



Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard (L) scores his second goal past Birmingham goalkeeper Joe Hart (C) during their Premier League encounter at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Chelsea back on top Gunners fire blank

AFP, London



Chelsea marched back to the top of the Premier League table with an emphatic 3-0 defeat of on-form Birmingham at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday.

A Frank Lampard double helped Carlo Ancelotti's side end Birmingham's 15-match unbeaten run on a night when Arsenal were held to a goalless draw at Aston Villa.

Chelsea were in control from the start, with Florent Malouda heading in a Joe Cole cross to secure a fifth minute lead.

Ricardo Carvalho then headed against the woodwork before Frank Lampard doubled the lead with a drive from 20 yards just after the half hour mark.

Birmingham could have ensured a tense finale if James McFadden had not squandered a great chance to put them back in the game.

As it was, Lampard claimed his second right at the death to ensure Chelsea moved back to the top with the bonus of a significant boost to their goal difference.

Ancelotti's men are now a point ahead of Manchester United with the advantage of having played a game less than the champions.

Arsenal, who entertain United at The Emirates on Sunday, are two points adrift of Sir Alex Ferguson's side while Villa remain in seventh place, four points off Tottenham, the side currently occupying the fourth and final qualifying place for next season's Champions League.

Ancelotti paid fulsome tribute to Lampard's contribution. "I think he's the best running midfielder in the world," he said. "He has this fantastic quality to time his run into the box."

The Italian added: "It's good we are back at the top. We have one more point with a game in hand on United and two points more than Arsenal."

"That's important because on Sunday United play Arsenal. Maybe we can improve

our position on Saturday."

Arsenal came closest to breaking the deadlock, twice hitting the woodwork in an entertaining contest at Villa Park.

Cesc Fabregas rattled a shot against the post in first-half stoppage time and Tomas Rosicky struck the underside of the bar after the interval after Brad Friedel had kept out Andrey Arshavin's shot.

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger admitted Villa had done a good job of nullifying his side's passing game.

"Villa know how not to let us play and they did that very well tonight," the Frenchman said.

Blackburn moved closer to mid-table safety after a 2-1 win over Lancashire neighbours Wigan, who were left just two points clear of the relegation zone.

Morten Gamst Pedersen fired Blackburn into a 20th-minute lead with a fine half-volley that was cancelled out just before the hour mark by Scotland defender Gary Caldwell's header.

Blackburn always looked marginally the better side however and they were rewarded with 14 minutes left when Nikola Kalinic headed home from a Pedersen corner.

In Wednesday's other match, Everton continued their recent improvement with a 2-0 win over a Sunderland side moving in the opposite direction.

Everton needed only seven minutes to claim the lead against opponents who have been leaking goals of late and have now won only once in their last 13 league matches.

Belgian midfielder Marouane Fellaini directed a cross to the near post and Tim Cahill met it with a deft header that found the far corner of Craig Gordon's net.

Cahill then turned provider for Everton's second, heading Leighton Baines's long ball into the path of Landon Donovan, who beat Craig Gordon from the edge of the area for his first goal since joining on loan from Los Angeles Galaxy earlier this month.

## 'I will experiment'

AFP, San Juan



Argentina coach Diego Maradona says there are roughly 10 undecided places up for grabs in his squad for this summer's World Cup in South Africa.

The outspoken former national team great, speaking after watching his charges beat Costa Rica 3-2 in a friendly on Tuesday, said he had already decided on "60 per cent" of his squad.

Tuesday's match, featuring only home-based players tuning up for the resumption of the Argentine championship next weekend, provided few clues as to the likely make-up of Maradona's group for the June 11-July 11 tournament.

"A victory which didn't provide the necessary answers," was the verdict of Argentine daily La Nacion following a victory over a side that has not qualified for the World Cup and which was mostly comprised of under-21 players.

The game nonetheless provided Maradona with the opportunity to increase the number of players he has called up to 94 since he took over the role in late 2008.

"Clement Rodriguez, (Jose) Sosa, (Walter) Erviti, (Juan) Mercier and (Nicolas) Gaitan impressed me," Maradona said.

Full-back Rodriguez, who performed well in a position that has yet to be claimed, and midfielder Sosa were the two players who strengthened their cases the most, according to the local press.

"No matter what anyone says, I will continue to experiment," added Maradona, who was making his first touchline appearance since the expiration of the six-month ban issued by FIFA

for his outburst at the press in the wake of the 1-0 win in Uruguay last October that sealed World Cup qualification.

The two-time world champions have no more than three or four matches in which to complete their preparations for the tournament, in which they will face Nigeria, Greece and South Korea in Group B.

They host Jamaica on February 10 before travelling to Berlin to face Germany on March 3, with fixtures against Canada and Israel possibly to follow in May.

Maradona claimed on Tuesday that he had "already decided 60 per cent of the squad", adding that only "Lionel Messi, Juan Sebastian Veron and Javier Mascherano have already secured a place at the World Cup".

The former Boca Juniors, Barcelona and Napoli star is likely to name an initial 30-man group for the tournament before trimming it down to the required size.

Given the figure quoted by Maradona, around 10 other players are already guaranteed a seat on the plane to South Africa.

"I've already got some names in my head that I regard as certain, but whether they go or not will depend on their form, whether they're playing for their clubs or not," he said.

"There are still lots of things to assess before submitting the squad."

According to the daily Clarin, aside from Messi, Veron and Mascherano, 10 other players can already pack their suitcases.

They are: the goalkeepers Sergio Romero and Mariano Andujar, the defenders Gabriel Heinze, Martin Demichelis and Nicolas Otamendi, the wide midfielders Jonas Gutierrez and Angel Di Maria, and the forwards Gonzalo Higuain, Sergio Aguero and Carlos Tevez.

### IN BRIEF

#### Milan out of Italian Cup

AFP, Rome

AC Milan suffered their second defeat in four days at the San Siro when they were knocked out of the Italian Cup, losing 1-0 to Udinese in the quarterfinals on Wednesday.

Having been beaten 2-0 by Inter in Serie A at the weekend, a loss that left them nine points off the top of the table, Milan were undone by Gokhan Inler's 56th-minute goal.

On Thursday, Inter have a chance to make the semifinals when they tackle Juventus.

#### Diego's girlfriend has a mishap

AFP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona's girlfriend, Veronica Ojeda, suffered a miscarriage after falling at her home, a hospital source said here on Wednesday.

"She fell at her house and when she arrived at the clinic, she had miscarried," said Carlos Prigola, a doctor at the clinic which treated Ojeda, who was 19 weeks pregnant.

Maradona, 49, now the coach of the Argentine national team, visited his girlfriend as soon as he had returned from seeing his team defeat Costa Rica 3-2 in a friendly match on Tuesday.

Maradona already has three children.

#### Spain set South Korea date

AFP, Madrid

Spain will play three international friendlies, one of them against South Korea, in the run-up to the World Cup in South Africa, the country's football association said Wednesday.

On June 3, it will face South Korea in Innsbruck, Austria, where Spain was based when it won Euro 2008.

#### Gentile favourite to replace Ferrara

AFP, Rome

Former Italy Under-21 coach Claudio Gentile has emerged as the favourite to take over at Juventus, with Ciro Ferrara expected to be fired soon after a dismal run of form.

The Turin giants are out of the Champions League and well off the pace in the Serie A title race, having lost five of their last six league games and slipped down to sixth.

"Juve Await Gentile," read the front-page headline of Thursday's La Gazzetta dello Sport.

Juve's management have stopped giving Ferrari votes of confidence after recent losses and local media say he will be dismissed no matter what happens in Thursday's Italian Cup quarterfinal at league leaders Inter Milan.

## Rooney ends City challenge

### Football

AFP, Manchester

Wayne Rooney's 91st-minute header secured a 3-1 victory for Manchester United over rivals City at Old Trafford and carried the holders through to a League Cup final meeting with Aston Villa.

The England forward struck with a close range header from a Ryan Giggs cross following a well-worked short corner and clinched a 4-3 aggregate semifinal victory, denying City what would have been a place in their first major final for 29 years.

On an evening of high drama at Old Trafford, former United forward Carlos Tevez -- scorer of both goals in City's 2-1 first leg victory last week -- was again prominent as his 75th minute goal tied the aggregate scores at 3-3.

After a goalless first half, Rooney sent Giggs racing clear in the 51st minute and, after City appeared to have halted the attack, Michael Carrick's pass found veteran midfielder Paul Scholes who finished clinically from a dozen yards.

In the 70th minute, the tie looked decided after Darren Fletcher laid a Nani pass into the path of Carrick who scored with a precision 'pass' into the corner of the City goal.

But Tevez struck five minutes later, flicking the ball powerfully into the home goal from eight yards after United failed to deal with Craig Bellamy's cross.

The build-up to the second leg had

been intense; the feud between Tevez and Gary Neville, the FA warning both clubs about their behaviour, City's chief exec Garry Cook appearing in a televised rally in which he gloated to his club's fans that they would become "the biggest and the best in the world."

There had also been a major operation by Great Manchester Police, who made a number of pre-match raids around the region in an effort to avoid the crowd trouble that had marred the first leg.

Against this backdrop, the game started at a frenetic pace with United playing Rooney as a solitary striker ahead of a five-man midfield.

Nani, so impressive in helping Rooney score four in the weekend league victory over Hull, forced young City defender Dedryck Boyata to make a superb defending header with Rooney poised to connect.

Tevez was being jeered by home support every time he touched the ball and his former fans were far from impressed when he went down heavily after Rio Ferdinand appeared to accidentally catch the Argentine under the chin with his trailing arm.

But City, full of pace and daring on the counter-attack, looked capable of adding to their slender first leg advantage.

In the 22nd minute, Shaun Wright-Phillips landed a perfect cross for Bellamy whose effort was well kept out by Edwin van der Sar before Tevez tested the keeper with a diving header.

United responded with Giggs' latching onto Fletcher's neat lay-off and

drawing a fine save from Given before the Irish keeper was again alert in keeping out Giggs' dangerous cross after a rare slip by Boyata.

If anything, the second half opened in even more intense fashion than the first with defender Micah Richards being allowed to advance to the edge of the United area before testing van der Sar.

Tevez was booked for a nasty hack at Rafael, joining Scholes in the book for a first half foul on Wright-Phillips and the mood darkened further when Bellamy appeared to be hit by a coin thrown by United fans as he took a City corner.

A minute later, Scholes levelled the aggregate score and, shortly after, had a hand in another promising attack which ended with a goalmouth scramble and Fletcher seeing his shot deflected to safety.

Boyata had to defend heroically, again, to keep out a Nani cross while Carrick did well in flicking over a threatening Richards header but, after Carrick had doubled United's lead, a miss by Rooney looked in danger of becoming the game's turning point.

The moment came in the 72nd minute from Patrice Evra's left-wing cross which Rooney, off-balance, directed wide.

Three minutes later, Tevez equalised the aggregate score and United were back at square one.

A late Carrick shot and weak header from substitute Emmanuel Adebayor both failed to threaten the keepers and the semifinal appeared to be heading for extra-time until the late drama.

## Cabanas fights for life

### Football

AFP, Mexico

Paraguay World Cup star Salvador Cabanas, who was shot in the head in the toilet of a trendy Mexico City bar, was still fighting for his life on Wednesday.

The 29-year-old, who plays his club football with Club America of the Mexican league, remains in a serious condition following Monday's incident, which saw his attacker flee the scene.

"His condition remains serious," said Dr Ernesto Martinez, the chief of surgeons at the hospital where the player, who is under sedation, underwent emergency surgery.

Martinez added that Cabanas, the 2007 South American footballer of the year, had been fed and had already received some physical therapy.

But the bullet has yet to be removed from the player's skull, with doctors wary of aggravating the damage.

Paraguay will face defending champions

Italy, Slovakia and New Zealand in the opening round of the World Cup, which begins on June 11 in South Africa.

While Cabanas has played in Mexico since 2003, Sunderland of the English Premier League had shown interest in obtaining him earlier this month.

He has scored 125 goals in 218 games in Mexico and 10 goals in 44 international appearances.

Even if he recovers from the shooting, he has little chance of playing in the World Cup, said Carlos Cotas, the former head of the Paraguayan neurological society.

The shooting brought back grim memories of the death of Colombia footballer Andres Escobar, who was shot dead outside a bar in Medellin following the 1994 World Cup in the USA.

Escobar had scored an own goal in a 2-1 defeat to the hosts that eliminated his country from the tournament and many believed his death was a contract killing, ordered by powerful drug lords who had lost millions of gambling dollars as a result of Colombia's exit.

## Marseille pip Lille

### Football

AFP, Paris

Mathieu Valbuena's late strike earned Marseille a 2-1 victory over 10-man Lille in a pulsating French League Cup quarterfinal at the Stade Velodrome on Wednesday.

Valbuena swept home Mamadou Niang's cutback with eight minutes remaining after Lille, third in Ligue 1 and a place above Marseille, had midfielder Yohan Cabaye sent off 11 minutes into the second period for two bookable offences.

Tulio De Melo had given the visitors a fifth-minute lead when he finished off a slick counter-attack but Argentine playmaker Lucho Gonzalez slammed home moments later to bring Marseille level.

Lyon's quest for silverware this season took a

further blow when they went down to a 1-0 quarterfinal defeat at Lorient.

The decisive goal arrived in the fourth minute when Kevin Gameiro got in front of Lyon's new defender Dejan Lovren to dispatch a crisp volley past Remy Vercoffre in the visitors' goal.

Claude Puel's Lyon were knocked out of the French Cup by Monaco on Sunday and are 11 points behind league leaders Bordeaux, while they will face the mighty Real Madrid in the last 16 of the Champions League.

"It's a huge disappointment, the French Cup and the League Cup were real targets for us and now they've gone," said a downhearted Puel.

"We put some real effort in, now we have to make sure we recover well."

Lorient, eighth in Ligue 1, and Marseille were joined in the last four by Toulouse, who overcame reigning French Cup champions Guingamp of the second division 1-0 thanks to a 55th-minute effort by defender Albin Ebondo.



Manchester United star Wayne Rooney performs a somersault after scoring the winning goal against Manchester City during their Carling Cup semifinal second leg match at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP