



Chelsea hat-trick hero Didier Drogba (2nd R) and fellow striker Andriy Shevchenko (2nd L) celebrate the Ukrainian's goal in their Premiership match against Watford at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

Drogba delights Chelsea

United keep the distance

AFP, London

A Didier Drogba hat-trick kept Chelsea snapping at the heels of Manchester United in the Premiership title race on Saturday.

United, who will host the champions at Old Trafford on November 26, maintained their three-point lead at the top of the table thanks to a 1-0 win at Blackburn, the sixth successive success in the league.

But it was Chelsea who were the far more impressive performers, bouncing back from last weekend's defeat by Tottenham to demolish Watford 4-0 at Stamford Bridge.

Drogba's treble, sandwiched around a goal he made for strike partner Andriy Shevchenko, took his goal haul for the season so far to 14, prompting manager Jose Mourinho to describe him as the best striker in Europe on current form.

"In this moment I don't see another striker in Europe playing and scoring like him," said

Mourinho.

"I don't like to use the word unstoppable, but he is great in every aspect of his game. I have never seen a better Drogba than now."

United might have won much more comfortably if Wayne Rooney had taken either of two simple first-half chances but in the end they had to settle for just Louis Saha's 64th-minute strike.

The French striker was left with a close-range finish after Ryan Giggs had hooked the ball back into the goalmouth from beyond the back post.

"We've played a lot of good stuff lately and maybe we were not as good tonight," admitted Giggs.

"But sometimes you have to dig out results and you can't complain with 1-0 at a place like this, it is always hard to get a result here."

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson was relieved to have secured all three points at a ground where his side have struggled in recent seasons.

"I was really pleased with the goals we showed," said the Scot.

"We worked really hard to get the result because we had to."

Chris Sutton's first Premiership goal for Aston Villa was enough to give Martin O'Neill's side a 1-0 victory over Everton at Goodison Park.

With Bolton being held to a 2-2 draw at Sheffield United, the win lifted Villa to third place.

Everton's afternoon was made even more miserable as a result of an apparently serious injury to Australia midfielder Tim Cahill, who was stretchered off midway through the first half.

Middlesbrough super-sub Massimo Maccarone came off the bench to score the only goal of the game, a 74th-minute winner, against West Ham and ease the pressure on beleaguered Boro boss Gareth Southgate.

Veteran striker Andy Cole earned Portsmouth a 1-1 draw at home to one of his former clubs, Fulham. The former Manchester United man came off the bench to cancel out Zlatko Dizdarevic's opener for the visitors.

Sheffield Utd escaped from the

relegation zone after battling back from two goals down against Bolton.

Bolton had been cruising after goals either side of the break from El Hadji Diouf and Kevin Davies.

But a Rob Hulse strike in the 70th minute and a spectacular long-range effort from Colin Kazim-Richards three minutes later allowed the home side to plunder an unlikely point.

Wigan condemned bottom side Charlton to their eighth defeat of the season with a 3-2 win at the JJB Stadium.

First-half goals from Lee McCulloch and Henri Camara, both set up by huge goal-kicks by Chris Kirkland, put Wigan in control.

Darren Bent pulled goal back for Charlton in the 52nd minute and spurned a glorious chance to equalise before Matt Jackson restored Wigan's two-goal cushion 12 minutes from time, ensuring that Marcus Bent's last-minute effort provided no more than consolation for the visitors.

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Loew fearful of Cyprus

AFP, Frankfurt

Germany coach Joachim Loew says Cyprus are their most difficult opponents to date in the 2008 European championship qualifiers ahead of Wednesday's trip to Nicosia.

Germany have won all three of their qualifiers so far and lie second in group D -- a point behind the Czech Republic with a game in hand -- but Loew expects the game against Cyprus to test his side to the limit.

"There is no reason to underestimate this Cyprus team. Cyprus have already shown that already with a 5-2 win over Ireland," explained Loew.

"They are our strongest opponents up until now, stronger than Ireland and Slovakia."

It is the final competitive match of the year for Germany, third at the World Cup, and Loew believes a win would be the perfect platform with some home games to come in 2007.

"After three away games we will have made an important step towards the European championships and have a super platform for our home matches in the new year," explained Loew.

Germany have doubts over Bayer Leverkusen midfielder Bernd Schneider who picked up a minor knee injury in Saturday's 3-2 defeat to Bayern Munich.

Bayern striker Lukas Podolski is also injured and Loew must pick either Mike Hanke or Oliver Neuville to partner Miroslav Klose in attack.

Pardew banking on Tevez

AFP, Middlesbrough

West Ham manager Alan Pardew has called on Argentinian misfit Carlos Tevez to solve his club's goalscoring puzzle after the Londoners drew yet another blank on their travels.

The Hammers have managed just two goals in six away games in the Premiership this season and Saturday's 1-0 defeat against Middlesbrough was the club's fifth on their travels this term.

Tevez, signed from Brazilian club Corinthians in August, again failed to make Pardew's starting 11 as he took his place alongside compatriot Javier Mascherano on the substitutes bench.

And the World Cup star failed to break his Premiership duck after appearing as a 62nd minute substitute in a fixture short on quality and creativity.

"We need more goals from the team as a whole," said Pardew, set to answer an English Football Association charge of improper conduct following last weekend's touchline brawl with Arsenal's French manager, Arsene Wenger.

Sven breaks his silence

Football

AFP, London

Former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson has spoken out about his time as England manager, claiming he was right to take untested teenager Theo Walcott rather than Jermain Defoe to the World Cup.

In an interview with The Observer newspaper on Sunday Eriksson suggested Tottenham striker Defoe was not good enough to take to the finals in Germany, that England could have recruited a psychologist to help them with penalty shootouts, that the ability of the team was overestimated but that they were good enough to have reached the World Cup final.

The Swede, reflecting on his controversial move in selecting Walcott over Defoe, said: "It was a good decision, the right decision

because where are the other good English centre forwards.

"Where are they? I don't know. I saw 100, 120 games with Premiership clubs every year and I couldn't find out.

"They talk about Defoe. I think he had a very bad season last season. I don't think he deserved to go to the World Cup," adding his preference for Walcott was "good for England, good for Walcott, good for the future."

Eriksson, speaking at the International Football Arena in Zurich, reckoned a sports psychologist might have helped England who lost to Portugal on penalties in both Euro 2004 and the 2006 World Cup finals.

"Maybe I should have taken on a psychologist, for the taking of penalties, because we lost on that. I think that's coming more and more. I know that many Premier League clubs work with one."

Looking back at his time in

charge, Eriksson continued: "I think we did rather well. Of course, sometimes we didn't. But if you look at the whole picture, I think it was a good five-and-a-half years...."

And on the media hype surrounding the team, he said: "The press builds up the whole country before the big tournaments and we have already won the tournament before it starts. And of course that's bad."

Yet he still believed England could have gone further.

"But if you talk about the team we had in the (2006) World Cup, I think that even today that we could have played the final," he said.

"We shouldn't lose against Portugal, absolutely not. We started the tournament so-so, we got through and we played better and better. And I don't think we were worse than Italy or France, absolutely not."

"But the fact is we only reached the quarter-finals. But we had a very, very good team."

Totti compounds Milan's misery

REUTERS, Rome



AS Roma's bid for the Serie A title gathered momentum when Francesco Totti scored twice to give them a 2-1 win over AC Milan on Saturday.

The Roma captain struck first in the seventh minute when he volleyed crisply past Milan keeper Dida.

Cristian Brocchi equalised early in the second half but in the 83rd minute Totti grabbed the winner, heading in a cross by Brazilian winger Mancini.

Roma's victory -- their first away win against Milan in Serie A for 19 years -- gave them 23 points from 11 matches, one point behind joint leaders Inter Milan and Palermo, who play Parma and Torino respectively on Sunday.

Milan's fourth defeat in five matches left them stranded in 16th place in the 20-team division with seven points, after they began the season with an eight-point penalty for being implicated in a match-fixing scandal.

Defeat seemed particularly harsh for Milan, who played one of their liveliest league matches of the season.

"Overall I thought we played an excellent match but we were punished for one or two lapses in concentration," said coach Carlo Ancelotti.

"We are playing good football but that is not translating into good results. This situation needs to end as soon as possible."

Milan did not make the ideal start. A short clearance by Alessandro Nesta allowed Rodrigo Taddei to clip the ball over the defence to Totti, who spun and volleyed past Dida.

Gradually, however, Milan worked their way into the match. Midfielder Clarence Seedorf and striker Ricardo Oliveira both hit the crossbar with shots from outside the area, and Roma keeper Doni dived to his near post to save an Alberto Gilardino shot as the hosts finished the first half in control.

The pace of the game showed no sign of falling at the start of the second half.

Totti tested Dida with a long-range effort, and Oliveira angled the

ball narrowly wide of Doni's far post.

In the end it was one of Milan's foot soldiers, Brocchi -- standing in for the injured Gennaro Gattuso -- who pulled them level, picking up the ball just outside the area before firing a low shot into the bottom corner in the 56th minute.

As the game neared its end, both sides pressed forward in search of the winner, leaving themselves dangerously exposed at the back.

Totti blasted the ball off Dida's post. At the other end a shot by Kaka flashed over the bar.

Roma's winner came on the break. Alberto Aquilani picked out Mancini free on the left of Milan's area and the Brazilian winger's cross dropped perfectly for Totti to head into the net.

Earlier, Fiorentina striker Giampaolo Pazzini scored two late goals as his side came from behind to beat Atalanta 3-1.

Behind to a 25th-minute goal by Giulio Migliaccio, Fiorentina equalised quickly through Adrian Mutu but they struggled to find the winner despite dominating the second half.

They had to fight until the 90th

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AS Roma talisman Francesco Totti (L) about to unleash a shot as AC Milan defender Paolo Maldini tries in vain to impede him during their Serie A clash at the San Siro in Milan on Saturday.

Christmas could be decisive: Ferguson

AFP, Blackburn



Sir Alex Ferguson believes that Manchester United's impressive start to the current Premiership campaign has set up a crucial Christmas period.

United's veteran manager was talking after seeing a goal from France centre-forward Louis Saha secure a hard-earned 1-0 victory over Blackburn Rovers at Ewood Park.

Now Fergie believes the festive period could go a long way to deciding this season's title race with Chelsea.

It was Saha's eighth goal of the season but, more significantly, a sixth successive Premiership win for a United side that has allowed just five goals in 12 league games

this term and which has maintained its three-point cushion above Jose Mourinho's side.

"The important thing is Chelsea have done fantastic the last two years, winning the league early on and making it difficult for us all," Ferguson said. "But at least this good start must give us a chance."

"A lot of things come into consideration. You've got to get through December, which is always difficult, and by January you have a good idea of who's going to contest and who's going to be involved in relegation."

"That's a pivotal time. Hopefully, if we can keep our form good and keep the injury situation low, we will be there."

Injuries have hurt not just United but Saha, in particular, in recent years and the Frenchman expressed his delight in his current run of fitness and form as the cut-

ting edge to his team's effective approach play.

"It was a big win and we're delighted because it's going to be a tough run in the title race," said Saha. "To score a goal in a game like this is a great achievement for the team."

"The movement up front today (Sunday) was great. Everyone has helped me in the team and staying injury-free is a great confidence booster."

With Ferguson having declared that Alan Smith can leave the club on loan, the manager is clearly placing great store in Saha and Rooney and their ability to remain free of injury, particularly with backup forward Ole Gunnar Solskjaer currently out with a hamstring pull.

Sunday's only injury concern was Gary Neville, the right-back, who was replaced at half-time with

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Belgium's Kim Clijsters reacts after losing a point during her semifinal match against French star Amelie Mauresmo at the end of the season WTA Tour Championships in Madrid on Saturday.

Mauresmo, Henin rematch in Madrid

Tennis

AFP, Madrid

Belgian Justine Henin-Hardenne and France's Amelie Mauresmo set up their third major showdown of the season by advancing to the finals of the WTA Tour Championships here on Saturday.

Henin-Hardenne ensured that she will finish the year as world number one by beating Russian Maria Sharapova 6-2, 7-6 (7/5), while reigning champion Mauresmo overcame Belgian Kim Clijsters 6-2, 3-6, 6-3.

The Frenchwoman beat Henin-Hardenne in the Australian Open, when the Belgian retired through illness, and at Wimbledon.

Mauresmo also got the better of 24-year-old Henin-Hardenne in three sets in Friday's pool match, but nevertheless lost her world number one ranking.

But she warned that she would fight to hold the title which marked a major breakthrough in her career last year.

"I hope she celebrates her world number one place this evening," joked Mauresmo.

"But seriously, this tournament is one that means a lot to me. It was a year ago (in Los Angeles) that it all began for me," said the 27-year-old Frenchwoman.

Henin-Hardenne, meanwhile, ended Sharapova's 19-match winning streak, dominating from the outset to reclaim the ranking that she held for 45 weeks in 2003 and 2004.

"I'm very happy with the way I handled the pressure today. I was

very aggressive," said Henin-Hardenne, making her comeback after two months out with a calf injury.

But she insisted that she will not be celebrating too early.

"The tournament is not over yet and I don't want to make the mistake of sitting back and saying 'now I'm number one'," she said.

"I felt fantastic and comfortable. I thought she was a bit nervous. I was a bit nervous myself as well but was able to handle this."

Despite Sharapova being the only player undefeated in her pool games and not having dropped a set so far in the championship she hit double the unforced errors of her opponent with six doubles faults.

"I didn't feel like myself, I had problems concentrating," said US Open champion Sharapova, who needed to win the tournament to claim the world number one spot.

"I tried to find a way to get back into the game. It was better towards the end. But there are days you're not at your best. Obviously today was one of them."

"There was a bit of fatigue, but it's not the key answer to the loss."

"Not to finish number one is not so disappointing. I'm disappointed because I lost a match that's all. Justine deserves it, she was very consistent all the year round, in the final of all the Grand Slams."

Henin-Hardenne, who reached the final of all four Grand Slams this season, booked a place in the Championship final for the first time having missed out on the last two editions with injury.

She won the French Open for

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