



SORRY THE HATTRICK DIDN'T WORK MATE: Blackburn striker Roque Santa Cruz (L) is congratulated by teammates Robbie Savage (R) and Morten Pedersen during their enthralling Premier League match against Wigan at the JJB Stadium on Saturday.

Goal fest at the JJB

AFP, London



Manchester City maintained their perfect home record this season as they moved into the top four of the Premier League with a 4-2 win against Bolton on Saturday.

City's ninth league win at Eastlands saw them leapfrog Liverpool into fourth spot ahead of Sunday's clashes between the 'Big Four' when leaders Arsenal face third-placed Chelsea while Liverpool take on Manchester United.

Portsmouth missed the chance to go fourth themselves as Tottenham's 1-0 win at Fratton Park gave Spurs their first away league victory of the season.

At the bottom of the table, Wigan ended a run of 14 matches without a win with a 5-3 victory over Blackburn, Marcus Bent scoring a hat-trick as did Rovers' Roque Santa Cruz.

Manchester City went ahead in the seventh minute through Rolando Bianchi before El-Hadji Diouf levelled in the 31st minute.

Bolton took the lead when Kevin

Nolan turned in Ricardo Gardner's pull-back.

City drew level in the 48th minute when Lubomir Michalik headed into his own net and they were back in front when England forward Darius Vassell scored in the 77th minute. Kelvin Etuhu's last-minute goal sealed City's victory.

Wigan were 2-0 up inside 13 minutes at the JJB stadium through Denny Landzaat and Bent.

Blackburn missed a chance to pull a goal back when South Africa forward Benni McCarthy's penalty was turned round the post by Chris Kirkland.

Shortly before half-time Austria striker Paul Scharner headed in to make it 3-0 before Rovers, who had Brett Emerton sent off, hit back through Santa Cruz on the stroke of half-time.

The Paraguayan scored a second to make it 3-2 five minutes after the break and made it 3-3 just after the hour mark.

Bent put Wigan back in front in the 66th minute and made it 5-3 nine minutes from time as his team went six points clear of Derby but still stayed in the bottom three.

"You could see why we haven't won for two or three months. Panic set in," said Wigan manager Steve Bruce.

Aiyegbeni Yakubu, who scored Everton's winner in the League Cup quarterfinal at Upton Park on Wednesday, returned to haunt West Ham again with a goal on the stroke of half-time. Andy Johnson scored on the counter-attack in the 90th minute to make it 2-0 to Everton.

Portsmouth's three previous home league matches had ended in goalless draws but Spurs' Dimitar Berbatov ended that sequence when he turned in an 81st minute cross from Aaron Lennon.

Middlesbrough added to bottom-of-the-table Derby's woes when Tuncay Sanli volleyed in Stewart Downing's cross in the 38th minute for his third goal in three league games, Boro backing up their win over Arsenal.

In Saturday's late game, a stoppage time penalty from Joey Barton saw Newcastle win 1-0 away to Fulham as the London side slipped into the bottom three.

Referee Howard Webb had no hesitation in awarding the visitors

the penalty at Craven Cottage after Elliot Omuzi brought down Alan Smith.

"It wasn't the prettiest but it's another last-minute winner and shows the lads are very fit," said Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce.

Danny Higginbotham put Sunderland in front in the 10th minute at home against Aston Villa with a fine header but Villa drew level through Shaun Maloney's free-kick 17 minutes from time.

It seemed as if Sunderland's Danny Collins had scored the winner in stoppage time but his header was ruled out by Steve Bennett for a foul.

Furious Sunderland manager Roy Keane risked punishment from the Football Association by suggesting Bennett had "cheated" his side out of victory.

"We scored a very good goal, a fair goal, and for some reason the referee's disallowed it," said Keane.

"I'm sure he will be delighted we're talking about him (Bennett) after the game. Our brilliant supporters, who travel up and down the country in unbelievable numbers, for them to be cheated today is really disappointing."

Elano set for recall

AFP, Manchester

Sven Goran Eriksson is ready to restore Brazilian playmaker Elano to Manchester City's starting line-up in the League Cup quarterfinal against Tottenham, despite seeing his side secure a ninth straight Premier League home win with a 4-2 victory against Bolton.

Goals at Eastlands from Rolando Bianchi, Darius Vassell, Kelvin Etuhu and Lubomir Michalik's own goal sealed victory for City against a Bolton team that had briefly led 2-1 through El-Hadji Diouf and Kevin Nolan.

But with City aiming to reach their first major cup semifinal since 1981, former England coach Eriksson is planning to bring back five-goal top scorer Elano, out for two weeks with a hamstring injury, against Spurs on Tuesday.

"Elano will hopefully be fit for Tuesday. He is a fantastic player and we are hoping that everything is okay with him," Eriksson said after a win that maintained City's push for European football next season.

"It is good to go into that game with a victory, though. We started well and scored a good goal, but it looked very bad for us at half-time after Bolton had taken the lead," the Swede added.

"When the players came in at half-time, I told them that they looked like losers. They looked like a losing team and I told them to their faces that they wouldn't win the game like that. But they were much better in the second-half and they deserved to win the game in the end."

Italian striker Bianchi set City on their way to victory with his seventh minute goal, his fourth for the club since arriving in an 8.8 million pounds pre-season move.

Diarra wants to leave

AFP, Paris

France midfielder Lassana Diarra wants to leave Arsenal due to his frustration at being left on the substitutes' bench.

Diarra is a regular with 'Les Bleus' but has found regular playing time among Arsene Wenger's foreign legion hard to come by.

"We're halfway through December, and I've decided: I want to leave Arsenal. The bottom line is the coach doesn't need me," Diarra told Sunday's edition of L'Equipe.

"They don't want me. I don't understand, because I've got more value in the French national team."

Diarra has already informed the Premier League leaders, who face Chelsea on Sunday, of his feelings.

And while he said he has no argument with Wenger, he feels let down by the club's management.

"When I signed for Arsenal I was made promises by the people who recruited me," he added.

"But since the start of the season the only matches I've been involved in have been low-key, and to be honest I'm getting fed up with it."

"With Mister Wenger, there's no problem whatsoever. I'm not going to criticise him or speak badly of him. I'm not the kind of person who creates problems."

"But I signed for Arsenal because I was led to believe I was going to be playing, and there would be healthy competition (for a spot). That hasn't been the case."

Simeone takes River reigns

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Former Argentina midfielder Diego Simeone has signed a one-year contract to coach River Plate starting on Jan. 3, the club announced on Saturday.

Simeone replaces Daniel Passarella, who quit last month after River were knocked out of the Copa Sudamericana by modest Arsenal ending their last chance of winning a trophy this year.

Simeone, 37, turned to coaching in 2005 after playing 106 games for Argentina and having represented some of Europe's top clubs including Inter Milan and Atletico Madrid.

He began his coaching career at Racing Club and led Estudiantes to the national championship in 2006.

"This is an enormous challenge," Simeone told a news conference. "I love challenges, but I know that with the players and with people's support we are going to restore River to their rightful place."

River have not won a title in the last six domestic championships, considered an eternity for one of the clubs which traditionally dominates the game in Argentina alongside arch-rivals Boca Juniors.

River Plate president Jose Maria Aguilar, whose support for former Argentina captain Passarella never flagged despite the club's poor performances, was pleased with the new appointment.

"We feel very comfortable having found Simeone as his career takes off," Aguilar told reporters.

Simeone said he was looking forward to working with players who were anxious to redeem themselves.

"I know what it means to come to River at my young age and I know what I want," said Simeone, whose two sons play for River's junior teams.

Boring Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich will stay top of the Bundesliga for Christmas only by virtue of a superior goal difference over Werder Bremen after they were held to a 0-0 draw at Hertha Berlin on Saturday.

While second-placed Bremen were busy destroying Bayer Leverkusen 5-2, Bayern gave their travelling fans little to cheer about as they picked up their second consecutive 0-0 draw in freezing temperatures in the German capital.

"We had planned for and really wanted to get three points, so that we could stand alone at the top of the table," said coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

"That did not happen for us, unfortunately. Nevertheless we go into the winter break as leaders."

"After the press reports of the past week, you would have thought we are in the bottom three of the table."

"To be league leaders over Christmas is a great achievement for the players and will help motivate them to do well next year."

But Hitzfeld's comments did little to divert attention away from what are troubling times for Bayern after a week of worrying headlines.

Captain Oliver Kahn was suspended for the Hertha game and

heavily fined after criticising teammates Luca Toni and Franck Ribery for inconsistent performances in the wake of last weekend's goalless draw with struggling Duisburg.

After their spectacular start to the season, when they hammered rivals Bremen 4-0 on the second weekend, Bayern are mere shadows of their former confident selves having won just two of their last seven league games.

And, according to reports in the German press on Friday, a replacement for Hitzfeld, out of contract next June, is already being sought for next season.

With in-form striker Toni out with a thigh injury, it was down to Miroslav Klose to be the lone forward supported by converted striker Lukas Podolski and Ribery in the midfield.

But ever since they were hammered 3-1 at defending champions VfB Stuttgart on November 10, Bayern have struggled to break down their opponents and this was another lacklustre performance.

Bayern's best chance fell to Klose on 75 minutes, but he just stabbed his shot wide.

The visitors failed to impress even though they are crowned autumn champions as the league breaks for winter to resume on February 1.

In Bremen, Croatian striker Ivan Klasnic - making just his third league appearance since recovering from a kidney transplant operation at the start of the year - was the hero for Werder.

He opened the scoring against Leverkusen with a well-taken strike on 30 minutes before adding his second and Bremen's fourth just after the hour mark.

Bremen's Brazilian midfielder Diego scored to become the league's joint top-scorer with nine goals, while German international Clemens Fritz and Markus Rosenberg also scored in the comfortable 5-2 win.

On Friday, Energie Cottbus lifted themselves from the bottom of the table and up to 16th with a stunning 5-1 win over high-fliers Hanover.

Hamburg stay in third place, but are now four points adrift of the top two after they drew 1-1 at Karlsruhe, who are now sixth.

Schalke 04 held onto their half-time lead over Nuremberg for a 2-1 win to move up to fifth.

VfL Wolfsburg are tenth after they blitzed Borussia Dortmund 4-0.

And Stuttgart were reduced to nine men as they were beaten 2-0 at Arminia Bielefeld as they had Mexican midfielder Pavel Pardo and compatriot Ricardo Osorio sent off in a bad-tempered second half.

The result was impressive for the home side who saw coach Ernst Middendorp sacked on Monday and former German international Michael Frontzeck was named as his replacement on Saturday.

On Sunday, strugglers Hansa Rostock and VfL Bochum will slug it out, while bottom side Duisburg take on Eintracht Frankfurt.

Hitzfeld slams media



Football

AFP, Berlin

After a difficult week for the Bundesliga leaders, Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld went on the attack with the German media following his side's lacklustre 0-0 draw at Hertha Berlin.

Bayern were barely out of the headlines for all the wrong reasons last week after captain Oliver Kahn was fined and suspended for criticising teammates Franck Ribery and Luca Toni.

Kahn had launched a thinly-veiled attack on the French and Italian stars, published in last Monday's edition of German magazine Kicker, insisting they had to be more consistent.

But the Bayern captain also irked club bosses by exiting last weekend's Christmas party early, leaving midfielder Mark van Bommel to give the traditional

skipper's speech.

On Tuesday, the club announced Kahn had been hit with a 25,000 euros fine (36,000 US dollars fine) and suspended for a week.

The story, including Kahn's grovelling apology, ran in the German media for most of the week before German tabloid Bild claimed on Friday a replacement for Hitzfeld, out of contract next June, is being sought for next season.

Club manager Uli Hoeness slammed the article after Saturday's 0-0 draw in Berlin saying there was no truth in the matter, but rumours of a rift between Hitzfeld and board chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge have been recently. Their stars including Ribery, Lukas Podolski and Bastian Schweinsteiger just are not performing like they can.

"After the press reports of the past week, you would have thought we were in the relegation fight," said Hitzfeld, who will issue his team with a code of conduct to ensure there is no repeat of Kahn's

outburst.

"But we are champions at the season's halfway point which is a great achievement for the players and will motivate them when we start again next year."

Last week's negative headlines, implying the club are in crisis, aside, there can be no denying Bayern are mere shadows of the all-conquering side who began the season with a hiss and a roar.

Having blitzed title rivals Werder Bremen 4-0 on the second weekend of the season, Bayern have won just two of their last seven league games and the scoreless draw in Berlin was their second consecutive 0-0 result.

"We had planned and wanted very much to get the three points, so we would be alone at the top of the table," said Hitzfeld.

"That did not happen for us, but we are winter champions, which is pleasing."

"I hope the situation settles down again now in the media."

Kaka set to add to honours



Football

REUTERS, Berne

AC Milan and Brazil playmaker Kaka is widely expected to add to his haul of trophies and titles this season when FIFA announce their World Player of the Year at Monday's annual gala in Zurich.

Kaka, who is due to fly to Switzerland following AC Milan's appearance in Sunday's Club World Cup final, faces competition from Manchester United's Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo and Barcelona's Argentine striker Lionel Messi.

The trio were selected as this year's top three players in a poll of national team coaches and captains but the order in which they were chosen will only be revealed on Monday.

Kaka, who helped steer his club to the 2007 Champions League title, is seen as a strong favourite after already picking up a clutch of individual honours this year.

Earlier this month he received the prestigious Ballon d'Or award handed out by France Football magazine following a survey of sports journalists around the world. The Ballon d'Or winner has gone on to pick up FIFA's World Player award in six of the past 10 years.

Kaka was also named World Player of the Year this month by British magazine World Soccer, following a poll of fans in 48 countries.

Additional honours have included UEFA's Club Footballer of the Year, Champions League Best Forward and Champions League Top Scorer awards and the FIFPro World Player of the Year title, voted

on by Kaka's fellow professionals.

Kaka has modestly suggested that his haul of titles this year is mainly due to his club's Champions League success, telling France Football after picking up the Ballon d'Or, "that is key. You have to play in a winning side."

In reality the FIFA award seems to be based as much upon an individual's efforts and skills as the achievements of his team - if Kaka does win on Monday, he will become the first player in the award's 17-year history to win the title and the Champions League final in the same year.

All 16 of the previous winners were based at European clubs when they picked up the World Player title but Kaka's compatriot Ronaldo is the only player to have won the award in the same year as playing at a Champions League winning club.

Ronaldo failed to do the Champions League and World Player double however as he personally missed out on Real Madrid's successful 2002 European campaign through injury.

Monday's award also offers national coaches a chance to prove their skills at identifying the best players, with FIFA publishing all of the individual votes immediately after the gala.

Former England coach Steve McClaren was the only trainer to correctly pick all three top players in the correct order last year, and will be able to try his luck again on Monday.

The voting forms were sent out to the various coaches before McClaren was fired as England coach and FIFA have confirmed that his nominations were returned before his dismissal.

Sorry times for PSG

AFP, Paris



Paul Le Guen's hopes that ailing Paris Saint Germain's wretched season had turned a corner were dashed after a 2-1 home loss to Toulouse on Saturday.

PSG, desperate to build on last week's win over Auxerre, fell behind to a double either side of the break from Johan Elmander, with Pedro Pauleta's injury time penalty doing little to appease the frustrated Parc des Princes fans.

This latest loss, PSG's seventh of the campaign, left the capital club back in the relegation zone, with only Sochaux and Metz below them.

Club president Alain Cayzac said that the PSG management would be holding crisis talks next week.

Asked by Canal+ television whether Le Guen's future would be one of the subjects up for discussion Cayzac said: "We'll be looking at all the solutions to get out of this deep crisis, that means everything."

He added: "This situation is hitting me hard."

Lyon, fresh from their midweek heroics in qualifying for the Champions League last 16 with that 3-0 defeat of Rangers, found that a hard act to follow and were held to a goalless draw by Nice at the Stade Gerland.

That left Alain Perrin's champions, who are chasing a seventh title, still with a little work to do to going into the mid-season break

with the honorary title of winter champions.

Saturday's share of the spoils put them on 38 points, five clear of Nancy who host Strasbourg on Sunday.

Lyon's goalkeeper Remy Vercoutre said: "We left a fair bit of energy at Ibrox (against Rangers on Wednesday)."

Lyon can count themselves fortunate to have taken something from the game as Brazilian midfielder Ederson's 83rd minute freekick hit the crossbar with the ball rebounding off the line, to the evident relief of Vercoutre.

"We couldn't have done more this evening," reflected Perrin.

"We didn't have enough gas to grab the win, players aren't robots."

Highfliers Le Mans moved up a

place into third after a goalless draw with Lorient put them on 30 points.

Sochaux prevailed 2-1 in the bottom of the table dogfight with Metz, while strugglers Lille boosted their bid to stay in the top flight with a 3-0 win over Saint Etienne.

Valenciennes beat Auxerre by the same margin.

Monaco won their seventh match of the season, Jurgen Menz' second half double earning them a 2-0 success over Lens, and Caen were into sixth after beating Rennes 2-1.

On Sunday, Bordeaux can reclaim third place with victory over Marseille while second placed Nancy will be aiming to cut Lyon's five point lead when they host Strasbourg.



Football

AFP, Bremen

Werder Bremen's Ivan Klasnic enjoyed a Christmas fairytale finish to the kidney transplant nightmare - which almost ended his career - with two goals in the 5-2 win over Bayer Leverkusen.

The 27-year-old striker, who played for Croatia in last year's World Cup, opened his side's scoring in just his third league game back after his kidney transplant as Bremen drew level with Bayern

Munich at the top of the league on Saturday.

"I'm of course very happy," he said after netting twice to leave him with 44 goals in 138 Bundesliga matches.

"It was very emotional for me and it took me about five seconds to actually realise I had scored the first goal."

"I have forgotten the bad period which is behind me and I am just focusing on the future now."

And coach Thomas Schaaf was full of praise for the striker after watching him endure a difficult year in which his career hung in the

balance for many months.

"He has dealt with a very difficult situation with great strength and courage, but he has still kept his qualities."

Ill health had forced Klasnic to have a first kidney operation at the start of the year, but his body rejected the organ donated by his mother. A second operation proved successful.

Now, the 27-year-old could be forgiven for treasuring both strikes against Bayer. But he only got through it with the support of family and friends.

"I could not have got through 2007 without the support of my family and teammates."

"The year has changed my approach to life, from now on I concentrate on my health and those important to me."

For Bremen teammate Clemens Fritz, who also scored against Bayer Leverkusen in the 5-2 rout, the goals were Klasnic's just desserts.

"Those two goals were a fitting reward for all the hard months of rehabilitation he has gone through," he said.

After the first kidney was rejected, Klasnic had a second operation in March with an organ donated by his father which was successful.

"Thank God, the transplant went very well," he said on his website at the time.

"My body has accepted my father's kidney and we're both doing well."

"The doctors already told me I would be able to continue playing football."

But it was a long road back and in August Werder Bremen's doctors banned him from training with the squad through fears his body would not cope with the heavy physical strain.

In September, the medics finally allowed him to train with the first-team squad and he made a few appearances for the second team.

He started his first Bundesliga game since December 2006 three weeks ago in the 2-0 win at Energie Cottbus and has had to wait less than a month for his first goals.

With Croatia sealing their place at Euro 2008 with their 3-2 win at Wembley last month against England, next June's European Championships now beckon for Klasnic.



THANKING THE LORD: Werder Bremen striker Ivan Klasnic is on his knees as he offers a prayer of thanks after scoring against Bayer Leverkusen in their Bundesliga match at the Weser Stadium on Saturday.