

Lampard made the right call

AFP, London

Chelsea's England midfielder Frank Lampard says he is sure he made the right call to stay at Stamford Bridge instead of moving to join former mentor Jose Mourinho at Inter Milan.

Inter were in the market for Lampard during the summer and he admitted that he was tempted to make a switch - but now is happy he resisted.

"It was a very tough time for me personally after the death of my mum, and my head was in a spin in the summer," Lampard told the Sunday Times.

"I didn't really know what to do and I felt it might suit me to get away and change my surroundings and my life."

"But when I came back pre-season, I realised how much I loved this place and, through speaking to my family, I knew what I had to do."

"I'm sure now 100 per cent that I made the right decision."

Sagna out till December

AFP, London

Arsenal defender Bacary Sagna has been ruled out until December after suffering an ankle injury in the 2-0 defeat to Aston Villa on Saturday.

The France right-back was stretched off in the 70th minute after falling awkwardly, with Villa compounding his misery by scoring seconds later through Gael Clichy's own goal.

Sagna, who will also miss France's friendly against Uruguay in Paris on Wednesday, will be assessed more fully by the Arsenal medical staff on Sunday but the early prognosis is gloomy for manager Arsene Wenger.

"It is a serious injury," he said. "It is an ankle injury and we think he will be out for a few weeks."

City can rival Real: Robinho

AFP, London

Manchester City's Brazilian forward Robinho says his team can rival the likes of Real Madrid and hence he is happy to pledge his long-term future to the English Premiership side.

"I hope to play here for many years," Robinho told the Daily Star on Sunday.

"I hope to make history at this club and become one of the great heroes at Manchester City. I'm in a very good phase and I hope this will continue," said the Brazilian, who joined City in a record-breaking 45 million euro deal in the summer after initially indicating he wanted to join Chelsea.

Robinho, 24, says he wants to be on board for the duration following City's multimillion takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group.

"I'm enjoying it here, and my aim is to become the best player in the world," he said.

"I came to City because I saw them growing and making progress. Can they be as big as Real Madrid? I hope so, yes."

City boss Mark Hughes, under pressure with the team in the lower half of the table, is expected to receive money for transfers in the January transfer window.

Robinho would like him to splash the cash on Brazil teammate Kaka from AC Milan.

"Kaka's a great player and a great person. He's so strong, intelligent and fast. Obviously, I'm hoping that I can play with him here at City," Robinho said.

Villa down Gunners

AFP, London



Arsenal's title challenge suffered a hammer blow on Saturday as a 2-0 home defeat at the hands of Aston Villa left them nine points adrift of the Premier League pacesetters Chelsea and Liverpool.

A week after they had reasserted their own title credentials by beating Manchester United, Arsene Wenger's side suffered their first two-goal defeat at the Emirates Stadium.

"Top level performances are about consistency and at the moment we are not consistent enough," the Frenchman said. "Everyone in the dressing room is very down because it's a massive disappointment for us all."

An own goal by Gael Clichy and a Gabriel Agbonlahor strike revived Villa's hopes of Champions League football next season and it could have been worse for the Gunners if Manuel Almunia had not saved Ashley Young's first-half penalty.

Chelsea and Liverpool continued to set the pace with Chelsea's 3-0 win over bottom side West Brom keeping them top on goal difference.

After Jose Bosingwa had opened the scoring, Nicolas Anelka claimed a first-half double to take

his goal tally in the league to 12 in 13 matches.

Liverpool were almost as comfortable in compiling a 2-0 win over Bolton while champions United leapfrogged Arsenal into third place after knocking five goals past Stoke at Old Trafford.

Cristiano Ronaldo book-ended the win with free-kicks right at the start and right at the end of a one-sided contest, his 100th and 101st goals for the club.

Michael Carrick claimed United's second just before half-time, Dimitar Berbatov ended the contest four minutes after the break and, with United strolling, youngster Danny Welbeck came off the bench to score a memorable first goal for the club from well outside the box.

Liverpool's win came courtesy of headers in either half from Dirk Kuyt and captain Steven Gerrard, the latter coming from a superb cross from Fernando Torres after the talismanic Spanish striker came off the bench.

Tottenham's unbeaten run under Harry Redknapp came to an end when they went down to a 2-1 defeat at Fulham that sends Spurs back down into the relegation zone.

Fulham were gifted their opener by another blunder from Tottenham's Brazilian goalkeeper

Heurelho Gomes, who allowed a Simon Davies cross to slip through his grasp in the 32nd minute.

Andy Johnson doubled the lead with 20 minutes left and Frazier Campbell's first Premier League goal came too late for Spurs to salvage a point.

Titus Bramble rescued a point for ten-man Wigan with a last-minute equaliser in a 2-2 draw at his former club Newcastle.

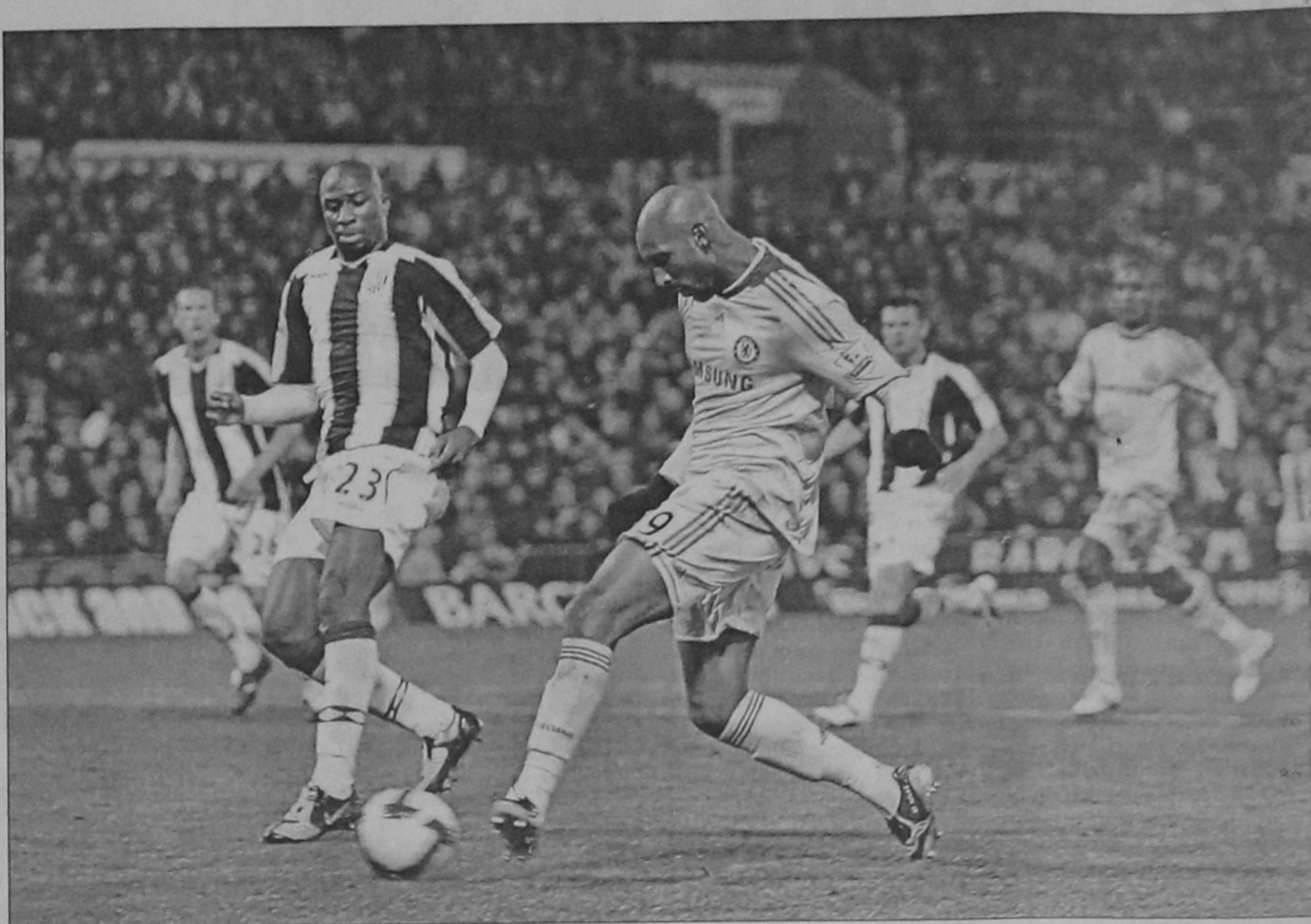
Wigan had gone ahead thanks to a spectacular 3rd-minute strike by Ryan Taylor. But after having Emmerson Boyce sent off midway through the second half they had looked set to leave St James' Park with nothing after late strikes by Michael Owen and Obafemi Martins had given Newcastle the lead.

Sunderland came from behind to take revenge for their League Cup defeat by Blackburn in mid-week.

Blackburn deserved to lead at the interval courtesy of Christopher Samba's stoppage time header from a Morten Gamst Pedersen corner.

But Kenwyne Jones equalised four minutes after the break and strike partner Djibril Cisse sealed a 2-1 win for Roy Keane's side with a 71st-minute strike.

The day's other match, between West Ham and Portsmouth, finished in a goalless stalemate.



Chelsea striker Nicolas Anelka (C) scores his second goal against West Bromwich Albion during their Premier League encounter at the Hawthorns on Saturday.

Valladolid stun Real

AFP, Madrid



Managers don't last long at Real Madrid and German coach Bernd Schuster could be heading for the exit door after the Spanish champions fell to a 1-0 defeat at Valladolid on Saturday.

The same Valladolid had been crushed 6-0 by Barcelona last weekend and before the game sections of the Spanish media were saying that this could be Schuster's last game if Real lost.

That is just what happened as Uruguayan striker Nestor Cannobbio struck a 48th minute winner with an unstoppable left-footed drive.

With two recent Champions League losses to Juventus and the midweek Spanish Cup embarrassment to minnows Real Union, Schuster had been under extreme pressure, and the Valladolid loss could be the final nail in his coffin although Schuster didn't see it that way.

"I am calm. We are working towards what we want to do and I am focused on my job," said Schuster.

"It is a difficult time at the moment but we had a similar situation last season."

"The result is obviously bad for us and we shouldn't lose but that is

football. They didn't really create a chance in the first half but when half a chance came along they took it well. We certainly didn't deserve to lose."

Schuster won the league title in his debut season but it is now up to the Real board to see if they want to extend his 16-month spell at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Real have now won just once in their last six matches in all competitions and the double league champions stay fourth, two points behind leaders Barcelona who have a game in hand.

It was a great day for Barcelona with Valencia falling to a surprise 3-2 home defeat to Sporting Gijon in Saturday's late game.

Valencia could have gone top with victory but goals from Luis Moran (19 minutes) and David Barral (51) gave them an uphill task.

David Villa scored his 11th goal of the season from the penalty spot to get his team back in the game but Diego Castro made it 3-1 in the 83rd minute and it proved crucial as Juan Mata scored late on for the hosts.

"We are conceding too many goals at home and this is something we have to cut out," lamented Villa.

Unai Emery's Valencia stay third above Real Madrid on goal difference but Villarreal, a point ahead in second, now have a great opportunity to pull away from the duo when they travel to Malaga on Sunday.

Barcelona are at Recreativo Huelva on the same day looking to move five points clear of Real and Valencia.

Without the creative Dutch duo of Ruud van Nistelrooy and Arjen Robben both out injured Raul and Gonzalo Higuain started in attack for Real with the latter hoping to build on his four goals against Malaga last weekend.

Valladolid were whacked 6-0 by Barcelona last time out and must have feared a Real backlash but Jose Garcia Calvo almost put the hosts ahead with his 12th minute header cleared off the goal line by alert Brazilian defender Marcelo.

Higuain then showed a great turn of pace to race clear only to be thwarted by the goalkeeper.

At half-time it was scoreless with Schuster cutting a grim figure in the dug-out but the clean sheet was a bonus when you consider that Real had leaked six goals in their last two matches.

But three minutes into the second half Valladolid took the lead with a poor pass from Guti gifting possession and Canobbio rifled in past the helpless Iker Casillas.

Casillas last kept a clean sheet back on September 21 in a 2-0 win over Racing Santander underlining Real's defensive frailties.

Higuain and Wesley Sneijder both went close but captain Raul squandered the best chance with three minutes left shooting at the legs of goalkeeper Sergio Asenjo.

No room for Beckham

AFP, London

David Beckham has been axed from Fabio Capello's 23-man England squad for Wednesday's friendly against Germany in Berlin, while there was a surprise call-up for Chelsea defender Michael Mancienne.

Capello left out Beckham because the LA Galaxy midfielder hasn't played since the Major League season ended on October 26.

Beckham is due to join AC Milan on loan in January and could get the chance to equal Bobby Moore's tally of 108 caps in England's next friendly against Spain in February.

Mancienne, 20, is yet to play a game for Chelsea but Capello has been impressed by his performances on loan for Championship leaders Wolverhampton and the England Under-21 team.

Uncapped Aston Villa duo Gabriel Agbonlahor and Curtis Davies are also included, as is John Terry even though the England captain is due to have a scan on a foot injury he suffered in Chelsea's 3-0 win at West Bromwich on Saturday.

There were also recalls for in-form Tottenham striker Darren Bent and Manchester City pair Micah Richards and Joe Hart.

Rio Ferdinand and Wayne Rooney were absent after missing Manchester United's win over Stoke with injuries.

Kalle slams Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge has accused the German giants of carelessness after allowing struggling Borussia Moenchengladbach to score two late goals in Saturday's 2-2 draw.

A first-half goal from Italy striker Luca Toni and a second-half penalty from France midfielder Franck Ribery meant Bayern were 2-0 up at Gladbach with barely 15 minutes left.

But headers from Canada striker Rob Friend and United States midfielder Michael Bradley snatched the draw and brought to an end Bayern's five-match winning streak to keep the defending Bundesliga champions third in the table.

"We're guilty of carelessness," said Rummenigge, after Bayern did virtually the same thing to draw 3-3 at home against minnows Bochum last month.

"We were comfortably in the lead here and had the chances to make it three or even four."

"At the end of the day, we've only taken a point when it simply should have been three."

"It's a bad day at the office when we've dropped vital points."

"We drew 3-3 with Bochum at home, and here it's finished 2-2."

"If we hadn't dropped these four points, we'd definitely have been top of the league - these are the matches we simply have to win."

The equalising goal by Bradley with nine minutes left was particularly painful for the Bayern defence as the midfielder was left unmarked in the penalty area.

"You can't be 2-1 up and then suddenly find yourselves outnumbered in your own penalty area, that's not on," said Bayern's German defender Philipp Lahm.

"Perhaps we thought we were home and dry and didn't concentrate hard enough."

"We had the match under control and we made chances, but we didn't kill the game there and then."

"We had a huge opportunity to take all three points here, but instead it's a case of dropping two."

The result leaves Bayern three points off leaders Bayer Leverkusen - who they face in a fortnight - but Munich play the Bundesliga's bottom club Energie Cottbus at home next weekend which will give them a chance to close the gap.

Leverkusen stayed top of the league after their 2-1 win over Schalke 04, despite being reduced to ten men.

First-half goals by Germany strikers Patrick Helmes and Stefan Kiessling meant Leverkusen were 2-0 up at half-time then had defender Gonzalo Castro sent off just after the hour mark before Schalke striker Kevin Kuranyi scored a late consolation header.

"I must pay a huge compliment to my team that they never lost patience for this important game," said Bayer coach Bruno Labbadia.

"After the red card, we were under pressure, but the team showed the desire to fight for every ball."

Second-placed Hoffenheim had a tough time as guests Wolfsburg fought back twice before the home side sealed a 3-2 win as Bosnia striker Vedad Ibisevic scored his 14th goal in 13 games to remain the league's top scorer.

Two goals in three minutes gave Hertha Berlin a 2-1 win over Hamburg at Berlin's Olympic Stadium to fire the home side to fourth in the table.

In Saturday's other results, Borussia Dortmund enjoyed a 4-0 win over Eintracht Frankfurt, VfB Stuttgart drew 0-0 with Arminia Bielefeld and Energie Cottbus picked only their second win of the season when they beat Karlsruhe 1-0.

On Friday, Hanover and Bochum drew 1-1, while on Sunday Werder Bremen host Cologne.

Ibra magic fires Inter

AFP, Rome



Two goals from striking magician Zlatan Ibrahimovic in a 2-0 victory at Palermo shot Inter Milan three points clear at the top of the Italian league table on Saturday night.

Ibrahimovic's second half goals meant Jose Mourinho's team will finish the weekend on top regardless of what happens in other matches as Juventus, three points behind Inter, have already played

in a 4-1 win against Genoa on Thursday.

AC Milan and Napoli, who are in equal third spot four points behind Inter, play Chievo and Atalanta on Sunday.

Ibrahimovic simply had a superb match. Known as "Ibracadabra," the Swedish striking magician found the net in the 46th and 64th minutes to spell the end for Palermo.

An uneventful first half gave way to more incidents in the second. Ibrahimovic, largely left unattended by the Palermo defence, opened the scoring with a powerful

25-metre shot which left keeper Alberto Fontana with little chance.

He then doubled his striking tally with a just-as-powerful 20-metre freekick which Fontana was once more unable to do much about.

In between the goals, the hapless Sicilian keeper was a little lucky that the rampant Ibrahimovic had not found the net as he parried away another shot from the on-form Swede.

Sunday's programme of matches sees capital city rivals AS Roma, in great difficulty in 17th spot, and fifth-placed Lazio clash in their Olympic stadium.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Scott Carson (West Bromwich), Joe Hart (Man City), David James (Portsmouth)
Defenders: Wayne Bridge (Chelsea), Curtis Davies (Aston Villa), Glen Johnson (Portsmouth), John Terry (Chelsea), Joleon Lescott (Everton), Michael Mancienne (Chelsea, on loan at Wolverhampton), Micah Richards (Man City), Matthew Upson (West Ham)

Midfielders: Gareth Barry (Aston Villa), Michael Carrick (Man Utd), Stewart Downing (Middlesbrough), Frank Lampard (Chelsea), Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Shaun Wright-Phillips (Man City), Ashley Young (Aston Villa)
Strikers: Gabriel Agbonlahor (Aston Villa), Darren Bent (Tottenham), Peter Crouch (Portsmouth), Jermain Defoe (Portsmouth), Theo Walcott (Arsenal)



Marseille were sailing to victory against Lorient on Saturday before imploding in front of their Velodrome fans to lose 3-2 and squander the chance to gain ground on league leaders Lyon.

With 14 minutes left on the clock Eric Gerets' side had victory in their grasp after an early strike from Karim Ziani and a penalty on the hour mark from Mamadou Niang.

As things stood that would have pushed them up to within a point of Lyon, but then followed a collapse of seismic proportions as Lorient hit back with three goals inside 11 minutes.

Morgan Amalfitano, in the 76th minute, and then Fabrice Abriel, pulled the struggling visitors back on level terms before Kevin Gameiro grabbed the unlikely winner three minutes from time.

Gerets stated: "To lose a match like that is catastrophic! For 70 minutes we were in control. Then we lost it. What a shame."

"We should have closed the door but we weren't able to. We have to catch up for each lost point now but it doesn't mean that everything's finished just because we've lost one match," said Marseille captain Loris Collin.

For Lorient manager Christian Gourcuff justice was done as he claimed Marseille's penalty should not have been awarded.

"The foul wasn't committed in the penalty area, I concede referees can make mistakes but everything should be done to ensure it doesn't happen."

He added: "For us we're happy, even if we didn't play our best. What counts is to take three points which could be important on judgement day."

This embarrassing reverse which left Marseille four points adrift in second, came on the back of the club's midweek humiliation in the League Cup at the hands of Metz.

Marseille's arch rivals Paris Saint Germain were enjoying altogether better fortunes up on the Normandy coast where Paul Le Guen's men notched up their third straight win in a week.

After Lille and Nancy in the League Cup the capital club gained

the scalp of Le Havre with a 3-1 win with up-and-coming Guillaume Hoarau getting a double, his strikes sandwiching Ludovic Giuly's first half contribution.

That left PSG in the right frame of mind to take on seven-time champions Lyon, who host Bordeaux on Sunday next weekend.

This result strengthened further PSG's claims on a place in Europe's next season, lifting them up a place into fifth.

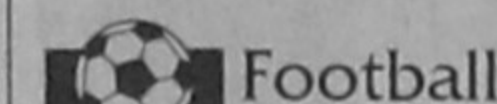
The other big winners from Saturday's menu were Toulouse who took third courtesy of a 2-0 win at Grenoble.

Goals in the second and 19th minute from Andre-Pierre Gignac did it for Grenoble and lifted the Toulouse striker up on to eighth goals to join Karim Benzema and Horeau at the top of the scoring charts.

Elsewhere Steve Savidan was keen to impress with his call-up to the French squad for the upcoming Uruguay friendly and he didn't disappoint, scoring Caen's goal in their 1-1 draw at Nancy.

Down at the foot of the table bottom-club Valenciennes fell to their ninth defeat of the season with a 1-0 defeat at Le Mans - Auxerre beat Sochaux by the same score.

Loew to lay down the law



AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew will on Monday lay down the law to his players after last month's public spat with captain Michael Ballack as the Mannschaft prepare for the friendly here against England.

Germany and England will meet at Berlin's Olympic Stadium on Wednesday night, but Loew will gather his squad at their city centre hotel to spell out what is acceptable behaviour after last month's bust-up with Ballack.

During the 30-minute speech, Loew will leave his players in no doubt what is - and what is not - acceptable behaviour over the next 18 months on the road to South

Africa with his side top of their qualifying group.

"It will be a clear and frank address," Loew told German tabloid Bild on Sunday.

"It will not be a debate nor a discussion."

"I want to make it absolutely clear how I imagine the run-up to the next World Cup will be - and exactly what I expect from the players."

"I believe that they will take my words on board, they will not need a written copy of what I have to say."

Having taken over as Germany head coach after the 2006 World Cup, Loew faced by far the biggest test of his tenure when Ballack and fellow senior player Torsten Frings openly criticised the national coach last month.

Frings slammed Loew on televi-

sion for dropping him for the World Cup qualifiers against Russia and Wales, while, in an interview with a German newspaper, Ballack said the coach should show his senior players more respect.

The pair later apologised in person and both will miss the England friendly, but Loew has said he wants to use the game to experiment with younger players.

But the coach's authority has been questioned after an episode in which no party emerged with any credit.

"That is a question of the respect," said Loew when asked about Ballack and Frings.

"We have in principle a good relationship with one another."

"But these incidents moved the national team into a negative light."

"That does not mean I am above criticism, quite the opposite - I am

even glad when someone says something to me internally."

After Ballack and Frings' criticisms, Loew has reiterated he will not consider a player's reputation when choosing his side and repetition form is his sole criteria for selection.

"It is of no concern what someone has done before," said Loew.

"We will observe players and only after watching their performances will we decide who plays."

And Germany squad members can expect stringent testing throughout next year as Loew revealed he was far from happy with some of the fitness levels at June's Euro 2008 tournament which the Germans lost in the final to Spain.

"Some things were neglected," said Loew.



Inter Milan star Zlatan Ibrahimovic shoots to score his second goal against Palermo during their Serie A tie at the Barbera Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP