

Bad day for Arsenal

AFP, Birmingham



James McFadden's injury-time penalty secured a vital point for ten-man Birmingham City in a 2-2 draw with Arsenal that could have done serious damage to the Gunners' bid to reclaim the Premier League title.

And to add to the frustration for Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, he will be without Eduardo for the rest of the season after the striker suffered a suspected broken leg in a challenge that resulted in Birmingham defender Martin Taylor being sent off.

McFadden's controversial spot-kick added to his earlier free-kick to cancel out Theo Walcott's two second-half goals that looked to have earned Arsenal their fifth successive league victory.

Eduardo, just two days away from his 25th birthday, was left in agony after only three minutes of the game as a result of Taylor's lunge.

The Brazilian-born Croatian striker's left ankle was facing the wrong way and his leg break was such an horrific sight that team mate Cesc Fabregas was forced to shield his eyes, while Alexander Hleb and Emanuel Adebayor screamed for assistance for their injured colleague.

Eduardo had to be given morphine by paramedics and was treated for eight minutes on the pitch before he was able to be stretchered off wearing an oxygen mask.

Taylor was shown a straight red card by referee Mike Dean, although the tackle was not two-footed and seemingly not malicious and the central defender was said to be 'distracted' by members of Birmingham's staff.

The loss of the 12-goal striker, signed for 7.5 million pounds from Dynamo Zagreb in the close season, is a major blow and Arsenal were subdued for the remainder of the first half.

Their mood was not improved by McFadden's second goal for Birmingham since his five-million-pound arrival from Everton in January.

The Scottish international produced a wonderful curling free kick to beat Spanish keeper Manuel Almunia after he had been fouled on the edge of the area by Mathieu Flamini.

But Birmingham's hopes of ending a seven-game sequence without a victory disappeared in a six minute spell early in the second half as Arsenal finally found their rhythm and Walcott turned a frustrating performance into goals.

It seemed only a matter of how long Birmingham could hold out and they managed just four min-

utes of the second half before Maik Taylor failed to collect Cesc Fabregas' corner, under a challenge from Adebayor.

The rebound from the aerial combat fell back into the six-yard box and Walcott flicked out his right leg to level the match.

Fabregas struck the post with a shot from just inside the area as Birmingham's defence struggled to cope with the onslaught and Taylor was beaten again when Liam Ridgwell failed to intercept the Spanish midfielder's long pass.

His mis-control presented the ball directly to Walcott and the young England international sped forward before dispatching a low left-foot shot into the bottom corner.

Arsenal appeared home and dry but they were pegged back in controversial circumstances right at the death.

With the match entering the fourth minute of stoppage time, Arsenal's French left-back, Gael Clichy, was adjudged by referee Dean to have fouled Stuart Parnaby as the Birmingham midfielder burst into the box.

Television replays showed Clichy had played the ball before Parnaby fell over his leg but Arsenal's furious protests fell on deaf ears and McFadden sent the spot-kick high into the net to claim the most unlikely of points for his relegation-haunted club.



HORRIFIC: Arsenal striker Eduardo da Silva lies motionless on the ground and is tended to by teammate Bacary Sagna after having his ankle broken by a horrific challenge (inset) from Birmingham defender Martin Taylor during their Premiership match at St Andrews on Saturday.

Keegan supporting Gazza

AFP, Newcastle

Kevin Keegan has promised troubled former Newcastle star Paul Gascoigne that his club will do everything they can to help get his life back on track.

Newcastle manager Keegan has spoken to Gascoigne's family in the wake of his detention under the Mental Health Act to offer assistance in his recovery.

Gascoigne, who was a youth team player at St James' Park during Keegan's swansong with the club in the 1980s, was arrested and

sectioned on Thursday after his behaviour became increasingly erratic while he was staying in two Newcastle hotels.

Keegan believes the shocking decline in Gascoigne's health could prove a blessing in disguise if it gets him the help he needs.

"It's sad, but maybe what has happened now will be a turning point for him, and instead of looking on it as something that is really bad, this might be the best thing," Keegan said.

"I have talked with his father and one of his sisters and I know it looks negative, but I think it is a massive positive for Paul Gascoigne from all the information

I have had. "This is a good thing for him and although in the short term, it does not look that way, in the long term, I think it will prove to be really important in the life of Paul Gascoigne."

Meanwhile, Terry Venables, who signed Gascoigne for Tottenham and coached the midfielder during England's Euro 96 campaign, said: "I am really saddened to hear this news about Paul."

"It is no secret he has had troubles in recent years but I also know that he has been fighting hard to do the right things. The whole country will be upset by this news."

'Expansion plans dead'

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger fears Premier League plans to play a round of

fixtures in cities across the world have been killed off by the negative response to the proposals.

Wenger was one of the few leading figures in the game not to completely reject the scheme when it was mooted by Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore earlier this month.

Football's major governing bodies, FIFA and UEFA, both expressed their contempt for the idea, while the English Football Association claimed it was unsustainable in its current form.

Now the Arsenal manager concedes the attempt to add a 39th set of matches in cities like Tokyo, Sydney or Bangkok is unlikely to get off the ground.

"The idea looks to be dead, maybe because the idea came out

in a brutal way and maybe the PR was not done before," Wenger said. "If you don't give yourself time to prepare people for new ideas, sometimes it gets a lot of resistance and reluctance from the start."

"Now it looks to be an idea which is in a very difficult position. "I was open-minded but as well I will not cry if it doesn't happen. I just felt there was something to explore there which will now not be done."

"It looks difficult to resurrect now because UEFA, FIFA and the FA have come out against it. It is a big stream to swim against now."

Wenger is more concerned about keeping his side fresh as they finish a gruelling week with a trip to Birmingham in the Premier League on Saturday.

A win would open up an eight point lead over second placed Manchester United, who face Newcastle later Saturday.

But the Gunners have played tough matches against United and AC Milan in the seven days, while Birmingham have been inactive

since February 9.

Wenger is counting the absences, with Kolo Toure, Tomas Rosicky, Abou Diaby and Robin van Persie all sidelined and Emmanuel Ebou suspended.

But the French coach does at least welcome back goalkeeper Manuel Almunia, while Emmanuel Adebayor and Alexander Hleb will travel to St Andrews' despite carrying knocks.

"We can cope with the number of games we have played and sometimes it is a disadvantage for the team who doesn't play," Wenger said.

"We have one advantage because we have the rhythm of competition; the disadvantage for us is that we have the fatigue factor."

Birmingham have the advantage of freshness because they have recovered completely but they have not got the rhythm of competition.

"So let's just take it as it is. I know my players are focused, they want to do well and that is the best way to prepare."

Basten to take over Ajax

AFP, The Hague

Marco Van Basten will leave his job as Dutch national team coach after Euro 2008 and take charge of Ajax, the club announced on Friday.

Van Basten has signed a four-year deal and will take John van't Schip and Rob Witschge, two of his assistants with the Dutch team, with him.

"The new staff will be presented to the media on March 5. We are very happy," said Ajax technical director Martin Van Geel.

"They represent three former great players; they are all ambitious and want to restore Ajax to the highest level in Holland and in Europe."

The 43-year-old Van Basten will succeed Adrie Koster who took charge of Ajax on a caretaker basis following the departure of Henk ten Cate to Chelsea at the start of the season.

Van Basten, a triple European Footballer of the Year award winner, played for Ajax from 1981 to 1987 before leaving for AC Milan where he remained until 1995.

He returned to Ajax as youth team coach between 2000-2004 before taking charge of the national team.

WC boss sorry for racist slur

AFP, Johannesburg

A South African rights body told a local organiser of the 2010 football World Cup on Friday to apologise for using the word "kaffir", a term considered grossly offensive by the black population.

The South African Human Rights Commission, created by the constitution, sent a letter to Irvin Khoza, chairman of FIFA's 2010 local organising committee, urging him to retract the widely condemned slur.

"Your statement has caused hurt and indignity to many South Africans and we do believe that irrespective of your motive at the time you should, in order that we may move forward, apologise to the people of South Africa for the remarks that you made," read the letter.

Through his statement, Khoza had advanced the idea that black people's thought processes and intellectual abilities were inferior, said commission chairman Jody Kollapen.

Khoza, who is black himself, publicly told a journalist on Monday to "stop thinking like a kaffir."

Kollapen said South Africa should use its hosting of the World Cup in 2010 to display progress in the fight against racism and prejudice.

Khoza was given until February 29 to apologise, failing which he ran the risk of being dragged before a special court set up to deal with cases of racial discrimination.

"We trust that you will revert to us by not later than the 29th February 2008 with your response, failing which we shall have no option but to consider instituting proceedings in the Equality Court," warned the letter.

The term "kaffir" was formerly a commonplace and derogatory reference to black South Africans, labelled hate speech under a new constitution adopted after the fall of the white minority apartheid regime 14 years ago.

In a separate racism complaint, the commission was investigating the barring of white journalists from a briefing Friday by the leader of the ruling African National Congress, Jacob Zuma.

The South African National Editors Forum condemned the incident, saying such behaviour "has no place in South Africa today".

CARLING CUP

London derby in final

Football

AFP, London

Avram Grant will never hog the headlines like Jose Mourinho, but the Chelsea manager is developing a ruthless streak to match his predecessor and it could prove the decisive factor in Sunday's League Cup final against Tottenham.

While Mourinho's volcanic temper was always on the verge of erupting at any moment, Grant has seemed happy not to rock the boat since replacing the Portuguese coach in September.

That perceived passivity was portrayed as a fear of upsetting the assorted egos jostling for stardom in the Stamford Bridge dressing room. But the reality appears rather different.

Grant left out captain John Terry and star midfielder Frank Lampard

for Tuesday's Champions League draw at Olympiakos and is keeping the club's most iconic figures sweating over their places for the Wembley showpiece.

Lampard looks likely to return to the starting line-up but Terry, only just back from an ankle injury, could be sidelined by the impressive form of Brazil centre-back Alex.

It is a gamble that could make or break Grant's Chelsea reign. If Spurs win on Sunday with Terry watching from the bench, the Israeli would be left in a precarious position.

Yet he remains impressively single-minded about the task in front of him.

"We don't need to kill the ghost of Jose Mourinho because he did a good job," Grant said. "On Sunday, it is not me that I need to worry about."

"I am the boss and the boss

needs to see what is good for the club. I don't think players are computers, you need to respect them but I have to take a decision that is good for the club; long and short term."

"Frank and John were injured but I don't intend to punish any player that wants to play."

"Rewarding players is not the main thing but I am thinking about that. It is not an easy decision."

"John is a great captain even when he is not playing. He is also a great defender but it is not an easy decision because Alex and Ricardo Carvalho were very good."

"John, before his injury, was excellent and in training is very good, so it is a very hard decision."

It is safe to assume Grant hasn't taken quite so long to ponder who should lead the attack for Chelsea.

Didier Drogha has developed a valuable knack of grabbing the

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Maria, Li into qtrs

Tennis

AFP, Doha

China's Li Na, who hopes to challenge for a medal at the Beijing Olympics, and Maria Sharapova, who'll be one of the favourites in the Chinese capital, both stormed into the Qatar Open semi-finals on Friday.

Li got the better of her third top 20 victim in a row when she enjoyed a 6-3, 6-4 success against Jelena Jankovic, the world number four from Serbia to add to her wins over Anna Chakvetadze, the fifth-seeded Russian, and Shahar Peer, the 12th seeded Israeli.

The victories have carried Li to the semi-finals of this 2.5 million dollar event, the first time she has reached this stage in a tier one tournament. They also continued her great start to 2008 after taking six months off.

Asked why she was playing so well now, Li said: "Maybe because my husband just gave me a credit card - no I'm joking."

Li will now face experienced Russian Vera Zvonereva while Sharapova, who brushed aside Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki 6-0, 6-1, will tackle Agnieszka Radwanska, the Polish girl who knocked her out of the 2007 US Open.

Li's success hinged on making the first aggressive hit in the rally and striking the ball more powerfully than Jankovic, forcing her highly rated opponent to contain and defend more often.

However, in the second set it seemed that Jankovic might level things up.

Three times she had Li at 15-30 on her serve, but each time the world number 29 from Wuhan responded with some of her best tennis.

In fact her husband-coach Jiang Shan told her not to worry about how her opponent would play. "I told him that it was so windy I

can't play properly," Li admitted. "He said: 'Just think you like windy and that will help a lot'. It did."

Li created history when she became the first Chinese singles player to reach a Grand Slam quarter-final at Wimbledon two years ago and the first to reach the

world's top 20. Jankovic gave credit to her opponent.

"I just couldn't play my game. It was difficult dealing with her shots. I was fighting and came back into it and had some opportunities which I couldn't take," said Jankovic.

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Russian star Maria Sharapova raises her racket after beating Danish Caroline Wozniacki during their Qatar Open quarterfinals in Doha on Friday.

World record for Japanese swimmers

AFP, Tokyo

Athens Olympic bronze medalists Reiko Nakamura and Yuko Nakanishi issued an Olympic warning by setting new world records at the Japan Open short course swimming championships on Saturday.

Nakamura clocked two minutes 3.24 seconds to win the women's 200-metre backstroke, beating the previous mark of 2:03.62 set by American Natalie Coughlin in New York in November 2001.

Nakanishi timed 2:03.12 to win the women's 200m butterfly, beating the 2:03.53 set by Otylia Jedrejczak of Poland in Debrecen, Hungary, last December.

"I had targeted to set a new world record, but I was surprised that I actually did it," said Nakamura, 25.

"I'm going to do it again at the qualifying races for the Olympics in April. Top swimmers in the world are also getting better and better, so I'm determined not to be left behind."

Nakanishi, 26, said she was also pleased.

"Because it was my target to set a new world record. Reiko set a new record in the previous race, so it fired me up to follow her."

"It was my third time lucky to break the world record. Now I'm able to be ready for the Olympic qualifier in April in pretty good form," she added.

When she was asked about the 200-million yen prize (18,000 dollars), she said: "I don't know yet."

A total of two world records and 12 national records, including two in the heats, were broken in the championships, tune-up races for the national championships in April for places in the Beijing Olympics.

The records of Nakamura and Nakanishi outshined dual Olympic champions and former world record holder Kosuke Kitajima, who won the men's 100 metre breaststroke in a new national mark of 57.62.

"A new world record... I was close. But considering my current condition, I must be satisfied," said Kitajima, who was recovering from the flu.

"I wanted to set a new world record before they did. But I was able to set my personal best today, so I'm going to set another personal best tomorrow," added Kitajima, who also set a new national mark in the morning.

Yuka Sato, Tomomi Morita and Sato Hisayoshi also set new national records twice winning the women's 500m butterfly in 25.95, men's 50m and 200m backstroke in 23.88 and 1:53.01, and men's 50m freestyle and 100m individual medley in 21:94 and 52.91, respectively.

Shogo Hihara set 1:44.72 to win the men's 200m freestyle, while Asami Kitagawa set 1:06.18 to win the women's 100m breaststroke for the remaining two national records.

Only thinking of physiotherapy

AFP, Paris

Three-time former world footballer of the year Ronaldo has shelved thoughts about playing again and is focused on the lengthy and testing physiotherapy sessions needed to recuperate his injured left knee.

The 31-year-old AC Milan striker underwent surgery at the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris last week on the tendon ruptured while playing for his club against Livorno in Serie A action.

It was the latest in a series of knee injuries that have affected his glittering career, which has seen him established as top World Cup goal scorer.

"My heart tells me to play again but my body is sending me signs of fatigue and suffering," said Ronaldo, who was due to be released from hospital on Friday but will remain in Paris for two further weeks before returning to Milan.

"It has been a real knock-out blow, both physically and mentally," he admitted.

"I still don't know how it happened. I still mustn't think about playing again. I must focus for the moment on undergoing the best physio possible. This will be very tough."

"If I'm okay at the end of that, then of course I'll play again. If there's another ending, it will be a difficult and sad decision. I know exactly the bridges I have to cross. I have experience of recuperating from injury."

According to Professor Yves Carbonne, head of orthopedic and sports surgery at the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital, Ronaldo will likely have to wait five to six months before jogging and eight months before touching a ball again.

The surgeon who carried out the operation, Professor Eric Rolland, split out in detail what lies ahead for Ronaldo on the long road to full fitness.

"He's going to have to keep the protection on his right leg in place