

Liverpool striker Peter Crouch (C) pumps his fist after scoring against Birmingham City during their Premiership encounter at St Andrews in Birmingham on Saturday.

Liverpool force a draw

AFP, Birmingham



Jermaine Pennant pushed his claims for a role in Liverpool's Championship League showdown with Chelsea on Wednesday night by inspiring a wonderful second-half fight back as Liverpool forced Birmingham City to settle for a 2-2 draw.

The former Birmingham City winger played a part in a burst of two goals in 12 second-half minutes that deprived his old team of two vital points that would have seen Alex McLeish's side climb out of the bottom three.

Pennant set up Peter Crouch for Liverpool's first and played a role in the header from Yossi Benayoun that cannoned off the back of Rahdi Jaidi to secure a point for the visitors and leave Birmingham in the bottom three.

McLeish must have thought he would be travelling to fellow relegation candidates Fulham next week needing one more win to make survival a certainty, after Mikael Forssell and Sebastien Larsson's goals gave Birmingham a two goal lead after 55 minutes.

But they were unable to capitalise on a Liverpool team with clearly far more important priorities than Premier League points.

Benitez had his mind firmly on plans for Tuesday night's Champions League semifinal return leg at

Stamford Bridge and tested no fewer than nine of the players that were on duty at Anfield last Wednesday evening.

Spanish talisman Fernando Torres was omitted from the 16-man squad completely as he was wrapped in cotton wool ahead of Liverpool's most crucial game of the season as they look to keep alive their bid for a sixth European crown.

Birmingham had not managed to prevent opponents scoring against them in their previous 16 games and they collapsed again in the face of some direct and dangerous attacking from their former winger.

It was Pennant's wonderful run from inside his own half and exchanged passes with Benayoun and Andriy Voronin that set up Crouch in the 63rd minute and you could sense the Birmingham nerves.

Pennant's astute pass gave Lucas Leiva the chance to outpace David Murphy and cross for Benayoun.

The Israeli international directed a weak header goalwards, which Maik Taylor, the Birmingham keeper looked to have covered, until it deflected off Jaidi and into the opposite corner to deprive Birmingham of two crucial points.

At the other end of the table, Fulham continued to cling on to their top flight status, albeit by the slenderest of threads, after fighting back from two goals down to win 3-2 at Manchester City.

First-half goals from Stephen Ireland and Benjani Mwaruwari had put City in control at the break.

But after Diomansy Kamara had grabbed Fulham a lifeline, Danny Murphy equalised with a rebound

from a 79th-minute penalty and Kamarasnatched the winner with his second goal right at the death.

Bolton and Reading both remain one point ahead of third-from-bottom Birmingham after draws with, respectively, Tottenham and Wigan.

Bolton took the lead at Spurs through Stelios Giannakopoulos but had to settle for a draw as a result of Stéphane Malbranque's equaliser, while Wigan are virtually safe after holding Reading to a goalless draw at the JJB Stadium.

Sunderland secured their Premier League status and left Middlesbrough still sweating after a dramatic 3-2 win at the Stadium of Light.

A last-minute own goal by Emmanuel Pogatetz decided a rollercoaster derby, goals from Danny Higginbotham and Michael Chopra having allowed Roy Keane's side to overturn the early lead Boro had taken through Turkish forward Tuncay Sanli before Alfonso Alves equalised for the visitors.

In the day's other game, Newcastle rallied from two goals down to extend their unbeaten run to seven matches with a 2-2 draw at West Ham.

Mark Noble and Dean Ashton put the home side in charge but Obafemi Martins and Geremi secured a point for Kevin Keegan's men.

Real ready to pounce C'Ron

AFP, Madrid

Kuranyi fires Schalke

AFP, Berlin



Real Madrid would jump at the chance to sign Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo, the Spanish club's president Ramon Calderon said on Sunday.

"If one day he decides to leave, Real Madrid will be there to try and recruit him," Calderon told sports daily Marca.

"Cristiano is one of these men that we always want to have but I don't want to fuel false hope."

"Manchester are not selling and don't want to sell. In these situations the decision is always down to the player."

Calderon added that everything was in place for Real to celebrate winning the Spanish league title on Sunday.

Barcelona's 2-0 loss to Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday means that Real can be crowned champions if they beat Athletic Bilbao at home and if Villarreal fail to win at Real Betis.

'Legalise betting'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia should legalise football betting to stamp out match-fixing, a top coach said Sunday, after police launched a graft probe into five of the 13 teams in the Malaysian Super League.

Steve Darby, chief coach of former Malaysian Cup champions Perak state, told AFP profits from betting could be used to improve the game here.

"We cannot stop betting," he said. "Legalised betting will help (prevent match-fixing). The money can be ploughed back to provide better training facilities for the players," Darby said.

Darby added he had written to the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) three times to warn about possible match-fixing in the league after his players were approached.

Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi fired Schalke 04 up to joint second in the Bundesliga Saturday while Bayern Munich have a golden chance to extend their lead at the top of the table and put one hand on the league title if they beat Stuttgart on Sunday.

Kuranyi's 15th league goal of the season - after just two minutes - gave Schalke three points with a 1-0 win in Hamburg to go level on 54 points with Werder Bremen, who shared a 3-3 draw at Karlsruhe.

After Schalke 04 sacked coach Klemens Stochka a fortnight ago, care-

taker coach Mike Bueskens was delighted with the 1-0 win at rivals Hamburg.

"I am very, very pleased with the win," he said.

"We beat a direct competitor for a Champions League place and the early goal worked well for us."

"Hamburg played well, but just didn't take their chances."

Schalke and Bremen, who are second on goal difference, are now nine points behind Bayern with four games left.

A Bayern win will send them 12 points clear with a vastly superior goal difference and only a mathematical miracle would prevent them being crowned German champions for the 21st time.

But Bayern are without Germany internationals Miroslav Klose and Philipp Lahm against Stuttgart, while

Oliver Kahn is a huge injury doubt for the clash against Stuttgart who welcome back Mario Gomez back from injury.

The draw in Karlsruhe was a blow to Bremen, who were shocked by an early goal when Karlsruhe striker Sebastian Freis drilled home his 15th minute shot.

Werder hit back when midfielder Diego equalised eight minutes later and former Schalke midfielder Mesut Ozil scored his first goal of the season to put Bremen 2-1 ahead on 29 minutes.

Breis added his second on 59 minutes before Kapllani put Karlsruhe ahead only for Bremen striker Boubacar Sanogo to level the score in the 86th minute.

"It was a very entertaining game and the fans got their money's worth," said Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf.

"But we can't be happy with the result, because it was possible for us to keep the pressure on."

Further down the table, striker Mike Hanke gave Hanover an early goal at home to Hertha Berlin before Czech striker Jiri Stajner enjoyed the simplest of tap-ins to make it 2-0 after 26 minutes.

Breis clawed a goal back with a second-half penalty to make it 2-1 before Lukasz Piszczek equalised in the 66th minute to make it 2-2.

At the bottom of the table, Slovakian striker Marek Mintal netted a first-half goal for Nuremberg and Russian striker Ivan Saenko made it 2-0 against Arminia Bielefeld after 39 minutes with a superb strike.

But Breis hit back as Artur Wachnarek and Markus Bollmann scored second-half goals to make it 2-2.

Energie Cottbus pulled themselves further from the relegation battle with a 2-1 win over Hansa Rostock.

Duisburg have gone bottom of the table with a 1-1 draw against VfL Bochum.

On Friday night mid-table sides Eintracht Frankfurt and Borussia Dortmund drew 1-1 while on Sunday Bayer Leverkusen can break into the top five if they beat VfL Wolfsburg at home.

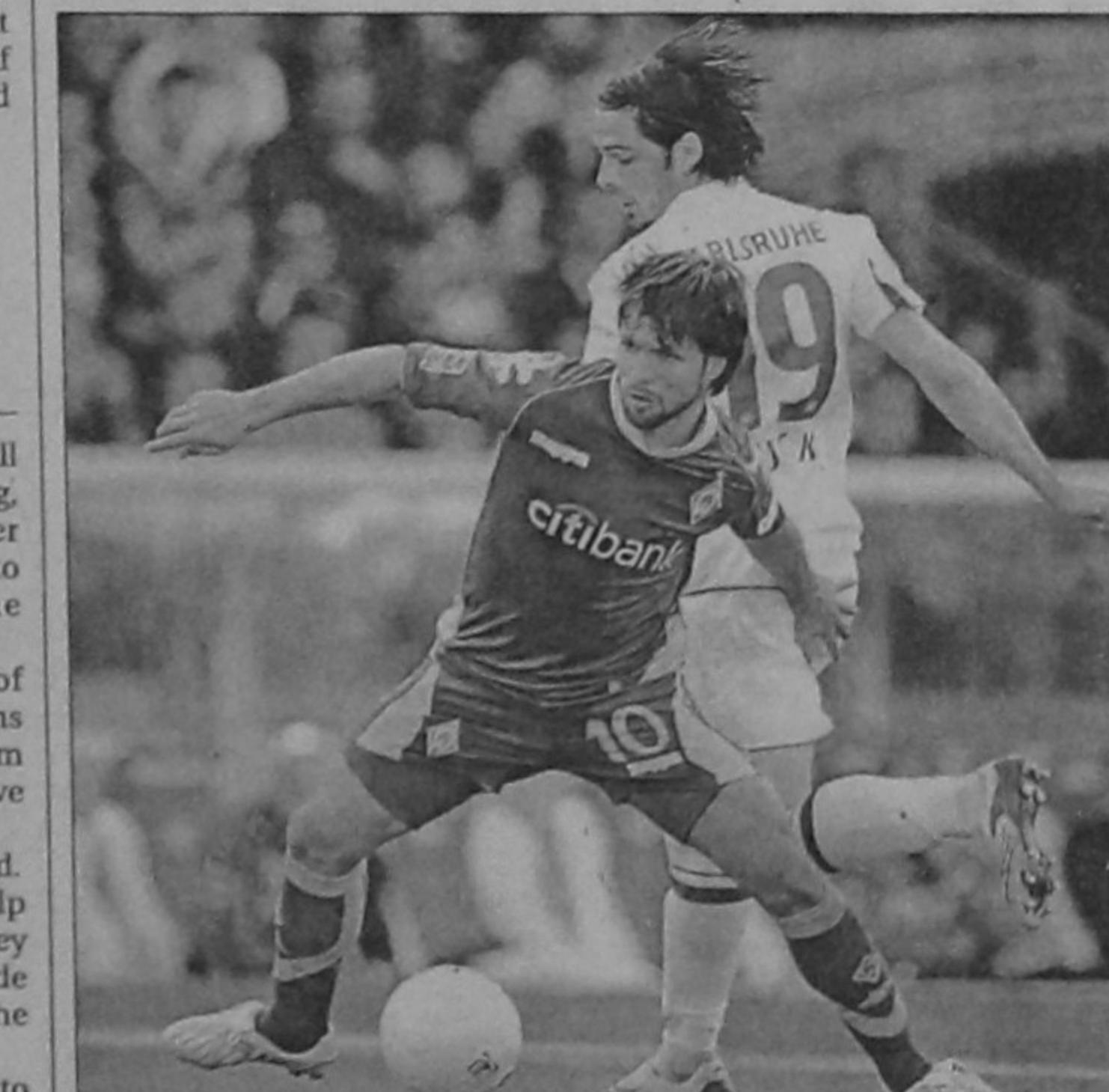


PHOTO: AFP

Werder Bremen's Brazilian midfielder Diego (L) shrugs off Karlsruhe defender Stefan Buck's challenge during their Bundesliga tie at the Wildpark Stadium in Karlsruhe on Saturday. The match ended in a 3-3 draw.

FA to examine bust-up

AFP, London

The Football Association (FA) confirmed Sunday they will be examining TV footage of the post-match bust-up between Manchester United players and Chelsea staff.

United substitutes became embroiled in a scuffle with Stamford Bridge groundstaff and stewards in the warm-down following Saturday's 2-1 defeat.

FA spokesman Andrin Cooper said: "This will have nothing to do with the referee's report. He would have been in his dressing room a long way from the incident."

"But we will obviously be asking Chelsea to let us see their CCTV footage of the incident."

Chelsea issued a statement after the game saying they would be "reviewing the relevant footage and will be considering the appropriate course of action".

United have also asked to see the pictures.

Patrice Evra, Paul Scholes, John O'Shea, Gerard Pique and Gary Neville were taking part in the warm-down on the pitch when they were asked to move by Chelsea groundstaff.

The row erupted when the players refused to come off the pitch and an altercation broke out between stewards, groundstaff and the United players.

Terry, Ferdinand impress Robson

AFP, London

Former England manager Sir Bobby Robson believes that Saturday's unruly clash at Stamford Bridge should not have an impact on John Terry and Rio Ferdinand's bids to be national team captain.

The pair, who are in the running to claim the England armband when coach Fabio Capello makes his decision in August, were involved in angry exchanges at Stamford Bridge.

Manchester United defender Ferdinand is reported to have apologised to a female steward he accidentally kicked in a fit of rage after the final whistle of the tie which Chelsea won 2-1.

But rather than condemn the experienced defenders, who have both skippered their country in recent months, Robson believes they showed the passion necessary to make a success of the captain's job.

The sight of those two towering leaders, John Terry and Rio Ferdinand, squaring up to each other illustrated to me the passion and endeavour of both players," he told the Mail on Sunday.

"My decision is not influenced by being first or second or still in the Champions League.

"Eto'o and Xavi are both in need of a rest to gain strength. As for Messi his case is different."

Lionel Messi, Samuel Eto'o, Xavi, Andres Iniesta, Gaby Milito, Deco and Victor Valdes were all notable absences in the Barca line-up against Depor although Rijkaard claimed he was not resting them for Manchester United.

"We put a team out there to do a job but before thinking about the result, I think about the health of my players," Rijkaard explained.

"My decision is not influenced by being first or second or still in the Champions League.

"Eto'o and Xavi are both in need of a rest to gain strength. As for Messi his case is different."

Argentine winger Messi, 20, played in the first leg against Manchester United but has only just returned to first team action after a torn muscle in his left leg back in March interrupted his season.

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