

Cole nails Hammers

AFP, London



Joe Cole maintained Chelsea's drive towards the top of the Premier League as his goal secured a hard-fought 1-0 win over West Ham on Saturday.

The Blues have settled into an ominous rhythm under Avram Grant and this latest triumph - which extended their unbeaten home league run to an astonishing 70 games - allowed them to leap-frog Manchester United into second place.

They had to sweat for their success. West Ham were valiant opponents who looked capable of storming Chelsea's Stamford Bridge citadel until Cole, helped by a generous linesman, swiped the points with a lovely goal with just 14 minutes remaining.

Visitors to one of the Premier League's big four have two options: to try and take the game to their betters and risk the kind of humiliation inflicted upon Manchester City here last month, or attempt to suffocate the match in the hope of snatching a useful point.

There was never much doubt as to which path the ever-cautious West Ham manager Alan

Curbishley would choose, and West Ham duly set about trying to throttle the life out of a Chelsea side buoyed by a run of nine wins in their last 11 matches.

Hayden Mullins and Scott Parker were deployed as midfield attack dogs, charged with denying Chelsea - and Frank Lampard in particular - the space they need to thrive, and with Matthew Upson and Danny Gabbidon sticking to Didier Drogba like glue, the hosts were quickly frustrated.

They failed to have a shot on target until the 42nd minute and, while it made for a dismal spectacle, the visiting supporters from East London were not complaining.

They almost celebrated a goal themselves on one of the rare occasions their side forged past the half-way line.

In the 31st minute, John Terry and Alex were caught napping by an aerial ball, with the impressive Nolberto Solano stealing into space behind them.

His first-time lob cleared the back-peddling Carlo Cudicini but dropped onto the top of the net.

Shortly after, Drogba made a bizarre complaint after losing possession in front of the West Ham fans behind Robert Green's goal.

The Ivory Coast striker immedi-

ately sprinted to the fourth official to complain that a supporter had flashed a laser beam in his eye, although it was not clear whether action was taken.

It was indicative of Chelsea's general loss of focus. Moments later, their annoyance got the better of them again when Jon Obi Mikel clattered through the back of Parker with referee Howard Webb generously opting to show just a yellow card. Salomon Kalou then followed suit almost immediately with a crude tackle on Luis Boa Morte.

Chelsea needed half-time to clear their heads and they started the second period in a more constructive mood. Within moments Steve Sidwell had seen a fierce drive well blocked by Upson and headed over from Lampard's corner, while Cole volleyed wide from eight yards.

With West Ham lively on the break, the game was delicately poised. A mistake or a piece of individual brilliance always seemed most likely to shatter the deadlock and in the 76th minute Chelsea got both.

Cole appeared fractionally ahead of the play when Kalou flicked on Mikel's header, but the England midfielder showed admirable composure to round Green and crunch a shot high into the net from a tight angle.

Ancelotti applauds Kaka

AFP, Rome

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti has already congratulated his star Brazilian striker Kaka for what appears to be his anticipated collection of the European Footballer of the Year award.

Considered the highest player's accolade in football, Kaka is among the favourites to win the trophy, otherwise known as the 'Ballon d'Or' when it is announced on Sunday.

But it appears that what was already considered an open secret is no more - Ancelotti appears to not only know who finished first, he also appears to know who finished fifth having also given words of praise to Andrea Pirlo.

Ancelotti said following a team training session at Milan's north of Milan Friday: "It's an award that he (Kaka) fully deserves, for what he has done, for his commitment and his image."

"He's a great kid," added Ancelotti. "With this award he's going to be even greater." He added: "We're all delighted that he's won this award, and we are equally happy that (AC Milan midfielder) Pirlo finished fifth (in voting)."

FIFA rejects Boca plea

REUTERS, London

Argentina's Juan Roman Riquelme cannot play for Boca Juniors in the Club World Cup next month, FIFA said on Friday.

Riquelme had hoped his return to Boca from Spanish club Villarreal, sealed on Thursday in Buenos Aires, would give him the chance of playing in the tournament in Japan.

However, the Argentine midfielder's transfer was too late for his inclusion in Boca's squad for the seven-team Dec. 7-16 tournament by the Nov. 23 deadline.

"FIFA can confirm that the Argentina playmaker will not be eligible to take part in the forthcoming FIFA Club World Cup in Japan," world soccer's governing body said in a statement on its Web site (www.fifa.com).

Riquelme played a key role in Boca's qualification for the tournament, inspiring them to their sixth South American Libertadores Cup title earlier this year while on loan from Villarreal.

CL Format reformed from 2009

AFP, Luzern

A reform of the European Champions League for the period 2009/12 was agreed by the UEFA executive committee on Friday night.

The idea of UEFA president Michel Platini to include Cup winners in a preliminary competition was thrown out but his plans to help the smaller nations make their mark on the event were kept.

"I'm happy we were able to come to this decision," Platini said. "It's a good compromise and means we will welcome six new nation champions into the event."

Platini's plans to have the Cup winners of the top 16 European nations playing in a preliminary competition for a total of four Champions League places was not

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Scottish supporter raped?

AFP, Madrid

A supporter of Scottish football club Aberdeen has told police she was raped ahead of a match against Atletico Madrid in the Spanish capital that was marred by crowd violence, the British embassy said.

It said the alleged incident occurred on Wednesday night, 24 hours before the UEFA Cup game.

The embassy said the woman has received consular assistance, but it could not provide more details for legal reasons. Spanish police were unable to confirm the information.

Spanish media said between 11 and 17 people were injured as rival fans clashed before and after the game, won 2-0 by Atletico.

Police intervened to separate the rival supporters who pelted each other with bottles and other objects in the Vicente Calderon stadium.

Around 6,000 Aberdeen fans came to Madrid for match, Spanish media said.

PICTURE OF THE WEEK



STEAM BATH IN THE COLD: The chilling cold is evident at Sixways as Worcester and Sale players work up a head of steam during their Guinness Premiership match on November 24.

PHOTO: INTERNET

It's C'Ron, Messi & Kaka

Football

AFP, Manchester

Cristiano Ronaldo has already proved himself as one of the greatest players in the world, even if he fails to beat Kaka to the title of European Footballer of the Year, according to Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

Portuguese forward Ronaldo, shortlisted alongside AC Milan's Kaka and Barcelona's Argentinian wonderboy Lionel Messi for FIFA's World Player of the Year title to be announced later this month is expected to miss out to Brazilian playmaker Kaka when the 2007 European Footballer of the Year is announced in Paris on Sunday.

Ronaldo, set to face Fulham in a Premiership clash at Old Trafford on Monday, has emerged as United's star player after inspiring the club to the championship last season.

His 23-goal haul last season saw him voted as England's Footballer of the Year and, despite Kaka's standing as odds-on favourite to secure the Ballon d'Or, United boss Ferguson insists that Ronaldo is already one of the world's elite players.

He said: "I don't think Cristiano needs any endorsement from me.

He gets all the endorsements he needs with his performances on the pitch, but I have said time and time again that I think the boy is a marvellous player."

"He is definitely one of the best players in the world. There is no question of that and his scoring record for Portugal is phenomenal. It is almost one in two games for them which is an amazing record for a young player."

"He must have some chance of winning the European Footballer of the Year award and it would be fantastic for the boy. The amount of work he puts into his practice in his effort to be top is justification in his drive to be top because he tries so hard."

Ronaldo, 22, has already struck 11 goals in all competitions for United this season and Ferguson admits that the former Sporting Lisbon youngster is getting better and better with experience.

Ferguson said: "He influences games for us and his improvement has been measured in one or two different ways. His decision-making is very good now as opposed to when he was a young kid and his goal scoring has improved each year which is a terrific sign."

"At this moment in time, he is in double figures for us and we have only just reached December

which augurs well for the rest of the season."

"He can go on to beat last season's goal scoring record which will continue the improvement we have seen over the last couple of years. So everything is going in the right direction for the lad."

Fulham travel to Old Trafford in search of their first Premiership away victory since September 2006, but manager Lawrie Sanchez insists his team will be bold against the reigning champions.

Sanchez said: "You want to test yourself against the best and Manchester United are one of the best teams in this country. But if you sit back for 90 minutes and hope, then you'll get what you deserve. You've got to go and make a game of it and we'll have a go for it."

"Wayne Rooney said the other day that it gets boring playing at Old Trafford because teams just sit back and defend and United have to spend 90 minutes trying to open them up."

"The facts of life are that United have a terrific home record, but if you don't go there with some ambition you tend to leave with very little. I want my team to go to Old Trafford and have a go."

CL final on Saturday

AFP, Luzern

UEFA president Michel Platini said the final of the European Champions League would be played on a Saturday from 2010 onwards.

Platini said the change, from the usual Wednesday, would mean the atmosphere would be more festive, allowing for more children to be present in the stadium during the final of the sport's most prestigious and richest club competition.

Almunia reveals Lehmann rift

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal keeper Manuel Almunia has revealed that he and Gunners goalkeeper rival Jens Lehmann are no longer on speaking terms.

Almunia deputed for Lehmann earlier in the season while the German international was sidelined through injury.

The Spaniard has since become Arsene Wenger's first-choice stopper, meaning the now fit Lehmann has had to settle for a place on the bench.

And Almunia has explained that he and Lehmann do not talk to each other - a situation that he prefers.

"We maintain a distance. There is no dialogue. It's better for me that way. I'm a lot calmer not talking to him," he said in The Sun.

"I'm having the best time of my career, enjoying each game as if it is my last. I like living fully in the present."

'Riquelme had to go'

REUTERS, Madrid

Argentine playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme had to leave Villarreal because he was not prepared to be treated the same way as the rest of his teammates, according to club president Fernando Roig.

"The conflict began last year when Roman wanted to take more holiday than the coach wanted in December," Roig was quoted as saying on the club's Web site (www.villarrealcf.com).

"As the player did not want to explain himself, I realised that this had become a problem of authority. We tried to sort it out in January after the winter break, but he refused to change his position. It is very difficult to solve a problem when someone refuses to speak."

He added: "No one is more important than Villarreal, not the president nor anyone else and we should always make that clear."

Riquelme was loaned out to former club Boca Juniors for the second half of last season and helped them win the Libertadores Cup.

However, the Argentine side said they could not afford to bring him to the club on a permanent deal.

The midfielder returned to Villarreal at the start of this season but did not play any games for the club.

Rather than let him continue to languish on the sidelines, the Primera Liga agreed to allow him to sign a 30-month contract with Boca earlier this week.

Roig said that Villarreal had received no transfer fee for the 29-year-old international. "We haven't earned a single euro from the move," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea winger Joe Cole (R) gets ahead of West Ham defender George McCartney to shoot and score the winning goal during their derby clash in the Premier League on Saturday.

Rooney set for return

AFP, Manchester



Sir Alex Ferguson is ready to unleash Wayne Rooney on Fulham on Monday following the Manchester United striker's rapid recovery from an ankle injury.

England star Rooney has been sidelined for less than a month with the ankle injury suffered during a training session at United's Carrington training ground.

Initial fears that he could be sidelined until mid-December have proven to be unfounded, however, and Ferguson admits that Rooney is on course to re-ignite his deadly partnership with Carlos Tevez against Premiership strugglers Fulham.

Ferguson said: "Wayne Rooney is training and I expect him to be fit for Monday. Wayne did all his running last week and his endurance work was fine. He has trained in the football and he has a couple of days

to be ready for Fulham and I think he will be ready."

"He hasn't even been out for a month, but his fitness levels are good and it won't take him long to get back to his best. He scored in something like seven games in a row before the injury, so hopefully he can get back to that kind of form."

"His combination with Carlos Tevez was looking good, but you miss these players when they are out. You cope, but you still miss them."

Ferguson is set to be canvassed by the Football Association (FA) for his views on the search for a successor to Steve McClaren as the England manager.

The Scot admits he has yet to speak to FA officials, but he has warned the English game's bosses that finding the right man to take the country forward will not be easy.

Ferguson said: "The FA haven't spoken to me and I don't know if they will, but I would obviously try to help the situation. There will be plenty of people with their opinions who have experience of what

is needed for the job."

"That applies to Scotland and England, but it is not easy to get international managers. That was shown with Alex McLeish. Alex is a young man and I spoke to him a couple of times about it, but despite Scotland doing so well, he had the urge to get that daily involvement again."

"If you are young, there is an inclination to go back into club football, particularly if you are successful. It's not an easy job and I have said time and again that experience is important."

"But it is important for our game that England get the right manager to replace Steve and drive the game on."

"If Jose Mourinho wanted it, he'd be a consideration, but there are quite a few of them. If Arsene Wenger or myself said we wanted it, we'd be under consideration. It's about who wants the job first of all and who has the qualifications for it."

"It's not an easy selection process. It's difficult and you have to go through the procedure and just allow the FA to get on with it."

Japan pick Okada

Football

AFP, Tokyo

The Japan Football Association said Friday it has picked Takeshi Okada, who coached Japan at their first World Cup in 1998, to return to the job to replace the ailing Ivica Osim.

Okada, 51, becomes the first Japanese to coach the national team since he quit the job in 1998. He takes charge as Japan prepare for next year's campaign to win a berth in the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

The technical committee, which handles the national team, approved the choice of Okada, who will be formally appointed by an executive board meeting on December 7, an

association spokeswoman said. "His recommendation was approved by the technical committee," she said. "I think it is unlikely the executive board would turn today's decision down."

Osim, 66, a gruff Bosnian who led the former Yugoslavia to the 1990 World Cup quarterfinals, suffered a serious stroke on November 16 and is only now emerging from a coma.

Under Osim, Japan have won 13 matches, lost five and drawn two. But they failed to win a third straight Asian Cup in July.

Osim's predecessor, Brazilian legend Zico, was criticized for trying to adapt a Latin American style of football to Japan. Zico stepped down after Japan's winless exit from last year's World Cup in Germany.

Okada was first appointed Japan's

coach in 1997 during the final Asian qualifiers for the World Cup in France, succeeding Shu Kamo who was fired due to mediocre results.

Despite limited experience at the time, Okada developed a reputation for being able to take tough decisions and sideline senior players if necessary.

After coaching the national team, Okada managed Consadole Sapporo in the J-League second division in 1999. It took him only one year to lead his club to promotion to the top flight.

Okada then moved to the Yokohama F Marinos, winning two championships before he stepped down last year. He is currently the Japan Football Association's special envoy for environmental conservation.

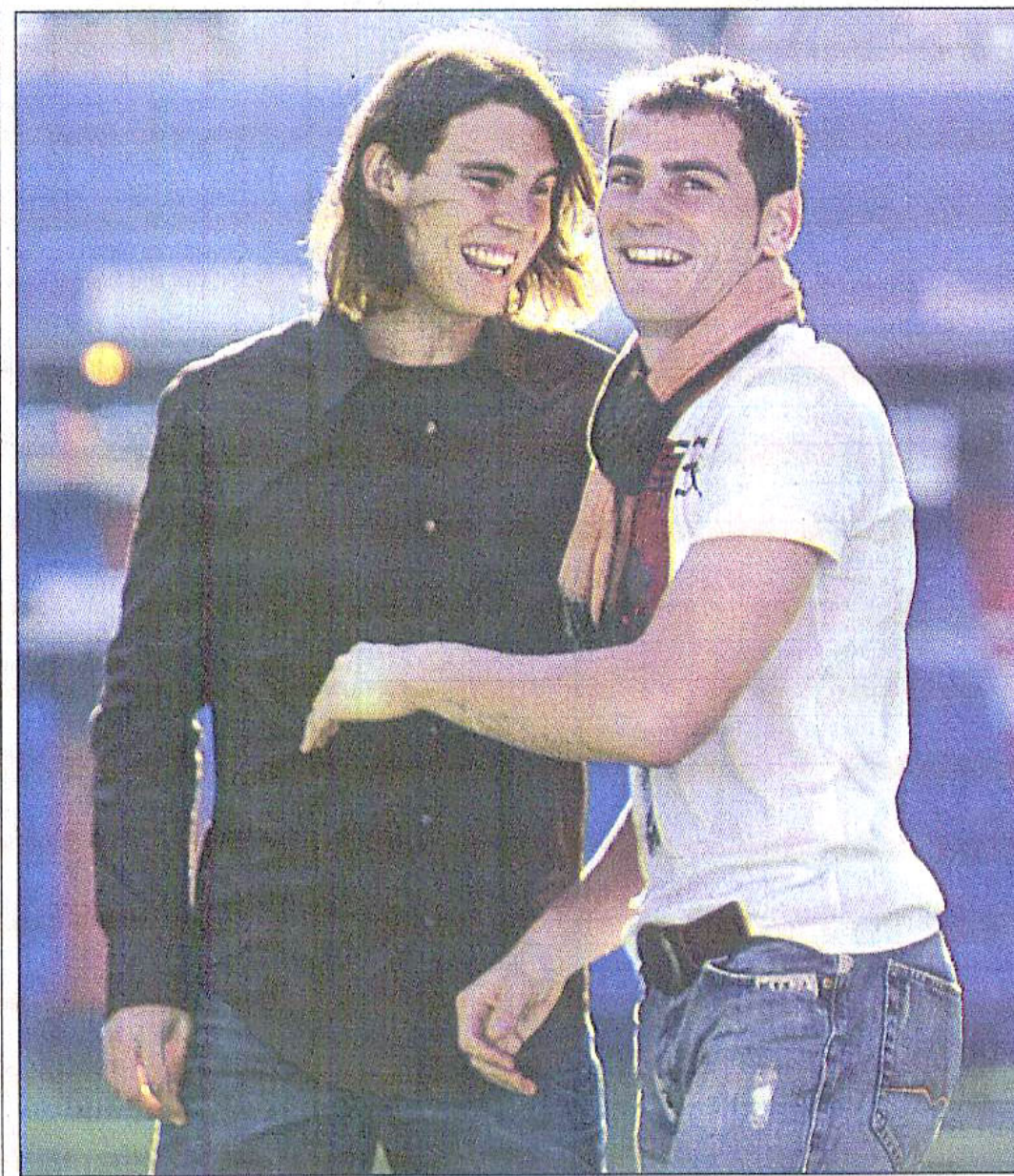


PHOTO: AFP

Spanish tennis star Rafael Nadal (L) and Real Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas share a joke during a Red Cross media event against malaria held at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Friday.