

CHELSEA KEEP WINNING C'Ron simply irresistible

AFP, London



Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as champions Manchester

United returned to the top of the Premier League on goal difference from Arsenal after a 2-0 win at home to Portsmouth.

The Gunners had briefly been at the head of the table after their 3-0 victory against Newcastle at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.

But their chances of staying there ahead of this weekend's fixtures were all but erased inside the first 13 minutes at Old Trafford on Wednesday as Ronaldo's double took his tally for the season to a remarkable 27 goals in 24 matches and nine in his last five.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson claimed Ronaldo's second goal was the best free-kick in Premier League history.

"That without doubt must be the best I've seen in the Premier League," Ferguson said. "From that distance he is going to hit them. No keeper in the world would save that. The boy practices. It's a delight to see, terrific."

In the day's other Premier League matches, third-placed Chelsea remained four points behind the leading duo after a 1-0 win at home to Reading.

Everton stayed fourth but were left 10 points adrift of the top three following a goalless draw with Tottenham at Goodison Park.

Liverpool, fresh from the embarrassment of shipping two goals against non-league Havant and Waterlooville in the FA Cup, went five games without a league win after conceding late on in a 1-0 defeat against West Ham.

The result saw Liverpool drop down into seventh place, a massive 17 points off top spot.

"It was a bad result for us, especially in this type of game when you are attacking and have chances. We didn't take them and in the last minute they got the penalty," Benitez said.

"We deserved to win but you cannot change the result. We need to improve in the league."

Manchester City leapfrogged Liverpool into sixth position with a 1-1 draw away to basement club Derby County.

Ninth-placed Portsmouth, whose away league record this season is second only to that of Chelsea, may have won seven times on their travels this term but their hopes of a first victory at Old Trafford since 1957 lasted until just the 10th minute.

Nani's superb through-ball found Ronaldo and the Portugal winger's cool finish beat David James.

And three minutes later Ronaldo reduced the England

goalkeeper, making his 500th Premier League appearance, to the role of a spectator with a brilliant 25-yard free-kick that arched into the top left corner of James's net.

Germany international Michael Ballack marked his return from injury after two games out with a calf strain by putting Chelsea ahead at Stamford Bridge with a 32nd minute header from Paulo Ferreira's cross.

"You cannot relax when you don't get a second goal. We missed chance after chance but it was ok in the end," Chelsea manager Avram Grant said of his side's hard-fought win.

At Upton Park, Liverpool were heading for a fifth straight league draw until, in stoppage time, West Ham were awarded a penalty after Jamie Carragher fouled Freddie Ljungberg and Mark Noble scored from the spot.

Derby, whose only previous league victory this season came back in September with a 1-0 win over Newcastle, went ahead at Pride Park after a 47th minute own-goal by China international Sun Jihai.

But Daniel Sturridge, who scored after coming on a substitute during City's 2-1 FA Cup exit at the hands of Sheffield United, equalised for the visitors just after the hour mark in what was only his second appearance in all competitions this season for Sven-Goran Eriksson's side.



Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo (L) laps up the applause after netting a stunning free-kick in their Premiership encounter against Portsmouth at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Gilardino hits back

AFP, Rome



Alberto Gilardino answered his doubters with a poacher's goal to earn AC Milan a vital 1-0 win at

Reggina on Wednesday.

Gilardino was the main talking point in Milan throughout the week after he was said to be angry at only being introduced to the fray in Sunday's 2-0 win over Genoa with two minutes to play.

Rumours suggested the Italy striker was unhappy at playing second fiddle to new teenage Brazilian wonderkid Pato and was heading for the exit door.

But instead he fired Milan to victory for the second time in their last four games.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti paid tribute to his match-winner.

"He is serving Milan, he's scored two decisive goals that have earned us six points," he said.

"When he plays he always gives his all, he's a very important part of our team."

The win moved the European champions up to sixth spot, now only seven points behind Fiorentina and the crucial fourth place and Champions League qualification position - and Milan also had a game in hand.

But this was a far from convincing performance from supposedly Europe's best team, who laboured to victory and even resorted to time-wasting at the end in a bid to hold onto what they had.

Sterners tests await Milan, not least a trip to Fiorentina on Sunday in a match that could prove decisive in the race for fourth spot.

"That was an important victory, for me it was derby. Those were three vital points because we need to fight for fourth place," said Milan's midfield enforcer Gennaro Gattuso.

"We need to find a way to close out matches, we never do that and at the end we struggle."

Carlo Ancelotti had sprung a couple of surprises before kick-off, keeping returning Brazilian goalkeeper Nelson Dida on the bench

and Australian stopper Zeljko Kalac in the starting line-up.

There was also a rare start for Brazilian defensive midfielder Emerson with Dutch veteran Clarence Seedorf rested.

Gilardino also got the nod from the off and took just 18 minutes to leave his mark.

The Reggina defence had a huge helping hand in Gilardino's goal as they completely went to sleep from an Andrea Pirlo cross, allowing him the freedom of the park to stab home unmarked from six yards out at the back post.

That was the only chance of note in a lacklustre first period where

Milan were content to dominate the ball without really threatening while Reggina sat back and hoped for an opportunity on the counter.

Things warmed up a little after the break as Pirlo rattled the bar with a curling free-kick and an Emerson header was denied at point-blank range by Reggina keeper Andrea Campagnolo.

Gilardino could have had a second 10 minutes from time but he failed to get a touch on Kaka's teasing cross into the six-yard box.

The defeat left Reggina, who never mustered a significant goal-scoring threat, perilously close to the relegation zone.



PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan striker Alberto Gilardino heads towards goal during their Serie A match against Reggina at the Oreste Granillo Stadium on Wednesday.

Maradona sorry for 'Hand of God'

Football

AFP, London

Argentina football legend Diego Maradona apologised in an interview Thursday for his infamous "Hand of God" goal in the 1986 World Cup quarterfinals that cost England a shot at the trophy.

Speaking to The Sun tabloid, Maradona, who scored both goals in the 2-1 victory over England more than 20 years ago, said that if he could go back in time and "change history", he would.

Maradona's first goal in the quarterfinal match in Mexico was deemed by the match referee to be a legitimate header past England goalkeeper Peter Shilton but replays confirmed he had illegally punched the ball in with his hand.

incident has, in England at least, long overshadowed Maradona's superb solo second goal, which saw him dribble past five England players before shooting past Shilton.

He told The Sun, speaking through a translator: "If I could apologise and go back and change history I would. But the goal is still a goal. Argentina became world champions and I was the best player in the world."

"I cannot change history. All I can do now is move on."

England's anger at Maradona's handball was further inflamed when, immediately after the match, he said his opening goal was the work of the "hand of God" and the mood of English fans was not helped by the fact that Argentina went on to win the World Cup that year, defeating the then West Germany 3-2 in the final.

Maradona, who suffered from a

well-chronicled drug problem, also took a swipe at fellow footballing legend Pele, saying that if he had never taken cocaine, "There would be no debate about who was the best footballer the world had ever seen... Everyone would say me."

"If I had never touched cocaine, I would have been three times as good a player," he added.

In a wide-ranging interview, Maradona said that he was looking for footballing jobs in England, but noted that no firm discussions had taken place with any clubs.

He also criticised former England national team captain David Beckham, whom he described as "just a good player, nothing more... he's not a great player - he doesn't belong to the superior group of players."

"There are hundreds of Beckhams playing football all over the world."

Klinsmann chooses US assistant

REUTERS, Berlin

Juergen Klinsmann has chosen Mexican-born American coach Martin Vazquez to work as his number two when he takes over at Bayern Munich next season, the Bundesliga club said in a statement on Wednesday.

The 44-year-old Vazquez played for both the Mexican and U.S. national teams and has held assistant coaching roles at Major League Soccer sides LA Galaxy and Chivas USA.

"I've known Martin since 2003 when he was training at an elite football camp in the United States," Klinsmann said in a Bayern statement. "I was impressed by his positive leadership style and I recommended him to LA Galaxy."

"He speaks perfect English and Spanish and he's started a German course."

Klinsmann was the mastermind behind Germany's run to third place at the 2006 World Cup but he delegated the training to Joachim Loew, who replaced him as head coach after the tournament.

The question of who would take the main assistant's role at Bayern Munich has been a burning issue in Germany ever since the club announced Klinsmann's appointment on a two-year contract starting in July, after Ottmar Hitzfeld steps down.

Ballack back for Germany

AFP, Berlin

Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack has been named in the Germany squad for Wednesday night's friendly against Austria in Vienna and is set to make his first international appearance for almost a year.

The 31-year-old last played for Germany in their Euro 2008 qualifier against the Czech Republic in Prague in March 2007, but an ankle injury in Chelsea's Premier League clash with Newcastle last April kept him out until December.

Ballack is set to win his 78th cap

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Timo Hildebrand (Valencia/ESP), Jens Lehmann (Arsenal/ENG)

Defenders: Gonzalo Castro (Bayer Leverkusen), Manuel Friedrich (Bayer Leverkusen), Philipp Lahm (Bayern Munich), Per Mertesacker (Werder Bremen), Heiko Westermann (Schalke 04)

Midfielders: Michael Ballack (Chelsea/ENG), Thomas Hitzlsperger (VfB Stuttgart), Jermaine Jones (Schalke 04), Simon Rolfes (Bayer Leverkusen), Bernd Schneider (Bayer Leverkusen), Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern Munich), Piotr Trochowski (Hamburg), Roberto Hilbert (VfB Stuttgart)

Forwards: Mario Gomez (VfB Stuttgart), Miroslav Klose (Bayern Munich), Kevin Kuranyi (Schalke 04), Lukas Podolski (Bayern Munich), Oliver Neuville (Borussia Moechengladbach)

Fergie toasts Ronaldo

Football

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson billed Cristiano Ronaldo as the equal of David Beckham after seeing the Manchester United winger score a spectacular free-kick as the reigning champions returned to the top of the Premier League with a 2-0 win against Portsmouth.

Ronaldo, 22, took his tally for the season to 27 goals in all competitions by netting twice in the opening 13 minutes against Harry Redknapp's team as United went ahead of title rivals Arsenal on goal difference.

His first goal was well-taken but the Portugal international's second, a powerful and swerving 25-yard free-kick, was simply stunning and Old Trafford manager Ferguson admitted Ronaldo's ability from set-pieces was just as good as that of former United star Beckham.

"From that distance, he is always going to hit them."

"It was a marvellous hit and no keeper in the world was going to save it because it was right in the junction of the post and the crossbar."

"Is Ronaldo the best free-kick taker we've had? Well we've had Ryan Giggs and David Beckham and Eric Cantona took them as well. David's strike-rate was pretty good and he could certainly take free-kicks, but Cristiano's strike-rate is phenomenal and is as good as any."

"He practises all the time and there are four or five of them that do it after training. It's great to see because I can just go back to the office for a cup of tea and watch them whacking them in!"

"This free-kick was as good as any I've seen in the Premiership, though. It was two or three inches underneath the bar and no goalkeeper could have saved that."

Ronaldo, who is now just five goals short of United legend George Best's club record for a winger of 32 goals in a season, admitted the free-kick, which left Portsmouth and England goalkeeper David James utterly help-

less, was the best he'd scored. "That was probably my best-ever goal," he said.

"I work for this in training and I'm very pleased to score. I shoot the way I do because it is my strength, but it's not just about me. We all try hard to practise our free-kicks."

United, with Wayne Rooney unable to match Ronaldo in front of goal, spurned a series of chances to increase their winning margin and Ferguson admitted his team should have sealed a more comprehensive victory.

"It was a fantastic performance, one of our best of the season, and I can't believe that we only scored two goals," the Scots said.

"We opened Portsmouth up so many times, but their goalkeeper made some great saves and we missed a fair few chances," he added ahead of this weekend's league match away to Tottenham.

"This is a tricky time with February coming up and that's why I used the squad for this game. We have league, FA Cup and Champions

SEE PAGE 22 COL 4

Iraq to appeal Akram decision

REUTERS, Bangkok

Iraq will appeal the British government's decision to deny its top player a worked permit to join Premier League side Manchester City, the country's soccer president said on Thursday.

Midfield playmaker Nashat Akram, a runner-up in last year's Asian player of the year awards, had been unfairly treated and Iraq would push hard for the decision to be reversed, Hussein Saeed said.

"I don't know why this happened, he is an exceptional player capable of playing in the English Premier League," Hussein told Reuters by telephone from Abu Dhabi.

"I am in regular contact with Manchester City and I have spoken with the Iraqi government to talk with the British government and appeal this decision."

He added: "I'm confident he will get the chance to play in England."

Akram, 23, was instrumental in Iraq's fairytale Asian Cup victory last year and impressed City boss Sven-Goran Eriksson during a

SEE PAGE 22 COL 4

CAMEROON, EGYPT THRU' Eto'o claims record

AFP, Accra



Samuel Eto'o became the all-time record goalscorer at the African Nations Cup Wednesday when he fired Cameroon into the quarterfinals, where Egypt will also feature despite Zambia holding the defending champions to a 1-1 draw.

In Tamale Eto'o's first half penalty and end-of-time second sandwiched between defender Mohamed Khiber's own goal fired Cameroon to a 3-0 win over Sudan to bag the Group C runners-up spot on six points.

Over in Kumasi, where the attendance figure barely touched 5,000, Egypt were held by come from behind Zambia with a point sufficient to make them the group leaders.

Egypt are in a quest here for a record sixth title.

The Pharaohs and the handful of fans had to contend with a smoky stadium as sawdust bonfires were lit outside in a local tradition to ward off mosquitoes, flouting local authority laws.

Wednesday's quarterfinal new recruits join already qualified Ivory Coast, hosts Ghana, Guinea and Nigeria.

Wednesday's two losing sides Sudan and Zambia joined Morocco, Benin, Mali and Namibia on the opening round scrap heap.

The tenth day of the biennial competition undoubtedly belonged to Eto'o.

The Barcelona striker was level

on 14 goals with Laurent Pokou of Ivory Coast entering the final-round fixture and took just 27 minutes to create history at Tamale Stadium before adding a second in stoppage time.

The three-time African Player of the Year celebrated reaching the milestone with extreme calm, returning to the centre circle while accepting the congratulations of teammates approaching him one at a time.

Eto'o struck his first Nations Cup goal in a 2000 group match against Ivory Coast in Accra and his tally includes one hat-trick, against Angola in Cairo two years ago.

A fierce critic of racism, Eto'o helped the 'Indomitable Lions' win the symbol of African national team supremacy in 2000 and 2002 and this is his fifth appearance at the biennial tournament.

Cameroon coach Otto Pfister later complained of some hitches

in the local organisation, claiming the team - having already lost its baggage - had to wait two hours for their hotel rooms to be ready, and then wait for their meals.

It meant Cameroon failed to train as they had planned for their final group fixture.

But in the end, Pfister was walking proud after reminding everyone of his side's goalscoring record so far.

SEE PAGE 22 COL 2



Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o slots home his second goal during their African Nations Cup match against Sudan at the Tamale Stadium in Ghana on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP