

MU prevail in a goal-feast

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United withstood a furious late onslaught to defeat Leeds 4-3 and leapfrog over Liverpool to the top of the English Premiership in a seven-goal thriller at Elland Road Saturday.

Norwegian marksman Ole Gunnar Solskjaer netted twice in two minutes for the visitors after Leeds' Australian striker Mark Viduka had cancelled out Paul Scholes' early opener in a thrilling four-goal first-half.

In the second-half Ryan Giggs made it 4-1 after a superb 80-yard run from England captain David Beckham before Ian Harte's brilliant curling free-kick reduced the deficit for Leeds.

Substitute Lee Bowyer headed Leeds' third goal 10 minutes from time to give the home side some hope, but Manchester United held on to keep their title dream alive.

The win boosted Manchester United's chances of winning their fourth successive championship, but Liverpool can return to the summit later Saturday if they win at home to Charlton.

Arsenal, who play Sunderland at Highbury later Saturday, are four points behind Manchester United, but crucially have three games in hand on the reigning champions and remain firm favourites to win the title.

Despite an impressive win, Manchester United skipper Roy Keane believes the champions will still have to rely on Liverpool and Arsenal slipping up if they are to retain their Premiership crown.

"All we can do is try to win every game and put pressure on the other teams," said the Republic of Ireland international.

"It's all to play for. The other teams are up there on merit."

"The others Arsenal and Liverpool are in a better position and we are playing catch-up. But we are running out of games."

"We go out to for wins and this was needed after the disappointing result last week losing to Middlesbrough," said man-of-the-match Keane.

Leeds midfielder Harry Kewell was chopped down by Nicky Butt in the early exchanges and had to have treatment on his injured ankle before Manchester United silenced

the home crowd in the ninth minute. Keane found Mikael Silvestre who stepped inside Danny Mills' weak challenge and laid the ball square for Scholes to drive home from 12 yards.

Kewell tried to continue but was in too much pain and had to be replaced after quarter of an hour by Bowyer.

His introduction had an immediate impact on Leeds and they levelled the scores in the 20th minute.

Robbie Fowler tested Barthez with a low shot from the edge of the penalty area a minute later and at the other end Silvestre headed wide when Beckham's corner found the Frenchman unmarked.

But the game swung heavily in the visitors' favour with two goals in two minutes from Solskjaer.

A long kick from Barthez was backheeled by Giggs for Scholes who unleashed a 20-yard drive which Nigel Martyn spilled into the

the wrong-footed Martyn.

Manchester United turned the screw 10 minutes into the second-half when Beckham went on a scintillating run down the right wing and crossed for Giggs to slide home from close range.

Ronny Johnsen's header struck the Leeds crossbar but Leeds refused to lie down and they gave themselves a glimmer of hope in the 62nd minute when Harte's brilliant 20-yard free-kick gave Barthez no chance.

And Leeds had Manchester United on the back foot when substitute Robbie Keane charged down the right wing and cut the ball back for Fowler whose mis-hit shot was diverted into the net by Bowyer's diving header.

But the title-holders, who rested leading goalscorer Ruud van Nistelrooy ahead of Wednesday's Champions League quarterfinal, first leg tie against Deportivo La Coruna of Spain, held on for three crucial points.

Earlier on Friday, fourth-placed Newcastle boosted their chances of a Champions League place next season with a stunning 6-2 victory at home to Everton in an eight-goal Premiership thriller at sunny St James' Park on Friday.

Everton went in at half-time on level terms at 2-2, but Newcastle turned up the heat after the interval with second-half goals from Peruvian Noberto Solano (2) and one apiece from Andy O'Brien and Olivier Bernard securing three valuable points.

Defeat for Everton, who were looking for their third win in a row since new manager David Moyes took charge, leaves them precariously close to the relegation zone, just three points clear of third-bottom Ipswich.

After an unsuccessful stint with Inter Milan he returned to the helm last summer in controversial circumstances after Ancelotti had been told that his services would no longer be required at the end of the season at a time when Juve were still very much in the hunt for the title.

Senior Juve officials have been reported as saying the club will retain Lippi for next season but the coach insists he has heard nothing officially.

Emon to stay at Marseille

AFP, Marseille

Albert Emon will continue as coach of French side Marseille until June 2003, the club announced on Friday.

"I have been confirmed in my position as coach until June 2003,"

Emon was quoted as saying on the club's official website, adding that the move was made to put an end to constant speculation in the press as to who would take over the reins.

Emon replaced Croatian Tomislav Ilic in November 2001 who vacated the hot-seat after suffering heart problems.

Premiership programme vexes Neville

AFP, London

Manchester United defender Gary Neville on Friday lashed out at the Football Association's "ridiculous" Premiership fixture list which he claims could hamper England's World Cup bid.

The country's top players will have only 24 hours between the Premiership finale on May 11 and jetting off to Dubai to start their preparations for Japan and South Korea.

"It's not helping our preparation for the finals at all. The fixtures aren't sorted with players in mind," Neville told *The Mirror*.

England's friendly fixtures in the build-up to the World Cup has added to the problem, according to Neville.

"These internationals are crammed in between two important league games and we've got a European Cup quarter-final in La Coruna next week."

"But the fact that our last league games are so late is ridiculous. We're the sort of country who organises a World Cup qualifier away to Greece in June, for God's sake."

"It's difficult for an England manager, although he'll learn some things from the Italy game."

"But the fact is we've got Leeds on Saturday at midday and then we fly out to La Coruna on Monday. It needs looking at."

Thai action to tackling WC gambling

AFP, Bangkok

Thai authorities are setting up a surveillance network to stop students joining an anticipated epidemic of illegal gambling on World Cup matches, officials said Friday.

"The key points of the 11-point measure are to ask for cooperation from parents and schools to closely monitor their students," education ministry spokesman Vorawut Pummakanchana told this news agency.

Students' general behaviour, cash spending and use of credit cards and mobile telephones will be under close watch during the event which kicks off in South Korea on May 31, he said.

Newspaper reports said plain-clothes inspectors will keep a close eye on Internet cafes located near schools, colleges and universities and that students will be encouraged to report any betting among their classmates.

Lippi under no illusion

AFP, Milan

Juventus coach Marcello Lippi admits his fate is uncertain despite reports that club officials have confirmed him in the job for next season, the Italian sports press reported Saturday.

Lippi was appointed last summer in place of Carlo Ancelotti who many felt was unjustly sacked after missing out on the title on the last day of the season for two consecutive years.

And Lippi admitted that anything could happen with Juve eliminated from the Champions League and facing an uphill battle for the Serie A title.

"You will be asking me this question for the next six weeks," said Lippi, who is in his second stint at Juve. "But I repeat what I said a month ago: I am proud Juventus called me back whatever decision they take about my future."

"Naturally I hope strongly to stay for a few years on this bench, but I will accept any decision with serenity."

Lippi had had previous Serie A experience with Cesena and Napoli before taking the Juve job for the first time in 1994-5 when he lead the Turin giants to three Scudetti, one Champions League and one Intercontinental Cup as well as other prizes.

After an unsuccessful stint with Inter Milan he returned to the helm last summer in controversial circumstances after Ancelotti had been told that his services would no longer be required at the end of the season at a time when Juve were still very much in the hunt for the title.

Senior Juve officials have been reported as saying the club will retain Lippi for next season but the coach insists he has heard nothing officially.

Romantsev hopes for the best

AFP, Moscow

Russia national coach Oleg Romantsev on Friday played down concerns about Russia's World Cup hopes following their second consecutive defeat at the start of the new season.

Russia began their 2002 World Cup warm-up with a 2-0 defeat by fellow qualifiers Ireland on February 13, which was followed by an unexpected 2-1 defeat at the hands of minnows Estonia on Wednesday.

The country's football observers were stunned with the result despite the fact that Romantsev included a set of rookie players in his selection for the clash with their former compatriots.

"I don't see any reasons for panic. Our team need some fresh blood and we are set to continue experimenting," Romantsev affirmed at a press conference Friday.

"We have a lot of work to do but we still have time and several friendly matches in hand to select the best of the best for the World Cup finals."

Romantsev added he believed his squad would enter the play-off stage at the World Cup finals in Korea and Japan.

"We are set to reach the play-offs at the World Cup. It's a minimum task for us," he said. "It's a good result to be in the world's top 16. If we manage to do that we'll work out our further plans for the World Cup campaign."

Despite the new football season having only just begun, Russia will face world and European champions France in a friendly match at the Stade de France on April 17.

They are also set to play in the international tournament in Moscow on May 17-19 along with Belarus, Ukraine and Yugoslavia before the team's departure for Japan, scheduled for May 25.

Beckham loves United too

Football

AFP, London

England skipper David Beckham on Saturday hit back at claims that he tries harder for England than Premiership champions Manchester United.

The 26-year-old midfielder said he was hurt by criticism of his club form, which dipped after the World Cup qualifying campaign when he secured England's place with a last-minute free-kick against Greece in October.

He said: "That's upsetting, I've never thought that. It has never entered my mind."

"I admit that I have got used to the England captaincy quicker than I thought I would and I'm glad that it has gone that way."

Pires wishes Gunners well

Football

AFP, Sydney

position so, for example, if I don't make it back in time there is already a solution."

Pires surprisingly said winning with Arsenal was more important to

him than winning with France.

"I've already won everything with France so, in one way, if I do miss the World Cup it's not such a drama, but I have no trophies with Arsenal. I want something this year."

Pires said he plans to wait three weeks before deciding whether or not to undergo an operation on his knee injury. Surgery would end his hopes of playing again this season.

"I was flying up until last week," he said. "I was in good form and doing well. People have said the injury happened because we play every three days in England but I

have three players for every

"There is one reason I want to be part of France winning the World Cup again – to be part of history," Pires said. "If we win in Japan, this team can become one of the best World Cup teams ever – just like Brazil in the 1950s and 60s."

"We are very confident and I don't know who can stop us. Maybe Argentina, Italy or Portugal, but we are very strong."

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