

MU, Chelsea on the brink

AFP, Paris



Compared to the domestic and European woes of five-times European kings Liverpool, life is bliss for Manchester United and Chelsea as Premier League glory and the knockout phase of the Champions League beckon.

Liverpool, six defeats in seven games, have run into a brick wall in the Premier League where a first title in 20 years already looks beyond them.

Failure to win at Lyon on Wednesday could derail their Champions League ambitions after defeats to the French side and also Fiorentina.

Meanwhile it's been relatively plain sailing for United and Chelsea, both at home and abroad.

Sir Alex Ferguson's 2008 European champions are just two points off the Blues in the league while in Europe both sides have posted three wins already.

Despite veterans Ryan Giggs and Rio Ferdinand both being ruled out of Tuesday's game United will expect to polish off rivals CSKA Moscow

at Old Trafford having already secured full points in Moscow.

Chelsea, having already humiliated Atletico Madrid at Stamford Bridge, will be confident they can get the point they need to advance from Group D, particularly with Didier Drogba having completed the three-match ban imposed for an on-pitch outburst after last season's semifinal loss to Barcelona.

Frank Lampard says the Ivorian is the true ace in the pack.

"Having Didier back in the Champions League this week will be great for us. It's a big boost, he's a top-class player in great form," the England midfielder said, dubbing Drogba the best striker in the world.

"He's neck and neck with Fernando Torres in the goals chart, but for me Didier is the best in the world because of his all-round game."

Nine-times champions Real Madrid should ultimately emerge from Group C even if AC Milan, with seven titles, complete the double Tuesday over the expensively reconstituted 'Meringues' at the San Siro.

Both sides have six points from three games but Real will again be without the world's most expensive player

Cristiano Ronaldo as he has not recovered from a nagging right ankle injury.

Veteran midfielder Guti will also miss the game after falling out with coach Manuel Pellegrini during last week's humiliating 4-0 Spanish Cup defeat at third division Alcorcon.

Assuming Milan - already shocked at home to Zurich before redeeming themselves in Madrid - qualify along with the Spanish giants, whose last crown came in 2002, that would mean the end of the road for Marseille, the 1993 champions, who should nonetheless beat Zurich at the Stade Velodrome.

FIXTURES

(1945 GMT)
Tuesday
Group A
Bayern Munich (GER) v Bordeaux (FRA), Maccabi Haifa (ISR) v Juventus (ITA)
Group B
Manchester United (ENG) CSKA Moscow (RUS), Besiktas (TUR) v VfL Wolfsburg (GER)
Group C
AC Milan (ITA) v Real Madrid (ESP), Marseille (FRA) v FC Zurich (SUI)
Group D
Atletico Madrid (ESP) v Chelsea, Apoel FC (CYP) v Porto (POR)

Also teetering on the brink are four-times winners Bayern Munich, who are labouring to make an impression in Group A where Bordeaux are setting the pace after beating the Bavarians in France.

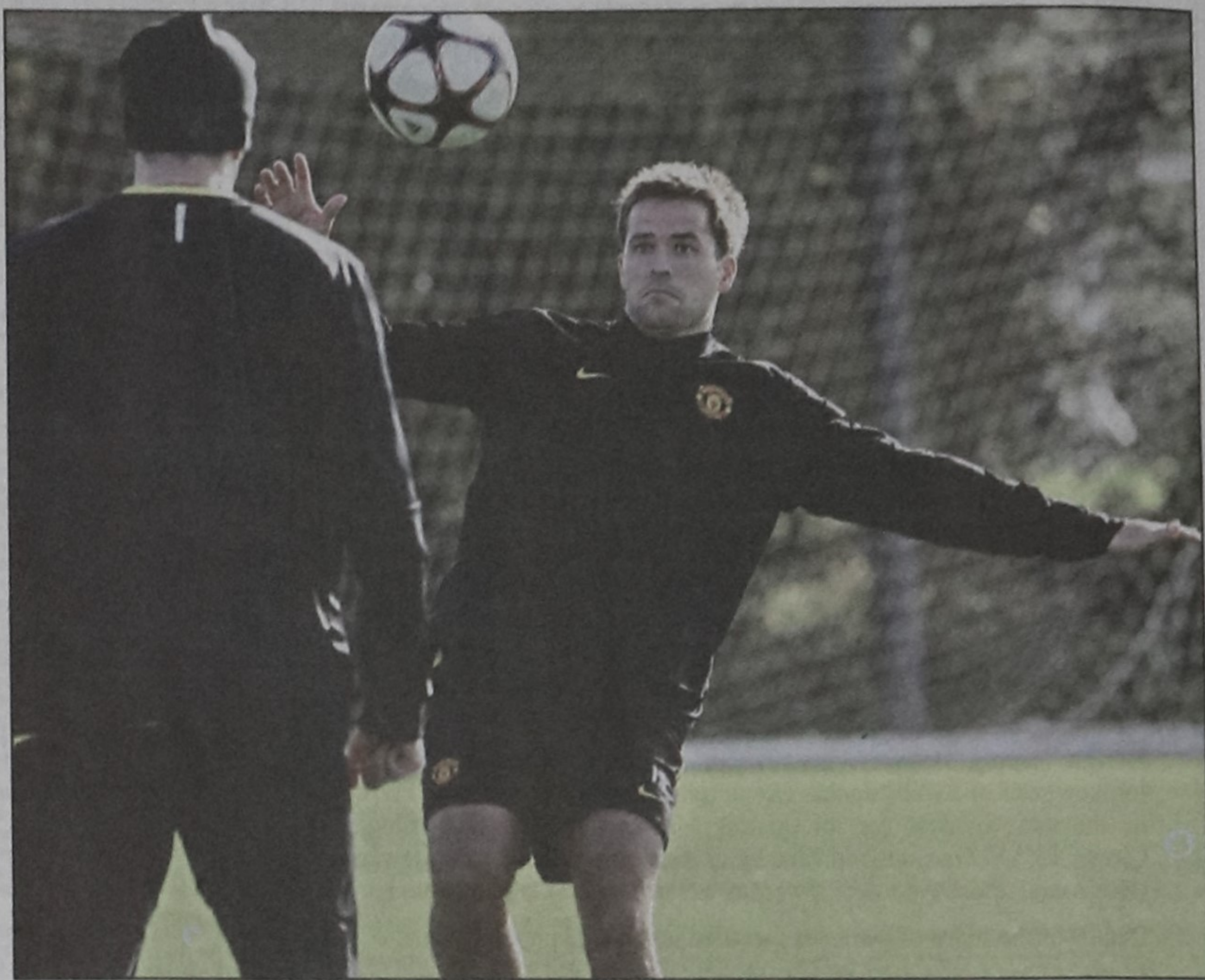
With Italian former champions Juventus unbeaten in the same group and a point clear of Bayern, the latter cannot afford to drop points against Laurent Blanc's Bordeaux as Juve will expect to pinch full points at Israel's Maccabi Haifa.

Bayern team manager Uli Hoeness admits the struggle will be an uphill one if neither of their playmakers, Franck Ribery and Arjen Robben, can shrug off injuries in time.

"Bayern without Franck Ribery or Arjen Robben is not the same team. When they return, we will return very quickly to a higher level."

Ribery will miss out with a knee injury though Robben may make the date at the Allianz Arena as he has recovered largely from a knee operation at the start of last month.

Bayern Munich will be without banned pair Daniel van Buyten and Thomas Mueller after their dismissals during the loss in France.



Manchester United striker Michael Owen (R) takes part in a training session in Manchester on Monday on the eve of their Champions League match against CSKA Moscow.

Inter march on

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan continued their inexorable march towards a fifth straight Italian Serie A title with a 2-0 victory away to lowly Livorno on Sunday.

There may only be 11 games gone in the championship but Inter have already opened up a seven-point lead over second-placed Juventus after the Turin giants were beaten 3-2 at home to Napoli on Saturday.

Sampdoria also failed to keep pace with Inter as they were held to a 0-0 draw at home to newly-promoted Bari on Sunday, leaving them third on goal difference behind Juve.

Inter were far from their sparkling best against a team who had won their previous two matches under new boss Serse Cosmi, but they always looked capable of doing enough to win.

Livorno, who lost on-loan Inter centre-back Nelson Rivas to injury in the warm-up, had the best chance of the opening period as Antonio Candreva brought a fine save out of Julio Cesar from a free-kick.

The opener came just four minutes into the second half as Diego Milito, restored to the starting line-up after making a substitute appearance in midweek on his return from injury, twisted and turned on the edge of the box before

shooting low through a crowd of legs into the bottom corner.

Brazilian full-back Maicon then set the seal on the victory 10 minutes from time as he burst forward from his half, played a one-two with Patrick Vieira and reached the edge of the box unchallenged before slotting home left-footed into

the bottom corner.

This relatively comfortable stroll in the park was ideal preparation for Inter ahead of their midweek trip to Ukraine to face Dynamo Kiev in a crucial Champions League match.

Coach Jose Mourinho gave rare starts to young Slovenian

midfielder Rene Krhin and Brazilian misfit Mancini whilst leaving the likes of Samuel Eto'o, Walter Samuel and Esteban Cambiasso on the bench, although all three came on as substitutes.

In Genoa Sampdoria were in uninspired form as they failed to break down a stubborn Bari.

Sampdoria playmaker Antonio Cassano, playing against the club where he began his career, had a goal ruled out for offside three minutes from time in an otherwise anonymous performance.

It could have been worse for Sampdoria, though, as Bari's Paulo Barreto put an injury-time penalty wide while Leonardo Bonucci then had a goal wrongly ruled out for offside.

AS Roma ended a three-game losing streak as they came from behind to beat Bologna 2-1 in the capital.

Brazilian Adailton gave Bologna the lead on 32 minutes but Mirko Vucinic benefited from a kind ricochet to equalise three minutes later before Simone Perrotta scored the winner in the 52nd minute.

Marco Marchionni scored a brace as Fiorentina got back to winning ways after two straight defeats with a 3-1 success at home to Catania in a match that ended 10-men a piece.

Alberto Gilardino scored the third goal for La Viola while Giuseppe Mascara netted for Catania.



PHOTO: AFP

Inter Milan defender Maicon (R) celebrates scoring the second goal against Livorno during their Serie A encounter at the Armando Picchi Stadium in Leghorn on Sunday.

BUNDESLIGA Hoffenheim go fifth

AFP, Berlin

Hoffenheim's Brazil striker Maicosuel hit a first-half goal to seal a 1-0 win over Freiburg on Sunday which put his side fifth in the Bundesliga and knocked Bayern Munich down into sixth.

Hoffenheim's hot-shot striker Vedad Ibisevic set up the goal when he played the Brazilian into the penalty area and the South American lobbed his shot out of reach of Freiburg goalkeeper Simon Pouplin on 39 minutes.

The result drops Freiburg down to 13th in the table.

In Sunday's late game, Eintracht Frankfurt defeated second-bottom Bochum 2-1 and moved up to ninth after Maik Franz made amends for a 25th-minute own goal by scoring the winner in the 53rd minute.

Werder Bremen are second after attacking midfielder Aaron Hunt hit two second-half goals to help his side come from behind to salvage a 2-2 draw at Nuremberg.

Hamburg were robbed of the chance of going top of the German league for the second consecutive match after mid-table Borussia Moenchengladbach poached a shock 3-2 away victory, with Canadian striker Rob Friend hitting an 82nd-minute winner.

Stuttgart coach Markus Babbel boosted his chances of holding onto his job after his side held Bayern Munich to a scoreless draw in Stuttgart.

The home side had been dumped out of the German Cup last Tuesday at Greuther Fuerth, their fifth consecutive defeat, but the ex-Bayern Munich defender received a vote of confidence from his board on Wednesday.

Defending champions Wolfsburg threw away a 2-0 lead after two goals from Nigeria striker Obafemi Martins had put them in control against mid-table Mainz.

In the closing minutes Mainz defender Tim Hoogland hit an equaliser to rescue a 3-3 draw and a share of the spoils.

Cologne are hovering above the relegation zone after their 1-0 defeat at home to mid-table Hanover.

Barca confident of Robinho deal

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona directors remain optimistic about signing Manchester City star Robinho in January.

El Mundo Deportivo says while the presence of City boss Mark Hughes at Osasuna for Barca's 1-1 draw did not lead to talks over Robinho, Nou Camp powerbrokers remain hopeful a deal can be struck.

Barca are willing to offer £3 million for the six-month loan of the Brazil international with an agreement over a set fee in June for his permanent signing. Barca would be prepared to pay around £30 million for the former Real Madrid and Santos winger.

Hughes is prepared to lose Robinho, though much will depend on if City chiefs can identify - and sign - an adequate replacement.

Valencia edge Malaga

AFP, Madrid



Valencia reclaimed fourth spot from Real Mallorca thanks to a fortunate 1-0 win over bottom side Malaga on Sunday with defender David Navarro's first goal of the season clinching the points.

Centre-back Navarro jumped highest at the back post to head in a Pablo

Hernandez cross for the winning goal on 68 minutes as Valencia moved a point behind third-placed Sevilla.

Malaga continue to prop up the table having not won since the opening day of the season when they thrashed Atletico Madrid 3-0.

David Villa, the league's joint top-scorer with seven goals, almost scored for Valencia in the third minute when his cross crashed against the post to safety.

Juan Mata then had a goal ruled out for offside and Pablo Hernandez went agonisingly close with a drive as Malaga were over-run.

Albert Luque had the hosts' best first half chance sliding in at the back post but could not get a foot on the devilish cross.

Villa went close with a lobbed effort in the second half but the goal was to come from a surprising source as Navarro capitalised on some slack defending to head home.

Malaga spurned several chances to equalise with Valencia goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez in

fine form.

Real Mallorca are a point behind Valencia after maintaining their 100 per cent home record with a 1-0 win over Racing Santander on Sunday.

Cameroon striker Pierre Webó scored the decisive goal to make it a perfect five wins for Mallorca at their fortress-like Ono Stadium.

Deportivo La Coruna lost ground with Mallorca and Valencia following a 1-1 draw at Sporting Gijon.

Depor's first draw of the season seems them fall two points behind Valencia in sixth.

Earlier Villarreal powered out of the bottom three thrashing promoted Tenerife at El Madrigal where three of the hosts' five unanswered goals came in a magical six-minute spell.

An action-packed start to the second half saw veteran French midfielder Robert Pires put Villarreal 2-0 up 60 seconds after the break before Giuseppe Rossi (51 min) and Jose Llorente (52) put hapless Tenerife to the sword.

Llorente had opened the scoring after 14 minutes and Ruben Cani ended the goal-scoring rout in the 88th minute.

After going seven games without a win Villarreal have now recorded successive victories and move up five places to 13th in the table.

Villarreal's win sees Atletico Madrid, who face Chelsea in the Champions League on Tuesday, fall into the bottom three with just one win from nine games.

Tenerife hover just above the relegation zone after failing to collect a point on their travels.



PHOTO: AFP

Valencia defender David Navarro (L) celebrates his goal with teammate Ever Banega during their Primera Liga clash against Malaga at the La Rosaleda Stadium on Sunday.

PSG back winning

AFP, Paris



Paris Saint-Germain put their swine flu woes behind them and recorded their first victory since the end of August by winning 4-1 at Sochaux in the French top flight on Sunday.

Jeremy Clement was one of the players to have contracted the virus that prompted the

last-minute postponement of PSG's match at Marseille last weekend but he struck the opening goal before Clement Chantome notched the second.

Mevlut Erding claimed the third on his return to his former club and Peguy Luyindula was also on target as PSG climbed above Sochaux into 10th place while retaining a game in hand.

Their last victory was a 3-0 triumph at home to Lille on August 30.

Earlier, Valenciennes moved up to sixth with a fine 3-0 victory at Rennes, while Nice followed up their shock 4-1 win over Lyon last weekend by beating 10-man Le Mans 1-0.

Turkey international striker Erding was making his first start after missing PSG's previous six games with a shoulder injury and he spurned his first chance by blazing over from Chantome's pass in the 11th minute.

Erding was then given the opportunity to

put the visitors ahead after home goalkeeper Teddy Richert was harshly adjudged to have felled Luyindula in the area, but although Richert did brilliantly to save both Erding's penalty and Christophe Jallet's follow-up, the second rebound was converted by Clement.

Stephane Sessegnon and Luyindula both came close to extending the visitors' lead early in the second period before Chantome made the points safe in the 57th minute, racing clear and lifting a delightful finish over Richert.

Erding clipped home Jallet's cross at the near post with 15 minutes to play and Luyindula rounded things off late on after Stephane Dalmat had netted a 25-yard consolation for the hosts.

Rennes, beaten just twice in their previous 27 league home games, bossed the first half at the Stade de la Route de Lorient but fell behind in the 58th minute when Bobo Balde headed in Fahid Ben Khalfallah's free-kick.

Ben Khalfallah sealed the points for Valenciennes in the 78th minute, striding forward from midfield and bending a shot past Rennes goalkeeper Nicolas Douchez, before Gregory Pujol added a third four minutes from time.

The win moves Philippe Montanier's side above Rennes, Nancy, Lorient and Marseille into sixth place in the table and they also top the goalscoring charts with 22 strikes to date this season.

IN BRIEF

Rooney to become dad

AFP, Manchester

Wayne Rooney missed training with Manchester United on Monday, fuelling speculation his pregnant wife Coleen was about to give birth.

The England forward's first child was due over a week ago and the impending birth could lead to Rooney missing Tuesday's Champions League clash with CSKA Moscow at Old Trafford.

Farina guilty of drink-driving

AFP, Sydney

Former Australian national coach Frank Farina was fined and disqualified from driving after being found guilty of a drink-driving charge on Monday.

Farina, 45, was sacked as coach of A-League club Brisbane Roar after he was charged by police with the drink-driving offence while on his way to club training last month.

He appeared in the Brisbane magistrates court on Monday where he pleaded guilty to the charge and was fined 500 dollars (450 US), disqualified from driving for three months and had a conviction recorded.

City deny Birmingham

AFP, Birmingham



Shay Given was Manchester City's hero as the goalkeeper produced several fine saves to earn Mark Hughes's men a point in their goalless Premier League draw away to Birmingham City.

Sunday's stalemate here at St Andrews was enlivened by an impressive display from Republic of Ireland international Given, including a penalty save from Scotland's James McFadden.

Manchester City's fourth straight draw was good enough to take the visitors into fourth place in the table.

The home side had a gilt-edged opportunity to take the lead in the 55th minute after Nigel de Jong handled in the box.

But the resulting penalty saw McFadden strike a weak shot which wasn't far enough away from Given and the goalkeeper, diving to his left, made a two-handed save.

"It was a bit of luck I suppose," Given told Sky Sports. "It's a bit of a lottery, penalties, for goalkeepers, and luckily today I've gone the right way and got a strong enough hand to get it away."

The penalty was the first awarded against City this season and Given joked: "I hope it's the last as well!"

"It probably was a penalty looking back, I think Nigel's hand was a bit high and it was the right decision from the referee," the former Newcastle goalkeeper added.

"Luckily for us we've managed to keep it out and we've kept a clean sheet. I think we can play better than we did today and we'll take a point."

However, he said Hughes's expensively-assembled side had bigger ambitions.

"We're disappointed, these are games where we're looking to pick up three points.

"Credit to Birmingham, they had good spirit today and a good workrate in their team."

"But we were coming here today looking for three points, and the same against Fulham last week when we threw away a two-goal lead, so we've been disappointed in the last couple of weeks."

Birmingham's disappointment at seeing McFadden miss was made worse when Blues midfielder Barry Ferguson was sent off in injury-time for his second bookable offence after trying to stop Manchester City taking a quick throw.

Asked if Ferguson, already on a yellow card, should have known better, Birmingham manager Alex McLeish replied: "He should. He's apologised to myself and his team-mates in there."

"We lose him next week. That's disappointing, because he's been exceptional and made us play," McLeish said of the former Rangers and Scotland star.

"We cannot afford the discipline throughout the season, especially with such a fragile squad, to go awry at any stage."

A draw took Birmingham three points clear of the relegation zone and McLeish added: "We are disappointed not to have got the three points and that's a measure of how well we've played."

"We just lacked that bit of composure in front of goal."

Christian Benitez hit a post early on for Birmingham before Manchester City and Wales striker Craig Bellamy had a shot blocked.