

Gunners go top

Kuyt fires Liverpool

AFP, London



Arsenal went top of the English Premier League after coming from 2-0 down to beat Bolton Wanderers 4-2 on Wednesday.

The Gunners needed to win by two clear goals to go ahead of Chelsea on goal difference but that looked unlikely as they fell two goals down inside half an hour, just three days after winning 2-0 away to the same opponents.

Bolton went in front through Gary Cahill before Matt Taylor's penalty doubled their lead as they looked to give Owen Coyle his first win as manager.

However, Arsenal pulled one back before half-time through Tomas Rosicky before goals from Cesc Fabregas, Thomas Vermaelen

and Andrey Arshavin sealed their comeback at the Emirates Stadium.

Meanwhile, Liverpool moved to within a point of the top four and a place in next season's Champions League with a 2-0 win at home to fourth-placed Tottenham Hotspur at Anfield.

Dutch striker Dirk Kuyt gave the Merseysiders an early lead before making sure of victory with a stoppage-time penalty.

At the Emirates, Bolton needed just seven minutes to take the lead when Cahill scored from Kevin Davies's flick-on.

Bolton doubled their lead in the 28th minute when Lee Chung-Yong was brought down in the box by Denilson and Taylor scored from the penalty spot.

But Arsenal reduced the deficit in the 43rd minute when Rosicky fired in a shot at

the near post.

And the Gunners were level, in controversial fashion, seven minutes after the break.

Arsenal's William Gallas was fortunate not to be sent-off for a crude tackle on Mark Davies but referee Alan Wiley let play continue.

The ball eventually fell to Fabregas, who evaded a couple of challenges before shooting through the legs of Bolton keeper Jussi Jaaskelainen.

Worse was to follow for Wanderers with goalscoring centre-half Vermaelen firing the Gunners in front in the 65th minute with a half-volley that went in off the post.

Then, with five minutes remaining, Arsenal got the fourth goal they needed to go top when Russia forward Arshavin, after a neat one-two with Eduardo, slammed a shot past Jaaskelainen.



Arsenal defender Thomas Vermaelen (R) scores the third goal against Bolton Wanderers during their Premier League encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Roger stamps authority

AFP, Melbourne



Roger Federer and the Williams sisters stamped their authority on the Australian Open Thursday, but former world number one Ana Ivanovic was sent packing.

The Swiss world number one took his place in the third round with a straight sets demolition of hapless Romanian Victor Hanescu.

Watched by Britain's Prince William, he dominated in the 6-2, 6-3, 6-2 rout.

Federer, bidding for his 16th Grand Slam title and fourth Australian Open, will now play Spanish 31st-seed Albert Montanes.

"I'm happy with the way I played today. I think the opponent was very different to the one I played in the first round," he said.

"I got off to a good start and kind of never looked back. I moved well and played some amazing shots. It was great."

Defending champion Serena showed she was still the woman to beat, barely breaking a sweat as she crushed Petra Kvitova of the Czech Republic, 6-2, 6-1.

Much of the talk this year has been about the return of Belgian pair Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin, but Williams made clear that anyone who wants to lift the trophy will have a fight on their hands.

"Today I was better than my first round match, I was moving better, better energy. All round a lot better," she said.

"I feel like I could have played a lot better today."

Sister Venus, a seven-time Grand Slam champion but yet to win in Melbourne, was more workmanlike, grinding down Australian Sybille Bammer 6-2, 7-5.

Men's third seed Novak Djokovic overcame some first set wobbles to ease past Swiss Marco Chiudinelli 3-6, 6-1, 6-1, 6-3 and set up a third round with Uzbekistan's Denis

Istomin.

More impressive was Russian sixth seed Nikolay Davydenko, who is shaping as a serious title contender after extending his win streak to 11 matches.

The 28-year-old has yet to win a Grand Slam and has never been in a final but his 6-3,

20 for the first time in five years, and Thursday's flop was the sixth time in her past seven tournaments where she had failed to go beyond the second round.

In other matches, Danish fourth seed Caroline Wozniacki breezed past Germany's Julia Goerges 6-3, 6-1 while ninth-



PHOTO: AFP

World number one Roger Federer of Switzerland plays a forehand against Victor Hanescu of Romania during their Australian Open second round tie in Melbourne on Thursday.

6-3, 6-0 disposal of Ukrainian Ilya Marchenko served notice that his time may have come.

For Ivanovic, it looks like her time has past.

The former finalist and world number one put in an error-riddled performance to crash out to Argentinian Gisela Dulko 6-7 (6/8), 7-5, 6-4.

She has slipped down the top rankings to be outside the top

seeded Russian Vera Zvonareva had an easy 6-0, 6-3 win over Czech Iveta Benesova.

Former finalist Marcos Baghdatis of Cyprus advanced past David Ferrer 4-6, 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-3, 6-1 and will next face Australian Lleyton Hewitt.

Ninth seed Fernando Verdasco and 10th seed Jo-Wilfried Tsonga also progressed.

IN BRIEF

Kanoute ends int'l career

AFP, Lubango

Mali striker Frederic Kanoute retired from international football on Wednesday following his team's first round elimination at the Africa Cup of Nations.

"That's life. I'm sorry I couldn't succeed in helping my team go further at the Nations Cup which now marks my retirement," the 32-year-old told the Angolan Angop news agency.

French-born Kanoute, who made his international debut in 2004, scored 23 goals in 38 appearances.

Real plunged into darkness in Albania

AFP, Tirana

Real Madrid, who were reportedly paid 2.5 million euros to play an Albanian oil magnate's team, were plunged into darkness after an embarrassing power cut at half-time on Wednesday.

The second half of the game between the Spanish giants and Gramozi Erseke started 90 minutes late after a blackout forced both sides back into the dressing room.

An emergency generator was quickly installed, reported local media, before the Albanian football federation announced that the stadium director had been sacked for failing to guarantee the match passed off smoothly.

The opposition Albanian socialist party condemned the incident.

"Albania has been made a laughing stock," said a party statement.

Proceeds from the match, which Real won 2-1, were to be donated to the victims of flooding in the north of the country.

Loew calls time on Frings's Germany career

AFP, Paris

Germany midfielder Torsten Frings was told on Wednesday his international career is over after national coach Joachim Loew said the Werder Bremen star will play no part in his World Cup plans.

The 33-year-old won 79 caps and scored 10 goals for his country, but has been out of favour since October 2008 and Loew told the midfielder he now plays no role in his plans for June's tournament in South Africa.

The defensive midfielder's last international appearance was the 1-0 defeat to Norway in a friendly in February 2009.

Frings was at the centre of a row in October 2008 when captain Michael Ballack accused Loew of not showing his senior players respect after Frings was dropped for the 2-1 win over Russia in a World Cup qualifier match.

Tevez angry at Neville

Football

AFP, London

Carlos Tevez has admitted that he was hurt by Gary Neville's assertion that Manchester United were right to sell him to Manchester City and accused his former team-mate of being disrespectful ahead of this week's stormy derby clash.

Neville's provocative comments inspired Tevez to score two goals in City's 2-1 League Cup semifinal first leg win on Tuesday and the Argentina striker claimed he had been justified in goading his former team-mate after the first of them.

Neville, who was warming up on the touchline, responded with a one-fingered gesture that is being examined by the English Football Association but is not expected to lead to any disciplinary action.

Tevez admitted he had been enraged by Neville's pre-match comments.

"Gary was very disrespectful, which is out of character, but he didn't know the whole story of why I left Manchester United and I believe I

deserved his respect," the striker said.

"We achieved a lot together at United, I was the second top scorer there in my first season at the club and I deserve respect from my fellow professionals."

Tevez, who celebrated his second goal with an ear-cupping gesture to the United directors and dugout, said he felt he was justified in making his point.

"Football is a form of theatre and it was just a form of banter," he said. "There was nothing malicious intended. I was not trying to incite anyone but I was entitled to say to Neville that he should have been more respectful."

"For the second goal I ran to the touchline and cupped my ears and looked up to the part of the ground where the United directors were sitting, and also to Ferguson in the dugout, because I wanted them to know this was my response to them saying I was not worth the money."

"People from United have been speaking about me publicly and criticising me but I wanted to do my talking on the pitch because that was the best way of responding to all these people, such as Neville, who were saying United were right to let me go."

Villa win a thriller

Football

AFP, Birmingham

Aston Villa booked their first Wembley final appearance in a decade after a 6-4 victory over Blackburn Rovers in the second leg of their League Cup semifinal here on Wednesday.

Victory at Villa Park saw Martin O'Neill's men win the tie 7-4 on aggregate and they will now face either Manchester City or Manchester United in the final.

But his pre-match claim that this was the best Villa team their supporters had seen in 20 years looked hollow as a double from Nikola Kalinic put Rovers 2-0 up.

Villa endured a dreadful opening 25 minutes as they squandered the first leg advantage James Milner had given them in a 1-0 win at Ewood Park before the tie swung in their favour with the sending off of Rovers' Christopher Samba five minutes before half-time.

Milner converted the penalty, which resulted from

Samba's foul in bringing down Gabriel Agbonlahor and added a second goal to cap a wonderful personal display which will only further enhance his England credentials as Villa moved within a match of winning their first trophy in 14 years.

But Blackburn continued to push Villa all the way, even a man down.

After Kalinic's double, Stephen Warnock converted at the far post, following Ashley Young's cross, to put Villa back into the tie and make amends for his earlier error that gave Rovers such an emphatic start.

Warnock was at fault at the far post, failing to challenge Croatia's Kalinic for David Dunn's corner under the crossbar and the Rovers striker's header struck Warnock on the head before beating American goalkeeper Brad Guzan.

Villa were two down before the half hour mark when Kalinic started the move, which resulted in him tapping home the rebound after Martin Olsson's header from Morten Gamst Pedersen's cross had been half saved by Guzan.

Villa simply could not get to grips with Rovers' five-man midfield, but that all changed when Samba was shown a straight red card for his trip on Agbonlahor as the pair chased Emile Heskey's through ball.

Milner beat Paul Robinson from the spot before an own goal from Steven Nzonzi and further goals from Agbonlahor and Heskey left Villa with a seemingly comfortable lead.

At that point they could be forgiven for turning their thoughts to whether they played Manchester United or Manchester City, but at least Rovers demonstrated some character of their own to push Villa close.

Olsson produced a stunning volley from Gael Givet's cross to reduce the deficit and when Brett Emerton's volley from the edge of the area forced its way through a crowded penalty area, their were some nervous moments for Villa to endure.

But Ashley Young rounded off the evening with a wonderful solo effort, running from half way to beat Robinson with a curling shot.

COPPA ITALIA Fiorentina reach semis

AFP, Rome

Romania captain Adrian Mutu scored a brace as Fiorentina beat holders Lazio 3-2 at home in the Italian Cup quarterfinals on Wednesday.

With a place in Europe on offer for the winners, both teams picked a full strength side, a rarity in the much-maligned Coppa Italia.

The hosts were off to a great start as Mutu gave them the lead on nine minutes and they seemed to have one foot in the semifinals when he doubled their advantage a minute before the break.

Mauro Zarate then pulled a goal back five minutes after the restart.

Dane Per Kroldrup restored La Viola's two-goal advantage on 59 minutes before Tommaso Rocchi ensured a grandstand finish when he reduced the arrears midway through the second period.

The other three last eight ties will all be played next week with Inter Milan against Juventus at the San Siro the pick of the games.

MU debt tops 700m pounds

AFP, London

Manchester United's parent company's debts have topped 700 million pounds, accounts filed on Wednesday revealed.

Red Football Joint Venture Ltd, the company owned by United's American owners the Glazer family, had total debts of 716.5 million pounds (1.17 billion dollars) at the end of June 2009, up from 699 million pounds a year earlier.

The figures will intensify mounting concern among the club's supporters that the cost of servicing United's debt is acting as a brake on investment in players.

Almost one third of the debt is in the form of 'payment in kind' loans from hedge funds which have to be repaid at a 14.25 per cent rate of interest.

The amount of Red Football's debt in this form increased from 175 million pounds to 202 million in the 12 months to June 2009 and accounted for a substantial proportion of the 68.5 million pounds the company paid in interest over the year.

The sale of Cristiano Ronaldo to Real Madrid for 80 million pounds ensured that the company was in profit, but only to the tune of 6.4 million pounds, compared with a loss of 47 million pounds in 2008.

The Glazers last week unveiled plans to restructure the company's debts by issuing a 500 million pound bond.

If fully subscribed, the bond should enable the parent company to reduce the cost of financing its debt but it seems inevitable that the heavy debt burden will continue to weigh heavily on United for years to come.

Egypt keep winning

AFP, Luanda



Egypt maintained their faultless Africa Cup of Nations' title defence and World Cup qualifiers Nigeria became the latest team to progress to the quarterfinals in Angola on Wednesday.

Egypt had already assured their last eight ticket but finished the first round with a 2-0 win over Benin in Benguela to top Group C with a maximum nine points.

They are the only one of the 15 Cup contenders not to shed a point in the opening fortnight.

Egypt, who missed out on a ticket to South Africa 2010 in last November's stormy playoff with Algeria, continued their seemingly charmed path with goals from Ahmed Al-Mohammadi and Emad Motaeb earning them a last eight date against the Group D runners-up - Cameroon, Tunisia or Gabon, on Monday.

For all the pre-competition hype promoting Ivory Coast as favourites it is the six-time champions who have put up a faultless first round display.

This latest win stretched their record unbeaten run in the Africa Cup of Nations to 15 while the game was also a personal milestone for skipper Ahmed Hassan who won his 169th cap to tie the Egyptian record for most international appearances.

Despite the scoreline, Egypt assistant coach, Shawki Gharib insisted the winning margin should have been more decisive.

And he added: "We are here to defend our crown as champions of Africa. All the games here are tough, but we are here to fight and in the end succeed. This is a feeling shared by the entire team."

Benin coach Michel Desuyter said his team have learned lessons in Angola. "We were unlucky not to make the impact we had hoped for here. We have taken some lessons from this experience and we will continue to work hard for us to do far better next time," said the French coach.

In Lubango a double either side of the break from Russia-based Osaze Odemwingie and a late contribution from substitute Obafemi Martins earned Nigeria a comfortable 3-0 win over Mozambique.

The Super Eagles now progress to a quarterfinal tie against the winners of Group D.

They join Ivory Coast, Angola, Algeria, Ghana and the Egyptians in the next stage with the final two places to be decided on Thursday with the final batch of Group D games.

Odemwingie said: "I'm happy for the team. We had a lot of pressure on us, but since the start of the competition we have made daily progress, from the goalkeepers to the strikers."

Under-fire Nigeria coach Shuaibu Amodu added: "My job is to do a good CAN - I can't avoid the critics. I'm happy that the boys were able to deliver the goods."

"As for our next rivals let me enjoy this victory today before speaking about Cameroon or any other team."

Mozambique coach Maart Nooij commented: "I can't be disappointed, my players gave everything they had to give. We arrived here with our heads held high, and we're leaving with our heads held high."

On Thursday a draw against Zambia will secure a last-eight appearance for Gabon, while World Cup-bound Cameroon will join them in a win over 2004 champions Tunisia.