

Santa rescues Rovers

AFP, Manchester

Roque Santa Cruz ended Blackburn's four-game losing streak with a controversial late equaliser to seal a 2-2 draw at Manchester City on Thursday.

Santa Cruz took his tally to seven goals in his last four games with the 82nd minute header which had initially been ruled out for offside by the linesman Darren Cann before being awarded by referee Howard Webb.

It was a crucial goal that ended City's hopes of claiming ten successive league home wins and moving into fourth spot in the Premiership ahead of Liverpool, who visit Eastlands on Sunday.

Although City's unbeaten home record this season went up in smoke with the 2-0 League Cup defeat against Spurs last week, their 100-per cent Premiership record at Eastlands remained intact ahead of the clash with Mark Hughes's men.

And after a slow start, Sven-Goran Eriksson's side took the lead as the game burst to life with three goals inside three minutes midway through the first-half.

By that stage, Rolando Bianchi had already missed an easy chance for the home side when he failed to score from three yards after being teed up by Martin Petrov's precise cross from the left.

But City were able to break the deadlock on 27 minutes when Bulgarian midfielder Petrov once again broke down the left, beating the out-of-position full-back Zurab Khizanishvili far too easily, before crossing for former England striker Darius Vassell to head in at the far post.

Khizanishvili was only playing at full-back due to an injury and suspension crisis within the Blackburn squad, but his night was to get even worse due to the pace and precision of Petrov's crossing. However, just a minute after falling behind, Blackburn had hauled themselves level when Paraguayan striker Santa Cruz headed David Bentley's free-kick past goalkeeper Joe Hart at the near post.

City's defence made it easy for the former Bayern Munich man to score by allowing him to work himself free inside the six-yard box.

Blackburn, with just one win in nine games ahead of this clash, were not able to celebrate for long, however, as City reclaimed the lead sixty seconds later with Petrov once again at the heart of the move.

Yet again, he beat Khizanishvili before evading a Christopher Samba challenge on the edge of the box.

Free of attention, Petrov pulled the ball across the face of goal, but just as Bianchi looked set to score, Rovers captain Ryan Nelsen beat him to it by inadvertently diverting the ball into his own net.

The shell-shocked Khizanishvili was replaced at half-time by striker Benni McCarthy as Hughes attempted to boost his team's attacking threat.

But City continued to dominate, even if clear-cut chances proved to thin on the ground.

Blackburn struggled to threaten Hart and, when Morten Gamst Pedersen was picked out by Brett Emerton at the far post on the hour mark, the Norwegian could only direct his volley against the body of City defender Micah Richards.

City substitute Elano then went close to sealing the points eight minutes with a stunning volley from 20 yards that unluckily dipped the wrong side of the post to let Blackburn off the hook.

But Santa Cruz claimed the decisive strike when he headed Bentley's cross into the net from close range eight minutes from time.



Blackburn striker Roque Santa Cruz races off to celebrate the first of his two goals in their Premiership match against Manchester City at The City of Manchester Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Offside law puzzles Sven

Football

AFP, Manchester

Sven-Goran Eriksson admitted he has been left bemused by the latest interpretation of the offside rule after Roque Santa Cruz's controversial late equaliser sealed a 2-2 draw for Blackburn at Manchester City on Thursday.

Paraguayan striker Santa Cruz claimed his seventh goal in his last four games as Rovers denied City the chance to go fourth in the Premiership, but his 82nd minute header was shrouded in controversy with linesman Darren Cann initially flagging for an offside involving Rovers midfielder David Dunn.

Cann then changed his mind, leaving referee Howard Webb to award the goal for Blackburn, and City manager Eriksson admitted that the uncertainty surrounding whether players are active or inactive was affecting everybody in the game.

He said: "What is the offside rule? I can use the words of the referee after the game -- he said it is

a grey area and I agree with him.

"Dunn jumped to try to head the ball from an offside position before Santa Cruz scored from an onside position. For me, Dunn was interfering with play and he affected the goalkeeper's position. I asked the referee to explain, but he said it was a grey area.

"There is no point discussing it now, though. Two points we had are now gone and that's it. Against Spurs recently, we had another decision go against us like that, but that is football and you have to accept it and overcome it.

"I'm just disappointed because we have conceded two goals at set pieces which were very similar. We could and should have defended them better."

City had claimed a 2-1 half-time lead after Darius Vassell's headed opener and a Ryan Nelsen own goal cancelled out Santa Cruz's first headed equaliser.

Blackburn manager Mark Hughes admitted that he was relieved at Cann's decision to admit he had made a mistake.

Hughes said: "The linesman has been honest enough to admit that he got the decision wrong when he

put his flag up initially. He put the flag up very early and I expected the goal to be chalked out.

"The linesman had to be brave to go back on it. I think he initially flagged for David Dunn being offside, but that wasn't the case and he was big enough to admit that.

"He called Mr Webb over and he said he had made a mistake. I have questioned officials in the past, but on this occasion I thought he was strong enough to change his mind.

"I think it was a correct and valid decision to award the goal, but the rules are more grey than black-and-white these days."

Hughes has now urged his team to build on the point by making a surge up the table, starting with Sunday's clash with bottom club Derby.

He said: "This is a start for us. We have been on a bit of a bad run and have made life difficult ourselves, but hopefully this can kick-start our season.

"We now have a run of games against teams in the bottom half of the table, so we have to take advantage and start picking up some victories."

Lamps out for several weeks

AFP, Lampard

Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard will be out of action for several weeks after scans revealed he has suffered a torn thigh muscle.

Lampard, 29, sustained the injury in the first half of his side's 4-4 draw against Aston Villa on Wednesday.

The England midfielder is likely to be back in late January but his absence is another blow for Chelsea manager Avram Grant, who is already without John Terry, Didier Drogba and Florent Malouda.

"Scans have revealed a tear in Frank Lampard's right thigh," a Chelsea statement confirmed. "The tear is not in the same leg that Frank injured earlier this season."

"He will begin his rehabilitation immediately and we hope to have him back playing within a few weeks."

On top of those injuries, Drogba, Michael Essien, John Obi Mikel and Salomon Kalou are set to miss a month's action on African Nations Cup duty in the New Year.

Grant had already been weighing up potential signings and he admits he will definitely have to move into the transfer market to bolster a severely depleted squad.

"I was hoping to use the transfer window but now, because of the suspensions and injuries, as well as the African Cup, I must think about using it more," Grant said.

Romario gets 4-month ban

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Former Brazilian star striker Romario has been hit with a 120 days ban after failing a doping test.

The 41-year-old 1994 World Cup hero, tested positive for the anti-balding drug finasteride on October 28 after he had coached his new club Vasco de Gama in a league game against Palmeiras.

Finasteride is black-listed as it can be used as a masking agent for performance-enhancing substances.

The start of the 120 days ban was back-dated to December 18, but the case will be heard again between January 24-31 in order to ascertain whether or not it stands.

Real bonus for treble

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid bosses have promised players a bonus of 900,000-euro (1.3 million dollars) each if they achieve the treble - the Primera Liga, Champions League and Spanish Cup titles this season, sports daily Marca reported here on Friday.

The Spanish giants have never achieved the feat in one season and the sum being offered is an increase on the 600,000 euro (881,000 dollars) originally offered, the newspaper reported.

As Real's first team includes 22 players this would mean the club will pay out an estimated 19.8 million euro (29m dollars) in bonuses.

But it would be money well spent as a Champions League win can reap benefits of up to 40 million euro (59m dollars) for a club.

Real are currently leading the Primera Liga by seven points, and are due to face AS Roma in the Champions League last 16, and host Alicante in the Spanish Cup last 32 after being held 1-1 in the away leg.

The last European club to achieve the treble was Manchester United in 1999.

MU ready to show up rivals

AFP, London

Louis Saha expects Manchester United's superior squad to give the champions a decisive edge as the Premier League title fight heats up.

Sir Alex Ferguson rested Carlos Tevez, Ryan Giggs, Anderson and Patrice Evra against Sunderland on Wednesday but United still coasted to an emphatic 4-0 victory that took them back to the top of the table.

Ferguson's side, who lead Arsenal by a point, face West Ham at Upton Park on Saturday in their third game in six days and a win would see them end the year in first place.

With so many games coming thick and fast over the Christmas period, Saha is confident United's strength in depth will help them ease further ahead of their title rivals.

The French striker, who scored twice at Sunderland, said: "The squad we have is amazing. It is strong in every position."

"A few players did not even

travel on Wednesday and we still have Paul Scholes and Gary Neville to come back.

"We are all aware this is a difficult period. Any team who has not got the right squad will struggle because fitness-wise, it is very hard."

Arsenal have set the pace in the title race this season but Arsene Wenger's side showed a few signs of exhaustion when they surrendered pole position with a tame goalless draw at Portsmouth.

The Gunners have another tricky trip this weekend at Everton, who have lost only one of their last 14 matches.

Everton midfielder Tim Cahill believes his side are on the verge of becoming a major force in the English league and he can't wait to take on Arsenal.

"We are flying and are just happy to be in this position. I really believe we have a great chance of achieving something. It is all about how we apply ourselves," Cahill said.

"We will be buzzing again when we play one of the elite teams in the world. Arsenal will be coming here knowing they are facing a massive game. We probably will not see a lot

of the ball. But if we get a chance, we have got to try and take it."

Wenger will be without Robin van Persie again as the Dutch striker struggles with a muscle problem, while captain William Gallas is a doubt.

Chelsea manager Avram Grant faces the first real test of his reign as his side take on Newcastle without John Terry, Didier Drogba and Ricardo Carvalho, with Frank Lampard also likely to be sidelined.

Injuries to key players ruined Chelsea's league campaign last season and they could be derailed by the same problem this time.

But Grant, heartened by Andriy Shevchenko's impressive display

against Aston Villa and the return to fitness of Michael Ballack, refuses to rule out a title challenge.

"As long as we have a chance we will do everything we can to catch Manchester United and Arsenal," Grant said. "We have character and will not give up. We will do anything to challenge them."

"This job has been a big challenge from the day I started it and I will accept this latest challenge."

Rafa Benitez knows Liverpool must beat Manchester City on Sunday to cement their place in the top four and keep in touch with the leaders.

Benitez, whose fourth placed side are nine points behind United, believes they can still win the league.

"When people ask if we have a realistic chance of the title they are really trying to tell me something," Benitez said. "Let's wait and see. We have Manchester City next and that is very important for us."

"We have two more games over the holiday period. The most important thing for me is that we stay close. You never know what can happen."

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday
Birmingham v Fulham, Chelsea v Newcastle, Everton v Arsenal (1715GMT), Portsmouth v Middlesbrough, Sunderland v Bolton, Tottenham v Reading, West Ham v Manchester Utd, Wigan v Aston Villa
Sunday
Derby v Blackburn (1330GMT), Manchester City v Liverpool (1600GMT)

Lehmann close to Dortmund return

INTERNET, undated

Jens Lehmann's Arsenal career was nearing an end last night after Borussia Dortmund officials flew to London in an attempt to sign him.

Despite claims that Bayern Munich were ready to move for him, a return to the Westfalenstadion looks a certainty for the 38-year-old after his old club set up talks that are expected to start at The Emirates today.

Dortmund reacted swiftly to the long-term injury absence of first choice keeper Roman Weidenfeller by despatching director of football Michael Zorc to London with instructions to secure Lehmann's release on a free transfer.

With the Germany keeper out of contract in the summer and out of favour under Arsene Wenger after only four appearances so far this season, the Bundesliga club were confident a deal could be agreed.

Claims that Lehmann was house hunting in Munich and about to replace his arch-enemy Oliver Kahn at Bayern were dispelled by sources close to him.

He is understood to be looking for property in the Munich area but only because he has decided to set up home there with his family once his playing days are over.

"I should know more in the next week, so I can make a decision about my future in the first few days of the New Year," he said. "I have listened to something but, at the moment, I can't say too much about it." His departure will increase the need for another keeper at The Emirates.

Aston Villa's Thomas Sorensen, Bolton's Jussi Jaaskelainen and Celtic's Artur Boruc have all come under scrutiny and Barnsley's 1 million-pound rated Heinz Muller is also believed to be a target.

Lehmann joined Arsenal from Dortmund for an undisclosed fee in July 2003 and played a major part in League and Cup successes.

But after errors at the start of this season, he lost his place to Manuel Almunia and again deputised for the Spaniard at Portsmouth on Boxing Day.

Wenger criticised Pompey's "defensive" approach in the goalless draw, but counterpart Harry Redknapp hit back yesterday.

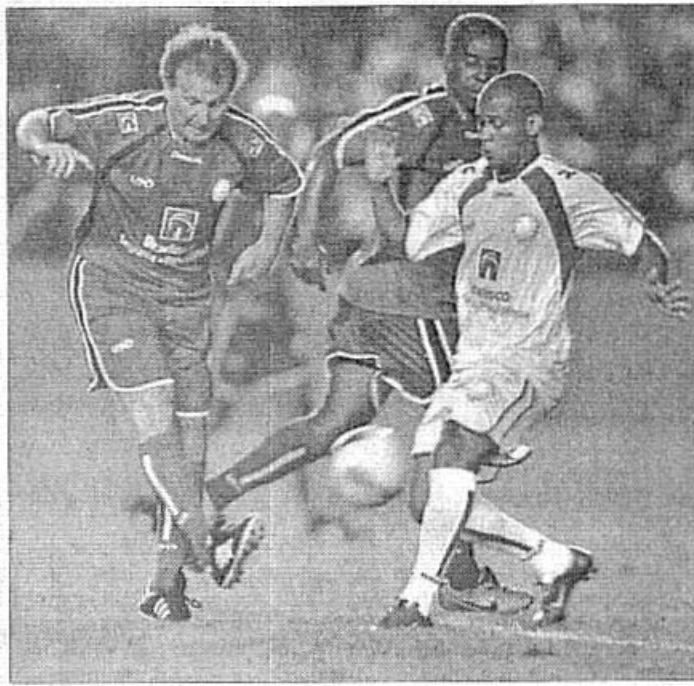


PHOTO: AFP

Brazil legend Zico (L) makes a pass under the challenge of Fluminense defender Gabriel during a game titled "Game of the Stars" in Rio de Janeiro on Thursday.

'We can beat Gunners'

THE GUARDIAN



Tim Cahill has painted a sign of the times at Everton by declaring that he expects to defeat "one of the elite teams in the world" when Arsenal visit Goodison Park tomorrow.

The Australia international has helped Everton progress in the Premier League, UEFA Cup and Carling Cup with eight goals in 14 appearances since returning from a metatarsal injury in October. He was involved in both goals as Everton responded to Sunday's late defeat at Manchester United with victory over Bolton Wanderers on Boxing Day and, despite losing to both Liverpool and the champions either side of a 13-game unbeaten run, he believes David Moyes's side are equipped to challenge the big four this season.

"We will be buzzing when we play one of the elite teams in the world on Saturday and we will see where we are against some of the best players in the world," the 28-year-old midfielder said. "We have got a great chance of achieving something great against Arsenal. It's all about how we apply ourselves. We probably won't see a lot of the ball, like it was against Chelsea, but Arsenal will come here

knowing they are going to face a massive game."

Moyes's side lie sixth in the table but Cahill believes a good festive programme will leave them aiming higher, having enjoyed a brief flirtation with Champions League qualification in 2005. "We need to get maximum points if we possibly can and push ourselves up the table," he said. "If we keep going as we have been and keep focusing on the main objective then we can't go wrong. The only time it might start to catch up with us if we started to let our heads get in the clouds."

The Everton manager is considering renewing his interest in Johann Vogel during the transfer window after the Swiss international left Real Betis yesterday. Vogel, who had joined the Spanish club from Milan, was close to a move to Goodison in the summer only for Betis's insistence on a fee for the 30-year-old midfielder - when Everton believed he was available on a free-to-scupper deal.

Liverpool may have Jamie Carragher and the inexperienced Jack Hobbs as their only available central defenders for the trip to Manchester City on Sunday after the ankle injury suffered by Sami Hyypia at Derby County on Boxing Day. The Finn received intensive treatment yesterday but is rated a serious doubt.

Football

THE GUARDIAN

Chelsea's chronic injury list has lengthened further after Frank Lampard was ruled out for up to a month with a torn thigh muscle, an absence which could persuade Avram Grant to seek the Croatia and Dinamo Zagreb midfielder Luka Modric's signature during the January transfer window.

Lampard sustained the tear to his right thigh midway through the first period of the riotous 4-4 draw with Aston Villa at Stamford Bridge on Boxing Day. The England

midfielder, whose goals have been so pivotal to Chelsea's title challenges in recent seasons, underwent a series of scans yesterday on the injury with the results confirming he will play no further part in the club's busy fixture programme over the festive season.

The 29-year-old will miss games against Newcastle United, Fulham, Tottenham Hotspur and Birmingham City as well as the FA Cup third-round tie against Queens Park Rangers and the first leg of Chelsea's Carling Cup semi-final against Everton, with the club hopeful he may be fit to return for the second leg on January 23. "Scans have revealed a tear in

Frank Lampard's right thigh," confirmed a club spokesman. "The tear is not in the same leg that Frank injured earlier this season. He will begin his rehabilitation immediately and we hope to have him back playing within a few weeks."

While the loss of a key player in Lampard would represent enough of a blow, it has merely compounded Chelsea's problems. John Terry is still absent after breaking three bones in his foot during the defeat at Arsenal earlier this month, Florent Malouda has a knee complaint, while Didier Drogba has yet to return from knee surgery and, should he prove his fitness,

will miss up to four weeks in the new year with the Ivory Coast at the African Cup of Nations.

The tournament in Ghana will also prompt the departures of Michael Essien, Salomon Kalou and Mikel John Obi. Ricardo Carvalho, meanwhile, will miss the club's next three games after his dismissal against Villa for a two-footed lunge on Gabriel Agbonlahor. Chelsea have appealed to the Football Association against Ashley Cole's last-minute dismissal for handball on the goal line - the England full-back will learn on Friday whether that appeal has been successful - but he, too, is currently due to sit out tomorrow's game against Newcastle at Stamford Bridge.

That has left Grant to consider how best to prioritise additions to his squad when the window opens on January 1. The new manager was always likely to be busy during the month of trading as he begins to shape a team he inherited from Jose Mourinho into his own. Interest is retained in Bolton's Nicolas Anelka, with a potential move for Modric also now more enticing to bolster numbers in midfield. "I was hoping to use the transfer window, but now, because of the suspensions and injuries, as well as the African Cup, I must think about using it more," said Grant.

The Croat, so impressive in the 3-2 defeat of England at Wembley last month, has long been on Chelsea's radar. It had been expected that Modric would move at the end of the season - Lampard, after all, has suspended talks over a new contract until the summer prompting uncertainty over his long-term future at the club.

The Dinamo Zagreb vice-president Zdravko Mamic, who also acts as Modric's personal manager, returned to London on Boxing Day and intends to hold talks with numerous Premier League clubs over his player's future over the next few days. Arsenal, Manchester City and Tottenham would compete in that pursuit, though Chelsea remain favourites to secure the 22-year-old for all that they would be reluctant to match Dinamo's 20 million pound valuation.

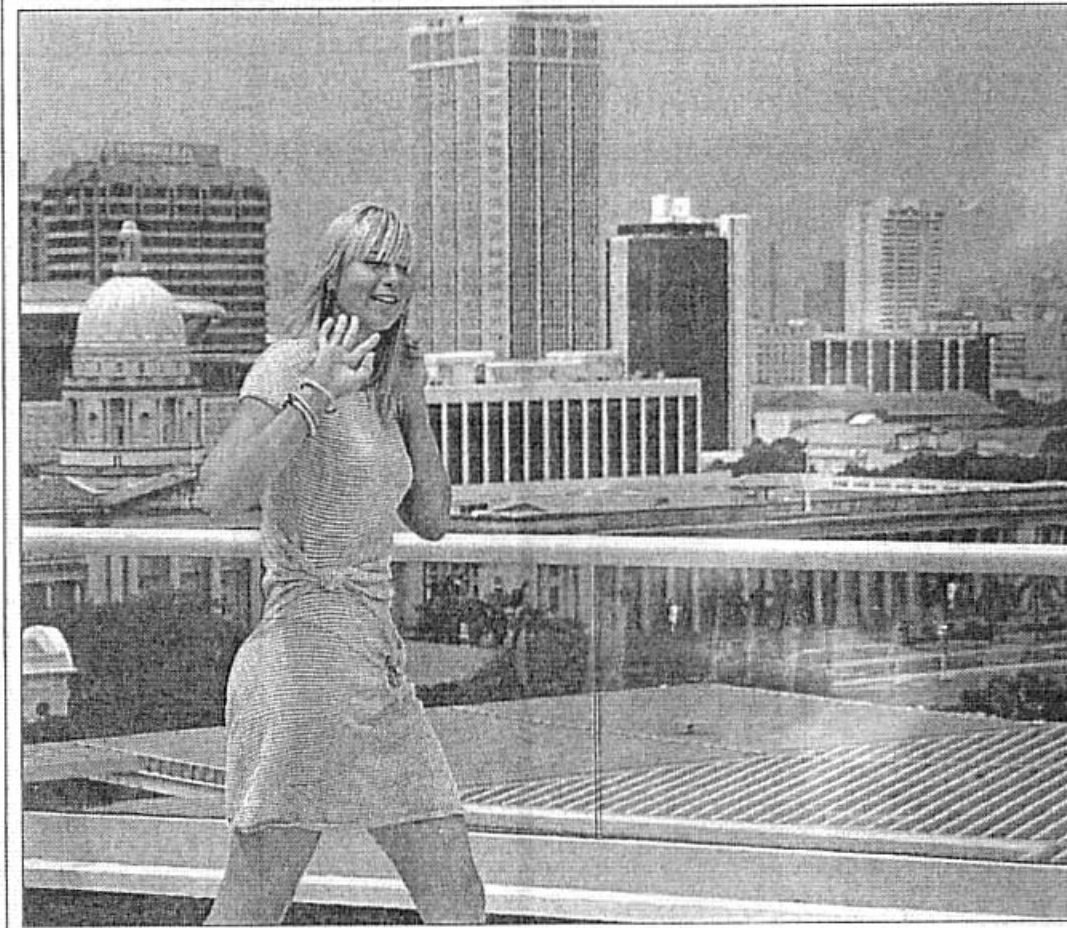


PHOTO: AFP

Russian star Maria Sharapova waves during a photo session on the roof of a hotel in Singapore on Friday. Sharapova is in Singapore to play an exhibition match in the build-up to the Australian Open.