



Liverpool midfielder Maxi Rodriguez celebrates after scoring the fourth goal of the game in their Premier League clash against Fulham at Craven Cottage on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Rodriguez keeps Kop flying

AFP, London



Liverpool boosted their late challenge for a top four finish in the Premier League as Maxi Rodriguez's hat-trick fired the Reds to a 5-2 victory against Fulham on Monday.

Kenny Dalglish's side romped into a three-goal lead within the first 16 minutes at Craven Cottage, with Rodriguez scoring twice before Fulham goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer allowed Dirk Kuyt's weak shot to squirm into the net.

Moussa Dembele got one back for Fulham but Rodriguez struck again for his second hat-trick in three games and Luis Suarez bagged the fifth goal to complete the demolition.

Steve Sidwell's late strike meant little to Fulham and Liverpool's five-star display lifted them above Tottenham in fifth place and within four points of fourth placed Manchester City in the race for the final Champions League spot.

With only two matches left, Liverpool are more likely to have to settle for Europa League qualification, but a slip by City in their game in hand against Tottenham on Tuesday will have the Anfield faithful dreaming of a return to Europe's elite club competition.

Whatever the outcome of their European charge, Dalglish has surely done enough to persuade Reds owner John W Henry to hand him the manager's job on a permanent basis.

Liverpool's record signing Andy Carroll was missing again after suffering an injury in training, but the Reds arrived in west London in fine form and took the lead in 31 seconds.

Manchester United may be about to take Liverpool's record of 18 league titles, but even Sir Alex Ferguson's team haven't scored such a fast goal this season.

Suarez broke away down the left and the Uruguayan's cross was miscued by Fulham defender Carlos Salcido towards Schwarzer.

Schwarzer could only scramble the ball away from Kuyt and into the path of Rodriguez, who fired home emphatically.

Liverpool captain Jamie Carragher couldn't have wished for a more perfect start on his 666th appearance, an astonishing total that made him the club's second highest appearance holder behind Ian Callaghan.

It got even better for Carragher when Argentine midfielder Rodriguez struck again five minutes later.

Lucas Leiva's long pass picked out a surging run from Glen Johnson on the

right wing and the England defender's looping cross to the far post was met with a powerful volley from Rodriguez that flashed past Schwarzer.

Dalglish's men were pouring forward in waves and they didn't have to wait long for a third goal as Schwarzer blundered in the 16th minute.

Kuyt's low shot from the right side of the penalty area should have posed no problems for Schwarzer, yet the Australian somehow allowed the tame effort to trickle through his legs and into the net.

Schwarzer hung his head in embarrassment as Dutch forward Kuyt celebrated his ninth goal in eight matches.

After Raul Meireles was forced off early in the second half, Fulham scored in the 57th minute when substitute Bobby Zamora slipped a pass for Dembele to shoot past Jose Reina.

But Liverpool had too much firepower for Fulham and Rodriguez sealed his treble in the 71st minute.

Taking John Flanagan's pass 30 yards from goal, Rodriguez advanced unopposed before blasting an unstoppable strike into the top corner.

Liverpool hadn't finished there. Suarez capped a fine display as he jinked round Schwarzer to slot in the fifth in the 75th minute and Sidwell's superb 85th minute goal was no consolation for Fulham.

Hertha rope in Kraft

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich second choice goalkeeper Thomas Kraft signed for newly-promoted Bundesliga side Hertha Berlin on Monday on a four year contract, the buying club announced.

The 22-year-old arrives on a free transfer having grown disenchanted at Bayern after he was demoted to the number two role behind veteran Hans-Jorg Butt following the sacking of coach Louis van Gaal at the beginning of March.

Kraft had replaced Butt as number one at the turn of the year much to the surprise of many, but the 37-year-old Butt not only regained his place but was also offered a new contract at the behest of Jupp Heynckes, who takes charge next season.

"We are very happy to have succeeded in signing Thomas Kraft," said Hertha sporting director Michael Preetz.

Blanc cleared of allegations

Football

AFP, Paris

France coach Laurent Blanc was on Tuesday cleared of racial discrimination by French Sports Minister Chantal Jouanno in the row over talks concerning the introduction of quotas for dual nationality players.

"There is nothing to suggest that Laurent Blanc in any way gave his support to discriminatory actions," Jouanno told a press conference.

Blanc appeared before a joint hearing of the French Football Federation (FFF) and the Sports Ministry on Monday.

The two-pronged inquiry was launched after the Mediapart website released a transcript of a meeting last November in which Blanc and French officials discussed introducing quotas on the number of dual-nationality players at youth training centres.

A number of players have come through French academies in recent years, and represented France at youth level, only to switch allegiances to the senior sides of different countries.

"The means of limiting dual-nationals was in effect debated," Jouanno continued.

"The subject was brought up in an awkward and uncalled for manner. It was alluded to in a manner which bordered on racist but there was no project to establish quotas."

Jouanno said that there was no evidence to suggest that the 2001 law against racial discrimination had been broken.

"There is no need to take legal action," she said.

"Laurent Blanc took part in this type of meeting for the first time. He was neither the organiser nor the pilot. The hearings show that he came in on the debate and that he had no project or fixed opinion."

She also paid tribute to Blanc who took over from Raymond Domenech after the fiasco of France's 2010 World Cup campaign in South Africa when the team went on a training ground strike.

"He's (Blanc) striving to put values back into the heart of the game," said Jouanno.

However, the minister said the FFF's Federal Council would have to decide whether suspended National Technical Director (DNT) Francois Blaquart could continue in his role.

Blaquart could pay heavily for his comment "we can think about a kind of quota without saying it" during the November meeting.

"I'm not here to make heads roll at any price," said Jouanno.

"Nothing can lead one to think that a racist philosophy or discrimination is sustained by the FFF, but the DTN's words are regrettable. He should lead by example in debates," added Jouanno.

The report has caused huge controversy and created ruptures among the multi-racial France team that won the World Cup in 1998.

Several members of France's 1998 squad have spoken out about the affair including Zinedine Zidane, who voiced his support for Blanc, along with Christophe Dugarry, Marcel Desailly, Bixente Lizarazu and World Cup winning coach Aime Jacquet.

Lilian Thuram and Patrick Vieira have both strongly criticised Blanc.

Milan snap up Mexes Taiwo

AFP, Rome

Newly-crowned Italian champions AC Milan confirmed Monday the arrival of two new defenders for next season, Roma's French international Philippe Mexes and Marseille's Nigerian international Taye Taiwo.

Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri said that 29-year-old Mexes - who has been at AS Roma for seven seasons - and Taiwo, 26, who has spent six years with French champions Marseille, would bolster an aging defence.

"We are looking good in terms of defence with the signings of Mexes and Taiwo," said Allegri, who won the title largely relying on veteran players.

Both players came on free transfers, with Mexes set to be paid 4.5 million euros a year according to the Italian media.

Mexes is set to replace Milan legend Alessandro Nesta, 35, in the centre of defence alongside Brazilian Thiago Silva.

Taiwo, who played for Nigeria at last year's World Cup finals, has had a successful spell with Marseille playing a pivotal role in their first league title in 18 years last term and scoring the only goal in their League Cup final victory last month.

Figo, Diego to play in Chechnya

Football

AFP, Grozny

Football legends from Diego Maradona to Luis Figo were expected in Russia's restive republic of Chechnya on Wednesday for an exhibition match sponsored by the local strongman leader.

The authorities of Chechnya have poured enormous financial and political capital into the unveiling of a new stadium in Grozny -- a city slowly rebuilding from two wars in the past 15 years.

The office of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov -- a former rebel backed by the Kremlin despite his questionable record on human rights -- said the unveiling ceremony will include a match featuring some of the sport's most revered names.

The list of all-stars announced by the Chechen authorities includes English greats Robbie Fowler and Steve McManaman as well as France's Jean-Pierre Papin and Fabien Barthez.

The Italian contingent was supposed to include Franco Baresi and Alessandro Costacurta along with Christian Vieri.

The local side will be captained by Kadyrov himself and feature a couple of retired stars from the Russian national squad.

But none of the international big names have thus far confirmed their participation while Zinedine Zidane called earlier reports of his involvement "quite annoying".

Chechnya did manage to pull off a minor miracle in March by playing an exhibition match against Brazilian legends who included 1994 World Cup winners Bebeto and Dunga.

The new stadium holds added significance for Chechen rulers because the existing one was the site where the republic's former leader Akhmad Kadyrov -- the current president's father -- was killed in a bomb blast in 2004.

The new stadium bears Akhmad Kadyrov's name and represents Chechnya's attempt to rebuild a civil society in a republic whose conflicts killed tens of thousands and left most infrastructure in ruins.

Italian FA to investigate Gattuso

AFP, Rome

Veteran AC Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso is to be investigated by the Italian football Federation after taking part with fans in chants against the club's former coach Leonardo.

The Brazilian has been branded a traitor by Milan fans for joining arch rivals Inter Milan in December, having ended a 13-year association with Milan in May.

And Gattuso joined in with fans singing "Leonardo is a piece of shit" following their 0-0 draw at Roma on Saturday night that secured an 18th league title.

Inter president Massimo Moratti revealed that Leonardo had taken the news badly, while the coach himself released a statement on the club website.

"I would like to know AC Milan's official position on what has happened," he said.

Asked about the incident, Milan vice-president said it was being blown out of proportion.

"About Gattuso's alleged offensive behaviour towards Leonardo, let's not dramatise it," he said.

"Let's not forget that at the end of the day, footballers are kids."

SPORTS POLL
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What to WATCH
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Indian Premier League
Rajasthan v Bangalore
Live from 8:30pm
ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News

DAY'S EVENT
National Cricket League FINAL
(Five-Day Match, Day-2)
Dhaka v Rajshahi
Time: 9:30am
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur
Bangladesh League
Sk Jamal Dhanmondi Club v Ctg Abahani
Time: 4:15pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National

Ganso might miss Copa America

Football

SOCCERNET

Brazil starlet Ganso could miss this summer's Copa America after it was revealed that he will be out of action for around six weeks with a thigh injury.

Ganso, 21, suffered the injury while playing for club side Santos in the Sao Paulo state championship final against Corinthians on Sunday, although Brazil coach Mano Menezes claimed he would wait until the last minute for the playmaker to prove his fitness.

"We're going to wait a little longer. Maybe it won't be so much (time he is out), let's wait a bit to see how his recovery goes," Menezes said. "Look how capricious football is. He only managed to play one match against the U.S [a 2-0 friendly win]. With the ligaments injury he was out for 199 days, he came back and had a few games, not enough to be called up, and now he's had another muscle injury."

Menezes' side play Netherlands on June 4 and Romania on June 7 in friendlies at home before the Copa America begins on July 1 and the coach is keen to have Ganso involved.

"Ganso is an organiser who reads the game for the team, he puts the pass through on goal, he sets the rhythm. This player is harder to find," he added.

Pele purring about Hernandez

SOCCERNET

Brazil legend Pele has been impressed by the impact made by Manchester United's Javier Hernandez this season and thinks the Mexican can be 'the next Lionel Messi'.

Pele has watched on as the 22-year-old has taken the Premier League by storm and the Brazilian has heaped praise onto the striker.

"There is no doubt that Hernandez is a promising player. He is excellent, I have seen some games of his on television and he is a fantastic footballer," Pele told a press conference. "He could be the next Messi because he has great talent; he is a big surprise just as Hugo Sanchez was because he is another that scores a lot of goals."



World Cup winner and member of FIFA's Football Committee, Christian Karembu juggles the ball outside FIFA headquarters prior to the inaugural meeting of the FIFA Task Force Football 2014 yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP