



(From L-R) Manchester United stars Ryan Giggs, Rio Ferdinand, Michael Carrick and Gary Neville watch their team take on Wigan at Old Trafford on Tuesday. The quartet were rested for this fixture.

Rovers foil Reds revival

AFP, Blackburn



South Africa striker Benni McCarthy scored the only goal of the game as Blackburn Rovers ended Liverpool's recent revival with a 1-0 win at Ewood Park here Tuesday.

McCarthy took his total for the season into double figures when he punished Liverpool in the 49th minute for their failure to turn possession into goals.

Poor finishing from Rafael Benitez's side, who dropped from third to fifth after this result and could be sixth if Arsenal avoid defeat against bottom-of-the-table Watford later Tuesday, was a significant factor.

But the visitors also encountered Brad Friedel on a day when Rovers' American keeper was at his best.

Friedel was responsible for half-a-dozen fine saves as he earned Blackburn their first Premiership victory over Liverpool in 17 games

and ended the Reds' four-match winning run.

It was a badly-needed success for Blackburn, who had won only two of their previous 11 league games and were in danger of slipping into the bottom three, although the early signs suggested a vastly different outcome as they struggled to cope with Craig Bellamy.

Bellamy, making his first visit back to the club that sold him in the pre-season, was partnered by Peter Crouch, with Dirk Kuyt on the bench along with Luis Garcia.

And the Welsh striker soon showed he was ready to ignore the predictable jeers of the home supporters and sustain his recent run of good form.

Within the first minute, Bellamy's cross set up Crouch for a header that was comfortably saved by Friedel.

Crouch forced a better save from Friedel, but the England international was marginally off-side, while John Arne Riise's long-range shot tested the keeper.

The consolation for Rovers was

that McCarthy was back from suspension and Shabani Nonda (groin) had passed a fitness test.

However it was midfielder Robbie Savage who had Blackburn's first threat when a weak header failed to trouble Liverpool's Spanish keeper Pepe Reina.

It was a rare interruption to Liverpool's initial grip on the game and Friedel was forced to make two more saves in quick succession from Bellamy and Crouch.

Then McCarthy tested Rein with a fierce 22nd minute shot but Liverpool were still creating the bulk of the chances and should have scored twice as they slipped open Rovers's defence with ease.

In the 34th minute, Riise headed Xabi Alonso's superb crossfield pass towards Bellamy, who guided his shot inches wide with Friedel beaten.

And, two minutes later, Crouch was badly at fault when he directed Steve Finnan's cross too close to the keeper when he was given time and space inside the six-yard area.

Liverpool paid for their profi-

gacy within four minutes of the restart.

Turkish midfielder Tugay, anonymous in the first-half, outwitted Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard with a superb piece of skill before setting up David Bentley, who whipped in a low cross that left McCarthy with a straightforward chance to score his 10th goal of the season.

It was the first goal conceded by Liverpool in 689 minutes of Premiership football and soon heralded the departure of Crouch, replaced by Kuyt in the 57th minute.

Fabio Aurelio also went on instead of Mark Gonzalez in the 64th minute, but Friedel still stood firm.

The American made three marvellous saves from Kuyt, Garcia and Alonso in the final 16 minutes.

And Liverpool must have sensed it would not be their day when Alonso also hit the outside of the post when he finally found a way past Friedel.

Anelka turns Bolton's touchstone

Football

AFP, Bolton

Bolton stretched their winning streak to four games with a hard-fought 2-1 win over Newcastle at the Reebok Stadium here on Tuesday with France striker Nicolas Anelka scoring the winner.

Anelka, who scored both goals in the 2-0 win at Manchester City on Saturday, hit the clincher in the 57th minute as Bolton moved into fourth place.

Bolton boss Sam Allardyce paid tribute to his controversial striker, claiming he was the missing piece in his team's jigsaw.

"We are reaping the rewards of a goalscorer at long last and he (Anelka) popped up in the right area for a tap-in," said Allardyce.

"We have not seen that type of goal from him yet. We have seen a lot of quality runs and skill and

finishing. Today we saw a goalscorer's goal when he popped up at the far post and tapped it in.

"He got us going even more again in the second half to keep continuing pressing Newcastle and

we could have had maybe a goal or two more, but we did not quite find the right final ball or the right shot.

"But it was a great victory having gone 1-0 down and having to claw our way back in the first half on what

was a poor performance by us."

Bolton have mounted an impressive renaissance since struggling badly through the end of October to the beginning of December, picking up only four points from a possible 21.

Newcastle came into the game in their best form of the season having won five of their last six league matches.

Having won only two of their opening 13 games they had found themselves in the relegation zone with manager Glenn Roeder looking a near-certainty to get the chop before Christmas.

Newcastle were forced to field veteran Czech goalkeeper Pavel Smicek, who made his first start for the club since 1997.

The 38-year-old had come on as a late substitute in Newcastle's 3-1 win over Tottenham on Saturday after Shay Given was forced off with an injury.

Smicek was soon celebrating as Newcastle made a great start but Roeder was distraught that it did not last.

"It is stating the obvious but the two goals we conceded were, by our standards of late, shockers," he said.

"They were two woeful goals.

"Smicek hardly had anything else to do of any consequence, so after Kieron (Dyer) scored, to concede that goal in the first half and not get in 1-0 up after for the first half-hour playing so well, was a huge disappointment."

The Magpies went in front after some sloppy defending in the Bolton ranks allowed Dyer to skip through and blast the ball home on eight minutes.

But just after the half hour mark Bolton were level after some comic defending in the Newcastle box ended with Peter Ramage heading in an own goal.

Bolton secured the three points in typical fashion as a long throw was helped on by Kevin Davies and El-Hadji Diouf, leaving Anelka to tap home at the farpost.



Nicolas Anelka (L) with manager Sam Allardyce

6x3

Huddlestone extends Spurs deal

AFP, London

Tottenham midfielder Tom Huddlestone signed a new four and a half year contract with the Premiership club on Tuesday.

Huddlestone's new deal will begin on January 1 and keeps him at White Hart Lane until 2011.

The England Under-21 player, who moved to Spurs from Derby in July 2005, has established himself as a regular in the side this season and recently scored his first goal for the club against Manchester City.

Real await Becks' reply

INTERNET, undated

Reports in Spain claim Real Madrid want David Beckham to respond to a contract offer by New Year's Eve.

The former England captain's current deal expires at the end of the season and he is mulling over his future at the Bernabeu.

Real have offered the midfielder a contract to stay at the club until 2009 and have matched his current wages.

The issue is not financial, but Beckham's desire to play regular football as he has not been guaranteed a starting role under Fabio Capello.

The Real coach, though, feels the 31-year-old is still a key figure in his squad and hopes to keep him in the Spanish capital.

But Real are also anxious for a resolution to the situation and reports in Spain suggest the club want an answer before 2007.

If Beckham fails to reach a conclusion, then the club will review the position in the middle of January.

From next month, the ex-Manchester United star is eligible to talk to other clubs, with a view to a Bosman transfer in the summer.

He is not short of suitors, with the likes of Bolton Wanderers interested in bringing Beckham back to the Premiership.

The Spanish media believes the key to Beckham's future lies in him being convinced that he still has a prominent role to play at Real.

Strachan salutes Nakamura

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic manager Gordon Strachan hailed the genius of Shunsuke Nakamura after the Japanese midfielder rescued his side's unbeaten home record.

The Scottish champions were trailing 2-0 against Dundee United on Tuesday until Nakamura created Darren O'Dea's goal and then equalised with a long range strike just 10 minutes from full-time.

Celtic, who had won all 10 of their home league matches this season, are 15 points clear at the top of the table and Strachan admits his side will always be a danger to any opponent as long as they have Nakamura.

"We didn't play well but Nakamura came to the fore," Strachan said. "He is a genius.

"I don't know what more he can do apart from carrying the players on his shoulders and playing at the same time.

"His personality today decided that we weren't going to get beat. Some of the other players were maybe thinking that it might not be our day.

"That's when you need big personalities who can say, 'we can get something from this.' He is just a fantastic player."

Juve still on Javier trail

INTERNET, undated

Reports in Italy claim Juventus are to make a renewed bid for West Ham United midfielder Javier Mascherano.

The Argentine has struggled to adjust to the demands of English football and has made just seven appearances since his August move from Corinthians.

He has yet to feature under new Hammers boss Alan Curbishley and reports persist he will be allowed to leave Upton Park.

Curbishley is still assessing his squad, while Mascherano insists quitting West Ham has not crossed his mind.

But Juventus have been long-term suitors of the stylish midfielder and coach Didier Deschamps is a fan of the South American.

The latest reports in Italy suggest Juve are dispatching two officials to London in the coming days to meet with Mascherano's management company MSI.

The club hope to persuade MSI to move Mascherano out of West Ham and are willing to pay up to 8 million euros to arrange a deal.

Speculation has also claimed that the player has recently shunned interest from Liverpool in order to remain available for a switch to Italy.

Pepe to become Portuguese

AFP, Lisbon

FC Porto's Brazilian defender Pepe is set to follow Barcelona midfielder Deco and play for Portugal after obtaining Portuguese citizenship.

"He (Pepe) wants to represent Portugal," Portugal's Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari revealed.

"To hear that is very interesting for me. Even if it won't please fans and journalists to hear, it's becoming easier to think of the future of the national side."

Houllier relishes the challenge

INTERNET, undated



Lyon coach Gerard Houllier believes he has the hardest job in French football, despite his side taking a 15-point lead into French football's winter break.

Houllier's side have one hand on their sixth Ligue 1 title on the trot, but the former Liverpool boss insisted the pressure on him is much greater than at other clubs.

"It is harder than elsewhere. There is no other club where there is so much pressure to get results," he told Wednesday's L'Equipe.

"When you arrive at Lyon, and the club has just won the French championship four times in a row and twice gone to the quarterfinals of the Champions League, you don't have the right

to come second.

"So, yes, it's difficult, you need plenty of common sense and experience.

"I'll tell you a secret: what I am doing there, I would not have been capable of 20 years ago.

"You have zero margin for error. As soon as you get there, everything is blown up by the media.

"When a coach makes a mistake in mid-table, nobody cares. For me, one defeat at Rennes is enough to hear recriminations.

"Every poor performance is a crisis.

"It is hard to be at Lyon. If it were not difficult, Lyon would have the same coach for ten years.

"What the president says is true -- I am driving a Formula One car. It goes too quickly for me to make the slightest error.

"Formula One is more difficult than Formula 3000."

Pires pleads for Gunners return

INTERNET, undated

Robert Pires has pleaded with Arsene Wenger to give him a final fling with Arsenal. The 33-year-old has not yet played a competitive match for Villarreal because of a serious knee injury, but is already planning his departure from the club.

The former France international said he wanted to stay with the Spanish side until the end of the 2007/08 season, before returning for his swansong at Arsenal.

"There is less pressure here at Villarreal. Arsenal is a big machine," he told TFF1.

"After my two years here, I would love to play one last season for Arsenal.

"Arsene, boss, have you got the message?"

Although jovial, Pires's comments are unlikely to endear him to Villarreal president Francisco Roig, who recently criticised star player Juan Roman Riquelme's attitude.

Pires suffered a cruciate ligament injury at the start of the season, and has still to make his debut for last season's Champions League quarterfinalists.

Wenger still has title hopes

AFP, Watford



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has not given up hope of winning the Premiership title this season after the Gunners snatched a 2-1 victory over struggling Watford.

Tuesday's win at Vicarage Road, courtesy of a goal from Robin van Persie seven minutes before the end, propelled Arsenal to third in the table, 14 points behind leaders Manchester United with 18 games left.

Van Persie curled home his 10th goal of the season to leave the Hornets rooted to the bottom of the league.

Gilberto had given Arsenal the lead in the 19th minute but Tommy Smith equalised four minutes later for the hosts with his first goal of the season.

"No matter how big the challenge is (of winning the title) we want to give the maximum, to come back as close as possible. You never know what may happen," Wenger said.

"The first step for us is to be consistent," added the Frenchman after Arsenal followed up a 6-2 thrashing of Blackburn Rovers on Saturday with a win that had to be ground out -- something which pleased their manager.

"If you win 6-2, I guarantee you 90 times out of a hundred you lose the next game if you're small in your head."

Wenger heaped praise on the Arsenal goalscorers against Watford, describing Gilberto as "unbelievable" after he scored his eighth goal of the season and comparing Dutch striker van Persie to former Arsenal and Netherlands great Dennis Bergkamp.

"I think tonight Gilberto was tremendous," said Wenger.

"He scored the first goal but he also dictated the game in the middle of the park. He is slowly getting the credit he deserves."

Regarding van Persie, Wenger described the young forward as "a great finisher", adding: "Also he has developed into a team player now. He works very hard for the team... There is some Bergkamp in there, in the way he finishes."

Wenger noted also the improvement in the 23-year-old van Persie's positional play -- another of Bergkamp's key attributes during his career.

"It's difficult to teach somebody where to be on the pitch and the first quality of a football player is to know where to stand. He (van Persie) has that."

Van Persie's winning goal against Watford was superbly set up by teenage English forward Theo Walcott.

Controlling the ball near his own penalty area, Walcott played a perfect ball down the line into the path of the on-running Dutch international, who cut inside the box before unleashing a shot into the bottom corner.

Watford manager Aidy Boothroyd was downhearted after having seen his side lose yet another match in the dying minutes, following similar defeats against Bolton, Portsmouth and Newcastle this season.

"At the end I thought the goal could have been avoided," said Boothroyd, who must now pick up his players for Saturday's match against Wigan.



Arsenal striker Robin Van Persie scores a spectacular goal in their Premiership clash at home to Watford on Tuesday.

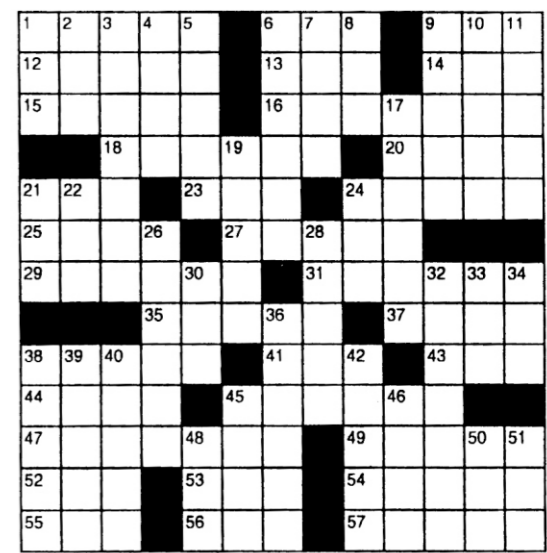
CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS 38 Rodeo prop 19 Euripides drama
1 A deadly sin 41 Literary collection set 43 Schedule abbr. 45 Lee or Vaccaro
6 Tool set 44 Grad gradually 4 Vivacity
9 Uncle (Sp.) 45 Lee or Vaccaro
12 Cecil B. De- 47 "Leave it to Beaver" planet
13 Pub order 47 "Leave it to Beaver" planet
14 Mork's home planet 49 Flavor device
15 Accordion feature 52 Listening device
16 More grim 53 Freudian topic
18 Ill will 54 Prepare character 55 Meth. than
21 Coop occupant 56 More than
23 "A mouse" 57 Gridiron stats
24 Links halves 57 Gridiron stats
25 News story
27 "Saturday Night Fever" venue
29 Again and again?
31 Follow orders
35 Quickly
37 -- gin fizz

DOWN 1 Part of a roadie's load 2 Zero 3 One who gathers gradually 4 Vivacity 5 Tend a sphere 6 Traditional Japanese drama 7 Misfortunes 8 Shirt type 9 Fare, at times 10 Vernon Castle's partner 11 Gumbo pods 17 Proverbs
21 Smack 22 Biblical verb suffix 24 Sarge, for ex. 26 Corruptive atmosphere 28 Clapper board datum 30 Navy rank (abbr.) 32 Crowd-- (popular one) 33 Sodom evacuee 34 Verily 36 Treat for Bugs 38 Spikes the punch 39 Soothe 40 Litigants 42 Nervous 45 Pleads 46 Brent Spiner's "Star Trek" role 48 Churchill gesture 50 Slight amount 51 Type squares

Solution time: 25 mins.

JOKE LED OPTIS
APIN URI BLAH
MILLO MRS EURO
BENUMB HAYMOW
GIE FIE
ETICH RAGTRADE
TAO ERA GAY
CULTURAL ROBE
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COMEDON MOSAIC
ALBA ASP CODA
GLUIT DIOM ANEW
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CRYPTOQUIP
V Y T Q P S U Q L B E Z T I Q
Y Q G P Z K L G S T T J Z I A T V
T C J J Q T S B Q C L T Z B A E Z A
E S K Z F R T U K Z F R T K Z F R T.
Yesterday's Cryptquip: ANY COMPANY THAT SPENDS A LOT ON TELEVISION COMMERCIALS CLEARLY HAS A GREAT AD-VANTAGE.
Today's Cryptquip Clue: B equals Y
The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.