

# 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.

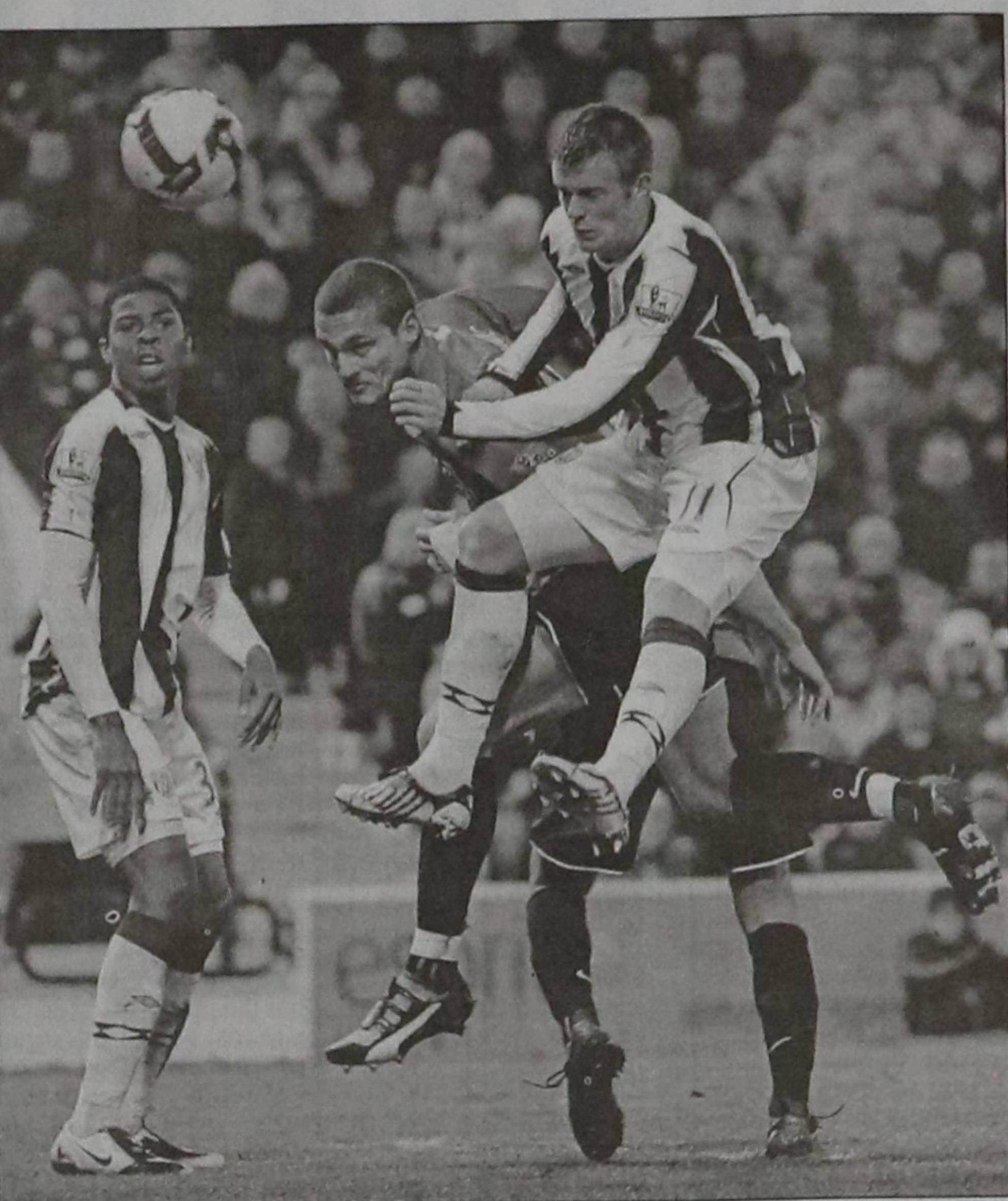
James Beattie pulled one back for Stoke 12 minutes after the interval but there was no way back for the Premier League newcomers, who remain second from bottom.

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.



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 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 \$5 million 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."

# 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 at 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 teenaged 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.

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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 Aguero (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).

## 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 play a figure. In the coming days we will meet his advisors," Galliani told Sky Italia.

"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."



Fernando Verdasco of Spain makes a backhand return against Jo-Wilfried Tsonga of France during their Australian Open quarterfinals in Melbourne on Wednesday.

# Verdasco downs Tsonga

AFP, Melbourne

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.

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

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

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."



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.