



Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard (L) scores the third goal during their Premier League clash against West Bromwich Albion at the Hawthorns yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea rebound

AFP, London

Chelsea bounced back from the disappointment of their European exit to record a morale-boosting 3-1 victory over West Bromwich Albion on Saturday.

With leaders Manchester United taking on Manchester City in the FA Cup semifinals and Arsenal playing Liverpool on Sunday, Chelsea's trip to the Hawthorns took centre stage in a reduced Premier League programme.

Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti -- who admitted on Friday he may face the sack at the end of what is likely to be a trophy-less season -- must have feared the worst after Peter Odemwingie fired the Baggies ahead on 17 minutes.

But Chelsea, who had left record signing Fernando Torres on the bench, responded swiftly, scoring three times through Didier Drogba, Salomon Kalou and Frank Lampard to lead 3-1 at half-time.

Minnows Blackpool sunk into the relegation zone after crashing 3-1 at home to fellow strugglers Wigan Athletic, who moved out of the bottom three for the first time since early February with a vital win.

Colombian striker Hugo Rodallega fired Wigan ahead after only three minutes, taking advantage of a slip by Blackpool defender Craig Cathcart before beating Matt Gilks with a low shot.

Wigan striker Charles N'Zogbia made it 2-0 on the stroke of half-time to ensure there was no way back for Blackpool.

Neal Eardley's 67th-minute own goal

compounded the Seasiders' misery before DJ Campbell grabbed a late consolation effort.

West Ham's relegation fears mounted after Aston Villa striker Gabriel Agbonlahor pounced in injury time at Upton Park to give the visitors a 2-1 victory.

West Ham striker Robbie Keane had put the Londoners 1-0 up after only 105 seconds, sweeping into the roof of the net from 12 yards after Villa failed to deal with a corner.

But Villa levelled through Darren Bent on 36 minutes, the England striker heading in from a Luke Young cross. The game seemed destined for a draw until Agbonlahor popped up in the first minute of injury time to sink the Hammers.

Sunderland's miserable run of form continued after they crashed 2-0 against Birmingham at St Andrews.

Birmingham went ahead shortly before half-time, Swedish international Sebastian Larsson capitalising after Simon Mignolet and Phil Bardsley failed to deal with a Cameron Jerome flick-on.

The Blues made sure of the points on 66 minutes, Craig Gardner lashing in a powerful 20-yard effort to make it 2-0.

In-form Everton stretched their unbeaten run to six matches with a 2-0 victory over Blackburn Rovers that nudged the Indian-owned Lancashire club ever closer to the relegation zone.

Leon Osman put the Toffees ahead on 54 minutes after a well-worked short corner routine before a Leighton Baines penalty on 75 minutes sealed a win that leaves Rovers just two points clear of the drop in 16th place.

US group inks Roma deal

AFP, Boston

A group of American investors led by Boston-based private equity tycoon Thomas DiBenedetto have signed a deal to buy Italian football club Roma, making it the first Serie A club to have foreign ownership.

"The deal is done," DiBenedetto said at a press conference after completing the formalities along with Paolo Fiorentino, vice president of Unicredit bank.

"I am proud of my Italian origins and for this reason I will do big things."

Unicredit last year became co-owner of the cash-strapped club and will have a share of the new ownership company.

What to WATCH

STAR Sports
F1 World Championship
Chinese Grand Prix
Live from 12:45pm

SET Max
Indian Premier League
Pune v Delhi
Live from 4:30pm

ESPN
English Premier League
Arsenal v Liverpool
Live from 8:55pm

TEN Action
Primera Liga
Espanyol v Atletico Madrid
Live from 1:00am (Monday)

Silence provokes walk-out

EUROSPORT

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho's decision not to speak to the media ahead of the 'Clasico' with Barcelona resulted in a walk-out by scores of journalists at the start of the pre-match press conference, which was held by assistant coach Aitor Karanka.

It was revealed earlier on Friday that Karanka, as has happened on occasions this season, would speak to the media in place of Mourinho prior to the table-topping clash between the two Spanish superpowers at the Bernabeu.

That did not go down well with the assembled journalists at Madrid's Valdebebas training ground and many took the decision to stage a walk-out as soon as Karanka arrived.

When Karanka did come out he was accompanied by Mourinho, but as soon as it was confirmed the Portuguese would not be answering any questions, it was estimated that more than 100 journalists and television crews from several different countries left the room.

Karanka then fielded

questions from the journalists who stayed, but Mourinho remained silent.

Filippo Ricci, a journalist with Italian newspaper Gazzetta dello Sport who was among those who left, explained: "What happened

was Mourinho decided not to come to the press conference, the usual press conference before the Clasico, and to send out Aitor Karanka.

"The press didn't like this decision and decided to quit the press centre as he was

coming in.

"The surprise was that Mourinho also came into the press centre, but when the press officer said Mourinho wasn't getting any questions, at that moment around half to three quarters of the press centre left."

Karanka played down the incident.

"Every time the coach talks everything is blown out of proportion," Karanka said.

"He (Mourinho) doesn't want his words blown out of proportion and he doesn't want to be the one who raises the temperature ahead of the match," the former Real player added. "It's just one way that we have of working."

Mourinho has frequently clashed with the media during his coaching career and has angered journalists in Spain since his arrival at the end of last season by cutting back on their access to players and training.

Asked what he thought about the protest by the Spanish media, Karanka, who has stood in for Mourinho at news conferences on around 10 previous occasions, said: "I am not going to take that much notice."

"I also represent the institution of Real Madrid and it is not the first time I have sat here."



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho attends a press conference after a training session at Madrid Sport City on Friday. Mourinho refused to take questions from the media regarding the much-awaited Barcelona encounters.

Four Clasicos excites Xavi

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona playmaker Xavi Hernandez says he is most afraid of facing Real Madrid in the Spanish Cup final, of the four Clasicos that the two sides will play over the next three weeks.

The bitter rivals confront each other in a league match in Madrid on Saturday night, before locking horns again in the Spanish Cup final on Wednesday and then in the two legs of their Champions League semifinal, on April 27 and May 3.

"The fans wait every year with great expectation for the two Clasicos, at home and away," Xavi told the Spanish daily El Mundo in an interview published Saturday.

"In the coming days, we will have not two but four Clasicos. It's fantastic."

Of the four, he is most afraid of the Cup, "because it is a single match."

If there is "any temporary collapse, even if only for five minutes, any expulsion, right or wrong, any isolated incident, it can kill the game and there's no room to react," said the 31-year-old Spanish international.

But is he excited about the challenge of facing Real.

"We play better against the big teams. With Real Madrid, there's the extra motivation because it's our oldest rival and also the most difficult rival, now and forever. I like these kind of challenges."

Champions Barcelona hold a commanding eight point lead over Real in the league with seven games left and victory over their foes on Saturday would virtually seal the league title, while a draw would still leave Madrid with a mountain to climb.

In the first Clasico of the season, on November 29, Barcelona thrashed Real 5-0 at the Camp Nou.

"Some may think that the 5-0 league match at the Nou Camp was a shock result, but if an hour later we had returned to play another game with the same players and the referee, the result could have been completely different," said Xavi.

"You never know in a Barcelona-Real Madrid match. You never know."

Arab investor to save 1860

AFP, Berlin

Bankruptcy-threatened Munich 1860 may have secured a reprieve with an Arabian businessman set to buy a majority share in the second-division German club worth 13 million euros (18.75m US dollars).

The ex-Bundesliga club had been on the verge of bankruptcy, saddled with 14 million euros of debt, report Munich daily the Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

Now multi-millionaire Hasan Abdullah Ismaik, from Abu Dhabi, is close to buying a 49 percent stake.

The 34-year-old is reported to be willing to pay up to five million euros of the club's debts and wants to invest 20 million euros by 2014 to help the club return to the Bundesliga.

SPORTS POLL

Do you agree with ICC's decision to restrict the next two World Cups?

Yes 57.4%

No 42.6%

TOTAL VOTES: 256

WEEKLY QUESTION

Are you happy to see Shakib Al Hasan play in IPL and County cricket?

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Wenger stays resolute

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has made it clear he is not prepared to compromise his footballing philosophy now that the club is owned by American tycoon Stan Kroenke.

That philosophy -- of putting faith in young, technically proficient and therefore inexpensive players -- is set to receive one of the sternest tests of the season on Sunday when Liverpool are the visitors to the Emirates Stadium.

Arsenal can cut Manchester United's lead at the top to four points with a victory but should they lose, their title chances will be all but nonexistent.

Either way, Wenger says he intends to continue to follow the course he has pursued for over a decade, having already had talks on the subject with Kroenke, who will attend the match on Sunday.

"On the football side of things we will continue to focus on the football the way we want to play it and to develop our players," said the Frenchman.

"We have a squad which is about 23

years of age, which is in a strong position in the league.

"We have a certain philosophy of football and we will continue to develop that and to play even better."

"We will continue to run the club like it has been done until now -- that means live within our resources, produce our own resources and develop our football team."

Liverpool have revived significantly since Kenny Dalglish replaced Roy Hodgson and used the money from the £50 million (\$81.5m) sale of Fernando Torres to bring in England striker Andy Carroll from Newcastle and Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez in January.

"Liverpool have a good offensive force with Carroll and Suarez. We are as well an offensive team, so it promises to be an interesting game," Wenger said.

Monday night's 3-0 Anfield victory over Manchester City was Liverpool's most recent success under Dalglish and they are now six points behind fourth-place City.

"It was a great game for us," said defender Martin Skrtel.

"These few days after the game we have really enjoyed the atmosphere. You can see the smiles on the faces and

that is very important. Sunday is going to be a big game, a very important game for us."

"We are in a race for the best position we can reach in the league table at the end of the season."

"We have to work hard and try to repeat the performance we did in the game against City. If we do that we can get a good result there."

Dalglish could keep faith with teenage right-back John Flanagan, who made an accomplished debut against City.

Goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny could make a quicker than anticipated Arsenal return from the finger injury he suffered in the Champions League against Barcelona.

However, 41-year-old Jens Lehmann is standing by to continue after replacing knee injury victim Manuel Almunia at short notice at Blackpool last week.

Centre-back Johan Djourou and central midfielders Alex Song and Denilson could also make returns but right-back Bacary Sagna is a doubt with a knee injury.

Right-back Glen Johnson, centre-back Daniel Agger and midfielders Jonjo Shelvey and Steven Gerrard will all be missing for Liverpool.



Brazil legend Ronaldo holds the T90 Tracer Doma, the official football for the 2011 Copa America, during its presentation at Ciudad de La Plata Stadium on Friday. Argentina will host the tournament from July 1 to July 24.

PHOTO: AFP