



Chelsea striker Andriy Shevchenko goes airborne after scoring the first goal against Sunderland during their Premiership match at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

Smith out of first T20 tie

CRICINFO, undated

Graeme Smith, the South Africa captain, has backed out of the first Twenty20 against West Indies, as well as Makhaya Ntini's benefit match, on medical advice. In Smith's absence, Shaun Pollock has been named captain for the Twenty20 on December 16 in Port Elizabeth.

"The decision has been taken purely on medical grounds," said Mickey Arthur, South Africa's coach. "His doctors feel that rest and recuperation is the way for him to go and they have recommended that he takes three weeks off. They are confident that he will be ready for the first Test against West Indies starting on December 26."

Morne van Wyk will fill Smith's absence at the top of the order.

The benefit match, also against West Indies, takes place at East London's Buffalo Park ground on December 14. The second Twenty20 will be played on January 18, after the three-Test series.

Symonds would love to skipper

PTI, Melbourne

Michael Clarke maybe the natural heir to Australian captain Ricky Ponting but belligerent all-rounder Andrew Symonds revealed he too cherishes the ambition of leading the side, even if it's just in the one-dayers.

Symonds reckons Clarke stood the best chance to succeed Ponting when it comes to Test captaincy but feels he has matured a lot over the years and can lead the side in one-dayers.

"It's great to see Michael Clarke's rise in Australian cricket. But when I sit down and think about it I would also love the chance to captain my country," Symonds wrote in 'Sunday Herald Sun'.

"I think he'll (Clarke) be the ideal successor to Ricky Ponting as captain of the Test side - although I joked with him recently that if I were skipper, there'd be no diamond earnings in my team."

"Behind the banter, I thought about my personal development, my status within the Australian side and the longer-term goals I'd like to achieve," Symonds said.

Rafa focused

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67th minute when James Harper latched onto a Doyle through-ball, sped past the cover and rounded Reina before calmly shooting into an empty net.

Liverpool's defeat left them seven points behind leaders Arsenal, who could extend that advantage over the Merseyside club to 10 if they beat struggling Middlesbrough on Sunday.

But while most attention was on the position of Liverpool, Reading manager Steve Coppell was delighted by his team's first win over one of the 'big four' (Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester United) since their promotion to the top flight last year.

"I will sleep well tonight and it was a good result for us," added Coppell, after a win that put the Royals up into 12th place.

"Liverpool looked a bit narrow and our tactics worked well against them."

But boyhood Liverpool fan Coppell, the former Manchester United and England winger, said he understood Benitez's position.

"In terms of priorities of the games this week I would say we were third (Liverpool play Manchester United next weekend).

"I don't want to put words into Rafa's mouth but Marseille has got to be the number-one priority."

Chelsea missing Drogba

AFP, London



Ayram Grant reckons Chelsea are braced for a testing spell without leading scorer Didier Drogba after his side laboured to a 2-0 win over Sunderland.

The Ivory Coast international has undergone surgery on a long-standing knee injury and, while the extent of his lay-off remains uncertain, he is expected to be out until January at the earliest.

Saturday's result at Stamford Bridge may have suggested Chelsea have little to fear in Drogba's absence but the reality is rather different.

Victory against a wretchedly unambitious Sunderland was virtually assured as soon as Andriy Shevchenko headed in Salomon Kalou's precise cross in the 25th minute but, for long periods, Chelsea looked decidedly uninspired.

Without Drogba as their focal point, there was a lack of focus to many of their attacks and, despite his goal, Shevchenko possesses neither the mobility nor the muscle to terrorise the Premier League's elite sides.

With meetings against two of the division's in-form teams - Arsenal and Blackburn - and a League Cup quarter-final encoun-

ter with Liverpool looming large, Grant has every right to be anxious.

"It will not be easy but I did not come to this club for an easy life," he said after a win which left Chelsea three points behind leaders Arsenal.

"We didn't want Didier to be injured but if you can say this about an operation, it looks quite good at the moment."

"We need to wait and see how long-term it is. We want him to feel well and for his knee to be okay. If he can play in (next month's) African Nations Cup then he will play but his health is the most important thing."

"I never want one of my players to have an operation but sometimes there is nothing you can do. He had a problem and we decided to wait a few days, but he locked his knee again on Friday so we had to get him to have an operation."

"It will not be easy but we have good strikers at this club - not just Shevchenko, who scored a good goal, but also Claudio Pizarro. Then we also have Kalou who is doing well."

Grant has to look on the bright side, but his pitch-side demeanour told a different story.

"Chelsea's lethargic second-half performance prompted the Israeli to repeatedly bellow reprimands to his players and against more polished opponents than Sunderland has team might have suffered for

such an approach.

Instead, the Wearsiders - for all their effort - hardly threatened and Chelsea were able to enjoy a stress-free final 15 minutes when Lampard converted the penalty a w a r d e d f o r D a n n y Higginbotham's tug on Alex's jersey.

Sunderland's misery was made complete in the dying moments when Liam Miller was sent-off after a clash with Pizarro, although visiting manager Roy Keane said Chelsea's players had helped spark the confrontation by over-reacting to Miller's initial foul on John Terry.

"Liam should not have raised his hands but the initial foul was not bad."

"Judging by the reactions of Terry and Pizarro, you clearly cannot tackle the England captain. "They made a big issue out of it and had a go at Liam but there was nothing malicious about it. Now Liam will miss three games which will hurt us."

Sunderland remain mired in relegation trouble and Keane admits he will have to wield the chequebook when the transfer window reopens in January.

"We certainly have to try and strengthen the squad," said the former Manchester United captain.

"We're hopeful but identifying and signing the right players is easier said than done."

Marseille warm-up for Reds

AFP, Paris



Marseille warmed up for Tuesday's d o o r - d i e Champions League clash a g a i n s t Liverpool with a 2-0 win over Monaco in the French championship on Saturday.

The win, their fifth of the season, also eased Marseille's relegation fears.

Central defender Julien Rodriguez, in the 53rd minute, and skipper Lorik Cana (70), both scored headed goals as Marseille moved up to 11th in the table ahead of Saturday's later matches.

A win on Tuesday will put Marseille into the knockout rounds of the Champions League.

Coach Eris Gerets praised the support his team received on Saturday and said their backing will prove crucial at the Stade Velodrome against Liverpool.

"There's been a change in the

behaviour of our fans," said Gerets. "I'm pleasantly surprised by the support we had throughout the 90 minutes. On Tuesday, against Liverpool, we will need even a little more."

Meanwhile, six-time champions Lyon, who travel to Rangers on Wednesday in another must-win Champions League clash, slumped to a 1-0 defeat at Caen.

The loss cut their lead to four points with second-place Nancy unable to take full advantage by playing to a dull 0-0 draw at Valenciennes.

With one eye on the tricky trip to Glasgow, Lyon coach Alain Perrin put vital players Juninho, Sydney Govou and Karim Benzema on the bench and handed Nadir Belhadj, Abdul Kader Keita and Milan Baros starting places.

Caen took full advantage of the champions' uncertainty with Yoan Gouffran scoring the only goal of the game after 17 minutes after a misunderstanding between Sébastien Squillaci and Cléber Anderson.

"Nothing's changed. Rangers are the favourites."

Meanwhile, Le Mans leapt into third place with a 3-1 win at Lens and are now four points behind Nancy.

Bottom club Metz, with just one win all season, were 2-0 losers at sixth-placed Saint-Etienne and are 11 points from safety.

On Sunday, third-placed Bordeaux travel to Nice, while floundering PSG desperately need a result at relegation rivals Auxerre.

Ronaldo doubtful

AFP, Yokohama

An injury-plagued Ronaldo is looking increasingly doubtful for AC Milan's Club World Cup campaign in Japan, but his teammates are trying to keep his spirits up, fellow Brazilian Kaka says.

The 31-year-old has missed every training session with the squad since the European Champions League winners arrived Thursday, a week before their first match in the annual tournament of continental champions.

"What annoys him is that since he does not play he feels he's a bit out of the squad," Kaka said on Milan's website.

"It's for this reason that in this training camp in Japan we talk to him a lot, because we want him to feel inside the team."

Ronaldo has featured in just one match this season, when he started against Cagliari two weeks ago on his return from a thigh injury -- only to pick up a knock to his left calf.

"Now we don't know how long he will be out for, even though we did not lose our hopes in seeing him on the pitch in this World Cup, but when we talk to him, and we often do, we never talk about injuries," said 25-year-old playmaker Kaka.

"The calf is still hurting him, but the doctors will think about this as he is making a lot of treatments and applications with them during this training camp," he added.

Kaka pointed out that Ronaldo has "gone through more difficult moments than this one," pointing to his two-year layoff with a knee injury until he came back to help Brazil win the 2002 World Cup in Japan.

Ronaldo scored twice in Brazil's 2-0 win over Germany in the 2002 final at the Yokohama International Stadium, which is also the venue of this year's Club World Cup final.

"I hope that he returns as soon as possible and plays those game sequences in which he hopes," added Kaka, who won France's prestigious Ballon d'Or award for best player of the year just a week ago.

Milan will face either Asian champions Urawa Reds of Japan or runners-up Sepahan of Iran in the semi-finals on Thursday at the Yokohama stadium. Urawa and Sepahan clash at Toyota on Monday.

Milan and Boca Juniors of Argentina, who beat the Italian side in the 2003 Intercontinental Cup final, are taking a bye into the semi-finals.

Milan's possible showdown with Boca is being widely labelled as a chance to take revenge, but it's not a sentiment Kaka shares.

Cacau out until 2008

AFP, Stuttgart

Defending Bundesliga champion's VfB Stuttgart will be without their striker Cacau until next year after the Brazilian injured his shoulder in Saturday's 3-1 win over VfL Wolfsburg.

Cacau scored his third goal of the season for Stuttgart in the 48th minute, but had to be substituted ten minutes later and will have an operation next week to repair shoulder ligaments.

It is unclear at this stage whether the striker will be back in action when the Bundesliga resumes on February 1. Stuttgart's win over Wolfsburg leaves them eighth in the league.

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"He's got a great left-foot and they were two fantastic finishes," Portmouth manager Harry Redknapp said of Muntari's goals.

At Goodison Park, Nigeria's Yakubu opened the scoring in the 51st minute after Australia's Tim Cahill's volley was blocked by Fulham keeper Antti Niemi.

He then headed in from a flick-on by Phil Jagielka and completed his treble in the 79th minute.

"What we have wanted from him is what he has given his other clubs," Portsmouth's Carrick said of Muntari's goals.

United are already through to the last 32 of European football's premier club competition and their position as group winners is secure regardless of the result in the Italian capital.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has already made it clear that a number of squad players will feature against Roma with Michael Carrick, who replaced Hargreaves on Saturday, set to start again while the former Bayern Munich midfielder receives treatment in Manchester.

"Owen strained his calf and we can't take chances at this time of

Duisburg hold Bayern

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich boss Ottmar Hitzfeld regretted his side's desire to "play pretty" rather than picking up the three points which would have guaranteed them top spot in the Bundesliga at Christmas.

Despite dominating both possession and territory, Bayern were held to a surprise 0-0 home draw by ten-man Duisburg on Saturday, but stayed top of the league after second-placed Werder Bremen stumbled 4-3 at Hanover.

Bayern's star-studded attack including midfielder Franck Ribery plus strikers Miroslav Klose and Luca Toni - summer signings worth 49 million euros (71.8 million US dollars) - could not break down the guests' defence which has leaked 25 goals already this season.

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