

Premiership Magpies' magical flight

Football

AFP, London

Newcastle staged an amazing fightback to stay top of the Premiership with a 4-3 win at Leeds on Saturday as Manchester United underlined their return to form with a 6-1 rout of Southampton.

A last-gasp winner from Peruvian international Norberto Solano gave the Magpies a remarkable win at Elland Road after Leeds had led 3-1 early in the second half.

The win extended Newcastle's lead in the Premiership standings to three points although Liverpool can draw level if they beat Arsenal in Sunday's fixture.

Goals from Newcastle's Robbie Elliott and former England skipper Alan Shearer had hauled Newcastle back into contention after Leeds looked to have the game wrapped up.

Leeds badboy Lee Bowyer opened the scoring for David O'Leary's side, putting his troubles behind him to equalise on 38 minutes after Craig Bellamy had put Newcastle ahead.

Australian striker Mark Viduka and Republic of Ireland fullback Ian Harte made it 3-1 for Leeds early in the second half and the Yorkshire men looked to be cruising.

But Newcastle refused to accept defeat and levelled with an Elliott header and a Shearer penalty before Solano's dramatic late winner.

Meanwhile Manchester United proved talk of their demise may have been premature with a 6-1 drubbing of Southampton at Old Trafford that lifted them to fourth, six points off the lead.

Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy opened the scoring with a right foot strike after just 30 seconds, the fastest goal of the Premiership this season.

Van Nistelrooy doubled his tally on 34 minutes, scrambling home from close range after a corner by Ole-Gunnar Solskjaer created confusion in the Saints six-yard box.

United had the result wrapped up just before half-time, Solskjaer volleying home for 3-0.

Van Nistelrooy completed his hat-trick on 54 minutes although yet another blunder from United's keeper

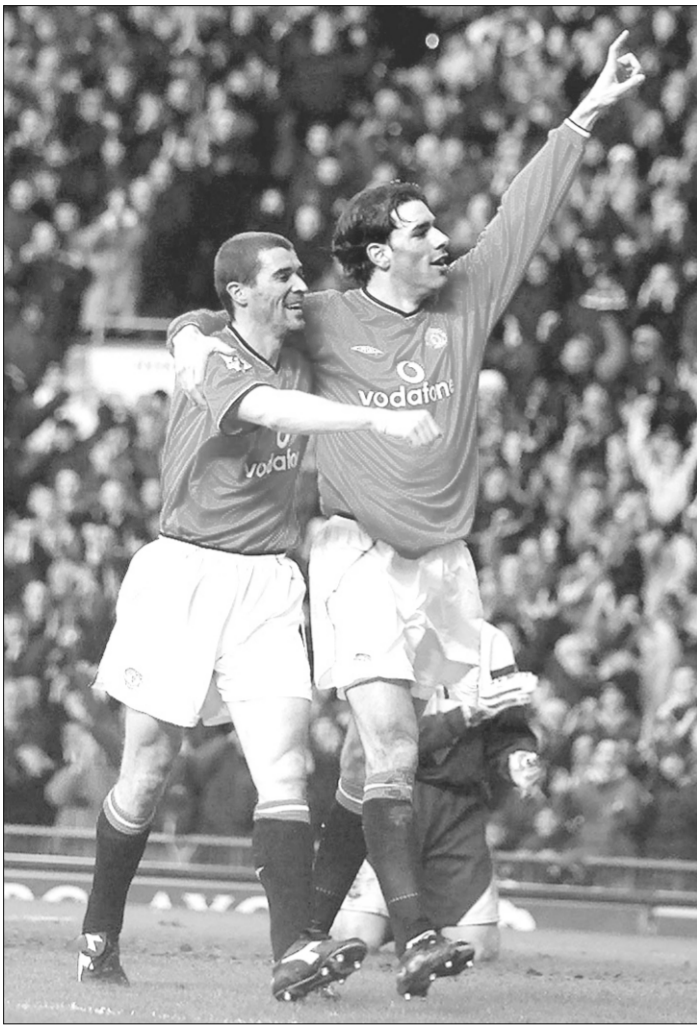


PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United's Ruud Van Nistelrooy (R) and Roy Keane celebrate after the former scored his second goal against Southampton during their Premiership fixture at Old Trafford on December 22.

Fabien Barthez allowed the Saints to pull a goal back through Marian Pahars. Captain Roy Keane and

defender Phil Neville scored late goals to complete the rout. At Filbert Street, Leicester's

Premiership's top six

English premier league standings after matches on Saturday (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Newcastle United	18	11	3	4	34	23	36
Liverpool	16	10	3	3	25	15	33
Leeds United	18	8	8	2	26	17	32
Manchester Utd	9	3	6	43	28	30	
Arsenal	17	8	6	3	35	21	30
Chelsea	17	6	9	2	23	12	27

Owen's backs Anelka

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool striker Michael Owen believes the arrival of temperamental French star Nicolas Anelka could help the Anfield club win their first English league title for 12 years.

Newly crowned European footballer of the year Owen said Anelka, signed in a surprise loan deal on Friday, could give added impetus to Liverpool's title charge.

"It was a shock to find we had signed Anelka because it had not even been hinted at," Owen told the News of the World.

"But it looks a good signing for us. I can vividly remember the goals he scored in helping Arsenal to win the 1998 Double and if he is capable of doing that for us it will be well worth him coming here.

"Hopefully that will bring us the goals which can win the title."

Anelka's arrival will help fill the void created by the departure of Liverpool favourite Robbie Fowler to

title rivals Leeds.

Anelka meanwhile was on Saturday beaming about the "warm welcome" he has found at Liverpool.

"I really have had a warm welcome from everyone. Michael Owen wasn't there but he called the coach who handed me the phone. It was great to talk to him," said Anelka on his personal website Saturday.

The 22-year-old Frenchman will not be eligible for Liverpool's Champions League campaign, leaving him free to pick up the relay from Owen or forward partner Emile Heskey whenever the going gets tough.

In any case, there appeared to be no ill-feeling from the recent European footballer of the Year.

"He (Owen) welcomed me to the club and I took advantage to congratulate him on winning the Ballon d'Or," added Anelka, who had fallen out of favour at PSG since joining from Real Madrid last season.

Anelka spent Saturday undergoing a medical which, along with his upcoming performances for the Anfield club, will help decide whether Liverpool act on their option to buy the player at the end of the

season.

The present contract between player and club is set to be signed Monday, followed by a much-awaited press conference.

Until then Anelka, who has known troubled times in the past few years with Arsenal, Real and with PSG coach Luis Fernandez, will be doing his best to get used to training with the Liverpool squad.

"I will start training on Tuesday in preparation for Wednesday's match at Aston Villa.

"Nothing's sure but I could make my debut for the Reds then."

Anelka also spelled out the main reason why he had left PSG - his current fringe status as a France international.

"I have no ill feelings against PSG, my first professional club. But I couldn't wait any longer to get back in shape and stay focused for my main objective: the World Cup.

"I know that it's with Liverpool that I'll get there," added Anelka, whose virtual spot in Roger Lemerre's squad is coming under growing pressure from several talents at home.

While the Frenchman's signing

has raised a few eyebrows in English football, Liverpool boss Gerard Houllier has defended the loan deal, saying he was not concerned with Anelka's badboy past.

"I know what has been said about him but I don't care less," Houllier said.

"His signing is not a major gamble - I think it's more a case of a fantastic coup to have got him.

"I am really pleased both for him and myself. A player like him doesn't lose his ability and his special talents overnight.

"Perhaps his confidence needs a boost and he will need to get his bearings once again, but his qualities are still there and I expect he has matured as a person.

"I am signing him because I believe in him. If there is an element of risk it is worth taking."

French First Division No problems for PSG

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain proved they can function without the services of temperamental striker Nicolas Anelka when they clinched an impressive 2-0 win at Sochaux on Saturday.

However for the more sympathetic followers of football the best story of the night was Nantes' 1-0 win against Troyes, giving the stricken French champions a lifeline and perhaps saving Raynald Denoueix his job.

Elsewhere former France international Didier Deschamps, now coach at Monaco, was also smiling as his side beat Rennes 3-1 to register their first league win since October 27.

On a night when weather played havoc with the fixtures, forcing the postponement of four league encounters, PSG faced trouble of their own before collecting a valuable three points.

Goals from Laurent Leroy and Nigerian teenager Bartholomew Ogebeche towards the end of the first half were enough to settle the matter and put PSG into fifth place in the table - a day after Anelka had joined English giants Liverpool on loan until the end of the season.

However, the match at Sochaux threatened to become a marathon affair after three power failures left the ground in darkness - stoppages of 23 minutes in total did nothing for the nerves of PSG coach Luiz Fernandez whose side were 2-0 ahead at the time of the first interruption.

Before then the matches between Metz and Montpellier, Auxerre and Lorient and Lyon against Bastia were postponed because of frozen pitches while the game between Lille and Bordeaux was called-off because of snow.

In Saturday's only other league match Guingamp lost 2-1 at home to Sedan who had Senegalese midfielder Henri Camara to thank for a brace of goals, on 77 and 85 minutes, for the last-gasp win.

On Friday, Lens extended their lead at the top of the table to eight points when they beat Marseille 2-1.

Del Bosque cautions Liverpool

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque warned Liverpool on Saturday to expect to see two sides of controversial French striker Nicolas Anelka when he begins the latest stage of his career at Anfield.

"The personal behaviour of Nicolas when he was at Madrid was fine, but his professional behaviour was immature," said Del Bosque who coached Anelka at the Bernabau from December 1999 until June 2000, when the former Arsenal man was off-loaded to Paris Saint Germain.

Del Bosque, usually known for his sense of diplomacy, also took the opportunity to hit back at PSG coach Luis Fernandez who has recently fallen out with Anelka.

"He (Fernandez) always said that he would know how to handle and manage Nicolas."



PHOTO: AFP

Espanyol's Morales Cuerva (R) tries to hold back Barcelona's Argentine youngster Javier Saviola (L) during their Primera Liga clash at Barcelona on December 22.

Primera Liga Deportivo reclaim lead

Football

AFP Madrid

Deportivo La Coruna returned to lead the Spanish First Division, after a gap of nearly a month, following their 2-0 victory over fellow title challengers Real Betis on Saturday.

Catania grabbed his ninth goal of the season after 58 minutes, pouncing on the rebound after the Sevilla goalkeeper Antonio Notario had saved his penalty.

Sevilla should have had a share of the points but their teenage striker Jose Antonio Reyes missed an open goal 18 minutes from the end.

Real Sociedad have not had much to celebrate this season but the struggling Basques at least ended the year on a high note by thrashing Valladolid 6-0.

The victory was the biggest in the Spanish top flight for 14 months, since Sociedad themselves went down 6-0 to Barcelona in October 2000.

Xabi Alonso headed the hosts into the lead after 35 minutes but three goals in nine minutes, early in the second half, sealed the victory.

Russian international Dimitri Khokhlov got the second goal after 51 minutes and then turned provider for Oscar De Paula to poke the ball into the net five minutes later.

Khokhlov again supplied, this time for Tayfun Korkut to score on the hour, and the rout was completed with goals in the last five minutes from Luiz Alberto and

"Betis created a lot of problems

for us until the second goal but after that we could relax a little," added Irureta.

Celta moved up to second place with only their second away win of the season, the deciding goal in their 1-0 win at Sevilla coming from their Brazilian-born Spanish international striker Catania.

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Tayfun.

Real Sociedad coach John Toshack decided to throw Sander Westerveld in at the deep end but the Dutch international goalkeeper, signed just a week ago from English Premiership side Liverpool, was flawless under early fire from Valladolid, before the goals started flowing.

The gloom that has surrounded Toshack in recent months visibly lifted in the post-match press conference.

"There is still a lot of work to do before we can say we are out of trouble, but if we stay patient I am sure we can do it," said the Welshman.

Nevertheless, despite the memorable victory, Real Sociedad remain in the relegation zone.

Espanyol took all three points from the local derby in the Catalan capital, winning 2-0 over their richer, and more famous, neighbours Barcelona.

Raul Tamudo got both the Espanyol goals and there will be long and hard recriminations at Barcelona over the manner of his first strike after 56 minutes.

Barcelona's Dutch international defender Frank de Boer provided a dreadful back pass which left goalkeeper Roberto Bonano chasing the ball to boot it away.

However, Bonano miscued his shot and the ball bounced off the body of the chasing Tamudo and into the net.

Tamudo's second goal came in more conventional fashion, heading home a corner after 72 minutes.

Valencia came back from a goal down against Malaga to win 2-1 and maintain their unbeaten home record.

Malaga's Uruguayan striker Dario Silva opened the scoring after 14 minutes only for Valencia's Vicente Rodriguez and Mista Ferrer to get two goals within four minutes shortly afterwards.

Primera Liga's top six

Standings in the Spanish First Division after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Deportivo La Coruna	18	10	3	5	32	22	33
Celta Vigo	18	8	7	3	34	20	31
Real Madrid	17	9	4	4	32	20	31
Real Betis	18	9	4	5	19	15	31
Alaves	17	9	3	5	19	10	30
Valencia	18	7	9	2	20	15	30

Serie A Roma burst Chievo bubble

Football

AFP, Milan

Champions AS Roma defeated Serie A dark horses Chievo 3-0 to grab provisional pole position in the Italian First Division on Saturday.

Goals from Emerson, Walter Samuel and Damiano Tommasi ensured Roma prevailed in a match where both teams had a player sent off. The result was enough to lift Roma to the top.

However, Inter Milan will return to the summit if they beat Piacenza on Sunday in the last round of matches before the Christmas break.

It was a disappointing end to what has been a memorable year for Chievo who have astonished everyone in their debut top-flight campaign in which they topped the table for a total of seven calendar weeks and only lost that spot on Wednesday because their match with Lazio was postponed.

This was their fourth defeat of the season but their first real thrashing of the season - their other three setbacks had all finished 3-2.

In Saturday's other match Roma's arch-rivals Lazio threw

away a 2-0 lead to end up tying the match 2-2 with Bologna at the Olympic Stadium.

Chievo started well at the Stadio Marc'Antonio Bentegodi and defender Lorenzo D'Anna clipped the outside of Francesco Antonioli's post with a header from Eugenio Corini's corner.

But Roma started to get on top and rack up the pressure on the side from Verona.

A header by Brazilian Emerson from Francesco Totti's corner forced a fine save from Cristiano Lupatelli, Antonioli's number two at Roma during the Scudetto-winning campaign before moving to Chievo in the summer.

Another corner resulted and Totti's delivery again found Emerson - this time the header found the corner of the net.

It was 1-0 at the interval but in the second period the game looked like it might swing Chievo's way.

Chievo playmaker Corini caught Roma off guard with a long ball to striker Massimo Marazzina who was fouled by Antonioli on the edge of the area.

Referee Graziano Cesari brandished the red card at the goalkeeper and awarded a freekick to the anger of both sets of players - Roma clearly felt the dismissal was



PHOTO: AFP

Chievo's Massimo Marazzina (L) avoids a tackle from Roma's Ferreira Emerson during their Serie A encounter in Verona on December 22.

harsh while Chievo were convinced the offence had occurred inside the area and merited a penalty.

Roma coach Fabio Capello brought on Ivan Pelizzoli who was bought as a first choice from Atalanta in the summer but has since lost his place again to Antonioli.

Corini's freekick was well saved by Pelizzoli.

But after 73 minutes Roma killed the match when Argentinian defender Walter Samuel scored the second goal.

Two minutes later Chievo's Brazilian winger Eriberito also saw red for what looked an innocuous foul on Emerson and that effectively ended Chievo's resistance.

Italian international Tommasi, booted throughout as he used to play for Chievo's arch-rivals Verona, added insult to injury with an injury-time strike.

Lazio threw away a golden opportunity for three points after dominating the early stages via two goals from Argentinian striker Claudio Lopez in the opening 34 minutes.

Lopez, only playing because Simone Inzaghi was injured, took his chances well but after 41 minutes it was another Argentinian - Bologna's Julio Cruz who got in on the scoring act to reduce arrears to 2-1.

The Roman side's task was made more difficult by the 66th-minute sending off of Yugoslav winger Dejan Stankovic and nine minutes later Bologna took full advantage when rookie defender Christian Zaccardo headed them level for his first Serie A goal.

Serie A's top six

Italian First Division table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

AS Roma	16	9	6	1	24	9	33
Inter Milan	15	9	4	2	28	14	31
Chievo	15	9	2	4	28	19	29
Juventus	15	6	7	2	23	13	25
Lazio	15	6	6	3	21	12	24
AC Milan	15	6	6	3	23	17	24