

More misery for Wolves

AFP, London

Wolves' battle against relegation suffered a setback on Saturday as Everton scored their biggest Premier League win of the season in a 3-0 victory at Molineux.

First-half goals from Jermaine Beckford, Phil Neville and Diniya Bilyaletdinov secured all three points for Everton, who remain in seventh spot after extending their unbeaten run to six matches.

But the defeat left Mick McCarthy's Wolves rooted in the relegation mire, with the midlands club second from bottom with only six games remaining.

Wolves hopes of securing a vital three points were snuffed out in the opening 45 minutes, Everton storming into a 3-0 lead at the break.

After soaking up early Wolves pressure, Everton went ahead against the run of play on 21 minutes, when Beckford ghosted into the near post to meet a Leon Osman cross with a glancing header.

Wolves midfielder Aldene Guedioura almost equalised for the home side moments later but his curling shot flew just wide.

Instead it was Everton who rammed home their advantage with a goal that was desperately cruel on Wolves goalkeeper Wayne Hennessey.

Hennessey thought he had prevented what would have been a certain George Elokobi own goal with a brilliant save, but as Wolves struggled to clear the ball fell to Neville, who rifled in a shot from just outside the area.

It got worse for Wolves on the stroke of half-time when Bilyaletdinov pounced on a loose ball in the centre circle.

The Russian midfielder surged towards goal and with Wolves defence backing off, let fly with a swerving 25-yarder that flew into the top corner for 3-0.

Pastore agent bins Roma link

AFP, Rome

Argentine playmaker Javier Pastore's agent Marcelo Simonian has denied his client is set to move to Roma, following Italian press reports to that effect.

Pastore is one of the most highly sought-after players in Serie A following a couple of excellent seasons with Palermo.

But with the Sicilians' president Maurizio Zamparini insisting it would take a mega-bid to prise him away, Simonian insists cash-strapped Roma is not a likely destination for the 21-year-old.

"There's no truth in it, I only found out about it through the media," Simonian told a Roma fans' website.

"I don't know how much he's worth because Zamparini will decide the price when the moment comes to sell him.

"In every case Pastore is thinking about the present, which means Palermo, and doing well in the pink and black shirt.

"He knows that doing well now will make him even better in the future.

"Rome is an incredible city and Roma are a fantastic club but he feels great at Palermo."

SPORTS POLL

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Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Luka Modric (C) goes past Stoke City defender Robert Huth (L) before sliding home the second goal during their Premier League encounter at White Hart Lane yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

FIFA may bend rules MU march 10 clear

Football

AFP, Tokyo

FIFA is considering bending the rules to help Japan take part in the Copa America after a quake-tsunami disaster forced them to withdraw from the event, the country's football chief says.

The March 11 catastrophe has thrown Japan's J-League into disarray and five rounds of matches which were suspended are now due to be played around the same time as the July 1-24 Copa America in Argentina.

Under the current rules of world football's governing body, clubs are not obligated to free up Japanese players for the South American championship because Japan have been invited only as guests.

But FIFA president Sepp Blatter is considering a one-off exceptional measure asking clubs to free up players, Japan Football Association (JFA) president Junji Ogura told Japanese media on Friday after visiting South America.

The measure would apply to Japanese clubs as well as teams in Europe and elsewhere who have Japanese players.

Ogura said that Argentina Football Association president Julio Grondona, who is also a senior FIFA vice president, had asked

Japan to reconsider pulling out when they met on Tuesday.

"Grondona knows that European clubs don't have to release their players, but he called Blatter this morning and Blatter said he would consider changing the rules," Ogura said, according to Kyodo news agency.

"Grondona knows how many Japanese players are playing in Europe and says if they are needed for the Copa America, then CONMEBOL (South American Football Confederation) would take responsibility and negotiate their release.

The JFA board is expected to make a decision on the matter at a board meeting next Thursday, he said.

The J-League is opposed to releasing players in July because of its revamped calendar. European clubs may be reluctant to free up players for fear of injury as the summer break is important for them to tune up for the new season.

The JFA has submitted to the CONMEBOL a list of 28 Japanese playing in 14 countries in Europe's first or second divisions, who may make up the core of the Blue Samurai bound for Argentina, Ogura said.

He added that the JFA would also make a fresh plea to J-League teams to release their best players.

AFP, London



Manchester United shrugged off the absence of Wayne Rooney to defeat Fulham 2-0 at Old Trafford and open up a 10-point lead at the top of the Premier League on Saturday.

United, still furious at the two-match ban handed out to Rooney for swearing, secured all three points thanks to Dimitar Berbatov's 22nd goal of the season and a close-range header from Antonio Valencia.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson made eight changes from the side which defeated Chelsea 1-0 in the Champions League as he juggled his options ahead of next Tuesday's return leg at Old Trafford.

United's victory keeps the pressure on second-placed Arsenal, who travel to Blackpool on Sunday knowing they can ill-afford any more slip-ups, even with their two games in hand over the leaders.

Chelsea kept alive their remote hopes of overhauling United with a 1-0 victory over Wigan at Stamford Bridge, Florent Malouda scoring the only goal as the Blues remained third, 11 points adrift of United.

But it was another disappointing afternoon for Chelsea's 50 million pound striker Fernando Torres, whose goal drought continued after he appeared as a second-half substitute.

Tottenham -- thrashed 4-0 by Real Madrid in midweek -- maintained their push for a place in next season's Champions League with a 3-2 win over Stoke at White Hart Lane to remain in fifth spot.

Peter Crouch bounced back from the disappointment of his red card in the Bernabeu to score twice, with Luka Modric grabbing Spurs' other goal.

Stoke's goals came Matthew Etherington and Kenwyne Jones.

At the other end of the table, Wolves' battle against relegation suffered a setback as Everton romped to a 3-0 victory in the early kick-off at Molineux.

First-half goals from Jermaine Beckford, Phil Neville and Diniya Bilyaletdinov secured all three points for Everton, who remain in seventh spot after extending their unbeaten run to six matches.

But the defeat left Mick McCarthy's Wolves rooted in the relegation mire, with the midlands club second from bottom with only six games remaining.

Birmingham and Blackburn remain three points clear of the relegation zone after grinding out a 1-1 draw at Ewood Park.

Birmingham took the lead through a headed Lee Bowyer effort on 32 minutes only for Blackburn to level on half-time courtesy of David Hoyle.

West Ham missed the chance to pull themselves out of the drop zone after crashing to a 3-0 defeat at Bolton.

Bolton took the lead on 14 minutes with an exquisite strike from Daniel Sturridge, the on-loan Chelsea striker curling a shot from the edge of the area beyond the grasp of West Ham keeper Robert Green.

Lee Chung-Yong made it 2-0 for the Trotters on 20 minutes, heading in at the near post from Martin Petrov's cross before Sturridge grabbed his second.

RESULTS

Blackburn 1 (Hoyle 45)

Birmingham 1 (Bowyer 32)

Bolton 3 (Sturridge 14, 51, Lee 20) West Ham 0

Chelsea 1 (Malouda 67) Wigan 0

Man Utd 2 (Berbatov 12, Valencia 32) Fulham 0

Sunderland 2 (Shorey 10-og, Bardsley 31) West Brom 3 (Odemwingie 28, Mulu 54, Scharner 72)

Tottenham 3 (Crouch 11, 34, Modric 18) Stoke 2 (Etherington 27, Jones 41)

Wolves 0 Everton 3 (Beckford 21)

Wenger remains hopeful

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger launched a stout defence of his Arsenal team's achievements and his managerial policy ahead of their Premier League game against Blackpool on Sunday.

Arsenal have come under criticism this week from the club's influential Supporters Trust following the 0-0 draw against Blackburn, which dimmed their hopes of overtaking Manchester United at the top of the Premier League.

But Wenger claims the dissent is premature, as there is still a chance they could win the league.

And he pointed to the fact that even though they have gone almost six seasons without a trophy, the players they have at their disposal and the sound financial footing should count as success.

"We give our maximum and you have to accept people's opinion," Wenger said.

"Let's hope that in the whole history we will never be more disappointed than that and that, in the next 20 years, they will be exactly as disappointed as they are at the moment.

"If the situation remains like that, it is not too dramatic. People's opinion is

people's opinion and we have to accept that in our game.

"As long as you are second in the league, I am ready to sign for the next 20 years and stand up for that.

"You are judged only on your last game. We live in a society where everybody has an opinion and very few people do something.

"We have to act and we want to be judged on our actions. For the rest, our society lives at the moment only on opinion.

"I have grown up by judging people on what they do, not what they say. We want to be judged on Sunday on what we do, that means a good performance."

Two months ago Arsenal were chasing four trophies, but lost the League Cup final to Birmingham, the FA Cup quarterfinal to Manchester United and the Champions League round of 16 tie to Barcelona.

But Wenger insisted he would still look upon this season as a success, even if they fail to win the Premier League.

"We want to fight until the last game of the season," Wenger said. "The fight of the team is to come out after every game and know we have given as much as we can."

"If there is a team that is better than us we have to accept it. I believe we do not have to be ashamed at the moment of what we have done.

"Rather, I have to be proud because if I took statements from all the people here at the start of the season we were not even in the top five. Now it is a scandal we are second.

"It is time people understand what our job is about. It is important we realise this team is absolutely amazing for what they do at their age. One day people will understand that, but at the moment, I am not sure many people do.

"Now it is a crucial moment where we have to trust these players and not listen to some opinions of people who have not worked half a day in football."

Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas is fit, but Wenger will be without Alex Song, who has a knee injury. Theo Walcott and Bacary Sagna face fitness tests.

Blackpool manager Ian Holloway, meanwhile, has moved to quell the anticipation for their game against bottom club Wigan on Saturday week.

"I've already heard people going on about Wigan -- it is being made out to be the game that could decide whether we stay up or not. But that's nonsense as it will decide nothing."

Carlo relaxed about future

AFP, London



Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti insisted Friday that his future at the club did not hinge on the outcome of his team's Champions League quarterfinal with Manchester United.

The reigning English champions are facing up to the prospect of a trophy-less season after conceding a 1-0 first leg lead to United at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday, who they trail in the Premier League by 11 points.

Chelsea have failed to win a trophy in only two other seasons under Russian owner Roman Abramovich, and on each occasion the manager was sacked.

However Ancelotti was bullish about his job prospects on Friday, believing that he enjoyed "100 per cent" support from club chiefs.

"I don't think the decision on my future at the club rests on whether or not I win the Champions League," he said.

"The club knows me very well, knows my behaviour, and they will take their decision on that.

"Until now, the support is totally 100%. I don't have a problem with this."

Ancelotti meanwhile defended £50-million striker Fernando Torres, who is yet to score a goal for the club in more than 10 hours of game time since joining from Liverpool in January.

"This is not a good moment for Fernando. But he has the support first from himself - his confidence - and from his manager and team-mates," Ancelotti said.



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DAY'S EVENT



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Abahani v Ctg Mohammedan

Time: 6:30pm

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