Such is the loyalty Hiddink has inspired from the club's supporters that a section of them even made it clear they would rather keep him than have AC Milan boss Carlo Ancelotti, who is widely expected to succeed the Dutchman.

The former Australia and South Korea coach was also given a guard of honour by the players after the match.

All the plaudits emphasised the impact Hiddink has made at a club that was in turmoil when he arrived and he was emotional as he reflected on

his brief taste of life in the Premier League.

"I have many second thoughts. Sometimes third thoughts. You cannot avoid them," he said. "You do not have a button to turn them off, but that is how it is."

"When I have to leave and I see the reaction of the players and how they have worked, I feel a kind of sadness. That is for sure, but that is the reality."

"Russia is a country that needs to be developed. I have given my commitment to them, with pleasure, and I have to fulfil that - but that does not mean that it is difficult to leave this atmosphere."

"It was nice appreciation from the crowd, and to be honest, I did not expect this when I am here for a relatively short period to do my job."

"We enjoyed the atmosphere, but the season is not over for me and the team. We would love to finish it off with the FA Cup."



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea manager Guus Hiddink bows to the home fans at the end of their Premiership match against Blackburn at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

Mallorca humble Barcelona

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona's championship party was gatercrashed by humble Real Mallorca on Sunday who stunned the double winners 2-1 with two late goals.

Samuel Eto'o, who missed a late penalty which would have salvaged a point, had headed Barca ahead with his 29th goal of the season after just 10 minutes at the Ono Stadium, but a Juan Arango free-kick (73 min) and Cleber Santana header (78) secured a comeback win.

Barcelona had won their 19th league title on Saturday when Real Madrid lost 3-2 at Villarreal and Mallorca players saluted the champions with a guard of honour to mark their visitors' achievement of securing a league and cup double for the first time since 1998.

"With other players I would not be a champion but they certainly would be with another coach," said Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola.

"I appreciate the praise but it is the talent of the players and their humility that has taken us this far."

Elsewhere, Atletico Madrid took pole position in the Champions League race with a 1-0 home win over rivals Valencia.

Diego Forlan scored from the penalty spot on the half hour mark for his 28th goal of the season just one behind Eto'o in the goalscoring charts.

Atletico leapfrog Valencia into fourth holding a two-point cushion over both Valencia and Villarreal with just two games left and are on course to qualify for the Champions League for the second successive season.

Valencia goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez was furious about the winning penalty, which he conceded, claiming Argentine Sergio "Kun" Aguero dived and the two had a heated exchange of words.

Forlan didn't care smashing in the spot-kick to score for the sixth consecutive league game.

With one eye on the Champions League final against Manchester United on May 27, Barca manager Guardiola rested stars such as Lionel Messi, Xavi, Carles Puyol and Victor Valdes.

In came youth players such as Pedro Ledesma, 21, midfielder Xavi Torres, 22, and 19-year-old goalkeeper Oier Olazabal.

However, it was one of Barca's star performers who stole the limelight with old boy Eto'o sending in a bullet header in off the underside of the crossbar in the 10th minute after a great cross from Bojan Krkic.

Eto'o made his name at Mallorca in four glorious seasons before joining Barcelona in 2004.

It was a 29th goal of the season for Eto'o and both he and Forlan could become the first player to reach 30 goals since Brazilian great Ronaldo scored 34 with Barcelona in 1997.

Arango drilled home a free-kick in the 73rd minute to equalise and five minutes later Santana flicked in a header. Eto'o missed a spot-kick in the dying seconds to sum up his night.

"Eto'o scored a great goal and had his chances, including the penalty miss, but I can't fault him as he has scored goals all season and will continue to do so," said Guardiola.

"I can't reproach the team at all. We had a lot of players who had not played much and they had to tonight."

The defeat means Barca - currently on 86 points with two games left - can now only equal Real's all-time record of 92 points set back in 1997 - although there were 42 games in a season compared to the current 38.

Barca are also gunning for Real's goals record of 107 set back in 1990 and need three goals to equal the mark.