

MU demolish West Brom

AFP, London



Manchester United set a new Premier League record with an 11th consecutive clean sheet and maintained their grip on top place in the table with a 5-0 demolition of bottom side West Brom on Tuesday.

The stroll at The Hawthorns left United three points clear of Liverpool, who play at Wigan on Wednesday evening, and Aston Villa, who moved up to joint second place with a hard-fought 1-0 win at Portsmouth.

It was also a good night for Tottenham, 3-1 winners over fellow strugglers Stoke, and Sunderland, who beat Fulham 1-0.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson was delighted with what he described as a "ruthless" display that enabled his side to significantly improve their goal difference, which he feels could prove decisive in what is a very tight title battle.

"The scoreline was very important to us," the Scot said after watching his side improve their goal difference to +29, the same mark as Chelsea and seven better than Liverpool.

"Goal difference could play a part and over the years we have always had an advantage over our opponents, so it was a satisfying result in that respect."

United's kick-off was delayed by half

an hour because of traffic congestion but the champions wasted no time in seizing control of the match.

With 21 minutes gone, Dimitar Berbatov played a one-two with Michael Carrick before slotting the ball past Scott Carson for his 11th goal of the season.

The Baggies then had defender Paul Robinson sent off for what was -- perhaps harshly -- adjudged to be a dangerous challenge on Park Ji-Sung before Carlos Tevez doubled United's lead just before half-time, firing in from close range after Carson dropped a Ryan Giggs freekick.

A Giggs corner enabled Nemanja Vidic to head in United's third on the hour mark and a Cristiano Ronaldo double rounded off a performance that enabled United to eclipse Chelsea's Premier League clean sheet record.

Emile Heskey marked his debut for Aston Villa with the only goal of the game at Portsmouth as Martin O'Neill's men again displayed their ability to grind out results in their pursuit of a top-four finish and a place in next season's Champions League.

Heskey latched on to Gabriel Agbonlahor's flick-on from goalkeeper Brad Friedel's clearance and fired past David James from just outside the area to start paying back the 3.5 million pounds it cost Villa to sign him from Wigan.

"It is always hard to fit into a new team but I enjoyed it out there," Heskey said. "I

had good times with Martin at Leicester and I hope to have more here."

Tottenham pulled three points clear of the relegation zone with a convincing 3-1 win over fellow strugglers Stoke at White Hart Lane.

The game was over as a contest after only 25 minutes as goals from Aaron Lennon, Jermain Defoe and Michael Dawson put Spurs in control.

James Beattie pulled one back for Stoke 12 minutes after the interval but there was no way back for the Premier League newcomers, who remain second from bottom.

Tottenham's win was orchestrated by Luka Modric and manager Harry Redknapp paid tribute to the Croatian playmaker.

"He showed against a strong, physical team that he is a great footballer and has a massive heart. He never shirks receiving the ball, he's a top, top player."

Trinidad and Tobago star Kenwyne Jones celebrated signing a new long-term contract with Sunderland by scoring his side's winner against Fulham, who are rapidly sliding towards trouble after a positive start to this season.

The decisive strike from Jones came ten minutes after half-time with the striker firing home the loose ball after Fulham goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer had parried a shot from Djibril Cisse.

Robinho in hot water

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City and Brazil striker Robinho has been arrested over allegations of a serious sexual assault in a British nightclub, police and his spokesman said Wednesday.

The spokesman for 25-year-old Robinho, Britain's most expensive player, said he had been interviewed by police on Tuesday but "strenuously denied" the allegations.

"We can confirm that Robinho met the police today, as pre-arranged and as part of a criminal investigation," spokesman Chris Nathaniel said in a statement on Robinho's official website.

"He strenuously denies any allegation of wrongdoing or criminality and is happy to cooperate with the police if further required."

West Yorkshire police in northern England confirmed a

man was arrested on Tuesday and was questioned in connection with a serious sexual assault in a Leeds nightclub on January 14.

A spokesman said the man had been released on bail pending further inquiries.

Manchester City declined to comment on the arrest.

The Sun newspaper reported a teenage student had alleged she was raped by Robinho at The Space nightclub in Leeds.

The report said Robinho, who is married and has a son, had gone to the nightclub for a night out with his teammates.

Earlier this month Robinho walked out of the team's warm weather training camp in Tenerife and headed for Brazil, citing an "important family matter", thought to be his birthday.

He returned to Manchester on Sunday and held a meeting with the club's manager Mark Hughes the following day, who said Robinho would be fined for leaving the training camp

without permission.

Robinho, whose full name is Robson de Souza, joined Manchester City from Spanish giants Real Madrid in September for 32.5 million pounds (34.8 million euros, 46.2 million dollars).

He arrived at the club following its takeover by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi.

Chelsea had been the frontrunners to sign Robinho before City's billionaire owners topped the London club's bid on the transfer deadline day last summer.

Reports say Robinho is unsettled at Manchester City and was disappointed by the failure of an audacious attempt by the club's owners to sign his Brazil teammate Kaka from AC Milan.

The club, who were facing Newcastle on Wednesday, are just four points clear of the relegation zone in the English Premier League.

Maradona picks Messi

AFP, Buenos Aires

Barcelona's star striker Lionel Messi was picked by Argentina coach Diego Maradona for their February 11 friendly against France in Marseille, the Argentine football federation said on Tuesday.

The squad announced only concerned Europe-based players and should at some stage be completed with those playing in Argentina such as Juan Roman Riquelme of Boca Juniors and Juan Sebastian Veron of Estudiantes de La Plata.

Maradona also gave a recall to Inter Milan defender Walter Samuel who has not played for his country for three years.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Juan Pablo Carrizo (Lazio/ITA), Sergio Romero (AZ Alkmaar/NED)

Defenders: Javier Zanetti (Inter Milan/ITA), Martin Demichelis (Bayern Munich/GER), Gabriel Heinze (Real Madrid/ESP), Daniel Diaz (Getafe/ESP), Nicolas Burdisso (Inter Milan/ITA), Walter Samuel (Inter Milan/ITA)

Midfielders: Javier Mascherano (Liverpool/ENG), Fernando Gago (Real Madrid/ESP), Maximiliano Rodriguez (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Jonas Gutierrez (Newcastle/ENG), Luis Gonzalez (Porto/POR)

Strikers: Lionel Messi (Barcelona/ESP), Sergio Agüero (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Carlos Tevez (Manchester United/ENG), Ezequiel Lavezzi (Napoli/ITA), Lisandro Lopez (Porto/POR), German Denis (Napoli/ITA), Angel Di Maria (Benfica/POR)

Five-star Bayern

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich returned from their winter holidays looking as though they meant business judged by the way Jurgen Klinsmann's men swept aside VfB Stuttgart 5-1 on Tuesday.

This last 16 German Cup tie was the reigning champions' first official game of 2009 after a one-and-a-half month lay off, a training camp in the sunshine of Dubai, and five friendly wins.

They were quickly into their stride though with Bastian Schweinsteiger starting the rout in the 14th minute.

Franck Ribery doubled up two minutes later and the France international then set up Luca Toni for Bayern's third just before the break.

Schweinsteiger got the second leg of his double from the penalty spot in the 53rd minute with Brazilian Ze Roberto completing a fine night for the visitors before the hour mark.

This was Stuttgart's first loss since Markus Babel took over as coach in November.

Bayern's league campaign resumes on Friday with a trip to Hamburg who earlier Tuesday won their Cup tie against 1860 Munich 3-1, while Schalke 04 saw off minnows Paderborn 4-1.

Bundesliga winter champions Hoffenheim were eliminated in the previous round by Freiburg, who were defeated 3-1 by fellow second-division outfit Mainz.

Wednesday's Cup programme features a showdown between top-flight sides Borussia Dortmund and Werder Bremen.

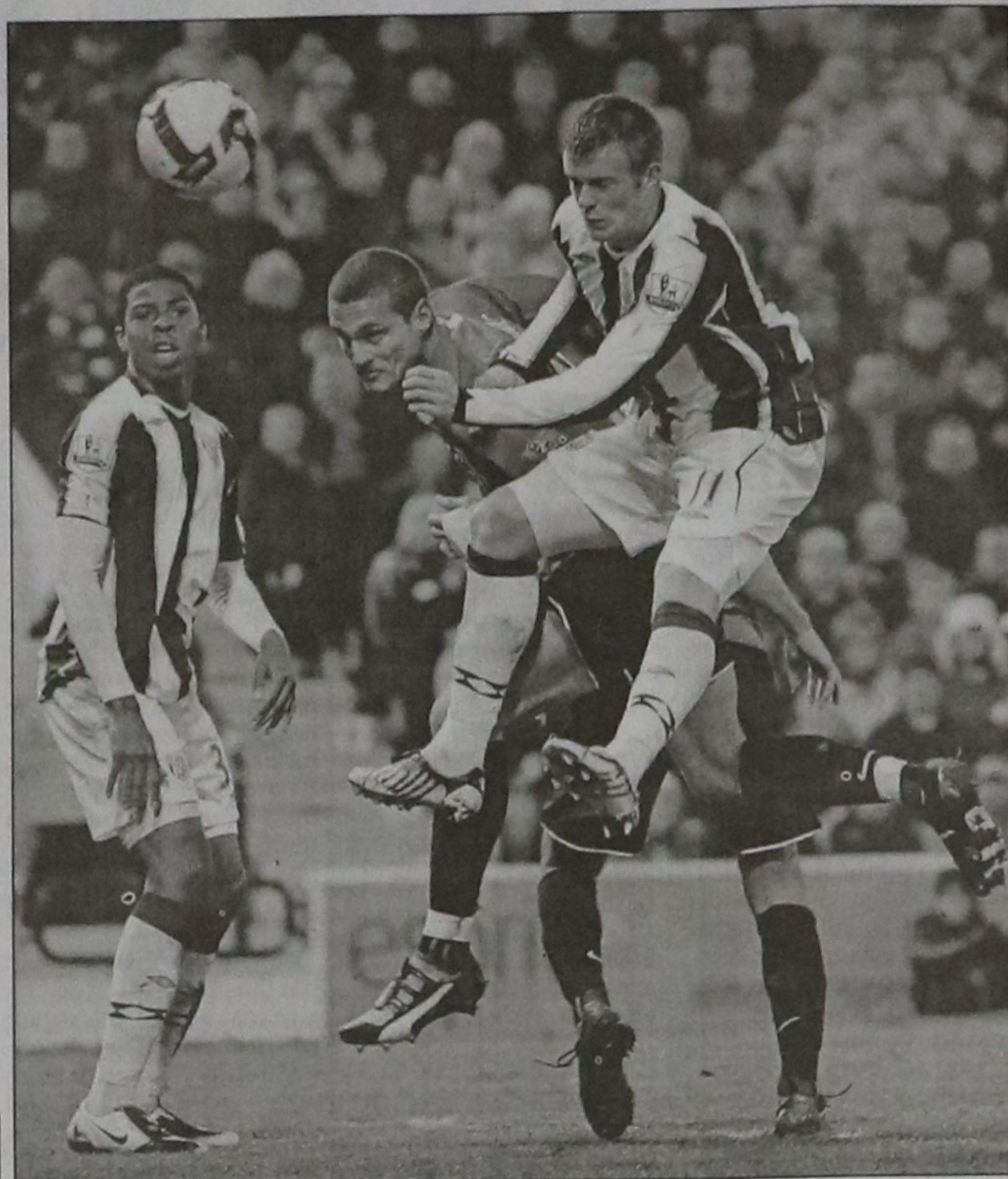


PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic (C) heads in the third goal against West Bromwich Albion during their Premier League clash at the Hawthorns on Tuesday.

Milan to buy Becks

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan moved a step closer to a permanent purchase of loan-signing David Beckham after saying they would buy him outright if discussions with his advisors bore fruit, Sky Italia reported on Tuesday.

The 33-year-old former England captain, who signed a five-year contract with LA Galaxy in 2007, is on loan in Milan until early March but club chief executive Adriano Galliani said they were willing to buy him should they get the permission to do so.

Beckham scored his first goal for Carlo Ancelotti's team in a 4-1 victory at Bologna on

Sunday.

"If Beckham comes to an agreement with Galaxy, we are ready to pay a figure. In the coming days we will meet his advisors," Galliani told Sky Italia.

"If Los Angeles Galaxy decide not to sell him, they won't sell him."

Ancelotti was more cautious however and emphasised it would firstly be down to the player to make absolutely sure about what he wanted to do in the next stage of his career.

"Milan is a serious club, a very serious club," Ancelotti said.

"There is no new agreement with David. The current agreement is the contract which allows him to stay with

Milan until March 9.

"Then the decision is up to him and neither I nor the club want to get involved. I don't want to force anything regarding him."

"But I can only say that, despite the short time he has been available he has already understood what it means to be at Milan and what we all think of him."

"Obviously if he stays, we would all be delighted, but he has a contract and it will be he and only he who decides what he wants to do."

"Milan is doing nothing, other than taking advantage of the ability of a great sportsman. A player like Beckham can be useful to any team and that also means the England national team."

Federer questions time-out rules

AFP, Melbourne

Switzerland's Roger Federer has questioned the rules on medical time-outs and warned the system was probably being "abused" by players keen to gain an unfair advantage.

Federer, who is president of the ATP Player Council, said he rarely calls for the trainer and added there was an argument for scrapping the system altogether.

"Probably on the outside courts it's still being abused at times," he said.

"I'm almost in favour to just say, you know what, if you're not fit enough, just get out of here," he added.

"But if something really bad happens, it is just unfortunate, I guess. It's a tough call. I don't know. I guess we'll speak

about it and see what happens."

Under ITF rules, men's players are allowed up to two three-minute medical time-outs if a trainer has identified a treatable problem, including heat illness or cramp.

But players are sometimes accused of using time-outs as an opportunity to rest or break up their opponents' momentum.

"I really felt when I was coming up the young players abused it, especially against a player like me when I was a little bit insecure about finishing matches," Federer said.

"You lose a set easy, and then you go to the toilet and call the trainer and strap your ankle. Next thing you know, you're 20 minutes extra out on the court. Things go through your mind."

"Then once I got out on centre court, I guess I got the respect I deserved. People stop doing it against you."

Australian fans booed Fernando Gonzalez after his win against Lleyton Hewitt at the Australian Open last week, believing the Chilean had used a time-out to break his opponent's flow. Gonzalez denied any wrongdoing, saying he had cramp.

America's Andy Roddick was also upset during his quarterfinal with Novak Djokovic here when the defending champion had several areas treated during the same time-out. The Serbian third seed later pulled out blaming cramp.

"I looked over and I was confused, because I thought it was one injury per time-out, and I saw a calf, a neck, and an arm. But I guess cramping is one condition," Roddick said.

"There's obviously some wiggle room, a little bit of grey area there. Hopefully we'll be able to do something about it."

PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni (C) scores to make it 3-0 against Stuttgart during their German Cup encounter at the Gottlieb-Daimler Stadium in Stuttgart on Tuesday.

Real target Valencia

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have resumed talks with Wigan to sign the English Premier League side's Ecuadorian winger Antonio Valencia, local media reported here Wednesday.

According to Spanish sports daily AS negotiations are taking place this week and a deal, either permanent transfer or loan, is in sight before the transfer window closes.

Wigan had reportedly fixed a 17.5 million euro price tag on the former Villarreal star's head when Real first made contact with them in late December.

The 23-year-old Valencia's advantage to Real is in his eligibility to play Champions League football in contrast to the Spanish giant's new signings, Lassana Diarra and Klaas-Jan Huntelaar.

French midfielder Diarra has already played for Portsmouth while Dutch striker Huntelaar has appeared for Ajax this season in the UEFA Cup.

Real agreed with UEFA on Tuesday to drop their appeal to have both Diarra and Huntelaar made eligible for the Champions League.

They must now choose which of the two newcomers they wish to register for the first knockout stage of the Champions League, on February 25 and March 10, against Liverpool.

Real - who are second in the title race, 12 points adrift of Barcelona - have sought to reinforce their squad after several key players such as Ruud van Nistelrooy and Malian midfielder Mahamadou Diarra suffered season ending injuries.

Balotelli staying at Inter

SOCCERNET

Inter Milan are adamant teenage striker Mario Balotelli will not leave the club in this month's transfer window.

The 18-year-old is reportedly a target of West Ham, but Inter assistant coach Giuseppe Baresi told the club's website the player is going nowhere.

"He is an Inter player and will remain so," Baresi said.

Balotelli, an Italy Under-21 international, has also been linked with a loan move in order to gain more first-team experience.

He has made 14 appearances for the Serie A leaders this season.

No Spurs bid for Fred

SOCCERNET

Tottenham Hotspur's bid to sign Fred appears to have hit the skids after the Lyon striker failed to turn up for a meeting at White Hart Lane and the French club's president Jean-Michel Aulas revealed he had yet to receive a bid from Spurs.

Aulas claims that Palmeiras are the only team to have made an offer for his wantaway striker and that is why the Brazilian was a no show for a scheduled meeting with Tottenham, prior to the London club's 3-1 win over Stoke City on Tuesday night.

It leaves Brazilian club Palmeiras as the only party to have made a concrete bid for Fred and Aulas believes there is now only a one-in-two chance the striker will move on before the winter transfer window shuts.

"All I know is I haven't received a single offer concerning him, in any case from a European club," said Aulas. "The only one has come from Palmeiras of Brazil, but Fred doesn't want to go there."

"Regarding Tottenham, we haven't talked. The last news is that there is a disagreement between Fred and the English club."

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp said: "I don't know what happened, the plan was for me to meet him and have a chat with him. He's out of contract in the summer so I think they are asking for a small fee."

Lyon are believed to be holding out for up to \$5million for Fred, who is in his fourth season with Les Gones. Aulas has given Fred a deadline of Saturday to find a club.

"Fred is in the process of tarnishing his image, notably with the big clubs," he added.

"He must go to a European club by Saturday evening and there will be a transfer fee. It will not be too high, but there will be one. And he knows what is expected of him if he has to stay."

Verdasco downs Tsonga

AFP, Melbourne

australian open

The spirit of four-time Australian Open champion Andre Agassi was alive and well on Wednesday as Fernando Verdasco downed Jo-Wilfried Tsonga to make his first Grand Slam semifinal.

The 25-year-old Spaniard grew up idolising Agassi, and while he said he hadn't been able to emulate the brash American's style, he had sought his advice during a recent training camp in Las Vegas.

"(I talked to him) about a lot of things," the 14th seed said after his 7-6 (7/2), 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 win under the closed roof of the Rod Laver Arena as temperatures soared outside.

"He was just giving me advice about what he thinks about all this, about what tournaments I need to play and which weeks I need to practice and be ready for the big tournaments."

"Also about tactics, and about my game, how he thinks that I should play more and take more advantage of my game."

Verdasco has been in a rich vein of form since he arrived in

Australia, making the final in Brisbane and now reaching his first ever Grand Slam semi.

He downed fourth seed Andy Murray in the previous round and on Wednesday absorbed the shot making and athleticism of French fifth seed Tsonga to record a memorable victory.

He also proved far steadier at the crucial moments, winning four out of four break points as opposed to two of 13 from his opponent, which a shell-shocked Tsonga said had been the difference.

"Today everything was wrong and all the time when I got the possibility to make a break, I missed or Fernando played a good point," Tsonga said.

Verdasco had his best year on the ATP tour in 2008, finishing in the world top 20 for the first time and winning his second career title.

He also won the crucial rubber that gave Spain the Davis Cup when he came from two sets down to beat Jose Acasuso in Argentina.

Verdasco is now training with Agassi's former mentor Gil Reyes in Las Vegas as part of a program for adidas-sponsored players.

"Some players, maybe they don't want to do it," Verdasco said.

"But me, because I don't have a coach I decided to go there."

"Also because Agassi was my idol when I was young. I decided that it was a good experience, that I will learn so much. So I took that decision."

"They've helped me so much, they treat me unbelievably there."

Verdasco also showed the benefits of recent conditioning training, becoming stronger as the match progressed while Tsonga appeared to fade.

It became increasingly noticeable towards the end of the third set when Verdasco had been running Tsonga all over the court.

"You know, I was feeling much better in the third and the fourth than the first and second," he said.

The confident Spaniard said there was no reason he couldn't go on and win the title.

"What I'm thinking right now is that I'm playing good, I'm feeling good," he said. "I just think that I can beat anyone."

"But, you know, the same way that I can win, I can lose. I'm playing with the best players in the world. Of course, they are always tough matches."