



An agitated Chelsea frontman Didier Drogba (R) shouts at referee Philip Dowd during their Premiership encounter against Aston Villa at Villa Park on Tuesday.

Villa frustrate champions

AFP, Birmingham



Jose Mourinho's public rage at his malfunctioning Premiership champions failed to have the desired effect when Chelsea dropped more valuable points in the title race after a goalless draw at Villa Park on Tuesday.

Chelsea's inability to record their first win at Villa Park since 1999 left the champions for the past two seasons six points behind Premiership leaders United and in the unusual position of having to play catch-up with Alex Ferguson's men.

To make matters worse for Mourinho he looks likely to be without Khalid Boulahrouz for an extended period of time.

The Dutch defender lasted only 33 minutes of his return from suspension before he left the field with suspected knee ligament damage following a challenge with Northern Ireland midfielder Steven Davis.

Nevertheless, after venting his "anger and frustration" after Chelsea's 2-2 draw with London rivals Fulham last week, Mourinho was in more conciliatory mood in Birmingham.

"I'm happy with my team," Mourinho told Sky Sports afterwards. "The team played as a team."

"Six points at the end of the Christmas period is not bad. I have a lot of hopes for the second part of the season."

Villa manager Martin O'Neill might have equalled his worst ever run as a manager, by completing his 10th game without a victory, a sequence he endured when in charge of Leicester City, but he was pleased by his team's resilience.

"Our players worked tirelessly and they stuck at it until the end. We've played better and lost," said O'Neill.

Only Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba escaped Mourinho's outburst after the draw with Fulham.

The forward is one of few the Portuguese coach feels he can

rely upon at the moment.

Mourinho's faith is hardly misplaced as Drogba sits at the top of the Golden Boot charts, but he could have increased his lead over Manchester United's Ronaldo in the eighth minute at Villa Park.

His movement to lose his marker, Gary Cahill, was exemplary, but his attempted volley after Shaun Wright-Phillips' cross was nowhere near as good, bouncing into the ground and over the crossbar from six yards.

Without suspended German international Michael Ballack, Mourinho put the onus firmly on Frank Lampard to inspire his faltering team, but the England international appeared jaded once again, apart from one long-range effort which flew fractionally wide of Gabor Kiraly's crossbar.

The Hungarian goalkeeper only had one save to make in the first half, when Ashley Cole headed Drogba's cross straight into his arms at the far post.

Lampard is a shadow of the

player he was for Chelsea last season and was fortunate to escape a booking when he pushed Gavin McCann, after the Villa midfielder's over-zealous challenge on Ricardo Carvalho.

Drogba also summed up Chelsea's frustration when he was booked for dissent by referee Phil Dowd.

The only real consolation on another frustrating night for Mourinho will have been the sight of John Terry, the England captain, being put through his paces on the field two hours before kick-off just six days after key-hole surgery on his back injury.

Terry expects to be fit for Chelsea's next Premiership game against Wigan -- but will miss the League Cup semi-final against Wycombe Wanderers.

Villa created little in terms of genuine threat. They could easily have lost their share of the points in stoppage time but Drogba failed to direct Cole's cross on target with his head to leave Chelsea counting the cost of another sub-par performance.

Coach embroiled in match-fixing

AFP, Singapore

A former coach of Malaysia's national football team went on trial Wednesday charged with match fixing in Singapore.

Chow Kwai Lam could face up to five years in prison if convicted.

He is accused of bribing Paya Lebar-Punggol FC goalkeeper Zulkifli Zainolabidin to let in two or three goals during a local professional league match in June 2005, according to the charge sheet.

Chow, who is also a former coach of the Singaporean club, is alleged to have offered 200-300 dollars (131-196 US) plus a further unspecified amount.

His lawyer Hamidul Haq told AFP at the conclusion of the hearing that court heard testimony from three witnesses including a newspaper reporter and a player.

Haq said he will cross-examine the key prosecution witness when court resumes Thursday.

The subordinate court trial is scheduled to last until Friday.

Blues to curb spending

INTERNET, undated

Jose Mourinho says Chelsea won't pay over the odds for players in the January transfer window.

The Blues boss continues to be linked with a big-money move for Manchester City defender Micah Richards.

He said: "I want to go into the market but I have told my top people that it is time for other clubs to look at us as a normal club."

"People want my players on loan or at sale prices. When I go for a player it is like being told an Aston Martin worth 250,000 pounds will cost me 1 million pounds. Then I tell them 'goodbye'."

"I am not speaking about Micah Richards. I am speaking generally. We are waiting and watching to see the reactions of other people and we are not crazy."

Milan chasing Belletti

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan are hoping to sign Barcelona full-back Juliano Belletti for around 3.5 million pounds.

Belletti has already etched his name into Nou Camp folklore after netting the late goal that beat Arsenal in last season's Champions League final in Paris.

But the summer signing of Italian World Cup star Gianluca Zambrotta means the competition for places in Calatonia is now very stiff.

And according to reports from Italy the Rossoneri are hopeful that a bid of five million Euros will be enough to land the Brazilian star.

Milan had Lazio's Massimo Oddo as their first choice to replace Cafu at right-back, but have now switched their attentions to Belletti.

He's played only six La Liga games this season and only one in the Champions League.

Bayern sign Schlaudraff

REUTERS, Berlin



German champions Bayern Munich have signed national striker Jan Schlaudraff from Alemannia Aachen on a three-year contract from the end of the season, the two clubs said on Wednesday.

Bayern will pay Aachen a fixed transfer fee of one million euros (1.33 million dollars).

Schlaudraff, 23, who has been capped once, was the surprise of the first half of the Bundesliga season, helping promoted Aachen stay clear of the relegation zone with six goals in 15 matches.

"I think this is the right step for me," Schlaudraff told the sports agency SID. "It's a big step but I see a chance to develop further at

Munich and for Germany." Schlaudraff also scored the final goal in Aachen's 4-2 victory over Bayern Munich which knocked the



JAN SCHLAUDRAFF

holders out of the German Cup in the round of 16 last month.

German media reports said Schlaudraff will earn about two million euros a year at Munich from July 1.

"Jan is one of the most promising young German players," said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

Bayern signed another young Germany striker Lukas Podolski from Cologne at the end of last season. Podolski has not yet started for Bayern, who are in third place at the halfway stage of the season three points behind leaders Werder Bremen.

Schlaudraff, who played only 10 Bundesliga matches for Borussia Moenchengladbach, flourished after transferring to Aachen, then in the second division. He scored 11 goals in 29 matches last season to help Aachen win a spot in the Bundesliga.

PFA questions facilities

Football

AFP, London

England's Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) has questioned the effectiveness of emergency services at Premier League grounds after a series of high-profile injuries to goalkeepers this season.

Fulham's Antti Niemi was carried off on a stretcher after appearing to fall on his head Monday against Watford, 11 weeks after Chelsea's Petr Cech suffered a fractured skull against Reading.

Shay Given had a tear in his bowel following a challenge in Newcastle's match at West Ham, with surgeons comparing the impact of the injury to that of a car crash.

Niemi has been released from hospital and doctors have cleared him of spinal cord or column injury but his injury once again put the issues of goalkeeper safety and emergency access into the spotlight.

The incident highlighted the importance of having the emergency services ready for players.

"We've had a number of serious injuries, particularly to goalkeepers, and it highlights the precariousness of the profession," PFA chief executive Gordon Taylor said Tuesday. "It's not a piece of cake out there."

"We've had discussions with the

Premier League on making sure that all immediate possible medical facilities are at hand, particularly with ambulances to get them to hospital as quickly as possible.

"That is something that we're wanting to make sure of and are checking up on. While there needs to be ambulance facilities for spectators, we're looking to make sure that everything is in place for a quick and speedy action when emergency treatment is needed."

"The Petr Cech case was a reminder that we should make sure that everything possible that can be done is being done to avoid any possible tragedy."

However, former England goalkeeper Peter Shilton said it was impossible to eliminate all risk of serious injury.

"I was lucky enough not to have any serious injuries during my career but you are bound to have the odd occasion when players fall awkwardly."

"It's always there, you're never going to be 100 percent sure," Shilton, twice a European Cup winner with Nottingham Forest, added.

"In some ways, technique can help sometimes but obviously there are occasions when you can't do anything about it."

"With Petr Cech's injury, he came out correctly -- it was just unfortunate he got caught."

"I think goalkeepers need that extra bit of protection, they are always vulnerable to opposition making early challenges on them -- the opposition do not have anything to lose and can take chances."

"So referees have to give the benefit of the doubt for that reason, without bordering on the ridiculous."

Andrade in demand

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho reportedly wants to sign Portuguese defender Jorge Andrade on a short-term deal.

The Blues have struggled defensively in the absence of the injured John Terry and Mourinho wants to add more experience to his backline, according to the Daily Mirror.

Andrade is on his way back from nine months out with a knee injury and his club Deportivo La Coruna are willing to let him leave in order to gain fitness.

It would mean a short-term deal until the end of the season similar to the one which brought midfielder Maniche to Stamford Bridge last season.

Andrade moved to Spain in 2002 from Porto and has 45 caps for Portugal.

Juve give up on Mascherano

INTERNET, undated

Juventus have revealed they have given up on signing West Ham midfielder Javier Mascherano.

Juve coach Didier Deschamps has admitted he would like to add the Argentinian star to his squad as the fallen giants look to return to the top flight of Italian football after being relegated for match-fixing.

However, Juve sporting director Alessio Secco told an Italian newspaper that the deal was too complicated, apparently due to the fact Mascherano is owned by investment group MSI.

Secco told La Stampa: "That (Mascherano deal) will not be possible."

"We have pursued this until the day the market opened, but we have had to renounce because of the complicated contract situation."

Mascherano, along with compatriot Carlos Tevez, has failed to settle at West Ham and has been linked with a host of clubs, including Liverpool.

Secco also revealed that Juve would not be making many moves in the transfer window with 'The Old Lady' sitting just a point off the top of Serie B.

"We have the idea of loaning (Tomas) Guzman and perhaps (Paolo) De Ceglie -- but other than that nothing will happen," he said.

David Trezeguet will be given time to decide over a new contract, however, Gianluigi Buffon, Mauro Camoranesi and Alessandro Del Piero are ready to sign new deals regardless of whether Juve are promoted or not.

Secco said, "With David we are already speaking, but he wants to see what Juve will be next season."

"We may need to give him more time than others, but we will offer all a contract extension."

"For them (Buffon and Camoranesi) they have enough optimism to sit and speak now," Secco continued.

"I believe Buffon has already accepted that he will respect his current contract which expires in 2011 and also the same with Camoranesi."

"Alex was the first one to accept us in Serie B and therefore we recognise that part but we will look at the issue of the future with him."

Keane splashing cash

Football

AFP, London

Sunderland manager Roy Keane wasted little time in utilising this month's transfer window, signing Luton midfielder Carlos Edwards and Tottenham reserve goalkeeper Marlon Fulp for a combined two million pounds on Tuesday.

Trinidad and Tobago international Edwards, who starred for his country at last year's World Cup, has arrived at the north-east club

from Championship rivals Luton in a 1.5 million pounds deal while Fulp joined in a 500,000 pounds move which saw 20-year-old Sunderland keeper Ben Alnwick go to Spurs.

Edwards joined Luton in 2005 from Wrexham and made 74 appearances, scoring eight goals and former Manchester United and Republic of Ireland captain Keane was in no doubt about his value to Sunderland, just three points off the play-offs as they bid to return to the Premier League at the first attempt.

We're absolutely delighted to

have captured such a sought-after, top player," said Keane. "A lot of clubs have been interested in Carlos, so it's great that he will be here at Sunderland to play his part in getting this club back to the Premiership."

Defender Robbie Elliott left Sunderland after completing a move to Championship strugglers Leeds, while Liam Lawrence has moved to Stoke, three points ahead of Sunderland, in a deal worth an initial 500,000 pounds after eight games on loan at the Britannia Stadium.

Curbishley given license to spend

AFP, London



Money will be no object for West Ham manager Alan Curbishley during this month's transfer window according to the Premier League strugglers' chairman Eggert Magnusson.

The Hammers were thrashed 6-0 by Reading on New Year's Day -- the east London club's worst defeat for three years -- and the third-bottom club are now four points adrift of safety.

"There is no limit on the money available to the manager," Magnusson, whose Icelandic consortium took control of West Ham in November, told Tuesday's London Evening Standard.

"If Alan identifies the targets then we will do our best to sign them, although they must be realistic. We are not a Chelsea in that respect," added Magnusson who last month sacked former manager Alan Pardew -- now in charge at

second-bottom Charlton, the club Curbishley left at the end of last season.

But such is West Ham's recent form that Curbishley admitted it would be hard to attract new players, regardless of how much financial backing he had from Magnusson. "People say bring people in, but the last three results might have shot that to pieces."

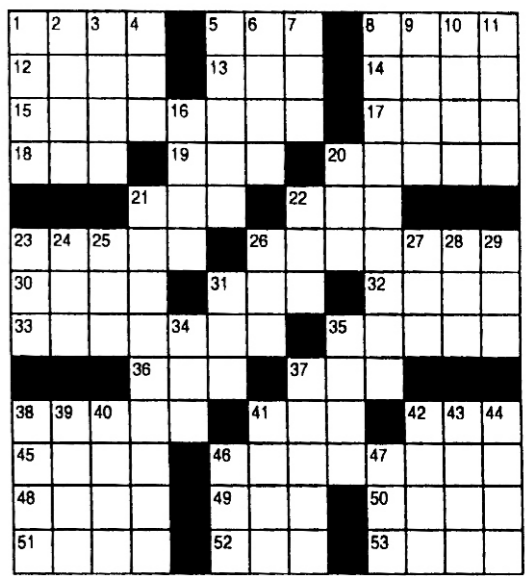
"When you're in the bottom three, trying to attract new players, it's very difficult," Curbishley added. "Harry Redknapp managed it at Portsmouth and he turned it around. I'm not going to complain about my lot though. I saw the full picture when I decided to come here."

"You have to dig in and do the right things. These players haven't got the experience to sort this out for themselves."

Former Hammers boss Redknapp kept Portsmouth in the Premier League last season, when they seemed destined for relegation at the turn of the year, and now the south coast club are sixth in the table.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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 35 Hawk
 37 Tammany Hall boss
 38 Snead and Spade
 39 Masticate
 40 Frog genus
 41 Many millennia
 42 Cuddled up cozy
 43 Main part of a ship's structure
 44 Gilligan's home
 46 Underwear with underwire
 47 Bachelor's last utterance



CRYPTOQUIP
 J L F V Q L E M I T F T E W
 E J U Z Y T E J K V L F I Z F Q L ?
 O Z Y L F O Q L Z E M W L V E
 O M I I V L Z O M W E U K V
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF A COUPLE OF TINY ARACHNID PARASITES WERE TO SPEAK, WOULD YOU CALL THAT TICK TALK?
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: J equals W
 The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.



Russian tennis star Maria Sharapova flashes the victory sign as she poses for pictures with kids at a tennis clinic in Hong Kong on Wednesday.