



PHOTO: AFP

Aston Villa defender Luke Young (R) slide-tackles Hull City midfielder Peter Halmosi during their Premiership clash at the Kingston Communications Stadium in Hull on Tuesday.

Own-goal gift for Villa

AFP, Hull



Aston Villa leapfrogged Arsenal into the last Champions League placing here on Tuesday as an own-goal by Kamil Zayatte gifted them a 1-0 victory over Hull City in the last Premier League match of the year.

Zayatte turned his attempted clearance from Ashley Young's cross past goalkeeper Boaz Myhill to extend Villa's unbeaten sequence to eight while Hull must be staring anxiously at the bottom three as they have only won once in their last 11 games.

They looked to be on course to salvage a point in time added on when referee Steve Bennett awarded them a penalty for handball but after consulting with a linesman he correctly rescinded his decision as former Real Madrid target Young had not handled the ball, though he did raise his arm as the ball went over the bar.

Aston Villa skipper Gareth Barry praised Bennett after the match.

"That sort of decision

doesn't happen too often," said Barry.

"The referee deserves a lot of credit for changing his mind."

Young said that his attempt to save the ball had been instinctive.

"I was on the post and it was a reflex reaction. It hit the bar and it went over."

"It's a good feeling to be up there above Arsenal and level on points with Manchester United."

Villa manager Martin O'Neill was delighted to have taken three points from a game that looked likely to end in a draw.

"I am absolutely delighted with the result because we didn't play very well tonight (Tuesday)," said the former Northern Ireland international.

O'Neill while paying credit to Bennett for changing his mind was hoping that Young would not be quite so theatrical next time.

"I wasn't best pleased with Young," said O'Neill.

"It is not often I am not pleased with Young. However, he has said he would not do it again and I am hoping that is a promise and not a threat!"

Hull's veteran former England striker Nicky Barmby thought he might have got the opener early in the first-half but Bennett adjudged correctly that he had barged Villa keeper Brad Friedel -- who was making his 172nd successive Premier League appearance -- before stabbing the ball home.

Indeed despite Villa playing the most creative football it was Hull that were slightly more effective in the danger areas and it took a desperate headed clearance by Curtis Davies 10 minutes from the break to stop Hull capitalising on a fine move.

The second-half was a similar period to the first where Villa played the pretty football but were unable to impose themselves as Hull's players stopped them every time they looked dangerous.

TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Tuesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):							
Liverpool	20	13	6	1	35	13	45
Chelsea	20	12	6	2	40	9	42
Man Utd	18	11	5	2	29	10	38
Ast Villa	20	11	5	4	33	22	38
Arsenal	20	10	5	5	33	23	35
Everton	20	9	5	6	27	32	32

Maria hopes to return

Tennis

AFP, Los Angeles

Maria Sharapova says she hopes to be fit to defend her title at the Australian Open in January, despite pulling out of an exhibition event in Hong Kong next month.

In a statement posted on her website, Sharapova said she regretted pulling out of the JB Group Classic team tennis tournament, scheduled for January 7-10 in Hong Kong.

"It's with much disappointment that I have to withdraw from Hong Kong. I've been using this event for the last five years to get match fit and ready for the new season, in fact Hong Kong has been successful in preparing me for the Australian Open," she said.

Sharapova launched her 2008 season in style with a triumph at the Australian Open.

But the 21-year-old was hindered by a right shoulder injury much of the year. She skipped the Beijing Olympics, the US Open before having arthroscopic surgery in October.

"I'm just not ready to play against the top class competition in Hong Kong, although I remain hopeful for Australia where I'm the defending

champion," she said.

The Australian Open, first Grand Slam of the season, starts in Melbourne on January 19.

"Believe me, it's been a very difficult decision, but I only started practicing 16 days ago," she said.

The Hong Kong event has a new format this year, featuring four teams -- Europe, Russia, Team Americas and Asia Pacific.

Top players slated to appear include world number one Jelena Jankovic and Wimbledon champion Venus Williams.



MARIA SHARAPOVA

Cricketers' transfer Jan 10-12

SPORTS REPORTER

The Premier and First Division cricket league transfers will be held this month, the Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolitan confirmed yesterday.

The three-day bourse will begin on January 10.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board has already announced a 17-member national pool for the 2008-09 Premiership.

Milito not for sale

SOCCERNET

Genoa coach Gian Piero Gasperini has again insisted that star striker Diego Milito is not for sale, at least not at the time being.

The Argentinian has been a revelation during his second spell with the Rossoneri, scoring 12 goals to lead the Serie A goalscoring charts.

Ashraful gets

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The Bangladesh skipper however was happy with the way they finished the year.

"We had created chances in four Tests in this year (2008), so we are looking for a much better performance in the coming year. And I must say Shakib was the find in this year as he replaced the retired Rafique (Mohammad Rafique) successfully, which is a good news for our cricket," said Ashraful.

2008: Spain finally come good

Football

AFP, Madrid

The year 2008 will be long remembered in Spain after the eternally underachieving national team finally came good, winning the European Championships on June 29 after Fernando Torres's goal sealed a 1-0 victory over Germany in the final.

It was their first title in 44 years -- following their European championship success back in 1964 -- and it was fiesta time as the champagne and sangria flowed throughout the country.

"This is a happy day for Spain, we've won this tournament in style and we're very happy. Now we will start expecting to win on this sort of stage," said outgoing coach Luis Aragones.

On the domestic front champions Real Madrid started 2008 seven points clear of Barcelona after Julio Baptista's goal sealed a 1-0 win over their rivals in 'El Clasico' at Camp Nou days before Christmas.

Under German coach Bernd Schuster Real showed German-like efficiency to cruise to a second successive league title in May and finished a mighty 18 points ahead of Barca with Villarreal sandwiched in between.

Barcelona lost both matches against Real and on May 7 had to suffer the ultimate humiliation performing the guard of honour at Santiago Bernabeu and then lost 4-1.

However, the tables were to turn and by the end of the year new Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola, a former Barcelona captain who won six league titles and the 1992 Champions League, had revitalised the club steering them to the summit with a ten point gap over Sevilla and 12 points over sixth-placed Real.

Barcelona won a heated Clasico on December 13 at Camp Nou with Samuel Eto'o and the irrepressible Lionel Messi scoring in the final seven minutes.

"This guy Messi is a football god," said Brazilian teammate Dani Alves. "If he can continue with this desire and mentality he will go down in history."

It capped a fine first half of the season for Barca who had demolished title rivals Atletico Madrid 6-1, Valencia 4-0 and Sevilla 3-0.

In stark contrast last season's hero Schuster could do no right and defeats to Valladolid, Getafe and Sevilla saw Schuster lose his job four days before 'El Clasico' on December 13 with Juande Ramos taking his place.

Schuster's post match comments after the 4-3 defeat to Sevilla are thought to have put the final nail in his coffin with the Real hierarchy unimpressed by his pessimistic attitude.

"As it stands it is impossible to win at the Camp Nou," Schuster said. "They (Barcelona) are playing really well there and it's their year."

The eye-catching performances of Barcelona did not help Schuster's cause either with Pep Guardiola, whose only experience had been managing the reserve team, getting the best out of a team that had underperformed under Frank Rijkaard.

Rijkaard bid farewell in May and was applauded off the pitch in recognition for his two league titles and 2006 Champions League success.

Ronaldinho and Deco followed Rijkaard out the door as Guardiola stamped his authority on the team.

Persuading Eto'o to stay proved significant for Guardiola as the Cameroon forward blasted 15 goals to fire Barcelona top.

Real had endured a nightmare in the transfer market failing to land Ronaldo from Manchester United and then lost Brazilian winger Robinho who engineered a 39.8 million euro move to Manchester City after discovering that Real wanted to use him as collateral in the Ronaldo deal.

"The problem is that (Real Madrid) did not manage to recruit," Robinho said. "(Bernd) Schuster (Real coach) isn't my father, he's my coach. He can't make me do anything."

B. League

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who upset giants Abahani and Mohammedan in the first leg, are expected to field their third foreigner in a bid to strengthen their campaign in the second half of the competition.

They have signed Miendjin Mathurin Roland of Cameroon during the mid-season transfer window, which saw Sheikh Russel and Arambagh change their entire imported force.

But both Russel and Arambagh have yet to get the ITCs (international transfer certificate) of their new signings.

Russel have roped in Serbian defender Marko Matic and Hicham Admi, Samir Omari and Ahmed El Moujahid of Morocco to replace compatriots Touati Youness, Bourdip Mohamed and Igir Mohamed.

At Arambagh, Kenyan striker Nicodemus and Liberian Jerry Weah made way for Sekou Oumardrame and Mohamed Soumah of Guinea.

Chittagong Abahani, who host second-placed Brothers Union on Saturday in the port city, released their Nepalese trio for Liberian players Joseph Romeo Sherman and Joseph Fullo Samai.

The 13th week of the competition has a tough match for leaders and defending champions Abahani, who are playing away against unbeaten-at-home Chittagong Mohammedan tomorrow.

Arambagh play Muktiyoddha also tomorrow, bottom-table Khulna Abahani host Russel on Saturday while Mohammedan rest in this round.

Becks can play till 38

Football

SOCCERNET

AC Milan club doctor Jean Pierre Meersseman believes loan signing David Beckham can continue playing for another five years at least, by which time the midfielder will be 38 years old.

"He will be at his top level in 15-20 days," he told Sky Italia. "The tests which he did showed that he is already very good."

"He has an exceptional physique which will allow him, as happened to (Paolo) Maldini or (Alessandro) Costacurta, to play for another five or six years."

The England midfielder is in Dubai with the rest of the Milan squad after joining the team on a short-term deal from the LA Galaxy and took part in his first training session with his new teammates today.

Beckham has not played since the end of the MLS sea-

son in October, but captain Maldini is confident the former Manchester United star will be match fit again soon.

"Beckham is a great champion, but we shouldn't forget that he has come into a great team and a great club like Milan," said Maldini.

"We players don't care what his life is like off the pitch, we have found a lad who has not trained for two and a half months, but I have had the chance to talk to him and I noticed his determination and his great desire to put himself to work immediately to return to playing as soon as possible."

Beckham officially becomes a Milan player on January 7 and could make his debut four days later, against Roma at the Stadio Olimpico.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti has reiterated his belief that the former England captain will make a valuable contribution to the team before he returns to Los Angeles in March.



PHOTO: AFP

Milan midfielder David Beckham (L) looks on as teammate striker Alexander Pato (2nd from R) runs with the ball during a training session at Al-Nasr's club ground in Dubai on Tuesday.

Shakib is loving it

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"What I always said was that I enjoy cricket. I feel good when I enter the ground. That's it. My performance has been improving day by day and there will be something happening if I could continue the trend," responded Shakib, who didn't want to compare his all-round effort against New Zealand with this match performance.

The young all-rounder also praised the pitch of Mirpur and branded it as the 'best wicket' in the country.

"I think day by day the wicket has improved and in my opinion is that it's the best wicket in the country. The other thing is that we played well at home because we are playing this series after a tough tour in South Africa," he explained the reason behind Bangladesh's good show in the first Test.

Shakib also said that it was always a different taste for him to bat with players like

Mohammad Ashraful.

Without any doubt the effort of Shakib created another opportunity for the Tigers but it would be unfair to forget another fighter and he was none other than wicketkeeper Mushfiqur Rahim, who once again showed his calibre as a future star.

SCOREBOARD

Final scoreboard on the fifth and final day of the opening Test between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur on Wednesday:

SRI LANKA: First innings 293 (Samaraweera 90; Shakib 5-70) BANGLADESH: First innings 178 (Imrul 33; Muralidaran 6-49)

SRI LANKA: Second innings 405-6 decl (M Jayawardene 166, Sangakkara 67) BANGLADESH: Second innings (overnight 254-5) Tamim c P Jayawardene b Prasad 47 Imrul run out 13

Zunaed c M Jayawardene b Muralidaran 37

Rokibul b Muralidaran 24

Ashraful lbw b Vaas 101

Mehrab c sub (Kapugedera) b Muralidaran 23

Shakib b Prasad 96

Mushfiqur c Dilshan b Muralidaran 61

Mashrafe c P Jayawardene b Prasad 2

Mahbubul run out 2

Shahadat not out 0

Extras: (lb-3, nb-4) 7

Total: (All out in 126.2 overs) 413

Fall of wickets: 1-40, 3-124, 4-144, 5-180, 6-292, 7-403, 8-422, 9-411.

Bowler O M R W

Vaas 25 5 74 1

Prasad 25.2 5 105 3

Muralidaran 48 9 141 4

Herath 26 4 86 0

Dilshan 2 0 4 0

Result: Sri Lanka won by 107 runs.

Man-of-the-match: Shakib Al Hasan.

Second Test: Chittagong (Jan 3-7)