



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 Champions 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 Forsell and Sebastian 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 rested 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.

Premier League points were certainly more of a priority for McLeish and Birmingham as they entered a three-game sequence that would decide their fate and they would have been hugely grateful for the understandable decisions of Liverpool's Spanish manager. Yet it was hardly a completely weakened Liverpool side, with only one alteration from the side that defeated Fulham the previous Saturday. However Birmingham are made of sterner stuff than Roy Hodgson's team.

Especially at St Andrews where they have lost only once under McLeish since his arrival to replace Steve Bruce and their chances of extending that impressive record improved from the 34th minute thanks to Forsell.

McLeish believes the Finnish international is the most natural goalscorer he possesses and he demonstrated precisely why when he controlled James McFadden's cross at the far post, after it had skimmed the head of Martin Skrtel and dispatched his tenth goal of the

season.

Larsson rammed home a 25-yard free kick after Skrtel fouled James McFadden, but Birmingham's inability to keep a clean sheet came back to haunt them again in the closing stages, as did Pennant.

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 topflight 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 Mwaruwaru 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 Kamara snatched 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 Steed 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.

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 ground staff 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 ground staff.

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

"As a former England manager, I would tell Fabio Capello not to be concerned at all with the brief shoving between them. It shows their desire to win and, when they wear the white of England together, they will be a formidable partnership."

"Ironically, they are regarded as the main candidates to be Capello's England captain. I think they showed yesterday that either one of them will do the job rather well."

Schneider faces fitness race

AFP, Berlin

Veteran Germany midfielder Bernd Schneider faces a race against time to be fit for June's Euro 2008 tournament after back surgery.

The 34-year-old went under the knife last week to repair a slipped disc, but is hopeful of being fit in time for this summer's European Championships which start on June 7 and are being co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland.

"The operation went well and I feel pretty good considering the circumstances," Schneider told Sunday's edition of the Frankfurter Allgemeine.

"The healing process is pretty quick, I am told, and I am hopeful of being fit in time."

With 81 caps to his name, Schneider - who was a member of the team that made the 2002 World Cup final where they lost to Brazil - has struggled with a knee injury this season before his latest set back, but the operation was essential according to his club Bayer Leverkusen and the German Football Federation (DFB).

Germany head coach Joachim Loew says he will discuss the situation with the player and his doctors before making a final decision.

Loew will name his 23-man squad on May 16 for Euro 2008. Germany have been drawn in Group B alongside Poland, Croatia and Austria.

Fergie fumes over penalty

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson hit out at the penalty decision which allowed Chelsea to claim

a 2-1 win over Manchester United on Saturday and has revived the Londoners' chances of reclaiming the Premier League title.

The 87th-minute penalty, converted by Michael Ballack after a Michael Essien cross struck the arm of Michael Carrick, was variously described by the United boss as "ridiculous," "disgraceful" and "diabolical."

Ferguson insisted that Carrick should not have been penalised because the contact with the ball was not deliberate and Rio Ferdinand was waiting to clear the ball behind the midfielder.

"It was absolutely diabolical," the United boss told United's in-house television station.

"It is a major decision. Granted, it hit his hand. But he has not lifted

his hand above his shoulders, above his head, anything like that.

"It is going straight to Rio Ferdinand. The referee should have seen that rather than the linesman."

"If we're not going to get those decisions then we are under pressure."

The penalty was not the only issue Ferguson had with referee Alan Wiley and his assistants.

"If we're not getting the decisions we deserve then we're going to have to perform really well. In the context of today, when (Cristiano) Ronaldo comes on, in the first minute he's grappled to the floor by Ballack."

"It was a clear penalty kick but no penalty was given."

Ferguson was also upset by a challenge by Didier Drogba on Nemanja Vidic, which saw the defender come off after 14 minutes.

The Serbian needed stitches and lost a tooth.

"He got kneed in the face by Drogba - no foul given," said the

Old Trafford boss. "He was dazed rather than concussed."

Ferguson maintains United are still in the driving seat - given their superior goal difference - with two games remaining.

United face West Ham next Saturday before Chelsea travel to Newcastle two days later.

It could even come down to the last game.

United go to Wigan on May 11 while Chelsea face Bolton.

Ferguson added: "It's still in our hands. The players and the support are really fired up for the next game. Hopefully we can get the result we want."

The Scot acknowledged that Chelsea had dominated the first half but put that down to sluggishness in the wake of his own side's Champions League encounter with Barcelona in midweek.

"Sometimes, coming out of a European game, it takes a while to get it right. Unfortunately, it didn't happen for us."

Europe on Rijkaard's mind

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard took no risks ahead of Tuesday's massive Champions League semifinal with Manchester United, resting most of his stars

in a 2-0 defeat at Deportivo La

Coruna that all but gifts the title to Real Madrid.

Real can win the title on Sunday with victory over Athletic Bilbao - providing Villarreal fail to win - and Barca's approach against Depor emphasised that they had waved the white flag and Europe is now the top priority.

Barca are 11 points behind Real, who also have a game in hand, and face a fight to seal second place with Villarreal a point ahead having played one game less.

But that pales in significance to the trip to Old Trafford with Barca, who drew 0-0 in the first leg at Camp Nou, looking for a vital away goal to help them reach the Moscow final.

Lionel Messi, Samuel Eto'o, Xavi, Andres Iniesta, Gaby Milito, Deco and Victor Valdes were all notable absentees 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.

"Some people are saying Messi is ready to play ninety minutes, but unfortunately that is not the case," Rijkaard added.

"He has already suffered two very serious injuries and we must protect him - I no longer speak as the coach of Barca, but as a fan of football, because I would like to see Messi playing for many years."

"I do not rest anyone thinking about another game, but only because the player needs it."

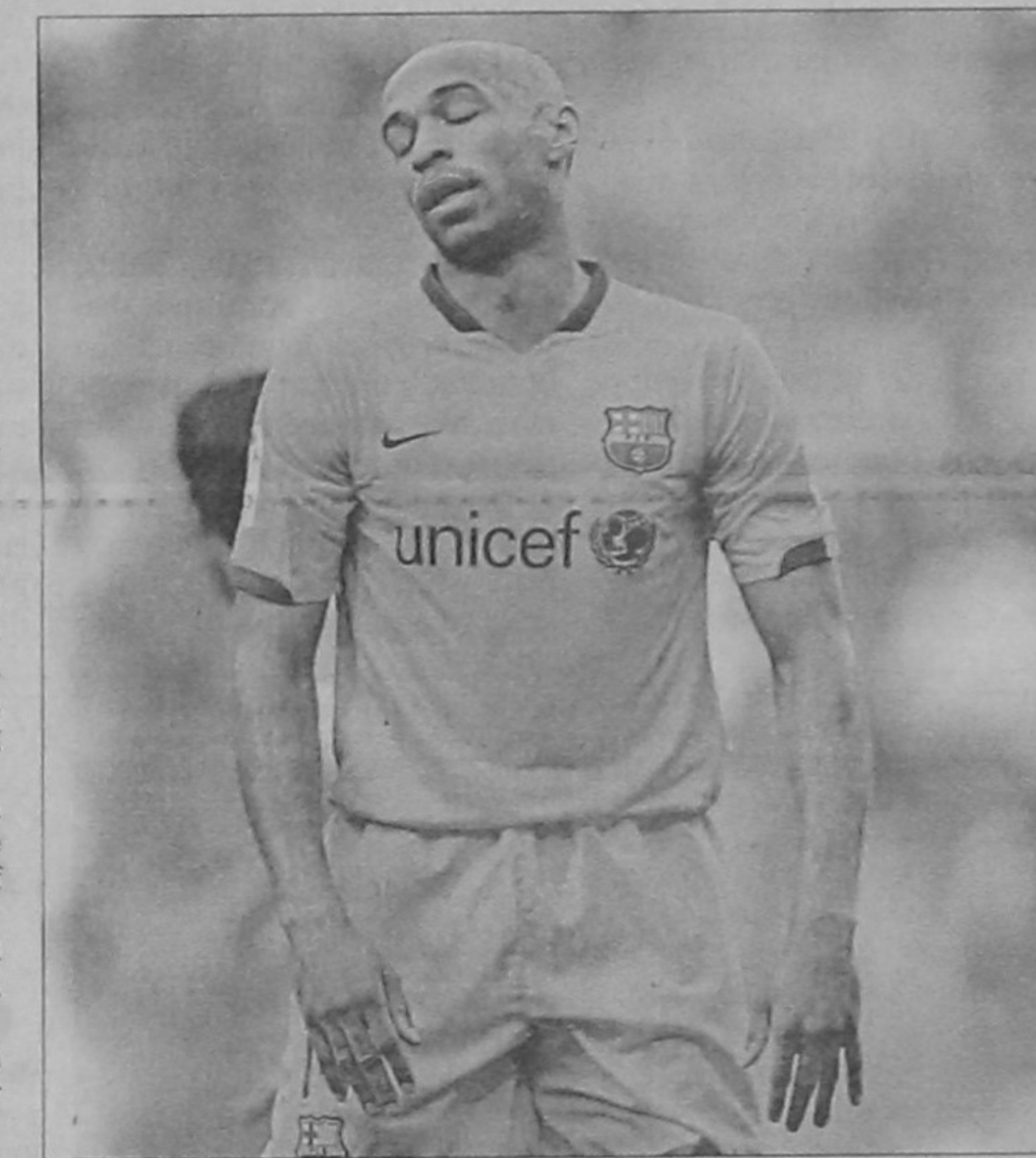
A concern for Barca is that despite having the likes of Henry, Messi and Eto'o the goals have dried up with three out of their last

four league matches ending in scoreless draws.

"If we create chances the goals will come," Rijkaard. "A lot of things have happened this season, like injuries for example, and these things affect you."

Against Manchester United they are desperate to get an away goal knowing Sir Alex Ferguson's team will then have to score twice.

Rijkaard won the Champions League with Barca two years ago - defeating Arsenal in the final - and may have to repeat that feat to save his job.



Barcelona's French striker Thierry Henry shows his frustration during their Primera Liga match against Deportivo Coruna at the Riazor Stadium in Coruna on Saturday. Henry, who is having a very poor season, once again failed to perform as his team lost 2-0.

Real ready to pounce C'Ron

AFP, Madrid

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 those 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 they 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.

Kuranyi fires Schalke

AFP, Berlin



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 Mirko Slomka 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 international 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.

But Freis added his second on 59 minutes before Kapllani put Karlsruhe ahead only for Bremen striker Boubacar Sanogo to level the scores 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.

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

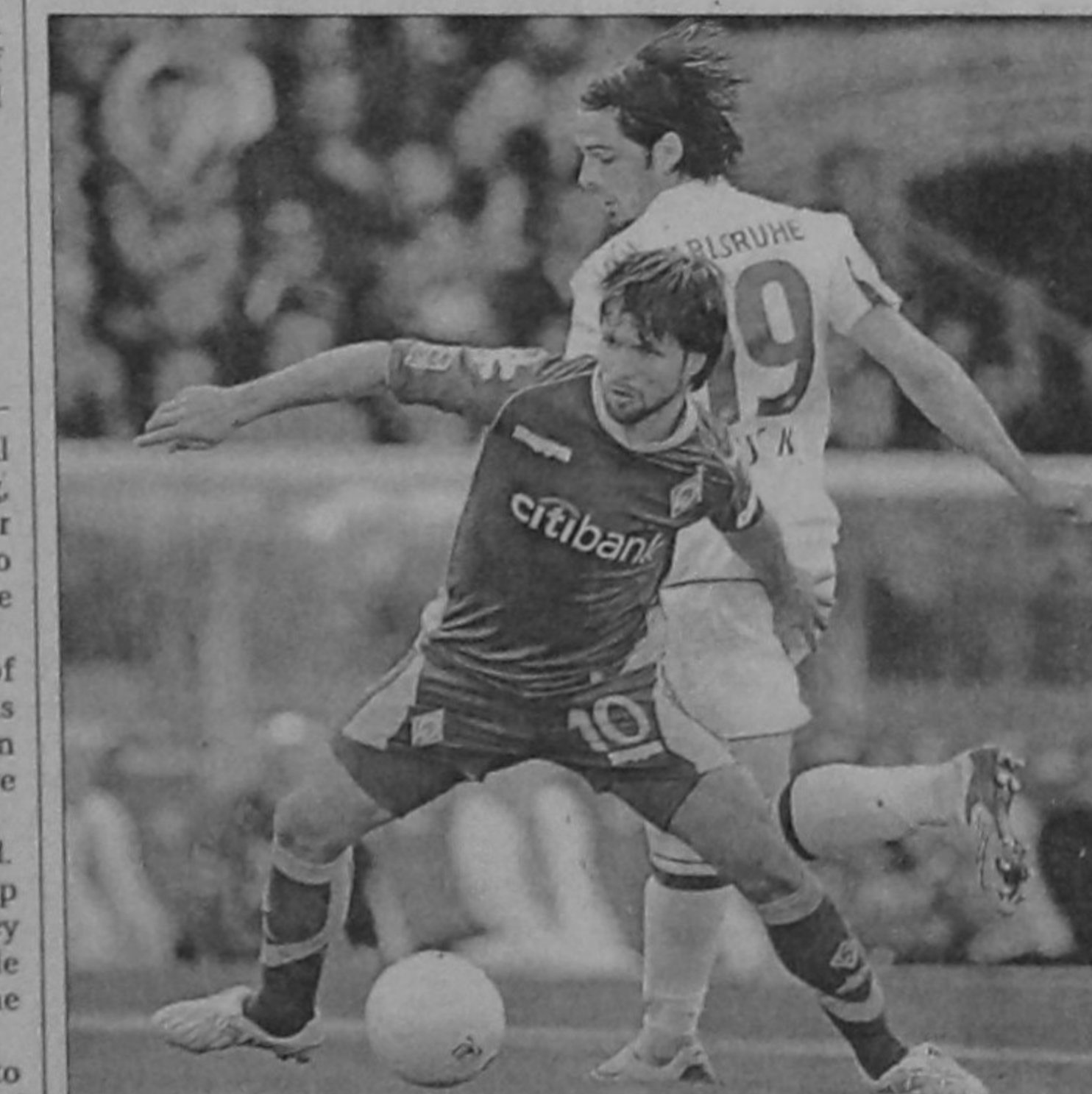
At the bottom of the table, Slovakian striker Marek Mintal netted a first-half goal for Nuremberg and Russian striker Ivan Saenko made it 2-0 against Arminia Bielefeld after 39 minutes with a superb strike.

But Bielefeld hit back as Artur Wichniarek 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.

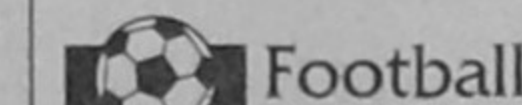
Duisburg have gone bottom of the table with a 1-1 draw against VfL Bochum.

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.



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.

Real, Barca attract Jose



INTERNET, undated

Jose Mourinho has spoken enthusiastically about the possibility of taking charge of either Real Madrid or Barcelona one day.

The Primeira Liga giants are two of a number of clubs frequently being linked with Mourinho, who has been out of work since leaving Chelsea earlier this season.

The Portuguese insists his next destination has yet to be decided, but he admits the top jobs at Madrid and Barca both appeal to him.

"Barcelona is an absolutely fantastic club and I enjoyed my time there very much, just like in the six games I have played against them in three years," said Mourinho, who was at Barca earlier

in his career as an assistant coach.

"I don't know if my future will be to train Barca or to play against them. (Either way) what is clear is that I hope to enjoy myself again with Barcelona."

Like Barca, Real Madrid still have a coach in place at present but that has not stopped speculation about the possibility of Mourinho taking charge at the Bernabeu either.

When asked about Madrid during an interview with Spanish newspaper ABC this weekend, Mourinho said: "Every coach wants to coach Real Madrid, I am not the only one."

Mourinho also denied any suggestion that he had already signed a deal to become the next boss of Italian side Inter Milan.

"No, I continue being a coach free to decide my future. I do not feel any type of pressure to decide what I want to do. I can wait a little more."

Benzema rescues Lyon

REUTERS, Paris



Olympique Lyonnais recovered from going 2-1 down and the dismissal of Fabio Grosso to draw 2-2 at home to Caen

on Saturday to edge closer to a seventh successive Ligue 1 title.

France striker Karim Benzema, the league's top scorer, made it 1-0 on 33 minutes before grabbing his 19th goal of the season with a superb free kick early in the second half.

Caen had been 2-1 up at

half-time after goals by Argentine midfielder Juan Eduardo Eluchans and forward Lilian Compan.

Lyon were reduced to 10 men at the interval when Italy defender Grosso received a red card for slapping Caen forward Yoan Gouffran in the tunnel.

With three matches left Lyon have 72 points from 35 games, four points ahead of second-placed Girondins Bordeaux who drew 0-0 at home to mid-table Nice.

Paris St Germain, in danger of being relegated for the first time, beat Auxerre 3-1 after a two-goal show from Amara Diallo.

Former Portugal striker Pauleta, the PSG captain, showed

his side the way by opening the scoring from a free kick on three minutes.

Ivory Coast forward Diane made it 2-0 from close range 10 minutes later.

Defender Jean-Pascal Mignot reduced the arrears for the visitors when he headed in a corner on 78 but Diane put the game beyond doubt with his second close-range goal four minutes from time.

PSG stayed third from bottom and in the danger zone but moved level on 38 points with Racing Lens, who lost 3-2 at Le Mans with Japan midfielder Daisuke Matsui scoring twice for the hosts.