



Tottenham Hotspurs striker Peter Crouch (C) scores the opening goal against Fulham during their Premier League encounter at White Hart Lane on Tuesday.

Spurs see off Fulham

AFP, London



Tottenham retained their place in the Premier League's top four with a 2-0 win over Fulham on Tuesday as Liverpool's hopes of securing a return to the Champions

League next season suffered another setback. Despite the return of club captain Steven Gerrard from injury, Rafael Benitez's men were listless in a goalless stalemate at struggling Wolves.

But the Liverpool manager was defiantly upbeat after a result that means his side are unbeaten in five matches in the league.

"We had two or three chances in the first half and it was same in the second but our final pass not the best," the Spaniard said.

"But it is another clean sheet and everyone is working really hard, so I think it is really positive."

The draw leaves Liverpool three points adrift of fourth-placed Tottenham, who were always in control of their London derby clash with Fulham at White Hart Lane.

"Three points -- that was the main thing tonight, but I think the win was well deserved tonight," said Spurs boss Harry Redknapp.

Spurs went ahead mid-way through the first half through Peter Crouch, who fired home after being teed up by Luka Modric following a wonderful piece of improvisation from the Croatia playmaker.

David Bentley made sure of the win with a second-half free-kick that found the net with the help of a deflection off Bjorn Helge Riise which wrong-footed Fulham's Australian

goalkeeper, Mark Schwarzer.

At the other end of the table, it was a memorable night for Bolton, who claimed their first league win under new manager Owen Coyle, at the expense of his former club Burnley.

Lee Chung-Yong's 35th-minute strike proved enough to earn Bolton a 1-0 win that lifted them out of the relegation zone.

As a result of West Ham and Wolves both picking up a point apiece, Burnley dropped into the drop zone for the first time this season.

Predictably, Coyle was given a hostile reception from the visiting fans, who hurled "Judas" insults at the man they used to refer to as "God."

A more appropriate biblical reference, Coyle wryly reminded his critics, would be Moses, given his achievement in leading Burnley to the promised land of the Premier League.

West Ham had to settle for a 1-1 draw at bottom club Portsmouth after taking the lead at Fratton Park.

The Hammers had gone ahead seven minutes into the second-half. Alessandro Diamanti curled a corner from the right towards the back post and, after it had been deflected goalwards by Pompey defender Younes Kaboul, the ball ended up in the net off the thigh of Matthew Upson.

The Hammers looked strong favourites to go on and take all three points at that stage, but Portsmouth snatched an equaliser with just under quarter of an hour left.

John Utaka played in Danny Webber and the substitute slotted his finish through the legs of Hammers' goalkeeper Robert Green for his first Premier League goal.

GHANA V NIGERIA West African derby

AFP, Luanda



Ghana face neighbours Nigeria in a charged west African derby here Thursday with the prize a ticket to the Africa Cup of Nations final.

The semi-finalists who face off at Luanda's 11 November stadium made it through in wildly contrasting fashions.

While four-time winners Ghana impressed in their 1-0 quarter-final win over hosts Angola, Nigeria laboured to a goalless extra-time draw with Zambia, only prevailing on penalties, with Israeli-based goalkeeper Victor Enyeama converting the decisive spot kick for a 5-4 win.

Despite their far from impressive performance Ghana coach Milovan Rajevic is too wily a coach to take Nigeria's form in Benguela at face value.

"If you just look at Nigeria's quarter-final performance it can create a false impression," warned the Serb, speaking as ever with the help of his trusty translator.

"Yesterday (Tuesday) they showed they were an experienced team who knew what they wanted. You can't draw any conclusions from that game, you have to look at the bigger picture."

"Take for example Ivory Coast. They didn't play very well against Burkina Faso, then showed they could play a lot better in their next

matches." Rajevic has worked wonders to get Ghana this far given the injury crisis he has had to contend with, Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien among a host of key players out injured.

Yet he said he wasn't surprised at Ghana's progress to the semi-finals.

"When you consider we have eight younger players from Ghana's Under-20 World Cup winning team combined with some experienced players it's an excellent mix."

"My team has proved its quality, they know how to compete, they are tough, and there is an excellent atmosphere and spirit in the squad."

Rajevic is due to welcome back Norwegian-based midfielder Anthony Annan, who has missed all of Ghana's matches in Angola up to now.

"Anthony is recovering well and we can use him for the semi-final," Rajevic confirmed.

However, he will be without Agyemang Opoku, who is suspended.

Rajevic, meanwhile, may be a 'blow in' from Serbia but he doesn't need reminding of the importance Ghanaians attach to beating Nigeria.

"There is a definite rivalry between the two countries. On top of that this is a semi-final in the Africa Cup of Nations, with a place in the final up for grabs."

Recent history is on Ghana's side, after they knocked out Nigeria in the quarter-finals at the 2008

competition on home soil.

Asamoah Gyan scored the decisive goal in Ghana's quarter-final win over the hosts in Luanda on Sunday and the Rennes striker is relishing facing Nigeria again.

Gyan said: "Every Ghanaian knows how important it is to play Nigeria. We are ready for them and prepared and we will stick to the game plan that the coach has mapped out for us."

"We beat Nigeria two years ago. We have a lot of young guys in the team but we are concentrated and we will do everything possible to win."

Ghana are four time winners of the competition but their last title dates back to 1982.

Nigeria, meanwhile, champions in 1980 and 1994, have yet to catch fire in Angola, and will have to put in a more convincing display than they did against Zambia to see off Ghana.

Nigeria's under-fire coach Shaibu Amodu said after edging Zambia: "I was worried for the reputation of Nigeria, not for my job. It wouldn't have been good to once again be knocked out in the quarter-finals."

"We've said from day one that we have a team that can win this tournament. I know that I have the players to win it."

"We didn't play very well against Zambia but we showed how to play as a team."

"We're not at our best at the moment but we are improving all the time, and in five months (at the World Cup) we'll be a lot better."

IN BRIEF Germany to unveil new strip

AFP, Berlin

Germany will unveil their new alternative strip ahead of the 2010 World Cup when they play Argentina in a warm-up friendly wearing black shirts.

While Germany's first-choice strip includes their traditional white shirt, the "Mannschaft" will don black shirts, white shorts and black socks for the March 3 friendly at Munich's Allianz Arena.

The design of the new black strip is inspired by the first appearance of a Germany team, when they won 7-0 against the White Rover club, whose side contained nine Englishmen, in Paris on December 12, 1898.

Hoeness slams FIFA

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich chief Uli Hoeness has criticised FIFA's decision to award the hosting of the World Cup to South Africa and said he will not be going because of safety fears.

The World Cup will be held in the Republic, and on African soil, for the first time from June 11-July 11.

But Bayern president Hoeness told German agency SID: "I will not travel to South Africa."

"I was never a fan of the World Cup being held in South Africa, or anywhere on the African continent, as long as safety aspects are not clarified 100 per cent."

Hoeness did not elaborate on which "safety aspects" he was concerned about, but added: "I have always thought it was wrong."

"Now it makes no sense to moan about it anymore, we simply have to try and do the best with it."

C'Ron gets 2-match ban

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo Tuesday received a two-match suspension for a red card he picked up at the weekend, the disciplinary committee of the Spanish football league announced.

It said the world's most expensive player had been punished "for resorting to dangerous play that caused an injury" to an opponent.

It also fined Real 180 euros and Ronaldo 600 euros.

Ronaldo spoiled a stellar two-goal display on Sunday by getting sent off after a stray elbow caught Danish defender Patrick Mtiliga, who tugged the Portuguese winger's shirt during the 2-0 win over Malaga.

Real's sporting director, Jorge Valdano, described the referee's decision as "unfair and very hard."

But, speaking prior to the disciplinary committee's decision, he told Spain's COPE radio that Real "will accept any decision" by the body.

The former Manchester United star said Monday he also felt his red card was unjust.

Egypt fight Algeria again

AFP, Benguela



The die is cast for the Africa Cup of Nations semifinal between fierce regional rivals Egypt and Algeria here less than two months on from when two qualifying matches for a World Cup ticket left a long trail of bitterness and violence.

Algeria will feature at the World Cup in South Africa later this year only after they pipped their fellow north Africans in a play-off in Sudan after both teams were tied on the same points and same goal difference at the end of their group campaign that included Zambia and Rwanda.

The Algeria team bus was attacked by Egyptian fans in Cairo ahead of a World Cup qualifier that the Pharaohs won 2-0 to force a play-off in Sudan, and violence also erupted in Khartoum after Algeria won the play-off to qualify for the World Cup.

Problems also flared in France, as well as in both Algeria and Egypt. These led to political tensions between the two governments with an Egyptian foreign ministry spokesman saying the Algerian government had a responsibility for the safety of Egyptians living in Algeria.

Egypt striker Amr Zaki heightened the tensions when he said on his personal website that he would not be interested in joining English Premier League side Portsmouth because they have two Algeria players on their books - Nadir Belhadj and Hassan Yebda.

The bitter rivalry between the two countries dates far back to the 1978 All-Africa Games hosted by Algeria when the Egypt football team were involved in a free-for-all brawl after a game against Libya and

Algerian spectators joined in on the side of the Libyans.

In 1989, Egypt beat Algeria to reach the 1990 World Cup in Italy. After the match, midfielder Lakhdar Belloumi allegedly blinded the Egyptian team doctor with a bottle. He was later sentenced by an Egyptian court.

The following year, Egypt refused to feature in the Nations Cup in Algeria even after they qualified for the tournament.

The last time both teams clashed at the Nations Cup was six years ago in the Tunisian coastal city of Sousse with Algeria running away 2-1 winners.

That was Egypt's last loss in the event to date and they have since compiled an unbeaten record of 17 matches in the competition.

Despite missing several of their top stars including Mohamed Aboutrika and Amr Zaki, the Pharaohs have defied their critics with their run in Angola.

They were stretched by Cameroon's revenge-seeking Indomitable Lions in Monday's quarter-final, but they have a genuine match winner in skipper Ahmed Hassan, who quickly got over his own goal to shoot his team into the next round.

"Against Cameroon, we were partially focused on the potential meeting with Algeria. This affected our performance," veteran defender Wael Gomaa admitted.

"We are eager to reach the final and win the cup in order to compensate the fans after our failure to make the World Cup."

For long periods on Monday, Cameroon had Egypt on their backfoot and but for an incorrect decision to allow Ahmed Hassan's second goal on 95 minutes, the Indomitable Lions could well have staged a late fightback.

Mohamed Zidan has caused some

controversy by likening this match to "a war", which Egypt have to win to prove they are a better team than Algeria.

Sayed Mowad has followed up by saying the champions will teach their north African rivals a lesson in football.

"The next game will be on the pitch away from any troubles, but we will teach the Algerians a lesson in football," Moawad said.

"We want to prove that we failed to qualify for the World Cup only because of certain circumstances."

Algeria too have been clear they have to win on Thursday to prove that their victory last year in Sudan was not a flash in the pan.

"It is great playing Egypt again as it offers us a chance to prove we beat them fairly and not through luck," said Blackpool striker Hameur Bouazza.

"We won (1-0 in Sudan) through hard work and because we have a lot of talented players. This team has got real character and team spirit is probably our greatest strength."

"I am convinced we can do something special in Angola."

The Desert Foxes showed character by lifting themselves from a shock 3-0 spanking at the hands of no-hopers Malawi in the opening match in Angola to go on to upset tournament favourites the Ivory Coast in the quarter-final.

In November's World Cup decider the Algerians took a late first half lead, then blocked everything the Pharaohs threw at them with young goalkeeper Faouzi Chaouchi playing the game of his life.

CAF officials have assured that despite the intense rivalry between the nations security measures have been put in place to ensure the safety of fans at the Ombaka Stadium.

Carlo's Rooney warning

AFP, Cobham



Carlo Ancelotti has warned Manchester United that an injury to Wayne Rooney could shatter their Premier League title challenge because they don't have the same squad strength as Chelsea.

Cristiano Ronaldo's pre-season move to Real Madrid has allowed United manager Sir Alex Ferguson to restore Rooney to his favoured central attacking role and the England forward has responded with a superb run of form.

He has already scored 20 goals in all competitions and emphasised his importance to United with the first four-goal haul of his career, against Hull on Saturday, to send the champions to the top of the table.

But Chelsea boss Ancelotti is convinced Rooney's effervescent displays only serve to underline how much Ferguson's team depend on the 24-year-old.

"Without Rooney it would be difficult (to win the league). He's the best striker at Manchester United, one of the best strikers in the world," Ancelotti said.

"Rooney, for me, is a fantastic player. He's not only a striker because he's not only a finisher, he's a champion, a

world-class player.

"He plays for the team. I saw him play left wing last year and coming back to help out the team defensively. He's a football player. I'm a big fan of Rooney's."

"He's a very decisive player for United. We have a possibility without Didier because we can put Anelka on, another top striker in the world."

Ancelotti feels United would struggle if Rooney was sidelined for a long period because, in contrast to his own squad, Ferguson has only the aging Michael Owen to turn to.

Although Chelsea have been without star striker Didier Drogba and Salomon Kalou, one of his main understudies, over the last month due to the African Nations Cup, Ancelotti has been able to rely on Nicolas Anelka - who has five goals in four games - and highly-rated youngster Daniel Sturridge.

Even without Drogba, who is expected back for Saturday's game at Burnley, Chelsea had scored 14 goals in three matches prior to Wednesday's clash against Birmingham.

Ancelotti believes that is a tribute to the quality of Anelka and his squad's impressive depth.

"Without Didier we have the possibility to put other strong, fantastic players in. Without Didier in the

Champions League at the start of the season, Nicolas did very well," he said.

"Now we have Nicolas and Sturridge doing very well in this month. So we had the possibility to play without Didier."

"We changed something on the pitch but if we have less strength in forward areas we can use other players."

"Our aim was to keep all the players in good condition because, if we stay without four players and we then have some injuries, it could have been a difficult period."

"We have those injuries but we can put Deco in because he's in good condition. In training and work, the players have worked very hard in this period and we could do well without those (African) players."

With the title race looking set to be a three-horse sprint between Chelsea, United and Arsenal, Ancelotti believes the team that keeps most of its' star players fit during the run-in will lift the trophy.

"I think that, in this moment, to avoid injury is very important," he said. "We have to control training and the players' rest and we can do that because we have good facilities."

"We have to control the load of the matches and training. To have injuries now is very difficult. The risk is to arrive at the end of the season with a tired squad."



Argentina midfielder Franco Jara (lying on the ground) celebrates his winning goal with teammate Federico Insua during their friendly tie against Costa Rica at the San Martin Stadium in San Juan on Tuesday.

Argentina edge Costa Rica

AFP, Buenos Aires

Football

Franco Jara scored a late goal as Argentina, fielding a side made up only of domestic players, beat a young Costa Rica side 3-2 in a World Cup warm-up match Tuesday.

The friendly, played in the western Argentine province of San Juan, marked the return of coach Diego Maradona to the bench after serving a two-month ban from FIFA for a

foul-mouthed tirade at reporters.

Argentina opened the scoring with a goal by Jose Sosa in the 11th minute before Michael Barrantes equalized for Costa Rica in the 21st.

Guillermo Burdisso gave Argentina the lead again in the 38th, but and Diego Madrigal pulled the sides level for the second time in the 77th.

Franco Jara found the winning goal for Argentina in the 80th minute.

Maradona has used more than 90 players in 15 matches since taking charge of the national side in November 2008. He must prune the squad to 23 in time for the finals in South Africa.

Costa Rica, which failed to qualify for the 2010 World Cup after losing to Uruguay in a play-off, fielded a young side as part of moves to rebuild the national team ahead of the 2014 Cup in Brazil.

Argentina will face Nigeria, South Korea and Greece in Group B at the World Cup.

COPPA ITALIA De Rossi fires Roma

AFP, Rome

A goal 16 minutes from time by Daniele De Rossi sent AS Roma into the semi-finals of the Italian Cup on Tuesday after securing a 1-0 quarter-finals win over Catania.

Catania made life hard for themselves after having Giuseppe Bellussi sent off early in the second period for a foul on Rodrigo Taddei and before De Rossi struck to send the hosts through to a semi-final meeting with either AC Milan or Udinese, who face off on Wednesday.