

City close gap

AFP, London



Manchester City forward Carlos Tevez scored twice at Craven Cottage to help his club return to winning ways and get within three points of the Premier League summit.

Roberto Mancini's team have dropped points in the last month but remain in the title race after taking advantage of defeats for Chelsea and Arsenal this weekend.

They swept aside a Fulham team who are in danger of becoming involved in a relegation fight this season, with Pablo Zabaleta and Yaya Toure also finding the net.

City were seen as a club in crisis following a recent defeat to Wolves, where their players were seen arguing among themselves on the pitch, and two goalless draws heading into this clash.

Centre-back Kolo Toure was quoted earlier in the day suggesting players should be docked wages for underperforming and that some of his team-mates were not giving enough effort.

That did not appear to be the case when they took the lead in the early stages with their first goal in 249 minutes of action.

Garth Barry created the opener when he latched onto a poor clearance before angling a pass into the penalty area, with midfielder Toure allowing the ball to run to Tevez.

Tevez tucked away his finish past Mark Schwarzer and was able to celebrate as Diego Maradona - his coach for Argentina at the World Cup - watched from the directors' box.

The visitors could have doubled the lead midway through the first half when they broke

quickly after defending a corner. Nigel de Jong shifted the ball to David Silva and Aleksandar Kolarov was sent through.

Kolarov had sprinted most of the pitch from his full-back position to create the chance but his finish was saved well by Schwarzer, who was down sharply to his left.

But City were not made to wait long for their next goal, with Zabaleta finding the top corner in the 32nd minute with a first-time shot after a poor clearance from Damien Duff. The effort, from 25 yards, left Schwarzer with no chance to save.

City extended their lead three minutes later when midfielder Toure was fed the ball by Tevez before skipping around Carlos Salcido and angling his finish into the far post beyond Schwarzer.

RESULTS

Fulham 1 (Gera 70) **Man City 4** (Tevez 6, 56, Zabaleta 32, Toure 35)
Blackburn 2 (Pedersen 45, 66)
Aston Villa 0

half-time for Duff, although the hosts still struggled to create chances.

They fell further behind 11 minutes after the break when Zabaleta shot from the edge of the penalty area, with Tevez standing in front of Schwarzer and diverting the ball into the roof of the net.

Replays suggested Tevez wanted to leave the ball but when it went in he was off celebrating his ninth of the season.

Fulham pulled a goal back with 20 minutes remaining when Gera shot after a cleared corner, with the ball hitting Clint Dempsey and flying in.



Manchester City striker Carlos Tevez (R) scores against Fulham during their Premier League encounter at Craven Cottage on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Trio looks to rebound

AFP, Paris



After suffering a domestic dose of the jitters, Chelsea, London rivals Arsenal and German giants Bayern Munich will seek solace in strong Champions League form on Tuesday.

Chelsea and Bayern are at least already assured of their passage to the last 16 ahead of a home encounter with Zilina and trip to Roma respectively whereas Arsenal must put points on the board at Portugal's Sporting Braga if they are to avoid throwing away their strong start in Group H.

Their Premier League lead down to mere goal difference after three losses in four games, Chelsea are struggling to stay on the rails at home and there is clearly some discord over the sudden sacking of former assistant coach Ray Wilkins - who has claimed unfair dismissal.

Losses to Liverpool, Sunderland and Birmingham have shattered the Blues' early season aura of invincibility and coach Carlo Ancelotti is also having to cope with injury to such talismanic figures as John Terry and Frank

Lampard.

With Zilina already eliminated and having shipped seven goals at home to a Marseille side Chelsea easily dispatched at Stamford Bridge, Ancelotti's men should be able to look forward to Tuesday with confidence as they target a fifth straight win in the group.

Much more is at stake for Spartak and Marseille, who are both on six points.

The Russians know a win will take them through but the French equally are aware that three points will suffice if they can manage a margin greater than the 1-0 loss in their first encounter at the Stade Velodrome.

If Chelsea's domestic league form is giving cause for concern then so is that of Arsenal - who, like their neighbours, have never managed to win the top prize in European club football, losing the 2006 final to Barcelona while Chelsea succumbed in the 2008 final on penalties to Manchester United.

Gunners' boss Arsene Wenger seems destined to miss out on Champions League glory but it is an overall trophyless run which now stands at half a decade which has sent the grumble-ometer into overdrive at the Emirates

Stadium.

Thanks to United's fondness for draws this season - seven in 14 Premier League matches - and Chelsea's recent stumbles - the gap on the Premier League summit is only two points but the momentum is far from being with the Gunners after Saturday's third home loss of the season.

Reverses to promoted sides West Bromwich Albion and Newcastle were bad enough but fans found it even harder to stomach another slip-up, this time to local rivals Tottenham after the red side of North London had led 2-0.

Always mindful of giving youth its chance, Wenger did just that in his side's last European outing - but a loss at Shakhtar Donetsk wrecked a perfect record over the opening three games.

Arsenal thus still have work

to do before they can book their spot in the knockout stages.

Shakhtar now likewise have nine points and so will Braga if they can spike the Gunners on their own patch, a remarkable if unlikely turnaround considering they lost 6-0 in London.

Arsenal cannot afford a slip-up as Shakhtar will be out to claim top spot in Group H by beating a Partizan Belgrade side who look out of their depth.

Elsewhere, four-time European champions Bayern Munich stand just eighth in the German Bundesliga - but four wins on a roll have given them ownership of Group E ahead of their trip to Roma, who are currently sitting second after two wins and two losses.

A defeat at the Olympic Stadium does not bear thinking about for the Italians as it could let in the winners of the other tie between Basel and Cluj.

In Group G, Real Madrid travel to Ajax having already qualified and seven-time winners AC Milan need to put daylight between themselves and third-placed Ajax by winning in France against Auxerre, while hoping Real can help their cause in Amsterdam.

FIXTURES

(1945 GMT unless stated):
AS Roma (ITA) v Bayern Munich (GER), Basel (SUI) v CFR Cluj (ROM), Chelsea (ENG) v Zilina (SVK), Spartak Moscow (RUS) v Marseille (FRA) 1730, Auxerre (FRA) v AC Milan (ITA), Ajax (NED) v Real Madrid (ESP), Sporting Braga (POR) v Arsenal (ENG), Partizan Belgrade (SRB) v Shakhtar

Just 'another match'

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho has played down the importance of the first 'clasico' of the season between his side and arch-rivals Barcelona next week, saying it is just "another match".

While the clash at Barcelona's Camp Nou will be the first between the sides since Mourinho arrived at Real in May, he has already faced Barca in the Champions League while at Chelsea and Inter Milan.

"It will be another league match. It will lack the spice that only the 'knock out' matches (of the Champions League) have," he told sports daily Marca.

"With the matches between Barca and Chelsea or between Barca and Inter it was head or tails. This match will be one of 38 in the Spanish league, so it will not be decisive."

Real go into the fixture one point ahead of Barcelona, but Barcelona's double victory in the fixture last year was crucial in determining the outcome of La Liga, which Barcelona retained by the margin of one point.

Both teams head into the November 29 'clasico' after demolishing opponents in their respective weekend league matches.

Real thrashed Athletic Bilbao 5-1 on Saturday to maintain their perfect winning home form so far this season while Barcelona routed minnows Almeria 8-0 to equal the biggest ever away win in La Liga.

The return 'clasico' of the season is scheduled for April 17.

New role excites Zidane

AFP, Madrid

French great Zinedine Zidane has expressed his enthusiasm about working more closely with the first-team squad at Real Madrid.

The three-time FIFA World Player of the Year, who played for Real for five years between 2001 and 2006, will on Monday start work as an advisor to president Florentino Perez on first-team affairs.

"I'm happy to be able to get closer to the club and to the team," Zidane said in an interview with Real's official website published on Sunday.

"It's a role that's taking shape gradually. It's not like a new position but for me it's as good as. I will try to work with the team, positioning myself between the president and the squad.

"I'll be closer to the team. I'll travel with the squad for Champions League matches. Day-to-day I'll be with the team at Valdebebas (Real's training centre).

"It's four years since I left football (as a player) and it's the right time to seize another opportunity to be closer to what I like, which is football."

Zidane's re-positioning will bring him into closer contact with Real coach Jose Mourinho and the Portuguese tactician welcomed the move.

Espanyol's perfect 6

AFP, Madrid



Espanyol made it a perfect six wins from six at their Cornellà-El Prat stadium on Sunday, defeating promoted Hercules 3-0 to move into fourth.

Joan Verdu opened the scoring on 14 minutes and late penalties from Pablo Osvaldo (80 min) and Luis Garcia (90) gave the scoreline a flattering look as Espanyol maintained their 100 per cent home record -- leaders Real Madrid are the only other team with a flawless 18 points at home -- to go a point above Valencia into fourth.

Despite scoring just 12 goals in their 12 league matches Espanyol are now in the Champions League spots as the Barcelona-based club dream of European football after four seasons of mid-table obscurity.

Sevilla missed the chance to leapfrog Espanyol crashing to their first league home defeat of the season with an agonising 2-1 loss against Real Mallorca.

Brazilian international forward Luis Fabiano looked to have stolen a point for Sevilla on 87 minutes after cancelling out Frenchman Michael Pereira's opener but Cameroon striker Pierre Webstrook the winner two minutes later.

It was particularly disappointing for Sevilla

boss Manzano against the club he left in the summer, however, it was sweet revenge for Mallorca who lost out on fourth place to Sevilla on the final day of last season.

Sevilla fall to seventh, two points off the top four, while islanders Mallorca climb to eighth two points behind Sevilla.

In other matches, Atletico Madrid came from behind to win 4-2 at Real Sociedad on Sunday and move above Sevilla into sixth place on goal difference.

A flurry of late goals turned the game in Atletico's favour with the visitors scoring three times in the final 11 minutes to leave Sociedad empty-handed.

Diego Forlan equalised at 1-1 on 71 minutes before Argentine Sergio "Kun" Aguero (79 min, 82) scored twice inside three minutes and Simao converted a last minute penalty to hand Atletico only their second away win of the campaign.

Elsewhere on Sunday Deportivo La Coruna continued their revival with a 3-0 home win over Malaga.

Depor failed to win any of their first eight league games but have now taken 10 points from the last 12 to move into mid-table.

Promoted Levante moved away from the relegation zone with a 3-1 win over 10-man Racing Santander. Ecuadorian international striker Felipe Caicedo, on loan from Manchester City, scored twice to down Racing who had Domingo Cisma sent off on 29 minutes.

RESULTS

Osasuna 1 (Masoud 63) Sporting Gijon 0
Espanyol 3 (Verdu 14, Osvaldo 80- pen, Luis Garcia 90- pen) Hercules 0
Levante 3 (Caicedo 23, 26, Stuani 42)
Racing Santander 1 (Lacen 87)
Deportivo La Coruna 3 (Adrian 22- pen, Colotto 30, Alvarez 83) Malaga 1
Sevilla 1 (Fabiano 87) Real Mallorca 2 (Pereira 35, Webro 89)
Real Sociedad 2 (Llorente 12, Rivas 85)
Atletico Madrid 4 (Forlan 71, Aguero

Rafa under pressure

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan coach Rafael Benitez is teetering on the brink of being sacked after his Italian

champions crashed 2-1 at Chievo to drop to sixth and nine points off leaders and city rivals AC Milan.

And to make matters worse he could lose star forward Samuel Eto'o to a suspension after the Cameroon captain's blatant headbutt into Chievo centre-back Bostjan Cesar's chest for which he was fortunate to stay on the pitch.

On 36 minutes Cesar was punished for a clash with Eto'o, who picked himself up, ran over to the defender and headbutted him in the chest.

TV replays showed Eto'o glancing over at Gianluca Rocchi before the headbutt, while another angle suggested the referee may have seen what took place.

Eto'o did not receive any punishment at all, although if the incident is reported he would certainly face a two or three game ban from Football League chiefs.

And that will dismay Benitez who was already without the likes of Diego Milito, Walter Samuel, Thiago Motta, Maicon, Julio Cesar and Coutinho for this match.

However, the Spaniard may not be in the job long enough to suffer the fallout should Eto'o be banned if Italian press reports are to be believed as they claim anything other than a win against FC Twente in the Champions League on Wednesday will signal the end of his brief Inter tenure.

Things could have been so different had Goran Pandev taken an early chance on 13 minutes.

Played in by Eto'o the Macedonia forward rounded goalkeeper Stefano Sorrentino but from a tight angle he shot against the post.

Inter were made to pay on 29 minutes as Sergio Pellissier rose above a static Davide Santon to send a bullet header from Nicolas Frey's cross into the top corner.

Pellissier could have had a hat-trick by half-time but having twice got in behind the Inter defence, his first shot was deflected just past the post by Lucio, while the Brazilian defender put him under enough pressure to scuff his second effort wide.

In the second half it was again Chievo who came closer as Dejan Stankovic had to whip the ball off Luca Rigoni's foot to deny a certain goal.

Although Sorrentino made great saves from Stankovic and Eto'o, Chievo's Gelson Fernandes should have made it two but dragged his shot wide of the far post.

RESULTS

Genoa 0 Juventus 2 (Eduardo 18-og, Krsacic 23)
Brescia 1 (Caracciolo 20- pen)
Cagliari 2 (Matri 63, Conti 66)
Catania 1 (Terlizzi 82) Bari 0
Cesena 1 (Bogdani 24) Palermo 2 (Ilicic 11, Miccoli 51)
Chievo 2 (Pellissier 29, Moscaredelli 82)
Inter Milan 1 (Eto'o 90)
Lecce 2 (Di Michele 72, Diamountene 83)
Sampdoria 3 (Pazzini 8, 40- pen, 88)
Parma 1 (Crespo 23) Lazio 1 (Flocari 45)
Napoli 4 (Maggio 2, Hamsik 36, 48,



Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo (L) fullback Marcelo (C) and defender Pepe take part in a training session at their sport city yesterday on the eve of their Champions League tie against Ajax.

PHOTO: AFP

Ancelotti dismisses rumours

AFP, London



Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti has insisted he has no plans to leave the English champions after a British newspaper report suggested he was frustrated by his lack of control at Stamford Bridge.

Chelsea's 1-0 away defeat to Birmingham at the weekend was their third loss in four league games and came after the shock sacking of Ancelotti's assistant, Ray Wilkins.

paper Ancelotti made an unfavourable comparison between his situation and that of Sir Alex Ferguson, the veteran Manchester United boss and the man in charge of Chelsea's main title rivals.

"You compare me with Ferguson, it's a different position. Ferguson has total control of the team. I have just technical direction. Full stop. OK?"

But the Italian, speaking ahead of Tuesday's Champions League clash at home to Group F makeweights MSK Zilina, denied he was on the verge of quitting and had consulted England's

League Managers' Association (LMA) for advice.

"I don't know if it's enough to clarify my position today (Monday) to close these rumours and speculation," said Ancelotti.

"These rumours are totally untrue. I don't know why they came out. I didn't speak with the LMA.

"They called me last night when I was at home, quiet, to find out what was happening.

"These rumours are totally untrue. I have my contract until 2012, here, in this club. I've said a lot of times that I'd like to stay here.



Juventus winger Milos Krsacic (L) celebrates his goal against Genoa during their Serie A clash at the Luigi Ferraris Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP