

Dzeko fires City

AFP, Wigan

Edin Dzeko's first goal for two months earned Manchester City a hard-fought 1-0 win at Wigan on Monday which sent Roberto Mancini's side three points clear at top of the Premier League.

The 25-year-old Bosnian's sublime 22nd minute header proved enough to sink the bottom club after Wigan goalkeeper Ali Al Habsi had threatened to frustrate the leaders.

Al Habsi produced a string of excellent saves both before and after Dzeko had netted his 14th goal for City this season.

David Silva, Sergio Agüero and Dzeko were all denied by the Oman international but City returned to winning ways to pull clear of nearest rivals Manchester United ahead of Sunday's big home game with third-placed Tottenham.

Having suffered back-to-back defeats in cup competition, an away game against basement team Wigan provided City with a perfect opportunity to snap out of their winter blues.

The FA Cup elimination at the hands of Manchester United as well as the League Cup first leg home defeat to Liverpool, together with captain Vincent Kompany's four-match suspension, had resulted in a poor start to 2012 for Mancini's expensively-assembled side.

But they found relief at Wigan, whose record against the so-called big four is nothing short of diabolical.

Since winning promotion to the top-flight in 2005, Wigan have lost all 14 league and cup games against Manchester United while they have now gone eight hours 15 minutes without scoring against City.

Wigan started brightly with Scottish midfielder James McArthur seeing a third minute shot deflected narrowly wide by James Milner while the hosts were also denied a sixth minute penalty.

Martin Atkinson has sent off six players this season but the referee did not want to know when City's England midfielder Gareth Barry appeared to lean into Jordi Gomez deep inside the visitors penalty area.

But Wigan, like their season, quickly fizzled out and City, captained by Pablo Zabaleta on the Argentinian's 27th birthday, gradually began to take command.

The home side, who had conceded 11 times in their previous three league games, were undone by a simple set-piece midway through the first half as Dzeko found the net with a superb header after meeting Silva's inch-perfect free-kick.

It was the former Wolfsburg player's first goal in 14 games for club and country yet despite the quality of the finish, it was far too easy for City.

Wigan are now without a win in their last nine home attempts in the league yet they can count themselves fortunate to have escaped a hiding.

Al Habsi produced a flying world-class save to deny Dzeko a second from 12-yards after 55 minutes before the Oman international frustrated Silva moments later.

Then Agüero went on a sensational mazy run which had Wigan's defence chasing shadows.

But just when the former Atletico Madrid player looked set to walk the ball into the net, Dzeko spoiled it all by taking the ball off his toe and allowed Al Habsi to make an easy save.



Manchester City striker Edin Dzeko (C) is ecstatic after scoring the all-important goal against Wigan Athletic during their Premier League match at the DW Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Abidal extends Barca stay

AFP, Madrid

French international defender Eric Abidal has signed a new deal with Barcelona, the Catalan club said on Monday after some protracted negotiations.

European champions Barca said they had reached agreement with 32-year-old Abidal for an extra year meaning his new deal runs through to June 2013.

"The agreement includes an option to extend it through to 2015," Barca added on their website.

Abidal's original deal at the Nou Camp was until 2012 and he was initially offered a one-year extension but based on appearances whereas the player had asked for two years without any appearance strings attached.

Abidal - capped 60 times - has made 177 appearances in four years at the club, winning the Champions League twice and the Spanish title three times among other trophies.

Maradona returns to training

AFP, Dubai

Former Argentinian football legend Diego Maradona will return to coaching at Al-Wasl club after he was successfully treated for kidney stones at a Dubai hospital, the club said Monday.

"Maradona is well and in good health. He will rest for one day (Tuesday) before supervising the training on Wednesday," said the statement by Al-Wasl.

The 51-year-old began feeling pain after the club's match on Saturday and was later admitted to hospital, an Al-Wasl spokesman had said Sunday, adding that the treatment was successful.

"Maradona has insisted on watching on video the game between Sharjah and Bani Yas that took place yesterday (Sunday) in preparation for the coming game between Al-Wasl and Sharjah" scheduled for January 23, said the statement.

The 1986 World Cup winner signed a contract with Al-Wasl in June, 11 months after he was dismissed as the manager of Argentina's national team.

Cup clasico returns

Football
AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid and Barcelona resume their historic rivalry on Wednesday when the two teams meet in the first leg of the quarterfinals of the Spanish Cup.

The scene is the Santiago Bernabeu before the return leg in Barcelona the following Wednesday and at stake is the first of three prizes the two giants are targeting this season.

With the Champions League resuming in February with both teams in the last 16 and the two locked in a battle at the top of La Liga, the season promises combat on three fronts.

In the league at the weekend the pressure was already starting to show for both teams.

Madrid had to come back to win 2-1 away at Mallorca on Saturday night with late goals from Gonzalo Higuain and Jose Callejon, a result that temporarily opened a gap of eight points on Barcelona in second position.

Twenty-four hours later it was Barcelona's turn to suffer when they gave away a two goal lead at home to Betis, the first goals conceded by the Catalans in the league at

home this season, before running out 4-2 winners and reducing the gap back to five points.

Barcelona have already triumphed in the Bernabeu in December with a resounding 3-1 league victory after goalkeeper Victor Valdes had gifted Madrid a first minute lead with an uncustomary mistake.

On that occasion Cristiano Ronaldo was criticised for his performance and despite scoring the winning goal in last season's Spanish Cup final between the two sides, his tally of three goals in 11 games against Barca is subject to debate.

It does not compare favourably with Lionel Messi's total of 13 strikes against Real and a good display from the Portuguese superstar will be key to Real's chances on Wednesday.

Madrid have injury doubts over Sami Khedira and Pepe but expect to welcome back Angel Di Maria, who has been very important for them this season.

Barcelona's long-term casualties Ibrahim Afellay, David Villa and Pedro Rodriguez will not be in the Bernabeu, and neither will Seydou Keita who has travelled to the Africa Cup of Nations to play with Mali.

Brazil urged to pass bill

AFP, Brasilia

Visiting FIFA's general secretary Jerome Valcke called here Monday for quick legislative approval of a bill on Brazil's hosting of the 2014 soccer World Cup.

"There is a time you have to give birth to this law," Valcke told reporters. "We are so closer to give birth to this law, the nine months are over, we are ready to bring it out."

The bill gives FIFA exclusive rights to pictures, sound and other forms of expression linked to the World Cup and slaps penal and financial sanctions for any illegal reproduction.

Valcke was accompanied by the country's sports Minister Aldo Rebelo and by Brazilian football icon Ronaldo, who last year accepted an invitation to become head of the 2014 World Cup organizing committee.

"We also have a strong commitment from the Congress to vote on the 2014 bill in the first part of March," said Rebelo, who acknowledged that a few points remained to be solved.

"But it will be done," he pledged. "I want

to reassure everybody of the willingness and commitment of President (Dilma Rousseff) and the government of Brazil to make every effort to make the 2014 FIFA World Cup a success."

FIFA, keen to prevent sales of tickets on the black market, has agreed to lower prices of admission tickets for students and seniors in line with the World Cup Law.

Discount tickets represent 10 per cent of total tickets for the World Cup in a country where the minimum wage is \$332 per month.

This week, Valcke is to visit soccer stadiums in the northeastern cities of Fortaleza and Salvador de Bahia -- two of the 12 Brazilian cities that will stage World Cup games.

Brazilian authorities are racing to build or renovate the 12 stadiums in time for one of the world's premier sporting events.

On Thursday, Valcke is to meet the local World Cup organizing committee in Rio.

During his Brazilian tour, he was also to confer with members of the government and lawmakers, including former World Cup winner Romario who last week said Brazil will not be "100 percent ready" for the World Cup.

Blatter backs Platini for FIFA chief

REUTERS, Undated

Michel Platini will be a good president for FIFA, incumbent Sepp Blatter said on Tuesday.

Swiss Blatter, whose spell at the helm expires in 2015, believes Europe will fight to keep control of world soccer's governing body with UEFA president Platini of France a natural candidate.

"Michel Platini is ready, if he wants. He says 'I don't know yet...' but deep inside, he wants it," the 75-year-old Blatter told France Football magazine on Tuesday.

"Of course he will be a good president. He will not be the same president that I am, because everyone is different but he will be a good president."

Blatter reaffirmed that his current spell in charge would be his last.



Argentina legend Diego Maradona juggles the ball during a promotional event at the Peninsula Hotel in Shanghai on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Napoli lose ground

AFP, Rome

Napoli's title hopes took another blow as Walter Mazzarri's team were frustrated by lowly Bologna, who held them to a 1-1 draw at the San Paolo Stadium on

Monday. Despite having recorded impressive wins over AC Milan, Inter Milan and Manchester City this season, Napoli have slipped up too often against supposed minnows.

And it happened again as they needed Edinson Cavani's penalty to cancel out Robert Acquafresca's early opener for the visitors.

The result left Napoli down in sixth and still 10 points off leaders Juventus while Bologna moved four points clear of the drop zone.

Bologna coach Stefano Pioli was proud of his team.

"We played a great game, it's not easy going to Napoli and keeping your head up against such a strong team with good organisation, a well-defined game-plan and quality players," he said.

Napoli were straight on the attack and Marek Hamsik should have given them an early lead when picked out by Hugo Campagnaro's cross, all alone, 10 yards out but his low finish was stopped by Jean-Francois Gillet.

Mazzarri was full of excuses and said he felt scoring then would have changed the game.

"My only regret is that chance Hamsik missed after a few minutes," he said.

"Bologna played well, they contained well and that countered, but then again everyone who comes here plays like that.

"We weren't very lucid tonight, there were too many players not at their best.

"We play with tempo and the pitch tonight didn't help us and then when you don't get a goal straight away and instead concede one you have to claw your way back and it was easier for Bologna."

The hosts were made to pay for that as Bologna scored out of nothing. Campagnaro failed to block Nico Pulzetti's through ball and Acquafresca was left all alone in front of goal to beat Morgan De Sanctis.

Hamsik came close again as he worked space on the edge of the box but his shot was deflected behind.

In the second half Bologna had a close shave as Goran Pandev took down a corner on the six-yard box but with his back to goal and under pressure he failed to get the contact needed to turn the ball home.

Napoli started getting desperate and Salvatore Aronica tried his luck from fully 30 yards, but although he hit it well, Gillet held on.

Drama broke out 20 minutes from time as Diego Perez was adjudged, perhaps harshly, to have handled the ball.

The referee originally gave a free-kick on the edge of the box but then changed it to a penalty on the linesman's advice.

Bologna defender Andrea Raggi gave Aronica a huge shove in the mayhem and protests that ensued but the referee didn't see it and it was left to Cavani to thrash home the spot-kick.

Pioli was fuming about that decision.

"The rule is clear, a handball has to be intentional to give a penalty but it was ball to hand, the rule wasn't properly applied," he moaned.

Captain Marco Di Vaio had two great late chances to snatch a victory on the counter-attack for the visitors but he was tackled by Juan Zuniga the first time and De Sanctis denied him on the second.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Do you think the BPL will be successful?

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What to WATCH

TEN Cricket
Pakistan v England
First Test, Day 2
Live from 12:00pm

STAR Sports
Australian Open
Second Round, Day 4
Live from 6:00am (Thursday)

ESPN
Sportscenter India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm

DAY'S EVENT

Federation Cup Football
QUARTERFINAL
Sk Russel v Arambagh
Time: 2:30pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Bangladesh A v England Lions
Fifth One-day
Venue: Sylhet Divisional Stadium