



Tottenham striker Dimitar Berbatov (2nd from R) is congratulated by teammates after scoring against Manchester United in their Premiership match at White Hart Lane on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

ARSENAL SOLELY ATOP MU, Chelsea held

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson insists Manchester United are still on track to retain their Premier League title despite being forced to produce a stoppage time equaliser to earn a point against revitalised Tottenham.

The setback allowed Arsenal, 3-1 winners at Manchester City, to open up a two point lead at the top of the table.

But Ferguson insisted that gap will be closed if his side continue to display the spirit they demonstrated at White Hart Lane.

"Some people are saying we have dropped two points but that could be a massive point for us," the Scot said.

Dimitar Berbatov's first-half strike had looked set to give Spurs victory but United's late pressure paid off when, after a corner in the fourth minute of stoppage time, Carlos Tevez wrapped his leg round Spurs defender Michael Dawson to prod home an equaliser.

It was though a good day for Arsenal, who had ended Manchester City's unbeaten home record and also saw third-placed Chelsea held to a 1-1 draw at Portsmouth.

Berbatov put Tottenham ahead against United with a close-range finish in the 20th minute after Edwin van der Sar failed to hold Aaron Lennon's cross. The United goalkeeper was then

booked for angrily protesting to the officials over what he felt was a handball by Jermaine Jenas in the build-up, but television replays suggested the Dutchman was simply venting his frustration at what could prove to be a very costly error.

Ferguson said Tottenham deserved credit for a display that suggests Juande Ramos is beginning to have a major impact on the club.

"You're seeing an upswing with Tottenham, there's no question about that, Juande Ramos has done a fantastic job," said the Scot.

"But we've never stopped going and that's a great credit to the players. I think we deserved a point, but just."

Arsenal's win came courtesy of two goals from Emmanuel Adebayor and a fine finish from Eduardo da Silva, with Gelson Fernandes netting for City.

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger acknowledged the outcome had been in the balance for long periods.

"It is hard here because they hadn't lost at home," he said. "It's their first defeat. It is always difficult when they have that belief they won't lose."

Jermain Defoe marked his debut for Portsmouth with a well-taken equaliser as Chelsea's nine-match winning streak came to an end with a 1-1 draw at Fratton Park, where Nicolas Anelka had given them the lead.

"Defoe's goal was offside, but that's history now," said disgruntled Chelsea boss Avram Grant.

"We had enough chances to win the game."

Everton's bid to claim a place in next season's Champions League suffered a setback when they were held to a goalless draw at Blackburn.

But David Moyes's side remain in fourth place, a point ahead of Liverpool, who beat Sunderland 3-0 at Anfield.

A Peter Crouch header, Fernando Torres's 18th goal of the season and a late penalty from Steven Gerrard gave Rafael Benitez's side their first league win since December 26. "When your confidence is low it is important to win," acknowledged the Spaniard after what was a far from convincing display despite the scoreline.

At the bottom, Bolton took a significant step towards securing their Premiership status with an impressive 2-0 win away to fellow strugglers Reading, courtesy of goals either side of half-time from Kevin Nolan and Heidar Helguson. Wigan also enjoyed their day. Kevin Kilbane headed Ryan Taylor's free-kick beyond Robert Green to give them a 1-0 win over West Ham which lifts them out of the relegation zone.

That move came at Birmingham's expense. Alex McLeish's side slipped to third from bottom after a 1-1 draw at home to Derby. Sebastian Larsson had given Blues the lead with just over 20 minutes left but Argentinian striker Emmanuel Villa came off the bench to rescue a point for the bottom side.

Ballack repeats warning

AFP, Berlin

Germany captain Michael Ballack has issued a Euro 2008 warning to his side on the eve of their friendly against hosts Austria in Vienna on Wednesday.

Ballack, 31, who picked up a head gash for his club Chelsea in their Premier League draw with Portsmouth on Sunday, insists Germany would be foolish to see themselves as favourites to win the Euro 2008 title in the final on June 29.

"We have to stop believing we will just walk out of our group and that we are virtually guaranteed a place in the final," Ballack told Sunday's edition of the Die Welt newspaper.

"Of course, our goal is to try to take the European title, but when I look at teams like Italy and France and I see the individual quality of their players, they are stronger than us."

Ballack is expected to lead his country in a friendly against Austria in Vienna, in what would be his first appearance for Germany in 10 months.

An ankle injury he picked up for Chelsea in their Premier League clash against Newcastle United last April kept Ballack out of football until just before Christmas.

But Ballack says he is looking forward to winning his 78th cap in Vienna and leading his country's Euro 2008 bid.

"What we produced to reach third place at the 2006 World Cup was great, but we have not yet reached the level where we can say 'We are amongst the favourites'."

Having become the first team to qualify for June's Euro 2008 tournament, Joachim Loew's team will face Austria, Poland and Croatia in Group B.

Racist abuse hurled at Hamilton

INTERNET, undated

Lewis Hamilton was subjected to severe racist taunts by Spanish Formula One fans during the second day of testing at Barcelona.

The 23-year-old Briton, who narrowly missed out on last year's world title to Kimi Raikkonen, had abuse hurled at him from the stands, which were full of public visitors on the day.

Eyewitnesses told the Spanish sports daily Marca that he was booed whenever he walked from McLaren's motorhome to the garage, with insults that translate as "bloody black" and "blacks**t" common.

"It is not right that he is being treated," McLaren test team manager Indy Lall said.

Circuit director Ramon Pradera said that anybody caught shouting offensive words would be thrown out of the circuit immediately and also demanded that fences be put up around the McLaren area for the team's safety.

"We would like to make a plea to the fans to behave correctly, no type of offensive behaviour can be tolerated," circuit director Ramon Pradera told daily paper La Vanguardia.

Hamilton has become deeply unpopular in Spain because of his rivalry with former teammate Fernando Alonso last season.

Capello trims squad

Retains Bentley & Young

AFP, London

Fabio Capello stuck with England's old-guard as he trimmed his squad for Wednesday's friendly against Switzerland.

The Italian on Saturday finalised a 23-man squad for his first match as England coach after dropping fringe players Curtis Davies, Nicky Shorey, Michael Carrick, Stewart Downing and Glen Johnson from his provisional 30-man group.

Wigan striker Emile Heskey was ruled out after suffering an injury during his team's win over West Ham on Saturday, while Tottenham defender Ledley King is also sidelined through injury.

Those changes left a familiar looking group, with the only fresh face Aston Villa's young striker Gabriel Agbonlahor.

Capello insisted the players who didn't make the cut would still be considered in future, giving David Beckham, who didn't even make the provisional squad, hope that he could still win his 100th cap.

"I want to be clear that the players who have not made the squad this time are still part of my plans," Capello told the FA's website.

"We will be monitoring the form of everyone very closely as we work towards the competitive matches which start in September.

"It is of course a blow to lose Ledley King from the squad. He is a very good player who has impressed me a lot when I have seen him play.

"I am fully aware of his injury status after speaking with Juande Ramos on Friday.

"Emile Heskey's injury is disappointing too, but we have to concentrate on the players who are in the squad."

Capello is still to confirm his first England captain and admitted he didn't want to announce his decision until Tuesday, giving him time to work with the players first.

John Terry, the captain during Steve McClaren's reign, is out through injury, so Liverpool midfielder Steven Gerrard looks favourite to get the honour.

"I plan to name a captain for the Switzerland game on Tuesday, but I don't expect to appoint a permanent captain until we start the (World Cup) qualifying games. I want to work closely with the players before deciding on this," Capello said.

Capello won't take charge of a competitive match until September

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Scott Carson (Aston Villa), David James (Portsmouth), Chris Kirkland (Wigan)

Defenders: Wayne Bridge (Chelsea), Wes Brown (Manchester United), Ashley Cole (Chelsea), Rio Ferdinand (Manchester United), Joleon Lescott (Everton), Micah Richards (Manchester City), Matthew Upson (West Ham), Jonathan Woodgate (Tottenham)

Midfielders: Gareth Barry (Aston Villa), David Bentley (Blackburn), Joe Cole (Chelsea), Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Owen Hargreaves (Manchester United), Jermaine Jenas (Tottenham), Shaun Wright-Phillips (Chelsea), Ashley Young (Aston Villa)

Forwards: Gabriel Agbonlahor (Aston Villa), Peter Crouch (Liverpool), Michael Owen (Newcastle), Wayne Rooney (Manchester United)

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Loew pleased at Lehmann return

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew said Jens Lehmann's return to the Arsenal first-team was a case of perfect timing with Germany facing Euro 2008 hosts Austria in a friendly on Wednesday.

The Gunners' first-choice goalkeeper Manuel Almunia has picked up a thumb injury to give Lehmann his first league appearance since August, while German captain Michael Ballack received stitches in a head wound for Chelsea.

Both will report for duty when the team meet in Frankfurt on Sunday, but Borussia Moenchengladbach striker Oliver Neuville has succumbed to a foot injury and has been ruled out.

"Jens return to the Arsenal goal is good news," said Loew. "Perhaps he will get more game time after the match against Austria. It can be assumed Jens will play in Vienna."

"But I do not think that Arsene Wenger has changed his opinion about his preferred goalkeeper."

Loew is also anxious for news on Bayern Munich striker's Lukas

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Afonso's simple explanation

INTERNET, undated

Middlesbrough's record 14 million pound signing Afonso Alves had a bizarre explanation for signing a contract to join Dutch club AZ Alkmaar shortly before agreeing his move to Boro.

Lawyer Pim de Vos, who represented Brazil international Alves at a Dutch tribunal hearing to strike out the Alkmaar deal, said: "Afonso can't help it. He can't read and write. He does not speak English. He does not control anything in his life apart from a football on the pitch."

Ribery doubtful for Spain

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich's French midfielder Franck Ribery is a doubt for his country's friendly against Spain on Wednesday after picking up a hamstring injury in his side's Bundesliga win at Hansa Rostock.

The 24-year-old scored the opening goal in his side's 2-1 win, but was substituted just after the half-time break and is facing a race against time to be fit for Wednesday's clash against Spain in Malaga.

"I felt some hamstring pain during the first half," said Ribery as Bayern's win took them three points clear at the top of the Bundesliga.

Having been capped 24 times by France, Ribery is also keen to shake off his injury in time for Bayern's UEFA Cup last 32 match against Aberdeen on February 14.

For Euro 2008, France have been drawn in Group C with the Netherlands, Romania and Italy, while Spain are in Group D with defending champions Greece, Sweden and Russia.

Real take a tumble

AFP, Madrid



Almeria caused the biggest upset of the Spanish season with a sensational 2-0 win over reigning champions Real Madrid on Saturday to inject some much-needed spice into the title race.

Real could have gone 12 points clear of Barcelona at the summit with victory at Almeria but the La Liga newcomers, only founded in 1989, enjoyed the biggest result in their history.

Barcelona, who reached the semifinals of the Kings Cup in midweek, can now cut Real's lead

to six points with a home win over Osasuna on Sunday.

Madrid coach Bernd Schuster warned his team not to get complacent after opening up a nine-point cushion but his words fell on deaf ears as goals from Juanito and Alvaro Negredo condemned Real to their third defeat of the season.

"Almeria showed how good they are and if you don't score it is always difficult," explained Schuster.

"The other day I heard someone smart saying how the league was poor because of our points advantage over the rest but this shows the strength of the Spanish league and why it is the most competitive in the world."

The shock loss ended Real's sequence of eight successive league wins and was their first defeat since

their 2-0 reverse against Sevilla in November last year.

For Almeria it was a fourth straight win and they climb to seventh just one point off the UEFA Cup spots.

Mahamadou Diarra, back in Spain following Mali's exit from the African Nations Cup, returned to the Real starting line-up with Gago suspended.

Dutch forward Ruud van Nistelrooy shrugged off a bout of gastroenteritis to lead the front-line and his strike partner Raul almost put Real ahead after five minutes when he went close with a delicate chip.

However, it was Almeria who took a shock lead after 15 minutes with Real failing to defend a set-piece

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FED CUP Sharapova on fire

AFP, Jerusalem

Maria Sharapova helped fire defending champions Russia into an unassailable 3-1 lead over Israel in their Fed Cup World Group quarter-final clash here on Sunday.

With the nations tied 1-1 going into Sunday's matches, Australian Open champion and Fed Cup debutant Sharapova proved fearless in her battle with Shahar Peer as the number ones went head-to-head in the reverse singles.

The Russian routed Peer, who had been undefeated in 11 Fed Cup singles matches 6-1, 6-1.

"She actually gave me confidence because she was encouraging the crowd," Sharapova said of Peer. "In a way I felt she was telling me 'I need their help, I can't do it on my own'."

It was great, I said to myself I'm going to take my chances and win the match. "I'm glad I could finish it off in style."

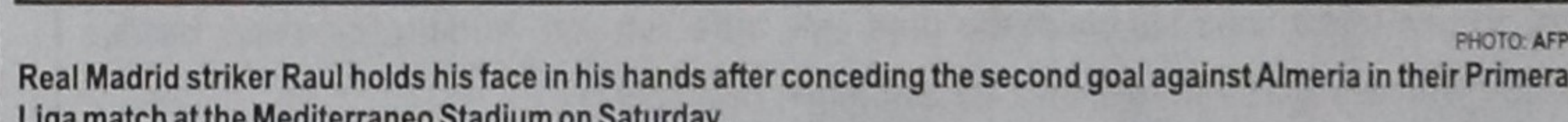
In the second singles rubber, world number seven Anna Chakvetadze sealed the winning point for the defending champions, having stepped in as a replacement for Dinara Safina.

Chakvetadze defeated Tzipi Obziler 6-4, 6-2 to ensure her country gets another chance at winning the Fed Cup title.

In Saturday's games, Peer had drawn first blood for Israel with a 0-6, 6-2, 6-2 win over Safina, while Sharapova completely outclassed the world number 81 Obziler 6-0, 6-4 in the second rubber.



Russia's Maria Sharapova makes a backhand return against Israel's Shahar Peer during their Fed Cup match in Tel Aviv on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP



Real Madrid striker Raul holds his face in his hands after conceding the second goal against Almeria in their Primera Liga match at the Mediterraneo Stadium on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

Adebayor in demand

AFP, Manchester

Arsene Wenger could be facing a desperate battle to keep star striker Emmanuel Adebayor at Arsenal after the Togo international enhanced his growing reputation by helping the Gunners pull clear at the top of the Premier League.

Adebayor helped himself to a brace of goals as Arsenal ended Manchester City's unbeaten home record with a 3-1 win on Saturday.

It was a particularly significant win as Manchester United were held by Tottenham later in the day and Adebayor deserved the headlines after a polished display that underlined why he is rapidly becoming one of the most talked

about and sought-after forwards in European football.

Wenger heaped praise on Adebayor, but didn't help himself when suggesting the 23-year-old has filled the void left by Thierry Henry's departure to Barcelona last year.

Several of the continent's leading clubs, including Real Madrid, Juventus and AC Milan are known to be keeping close tabs on the progress of the lanky forward with a view to making a bid for him in the summer.

It remains to be seen whether or Adebayor wishes to pledge his long term future to the London club, but it is a safe assumption that Wenger will be encouraging his board of directors to tie his leading goalscorer down to a new and improved long-term contract.

Should a European rival table a multi-million pound bid come the

end of the season, Arsenal might find themselves in a difficult position.

As Wenger proved with Henry when selling him to Barcelona for 16 million pounds, every player has their price irrespective of how important they are to the club.

Wenger paid seven million to sign Adebayor from Monaco two years ago and the price was questioned at the time.

Adebayor has flourished this season, however, scoring 21 goals, including eleven in his last eight games, to suggest Wenger landed himself a bargain.

Adebayor is the only player capable of keeping pace with United's Cristiano Ronaldo in the scoring charts this season and Wenger admits he is maturing into a class act.

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