



Manchester United's Juan Veron (C) has the ball deflected off his head into the net for an own goal and even Rio Ferdinand (L) can do nothing during the match against Sunderland at Old Trafford on January 1.

Photo: AFP

## Premiership Gunners going great guns

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsenal entered the New Year ideally placed to retain its Premier League crown after severely denting the challenge of another title pretender with a 3-2 victory over Chelsea Wednesday.

Last season's double winner has 46 points, eight more than its London rival, with second-place Manchester United reinstated as its main threat.

United is five points behind on 41 after Paul Scholes added an injury-time goal to England captain David Beckham's 81st-minute equalizer to give it a 2-1 home win over lowly Sunderland.

Newcastle United, with a game in hand on the top three, is fourth on 38 after beating Liverpool 1-0 at St. James' Park.

Everton is fifth on 36 after a 2-2 home draw with Manchester City, with Southampton up to a surprise sixth on 35 following its 1-0 home win over Tottenham Hotspur.

Liverpool, which has now taken a miserable four points from the last 30, is seventh on 34 and in disarray - it led the table by four points just seven weeks ago.

Arsenal won the Highbury show-down thanks to an early Marcel Desailly own goal and strikes by Dutchman Giovanni van Bronckhorst and French striker Thierry Henry after 81 and 83 minutes.

Croatia's Mario Stanic and French midfielder Emmanuel Petit then got two in two minutes for Chelsea, but the comeback came too late to prevent it from taking just one point from three games over the

holiday period.

"Spirit got us through," Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said.

"At 3-0, we thought it was done, relaxed a little and we got quickly punished. We got away with 3-2 but it became very, very dangerous in the end."

There was some bad news for Wenger, however, as Henry suffered a hamstring strain and will

Juergen Macho.

Beckham finally found a way past him though after a simple clearance from Rio Ferdinand, and Scholes then popped up to head the winner.

"Perseverance and determination," were the keys to the win said manager Alex Ferguson. "It was reminiscent of many games we've won over the years. They've never given in."

"It was a difficult position after the own goal we gave away so early in the match and the chances we were missing. But we kept going, kept going and we deserved what we got."

"It was a significant result." Bookmakers William Hill make Arsenal 1-2 favorites to win the title with United at 7-4 and Chelsea 12-1.

In a late kickoff at St. James' Park Newcastle went ahead in the 13th minute when Laurent Robert's free kick crashed through a jerrybuilt Liverpool wall and beyond Chris Kirkland.

Liverpool barely threatened all match and ended it with 10 men after the 68th-minute dismissal of Senegalese midfielder Salif Dia for a second booking.

On a heavy pitch, Newcastle ground out its ninth successive home league win and left Liverpool facing an uncertain New Year.

"If we could play every game at home we could win the championship," said Newcastle manager Bobby Robson. "It will take an outstanding team to come here and beat us."

"I don't think we can win it (the title). I think Arsenal and Manchester United are just that bit ahead of us but we won't be very far away."

Liverpool manager Gerard

Houllier accepted that his team had been outmuscled.

"It was a very physical game and I thought they were better than us in that area," said the Frenchman.

"I think my players know they were outclassed physically and they will learn from that."

Liverpool is now 12 points behind Arsenal, a gap Houllier admitted looked unbridgeable.

"I think it will be difficult to catch up with Arsenal, I don't see them losing 12 points," he said.

"You never know but I acknowledge it will be difficult."

Leeds United made it four wins and a draw in its last five with a 2-0 home success against Birmingham City while James Beattie got his 13th of the season as Southampton took its unbeaten run to eight with its win over Spurs.

Aston Villa beat Bolton Wanderers 2-0, Blackburn Rovers beat Middlesbrough 1-0. Charlton Athletic against West Ham United and Fulham against West Bromwich Albion were postponed because of waterlogged pitches.

### TOP SCORERS

Leading scorers in the English Premiership after Wednesday's matches:

- 13 - James Beattie (Southampton), Alan Shearer (Newcastle)
- 12 - Thierry Henry (Arsenal)
- 10 - Nicolas Anelka (Man City)
- 9 - Gianfranco Zola (Chelsea)
- 8 - Van Nistelrooy (Man Utd), Michael Owen (Liverpool), Sylvain Wittord (Arsenal), Harry Kewell (Leeds Utd)
- 7 - Kevin Campbell (Everton)
- 6 - Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink (Chelsea)
- 5 - Milan Baros (Liverpool), Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (Man Utd), Dion Dublin (Aston Villa), Eidur Gudjohnsen (Chelsea)

miss Saturday's FA Cup third round tie with Oxford United.

Manchester United fell behind in the fourth minute as Juan Sebastian Veron's attempted clearance only helped midfielder Gavin McCann's chip over the line.

United absolutely battered the visitors from then on, only to be foiled by a superb display from Sunderland's Austrian keeper

TOP SIX	
English Premiership table on Wednesday ahead of Newcastle v Liverpool match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):	
Arsenal	22 14 4 4 45 24 46
Man Utd	22 12 5 5 35 22 41
Chelsea	22 10 8 4 36 20 38
Newcastle	21 12 2 7 35 29 38
Everton	22 10 6 6 25 24 36
Southampton	22 9 8 5 25 20 35

## Gate closed for Woodgate?

Football

INTERNET

Newcastle United opened the transfer window with a flourish on Wednesday, offering Leeds United £10m for Jonathan Woodgate. Leeds' response was to reject the offer instantly and Newcastle will have to go to £12m or more to have any realistic chance of signing the 22-year-old England international.

The bid was something of a shock, coming as it did just days after the Newcastle chairman Freddy Shepherd said the club had little money to spend and that they were going to monitor January's window.

Sir Bobby Robson has said repeatedly that Newcastle need a commanding centre-half to shore up their bid to get into next season's Champions League, and the name of Woodgate has been prominent for a few weeks on Tyneside. Leeds denied that there had been an approach a fortnight ago, but Newcastle's confirmed interest now applies greater pressure on Leeds.

The Leeds manager Terry Venables already has Manchester City's bid for Robbie Fowler to deal with, and the sale of him alone might be enough to assuage Leeds plc.

A Leeds director described

Woodgate as one of their "crown jewels" recently, and after last summer's sale of Rio Ferdinand to Manchester United for £30m there would appear among the fans at Elland Road if a home-grown favourite like Woodgate was allowed to leave.

Woodgate, born in Middlesbrough, has known of Newcastle's desire for some time: the prospect of a transfer to a club currently more promising than Leeds must hold some appeal. He

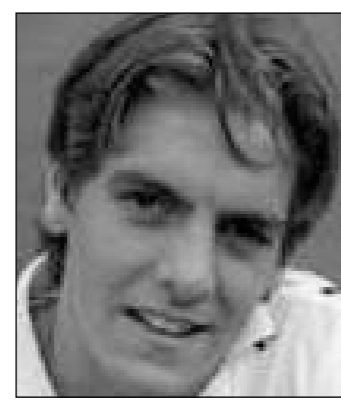
Should Newcastle's bid fail then Robson has said he will look abroad for a defender.

Birmingham City have signed Christophe Dugary from Bordeaux. The 30-year-old striker, who kept Thierry Henry out of France's World Cup winning side in 1998 was expected to be unveiled on Thursday.

Dugary has joined on-loan until the end of the season with a view to a permanent move if they retain their Premiership status. They would then pay Bordeaux £2m for Dugary; in the meantime they will pay him £20,000 a week.

The signing highlights Steve Bruce's determination to safeguard his team's hard-earned place in the top flight, which was earned after 16 years of trying. They have beaten Spurs and Manchester City to the punch although it could be argued they are taking a chance on a player whose second spell with his hometown club has turned sour. Dugary has failed to score for them this season and been sent off twice.

In 1999, moreover, he tested positive for nandrolone while at Marseille, though he protested his innocence and was cleared on a technicality. The doctor who conducted the test was not qualified to do so. Blues have also taken the Senegalese defender Ferdinand Coly on a free from Lens.



JONATHAN WOODGATE

appears to have put the turmoil of the Hull crown court saga behind him but there would be an element of a fresh start about any new club.

## Magpies for a better nest

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle are to replace their pitch in a bid to give the likes of Kieron Dyer, Craig Bellamy and Alan Shearer a better platform to display their talents.

The St James Park surface has been reduced to a quagmire by recent wet weather and bulldozers moved in on Thursday to start laying a new turf.

"It's going to be an expensive job, but it's money well spent," Newcastle boss Bobby Robson said. "We've got good players here and we've got to give them a good pitch."

Robson blamed the poor state of the pitch on the chilly winter weather in the north east of England.

"My lawn up here isn't as good as my lawn in Ipswich, and it's the same reason. My wife tells me that because she cuts them both."

Newcastle are not the only Premiership club to encounter problems with their pitch.

Manchester United have already turfied Old Trafford this season and have done so repeatedly in recent seasons as extensions to the stadium have played havoc with the grass.

## Pires not amused

Football

AFP, Paris

French international winger Robert Pires said he would be seeking an explanation from Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger after being substituted in the second-half of Wednesday's 3-2 defeat of Chelsea.

Pires, who will be 30 at the end of the month, said in his column for L'Equipe newspaper being substituted was part and parcel of a footballer's life but sometimes it was necessary to ask the manager why he had been taken-off.

"The manager took me off just before the hour mark."

"That surprised me and didn't please me very much."

"This is part of a footballer's career but sometimes it requires an explanation from the manager and I will be seeking one," he wrote.

Pires, who has yet to reproduce the sparkling form he showed prior to tearing his cruciate ligaments in an FA Cup quarter-final with Newcastle last season, said he

believed Arsenal were lucky to have beaten Chelsea to leave them five points clear of Manchester United.

"To be honest they were better than us for parts of the match."

"Frankly Chelsea deserved a draw."

"However we dug deep and came away with the three points which has given us a huge advantage over Chelsea (they are three eight points adrift after taking just one point from three matches)."

Pires said he was looking forward to the second-half of the season with Arsenal also leading their Champions League second phase group and about to embark on their defence of the FA Cup this weekend against Third Division Oxford.

"Of course there is a long way to go but I think our progress in the way we are playing has been as impressive as the amount of points we have been taking."

"It promises to be a fruitful Spring."

## Fenerbahce wants Rebrov

Football

AFP, London

Turkish giants Fenerbahce have made a move for Tottenham misfit Sergei Rebrov.

Spurs paid a club record 11 million pounds (17 million dollars) for the 28-year-old Ukrainian striker when George Graham bought him from Dynamo Kiev in May 2000.

But a forward once regarded as one of the brightest prospects in Europe has fallen out of favour under Graham's successor Glenn Hoddle and Spurs are now desperate to unload him.

The Turks are understood to be looking to take Rebrov on a loan until the end of the season but Spurs would prefer to get some of their money back through a permanent deal.

"There has been contact with us from Fenerbahce but nothing has been decided at this stage," Hoddle told the Evening Standard newspaper.

Rebrov confirmed a deal was in the offing.

"I haven't signed anything yet, we are only negotiating. I am thankful to Fenerbahce that they want to sign me despite having been sidelined for so long."

"I would be interested to play for them, taking into account that they are Champions League contenders, but I would be happy to play for a manager who wants me to be a starter."

"I want to play in a team whose management believes in me. I want to return to the level I used to be at a couple of years ago."

## Lopez keeps options open

Football

AFP, Rome

Lazio's in-form Argentine striker Claudio Lopez says he is happy at the financially-stricken Serie A giants, but refused to rule out a move back to Spain where he built his reputation as a goalscorer.

Lopez, who made his name with Spanish outfit Valencia before moving to Italy in 2000, has scored nine times for the Rome club who are genuine title contenders this season despite their money problems.

"I love Spanish football, I know it well and would not have a problem going back there," the 28-year-old marksman told the Gazzetta dello Sport on Thursday.

"At the moment however I am happy to stay in Rome with Lazio,

then we'll see."

Lopez said he was delighted to be playing as an out-and-out striker



CLAUDIO LOPEZ

having been employed in a more withdrawn role in previous seasons.

"I now feel the same as I did at Valencia," he added.

"I love playing in that position. I believe it brings out the best in me."

Lopez, who was part of the Argentina squad which crashed out of this summer's World Cup after the first round, praised Lazio coach Roberto Mancini for guiding the club to third place in the table, a point behind joint leaders AC and Inter Milan.

"Mancini has given us a new mentality," said Lopez, who endured a difficult start to his Lazio career, scoring just 10 goals in his first two seasons.

"We have rediscovered the confidence to enjoy our football and now have the means to finish first."

## No sharing new Wembley

INTERNET

The Football Association has dismissed speculation that Arsenal or Tottenham could use the new Wembley stadium as their home ground.

A newspaper report last month claimed that informal preliminary talks between the clubs and FA officials had taken place.

But FA spokesman Nick Baron told BBC Radio Five Live that there was no possibility of any team being based at Wembley when the new stadium is finished in 2005.

"The conditions of the money we receive from Sport England are that we are not allowed to have an anchor tenant," said Baron.

"Also I don't think that Brent Council would look very favourably on having another 30 major events a year at the stadium."

"So it's not even up for discussion."

"We have not been approached by any football club and it is not something we need for our business plan."

"It is a decision for Sport England," he added.

"If Sport England were to change their mind, which they have said they are not interested in doing, then we would have a discussion with them, of course."

"But it is not up for discussion at the moment."

Baron also hit back at accusations that the old Wembley had not been used often enough.

"Wembley got a great amount of use - from speedway and greyhound racing to the FA Cup final," he said.

"But you have got to consider local people."

## Del Neri dreams Giggs!

AFP, Rome

Chievo coach Luigi Del Neri says he would love to be able to buy Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs.

Del Neri, regarded as one of the best coaches in Italy and touted as a possible successor to embattled national team boss Giovanni Trapattoni, believes Giggs would add another dimension to his side's attacking play.

"Giggs would be perfect as he plays my kind of football," Del Neri told the Gazzetta dello Sport on Thursday.

"He has all the qualities I look for in a player."

"He has great vision, can skip past his marker and is a handful for any defender."

However, Del Neri, who bought German striker Oliver Bierhoff last summer, is unlikely to be able to make a move for Giggs due to the Verona club's limited resources.

Earlier this week Giggs insisted he wanted to finish his career at Manchester United, quashing speculation in Italy linking him with a multi-million pound move to Chievo's title rivals Inter Milan.

"I don't comment on speculation and that's all it is at the moment," said the Welsh international.

"When I signed my contract last year I said I wanted to finish my career at United. That is the end of the story as far as I am concerned. I still have four years left on my present contract and I am quite happy."

Despite their financial constraints, Del Neri has guided Chievo into fourth position in the league, one place ahead of reigning champions Juventus.

Chievo visit AS Roma a week on Saturday when the Italian season restarts after a three week winter break.

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