

Villa hold Liverpool

AFP, Liverpool



Substitute Peter Crouch scored two minutes from time after Marlon Harewood's over-head kick and an own goal from Fabio Aurelio cancelled out Yossi Benayoun's opener to earn Liverpool a 2-2 draw against Aston Villa.

It was a night that was all about the Liverpool fans directing their displeasure at the club's owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett's plans to re-financing their debts.

But Liverpool remain 14 points off the top of the Premiership and were nearly 15 adrift of Manchester United. Benayoun opened the scoring but second-half goals from set-pieces put Villa in control.

But Crouch came off the bench to pinch a dramatic point for the Reds.

Against the backdrop of anti-Hicks and Gillett banners and constant singing against the club's American owners, there was little in the early stages to concern the watching Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini, whose team face Liverpool in the Champions League next month.

With a minute gone, Benayoun fired over with an early chance from

a Kuyt cross and Steven Gerrard and Javier Mascherano were also guilty of wild efforts on goal.

Reds goalkeeper Jose Reina had to be alert at the other end to rush off his line and head away before Stiliyan Petrov's clipped pass reached Gabriel Agbonlahor and Craig Gardner was unlucky to see his driven cross fly past the far post after he had robbed Aurelio.

But in the 19th minute, Dirk Kuyt slipped the ball between two defenders and after Benayoun's initial attempt was blocked, he beat Martin Laursen to the loose ball and stabbed over the line from 10 yards.

Just before the half hour, the lively Kuyt also saw a fine cross and Aurelio could have done better after hitting the Dutchman's precise lay off well wide of goal a couple of minutes later.

Nigel Reo-Coker was pulling off another accomplished display as the midfield anchor in front of the Villa back-four the visitors carried little threat until the final moments of the opening period.

Liverpool centre-back Sami Hyypia did well to knock the ball behind for a corner with Agbonlahor poised to prod goalwards from John Carew's flick-on and Petrov fired over in added time at the end of the first half.

After the restart, Fernando Torres turned and hit a shot onto the roof of the net with his first real contribution and the attack-minded Alvaro Arbeloa also curled a shot over the bar.

Villa substitute Harewood made an immediate impression and after powering clear down the right, his cross eventually fell for Carew, who forced a low save from Reina.

And with 21 minutes left, Harewood produced an equaliser for the visitors with a superb over-head kick.

Petrov's lofted free-kick was headed across goal by the towering Laursen and Harewood's improvised shot flew into the top corner.

Three minutes later, they were ahead when Wilfred Bouma's free-kick was headed on by Carew to Mellberg and the Swedish defender fired in with a deflection off Aurelio's hand.

Torres forced a save from Stuart Taylor with a driven effort but Liverpool were stunned and never looked like getting an equaliser of their own.

But Crouch produced one in the 88th minute to earn Liverpool a point. Aurelio's free-kick hit Jamie Carragher and gave the England striker the space to lob over Stuart Taylor.



Aston Villa striker Gabriel Agbonlahor (C) jumps on defender Olof Mellberg (R) to celebrate his team's second goal against Liverpool during their Premiership encounter at Anfield on Monday.

Nadal storms into semis



AFP, Melbourne

Rafael Nadal reached his first Australian Open semifinal on Tuesday with plenty of gas left in the tank for coming battles after a straight sets victory over Finland's Jarkko Nieminen.

The mercurial Spanish second seed broke the 24th seed's serve six times and won the pressure points to come away with a commanding 7-5, 6-3, 6-1 victory in two hours 19

minutes. The triple French Open champion has spent just nine hours 40 minutes on court in winning his five matches at the season-opening major without dropping a set to conserve energy ahead of a possible final showdown with Roger Federer.

"It's better than usual. I always play a lot of time on court," Nadal said.

"This year not one match has gone for more than two-and-a-half hours, so that's very good for me. That's a very good thing about my game."

"Sure, I had little bit luck against Paul-Henri Mathieu (injury retire-

ment), but the rest of the matches have not gone longer than two-and-a-half hours."

The victory was significant for the 21-year-old as it ensures he will play his first semifinal on hardcourt at a Grand Slam, having missed out previously at the US and Australian Opens.

"It's a good moment for me. The first semifinal on hardcourt at a Grand Slam, it's very important for me," he said.

"I'm happy too because I am here without losing a set. That's always an important point."

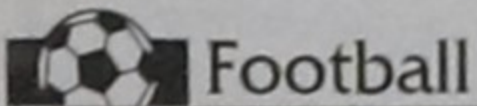
Nadal's momentum is building

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2



Spanish Rafael Nadal stretches to make a backhand return during his quarterfinal match against Finnish opponent Jarkko Nieminen at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Tuesday.

ITALIAN CUP Inter take on Juventus



AFP, Rome

Cup matches rarely generate much interest in Italy until the final but that will change on Wednesday with the mouth-watering quarterfinal showdown between Inter Milan and Juventus.

Both sides proved in the previous round that they were taking this competition seriously, for different reasons.

Juventus are not playing in Europe this season and know full well they likely do not have the ability to claim the Serie A title; hence this is the only piece of silverware they can win this season.

Inter, on the other hand, have such a formidable squad that when

their stand-by players get a rare start in the Italian Cup they give their all to try to prove they're worthy of a starting berth in the league.

These differing motivations resulted in Inter's second string trouncing Reggina 7-1 on aggregate in the previous round while Juve overturned a 2-1 first leg deficit against Empoli to win a thrilling return 5-3 and book their meeting with the champions and league leaders.

Inter will probably start the contest as favourites but Juventus will most likely field the more experienced and tested outfit.

Even so, Juve coach Claudio Ranieri is not expecting his side to have an easy ride.

"We'll give it our all; we've got to have a go. In the league we did

really well," he said. "We were losing and then equalised through (Mauro) Camoranesi. We want to progress to the next round and we will go for it."

Juve held Inter to a 1-1 draw in the pair's league meeting in Turin with Camoranesi cancelling out Julio Cruz's opener.

But that match should have little bearing on this one with Inter expected to field a much-changed line-up.

In other ties, Roma travel to Sampdoria but will have to do without their travelling army of followers as they have been barred from the stadium in Genoa.

High-flying Udinese tackle Catania while struggling Lazio will try to salvage something from their dismal season as they host Fiorentina on Thursday.

Dutch deny Hiddink link

AFP, The Hague

The Dutch Football Federation (KNVB) on Tuesday denied that Guus Hiddink had declared his candidacy to replace Marco Van Basten as Dutch coach after this summer's Euro 2008 finals.

Press reports had cited the head of the Dutch Football Federation Henk Kesler as saying that the 61-year-old Hiddink, formerly in charge of the national side from 1995-1998, had made an official approach for the job.

But specialist football website www.voetbal.nl reported that Hiddink had not thrown his hat into the ring for a second stint in charge of his national side.

In Moscow, the chairman of the Russian National Football Academy Sergei Kapkov said that talks with Hiddink to extend his contract as Russian coach past Euro 2008 were in trouble for taxation reasons.

But the head of the Russian Football Federation Vitaly Mutko said he was confident that a new deal could be reached with the Dutchman.

Albelda ready to give up

AFP, Madrid

Spain international midfielder David Albelda is ready to give up football altogether after being sidelined by coach Ronald Koeman at Valencia, he told a Spanish newspaper Tuesday.

"I am sidelined as they won't even let me train normally," he told the El Mundo daily.

"I don't deserve what they are putting me through, and I don't know the reasons. The supporters must know."

"I am considering giving up football," said the 30-year-old who has 50 caps for his country.

Spain coach Luis Aragones said on the subject of Albelda recently that players who don't appear regularly for their clubs will find it difficult to make the squad for Euro 2008.

Koeman, who took over at Valencia in October, last month told midfielder Albelda, striker Miguel Angel Angulo, 30, and goalkeeper Santiago Canizares, 37, that they no longer featured in his plans.

Pepe out for three weeks

AFP, Madrid

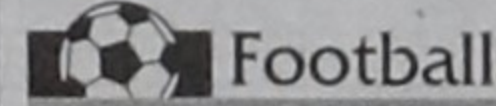
Real Madrid's Brazilian midfielder Pepe will be out for at least three weeks following an injury, and could miss next month's Champions League match at Roma.

Pepe was taken off after 10 minutes of Sunday's match with Atletico Madrid after injuring a leg muscle, Real Madrid said on its website late Monday.

The Brazilian, bought for 30 million euros from Porto in 2007, has already missed a large part of the season after being injured on the first day of the league championship.

CARLING CUP

Everton plot Chelsea upset



AFP, Liverpool

Andrew Johnson is aiming to exorcise the demons lingering from one of the worst moments of his career by helping to fire Everton into the League Cup final at Chelsea's expense here on Wednesday.

Johnson's penalty shootout miss for Birmingham handed Liverpool the trophy after a 1-1 draw in the 2001 final and the England striker is determined to secure another chance of a winner's medal in the competition.

For that to happen, Everton must overturn a 2-1 first-leg deficit and their on-form striker believes a sell-out crowd can roar the Toffees all the way to Wembley.

"There will be a fantastic atmosphere," Johnson said. "Everyone knows it's a tough place to come,

with 40,000 fans screaming away. "It's been hard for sides here over the last few years and we can use that to our advantage. Arsene Wenger said he doesn't like coming to our place. It would be nice if (Chelsea boss) Avram Grant was saying the same."

"But we're not worried about them, just us and I'm sure that will be enough on Wednesday."

Johnson, who turns 27 next month, is now entering the peak years of his career and he believes that his progress has actually been helped by the experience of missing that crucial penalty at the Millennium Stadium.

"I stepped up for the sixth penalty because I don't think anyone else wanted it," he recalled. "When you're young you don't have fear but I do remember Michael Grainger had taken the second penalty and missed."

"I'd seen the tears rolling down his cheeks and thought 'If that's

what it can do to an experienced 29-year-old, what's it going to do to me?"

"It was a half-hearted penalty. But it's made me more determined and it made me a stronger person. It was one of the worst moments of my career."

A 1-0 win would be enough to put Everton into their first domestic final since they won the 1995 FA Cup.

But they will be up against opponents who have defied an injury crisis and the loss of four players including Didier Drogba to the African Nations Cup, to put together a run of six successive wins.

Since losing at Stamford Bridge, Everton have ground out wins over Manchester City and Wigan and manager David Moyes admits he and his squad have been preoccupied with Wednesday's clash.

"I think that game has been in the back of my mind and I think it

has with the players as well," said the Scot. "We have not been in loads of semi-finals so maybe we are fixated by it and we know what is waiting if we can get a result."

"So at Wigan we needed to get away with as little damage as we could and get a result and we have done that."

Chelsea will be without Shaun Wright-Phillips, one of their most impressive performers in recent weeks, after the England midfielder succumbed to an ankle injury sustained in Saturday's 1-0 win at Birmingham.

That blow could be offset however by the return of Frank Lampard, who is recovering from a thigh injury.

But skipper John Terry (foot) and striker Andriy Shevchenko (ankle) are both still sidelined while African Nations duty has deprived Avram Grant of Michael Essien, Salomon Kalou and John Obi Mikel, as well as Drogba.

Kalou inspires Ivory Coast

AFP, Accra



Africa Cup of Nations Ghana 2008

Ivory Coast lived up to their billing as serious title contenders with victory in Monday's crunch African Nations Cup game against fellow regional giants Nigeria.

Salomon Kalou produced a superb solo strike in the Group B tie in Sekondi, the Chelsea forward meandering through a packed Nigerian defence to set the 2006 beaten finalists up for their 1-0 win and nicely en route to the quarter finals.

The Ivory Coast were coached by Henri Michel two years ago and earlier the Frenchman, a Nations Cup veteran, watched his new team Morocco hand out a 5-1 drubbing to inexperienced Namibia.

Three of the Atlas Lions' goals in this Group A match came from the boot of Souffiane Allouadi who is in danger of missing his side's next match after damaging ligaments in his right knee.

Monday's third game saw Mali beat Benin 1-0 with Sevilla's Fredi Kanoute converting a 49th minute penalty in the second of the Group B double header delayed by floodlight failure.

The stadium had earlier been lit up by a polished display from the Didier Drogba-led Ivory Coast with manager Gerard Gili reflecting: "It's a good start. The players worked well. We have to continue like that."

"Nigeria aren't just a good team, they're a very good team, without any weaknesses. The two sides were evenly matched."

Berti Vogts, the German who took up Nigeria's cause after his tenure as Scotland manager, dipped into the history books to put a positive gloss on this opening reverse.

and we went on to qualify for the quarterfinals, but we'll have to play better against Mali (on Friday)."

"We lost to a very good team today, on a cracker of a goal."

Earlier, in the Ghana capital Accra, the tens of thousands who'd turned up to cheer on the hosts in Sunday's curtain raiser against Guinea were nowhere to be seen as Morocco turned on the style against Namibia in a near deserted stadium.

Michel's Moroccan didn't let the handful of supporters who'd turned up to support them down,

Allouadi helping them race to a 2-0 lead within five minutes.

He brought up his hat-trick before the half hour mark with Tarik Sektioui putting them 4-0 up from the penalty spot.

Substitute Moncef Zerka added a late fifth with Brian Brendell getting Namibia's consolation.

Michel observed: "I'm very satisfied. We opened the scoring quickly and then controlled the game."

"It's a sign of a good team that we didn't fall into the trap of getting

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1



Ivory Coast striker Salomon Kalou is overjoyed after their victory over Nigeria in the African Nations Cup in Sekondi on Monday.

Milan aim to keep up thrust

AFP, Rome

AC Milan travel to Atalanta on Wednesday looking to continue their Champions League charge and kick on from the momentum garnered from Sunday's last gasp 1-0 victory at Udinese.

Milan trail fourth-placed Fiorentina by 10 points in the race to secure the crucial last qualification berth for Europe's premier competition, but the reigning kings of Europe also have three matches in hand.

The first of those will be played behind closed doors in Bergamo - a result of the original fixture being postponed after just seven minutes back in November due to crowd disturbances.

There may be an eerie silence for the match on Wednesday evening but that won't deter a rampant Milan who have come back from the winter break, and a training camp in the sun of Dubai, refreshed and firing on all cylinders.

This month they trounced Napoli 5-2 for their first league win at the San Siro this season and then gained a vital three points against Champions League rivals Udinese thanks to a stoppage time winner from Alberto Gilardino.

He has started the last two games on the bench as Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti favoured this Brazilian Ka-Pa-Ro attacking triumvirate of Kaka, Pato and Ronaldo.

The former Parma, Verona and Piacenza man has scored 43 goals in 113 matches for Milan and is one of four top class strikers at the club including Ronaldo, Pato and veteran Filippo Inzaghi, who is currently injured.

It is not just up front where Milan look formidable as Australian goalkeeper Zeljko Kalac proved on Sunday.

Three points are vital for Milan whose other matches in hand are against strugglers Livorno and Reggina. Victories in all three would close the gap on Fiorentina to a single point.