

Ligue 1 PSG climb

Football

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain closed the gap on the leaders with a 1-0 win at Nantes on Saturday on what proved to be a historic day for Le Mans who registered their first ever win in the French first division.

above the relegation zone - consequently they will have been mildly comforted by a tense 2-2 draw against Rennes on Saturday.

Lille's Bulgarian striker Vladimir Manchev got the first half opener before Rennes replied with goals after the break from Alexander Frei and Stephane N'Guema.

Manchev then earned Lille a much-needed point with a 71st minute equaliser to leave them fifth from bottom.

The draw will have earned under-fire coach Claude Puel some welcome respite.

Rennes finished with nine men after Frederic Piquionne was red carded after a run-in with some fans as he made his way to the dressing room at the interval, and Cyril Jeunechamp picked up a second yellow with 20 minutes left.

Nice climbed from 12th to fifth after a 2-0 win against Bastia. Striker Christophe Meslin was responsible for both goals either side of half time.

The loss left Bastia in midtable.

TOP SIX

French league table after Saturday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Table with 6 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, Pts. Rows include Monaco, Lyon, Marseille, Paris SG, Nice, Nantes.



...9...10... KNOCKOUT! Arsenal superstar Thierry Henry (L) taking a heavy fall after colliding with Tottenham Hotspur custodian Kasey Keller at Highbury Stadium on November 8.

Premiership Ljungberg makes the day

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger claimed his side were displaying the character of champions after watching them come from behind against Tottenham to keep their unbeaten league record intact.

Late goals from Robert Pires and Freddie Ljungberg secured a 2-1 derby victory after Darren Anderson had given Spurs an early lead at Highbury.

The win ensured Arsenal will remain top of the Premiership throughout the

upcoming two-week break for international matches.

Wenger was thrilled with the guts displayed by his side as they chalked up a third win in the space of eight days, just two and a half days after a draining Champions League win over Dynamo Kiev.

"It was character that got us victory again today," the Frenchman said.

"At half-time we were one goal down but I could feel in the dressing room that the players wanted to turn it around.

"The only question mark I had was if they had their physical strength because they gave a lot of Wednesday night but

we wanted it so much and we got it in the end."

TOP SIX

Table with 6 columns: Team, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, Pts. Rows include Arsenal, Chelsea, Man Utd, Charlton, Birmingham, Man City.

At the other end of the table, Leeds were plunged deeper into the mire after a 6-1 battering by Portsmouth.

It was Leeds' worst ever Premiership defeat but beleaguered manager Peter Reid insisted he would carry on battling to turn the Yorkshire club's season around.

"I'm not sure if the players understand how serious the situation is," Reid said. "We need to pull our sleeves up and battle. We needed a kick up the backside."

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Fired online!

Football

AFP, London

English first division club Bradford set a new benchmark for cruelty in the sacking of a manager by dismissing Nicky Law via an announcement on the club's official website.

The decision was not entirely unexpected after a 1-1 home draw with Walsall extended the club's run without a league win to 11 matches and left them second from bottom of the table.

But Law himself was evidently not aware of it when he gave a press conference after the match in which he expressed confidence that he would be given time to turn things around.

"At the end of the day, the chairman has shown faith in me and not made any rash decisions," Law said, just minutes before the announcement of his sacking was posted on the worldwide web.

"In the last two games we have improved and I am sure we can take it on from there," Law added. "The

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Deportivo la Coruna's Uruguayan striker Walter Pandiani (R) is ecstatic as he celebrates with teammate Hector Berenguer the winner against Real Sociedad at the Riazor stadium in La Coruna on November 8.

Primera Liga

Deportivo bounce back

Football

AFP, Madrid

Espanyol's new coach Luis Fernandez made a losing return to former club Athletic Bilbao on Saturday as a 14th-minute goal from Andoni Iraola bagged the points in a 1-0 success for the Basque hosts.

As a result of their eighth loss in 11 games, thanks to Iraola's first goal of the season, Barcelona-based Espanyol stay rooted to the foot of the table with a pitiful five points while Bilbao can again mull chances of a top-six showing this season.

Meanwhile, Deportivo La Coruna bounced back from their 8-3 Champions League mauling by Monaco earlier in the week with a come-from-behind 2-1 home success over Real Sociedad which took them top.

The Galicians were stunned when Turkey's Nihat Kahveci put opponents

Real Sociedad ahead in the 28th minute, capping a surging run with a low drive.

But a pair of own goals from Igor Jauregui turned the tide as Deportivo threw everything at their visitors in the second half and sent "Super Depor" top of the heap with 25 points from 11 games.

First Jauregui turned a dangerous loose ball past his keeper under pressure from Walter Pandiani on 72 minutes and then the same luckless Espanyol player saw a Pandiani towering header deflect in off his back in the closing stages.

Leaders Valencia and second-placed Real Madrid, both two points further back, can go above Deportivo if they respectively see off Racing Santander and Seville on Sunday.

Espanyol's highly-regarded Fernandez, who has twice coached Paris Saint Germain, replaced former Spanish national boss Javier Clemente in midweek and insisted that he could see some light at the end of the tunnel

despite the loss in Bilbao.

"I think we deserved a draw. I liked the attitude of the team and there were some plus points.

"We didn't let our heads drop after the goal," said Fernandez, who said his return to the San Mames stadium was a "very emotional occasion."

Elsewhere Real Zaragoza and Celta Vigo, who beat Ajax in midweek for their first Champions League win, parted 1-1.

Jose Ignacio headed Vigo into a fourth-minute lead but Leonardo Ponzio levelled three minutes later.

TOP SIX

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Sissy Jardel!

AFP, Bolton

Gordon Strachan gave Mario Jardel a lesson in the Scottish vernacular by labelling the Brazilian striker "a big Jessie" over the clash which led to Southampton defender Michael Svensson being sent off during the goalless draw at Bolton.

Svensson picked up a second booking after a gentle push at Jardel prompted the forward to fall theatrically, much to the irritation of the ever-quotable Strachan.

The Southampton boss fumed: "He's a big guy and a 15 stone to fall like that... My grandson weighs two and a half stone and he wouldn't have fallen because he's got more in him, he's a determined wee fella.

"I don't know how you face people after that. When you go and speak to your mates and they ask what you contributed to the game and you say 'I fell, I fell like a big Jessie'. It wasn't even a real push."

Fergie, Fergie and more Fergie!

AFP, Manchester

Alex Ferguson is set to agree a new deal with Manchester United that would see the Scot stay as manager of the club beyond 2007.

Ferguson has already scrapped retirement plans and now feels in such good health that he hopes to stay at Old Trafford beyond his 65th birthday - the official retirement age in Britain.

"We have had good discussions and we are not far away. It could be done in the next week," said Ferguson, who has now managed the Premiership club for 17 years.

He added: "The length of the contract is open to discussion. That is one of the areas we are discussing. How long should I stay on? It is a difficult one. I would probably think until I am 65 years old. That is a nice time to say 'Do I want to go now?'"

"I have made the point of saying that I am enjoying it and I have my health, and I think that is the way of looking at it."

Ferguson will reach his 65th birthday on December 31, 2006, midway through the 2006-07 season, and says if his appetite for the job remains as it is now he could work on.

"I would stay on. If I felt that way, I would stay, but it is a long way ahead."

'We want Robson'

Football

AFP, Kano

Hundreds of angry Nigerian football fans marched on a government building here Friday to protest a decision to drop plans to sign former England skipper Bryan Robson as national team coach.

Nigeria's sports minister this week pulled the plug on a 300,000-dollar, six-month deal that would have seen the one-time Middlesbrough manager lead Nigeria's Super Eagles to next year's African Nations Cup.

In the football-mad northern city of Kano, supporters were outraged at the decision, and on Friday 200 of them marched on the headquarters of the state government to demand contract talks be revived.

"We, the football loving Nigerians are devastated by this outrageous decision," said Yakubu Musa, a spokesman for the placard-wielding fans, who handed local officials a letter for President Olusegun Obasanjo.

"It is common knowledge that we don't have a competent indigenous coach to face teams like Senegal and Cameroon, who have foreign coaches," he said.

Obasanjo's sports minister, Musa

Mohammed, said Wednesday that Nigeria could not afford to pay for a high-profile figure like Robson to lead the Super Eagles into January's continental show-down in Tunisia.

The Nigeria Football Association complained about the decision - insisting it had found private sponsors to foot the former Manchester United midfielder's wage bill - but grudgingly accepted it.

But the supporters' were not so easily placated.

The Kano fans letter to Obasanjo said: "Football is about the only unifying factor which binds the over 300 tribes of Nigeria together."

"We remind Mr President that Nigerians would not forgive him and his administration if this chance of having a world class coach for a meagre sum is allowed to slip by," it continued.

"The minister - being a neophyte in sports administration - should be dropped before he does further damage to Nigerian football and sports in general," it said.

Nigeria's caretaker manager, Christian Chukwu, is now expected to lead the national squad into the tournament, despite struggling in the past to win world-beating performances from his well-paid international stars.

Pires' worry

Football

AFP, London

French star Robert Pires fears the two-week international break could derail Arsenal's title charge just as the Gunners appear to be hitting their stride.

Saturday's derby victory over Tottenham completed a run of three wins in eight days and extended the Premiership leaders unbeaten start in the league to 12 matches.

"It has been a fantastic week for the club," Pires told AFP. "After the games against Leeds (4-1) and then Kiev (1-0) in the Champions League in midweek, we were a bit drained. We really had to dig deep against Spurs but we did it."

"We're on a bit of a roll at the moment and it is a shame that most of the squad will now be going away with their national teams."

"It is always hard to get back into gear after the international breaks."

Pires and team-mates Thierry Henry and Sylvain Wiltord will link up with the France squad this week ahead of Saturday's friendly against Germany in Gelsenkirchen.

They then report back to Highbury for a tough trip to Birmingham on Saturday,

November 22 before travelling to Milan for a make-or-break Champions League appointment with Inter on the following Tuesday.

Pires was behind much of Arsenal's good work in the win over Kiev that resurrected their European campaign and his goal against Tottenham was the fifth he has scored in north London derbies.

"Scoring against Tottenham is always a bit special and I seem to be making a habit of it," he said, before joking: "I'm becoming really fond of their defence."

After struggling at the start of the season after having his summer break cut short by playing in the Confederations Cup for France, Pires now believes he is returning to the kind of form that won him a player of the year award in Arsenal's double-winning 2001-02 season.

"I'm my own biggest critic and I recognise that I was not at my best at the start of the season," Pires said.

"I had lost my fitness and with it a bit of the cutting edge that is the strong point of my game," he admitted.

"But I never lost faith in my ability. The goal I scored at Liverpool gave me a big boost and now things are starting to go really well."

Bundesliga Stuttgart march on

Football

AFP, Berlin

VfB Stuttgart's Bundesliga march shows no sign of coming to a halt after a 2-0 win over Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday.

The away victory maintains Stuttgart's two-point lead at the top and moves them nine points ahead of reigning champions Bayern Munich.

Bayern host Borussia Dortmund on Sunday hoping to close that gap and keep Stuttgart, Bayer Leverkusen and Werder Bremen within striking distance.

With just eight minutes gone Stuttgart went in front as Hungarian striker Imre Szabics slotted home.

Frankfurt knew they would be up

Stuttgart with a 5-1 hammering of Hannover and emphasised that they are not a one-man team.

Brazilian goal machine Ailton, who leads the Bundesliga scoring charts with 10 goals, was forced out with an eye injury but he was hardly missed as Bremen found goals easy to come by.

"We were confident as soon as we stepped out onto the pitch," said Bremen chief Thomas Schaaf. "Hannover came back into the match in the second half but we got going again and turned in a convincing display."

Paraguayan striker Nelson Haedo Valdez, 19, was handed a rare start and had a huge impact opening the scoring for Bremen in the eighth minute and then doubling his tally on 37 minutes.

Ivan Klasnic also grabbed a brace with Fabian Ernst adding a fifth as



Stuttgart's Kevin Kuranyi (R) scoring despite pressure from Eintracht Frankfurt's Jean Tsoumou-Madza at Frankfurt on November 8.

against it for the remaining 82 minutes with Stuttgart conceding a meagre two goals all season and it proved the case as the home side's toothless attack was shackled by the Stuttgart rearguard.

German international Kevin Kuranyi extended the visitors' lead in the second half as Stuttgart notched their ninth win in 12 Bundesliga outings.

The victory was marred by the late sending-off of Stuttgart's Portuguese defender Fernando Meira who clashed with Gerl Cipi who was also red-carded.

"In the first half I feared we would concede a goal but after the interval we pulled it together," said Stuttgart coach Felix Magath. "The red card awarded to Fernando Meira was unnecessary."

Bremen kept up the heat on

Bremen moved to within two points of Stuttgart.

Klaus Toppmoller was handed his first Bundesliga win since taking charge of SV Hamburg as his side triumphed 3-1 over 1860 Munich at the AOL-Arena.

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TOP SIX

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Di Stefano becomes citizen of honour

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentinian football legend Alfredo Di Stefano was on Saturday inducted as a citizen of honour of Buenos Aires.

"This is an emotional moment for me," said Di Stefano who made his name at Real Madrid but also played for local side River Plate in his illustrious career.

"I was very surprised to see photographs of me everywhere on the road from the airport," said the 77-year-old who was presented with a plaque and a diploma.

"This is a great honour. I thank you all very much."

