



Aston Villa defender Curtis Davies (jersey no15) heads in the opening goal against West Bromwich Albion during their Premier League encounter at Villa Park on Saturday.

Villa keep up pressure

AFP, Birmingham

Aston Villa consolidated their place in the Premier League's top four with a 2-1 win over local rivals West Bromwich Albion on Saturday. Martin O'Neill's team moved above Manchester United into third place thanks to Curtis Davies' strike against his former club and an own goal from Scott Carson at Villa Park. James Morrison got one back for Albion soon after half-time but Villa, now unbeaten in nine matches, held on for a fifth win in six games.

With Arsenal spluttering, Villa have a golden opportunity to shake up the Premier League's established order by edging the Gunners out of the Champions League places. They were below their best for long periods here but still did enough to beat an Albion team desperate for the points to haul themselves off the bottom of the table. Albion were looking to win a league game at Villa Park for the first time since May 1979 and they started brightly enough without creating any serious chances. Robert Koren tested Villa keeper Brad Friedel for the first time when he collected Jay Simpson's pass and drove goalwards.

But, sparked the run of play, Villa went ahead after 19 minutes through former Albion defender Davies. Steve Sidwell had two headers cleared off the line following a Barry corner by James Morrison and Greening. But, when Barry delivered the ball into the danger area for the third time, no-one picked up Davies, who headed past Carson and barely celebrated despite the taunts of the visiting fans. That sparked Villa into life and Ashley Young's curling shot from the edge of the area was only just off target. Gareth Barry, who had recovered from a groin injury to play, met a cross from James Milner but his header was

straight at Carson. Milner caused panic in the Albion defence again with another cross that picked out Sidwell, only for the midfielder to shoot wide. Morrison should have done better than header straight at Friedel from a Paul Robinson cross and Villa made him pay in the 41st minute. Barry slipped a pass through to Agbonlahor on the left flank and he cut into the area before hitting a cross-shot that deflected off Carson and trickled over the line. Albion had lost their last seven away games but Morrison gave them hope of a fightback when he reduced the deficit four minutes after half-time.

Joe Cole not for sale

AFP, Cobham

Chelsea manager Luiz Felipe Scolari insists he has no intention of selling England midfielder Joe Cole to London rivals Tottenham. Cole is unhappy that Scolari keeps substituting him and Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp, who gave the star his professional debut at West Ham, reportedly wants a reunion at White Hart Lane. The 27-year-old was replaced for the 12th consecutive game during Saturday's FA Cup draw against Southampton and is thought to be concerned about his long-term future at Stamford Bridge. Although Cole has 18 months left on his current contract, talks about an extension were put on hold earlier this season, fuelling speculation that he could ask to leave during the January transfer window. Scolari knows how to sell before he can bring in new players and the Brazilian has already offloaded Wayne Bridge to Manchester City, but he is determined to keep hold of Cole.

Will the Devils feel Blue?

AFP, Manchester



When Sir Alex Ferguson suggested this week that Liverpool might lack the necessary experience to stay the pace over the second half of the Premier League season, he touched a raw nerve with Rafael Benitez. Infuriated, the Liverpool manager responded caustically by claiming that it was, in fact, his Manchester United counterpart who was betraying signs of apprehension as the season heads towards its decisive phase. Ferguson's demeanour of late has offered little to support that suggestion. But the Scot readily admits that the champions' margin for error has been curtailed by the unexpected resilience of Liverpool's challenge this season and, in the process, substantially raised the stakes involved in Chelsea's visit on Sunday. United's two games in hand reduce the significance of the eight-point advantage Liverpool held over the champions as 2009 got underway. But United can ill afford to

see their current momentum stalled by a Chelsea side which arrives at Old Trafford with almost identical concerns and a record of eight wins from their ten away matches this season. "The games we have in hand gives us the opportunity to close the gap on those clubs at the top," Ferguson said ahead of what will be Chelsea's first visit to Old Trafford under Luiz Felipe Scolari. "Those two games are at home and it's important we take advantage of that. But the first thing is to win Sunday's game. That's the one that can set us on our way." For Scolari, a victory would help him to repudiate criticism that he lacks the nous required to make the difference in major matches, an argument that has been fuelled by the Brazilian's failure to secure a win over United, Arsenal or Liverpool since he arrived in England last July. Given his coaching pedigree, that kind of criticism inevitably causes Scolari to bristle a little. "I didn't win only the World Cup, I won two Copa Libertadores and many things in Brazil," he reminded his critics, before endorsing

Ferguson's assessment of this encounter as a potentially pivotal meeting. "We need to win because this is a game that if they take three points it is difficult to recover after," the Brazilian acknowledged. Both sides will be close to full strength with John Terry and Michael Ballack, for Chelsea, and United's Patrice Evra all returning from suspensions while Rio Ferdinand has recovered sufficiently from a back problem to make his first start in almost a month. United had the better of the contest when the two sides met at Stamford Bridge earlier in the season but Salomon Kalou's late equaliser rescued a point for Scolari's men. Away from home, Chelsea have been far more incisive however, as Ferguson recognised. "Normally you are talking about Chelsea being unbeaten at home," he said. "But this season it is their away record that has kept them at the top. It is absolutely outstanding." United's home form has been equally impressive - seven league wins in succession since Newcastle claimed a point on the opening weekend of the season - so something will have to give on Sunday.

Benitez slams Fergie

Football

INTERNET, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez has launched a verbal attack on Manchester United counterpart Sir Alex Ferguson. The Spaniard claimed United boss Ferguson is "the only manager who will not be punished" for outspoken attacks on referees. "We had a meeting in Manchester with managers and the Football Association about the respect campaign. And I was very clear, forget the campaign because Mr Ferguson was killing the referees, killing Mr. (Martin) Atkinson, killing Mr. (Keith) Hackett," Benitez claimed. Benitez is clearly irked by the lenient way he sees Ferguson treated by the FA, and hit back at the Old Trafford chief's complaints about how the fixtures are compiled. But the Spaniard's long list of complaints about the world and European champions was not an angry rant. It was a measured, controlled delivery at the media conference ahead of the Barclays Premier League trip to Stoke. Liverpool are top - and if they win Saturday they will be six points clear of second-place Chelsea and 10 ahead of the champions before the pair meet at Old Trafford on Sunday. Benitez sat with a sheet of paper, unfolded in front of him, from which he read a catalogue of grievances against the Manchester United

regime. Ferguson's complaints about supposed favouritism over fixtures prompted Benitez to respond. "I was surprised by what has been said, but maybe they are nervous because we are at the top of the table," Benitez said. "But I want to talk about facts. I want to be clear, I do not want to play mind games too early, although they seem to want to start." Benitez believes Ferguson is getting away with attacks on referees which would not be tolerated from other managers. "All managers need to know is that only Mr. Ferguson can talk about the fixtures, can talk about referees and nothing happens," Benitez said. "We need to know that I am talking about facts, not my impression. There are things that everyone can see every single week." "Are they under pressure? Maybe they were not thinking that we would be at the top of the table in January. But we are at the top of the table and they are nervous. I am not telling the authorities what to do. But I have been here for five years and know how things are going on." Benitez finished off by criticizing the conduct of United officials when Liverpool plays matches at Old Trafford. "We know what happens every time we go to Old Trafford and the United staff," Benitez said. "They are always going man-to-man with the referees, especially at half-time when they walk close to the referees and they are talking and talking."

Podolski set for Cologne

AFP, Berlin

Unsettled Bayern Munich forward Lukas Podolski is likely to be sold to his formative club FC Cologne, according to Bayern's general manager Uli Hoeness Friday. The German international has been out of favour at Bayern in recent seasons and Hoeness believes Podolski is set to return north once the "finer details" of the deal have been ironed out. "I'm negotiating with Cologne. Next week I'll resume discussions and I think we'll come to some kind of agreement before the end of the month," Hoeness told television channel DSP from Dubai where the club are at a training camp. Cologne earlier offered Bayern 7.5 million euros for the 23-year-old Podolski, but that offer was rejected. Bayern, who paid 10 million for Podolski in 2006, are hoping to recoup at least that much.

'Ron best, not for long'

Football

AFP, Cobham

Chelsea manager Luiz Felipe Scolari admits Cristiano Ronaldo deserves to be crowned the world's best player but he has warned the Manchester United winger he could lose the title in 2009. Ronaldo is favourite to collect the FIFA World Player of the Year award for 2008 when it is presented in Zurich on Monday. The Portugal star, who is nominated alongside Liverpool striker Fernando Torres, AC Milan playmaker Kaka and Barcelona duo Lionel Messi and Xavi, has already won the European honour and Scolari is convinced his superb form for United last season deserves another reward. But the Brazilian knows Ronaldo better than most after coaching him with the

Portugal national team for five years and he hinted that the United idol has been below par so far this season. "In the last season, for me, he was the best in the world. If he doesn't receive the award it will be wrong," Scolari said. "He is a very intelligent player that changes games. When you expect him to be on the left, he turns up on the right. When you expect him to shoot with his left, he shoots with his right. "But this season maybe some other players are in a good position to discuss it." Ronaldo scored 42 goals to help United win the Premier League and Champions League last season, but he spent most of the close season unsuccessfully trying to engineer a move to Real Madrid and has cut a forlorn figure at times since then. The 23-year-old has scored just nine times and has failed to hit the net in his last eight appearances, yet he could easily prove Scolari wrong by

helping United to a crucial win over Chelsea at Old Trafford on Sunday. He only made a cameo appearance as a substitute in the 1-1 draw between the teams at Stamford Bridge earlier this season. Now the stage is set for a more significant contribution. Scolari knows none of his Chelsea players have Ronaldo's flamboyant skills but he believes the likes of Deco, Frank Lampard, Michael Ballack and Joe Cole are just as capable of winning a match on their own. "I have some players who don't have his characteristics but I have others who cross very well and pass very well. "This is different player with a different style. Maybe we have here with a different style but who are as good as Ronaldo. "For sure, one player from Chelsea will be in the best five players in the world this year

Fans panic over Becks sticker

AFP, Rome

Obsessed football fans are in a panic that the David Beckham sticker for the Panini albums will not be freely available, Ansa reported on Friday. The sticker will only be sold on request rather than in the usual packets leading Panini commercial director Antonio Allegra to describe the response as a real "panic." Allegra added: "It's a real obsession. Since early this morning, we have been submerged by telephone calls and e-mails. I think we have had a 1,000 in a single day (...). "I could never have imagined something like this. Even after 6p.m. when our offices closed, the telephone was still ringing." Former England captain Beckham is set to make his league debut for AC Milan, on loan from LA Galaxy, in Sunday's match at AS Roma following a midweek friendly and weeks of anticipation.



British star Andy Murray hits a forehand return against Roger Federer of Switzerland during their Qatar Open semifinals on Friday.

Murray thumps Federer

Tennis

AFP, Doha

Andy Murray, widely-tipped to end Britain's 73-year Grand Slam drought this year, beat Roger Federer in the Qatar Open semifinals on Friday for his fourth win in five matches against the Swiss superstar. The 21-year-old's stunning 6-7 (6/8), 6-2, 6-2 victory carried him into the final of the Doha event where he is the defending champion and where he will face Andy Roddick on Saturday. His win on Friday came just a week after he had also defeated 13-time Grand Slam title winner Federer in the exhibition event in Abu Dhabi. Murray once again showed that he can contain the brilliant fluency of Federer off the ground, and also has the weapons to manoeuvre for flaws in the great man's armoury, especially on the backhand side. He also returned superbly, so that Federer's smooth delivery deteriorated as the match wore on. Murray's serve, the most improved part

of his game along with his mental strength, was not broken at match. The most remarkable thing was that Federer was showing signs of disappointment in his body language well before the end, and appeared to have lost hope in the final game. "He doesn't let too many things get to him. But when I have watched him play Rafael Nadal I have seen he can get frustrated because he is so used to winning," said Murray who knocked out world number one Nadal in Thursday's quarterfinals. "It can be difficult sometimes, and he obviously had his chances in the second set. When I managed to break him I saw that he was frustrated. It was not that surprising." Federer said that Murray had been a serious rival for at least a year now and agreed that he "had a shot" at becoming number one. "If he carries on the way he is he will have a shot," said Federer. "Things change very quickly. But I hope if he were to become number one he would win a Slam - not like the women's side. No disrespect

to Jelena Jankovic but it took Rafa five Grand Slams to become number one." Murray was unlucky with a line call at 6-6 in the first set tie-break, which was shown by Hawkeye to be incorrect and happened at a moment when he appeared about to reach set point. He appeared still to be annoyed when he started the second set, and had to come from love-40 in the third game to save his service. After that he quickly broke for 4-2 and never looked like dropping his own delivery. When he broke for 3-1 in the final set, it already looked all over for Federer, who appeared to lose heart near the end. Murray has a 5-2 career record over Roddick, who earlier reached his first final since September when he carved a fine win in a high quality match against Gael Monfils. The former world number one from the United States also showed signs of evolving into a more measured and varied player during his 7-6 (7/1), 3-6, 6-3 win over the brilliant Frenchman.

Zico to take over at CSKA

AFP, Moscow

Brazilian legend Zico will take up the coaching reins at one of Russia's top football teams, CSKA Moscow, the club said Saturday on its website. The Brazilian, 55, has signed a three-year contract with the club, CSKA said. Zico replaces Valery Gazzaev, who stepped down at the end of last year after leading CSKA to three national titles, four Russia Cups and a UEFA Cup victory. Zico joins the Moscow side from Uzbekistan's Bunyodkor, terminating his contract early with the team he took over only in September. From July 2006 to June 2008 Zico coached Fenerbahce, leading them to the Turkish title in 2007. Earlier Zico coached Japan's national team, leading them to the Asian champions title in 2004.

Clubs eye Cassano

INTERNET, undated



Three days into the Italian winter market, and with as many weeks left to its end, Sampdoria striker Antonio Cassano is the only name to stand out in a fairly dull scenario of possible transfers. His move to Serie A champions Inter Milan was rumoured even before the market opened, but the Genoa club and the player himself have seemed to agree that they will consider a transfer only at the end of the season. La Gazzetta dello Sport Friday wrote that powerhouse Juventus have renewed an old interest for the 26-year-old talent, who could become a valid substitute for veteran captain Alessandro Del Piero, 34 and with a contract expiring in 2010. Inter may have better chances for an immediate signing of Cassano, as they can offer Brazilian Adriano or the young Mario Balotelli in exchange to Samp, which would reduce the transfer fee of about 18 million euros (24.5

million dollars). The powerful but often undisciplined Adriano, who turns 27 in mid-February, returned from his home country with an uncertain future at Inter. His bad relationship with coach Jose Mourinho didn't improve when he showed up late as the league leaders resumed training on January 2 after the Serie A winter break. Lack of discipline, added to memorable fits of anger on the pitch, also marred the career of Cassano during his stints at Roma and Real Madrid, but he seems to have mellowed out since arriving at Samp in 2007. Balotelli, an 18-year-old Italian-born of Ghanaian origins, is already a mainstay with Italy's Under-21 team, where he scored three goals in four games. Despite being considered a rising star, Balotelli has had troubles finding a spot in Inter's frontline and seemingly would prefer to be loaned to a smaller club with more chances to play. "He asked to see me and I'm going to meet him soon," Inter president Massimo Moratti said. "I'll try and

understand what is best for him. "Certainly, Inter believes in him. He is a crucial player. I don't think he'll leave, not even on a loan." Inter, however, need to find a new striker to play next to Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic as both Argentine veterans Julio Cruz, 34, and Hernan Crespo, 33, could leave at the end of the season. Genoa's Diego Milito has been eyed by Inter, but their market managers reportedly found no positive response from the seaside club, who owe much to the Argentine for their comfortable sixth place and unbeaten home record. The 29-year-old Principe, (the prince), could be suffering from pubalgia, a nagging inflammation of the lower abdominal muscles that can sideline players for months, but remains the current Serie A topstriker. He boasts 12 goals along with Marco Di Valo of Bologna and Fiorentina's Alberto Gilardino, which prompted president Enrico Preziosi to say: "I'm not selling Milito, not even for 50 million (euros)."