

Blues in the mood

AFP, London



The top of the Premier League has an unusual look as champions Chelsea and relegation favourites Blackpool hog the spotlight following emphatic opening weekend wins.

Blackpool, who sit in second place behind Chelsea on goal difference, are an unlikely but romantic presence alongside Carlo Ancelotti's superstar squad at the summit of English football.

However, their paths may diverge for the rest of the season as Blackpool prepare to come back down to earth with a bump at Arsenal, while Chelsea's early-season momentum should continue at woeful Wigan.

It was business as usual at Stamford Bridge as Chelsea drubbed West Brom 6-0 with the kind of dynamic display that brought back memories of their 8-0 demolition of Wigan which clinched the title on the final day of last season.

Chelsea's Nigeria midfielder John Obi Mikel offered little hope to his side's rivals as he insisted Ancelotti's team are still hungry for success despite last season's double.

"Man United will be hungry to win the title back and I think Man City will be up there but we want it just as much, if not more, and it will be our job to try to keep it," Mikel told the London Evening Standard.

"For me, once I've won something, I want to keep it. Just because you have won some-

thing it doesn't mean you lose that hunger.

"Truly great teams win things multiple times and that's what I want Chelsea to do."

If the sight of Didier Drogba terrorising Albion's defence could have been predicted in advance, there was no denying that newly-promoted Blackpool's 4-0 win at Wigan was one of the shock results of this or any other year.

The joy of victory in the Championship play-off final almost vanished for Blackpool during a close-season marred by a lack of success in the transfer market and ground improvement delays which forced the club to switch their opening match away from Bloomfield Road.

But Ian Holloway's motley collection of unheralded journeyman put that all behind them in sensational fashion as two goals from Marlon Harewood, signed on a free transfer just days earlier, inspired a remarkable result.

Yet Blackpool were rocked by the resignation of chairman Kayl Oyston this week and there is likely to be more bad news for

the Seaside at the Emirates Stadium as Arsenal look to build on last week's battling 1-1 draw at Liverpool.

While Chelsea ran riot against Albion, 48 hours later Manchester United made an early statement of their own by brushing aside Newcastle 3-0 at Old Trafford and Sir Alex Ferguson will expect more of the same at Fulham on Sunday.

After missing out on a record 19th English title by just one point last season, Ferguson is desperate to regain the crown this time and Ryan Giggs admits the United boss is still as fiercely driven as when the pair first met 23 years ago.

"Don't go thinking the desire and the hunger are no longer there. He still wants to win and still hates losing," Giggs said.

"When I first met him, I was 13. For the next 10 years you try to keep out of the way! But he asks your advice more now than when you were a younger player because you have that experience."

On Monday, big-spending Manchester City host Liverpool in a clash which could see debuts for James Milner and Mario Balotelli, who both arrived at Eastlands this week in deals worth around 25 million pounds each.

England midfielder Milner has finally completed his protracted switch from Aston Villa and he expects City to mount a title challenge.

"(Manager) Roberto Mancini said 'be ready to win the Premier League', and that's my ultimate aim - that's what I want to do and why I'm here," Milner said.

FIXTURES

Saturday
(1400GMT unless stated)
Arsenal v Blackpool, Birmingham v Blackburn, Everton v Wolves, Stoke v Tottenham, West Brom v Sunderland, West Ham v Bolton, Wigan v Chelsea (1615GMT)

Sunday
Fulham v Man Utd (1500GMT), Newcastle v Aston Villa (1230GMT)

Monday

Remorseful Cole

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool midfielder Joe Cole apologised to his team-mates as his indifferent start to life at Anfield left the club's Europa League hopes hanging in the balance.

Cole followed up his red card against Arsenal last Sunday by missing a second half penalty against Trabzonspor in the play-off first leg on Merseyside on Thursday night.

Liverpool still won 1-0 thanks to Ryan Babel's goal in first half stoppage time.

But Cole's second half miss from the spot, after Lucas had been fouled by Serkan Balci, means Roy Hodgson's side face a nervous night in Turkey in the deciding leg next Thursday.

"The last penalty I took was when I was 13 and I scored that one," said Cole, who joined the club on a free after being released by Chelsea in the summer.

"It was always predetermined that if we got one I would take it, but it was a bad penalty. It's one of those things. But I hold my hands up for that."

"I'm still finding my feet, but I'm enjoying my time here and we've had a decent start. I'm getting fitter and stronger with every game."

Cole admitted that Liverpool still had it all to do if they were to qualify for the group stages. Before his penalty miss, Cole had provided the pass that allowed Babel to score in first half stoppage time.

"We won the game 1-0 and we can take the positives from that," added Cole. "I'm happy about that but it wasn't a vintage display by any stretch."

"A lot of players still need games and we know it will be tough over there. We are far from through it yet."

"Going to Turkey is always very, very tough and we will have to be on top of our game to go through."

Hodgson said Liverpool had no one else but themselves to blame for failing to establish a more comfortable cushion.

"We must blame ourselves because we missed a penalty," said the Liverpool manager. "If you miss a penalty then you can't blame anyone else."

"The extra goal would have made the trip to Turkey more comfortable. But it will be far from comfortable."

"I thought we needed to play with more intensity after half time and I was pleased that we caused Trabzonspor more problems."

Hodgson rested midfielder Steven Gerrard but confirmed that his influential skipper will be back to face Manchester City at Eastlands on Monday.

With such a slender lead, Gerrard could also now feature in the deciding leg against Trabzonspor.

"We'll see," added Hodgson. "It was important to rest him tonight. He played last Wednesday and then had a very intensive game against Arsenal."

"So it was important that we rotated the team. We'll have to wait and see whether the margin of victory will be enough."



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool winger Joe Cole (R) slide-tackles Trabzonspor midfielder Ceyhun Gulselam during their Europa League play-off at Anfield on Thursday.

Gallas set for Spurs

Football

AFP, London

Harry Redknapp confirmed on Friday that former Arsenal captain William Gallas is due to join the Gunners' north London rivals Tottenham.

Redknapp expects to complete the free transfer signing once the 33-year-old French defender, who agreed a one-year contract with an option to extend the deal, has passed a medical on Friday.

Gallas was left looking for new employers after Arsenal balked at his high wage demands, reportedly 80,000 pounds a week, and opted to release the former Chelsea star.

But the wage issue has not put off Spurs boss Redknapp, who said: "He's a no-brainer on a free transfer."

"He's never asked for big money here. The chairman's agreed a one-year contract with him and the wages are more than reasonable."

Traffic between Arsenal and Spurs has been light over the years, aside from Sol Campbell's acrimonious transfer to join Arsene Wenger's team also on a free transfer in 2001.

But Redknapp had already shrugged off any controversy there could be from Gallas crossing the north London divide.

"He's been an Arsenal player but he was at Chelsea before that and playing abroad before he arrived there," he said recently.

"It's not like we would be signing Tony Adams. He's a good player and he would be a very useful addition to our squad."

With Jonathan Woodgate still out with a long-term groin injury and captain Ledley King plagued by knee problems that have the potential to limit his playing time, Redknapp has been keen to bolster his defensive resources.

Gallas will be Spurs' second signing since the end of last season, following that of Sandro.

The Brazilian midfielder's arrival in the UK is imminent after he helped Internacional win the Copa Libertadores.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Bayer Leverkusen midfielder Michael Ballack scores the third goal from a penalty during their Europa League play-off against Tavriya Simferopol in Leverkusen on Thursday.

Lahm has no stress with Ballack

AFP, Berlin

Defender Philipp Lahm insisted on Friday he has no problem with rival Michael Ballack as the pair wait to see who will be made captain of Germany for next month's opening Euro 2012 qualifiers.

Lahm took over the captaincy for the World Cup which saw Germany finish third with Ballack ruled out with an ankle injury.

After four years at Chelsea, Ballack is back in the Bundesliga with Bayer Leverkusen, but Lahm says there is no problem between the pair as they wait to see who coach Joachim Loew will name as captain against Belgium on September 3.

"For me, there is no problem at all, because neither of us has said anything bad," Lahm said in an interview for Eurosport with Germany set to face both Belgium and Azerbaijan in Euro 2012 qualifiers next month.

"Michael and I will meet as usual. It would have been bad if I had said that I don't want to be captain. When I was asked if I wanted to remain as captain, I just answered 'yes'."

Ballack made his debut for Leverkusen on Thursday night in a Europa League qualifier and has said he assumes he will be made captain of Germany on his return.

Loew has said he will name Germany's captain for the two qualifiers at the start of September.

Aquilani on way to Italy

AFP, Liverpool

Roy Hodgson is ready to end Alberto Aquilani's nightmare spell at Liverpool by loaning the Italy midfielder to a Serie A club.

Aquilani has failed to make any impact at Anfield since his 20 million pounds move from Roma last year and Liverpool boss Hodgson is willing to let him return home to rediscover his form.

The 26-year-old was signed by former Reds manager Rafael Benitez as a replacement for Xabi Alonso but his first season on Merseyside was hampered by injuries.

He wasn't included in Liverpool's squad for Thursday's Europa League play-off win against Trabzonspor and Hodgson said: "At the moment we are considering possibly loaning him to an Italian club, but nothing is sure about that yet so I don't have anything definite to report."

"I didn't want to use him (against Trabzonspor) just in case the loan goes through, because for Aquilani this year it's very important that he plays regular football, every week, as the number one man on the teamsheet."

"I can't promise him that here so if a loan move to Italy could help him in that respect it might be good for all parties."

"It would certainly be what he needs, it would certainly protect the value of the player and when he does return to Liverpool no doubt we will see the Aquilani that we signed before he came here injured last year."

Balotelli's flying start

AFP, Paris



Mario Balotelli got his Manchester City career off to a flying start when he scored the only goal in their 1-0 win over Timisoara in Romania in the first leg of their Europa League play-off.

Balotelli, who joined City from Inter Milan last week for around 29 million euros, started on the bench before coming on as a 57th minute substitute for Gareth Barry in Thursday night's match.

In the 72nd minute, moments after Yaya Toure had hit the post, Balotelli capitalised on some fine work by Emmanuel Adebayor to fire the ball into the top corner.

City boss Roberto Mancini was full of praise for Balotelli as the English side got an important away win.

"He had a great debut and I am happy that he scored. He is a good player," said the Italian. "He needs to improve of course and get to know everybody. It was the first time he had played with the team."

Balotelli, however, picked up a yellow card after losing his cool and was warned by Mancini not to repeat his actions in England.

"We must work on this with him because it will be different in the Premier League than in Italy," said Mancini.

Balotelli needed treatment at the end of the game but should be ready to face Liverpool at home on Monday.

Mancini said: "We do not think it is serious. It was probably just a kick, it is not a problem."

But Mancini insisted that the tie was not over and there was still work to be done at Eastlands.

"Football is strange. When you think you can win easy, you must have maximum concentration."

There was good news for the other English teams in action as well with Ryan Babel's goal on the stroke of half-time giving Liverpool a 1-0 win over Turkey's Trabzonspor.

Roy Hodgson's side should have had more but Christian Poulsen had a goal disallowed and Joe Cole missed a penalty.

Aston Villa shrugged off the recent departures of coach Martin O'Neill and star midfielder James Milner to grab a useful 1-1

draw against Rapid Vienna in Austria.

Villa made an excellent start when winger Marc Albrighton crossed for Barry Bannan to tap home from close range in the 12th minute.

The home side hit back though to level just after the half hour when Atde Nuhui glanced in Steffen Hofman's cross.

Scottish sides had a mixed evening. Celtic took a valuable 2-0 lead from their first leg game against Utrecht in Glasgow.

The Bhoys opened the scoring in the 19th minute through Mexican midfielder Efraim Juarez before Greece striker Giorgos Samaras fired in the second in the 34th.

Neil Lennon's team were unable to add any more after the break but will be happy to have a handy cushion heading back to the Netherlands.

The two other Scottish sides in action both lost, however. Dundee United were beaten 1-0 at home by Greek side AEK Athens - Algerian striker Raffik Djebbour netting the only goal of the game - while a late effort from Tom Hately threw Motherwell a lifeline as they went down 2-1 at Odense in Denmark.

Veteran German midfielder Michael Ballack made his first appearance for new club Bayer Leverkusen since his summer move from Chelsea.

Coming on in the second half, Ballack, who missed the World Cup because of an ankle injury, scored from the penalty spot in Leverkusen's comfortable 3-0 win over the Ukrainians of Simferopol.

Juventus needed a last gasp winner from Amauri to sneak a 2-1 win at Sturm Graz in Austria.

French Cup winners Paris St Germain cruised to a 2-0 win over Maccabi Tel Aviv while Lille were held to a goalless draw at Romanian side Vaslui.

Russian side Sibir Novosibirsk collected a notable scalp as they beat PSV Eindhoven 1-0. Both sides were down to 10 men by half time with the winner coming two minutes into added time at the end of the game through Aleksandr Degtyarev.

Another Russian side CSKA Moscow all but booked their passage to the group stage with a 4-0 home win over Cypriot outfit Anorthosis Famagusta, as did Spanish club Villarreal with a 5-0 home win over Dnepr Mogilev of Belarus.

Favourites struggling

AFP, Paris



August is hardly a time for any one club to win the French championship but it may just be possible for one or more of the favourites to lose it.

Defending champions Marseille and the 2008/09 winners Bordeaux are in the bottom three having both lost their opening two games while Lyon, last year's runners-up and seven-times champions between 2002 and 2008, are just one point better off.

Defeat for any of them in round three could be catastrophic for their season.

Meanwhile, the presence of unfancied Toulouse - they play second fiddle to the hugely successful rugby team in the city - and newly promoted Caen at the head of the table with two wins from two - give Ligue 1 a slightly upside down feel.

Marseille have seen last season's top scorer Mamadou Niang head off to Fenerbahce and fellow striker Hatem Ben Arfa is less than pleased with the heel-dragging surrounding his preferred move to Newcastle United - Werder Bremen now appears to be his destination.

The lack of transfer activity has held them back although the capture of Andre-Pierre Gignac from Toulouse and Loic Remy from Nice should give their forward line a little more poke when they host Lorient in round three.

But the continued absence through injury of first-choice centre-backs Souleymane Diawara and Stephane Mbia is sure to raise questions about the depth of quality in their defence.

Jean Tigana's Bordeaux face a stiffer task as they entertain a Paris Saint Germain side which has shown its stern new self with a 3-1 win over Saint Etienne and a goalless draw with Montpellier.

Bordeaux will be glad to see goalkeeper Cedric Carrasso and striker Michael Ciani both returning from suspension.

Lyon also have injury worries with Cris and Michel Bastos both picking up thigh injuries in the 3-2 defeat at

Caen last week.

Another Brazilian, Ederson, is already on the sidelines thanks to an injury he picked up on national service against the USA.

"We are not used to this (kind of start) at Lyon," said goalkeeper Hugo Lloris.

"We have to learn the lessons from these first two matches during which there were some good things and things that were not quite so good."

"There was a certain lack of balance between defence and attack and too much space between the two lines. We have to fix that because opponents are able to push forward quickly. We must have a balanced team."

Lloris, 23, denies that the two defeats have added to the pressure ahead of this weekend's meeting with Brest but did admit: "Everyone should be concerned."

He also insisted that Lyon still have time to return to the top of the table and possibly claim the championship.

"Our ambitions are always there. We know what the youngsters can do and what might be lacking in the finish. The kids are there to learn while we, the more experienced players are there to push for the top."

"The most important thing is quality in the squad and we have that."

Carlo slams French Federation

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti has slammed the French Football Federation for banning Nicolas Anelka for 18 matches.

Anelka has been suspended from international duty after being sent home from the World Cup following a dressing room row with then-France coach Raymond Domenech at half-time of the group stage match against Mexico.

The French squad refused to train for one day in South Africa in a show of solidarity with Anelka - an action which sparked outrage in France and led to a government probe into the scandal.

Blues striker Anelka responded to the ban by calling the federation's chiefs "clowns" and insisted he had already retired from international football.

Ancelotti is adamant Anelka doesn't deserve to be hit with such a lengthy suspension and, speaking at his weekly press conference on Friday, he said: "I think it was unfair for him - 18 games is too much."

"I don't know what happened there but Anelka is an honest man and he didn't deserve the decision."

"But Anelka has reacted very well. He has taken it with good spirit."

Ancelotti, who took charge at Chelsea last year, insists Anelka has never caused him any problems and he believes the ban is good news for the Premier League champions as it gives one of their star players extra time to rest.

"He never caused any problems for me. It is good news for myself because he can stay here to train during the international break, he can maintain a good condition," Ancelotti added.

"But for him it is not good news because every player wants to play in the national team."

Juventus tie up Krasic deal

AFP, Moscow

CSKA Moscow announced on Friday that Milos Krasic was joining Juventus after the two clubs reached agreement on a 15 million euro price tag for the Serbia forward.

Krasic is due to fly to Turin to put pen to paper on a five year transfer.

Krasic, 26, made his professional debut in Serbia in 1999, when he was only 14, with Vojvodina Novi Sad, joining CSKA Moscow in 2004.

With the Russian side, he won two national championships in 2005 and 2006, four Russian Cups, as well as the UEFA Cup in 2005.

In 2009, Krasic was named Serbian footballer of the year.

He had a disappointing World Cup having been hailed as one of the likely stars, failing to sparkle as Serbia exited in the first round.