

Premiership Saints send Reds to Europe

 Football

AFP, Southampton

Liverpool were handed fourth place in the Premiership and the final qualifying spot for next season's Champions League after rivals Newcastle were held to a 3-3 draw by Southampton here.

In a game they had the chances to win comfortably, Newcastle ended up needing a stoppage time equaliser from Darren Ambrose to secure a point after substitute Leandre Griffith had put Southampton ahead for the first time in the match with two minutes of regulation time left.

The home side had twice come from behind in the first half of a pulsating encounter at St Mary's.

Goals from Shola Ameobi and Lee Bowyer were cancelled out, respectively, by James Beattie and a Titus Bramble own goal but Southampton's point was every bit as much the result of a stunning display by young goalkeeper Alan Blayney on his Premiership debut.

The draw leaves Newcastle facing the possibility of missing out on Europe altogether with Aston Villa now a point ahead of them in 5th place, which qualifies teams for the UEFA Cup.

Which of them qualifies will be decided on Saturday when Villa entertain Manchester United and Newcastle travel to Liverpool.

Villa could still equal Liverpool's points tally but they would have to make up 12 goals in terms of goal difference to overhaul the Reds.

Newcastle went into the game knowing nothing less than victory would do and they got off to the perfect start when Ameobi headed on Olivier Bernard's long ball down the left wing.

The England under-21 striker chased his own flick-on to the edge of the area before muscling Paul Telfer off the ball and firing a low shot past Blayney, whose first touch in Premiership football turned out to involve picking the ball out of the net.

Southampton may have been without a string of first-team regulars but they quickly began to dominate proceedings and it was no surprise when they equalised courtesy of some sloppy defending by the visitors.

Anders Svensson was allowed time and space in the box after gathering Fabrice Fernandes's cross and the Swede exploited it with a low shot that an unsuspected Shay Given could only parry, leaving Beattie with the simplest of tap-ins.

Newcastle then had a huge let-

off when referee Graham Poll failed to spot Steven Caldwell's blatant shove on Beattie and waved away Southampton's penalty appeal.

The home fans were still roaring in protest when Newcastle went ahead for the second time.

Ameobi broke clear on the left of the box and cut the ball back for the rapidly arriving Bowyer, who struck a sweet first-time shot that beat Blayney at his near post.

But three minutes later Saints were level again with a goal that, in terms of defensive lapses from Newcastle, mirrored their first.

Again Fernandes was afforded too much time on the right flank. Again the Newcastle back four failed to deal with a cross from the French winger. Again the ball ended up in the net, this time courtesy of Titus Bramble's clumsy deflection past his own goalkeeper.

Newcastle could scarcely complain about finishing the first half on level terms.

But they were desperately unlucky not to put the game beyond reach in a flurry of attacking endeavour immediately after the restart.

A back-post header from Caldwell and a long-range effort from Ambrose both struck the crossbar before Alan Shearer was denied by a phenomenal reaction save from the debutant goalkeeper.

From barely three yards out the Newcastle skipper met Caldwell's cross with a textbook header. Yet somehow, as the ball bounced up off the turf, Blayney's reflexes allowed him to throw out a hand and flick it over the bar.

Blayney produced two more fines saves to keep out an Ameobi shot and block Bowyer's effort at close range before Southampton broke away to score the goal that sealed Newcastle's fate.

Running on to a Beattie flick, Griffith held off Bernard's poor challenge before side-footing the ball past Given at his near post.

Ambrose levelled things up deep into stoppage time but by then there was only time for Poll to blow the final whistle on Newcastle's hopes of a return to the European elite.

TOP SIX

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

Arsenal	37	25	12	0	71	25	87
Chelsea	37	23	7	7	66	30	76
Man Utd	37	22	6	9	62	35	72
Liverpool	37	16	11	10	54	36	59
Aston Villa	37	15	11	11	48	42	56
Newcastle	37	13	16	8	51	39	55

PHOTO: AFP

Newcastle's Shola Ameobi gestures after scoring against Southampton in their English Premier League encounter on Wednesday.

Cameroon lose kit plea

REUTERS, Zurich



Cameroon have lost their appeal against FIFA's decision to dock the country six World Cup qualifying points as a punishment for wearing a one-piece kit in this year's African Nations Cup.

At a meeting on Wednesday, world soccer's governing body rejected the Cameroon football association's appeal against the April 16 ruling, which also included a 200,000 Swiss francs (154,300 dollars) fine imposed on the country's FA.

FIFA handed out the punishment, as officials were furious that

their instructions to cease wearing the kit were ignored.

FIFA regulations make clear shorts and shirts have to be separate and officials said they had shown leniency by only warning Cameroon after they wore the controversial kit in the group phase of the Nations Cup.

But the team ignored the warning, wearing the one-piece outfit for their quarterfinal against Nigeria, which they lost.

Cameroon soccer officials said FIFA did not give them enough time to arrange an alternative kit but critics accused them of persevering with the strip to please their sponsors, Puma.

The German sportswear manufacturer had previously supplied Cameroon, one of Africa's football

superpowers, with sleeveless shirts for the 2002 African Nations Cup finals -- a design that was later banned by FIFA.

Some fans blamed Puma for its role in the situation but others pointed the finger at Cameroon's soccer officials.

Former sports minister Bidoung Mkpatt assembled a 12-member panel of legal experts and soccer administrators to appeal and convince FIFA to reverse it but to no avail.

Mkpatt was sacked last month and replaced by Sigfried Etame Massoma, who said in a statement, read out on state television.

"True to its policy of respecting international conventions to which it voluntarily subscribes, the Cameroon government acknow-

edges the decision by ... FIFA. The government will (consult) the parties concerned to find some consensus."

He called on Cameroonians to "remain calm and exercise a spirit of understanding in the face of the sanctions".

Cameroon start their 2006 World Cup qualifiers in June in a group that includes Egypt, Sudan, Benin, Ivory Coast and Libya. The matches will be played on a home-and-away basis and only the top team will go through to the finals in Germany.

The highest African nation in the FIFA rankings at 13th, Cameroon should not find the penalty an insurmountable obstacle with 30 points to play for, but still a sizeable handicap.

Wales appeal thrown out

AFP, Nyon

European football's governing body UEFA rejected Wales' appeal against a decision to allow Russia to play in the Euro 2004 finals.

UEFA's appeals body said in a statement Wales had "failed to present evidence of any implication of the Russian federation in the alleged doping infringement, the occurrence of which was not established."

It also pointed out that UEFA rules did not allow a whole team to be punished if one of its players failed a drugs test.

Wales wanted Russia thrown out after it emerged that midfielder Yegor Titov tested positive for a banned substance during the qualifying play-offs which Wales lost 1-0 on aggregate.

Their initial complaint, heard at a closed meeting of European football's governing body's disciplinary body last month, was dismissed.

Titov tested positive for a masking agent after the first leg play-off which ended 0-0 in Moscow on November 15.

Perez promises major signings

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez promised the club's fans a summer recruitment drive that would leave them gasping and let them forget the failure to win a trophy this term.

At a press conference to map out the future of the club that failed to land any silverware this year Perez said: "For next season we're going to go on a recruitment drive that will dazzle our fans."

Although not wishing to comment on the future of manager Carlos Queiroz he did have something to say on Roberto Carlos, the Brazil World Cup winner who has been approached to play for Chelsea next season.

"I'm very hopeful that Roberto Carlos will end his playing career with Real Madrid," Perez said.

Roberto Carlos' contract ends in June 2005 and on Tuesday he told

Big bonuses

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal's national team will be paid a seven-million euro (8.3-million dollar) bonus if they win the European football finals which the country will host between June 12 and July 4, sports daily Record reported.

The paper said the Portuguese football federation would pay each player in the 23-man squad 200,000 euros in case of victory with the rest of the money divided up amongst coach Luiz Felipe Scolari and other team officials.

Scolari, who led his native Brazil to a record fifth World Cup win in the Far East in 2002, will announce his squad for the finals on May 18.



PHOTO: AFP

Lazio captain Giuseppe Favalli (R) holds up the Italian Cup trophy with his teammate Demetrio Albertini at the Delle Alpi stadium in Turin on Wednesday. Lazio defeated Juventus in the two-legged final.

Italian Cup Lazio's

 Football

REUTERS, Turin

Lazio came back from two goals down to lift the Italian Cup for the fourth time with a 2-2 draw at Juventus in the second leg to secure a 4-2 aggregate victory.

Juventus, trailing 2-0 from the first leg, pulled a goal back through French striker David Trezeguet in the 20th minute and then Alessandro Del Piero brought the tie level with a goal right after the interval.

But Lazio fought back with a header from Bernardo Corradi and a late Stefano Fiore strike to make it 2-2.

The match was Juve coach Marcello Lippi's last on the bench at

the Delle Alpi as he will leave the club at the end of the season and it looked as though it might well end in triumph as his side made a positive start.

Trezeguet rose above Giuseppe Favalli to meet an Alessandro Birindelli cross with a superb angled header that flashed into the bottom corner.

Juventus were well on top, particularly in midfield, with Lazio restricted to a shot from Fabio Liverani before the break.

Just 24 seconds after the restart Del Piero put Juve 2-0 up on the night, and level overall, with a clinical finish after Trezeguet had put him though following a Pavel Nedved knock down.

That opened up the prospect of extra time but Lazio coach Roberto Mancini brought on Simone Inzaghi

to boost his attack and the move paid handsome dividends.

Suddenly, Lazio looked dangerous and the vital away goal came when Corradi rose majestically to power home a header from a Sinisa Mihajlovic corner.

The goal left Juventus needing two in the final 20 minutes but Lazio never looked back and six minutes from the end they made sure of lifting the Cup with Corradi heading down to Fiore who fired home from just inside the area.

Lippi, who guided Juve to last season's Serie A title, is quitting club football but has not ruled out taking over the national team.

"Who wouldn't want that job?" he asked when announcing his decision to leave Juventus after a three year spell.

Ligue 1

Within Lyon's reach

 Football

AFP, Paris

Two-time defending champions Lyon are just one victory away from achieving a hatrick of titles after a goal from Brazilian midfielder Juninho Pernambucano gave them a 1-0 victory over Bastia.

Main rivals Monaco were handed flowers by their opponents Strasbourg before the match but the Champions League finalists failed to blossom as a team during the game which ended 0-0.

With third-placed PSG having lost 3-0 at Bordeaux on Tuesday Lyon hold a four point advantage over Monaco with two matches to play while PSG are six points adrift, though they could set up a cracking finale if they beat Lyon on Saturday.

"We are still in front which is the main thing," said a relieved Lyon coach Paul Le Guen after a tense performance which was against 10 men for over 25 minutes of the second-half after Benoit Cauet was sent-off.

"Tiredness is starting to set in both mentally and physically but we are nearing the finishing line," added Le Guen, who as a central defender won the 1996 Cup Winners Cup with PSG.

Monaco coach Didier Deschamps admitted that the game was pretty much up for his side.

"The chance has pretty much gone but we will fight to the end nevertheless," said the former French captain, who led France to the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 crowns.

Juninho struck in the 26th minute with a trademark free-kick which evaded the outstretched leg of the Bastia defender at the left hand post for his 10th of the season.

Bastia had their chances too, the best falling to former French international striker Florian Maurice but he snatched at his shot when unmarked five yards out and it went wide.

Lyon went back down the other end and Peguy Luyindula could have doubled their advantage but his shot was blocked.

However the tense encounter was made somewhat easier for Lyon when Cauet was sent-off midway through the second-half, the former Inter Milan hardman midfielder being yellow carded for the second time when he obstructed former Bastia midfielder Mickael Essien.

Monaco dominated the first-half of their clash but rarely threatened to break the deadlock with Edouard Cisse going closest with a fine individual effort dribbling past several Strasbourg players before unleashing a fierce drive from 25 yards which flew agonisingly over the bar.

Their fellow European finalists Marseille drew 1-1 with virtual relegation certainties Montpellier.

Marseille, who play Valencia in the UEFA Cup final next week, took a first-half lead against Montpellier through a brilliant free-kick by

playmaker Camel Meriem which got a slight touch from France international Steve Marlet on the way in.

However Montpellier levelled in the 62nd minute through a superb solo effort by Fode Mansare, who tricked Meriem and then curled a shot past French international goalkeeper Fabien Barthez.

Barthez, though, saved Marseille from defeat at the end as he was penalised for taking down Habib Bamogo in the area but then got down to save the ensuing penalty from Mansare -- his miss should prove to be a costly one as Montpellier are six points adrift of fourth from bottom Ajaccio, who surprisingly beat League Cup winners Sochaux 1-0.

However Marseille may have handed another of the relegation candidates Toulouse a lifeline as coach Jose Anigo revealed after the Montpellier match he would not have one first choice player starting against Toulouse on Saturday.

"Against Toulouse there will be none of my first choice team on the pitch including Barthez, who will not even be on the bench," said Anigo.

Paris St Germain's hopes of clinching their third league title

and first since 1994 all but died on Tuesday as a Pascal Feindouno double inspired Bordeaux to a 3-0 victory.

PSG did not help themselves as Frederic Dehu and Reinaldo had penalties saved by an inspired Ulrich Rame but it was Feindouno, whose goal against them five years ago at the Parc de Princes grabbed the title for Bordeaux at the expense of Marseille, who made them pay as he doubled his tally for the season to four.

Bergkamp's new deal

AFP, London

Former Dutch international Dennis Bergkamp signed a one-year extension to his contract with Premiership champions Arsenal.

The veteran striker, who scored seven goals in 35 games this season, turns 35 on May 18.

"I am so pleased that I will be at Arsenal for another year," Bergkamp told the club website arsenal.com.

"Next season will be my 10th with the club, and that just shows what Arsenal means to me."

 Football

REUTERS, London

The last time a team dominated English football as Arsenal have done this season, Jack the Ripper was stalking the streets of London.

On Saturday, Arsenal stand to make history by becoming the first top-flight club since Preston North End in the inaugural season of 1888-89 to finish their campaign unbeaten.

Arsene Wenger's multinational team of millionaires need only a draw with Leicester City to complete a timeline stretching back through two world wars, six monarchs and the advent of the Football League.

Few doubt the champions will succeed at Highbury against a side who are already relegated.

Striker Thierry Henry, captain Patrick Vieira and winger Robert Pires, who will all be playing for France at Euro 2004 next month, have made Arsenal one of the most feared teams in Europe.

Domestically, their 37-match unbeaten run comprising 25 wins and 12 draws has earned the north London club a 13th league championship and a reputation for swash-buckling, attacking football that has won admirers around the world.

Arsenal's achievement is remarkable for such a competitive environment as the premier league, a global business worth more than a billion pounds (\$1.76 billion) a year where new Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich has had to spend \$200 million to be even relatively successful.

Yet in their day, Preston were also a force to make defenders quail and the money creeping into the game was making headlines.

Preston started life in 1863 as a cricket club, moved to the 'north end'

of the town a few years later and turned to football only in 1881 after cricketing interest waned and a brief foray into rugby proved unsuccessful.

Under club president William Sudell, Preston began to build a team drawn from England and Scotland with players, controversially at the time, being paid for their services.

Matters came to a head in 1884 when Preston were kicked out of the FA Cup for paying footballers to play the game, a common enough practice in the north of England but virtually unknown in the south where the amateur game ruled.

Football was at a fork in the road.

One way pointed to the nationwide legalisation of professional football, the other to a professional north and an amateur south. The Football Association chose the former at a special meeting in 1885, while a few years later rugby's leading figures chose the latter, leading to a split in that sport with the creation of two codes: league and union.

Buoyed up by the FA's decision, Preston steamed ahead, going unbeaten for 64 friendly and cup matches 1885-86 (59 wins and five draws) and then winning a remarkable 42 consecutive matches in 1887-88, the season before competitive league football started.

They also established an FA Cup scoring record that will almost certainly stand for all time when they beat Hyde 26-0 at Deepdale in 1887.

Not surprisingly, no team in the land was as well-prepared for the start of the first English season on September 8 1888 when the newly-formed Football League of 12 northern and midlands clubs kicked off.

Preston beat Burnley 5-2 in their opening match and won 18 and drew four of their 22 league matches. Only one other club, Liverpool, when they won the second division champion-

FACTBOX

REUTERS, London

Following is a factbox on unbeaten runs in European soccer ahead of Arsenal's final league match of the season against Leicester City on Saturday:

ENGLAND: Arsenal will become the first club since the 19th century to complete a top-flight season unbeaten if they avoid defeat by Leicester City on Saturday in the 38th and final round of the Premier League season.

Until now, the champions have won 25 and drawn 12 league matches.

The last top-flight club to complete an unbeaten season were Preston in 1888-89 when they played 22 matches and won 18. They also won the FA Cup that season without conceding a goal.

Liverpool won the second division title in 1893-94 without losing a game. They won 22 of their 28 matches.

Arsenal are on a run of 39 league matches without defeat, including two at the end of last season. The record is 42 by Nottingham Forest from November 1977 to December 1978.

SPAIN: A top-flight side has gone unbeaten for a whole season on two occasions, both before World War Two when the league was in its infancy and contained just 10 teams.

1929-30 -- Athletic Bilbao, 18 games unbeaten
1931-32 -- Real Madrid, 18 games unbeaten

The longest unbeaten run from the start of a season was achieved by Real Sociedad, 32 games in 1979-80. Real Madrid snatched the

title on the final day of that season.

The longest unbeaten run was also achieved by Real Sociedad, 38 games spread across the 1978-79 and 1979-80 seasons.

ITALY: The great AC Milan side of the early 1990s went the whole 1991-92 season unbeaten, winning 22 of their 34 games in Serie A. They went 23 matches at the start of the following season unbeaten on the way to winning the title again. Add in one game at the end of the 1990-91 season and that makes a run of 58 games without defeat.

GERMANY: No side has gone a whole Bundesliga season without defeat. The longest unbeaten run from the start of a season is 23 matches by Bayern Munich in 1988-89.

The longest unbeaten run is 36 games by Hamburg SV from January 1982 to January 1983 -- 20 wins and 16 draws under coach Ernst Happel.

FRANCE: The 32-match unbeaten run by Nantes in the 1994-95 season remains the record for the top flight. It began at the start of the season and took Nantes to the title.

In Scotland, Celtic went 62 league games without defeat from 1915 to 1917.

In the Dutch league, Ajax Amsterdam played through the 1994-95 season unbeaten and put together a run of 52 games without defeat from August 1994 to January 1996.

Steaua Bucharest played an extraordinary 104 games without defeat in the late 1980s when they went three successive Romanian league seasons, and more than three years, unbeaten.