

Rovers' late rally

AFP, Blackburn



Benni McCarthy made his point to Sam Allardyce as the South African's late goal put Blackburn on course for a crucial 2-1 win against Tottenham on Saturday.

McCarthy has been reduced to a bit-part role recently after Allardyce accused the striker of being over-weight, but the former Porto star was back in Blackburn's starting line-up at Ewood Park and showed his manager what he can bring to the team.

Rovers fell behind to Robbie Keane's controversial penalty in the first half.

But referee Peter Walton gave Blackburn a helping hand when he harshly sent off Wilson Palacios for two bookings in quick succession with 10 minutes to play.

Tottenham couldn't hold on as McCarthy pounced from close-range two minutes later and then Andre Ooijer punished a mistake from Brazilian goalkeeper Heurelho Gomes to score the winner in the 89th minute.

Allardyce's side are now five points clear of the relegation zone ahead of the rest of Saturday's fixtures.

It was Tottenham who had made the more positive start and Aaron Lennon tried to release Keane only for goalkeeper Paul Robinson to make the interception.

Blackburn responded with an El-Hadji Diouf header from Morten Gamst Pedersen's cross but the Senegal star failed to hit the target.

Robinson then did well to parry a shot from Darren Bent to safety in the 18th minute after a fine through ball from Palacios.

Blackburn were forced to make a change in the 26th minute after Pedersen took a knock

and was replaced by David Dunn.

Tottenham were steadily pushing Rovers deeper into their own half and took the lead in controversial circumstances after half an hour.

Lennon's cross from the right struck French defender Gael Givet on the arm and referee Peter Walton awarded a penalty.

Keane ignored Ryan Nelsen's complaint that the ball wasn't on the spot as he prepared to take the penalty and calmly slotted past Robinson.

With Rovers struggling to make any headway, Allardyce made a surprise change at half-time. He took off striker Jason Roberts, pushed central defender Christopher Samba into attack and brought on Ooijer to cover at the back.

It was a bold move from Allardyce and Samba quickly made a nuisance of himself, winning a header in the penalty area that fell to Diouf, who sent his effort over the bar.

Lashing the ball long to Samba gave Blackburn an outlet they lacked in the first half but it still took Palacios's dismissal to give them a lifeline.

The former Wigan midfielder had already been booked for a foul on David Dunn a minute earlier when he challenged the same player. Dunn made the most of minimal contact and Walton decided the tackle was worthy of a second booking.

Blackburn threw players forward in search of an equaliser and got in the 82nd minute when McCarthy turned in Samba's flick for his 11th goal of the season.

That set the stage for a grandstand finish. In the 89th minute, Stephen Warnock sent over a corner and, when Bent missed his header at the near-post, Gomes could only help the ball onto Ooijer, who tapped in to complete the great escape.



Tottenham Hotspur striker Robbie Keane (2nd from L) scores the opening goal from a penalty against Blackburn Rovers during their Premier League encounter at Ewood Park on Saturday.

Some relief for Valencia

AFP, Madrid

Spanish first division side Valencia has received a loan of 50 million euros and plans a capital increase to help it over a financial crisis threatening the club.

Valencia's chief executive Javier Gomez made the announcement to players on Friday.

The two-time Champions League finalists suspended payments to players in February and stopped work on a new stadium amid a total debt which Spanish news reports have put at around 450 million euros (600 million dollars).

"It's positive and major news for everyone," striker David Villa, the top scorer at Euro 2008 which was won by Spain, said of the loan.

"We only have 10 matches, and what we can do to help the club economically is to qualify for the Champions League," he said.

The loan will give some breathing space to the club, whose financial problems have been exacerbated by a drop in form in which they have just one win from their last seven matches.

Valencia, based in Spain's third-largest city, have been eliminated from this season's UEFA Cup and the Spanish Cup and are in sixth place in the Primera Liga, five points from the fourth place that would see them qualify for the Champions League.

The club had hoped to sell land around its 55,000-seat Mestalla stadium to finance the building of a new 75,000-capacity ground with an estimated cost of 200 million euros.

But last year Spain entered a steep recession as the cheap credit which had fuelled a decade-long real estate boom dried up due to the global financial crisis, making it hard for Valencia to sell the land.

Button grabs pole again

AFP, Sepang

Jenson Button in his Brawn stormed to pole position for the Malaysian Grand Prix Saturday, topping the times during qualifying ahead of Toyota's Jarno Trulli.

The Briton swept around the 5.5 kilometre (3.4 mile) Sepang circuit in one minute 35.181 seconds to burn off his rivals in an eventful hour-long qualifying.

But there was misery for Ferrari's Felipe Massa who only managed 16th while McLaren's disastrous weekend continued with world champion Lewis Hamilton 13th fastest and his teammate Heikki Kovalainen 14th.

Third fastest was Sebastian Vettel in his Red Bull but he is carrying a 10-place grid penalty from the Australian Grand Prix so starts in 13th.

Button's teammate Rubens Barrichello was fourth quickest but he has a five-place grid penalty so starts ninth.

Timo Glock in the other Toyota will be third on the grid alongside Nico Rosberg in his Williams-Toyota.

Must-win for United

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United's shell-shocked stars have admitted that Sunday's Premier League clash with Aston Villa at Old Trafford has developed into a must-win game for Sir Alex Ferguson's faltering champions.

United, who held a seven-point lead over their closest challengers just three weeks ago, have seen their aura of invincibility shattered by successive defeats against Liverpool and Fulham.

Liverpool have emerged as the form team and United's players are acutely aware that any further stumbles could undo their exemplary work earlier in the season.

With Martin O'Neill's Villa also struggling for form, and without a league victory at Old Trafford since 1983, United midfielder Michael Carrick and goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar admit that they simply have to get back to winning ways on Sunday.

Carrick said: "We'd gone so long without a league defeat that, when it happened against Liverpool, it was a bit of a shock to the system, especially when you consider the run we had been on and how we had been playing."

"But you're going to lose games through the season. It's very rare you don't. We've just got to bounce back -- we've done it before and we'll do it again."

"It's not a case of changing everything because we've lost a couple of matches -- we've got to focus on doing what we do best and hopefully go on another winning run."

Van der Sar, who has now conceded six goals in his last two league games, insists that United -- without the suspended trio of Wayne Rooney, Paul Scholes and Nemanja Vidic and the injured Dimitar Berbatov -- cannot allow themselves to be sidetracked by the costly defeats against Liverpool and Fulham.

He said: "If you put it into context, then we have lost two games in four months. Overall, that's not a bad record, but because the emphasis has been placed on the last two

games, it looks very bad.

"We are not too worried, but we do need to win the next game and the Villa fixture is a massive game for us."

Ferguson meanwhile believes that the Fulham defeat -- in a match which United finished with nine men -- will have served as a welcome wake-up call for a squad that may have begun to take their compliments for granted.

"Everybody likes to read good things about themselves," the Scot said. "We do, it's a natural thing to do. So it can have an effect."

"There are a lot of young players in our dressing-room, so maybe it was a good time for us to get that defeat at Fulham in particular."

"What we have to do now is win our next games. The challenge is always there for this club but the important thing is for the players to focus on who they are, what they're good at and we'll be okay."

Villa, who has slipped out of the top four in recent weeks after picking up just one point from five games, will be without the injured Emile Heskey against United.

I was an idiot: Podolski

AFP, Berlin

Germany striker Lukas Podolski admitted on Saturday that he had been an "idiot" for slapping national captain Michael Ballack during a World Cup qualifier against Wales.

"I have to realise that I was an idiot," Podolski told the Bild tabloid of the incident that occurred on Wednesday. "Unfortunately I over-reacted."

"The whole thing is now over. I have no problem with Michael Ballack - we've talked between ourselves."

German footballing legend Franz Beckenbauer, writing in his Bild column, said "this gesture could not be tolerated". "If a slap given to Michael Ballack had gone unpunished, it would not really have been the right signal sent to the team," he said.

"Apparently, there is something hatching at the heart of the team."

In an attempt to dampen the furore swirling around Podolski, the German football federation announced on Friday that the striker would contribute 5,000 euros towards a fair play initiative organised by the federation.

Podolski, who had disagreed with Ballack over tactics, has received the support of his club manager Jurgen Klinsmann, himself a former striker for the German team.

Italy line up friendlies

AFP, Rome

World champions Italy will face Northern Ireland and New Zealand in friendlies in June as part of the build-up to the Confederations Cup in South Africa, the Italian football federation (FIGC) announced.

Marcello Lippi's side will face Northern Ireland on June 6 at an Italian venue yet to be confirmed and then the Kiwis in South Africa on June 10.

The Confederations Cup takes place from June 14-28.

Klinsi plans long stay at Munich

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Jurgen Klinsmann sees himself staying for a long time with the Bundesliga giants.

"There's no limit to the time. Of course someone will succeed me, that's partly the nature of things but I hope that will only happen a very, very long time off," Klinsmann said in an interview with the Munchner Merkur daily.

"I get an enormous amount of happiness from my job, that's why I've not got anything planned out over one, two, three or even the next four years," said the 44-year-old former Germany coach whose contract runs out in 2010.

Bayern are level on both points and goals with Wolfsburg, their Bundesliga opponents on Saturday, just behind league leaders Hertha Berlin.

They then travel to Barcelona's Nou Camp stadium for Wednesday's Champions League quarter-final first leg clash.

Jose jibes at rivals

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan boss Jose Mourinho has been cultivating his favourite siege mentality at the Serie A leaders ahead of Sunday's trip to Udinese.

Inter lead second-placed Juventus by seven points with just nine matches remaining but Mourinho is taking no chances and has been trying to wind up his Italian league counterparts while motivating his own troops.

In an interview on a popular television show the former Chelsea manager poured scorn on the achievements of his rivals and claimed Italian media favour Juve and AC Milan.

As he settles in for the title run-in and the crucial potential title-decider against Juventus in Turin in two weeks time, Mourinho has been in typically cantankerous mood.

"Many coaches have won the Champions League more than once," he said of Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti's two European crowns, "but only one club (Milan in 2005) has lost a final after leading 3-0."

Even Manchester United's Sir Alex Ferguson didn't escape Mourinho's sibe.

"Ferguson has won it twice but he's 68. In 23 years time we'll see how many I've won."

If that wasn't enough, Mourinho also claimed that the media support his main rivals.

"We have the Inter Channel

with its 45,000 subscribers, Juve have (sport newspaper) Tuttosport and Milan have three TV stations and the newspapers," he said. "I feel a bit like Robin Hood."

It is a tactic that Mourinho often used at Chelsea and one with which Ferguson has also attempted to galvanise his Manchester United players, creating a feeling that the world is against them.

And it could not come at a more opportune moment for Inter who are in the midst of a defensive crisis that looks set to force Mourinho to once again play his holding midfielder Esteban Cambiasso at centre-back.

The loss of marauding Brazilian rightback Maicon for the rest of the season is another blow and means Mourinho will either have to move captain Javier Zanetti back from midfield or give disgruntled left-back Maxwell a starting berth and switch teenager Davide Santon from left to right.

However, Udinese's attacking options have been severely hit by a nasty knee ligament injury suffered by

Antonio Di Natale last Saturday in Montenegro that could rule him out for the rest of the season.

Earlier in the campaign this fixture would have been seen as a potential stumbling block for a top team as Udinese were early Serie A pace-setters.

However, their form dipped alarmingly and they have won only three of their last 20 league matches, although they are Italy's only remaining representatives in Europe.

Juventus's match at home to Chievo looked a lot easier a month ago as the 'flying donkeys' propped up Serie A for most of the season.

However an incredible March saw them win three and draw one in four matches and suddenly Domenico Di Carlo's side no longer look a soft touch but instead appear to be more durable opponents.

A trip to Juve and then the visit of Milan in their next two matches will put that theory to a stern test.

Milan for their part are still trying to tie up third place to ensure direct entry into next season's Champions League group stages and they host Lazio on Saturday.

Ancelotti himself has become very focused on that objective in recent weeks and even dismissed Mourinho's jibes.

"I don't talk about him, I don't respond to what he says," said Ancelotti. "The aim is to get back into the Champions League and to go through a season very different to this one. We have to finish in the top three."

Mexico appoint Aguirre

AFP, Mexico City

The Mexican football federation said Friday it had appointed former coach Javier Aguirre as their new handler a day after sacking ex-England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson.

Aguirre, 50, coached the Mexicans at the 2002 World Cup before moving to Spanish side Osasuna and thereafter to Atletico Madrid, who dispensed with his services in February.

Eriksson, 61, was fired after barely ten months in the job following Wednesday's disappointing 3-1 loss to Honduras in a World Cup qualifier, which came after a previous defeat regional rivals the United States.

In between, the Mexicans enjoyed a home success over Costa Rica but the two away reverses left them struggling to make a berth in South Africa at next year's finals a place below the third guaranteed slot.

The fourth-placed team must come through against the fifth best from South America in a playoff.

Media reports said Thursday that Eriksson is in line to receive a handsome payoff.

"His sacking will cost the Mexican Federation 3.5 million dollars," reported El Universal daily.

Eriksson, who was sacked



JAVIER AGUIRRE

after just 13 matches at the helm having only taken the post last June, was earning a reported seven million dollars a year.

When he stepped down as England boss after the last World Cup he received a six-million pound (8.5 million dollar) golden parachute.

A year later he took the reins at Manchester City but he was relieved of his post after a single midtable season and then to general surprise crossed the Atlantic to replace the sacked Hugo Sanchez.

El Universal suggested that not qualifying could cost in the region of 500 million dollars in potential commercial receipts.

Eriksson's personal manager Athole Still meanwhile

told Sky Sports News he thought taking the Mexican job was a mistake.

"We discussed it and I think the big decision for Sven was getting back into the World Cup and going to South Africa. Also because his son works in soccer schools over there and Sven is connected so there were family issues there."

"But I felt that he should have stayed in Europe," said Still, who denied any contact between the Swede and English Premiership strugglers Portsmouth.

Still suggested Eriksson's next port of call would be with a big-name club but added that "if the right job came up he might go for another international team again."



British Formula One driver Jenson Button of Brawn celebrates his pole position at the end of the Malaysian Grand Prix qualifying round in Sepang on Saturday.