

Fulham Hammered on Boxing Day

AFP, London



Carlton Cole scored his first ever Premier League double as West Ham eased the pressure on boss Avram Grant with a crucial 3-1 win at Fulham on Sunday.

Grant has been edging closer to the sack in recent weeks as West Ham struggled to climb off the bottom of the Premier League, but the former Chelsea manager earned a stay of execution thanks to Cole's heroics.

The England striker, recalled as one of Grant's five changes for the crunch clash, cancelled out an early goal from Fulham defender Aaron Hughes and then struck again with the decisive third goal after Frederic Piquionne put the Hammers in front.

Cole's double, which sealed the Hammers' first win in four league games - and their first away success in 27 attempts, moved Grant's team off the bottom of the table and level on points with fourth bottom Fulham.

With West Ham's co-owners David Sullivan and David Gold in attendance at Craven Cottage, defeat could have spelled the end for Grant.

Instead it is Fulham boss Mark Hughes who will start to feel the heat as his struggling side's underwhelming run continues.

Grant took a gamble by handing Freddie Sears his first Premier League start since March 2009 after recalling the young striker from a loan spell at Championship club Scunthorpe but was amply rewarded as he picked up man of the match honours.

West Ham made the short trip across London knowing only one club in Premier

League history has avoided relegation having been bottom at the start of Boxing Day.

Cole had two chances in the early stages as he headed wide and dragged an effort off-target from a tight angle.

But it was Fulham who took the lead in the 11th minute as West Ham failed to clear a corner, allowing Simon Davies to cross for the unmarked Hughes to head home his first goal for more than six years.

Andy Johnson tested Green from distance two minutes later and should have doubled Fulham's lead in the 18th minute when he failed to connect properly with Davies' cross from six yards.

After that lacklustre opening, West Ham snatched a lifeline as Cole equalised against the run of play in the 37th minute.

Sears' cross was intercepted by Dickson Etuhu but the midfielder could only send the ball straight to Cole, who stretched to shoot past Mark Schwarzer from six yards.

Suddenly West Ham were playing with more verve and Piquionne put the visitors ahead in stoppage time when he arrived completely unmarked to volley in Scott Parker's cross.

Hughes withdrew Clint Dempsey and Etuhu for Damien Duff and Eddie Johnson a minute later, a change greeted with chants of "you don't know what you're doing" from Fulham fans.

Brede Hangeland played a defence-splitting pass to Johnson but West Ham goalkeeper Rob Green was off his line in a flash to block the forward's finish.

Any Fulham thoughts of a comeback were ended in the 73rd minute when Hughes tried to cut out a long ball forward but only succeeded in nodding straight to Cole, who fired a superb angled drive past Schwarzer.



Fulham defender Aaron Hughes rises above the West Ham defence to head in his team's only goal in their Boxing Day Premier League match at Craven Cottage yesterday.

PHOTO: INTERNET

Cryuff, Rosell at war

Football

INTERNET, Undated

Johan Cruyff, former captain and coach of Barcelona, is claiming that the club owes around 100,000 euros (131.1 dollars) to his charitable foundation.

Cruyff's foundation, which helps orphaned and sick children, has had a contract with Barca for five years.

"I am worried," Cruyff told Catalunya Radio on Thursday, "that the foundation has a contract with them and they don't pay. We call them every week. We have a contract for a 100,000 euros per year. The money is not for me, it is for the children."

Cruyff added that Barca president Sandro Rosell should "behave like a gentleman" and "keep his obligations."

The row about the money for his foundation should be seen within the context of the bitter feud between Cruyff and Rosell, a feud which threatens to divide the Barca fans and jeopardize the club's internal harmony.

Online polls and blogs showed, on Friday, that most Barca members and fans support Rosell in

the feud, but that Cruyff also has a massive group of supporters.

Cruyff was Barca's star and captain from 1973 to 1978, then highly successful club coach from 1988 to 1996. He is currently the coach of the Catalan regional team, a part-time and honorary post.

Rosell was Barca vice-president from 2003 to 2005, and effectively the right-hand man of president Joan Laporta, the club's young new president.

In 2005 Rosell dramatically resigned, claiming that Laporta was too heavily influenced by Cruyff, his old friend. Cruyff was an informal advisor to Laporta throughout his presidency, from 2003 to 2010.

Laporta had to stand down as Barca president in June 2010 after serving for two terms. Rosell, by now his sworn enemy, won a landslide victory to succeed him.

One of the first decisions taken by Rosell was to annul Laporta's appointment of Cruyff as 'President of Honour', an appointment made only three months before he left office.

Cruyff and Laporta were furious at this decision. Cruyff claimed that Rosell had humiliated him, and has been vociferous in his criticism of the new president since then.

Carlo moans at fixture pile-up

THE GUARDIAN



Carlo Ancelotti has bemoaned the fact that Chelsea must play twice in 48 hours next week but does not share his captain John Terry's concerns over the depth of the squad as his team attempt to recover momentum in their title defence.

Chelsea visit Arsenal for a potentially pivotal fixture on Monday before welcoming Bolton Wanderers to Stamford Bridge on Wednesday, with Owen Coyle's side to benefit from an extra day's preparation for that game after playing on Boxing Day. With matches against Aston Villa and Wolverhampton Wanderers to follow in the new year, Ancelotti will have to rotate his squad, with his team having won only once in seven league games to slump from top to fourth in the table.

"All we can do is think about doing our best to win against Arsenal, and then against Bolton," said Ancelotti. "I want to say something about the Bolton game because we won't have the possibility to recover. We'll have two days, compared to Bolton who, unfortunately, play on the

26th. We play on the 27th. That's not a good thing, to have one day less to recover." Asked whether he was angered by the schedule, he added: "Yes. I'm not happy about that."

The run of four games in 10 days will test the depth of Chelsea's squad, which was stripped of Ricardo Carvalho, Joe Cole, Michael Ballack, Juliano Belletti and Deco in last summer's cull. Frank Lampard will start his first game since August on Monday and Terry, José Bosingwa, Didier Drogba and Michael Essien are fit again after their own injury problems.

Yet Terry admitted today that the manager's options were more limited than in previous seasons, with the club's hierarchy having put the emphasis on tapping into the younger players.

"We've missed some key players at key times and it is a case of keeping everyone fit now over the Christmas period, where we have two games in three days," said Terry. "In the past, we had a big squad and could rotate and put other players in. We don't have that now we have quite a young squad and it's a time for everyone to stay together like we always will. Once we've turned that corner, we can move on from there and wait for other teams to slip up, which they will do."



PHOTO: STAR

Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club's three Serbian recruits practice at the BUET field yesterday, ahead of today's opening clash against Abahani in the Bangladesh League.

L'pool, Everton games cancelled

THE GUARDIAN

The Premier League matches at Blackpool and Everton have fallen victim to the cold weather.

Blackpool's match against Liverpool, scheduled for a 3pm kick-off, did not survive overnight temperatures in Lancashire of minus 9c degrees and a scheduled midday inspection was brought forward to 10am because of concerns about the Bloomfield Road pitch, which does not have under-soil heating.

Despite covers and hot-air blowers being employed over the last few days an assessment of the playing surface showed there was no possibility of the match going ahead.

The match has already been rescheduled for January 12, with an 8pm kick-off. It is the third home match in succession this month Blackpool have had to postpone because of the weather, having already had to move matches against Manchester United and Tottenham.

Everton's game against Birmingham at Goodison Park has also been postponed because the freezing temperatures have left the stadium in an unfit condition for the match. The club reported there were "several miles of frozen pipes, many of which burst during the course of Christmas Day night".

Park bullish about MU prospects

AFP, Manchester

Park Ji-Sung has admitted he is frustrated to be leaving Manchester United when they are top of the Premier League but expects them to still be there when he returns from Asia Cup duty with South Korea.

"Playing for the national team is an honour, but I am also very happy to play for United, so missing several games is disappointing," said in-form midfielder Park, who has scored six goals this season.

"But United have a big enough squad to be very strong and they will do well without me. I will keep an eye on United's schedule and results when I am away - I will focus on the team.

"And I totally believe we will still be top when I come back. I have no doubts we will be in the same position as we are at the moment," he added.

Park, who has had to balance his commitments with European club sides and at international level for eight years, is thinking of retiring from South Korea duty after the Asia Cup in Qatar.

"For now I can't say anything. Maybe after the Asia Cup I will," he said.

Gunners aim fatal blow

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger wants Arsenal to deliver a hammer blow to Chelsea's title challenge when the champions visit the Emirates Stadium in a crucial London derby on Monday.

Wenger's side have endured a miserable run against Chelsea recently, but they have a golden opportunity to end that barren streak of five successive defeats in their final home match of 2010.

While Chelsea have slipped to fourth in the Premier League after failing to win any of their last five matches, the Gunners have moved one point above their rivals into second place thanks to some impressive performances.

Arsenal's only slip came two weeks ago when they lost to leaders Manchester United, but, despite being widely written off as title contenders in pre-season, they have managed to outshine Carlo Ancelotti's team over the last two months and Wenger knows they can significantly damage Chelsea's chances with victory in the first of their Christmas fixtures.

"Of course this is a must-win game," Wenger said. "We have mixed feelings because we came out of both games against Chelsea and Manchester United this season thinking we could have won and that there wasn't a

difference between the teams. "We have a good opportunity to show that in the coming months and that our improvement is bigger than any other team because we are a very young side.

"We are confident over taking Chelsea on at home. Chelsea have gone through a period where results are a bit

Emirates and show we are masters at home."

Wenger hopes the boost of having captain Cesc Fabregas and Dutch forward Robin van Persie starting together for the first time since August will spark his team to a landmark victory.

But Chelsea boss Ancelotti believes the presence of Frank

during Chelsea's dismal run.

"It's very important to have him in our attacking play and when we have the ball. That will increase our possibility to score," Ancelotti said.

"Having him back will be fantastic news. He will be able to play. He's fit. He's excited."

"It's very difficult to find this kind of player who has the capability of scoring 20 goals. He has character, ability, he always runs and works hard.

"He's so professional. In the (transfer) market there is no player capable of replacing Lampard."

After starting the season with a blizzard of goals and dominant displays that had many proclaiming them as certainties to retain the title, Chelsea looked far from invincible as injuries to Lampard, John Terry, Michael Essien and Didier Drogba took their toll.

That quartet are all back now though and Ancelotti will be left with no excuses if Chelsea continue to fall further off the pace.

The Italian's claims that it is harder to stay at the top than get there are unlikely to cut any ice with notoriously demanding Blues owner Roman Abramovich and his coterie of advisors.

"In football it is difficult to maintain first place. It's easier to arrive first. It's very difficult to maintain it," Ancelotti said.

"It's harder to stay at the top of the table. Obviously, it's harder now to win the title and stay at the top level. But that's a fantastic motivation for us."



ARSENE WENGER AND CESC FABREGAS

less good but that can happen to anyone in this league.

"They have a little bit less confidence than they had in October but we know that winning will be down to our performance.

"We want to put a top-level performance in at the

Lampard in the team after his three-month injury absence could prove decisive.

Lampard has been sidelined by hernia surgery and a groin injury and the England midfielder's eye for goal and energetic displays have been sorely missed

'Smile a little Mario'

THE GUARDIAN



Roberto Mancini has warned the Manchester City striker Mario Balotelli it is time for him to forget his own hype and prove his worth on the pitch. Balotelli, who has attracted as much attention for his behaviour as his performances, is yet to match the high esteem he holds himself in.

The 24 million pound summer signing from Inter Milan this week dismissed Arsenal's Jack Wilshere as "Jack who?" in assessing the man who finished runner-up to him as the best young player in Europe. He also claimed that of the past winners of the award, only Lionel Messi had been a "little stronger" than him at the time.

Mancini has told Balotelli before City's Boxing Day game at Newcastle United to cut the bravado and play with a smile, rather than a scowl. "He must improve in this situation," said the Manchester City manager. "You need to smile to play football; that is the best thing you can do.

"You need to smile to play football; that is the best thing you can do.

"It is good when a player has confidence in himself. Mario Balotelli has everything

"If not, I know plenty of players, talented like Mario, who didn't play football for a top team. He has to prove he has the character to play at the top level."

Mancini also invited Carlos Tevez to do his talking on the pitch. Asked whether the striker should follow the exam-



MARIO BALOTELLI

says, he must show it in every game.

"But he's happy. He is in a fantastic team playing in probably the best league in the world. He is special because he has great attributes to play football but you have to put with that your heart, your strength on the pitch.

ple of Manchester United's Wayne Rooney and apologise to the supporters following his transfer request U-turn, Mancini said: "Maybe. I don't know. The fans still love him. But I think what is most important is that Carlos plays well, scores goals and the fans will love him."



STAR Cricket

Australia v England

Fourth Test, Day 2

Live from 5:30am

TEN Cricket

South Africa v India

Second Test, Day 2

Live from 2:00pm

ESPN

Sportscentre India

Sports News

Live at 8:30pm

English Premier League

Arsenal v Chelsea



Premier Division Cricket League

Mohammedan v BKSP

Venue: Bogra

Biman v Gazi Tank

Venue: Rajshahi

Abahani v Old DOHS

Venue: BKSP-2

Bangladesh League

Abahani v Sheikh Jamal

Time: 4:00pm

Venue: Bishreshtha Mostafa Kamal