

Hammers hold Spurs

AFP, London

West Ham goalkeeper Robert Green made a series of fine saves to help West Ham earn a 0-0 draw against London rivals Tottenham at White Hart Lane on Saturday. Green was in unbeatable form and saved his best moment until the final minutes when he tipped Gareth Bale's free-kick onto the crossbar. The England international's man-of-the-match display ensured Avram Grant's side overcame waves of Tottenham pressure and moved out of the relegation zone ahead of Saturday's 1500GMT matches. Spurs were handed a tough task when they were pitted against Real Madrid in Friday's draw for the Champions League quarter-finals. But their focus was on this London derby as they tried to close the three-point gap on Chelsea in the race for a top-four finish. Make no mistake, there is no love lost between these two sides. There is a deep-rooted rivalry that has only intensified following the battle for the Olympic Stadium. Tottenham and West Ham both launched bids for the stadium in Stratford and the latter were successful. West Ham arrived at White Hart Lane in their best form of the season. Wins over Liverpool and Stoke in the Premier League have improved their chances of beating relegation. However, they were missing injured striker Frederic Piquionne while Robbie Keane could not play as part of his loan agreement from Tottenham. Spurs' first shot at goal came from an unlikely source as defender Michael Dawson struck the bar with a shot from the edge of the box. Jermain Defoe then had his first chance when he connected with Bale's cross in the seventh minute but he was unable to direct his effort on target. Luka Modric and Rafael van der Vaart both had chances as Tottenham looked likeliest to break the deadlock. But West Ham had chances to score themselves. The best fell to Carlton Cole, which the England striker wasted when he shot straight at Heurelho Gomes with just the Spurs goalkeeper to beat. Defoe should have given Spurs the lead in the 40th minute. Aaron Lennon's effort struck the post and the ball rebounded into Defoe's path. However, the England international was caught off-guard and the ball bounced off his shin and wide. After the restart Cole had another chance for West Ham while Defoe was denied again, this time by Green, who saved with his legs. As Tottenham continued to squander their chances, West Ham started growing in confidence and the impressive Mark Noble came close to giving them a 56th minute lead with an overhead kick that was only just wide. Demba Ba was next to try his luck with a shot from the edge of the box that Gomes did well to parry. Both sides continued to press for an opening and made a flurry of substitutions to break the stalemate. Tottenham substitute Roman Pavlyuchenko looked the most threatening and had two shots inside a minute that forced Green to make two saves. Green then denied Bale again, as West Ham clung on for a point to help their relegation battle.



West Ham United midfielder Mark Noble (L) fights for the ball with Tottenham Hotspur counterpart Sandro during their Premier League encounter at White Hart Lane yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bangladesh fly sans Aminul

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national football team reached Myanmar in the early hours of Saturday for the AFC Challenge Cup Qualifiers without their veteran goalkeeper Aminul Haq. Aminul, who has been dogged by injuries this season, sustained the setback during a practice session at the Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal Stadium on Friday. After consulting the doctor, Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) decided to leave him out of the tour to give rest to his injured leg, said a press release from BFF yesterday. The inclusion of Aminul was a surprise to everyone, especially for the fact that he has a one-match suspension to serve and also because his recent form in the league was scratchy. However, the team management have not reportedly opted for any goalkeeper to replace the injured Aminul. Lead by striker Zahid Hassan Emily, Bangladesh will play their first match against Palestine on March 21 at Youth Training Centre in Yangon. They will meet hosts Myanmar and Philippines on March 23 and 25 respectively.

Lucho falls victim to burglary

AFP, Marseille

Didier Deschamps expressed concern Friday after revealing that star midfielder Lucho Gonzalez was the latest Marseille player to fall victim to armed burglars. Lucho was at home in Aix-en-Provence when four individuals broke into his apartment late on Thursday. They stole bank cards, jewellery and other valuable belongings before escaping in the Argentinian player's car. Marseille coach Deschamps said Lucho handed over his personal effects and had been left unharmed. "Obviously he's very upset, who wouldn't be upset or shocked by such an incident?" said former France international Deschamps, who led Marseille to the league title last year.

City come calling

AFP, London

Carlo Ancelotti insists his Chelsea remain bystanders in the title race but their chances of making a late charge will strengthen if they can secure victory over Manchester City at Stamford Bridge on Sunday. Similarly, City's hopes of remaining on the coat-tails of leading two Manchester United and Arsenal will be maintained should they complete a second successive double over Ancelotti's side. Chelsea go into the clash knowing victory will allow them to leap-frog third-placed City and reinforce the upbeat mood in west London that has accompanied the recent upturn in form. The midweek Champions League aggregate victory over FC Copenhagen set up a quarter-final meeting with United and put more distance between the Blues and their mid-season slump. Ancelotti, though, has played down suggestions his side could now be on course to retain the title they won last season and, like City manager Roberto Mancini, is more concerned with securing a top four finish. "We have the same aim," said the Chelsea manager. "The first thing is to finish in the top four. At this moment, five teams are involved in this race and one will miss out. It will be important for every team to reach this." He added: "The title is not in our hands. If United or Arsenal win all their games, we're not involved. Obviously, we hope that they lose some points, but we can't think about this. We have to do our job, and our job at this moment is to beat City." Ancelotti will recall Fernando Torres after the striker was rested against Copenhagen along with centre back David Luiz who was rested for that tie. Torres' continuing problems in front of goal - he has failed to score in six appearances for his new club - have been one of the

few disappointments in the last month but Ancelotti insists he is unconcerned. "He needs to score above all for himself, not the team," said the manager. "The team is doing well. I understand very well that, for the strikers, it's very important to score. But I ask my striker not just to score but to be involved for the team and work hard. He's doing this. I've had this before a lot of times. I kept Hernan Crespo for six months without him scoring. I don't ask them to score. I never said to them: 'You have to score.' The team has to score." City have won the last three meetings between the sides but they must restore their belief after exiting the Europa League at the hands of Dinamo Kiev three days before this game. Mancini's side failed to recover after the first half dismissal of Mario Balotelli, the Italian striker who is now expected to be dropped for the trip to Stamford Bridge. "I don't know if I could rely on him (Balotelli) for a game like this," said City manager Mancini. "I'm going to chat with him in the next couple of days and we'll see. Mario is young, he needs to think about what he wants to do because he has everything he needs to become a fantastic striker. But he lost the tie for us this time. I hope every day he will change his behaviour. I can't understand his bad behaviour sometimes. Sometimes I can, but other times I can't. I hope he can change." Adam Johnson is poised to make his first league start after a two-month lay-off while Nigel de Jong faces a late test on an ankle problem. The Holland midfielder admits this is a vital game for Mancini's side. "It's a big challenge for us. Every game from now is big for us," he said. "The end of the season is coming and everyone is going to be trying to get those places in the top four."

We crumbled under pressure

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"I don't think that the skill levels of the players are the problem. These guys are capable of scoring 50s and 100s but maybe the pressure got to everyone and the expectation was so high that we could not handle it." On the context of yesterday's game, Shakib said that the only thing Bangladesh did marginally well was the bowling, even though he felt that by the end they had given away 30 or 40 more than they targeted. "Today the fast bowlers let us down, although they have bowled well throughout the tournament. But aside from them, I thought that the bowling was okay." Before the tournament, the target had been for three wins which would take the Tigers into the last eight, and Shakib suggested that they missed a little bit of the rub of the green that was required to push them through. "Before the tournament we believed that we would go to the second round. If we won three, we knew we would need some luck, and with four we would go through for certain. At the end we won three, which is the only positive but the luck did not really favour us." But poring over the details will tell you that in spite of the three wins, this was not

really the best of campaigns for the Tigers. They made hard work of their victories over Ireland and Netherlands and although the England game encompassed great drama, it was a match salvaged from a desperate situation. The lingering feeling then is that the Tigers could not perform to their best in this World Cup. This fact was not lost on Shakib. "We could not show our ability at the top stage, and I think it was due to the pressure factor. But at the end of the day the fact remains and the fault is entirely ours." From a personal standpoint, Shakib felt that his report card would also have read, 'can do better.' "I thought I did okay with the ball, but maybe I should have got some more runs with the bat," he said. Mathematically the Tigers are still in with a chance of making the quarterfinals, providing that India absolutely belts the West Indies in their final encounter today. But pragmatist that he is, Shakib was not holding on to hope. "Our run-rate is very poor," he said. "It would be a dream come true if we did qualify, but no I don't think so." The subtext was as clear as day. Bangladesh's World Cup journey for 2011 has come to an end.

Benzema at his best

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's French international Karim Benzema believes he is in his best form since he joined the Spanish giants from Lyon in July 2009. The 23-year-old striker struggled to impress following his 35-million-euro move but he has scored nine goals in his last seven appearances, including once during Real's 3-0 Champions League win on Wednesday over his former side Lyon. "Now I am lucky and my teammates are giving me a lot of balls to score goals," he said during an interview with Onda Cero radio. Asked if he felt he was in his best form since he arrived at Real, Benzema said: "I think so because now mentally and physically I am very well. I am very well physically, I can run a lot." Benzema joined Lyon's youth academy at the age of nine and progressed through club's ranks before making his first-team debut aged 17. He scored 43 goals over five seasons for Lyon, helping them to four league titles. Real are in second place in the Spanish league, five points behind leaders Barcelona with 10 games left.

Draw pleases Jose

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho is looking forward to congratulating Tottenham Hotspur manager Harry Redknapp for leading his side into the Champions League quarterfinals when their teams meet next month. The Portuguese coach has never hidden his fondness for English football after spending just over three seasons in London with Chelsea and will return to the capital with Real for the second leg of their tie against Spurs on April 13. Mourinho was full of praise for what his friend Redknapp has achieved at White Hart Lane since he took over a struggling team in October 2008, describing his achievements as "brilliant." "I left England in 2007/8 and Spurs weren't in the UEFA Cup, they weren't even in the first six in the Premier League,"

Mourinho told a news conference on Friday. "Martin Jol started the good work and Harry has continued it in amazing ways. I'm so happy for that. He's a friend, one of the few really good friends I made in England." Spurs topped their Champions League qualifying group and then dumped out seven-times European Cup winners AC Milan in the last 16 stage, 1-0 on aggregate, to set up a juicy encounter against one of the competition favourites. "It's brilliant," Mourinho said. "They played against the European champions in the group phase (Inter Milan). They played against the team who have won the European Cup the second highest number of times, AC Milan, and now they play Real Madrid, the Champion of Champions, who have won nine European Cups." Mourinho, who led Inter to a treble which included the European Cup last season, has been brought in to repeat the feat with Real Madrid this year. He took a major step forward by breaking their last 16 hoodoo during the week, when Real knocked out Olympique Lyon to make the last eight for the first time in seven years, but was clearly pleased to be heading back to London. "I'm happy to play Spurs," he added, "...because I go back to London, to an English stadium and I see Harry and can congratulate him for what he has done." Redknapp was similarly fulsome in his praise of Mourinho who he called "one of the all-time great managers." "It will be good to see him. I think he was amazing for English football when he came, a fantastic coach, great manager and a real personality," the Spurs boss told a news conference. "He lit the Premier League up in the time he was here as well as winning the (English) championship. He's a great personality, has great knowledge. Look what he did to win the Champions League twice."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words. Includes a solution time of 27 mins and a solution key at the bottom.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with letters and numbers. Includes the clue: Yesterdays Cryptoquip: ONE WOULD SUPPOSE THAT RABBITS SHOULD START LEAPING WHENEVER THEY'RE GIVEN THE HOP-PORTUNITY.

CRYPTOQUIP
M K X R Y Q E D X E Y D V K X
O L M X Y R S D Y J Y X U D L D N F A N F
B X Y Y D A D H F U N Z X F T D F S M L D
B X F M N Q D Z D Q O B O Q D T N O F R S M ?
Yesterdays Cryptoquip: ONE WOULD SUPPOSE THAT RABBITS SHOULD START LEAPING WHENEVER THEY'RE GIVEN THE HOP-PORTUNITY.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: E equals P