

City do MU double

AFP, Manchester



Zimbabwean striker Benjami Mwaruwari struck a debut goal to seal Manchester City's first win at Old Trafford since 1974 as the Premier League champions crumbled to a 2-1 defeat against their local rivals here on Sunday.

United, playing their first home game after Wednesday's 50th anniversary of the Munich air disaster, produced one of their worst performances of the season as City claimed the victory with first-half goals from forwards Benjami and Darius Vassell.

Defeat left United two points behind leaders Arsenal, who can extend their advantage at home to Blackburn on Monday.

Prior to the game, the two teams, with United wearing 'Busby Babes' kit devoid of sponsors names and logos, marched out behind a lone piper to the centre circle.

Both United manager Sir Alex Ferguson and City boss Sven-Goran Eriksson placed a wreath in memory of the 23 people killed at Munich, when an airplane carrying United home from a European Cup tie crashed on take-off.

Then came the minute's silence, the subject of much debate in recent weeks amidst fears of City supporters disrupting the tribute.

Yet the silence was observed impeccably inside the ground, a moving tribute which led to the United fans applauding the 3,000 visiting City supporters.

Outside the ground, several loud bangs were heard during the silence, but the behaviour of City fans inside Old Trafford could not be criticised.

Although this was a solemn occasion, once the game started it became a crucial fixture for both teams.

United needed the points to close the gap on league leaders Arsenal, while City went into the game retaining hopes of securing a Champions League spot by finishing fourth.

During a frantic start, United nearly opening the scoring in the seventh minute when captain Ryan Giggs forced a tremendous save from City goalkeeper Joe Hart with a left-foot volley.

Bulgarian midfielder Martin Petrov responded by sending a 20-yard strike narrowly over the crossbar.

United, without the suspended Wayne Rooney and Patrice Evra, then tested City again when Cristiano Ronaldo released Carlos Tevez in the penalty area, only for City captain Richard Dunne to deny the Argentinian with a perfectly-timed tackle.

The game continued to swing one way then the next, but the breakthrough came in the 25th minute and it was City that stunned

Old Trafford by grabbing the lead through Vassell.

It was a goal sparked by a blistering counter-attack by Eriksson's team and it resulted in Petrov's cross picking out Stephen Ireland 12 yards from goal. Ireland's shot was blocked by Edwin van der Sar and the Dutch keeper also saved Vassell's effort from the rebound.

But the former England striker pounced on the loose ball and he scored from close range to give City the lead and record his 50th Premier League goal.

It was an outcome that certainly wasn't in the United script, but things went from bad to worse for the home side on the stroke of half-time when Benjami, a transfer-window signing from Portsmouth, doubled City's lead.

Once again, Petrov was a key factor in unlocking the door for City. Having failed to clear his corner properly, United sent the ball back to the winger and his cross was glanced into the far corner by Benjami.

With Rooney absent, United looked bereft of ideas going forward and their hopes of fighting their way back into the game always appeared flimsy, especially with Ronaldo producing one of his worst displays this term.

The brilliance of recent weeks was nowhere to be seen and his second-half display was marked by wayward shooting and inept crossing, just when his team needed him

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Manchester City striker Benjami (L) salutes the away crowd after scoring the second goal as his teammates join in the celebrations during their derby clash against Manchester United at Old Trafford on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Xavi the saviour again

AFP, Madrid



For the second week running Spanish international Xavi came to Barcelona's rescue scoring a 75th minute equaliser to salvage a point in a 1-1 draw at ten-man Sevilla on Saturday.

Barcelona are now five points behind leaders Real Madrid although the champions have the chance to move eight points clear when they host Valladolid on Sunday.

Barca looked to be heading for defeat after 19-year-old Diego Capel had put Sevilla ahead in the first half but Xavi, who scored a late winner against Osasuna last weekend, levelled to snatch a draw.

"We came from behind to get a point so that is something," said Barca midfielder Andres Iniesta. "It is so difficult to win here at Sevilla.

We tried but just came up short." Sevilla, who were reduced to ten men late on when Seydou Keita was sent off, stay seventh and will rue the missed chance to bolster their European push and exact revenge for last month's Kings Cup to Barcelona.

"I had lots of chances," admitted Capel. "I enjoyed the game and we played well but it is just a shame I couldn't score the vital goal to win the match."

Barcelona were without Carles Puyol, Deco, Yaya Toure, Samuel Eto'o, Bojan Krkic and Gianluca Zambrotta so coach Frank Rijkaard brought in Mexican striker Giovanni Dos Santos, Oleguer and Edmilson in for rare starts.

Sevilla welcomed back Keita and Freddy Kanoute into the starting line-up after the duo's return following Mali's elimination from the African Cup of Nations.

Brazilian Daniel Alves also started after having a suspension lifted and almost opened the scoring after 10 minutes with his fierce free-kick

punched away by Victor Valdes.

Thierry Henry then had a good chance at the other end for Barca but the angle was tight for the Frenchman whose shot was stopped by the outstretched Andres Palop.

The game was played at an incredible tempo with two of the most attacking teams in the league both going for the jugular.

However, Sevilla always looked the more likely to score and on 34 minutes Capel arrived late to steer in a Jesus Navas cross for his first goal of the season.

Ronaldinho came on at the beginning of the second half for Edmilson as Rijkaard pushed for an equaliser.

It came from Xavi with a quarter hour remaining with the midfielder drilling a low shot through the hapless Palop who should have done better.

Keita was red-carded 60 seconds later collecting a second caution for a late tackle on Lionel Messi.

Both teams could have won it

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Fergie blasts schedule

INTERNET, undated

Sir Alex Ferguson has blasted the decision to schedule Sunday's (AET) Manchester derby in the week of the 50th anniversary of the Munich air disaster.

The Red Devils have been honouring the eight players who died alongside 15 other passengers - including former Manchester City goalkeeper Frank Swift - all week, with the clash at Old Trafford today set to cap off the memorials.

There will be a minute's silence - which City officials including manager Sven-Goran Eriksson have appealed for visiting fans to respect - and both teams will play in traditional, unsponsored jerseys to honour the occasion.

But Ferguson, aware of concerns that a small minority of the City crowd will not respect the silence, admits his initial reaction when he was presented with the fixture list was an angry one.

"When I saw what the fixture was at this time at the beginning of the season I said 'who the hell chose that?'," the Scot told the Sunday Express.

"It puts pressure on the clubs. We could easily have had Middlesbrough at home or something like that. There was no opportunity given to change it. I hope it's a good game, the crowd have a part to play in that."

Oleguer breaks hand

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona defender Presas Oleguer will be out for six weeks with a broken bone in his hand, the Spanish giant said Sunday.

Oleguer broke the third metacarpal in his left hand during Saturday's 1-1 draw with Sevilla.

The club's French striker Thierry Henry limped off in the 58th minute of the same game after suffering a bruised leg.

He did not train on Sunday but officials said his injury was not serious.

Africa bans five nations

REUTERS, Accra

Clubs from five countries -- the Central African Republic, Chad, Kenya, Rwanda and Sierra Leone -- have been excluded from African continental club competition this year, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) said on Sunday.

The five countries were disqualified from competing in this year's African Champions League and the African Confederation Cup after "failing to fulfill their financial obligations to the Confederation," a CAF statement said.

The decision was made by CAF's executive committee, whose membership includes Chad and Rwanda.

The decision means clubs like Zamalek of Egypt and TP Mazembe of the Democratic Republic of Congo have walkovers to the second round of the Champions League.

First round, first leg matches in both the Champions League and Confederation Cup are scheduled for Feb. 15-17.

League remains defiant

BBC ONLINE



Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore has defended controversial plans to play league matches abroad.

Scudamore, responding to widespread criticism of the proposal for a 39th round of games, told the BBC: "Clearly, there are a lot of hurdles to overcome.

"We've seen how sport's globalising, we compete in the entertainment industry.

"This is a solidarity move where all 20 clubs want to do it. It benefits all of them and it's far better we all do it rather than allow single clubs to."

Scudamore, talking on Radio 5 Live's Sportsweek programme, admitted that only preliminary discussions had so far taken place with football's governing body Fifa

and that no specific details had been presented to them.

Asked if Fifa could put a stop to the proposals, Scudamore said: "I don't think their statutes currently cover this; we will talk it through with them.

"Why would we want to do it and upset everybody in the process? We wouldn't. We will have future meetings."

The Premier League chief, who insisted that FA Cup replays would not be scrapped if the extra league matches came to fruition, revealed that he had met Football Association counterpart Brian Barwick to discuss the plans.

"The FA can see the hurdles but they were supportive," he said. "The spoils from the Premier League are shared down the football pyramid."

He confirmed that the matches were unlikely to be played in a European city, adding: "Clearly we're only going to go where we're

welcome and not to places where there is fully developed professional football."

Scudamore was convinced that the plan to play Premier League matches would go ahead.

"I think it will, I think it's got a momentum and a huge amount of merit."

And he rejected the claim that one extra round of matches could lead to more.

"There are a whole lot of hurdles to overcome and a lot of work has to be done," he said.

"We don't do things radically but this is a strategic move, the time has come and we want to do it."

Liverpool and England striker Peter Crouch believes the idea is worth investigating but expressed his sympathy with supporters.

"The only problem is with the fans," he said. "It's going to be difficult for them to go wherever the games are played, and the game is about the fans."

Fresh doubt on Lampard's future

INTERNET, undated

Frank Lampard will return for Chelsea this afternoon in their vital Premier League showdown against Liverpool with his long-term future at Stamford Bridge in fresh doubt.

Leading European clubs are considering exploiting a new FIFA ruling which means the England midfielder can quit Chelsea for just 5 million pounds this summer. And Lampard would be willing to invoke it if his employers do not come up with Chelsea at the moment.

Lampard has been given a huge boost by the recent ruling from the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which stipulated that players need to pay only the remainder of their contract if they wish to join another club.

It means that Lampard can control his exit from Chelsea this summer even if the club do wish to sell him.

Barcelona, the club Lampard would most like to join on account of his wife Elen coming from the city, are expected to renew their interest in the England midfielder this summer on the basis of the new ruling.

They have previously ruled out making a move for him on the basis that the asking price of 20 million pounds was too expensive but would happily pay the reduced fee.

Current coach Frank Rijkaard is expected to leave the club in the summer and there is a concerted campaign by some of the board at the club to bring in former Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho, whose first move would be to sign Lampard.

Lampard has already turned down a contract offer from Chelsea and has just one year left on his deal at the end of the season.

Kutner has previously insisted that Lampard would like to stay at Chelsea but clearly it will be dependent on the contract on offer.

Now, as long as he serves notice by May 26, Lampard can leave the club by paying up the value of the year remaining on his contract.

Dumplings for diplomacy!

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan's footballers will be doing their bit for their country's often-strained relations with China by ordering dumplings at this month's East Asian Championships.

Dumplings imported from China contaminated with pesticide triggered a recent food scare in Japan and has become an emotive issue in already sensitive Sino-Japanese diplomacy.

But Japan's soccer chief wants his players to act as ambassadors for the country when they play at the Feb. 17-23 tournament in Chinese city of Chongqing.

"I want them to help improve relations between Japan and China," Japan Football Association president Saburo Kawabuchi told reporters.

"At the welcome party, I'll be asking them to eat the dumplings."



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla striker Diego Capel is exuberant after scoring the opening goal in their Primera Liga match against Barcelona at the Sanchez Pizjuan Stadium in Seville on Saturday.

Everton sitting pretty

AFP, London



Everton piled the pressure on Liverpool by grinding out a 1-0 win over Reading that tightens the Toffees grip on fourth place in the Premier League.

The victory enabled David Moyes's side to open up a four-point lead over their neighbours -- who face a daunting trip to Chelsea on Sunday -- in the battle for the final Champions League qualifying spot.

On a day when none of the top three clubs were in action, there were few of the thrills and spills that have helped make English football so popular around the world and generated proposals for matches to be played at overseas venues.

Even Everton boss David Moyes admitted his side's win, which sent Reading down into the relegation zone, had not been a pretty affair.

"It was extremely ugly for a lot of it," he said. "But you have to give Reading credit for that. They are fighting to stay in the division and they made it hard for us right to the end."

Phil Jagielka headed in his first Premier League goal just after the hour mark to condemn Reading to a seventh straight defeat.

Aston Villa moved above Liverpool into fifth place after a 4-1 win over Newcastle that saw Norwegian striker John Carew claim a second-half hat-trick.

Michael Owen had given Newcastle hope of claiming their first win since Kevin Keegan's return to the club with a near-post header after only four minutes.

But a deflected shot from Wilfried Bouma got Villa back on level terms three minutes after the break and giant Norwegian forward Carew did the rest, following up two headers with a 90th minute penalty.

Villa boss Martin O'Neill admitted Newcastle had deserved their

half-time lead. "We had to do something about it and the players' response was fantastic," said the former Celtic manager.

Keegan accused his players of allowing themselves to be bullied by the power of Carew and Marlon Harewood. "They were doing what they wanted with us at times," Keegan complained.

Newcastle are now winless in nine matches and Saturday's defeat saw them slip to just six points above the drop zone.

Below them, Sunderland notched up a convincing 2-0 win over fellow strugglers Wigan.

Nigeria forward Dickson Etuhu headed in a Dean Whitehead free-kick to give Roy Keane's side a first-half lead and Daryl Murphy added a stunning 25-yard drive with quarter of an hour left.

"Only time tell how big a win that was, but when you are playing other teams fighting at the bottom, you have to get three points," Keane said.

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PHOTO: AFP

Roma winger Ludovic Giuly (C) dribbles his way amongst three Reggina players during their Serie A clash at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Saturday.