

Schalke at the summit

AFP, Berlin



A first-half goal from Peruvian star Jefferson Farfan lifted Schalke two points clear of previous Bundesliga table-toppers Leverkusen on Friday in cementing a 1-0 win over Mainz.

Farfan kept his cool to finish with aplomb and notch his sixth goal of the campaign after taking a neat pass from German under-21 international Lewis Holtby, who, along with his English father, is a staunch Everton fan.

Schalke now have 34 points from 17 games as they bid to go into the winter break top of the heap - though Leverkusen will expect to leapfrog them with victory Saturday at home to midtable Moenchengladbach.

Third-placed Bayern Munich will bid to keep up their solid recent run by beating bottom Hertha Berlin which would put them on 33 points.

No hate from Lampard

AFP, London



Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard won't take any pleasure from plunging West Ham deeper into relegation trouble even though the former Hammers star faces another hostile reception at Upton Park on Sunday.

Lampard has been public enemy number one in east London since quitting West Ham to join bitter rivals Chelsea for 11 million pounds (12.3 million euros) in 2001.

The 31-year-old, who spent nine years at West Ham, has suffered vicious abuse from the Hammers fans every time he has faced his old club and he knows it will be no different this weekend.

But despite all the taunts, Lampard is sad to see the Hammers languishing second bottom of the Premier League because of former Chelsea favourites Gianfranco Zola and Steve Clarke - now manager and assistant at West Ham - who worked with the England international at Stamford Bridge.

"I have a lot of respect for Gianfranco and Steve Clarke. It's been difficult for them. They have a lot of financial difficulties and have had to

sell a lot of players," Lampard said.

"I don't want to see them do badly at all. They're great lads. It's difficult, but then it's a difficult league."

While Lampard would genuinely like to see West Ham prosper, he will show no compassion on Sunday as Chelsea bid to cement their position as league leaders going into the busy Christmas programme.

By the time Chelsea kick off on Sunday, they could be ahead of Manchester United only on goal difference if the reigning champions win at Fulham 24 hours earlier.

After recording a string of convincing victories last month, Carlo Ancelotti's side have spluttered of late.

They won for the first time in five matches against Portsmouth on Wednesday, but their victory against the league's bottom club was less than convincing.

The Blues have conceded 11 goals in five games and looked nervous at the back again against Portsmouth.

Yet Lampard is adamant his side are still on course to win the title and he expects them to rediscover their dominant form soon.

"I'm sure people would have been talking again if we hadn't beaten Portsmouth, but that's why it was important to win," he said.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Leonardo can't wait

AFP, Rome



AC Milan coach Leonardo admitted he was excited to be facing Manchester United in the Champions League second round following Friday's draw but insisted his team must first finish 2009 with a win.

Milan travel to Fiorentina for a tough last match of the year knowing that anything other than a win could seriously damage their Serie A title hopes.

Leonardo's team trail champions and leaders Inter Milan by five points and a loss could see that gap increase to an insurmountable-looking eight.

But first he couldn't help but cast an eye on an exciting tie to come in February in which he insists his team will not be the underdogs.

"In the last 16 we'll face Manchester United who like us have a great European

tradition," he said.

"They have the same objectives as us and I believe we'll face each other on an equal footing."

"It's too early to make predictions because the tie isn't until February and there's a lot of time before then."

"But Milan and Man United are two teams that have Europe in their blood and looking back on past matches between the teams, they were always emotional encounters in which they just had to be there."

Before then, though, there is the crucial clash with Fiorentina, who themselves are chasing important objectives, namely a top four finish and a third straight season in the Champions League.

"It will be a tough game against Milan between two teams in good form despite their last defeats," he said.

"You'll see two teams fighting to win. As for us we need to do the right things in certain areas of the pitch and be brave in attack."

"Even the best teams aren't perfect for 90 minutes. We have to be compact, concentrate, be organised and play our game without thinking only about containing our opponents."

"And honestly I think it will be one of the best matches of the season, one not to be missed."

"It will be an important test

Party-pooper Redknapp

SOCCERNET



Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp is set to punish players involved in a Christmas party organised behind his back last week and Robbie Keane's role as skipper could be under scrutiny.

Redknapp was furious to learn about reports of 16 of his squad travelling to Dublin days before he insisted they would not be allowed to celebrate excessively during the festive period. The Spurs boss will wait until after this weekend's Premier League trip to Blackburn before deciding what action to take.

"It was wrong and it will be

dealt with. Severely. It will be dealt with," Redknapp insisted. "It's being dealt with internally and we'll keep it in-house. I will be dealing with it after the weekend. We've got a game to concentrate on - we'll sort the game out, then I'll sort them out. Believe you me, it will get sorted out."

"I'm not happy, I'd be lying if I said I was happy. I didn't know anything about the trip at all if I'm perfectly truthful but it's done now and will be dealt with on Monday morning."

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Schalke players congregate in celebration after scoring the all-important goal in their Bundesliga match against Mainz 05 in Gelsenkirchen on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Tevez backs Hughes

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City's Argentine striker Carlos Tevez has backed coach Mark Hughes as the man for the job amid reports the club are interested in former Chelsea interim coach Guus Hiddink.

Tevez, on target twice in last week's draw at Bolton, reacted to reports that Hughes is fighting for his job with the club eighth in the table despite massive summer outlay and only two league defeats to date.

Ahead of Saturday's game with Sunderland, Tevez, who arrived in the summer from rivals United, said: "When I first joined the club I had a long chat with Mark Hughes and he gave me a vision of how the club was going to go forward."

"The reason I joined was because I believe in his vision. I believe in what he had to say," Tevez told the Daily Telegraph.

"I believe in the club. I also believe in Mark. We will be a big club. I'm 100 per cent behind the manager. I'm really surprised that a question about his future even exists at such an early stage."

"Every team in the Premier League will say they can do better and we are no exception. But the team is in transition with a lot of new players coming in and we have had a lot of injuries."

Benitez's praise for Carragher

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez praised Jamie Carragher's "passion" and "character" as the defender prepared to make his 600th appearance for his hometown club.

Carragher, who joined Liverpool as a schoolboy, is set to reach the landmark away to Portsmouth on Saturday.

Benitez said he did not see Carragher's feat ever being repeated in future.

"Maybe someone will do it but it will be very difficult. Now there is too much money around the world in football," the Spaniard said.

"If you have a good player normally someone will make a good offer and the agents have too much power."

"Modern football is more difficult so 600 games in a top side for a local player is a massive achievement."

Turning to the 31-year-old Carragher's qualities, Benitez added: "He is a very good example for the younger players. He trains 100 percent in every session and that is good for the mentality of the team."

"Carra has a strong character, passion, he likes to win every game, and that is the type of player you are looking for."

"The last five and a half years have been really good. He was playing as a left-back, right-back and now he has settled down as a centre-back."

"He knows he can help the others and is always talking. That is now one of his main strengths as he can organise the team."

"He has improved his game and, because he is a centre-back, he has time and he will play for a long time."

Juve-Ajax pick of draw

INTERNET, undated

UEFA Cup holders Shakhtar Donetsk face Premier League side Fulham in the draw for the last 32 of football's Europa League in Nyon, Switzerland on Friday. The Ukrainians, who play the first leg in London, will then come up against either Juventus or Ajax in the last 16 if they go through.

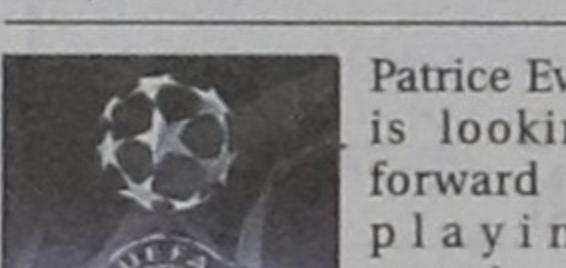
Big names come together in the meeting between four-time European champions Ajax and two-time European winners Juventus, who have twice met in European Cup/League finals.

Two former European champions SV Hamburg and PSV Eindhoven were also drawn together, while last season's losing UEFA Cup finalists Werder Bremen were paired with FC Twente in two German-Dutch duels.

Round of 32 matches will be played on February 18 and 25; Round of 16 played March 11 and 18.

Evra eyes Becks battle

AFP, Manchester



Patrice Evra is looking forward to playing against former Old Trafford hero David Beckham after Manchester United were drawn against AC Milan in the Champions League.

England midfielder Beckham, who made his name with United, is set to begin his second loan spell with Italian giants Milan from US Major League Soccer side the Los Angeles Galaxy in January.

Beckham won the Champions League with United in 1999 before moving to Real Madrid four years later.

"I am happy for David

Beckham because he did a lot for United and I know he wanted to play again at Old Trafford," France international defender Evra told the club's official website following Friday's draw for the last 16.

"I will say 'welcome home' to him but I will make sure he doesn't have an easy game! I like him because I have met him and he is a good person, a real gentleman."

"He's a professional and that is why Milan wanted him. I'm sure all his old team-mates who are still here are looking forward to welcoming him back," Evra added.

"But I'm looking forward more to playing against Milan rather than just Beckham, because Milan are much more than one man," insisted Evra.

a member of the United side that lost last season's Champions League final 2-0 to Barcelona in Rome in May.

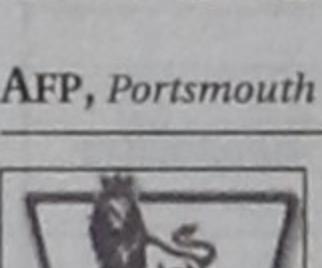
As well as wanting to go up against Beckham, Evra was equally keen to banish the memory of United's 2007 semi-final loss to Milan when the Italians won 5-3 on aggregate.

"I remember it was a very frustrating tie. We won 3-2 at home but we didn't play very well. In the second game I was suspended and watched it on TV."

"It was very difficult to see my team lose 3-0 in that way, but after that game we had more experience and we won the Champions League (beating English rivals Chelsea on penalties in the Moscow final) the next year."

Reds hit new low

AFP, Portsmouth



Javier Mascherano was sent off for the second time this season as Liverpool suffered another setback with a 2-0 loss away to Premier League basement club Portsmouth on Saturday.

Goals at Fratton Park from Argentine defender Nadir Belhadj and French striker Frederic Piquionne condemned Rafael Benitez's side to their seventh league defeat of the season.

And to make matters worse for the visitors, Argentina midfielder Mascherano was dismissed for a horror tackle on Portsmouth defender Tal Ben Haim on the stroke of half-time.

Portsmouth had taken just 11 points from their opening 17 games and remain beset by financial problems.

But Avram Grant's side could have taken the lead after only six minutes when Piquionne got in behind the Reds defence to latch onto Michael Brown's pass.

However, Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina did enough to force Piquionne wide.

The hosts had a lucky escape ten minutes later as Steven Gerrard's goalbound shot was inadvertently blocked by teammate Fernando Torres before being cleared.

Torres came within inches of putting Liverpool in front in the 20th minute with a majestic 20-yard curler, which had Portsmouth keeper Asmir Begovic beaten before nestling on the roof of the net.

Jamie O'Hara threatened to leave Reina red-faced in the 25th minute with a sweetly struck free-kick, which was heading towards the top right corner before the Spaniard retreated to pluck the ball from underneath his crossbar.

Jamie Carragher was making his 600th appearance for Liverpool and the defender

produced a heroic block to divert Hassan Yebda's powerful volley behind for a corner from point blank range.

But Carragher was powerless to stop Belhadj giving Portsmouth the lead 12 minutes before half-time.

Kevin-Prince Boateng's driven low shot was palmed away by Reina but Liverpool failed to clear the rebound and the ball broke kindly for Belhadj, who lashed an unstoppable right foot shot into the roof of the net from an acute angle.

Daniel Agger should have drawn Liverpool level just six minutes later when Gerrard's free-kick presented him with a free header at the back post but the centre-back nodded wide when it looked easier to score.

Liverpool were reduced to 10 men on the stroke of half time when Mascherano was shown a straight red card for a reckless lunge on Ben Haim.

Benitez, who was taunted with chants of "You're getting sacked in the morning", having "guaranteed" Liverpool would finish in the top four this term, by the home fans, replaced the hapless Andrea Dossena with Yossi Benayoun early in the second-half in a desperate bid to find a way back into the game.

Carragher came to Liverpool's aid once more in the 55th minute with a last-ditch tackle to deny Piquionne a clear shot at goal after the on-loan Lyon striker had been played through by Boateng.

Torres cut an isolated figure as Liverpool's lone striker and was lucky to stay on the pitch after elbowing Ben Haim in the face with a forearm smash.

Begovic, replacing the injured David James, produced a miraculous 67th minute save to keep Portsmouth in front.

Gerrard's 15-yard piledriver struck two Portsmouth players on its way to goal but Bosnian Begovic somehow managed to readjust his dive and claw the ball behind for a corner.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

IN BRIEF

Graf, the player to Graf, the photographer

INTERNET, undated