

Chelsea's instant reply

AFP, London



Chelsea remained on Manchester United's heels in the Premiership title race with a comfortable 3-0 dismissal of Sheffield United at Stamford Bridge.

United's 4-1 victory over Bolton earlier in the day meant that Jose Mourinho's men remain six points adrift but they made sure no ground was lost as the title race enters its final phase.

The Blades could produce no response to goals from Andriy Shevchenko, Salomon Kalou and substitute Michael Ballack and left the capital fearing they will be without Rob Hulse for a significant period after the forward suffered a suspected broken leg.

Before kick-off, the injured Michael Essien had paraded the League Cup on the pitch -- and was soaked by an unexpected turning on of the sprinkler system.

Once the match was underway, however, it was United who were quickly caught out as Shevchenko, who had not featured in the mid-week victory at Manchester City,

opened the scoring within 184 seconds.

Centre-back Ricardo Carvalho was the architect with a surge into the opposition half and a pass to find the Ukrainian in plenty of space on the edge of the box and the finish was worthy of a 30-million-pound striker -- a rising, left foot drive that gave goalkeeper Paddy Kenny no chance.

The recalled Shaun Wright-Phillips showed great skill to nutmeg Phil Jagielka and move into a shooting position in the box but spoiled all that effort with a poor poke wide.

Kalou doubled the lead in the 17th minute with a simple finish from two yards out after Shevchenko had flicked on Wright-Phillips's cross from the right a split second before being clattered by Chris Morgan.

The Blades, who remain seven points clear of the relegation places, responded with a 30-yarder from Colin Kazim-Richards that forced Petr Cech into an acrobatic parry.

Hulse sent a volley on the turn just wide before being hurt by Cech's point-blank parry of the next chance, which had been set up by Keith Gillespie's pass.

It was immediately apparent the striker had suffered a serious leg injury and he was stretched off to be replaced by Christian Nade in the 27th minute.

United had a goal disallowed in the 32nd minute as Kazim-Richards was almost on top of Cech as the goalkeeper parried a Morgan header, with Claude Davis then dispatching the rebound.

With Monday's FA Cup quarterfinal replay with Tottenham in mind, Mourinho made a change at the break with Ballack replacing Frank Lampard in the heart of midfield.

The German sent a 30-yard drive wide before heading home a Wright-Phillips free-kick in the 58th minute, with the United defence again guilty of switching off at the vital moment.

With victory already assured Chelsea made two more changes in the 65th minute with Didier Drogba replacing Shevchenko and Paulo Ferreira coming on for Ashley Cole.

Arjen Robben almost made it 4-0 when he cut in from the right but his curled effort flew narrowly wide and Jagielka was perfectly placed to head a Drogba free-kick off the line with nine minutes remaining.

Robinson feels for Foster

AFP, London

Tottenham goalkeeper Paul Robinson apologised to Watford's Ben Foster for the 'freak' goal that embarrassed his England rival.

Robinson left Foster red-faced when he scored Tottenham's second goal in their 3-1 win over Watford on Saturday. The England number one launched a free-kick from deep in his own half that bounced over Foster and into the net.

The match had been billed as a battle of the top two English goalkeepers and Foster, who has been earning rave reviews this season, was expected to underline his case to unseat Robinson.

But Foster's 63rd minute mistake means England coach Steve McClaren is likely to keep the on-loan Manchester United stopper on the sidelines for the forthcoming Euro 2008 qualifiers against Israel and Andorra.

However, Robinson insists he will go easy on Foster when they meet up for England duty next week.

He said: "I will try not to mention it. I know what it's like and it's not nice."

"It was a bit of a freak. If it goes wide I would probably have got a telling off from the strikers -- it's just one of those things in football."

Romario scores another hatrick

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Former Brazil striker Romario took his career tally, according to his own records, to 998 goals on Saturday after scoring his third hatrick of the year.

Romario's goals came in a 20-minute spell in the second half as he helped Vasco da Gama beat modest opponents Boavista 6-2 in the Carioca (Rio de Janeiro state) championship.

The irrepressible 41-year-old former Barcelona and PSV Eindhoven player scored with a header, a penalty and a left-foot shot to drag Vasco from 2-1 down to 4-2 ahead.

"A few years ago, everybody thought my career was finished," Brazil's 1994 World Cup winner told reporters.

"But there's the reply. I'm going to be the second to reach this milestone," he said, referring to the 1,000-goal target which Brazilian Pele passed in 1969.

Sampdoria hold Palermo

INTERNET, undated

Ten-man Sampdoria came from behind to claim a 1-1 Serie A draw at home to Palermo on Saturday night.

The home side was the brighter team throughout but was hampered by a harsh red card to central defender Giulio Falcone after 36 minutes.

Their resistance was broken eight minutes into the second half when Edinson Cavani headed the Rosanero ahead, but three minutes later, Fabio Quagliarella scored a deserved equaliser.

The Sicilians were unable to make their one-man advantage count against a brave Blucerchiati, who draw their second home game in a row but, given the circumstances, will not be too disappointed.

Palermo did not offer much in the first half, but they actually came closest to breaking the deadlock in the 19th minute when David Di Michele shot against the outside of the post.

But it was the home side who continued to pose the greater threat with Quagliarella and Emiliano Bonazzoli combining well and Genaro Delvecchio advancing regularly to support his strikers.

Delvecchio advanced a split second too soon before scoring in the 30th minute, only to see the flag raised for offside.

The turning point in the match arrived in the 36th minute when Falcone was sent off by referee Emidio Morganti.

There did not appear to be any malice in Falcone's challenge on Simplicio, nor was he the last man with the action near the halfway line, but Morganti instantly pulled the red card from his pocket and sent the Samp defender for an early bath.

The home side laboured on until halftime before Novellino made a change in personnel with Luigi Sala coming in to replace Daniele Franceschini Sala was still acclimating himself to his position when Cavani crept in to nod the Rosanero ahead.

The Uruguayan met Mattia Cassani's cross with a neatly flicked header which left Bertl on chance.

The home side were level within three minutes, though, as a calamitous breakdown in communication between Andrea Barzagli and Agliardi allowed Quagliarella to steal the ball and place it into the empty goal.

It was difficult to see which team had a full complement of players and which had just 10 men.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona's Argentine sensation Lionel Messi (R) shakes hand with teammate Samuel Eto'o after scoring against Recreativo Huelva in their Primera Liga tie at the Nuevo Colombino Stadium in Huelva on Saturday.

Goals galore for Barca

AFP, Madrid



Samuel Eto'o contributed two goals as Barcelona won their first away game in La Liga for four months with a 4-0 thrashing of Recreativo Huelva on Saturday.

The reigning Spanish champions stay on course for their third successive league title and have a three point lead over nearest rivals Sevilla, although the UEFA Cup winners have a game in hand.

However, Barca coach Frank Rijkaard demonstrated the old adage that some people are never happy, despite the emphatic victory.

"I'm happy with the result but not the way we played. The early goal changed the plans and facilitated our victory but we didn't play well," the Dutch coach told a surprised

audience at the post-match press conference.

"Deco and (Andres) Iniesta had a good game but we were fortunate to score at opportune moments. Nevertheless, winning away after four months is important," added Rijkaard.

Barca were quickly out of their blocks with Eto'o scoring just three minutes into the game.

He spotted Recreativo goalkeeper Javier Lopez Vallejo out of position and found the net with a long, looping shot from 30 metres.

Gianluca Zambrotta got his first league goal for Barca six minutes before the break when he chipped the ball past Lopez Vallejo from the corner of the six yard box following a pass by Deco.

Eto'o then added his second goal four minutes later and Lionel Messi completed Barca's quartet four minutes from time to give the Catalan club their best away victory in any competition this season.

The Argentine teenager sped past Recreativo's hapless defend-

ers before unleashing a left foot shot from the edge of the area.

"This win is very important. We've not won away from home for so long," said Messi.

Third-placed Valencia squandered their chance to close the gap on the leading pair in the Spanish first division when they went down 2-0 at home to Racing Santander earlier on Saturday.

Pedro Munitis put Racing in front after 20 minutes, finding the net from the edge of the six yard box following a pass by Nicola Zigic, and Oriol Lozano sealed the victory with a header from a Munitis corner after 63 minutes.

"We weren't comfortable at any moment. They (Racing) had clear ideas and they were endorsed by their goals," lamented Valencia coach Quique Flores.

"Valencia are fighting on two fronts and this can wear you out," said Racing coach Miguel Angel Portugal, referring to the fact that Valencia are the only Spanish team remaining in the Champions

League.

Two goals in less than three minutes after the start of the game gave Real Mallorca a 2-0 win over Real Betis on Saturday and handed the Seville-based side its first loss in 10 games.

Guillermo Pereyra headed Mallorca in front in under a minute, connecting with a corner from his Argentine compatriot Ariel Ibagaza, and Venezuela midfielder Juan Arango added a second shortly afterwards.

Athletic Bilbao's relegation worries deepened when they went down 3-0 at home to Osasuna.

An Inaki Munoz penalty on 30 minutes, after Athletic defender Fernando Amorebieta had brought down Roberto Soldado, was augmented by two exceptional second half goals from David Lopez and Jose Izquierdo.



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack (C) leaps high to score a header past Sheffield United goalkeeper Paddy Kenny (L) during their Premiership clash at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

Schalke gain priceless win

AFP, Berlin



Schalke coach Mirko Slomka praised his side's ability to squeeze out a precious win while admitting the Bundesliga leaders were sub-standard in Saturday's 1-0

home victory over VfB Stuttgart. This was Schalke's first win in five games, but has opened a six-point lead over second-placed Werder Bremen, who are in action against Mainz 05 at home on Sunday, as Serbian defender Miladen Krstajic's second-half goal sealed the win.

Slomka, who signed a two-year extension to his contract last week, said "This was no one of our better performances, but we have lost games while playing much better football, so it's good to see the team grinding out a result."

After Stuttgart squandered several chances to take the lead, the break through Schalke craved came in the 76th minute when the visitors' defence failed to deal with a cross.

Schalke striker Kevin Kuranyi headed the ball goal-bound, but Stuttgart keeper Timo Hildebrand failed to hold on to it and Krstajic pounced on the opportunity to slot home the goal from just two metres out.

It was tough luck for third-placed Stuttgart whose Thomas Hitzlsperger had gone close on numerous occasions.

Schalke have now thrown down the gauntlet to Bremen to close the gap against rising-stars Mainz 05, but Werder welcome back Miroslav Klose, the veteran German national side's striker, who has shaken off his back injury and looks to add to the 11 goals he has scored this season after two weeks out.

"There is still some bruising, but I am confident enough of it and I feel good, in any case, so well that I can play," said the 28-year-old.

Relegation-threatened Eintracht Frankfurt did themselves a huge favour by scrambling a 1-0 win at home to Bayern Munich, which dented the Bavarians' aspirations of

capturing a 21st Bundesliga title and leaves them now nine-points behind Schalke.

Having gone into the match just one-place off the relegation zone, Frankfurt's midfielder Christoph Preuss bagged a superb 78th-minute goal from a bicycle kick to keep Munich fourth and move his side up three places to 12th.

Having announced in mid-week that he will coach Bayern for another season, veteran Ottmar Hitzfeld was far from happy with his side, who play AC Milan in the Champions League quarter-finals early next month.

"This was a quite bitter defeat," said Hitzfeld.

"We lacked creativity and we made life comfortable for Frankfurt in embarrassment. We were dominated and just couldn't put together any meaningful passes."

In his first game in charge, Borussia Dortmund coach Thomas Doll's side picked up a valuable point from their draw at home to fifth-placed Nuremberg, but they still dropped two places to fifteenth, one above the drop zone.

Hanover drew 0-0 with Hamburg, while VfL Wolfsburg enjoyed a 3-1 win over second-from-bottom Bochum after taking a 2-0 half-time lead at home.

Ghana international Isaac Boakye opened the scoring in the 21st minute when he drew Bochum goalkeeper Jaroslav Drobný off his line and fired his shot home.

And the hosts extended their lead when defender Alexander Madley slipped his marker from a corner and blasted his header past Drobný from point-blank range.

But Bochum got themselves back in the match thanks to their Greek striker Theofanis Gekas, who gave his side a 66th minute life-line to become the league's joint top-scorer, alongside injured Stuttgart striker Mario Gomez, with 13 goals.

But Brazilian midfielder Marcelo Marcelinho made the win safe with a goal in the 83rd minute.

And two goals in five minutes handed ninth-placed Alemannia Aachen a 2-0 win over third-from-bottom Arminia Bielefeld after 23-year-old striker Jan Schlaudraff bagged his eighth goal of the sea-

son with 19 minutes to play, only for Romanian midfielder Laurentiu Reghecampf to convert a penalty soon after.

Capello hanging on hope

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello said that the Spanish giants can still salvage their stuttering season by winning the La Liga title, the Italian told a press conference here Saturday.

The 29-times Spanish champions are currently in fourth place in the Spanish title race, five points behind league leaders and bitter rivals Barcelona, but Real are out of both the Champions League and the Spanish Cup.

"I am always an optimist and we can win the league but to do that we have to win all our games in our own stadium because it's here that we are losing the title," said Capello.

Real face relegation-threatened Gimnastic Tarragona, who are second from bottom although they beat second-placed Sevilla 1-0 last week, on Sunday.

"It's the truth, we can still achieve some important things. I liked a lot what I saw in training this week and in the days before playing Barcelona last Saturday. Psychologically, the players are in top form too," added Capello.

Real drew 3-3 at Barcelona only losing out on a memorable victory in the Nou Camp thanks to an injury-time equaliser from the Catalan club's Argentine teenager Lionel Messi.

"I hope that we will carry on playing like we did against Barcelona. The support of the public is important, they can help you through difficult moments. We win and lose together," added Capello.



AFP, Melbourne

Finland's Kimi Raikkonen gave Ferrari early season ascendancy with a stroll around Albert Park to win his first Australian Grand Prix in the season-opener here Sunday.

The deadpan Flying Finn had few worries in his first race for Ferrari as he dictated the 58-lap race off the pole to hold off world champion Fernando Alonso by a comfortable seven seconds, with Alonso's rookie McLaren teammate Lewis Hamilton finishing an encouraging third.

It was the 27-year-old Finn's first Australian triumph after three podium finishes with his previous McLaren team in 2002-03 and last year.

But despite Ferrari's dominance, resurgent McLaren took an early advantage in the constructors' title with 14 points to Ferrari's 13 after the second Ferrari driver, Felipe Massa, fought his way from the eighth row on the grid to finish sixth.

"It's always nice to win the first race straight away. I have never done that before," said Raikkonen, who was brought into Ferrari this year from McLaren to replace retired seven-times world champion Michael Schumacher.

"I've had good races here before but I've never been able to win and with the new team it's an ideal way of starting the season."

"The car was perfect all day and it was just a matter of bringing it home."

Unflappable Raikkonen's only irritant was a malfunctioning radio which forced him to keep in contact with the team via pit boards.

"The car is very strong and the team is making my life very good and easy. I'm enjoying it and hopefully we can keep it up."

It was obvious from the start that Raikkonen had the fastest car here this weekend, building up a 15-second lead before the first of his two pit stops on the 19th lap, regaining the race lead four laps later and holding a massive 19-second lead by his last stop on lap 42.

Raikkonen's fastest lap of 1:25.235 came on the lap before his second pit stop and he was able to ease down over the final 12 laps to greet the chequered flag.

Asked about Ferrari's standing after the opening race in the 17-race season, Raikkonen said: "It's too early to say and we need to wait for a couple of races to see where we really are."

"We're in a good position right now and we just have to keep working hard and keep improving and try to win as many races as we can."

Alonso got away slowly off the outside of the front row and was beaten to the first right-hander by Raikkonen, BMW-Sauber's Nick Heidfeld and his rookie teammate Hamilton.

He briefly grabbed the lead on

laps 43 and 44 after Raikkonen's second stop before he pitted on the 45th lap to hand the lead back to the Finn.

"We have to be pleased with the final result," Alonso said. "Ferrari were a little bit too quick for us today so we have to take the maximum points out from here, and second place is a good place to start the season."

"We showed a good potential in the team and we're looking forward to the next one in Malaysia."

"It wasn't a very good start for me and I saw Nick Heidfeld coming from the outside so I was more concentrated on him than the corner itself."

"I realised later that I was fourth, unfortunately, and from there I didn't think I had the possibility to push in

the race.

"I was up and down all through the race and I was a little lucky to overtake Lewis in the second pit stop."

Hamilton, the 22-year-old rookie, was ecstatic with a podium finish in his first F1 drive, making it the best finish by an Englishman in his debut race since 1966.

"To lead in my first Grand Prix was a fantastic feeling, it was extremely tough to have the two-time world champion (Alonso) behind you -- it's not easy, especially in your first race," Hamilton said.

"It was all a new experience for me and I thoroughly enjoyed it."

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP

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Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT WOULD YOU CALL A MIDMORNING MEAL FOR A BUNCH OF SITCOM SIBLINGS? THE BRADY BRUNCH.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: A equals I