



Sporting Lisbon striker Carlos Bueno (R) celebrates with teammate Liedson Nuniz after hitting four goals in their Portuguese league match against Nacional at Lisbon on Saturday.

Jose rubbishes Real talk

Football

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho rubbished speculation that he has decided to join Real Madrid after watching Chelsea sustain their Premiership challenge with a 1-0 win over Charlton.

Reports on Spanish television suggested Mourinho had informed friends and colleagues that he will replace Fabio Capello, the current Real head coach, at the end of the season after growing disillusioned at Stamford Bridge.

The Portuguese has been involved in a series of disputes with Roman Abramovich, the Chelsea owner, over issues ranging from the signing of Andriy Shevchenko to an alleged boardroom veto on new signings in the January transfer window.

The unrest had appeared to subside in the last fortnight and Mourinho moved quickly to quash the latest round of rumours, claiming that they had been spread by mischief-makers with an agenda to unsettle both Chelsea and Real.

BUNDESLIGA

Hertha horror for Huub

AFP, Berlin

New Hamburg coach Huub Stevens failed to reinvigorate rock-bottom SV Hamburg on Saturday as the struggling Bundesliga side surrendered a one goal lead to lose 2-1 at his former club Hertha Berlin.

Alexander Laas gave Stevens, who replaced the sacked Thomas Doll in midweek, the perfect start with a 1-0 win after 33 minutes.

But Hertha, who had seen Serbian striker Marko Pantelic miss a ninth-minute penalty, levelled when international defender Arne Friedrich scored in the 78th minute.

Brazilian striker Mineiro, who was brought in during the transfer window, then hit the winner with a thundering strike in the second minute of injury time.

The defeat left Hamburg firmly rooted to the foot of the table with just one win and 15 points to their name and facing the prospect of losing their top status after 43 years.

It was their seventh defeat of the season and left them four points from safety.

Hertha stay in fifth place, a point behind Bayern Munich who were beaten 3-0 by Nuremberg on Friday to hand returning coach Ottmar Hitzfeld the worst possible start to his second spell in charge of the Bavarian giants.

Eight-placed Hanover, who beat Hertha 5-0 last week, were in the goals again on Saturday with a 4-1 trouncing of Alemannia Aachen.

Borussia Monchengladbach gave their new coach Jos Luhukay, who has replaced Jupp Heynckes, a winning start with a 2-0 success at Arminia Bielefeld for the club's first win since October 14.

On Friday, Hitzfeld endured a nightmare return to the Bayern hotseat.

Having led Bayern to the German title in 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2003 as well as the 2001 Champions League crown, he replaced the sacked Felix Magath in midweek.

But he was left in no doubt about the task he faces as the result left the Munich side in fourth place in the table, eight points behind leaders Werder Bremen.

Hitzfeld admitted he viewed a video tape of the game on Saturday and he didn't like what he saw.

"It wasn't pleasant viewing. It was a disgrace to the name of Bayern Munich," raged the coach.

"I knew I'd taken on a tough task, but I'm slightly surprised at how tough it's going to be. We caved in at the end."

"I won't play this game," he said.

"If someone doesn't respect Chelsea or myself then that is their problem - I will not get involved. I respect Real Madrid and Fabio Capello and, for sure, I spoke with nobody and nobody spoke with me.

"I don't think a big club like Real or a big coach like Fabio deserve this sort of thing and I won't play this game. If others want to, that is up to them. But it is important that I send this message to Fabio because I respect him a lot."

"There are apparently 12 on the list (to replace Mourinho at Chelsea) - some confirm, some close their mouths, some are happy to see their names in the light but that is their problem, not my problem."

Mourinho preferred to focus on Chelsea slushing the gap to Premiership leaders Manchester United to three points with Saturday's hard-fought win, secured by Frank Lampard's eighth goal in as many games.

The England midfielder pounced in the 18th minute with a typically clinical long-range drive, after Shevchenko had snuffed posses-

sion from Andy Faye.

Chelsea were forced to endure a late barrage from Charlton, with Petr Cech forced into two smart saves from Faye, but their defence boosted by the presence of John Terry for the final five minutes after six weeks out with a back injury - held firm.

The Blues manager was thrilled at his captain's return, although he urged Steve McLaren, the England manager, not to make him play for 90 minutes in the friendly international with Spain on Wednesday.

"When opponents decides to kick balls into the box, having Petr Cech there makes me feel comfortable and having JT there gives us even more confidence," Mourinho added.

"I think now that opponents have to forget what teams have done to us over the last couple of months because now we have our defensive security back."

"I hope JT plays a period of the game with Spain and then comes back to us ready to play. I have an open communication with Steve and we have spoken a lot, so he

knows he is ready. But JT cannot play 90 minutes because of his physical condition."

Alan Pardew, the Charlton manager, refused to be downcast after seeing his side's mini revival brought to a halt, and predicted the belief gained from a perky performance will stand them in good stead for their relegation battle, even though Wigan's win over Portsmouth has opened up a gap of five points above the bottom three.

"Our commitment and effort was fantastic the ovation we got at the end was recognition that we had put everything into the match," Pardew said. "If we keep doing that, we will have a great chance of staying in the division."

"We knew that if we lost this very difficult game, the other teams were going to get ahead of us but ultimately we need 38 or 40 points and we can still do that. This keeps the momentum going: Sheffield United and West Ham have lost and six clubs are still involved in this."

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will have loved to have come here and put on a bigger show."

Liverpool did not deserve to win despite dominating possession for much of a niggly and unevenly game.

"We got frustrated but we had plenty of possession," added Benitez. "I think we were doing a lot of things really well but the players were nervous at times."

"We had possession, passing, three strikers and Jermaine Pennant and John Arne Riise wide to provide crosses."

"We were doing a lot of things right and were attacking all the time."

Everton might have celebrated a

Benitez attacks Everton

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez let his frustration at Liverpool's fading title hopes get the better of him as he launched a bitter attack on Merseyside rivals Everton.

Benitez voiced his displeasure at Everton's defensive tactics and branded them a "small club" after a 0-0 draw at Anfield that left Liverpool 10 points behind leaders Manchester United.

The Spaniard accused his rivals of being negative and playing with too many men behind the ball.

"That's what small clubs do when they come to Anfield," said Benitez. "One team wanted to win and one didn't want to lose. When you play against a top side a draw is sometimes good."

Everton manager David Moyes dismissed Benitez's accusations as he celebrated a hard-earned point which helped his club's chances of

securing a place in next season's UEFA Cup.

"It's nice of some managers to show a bit of humility," Moyes responded sarcastically.

"We're doing our best to bridge the gap between Liverpool and Everton, but there's about 100 million pounds spending power between the two clubs."

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Lens go second

AFP, Paris

Goals from Eric Carriére, Seydou Keita and Issam Jemaa lifted Lens back into second place in the French league with a 3-1 win at Valenciennes Saturday as Lille were held to a goalless draw at home by Nantes.

A Carrière header after 28 minutes put Lens ahead, with Keita strengthening their grip on the game with a volley just before the half-time whistle.

Steve Savidan pulled a goal back for Valenciennes with a 61st-minute penalty before Jemaa completed his ninth goal of the season after 53 minutes just minutes before the Lille midfielder was stretchered off with a sprained ankle.

The injury is a blow for Lille ahead of potentially key ties against Lyon and then Manchester United in the Champions League later this month.

"This away win is an important one for us having not won since the winter break," said Lens coach Francis Gillot.

"We put up a good fight but weren't rewarded," said Lille coach Claude Puel.

Nantes coach Georges Eo was

third one point behind.

Champions Lyon travel to lowly Troyes on Sunday with an 11-point cushion.

Misfiring Nigerian striker Peter Odemwingie let a string of chances slip by as Lille stumbled for the second time in a week at home to lowly Nantes, after being eliminated from the French Cup by the Canaries midweek.

Nantes, without injured midfielder Emere Fae and first choice goalkeeper Fabien Barthez, were content to sit back and defend, but despite dominating Lille failed to break through. A Lamine Diatta own goal after 72 minutes handed the three points to Sedan.

Sedan's Tony Heurtebise did well to stop Mathieu Bodmer scoring his ninth goal of the season after 53 minutes just minutes before the Lille midfielder was stretchered off with a sprained ankle.

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Bueno scores four

REUTERS, Lisbon

Uruguayan Carlos Bueno struck four times in the second half to help Sporting crush Nacional Madeira 5-1 and leaders Porto suffered a shock home defeat by Estrela Amadora in the Portuguese Premier League on Saturday.

The victory lifted Sporting into second place, three points behind leaders Porto who lost 1-0 to Amadora.

Porto top the standings with 40 points, followed by Sporting on 37 and Benfica, who were held 0-0 at home by Boavista on Friday, on 36.

Sporting fell behind after 26 minutes to a goal by Bruno Amaro but struck back after halftime with three goals by Bueno, the first a header from a cross by Joao Moutinho. The Uruguayan winger grabbed his fourth goal in stoppage time.

Brazilian striker Liedson, who missed a penalty on 62 minutes, claimed the other Sporting goal.

Porto, unbeaten at home since October 2005 and without suspended winger Ricardo Quaresma and defender Pepe, controlled much of the game against Amadora but could not find a way through.

Striker Helder Postiga had an effort ruled out for offside one minute from time and mid-table Amadora stretched their unbeaten run to eight matches when substitute Anselmo grabbed the winner in stoppage time, tapping in a cross from the right.

Benfica's title challenge suffered a setback when they were held 0-0 by Boavista at home on Friday with striker Nuno Gomes squandering several good chances to score.

Roon yet to mature: Fergie

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson insisted that Wayne Rooney can only get better as his team target the Premiership and Champions League titles.

The United manager believes that the 21-year-old England spearhead benefited from being left on the bench against Portsmouth recently before coming on as a substitute with devastating effect.

He replaced Ole Gunnar Solskjær at Fratton Park and made sure of the three points with two goals in the final 13 minutes.

Rooney then hit final goal in Wednesday's demolition of Watford.

"I think he has taken encouragement from getting a rest," said Ferguson.

"We left him out for the Pompey game and I think that was worth doing from his perspective because it gave him the opportunity to realise how important it is."

"Even just an hour's rest seemed to galvanise him. He came on as a fresh player almost, and I think that was important for us. These odd goals he is scoring give me great encouragement that he is coming into his best form now."

Such is Rooney's superb goalscoring record there was talk of a mini-crisis earlier this season when he went eight games without scoring before responding to his drought by netting a hat-trick at Bolton.

"He is not a goalscorer who is going to stay in the penalty box. He wants to link the play and be in the box at the same time and because he is 21 he has not got the knowledge to do both things."

"The part we want to see the development in is where he starts getting these odd goals. It will make a hell of a difference to him as a goalscorer because he is a finisher, there is no doubt about that."

Thailand's D-day on Tuesday

AFP, Bangkok

The Asian Football Federation (AFF) will convene a special meeting on Tuesday to decide whether to punish Thailand for walking off the pitch for 15 minutes against Singapore in the regional final.

The AFF held a scheduled meeting in Bangkok ahead of the second leg of the final here on Sunday and opted to meet again in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the scenes that marred the first leg.

"After studying all the relevant reports from the Match Commissioner and the Referee Assessor, it is felt that we need to study the issue further," Ibrahim Saad, who was AFF head of delegation in Singapore, said on the AFF website.

"We will decide then if there had been a breach of discipline in the game."

The Thai team stormed off the pitch last Wednesday in the first leg in Singapore after a controversial refereeing decision gave the hosts a penalty eight minutes from time.

They eventually returned and Mustafic Fahrudin converted the spotkick to hand Singapore a 2-1 victory.

Officials from both sides have urged Thai and Singapore fans to stay calm at the potentially volatile second leg.

Time for action

AFP, Rome

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