

Jeunechamp to appeal ban

AFP, Paris

Montpellier defender Cyril Jeunechamp is to appeal his one year ban for striking a journalist at the end of a league match last month, his club announced on Monday.

The 37-year-old received his suspension last Thursday for the incident on November 17.

Jeunechamp accosted the journalist in the corridors of Valenciennes' Stade Hainaut and struck him on the face in protest against an article written about him.

In a statement Montpellier condemned "the gesture which wasn't acceptable irrespective of the context" but noted that Jeunechamp's on-pitch behaviour in the club's colours had always been "exemplary".

Owen anxious to break duck

AFP, London

Michael Owen is desperate to break his scoring duck against former club Liverpool on Wednesday and end an eight-year wait.

The 33-year-old hit 118 goals during his prolific Anfield career but since leaving for Real Madrid in 2004, he has not been able to break through.

"It is a strange feeling really playing against your old club, especially one where you were for around 15 years," Stoke striker Owen told Independent Sports News.

"Liverpool are a big part of my life and career and I had some of the best times of my life at the club."



What to WATCH

STAR Cricket
Australia v Sri Lanka
Second Test, Day 1
Live from 5:30am

TEN Cricket
South Africa v New Zealand
Third T20
Live from 6:30pm

ESPN
English Premiership
Man United v Newcastle
Live from 9:00pm

Aston Villa v Tottenham
Live from 11:30pm

Stoke City v Liverpool



Swansea defender Ashley Williams (L) gestures after being booked for clashing with Manchester United striker Robin Van Persie during their Premier League encounter at the Liberty Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ashley escapes action

AFP, London

Swansea defender Ashley Williams will not face a Football Association charge after Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson slammed the Wales star for kicking the ball into Robin van Persie's head.

Williams earned a stinging rebuke from Ferguson after Sunday's 1-1 draw at the Liberty Stadium following the second half clash with van Persie.

The United forward was lying prone on the turf following a foul when Williams kicked the ball into the back of the Dutchman's head.

Ferguson called on the Football Association to ban the Swansea centre-back, who was booked for the incident by referee Michael Oliver.

"He (van Persie) could have been killed. Williams should be banned for a long time, Ferguson said.

"It was absolutely deliberate. The whistle has gone, the game has stopped and he has done that right in front of the referee. It was a disgraceful act."

But it is believed the FA will not instigate disciplinary procedures against the 18-year-old, who denied malicious intent.

Meanwhile, Williams was backed by Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers, who was his boss at Swansea until the end

of last season.

"I think more has been made of it than what it actually was," Rodgers said.

"When you slow it down and look at it 20 times it does not look good for Ashley.

"But I know the player well and it is just that split-second when you can see he is trying to clear the ball and unfortunately hits van Persie right on the back of his head.

"Of course, it looks dangerous but knowing Ashley he won't have meant it, knowing his character that won't have been intentional."

Wigan manager Roberto Martinez, who signed Williams for Swansea in 2008, admitted he could understand Ferguson's reaction but did not believe the player acted out of malicious intent.

"If you see one of your players with a bang on the back of the head it is really dangerous and it can have bad consequences. You can understand that," Martinez said.

"I signed Ashley Williams for Swansea and I know his character inside out. I can guarantee you without even looking at the incident that he is not a nasty footballer.

"He is a winner and fully committed, a leader and a captain. When you sign a player you find out about a player and I can guarantee you he is not the type of footballer who would do that on purpose."

Fergie hails Van Persie

AFP, London

Alex Ferguson has hailed Robin van Persie as the missing piece in Manchester United's title jigsaw as the Premier League leaders bid to extend their lead at the top against Newcastle on Wednesday.

Van Persie has made a superb start to his United career after leaving Arsenal in a £24 million move in pre-season and the Dutch forward's haul of 15 goals has fired Ferguson's team four points clear of champions Manchester City heading into the hectic Christmas programme.

The 29-year-old's dynamic displays have added an extra edge to United in the same way that French playmaker Eric Cantona and Portugal forward Cristiano Ronaldo galvanised previous teams in the Ferguson era.

After missing out on the title to City last season, United were in need of a new driving force this term and Ferguson believes van Persie is providing it.

"I am reluctant to subscribe to the cult of an individual. But sometimes you find the last piece of the jigsaw," Ferguson told United's official matchday programme.

"We did it when we brought Eric Cantona to Old Trafford and he proved to be the right player at the right club at the right time. He

became the catalyst and springboard for our surge to success.

"It doesn't have to be signing someone for a record fee. Cristiano Ronaldo was not a record buy either but he certainly made a difference as he prospered with us to the extent that he came to be regarded by a lot of people as the world's best player."

Without van Persie's goals, United would be eighth and that perhaps explained Ferguson's fury when Swansea defender Ashley Williams

FIXTURES
(1500GMT unless stated)

Aston Villa v Tottenham (1730GMT), Everton v Wigan, Fulham v Southampton, Man Utd v Newcastle, Norwich v Chelsea, QPR v West Brom, Reading v Swansea, Stoke v Liverpool (1945GMT), Sunderland v Man City

Postponed

kicked the ball into the Dutchman's head as he lay prone on the turf during Sunday's 1-1 draw at the Liberty Stadium.

How Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini must rue van Persie's decision to snub the champions in favour of joining United.

Mancini had hoped to make van Persie the centre-piece of his team as he looked to build on last season's title triumph, but instead he has had to watch the striker revitalise his club's arch rivals, while his own

strike-force has gone through a barren period.

Sergio Aguero, Carlos Tevez and Edin Dzeko all laboured once more against Reading, the division's bottom club, on Saturday and it was left to England midfielder Gareth Barry to show them how to do it with a stoppage-time winner.

The good news for Mancini's side was United's failure to defeat Swansea 24 hours later, a result which will give fresh impetus to City's challenge according to defender Kolo Toure.

"It's giving us encouragement because we haven't played to our best yet," Toure said ahead of Wednesday's game at Sunderland.

"Every team knows we are champions. They play 200 percent and that makes it really hard for us. We just keep fighting, keep pushing and we can still be better."

United and City could be forgiven for regarding the title race as a strictly Manchester affair this season, especially as Chelsea have appeared on the verge of self-destructing at times.

But the Blues finally showed signs of emerging as a serious contender on Sunday thanks to an 8-0 demolition of Aston Villa.

That victory left Chelsea 11 points behind United but with a game in hand and interim manager Rafael Benitez refuses to write off the prospect of a title challenge.

MOURINHO gone too far?

AP, Barcelona

Real Madrid President Florentino Perez adjusted his glasses, as if he couldn't believe what he was reading on the lineup card: Beloved veteran goalkeeper Iker Casillas would not be playing.

That decision might have shown just how far coach Jose Mourinho has gone in his quest to exert control over the club. And it may be that Mourinho has finally gone too far.

Waves of criticism from fans and players followed Madrid's 3-2 loss to Malaga on Saturday, raising the question of whether Perez has reached his limit of support for the often successful, yet equally abrasive, Mourinho.

"Mourinho has his particular way of dealing with his squad," former Madrid player and coach Jorge Valdano said. "But this was him doubling down. It was an exhibition of power. It was him imposing his decision on a club legend."

Mourinho did not announce his decision to drop Casillas, highly respected both in Spain and abroad for his decade of quality service in Madrid's net, for the little-used Adan Garrido until minutes before the game.

The move backfired in the second half when Malaga scored on the inexperienced Adan three times to deal Madrid another loss that left it 16 points behind Spanish leader Barcelona and its league title defense hopes shattered.

Mourinho said that he had picked Adan because he was "in better form" than Casillas. That argument was far from convincing to fans and players past and present.

A fan poll published on Monday by the Spanish sports daily Marca indicates that most of Madrid's fans want Mourinho out. Eighty-two percent of the almost 100,000 participants in the online poll voted yes to the question "Should Real Madrid fire Mourinho?"

"Iker doesn't need to be punished to play better," said former Madrid goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez, an old teammate of Casillas. "This only brings to a boil the atmosphere of conflict that Madrid already has."

Madrid defender Sergio Ramos said after the match that he was "surprised" by the decision. Casillas told La Sexta television on Sunday that he felt fine and that Mourinho hadn't told him why he had been benched.

"I'm not used to being a backup," Casillas said. "But the team is above any player. I have to keep training and try to win back my place in the

starting lineup."

Since arriving at Madrid three seasons ago, Mourinho has won a Spanish league title in 2012 and a Copa del Rey a year earlier.

But he has also ruffled more than one of Madrid's purist fans, as well as dispatching several perceived enemies within the club.

Casillas, the captain of Madrid and Spain's world and two-time European championship national team, was always seen as untouchable.

The 31-year-old goalkeeper is the most revered member of Madrid's current squad. Many fans see him as

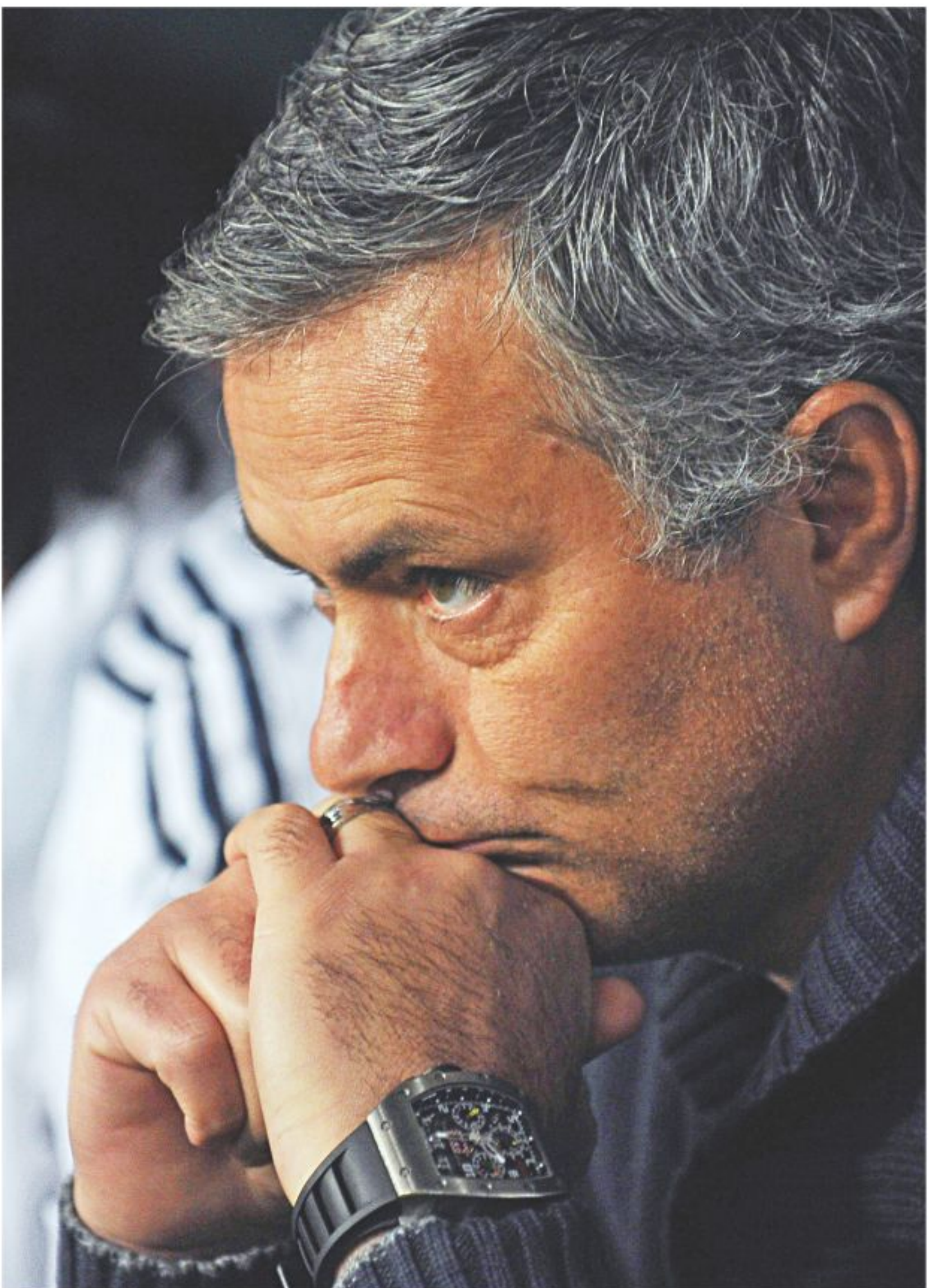
And therein lies the potential problem for Mourinho.

Perez had not been informed of Casillas' exclusion when a journalist for Canal Plus television showed him the lineup minutes before the game.

The 65-year-old club president, who in his 10 years has made Madrid one of the world's richest teams, raised his glasses as if to get a better look at the player list and then, apparently stunned, just turned away.

Perez has been Mourinho's biggest backer.

He has defended the Portuguese coach every time he has been ques-



the last link to the winning days of the "Galaticos" of David Beckham, Ronaldo and Zinedine Zidane and to the prior golden era of beloved forward Raul Gonzalez and Vicente del Bosque, the club's ultimate "gentleman" coach.

Two weeks ago, Perez called Casillas a "legendary captain of Real Madrid."

"He is one of the great captains in the history of this club," Perez said. "He shows that above and beyond winning titles, he knows how to interpret this institution."

tioned by the sector of Madrid's fans who interpret that his aggressive style goes against the club's proud tradition of always behaving in a "noble" manner. Perez didn't flinch even when Mourinho poked Barcelona's then assistant and now head coach, Tito Vilanova, in the eye during a melee between the archrivals.

Last week, with Mourinho under increasing pressure to turn things around in the league, Perez told a meeting of club members that Mourinho had his "confidence" and "affection."

Michu set for Spain debut

REUTERS, Undated

Swansea City's free-scoring striker Michu is set to make his Spain debut early next year following a sensational start to his career in the English Premier League.

Vicente del Bosque, coach of European and world champions Spain, told Spanish television that the 26-year-old will play in the February 6 friendly against Uruguay in Doha.

Michu will be joined in the Spain squad by Iago Aspas, currently being linked to Swansea, whose manager Michael Laudrup is an admirer of the Celta Vigo forward.

"Iago Aspas and Michu will appear (against Uruguay)," confirmed Del Bosque.

Michu has been prolific since his bargain \$3.2 million transfer from Rayo Vallecano in the summer, topping the Premier League scoring charts with 13 goals in 18 games.

He leap-frogged Manchester United's Robin van Persie after scoring the equaliser in Sunday's 1-1 home draw against the league leaders.