

Bowyer denies MU

AFP, London



Manchester United remained top of the Premier League but on goal difference alone after Lee Bowyer's late equaliser gave Birmingham a 1-1 draw at St Andrews on Tuesday.

It seemed as if Dimitar Berbatov's sublime goal in the 58th minute had wrapped up all three points for United but Bowyer salvaged a share of the spoils in controversial fashion a minute from time.

There was a suspicion of handball when Birmingham striker Nikola Zigic got to Roger Johnson's cross.

The ball then rebounded to Bowyer - whom United were convinced was offside - and he slid in to score a goal that ensured Birmingham, briefly in the relegation zone, climbed out of the bottom three.

"It was handball," frustrated United manager Sir Alex Ferguson told Sky Sports. "If the ref can't see that what chance have you got?"

"It's terribly harsh... We deserved to win, we were the better team," added Ferguson, who turns 69 on Friday.

Unsurprisingly, Birmingham manager Alex McLeish had no complaints about Bowyer's goal.

United, unbeaten in the league this season, needed nearly an hour to pierce Birmingham's defence before Berbatov started and finished a fine move that saw the Bulgaria striker score his 14th goal of the season.

By contrast, Wayne Rooney was left searching for his first goal in open play since March after yet another frustrating match for the England striker.

Earlier Mario Balotelli scored a hattrick as

second-placed Manchester City, now level on points with United, who have two games in hand, won 4-0 at home to Aston Villa.

Tottenham Hotspur displaced Premier League champions Chelsea in the top four after a 2-0 win at home to Newcastle.

England international Aaron Lennon's second-half goal broke the deadlock at White Hart Lane.

Then, for the second match in a row, Spurs were reduced to 10 men when Younes Kaboul was sent off in the 65th minute after his head needlessly made contact with Newcastle's Cheik Tiote.

RESULTS

Birmingham 1 (Bowyer 89)
Man Utd 1 (Berbatov 58)
Man City 4 (Balotelli 8-pen, 27, 55-pen, Lescott 13) Aston Villa 0
Stoke 0 **Fulham 2** (Baird 4, 10)
Sunderland 0 **Blackpool 2** (Campbell 50, 90)
Tottenham 2 (Lennon 57, Bale 81) Newcastle 0
West Brom 1 (Thomas 17) **Blackburn 3** (Kalinic 3, 53, M.Diouf 62)
West Ham 1 (Hibbert 16-og)

Baird scored twice for his first goals in four years.

It was only Fulham's third league success this season and their first away victory in the Premier League since August 2009.

Nikola Kalinic scored twice but was then sent off as Blackburn Rovers won 3-1 away to West Bromwich Albion.

West Ham remained in the drop zone after a 1-1 draw at home to Everton.

Tony Hibbert's 16th minute own-goal gave the Hammers the lead before Everton's Seamus Coleman levelled three minutes before half-time.

But, as was the case in their win over Villa, Spurs scored a second goal when a man down with Wales midfielder Gareth Bale netting nine minutes from time.

Blackpool's fairytale first season in the Premier League continued with a 2-0 win away to Sunderland -- the Black Cats first home league defeat this season -- secured by striker DJ Campbell's second-half double.

At the other end of the table, Fulham climbed out of the bottom three after a 2-0 win away to Stoke City where defender Chris



Manchester City striker Mario Balotelli completes his hattrick from a penalty during their Premier League encounter against Aston Villa at the City of Manchester Stadium on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldinho wants out

Football

SOCCERNET

Wentaway AC Milan playmaker Ronaldinho has not yet agreed a deal to return to first club Gremio, with his agent Roberto de Assis refusing to rule out a European move.

Ronaldinho has been publicly seeking a move away from the San Siro for some time after finding first-team opportunities difficult to come by this season under Massimiliano Allegri.

And Gremio, where the Brazil international began his career, claimed last week that they had agreed a deal for him to make a sensational return to his homeland.

But while Assis is set to meet Milan vice president Adriano Galliani on Wednesday in a bid to come to a conclusive agreement about Ronaldinho's future, his agent and brother hinted that a stay in Europe will be considered.

"It seems clear his time with the Rossoneri is at an end and a meeting is planned for today [Wednesday]," Assis told Sky Sport Italia. "I will speak to Galliani and we'll decide what to do."

"There are many Brazilian clubs interested in Ronaldinho, but I won't rule out a European move."

The arrival of Leonardo at Inter Milan has fuelled speculation that Ronaldinho may make a shock move to the Rossoneri's city rivals, though talk of a move back to Brazil or to MLS side LA Galaxy has been more prevalent in recent weeks.

Ronaldinho has been unable to command a regular spot in Milan's first-team this season, with Zlatan Ibrahimovic and compatriots Alexandre Pato and Robinho generally preferred by coach Allegri.

Mario staying at Eastlands

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini has insisted Mario Balotelli's long-term future is at Eastlands as the striker himself denied rumours of a move back to Italy with AC Milan.

Balotelli, 20, scored a hattrick as City overcame Aston Villa 4-0 on Tuesday to maintain their bid for the Premier League title.

The Italian striker has rarely been out of the headlines since arriving from European champions Inter Milan in a 24 million pounds (37 million dollars) pre-season move.

Balotelli has been involved in several on-field spats but Mancini is adamant his compatriot's miserable on-pitch demeanour is just an act and that he is satisfied with life in England.

"After the first goal he celebrated, which is a step forward," Mancini joked after Tuesday's comprehensive home victory. "He celebrated after the first goal but it's more important that he scored goals."

"Every player has his behaviour but I think he's happy. Mario is a good guy but I think that today he was happy because the supporters supported him throughout the game."

"He's a different guy outside the pitch but he likes to give this hard, 'don't like to play' image."

Mancini added: "I think maybe he could be homesick because he's 20 and it's his first time away from his family and it's normal to miss your family."

"I don't think it's a long-term problem."

Balotelli, who has now scored eight times in 11 games for City, said he could not understand all the fuss about his lack of goal celebrations.

"I am always happy, even when I don't smile," he told www.mcfc.co.uk.

"But I feel a striker has to score. It is my job. That is why I don't smile."

"I am still happy and I can score more." And he too dismissed talk of a return to Italy by saying: "I am very happy even if the journalists in Italy say I want to go to Milan."

"I am here and I am working hard in training. I want to be an important man for this team and the results are on the pitch."

Mancini confirmed star striker Carlos Tevez was left on the bench against Villa with a minor hamstring problem but will be fit to return against Blackpool on Saturday.

"Carlos will be OK. He had a little problem with his muscle and he went on the bench. We didn't take any risk with him."

City were briefly top of the table before Manchester United's 1-1 draw away to Birmingham in Tuesday's late kick-off saw Sir Alex Ferguson's regain first place on goal difference alone from their cross-town rivals.

But Mancini believes City, last crowned champions of England in 1968, are showing they have the quality and depth to mount a sustained title challenge.

"In 2011 I hope we can improve like a team who can play football well always and stay always on the top but the most important thing is to improve again."

"If we can improve we can stay there (top) for longer than three hours."

"I'm proud for my players, I'm very happy for the supporters for the club, for everyone."

"But it's important we continue against Blackpool (on Saturday). People think that will be easy but it will be a very tough game."

Meanwhile Villa manager Gerard Houllier did his best to remain upbeat after a sixth defeat in seven matches left his faltering side just a point above the relegation zone.

The Frenchman, who claimed he did not hear abuse from the visiting fans at Eastlands, said: "We are in a relegation battle, definitely. We were before and we knew we would have a difficult run of games over Christmas with games against Tottenham, Manchester City and Chelsea."

"Confidence is something that we need to address," the former Liverpool manager added.

"I think we have the spirit, the players are aware we're going through a difficult run."

City make Dzeko bid

Football

AFP, Berlin

Manchester City have offered 35 million euros (29.8 million pounds, 45.9 million dollars) for Wolfsburg's Bosnian striker Edin Dzeko, Germany's Bild daily reported on Wednesday.

In what Bild said would be a record price for a Bundesliga player, the English club would pay the Germans 30 million euros for the 24-year-old plus five million euros more if City reach the Champions League.

The transfer could be finalised in time for City's crunch away clash at Arsenal on January 5, Bild added, without identifying a source.

The paper cited Wolfsburg's general manager Dieter Hoeness as declining to comment on what he called "speculation".

Wolfsburg are currently 13th in the table, having gone seven Bundesliga games without a win, putting their coach -- former England manager Steve McClaren -- under severe pressure.

Roberto Mancini's City, by contrast, are riding high, level on points with Manchester United at the top of the Premier League, although they are behind on goal difference and Sir Alex Ferguson's side have two games in hand.

Earlier this month, Dzeko, who is Wolfsburg's captain, refused to shake McClaren's hand when he was substituted after missing a crucial penalty in the 77th minute of a goalless draw with Werder Bremen.

Other top-rank European clubs have also been linked with the striker, including Italian giants AC Milan and Juventus as well as under-performing Bundesliga heavyweights Bayern Munich.



Milan star Zlatan Ibrahimovic practices during their annual winter training camp at the Al-Ahli Stadium in Dubai on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bellion back in Nice

AFP, Nice

Much-travelled French striker David Bellion returned to one of his former clubs Nice on loan for the rest of the season on Tuesday from French First Division rivals Bordeaux.

The 28-year-old - who previously played for Nice from 2006-07 before moving to Bordeaux - was an integral component of the Bordeaux team that won the 2009 title under present France coach Laurent Blanc.

However, the former Sunderland, Manchester United and West Ham forward has failed to find favour with Blanc's replacement as coach Jean Tigana and he has seen action just twice this term - both times as a substitute.

Bellion, who is under contract with Bordeaux till 2014, scored 12 times in 45 appearances for Nice in his previous spell and should boost an attack that has scored only 14 goals in 19 matches this term.



Premier Division Cricket League
Mohammed v Gazi Tank
Venue: Bogra
Biman v Old DOHS
Venue: Rajshahi
Abahani v Cricket Coaching
Venue: BKSP-2
Bangladesh League
Sk Russel v Farashganj
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal

Drenthe won't train

AFP, Madrid



Dutch midfielder Royston Drenthe, on loan from Real Madrid to fellow premier division side Hercules, is reportedly refusing to return to his new team unless he receives months of unpaid wages.

"If they don't find a solution for my pay I will go back to Real Madrid to train and regain my strength," Drenthe said in an interview with Spanish sports daily Marca while in Rotterdam.

"Of the six months I have been here they have only paid me for one, and they owe me five. I have a lot of expenses and I cannot work without pay," said Drenthe, who is on loan for the 2010-2011 season.

"At Hercules they have given me a lot of talk but no action. Until there is action, I am not going back. I love the Hercules fans but this is not right."

Hercules captain Joaquin Rufete said pay problems at the Alicante-based team were no secret.

"But we have to train because the team comes before anything else," Rufete told the paper.

Hercules admit that they owe players wages for November and December but say they will be able to pay salaries in mid-January when they receive expected income, according to the Spanish press.

Other Spanish clubs face similar problems with salary payments, apparently feeding tensions between the Spanish Players' Association and the Professional Football League.

Baptista joining Malaga

AFP, Malaga

Roma's Brazilian forward Julio Baptista is on the brink of joining Spanish side Malaga, according to reports in the Spanish and Italian press on Wednesday.

The El Diaro Sur daily claimed that the 29-year-old reached an agreement on a three-and-a-half-year contract with the Andalusian club on Tuesday.

Italian daily Corriere dello Sport reported that Malaga will pay two million euros for Baptista, whose annual salary will fall from 3.2 million euros to 2.5 million euros.

The final decision on the transfer rests with Italian bank Unicredit, who are Roma's majority shareholders.

Baptista, a member of Brazil's World Cup squad, made his name in Europe with Sevilla before joining Real Madrid in 2005.

He spent a season on loan at Arsenal in 2006-07 and signed for Roma in 2008, but has failed to hold down a first-team place at the Italian side.



Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal talks during the presentation of the book Kopsterk (Headstrong) in Noordwijk on Tuesday. Van Gaal wrote the introduction to the book, which is a guide to mental training in football.

PHOTO: AFP



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