

United win thriller of Manchester

REUTERS, Manchester



Manchester United withstood a furious fightback by 10-man Manchester City to beat their local rivals 3-2 in a dramatic FA Cup third-round match at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday.

United surged into a 3-0 halftime lead after the controversial early sending-off of City defender Vincent Kompany and looked poised to exact full revenge for their humiliating 6-1 home league drubbing by their neighbours this season.

But goals from Aleksandar Kolarov and Sergio Aguero gave City hope and United needed the calming presence of 37-year-old Paul Scholes, on as a second-half substitute after coming out of retirement, to knock out the FA Cup holders at the third-round stage for the first time since 2007.

The visitors went ahead with a goal from their first attack after 10 minutes. Wayne Rooney spread the ball wide to Antonio Valencia on the right and the England striker continued his run to head the Ecuadorian winger's cross into the net off the underside of the bar.

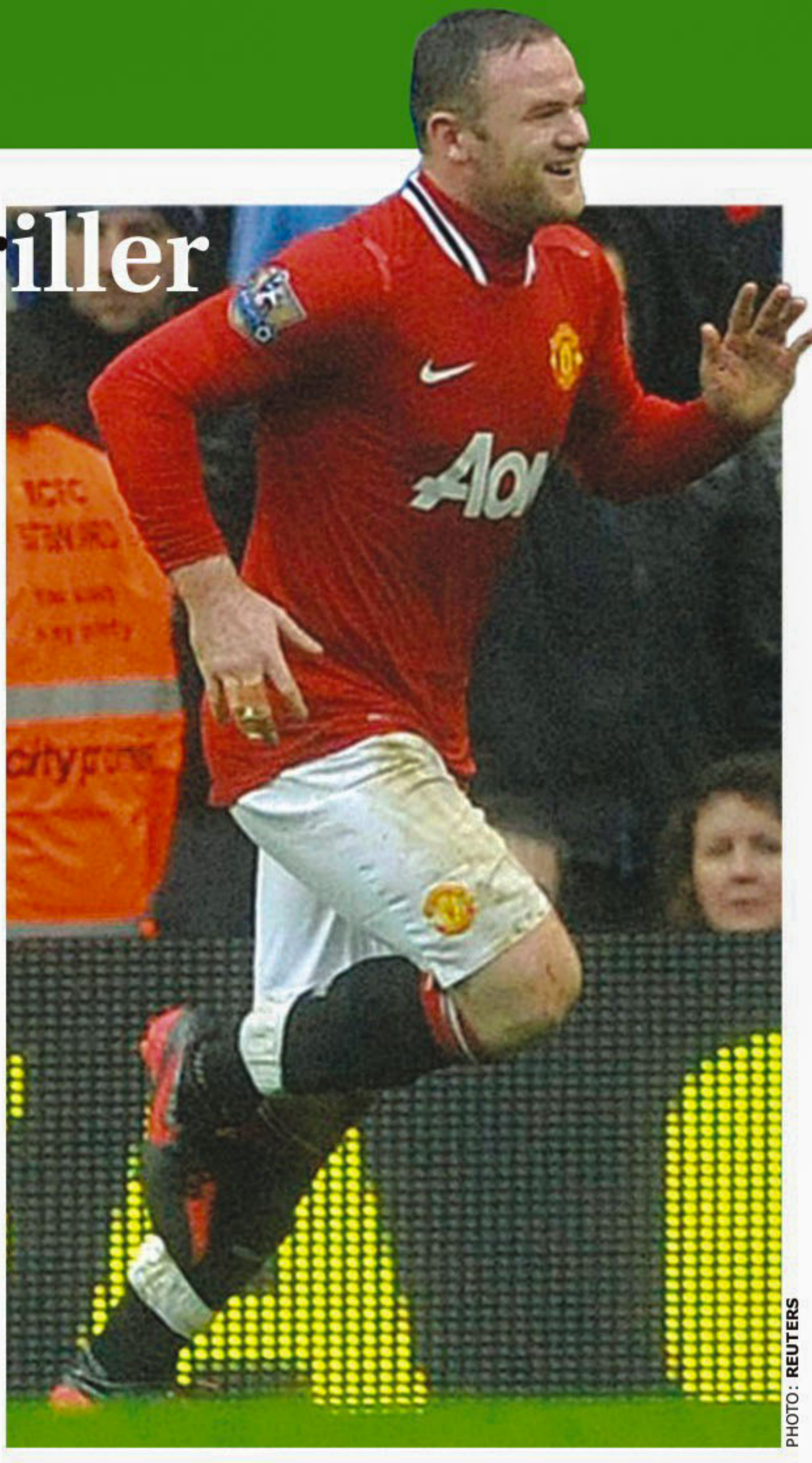
Two minutes later Kompany was harshly sent off for a clumsy challenge on Nani. City moved Micah Richards into central defence and their 10 men continued to provide a significant attacking threat with David Silva's clever prompting and Aguero working tirelessly on his own up front.

But soon Nani cut in from the left and although his ambitious shot ballooned up off a defender, the ball fell kindly for Danny Welbeck who swivelled cleverly to hook it into the far corner of the net.

It got worse. Welbeck was tackled late by Kolarov and referee Chris Foy pointed to the penalty spot. City's reserve goalkeeper Costel Pantilimon brilliantly palmed away Rooney's penalty but the striker followed up to head in the rebound.

City pulled a goal back immediately after halftime when Kolarov's powerful free kick pierced a flimsy wall and beat goalkeeper Anders Lindgaard, and they struck again with Aguero pouncing from close range after Lindgaard had failed to deal properly with his first shot.

City poured forward in search of the equaliser but their tired legs could not find the necessary inspiration and United hung on, reviving their season after two successive defeats had left them three points behind their opponents at the top of the Premier League.



Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney celebrates his second goal against Manchester City during their FA Cup clash at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday.

Inter, Siena herald a goal rush

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan crushed Parma 5-0 at the San Siro on Saturday to keep their slim Serie A title hopes alive while Lazio's championship challenge took a hit when they crashed 4-0 to a vibrant and adventurous Siena.

Fifth-placed Inter moved to within a point of Lazio, one place above them, having hit nine goals in their last two games. They have won seven of their last eight league matches.

"These numbers are pleasing, we're correcting a situation that was complicated," said Inter coach Claudio Ranieri, referring to Inter's disastrous start.

However, he stopped short of suggesting they could challenge for honours this season.

"I'm not saying anything, I've arrived here and I'm trying my best. In April or May we'll see what we've done. Ahead of us there are teams who are running and we'll need to fly to be able to catch them."

It was also the third time this season that Parma have been thrashed by one of the

big teams, having previously lost 4-1 to both Juventus and AC Milan.

Diego Milito scored a brace for Inter while he also had a hand in goals by Thiago Motta and Giampaolo Pazzini before youngster Marco Faraoni scored his first goal in Serie A late on.

Milito darted across his marker to flick home Ricardo Alvarez's left-wing cross at the near post after 13 minutes.

His deflected shot then dropped to Thiago Motta 20

RESULTS

Inter Milan 5 (Milito 13, 41, Motta 18, Pazzini 56, Faraoni 79) Parma 0
Siena 4 (Destro 11, 81, Giallo 35-pen, 45-pen) Lazio 0

yards out five minutes later and the Brazilian-born international lashed home a low drive.

Macon crossed from the right four minutes before the break and Milito headed home to kill the game.

Milito then slipped in Pazzini on 56 minutes to clip home before 20-year-old Faraoni put the icing on the cake with a stunning volley that dipped over goalkeeper Antonio Mirante on 79 minutes.

In Siena, Mattia Destro scored a brace for the hosts and Emanuele Calaiò added two penalties while the visitors had goalkeeper Albano Bizzarri sent off at the end of the first half.

The victory moved Siena up to mid-table while Lazio could drop to seven points off the leaders if either AC Milan or Juventus win on Sunday.

Vargas will need time

AFP, Napoli

Napoli coach Walter Mazzarri will give new Chile forward Eduardo Vargas time to bed down.

Vargas joined the Italians from Universidad de Chile this month following a stunning 2011 in his homeland.

But Mazzarri doesn't want to rush him in Naples, although he has included him in the squad for Sunday's trip to Palermo.

"I've spoken little with Vargas, (Hugo) Campagnaro has been translating for me," said Mazzarri.

"He seems a bright lad, yesterday (Friday) he watched our tactical session to accelerate his adaptation process."

Dramatic return for Scholes

AFP, Manchester

Paul Scholes, who retired last season, is making a dramatic return to help Manchester United cope with injuries for the rest of the season.

The 37-year-old former England and United midfielder has been named on the bench by Sir Alex Ferguson for United's FA Cup third round tie at Manchester City on Sunday after agreeing to help his old club out of a fix.

With injuries biting deep into his squad, Ferguson made the move to ask his veteran midfielder to come out of retirement.

"It's fantastic that Paul has made this decision," said Ferguson.

"It's always sad to see great players end their careers, but especially so when they do it early.

"But he has kept himself in great shape and I always felt that he had another season in him.

"It's terrific to have him back."

Much flak for sulky Ronaldo

REUTERS, Madrid



Football

Cristiano Ronaldo was the target of some unusually harsh criticism from the pro-Real Madrid sports media on Sunday after he reacted to whistling and grumbling from a section of the home fans at the Bernabeu by refusing to celebrate his goal.

The Portuguese, the world's most expensive player who earns around 10 million euros (\$12.7 million) a season, netted Real's fifth in Saturday's 5-1 drubbing of Granada, his 21st La Liga strike of the campaign.

However, there appears to be a perception among some fans that he can be too selfish and he reacted to their complaints, which were also audible in last month's 3-1 defeat to Barcelona, by declining to celebrate with his team mates and walking back to the Real half with his head bowed.

"Since the game against Barca, a significant section of the stadium has been complaining about Ronaldo's performances and he doesn't like it," sports daily Marca wrote on Sunday.

"But a goal is a collective achievement, the ultimate expression of a job well done by the team," the paper added.

"If Cristiano doesn't like the way the fans are expressing themselves, the worst thing he can do is show it in the celebration of a goal.

"Above and beyond the individual scorer, it's a Real Madrid goal. By the whole team."

Writing in Marca's Madrid-based rival As, Antonio Romero noted that Ronaldo's patchy performances of late have meant he is being overshadowed by Real's in-form France striker Karim Benzema, who scored twice on Saturday and netted the winner in last week's comeback victory against Malaga in the King's Cup.

Argentina striker Gonzalo Higuain, who scored Real's third against Granada, was also stealing some of Ronaldo's limelight and developing a fine partnership with Benzema, Romero added.

Messi can be the best in history

AFP, Madrid



Football

Barcelona defender Gerard Pique says his teammate Lionel Messi deserves to win the Ballon d'Or, saying the Argentine forward has helped turn the Spanish club into "one of the best in history".

Messi, 24, will find out on Monday if he has become the first man since Michel Platini to win the Ballon d'Or for three years running when the winner of the 2011 award is announced at a ceremony in Zurich.

"It is clear, Messi, he has been playing at a high level for years. And Leo is the best in the world," Pique said in an interview published in Catalan daily La Vanguardia on Sunday when asked who deserved to win the prize.

"He is driving this team to be one of the best in history. Thanks to him we have won many of the titles that we have in our windows.

"It is a pleasure to have him with us, he plays like when he was 13 years old, except now he does it in a professional way and before the best players. We just have to hope that he maintains this level for as long as possible."

Messi won the inaugural FIFA Ballon d'Or -- a combination of the France Foot-

ball Ballon d'Or prize and FIFA's World Player of the Year award -- last year, having picked up both awards in 2009.

The Barcelona superstar's rivals for the honour are his Barcelona teammate Xavi and his great Real Madrid rival Cristiano Ronaldo, who won the Ballon d'Or in 2008.

Pique, 25, also said he hopes that Pep Guardiola signs a new contract with Barcelona.

Guardiola's current deal expires at the end of the season and the fact that he has so far not renewed it has led to media speculation that he plans to leave the Spanish and European champions.

Last week Guardiola said he has "not taken any decision" about his future.

"Pep is much of the essence of this team, since he arrived he has defended his ideas to the death, he has achieved everything that he wanted to," said Pique.

"If he departed now, Pep would leave a huge gap, it would be very difficult to find a substitute. But you can't think of this, you have to enjoy yourself, and learn everything that he can teach you, which is a lot," he added.

Guardiola was on Friday elected coach of the year for 2011 by the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS).

Henry to play today

AFP, London



CUP

Arsene Wenger has confirmed Thierry Henry will make his second 'debut' for Arsenal during the FA Cup third-round clash against Leeds, more than 12 years since he made his first appearance for the club.

Henry was registered in time for Monday's game at the Emirates, although Wenger is unsure whether the 34-year-old will start against their Championship opponents or come off the bench as he attempts to add to his 226 Arsenal goals.

The Frenchman is expected to receive a huge ovation from supporters following his six-and-a-half week loan deal from New York Red Bulls.

"It took a little while to get the paperwork done but finally it is done," Arsenal boss Wenger said. "He will be involved against Leeds but I haven't decided yet what I will do.

"He works hard, he is a bit behind physically of course. I think in one or two weeks he will be fine. Everybody is happy that he has joined the team."

It was only recently that Arsenal erected a statue to honour Henry's achievements with the club, with the striker moved to tears when it was unveiled before Christmas.

Wenger is confident Henry's legacy will not be tarnished by his second spell at the club. "You cannot take away from people what they have done, and what he has delivered will stay forever," he said. "It can just make the statue a bit bigger, let's hope he will do that."

"He still has the quality. He is a bit less strong physically, because we all go down physically every day, nobody can stop that, you can only slow it down."

Madrid rout Granada

AFP, Madrid



LFP

Real Madrid extended their lead over Barcelona at the top of La Liga to six points on Saturday with a 5-1 rout of Granada in the minnows' first trip to the Santiago Bernabeu in 36 years.

The pressure is now on champions Barcelona, who still boast the psychological advantage of having beaten Real last month, when they met Espanyol on Sunday.

Real coach Jose Mourinho promised there would be no repeat of the sloppy first half performance in the King's Cup against Malaga in mid-week where they had to come from behind to win 3-2.

But it was still a laboured first 45 minutes with the team fortunate to go in 2-1 up at the break.

Cristiano Ronaldo and Mesut Ozil combined to set up Karim Benzema to slot in the home side's first goal, but Granada replied for their first real attack with an unmarked Mikel Rico heading into the corner after 22 minutes.

With the Real defence dozing again, Granada could have gone ahead after they cut through the backline but Rico saw his

shot saved well by Iker Casillas.

Sergio Ramos then headed Real back into the lead from a corner after 34 minutes.

The game turned in the first few minutes after the break when Gonzalo Higuain and Benzema finished off Granada's hopes of a comeback and then, with a minute to go, Ronaldo hit the fifth.

"The third goal after the break was the key," said Real assistant coach Aitor Karanka.

"We knew that Granada were going to be a difficult opponent as they showed in the first half but they are a team which is built to defend and so after we had scored the third -- and with all the space at the Bernabeu -- they had more problems." Champions League hopefuls Levante drew 0-0 against Mallorca, but remained four points clear of fifth-placed Osasuna who were also locked in a stalemate with Real Sociedad.

Atletico Madrid showed more bite under new coach Diego Simeone as they drew 0-0 with sixth-placed Malaga. They showed plenty of tenacity and grew as the game went on but found it difficult to create clear cut chances with Jose Rondon going closest.



Real Madrid forward Karim Benzema shoots through the legs of Granada goalkeeper Roberto Fernandez to open the scoring in their La Liga match at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Saturday.

SPORTS POLL WEEKLY QUESTION

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