

C'Ron feels phenomenal

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid star striker Cristiano Ronaldo predicted Friday he will perform even better during the final stretch of the season than at the start, saying he feels "phenomenal".

The 26-year-old Portuguese international became the first Real player to score 50 goals in only 51 league games after he scored twice during his side's 4-1 home win over Real Sociedad on Sunday.

He now sits top of the La Liga scoring charts this season alongside Barcelona's Argentina international Lionel Messi with 24 goals.



What to Watch

STAR Sports
India v Australia
WC Warm-up Match
Live from 2:40pm
ESPN
English Premiership
Bolton v Everton



DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League
Rahmatganj v Ctg Abahani
Venue: Kamalapur Stadium



A ROONEY SPECIAL: Manchester United star Wayne Rooney (C) scores a breathtaking winning goal from a bicycle kick during their Premier League encounter against Manchester City at Old Trafford yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Xavi a fan of Rooney

INTERNET

Barcelona's Xavi has revealed his admiration for Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney and would love to have him at the Nou Camp.

The World Cup winning Spaniard is regarded as one of the best midfielder in the world and has played alongside some of the best strikers in his time.

And Xavi has ranked Rooney up there with the best as he reckons the England international is a perfect fit for the Catalan giants.

"Rooney is extraordinary, he could play for Barcelona," the 31-year-old told the Guardian.

"And before people imagine headlines like, 'Xavi says Rooney to join Barcelona' - although, I'd love him to! - what I mean is that he's our kind of player."

SPORTS POLL

Have the organizers done a good job with the World Cup preparations?

Yes 51.7%

No 45.5%

TOTAL VOTES: 319

WEEKLY QUESTION

Do you think India will be under pressure against the Tigers?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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A moment of magic

AFP, Manchester



Wayne Rooney's stunning finish gave Manchester United a 2-1 victory over Manchester City at Old Trafford on Saturday which left the leaders firmly in control of the title race.

Rooney erased memories of what had been a mediocre performance, personally and by his team, when he produced a moment of genius in the 78th minute.

Paul Scholes found Nani on the right and his cross was despatched into the bottom corner of the City goal by Rooney's spectacular overhead kick.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side are now seven points ahead of second placed Arsenal, who host Wolves later on Saturday, while City are a further point behind and have played a game more than their bitter rivals.

United's opening goal, four minutes from the half-time whistle, came largely against the run of play but was just reward for Nani, the Portuguese winger, who had been United's most dangerous attacking player throughout the first period.

Wide on the right, Nani had often been United's only potent threat but, when the opener arrived, it came from a long punt through the middle

from home goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar.

Rooney's strength saw him glance the ball to Ryan Giggs and he flicked on to Nani, who had caught defender Pablo Zabaleta out of position.

Nani kept his composure admirably, advancing before rolling the ball past Joe Hart, left-footed, from a dozen yards.

City looked stunned, and understandably so after they had more than held their own in an opening 45 minutes which laid to rest memories of the awful goalless draw between the clubs at Eastlands earlier this season.

Indeed, the visitors should have been ahead after three minutes. Yaya Toure found Carlos Tevez whose angled pass played in the impressive Silva who, with the goal at his mercy, placed his shot beyond van der Sar, missing the far-post by inches from a tight angle.

That early foray gave City confidence and a Gareth Barry free-kick found the head of Toure at the far post only for the midfielder to turn the ball harmlessly back across the face of goal.

Both sides chanced their arm with long-range shots before United created their first opening, just after the half hour, with John O'Shea's square ball allowing Giggs the room to cross for Darren Fletcher whose header, at full run, was well kept out on his line

by Hart.

Nani's 20-yard shot tested Hart as it deflected unkindly off Richards, while, before the interval, Silva enjoyed the luck of a deflection from Patrice Evra only to have his follow-up shot blocked by the Frenchman.

The interval brought City some much-needed breathing space and Tevez, a virtual non-factor thus far against his former club, opened the second half with a committed run to the by-line, with his cross being cut out by a home defender.

Silva also had a shot, which van der Sar held comfortably, but City were struggling to rediscover their attacking spark of the first half and, by the hour, Roberto Mancini had brought on Shaun Wright-Phillips and Edin Dzeko as substitutes in a bid to salvage at least a point.

It was a tactical re-shuffle that brought an almost instant dividend, through City's fortunate 64th minute equaliser.

Wright-Phillips probed down the right, delivering a dangerous cross to the six-yard line where Dzeko swung his foot for an untidy shot which deflected off the back of Silva and into the United goal.

Both sides probed thereafter, without either keeping being forced into a save in anger, until Rooney's superb solo effort settled the outcome.

Guardiola deal relieves Valdes

REUTERS, Madrid



Barcelona goalkeeper Victor Valdes believes Pep Guardiola's decision this week to extend his contract until the end of next season has removed an unwelcome distraction for league leaders.

"Now we will only talk about football," the Spain number two, who has conceded only 11 goals in 22 league matches this season, told a news conference on Thursday.

"I cannot imagine a Barca without Guardiola," he added. "Barca must always have the best coach and he is the best."

Real Madrid face a tough match at sixth-placed Espanyol, one of the surprises of the season, on Sunday (2000) and will be trying to avoid dropping points away from home for a third straight game.

Real's hopes of ending Barca's two-year reign as Spanish champions were dented when they drew 1-1 at Almeria and lost 1-0 at Osasuna on their last two trips outside Madrid.



PEP GUARDIOLA

IN brief

Another set-back for Pirlo

AFP, Rome

AC Milan's injury-plagued Italian midfielder Andrea Pirlo will be ruled out for another six weeks after suffering a knee strain in training on Friday.

"Pirlo has a strained right knee and a stretched knee ligament. The recovery time will be around six weeks," said Milan club doctor Gianluca Melegati.

Pirlo, 31, has already been out for two months with a hamstring problem but coach Massimiliano Allegri had hoped to recall him for the game against Parma on Saturday.

Pearce wants Olympics role

AFP, London

England Under-21 manager Stuart Pearce admits he is interested in coaching a Great Britain side at next year's London Olympics.

The English Football Association have been given responsibility for preparing a British side for the 2012 Games and former Manchester City boss Pearce, who also works with England coach Fabio Capello's staff, would be honoured to lead the home side.

"The Olympics don't come around very often in our country. Certainly in the job I'm in at the moment, having worked with a lot of players that will be drawn from this age group, I would be very interested," former England defender Pearce told The Times.

The football associations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have said that they do not want their players to be selected for the Great Britain side, for fear of losing their independent status with FIFA.

But ex-Nottingham Forest star Pearce believes every British player should be considered to allow a greater depth to choose from - especially if England qualify for Euro 2012 and their players are not allowed to compete in both tournaments.

WC bonus row over

AFP, Paris

The French Football Federation (FFF) announced on Friday that the debate over the France squad's forfeit of their World Cup bonuses was "definitively closed".

"The office of the federal council, which met this Thursday, February 10 under the chairmanship of (FFF president) Fernand Duchaussoy, believes that the case of the 2010 World Cup bonuses is definitively closed," read an FFF statement released on Friday.

"To date, almost all the players present in South Africa last summer have officially confirmed in writing their renunciation of the money they were owed for their image rights."

The FFF added that even the players who had not yet officially informed the FFF of their decision to give up the payments would be considered to have abandoned their bonuses.

The money, believed to total around three million euros, will be distributed in the amateur game.

Last Sunday, Duchaussoy told AFP that six members of the World Cup squad -- Patrice Evra, William Gallas, Nicolas Anelka, Andre-Pierre Gignac, Marc Planus and Franck Ribery -- were yet to formally

Bulgaria-Estonia tie under FIFA probe



Football

REUTERS, Sofia

World soccer's ruling body FIFA has ordered an investigation into the midweek friendly between Bulgaria and Estonia, an official said on Friday.

The match, played in the Turkish resort of Antalya on Wednesday, ended 2-2 with all the goals coming from penalties.

"FIFA contacted us and requested a full report from the Bulgarian Football Union (BFU) and also said they would receive a report from the Estonian FA," a BFU official who declined to be identified told Reuters on Friday.

"We will provide full assistance to FIFA."

Earlier on Friday, BFU president Borislav Mihaylov told reporters: "We had some doubts about the refereeing in this match".

There is also confusion over which referee took charge of the game.

Official reports from the BFU and the Estonian FA say the referee was Hungarian Krisztian Selmeczi.

However, Hungarian referees' chief

Laszlo Wagner and Hungarian media have indicated the referee was Selmeczi's fellow countryman Kolos Lengyel. Wagner said the three match officials involved would now be suspended.

"I'm shocked because we didn't receive a letter to allow these referees (Selmeczi, Lengyel and Janos Csak) to officiate at this game," Wagner told Bulgarian radio.

"I can say that these three will not officiate any more matches while I'm head of the commission."

On Thursday, Estonia FA spokesman Mihkel Uiboleht told local media that his organisation were told about "possible manipulation" ahead of the match.

"The friendly was organised by an agency with whom we will not work any more," said Uiboleht.

"We received information of possible manipulation even before the game as the same agency also organised the match between Latvia and Bolivia and there was the same scenario there."

Latvia beat Bolivia 2-1 in a game featuring three penalties in a friendly held at the same venue earlier on Wednesday.

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