

Mancini off to a flier

AFP, London



Roberto Mancini's reign as Manchester City manager began on a winning note on Saturday but it was another frustrating day for his fellow Italian Carlo Ancelotti as Premier League leaders Chelsea were held to a goalless draw by Birmingham.

City's first match since Mancini's controversial replacement of Mark Hughes ended in a 2-0 win over Stoke that lifted the Abu Dhabi-backed club back to within three points of the top four place targeted by their new Italian manager.

It could hardly have gone any better for the former Inter Milan boss, who was warmly received by the fans before goals from Bulgarian winger Martin Petrov and Carlos Tevez had the points wrapped up by half-time.

"I'm very happy because we won a hard match," Mancini said. "The players were fantastic. We have been working together for only five days and we must improve but it is a good start."

Ancelotti meanwhile struggled to put a convincing positive spin on his side's display after a draw that left Chelsea with just one win in seven matches in all competitions and extended Birmingham's unbeaten run in the league to ten games.

"We had a lot of chances, showed very good heart and the goalkeeper for Birmingham made very good saves," Ancelotti said. "We are disappointed with the result but not the performance."

Birmingham goalkeeper Joe Hart certainly helped earn Alex McLeish's side their point with a string of fine saves.

Tottenham had the opportunity to move up

to third place in the table.

But Harry Redknapp's side could muster no more than a goalless draw from their cross-London trip to Fulham, for whom Clint Dempsey struck the bar with a first-half free-kick.

Liverpool moved back to within five points of a top four finish with a 2-0 win over struggling Wolves at Anfield.

It was a much-needed win for Rafael Benitez's squad but a far from convincing one.

The decisive goals -- a rare header from Steven Gerrard and a Yossi Benayoun strike -- both came after Wolves had been reduced to ten men following a second yellow card for stand-in left-back Stephen Ward.

West Ham clawed themselves out of the relegation zone with a 2-0 win over fellow strugglers Portsmouth.

Gianfranco Zola's side started the day just one point ahead of bottom side Pompey but goals from Alessandro Diamanti, who put the hosts ahead with a first half penalty, and Radoslaw Kovac enabled the Hammers to boost their hopes of beating the drop.

David Nugent's header earned Burnley a 1-1 draw in their Lancashire derby clash with Bolton, who had gone ahead through Matthew Taylor's superb first-half free-kick.

Bolton remain in the bottom three while Burnley are three points clear of the drop zone.

A late equaliser by Marouane Fellaini enabled injured-plagued Everton to snatch a point at Sunderland, who had claimed a deserved first-half lead through a Darren Bent header that was the England striker's 11th goal of the season.

Benni McCarthy's first league goal of the season was cancelled out by Hugo Rodallega's header as Wigan came from behind to secure a 1-1 draw in their Lancashire derby with fellow strugglers Bolton.



Manchester City striker Carlos Tevez (L) acrobatically scores the second goal past Stoke City goalkeeper Thomas Sorensen during their Premier League encounter at the City of Manchester Stadium on Saturday.

IN BRIEF

Atletico loan Maxi to Boca

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid's attacking midfielder Maxi Rodriguez is due to be loaned out to Argentine club Boca Juniors for the rest of the season, Marca sports daily reported here Sunday.

Rodriguez has failed to break into Atletico's first team this term and wants the move to be assured playing time to press his case to be included in Argentina's 2010 World Cup squad.

According to Marca an official from Boca Juniors describes the loan deal as "80 per cent" certain to take place in the January transfer window.

Rodriguez, 29, joined Atletico in 2005, on a five-year contract.

The one stumbling block could be his 2.5 million euro annual salary which may pose a problem for Boca unless he accepts a pay cut.

Sinama-Pongolle heads to Sporting

AFP, Lisbon

Former Liverpool striker Florent Sinama-Pongolle has agreed to move from struggling Spanish side Atletico Madrid to Sporting Lisbon, the Portuguese team announced on Saturday.

"An agreement in principle has been reached with Atletico Madrid and Florent Sinama-Pongolle in view to a transfer on January 1," said a Sporting statement.

According to the Diario de Noticias newspaper, French international Sinama-Pongolle will cost Sporting, who are fifth in the table and 12 points behind leaders Sporting Braga and Benfica, around six million euros.

Sinama-Pongolle, 25, started his career at Le Havre before spending three years at Liverpool between 2003 and 2006.

After two years at Recreativo in Spain, he moved to Atletico Madrid in 2008 but struggled to hold down a first team place in the face of competition from Diego Forlan and Sergio Aguero.

Petrescu quits Urziceni

AFP, Bucharest

Dan Petrescu has quit his job as manager of Romanian champions Unirea Urziceni, the club announced on Saturday.

Petrescu was the architect behind Urziceni's remarkable success, guiding the small town club with a 7,000 capacity ground to last season's league title.

This season Urziceni finished third in their Champions League first round group, to go into the Europa League mix where they meet Liverpool in the second round.

Confirming Petrescu's departure club director Felix Grigore told Romanian news agency Mediafax: "We have finished his contract by mutual agreement."

Urziceni's general manager Mihai Stoica added in an interview with GSP television: "We are going to see which managers are available and will be trying to hire an overseas coach."

Arsenal to fight charge

AFP, London



Arsenal are set to contest a Football Association charge of failing to control their players in a bad-tempered Premier League match against Hull last week.

Arsenal and Hull were both hit with the FA charge after a mass confrontation involving 21 of the 22 players on the field at the Emirates Stadium last Saturday.

The row started after Arsenal's Samir Nasri appeared to tread on the ankle of Hull midfielder Richard Garcia late in the first half. Hull manager Phil Brown has already hit out at the FA because he believes Nasri had deliberately set out to provoke.

However Arsene Wenger, whose side welcome Aston Villa to the Emirates on Sunday, believes the FA have overreacted.

Wenger told arsenal.com: "I think it is harsh but we will try to defend ourselves. I don't think it was a major incident compared to what can happen in a football game."

"At the start, the incident was created by Nasri's involvement but after that it was more players of Hull who were around it than Arsenal players. That's why we will try to defend it."

Both clubs have until January 13 to formally respond to the FA charges.

Brown complained in midweek: "Why are we up for a charge I don't know. I defend the players to the hilt. As far as I am concerned that lad (Nasri) has gone in there with the intent to start a fight, to start a ruck."

"For us to come under criticism yet again is absolutely scandalous, and we'll be defending it."

Wenger will be waiting on the fitness of captain Cesc Fabregas for the visit of fellow Champions League hopefuls Villa.

Fabregas missed the 3-0 win over Hull with a minor hamstring strain but may have recovered sufficiently to be involved.

Tomas Rosicky (hamstring), Nicklas Bendtner (groin) and Robin van Persie (ankle) remain sidelined, along with full-back Gael Clichy (back) and Johan Djourou (knee), while Armand Traore could be ready to return.

Wenger wants throw-ins scraped

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger believes throw-ins should be replaced by 'kick-ins' in a bid to make the game flow more smoothly.

Wenger is unimpressed with the way teams like Stoke have adopted the long throw as a way to put opponents under aerial pressure.

The Frenchman saw his side destroyed by two Rory Delap long-throws that led to goals in their 2-1 defeat at the Britannia Stadium last season.

Now Wenger has suggested that the rules should be changed so that players can use their feet to put the ball back in play rather than throwing it in because it would encourage shorter passes.

He told Arsenal's website: "The rule I would change would be maybe to play throw-ins by foot. Why not? I think it would make the game quicker."

Wenger believes the advantage gained by teams possessing long-throw specialists is unfair.

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Carlo remains calm

AFP, Birmingham



Carlo Ancelotti is convinced that he can still mastermind a Premier League title in his first campaign at Chelsea despite seeing his troops win only once in seven games.

The Italian is refusing to press the panic button after a run that has cost his side the chance to open up a convincing lead over champions Manchester United, who had the chance to cut Chelsea's lead back to two points with victory over struggling Hull on Sunday.

Ancelotti received a major boost ahead of the clash with west London neighbours Fulham on Monday, after striking a deal with the Ivory Coast FA to keep Didier Drogba and Salomon Kalou for one more match before the pair fly out to the African Nations Cup.

But his title hopes were distinctly average in a 0-0 draw at Birmingham on Saturday, with Ancelotti's excruciating afternoon plumbing further depths when Florent Malouda was sent off late on for a second bookable offence.

The Italian however is still convinced the title is heading to Stamford Bridge.

"Our aim is to win the title and we are still top of the league at this time," he stressed.

"Today we are halfway through the season and top so it's good for us. We hope to stay there. We do a good job if we work hard and I think we can still win."

"We have to find other solutions, we have a very good squad. This is not a good result for us. It is not a good moment for us but I do not see a big problem."

"We are missing good players in Nicolas Anelka and Michael Essien but we still played

good football.

"Birmingham and our next opponents Fulham are in good condition and these will be tough games. But I do not see a problem."

While Ancelotti could still consider transfer market moves, Birmingham manager Alex McLeish is mounting a compelling case to be named this season's Premier League manager of the year after a stunning campaign so far at St. Andrew's.

This was their tenth game unbeaten and they were rueing poor fortune of their own when Christian Benitez had a 'goal' harshly disallowed towards the end of the first half.

Birmingham needed England goalkeeper Joe Hart to preserve a deserved point, and McLeish believes the Manchester City youngster could still gatecrash Fabio Capello's World Cup squad.

He said: "I think Joe has come on a ton. He started the season, we spoke about one or two things but he's improved out of sight."

"He's a conscientious big guy, he studies everything and takes everything on the chin to improve from Dave Watson, our goalkeeping coach."

"Joe wants to get better and better, his form has been terrific. The England coaching staff think a lot of him and they will think even more of him after his performances for Birmingham."

Former Scotland boss McLeish added: "We're on a fantastic run, and if you'd said we'd got ten games unbeaten, winning a few games in there, I'd have bitten your hand off."

"The players deserve so much credit, we're running out of superlatives. It's frustrating for the guys on the bench but we can't change the team because of this fantastic run."

Jose to stay at Inter

Football

SOCCERNET

Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho has reiterated his intention to see out the remaining two and a half years on his contract with the Italian champions.

The 46-year-old former Chelsea manager has frequently been linked with a return to the Premier League but has again insisted he plans to honour his Inter deal.

"We all signed a clear contract until 2012, because we want to continue until 2012," he said in Portuguese newspaper Publico. "Yes, there are clauses to finish earlier - that Inter will pay me if they want me out and another that I will pay if I want to leave Inter... all very easy and objective."

Mourinho, who led Porto to Champions League glory in 2004 and Chelsea to back-to-back Premier League titles in 2005 and 2006,

will never deem his job completely secure but is happy with how things are going at the San Siro.

"My job is always in danger because Inter are a team that many want to coach and my teams are always well constructed for the following years," he said. "But if my job is in the balance after winning the championship, being first in the (Serie A) standings and in the knockout phase of the Champions League, imagine how the situation would be for those who fail to meet their objectives."

Mourinho will take his team back to Stamford Bridge to face Carlo Ancelotti's Chelsea in the last 16 of the Champions League in March, and plans to return to west London before then to see how the land lies at his former stomping ground.

"I will return to Stamford Bridge before the Champions League tie to see a game, because I will not return for the first time to play," he said. "That day, I want to be 'cold', but I know it will not be easy. It was a beautiful story. I cannot forget that I will be playing against my friends."



Liverpool star Steven Gerrard (C) is congratulated by teammates after scoring the opening goal during their Premier League clash against Wolverhampton Wanderers at Anfield on Saturday.

Gerrard leads Reds revival

AFP, Liverpool



Steven Gerrard insists Liverpool can turn their season around as they prepare for two vital matches.

The Reds got back on track with a 2-0 win over Wolves at Anfield on Saturday and now face season-defining games against Aston Villa and Tottenham as they look to revitalise their Champions League hopes.

Gerrard scored his first goal since the 2-2 draw with Birmingham on November 9 to set Liverpool on their way against Mick McCarthy's Wolves.

And the England midfielder is adamant that Liverpool, who have already lost seven matches in the Premier League, can begin to move up the table.

He said: "When you're not getting the results that you expect, it's always going to affect confidence and we want to put it right."

"The players are hurting at the moment but we're fighting and we've got the confidence that we will turn it around. "With the attitude that we showed (against Wolves) we'll slowly move up that table and we know where we want to be."

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez was also delighted with his captain's return to goal-scoring form.

And the Spaniard accepts that it will take small steps for Liverpool to get their season back on track and fulfil his ambition of finishing in the top four.

He said: "It was very important for us and very important for him. If he can score goals again, he will have more confidence and it will be really good for the team."

"We had to win against Wolves. We won, a clean sheet, two goals, some chances and we have to go forward."

"The main thing was to get three points. We will see if we can beat Aston Villa and stay closer. We were trying to do well but to win. We have done this."

"We know it is a long race and we have to start winning games in a row so we have done that and hopefully we can win the next one and it will be easier for us to keep the confidence high."

Benitez was also pleased with the impact made by Alberto Aquilani, who made his first start in the Premier League five months after arriving as a replacement for Xabi Alonso in a 20-million-pound move from Roma.

Aquilani has struggled with a long-term ankle injury but Benitez was happy with his first outing in the starting line up in the league.

"He was trying to be involved, to receive the ball and pass the ball and the match fitness is something he will

improve, playing games," the Spaniard said.

"The Premier League is difficult so he will settle, little by little."

Wolves boss Mick McCarthy was angered by the sending off of Stephen Ward in the game at Anfield.

Ward had been booked shortly after the break for a tug on Yossi Benayoun and moments later tripped Lucas.

But referee Andre Marriner initially showed the wrong player, Christophe Berra, the yellow card, before correctly sending Ward off.

The Wolves boss claimed the Liverpool's staff had told fourth official Phil Dowd that Ward had committed the foul and the official had passed that on to Marriner.

McCarthy said: "I'm not convinced by the sending off. He got the right player but he got enough assistance didn't he? They were in Phil Dowd's ear and he didn't know who it was."

"I don't know if Phil Dowd told the referee who it was and if referees can get assistance from the fourth official, then perhaps Ireland should still be in the World Cup."

Ward's sending off proved to be the turning point in the match. Shortly afterwards, Gerrard headed in from Emiliano Insua's cross before Benayoun added a second with 20 minutes remaining.