



ROONSTER IS BACK: Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney runs for joy after scoring one of his three goals against Bolton Wanderers during their Premiership match at the Reebok Stadium in Bolton on Saturday.

Rooney treble keeps United atop

AFP, London



Wayne Rooney ended his barren spell with a first Premiership hat-trick as Manchester United stayed top of the table with a 4-0 win away to Bolton on Saturday.

The England striker had gone 10 games without scoring but that run ended in the 10th minute at the Reebok Stadium when he shot past Jussi Jaaskelainen.

And six minutes later Rooney doubled United's lead over their third-placed opponents with a brilliant curling shot.

Cristiano Ronaldo shot into an empty net eight minutes from time before Rooney completed his treble in the closing stages.

"He was due to score at some point," United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said of Rooney.

"I was just pleased he got off the mark. The longer these things go for strikers, they start to doubt things. When they score their confidence goes up.

"You could see as soon as he (Rooney) scored, there was more to come," he also told Sky Sports.

Reigning champions Chelsea remained level on points with the leaders after a 2-0 win away to Sheffield United while Liverpool

ended Aston Villa's unbeaten start to the season with a 3-1 victory at Anfield.

Elsewhere, Arsenal came from behind in a 1-1 draw with Everton and Portsmouth moved above the Gunners into fourth place by beating Reading 3-1 at Fratton Park.

Watford, the only team yet to win in the Premiership this season, were held to a goalless draw at home to Tottenham as Wigan's 1-0 win against Fulham gave the Latics their first away victory since March.

Charlton remained bottom of the table after being held to a goalless draw away to Newcastle in Saturday's late kick-off.

Second-bottom West Ham are at home to Blackburn on Sunday while struggling Manchester City play Middlesbrough in Monday's match.

At Bramall Lane, Chelsea's third-choice keeper Hilario saved Danny Webber's poorly-struck penalty when the game was still scoreless after Didier Drogba was ruled to have fouled Claude Davis.

Chelsea then made the Blades pay when Frank Lampard's 30-yard free-kick deceived Paddy Kenny two minutes before half-time.

Early in the second-half England international Lampard's cross was headed in by German midfield colleague Michael Ballack.

But that didn't stop Mourinho complaining about the Blades' penalty.

"The decision for me was completely wrong," he told Sky Sports.

Frustrated Blades' boss Neil Warnock said: "Goals change games and it really would have been nice for once to put a penalty away and put a bit of pressure on them, take the lead and see how they reacted."

Villa, a transformed team this season under new manager Martin O'Neill, were brought back down to earth on Merseyside.

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez found himself under pressure after defeat by Manchester United last weekend appeared to end his club's title hopes.

But that didn't stop the Spaniard changing his starting line-up for the 99th consecutive match.

Benitez's men went ahead in the 31st minute through Dirk Kuyt's volley and seven minutes later former Villa striker Peter Crouch made it 2-0 when the England international turned in Steve Finnan's cross.

And there was still time for Liverpool to score another before half-time when Crouch set up Luis Garcia.

Gabriel Agbonlahor pulled one back for Villa in the 56th minute.

"We had 42,000 supporting us in the Carling (League) Cup and we wanted to win for them today," said

Benitez.

Arsenal started Saturday five points behind the leaders but with a game in hand.

However, they went behind in the 11th minute when Australia's Tim Cahill got on the end of Mikel Arteta's cross.

But Robin van Persie's 71st minute equaliser gave the Londoners a share of the points.

"The way the players performed was excellent," said Everton manager David Moyes. "We had to withstand an awful lot of Arsenal pressure."

Portsmouth went ahead when Pedro Mendes's 10th minute corner was headed into his own net by Reading's Brynjar Gunnarsson.

Nwankwo Kanu headed in his seventh goal of the season early in the second-half before Mendes's 66th minute volley sealed victory. Kevin Doyle grabbed a late consolation goal.

Watford, on the stroke of half-time, saw Ashley Young net against Spurs but the winger's effort was

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Blatter's apology to Aussies

Football

AFP, Sydney

FIFA boss Sepp Blatter has apologised to Australian fans -- saying the Soccerroos should have played in this year's World Cup quarterfinal instead of eventual champions Italy.

Australia's players and fans were outraged when Spanish referee Luis Medina Cantalejo awarded Italy a penalty in the fifth minute of stoppage time after Lucas Neill had brought down Fabio Grosso.

Substitute Francesco Totti converted the penalty to give 10-man Italy a dramatic 1-0 win over Australia in Kaiserslautern and a place in the World Cup quarterfinals.

Debate raged over the decision and world governing body FIFA was accused of not addressing the problem of diving and faking injuries in the world game.

In a television interview here Sunday, Blatter said referees at this year's cup finals "were not at their best".

He said the antics of players was the real problem for the game.

"I think there was too much cheating on the players' side," Blatter said in the interview.

"I agree with them and I would like to apologise (to) our fans in Australia.

"The Soccerroos should have gone into the quarter-finals in place of Italy... you go into extra time and you are 11 against 10. But that is presumptuous."

Blatter admitted the standard of refereeing at the World Cup was not as high as he would have liked.

"I said at the referees' committee after the World Cup, when compared to the performance of 2002, you have improved, but in my opinion not enough."

He added: "But from the quarter-

final to the semi-final, then you see the referees were back to being the best."

Blackburn Rovers defender Neill, who was captain in Australia's two recent home internationals against Paraguay and Bahrain, welcomed Blatter's apology but said the situation was worsening.

"It's pleasing to see FIFA is at last acknowledging and paying more attention to the issue," he said.

Football Federation Australia officials accepted Blatter's apology, but remained wary that it came during an interview for Australian consumption only.

"It's well after the event," FFA chief executive John O'Neill said Sunday.

"The position he's stated is what all of Australian football fans felt at the time.

"It's now four months after the tournament. It's a nice gesture, but it doesn't change the result."

Del Piero strikes 200th

AFP, Rome

Alessandro Del Piero scored his 200th goal for Juventus to secure a 1-0 home win over Frosinone on Saturday as the scandal-hit Turin club chalked up their seventh consecutive Serie B victory.

The 31-year-old's milestone and a hard-fought win prolonged the celebrations for Juventus, whose handicap for match-fixing was cut from 17 to nine points on Friday after a successful appeal.

Juve, who were thrown into the second division for rigging matches in the 2004-05 season, saw their points penalty reduced by the Italian Olympic Committee's Court of Arbitration.

Juve's win left them on 13 points, five points behind leaders Genoa who play on Monday.

Del Piero, in his 14th season with Juve, was overjoyed to reach his double century.

"I am very proud," he told Sky Sports Italia.

"It means a lot to me because I feel very attached to this city, the club and its fans. Not only that but my goal gave us an important victory."

Del Piero, who joined Juventus from Padova in 1993, broke the deadlock in the 73rd minute shortly after coming on as a substitute.

The World Cup-winning Italy international swept home the loose ball after Pavel Nedved's shot had come back off the post.

Gianluigi Buffon preserved Juve's lead with a superb one-handed save to deny Jose Castillo four minutes from time.

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Barca ride on Ronaldinho

AFP, Barcelona



World Player of the Year Ronaldinho scored twice to help reigning champions Barcelona extend their lead at the top of the Spanish first division with a 3-0 win over Recreativo Huelva on Saturday.

Real Madrid moved up to second place, at least overnight, with a 3-1 win at Gimnastic Tarragona and leapfrogged over Valencia who crashed 1-0 at Racing Santander.

"Ronnie" was again the determining factor," admitted Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard.

"I'm happy with three goals even though we could have scored more. We can still improve but the victory was important," added the Dutchman whose side had been shocked by their derby defeat at Real Madrid last week.

Barcelona got off the mark from a Ronaldinho penalty after 28 minutes, when Recreativo midfielder Mario Alvarez was harshly judged to have impeded Eidur Gudjohnsen.

Ronaldinho then put the Catalans comfortably in the driving seat with a rare headed goal after 57 minutes, connecting with a cross from his Brazilian compatriot Sylvinho.

Huelva's heads went down when they went two behind and midfield playmaker Xavi Hernandez added Barca's third with another header just two minutes later.

It wasn't one of Ronaldinho's classic games but the Brazilian almost got his hat-trick after 73 minutes only for an outstanding save from Recreativo's French goalkeeper Bertrand Laquait to deny him.

Real Madrid were stunned when they found that Gimnastic Tarragona, who are stuck in the

relegation zone, refused to be overawed by the Spanish giants.

Gimnastic even opened the scoring through a 29th-minute penalty from Abel Buaades, after Ariza Makukula had been fouled by Fabio Cannavaro, although it looked like a dive by the Portuguese striker to many pundits.

Roberto Carlos then got Real back on level terms barely a minute before the break with a trade mark thunderbolt free-kick from just outside the area.

Ivan Helguera headed Real

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Barcelona's Brazilian talisman Ronaldinho celebrates his goal against Recreativo Huelva during their Primera Liga match at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on Saturday.

Three cheers for Rooney

AFP, London

Wayne Rooney said it was good to be back amongst the goals after his first Premiership hat-trick as the England striker end a run of 10 scoreless games as Manchester United stayed top of the Premiership after a 4-0 thrashing of Bolton Wanderers.

The England striker ended his barren spell in the 10th minute of Saturday's match at the Reebok Stadium when he shot past Jussi Jaaskelainen.

And six minutes later Rooney, 21 earlier this week, doubled United's lead with a brilliant curling shot.

Cristiano Ronaldo shot into an empty net eight minutes from time before Rooney completed his treble in the closing stages.

"It's good to be back," said Rooney after helping United stay clear of reigning champions Chelsea on goal difference.

"There has been a lot of talk by a lot of people over the last few weeks saying I couldn't do it any more, so the feeling when the first goal went in was brilliant.

"To finish the hat-trick was nice." SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho was happy with his side's resilience after the English champions won 2-0 away to struggling Sheffield United at Bramall Lane here on Sunday.

But the Portuguese boss couldn't contain his anger at referee Martin Atkinson's decision to award the hosts a 17th minute penalty when the game was still scoreless.

Third-choice goalkeeper Hilario, only in the side because of injuries to Petr Cech and Carlo Cudicini, then denied United by saving Danny

Webber's weak spot-kick.

Shortly before half-time Frank Lampard put Chelsea, who started the day level on points with leaders Manchester United, ahead when his free-kick deceived keeper Paddy Kenny and soon after the break the England midfielder's cross was headed in by Michael Ballack.

It was just the result Chelsea were looking for ahead of their Champions League match away to title-holders Barcelona on Tuesday.

But that didn't stop Mourinho venting his anger at Atkinson's decision to give the Blades a penalty for Didier Drogba's foul on Claude Davis.

"The decision for me was com-

pletely wrong," he told Sky Sports.

"The referee has made a wrong decision but after that the performance it is good to think there was one mistake, that's it. When the performance is so poor you are not so happy."

"It was a big decision against Chelsea at the beginning of the game. If Hilario doesn't save it maybe we are in trouble."

"It was not easy for us but the team fought well. We deserved the victory and could have scored more goals."

United boss Neil Warnock, one of the few Premiership managers known for being as outspoken as Mourinho, was also unhappy with

the referee, particularly in the build-up to Chelsea's opener.

"Goals change games and it really would have been nice for once to put a penalty away and put a bit of pressure on them, take the lead and see how they reacted," Warnock said.

"Unfortunately it was not to be and a goalkeeping error resulted in the first goal."

"I don't understand the advantage rule. It seems to be one rule for one and one for the other."

"I'm disappointed with the result but it augsurs well. I think we've got a fighting chance (of staying up)," he added after United's sixth defeat in 10 league games.

Inter snatch thrilling derby

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan edged city rivals AC Milan 4-3 in a pulsating derby on Saturday to move three points clear at the top of Italy's Serie A.

Argentine striker Heman Crespo put the reigning champions ahead with an angled header and Serbian midfielder Dejan Stankovic's driven shot from outside the box gave Inter a two-goal half-time lead.

Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic increased Inter's advantage shortly after half time at the San Siro, only for Clarence Seedorf to quickly pull one back for Milan.

Marco Materazzi's celebrations after he had headed home Inter's fourth goal earned him a second yellow card and an early bath.

His dismissal sparked a rousing fightback by Milan whose morale had been damaged 24 hours earlier by their failure to see an eight-point penalty for match-fixing overturned on appeal.

Alberto Gilardino headed his first goal for six months before Kaka's lob in the first minute of five minutes of stoppage time ensured a nail-biting finale, but Inter's 10 men held on.

Six wins from their nine matches played left Inter on 21 points, three ahead of Palermo who visit Fiorentina on Sunday. Roma are third on 17 points after their 1-0 win at Udinese in Saturday's early match.

AC Milan remain on seven points.

Inter, who finished third last season but were awarded the title after Juventus and AC Milan were found guilty of rigging matches in the 2004-05 season, started

aggressively and they went ahead in the 17th minute.

Stankovic delivered a free-kick into the penalty box, and Crespo jumped above Marek Juankulovski to plant a firm header wide of Nelson Dida's outstretched hand for his fourth goal of the campaign.

Worse was to follow for the six-time European champions five minutes later. Maicon burst down the right and fed Stankovic who took one touch before firing a right-footed screamer into the top corner from 22 yards for his fourth goal of the season.

Ibrahimovic rounded off a quick counter-attack prompted by Stankovic at the start of the second half, but Milan responded when Seedorf's heavily-deflected shot looped past Julio Cesar.

Materazzi stole in at the back post to head home Stankovic's cross in the 68th minute, but he was

then immediately ordered off for pulling off his shirt.

Substitute Gilardino's glanced in Cafu's cross 15 minutes from time before Cafu's cheeky effort set the alarm bells ringing for Inter.

In Saturday's early match Roma returned to winning ways at Udinese.

Central defender Matteo Ferrari scored the only goal in the 66th minute to become the 12th Roma player to find the net in the league this season.

Udinese were reduced to 10 men four minutes later when their Ghanaian midfielder Sulley Muntari was sent off.

Victory for Roma revived their title challenge after a defeat and two draws.

Udinese, who have taken just two points from their last three matches, remain on 13 points.



Inter Milan defender Marco Materazzi (C) celebrates his goal against bitter rivals AC Milan with teammates Zlatan Ibrahimovic (L) and Luis Figo during their Serie A football match at the San Siro on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP