



Manchester United's Diego Forlan (R) and David Beckham are over the moon after the opening goal against Birmingham at Old Trafford on December 28.

Premiership MU gain from Chelsea slip

Football

AFP, London

Chelsea's Premiership title challenge was halted in its tracks on Saturday as Leeds United's recent revival gathered momentum.

A 2-0 win at Elland Road means Terry Venables side have now taken ten points from their last four games. The run has lifted them back into the mid-table safety zone after having coming perilously close to the relegation zone.

A Jonathan Woodgate header and 16-year-old James Milner's second in three days seal a win that means Arsenal can go seven points clear at the top if they beat Liverpool at Highbury on Sunday.

The 16-year-old's sweetly-hit shot in first-half injury time added to Jonathan Woodgate's 30th minute header - which took a wicked deflection off William Gallas - gave Leeds 10 points from their last 12 and seriously dented Chelsea's pretensions to be title contenders.

Chelsea had had the better of the first-half, though only Gianfranco Zola's curling freekick from 25 yards had troubled keeper Paul Robinson before Leeds struck.

Woodgate ran in unhindered by Chelsea defenders to head Jason Wilcox's cross although his header took a fortunate deflection off Gallas to beat Ed de Goey in the visitors' goal.

However as Woodgate celebrated in bizarre fashion cupping his hands under his chest to somebody in the crowd, Australian star Harry Kewell had to go off injured - to be replaced by Milner.

Milner's introduction paid off when in stoppage time of the first-half he seized on Eirik Bakke's beautifully-weighted pass inside the Chelsea defence and the teenager escaped Marcel Desailly and struck a beautiful curling effort past de Goey.

Chelsea came out firing in the second half and looked set to reduce the margin in the 56th minute when Enrique de Lucas was set free but Woodgate raced back to put in a tackle that distracted the Spaniard enough to just shoot wide.

Leeds eased the barrage on

them when Woodgate once again got to a Wilcox freekick but his backheader went narrowly wide in the 64th minute.

A minute later Bakke flicked in a cross which only Mark Viduka had to get the barest touch to for a goal, but unfortunately the Aussie's desperate dive ended with no contact.

Wilcox almost handed Chelsea a way back into the match in the 71st minute when he carelessly passed the ball to Eidur Gudjohnsen and the Icelandic international's lay-off to Zola ended with a fine save by Robinson.

Manchester United moved level with Chelsea on points with a 2-0 win at home to Birmingham, capped by a superbly taken goal by David Beckham.

Beckham crowned his first league start since November with a magnificent goal but afterwards it was the performance of his goalkeeper, Fabien Barthez, which drew most praise from United boss Alex Ferguson after the France international made two key saves in the second half to keep his side 1-0 up.

"He's won us the game today," Ferguson told Sky Sports. "It was a very good performance but there's a danger when you're 1-0 up you can cut your own throat and Barthez has made two magnificent saves."

Ferguson also praised Beckham's fitness and Roy Keane's spirit. "David has never had a problem with stamina and Roy Keane's got the determination and will to do well," the Scot said.

United were already 1-0 up through Diego Forlan when England captain Beckham, who had been out of action because of a rib injury, was released by fellow midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron.

Beckham spotted Nico Vaesen off his line and chipped the City keeper from 25 yards in the 73rd minute.

Beckham, 27, had earlier played a key role in United's first-half opener.

He headed the ball back across goal following Mikael Silvestre's cross after a rampaging run down the left.

Forlan received the ball from Beckham's header, let it bounce,

and then unleashed a spectacular volley into the roof of the net.

In the second half Birmingham pressed forward. But Barthez denied them an equaliser with some superb saves.

His best stop came when he dived low to his left to brilliantly turn away a powerful header from former United trainee Jovan Kirovski, who made excellent contact with Paul Devlin's free-kick.

Birmingham striker Clinton Morrison almost scored from the rebound but Rio Ferdinand and Barthez combined to clear the danger.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer could have made it 2-0 for United when, unmarked, he sprinted in to meet Beckham's cross inside the Birmingham box only to head over the crossbar.

But Beckham spared his blushes 17 minutes from time.

Ferguson had left Ryan Giggs and Gary Neville on the bench while Dutch goal machine Ruud Van Nistelrooy missed the game because of a toe injury.

With Beckham and Rio Ferdinand back in the starting line-up and Roy Keane making his first Old Trafford start since undergoing hip surgery, United played some scintillating football and could have won by a much bigger margin.

Diego Forlan put them ahead 12 minutes from the break, lashing in a volley after Beckham had headed Mikael Silvestre's cross back across the goalmouth.

The England captain then celebrated his return to the starting team with a delightful chipped goal in the 70th minute.

Andy Cole became only the second player - after Alan Shearer - to reach the 150-goal mark in the Premiership in Blackburn's 2-2 draw with West Ham.

The bottom-placed club had got off to the worst possible start when goalkeeper David James allowed Damien Duff's tricking shot to slip through his legs with barely three minutes gone.

Their luck appeared to have turned when a Steve Lomas shot took a wicked deflection of Martin Taylor to leave Brad Friedel stranded.

Cole's 78th minute strike

restored Blackburn's lead before Jermaine Defoe came off the bench to grab the Hammers a precious point three minutes from time.

Everton named Wayne Rooney in their starting line-up 48 hours after he was sent off against Birmingham.

But even the Merseysiders' wonder-kid was unable to break down a resilient Bolton defence, who held out for a point that keeps them just above the relegation zone.

Kevin Lisbie struck after six minutes to give Charlton the points against West Brom with a 1-0 win.

West Brom had to suffer the agony of seeing a fine Scott Dobie drive come back off the bar in the dying seconds.

It was an equally miserable day for Sunderland who went down 2-1 at Southampton thanks to a scrambled Joe Tessem goal with virtually the last kick of the match.

James Beattie's 12th Premiership goal of the season had put Southampton ahead mid-way through the second half but Sunderland had looked set for a point when Tore Andre Flo equalised three minutes later.

The 200th goal of Dion Dublin's career was enough to give Aston Villa the three points against Middlesbrough, who had to play for over an hour with ten men after Mark Wilson received a second yellow card.

Manchester City stole the points at Fulham after being under the cosh for most of the match. Nicolas Anelka fastened on to Shaun Wright Phillips and produced a clinical finish six minutes from the end to give them a 1-0 win and plunge the losers deeper into the relegation battle.

TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Arsenal	20	13	3	4	41	21	42
Chelsea	21	10	8	3	34	17	38
Man Utd	21	11	5	5	33	21	38
Everton	21	10	5	6	23	22	35
Liverpool	20	9	6	5	29	20	33
Newcastle	19	10	2	7	32	28	32

Africa's best short-listed

AFP, Cairo

The list of 22 African Footballer of the Year nominations, which will be reduced to three on Monday with the winner being named on March 31 in Johannesburg:

- Burkina Faso** - Moumouni Daganou (Genk/Bel)
- Cameroon** - Samuel Eto'o (Real Mallorca/Spa), Lauren (Arsenal/Eng), Geremi (Middlesbrough/Eng)
- Democratic Republic of Congo** - Tresor 'Lua Lua' Lomana (Newcastle Utd/Eng)
- Egypt** - Ahmed 'Mido' Hossam (Ajax Amsterdam/Ned), Ahmed Hassan (Genclerbirigi/Tur)
- Ghana** - Ibrahim Abdulrazak (St Etienne/Fra)
- Mali** - Seydou Keita (Lens/Fra)
- Nigeria** - Julius Aghahowa (Shakhtar Donetsk/Ukr), John Utaka (Lens/Fra)
- Senegal** - Saif Diao and El Hadji Diouf (Liverpool/Eng), Papa Bouba Diop (Lens/Fra), Khalidou Fadija (Auxerre/Fra), Henri Camara (Sedan/Fra)
- Sierra Leone** - Paul Kapaka (Antwerp/Bel)
- South Africa** - Benni McCarthy (Celta Vigo/Spa), Sibusiso Zuma (FC Copenhagen/Den)
- Tunisia** - Selim Benachour (Paris SG/Fra), Hatem Trabelsi (Ajax/Ned)
- Zimbabwe** - Benjamin 'Benjani' Mwaruwari (Auxerre/Fra)

South America's crucial meeting

AFP, Asuncion

South American football officials will be meeting in Montevideo next Saturday and are expected to ask the sport's world governing body FIFA to rethink their 2006 World Cup places.

Conmebol, the confederation which governs South American football, are likely to agree to request FIFA reconsiders their decision to cut their allocation by half a place. During FIFA's executive committee meeting in Madrid on December 17, they decided to give Conmebol just four places for Germany 2006, meaning the fifth-placed nation will not have the option of a play-off with another confederation, which counts as half a place.

A previous ruling also means reigning champions Brazil will have to go through the qualifying competition to get to the finals, meaning there will not be the extra place normally awarded to the title-holders.

Conmebol president Nicolas Leoz said: "The 10 presidents of our national federations are angry at FIFA and we are going to meet in Montevideo on January 4 to discuss the matter." The meeting takes place on the day the Pan-American under-20 football championships begin in the Uruguayan capital.

Big Phil seeks Brazilliance



REUTERS, Madrid

Luiz Felipe Scolari will be looking to instil in Portugal the same winning mentality of the Brazil side he steered to World Cup victory six months ago when he prepares them to host Euro 2004.

Scolari, who begins work in mid-January, is confident his methods would pay off for the under-achieving Portuguese as they had for a Brazil team that had sunk to an all-time low last year.

"I have plenty of confidence in the work that we are going to put in place and I think there is room for improvement in some areas that are already good in Portugal," Scolari said.

"And I am sure that in 2004 we are going to be in the final of the European championship," he said when in charge of the FIFA world team that played Real Madrid in the Bernabeu last week as part of the Spanish club's centenary celebrations.

The 54-year-old Brazilian, known as 'Big Phil' to his compatriots, has a wealth of Portuguese talent and experience at his disposal with the likes of captain Fernando Couto of Lazio, Real Madrid's Luis Figo and AC Milan's Rui Costa.

But Scolari insists his formula will work only if these influential players, members of Portugal's World Youth Cup winning side 11 years ago, contribute to the team.

"All those players of the 1991 generation who are still in activity and playing for the national side, when they get called up, they should get together with the younger generation to build a proper team - with no stars or main protagonists so we can really establish a strong side and a good atmosphere that will help us to achieve our main objective."

Brazil won their fifth World Cup under Scolari not only because of the quality of their players but also because the manager made big names such as Ronaldo and Rivaldo work for the team, closing down the opposition. Against pleas from fans all over

Brazil, including president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, he refused to call up Romario because the 1994 World Cup hero would not fit into the spirit of the so-called 'Scolari family' he hopes to repeat with Portugal.

"The national team should be a continuity of the work done at club level. In the end, players will be selected because they are doing well for their clubs as we are going to have at the most one friendly a month," he said.

"So, we are going to make our selection after considering what has been achieved at club level. The final intention will be to create a great club within the national side."

Scolari has been a winner with most of the teams he has coached - steering Palmeiras and Gremio to the Brazilian championship and Libertadores Cup titles.

He is following the Euro 2002 qualifying series very closely, and has a word of warning for traditional powers like Italy, who are struggling behind Wales in their group.

"A lot can still happen. Big teams are in trouble while other teams, in which nobody believed, are doing well. So we could have three or four quite interesting surprises," he said.

Scolari refused to name any title favourites, saying that all teams who qualified would have a chance.

But after having to overcome Turkey twice to win the World Cup, Scolari sees the nation who have won all three of their qualifiers so far and are ahead of England in their group as one of the strongest contenders.

"Turkey are in front - they've been keeping their consistency from before the World Cup. All they are doing is to reinforce what we have been saying about them. They are a very well managed team and have many good players."

As the host nation, Portugal do not need to qualify for Euro 2004 and Scolari recognises one of his main problems will be a lack of competitive matches.

"In this aspect, (not having to qualify) is bad, without being in a competitive environment, without a difficult situation to try to overcome, without knowing different reactions from various moments in a match."

To compensate for that, Portugal are organising friendlies against

strong opponents.

"The (Portuguese) federation has already arranged a friendly on February 12 against Italy. The second will be against Brazil. They are all very competitive and extremely difficult matches. With those matches, we hope to be able to present some competitive spirit, even being just a friendly," he said.

On March 29, Scolari will face his own country in Oporto. But he expects his professional head to overcome his heart on this occasion.

"I cannot see Brazil as my own team any more. Today, I work in Portugal and obviously I have patriotic feelings after living through such a marvellous situation (in the World Cup finals). "It's something I will never forget, nothing will change that. But now I am working for Portugal and I will have to put my best team together and do my best to try to beat Brazil."

Portuguese players are famous for their skills but they are also notorious under-achievers. After losing 2-1 to France in the semi-finals of Euro 2000, they failed to get past the first round in the 2002 World Cup with co-hosts South Korea and the United States qualifying ahead of them.

With Scolari, they can expect at least a good injection of confidence.

"Competitiveness and spirit can be added to someone's game - what we cannot do is to teach people who don't know how to play football, in six months, one year or even 30 years.

"Whoever doesn't know, will never learn but for the ones who know, we can add something extra and that's what we want to do."

Scolari might be left without competitive matches to improve the quality of his team. But he is sure that if the players respond to the expectations put on their shoulders, they will have their own fans as an extra weapon in their quest to win a major tournament for the first time on home soil.

"All will depend on our work and on the athletes to get the fans on our side to make the difference in key moments because with the support of 90 per cent of a ground we can feel much more confident," he said.

Milner, who became the Premier League's youngest goalscorer with the equaliser in Leeds' 2-1 win at Sunderland on Boxing Day, again stole the show and the headlines. The replacement's moment of magic came on the stroke of half time when he curled a spectacular 18-yard right-foot finish beyond Ed de Goey.

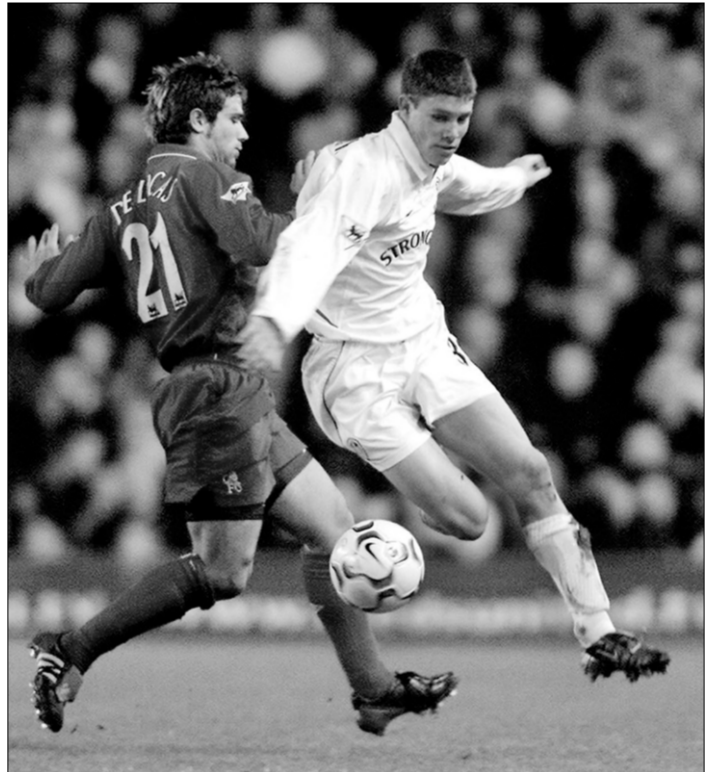
"I'm delighted with the game, in fact with the last few games," Venables said.

"But to be able to do it at home was what we were after and to do it against as fine a side as Chelsea is fantastic."

"We played some good football, playing as a unit, and there's a nice little story about a very special young man. He (Milner) is a very good player, no doubt about it."

"He is a fine young fellow. The sort of guy you want to be involved in your football club and in your squad."

"He is the kind of person who will



Leeds United's sensational teenager James Milner (R) outwitting Chelsea's Enrique De Lucas at Elland Road on December 28.

Born to impress

Football

INTERNET, Leeds

Leeds boss Terry Venables hailed rising star James Milner after his superb strike helped end United's desperate run at Elland Road.

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'Thanks World Cup'



AFP, London

Brazil's World Cup victory over Germany finally brought star striker Rivaldo respect from the press and the supporters he claimed Saturday.

The 30-year-old said before the World Cup he had been accused of being a very good club player but never repeating it at national level.

However with five goals in the tournament including the equaliser in the quarter-final with England he believed he had laid that to rest.

"I had a lot of pressure coming from the Brazilian press and public who accused me of never replicat-

ing my club form at national level," the 1999 World and European footballer of the year told the BBC.

"Thus to come out and play like I did and score five goals in lifting the trophy was very important to me personally."

"It meant I had at last got them off my back and earned the respect that I had always searched for," added the AC Milan star.

Rivaldo insisted that the one dark moment of his World Cup campaign came when he faked being hit in the face by a ball kicked deliberately at him by Turkey's Hakan Unsal, after Rivaldo took his time over taking a corner in their first round match. He was sent off for the action.

"There was only two or three minutes to go and all I wanted to do was to use up some time."

"However he did attempt to hurt

me when he kicked the ball and I decided to pretend I had been hit in the face rather than the leg."

"My intention was never to get him sent off and I didn't expect the referee to give him the red card and I didn't want this to be the outcome," added Rivaldo, who was fined 11,500 Swiss francs (7,350 dollars) for his moment of cheating.

As for the moment that England's World Cup hopes ended with Ronaldinho's duping of David Seaman with his long range freekick, Rivaldo for his part was not certain his team-mate had meant it.

"He says he did but I am one of those who are not certain."

"I am pretty sure he meant to cross it to other players but so what it went in and we went on to win the trophy."