

MU extend lead

AFP, London



Manchester United went three points clear at the top of the English Premier League table after a 2-1 win over Stoke on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Fulham climbed out of the relegation zone with a 3-0 victory at home to West Bromwich Albion while Birmingham also exited the bottom three following a 2-1 win away to Blackpool.

Javier Hernandez, who scored United's winner in a 2-1 win away to West Brom last time out, broke the deadlock in the 27th minute at Old Trafford with a stylish flick behind his legs from Nani's cross.

However, Stoke were level five minutes after half-time when Dean Whitehead scored their first goal at Old Trafford since 1980 after rising unmarked to head in Tuncay's cross.

But just after the hour mark United, the only unbeaten side in English football's top flight this season, regained the lead thanks to Nani's sublime left-footed curler from 20 yards out.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson made several changes to his side with some, such as Wayne Rooney's ankle problem, injury-induced and he was delighted by the way his new-look team performed against the Potters.

Fulham scored on the stroke of half-time when Simon Davies's long-range shot went through the hands of fumbling former England goalkeeper Scott Carson.

The hosts doubled their lead at Craven Cottage when United States midfielder Clint Dempsey headed in Davies's corner in the 56th minute.

And nine minutes later a Davies corner also led to Fulham's third goal, with Norwegian defender Brede Hangeland heading home on this occasion.

Albion's fifth defeat in a row meant they were just two points above the relegation zone.

Birmingham left it late to beat Blackpool, Scott Dann netting in the 89th minute after Roger Johnson's nod-down from Jean Beausejour's centre.

RESULTS

Blackpool 1 (Campbell 68)
Birmingham 2 (Hleb 24, Dann 89)
Fulham 3 (Davies 45, Dempsey 56, Hangeland 65) West Brom 0
Manchester United 2 (Hernandez 27, Nani 62) Stoke 1

PHOTO: AFP
Manchester United striker Javier Hernandez (L) flicks home the opening goal against Stoke during their Premier League encounter at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

All talk is on Milan

AFP, Rome



All eyes will be on the Milan neighbours as Serie A kicks-off again on Thursday after a two-and-a-half-week winter break.

AC Milan lead the table by three points and will be showing off new signing Antonio Cassano as they travel to Sardinia to tackle Cagliari.

Inter Milan, taking on Napoli, will also display a new acquisition as former Milan coach Leonardo takes over on the nerazzurri bench for the first time since Rafael Benitez was fired after last month's Club World Cup triumph.

Inter come into the game against the in-form biancocelesti fully 13 points behind Milan and 10 behind their second-placed visitors -- although they do have a pair of games in hand.

That form, added to an unprecedented outburst against his bosses for failing to support him in the transfer market, saw Benitez's short reign as Jose Mourinho's successor come to an abrupt end before Christmas.

He had complained that Mario Balotelli was sold without being replaced, leaving his squad light.

But if Leonardo thought he would be given a blank cheque in January, he'll be disappointed as Inter's sporting director Marco Branca said centre-back Andrea Ranocchia will be the only transfer window signing before the summer.

Ranocchia was brought in six months ahead of sched-

ule from Genoa because Walter Samuel has suffered a knee injury ruling him out for the season.

It means Leonardo will have to work some magic with more or less the same resources that Benitez had.

And things won't be starting well as he'll have top scorer Samuel Eto'o suspended for Napoli's visit while goalkeeper Julio Cesar, playmaker Wesley Sneijder and young forward Coutinho are all injured.

What's more, Napoli will be at full strength and well rested after struggling to cope with the twin commitments of league and Europa League before Christmas.

As for Milan they will be boosted by the arrival of Cassano, although he is unlikely to start in Sardinia.

Cagliari has not often been a happy hunting ground for Milan but the Sardinians have proved vulnerable this season, losing 1-0 at home to Inter, Napoli and Genoa, although they did thump Roma 5-1.

And while Milan will feel boosted by Cassano's signing, they have also lost Ronaldinho and it is hard to see them being significantly improved, if at all.

The strike force was never their problem with Zlatan Ibrahimovic in fine form all season and Robinho increasingly starting to settle in Italy.

It is at the back where they have been less than convincing, losing at home to both Juventus and Roma and being well beaten away to Cesena earlier in the season.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated):

Thursday

Juventus v Parma (11:30), Bologna v Fiorentina, Brescia v Cesena, Cagliari v AC Milan, Genoa v Lazio, Lecce v Bari, Palermo v Sampdoria, Roma v Catania, Udinese v Chievo, Inter Milan

Toure plays down Ade bust-up

AFP, London

Emmanuel Adebayor has dismissed his training ground bust-up with Manchester City team-mate Kolo Toure after the former Arsenal players had to be pulled apart during training.

Photographs published in several British newspapers on Wednesday showed the duo clashing on Tuesday.

The Times reported that the bust-up between Ivory Coast international Toure and Togo forward Adebayor stemmed from an "over-zealous tackle".

But Toure said such disputes had been common when the duo were at Arsenal, the club both players left 18 months ago, telling the Sun: "We both lost it but it calmed down quickly. Other players and the manager came to separate us. It's already forgotten."

IN brief

Higuain set for surgery

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain is to undergo surgery to fix a slipped disc that has already kept him out of action since late November, the club said Tuesday.

It said a new MRI showed "some improvement" and a "reduction of the inflammation."

But "the persistence of pain and of the slipped disc moved experts to advise surgery as the next step. This decision has been accepted by the player, his family and the club."

Rooney's brother joins MLS

AFP, New York

Major League Soccer announced the signing of an England playmaker named Rooney on Tuesday, but it's John Rooney, Wayne's 20-year-old brother, who is set to play in America later this year.

Manchester United forward Wayne Rooney's younger brother, pegged as a midfielder, will take part at the MLS five-day combine along with other prospects starting Friday at Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Ronaldinho signs for Gremio

AFP, Rome

Former twice world player of the year Ronaldinho has signed a deal to join Brazilians Gremio from AC Milan, according to the Gazzetta dello Sport on Tuesday.

The sports newspaper claims Ronaldinho's brother and agent Roberto de Assis has reached an agreement with Gremio, where the 30-year-old began his career in 1998 in his home town of Porto Alegre.

Gazzetta claims the official news will be announced in a few hours.

Should that be the case it will supper Blackburn's bid to bring the former Barcelona and Paris St Germain forward to the Premier League.

Zambrotta to undergo op

AFP, Rome

AC Milan full-back Gianluca Zambrotta is to undergo surgery on his knee after suffering a muscle tear, his club said on Tuesday.

However there was better news for Ghana midfielder Kevin-Prince Boateng who was diagnosed with a slight groin problem and is already

What to WATCH

STAR Cricket

Australia v England
Fifth Test, Day 4

Live from 5:00am

TEN Cricket

South Africa v India
Third Test, Day 5

Live from 2:30pm

ESPN

Sportscentre India
Sports News

Live at 8:30pm

STAR Sports

Hopman Cup

Serbia v Belgium

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League

Sheikh Jamal v Muktiyoddha

Time: 4:00pm

Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal

Loew opposes Jan WC 'Ben Arfa Magpies'

Football

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew said Wednesday he was opposed to playing the 2022 World Cup in Qatar during winter, saying it would be a disadvantage to fans in Europe.

Speaking to Sport Bild, Loew pointed to the atmosphere generated at home during the last two World Cups in Germany and South Africa by fans watching matches on giant screens in open spaces.

Asked if the 2022 tournament should be played in January, he replied: "I really do not think that can be done because I also see the tournament from another point of view: that of the fans."

"At the World Cup in 2006, the European Championships in 2008 and the World Cup in 2010, there were millions on the streets ... if the World Cup in 2022 takes place in winter, no fan is going to be on the street if it's minus five degrees (23 degrees Fahrenheit)," he added.

After football's world governing body FIFA decided to award the World Cup to the Gulf emirate, there were fears that the searing heat in June and July would make

the tournament dangerous for players and fans alike.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has said he would support moves to stage the tournament during the winter months.

Speaking last month, Blatter said: "It is important to play when the climate is



appropriate and I'm thinking about the footballers, not only the fans but the participants."

"Personally I think it would be better that it is played in the winter ... but it's not easy to realise."

German legend Franz Beckenbauer, a FIFA executive committee member, and FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke are among those who have also voiced support for a switch of dates.

AFP, London



English Premier League side Newcastle have transformed French winger Hatem Ben Arfa's loan move from Marseille into the first permanent signing of new manager Alan Pardew's St James' Park reign.

Ben Arfa has signed a four-and-a-half year deal for an undisclosed fee.

He has been sidelined since suffering a double leg fracture in a challenge with Manchester City's Nigel de Jong in October but had already done enough in four appearances to make Newcastle want to keep him in the north-east.

"I am absolutely delighted to be signing for Newcastle United on a permanent basis," Ben Arfa said in a Newcastle statement issued Wednesday.

"During my short time at the club, I thoroughly enjoyed playing for the team and for the supporters too. This is a great club and I am very happy to be committing my future to them."

"I am getting back to fitness as quickly as I can and am really looking forward to getting back to St James' Park, seeing the lads again and working with Alan Pardew and his staff."

