

MU Fool-hammed

City sack Hughes, hire Mancini

AFP, London



Fulham produced the latest twist in a see-saw Premier League title race with a shock 3-0 win over champions Manchester United at Craven Cottage on Saturday.

Goals from Danny Murphy, Bobby Zamora and Damien Duff condemned injury-hit United to their fifth league loss of the season.

Meanwhile, Manchester City manager Mark Hughes was sacked, despite seeing his side defeat Sunderland 4-3 in an Eastlands thriller, and replaced by former Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini.

United's defeat left Sir Alex Ferguson's team, without several sidelined defenders, three points behind leaders Chelsea.

The Blues will extend their advantage to six points if they win away to relegation-threatened West Ham on Sunday.

"The way the league is at the moment I hope today is not too damaging. I hope it doesn't cost us the league," Ferguson told club channel MUTV.

"We'll have to get our defenders back to give us a proper chance of going for the league, there's no question of that. But if we get them back we'll be back in it."

At Eastlands, Rogue Santa Cruz gave Manchester City a fourth-minute lead against Sunderland before Carlos Tevez made it 2-0 from the penalty spot.

But the visitors hit back through a John Mensah header before Jordan Henderson tied the match up at 2-2 from 14 yards.

Craig Bellamy restored City's lead with a curling shot but Sunderland replied again through Kenwyne Jones's 62nd-minute header, only for Santa Cruz to make it 4-3 seven minutes later.

Just before full-time, Sunderland's Michael

Turner was sent-off for leading with his elbow.

Then came the drama of Hughes's departure, after City's second win in 11 league games was not enough to keep the Welshman in his job, with the club's billionaire owner Sheikh Mansour demanding a greater return on his 200-million-pound player (225-million-euro) investment.

City chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak said: "A return of two wins in 11 Premier League games is clearly not in line with the targets that were agreed and set."

"Sheikh Mansour and the board felt that there was no evidence that the situation would fundamentally change."

Arsenal stayed third after a 3-0 win over Hull in Saturday's late kick-off, with Denilson, Eduardo and Abou Diaby on target at the Emirates Stadium but Liverpool's miserable season hit a new low as Javier Mascherano was sent-off in a 2-0 defeat away to bottom-of-the-table Portsmouth.

Fulham, who beat United 2-0 at home last season, took the lead in the 22nd minute at Craven Cottage when former Liverpool midfielder Murphy dispossessed Paul Scholes and let fly with a 25-yard shot.

United fielded a makeshift defence featuring midfielders Michael Carrick and Darren Fletcher, as well as youngster Ritchie de Laet.

Seconds into the second half, Fulham were 2-0 up after Zamora lashed in a half-volley. Zamora then set up Duff, who volleyed home 15 minutes from time.

Elsewhere, Aston Villa continued their push for a top-four spot with a 1-0 win at home to Stoke City thanks to a 61st-minute goal from substitute John Carew.

Fellow European contenders Tottenham Hotspur, fresh from their 3-0 midweek win over Manchester City, beat Blackburn Rovers 2-0 with two goals from England striker Peter Crouch.



Fulham striker Bobby Zamora (C) is congratulated by teammate Clint Dempsey (L) after scoring the second goal against Manchester United during their Premier League encounter at Craven Cottage on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Barca's 6th this year

Football

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Barcelona left it late before capping a superb year by clinching the Club World Cup here on Saturday.

The Spanish giants needed extra time to beat Argentina's Estudiantes 2-1 and secure their sixth title of 2009.

Mauro Boselli had put Estudiantes ahead after 37 minutes only for Barca striker Pedro to grab the equaliser in the dying minutes of the game, with Argentina striker Lionel Messi nailing victory after 110 minutes.

The Spanish giants end the year on a high after following up last season's league, Champions League and Cup treble with their first title in this competition.

Barca dominated early play but met with stubborn opposition from the South American champions' defense.

Xavi thought he had earned Barcelona a penalty on 35 minutes, but goalkeeper Damian Albil's challenge on him went unpunished.

And it was Estudiantes who surprisingly took the lead two minutes later when Juan Manuel Diaz crossed from the left, and Boselli got in front of Eric Abidal to fire home a header.

Barcelona reacted immediately with Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic almost getting a touch on a Messi free-kick after 41 minutes but Albil proved solid ensuring Alejandro Sabella's team held their lead going into half-time.

After the break an Ibrahimovic effort went just

wide and the Swedish forward then had another shot blocked by Leandro Desabato.

Despite the best efforts of Ibrahimovic and Messi, Barcelona failed to break down their opponents, with an effort from the Ballon d'Or winner held by Albil after 70 minutes.

But their pressing paid off after 89 minutes when Gerard Pique fed substitute Pedro, who headed into the back of the net.

Barcelona dominated extra time before Messi scored the winner after chesting home an Dani Alves cross to ensure the Catalans end the year as the kings of world football.

Earlier, South Korea's Pohang Steelers beat Mexican club Atlante 4-3 on penalties to clinch third place at the Zayed Sports City.

Media salute Barcelona

AFP, Madrid

Spanish media on Sunday eulogised Barcelona, who claimed their sixth title of the year with Saturday's 2-1 extra time win over Argentina's Estudiantes in the Club World Cup final.

The win, clinched with a goal from footballer of the year Lionel Messi, handed Pep Guardiola's side yet more silverware to add to their Champions League, Spanish League, Spanish Cup, European and Spanish Super Cup wins for an unprecedented haul.

"Eternal" and "Barca eternal" were the headlines in Catalan dailies La Vanguardia and El Periodico, while Spain's top national daily El Pais paid tribute by observing "Barca, six-time champions, make history."

El Periodico reported that Guardiola had told the team beforehand: "Gentlemen, if you lose today you will continue to be the best in the world - but if you win today you will be eternal."

ABC daily noted that "Guardiola's Barcelona is unequalled."

Although the Madrid-based sports newspapers devoted their main interest Sunday to Real Madrid's 6-0 win over Zaragoza which kept the club in the title race behind Barcelona, AS sports daily affirmed that "Barca have scaled the roof of the world" and are "champions of everything."

Bad weather halts Serie A

AFP, Rome

Saturday's Serie A match between Fiorentina and AC Milan was called off for safety reasons due to bad weather.

Conditions for fans inside the stadium were deemed unsafe after heavy snowfall and plunging temperatures left ice all over the stands at Fiorentina's home ground.

The match will now be played in the New Year after the possibility of playing it on Sunday was ruled out following a meeting that included the Mayor of Florence and local police.

Earlier in the day the game between Bologna and Atalanta was also postponed but that is due to be played on Sunday pending another inspection in the morning.

But one match definitely off on Sunday is Udinese-Cagliari, again due to the conditions in the north-eastern city of Udine.

It means that AC Milan could find themselves eight points adrift of leaders and champions Inter Milan at the turn of the year if Jose Mourinho's team beat Lazio at home on Sunday.

Real demolish Zaragoza

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid sent out a message of intent to all-conquering champions Barcelona with a 6-0 demolition of Real Zaragoza on Saturday.

While Barcelona were away in Abu Dhabi winning the Club World Cup, their sixth trophy this year, Real closed the gap at the top of La Liga to just two points after tearing apart sorry Zaragoza.

It was always going to be a tough challenge for Zaragoza's caretaker coach Jose Gay who took charge this week and it quickly turned into a nightmare with Gonzalo Higuain scoring after just three minutes.

A double for Rafael Van der Vaart then followed and Higuain volleyed in a delightful shot still before half-time.

Cristiano Ronaldo, returning after a one match suspension, teased the Zaragoza defence before adding the fifth and substitute Karim Benzema wrapped up the scoring with 20 minutes to go against the side which has conceded most

goals in the Spanish top flight.

Sevilla's disappointing home form cost them further points as they slumped to a 2-1 defeat by Getafe.

A brace from Roberto

Soldado led the visitors to victory and it means that Sevilla have now failed to win in three attempts at the Sanchez Pizjuan.

Soldado slipped the ball



PHOTO: AFP

FLYING DUTCHMAN: Real Madrid's Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart goes airborne to celebrate one of his two goals during their Primera Liga clash against Real Zaragoza at Santiago Bernabeu on Saturday.

through the keeper's legs to give Getafe the lead after 12 minutes and then later capitalised on a defensive mix-up to score into an empty net.

Substitute Alvaro Negredo reduced the deficit at the start of the second half and despite Sevilla battling hard in the final stages for an equaliser, Getafe hung on.

"We cannot afford to lose so many points at home and we need to become more solid in defence. We lost our concentration too often and we made it was too easy for Getafe," said Sevilla coach Manolo Jimenez whose side are nine points behind Barcelona.

Athletic Bilbao had a comfortable 2-0 win over Osasuna thanks to early goals from Fran Yeste and Fernando Llorente.

A below strength Osasuna side were a goal down after just a minute when Yeste knocked the ball home from close range after being set up by Llorente.

Osasuna offered little in response and it was Llorente himself who added a second after 12 minutes with clinical drive from the edge of the area.

Athletic took their foot off the pedal in the second half and eased to a victory which puts them up to sixth place in the table.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona players celebrate with the trophy after beating Estudiantes de La Plata in the Club World Cup final at the Zayed Sports City Stadium in Abu Dhabi on Saturday.

Bellion fires Bordeaux

AFP, Paris



A double by former Manchester United striker David Bellion inspired Bordeaux to a 4-1 home win

over Lorient on Saturday that stretched their lead at the top of the French first division to nine points.

Having weathered early pressure from the visitors, Bordeaux took a 12th-minute lead when Bellion ran onto Yoann Gourcuff's through-ball before finishing between the legs of Fabien Audard.

Bordeaux coach Laurent Blanc shuffled his pack after the 1-0 mid-week win at Montpellier and his second-choice strikers combined for a second goal when Fernando Cavenaghi's flick-on was converted by Bellion, before

Cavenaghi slotted home from Gourcuff's cutback in the 52nd minute.

Gourcuff, France's player of the year, added his name to the scoresheet with 15 minutes to play as the champions made sure that they will head into the winter break -- which starts on Christmas Eve -- at the top of the division.

Lorient top scorer Kevin Gameiro, left out of the starting line-up, rewarded the travelling fans with a late consolation goal as Bordeaux's defence was breached for the first time in 710 minutes of football.

Second-placed Marseille can cut Bordeaux's lead back to six points if they win at third-bottom Saint-Etienne in the Saturday evening kick-off.

Montpellier's week went from bad to worse as they went down 2-0 at home to Nancy but maintained their hold on third place.

The newly promoted side

had not been beaten at the Stade de la Mosson prior to their defeat by Bordeaux but goals from Djamel Bakar and Pascal Berenguer consigned Rene Girard's charges to their second home loss in three days.

Paris Saint-Germain's indifferent form continued with a 1-0 defeat at Rennes, who prevailed via a goal by Guinean forward Ismael Bangoura five minutes before the interval that sent his side fourth.

Luckless bottom side Grenoble were denied only their second win of the season by an 84th-minute goal from Nice's Chaouki Ben Saada, which cancelled out Nicolas Dieuze's 75th-minute opener for the hosts.

Lens' trip to Valenciennes ended goalless, while Boulogne's home game with Sochaux was postponed after heavy snow posed a safety risk to spectators.

Kroos leads Bayer

AFP, Berlin



Teenager Toni Kroos scored twice on Saturday to fire Bayer Leverkusen back to the top of the Bundesliga as the home side came from behind to inflict a 3-2 defeat on Borussia Moenchengladbach.

Kroos, who only turns 20 on January 4, scored the first and last goal of the game as Leverkusen wrestled back control of the German league after Schalke had briefly taken over on Friday night after their 1-0 win over Mainz.

The 19-year-old Kroos opened the scoring on 18 minutes after a pass from ex-Liverpool defender Sammi Hypia.

But goals from 'Gladbach's Roel Brouwers and Brazil defender Dante put the guests ahead.

Swiss striker Eren Derdiyok equalised on 60 minutes for the hosts before Kroos scored his second after Germany striker Steffen Kiessling found him on the edge of the penalty area.

The teenager drilled home the winner on 69 minutes to leave his side top going into the winter break.

Bayer Munich stay third and were ruthless against bottom-side Hertha Berlin in a 5-2 rout at Munich's Allianz Arena.

Bayern's Belgium defender Daniel van Buyten produced a

pin-point accurate header on 16 minutes before Gomez bagged

his sixth goal in seven games when he converted a close pass from Germany team-mate Philipp Lahm on 31 minutes.

Gomez then turned goal provider when he set up Dutch star Arjen Robben on 33 minutes before rising star Thomas Mueller gave Berlin goalkeeper Jaroslav Drobný no chance to make it 4-0 on 60 minutes.

Hertha's Adrian Ramos and Raffael scored consolation goals on 71 and 90 minutes and Bayern's Ivica Olic hit his side's fifth on 77 minutes.

But Berlin are still relegation candidates as they finish the first half of the season with just

six points and are six points adrift at the foot of the table.

Dortmund went fourth after they celebrated their 100th anniversary as a club with a 1-0 win at home over Freiburg.

The hosts took the lead when Argentina striker Lucas Barrios scored his ninth goal in ten games when he headed past Freiburg's French goalkeeper Simon Pouplin on 19 minutes.

Defending champions Wolfsburg were held to a 2-2 draw by Eintracht Frankfurt to finish eighth in the table, while Bochum pulled away from the relegation zone with a 3-2 win thanks to a late free-kick from defender Christian Fuchs.



PHOTO: AFP

Bayer Leverkusen midfielder Toni Kroos (2nd from R) celebrates his goal with teammates during their Bundesliga tie against Borussia Moenchengladbach in Leverkusen on Saturday.

IN BRIEF

Valencia duo sidelined

AFP, Madrid

Valencia midfielders Carlos Marchena and Pablo Hernandez will miss Sunday's Spanish league match against Deportivo La Coruna because of injury.

Valencia coach Unai Emery left the two Spanish internationals, who both picked up their injuries during their 2-1 Europa League win away to Genoa on Thursday, out of his line-up for the match against sixth-placed Deportivo.

Redknapp in tax trouble

AFP, London

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp will face proceedings over a tax issue, his solicitors said in a statement issued by the Premier League club on Saturday.

Just hours after Redknapp's side won 2-0 at Blackburn, the 62-year-old's day was marred by the news that Revenue officials were ready to take action against him.

Solicitors BCL Burton Copeland said: "Harry Redknapp is extremely surprised and disappointed to have been informed that HMRC (HM Revenue and Customs) intend to institute proceedings against him in the week commencing 11 January 2010."