

ARSENAL STAY ATOP Chelsea falter at home

AFP, London



Arsenal were left two points clear at the top of the Premier League table as rivals Manchester United and Chelsea both dropped vital points on Sunday.

Manchester City completed a first league victory at Old Trafford since 1974 and a season double over Manchester United with a 2-1 victory thanks to goals from strikers Darius Vassell and new signing Benjami Mwaruware.

Chelsea then stayed third but missed the chance to close to within a point of United after being held to a goalless draw by Liverpool at Stamford Bridge.

It was an important result for Liverpool, who moved into fifth place on goal difference, and were left just three points behind city rivals Everton, with a game in hand, in the race for the fourth and final Champions League spot.

Arsenal can extend their advantage even further at the top when they face Blackburn Rovers on Monday.

There were poignant scenes before kick-off at Old Trafford as fans from both Manchester clubs respectfully observed a minute's silence in the week of the 50th anniversary of the Munich air disaster.

In all 23 lives, including those of eight United players from the celebrated 'Busby Babes', were killed when a plane carrying the team home following a European Cup tie against Red Star Belgrade crashed on take-off after refuelling at Munich Airport.

Vassell put the visitors ahead in the 25th minute when he scored from the second attempt following good work by Stephen Ireland and Martin Petrov.

And just before half-time Benjami, a transfer-window signing from Portsmouth, marked his City debut by flicking on Petrov's cross into the far corner, just beyond the dive of United keeper Edwin van der Sar.

England midfielder Michael Carrick pulled a goal back in the second minute of stoppage time but it was too late to prevent a win which bolstered City's bid for a European place.

United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz said nerves had played their part in his side's defeat.

"We didn't play very well," he said.

"We did not have any tempo or inspiration early in the game. We were perhaps too anxious at the start, and that combined with a Manchester City side who showed good movement and were strong

on the counter-attack."

Queiroz added United had paid a price for having so many players on international duty during friendly games earlier in the week.

"We had seven or eight players who played 90 minutes in a friendly during the week and every time they come back to us they are affected by it in the next game," he said.

"The team was affected by those who played for their national teams but of course we cannot use that as an excuse."

City's victory gave them a first league double over local rivals United since the 1969/70 season.

"We worked ever so hard today and didn't give them much space when they went forward," said City midfielder Dietmar Hamann.

In London, Liverpool striker Peter Crouch wasted the best of the chances on offer in a match where both teams seemed more concerned with not losing rather than winning.

"It is better to get three points but at least we didn't lose," said Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez.

"If we win our game in hand we will be in the top four."

Chelsea boss Avram Grant defended his team's display by saying: "It is not easy to play against Liverpool. They know how to play tactically and don't give you spaces to play."



Liverpool striker Peter Crouch (L) tries to control the ball under pressure from Chelsea midfielder Claude Makelele during their Premiership tie at Stamford Bridge on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP

Anna wins Paris Open

Tennis

AFP, Paris

Top seed Anna Chakvetadze of Russia claimed her seventh WTA title on Sunday, beating Hungary's Agnes Szavay in three sets at the Paris Indoor Open.

The 20-year-old from Moscow maintained her unbeaten record in finals with a 6-3, 2-6, 6-2 victory in 2hr 05min against seventh-seed Szavay.

"It just happened that I won all seven finals. I don't think it's amazing it just happened," said Chakvetadze.

"I had to fight for it, but I'm very happy with this win. I think I deserve it. I knew that she would fight to the end and never give up."

Szavay, 19, had a disastrous start giving away five double faults in her first two service games to find herself 0-4 down after 15 minutes.

Despite a sixth double fault Szavay finally held her serve and came back to 3-4 but her world number seven opponent held and broke to love to take the first set in 37 minutes.

The situation was reversed in the second set with the 20th-ranked Hungarian responding to some motivating words from her coach to take a 4-0 advantage and keep herself in the tie as Chakvetadze lost just her second set in seven finals.

The Russian was treated for a left shoulder problem just before the third set and had to save two break points in the fifth game, before gaining the edge when she broke in the following game.

The break proved crucial as Chakvetadze nailed the title on her second match point to succeed compatriot Nadia Petrova and become the third Russian to hold the Paris title.

"In the second set I had so many unforced errors. I had problems with my shoulder. Yesterday I called my trainer because of my hip. I guess I'm getting older," said

Chakvetadze who said that she was uncertain whether she will be fit to compete in Antwerp next week.

Chakvetadze won four of her previous titles in 2007, and said her focus this season will be on the Grand Slams after reaching the US Open semifinal and the quarterfinals of last year's Australian Open and Roland Garros.

"My goal is to be in the final of a Grand Slam and hopefully one day

that will happen," said the Russian who reached the third round of the 2008 Australian Open.

Szavay blamed her poor start on shoulder problems and said that her coach had tried to calm her down.

"He just said I have to keep the ball on court and relax and play your game because it can't be worse," smiled Szavay who won her two previous WTA titles in Palermo and Beijing last year.



Russian starlet Anna Chakvetadze holds the trophy after beating her Hungarian opponent Agnes Szavay during their WTA Paris Open final on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP

Carrick confident of title

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United's Michael Carrick insisted the race for the Premier League was still on after his side's shock 2-1 loss to Manchester City here at Old Trafford.

Goals from Darius Vassell and Zimbabwe international Benjami Mwaruware put City 2-0 ahead at half-time and left the champions with too much to do in the second-half as Sven-Goran Eriksson guided City to their first league win at their local rivals' home ground since 1974.

Defeat left United two points adrift of league leaders Arsenal, who could extend their advantage to five points if they beat Blackburn Rovers at the Emirates Stadium on Monday.

But England midfielder Carrick, who scored United's consolation goal deep into injury time, insisted Sir Alex Ferguson's team remain in the hunt to retain their title.

"There are still a few games to go and I don't think Arsenal will go the

rest of the season winning every game," Carrick said.

"I'd be surprised if they do that. There will be a few more ups and downs to come and hopefully we can have more ups than downs."

This was United's first home match since Wednesday's 50th anniversary of the Munich air disaster which took the lives of eight of their players and killed 23 people in all.

Before kick-off both Ferguson and Eriksson laid wreaths in memory of those who died 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.

However, it was impeccably observed by all fans inside the ground.

"It was nice to see that the minute's silence for the Munich disaster went down really well," said Carrick. "Everyone was quiet, but in terms of the game, we have not gone home very happy."

United manager Ferguson was not around to discuss his team's

performance having left Old Trafford immediately after the final whistle in order to catch a flight to South Africa for a press conference in Cape Town on Wednesday to announce United's pre-season tour of the country.

But his assistant, Carlos Queiroz, blamed fatigue caused by the midweek international break for United's failure to avoid defeat.

"It was a very disappointing result for us. The lads tried their best to win, but it wasn't our day," he said.

"We started with anxiety and we tried to win the game too early against a team who are always very well organised and threatening to surprise you on the counter attack. We had the wrong approach."

"But we had seven or eight players away who played ninety minutes for their national teams in midweek and that is always a problem. It is a not an excuse, but the team was affected by it."

"It was just one of those days, but we have a long race in front of us and we are ready to start again. We have strong belief because this result doesn't mean that we are not a good team."

Egypt dominate all-stars team

AFP, Accra

Champions Egypt supplied five of the 2008 Nations Cup all-stars team chosen by African Football Confederation officials and released Sunday.

They are goalkeeper Essam al-Hadary, defender Wael Gomaa, and midfielders Mohamed Aboutaika and Hosny Abd Rabou and striker Amr Zaky, who scored four goals each in the biennial tournament.

The Pharaohs became the first country to twice successfully defend the Nations Cup when they edged Cameroon 1-0 in the final courtesy of a late second-half goal from Aboutaika.

Defender Geremi Njitap and midfielder Alexandre Song came from runners-up Cameroon and there was also a place for a revelation of the three-week tournament, Angola striker Manucho.

A surprise was the placement of Ghana midfielder Michael Essien in defence, a role he filled in the semifinal loss to Cameroon only because captain John Mensah was suspended.

The collapse of favourites Ivory Coast in the closing stages as they suffered heavy losses to Egypt in the semifinals and Ghana in the third place play-off was reflected by the presence of only midfielder Yaya Toure.

TEAM
Essam al-Hadary (EGY), Geremi Njitap (CMR), Wael Gomaa (EGY), Michael Essien (GHA), Sulley Muntari (GHA), Yaya Toure (CIV), Alexandre Song (CMR), Hosny Abd Rabou (EGY), Mohamed Aboutaika (EGY), Amr Zaky (EGY), Manucho (ANG)

SUBSTITUTES
Richard Kingson (GHA), Hany Said (EGY), Ahmed Fathy (EGY), Sabour Ben Frej (TUN), Stephane Mbia (CMR), Didier Drogba (CIV), Kader Keita (CIV)

Juninho's future in doubt

AFP, Sydney

Sydney FC are to hold talks with their costly Brazilian midfielder Juninho amid speculation he could be on his way after the former champions' early exit from Australia's A-League finals.

Juninho, who has had an injury-plagued season as the club's marquee player, is out of contract and with his 35th birthday two weeks away, appears unlikely to stay at Sydney.

Sydney FC chief executive George Perry said further discussions would be held with Juninho about his future in the wake of the club's 2-0 loss to Queensland Roar on Friday that ended their title bid.

Juninho did not play in the match, succumbing again to injury, which has limited him to just 15 appearances this season.

Sydney FC's board is considering whether to sign a big-money player or move towards a more

Real destroy Valladolid

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid bounced back from their Almeria defeat with a resounding 7-0 victory over Valladolid on Sunday to surge eight points clear at the top of the Spanish first division.

Barcelona's 1-1 draw with Sevilla on Saturday gave Real a chance to stretch their five-point lead and they made light work of Valladolid thanks to four goals in 13 minutes.

Dutch international Arjen Robben's first goal in Real's colours, a brace from captain Raul, taking his season's tally to 11, and efforts from Julio Baptista and Guti gave Real a 5-0 first-half lead.

Guti added his second and Roysten Drenthe scored his first league goal after the interval as Real, who have won all their matches at the Santiago Bernabeu this season, cruised to victory.

The 7-0 demolition was not Real's biggest ever league win with Elche routed 11-2 back in the 1959/60 season.

"When there is an emergency the team responds and that is the biggest positive to take from today," said Real coach Bernd Schuster.

"We try to play down the flanks with a lot of pace and with Robben

and Robinho we have that option and that is where most of our goals came from."

"It is not normal to win 7-0 and we have to enjoy the games like this."

Earlier, Atletico Madrid took a giant stride towards the Champions League with a 2-0 win over rivals Racing Santander moving them back into the top four.

Uruguayan international Diego Forlan scored both second half goals as Atletico, who had collected just one point from the last nine, took the spoils in Santander.

"In recent matches the ball has just not gone in but it finally did today," said Atletico coach Javier Aguirre.

"Forlan needed the goals and we all know that strikers go on runs in front of goal and we hope that this is the start not just for him but for the whole team."

Atletico's win was even more significant as rivals Espanyol lost 2-1 at home to Recreativo Huelva and fall to fifth two points behind Atletico.

"Recreativo were deserved winners," said Espanyol boss Ernesto Valverde.

"We weren't so bad but we have high expectations after some good results and we have to live up to them. Things are not going great at the moment."

With Ruud van Nistelrooy injured, compatriot Robben, a 36million euro signing from Chelsea in the summer, made his

first start since early October.

He had an immediate impact setting up Baptista for the opening goal on eight minutes.

Brazilian winger Robinho gave Schuster a headache when he went off injured early on and Drenthe replaced him.

Valladolid looked dangerous but Real showed their class with four goals in 13 minutes to wow the home fans.

On the half-hour mark, Raul rounded the goalkeeper to make it 2-0 and two minutes later Robben scored his first Real goal.

Raul (38min) notched his second from the penalty spot and Guti (43) netted to make it 5-0 at half-time.

Real seem to like playing teams beginning with the letter 'V' as they trounced Villarreal 5-0 and Valencia 5-1 this season before the Valladolid drubbing.

At the bottom, Recreativo gave new manager Manolo Zambrano the perfect start on his debut with a 2-1 win at Espanyol.

Former Liverpool man Florent Sinama Pongolle scored twice inside the first 25 minutes to stun Espanyol.

Elsewhere, Valencia continued their recovery with a 3-1 win over Real Betis courtesy of a double from David Villa and a Daniel Silva strike.

Valencia are now just a point behind Racing who occupy the final UEFA Cup spot.

Trapattoni set for Ireland

AFP, Dublin

Former Italy manager Giovanni Trapattoni is set to succeed Steve Staunton as the new manager of the Republic of Ireland, according to an Irish newspaper report Monday.

The Irish Examiner says the Football Association of Ireland's (FAI) three-man recruitment panel, led by caretaker manager Don Givens, met Trapattoni over the weekend where agreement in principle was reached.

FAI chief executive John Delaney is due to fly to Austria to meet the seven-time Serie A winning coach before a meeting of the association's board on Wednesday where Trapattoni is due to be proposed as the preferred candidate.

Former England and Australia coach Terry Venables was also in the frame and yesterday broke his silence to insist he wanted the Ireland job and to refute speculation he would not be fully committed to the position.

But it now seems that after highly publicised three-month search, the FAI are going to offer the job to Trapattoni despite his unavailability until May.

The 68-year-old Italian is currently managing Red Bull Salzburg, but his contract runs out the end of the season.

The Examiner reports that he will be offered a three- or four-year deal worth around 1.4million euros a year plus bonuses.

Ireland legend Liam Brady, who played under Trapattoni at Juventus, will be appointed to the backroom team with former Italian international Claudio Gentile as

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Gabon player drops dead

AFP, Libreville

Gabon international player Guy Tchingoma dropped dead at the end of a league game here at the weekend, L'Union newspaper reported on Monday.

The paper said that Tchingoma has been playing for his club side Canon 105 against Union Sportive O'Mbila when he collided heavily with an opposing player minutes before the end of the match.

He finished the game but immediately after the final whistle collapsed unconscious and medical staff were unable to revive him.

His death came almost a year to the day after that of another Gabon international, Cedric Nono de Mangasport, also during the course of a match.

Top scorers in Spain

AFP, Madrid

Leading scorers in the Spanish first division after the weekend's matches:

- 16 - Luis Fabiano (Sevilla)
- 14 - Diego Milito (Real Zaragoza)
- 12 - Ruud van Nistelrooy (Real Madrid)
- 11 - Raul Tamudo (Espanyol)
- Jose Llorente (Valladolid), Nihat Kahveci (Villarreal), Raul Gonzalez (Real Madrid)
- 10 - Raul Tamudo (Espanyol)
- Guiseppi Rossi (Villarreal)
- 9 - Kun Aguero (Atletico Madrid), Ricardo Oliveira (Real Zaragoza)
- 8 - Lionel Messi (Barcelona), Frederic Kanoute (Sevilla), Robinho (Real Madrid)



Real Madrid winger Arjen Robben (R) tries to go past Valladolid defender Jose Antonio Garcia Calvo during their Primera Liga clash at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP