



Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack is about to score the decisive penalty against Fulham during their Premiership match at Craven Cottage in London on Tuesday.

## Ballack rescues Chelsea

AFP, London



Chelsea ensured an unhappy New Year's Day for Roy Hodgson at Craven Cottage as his first match as Fulham manager ended in a 2-1 home defeat in the west London derby here on Tuesday.

For all their effort and positive play, Fulham were edged out by a near second-string Chelsea side, which still had the experience required to beat their hosts in the first English Premier League fixture of 2008.

Hodgson's Fulham career got off to the best of starts when Danny Murphy scored a 10th-minute penalty, awarded for an apparent trip by Joe Cole on Moritz Volz, though there appeared to be little contact, if any.

Ivory Coast striker Salomon Kalou equalised with a 54th-minute header before Blues captain Michael Ballack won and converted a penalty in the 62nd minute following some shirt tugging by Clint Dempsey.

Chelsea stay third in the Premier League table and still in the title hunt, while their less illustrious neighbours from a mile (two kilometres) down the Fulham Road remain second-bottom.

Hodgson, whose CV includes spells with Switzerland, Finland, Inter Milan, Udinese, Blackburn Rovers, Malmö, Grasshopper and FC Copenhagen, was given a warm reception by Fulham's fans.

And they had more to cheer when Senegal striker Diomansy Kamara tested the Blues' third-choice goalkeeper Hilario with a low shot before Kalou and Shaun Wright-Phillips got in early shots on Anti-Niemi's goal.

Hodgson's reign at Craven Cottage then got off to a flying start.

Full-back Volz cut into the penalty box where Cole, admittedly tackling from behind, was ruled to have brought the defender down. If there was any contact, it was minimal and the England midfielder protested his innocence.

Murphy took the resulting penalty and scored low to the left as Hilario dived the other way.

The Blues attempted to regroup and Kalou had the ball in the net in the 17th minute. However, play was correctly stopped for his handball.

In the 26th minute, Finland international Niemi charged out to the edge of his box and hauled down Kalou, but the Chelsea striker was offside.

Midfielder Murphy then curled a free kick over the bar and Kalou sent a near-post header wide.

Fulham's Simon Davies wasted a good chance in the 35th minute

when Blues right-back Juliano Belletti completely missed the ball. But the Wales winger lost his momentum when he checked inside and Chelsea cleared.

The Blues were incensed in the 51st minute when Wright-Phillips's attempted cross clearly hit Fulham captain Dejan Stefanovic's arm in the penalty box but referee Mark Halsey waved away Chelsea's penalty appeals.

But the visitors had their equaliser three minutes later.

Alex headed fellow Brazilian defender Belletti's corner back across goal for Kalou, who got the better of Volz to crash in a header.

Chelsea then took the lead in the 62nd minute, Germany skipper Ballack tumbling in the penalty box following a free kick as United States midfielder Dempsey tugged at his shirt.

Ballack struck the resulting spot-kick in exactly the same place as Murphy.

The midfielder then fired a fierce 68th-minute free kick just wide.

Hodgson threw on South Korea striker Seol Ki-Hyeon, Northern Ireland forward David Healy and former Blues midfielder Alexey Smertin as the hosts pressed for an equaliser.

But Chelsea closed out the match on the banks of the River Thames to secure local bragging rights.

## Scotland pays tribute to O'Donnell

AFP, Glasgow

The three remaining Scottish Premier League games on Wednesday will hold a minute's silence as a mark of respect following the death of Motherwell captain Phil O'Donnell - with the other fixtures already postponed.

The 35-year-old, married father of four, died after collapsing near the end of the Fir Park side's 5-3 victory at home to Dundee United on Saturday.

Motherwell's first two games of 2008, against Hibernian on Wednesday, January 2 and Celtic on Sunday, January 6, were subsequently postponed.

Gretna's game at home to St Mirren, due to be played at Fir Park on Wednesday, has also been called off.

And on Monday the SPL announced they had agreed to postpone Wednesday's Celtic and Rangers Old Firm match.

Ian Blair, the SPL secretary said: "These are never easy decisions. But we recognise that as a former player, Phil was part of Celtic's extended football family."

"After consultation with Rangers we agreed to postpone the Old Firm fixture on January 2."

The remaining three matches - Aberdeen v Inverness Caledonian Thistle, Dundee United v Hearts and Kilmarnock v Falkirk - will go ahead as planned but all will hold a minute's applause before they kick-off in honour of O'Donnell.

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## Kewell glad to be back

AFP, Liverpool



Harry Kewell is so glad just to be playing for Liverpool this season after four years of injury agony the Australia midfielder insists he has yet to think about a new contract at Anfield when his current deal runs out at the end of the season.

Kewell has featured in 11 of Liverpool's last 14 matches, an indication of the faith manager Rafael Benitez, who frequently alters his line-up, has in the player and the former Leeds favourite will be keen for more first-team action when Wigan Athletic visit Anfield in the Premier League on Wednesday.

"The last four years have been hellish with one injury after another," Kewell, who has had repeated groin problems since moving to Merseyside, told Liverpool FC magazine.

"But I can't even think about a new contract. That is what people have been talking about and saying about me, but I will tell the truth so the fans know the truth."

"And that is why I haven't honestly thought about it. I can't think about it at the moment... I can look no further than the next match."

Kewell added: "Given my Liverpool career, and the way it has gone, all I want to do is take the chance that the manager is giving me."

"I want to repay him for that, and the boys who have helped me through, for sticking with me and not giving up."

"You don't want to know what I have been through in four years, with injury after injury. The places I've been mentally during all those times, it has been pretty dark."

Frustration of a different kind has been a problem for Fabio Aurelio, still waiting for his first goal in a Liverpool shirt.

The 28-year-old Brazilian full-back has yet to score since arriving from Benitez's old club Valencia 18 months ago on a free transfer.

Aurelio was again out of luck in front of goal during Sunday's goalless stalemate against Manchester City which cost Liverpool further ground in the race for the Premier League title.

And they could be 13 points off top spot come Wednesday's kick-off if Arsenal, who start 2008 as leaders, defeat West Ham on New Year's Day.

"I'm looking for my first goal and I hope it happens soon because I have been waiting for a long time," said Aurelio, who twice went close to breaking his scoring duck against City.

Liverpool have failed to find the net in three of their last five outings. But they have never been goal-shy against Wigan though, finding the net 11 times in their five previous Premier League meetings.

Peter Crouch, who has been

linked with a move away from Anfield during the January transfer window, memorably broke his duck for the club with two goals against Wigan two seasons ago.

Available again after serving a three-match suspension, the big England striker will surely come into contention as Benitez rotates his squad, with Dutch forward Dirk Kuyt one of the potential figures to be tested.

After utilising Alvaro Arbeloa at centre-back against City, Benitez will hope to have Sami Hyypia or Daniel Agger available, while Xabi Alonso is likely to start in place of Javier Mascherano.

Wigan, who replaced manager Chris Huthings with Steve Bruce in November, have it all to do if they are to avoid relegation. Last Saturday's 2-1 home defeat to Aston Villa left them anchored in the bottom three of the table, one point adrift of safety.

But Latics and England forward Emile Heskey is winning his race to be fit in time to face his former club.

Heskey, who scored 39 top-flight goals at Liverpool between 2000-04, has missed the last three games with a sprained ankle, but manager Steve Bruce is confident he will be available for his side's first game of 2008.

"Emile was touch and go for the weekend," said Bruce. "It's vital we don't rush him too much, but I expect everyone to be fit for the game."

## Adriano in car crash

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Troubled Brazilian striker Adriano, who joined Sao Paulo on loan from Inter Milan earlier this month, was involved in a car crash in the early hours of Monday morning, Brazilian media reported.

The 25-year-old, already court-ing controversy after being photographed holding a beer can at a pop concert 10 days ago, escaped unscathed from the incident in Rio de Janeiro, where he is on holiday.

Adriano's car was in collision with three other vehicles but nobody was hurt or arrested, reports said. Police could not immediately be reached for comment.

Adriano, once one of Serie A's most feared strikers, moved to Sao Paulo after barely featuring for Inter in the last two seasons, which have seen him battling fitness and reported alcohol problems.

His international career has also taken a turn for the worse and he has played only once for Brazil since the 2006 World Cup.

On arriving at Sao Paulo, he promised to turn over a new leaf but only two days later was photographed at a pop concert in Rio with a beer can in his hand.

He later complained that photographers were not respecting his privacy and promised he would be fit and ready for the new Brazilian season which starts in mid-January.

## Allardyce defiant

Football

AFP, London

Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce has insisted he will defy the pressure to stand down following a dismal run of results and growing calls for former striker Alan Shearer to take over.

He was given on Monday a vote of confidence by chairman Chris Mort, who scoffed at rumours that club owner Mike Ashley was considering sacking the 52-year-old.

"I do not have any worries or concerns as far as they (Mort and Ashley) are concerned," Allardyce said.

"The pressure that has been put on them as well as me, they understand it is outside influences trying to exert pressure on them. It is all part of the game."

Asked if he felt Newcastle hero Shearer was casting a shadow over him, he said: "It has always been there and it always will be. There is nothing more to say on the subject."

Looking to the future, Allardyce revealed that he has already drawn up a shopping list for the January transfer window.

"I am putting players forward to the chairman and decisions will be made from there," he said.

"The players that might be available and are available are being discussed on a regular basis, day to day."

"I was never given an indication of a budget in the summer and it will be similar in this window."

Turning to possible departures from St James' Park, Allardyce added: "It would have to be a very lucrative offer for anyone to move away from the club."

One player consistently linked with a move away from Newcastle is England striker Michael Owen, who has now recovered from the thigh strain which sidelined him for six weeks.

He could return from what is the latest in a catalogue of injury setbacks during Wednesday's Premier League home game with Manchester City, although Allardyce admits he is undecided.

"We have had games where we have created a large number of chances and you have to wonder, if Michael had been there, we might have converted a higher proportion of our chances," he said.

"His injury has been a massive disappointment. But he is now back and we can only hope that with no internationals coming up, and his training and fitness work (being) in-house, we can get him fit and scoring goals again."

## Hitzfeld meets Swiss FA

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld heightened speculation over his future on Monday when it was revealed he had met with Swiss Football Association (SFA) chiefs.

The 58-year-old, whose contract ends next June, has already been linked with taking over the Swiss national side after Euro 2008 - which Switzerland are co-hosting with Austria - and has voiced his displeasure at criticism levelled at him by Bayern president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

"We did meet, that is true, but we have known each other for 25 years," SEA official Ernst Lammler told German daily 'Bild'.

"Ottmar wants to speak with the Bayern directors first. We respect his decision, and I am sure he will keep us informed of what is going on," he added.

Hitzfeld, who earlier this year admitted the job would interest him, is in his second spell as Bayern coach having replaced Felix Magath in February after the latter was sacked following a series of bad results.

However, while Hitzfeld - a two-time Champions League winning coach with Borussia Dortmund

and then Bayern Munich - has guided them to the top of the Bundesliga this term, it is only on goal difference over Werder Bremen as Munich have taken just 10 points from the last 21, scoring only four goals.

The coach - known as 'The Gentleman' - was incensed when Rummenigge came out with his comments following the poor run.

"When the club president publicly criticises his coach, the pleasure (of doing the job) is no longer the same. Especially when you've gone 24 matches unbeaten. At Bayern, things have got out of hand," remarked Hitzfeld earlier this month.

## Donovan leads young US

AFP, Chicago

Landon Donovan, one goal shy of becoming the all-time United States scoring leader, leads a young group of 26 players that will begin training camp Thursday ahead of a January 19 friendly with Sweden.

Donovan's 34 international goals in 96 matches have him level atop the US career scoring list with Eric Wynalda, who played 106 US matches from 1990 through 2000.

Donovan, a 25-year-old forward for the Los Angeles Galaxy, is the experience leader in a US lineup that features 20 men with 10 or fewer caps, seven of them seeking their first appearance on the national team.

Most of the US lineup comes from Major League Soccer teams that are now idle but three players from Scandinavian clubs whose leagues are on a winter break will also report to camp.

Aalborg BK captain Dan Califf, who played in triumphs over Swiss and South African squads, is joined by SK Brann's Ramiro Corrales, out of the US fold since 2004, and AGF Aarhus striker Jeremiah White, seeking his first cap.

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## Sania keeps hope alive

Tennis

AFP, Perth

Sania Mirza helped India keep its Hopman Cup hopes alive on Tuesday, winning both of her matches to seal a 2-1 victory over host Australia in their Group B tie.

Mirza and teammate Rohan Bopanna, beaten by the United States on Saturday, prevailed in the deciding mixed doubles rubber, after Bopanna lost his singles match.

To reach Friday's final, India will need to beat the Czech Republic on Thursday, and hope Australia can upset the Americans on the same day.

Australia can reach the final if they sweep the United States and the Indians are beaten.

Mirza claimed a crucial win over Australia's Alicia Molik in a closely fought match, 6-2, 2-6, 6-4, before teaming with Bopanna to defeat Molik and Peter Luczak in a thrilling three-setter, 6-2, 4-6, 7-6 (13/11).

"I think it was very important for us to win today -- we can still qual-

ify," Mirza said.

"Hopefully we will play well against the Czechs -- we beat them last year."

"We didn't have a great start the other day, but we are playing well now."

The mixed doubles win was the Indian pair's fifth in as many outings here.

Bopanna is ranked 267th in singles, but is a gifted doubles player and dominated the deciding match in its early stages with his stellar net play and big serve.

The Indians seemed to be cruising to victory when they were leading 4-2 in the second set, but the Australians scrambled back to level the match.

Both sides had match points in the deciding match tie-break, before Mirza sealed the victory with a winner.

"I have no energy left, it is almost mental relief," Mirza said. "I think we played really well and especially Rohan in the first set and a half."

"I think they were a bit surprised by him."

Mirza said she hoped her singles

win over Molik would inspire the Indian cricket team, who start the second Test against Australia at the SCG on Wednesday, having been thrashed in the first Test.

Molik was coming off an impressive win over Lucie Safarova on Saturday, but Mirza was able to blunt her trademark powerful serve and claimed the first set with three breaks.

Mirza dropped away slightly in the second set and started to make unforced errors, and the 26-year-old Australian picked up her game significantly to level the match.

Molik handed Mirza an early break when she shanked an overhead well wide early in the third set. The 21-year-old Indian then raced to a 5-1 lead and seemed set for an easy win.

Molik however saved three match points on her own serve in the seventh game and then immediately broke back with some of her best winners of the match, but Mirza steadied herself and served out the match on her second attempt.

The 79th-ranked Luczak was too good for Bopanna in the men's singles, winning 7-6 (7/2), 6-3.



Tennis stars Maria Sharapova (L) of Russia, Ana Ivanovic (C) of Serbia and Daniela Hantuchova of Slovakia pose for a group picture at a press conference in Hong Kong on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP