



IM BACK: Arsenal striker Thierry Henry points to the bench after scoring a goal on his comeback game in their Premiership clash against Charlton at The Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.

Red hot Gunners

AFP, London



Arsenal captain Thierry Henry marked his return from injury in style by inspiring the home side to a 4-0 league win against 10-man Charlton.

Henry was back in action for the first time in five weeks after recovering from sciatica and he played like a man determined to make up for lost time.

The France striker opened the scoring with a penalty, set-up Justin Hoyte's strike and won the penalty that Robin van Persie converted before the Dutchman scored his second in the last minute.

Henry was in irrepressible form as the Gunners moved into fourth place in the Premiership and provided a spark missing from Arsenal's attack when they ended 2006 with a dispiriting defeat at Sheffield United.

The victory must have been just as sweet for Arsene Wenger as he got one over on Alan Pardew in his first meeting with the Charlton boss since their touchline row in November.

Pardew, then in charge of West Ham, celebrated his side's late winner right in front of Wenger, who responded by shoving and swearing at his rival.

Wenger was fined 10,000 pounds by the English Football Association for his antics, while Pardew has a personal hearing over the incident on Thursday.

The bosses kept their distance and their emotions in check throughout the match before a brief handshake at full-time.

Wenger had little reason to lose his cool as Gilberto Silva set the tone for a dominant Arsenal display in the second minute with a fierce long range strike that flashed just

over the crossbar.

Pardew's appointment on Christmas Eve had sparked a upturn in Charlton's fortunes as a return of four points from two games gave the south London club renewed hope of climbing out of the bottom three.

But they never looked capable of stifling Arsenal in the way so many teams have at the Emirates Stadium.

Arsenal were producing some mesmerising moves but when they finally took the lead after half an hour the goal came via a fortunate deflection and some immature defending.

When Djimi Traore blocked Cesc

Fabregas's long range shot the ball looped goalwards and Carson could only push it onto the bar.

Van Persie was the closest Arsenal player to the rebound but he would not have reached it before El Karkouri, so why Osei Sankofa tugged the striker's shirt only he knows.

Referee Mike Riley wasted no time in awarding the penalty and sending off the inexperienced Charlton right-back.

Henry stepped up to send Scott Carson the wrong way from the spot and celebrated by running to the bench, where he embarked on a prolonged dance with injured teammate Emmanuel Adebayor.

Henry was denied a second goal moments later as Carson managed to tip over his free-kick as it arched towards the top left corner.

That was only temporary respite though as Arsenal crafted a breathtaking second goal on the stroke of half-time.

After a sweeping move that flowed from left to right across midfield, Hoyte played a one-two with Henry and surged on to the return before rolling his shot into the far corner for his first goal for the club.

Arsenal were tormenting the visitors and a third goal was inevitable. The only surprise was it took

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Becks no, Figo yes

INTERNET, undated



Inter have ruled out the proposed capture of David Beckham after confirming that Luis Figo will remain at the club.

The former Real Madrid star was linked with a move to Saudi Arabian club Al Ittihad last week, with the Englishman widely seen as his ideal replacement.

But boss Roberto Mancini has rubbished talk that the Portuguese wizard is on the verge of walking out on the club in favour of a 4.2m pounds six-month deal.

"Figo is an Inter player and he will stay at Inter," said Mancini following the squad's arrival in Bahrain ahead of Saturday's friendly match with the local national team.

"Furthermore, just as Figo is an Inter player, Beckham is a Real Madrid player. And out of respect I

never talk about players who belong to other clubs."

Mancini did recently admit that Figo was frustrated with his lack of first team action this term, but is confident that he will see out his contract that expires in June.

Meanwhile, the Italian tactician is delighted with the idea of flying out to Bahrain during the winter break.

"It is a pleasure for all of us to be able to work here in view of our next fixtures," said the former Fiorentina and Lazio tactician.

"On Saturday we will face Bahrain with the maximum seriousness and effort.

"They are a good side who missed out on qualifying for the World Cup in Germany by only losing to Trinidad and Tobago in the play-offs.

"We also know how good their Coach is and I know him personally, having played with Hans Peter Briegel for three seasons at Sampdoria," concluded Mancini.

Crouch commits to Liverpool

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool striker Peter Crouch has dismissed speculation linking him with a move away from Anfield during this month's transfer window, insisting his future lies on Merseyside.

England international Crouch was back in the goals on Monday with a spectacular scissor-kick opener in the 3-0 home win against Bolton which took Liverpool into third place in the Premier League table.

"I have heard all the speculation and all I can say is I am happy here and love playing for the club," 25-year-old Crouch told Tuesday's Liverpool Echo newspaper.

"It is a fantastic club, all the games are massive and I wouldn't want to leave. I see my future here and as long as the manager doesn't want me to go, I won't be going."

Newcastle were linked with a 12-million-pound move for Crouch

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Inter Milan midfielders Luis Figo (L) and Dejan Stankovic meet the press at the VIP lounge of Bahrain's international airport in Muharraq upon their arrival at the Gulf Kingdom on Tuesday.

'Hard to emulate 2006'

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Italian defender and World Player of the Year Fabio Cannavaro said Tuesday it would be hard to match last year's exploits in the coming 12 months but vowed to try to match an unforgettable 2006 which saw him lift the World Cup and then land a move to Spain.

"It'll be difficult (for 2007) to be as good as 2006, but this year's objective is to maintain my form," former Juventus star Cannavaro said as Real resumed full training after a short mid-season break.

The Italian, who said the recognition he received with his player of the year award was a major shot in the arm, went into the festive period smarting from two mistakes which helped modest Recreativo Huelva snatch a 3-0 win at the Bernabeu last month.

He added that "now it's tough when you have a bad game the knives are out."

At the weekend Real must travel to Deportivo La Coruna, who have slid into the bottom six, looking to catch leaders Seville and reigning champions Barcelona, whom the trail by five and two points -- though Barca have a game in hand.

Jose Antonio Reyes and Ruud van Nistelrooy were nursing knocks Tuesday but both are set to make the squad as La Liga resumes.

C'Ron offered to Barca!

INTERNET, undated

Cristiano Ronaldo's agent says he offered the Manchester United star to Barcelona last year.

The Portuguese winger is currently the hottest player in the Premiership after a sensational run of recent performances.

And a poll of Barca fans this week picked him out as the player they'd most like to see joining the reigning European champions.

Ronaldo's agent Jorge Mendes now says he actually offered the winger to the Catalan giants late last season.

He told El Mundo Deportivo: "I offered to the player to Barca (in April-May 2006), but they told me they were expecting to sign Thierry Henry and rejected a possible deal."

Mendes claims the price tag for Ronaldo might only have been around 12million pounds at that time, but says it's probably doubled since then.

He says his client is very happy at Old Trafford, and that United would be highly unlikely to sell him.

"At this point it is practically impossible that the player can join Barca because Manchester would not sell him for all the money in the world."

Diego best of the first half

REUTERS, Berlin

Brazilian playmaker Diego was voted the best player during the first half of the Bundesliga season in a Kicker magazine poll of 270 teammates and league rivals.

Kicker said on Tuesday 49.6 per cent had voted Werder Bremen's Diego, 21, as the best performer of the first half, well ahead of his teammates Miroslav Klose in second (32.7 percent) and Torsten Frings (4.1 percent) who was third.

Klose, a striker, and Hertha Berlin's Marko Pantelic are the league's top scorers with 10 goals each. Diego, an attacking midfielder, is fourth with eight.

Bremen, who have benefited greatly from Diego's move to Germany this season from Porto, lead the Bundesliga with 47 goals in 17 matches.

Robert Enke of Hanover 96 was voted best goalkeeper in the first half with 37.1 percent ahead of Bremen's Tim Wiese (24.9 percent) and Borussia Dortmund's Roman Weidenfeller (12.2).

Deco fancies Premiership

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona superstar Deco has played down reports of a move to Chelsea, but admits he'd like to play in the Premiership one day.

The Portuguese playmaker has recently been linked with a move to the English champions with Frank Lampard heading for the Nou Camp in exchange.

Deco won a Champions League with Blues boss Jose Mourinho when they were at Porto together, but the player says there's no truth in the rumours.

However, in an interview with Portuguese paper O Jogo, he added that he would love to play in England one day.

"I do not know if I am going to fulfil my contract at Barcelona

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New year, new Henry

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger insists Thierry Henry will provide the spark for a successful 2007 after the Arsenal captain returned from injury to inspire his side's 4-0 rout of Charlton.

Henry had been sidelined for five weeks with sciatica but he looked reinvigorated after that enforced break as he scored one and set up two more at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday to help Arsenal into fourth place and a coveted Champions League qualifying spot.

Wenger is convinced the striker has finally recovered not just from his injury but also the mental exhaustion brought on by playing for France in the World Cup.

The Gunners boss believes the draining experience of helping his country get to the final in July, only to be beaten on penalties by Italy, took its toll on Henry.

But he sees signs that his star striker has shaken off the cobwebs and is ready to lead Arsenal's challenge for the Champions League and the FA and League Cups.

"If you look across Europe, most of the players who played until the end of the World Cup has struggled," Wenger said.

"But he is in a good frame of mind now because he has been at the end of his physical and mental potential. He is refreshed and has

come back hungry and fresh.

"I'm convinced you will see a great Thierry Henry from now until the end of May."

Henry opened the scoring from the penalty spot in the 30th minute after Osei Sankofa was sent off for hauling down Robin van Persie.

From then on Henry was able to tease and torment Charlton at his leisure and he provided the pass for Justin Hoyte to score the second on the stroke of half-time.

Henry won another penalty when Souleymane Diawara fouled him in the 75th minute and van Persie converted the spot-kick before the Dutchman scored again in the last minute.

Wenger revealed Henry was still not fully fit but he had to play him after injuries ruled out Emmanuel Adebayor, Julio Baptista and Theo Walcott.

"He was as sharp as I expected," Wenger said. "Maybe it was an ideal game for him because it was 11 against 10 and the pace was not too high."

"I might have put him on the bench but we were so short that I had to start him. He is not 100 percent match fit yet."

"We have a lot to go for and a good Thierry Henry can make a difference in big games."

"We might be a long way from the title but we are still in the Champions League and have FA and League Cup matches coming up as well."

Wenger exchanged a brief hand-

shake with his Charlton counterpart Alan Pardew at full-time as they met for the first time since their touchline row in November, when Pardew was in charge at West Ham.

The French coach was adamant he did not hold a grudge against Pardew and he said: "It was a very sober exchange. I do not talk too much to a manager when they have lost a game out of respect."

Pardew's side remain in second bottom after their first defeat since he replaced Les Reed on Christmas Eve and he admitted injured leading scorer Darren Bent is likely to be out of action for several weeks.

England striker Bent has a knee injury and Pardew, who questioned Sankofa's red card, said: "Darren got the injury quite early in the game against Aston Villa and we didn't really think it was an issue until he went home and got a reaction to it."

"The scan has showed his ligaments have been strained. It doesn't warrant an operation but he is going to need some rest."

"He's out on Saturday and he'll be doubtful for the next two or three after that as well."

"It was hard without him but the decision to send off Sankofa was a triple-whammy."

"Van Persie was two yards offside and I didn't think Osei pulled him that hard. He went down quite dramatically and we were up against it after that."

Buffon pondering future

Football

AFP, Rome

Juventus keeper Gianluigi Buffon says he may quit the club unless they secure promotion and strengthen their squad.

Buffon was one of the few high-profile players to stick with Juve after their relegation from Serie A for their role in Calciopoli, the Italian match-fixing scandal.

But the 28-year-old, who kept goal for Italy in their triumphant World Cup campaign this year, may not hang around much longer



GIANLUIGI BUFFON

Swift return for Terry

Football

AFP, Birmingham

John Terry could play for Chelsea in the FA Cup against Macclesfield this weekend, barely a week after undergoing keyhole surgery on a back injury that has troubled him for much of the season. Terry trained with the rest of the Chelsea squad ahead of Tuesday's goalless Premier League away to Aston Villa -- which left the second-placed champions six points adrift of leaders Manchester United -- despite only having the minor operation last Thursday.

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho needs his captain more than ever now after defender Khalid Boulahrouz, who is expected to be sidelined for between four to six weeks, injured his knee ligaments against Villa.

"He opened up his knee in a tackle and it is ligament damage. It could be four to six weeks. It is hard for him because he was just back in the team after suspension," said Mourinho.

Portuguese defender