

CHELSEA BACK TO WINNING WAYS United keep their distance

AFP, London



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said it was critical the Premier-ships leaders did not become distracted by title talk after a 3-1 win against Aston Villa saw them stay six points clear at the top of the table.

Reigning champions Chelsea remained second with a 4-0 home victory over Wigan to end a modest run of three successive league draws but Ferguson, whose side now travel to fourth-place Arsenal said it was vital United kept their eye on the task in hand.

"We want to go to Arsenal and get the result we want. That is the only thing we can think about," Ferguson said.

First-half goals from Park Ji-Sung, Michael Carrick and Cristiano Ronaldo put United in an impregnable position.

It was United's third win over the Birmingham club in as many weeks after a 3-0 success in the league at Villa Park and a 2-1 third round FA Cup victory the previous weekend.

Reigning champions Chelsea stayed second with a 4-0 home victory over Wigan while Liverpool remained third after a 3-0 win away to basement club Watford.

Arsenal belied their reputation for being a soft touch in the north with a 2-0 win away to Blackburn despite playing most of the match with 10 men.

They lost Gilberto Silva in the 13th minute after the Brazil midfielder was sent-off for kicking out at Robbie Savage.

Despite that setback Kolo Toure put Arsenal ahead before a rapid counter-attack goal from skipper Thierry Henry sealed victory 19 minutes from time at Ewood Park.

"We controlled the game quite well," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, whose side had already won twice at Rovers's north-west rivals Liverpool this year to knock the Merseysiders out of both the FA and League Cups.

"Overall it was a great combination of quality, talent and solidarity. We are a very young team and we didn't concede which was very pleasing."

Commenting on Gilberto's red card, the Frenchman added: "It looked very harsh. Gilberto is a very honest man and he said he didn't touch him."

"But he has retaliated and he should not have done it at all."

Struggling Charlton went down 3-1 against Middlesbrough while West Ham also stayed in the relegation zone after a 3-3 draw against London rivals Fulham.

Bolton remained fifth with a goalless draw at home to Manchester City while Euro rivals Portsmouth, in sixth, drew 1-1 away to Sheffield United.

South Korea international Park followed up his own blocked shot to give Manchester United an 11th minute lead against Villa.

Two minutes later Park turned provider for Carrick before the England midfielder supplied the cross for Ronaldo to head home in the 35th minute.

Gabriel Agbonlahor pulled a goal back for Villa early in the second-half.

Frank Lampard ignored the

speculation surrounding manager Jose Mourinho's future to fire Chelsea into an early lead with a long-range free-kick.

But a first win in four league games wasn't secured until Arjen Robben made it 2-0 on the hour before the Dutch international's 70th minute cross was turned into his own net by Wigan keeper Chris Kirkland.

Didier Drogba added a fourth in the final minute at Stamford Bridge.

Afterwards, Portuguese boss Mourinho gave little away, saying: "Chelsea is important, not me."

West Ham remained in the bottom three after a see-saw home draw.

Tomasz Radzinski gave Fulham a 16th-minute lead before striker Bobby Zamora, sent off late-on for a second yellow-card, levelled.

Yossi Benayoun put the Hammers ahead early in the second-half but Fulham's United States striker Brian McBride tied the game at 2-2.

However, Israel's Benayoun restored West Ham's lead before French defender Philippe Christanval drew Fulham level in the last minute.

Charlton went ahead through former Boro striker Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink at The Valley.

But Boro bounced back through Lee Cattermole's equaliser on the stroke of half-time before goals from Julio Arca and Aiyegbeni Yakubu completed the recovery.

Craig Bellamy's strike and a double from fellow striker Peter Crouch gave Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez a much-needed victory at Watford.

10 clear of Roma who visit

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Mancini plays down record

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini has played down the significance of his team's record-breaking 12-match winning streak.

The Italian champions won 3-1 at Torino on Saturday to set a new record of consecutive victories in Serie A and open up a 10-point lead at the top of the table.

But Mancini said the new benchmark would count for nothing unless the Scudetto remains in the club's trophy cabinet at the end of the season.

"This record changes nothing and the boys haven't even been speaking about it," said the Inter coach.

"Twelve league wins on the trot is an important achievement because it brings us closer to our objective, but it will be meaningless if we don't win the title."

Zlatan Ibrahimovic, scorer of Inter's second goal, insisted the record had not entered the players' minds.

"We haven't given it a thought," said the Sweden international whose sublime hooked shot brought him his eighth goal of the season.

"We always try to win and it just so happens that this run has broken a record. But no team is perfect and we can always improve."

Inter equalled Roma's record of 11 straight wins - which was set last season by the capital club -- when they beat Atalanta 2-1 in the previous round of matches.

Yet another win for Inter, who finished third last season but were handed the title after Juventus and AC Milan were found guilty of match-fixing, left them on 51 points, 10 clear of Roma who visit

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PHOTO: AFP

Inter Milan defender Marco Materazzi kisses his jersey after scoring against Torino in their Serie A encounter at the Olimpico stadium in Turin on Saturday.

Terry firmly behind Mourinho

AFP, London

Chelsea captain John Terry firmly backed manager Jose Mourinho to say he was the best in the business and that senior players would do their best to ensure he stays with the Premiership champions.

Mourinho's possible departure from Stamford Bridge has been reported widely in the British press, fuelled by his reluctance to publicly scotch talk of a summer move.

Mourinho, who is 44 next week, has led Chelsea to successive Premiership titles and Terry admits he would hate to see him go. Terry said: "We all agree that we don't want Jose to go and if it takes five or six of the senior players to tell them so, then that's what we're prepared to do."

"Jose is the best in the business, there's no doubt about that, and I'm sure he will be for the next 20 years. That's what we want at Chelsea - the best and only the best. So there is no way we want the best boss around to be walking away."

"We don't want to see top people leaving. Jose Mourinho must stay. We are all loyal to Jose. We know what he has done for us as players and for this club as a whole. This situation is putting pressure on everyone at this club."

However Terry, who is currently out of action after a back operation, added: "I am convinced he will stay. I think he will be here again next season, I really do. I don't think he will be going anywhere."

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Rampant Inter set record

AFP, Rome

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open up a 10-point lead at the top of the table.

Adriano's header gave Inter a deserved half-time lead in Turin, only for Stefano Fiore to equalise in the 59th minute with a deflected shot.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic's sublime strike just 30 seconds later restored the champions' advantage before Marco Materazzi's late penalty ended Torino's resistance.

Torino keeper Christian Abbiati was sent off for clumsily bringing down Adriano for the spot-kick and substitute Massimo Taibi's first job was to pick the ball out of the net.

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clear of Roma who visit Messina on Sunday.

In Saturday's early match Empoli beat relegation-threatened Parma 2-0 to stake their claim as outsiders for the fourth and final Champions League place.

Coached by former Inter boss Alberto Zaccheroni, Torino started aggressively, snapping quickly into the tackle and showing no signs of fatigue as league action returned in Italy after a three-week break.

But Inter held their nerve and hit their hosts on the break in the 24th minute.

Brazilian wingback Maicon tore down the right wing and crossed into the box for Adriano whose flicked header gave Abbiati no chance.

Adriano should have doubled his tally before half-time when Ibrahimovic cut the ball back invitingly after a robust run, but the Brazil international sliced his shot wide.

Torino had Inter under the cosh at the start of the second half and their positive approach brought them back on level terms, although

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Roger, Kim favourites

Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

Roger Federer, a rare loss to Andy Roddick notwithstanding, is all the rage to chase down his third Australian Open title over the next fortnight.

The Swiss world number one, who has dominated men's tennis for three years, kicks off his title defence against German 83rd-ranked Bjorn Phau on Monday.

Only eight players in the Open Era (post-1969) have successfully defended their Australian Open crown, the last time by Andre Agassi in 2001.

Federer suffered a rare defeat by Andy Roddick in Saturday's final

"Now the first slam is around the corner. Hope I can do well here."

If Federer is, as expected, going to play in the final, that doesn't bode well for the chances of Roddick, 2005 champion Marat Safin and last year's finalist Marcos Baghdatis, who are all in the same half of the draw.

World number two Rafael Nadal is the man considered the best chance to topple Federer.

The 20-year-old Spaniard, who downed Federer in four finals last year, says he has recovered from a right thigh injury that forced him out of last week's Sydney International.

"I just try to play my best tennis here. To play Federer, it's always the same. I need to be in the final," Nadal said.

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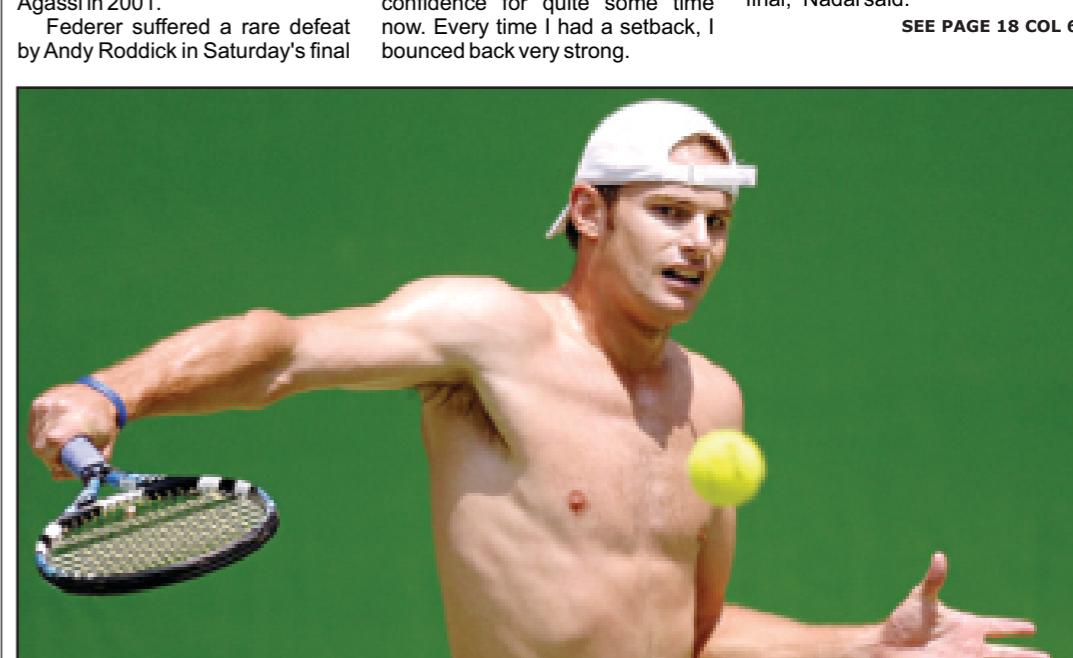


PHOTO: AFP
US star Andy Roddick hits a backhand return during training in Melbourne on Sunday in the lead-up to the Australian Open that begins today.

England snub drove Becks: Robson

AFP, London

Real axe stuns Beckham

Football

AFP, Madrid

Former England manager Bobby Robson has claimed it was David Beckham's ousting from the national side which resulted in him moving to semi-retirement with Los Angeles Galaxy.

Real Madrid's 31-year-old former England skipper revealed on Thursday he would next season play for the American team on a 250-million-dollar, five-year contract.

Robson was convinced the decision of national boss Steve McLaren to overlook Beckham for the Euro 2008 qualifier in Croatia last October, despite a long injury list, convinced Beckham his days at the top were numbered.

"The decision killed Beckham's aspiration and hope and, in my view, led directly to this week's announcement that he is off the United States for a very lucrative semi-retirement," 73-year-old Robson claimed in his column for the Mail on Sunday.

"You have to say now that McLaren was right. Those of us, including myself, who wanted Beckham to be involved did so because we felt he was among England's top 25 players," said Robson.

"I'm sure Alexi or Frank Yallop will try to bring him over as quickly as possible," said Rodriguez.

"It would be in (owners') AEG and LA Galaxy's best interests to buy out the rest of his contract."

Beckham has not been part of Capello's plans since the early part of the season.

Club captain Raul Gonzalez, Jose Antonio Reyes and Robinho, who are all principally left-sided players, have all been selected on the right wing in preference to Beckham.

Sources at the club have also suggested that Capello has been having doubts about Beckham's commitment ever since he took time off to go to Tom Cruise's pre-wedding dinner near Rome in November.

Beckham's fellow superstar Ronaldo remains part of Capello's plans, but only just.

The Real coach is reported to have told Real president Ramon Calderon on Monday that Beckham and Ronaldo were not part of his long-term strategy, a meeting that may have precipitated Beckham's surprise announcement three days later.

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