

Chelsea, Villa fight to an enthralling tie

AFP, London

Chelsea's bid to retain the Premier League title suffered another blow as struggling Aston Villa snatched a dramatic 3-3 draw at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

Carlo Ancelotti's side were on course for a crucial win after late goals from Didier Drogba and John Terry, but Ciaran Clark equalised in stoppage time and the reigning champions are now in severe danger of losing touch with the main title contenders.

Even a Champions League spot isn't certain for fifth-placed Chelsea. The Blues have won just once in eight league games and are six points behind leaders Manchester United, who also have a game in hand.

Frank Lampard put Chelsea in front with a 23rd-minute penalty, but Ashley Young levelled from the spot four minutes before half-time.

Villa took the lead when Emile Heskey headed in Stewart Downing's cross in the 47th minute.

Drogba equalised in the 84th minute and it looked as though Chelsea would steal the points when Terry netted in the 89th minute.

But in stoppage time the Chelsea defence went to sleep and Clark beat the offside trap to head in the leveller.



Chelsea defender Paulo Ferreira slides in on Aston Villa forward Gabriel Agbonlahor during a Premier League clash at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Cole keeps Liverpool afloat

AFP, London



Wayne Rooney scored his first goal in open play since March as leaders Manchester United won away in the Premier League for only the second time this season with a 2-1 victory against West Brom.

United, the only unbeaten side in English football's top flight this term and who've two games in hand, remained top on goal difference alone after Manchester City's 1-0 victory at home to Blackpool on Saturday.

"It's a massive result for us," United manager Sir Alex Ferguson told Sky Sports. "Over the years we've had to battle out games and we had to do that today."

At Anfield, Joe Cole's last-minute winner gave under pressure Liverpool manager Roy Hodgson a desperately needed come from behind 2-1 victory over Bolton Wanderers.

"I don't know about relief, I just

thought we played so well," said Hodgson. "It showed the character of the players and their determination to turn things around for the club and give us a better 2011 than 2010."

"Anything other than a victory would have been an unfair result."

West Ham moved off the bottom of the table and out of the relegation zone with a 2-0 win at home to drop rivals Wolves, who were left propping up the Premier League just days after their shock win away to Liverpool.

If the top two spots are an all Manchester affair, third and fourth belonged to north London after Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur both won on Saturday.

Arsenal stayed third, two points off the summit, after Robin van Persie's 13th minute deflected free-kick -- the Dutch

striker's first league goal this season -- Samir Nasri's second-half goal and Roger Johnson's 66th minute own-goal saw the Gunners win 3-0 away to Birmingham in Saturday's late kick-off.

Victory was just what Arsenal needed after a midweek draw with Wigan took some of the shine off their 3-1 humbling of champions Chelsea.

"I am delighted because we have shown physical qualities, we were up for the challenge and mentally as well we kept our calm," Arsene Wenger, the Arsenal manager, told ESPN.

"We kept faith in our game, that we could put the ball down and play our game. I feel we have had a great performance."

Spurs leapfrogged Chelsea, who can regain fourth spot against Aston Villa on Sunday, after Gareth Bale's header shortly before half-time meant they won

1-0 at home to relegation-threatened Fulham.

Rooney opened the scoring at The Hawthorns but substitute Javier Hernandez, who netted both goals in United's other away league win this term, a 2-1 success at Stoke in October, sealed victory 15 minutes from time by heading in the forward's corner after the Baggies' Peter Odemwingie had missed a penalty.

England striker Rooney also played through an ankle injury late on when Ferguson had used up all three of his substitutes.

"Wayne Rooney was absolutely out of this world," Ferguson said. "He's off the mark and, hopefully he's on a (goal) run now."

Rooney put United 1-0 up as early as the third minute at The Hawthorns when he stooped to head in a Patrice Evra cross.

But West Brom were level 11 minutes later when James Morrison lashed the ball in from 25 yards out.

SEE PAGE 17 COL 2

End is near for Ronaldinho

AFP, Rome

Ronaldinho is set to close the door on his AC Milan career after leaving their winter training camp in Dubai, coach Massimiliano Allegri confirmed on Saturday.

The 30-year-old Brazilian international is reportedly poised to return to his homeland to re-join former club Gremio, having fallen out of favour at Milan this season.

"We are waiting for his departure to become official," Allegri told Sky Italia. "Maybe there was a lack of willingness on his part."

"I was convinced that Ronaldinho could have a great season. He started well, with a balanced side, but then everyone has to take their own responsibility."

Ronaldinho joined Milan from Barcelona in 2008 but despite occasional flurries of his best form he lost his place in the starting XI after Milan signed Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Robinho last summer.

Bowyer antics may lead to ban

SOCCERNET

Birmingham midfielder Lee Bowyer is facing the prospect of a possible Football Association ban over incidents during Saturday's home Premier League clash with Arsenal.

Television replays showed Bowyer appearing to stamp on the knee of Gunners defender Bacary Sagna as he lay on the ground. In a separate incident, Bowyer was shown to apparently catch Sagna down the back of his Achilles near the touchline.

Referee Peter Walton took no action at the time and Bowyer was eventually substituted by Birmingham manager Alex McLeish.

RESULT
Chelsea 3 (Lampard 23-pen, Drogba 84, Terry 89) Aston Villa 3 (Young 41-pen, Heskey 47, Clark 90)

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League
Farashganj v Mohammedan
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur Ctg Mohammedan v SK Russel
Time: 2:30pm



Rangnick, Hoffenheim part company

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga club Hoffenheim, having parted company with coach Ralf Rangnick, have appointed his deputy Marco Pezzaiuoli, who takes over with immediate effect the club said Sunday.

The 52-year-old Rangnick left despite having a contract until June 30, 2012 having only extended his deal last May.

But he was incensed after Hoffenheim agreed to sell Brazilian midfielder Luiz Gustavo to Bayern Munich over his head.

"The departure of Luiz Gustavo to Bayern during the winter break is out of the question in my eyes," Rangnick had said last month.

Hoffenheim are currently eighth in the Bundesliga.

Rangnick took over in June 2006 and under his guidance the small outfit from southern Germany reached third in the Bundesliga.

Pezzaiuoli, 42, played for Mannheim before going into coaching with Karlsruhe.

Loew seeks continuity

Football

INTERNET, undated

Germany are seeking early qualification for Euro 2012 as their chief aim for 2011, coach Joachim Loew and team manager Oliver Bierhoff have said in interviews.

Expectations are high for Germany after reaching the World Cup semi-finals with a young squad and starting the Euro 2012 qualifiers with a maximum 12 points from four games.

"It's not as if we can just rest the whole year. Our aim is to clear things up early on," said Loew of the Euro 2012 qualifying campaign.

"We want to avoid a 'final' in Turkey. In 2009 it was interesting against Russia but we want to avoid

that," he added in reference to group opponents Turkey and last year's World Cup qualifiers.

Germany lead Group A ahead of Austria (7) and Turkey (6), but team manager Oliver Bierhoff told German Press Agency dpa qualification was not a foregone conclusion.

"The danger is in thinking we only have to collect our Euro 2012 ticket. We mustn't carelessly throw away our comfortable position," he said.

The German, however, are planning in the first half of the year to look at possibly bases at Euro 2012 tournament co-hosts Poland or Ukraine. Poland is the preference because of its better infrastructure, Bierhoff said.

Germany have picked some

strong opponents for friendlies in 2011, including Italy, Brazil, Uruguay and the Netherlands, with France following in early 2012.

The program kicks off against Italy in Dortmund on February 9.

"Our aim must be to optimize our playing strength," said Loew. Loew will be looking to integrate some promising newcomers such as the Dortmund duo Mats Hummels and Mario Goetze into a squad already featuring young players such as Manuel Neuer, Mesut Oezil, Thomas Mueller and Sami Khedira who established themselves at the World Cup.

Others such as captain Michael Ballack, midfielder Simon Rolfes and defender Arne Friedrich will be hoping to find their way back into the national team set-up after injuries.

Becks on the verge of Spurs move

AFP, London



Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp says that David Beckham wants to move to White Hart Lane, as he prepares to step up his bid for the former Manchester United star.

Redknapp had confirmed his interest in Beckham on Friday and, speaking after Saturday's 1-0 win over Fulham, he said the Los Angeles Galaxy midfielder is ready to return to the Premier League on loan until the Major League Soccer season resumes in March.

"He just said that he would like to come



DAVID BECKHAM

and play here at Tottenham," Redknapp said.

The final decision over whether Beckham joins Tottenham lies with the Galaxy and Redknapp admitted the north London club need to move quickly to clinch the deal.

"We'd have to (move quickly)," Redknapp added.

"I've left it to the people at the club. I've passed it on to them. They're talking to whoever they have to talk to at his club."

"We've got no-one else to play on the right," Redknapp said. "David Bentley keeps picking up injuries on Friday morning. It's a no-brainer."

Bayern rope in Gustavo

INTERNET, undated



Bayern Munich are to sign Hoffenheim midfielder Luiz Gustavo, the Bundesliga champions confirmed Saturday.

The Brazilian is to sign a four-year deal with Bayern on Sunday and will travel the same day with the squad to a training camp in Qatar, club officials said.

Details of the transfer were not immediately known, but Bild newspaper said on its online edition that a 15-million-euro (20 million dollars) fee was agreed for the 23-year-old.

Bild am Sonntag newspaper quoted club chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge as confirming that an agreement on an immediate transfer had been reached with Hoffenheim's chief investor Dietmar Hopp.



STAR Cricket
Australia v England
Fifth Test, Day 1
Live from 5:30am

TEN Cricket
South Africa v India
Third Test, Day 2
Live from 2:30pm

ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm

TEN Action+
La Liga
Real Madrid v Getafe
Live from 3:00am (Tuesday)

Reina only dreams Red

Football

SOCCERNET

Pepe Reina has hit out at the speculation he could leave Liverpool and insists he will honour his contract.

Reina, 28, has frequently been linked with a move away from Anfield since the summer, with Manchester United and Arsenal reported to have considered a move for the goalkeeper.

Reina, though, signed a new six-year deal in April and, although rumours persist that the contract may include an exit clause, he has stressed his commitment to the club.

"I'm tired of rumours linking me with many teams in England and abroad," he said in the Daily Star Sunday. "I am a man of my word and commitment. I will

honour my contract with Liverpool.

"Stories of these offers are not true. I have not spoken to anyone - ever - and I am 100% a Liverpool player."

He added: "Since I've been here, I've found an incredible passion - more than I thought from Spain."

"Liverpool as a club is sacred, it is something special. Being Liverpool's goalkeeper is a privilege. For now, I just want to win trophies for them."

Meanwhile, defender Paul Konchesky has vowed to improve in the second half of the season after failing to hit top form after his summer move from Fulham.

"The fans have not seen the best of me yet," he said. "Hopefully, I can kick on in the new year. Liverpool are a big club with a great history. We must try to get the club back to where it belongs."

Macheda for EPL loan move

SOCCERNET

Sir Alex Ferguson is keen to see Federico Macheda remain in the Premier League when he goes on loan for the second half of the season.

"If any club comes along and convinces the player and me that he'll get games, they will be the ones we will be thinking about," he said. "He's thinking about Italy, but I'd hope it will be the Premier League."

The Sunday Mirror reports that Wigan and Aston Villa have expressed an interest in Macheda.