

Premiership

The gap remains the same

Football

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho claimed Chelsea had enjoyed the good fortune that makes champions after his team rode their luck to beat Liverpool and preserve their five-points lead at the top of the Premiership.

Arsenal and Manchester United both won to maintain their pursuit but they will be painfully aware of how close Chelsea came to dropping at least a couple of points at Anfield.

As it was, a deflected shot from substitute Joe Cole ten minutes from time was enough to secure a 1-0 win over a Liverpool side who were unlucky not to be awarded at least one first-half penalty.

The win kept Chelsea five points clear of Arsenal, who won 3-1 at Charlton, and nine clear of Manchester United, 2-0 winners at Middlesbrough.

But fourth-placed Everton's challenge faltered further as they suffered a 5-2 hammering at the hands of on-form Tottenham, their second successive defeat.

Mourinho admitted Liverpool deserved at least a draw.

"The way both teams fought and both teams tried to win I think a draw would have been a fair result," he said.

"I think we won because we fought a lot for that but at the same time, in the right moment, we had a little bit of luck that normally champions need to have."

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger refused to accept that everything was going Chelsea's way and insisted his side can still overhaul their London rivals.

"Our last three away games have been like cup games but we're getting better and better in every game," the Frenchman said.

"If we are consistent, I believe we have a good chance and we were very strong today."

Arsenal suffered a brief scare when Talal El Karkouri cancelled out Freddie Ljungberg's 35th-minute opener with a long-range free-kick just before half-time.

But the Swede restored his side's lead three minutes after the restart and Dutch winger Robin van Persie completed an ultimately comfortable win for the Gunners.

Darren Fletcher's first goal for Manchester United, a ninth minute tap-in, and Ryan Giggs's third in as many games secured the points at Middlesbrough. United have now taken 25 points from the 27 available in their last nine matches.

"We're in a great vein of form at

the moment," said United boss Alex Ferguson.

"We are playing with great conviction and consistency and it's pleasing to see."

Dean Marney, a product of Tottenham's youth development programme, scored twice as Spurs ran riot against a weary looking Everton at White Hart Lane.

Reto Ziegler, Pedro Mendes and Robbie Keane also found the net while Tim Cahill and James McFadden responded for the visitors.

In Saturday's other action, Andy Cole scored twice as Fulham won for the first time in nine matches with a 3-1 victory over Crystal Palace, a result that sends Palace back into the relegation zone.

Peruvian midfielder Nolberto Solano grabbed a late winner for Aston Villa at home to Blackburn.

El Hadji Diouf brought an end to Bolton's six-match losing streak with an 85th-minute equaliser that denied bottom side West Brom, who had gone ahead in the 13th minute through Zoltan Gera, their second win of the season.

The New Year also brought an improvement in the fortunes of Newcastle, first half goals from Shola Ameobi and Lee Bowyer proving enough to secure a 2-1 win over Birmingham, for whom Emile Heskey pulled one back just after the hour mark.

Norwich City leaptfrogged Crystal Palace and moved out of the bottom three after securing a point in a 1-1 draw at Portsmouth.

Damien Francis had put them ahead but Pompey equalised just after the hour mark with a penalty from Yakubu Aiyegbeni that the Nigerian striker had to take three times because of players moving into the box on the first two, successful, attempts.

Southampton remained mired in deep trouble after a 2-1 defeat at Manchester City.

An early strike from Paul Bosvelt and a superb solo effort from Shaun Wright-Phillips put City in control of the match and Southampton's only consolation was a last-minute penalty from Kevin Phillips.

TOP SIX

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

Chelsea	21	16	4	1	41	8	52
Arsenal	21	14	5	2	51	23	47
Man Utd	21	12	7	2	33	13	43
Everton	21	12	4	5	25	22	40
Boro	21	10	5	6	34	25	35
Liverpool	21	10	4	7	34	21	34



IT FEELS THAT GREAT! Tottenham's Robbie Keane does a cartwheel after scoring against Everton at White Hart Lane in north London on January 1.

PHOTO: AFP

PREVIEW: Premiership

Ailing Magpies, Reds

Football

AFP, London

Newcastle United and Liverpool have been hit by major injury worries as the gruelling

Christmas and New Year schedule begins to exact a heavy toll in the Premiership.

As clubs face their fourth outing inside nine days, Newcastle Graeme Souness found his celebrations, at seeing his side end their seven-game

winless run against Birmingham on Saturday, cut short by a shortage of strikers ahead of Monday's visit to bottom club West Brom.

Welsh striker Craig Bellamy, whose career has been haunted by injuries, limped out of the 2-1 win with a knee injury and joins skipper Alan Shearer and Patrick Kluivert on the sidelines.

Stand-in striker Shola Ameobi, who scored one of the goals on Saturday, has been playing through the pain barrier with a shoulder problem in his last two games.

But it's the injury to Bellamy, who has already undergone five knee operations during his career, that is causing Souness his greatest worry.

"Craig came off with a knee injury and we will have to see what that is on Sunday," said the coach.

"He did not get a bang on it, it has just come on as the game has gone on. I do not think he got a bang on it anyway."

Shearer's planned comeback stalled after the veteran damaged a calf muscle in training on Friday while Kluivert is still suffering from a hamstring strain.

Liverpool, now 18 points behind leaders Chelsea after losing 1-0 to the Londoners on Saturday, go to Norwich Monday with injury worries of their own.

Djibril Cisse is already out for the season with a broken leg while top-scorer Milan Baros is unlikely to play at Norwich joining Harry Kewell sidelines.

To add to his problems, Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez lost Xabi Alonso for at least five weeks after picking up an ankle injury against Chelsea.

"We are losing an important player now seemingly every week. Maybe we need 30 players in our squad to cope," said the frustrated Benitez.

In Monday's other matches, Blackburn face Charlton while Crystal Palace take on Aston Villa.

FIXTURES

Monday: Blackburn v Charlton (1500GMT), Crystal Palace v Aston Villa (1500GMT), Norwich v Liverpool (1245GMT), West Brom v Newcastle (2000GMT)

Tuesday: Arsenal v Man City (1945GMT), Birmingham v Bolton (1945GMT), Chelsea v Middlesbrough (1945GMT), Everton v Portsmouth (2000GMT), Man Utd v Tottenham (2000GMT)

Wednesday: Southampton v Fulham (2000GMT)

Ronaldo sings Zidane song

INTERNET SOURCE

Real Madrid striker Ronaldo believes Zinedine Zidane is still the best player in the world and not his fellow FIFA World Cup winner Ronaldinho.

Barcelona midfielder Ronaldinho was last month crowned FIFA World Player of the Year, succeeding Frenchman Zidane, who had a disappointing year both with club and country.

But Ronaldo, like Zidane a three-time winner of football's top individual prize, still rates the Frenchman as the top man and reckons the pair of them will help Real turn around their form.

He told L'Equipe: "Zizou (Zidane) remains the best player in the world even if the season was difficult for him and for me also."

"He is a great player and a good man. I have no doubt about his behaviour when we are training every day."

"When you are in the best team of the world, it is because you are a very good player."

"I know him very well, I am a friend of his. I see him every day and I know he always has the fighting spirit."

Ronaldo also backed Zidane's decision to quit the French national side after the Euro 2004 defeat by Greece.

"To my mind, he was right to quit France because it is hard to play at a high level all year round," he added.

"You have to make a choice during your career, and one day, I will have to as well."

"It was probably difficult for Zizou but it is done. I think we still have plenty more to see from Zizou and myself, and with Real, we are going to show that. Zidane is the best."

Real to dance samba

Football

AFP, Madrid

Newly-appointed Real Madrid coach Wanderley Luxemburgo said on Friday that under his stewardship it would be a little bit more like watching his former charges Brazil in the coming months at the Bernabeu.

"My culture is that of Brazilian football," noted Luxemburgo, who was Brazil national coach between 1998 and 2000 and who took on the job of Real's fifth man at the helm in 18 months on Thursday after replacing stopgap Mariano Garcia Remon.

Nine-times European champions Real have endured a miserable first half of the campaign to stand just fifth in the league as bitter rivals Barcelona seemingly canter towards the title while, in Europe, they only just made it through the group phase. Luxemburgo, who arrives having coached Santos to the Brazilian crown for his fifth Brazilian domestic title success, Thursday stressed greater discipline and professionalism were needed and that his galacticos had to gird themselves to do much better.

Having called on his squad of multi-millionaires to pull together to prevent a second straight trophyless season Luxemburgo, 52, said Friday: "The players are professionals and there won't be any problems. To win we must stick together."

"The first thing we have to do is recover ourselves in the league and also prepare ourselves for the Champions League."

Real face mighty Juventus on February 22 when the Champions League knockout round gets underway.

At times Real have struggled to produce a cohesive on-pitch strategy leading to claims in some quarters that the squad is a collection of stars but not a team.

Yet Luxemburgo, who put the squad through their paces in the year's final training session Friday, said he would not have it any other way.

"It's better to work with great players than not have them in the ranks - but they have to be committed to the club."

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Luxemburgo, who will be in charge for Wednesday's home mini-match against Real Sociedad - the final seven minutes have to be played after a bomb threat caused the encounter on December 12 to be abandoned at the Bernabeu - drew a parallel with Barcelona's problems last season.

Barca started appallingly but recovered superbly to come second as Real did the reverse.

"Last year I saw some games

where Barcelona were pretty bad but they set off on a run and moved up the table."

"In football, everything is possible," said Luxemburgo.

Under his baton, Real must dance to a samba tune - sweet music to the ears of Brazilian kingpins Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos, though it remains to be seen if the likes of England stars David Beckham and Michael Owen will be able to sing as effectively from the same songsheet.



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's new Brazilian coach Vanderlei Luxemburgo watches his compatriots Ronaldo (L) and Roberto Carlos fooling around during his first training session with the club in Las Rozas, near Madrid on December 31.

Roberto Carlos staying put

Football

AFP, Lisbon

Brazil World Cup star Roberto Carlos, continually thwarted in his pay demands at Real Madrid, denied press reports Sunday that he wants to leave the Spanish giants and said he had turned down an offer from London's Chelsea.

"I can confirm that there was the possibility to leave to join Chelsea. However I felt it would be better for me to stay in Madrid," he told Portuguese daily newspaper Correio da Manha.

Arguably the world's most famous left back, the speedy Brazilian joined Real in 1996 from Italian side Inter Milan and his

contract with Real Madrid runs to 2007.

The 31-year-old has publicly complained in the past over Real's refusal to put him on the same wages as top-earners Raul, Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo and David Beckham who all pick up six million euros free of tax a year.

Last month Spanish media reported that Roberto Carlos, who is strongly linked with a move to Premiership leaders Chelsea next summer, had demanded a transfer after Real Madrid dropped him from the team's 3-2 league win over Racing Santander on December 18.

"I don't know where they got that story from. I never said I wanted to leave, I feel very good at Madrid. I am not leaving unless management and the coach want me to," he said.

Gazza critically ill

Football

AFP, London

Former England football international Paul Gascoigne was gravely ill in hospital Sunday suffering from pneumonia and a possible collapsed lung, Britain's News of the World tabloid said.

Gascoigne, the 37-year-old former midfield dynamo popularly known as Gazza, collapsed at home on Saturday night and was rushed to London's Princess Grace hospital, Britain's best-selling tabloid reported.

"Paul began feeling very unwell two or three days ago. He has pneumonia and a possible collapsed lung. They're testing for other problems," his agent, Alex Armitage, told the newspaper.

"He's serious. It's a possibility he's got 101 thing wrongs with him," Armitage was quoted as saying.

"It's bloody awful, pneumonia. But he's in hospital and being very

well looked after with his loved ones all around him," he added.

The report came the day after speculation that the former England midfielder had applied for a coaching job in Australia's newly-formed A-league.

Sydney's Daily Telegraph reported that Gazza had put his hand up to be coach of the Newcastle Jets.

Gascoigne announced earlier this year he wanted to be known as G8 in a bid to distance himself from his reputation as an alcoholic hellraiser who had squandered his talent.

He also quit as player-coach at League Two side Boston saying he intended to study for a coaching qualification.

Gascoigne enjoyed a colourful career with Newcastle, Tottenham, Lazio and Rangers and played 57 times for England.

He had a brief stint as a player-coach in China before a failed attempt at reviving his player career in England with Wolves.

Aragones gets on British nerves

Football

AFP, London

Spanish football coach Luis Aragones should be punished following his latest racist comments, British sports minister Richard Caborn said.

Aragones has in the past insulted Arsenal striker Thierry Henry and he has further brought out controversy after saying Jose Antonio Reyes was "a gypsy."

Aragones faces disciplinary action from the Spanish FA, who have launched an investigation into the coach telling Reyes that he was better than "that black s***" Henry.

Caborn wants action taken by the Spanish FA and soon. "When it

comes to racism there should be absolute zero tolerance," Caborn told the Sunday Mirror.

"Punishing him is a decision that should have been taken some time ago."

"These latest comments by the Spanish manager only serve to confirm my view that there is an urgent need for strong action by the Spanish FA."

Caborn also criticised FIFA over the world governing body's decision to fine the Spanish only 45,000 pounds (64,000 euros) for racist taunts aimed at England's black players during November's friendly and under-21 matches.

"FIFA missed an opportunity to stamp its authority and take some sort of symbolic action," said Caborn.

Keegan's Yugoslav nightmare revealed

AFP, London

England football star Kevin Keegan was beaten up in custody by Yugoslav police after the national team arrived in Belgrade for a match in 1974, newly-released British government archives said Saturday.

Striker Keegan, who later managed the national side, was "undoubtedly roughed up" with little provocation, and was left with bruises and blood pouring from his nose, the formerly secret files said.

Papers released by the National Archives contain a report from a clearly frustrated British diplomat in the former Yugoslavia about the events of June 2, 1974.



KEEGAN...A 70s file photo

The unnamed official describes it as a "nasty incident" which began after a group of England players fooled around at a luggage transporter, with Keegan then ignoring police orders to move.

"He was dragged off for interrogation and undoubtedly roughed up, returning after 30 minutes with a bleeding nose, although not otherwise marked," the official wrote.

However, a Yugoslav investigation alleged "that K (Keegan) struck a policeman (and) concludes that it is only in the interests of Anglo-Yugoslav relations, international football etc that the police are not pressing well-justified charges against him".

The official Yugoslav attitude was "as to be expected", the official lamented.

"Official, total rejection of the possibility that any policeman could have acted as alleged, plus unofficial and entirely unquotable assurances that there will be some further enquiry behind the scenes."

The diplomat added: "I have some hope that police concerned will now be punished, although of course Yugoslavs would never admit that had happened."

"Per contra, if things blow up any further here, it is not totally impossible that police would be allowed to press charges in defence of Yugoslavia's reputation etc."

Belgrade insisted at the time that Keegan had been offensive and had struck an official.

The England players threatened to boycott the friendly match in protest, but ended up playing, with Keegan scoring the equaliser in a 2-2 draw.