



PHOTO: INTERNET

Hertha Berlin striker Marko Pantelic (C) is sandwiched between Bayern Leverkusen defender Athirson (L) and midfielder Simon Rolfes during their Bundesliga clash at the BayArena on Friday.

Comeback win for Leverkusen

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen got back in the race for European places on Friday when they came from behind to win 2-1 at home to wasteful Hertha Berlin.

Fifth-placed Hertha took the lead with a Marko Pantelic goal in the 22nd minute and they should have gone further ahead in an opening spell that they dominated.

Instead, Leverkusen levelled when Paul Freire took advantage of a defensive mistake in the 33rd minute, blasting in gratefully after a poor clearance went straight to him as he lurked in the penalty area.

Marko Babic struck the winner for Leverkusen with a 25-metre free kick with 10 minutes to go and an evening that had started so well for Hertha ended on a sorry note when they had Sofian Chahed sent off with a minute to go.

The result leaves Hertha in fifth spot with 24 points from 16 games, while Leverkusen climb to sixth on 22.

Schalke 04, who trail Werder on goal difference, are not in action until Sunday when they host Borussia Dortmund in a local derby.

Third-placed VfB Stuttgart, who have 28 points, play at home to VfL Bochum in another of Saturday's games, while Bayern Munich, a point behind in fourth place, host Energie Cottbus.

Wenger the peacemaker

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger has attempted to take some of the heat out of the build-up to Arsenal's

Premiership showdown with Chelsea on Sunday by praising Ashley Cole for his contribution while he was with the Gunners.

Cole has become a figure of ridicule amongst the Arsenal faithful since his departure for Chelsea in the summer after turning down his first club's offer of a new contract worth 55,000 pounds a week.

The England defender's ill-advised publication of an autobiography in which he portrayed Arsenal's offer to make him one of their best-paid players as a disrespectful insult has led to him being dubbed "CAshley" by his former fans, some of whom have been printing off mock 20-pound notes with his face on them to taunt him at Stamford Bridge.

Wenger however insisted that all the acrimony that surrounded Chelsea's illegal approach to Cole, his subsequent departure and the

equally fraught move of William Gallas in the opposite direction was now forgotten about.

"He had a difficult time because he was exposed a lot in the media but it finished all right," Wenger said.

"He made a fantastic contribution and he is a great player. He is showing that again with Chelsea and we are not surprised to see that. But the fans wanted Ashley Cole here for the rest of his career, it didn't happen for different reasons.

"We do not say now 'is it his fault, is it our fault?'. It's just the way it is and the most important thing is that he makes a great career and that Arsenal has good results."

Wenger's conciliatory tone was in marked contrast to the waspish comments emanating from Arsenal's German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann, who said Cole deserves any abuse he gets on Sunday and mocked his production of an autobiography at the age of 25.

"Of course Ashley should expect criticism from supporters on Sunday," said Lehmann. "He should get criticism. That is foot-

ball. It makes the game exciting.

"If he didn't it would have meant that he wasn't an important player, but he was. He was a vital member of our squad and we enjoyed some major successes with him.

"So obviously he should expect some negative emotions when he plays against Arsenal."

Lehmann went on: "I do not understand why young players write books. I do not know why a player at 25 wants to tell me all about their big experiences.

"When I consider the age I am now, I would have a lot to tell people. But it seems to be an English habit to come out with books that nobody needs.

"I don't know if Cole should have waited before writing his book but the English mentality seems to be different to elsewhere.

"I will probably write one when I retire. But I am a bit older than these players. As I said, what is the point of writing a book at 25?"

Despite those comments, Lehmann insisted he was fond of Cole. "You can't really blame him for the decision he made. That's life. He's a nice lad and a very good player."

Ballack warns of distractions

INTERNET, Cobham



Chelsea's Germany midfielder Michael Ballack is warning the Blues must overcome the rarefied atmosphere

of a London derby to ensure they wrap up the victory they need over Arsenal on Sunday.

Ballack is well aware Chelsea could be nine points adrift of Barclays Premiership leaders Manchester United -- albeit with two games in hand -- by the time they kick-off against the Gunners.

But he is adamant they must not let any of those considerations, let alone the ire of travelling fans towards Chelsea's former Arsenal defender Ashley Cole, to deflect the champions from their purpose.

"It is very important to beat Arsenal. We cannot be satisfied with a draw," Ballack spelled out.

"United are playing first (in a derby of their own at home to Manchester City today) -- so there could be a gap.

"But we have to remain cool and not be distracted by that. We must concentrate on our game.

"The aim is to win, and we hope we can catch up those points in the coming weeks."

Meanwhile, Cole's old club have emailed all their away fans asking them to refrain from abusing the England full-back, whose summer switch to Stamford Bridge and subsequent remarks published in an autobiography have done nothing for his relations with the Gunners faithful.

Many fear an uncomfortable level of abuse will be directed at Cole.

But a spokesperson for Arsenal said: "We have communicated with members of our away ticket scheme that we are aware a small minority of supporters were planning to act in an unsavoury manner to an individual at Chelsea Football Club.

"We stressed that we won't tolerate any foul or abusive behaviour. We are working with Chelsea and the authorities to ensure the game proceeds in a safe manner."

Ballack has little doubt, however, that Cole has the strength of character required to cope with any ill-

feeling from the fans who once idolised him.

"He was very relaxed in training on Friday," Ballack reported.

"It is difficult when you play against your former team. Sometimes the fans are not very happy -- but that is the way things are.

"The players of the team want to put something in the mix, and the fans are similar. But Ashley will remain cool.

"Ashley is an experienced player and I am sure that he will show that on the pitch this weekend."



PHOTO: INTERNET

Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack listens to questions during a press conference at their training ground in Cobham on Friday ahead of tonight's derby against Arsenal at Stamford Bridge.

8x3

C'Ron wins player of the month

INTERNET, undated

Portugal wing wizard Cristiano Ronaldo has won November's Player of the Month award after inspiring Manchester United to an unbeaten month.

As well as creating numerous goalscoring opportunities for his teammates, Ronaldo was in lethal form himself in front of goal, netting a free-kick in the 3-0 win over Portsmouth and another long-range effort in the 3-0 success over Everton.

The winger's two goals in November took his season tally in the Premiership up to five, while he has also notched up three assists. This is the first time Ronaldo has won the Player of the Month award.

Jim Hytner, from the awards panel, said: "Ronaldo has been in excellent form, putting in a string of outstanding performances on the wing.

"His strike against Portsmouth has got to be a contender for goal of the month."

Rijkaard slams doping claims

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard said Friday the Spanish giants should react firmly to accusations in a French newspaper report that the club has links to a doctor accused of masterminding a doping network.

European champions Barcelona and nine-times continental kings Real Madrid fell under the doping spotlight on Thursday after a damaging report in Friday's edition of Le Monde newspaper.

The report alleged the clubs had links to Eufemiano Fuentes, a sports doctor who has been investigated for allegedly running a doping and blood doping network. Both clubs categorically denied the French newspaper's claims.

And Rijkaard said Friday: "The club should take steps to make sure that justice is done. You can't just come out and make these accusations.

"It's a pity that sportsmen who do their jobs honestly are spoken about in this way. We should get organised and take steps (to counter the accusations)."

In an interview with Le Monde Fuentes said that Barcelona, knowing that he specialised in helping to "optimise performances, avoid injuries and delay the onset of fatigue," tried to hire him twice.

"I don't want to discuss the second offer. The first was in 1996," said Fuentes. "(They wanted) the same things that all athletes want: medical supervision, testing and help to optimise their performances, avoid injuries and delay the feeling of fatigue."

He added: "I worked with first and second division Spanish clubs. I worked with several clubs simultaneously, sometimes directly with the footballers and indirectly by giving advice to the club doctors.

Asked if he worked with Barcelona or Real Madrid, he replied: "I can't say. I've had death threats. I've been told that if I say certain things then me or members of my family could have serious problems.

"I've been threatened three times. I don't want to be threatened a fourth time."

No more Mr Nice Guy

INTERNET, undated



Carlo Ancelotti has warned his Milan players it's no more Mr Nice Guy after a humiliating defeat to Lille.

"We've got to change our tune," said the tactician. "We were lacking team spirit out there and this is a squad that has to be motivated all over again."

Ancelotti expects his team to show a drastic improvement when they host Torino on Sunday.

It has not been the easiest of weeks for the Rossoneri as their efforts to revive their campaign in the domestic front have proved fruitless so far.

Last weekend's 2-2 draw at Cagliari left Milan in 15th position in the standings, eight points behind Livorno, who hold the last Champions League qualifying spot.

With the Rossoneri having been plagued by injuries and a lack of form from their top stars since the start of the season, Ancelotti cannot wait for the Christmas break to come soon enough.

In the meantime, he expects his players to come up with the goods.

"This negative trend has to change," said Ancelotti. "Fitness-wise we have to wait until the break but the psychological aspect we

have to change now. We have to look to be a team."

There was only one positive aspect from last weekend's game.

Marco Borriello ended his goalscoring drought by netting his first league goal for the Rossoneri this season in the game against Cagliari.

Opponents Torino travel to the San Siro inspired by their recent positive run.

Toro marked their centenary celebrations by clinching their third straight victory last weekend against Empoli thanks to Gianluca Comotto's late goal.

The outcome allowed the promoted outfit to climb nine points clear of the relegation zone.

Alberto Zaccheroni's men appear to have turned around their campaign after their dismal start.

They have shown a big improvement, particularly in attack, which was their main weakness this season.

They have struck four times and only given away one goal in the last three games.

"We still have a lot of work to do," said Zaccheroni. "But finally our hard work is paying off and we are getting the desired results."

However, Zaccheroni knows they will have to pull out their best performance if they wish to take a positive result against his former team on Sunday.

"We cannot make any mistakes against the Rossoneri," he said. "I

don't think a team that finished top of their Champions League group are in a crisis."

The Turin outfit will be without suspended midfielder Marco Di Loreto but are hoping to recover defender Andrea Ardito, who is doubtful with a minor knock.

The hosts welcome back Kaka to the starting XI with the Brazilian midfielder having missed last weekend's clash through a foot injury.

Kaladze wants Shevchenko

INTERNET, Undated

Milan defender Kakha Kaladze believes a return to the San Siro for Andriy Shevchenko is essential for both the club and the player.

"We need Sheva, and he needs Milan," the Georgian stopper said.

Shevchenko's future at Chelsea is uncertain after a poor start to his Stamford Bridge career, whilst Milan have been struggling since the Ukrainian quit the Rossoneri in the summer.

Meanwhile, under-fire striker Alberto Gilardino has refuted claims that he is on his way out of the San Siro in a swap deal with Juventus marksman David Trezeguet.

"I am happy here", Gilardino said. "I don't want to go anywhere else."

Bradley USA's interim coach

AFP, Chicago

Football

Gulati followed up with other candidates after that bid crashed.

"We're still engaged in dialogue," Gulati reported.

Bradley takes charge to begin preparing for a training camp next month, friendlies against Denmark in January and Mexico in February and appearances next June in the CONCACAF Gold Cup and South America's Copa America.

"Is it perfect? No. But we are trying to plan for the long term," Gulati said. "Hopefully we will have some consistency next summer. Those are proving grounds for World Cup qualifying, which is the important component for us."

Bradley made it clear that he considers his knowledge of US talent and the opportunity of the next few months post as advantages in trying to remove the interim tag from his coaching contract.

"I'm excited. I'm ready for it," he said. "I'm confident about what I bring. I know what lies ahead. None of that fazes me at all. When certain moments come, you have to be ready. You don't look back. You can't be afraid."

"If that's a risk, so be it. I'm looking forward to the challenges that lie ahead."

Having been advised by Arena to take the job, Bradley said he would consider serving as an assistant to a new boss if it would help the US squad advance.

"I'm confident in my work," Bradley said. "It comes across as a foregone conclusion someone new will be coming in. I don't see it that way."

"I know some of the things, having been in this country so long

and coaching some of those players. I have some advantages that some others don't have and I want that to show in the next six months."

US Soccer officials began a search five months ago after parting ways with Arena following a disappointing first-round ouster from the World Cup.

Gulati said US Soccer will not be hurt in the eyes of other candidates by not making a deal with Klinsmann, saying 10 years ago the US would have lacked the will or resources to bid for Klinsmann or any big-name international coach.

"Now we were able to play in that game," Gulati said of hiring such a coach. "My guess is we will do it."

Saying Klinsmann was a clear first choice, Gulati said the deal did not break down over power, sponsorship issues or salary and that there was never a signed deal from which the German walked away.

"There were times in the process where I did feel it would happen," Gulati said. "There certainly hasn't been a signed agreement. We tried to get Juergen Klinsmann. I don't regret trying to make that work out."

"It wasn't about control issues and sponsors. It wasn't about the number of euros."

While saying US Soccer might work with Klinsmann in the future, Gulati added that did not mean he might come on board as coach before the 2010 World Cup in South Africa or was in any future plans.

"That's not the notion at all," he said. "That issue is behind us. we're moving forward."

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Park on the mend

AFP, Manchester

Park Ji-sung is on his way back to the Manchester United first-team squad and the Korean star's recovery from a serious ankle ligament injury cannot come quickly enough for United boss Alex Ferguson.

The midfielder has been out of action since suffering the injury in a match against Tottenham in September.

But he played 45 minutes for the reserves in a win over Manchester City's second string on Thursday night and could be back in the first team picture as early as next weekend.

Park looked lively on a heavy, damp pitch and was given the all-clear by United's medical staff after being withdrawn at half-time, Ferguson revealed on Friday.

"Ji-Sung had 45 minutes in the reserves on Thursday night and that was enough him at this stage of his recovery," said Ferguson.

"It's good to have him back, though, because he gives me the option of resting Ryan Giggs or (Cristiano) Ronaldo.

"He can play on both sides, so he's an important player to have fit. Ryan can play in-field and the return to fitness of Ji-Sung helps him because he can play out wide and allow Ryan to move inside."

Park, 25, is in his second season at United after moving from Dutch club PSV Eindhoven for four million pounds. He has made 49 appearances and scored two goals for the Red Devils.

NOTICE

Due to an unavoidable reason, we could not print the CROSSWORD today. We regret any inconvenience.

--Sports Editor