



Manchester United striker Carlos Tevez (L) heads in the third goal against Derby during their English League Cup semifinal at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

United see off Derby

Football
AFP, Manchester

Cristiano Ronaldo scored a late penalty to secure Manchester United's place in the English League Cup Final as they survived a late Derby rally to seal a 4-3 aggregate win at Old Trafford.

Tuesday's 4-2 second leg victory was secured when Ronaldo, a second-half substitute for Ryan Giggs, netted from the spot after Carlos Tevez had been felled by former United goalkeeper Roy Carroll in the closing stages.

But although United ultimately cruised to the victory, the sight of Anderson being stretchered off at the end of the game took the shine off the result for Sir Alex Ferguson's English, European and world champions.

United's uncharacteristically poor showing at Pride Park in the first-leg ensured the Championship strugglers arrived at Old Trafford with a 1-0 advantage courtesy of a Kris Commons wonder strike.

Few gave Nigel Clough's team any hope of holding onto that lead and booking a place at Wembley for the final on March 1.

But United's youngsters

have displayed fallibility in cup competitions in recent seasons, with the likes of Exeter, Southend and Coventry all inflicting embarrassment on Ferguson's team, so Derby had something to cling to.

Clough had urged his players to take the game to United after warning that defensive tactics would merely encourage the home team to attack at will and they almost profited from their ambitious approach as early as the sixth minute when Commons went close to scoring again.

After being released by Rob Hulse, Commons shrugged off the attentions of midfielder Darron Gibson and bore down on goal before sending a 30-year effort inches wide of Ben Foster's right-hand post.

It was a warning for United and one they heeded because, from that point on, they dominated and had the tie won by half-time.

The breakthrough goal came in the 16th minute when Portuguese winger Nani, whose future at United has been placed in doubt following reports of a move for Wigan's Ecuadorian midfielder Antonio Valencia, levelled the aggregate scores with a stunning strike from 25 yards.

United still needed to get their noses in front in the tie,

however, and they were able to do that six minutes later when poor Derby defending allowed John O'Shea to score from 12 yards after he had been teed up by teenage striker Danny Welbeck.

Derby were now faced with a damage limitation exercise, but United continued to pour forward and Ferguson's men looked likely to score at every opportunity.

Carroll denied Welbeck from close range before the inevitable third goal arrived in the 34th minute when Tevez headed in Rafael's cross from six yards to claim his ninth goal of the season.

It was also Tevez's sixth goal in the League Cup this season, which reflects his increased involvement in this much-maligned competition.

The fans might want him to stay beyond the expiry of his loan deal at the end of the campaign, but whether Tevez is content with a diet of League Cup outings and a substitute role when the big games come around is another matter.

Tevez's goal all but secured victory for United although late penalties converted by Derby's Giles Barnes and Ronaldo, plus an injury-time freekick by Barnes ensured a lively finale.

Drogba speaks of Marseille love

SOCCERNET

Out-of-favour Chelsea striker Didier Drogba has spoken of his "love" for former club Olympique Marseille but insists he is not trying to engineer an exit from Stamford Bridge.

The Ivory Coast striker moved to Stamford Bridge in 2004 for £23.8 million after spending just one season in Marseille where he was named France's player of the year.

Drogba has been hampered by injury this season and in his absence Nicolas Anelka has flourished: Drogba has scored just three goals in all competitions compared to Anelka's 17.

Drogba was also singled out for criticism following Chelsea's recent 3-0 capitulation at Manchester United and the 30-year-old has been left out of manager Luiz Felipe Scolari's last two squads, all of which has added to the speculation surrounding the Ivorian's future at the club.

Now Drogba has refused to rule out a return to the French side at some point in the future.

He told French newspaper La Provence: "It clearly isn't the moment for me to talk about an eventual return to OM. I have a lot of respect for Chelsea and while I am with them, I can't say anything."

"The most important thing is knowing my attachment to Marseille is still intact. I have always said it. If something must come about, and I don't know under what conditions, OM are going to have to get in contact with Chelsea."

"But be careful, I am not opening the door to an eventual transfer, I am simply explaining the situation."

Pennant opts for Pompey

AFP, London

Jermaine Pennant has agreed to join Portsmouth on loan from Liverpool until the end of the season after turning down the chance to make a permanent move.

The two clubs had agreed a transfer fee for the winger, currently out of favour at Anfield, but the 26-year-old retains hope that he can rebuild his Liverpool career.

Pompey boss Tony Adams said he had admired Pennant - who saw a potential move to Spanish giants Real Madrid collapse after he asked for too much money - since he was coming through the ranks at Arsenal and believes he will provide plenty of ammunition for his leading forward Peter Crouch, another former Liverpool player.

"I saw him play with Peter Crouch for Liverpool at Fulham last year - and he was constantly getting past their left-back and getting crosses in for Crouchie," Adams said. "That's a good combination that I wanted to put back together."

Portsmouth's executive chairman Peter Storrie meanwhile revealed that a potential move for former Arsenal star Patrick Vieira has been scuppered by an injury to the Inter Milan midfielder.

Silvio the real winner

Football
AFP, Rome

As the world record Kaka transfer saga came to an abrupt end late on Monday with club and player claiming the Brazilian would stay in Italy, there was a palpable feeling that this had all played nicely into Silvio Berlusconi's hands.

The AC Milan president is a media mogul and his country's second-longest serving Prime Minister having held the position on four separate occasions.

He is a controversial figure who has an extensive record of criminal allegations being levied against him, so much so that last year he joked at a G8 summit: "I'm the universal record-holder for the number of trials in the entire history of man - and also of other creatures who live on other planets."

What has always been abundantly clear is his skill and cunning as a politician and he seems to have demonstrated his full repertoire in the Kaka transfer saga.

On Monday night, Berlusconi positioned himself as Milan's hero, the man who saved the club from the evil jaws of mega-rich Manchester City, who were trying to snatch Milan's prized asset.

"Both I and he (Kaka) have intervened," said Berlusconi in an interview with TV station '7 Gold'.

"When I heard him say that he prefers to stay, that he doesn't feel like he has lost the opportunity to earn a higher salary and that he feels privileged to wear the shirt, he values the closeness and the friendships, the heat and affection that all the fans have shown him even in these last two days, I said 'hallelujah' and we hugged."

"Since then Kaka described Berlusconi as an 'incredible' man while Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani was also keen to present his superior as the hero of the hour.

"Once more the fans should thank president Berlusconi for his economic strength," he said. "The whole affair has left a bitter taste in

City's mouth with their executive chairman Garry Cook believing they had been played by Milan.

"If you want my personal opinion they bottled it. He clearly was for sale but we never got to meet with the player, the behaviour of AC Milan got in the way," he told the BBC.

"We met with the football club and they made it quite clear that Kaka was for sale and we made it quite clear that we wanted to bring him to Manchester City Football Club."

With the level of funds reportedly on the table - a 100 million euros fee for Milan and 15 million euros a season for Kaka - Milan were clearly tempted to sell.

The proof of that was the comments coming out of the club. Unlike the past when Berlusconi had claimed he would never sell Kaka, this time he said he could not stand in the player's way if he wanted to leave.

That essentially absolved Milan of responsibility if Kaka did leave, meaning that it would have been the player's choice.

Milan went to great lengths to demonstrate that they could not match City's salary offer while also never actually accepting the bid.

What then emerged was that Kaka never wanted to leave Milan, and certainly not for a team struggling in the bottom half of their league and without Champions League football to look forward to either this season or next.

Kaka, possibly feeling pushed into a departure by his club, certainly considered City's offer, but with the passionate fans response pleading with him to stay it seems that both club and player felt it would be a big PR omen to let him go.

So to Berlusconi, who undoubtedly would have splashed the Kaka cash on some big name signings while trumpeting his role in strengthening the team, instead announced his rejection of the colossal bid, taking the moral high ground and humorously for a multimillionaire, claiming that there were things in life more important than money.

Had Kaka gone, Berlusconi would have won financially, now that he's stayed, the club president's popularity is set to soar instead.

Diego losing his way?

INTERNET, Bremen



The Bundesliga has had some eccentric players from Brazil in the past, but at least Werder Bremen have a model professional in Diego Ribas da Cunha - commonly known as Diego. Until now that is. This season the modest 23-year-old playmaker has been finding himself increasingly in the headlines for reasons which have often had little to do with his undoubted prowess on the field.

Right at the beginning of the season Diego ruffled a few Bremen feathers by insisting on playing for Brazil at the Olympics in Beijing, much against the will of the club who wanted him back for the Bundesliga start.

There then followed some late training appearances and a loss of control on the pitch in December when he grabbed a Karlsruhe player around the neck - an act which earned him a hefty club fine and sees him banned for four matches up to February 21.

Much has also been made in the German tabloid press of an alleged affair with pop singer Sarah Connor, although the player says the two are "just good friends."

Then this week began with headlines of a police car chase, with Diego stopped and breathalysed in Bremen.

Suddenly it seems, the quiet and modest Diego - the Bundesliga players' player of the year in 2007 - has joined the ranks of compatriots such as Ailton, Marcelinho, Alex Alves, Rafinha or Carlos Alberto, all who have been the subject of some rich anecdotes in German football.

Ailton rarely returned to training from Brazil on time when he was at Werder, while Carlos Alberto - the most expensive signing in the club's history - was a massive flop, known only for complaints of insomnia, feelings of weakness and fisticuffs in training.

Marcelinho enjoyed the Berlin nightlife at Hertha, Alex Alves was another eccentric player at the club who reportedly once broke off a medical examination to climb a drainpipe, while Schalke's Rafinha has been in the news for drink-driving and for breach of the peace after a party. Diego has now caused some amusement

among Bremen journalists for blaming his drink-driving incident on a restaurant waiter who "kept filling my glass" and the fact that he didn't know how much he was allowed to drink.

He will at least escape further punishment from his club for the incident on Saturday night in Bremen.

Bremen sports director Klaus Allofs says the incident should not be blown out of proportion.

"Diego is sorry. He knows that he committed an offence and will have to live with the consequences that the test brings with it. I don't know if he will receive a driving ban or a fine," Allofs said.

Diego said he had to take a breath test, but denied reports of a car chase or that he drove through a red light.

"I came to a police control stop where I followed the orders of the authorities. I was a bit shocked that there were three cars with blue lights flashing. But the policemen were very nice to me," he said.

German media reports said Diego was over the legal alcohol limit of 50 milligrams of alcohol per litre of blood and could lose his driving licence for a month.

"I had to blow into the tester. And after the test, I got my driver's licence right back. I did drink some wine but was not drunk," Diego said.

Allofs said: "He made a mistake in a part of his private life from which he will learn."

"We were not pleased about the headlines and we discouraged his behaviour. But that has nothing to do with the debate about discipline within the team."

"There will not be a fine from us. I don't think you can blame a 23-year-old for being out on a Saturday night after midnight if he has no practice on Sunday."

Allofs says the recent negative headlines were also to do with the increased media attention in Bremen, especially since Diego's liaison with Sarah Connor has put him in the paparazzi's focus.

"Nevertheless, our players naturally have a function as a role model," he said.

Spurs sign Palacios, target Materazzi

INTERNET, undated

Tottenham Hotspur on Wednesday agreed a fee to sign midfielder Wilson Palacios from Wigan Athletic. The clubs have agreed a deal thought to be worth 14 million pounds (19.2 million dollars), although it is subject to Tottenham securing a work permit for the Honduras international.

"We are delighted to announce that we have reached agreement for the transfer of Wilson Palacios from Wigan Athletic," a statement on Tottenham's website said.

"Personal terms have been agreed and a medical completed, we now await the Honduran international receiving his work permit before completing his registration."

Tottenham are also reported to be targeting Italian defender Marco Materazzi.

"There is interest in England and I can say that Tottenham in recent days have expressed a real interest in Marco," the player's agent Claudio Vigorelli told Calcio.com.

"We are at a very early stage, they are talking with Inter and presenting something to the player - then it is up to the club and Marco to decide whether to accept or not."

Robinho happy at City

INTERNET, undated

Brazilian forward Robinho insisted on Tuesday that he is happy at Manchester City, despite leaving their Tenerife training camp. There had been suggestions of a bust up with club officials following the breakdown of talks to sign his compatriot Kaka from AC Milan.

But Robinho insisted he had received permission to leave.

"I had made Manchester City aware that I needed to return to Brazil because of a family matter," he told the BBC.

"I will return to the club and hope to sort this out as soon as possible."

"I feel it is important to underline that I did not return to Brazil because of the Kaka deal."

"He is one of my good friends and it would have been great to see him at Manchester City - but it had nothing to do with his decision to stay in Milan."

"I am committed to helping Manchester City become the force the owners assured me they will become."

Meanwhile City executive chairman accused Milan of having "bottled" the deal.

"We had gone through a three or four-stage process in which Milan made it quite clear Kaka was for sale and we made it clear we intended to bring him to Manchester City," he told Radio Five Live.

SOCCERNET



Lukas Podolski has hit out at Bayern Munich coach Jurgen Klinsmann following his decision to return to Cologne at the end of the season.

The Germany international has agreed a reported 10 million euro transfer to his former club after three disappointing years with Bayern.

Podolski failed to make the grade under Klinsmann's predecessors Felix Magath and Ottmar Hitzfeld, but thought things would change after shining for Germany at Euro 2008.

But the 23-year-old has now accused Klinsmann of making his third year with the Bundesliga champions as frustrating as his previous two.

"A new coach arrived and there was the chance to give it another go, but I was told immediately I was only the number three striker," he told Sport Bild magazine.

"(I was told) my development here would

last one or two years before I can get past the two (Luca Toni and Miroslav Klose). That was not particularly motivating." Podolski has been pondering a move away from Bayern since then and Cologne were the only other club he could imagine playing for.

"They have impressed me a lot," he said. "They want to take the club forward and I fit in there because I want to take my career forward too. If it had been anything to do with money, I would have moved abroad. I had enough offers."

Although the move may be seen as a step back in his career, particularly if Cologne fail to avoid relegation this year, Podolski feels the transfer is the right one for him.

"A lot of people were surprised when Ralf Rangnick moved into the regional league with Hoffenheim after his time with Schalke, and now he is in first position (in the Bundesliga)," explained Podolski.

"Of course Cologne has a particular place in my heart, but that was not everything. There were also very convincing sporting reasons behind the move. At the end of the day, everybody has to make up their own mind."

Australian Open SECRETS

INTERNET, undated

James Blake quietly celebrated the inauguration of Barack Obama from the Australian Open, the American proud to have donated to the political cause. "It's a very significant inauguration, a very significant presidency to have the first African American in power," said the former Harvard student known for his views outside of the court. "I really think there's no one better qualified for the job than Barack Obama right now."

But Blake kept his mind on the tennis job, preferring to get his sleep rather than rise at 3 am in Australia to watch the ceremony in Washington.

"It will be on Tivo for me when I get home. With this job, I need to be very singularly focused on the next round."

Blake added that he gave donations to the Obama campaign when he had the chance during the course of a campaign lasting for several years.

"I tried to make it to one of the events (in his base of) Tampa, but I was out of town and couldn't make it back. I helped out with a couple of fund raisers in New York, as well."

HEWITT REFUSES TO BOW

Lleyton Hewitt has vowed to fight on with his career after suffering a heartbreaking early exit at the Australian Open. The 27-year-old is ready to take his game to the American indoor courts next month after losing to Fernando Gonzalez.

With a ranking which will now stand close to 100 for the former number one and double Grand Slam champion, prospects admittedly look grim.

Hewitt said that had he intended to give up the game, he would not have gone through summer hip surgery and five months of tough rehab. "If I was going to retire, then I wouldn't have had the surgery done."

"It wasn't something that was going to affect me in everyday life for the rest of my life. It

was something that, if I want to still play tennis, then it had to be done."

Hewitt is due to play indoors at San Jose and Memphis, then shift onto outdoor hardcourts for Masters 1000 tournaments in Indian Wells and Miami.

He will have to leave America in early March between event to play for Australia in a Davis Cup zonal round against Thailand.

JANKOVIC A 'CRIER'
Australian Open top seed Jelena Jankovic has opened up her sensitive side, revealing that claims she is not a worthy world number one sometimes upset her.

Describing herself as a "crier", Jankovic said success always attracted criticism - in her case, much of the barbs centre on the fact that she has reached the summit of women's tennis without winning a Grand Slam.

"Believe it or not I'm a bit of a crier! I do tend to be quite emotional and cry easily," she said in a column for Melbourne's Age newspaper.

"It's not something that I particularly like about myself, but that is how I am as a person." The 23-year-old Serb said she remained determined to keep a smile on her face because she held the still held the coveted number one spot regardless of what the critics said.

"I'm number one in the world and everyone wants to be in my shoes, so I don't have anything to worry about," she said.

"I'm just a girl who enjoys tennis. I go on the court with a smile on my face and that's what matters."

Jankovic expanded on what the top ranking meant to her after grinding out a 6-4, 7-5 win over Belgian Kirsten Flipkens in the second round on Wednesday.

"I love being here and being in the role of the number one player of the world," she said. "I also feel I have nothing to lose. Everybody wants to achieve the number one ranking and I have done that."

"It will always be in my biography and record and nobody can take it away from me."

World number two and nine-time Grand Slam champion Serena Williams fired a verbal broadside at Jankovic before the Australian Open, saying she considered herself the best player in the world.



Serbia star Novak Djokovic plays a forehand against Jeremy Chardy of France during their Australian Open match in Melbourne on Wednesday. Djokovic won 7-5, 6-1, 6-3.