



READING HOLD UNITED Chelsea win at a canter

AFP, London

Didier Drogba's 26th goal of the season helped Chelsea ease into the last eight of the FA Cup on Saturday as Arsenal and Manchester United were both forced into unwanted replays.

Arsenal were unable to find a way past Blackburn goalkeeper Brad Friedel in a goalless draw at the Emirates Stadium while the Red Devils were left red-faced after a 1-1 draw with a second-string Reading side.

Chelsea, who are still in the hunt for four trophies this season, were joined in the quarter-finals by Watford, who snatched a late winner at home to Ipswich, and Plymouth, who reached the last eight for the first time since 1984

courtesy of a 2-0 win over Championship pacesetters Derby at Home Park.

West Brom twice came from behind to earn a 2-2 draw at Middlesbrough.

Icelandic midfielder Brynjar Gunnarsson was Reading's hero at Old Trafford, heading in a second-half equaliser after Michael Carrick had fired United ahead with a low 25-yarder with virtually the last kick of the first half.

United squandered a string of chances to kill off what was virtually a reserve Reading side.

Norwich lived up to their pre-match pledge to have a go at Chelsea with a lively start in which Dickson Etuhu struck the post and Lee Croft's follow-up was cleared off the line by Khalid Boulahrouz.

But the Canaries were deflated six minutes before the break when a Shaun Wright-Phillips shot was deflected past substitute goalkeeper Paul Gallagher.

Drogba's close-range volley

made the outcome safe six minutes after the break and strikes by Michael Essien and Andriy Shevchenko put a flattering gloss on the scoreline.

The win was marred by a recurrence of the injury jinx that has been haunting Chelsea all season with Boulahrouz forced off with a dislocated shoulder having only just returned to action following a knee ligament injury.

Friedel earned Blackburn a replay by producing a string of top-quality saves, capped by a superb double stop in the dying seconds which saw him fling himself to his right to tip away Thierry Henry's close-range shot before scrambling to his left to block Justin Hoyte's fierce low drive.

Nigeria striker Aiyegbeni Yakubu rediscovered his touch from the penalty spot but could not prevent Middlesbrough from being held by West Brom.

Yakubu, who missed two penalties in midweek, converted from

the spot on the stroke of half-time after Mark Schwarzer had allowed Diomansy Kamara's shot to trick through his fingers to cancel out Julio Arca's early header.

Kevin Phillips grabbed West Brom's second equaliser with a deflected shot and the Baggies held on in the final stages after defender Curtis Davies was sent off after receiving a second booking for a foul on Mark Viduka.

Kevin Gallen only managed to convert one of the two first-half penalties that Plymouth won against Derby but on-loan Chelsea teenager Scott Sinclair made sure of the win for Ian Holloway's side with a late strike.

Damien Francis ensured the recent upturn in Watford's fortunes continued by scoring with a low shot after good work by Tommy Smith on the right wing, two minutes from the end of a tight battle against Ipswich at Vicarage Road.

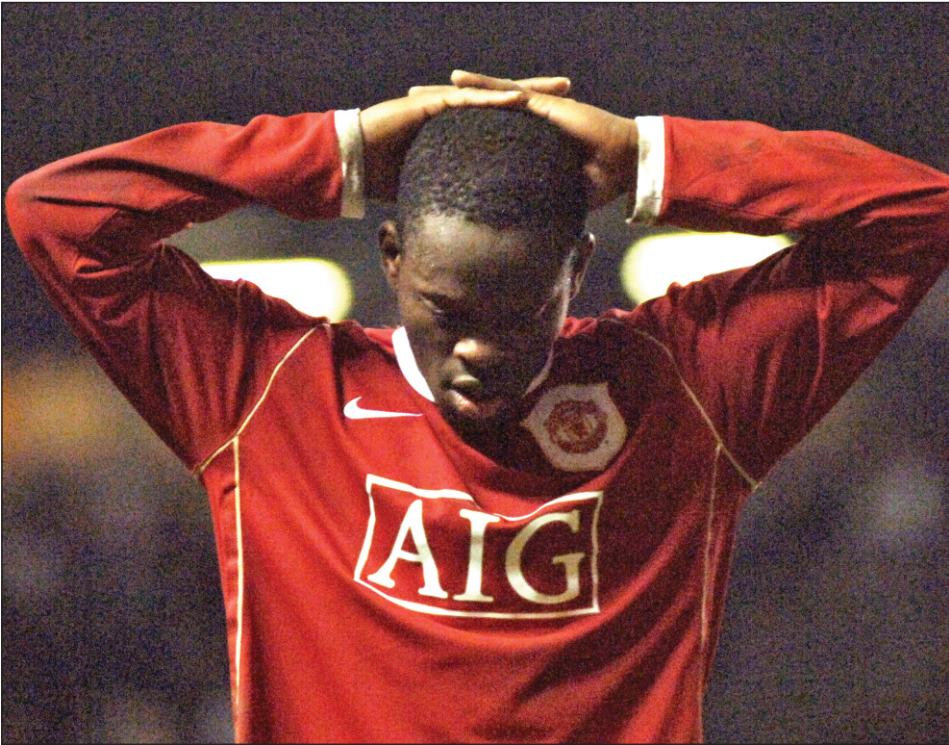


PHOTO: AFP

Abolish replays: Wenger

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger called for the abolition of FA Cup replays after Arsenal were held to a 0-0 draw by dogged Blackburn.

The stalemate at the Emirates stadium on Saturday means the north Londoners must shoe-horn a fifth round replay, on February 28, into an already bloated fixture list, which includes seven matches in the next four weeks.

Wenger has already seen his weary squad negotiate a fourth round replay with Bolton but he fears his players could be overwhelmed by the physical and mental demands of such a gruelling schedule.

With that in mind, he urged the English Football Association to examine the possibility of making all FA Cup ties finish at the first attempt, although his hopes of success are not high.

"There is a lot that can be done to help the problem of games but nobody is willing to do it," he said. "Replays in the FA Cup could be stopped, with penalties being held straight away."

"There is no magic solution because in order to cut down the number of games, something has to be sacrificed and to do that would damage the traditions of the English game. I would be very happy with stopping replays but other clubs I suspect would not."

As if to emphasise his point, Mark Hughes, the Blackburn manager, immediately suggested such an idea would prove unworkable as it would make the possibility of upsets even more remote.

"I can understand why Arsene is saying that because he is fighting on all fronts," he said. "Successful sides do not want any more games but from my point of view, we deserved some reward from this game and it would have been hard to have been made to play extra-time."

PSG impress against Nancy

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint Germain followed up their midweek UEFA Cup heroics against AEK Athens in the best possible way with a 3-0 win over 10-man Nancy on Saturday.

PSG teed themselves up for Thursday's return leg visit by the Greeks with an important domestic victory which will have boosted their hopes of pulling clear of the relegation zone.

Paul Le Guen's men climbed one place to sixth from the foot, two points above the drop zone, with the win kicked off by captain Pedro Pauleta's 71st minute penalty awarded after Frederic Blancalan's dubious handball.

Nancy keeper Damien Gregorini saved Pauleta's first strike but Pierre-Alain Frau picked-up the rebound and passed to Pauleta who made no mistake at the second attempt.

This was compensation for the Portuguese international who had a goal disallowed on the quarter of an hour mark for off-side but it so incensed Nancy manager Pablo Correa he was expelled from the dugout.

Frau added a second with five minutes on the clock before Marcelo Gallardo, who had set up that goal, rounding off an excellent night's work for the capital side with a third with one minute on the clock.

Nancy were reduced to 10 men after Brazilian striker Kim was given his marching orders in the 77th minute for a second yellow card.

Temper flared between the benches in Nice's 1-0 win over fellow strugglers Valenciennes.

The latter's coach, Antonie Kombouare, was sent packing to the stands after a fierce verbal altercation with his opposite number, Frederic Antonetti after Valenciennes' Steve Savidan was booked for diving.

Up at the top of the table Sochaux moved up to fourth, level on 39 points with Lille, after a 2-0 win over Le Mans.

The headline match of the weekend was on Friday when Brazilian international striker Fred inspired

champions Lyon to a come from behind 2-1 victory at Lille to give them a much needed boost ahead of their Champions League clash with Roma next Wednesday.

For Lille - who were watched by Sir Alex Ferguson manager of their Champions League opponents Manchester United - it was a bitter disappointment leaving them trailing Lyon by 18 points.

Lyon manager Gerard Houllier commiserated with Lille over their late late disappointment.

"It is always dreadful to lose to a late goal and that happened to us recently," admitted the former France and Liverpool handler.

"However, for us, it is a vital win as we did not have a great January but now we have won two in a row and tonight was a gutsy win."

"The game against Manchester United will be different but again we must not commit the same errors and lose focus like we did tonight," said Lille coach Claude Puel.

On Sunday, Nantes have a tough trip to Marseille's Velodrome stadium with co-managers Japhet N'Doram and Michel Der Zakarian at the helm for their first fixture following the sacking of Georges Eo.

Second-placed Lens will be aiming to cut their deficit over the leaders to 11 points with a win at Monaco.

Voronin agrees Liverpool deal

AFP, London

Ukraine striker Andriy Voronin is set to join Liverpool in the summer from Bayer Leverkusen on a four-year deal, the British Press Association reported.

The 27-year-old played for Leverkusen as they lost to Hannover 1-0 in Germany's Bundesliga on Saturday.

And after the match it was announced Voronin would be moving to Anfield at the end of the season, with a four-year deal having reportedly been agreed.

Voronin, who has scored six goals in 20 league appearances for Leverkusen so far this season, featured in the Ukraine team that reached the quarterfinals of last year's World Cup.

Big boys slip up

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga leaders Schalke 04 blew a two-goal lead in a 2-2 draw with VfL Wolfsburg on Saturday.

With two of their chief rivals Werder Bremen and Bayern Munich both losing, at home to Hamburg and away to Alemannia Aachen respectively, Schalke could have opened up a seven-point gap on second-placed Stuttgart with victory.

And it all seemed to be going to plan as two first half goals from Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi saw Schalke take a comfortable lead into the break.

But Wolfsburg did not give up and Diego Klimowitz hit a second half brace, the second with just two minutes left on the clock, to salvage a share of the spoils.

"There's nothing to say: Wolfsburg deserved the point from a draw, we couldn't defend their set pieces," said Schalke coach Mirko Slomka, who earlier in the season was under fire after his team slumped out of the German Cup and UEFA Cup.

Following Stuttgart's 4-0 win at Eintracht Frankfurt on Friday, Schalke now hold a five-point lead

over the pack as they seek to win a first German title since 1958 (the Bundesliga was created in 1963).

Bremen slipped to seven points off the pace following their third defeat in a row, this one against newly resurgent Hamburg who have two wins out of two under new coach Huub Stevens.

Dutch international midfielder Rafael van der Vaart opened the scoring for Hamburg from the penalty spot in the first half and then wrapped up the spoils just before the end.

"Over the last three (league) matches we have not been able to show our true face, particularly in attack," said Bremen sporting director Klaus Allofs, who admitted

the team's current results were harming their title aspirations.

It was a far cry from Werder's dazzling midweek UEFA Cup performance in the 3-0 victory over Dutch side Ajax.

However, Werder's problems pale in comparison to Bayern's, last season's double winners now sit 12 points down from Schalke and have next to no hope of retaining their title.

Even worse, Bayern are fourth and face a battle to close the five-point deficit to Bremen to make the top three and qualify for next season's Champions League.

Alexander Klitzpera scored a first half winner for Aachen, who also beat Bayern 4-2 in the German Cup a couple of months ago.

The only good news for Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld was the performance of Aachen forward Jan Schlaudraff, who will join the Bavarian giants next season.

Hamburg's win at Bremen moved them up to 16th and close to escaping the bottom three.

Mainz 05 continued their recent stunning form with a 2-1 win at Hertha Berlin, their fifth match in a row without defeat.



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski (R) holds off the challenge of Alemennia Aachen midfielder Laurentiu Reghecampf during a Bundesliga clash at Aachen on Saturday.

Impending return for Owen

AFP, Newcastle

Michael Owen should be fit to play for Newcastle before the end of the season, his manager Glenn Roeder said on Sunday.

Owen suffered a cruciate knee ligament injury at last year's World Cup and has not figured in the current campaign, but Roeder revealed his rehabilitation is progressing ahead of schedule.

"Michael Owen has been out all week on the grass, running hard," Roeder told Sportsweek on BBC Radio Five Live.

"He's working on getting back to full fitness. Michael is running very hard every day."

"He's much happier and there's a distinct possibility we'll get a few games out of him this year. We have to be positive and Michael believes he can play this season."

"We believe he can as well but if he can't it won't be a big crisis because we didn't think after the operation he would play again this year. But he's done so well."

Roeder believes Newcastle, who are ninth in the Premiership and are still in the UEFA Cup, have acquitted themselves well this season given their lengthy injury list.