



SORRY THE HATRICK 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.

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

APP, 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."

"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."

Now, the 27-year-old could be forgiven for treasuring both strikes against Bayern. 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.

"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.

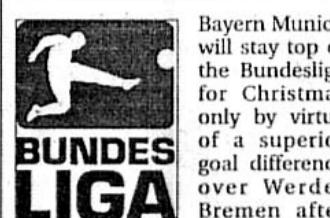
In September, the medics finally allowed him to train with the first-team squad and he made a few appearances for the second-team.

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.

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."

"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 Middendorf sacked on Monday and former German international Michael Frontzeck was named as his replacement on Saturday.

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

Hitzfeld slams media



APP, 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 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 team-mates 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 euro 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 rife 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 worked 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."

Klasnic's fairytale finish



APP, 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 Bayern 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.

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Kaka set to add to honours



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.

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

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.

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

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.

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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 McLaren 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.

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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 mehard."

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