



Chelsea forward Didier Drogba (C) is chased by fellow striker Saloman Kalou (R) as he runs towards two-goal hero Shaun Wright-Phillips after scoring against West Ham in their Premiership clash at Upton Park on Wednesday.

Chelsea keep up chase

AFP, London



Shaun Wright-Phillips believes Chelsea have been able to maintain their relentless pursuit of Premiership leaders Manchester United because every player feels part of Jose Mourinho's family.

Wright-Phillips scored twice as Chelsea closed the gap on United to three points with a 4-1 win at West Ham on Wednesday. But the England winger is convinced it is the team's all-for-one mentality rather than individual talent that has kept them on course for an unprecedented quadruple.

The reigning champions underlined that comradeship with another demonstration of their unbreakable will to win just hours after a missile was thrown at their team coach en route to Upton Park, shattering a window and shocking the players.

Chelsea hardly needed any more motivation to get the victory they sought to keep the pressure on United. But just in case they weren't sufficiently fired up, the mindless supporter provided

further incentive.

As a former West Ham player, Chelsea's Frank Lampard knows passions can run high in east London and he said: "A window got broken on the way. The outer layer shattered and there was a huge bang.

"It's football. These things happen when emotions are running high. West Ham are coming here fighting for their lives. But nobody died so there is no point making a big deal about it."

If Chelsea really are the close-knit community that Wright-Phillips describes, then he must be the long-lost relative who suddenly turns up on Christmas Day.

The 25-year-old has been anonymous since his move from Manchester City in 2005 and the fact that these were his first Premiership goals for Chelsea merely underlined the extent of his struggles.

In the past he has often appeared over-anxious to impress during his cameo appearances, but for once he managed to channel his boundless enthusiasm into a match-winning display.

While he admitted his two fine strikes gave him a measure of

personal vindication, it was their impact on the title race that was more important.

"It's an indescribable feeling and I just have to thank the other lads for being behind me all the way," Wright-Phillips said. "It's only normal that the more games you play the more confident you get.

"It was very important for us to cut down the gap again. We know what we have to do. We have to win every game to put them under pressure.

"The determination is unbelievable. Even if we go a goal down, we believe we can get back into it. That's the strength we have as a family at this club. We're always together."

Lampard claimed Chelsea's players had been inspired by the negative publicity surrounding Mourinho's frosty relationship with Roman Abramovich.

Mourinho's future is still uncertain after reports linked Abramovich with a move for former Germany manager Jurgen Klinsmann.

But Lampard said: "There's been a lot of talk and that comes with being a Chelsea player, but it can only inspire you. We have

been through tough times and we are in with a chance of everything. That is a testament to the lads and we will go to the end."

Wright-Phillips opened the scoring with a left-foot shot from the edge of the area in the 32nd minute, but Carlos Tevez equalised from 25 yards three minutes later.

Chelsea hit back just a minute later when Wright-Phillips volleyed in Wayne Bridge's cross. Saloman Kalou's close range effort just after half-time put the Blues in control and Didier Drogba wrapped up their ninth successive league victory with a fine finish.

West Ham remain five points from safety and manager Alan Curbishley admitted his side need to win three of their last four matches to avoid relegation.

"I thought we were excellent in the first half and I was very disappointed to go in 2-1 down," he said.

"My only complaint is that if we had performed like that against the teams around us we might be in better shape.

"We'll keep going because we've said it looks like it could go to the wire. But we have to win the rest of our games for that to happen."

Totti conquers Inter

AFP, Rome



Francesco Totti inspired Roma to a 3-1 victory over Inter Milan to put the Serie A title celebrations on hold Wednesday.

Totti's late freekick from the edge of the area was deflected by an Inter boot and handed the visitors a last-gasp lead after Marco Materazzi's spot kick had equalised Simone Perrotta's 44th minute opener for Roma.

Late substitute Marco Cassetti then found time and space as he charged towards the Inter goal in the dying seconds to beat Inter keeper Julio Cesar with a well-struck shot which stunned the hosts.

It is Inter's first defeat in 32 matches this season and means they will now have to wait before celebrating what will be their first league title won on the field of play since 1989.

With six matches remaining Inter, who were handed the Scudetto last season in the wake of Juventus's relegation to Serie B for match-fixing, lead second-placed Roma by 13 points.

Inter seemed strangely overawed by a Roma side who had obviously come to the San Siro motivated to ruin their party plans.

"We shouldn't have lost this match," said Inter coach Roberto Mancini.

"It hurts a little. We had hoped to finish the season unbeaten.

"We didn't play well in the first half. It was very good after the break and then their (second) goal was a bit lucky, it's a pity.

"But it's not a problem to put the party on hold," added Mancini.

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti was delighted with his side a week after being humiliated 7-1 by Manchester United in Champions League.

"The match was lively and intense with the result uncertain until the final whistle. Inter fought until the end, we suffered, but we bounced back and believed in ourselves."

But Spalletti remained realistic about their chances of catching Inter.

"It's only right that Inter should win the title after the season

they've had. And when a party is postponed it's always better later."

Roma easily dominated the first half, and Totti first gave Inter a scare with an angled shot which forced a save from Julio Cesar.

Perrotta ran down on the rebound, and only Douglas Maicon's head got in the way of a sure opener for the hosts. Minutes later Perrotta saw a well-struck long range drive dip inches over the crossbar.

A Cristian Chivu freekick then had Julio Cesar at full stretch before the ball landed on the roof of the net.

Roma took a deserved lead in the 44th minute, as confusion reigned in the Inter area.

A neat through ball was played on to Chivu and his pass across goal from the by-line was tapped in by the unmarked Perrotta from only two yards out.

Inter were soon back on level terms, although the penalty decision in the 50th minute seemed dubious after Doni was unfairly ruled to have brought down

Adriano.

Materazzi made no mistake, sending Doni the wrong way to pull level.

The goal gave much-needed confidence to Inter, who went on to create a series of chances.

Roma were getting twitchy, and French defender Philippe Mexes was cautioned for impeding Materazzi as Inter waited to take a free kick just after the hour mark, which slammed into the defensive wall.

Inter seemed on course for the winner, but after a patient build-up in front of Roma's area, Maicon sent his angled drive past Doni's far post.

Minutes later Roma took a shock lead when Totti saw his free kick effort take a deflection before beating Julio Cesar.

It stunned Inter, who seemed to be still at sea when Cassetti, who came on in the 74th minute, beat Julio Cesar from the edge of the area in the fifth and final minute of injury time.

In other Serie A action, AC Milan continued their push for Champions League football next season, crushing tailenders Ascoli 5-2 to consolidate their fourth place with a four-point lead on Palermo.

Alberto Gilardino and Kaka each grabbed a brace with Clarence Seedorf claiming the fifth after 75 minutes at the Del Duca Stadium.

Luigi Di Biagio got one back for Ascoli with a 33-minute penalty, and Stefano Guberti gave them a second eight minutes later.

Third-placed Lazio were held to a goalless draw at home by fourth-from-bottom Chievo, as Empoli's hopes of UEFA Cup football next season were boosted with a 2-0 win against visiting Atalanta.

Parma, meanwhile, continued their push for survival with a 2-0 win over UEFA Cup hopefuls Fiorentina.



AS Roma captain and forward Francesco Totti (2nd L) is hounded by his teammates after scoring a late goal to consign leaders Inter Milan to a defeat in their Serie A encounter at the San Siro in Milan on Wednesday.

Maradona stable

AFP, Buenos Aires

Ailing Argentine football star Diego Maradona is in stable condition and will be discharged from hospital when he recovers from his latest bout of hepatitis, his doctors said.

Maradona, "is clinically stable and persists in his positive development," the private Los Arcos clinic in Buenos Aires said in a statement Wednesday.

He will stay there "a few more days until his hepatitis analysis normalizes completely," Maradona's personal doctor Alfredo Cahe told the Continental radio station.

The ex-Argentina World Cup captain and Barcelona star was rushed to the clinic six days ago complaining of severe abdominal pain, just two days after being discharged from a different clinic where he was treated for two weeks for illness brought on by excessive drinking.

Doctors said Tuesday Maradona had recovered enough to possibly allow him to continue his treatment for alcohol abuse at home. The clinic had earlier warned of abnormalities in his liver functions.

He has seen his career on and off the football pitch marred by repeated drug and alcohol abuse and was also hospitalized in 2000 and 2004 for heart attacks provoked by cocaine overdoses.

Stuttgart book final spot

AFP, Berlin

VfB Stuttgart booked their place in the German Cup final at Berlin's Olympic Stadium next month with a convincing 1-0 win over VfL Wolfsburg on Wednesday night.

Midfielder Antonio da Silva grabbed the game's only goal when he smashed his free-kick over the wall after 16 minutes and gave Wolfsburg's goalkeeper Simon Jentsch no chance as Stuttgart dominated the game.

In the final on May 26, Stuttgart will face Nuremberg who humbled Eintracht Frankfurt 4-0 in Tuesday night's other semi-final.

Having led 2-0 at the break, goals by Marco Engelhardt, Ivan Saenko, Tomas Galasek and Chuhny Pagenburg were enough to put Nuremberg through as Frankfurt were well beaten.

Marseille reach final

AFP, Marseille

Marseille set up a clash with Sochaux in next month's French Cup final with a 3-0 win over Nantes in their semi-final tie here on Wednesday.

French international Franck Ribery set the hosts on their way to their second consecutive Cup final after 28 minutes only to limp off the pitch at half time with a thigh problem.

Toifou Maoulida doubled their account on 55 minutes with striker Djibril Cisse coming on as a late substitute and finding the net 14 minutes from time.

Marseille will be looking for their first title since 1993 on May 12 in Stade de France, and their 11th crown in a competition where they hold the record.

It will be their 18th appearance in the final. Last year they lost 2-1 to Paris Saint Germain.

Sochaux, competing in their fifth Cup final, will be bidding to win their first title in the event since 1937.

They booked their spot on Tuesday when two extra-time goals from Sochaux's Sebastien Grax and Jerome Leroy ended the dream run of fourth division Montceau.

Poland vows corruption clean-up

AFP, Warsaw

Polish Sports Minister Tomasz Lipiec on Thursday vowed to make Polish football graft-free by the time the country hosts the Euro 2012 championships with Ukraine.

"We want Polish football to be clean, and totally rid of corruption by 2012," Lipiec told reporters a day after Poland and its eastern neighbour beat Italy and joint bidders Hungary and Croatia in the race to host the quadrennial tournament.

"Measures to fight corruption are already under way and will continue. The first clubs have been punished," Lipiec said.

"We want to sort this problem out completely (by 2012). I'm convinced that we will manage it even earlier.

"The championships must take place in an atmosphere of fair-play," he insisted.

The image of Polish football has been tarnished over the past two years by a match-fixing scandal which has led to more than 60 arrests—including several referees, a top official with the Polish Football Association (PZPN) and a string of club officials.

Arsenal will retain Wenger



AFP, London

Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood has assured Arsene Wenger and supporters that the club wants him to stay on as manager even after his current contract expires next year.

Doubts are being cast over the Frenchman's future following the departure late Wednesday of the club's vice-chairman David Dein, a close ally of Wenger and the man who was instrumental in bringing him to Highbury in 1996.

Dein left over what were termed as "irreconcilable differences" involving the way the club was run.

Those differences are understood to be over the direction and ownership of the club, with Dein known to be very much in favour of the involvement of American billionaire Stan Kroenke.

That put him at odds with Arsenal director Danny Fiszman and also chairman Hill-Wood.

Despite the close bonds between Dein and Wenger, Hill-Wood was at pains to insist that the most successful coach in the history of the club was not on the way out.

"I think it's well known that Arsene and David have got on very well over the past 10 years and I am certain that Arsene will miss him," Hill-Wood told Arsenal TV Online.

"However I believe the relationship that Arsene has with the rest of the board is good.

"He is on contract with us until 2008 and we very much hope that he will extend his contract beyond that, but we haven't got into talking details on that yet."

Hill-Wood also said that reports that Dein had left was linked to the question of the transfer funds available to Wenger were wrong.

"We've always made funds available to Arsene, he attends the board meetings, he understands the financial position. I can assure supporters that we will continue to provide funds when Arsene requires them," he said.

"We have a very good squad - young, maybe, but developing well and if Arsene wants to strengthen it we have the money to provide him with any reasonable purchases he wants to make."

Dein was a key figure in Arsenal's transfer dealings but Hill-Wood insisted that other "senior executives" would fulfil the role.

"We have a number of senior executives at the club. We haven't

formalised the arrangement yet but I'm certain that one or more of them will handle the matter of transfers in David Dein's absence," he said.

Dein's departure has sparked speculation that he was ready to sell his 14 percent stake in the club to Kroenke, who has already acquired 11 percent of the tightly-controlled Arsenal shares.

If that was to happen, Kroenke, the owner of Major League Soccer's Colorado Rapids, basketball team Denver Nuggets and ice hockey side Colorado Avalanche, would become the biggest shareholder in the Gunners, currently valued at 420 million pounds.

But he would remain short of the 30 percent required to trigger an automatic takeover bid under UK corporate law and the remaining board members, who together account for just over 45 percent of the shares, have agreed to hang on to their stakes for at least the next year.

Analysts suggested that the stance of the board, led by chairman Peter Hill-Wood, made a takeover unlikely in the short term. But there is certainly scope for a power struggle which could put Wenger's future on the line.

Huge challenge for co-hosts



AFP, Warsaw

Poland and Ukraine will have their work cut out preparing for Euro 2012, facing a mammoth task of getting their stadiums, transport and hotels up to scratch, as well as overcoming a legacy of hooliganism and graft.

Organisers insist they will roll up their sleeves in order to ensure the success of the football championships, after Poland and its eastern neighbour's shock win over Italy and fellow joint bidders Hungary and Croatia in the race to host the quadrennial tournament.

In the lead up to Wednesday's decision by European football's governing body UEFA at a meeting in Cardiff, the Polish-Ukrainian bidders spared no effort to calm jittery nerves.

Polish President Lech Kaczynski travelled to the Welsh capital with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko to make an 11th-hour pitch for their bid.

After the announcement, Kaczynski took stock of what needed to be done.

"We must not forget the enormity of the task of organising Euro 2012, but that is also excellent news for Poland. There will be new stadiums built in Warsaw, Gdansk, Wroclaw and Poznan. That can only be seen in a positive light," Kaczynski said.

"Five years is long enough and I am sure that with the mobilisation and determination of the local authorities and the people, we will succeed."

It will be the first time that either Poland or Ukraine have hosted a major football championship.

Polish authorities said last week that around 26 billion euros (35 billion dollars), including EU financing, have been earmarked to upgrade infrastructure.

As it stands, a fan wanting to travel by road from Gdansk in northern Poland to Donetsk, a host city in eastern Ukraine, needs stamina to cover the 2,000-kilometres (1,240-miles).

The 22-hour trip -- not counting the lengthy wait at the Polish-Ukrainian border -- is mostly on single lane roads.

Only 23 kilometres (14 miles) of the trip is on motorway.

Despite major EU funding since the fall of communism in 1989 and Poland's membership of the bloc in 2004, the country still hasn't built a basic motorway network connecting its major cities. The situation is

worse in Ukraine.

And train travel is little better: it currently takes 43 hours, at best, to get from Gdansk to Donetsk.

Lack of investment means it is too dangerous to use high speed trains on the aging tracks.

While booming low-cost airlines carry hundreds of thousands of Poles back and forth to western Europe every year, there are still no cheap links between Ukraine and Poland.

Outside major cities, particularly in Ukraine, good hotels are hard to come by -- or at least in sufficient numbers to cater for tens of thousands of fans, journalists and football officials.

Polish football is also blighted by hooliganism.

Fears that Polish fans would cause trouble at last year's World Cup in neighbouring Germany led to a massive police operation in both countries, although in the end the hooligans stayed away.

At home, however, it could be a different story.

In addition, Polish football's image has been dented by corruption.

A two-year-old match-fixing scandal has led to more than 60 arrests, including several referees, a member of the Polish Football Association (PZPN) leadership and a string of club officials.

In Ukraine, meanwhile, foreign embassies regularly warn their citizens about the risk of attacks by skinheads. Poland also has a flourishing far right.

Although Ukraine is currently

locked in political crisis pitting supporters of the president and prime minister, its opposing forces are united about Euro 2012.

Four Ukrainian cities selected as venues have already started preparations including upgrading their existing football facilities.

And the Kiev mayor's office has said the capital would completely renovate its 86,000-seat Olympic stadium.

In the west of the country, Lviv city authorities have said they will renovate the city's 28,000-seat stadium and increase its capacity.

Ukraine's reigning champions Shakhtar Donetsk are currently building a new 50,000-seat ground, while Dnepropetrovsk, who finished sixth last season, had also began the construction of a new arena in their town.

Ukraine's Sports Minister Viktor Korzh said major investors were ready to step in alongside the authorities.

"There are serious investors, who are ready to invest up to 37 billion hryvnias (about 5.7 billion euros, 7.7 billion dollars) in the construction of airports, roads, hotels and improving sports infrastructure," he said.

Owen 50-50 for Chelsea



AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle striker Michael Owen has a 50-50 chance of being handed the opportunity to wreck Chelsea's Premiership title hopes on Sunday, Magpies boss Glenn Roeder revealed on Thursday.

The England forward has been sidelined since suffering a serious knee injury during the World Cup last year but is now close to making his comeback, although a minor groin problem could delay it until the trip to Reading on April 30.

"At this stage, I have not even discussed it with Michael as to whether he will be back for us on Sunday," Roeder said.

"He is 50-50, but he will not return until in my opinion he is in

pristine condition - and he has had a slight groin strain which he picked up in shooting practice at the end of last week.

"His groin is a bit sore, but that is what happens when players have been out for a long time, they pick up niggles in other parts of their body.

"At the moment, we are being very careful with Michael, as we would with any other player.

"He certainly has not been ruled out of the Chelsea game but, if in the end he is, then we will start looking to our next match at Reading."

Since suffering his injury, Owen, 27, has had two bouts of knee surgery in the United States and his only playing action has been 70 minutes in a closed-doors friendly against Scottish side Gretna last Tuesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Carte lead-in

4 Joe's ilk

7 Rapid

12 Flour-de-—

13 Important numero

14 Conversation

15 Starler

16 Discuss

18 Candle count

19 Goodman's style

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23 Touch

27 "SNL" alum Tina

29 Up till now

31 Abrade

34 Not limp

35 Classroom group

37 Listening device

38 NYSE counterpart

DOWN

1 Jennifer Garner series

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3 Sent out invitations

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Solution time: 25 mins.

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CRYPTOQUIP

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EMHFQROQHB: "PLMPL GLBQ."

Yesterday's Cryptquip: DRIVING RAPIDLY ON A MULTILANE HIGHWAY, I SUPPOSE YOU WOULD HAVE SOME PASSING THOUGHTS.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: C equals W