



PHOTO: REUTERS

Manchester United midfielder Paul Scholes shoots to score in their Premier League encounter against Bolton at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Torres close to best: AVB

AFP, London

Andre Villas-Boas is convinced Fernando Torres is nearing a return to his best despite the Chelsea striker's continuing problems in front of goal.

"The performance was good. He is getting his good run of games. He is finding inspiration, finding motivation, finding form. He has the team and the fans behind him. There was a good demonstration of solidarity behind Fernando from the fans," Villas-Boas said.

"It's good to see he is picking up confidence, assisting people. He hasn't been scoring but he is getting nearer every time and I think it is for the benefit of the team."

Villas-Boas insisted it didn't matter that Torres has been without a goal for so long and denied the player needs to return to the score-sheet to boost his confidence.

"I don't think so," he added. "As long as he helps the team to win games, we are happy."

Scholes' storybook return

AFP, London

Paul Scholes scored a fairy-tale goal as Manchester United outclassed Bolton Wanderers 3-0 to go level on points with Premier League leaders Manchester City on Saturday.

Playing his first game at Old Trafford since making a shock return from retirement in the FA Cup win over City on Sunday, Scholes fired United ahead in first-half injury time.

The 37-year-old's strike was his 103rd goal in the Premier League and came just under 18 years after his first, scored on his debut against Ipswich Town in September 1994.

Late goals from striker Danny Welbeck and Michael Carrick made sure of the points as United -- who also had a Wayne Rooney penalty saved -- ended a run of two league defeats to leave Bolton firmly stuck in the relegation quagmire.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson was delighted by Scholes' opener.

"He's a great player. Some of the press has been negative about his return but that's probably because it's United but he's still a fantastic player," Ferguson said.

"He's been in intensive training the last few weeks to get back to where he was today, and today he showed what he's had for the last 10 years. It was an important goal."

Tottenham, meanwhile, missed the opportunity to join United and City -- who face bottom club Wigan Athletic on Monday -- at the top after being held to a 1-1 draw by Wolverhampton Wanderers at White Hart Lane.

Wolves stunned Spurs by taking the lead on 22 minutes, Steven Fletcher bagging his ninth goal of the season after Roger Johnson headed on Matt Jarvis' teasing corner.

Spurs ramped up the pressure after

RESULTS

Aston Villa 1 (Bent 56) Everton 1 (Anichebe 69)
Blackburn 3 (Pedersen 45, Dunn 46, Formica 79)
Fulham 1 (Duff 56)
Chelsea 1 (Lampard 13) Sunderland 0
Liverpool 0 Stoke 0
Manchester Utd 3 (Scholes 45, Welbeck 74, Carrick 83) Bolton 0
Tottenham 1 (Modric 51) Wolves 1 (Fletcher 22)
West Brom 1 (Long 68-pen) Norwich 2 (Surman 43, Morison 79)

the restart and soon drew level, Croatian midfielder Luka Modric rifling in the equaliser from the edge of the area in the 51st minute.

Elsewhere, Chelsea clung on for a 1-0 victory over Sunderland at Stamford Bridge to remain four points clear of Arsenal in fourth place.

Chelsea took the lead on 13 minutes when Fernando Torres' volley thundered off the underside of the crossbar

and rebounded into the net off Frank Lampard.

Chelsea were forced to work hard for the win, however, and survived strong Sunderland penalty claims in the second half when Nicklas Bendtner appeared to be shoved over by Ashley Cole.

"It is an important three points to get for the run of consistency we need in January," Chelsea manager Andre Villas-Boas said. "It was important for the team bearing in mind Liverpool and Tottenham's results."

Liverpool's push towards a top-four finish suffered another setback when they were held to a 0-0 draw at Anfield by Stoke City.

The stalemate was Liverpool's seventh draw in 11 home matches this season, once again drawing attention to the Merseysiders' failure to find a reliable goalscoring threat this season.

An eventful game at Ewood Park saw Blackburn Rovers recover from the early dismissal of striker Ayegbeni Yakubu to cling on for a 3-1 win over Fulham which moved the club out of the relegation zone for the first time in four months.

In Saturday's other games, promoted Norwich City dug out another vital win away from home with a 2-1 win over West Bromwich Albion.

Aston Villa and Everton battled to a 1-1 draw at Villa Park.

Maicon scoffs at PSG link

AFP, Rome

Brazilian full-back Maicon's agent has dismissed speculation linking the Inter Milan player to a move to big-spending Paris St Germain.

The Qatari-backed club from the French capital have been making transfer waves these past six months, signing the likes of highly promising Argentine playmaker Javier Pastore and bidding for Carlos Tevez and Pato.

Earlier this week they signed another Brazilian, former Inter full-back Maxwell from Barcelona.

But Maicon will not be joining his compatriot, despite quotes to the contrary attributed to agent Roberto Calenda in the press.

"I categorically deny the content of the quotes that have been attributed to me, I haven't given any interviews regarding the subject," said Calenda in a statement.

"Maicon is represented only by yours truly and I have already directed my legal advisors to take action against whoever tries to discredit either me or the athlete."

Crespo, Cannavaro to play in India

Football

AFP, Rome

Italian World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro is to step out of retirement and make a comeback in India as part of a new competition aimed at kick-starting football interest in the cricket-obsessed country.

Cannavaro revealed the news on his Twitter account saying: "I'm getting back on the pitch with the Indian Football Association, West Bengal."

It is only six months since the 38-year-old announced his retirement from the game due to a nagging knee injury.

He had played the final year of his career in Dubai with Al-Ahli having left Italy following the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

He is to be part of the Indian Premier League, a six-team competition due to be run by the Indian Football Association and Celebrity Management Group (CMG).

Other famous names involved include Englishmen Robbie Fowler and John Barnes, France's Robert Pires, Argentine

Hernan Crespo, Spaniard Fernando Morientes and Jay Jay Okocha of Nigeria.

Each of the six franchises -- Kolkata, Barasat, Howrah, Haldia, Durgapur and Siliguri -- must have at least a famous foreign player and coach.

Argentine Juan Pablo Sorin is another player to be involved while Brits Peter Reid and Colin Todd -- who both have English Premier League experience -- join Barnes amongst the coaches.

Each team will be allowed to sign up to four foreign players while the rest will be made up of Indians.

The league will run for 10 weeks with matches played from Wednesdays through to Sundays, mostly at night, according to Italian press.

CMG have previous experience organising major sporting events in India having marketed a historic tour that saw Diego Maradona visit the country while they are also involved in AFC Champions League matches and were the marketing partner for Asia Cup Cricket in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2000.

Television rights are expected to be sold not only in South-east Asia but also Europe and America.

Grit helps Madrid push through

AFP, Madrid



LFP

Jose Callejon grabbed a late winner for Real Madrid as Jose Mourinho's men fought back from a goal down to defeat Mallorca 2-1 and go eight

points clear of bitter rivals Barcelona at the top of La Liga on Saturday.

The win piled the pressure on champions Barcelona who tackle Real Betis at home on Sunday.

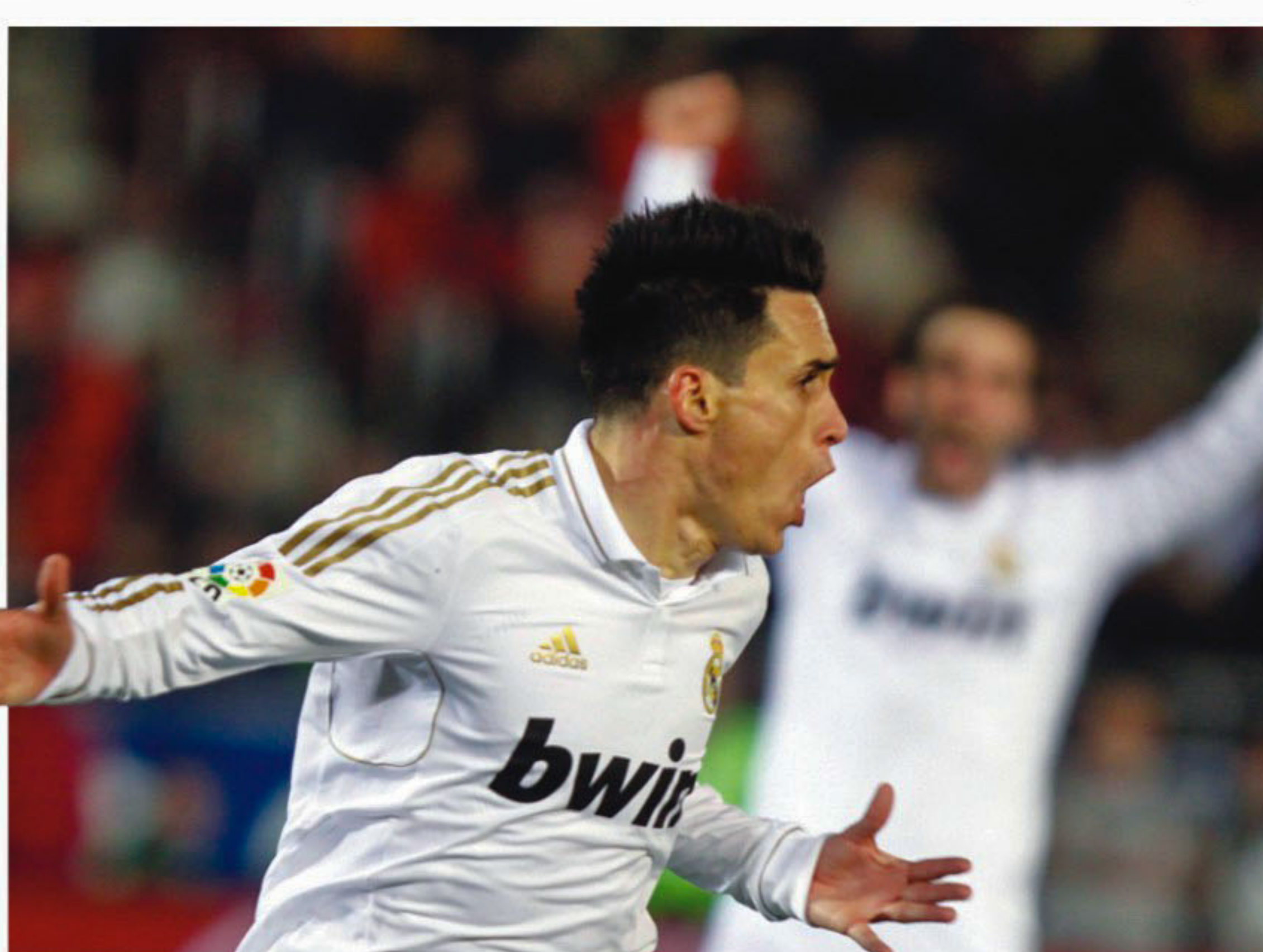
Israeli international Tomer Hemed put Mallorca in front in the first-half and it looked like a surprise result was on the cards before substitute Gonzalo Higuain gave Madrid hope with a 71st minute equaliser.

Callejon then struck what could prove to be a crucial winner in the 82nd minute of a game where Real were second best in the first half.

"They defended well with no errors and knew how we would attack them, they played really well, especially in the first-half," said Mourinho.

"We had to take risks in the second half to win. I took Marcelo off because I wanted to go with three at the back. I put Fabio Coentrao with Pepe and Sergio Ramos, because they are quick enough to play in a three-man defence."

Callejon added: "The most key thing is the teamwork that keeps us at the top, the three points are much



Real Madrid winger Jose Callejon celebrates after his late winner to beat Mallorca in their Primera Liga clash at the Iberostar stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

more important than my goal."

Mallorca were well-organised at the start, content to relinquish possession to Madrid, and which allowed the island side to counter-attack with pace.

The quick Victor Casadesus had the first opportunity when he narrowly failed to steer the ball home after good work from Hemed

on the right on nine minutes.

Next it was Hemed's turn to worry the Madrid goal after being put clear by Casadesus.

The breakthrough came for the home side on 38 minutes when Chori Castro created the space to whip in a cross at pace for Hemed

to stoop in front of the Madrid defence and glance a header past

goalkeeper Iker Casillas.

Sergio Ramos replied with the leaders' first real chance on the stroke of half-time with a header that crashed against the post and there was still time for Lass Diarra to try from distance before the break.

Castro and Hemed linked up again on 53 minutes when the Israeli sent another header just

wide from a corner.

Mourinho, having already sent on Higuain at half-time, introduced Kaka and Fabio Coentrao just before the hour mark in a bid to fire his team into action.

Casillas then had to turn a Michael Pereira shot past the post.

Dudu Aouate remained untroubled in the Mallorca goal until the 72nd minute when Higuain turned in the equaliser with the help of a deflection after a clever through ball from Mesut Ozil.

Two minutes later and Cristiano Ronaldo slammed a shot against the crossbar as Madrid were suddenly in control.

Ramos had a goal ruled out for a marginal offside decision on 76 minutes and it looked like Mallorca had done enough for a point when Aouate came off his line to block at the feet of Higuain on 84 minutes.

However, the ball fell to Callejon who thumped the ball past the stranded keeper to give Madrid a vital win and boost their hopes of winning back the title that Barcelona have held for the last three seasons.

RESULTS

Sevilla 0 Espanyol 0
Real Zaragoza 1 (Lanzaro 39) Getafe 1 (Paredes 79-og)
Grenada 1 (Rico 87) Rayo Vallecano 2 (Michu 26, Piti 52)
Real Mallorca 1 (Hemed 39) Real Madrid 2 (Higuain 72, Callejon 84)
Valencia 0 Real Sociedad 1 (Griezmann 55)

Journeyman Rivaldo now in Angola

AFP, Luanda

Former Brazil star and World Footballer of the Year Rivaldo has signed a one-year contract with Angola premier league club Kabuscorp Sport Clube do Palanca.

Club officials confirmed Saturday a deal that will bring Rivaldo, who turns 40 in April, to a Luanda team who finished second behind Recreativo Libolo in the national championship last year.

The 1999 World Footballer of the Year and European Footballer of the Year will inject much needed interest into a league that suffers, like most others in Africa, from an exodus of its best footballers to Europe.

Rivaldo left Brazilian outfit Sao Paulo a month ago after another chapter in a globe-trotting career that had taken him to Spain, Italy, Greece and Uzbekistan before returning home last year.

Attacking midfielder Rivaldo, who said the fact that Brazil and Angola are Portuguese-speaking countries played a big part in his decision, was part of the Brazil 2002 World Cup-winning team and played for Barcelona and AC Milan.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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QUARTERFINALS
BJMC v Rahmatganj
Time: 2:30pm
Muktijoddha v Farashganj
Time: 5:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Bangladesh A v England Lions
Fourth One-dayer
Venue: Sylhet Divisional Stadium