



Liverpool forward Craig Bellamy (R) is beaten to the ball by a Watford defender during their Premiership clash at Vicarage Road on Saturday.

PHOTO: INTERNET

Reds back on track

INTERNET, undated



Peter Crouch and Craig Bellamy helped Liverpool erase the pain of their Carling Cup humiliation with a 3-0 hammering of Watford.

Crouch, Bellamy and Dirk Kuyt started together in attack for the first time as Rafa Benitez boldly decided to change Liverpool's formation, with three in defence and Steve Finnan and Fabio Aurelio as wing-backs.

Crouch was the only striker to receive much service in the early stages as Liverpool started the game sluggishly, but the result was never in doubt after the first goal and The Reds finished the game with a swagger.

Steven Gerrard smashed a 25-yard effort just wide of Ben Foster's right-hand post after six minutes, but it seemed an age before Liverpool found their rhythm and they had to rely on set-pieces to threaten early on.

Watford's defensive frailties were highlighted at free-kicks as Crouch was twice allowed to peel

away to the back post to collect Gerrard's delivery, and on the second occasion he tested Foster with a low volley.

From the resultant corner Aurelio saw a goal rightly chalked out for offside as he turned in Finnan's mis-hit cross-shot, before Crouch headed straight at Foster from Finnan's cross moments later.

Watford only threatened sporadically but almost took the lead after 25 minutes as Hameur Bouazza sprinted in from the left and fired a shot inches wide of the post from just outside the area.

Liverpool broke the deadlock after 34 minutes as Crouch and Finnan combined to set up Bellamy. Crouch twice looked as though he had lost possession as he battled his way through towards goal, but his perseverance paid off as Foster rushed out and failed to gather the ball. It squirted out to Finnan and, with Foster stranded, he cleverly picked out Bellamy in the six-yard box to give him the simplest of tap-ins.

Tommy Smith had a glorious opportunity to equalise for Watford as he was played in to the penalty area down the right, but he showed

no composure as Reina approached and his shot across goal was so far wide of the mark it tickled out to hit the corner flag.

Watford were punished for Smith's miss as they found themselves 2-0 down after 40 minutes. Kuyt's header released Bellamy and, although the Welshman's strike was brilliantly parried by Foster, the ball bounced into Crouch's path and he headed into an empty net.

As the second half got underway Adrian Boothroyd brought Will Hoskins on for his Watford debut and Ashley Young quickly forced a fine save out of Jose Reina with a long-range drive.

However, any fleeting hopes Watford had of staging a comeback were snuffed out after 48 minutes as Crouch grabbed his second and Liverpool's third.

Aurelio fed Bellamy down the left and he was given time to cut the ball across goal to the unmarked Crouch 12 yards out. Full of confidence, the giant forward slotted his first-time shot coolly into the bottom left corner.

With Liverpool in full flow and the Watford backline in tatters a

goal looked likely every time The Reds broke forward, but Gerrard squandered a glorious opening as he blazed high and wide from inside the area.

Crouch was denied his hat-trick by a fine stop from Foster before being replaced by Jermaine Pennant after 69 minutes.

To their credit Watford continued to play positively, and Jordan Stewart's dipping half-volley from almost 30 yards was only kept out by the angle of post and crossbar.

Bouazza also came close to restoring some pride to the scoreline as his powerful free-kick was well held by Reina, and Watford saw a bit more of the ball in the closing stages as Liverpool took their foot off the gas.

Liverpool remained in control until the final whistle though and Bellamy, John Arne Riise and Aurelio all tried to pile more misery on Watford late on.

They had to settle for 3-0, a more than accurate reflection of their dominance, and Benitez will have been relieved to see his side return to winning ways.

Maria might quit early



AFP, Melbourne

Australian Open top seed Maria Sharapova said Saturday she will consider early retirement when she loses her motivation for top-level tennis and wants to start a family.

The 19-year-old Russian world No.2 said she was still hungry for more Grand Slams but would eventually examine the option taken by Kim Clijsters, who will retire at the end of the year aged 24 to have children and settle down.

"As long as I have the motivation, I'll definitely be playing," Sharapova said. "But I definitely think there are a lot of other things in life than tennis. I want to have a family, of course. I want to try other things in my career."

"Yeah, I can definitely see myself retiring at that age."

Sharapova, who made the semi-finals for the second time in Melbourne last year despite carrying an injury, said she wanted to maintain the momentum built up with her US Open win last September.

"I'm just ready to take it to the next level, hopefully get to the final or win it," she said.

"I'm glad that I could take the confidence that I played with at the (US) Open and take it through the end of the year, and hopefully start with that."

The Florida-based teen ended 2006 ranked a career-best world number two after a 19-match winning streak that was only ended by Belgian Justine Henin-Hardenne in the last tournament of the season.

Success at Flushing Meadows brought Sharapova's second Grand Slam, following the Wimbledon title she won in 2004.

She has had relatively little preparation heading into

Melbourne, limiting herself to the Champions Challenge in Hong Kong, where world No.5 Clijsters beat her in the final.

"I always like to take a week off with just training before a Grand Slam," she said.

"That's worked for me pretty well. I don't think I could physically play four, five matches and in two days start a two-week Grand Slam. I just don't think I'm ready for that yet."

Sharapova said her status as

top seed would give her opponents extra motivation at the Australian Open, where she faces France's Camille Pin in the first round.

"The level of women's tennis right now is pretty high. I think a lot of people would want to beat the No.1 seed," she said.

"It's just a matter of going out there and coming out with a win."

Sharapova said she would not be wearing the powder-blue dress resembling a baby-doll nightie she

sported at last year's tournament.

"Fashion-wise? I'm not doing baby doll any more. Baby doll has gone out the window," she said.

Instead, Sharapova will consolidate her position as the tour's glamour drawcard by wearing a high-waisted lemon-coloured chiffon number with a bow and "a little corset detail in the back".

"It's a pretty classy dress," she said.



Russian number one seed Maria Sharapova drives a forehand during a practice session in Melbourne on Saturday ahead of the Australian Open that begins tomorrow.

PHOTO: AFP

Real not tipsy

AFP, Madrid

No Real Madrid player turns up for training smelling of alcohol, keeper Iker Casillas insisted here Friday.

The Spanish international's assertion follows a remark made by the club's sporting director Pedja Mijatovic suggesting that some of the Bernabeu squad were not in a fit state to perform on the pitch.

Mijatovic, in the midweek interview with Cadena Ser radio, said: "There have been situations this season...where a player wasn't in a proper condition to carry out his job."

But having raised the issue Mijatovic refused to elaborate.

When tackled on the matter Friday Casillas issued a firm rebuttal on behalf of his teammates.

"I can assure you that no player smells of alcohol," he told a press conference.

"Things have been taken out of context which doesn't help anyone. I repeat: I've never come across a teammate with alcohol on his breath."

With Real Madrid enduring a near four-year trophyless run, Spanish media have taken frequent pleasure in recounting the nocturnal antics of some of Real Madrid's 'galacticos'.

Raul linked to Liverpool

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid captain Raul Gonzalez could move to English Premiership side Liverpool in the summer.

Spanish sports daily As Saturday speculated on its front page that the long-standing friendship between Raul and Liverpool coach Rafa Benitez, who was a Real youth coach during Raul's formative teenage years, could be the catalyst for the player to leave Real.

Raul could be another high-profile departure from the Spanish capital as Real coach Fabio Capello continues to wield a very large broom, clearing out the Spanish giants' aging but under-performing superstars.

Former England captain David Beckham announced on Thursday that he was joining Major League Soccer club Los Angeles Galaxy and Brazil's three-time World Player of the Year.

23 is the magic number

AFP, Los Angeles

The magic number for football fans around the world hungry for the future jersey of David Beckham appears to be 23.

Beckham told ESPN on Friday that he expects to be wearing 23 when he takes the field for the Los Angeles Galaxy of Major League Soccer next July to start his five-year, 250 million-dollar deal.

That would be the same number worn by Michael Jordan when he led the Chicago Bulls to six National Basketball Association titles in the 1990s.

Beckham, a big basketball fan, said it would be an honour to be linked in US sport history with such a legend as Jordan.

"I'm a huge fan of Michael Jordan. To wear the same number would be great," he said.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

Ayala wants new deal

INTERNET, undated

Roberto Ayala insists he wants to sign a new contract with Valencia ahead of the visit of Levante.

The 33-year-old, whose current deal expires in the summer, has been linked with Premiership clubs Chelsea and Liverpool as well as local rivals Villarreal, but claims his preference would be to remain at the Mestalla.

"I am playing, and of course I would like the future to be resolved as soon as possible," he said.

"I have roots here, the club has treated me very well. It would be a wrench for me to leave."

"My preference is that I remain here."

SEE PAGE 18 COL 6

Robben-Owen swap deal mooted

INTERNET, undated

Reports in Germany claim that Chelsea are to make a shock move for long time Manchester United target Owen Hargreaves.

The midfielder has made no secret of his desire to leave Bayern, and has been pursued by Sir Alex Ferguson since last summer's World Cup.

Now Bayern Munich claim that the Blues have made secret enquiries about the England midfielder and, worryingly for United, the German club may be keen to listen to offers from the West London side after expressing an interest in

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4

Game not glitz for Becks



AFP, Los Angeles

David Beckham insisted Friday he's making the move to the Los Angeles Galaxy as a footballer, not a celebrity, but such star power is sure to shine bright in Hollywood.

"I'm coming there not to be a superstar, I'm coming there to be part of the team," Beckham said as he addressed Los Angeles media from Spain, where he is still under contract to Real Madrid.

However, not many workhorse players come with a 250 million-dollar price tag, and Beckham's blockbuster five-year deal, set to take effect after his Real contract concludes in June, already had Los Angeles buzzing.

Beckham admitted he had sought the advice of celebrity pal Tom Cruise as he pondered the move, which he believes will be a perfect fit for his family - which includes pop singer wife Victoria and three sons.

Locals awoke to saturation coverage of two topics rarely on the

radar in Southern California - soccer and snow.

While the light snow that dusted some parts of the famously balmy region was gone before mid-day, Beckham's influence was just beginning to be felt.

A veteran of two of the highest profile clubs in the world - Manchester United and Real Madrid - Beckham will instantly raise the profile of Major League Soccer, which continues to be overshadowed by the National Football League, National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball and even the National Hockey League.

"David Beckham is not joining the Galaxy as an athlete, but as an advertising campaign," columnist Bill Plaschke wrote in the Los Angeles Times.

It's an impression Beckham and his new team are keen to refute - at least up to a point.

"I think the last two days are a pretty good test of what this means to the sport," said Timothy Leiweke, president and CEO of the AEG ownership group that operates the Galaxy.

Leiweke has predicted that Beckham's impact on football in the United States will exceed that of any other player on any other sport globally - bigger, for instance, than Tiger Woods' impact on golf.

But Leiweke said the former England skipper's crossover appeal wasn't his only recommendation.

"I think people underestimate this as a soccer deal," he said. "This deal was not done ultimately to go out and make records, it was done because David is a very good soccer player."

That sentiment was echoed by Galaxy general manager Alexi Lalas.

"This decision is based on soccer," Lalas said. "The important thing is the team on the field. ... is this somebody that's going to help our team win? The answer is yes."

While Beckham has been marginalized at Real Madrid this season, Leiweke noted that at 31, the former England skipper is no older than many of the top stars in other US sports - comparing him to Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning and the NBA's Allen Iverson.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5



PHOTO: AFP

Players of the LA Galaxy listen to David Beckham (R) as he addresses a press conference via video conferencing from Madrid in Marina del Rey in California on Friday.

Beckham won't play again: Capello



AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid midfielder David Beckham will never play for the team again, coach of the Spanish giants Fabio Capello said on Saturday.

Capello, speaking at a press conference, said 31-year-old Beckham, who confirmed on Thursday he would join Los Angeles Galaxy next season on a five-year, 250 million-dollar deal, was now completely out of his plans.

"The player's decision to go to Los Angeles on such a big contract means we cannot count on him, although he has been a great professional," Capello said.

"He is not going to play any more. The fact he wanted to go was down to him, not to me."

The former England captain,

who has been on the substitutes bench for most of the season, is still under contract to the club till June and the next six months could turn out to be the longest of his life.

Capello had already brought in Argentine playmaker Fernando Gago to occupy the spot in the centre of the field where Beckham was sometimes used under previous coaches like Wanderley Luxemburgo and Mariano Garcia Ramon as he tries to stamp his mark on the club he coached to the 1997 Spanish league title in his previous spell at the helm.

The Italian had previously made it clear that Beckham was low down the pecking order on the right wing with club captain Raul Gonzalez, Jose Antonio Reyes and Robinho all preferred.

Arguably the final insult, and one which may have contributed to the timing of his departure

announcement, could have been seeing Robinho, who is normally a left-sided player, chosen ahead of him for Thursday's Spanish Cup match at Real Betis.

It appeared Capello had been having doubts about Beckham's commitment in recent months, particularly since he took time off to go to Tom Cruise's pre-wedding dinner near Rome in November.

Beckham went to Italy with the club's permission but Capello is believed to have been furious with his player, who he apparently thought should have been working on his recovery from a left knee injury rather than rubbing shoulders with his showbiz pals.

Capello only gave Beckham a starting role for Real in five league games this season. The club are currently third in the Spanish Primera Liga five points behind leaders Sevilla.

Civil war at Chelsea

THE GUARDIAN



Jose Mourinho intends to drop Andriy Shevchenko from Chelsea's squad for the Premiership match with Wigan today in a direct challenge to Roman Abramovich to sack him immediately.

Chelsea's manager has been prevented from recruiting the new striker he considers essential to the club's domestic and European campaigns and denied even minor funds to purchase a central defender to replace John Terry, whose return from back surgery is proving more problematic than expected.

Mourinho has also been infuriated by the club's attempt to dismiss Steve Clarke and replace his assistant with a Russian-speaking Israeli coach to help Shevchenko rediscover his form. Mourinho's response to the board was to request that rather than change his backroom staff, Chelsea's owner should tell Shevchenko "to do some work for once".

Abramovich's close friendship with his £30m summer signing appears set to cost Chelsea the services of the man who has won back-to-back titles in his two full seasons in England. Citing ineffective spending in previous transfer windows, the Russian and his advisers told Mourinho in a recent strategy meeting that under no circumstances would he be allowed to add a striker to the squad and instructed him to use Shevchenko properly.

An earlier attempt by the manager to swap Shaun Wright-Phillips plus cash for Jermain Defoe had been put to Tottenham only to be vetoed by the Chelsea hierarchy. A subsequent loan exchange of the England winger for Aston Villa's striker Milan Baros was also blocked, even though no expenditure would have been involved.

Mourinho has also been stopped from bringing in cover for Terry. Aware that the eight-figure fee needed to buy his preferred target, Manchester City's Micah Richards, would not be provided, the Portuguese proposed a series of low-cost alternatives. However,

agreed deals for Oguchi Onyewu, a US international who had been in talks with Fulham and would have cost £1m, and the Portugal centre-back Jorge Andrade, available on loan from Deportivo La Coruña, were knocked back.

As an alternative, the club proposed bringing the Brazil international, Alex, to Stamford Bridge from PSV Eindhoven. The 24-year-old's sporting rights are already owned by Chelsea and he is a favourite of the club's senior scout, Frank Arnesen, but Mourinho does not rate Alex and refuses to have players imposed upon his squad.

Instead Mourinho has resolved to leave Shevchenko in the reserves, continue with the players available and await Abramovich's next move, aware that the Russian is considering paying off his £5.2m-a-year contract. Mourinho has also instructed his agent, Jorge Mendes, to field offers from interested parties, primarily Real Madrid, whose president Ramon Calderon would like to recruit both the coach and Frank Lampard as he prepares for re-election.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1