

FA Cup

Chelsea held, Charlton crash

Football

AFP, London

Charlton became the first Premiership team to be dumped out of this season's FA Cup when they lost 3-2 away to First Division Gillingham on Saturday.

Charlton were 1-0 up at the Priestfield Stadium thanks to a first minute own goal from Ian Cox.

But Gillingham rallied and hit back with first-half goals from Tommy Johnson, Mamady Sidibe and Paul Smith to be two clear at the break.

Carlton Cole, on loan from Chelsea, pulled one back for Charlton in the 90th minute but it was too late to save the team sitting fourth in the Premiership, who had rested key players.

Charlton boss Alan Curbishley appeared unflustered.

"It happens to us every year. We never seem to be able to get through the early rounds of the Cup," he said.

The Premiership's bottom club Wolves were almost knocked out too, but scrambled a 1-1 draw at Third Division Kidderminster after Alex Rae's 89th minute equaliser cancelled out John Williams's 77th minute opener.

Wolves manager Dave Jones was unimpressed. "Nine of my team who played today got us promotion last year. It's not as if they don't know each other."

Earlier Saturday, Chelsea - third in the Premiership - were held to a dramatic 2-2 draw away to First Division Watford at Vicarage Road.

Premiership battlers Bolton also face a replay after coming from behind away to Second Division Tranmere in a 1-1 draw at Prenton Park.

Elsewhere Portsmouth scraped past Second Division Blackpool 2-1.

In other Cup matches involving Premiership teams, Freddie Kanoute scored a hat-trick in Tottenham's 3-0 home win over First Division Crystal Palace, underlining why Spurs are reluctant to let him play for Mali in this month's African Nations Cup.

Manchester City drew 2-2 with Leicester City while in another all Premiership clash Birmingham



Chelsea keeper Neil Sullivan is called into action during the FA Cup third round match against Watford at Vicarage Road on Saturday.

thrashed Blackburn 4-0.

Another all-Premiership clash saw Newcastle secure a 3-0 win away to last season's beaten finalists Southampton in the day's late game.

Kieron Dyer scored twice and Laurent Robert also netted as Newcastle bounced back after being stung by criticism from chairman Freddy Shepherd after a string of poor performances.

"That was more like it," said Newcastle skipper Alan Shearer.

"Our performances over the last two games have not been acceptable. We don't need anyone to tell us."

Multi-millionaires Chelsea twice had to come from behind against a team 35 league places below them.

Watford, managed by former Chelsea player Ray Lewington who guided them to the semi-finals last season, went ahead in the first half through Heidar Helguson's controversial header and Alan Mahon.

But Chelsea hit back through Eidor Gudjohnsen's penalty after a foul by Watford keeper Lenny Pidgeley - who is on loan from Chelsea - and Frank Lampard's

deflected shot put the teams level at 2-2.

In the second half, Watford believed they were denied a penalty when William Gallas fouled Mahon on the edge of the box.

Lewington was elated at the prospect of a replay. "It's a great result for the club, another big pay day and we need it."

Watford went ahead when Helguson's header from Neal Ardley's cross beat Chelsea keeper Neil Sullivan and rebounded off the crossbar.

Replays confirmed that the ball had not crossed the line but referee Alan Wiley awarded the goal after consulting linesman Dave Bryan.

Chelsea manager Claudio Ranieri said the incident showed why stadiums should be equipped with goal-line cameras.

"I make mistakes, as do players, referees and linesmen," said Ranieri. "But sooner or later, all stadia, especially in the Premier League, must have a camera to say whether it's a goal or not - and not just because this happened to us."

Chelsea levelled in the 33rd minute when Adrian Mutu's through ball released Jesper

Gronkjaer, who went down under Pidgeley's challenge, and Gudjohnsen scored from the spot.

Just over a minute later Watford regained the lead.

From a free kick, Sullivan was caught in no-man's land, Marcus Gayle flicked on and Mahon headed home.

But Chelsea were not dead and Lampard's 41st minute deflected shot from the edge of the box beat Pidgeley.

Wiley turned down Watford appeals for a penalty after Chelsea defender William Gallas flicked out a boot at Mahon.

Elsewhere, Leicester took the lead through former City striker Paul Dickov in the fourth minute before Nicolas Anelka equalised with a penalty.

Marcus Bent put Leicester 2-1 up in the 66th minute before Anelka headed City level three minutes later.

Cup holders Arsenal travel to Premiership strugglers Leeds on Sunday, Aston Villa host Manchester United and Liverpool face a potentially tricky tie at Yeovil.

MU want Robben

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson confirmed Sunday that they were interested in acquiring the services of PSV Eindhoven Dutch international striker Arjen Robben.

Talks have already begun with the Dutch first division side and the 19-year-old visited Old Trafford on Friday.

"We are interested in him. Nothing's been finalised but we hope to do business with PSV," Ferguson told The Mail on Sunday.

Real Madrid have also shown interest in Robben, but his mother, Marjo, said that her son was not interested in a move to Spain.

"The things he thinks about when he has to make the final decision on his new club is who is the manager, how does he work with the players, will he have a chance to compete with the current players in the squad and what is the club culture like," she said.

United, who want to sign a striker to support Ruud van Nistelrooy, have also been linked with Fulham's Louis Saha and Leeds' Mark Viduka.

Blues eying Chivu

AFP, London

Big-spending Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich said Sunday he was determined to sign Romania captain Cristian Chivu from Italian Serie A side Roma.

The 23-year-old defender joined Roma from Ajax on a five-year deal worth 16.6-million-euro only a year ago, but his agent has claimed that both Chelsea and Manchester United have indicated their interest.

And Russian billionaire Abramovich is confident that the title-chasing Blues can capture the player.

"Chivu will come to England only for Chelsea and he will be my golden boy. We want and we need Chivu and we will make a better offer than Manchester United," Abramovich told the News of the World.

Chivu admitted that he would be interested in joining compatriot Adrian Mutu at Stamford Bridge.

Saudi club gets Rivaldo?

Football

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Brazilian World Cup winner Rivaldo has joined Saudi club Al Ittihad on a six-month contract, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) reports.

Al Ittihad president Mansour Al-Balawi announced the signing of the 31-year-old forward, freed

from his contract with European champions AC Milan last month, at a news conference on Saturday, the AFC said on its website.

Rivaldo, who helped Brazil win the World Cup for the fifth time in 2002, will earn around three million dollars (1.7 million pounds), according to the AFC.

Brazilian champions Cruzeiro, as well as Portuguese club Porto and Spartak Moscow of Russia, have all been linked with the 1999

FIFA World Player of the Year.

The AFC quoted Al-Balawi as saying Rivaldo will arrive in Saudi Arabia on January 12.

Rivaldo, who has kept his place in the Brazil team despite being surplus to requirements at AC Milan, has been a free agent after a troubled year in Italy.

Meanwhile AFP from Jeddah reports: Rivaldo on Saturday denied he had agreed to move to the Saudi team.

"This is not true. Rivaldo has more or less decided to stay in Brazil," said the player's agent, Carlos Arine.

The Al-Ittihad chairman Al-Balawi had told AFP that the player had agreed to join the Jeddah-based club.

"We have concluded an agreement with Rivaldo who has accepted our offer. He will play with Al-Ittihad for five months for three million dollars," said Al-Balawi.

"Rivaldo will sign the contract on Monday and he will come to Saudi Arabia in the next ten days to start training."

He joined the European champions on a free contract, a month after winning the 2002 World Cup with Brazil.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti limited him to just 16 Serie A matches, and eight Champions League games last season, when he was only a substitute for the Champions League final against Juventus.

This season Rivaldo made only one substitute appearance in the Champions League and did not play in Serie A.



RIVALDO

French Cup

Barthez hero at both ends!

Football

AFP, Paris

Fabien Barthez made a match-winning debut for Marseille as he saved two penalties and scored the decisive spot kick in a French Cup penalty shootout victory over Strasbourg on Saturday.

Playing the day after completing his delayed move from Manchester United, the World Cup-winning goalkeeper's new side were dead-locked at 1-1 after extra time in their round of 64 match.

In the shootout, Barthez pushed away Strasbourg's third kick from Pontus Farnerud and was at full stretch to keep out Senegalese striker Mamadou Diang's penalty.

The 32-year-old shaven-headed keeper then stepped up to send Strasbourg keeper Richard Dutruel the wrong way with a low kick to give Marseille a 4-3 winning advance.

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"It was tough for me today because six months without playing is tough for a goalkeeper," said Barthez. "But I'm happy with my first match back although there are a few little problems to sort out."

"The coach Alain Perrin had asked me before the penalty shootout if I would take the final kick and I said OK and there was no problem."

"My main aim is not the national team but to do everything I can to help Marseille get back up the table."

Barthez has been training at Marseille since mid-October after falling to third in the United pecking order behind American Tim Howard and Northern Ireland's Roy Carroll.

World soccer's governing body FIFA had turned down Marseille's appeal last month to sign Barthez outside the approved transfer

period but on Friday he joined on loan until the end of the season.

Djibril Cisse, the French international striker who has reportedly agreed to move to Liverpool at the end of the season in a 14 million pound (25.5 million dollar) deal, recovered from a stomach bug to help Auxerre beat fellow first division side Sochaux 2-0 at home.

Olivier Kapo, another player targeted by Premiership clubs, scored Auxerre's first goal on the hour mark and Finnish midfielder Teemu Tainio grabbed the second on 78 minutes.

Third division side Libourne Saint-Seurin knocked out Lyon at this stage last year but there was to be no repeat this season as they went down 2-0 at Bordeaux.

Reigning league champions Lyon easily overcame amateurs Aire 4-0, with Juninho and Giovane Elber among the scorers in northern France.

Primera Liga

Beck's injury spoils Real joy

Football

REUTERS/AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid eked out a 1-0 victory at home to Murcia on Saturday to stretch their lead at the top in Spain to five points. They showed obvious signs of rustiness on their return from the festive break and were never completely comfortable, despite taking the lead in the ninth minute with a tap-in from Raul.

The Spanish giants had to overcome the loss of injured David Beckham and flu-struck Zinedine Zidane.

Beckham was forced to leave the field after 79 minutes after a crunching tackle by Rafael Clavero left him with a bloodied right ankle. The England skipper needed four stitches in a wound on the ankle, making him doubtful for Wednesday's Spanish Cup match against Eibar.

Raul scored the only goal of the game after just eight minutes as the Spanish international striker became the third highest scorer in the club's history.

He joins Hugo Sanchez on 164 goals in third place in a table topped by the Alfredo Di Stefano (216 goals from 1953 to 1960) and Carlos Santillana (186 goals from 1971 to 1988).

Real had already lost the services of Zidane at half-time with the Frenchman suffering from a heavy cold and a fever.

Murcia missed several clear chances early in the second half and Luis Garcia hit the bar with a free kick five minutes from time but Real held on for a fifth straight league win.

The result gave Carlos Queiroz's side 42 points from 18 games and left Valencia, in second spot with 37 points, needing to win at home to Villarreal on Sunday to cut the deficit to two points.

Third-placed Deportivo Coruna stayed within striking distance of the leaders following a 5-0 victory away to their hapless Galician rivals Celta Vigo later on Saturday.

Albert Luque and Victor scored on the counter-attack to make it 2-0 at half-time and Victor completed his hat-trick after the break, his third coming from a dreadful mistake from Celta keeper Pablo Cavallero. Diego Tristan bagged the fifth late on.

Victory for Depor gave them 36 points from 18 games and took them eight points ahead of fourth-placed Atletico Madrid, who had to settle for a goalless draw away to Real Zaragoza.

Real took up in the new year where they had left off in a run of



Real Madrid's David Beckham is about to deliver a clever pass in the match against Murcia at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on January 3.

victories over Atletico Madrid, Barcelona, Deportivo Coruna and Real Mallorca at the end of 2003, with Raul scoring before Murcia had settled.

Luis Figo created the chance, beating a couple of players on his way to the goal line on the right and crossing towards the far post where Ronaldo won a crucial header to give Raul a simple finish a metre or so from goal.

Murcia, in 19th place in the table and with just one league win all season, were seemingly headed for a heavy defeat but

managed to limit the damage to a single goal at half-time after Beckham and Ivan Helguera missed good chances.

Against all odds, the visitors took control of the game at the start of the second half and might easily have moved ahead.

The referee turned down three plausible penalty claims for Murcia, who went desperately close with a shot from Richi that brushed past a post after 55 minutes.

They continued to create opportunities, helped in part by dismal defending from the home side, and would have deserved the point had Garcia's late free kick crept under the bar.

"We started well and controlled the game in the second half but we were tired after the break," said Real coach Queiroz.

"Murcia made it hard for us. They may be low down the table but they haven't given up."

Scottish Premier League

Thompson inspires Celtic

Football

REUTERS, Glasgow

Celtic took an enormous stride towards regaining the Scottish premier league title when they beat their only real rivals Rangers 3-0 on Saturday to open an 11-point lead.

The victory was secured by Stilian Petrov's 19th-minute diving header, which trickled over the line after bouncing off both posts, another header by Stanislav Varga after an hour and Alan Thompson's stunning 84th-minute free kick.

It was Celtic's second Glasgow derby success of the season -- they won 1-0 at Ibrox in October -- and although the campaign is only at the halfway point it makes them odds-on favourites to reclaim the championship after Rangers pipped them on the last day of last season.

It was also a club record 18th successive league win for Celtic -- a run starting after they drew their opening game of the season with Dunfermline -- beating the 17 set by Jock Stein's European Cup-winning side in 1968.

Celtic now have 55 points from 19 games with Rangers a distant second on 44 and they were rightful winners of an absorbing Old Firm encounter.

Rangers goalkeeper Stefan Klos produced an outstanding block to deny Bobo Balde as Celtic dominated the opening exchanges.

But Celtic were rewarded after 19 minutes when Henrik Larsson floated a neat cross deep into the box and although the excellent Klos tipped Petrov's header onto his right hand post the ball spun back across the line.

The home side continued to turn the screw after half-time and Larsson had a volley crash off the post from Thompson's free kick.

From the ensuing Thompson corner Balde headed the ball back across goal and Varga leapt highest to nod into the net.

Thompson piled on the misery for Rangers when he curled a free kick beyond Klos with six minutes remaining.

Shota Arveladze cracked a shot against the crossbar late on as the visitors, who have now won only one of the past 12 Old Firm league meetings, failed to even grab a consolation.

German FA's grim facts

Football

REUTERS, Berlin

The strained financial position of many Bundesliga clubs could result in a German club going out of business, German Football Association (DFB) president Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder said on Sunday.

Speaking on German radio, he said the experience in Spain and Italy had shown that the collapse of a Bundesliga club was "quite possible," according to a text extract released by Deutschlandfunk radio.

He said the German Football League (DFL) was currently discussing a solidarity fund to help bail out clubs in trouble but he showed little optimism that the talks would bear fruit.

"I don't think solidarity goes that far because the tangle of private interests and the general good of the league tends more towards the individual interests of the clubs," he said.

German clubs are still reeling after the collapse of the Kirch media empire in 2002, which deprived them of millions of euros in lost television revenues, leaving many clubs deep in debt.

Most have had to forego expensive transfers and several have had to take drastic measures including salary cuts, to avoid collapse.

Mayer-Vorfelder said the times of ever-rising TV revenues was past but he was optimistic a row between the DFL and Swiss rights trader Infront over marketing rights for the Bundesliga could be settled in a way that left clubs better off.

TOP SIX

Spanish league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):							
Madrid	18	13	3	2	37	18	42
Valencia	17	11	4	2	31	12	37
Deportivo	18	11	3	4	31	14	36
Atletico	18	8	4	6	23	22	28
Osasuna	17	7	6	4	18	13	27
Villarreal	17	7	6	4	20	17	27