

MU, Arsenal both held

AFP, London



Premier League leaders Chelsea were the winners on Saturday despite their match being postponed because of the bad weather in England - hold a one point advantage over United with a game in hand after the defending champions were held 1-1 away at in-form Birmingham City.

Arsenal have played the same amount of games as Chelsea, 20, but are three points adrift after coming away with a fortunate 2-2 home draw over Everton, Tomas Rosicky equalising in the final minute.

Birmingham, managed by Alex McLeish - who played under United boss Sir Alex Ferguson when his fellow Scot was in charge of Aberdeen - went ahead in the 39th minute when Cameron Jerome forced the ball home after the visitors failed to clear a corner.

But in the 63rd minute United equalised when Scott Dann unluckily put through his own net at St Andrews.

United finished the match down to 10 men after Scotland international midfielder Darren Fletcher was sent-off for two yellow card offences.

The draw meant Birmingham extended their club record of successive unbeaten top-flight matches to 12 games.

Earlier, Rosicky's stoppage-time leveller rescued a point for title-chasing Arsenal in their 2-2 draw at home to Everton.

Everton were on course for a shock victory after South African midfielder Steven Pienaar scored a brilliant goal to put the visitors, who kicked-off four points above the relegation zone, 2-1 up with nine minutes left.

But there was still time for Czech midfielder Rosicky to equalise after his shot looped off Australian defender Lucas Neill and over United States international goalkeeper Tim Howard.

Everton took a 12th minute lead when midfielder Leon Osman headed in a corner from on-loan United States international Landon Donovan, making his debut for the Merseysiders.

But the Gunners were level at a snow-covered Emirates Stadium before the half-hour mark when Denilson's shot deflected off Osman.

Then, in the 81st minute, Australia's Tim Cahill held the ball up and released Pienaar, who strode through before cheekily lofting a shot over Arsenal goalkeeper Manuel Almunia.

Earlier, Wigan's match against Aston Villa was the only one of the seven Premier League matches postponed this weekend to be called off because of a frozen pitch, the others falling victim to concerns about spectator safety on icy roads surrounding grounds.

However, today's encounter between Manchester City and Blackburn Rovers is still set to take place as scheduled.



Everton midfielder Leon Osman (2nd from R) heads in the opening goal against Arsenal during their Premier League encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Canales sinks Sevilla

AFP, Madrid



Racing Santander teenager Sergio Canales showed why he is regarded as one of the most exciting prospects in Spain scoring both goals as Racing recorded a third straight win with a 2-1 triumph at Sevilla on Saturday.

Midfielder Canales, 18, revealed this week that Sevilla had enquired about his services and he showcased his talents with two classy goals to inflict a third successive league defeat on Sevilla who stay down in fifth.

Canales scored his first league goal to open the scoring on 25 minutes and it was one to remember as he produced a delightful chip to beat Andres Palop.

His second came 12 minutes later and it was another ice cool finish as he rounded Palop, cleverly faked to shoot and then cut inside to dispatch the ball home.

Sevilla were on a high after beating Barcelona 2-1 in the Kings Cup first leg at Camp Nou on Tuesday but found themselves jeered off at half-time trailing 2-0.

The hosts spurned chances to get back in the game, Spanish international Alvaro Negredo going close on three occasions.

Kofi Romaric, left out of the Ivory Coast squad for the African Cup of Nations, pulled a goal back on 61 minutes after a goalmouth scramble and almost equalised with goalkeeper Fabio Coltorti Swiss producing a fine low save. Racing clung on to the three points and move up to 12th spot.

Atletico Madrid put their midweek Kings Cup shambles behind them with a convincing 4-0 win at Valladolid on Saturday to appease their disgruntled fans with a second successive league win.

Coach Quique Sanchez Flores was seething after Atletico's 3-0 first leg cup loss to second division Recreativo Huelva on Wednesday and read the riot act to his players and they responded by blitzing Valladolid.

Goals from Jose Jurado, Diego Forlan, Jose Antonio Reyes and substitute Sergio "Kun" Aguero secured Atletico's first win at Valladolid since 1997 although they stay in 11th position, 10 points off the desired Champions League places.

With 16 minutes gone Atletico took the lead with Reyes coming from deep on the left before the former Arsenal player cut the ball back for Jurado to convert.

Flores was out of the dug-out punching his fist in delight and the second goal came on 32 minutes through Forlan.

It has been a tough season for Forlan and this was his first league goal since the beginning of December and only his fifth of the season compared with the 32 he plundered last season to collect the 'Pichichi' crown for the league's top-scorer.

Close to the hour mark Reyes wrapped up the game with an impressive volley and Agueero made it four in the final minute to cap a miserable night for Valladolid who hover three points above the relegation zone.

In Sunday's other match 10-man Villarreal saw a run of five straight home wins come to an end with a 1-1 draw against Almeria.

Brazilian Nilmar headed the hosts into a 40th minute lead but Miguel Corona levelled with a 67th minute penalty conceded by Ivan Marcano.

Marcano's night got worse when he was sent off late on with a two-footed lunge earning him a second yellow card.

Villarreal stay ninth seven points off the Champions League places while Almeria move four points above the relegation zone.



PHOTO: AFP

Racing Santander midfielder Sergio Canales (L) celebrates one of his two goals against Sevilla during their Primera Liga clash at the Sanchez Pizjuan Stadium on Saturday.

Fergie's new ref rant

AFP, Birmingham



Sir Alex Ferguson may have landed himself in further trouble with the Football Association (FA) after his latest withering assessment of a referee.

The Manchester United manager was furious with Mark Clattenburg for sending-off Scotland midfielder Darren Fletcher towards the end of the English champions' 1-1 Premier League draw away to Birmingham City here on Saturday.

Ferguson has only recently served a two-match touchline ban for criticising the fitness of referee Alan Wiley earlier this season and has a two-match suspended sentence hanging over his head from the FA.

But that did not stop him from indulging in another spot of referee baiting at St Andrews following a match where a win for United would have seen them replace Chelsea at the top of the table.

Fletcher was dismissed for two yellow cards, the second of which was for a foul on Birmingham goalscorer Cameron Jerome three minutes from the end of another sub-standard

performance by Ferguson's side, just a week after their FA Cup capitulation to third division Leeds United.

Rather than concentrate on the deficiencies of his players, Ferguson opted for a concerted attack on Clattenburg, saying: "I saw him referee Arsenal against Spurs recently and someone needed to take out an axe to get booked and then he sends someone off for that. It was very, very soft."

"I've not seen a softer sending-off for a long time, absolutely ridiculous."

"There were some weird and wonderful decisions going on out there. The linesman gives offside for our goal and it's an own-goal! (which negates offside). And he still gives offside."

Ferguson, who may well be asked for an explanation of his comments by FA officials, insisted he was happy with a draw against an in-form Birmingham side managed by Alex McLeish, who played for the United manager when he was previously in charge of Aberdeen.

The United boss made seven changes from the team beaten by Leeds, but was forced to leave out Dimitar Berbatov because of a knee injury that is causing some concern for the Bulgarian striker.

"Berbatov has been carrying a little knee

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IN BRIEF

Togo to hold 3 days of mourning

AFP, Lome

Togo will hold three days of mourning for the assistant coach and squad spokesman of its national football team, who were killed in a recent gun attack, Prime Minister Gilbert Fossoun Houngbo said Saturday.

"The government has decided to decree three days of national mourning beginning on Monday," Houngbo said on national television.

Hooded separatist rebels opened fire as the team's buses crossed into the restive Angolan enclave of Cabinda to participate in the African Nations Cup on Friday.

Togo later pulled its team from the 22-day competition, but the Confederation of African Football and Angola announced the tournament would go on amid tightened security.

Ghana demands extra security

AFP, Accra

Ghana is demanding extra security for its players at the Africa Cup of Nations in Angola following Friday's deadly attack on the Togolese squad, the government said on Sunday.

Ghana is one of the teams based in the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda, where separatist rebels claimed responsibility for Friday's ambush that left at least two dead and several wounded.

Ghana President John Atta Mills "has demanded extra security for ... players ahead of the Nations Cup scheduled to kick-start in Angola later today," Information Minister Zita Okaikoi said in a statement.

"The safety of our players and any other participating countries is very important hence the need for extra security," she added.

Ono returning to Japan

AFP, Bochum

Japanese international midfielder Shinji Ono is to leave Bundesliga side Bochum and return home to play for Shimizu S-Pulse, the German side announced on Saturday.

The 30-year-old 2002 Asian Player of the Year has spent two years in Germany but has struggled to get much first-team football largely due to a succession of injuries.

Ono played for Japan in three World Cups and won the 2002 UEFA Cup with Dutch side Feyenoord before joining Bochum in January 2008.

"Shinji is a remarkable player and a good man, but during his time at Bochum he was badly hit by injuries and was unable to play as much as we would have wanted," said Bochum general manager Thomas Ernst.

Attack overshadows ANC

Football

AFP, Luanda

The African Nations Cup prepared for a subdued start Sunday with the opening game between Angola and Mali overshadowed by a deadly separatist attack on the Togolese team.

At least two people were killed and nine injured in Friday's ambush in the northern Cabinda enclave, darkening the spirit of what was intended to be a feast of African football ahead of this year's World Cup in South Africa.

Angola, finding its feet again seven years after a devastating civil war that killed at least half a million people, had hoped the arrival of world-class stars like Didier Drogba, Michael Essien and Togo's Emmanuel Adebayor would open a new chapter in history.

Instead the headlines are likely to remain focused on Friday's 20-minute hail of bullets 10 kilometres (six miles) from the Congo-Brazzaville border, no matter how compelling the football over the next three weeks.

The Forces for the Liberation of the State of Cabinda-Military Position (FLEC-PM) claimed the ambush and said attacks would continue because African football boss Issa Hayatou had refused to move

games scheduled in Cabinda.

"This is going to continue, because the nation is at war, because Hayatou persists," the group's secretary general, Rodrigues Mingas, told AFP by telephone from France where he is in exile.

Togo's government ordered the team to withdraw from the competition, to allow for grieving.

But players said they would stay on, even as goalkeeper Kodjovi Obilale lay in a Johannesburg hospital recovering from surgery to bullet wounds to his lower back and abdomen.

Questions were inevitably asked about the wisdom of the event's organisers, the Confederation of African Football (CAF), in placing matches in a known separatist hotspot.

"We are all a little shocked and we're asking why CAF were holding games in Cabinda. How can you organise a tournament in a state of war?" Togo international Thomas Dossevi told AFP.

While the attack dominated news bulletins across the globe, Angolan state media took hours to even mention it with Friday's main TV news broadcast leading with an Angolan team training session.

The wall of silence was broken later when an Angolan government minister condemned the rebels' in a prepared statement.

Nations Cup organisers insisted the show would go on. "Our great concern is for the players, but the championship goes ahead," CAF spokesman Souleymane Habuba said late Friday.

On Saturday Angola's Prime Minister Paulo Kassoma called the attack an "isolated act" and guaranteed teams' security. Some commentators raised questions about what the killing in Cabinda meant for the first World Cup on the continent thousands of miles away in South Africa in five months' time.

But 2010 World Cup chief Danny Jordaan gave the short shrift to the notion of any link, likening the situation to the bombing in London the day after the city was awarded the 2012 Olympics.

"It's nothing to do with it and I think everybody understands it has nothing to do with South Africa," he said.

"When there was a bomb in London no-one said we should not have 2012 in London so we cannot have double standards."

Hosts Angola will open the tournament at 1900 GMT Sunday by lining up against Mali at Luanda's Chinese-constructed November 11 stadium -- named to commemorate the day Angola achieved independence in 1975.

The competition may be going ahead, but no one will forget the bloody build-up.

Inter break Siena hearts

AFP, Rome



Champions Inter Milan scored two late goals to stun rock-bottom Siena

4-3 at the San Siro on Saturday to open up an 11-point lead at the top of Serie A.

Earlier in the day 10-man AS Roma moved up to fourth and the final Champions League qualification position with a 1-0 home success against woeful Chievo.

Inter looked to be heading for their first home defeat under Jose Mourinho as they trailed 3-2 with just two minutes remaining.

But Dutch playmaker Wesley Sneijder curled home his second free-kick of the game and then three minutes into injury-time substitute Walter Samuel crashed home the winner to send the Inter faithful wild.

It was rough luck on the Serie A basement-sitters who fully deserved something from a thrilling match.

Even without Algeria forward Abdul Kader Ghezzal Siena gave a good account of themselves from the off.

Macedonia forward Goran Pandev, on his home debut for Inter, had the first clear sight of goal on eight minutes and after jinking in from the right side of the box his low left foot shot was tipped around the post by goalkeeper Gianluca Curci.

The visitors then stunned their hosts on 18 minutes as former Middlesbrough for-

ward Massimo Maccarone ran unchallenged from the half-way line before smacking a 30-yard screamer past Julio Cesar's despairing dive into the top corner.

Inter's response was rapid as Brazil right-back Maicon stormed forward and shot wide from just outside the area.

Three minutes later, though, Diego Milito equalised after running onto Sneijder's long ball, cutting

inside Sanchez Cribari with embarrassing ease and curling the ball around Curci.

Full normality seemed to have been restored on 36 minutes when Sneijder scored his first free-kick from 20 yards but 60 seconds later Siena equalised.

Reginaldo turned Inter captain Javier Zanetti easily out on the right flank and his cross was missed by all until Swede Albin Ekdal arrived at the back post to slip the ball

under Julio Cesar.

A shock was then truly on the cards 20 minutes into the second half as Maccarone bagged his second as he beat Julio Cesar at the near post after arriving unmarked on the edge of the box to meet Reginaldo's pull back.

But two minutes from the end Sneijder hit a 25-yard special and then Samuel, playing at left-back but thrown forward for the final moments, turned on the edge of the box to shoot left footed in off the far post.

Inter's main rivals Juventus and AC Milan will try to limit their losses as they clash in the big game of the weekend on Sunday in Turin.

Roma survived the 11th-minute sending off of goalkeeper Doni as Daniele De Rossi scored the only goal of the game in the opening minute, with former Italy striker Luca Toni making his debut following his loan move from Bayern Munich.



PHOTO: AFP

Inter Milan defender Walter Samuel is ecstatic after scoring a dramatic 93rd minute winner during their Serie A tie against Siena at San Siro on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP