

Lamps rescues Blues

AFP, London



Chelsea were left four points clear at the top of the English Premier League table after a hard-fought 1-1 draw away to London rivals West Ham on Sunday.

Former Hammers midfielder Frank Lampard kept his nerve to draw Chelsea level from the penalty spot in the 61st minute, three-times having to strike the spot-kick after referee Mike Dean twice ordered a re-take for encroachment.

The penalty award was controversial in itself, with Hammers captain Matthew Upson adamant he had played the ball before bringing down Chelsea substitute Daniel Sturridge.

West Ham, managed by former Chelsea hero Gianfranco Zola, would have gone bottom if they had lost this match.

They went ahead at Upton Park when Alessandro Diamanti scored from the penalty spot after Ashley Cole had fouled Jack Collison.

The result saw the Blues pull away from second-placed reigning champions Manchester United, who themselves lost ground in the title race with a 3-0 loss away to Fulham on Saturday.

In Sunday's other matches, Wolves climbed out of the relegation zone with a 2-0 win at home to Burnley while Birmingham's five-match winning streak in the top flight ended with a 1-1 draw away to Everton.

Goals from Nenad Milijas and Kevin Doyle ensured Wolves finished a controversial week in style by moving up six places in the table.

Wolves manager Mick McCarthy had been widely criticised for his line-up during a 3-0

away defeat by champions Manchester United on Tuesday.

At Old Trafford, McCarthy changed all 10 outfield players from the side that beat Tottenham the previous weekend, with American goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann the only survivor.

But he ended up with the outcome he wanted as Wolves heaped yet more away-day misery on Burnley.

"Did the win justify my midweek team selection? I'm not looking for it at all, justification or vindication," McCarthy said.

"We've had nine points out of 12 since the Birmingham game and people who were here when we played Birmingham would never have thought that.

"It is about all the games, not just about today."

At least McCarthy was still in a job.

Manchester City manager Mark Hughes was sacked on Saturday, just hours after his side defeated Sunderland 4-3 in an Eastlands thriller, and replaced by former Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini.

City's billionaire owner Sheikh Mansour wanted a greater return on his 200-million-pound (225-million-euro) player investment than two wins in 11 Premier League matches.

Hughes though was taken aback by his exit, saying Sunday: "I was given no forewarning as to the club's decision."

"Given the speed with which my successor's appointment was announced, it would appear that the club had made its decision some considerable time ago."

"I am extremely disappointed not to have been given the opportunity to see through my plans at the club," the Welshman added.

Lyon challenge fading

AFP, Paris



Misfiring Lyon extended their run of indifferent form with a 1-1 draw at Monaco on Sunday that leaves them in fourth place in the French top flight, 10 points behind league leaders Bordeaux.

The dominant force of the past decade, Lyon have now won just once in their last seven league matches and their title challenge appears to be fading by the week.

Michel Bastos fired Lyon into a 22nd-minute lead with a sublime 30-yard free-kick that zipped into the bottom-left corner but Monaco drew level 11 minutes before half-time following an error from Lyon goalkeeper Hugo Lloris.

The France international raced from his line in an attempt to field a deep free-kick but Monaco left-back Djimi Traore beat him to the ball, flicking it back over his head into the penalty area where Park Chu-Young volleyed into the unguarded net.

Ovono.

Victory takes Rudi Garcia's side, who will meet Fenerbahce in the Europa League knockout stage, up to third place, nine points behind leaders Bordeaux.

Earlier, Lille's phenomenal run of form continued as they beat third-bottom Le Mans 3-0 to secure their fifth straight win.

The northern club had scored four goals in each of their four previous league wins, while also qualifying for the last 32 of the Europa League, and prevailed through goals from Aurelien Chedjou, Gervinho and Eden Hazard.

Chedjou headed Lille in front while Hazard's 12th-minute free-kick and they could afford the luxury of a missed Florent Balmont penalty before Gervinho finished a slick move to put the hosts 2-0 up on 27 minutes.

Hazard, the 18-year-old Belgian international, stretched Lille's advantage barely two minutes later when he ran from the centre circle before beating visiting goalkeeper Didier

Auxerre climb to seventh while Toulouse, who were eliminated from the Europa League following a 1-0 group-stage defeat at Belgians Club Brugge on Thursday, slip to 13th.

Defending champions

Bordeaux pulled clear at the top of the division after cruising to a 4-1 victory at home to Lorient on Saturday, with striker David Bellion twice on target and Yoann Gourcuff in typically influential mood.

Marseille could have closed to within six points of the leaders but they were held to a 0-0 draw at Saint-Etienne despite the home side having to play with 10 men for over 80 minutes after the eighth-minute dismissal of Greek defender Efstathios Tavlaridis.

Spain are in Group H alongside Chile, Honduras and Switzerland.

Slovenia opt for Johannesburg WC base

AFP, Ljubljana

Slovenia will be based in Johannesburg for the 2010 World Cup finals, the country's football federation announced on Sunday.

Earlier, teenager Toni Kroos scored twice 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.

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

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.

This was Stuttgart's first win under coach Christian Gross who took over from Markus Babbel on December 6 and

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their first success in ten league games since their last victory against Eintracht Frankfurt on September 26.

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