

Everton kill off WBA

AFP, Liverpool



Australia midfielder Tim Cahill kept Everton firmly on course for a top six finish in the Premier League as his header set up a 2-0 win over West Bromwich Albion on Saturday.

Cahill's eighth goal of the season came late in the first half at Goodison Park and Louis Saha sealed the points with a sublime second after the break.

The win moved David Moyes' side nine points clear of seventh placed Wigan, who were due to face Chelsea later on Saturday, and left Albion firmly rooted to the bottom of the table.

Tony Mowbray's team are now without a win in their last eight games and look destined for a quick return to the Championship.

With Mikel Arteta, Victor Anichebe and Jack Rodwell all injured, Moyes was happy to welcome back Cahill from suspension and Steven Pienaar and Marouane Fellaini from injury.

Everton had the first opportunity when Leighton Baines' long ball was met by Cahill, who beat Scott Carson to the ball, but also cleared the bar.

Albion's Marc-Antoine Fortune had two shots well held by Everton keeper Tim Howard before Robert Koren flashed a powerful strike wide of a post for the visitors.

Cahill had the ball in the net with a volley in the 24th minute but referee Steve Bennett correctly penalised the midfielder for climbing

on Paul Robinson.

Everton's Tony Hibbert, just back from injury, limped off with a thigh problem moments later.

Albion midfielder James Morrison set up Fortune for another opportunity with a neat pass but the striker's effort was blocked by Howard.

Moyes' side took full advantage in the 36th minute. Ryan Donk gave away a needless freekick with a foul from behind on Pienaar.

Baines curled a free-kick into the area and Albion's defence went missing, allowing Cahill yards of space to head past Carson.

Albion, who last won a league game at Goodison Park in 1979, made a positive start to the second half despite that setback.

Koren ran from his own half to fire just wide of the post from the edge of the box, then Luke Moore, on as a substitute, had a shot deflected wide.

From the corner Albion thought they had scored. Donk headed on and Moore's flick was somehow hooked off the line and into Howard's arms by Phil Jagielka.

Moyes' response was to take off Fellaini and send on Saha.

The move paid instant dividends. In the 70th minute Pienaar nudged a pass to Saha, who turned and rifled a perfectly placed long-range drive past Carson.

Moore hit the bar in the closing minutes but Albion were soon trudging off after their 11th away league defeat this season.



Everton midfielder Tim Cahill (2nd from L) scores the opening goal against West Bromwich Albion during their Premier League encounter at Goodison Park on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Harry plots an upset

Football

AFP, London

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp is relishing the prospect of wrecking Manchester United's bid to land an unprecedented five trophies in one season in Sunday's League Cup final.

United have already won the FIFA Club World Cup and have moved well clear at the top of the Premier League after a dazzling run of form since Christmas.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side are also well placed to make progress to the latter stages of the FA Cup and UEFA Champions League, leaving them tantalisingly poised to become the first team in English league history to complete a clean sweep of trophies at home and abroad.

Such a formidable record would deter most managers but Redknapp is thrilled that his Spurs side must overcome

a team which, by common consent, is the strongest Ferguson has yet assembled at Old Trafford if they wish to defend the League Cup successfully at Wembley.

United had to come from behind in their two-legged semifinal against Derby County, but Redknapp saw little to gain in being potentially pitted against Championship opponents in a shoot-out final.

"You have to look forward to playing Manchester United," Redknapp said. "When people asked when Derby won the first leg of their semifinal if it would be great if they could pull it off, I said no way."

"No disrespect but I really wanted to play United in the final. It's a way for you to test yourself against the best. They are the best team in Europe, and they were tremendous against Inter Milan in the Champions League on Tuesday."

"We've had some good games against the big teams

this season. At home with United we drew, with a good performance, so we've got players who can play against anyone."

"Hopefully, playing on a big stage on Sunday will bring best out of them and we'll get the bit of luck that you always need against the best teams."

Tottenham may be desperate to retain the trophy they claimed in such style last season, when they defeated Chelsea 2-1, but Redknapp has already warned his side that a repeat of their post-Wembley form last season, which saw them win just three matches under the stewardship of Juande Ramos, will not be tolerated.

Spurs can ill afford such a sequence this season as they struggle to keep clear of the relegation battle, but Redknapp believes the memories of last year will be enough to ensure a strong finish, regardless of the result against United.

"Our record after the last

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C'Ron should join Real: Figo

AFP, Madrid

Manchester United's star striker Cristiano Ronaldo should join Spanish giants Real Madrid, fellow Portuguese player Luis Figo said Saturday.

"Real Madrid is the most important club in the world, the best club in the world. I think Ronaldo has already wrapped up a stage at United," the Inter Milan midfielder told Spanish sports daily Marca.

"He has won everything he can with the English club, which is another great club, but he should have other goals now, other ambitions, and Real Madrid would allow him to achieve more importance, more relevancy," he added.

"That is what I have told him. I don't know what he thinks now," the 36-year-old former Real player added.

Real tracked Ronaldo all of last summer following his Champions League and English Premiership triumphs and 42 goals across the campaign before United boss Sir Alex Ferguson stepped in and emphatically vetoed his departure.

But Spanish media continue to insist that the 2008 Ballon d'Or and FIFA World Footballer of the Year will join Real at the end of the season. Ronaldo added to the speculation in January when he told Spanish television he was learning Spanish.

The 24-year-old playmaker is under contract with United until 2012.

Figo joined Real in 2000 after five seasons with Barcelona, in a controversial move which intensified the great rivalry between the two clubs.

Resino under fire from fans

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid's new coach Abel Resino has dug his heels in against club fans who were upset at his decision to substitute Argentine striker Sergio "Kun" Aguero, who has been dubbed the 'new Maradona'.

Resino subbed the 20-year-old fans' favourite early in the second half of their 2-2 draw Tuesday against Porto in the first leg of their last-16 Champions League tie, drawing whistles of protest from the home fans.

But asked if he would make the substitution again, Resino told El Mundo: "Yes, why not? If I felt it was the right move, for sure. No one is untouchable here."

He added: "Kun is another player, who is important for us when he is well, but another player. That is, he plays or does not play."

"The public is sovereign and can decide whatever it wants but I can't explain every decision to the whole world. I don't have time."

Aguero has not finished a game since Resino replaced Javier Aguirre as Atletico coach at the beginning of February, fuelling speculation the player may be on his way out of the Spanish club.

English Premiership sides Chelsea and Manchester City have in the past been linked to a move for the ace with Italian side Inter Milan also reportedly interested in signing the ace.

Rafa waits on new deal

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez insists victory in his power struggle with Anfield chief executive Rick Parry won't persuade him to make a quick decision over his future at Anfield.

Benitez has rejected five offers of a new contract from the Premier League club's owners George Gillett and Tom Hicks because he wants complete control of transfer policy and the youth academy.

Liverpool's announcement on Friday that Parry will leave at the end of the season was expected to lead to Benitez signing a new deal immediately.

But when the Spaniard, who fell out with Parry over the chief executive's failure to close several transfer deals, was asked on Friday if the change would speed up talks, he said: "Not really. We had the last press conference and I was talking about contact between owners and my advisers and still they have to talk."

"I am just thinking about football operations so I will not talk about this because it is a decision between them and I will still do the same."

"I want to concentrate on football, on games, on players that part of football business."

"I think it's a decision between the owners and Rick Parry."

"Rick will stay here until the end of season so we'll work together for the rest of the season and after this we will wish him all the best."

"It's a decision between them and normally I like to just concentrate on football. Football operations is my responsibility and that's it."

"I don't think so we know everyone wants the best for the club. We'll try to work together, try to win games and to be successful."

Benitez believes the feelgood factor from victory over Real Madrid has given Liverpool the belief that anything is possible, including overhauling United.

"The players have not given up the fight, they still really believe it is possible," he said.

"The confidence, the atmosphere, the mood among the players is very positive after the win in Madrid. Hopefully that will have a good impact on the club."

"We have two important games now to play in the league before the second leg against Real Madrid and our aim is to win both to cut the gap at the top. Six points in four days is possible."

Benitez acknowledges that Liverpool are very much reliant on United to slip up, but he hopes a winning run from his side will put pressure on the leaders going into their clash at Old Trafford next month.

"It is not a good position to be seven points behind, so we have to win to get closer. You never know then what could happen, we could then go to Old Trafford next month and win," he said.

"When I arrived here in Liverpool all I was hearing was that we wanted to be title contenders."

"This season we have got closer. We have to be ready to pounce if they do slip up, we must be close enough to take advantage."

'Villa won't wilt'

INTERNET, undated

Striker Gabriel Agbonlahor has insisted fatigue will not be a problem for the Aston Villa players as they try to hold onto a Champions League spot during the final third of the season.

Villa manager Martin O'Neill sacrificed hopes of glory in the UEFA Cup by sending a shadow squad to CSKA Moscow in midweek minus eight first teamers, including Agbonlahor.

O'Neill is conscious of the possibility of one of the smallest squads in the Barclays Premier League being affected by burn-out particularly as they launched their season in early July via the Intertoto Cup.

But Agbonlahor is confident Villa will be fresh enough to cope during the final 12 games ahead of Sunday's home clash with Stoke and Wednesday's visit to Manchester City.

Agbonlahor said: "We have had our time off to recover so the squad we have got should be enough to see us through the rest of the season."

"You need time to recover, the manager gives us that, and it will help us to see things through to the end."

"You also get used to playing lots of games. For the last couple of seasons, most of the team have got used to it. It is not really a problem."

"I don't see tiredness being a problem and we are all aware what is at stake. Qualifying for the Champions League would be superb."

Agbonlahor added: "The next few weeks are really big but there is a mood of optimism amongst the players. We are going into every game feeling confident and looking for a positive result."

"There is great strength and determination in this team. We have scored quite a few late

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Van Bommel to end at PSV

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich's Dutch international skipper Mark van Bommel said on Friday he intends to end his career with PSV Eindhoven in his homeland but told German media he had not fixed a date to return.

"That's for definite. I talked to the people over there when I went to Barcelona in 2005," van Bommel told Munich's Abendzeitung.

"There is an offer on the table for this summer. I have to think about whether to accept it or wait two or three years."

Earlier this month van Bommel said he was open about his future pending Bayern's decision ultimately to offer him only a one-year extension to his current contract, which expires this summer.

The 31-year-old said he was disappointed with the deal, although Bayern stressed it could be extended.

Van Bommel made his name with PSV before moving to Munich after his short Barcelona stint, which nonetheless included a 2006 Champions League win.

Djokovic battles thru'

Tennis

AFP, Dubai

Top-seeded Novak Djokovic survived a scare and an exhausting battle of just under three hours in intense heat before reaching the final of the Dubai Open on Friday.

The former Australian Open champion from Serbia survived 3-6, 7-5, 7-5 against Gilles Simon, the world number eight from France, but only after going a break of serve down in the final set.

Neither man played at his best in on-court temperatures of more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, with Djokovic making uncharacteristic errors in the first half of the match and Simon becoming rather passive in the later stages.

Eventually Djokovic came through because his experience in tight situations was greater than his opponent's, and because Simon was not able to push through to make a double break of serve in the final set.

Asked how he got through it, the favourite said: "It's hard

to explain. Physically and mentally I had to be all the time focused, and just believe that I can win. Fighting was the key today."

"I was being too aggressive and making a lot of unforced errors and I decided to be more patient."

Djokovic's difficulties began in the sixth game when he opened up the court with a nicely faded forehand drive, only to pull the ball wide with the attempted winner, losing his service game to go 2-4 down.

Simon consolidated the break and closed out the set, and looked likely to pinch the second set too, after surviving breakpoints against him at 2-3.

But he had Djokovic at love-30 at both 3-3 and 4-4, and as the rallies grew longer and both players more tired, his tension increased. Serving to save the set at 5-6 he was lured into driving errors which caused the match to go to a decider.

Simon broke at once and led 2-0 and 3-1 but Djokovic, without ever playing really well, always looked capable of fighting back, which he did by

regaining parity at 3-3.

The conclusion again happened when Simon was serving to save it at 5-6. The third seed crucially failed to put the ball away at the net at 30-30 and on match point at 30-40 allowed Djokovic to make the first decent strike, which set up a chance to put a smash triumphantly away.

Djokovic will need all his powers of recovery because in the final he will play an opponent, David Ferrer, who should be far fresher.

The fourth-seeded Spaniard overwhelmed the other Frenchman, Richard Gasquet, 6-2, 6-2 in the other semifinal in the cool of the evening, in only 75 minutes.

"It was a nightmare," said Gasquet, who had plenty of break points without converting any and whose challenge evaporated from early in the second set.

"I was very focused," said Ferrer, relieved to have won after losing two previous semifinals this year from match point up. "Playing Djokovic will be difficult of course but I shall fight a lot."



PHOTO: AFP

Serbia star Novak Djokovic celebrates his semifinal victory over Gilles Simon of France in the Dubai Open on Friday.