

8-goal frenzy

AFP, Berlin



VfB Stuttgart earned a dramatic 4-4 draw at German league leaders Borussia Dortmund on Friday when striker Christian Gentner hit a 92nd-minute equaliser.

In a breath-taking final 15 minutes, the lead changed hands three times.

After Stuttgart scored three goals without reply to take a second-half lead, Dortmund went back ahead in the 87th minute when Croatia midfielder Ivan Perisic scored, less than three minutes after coming off the bench.

But Gentner broke Dortmund hearts with his team's fourth goal deep into added time.

Despite the frenzied finish, defending champions Dortmund still extended their unbeaten run to 22 games.

There was no sign of the drama to come when Dortmund's Japanese star Shinji Kagawa gave his side the lead with his fourth goal in three league games with an opportunist strike on 33 minutes.

Poland captain Jakub Blaszczykowski extended Dortmund's lead when he converted a long-range pass from defender Mats Hummels on 49 minutes.

The game burst into life when Stuttgart hit back with three goals in eight minutes.

Bosnia striker Vedad Ibisevic gave the guests hope with his strike in the 71st minute.

Stuttgart's Julian Schieber then turned the game on its head when he beat Dortmund goalkeeper Roman Weidenfeller on 77 minutes and then produced a superb individual goal 99 seconds later as Stuttgart went ahead.

Dortmund got back on level terms when Hummels beat Stuttgart goalkeeper Sven Ulreich at the near post on 82 minutes.

Perisic then put Dortmund ahead five minutes later before Gentner's dramatic strike shared the points.



Borussia Dortmund defender Mats Hummels (R) is locked in an aerial tussle with Stuttgart striker Vedad Ibisevic during their Bundesliga encounter in Dortmund on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Neymar pips Robinho's mark

AP, Sao Paulo

Neymar is not wasting any time in making his mark with Santos as his latest hat-trick moves him past Robinho on the list of the team's greatest goalscorers.

Neymar scored three times in the 5-0 rout of Guaratingueta in the Sao Paulo state championship on Thursday, reaching 95 career goals with Santos to surpass Robinho's mark of 94.

The 20-year-old Neymar needed 40 fewer games than Robinho to reach the mark, and is now the fourth highest scorer in the post-Pele era, and the 25th all-time. Neymar has played 173 games with Santos so far.

Neymar downplayed his feat after the match.

"I don't play to be the best all time or to pass someone on a list," he said. "Robinho is my idol. I'm doing what I have always done. I've never changed."

Neymar is just nine goals behind Joao Paulo and Serginho Chulapa, the top scorers since Pele played for the team in the 1960s and scored nearly 1,100 goals. Juarez has 101 goals.

Neymar has scored 14 goals in 14 matches this season, including four in the Copa Libertadores.

The forward was involved in all five goals at the Vila Belmiro stadium in Santos on Thursday. He opened the scoring with a strike from close range just four minutes into the match and added the others by converting penalty kicks in the 42nd and 87th minutes. He also started the plays that led to Santos' other two goals, scored by striker Borges in the 26th and defender Juan in the 36th.

The victory moved Santos to fourth in the 20-team standings in the Sao Paulo state tournament, four points behind leader Sao Paulo. The top eight teams will advance to the playoff round. Santos is the competition's defending champion.

"Neymar is improving in all aspects," Santos coach Muricy Ramalho said. "It's very difficult to stop him, to mark him. The defender may steal a ball or two, but Neymar will eventually get through. He makes a difference."

The coach said Neymar has the potential to become the star to lead the national team when Brazil hosts the World Cup in 2014.

"I think he will be playing his best during the World Cup and will help Brazil win the title," Ramalho said.

Petrov has leukaemia

Football

AFP, Sofia

Aston Villa captain Stiliyan Petrov has said he has retired from football after being diagnosed with acute leukaemia, according to an interview he gave to a Bulgarian newspaper.

"No more football, this is the end," the 32-year-old told Bulgarian sports newspaper Tema Sport in a telephone interview.

"I am starting the fight for my life and I will fight."

Petrov's Premier League club Villa announced on Friday that their skipper has been diagnosed with acute cancer of the blood.

The illness was discovered in medical tests carried out on the Bulgarian international after he came down with a fever following last Saturday's defeat at Arsenal, his club said.

"I had totally lost my energy and that was unusual for me," said Petrov.

The Premier League star says he is grateful for all the messages of support he has received since news of his illness broke.

"I want to thank everyone around the world," added Petrov, who is due to start treatment for the illness in a London hospital on Monday.

His compatriot and Manchester United striker Dimitar Berbatov urged fans to pray for Petrov.

"Let's all pray and believe, that Stiliyan Petrov, one of the best football players Bulgaria have ever produced and one of my best and closest friends, will win this battle. He deserves all your support. BELIEVE," Berbatov wrote on his Facebook page.

Petrov, who joined Villa in 2006 after a seven-year spell at Celtic, was at an emotional Villa Park for Saturday's Premier League game against Chelsea just hours after the report of his retirement emerged.

He saw Villa players wearing 'support Stan' messages on their training kit while warming up for the game.

A message of support was to be relayed over the stadium's public address system five minutes before kick off.

Villa fans were also planning to show their support with an ovation after 19 minutes of the game in honour of Petrov who wears the number 19 shirt.

Petrov started his career as a professional with CSKA Sofia in 1996 and made more than 100 appearances for Bulgaria over a 14 year period.

Villa players led widespread tributes to Petrov after the announcement.

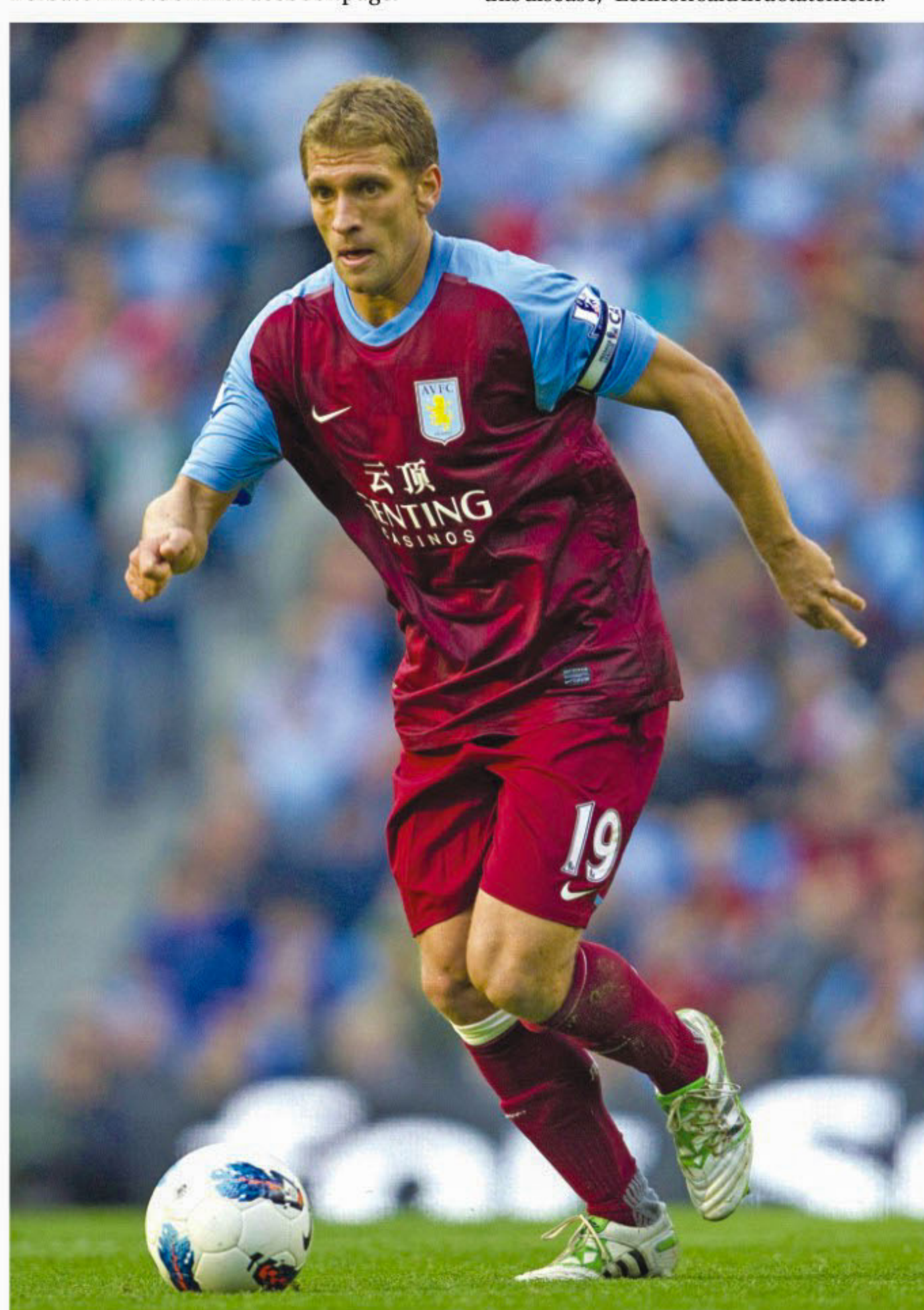
"Really sad news to hear about our captain Stan Petrov. hopefully he'll be back fighting fit soon. Thoughts are with him and his family. KTF," Villa striker Darren Bent wrote on Twitter.

Goalkeeper Shay Given added: "In shock about Stiliyan Petrov acute leukaemia but we are all here for him and his family. Please God he makes a full recovery. prayforstan."

Petrov joined Aston Villa in 2006 after a seven-year spell at Celtic.

Celtic manager Neil Lennon, a former team-mate of Petrov, expressed his shock at the news of the midfielder's condition.

"We are all absolutely devastated to hear this news. As a member of the Celtic family, it is important for Stiliyan to know that he has our unequivocal support in battling against this disease," Lennon said in a statement.



City salvage draw

AFP, London



Manchester City's challenge for the Premier League title suffered a setback as they were forced to stage a late fightback just to salvage a 3-3 draw against Sunderland at

Eastlands on Saturday.

With leaders Manchester United not in action until Monday's trip to Blackburn, Roberto Mancini's side would have returned to the top of the table on goal difference if they had beaten the Black Cats.

But City, who had won their previous 20 home league games to set a Premier League record, are now two points behind United and that gap will extend to five if the champions win at Ewood Park.

City, on a run of only one win in four league matches, fell behind to Sweden midfielder Sebastian Larsson's cool finish in the 31st minute.

Mancini's men equalised two minutes before half-time when referee Phil Dowd harshly awarded a penalty for Craig Gardner's challenge on Edin Dzeko.

Mario Balotelli stroked home the spot-kick, yet City were behind again moments later as on-loan Arsenal forward Nicklas Bendtner headed in Stephane Sessegnon's cross.

Larsson added the third goal as he fired

Sessegnon's pass beyond Joe Hart in the 55th minute.

But, to their credit, City kept going and Balotelli struck again in the 85th minute before Aleksandar Kolarov hit the equaliser moments later.

Chelsea kept their top-four bid alive with a 4-2 win over Aston Villa as the home faithful paid tribute to stricken captain Stiliyan Petrov.

Petrov's presence at Villa Park just 24 hours after being diagnosed with acute leukaemia produced an emotional atmosphere.

With reports circulating that the Villa midfielder will retire to focus on his battle, a tearful Petrov was given a rapturous reception from the home fans.

Chelsea made the perfect start when Daniel Sturridge slotted home in the ninth minute and Serbian defender Branislav Ivanovic doubled their lead in the 51st minute goal.

Villa looked to have snatched a point when James Collins struck in the 77th minute header and Eric Lichaj equalised three minutes later.

But Ivanovic restored Chelsea's lead in the 83rd minute and Fernando Torres moved the Blues within two points of fourth placed Tottenham, who host Swansea on Sunday, with his first league goal since September.

RESULTS

Aston Villa 2 (Collins 77, Lichaj 80) Chelsea 4 (Sturridge 9, Ivanovic 51, 83, Torres 90)
 Everton 2 (McAuley 18-og, Anichebe 68) West Bromwich 0
 Fulham 2 (Dempsey 2, Duff 13)
 Norwich City 1 (Wilbraham 77)
 Manchester City 3 (Balotelli 43-pen, 85, Kolarov 86) Sunderland 3 (Larsson 31, 55, Bendtner 45)
 Queens Park Rangers 2 (Taarabt 22, Diakite 66) Arsenal 1 (Walcott 37)
 Wigan 2 (Alcaraz 54, Moses 90) Stoke 0
 Wolverhampton 2 (Knightly 53, Jarvis 88) Bolton 3 (Petrov 63-pen, Alonso 80, Davies 84)

FIFA announces reforms

Football

REUTERS, Zurich

FIFA's long-awaited reforms quickly came under fire on Friday and soccer's governing body also risked igniting a new conflict with clubs by forcing them to release players for the Olympic Games.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter proudly announced that his executive had approved proposals to strengthen the ethics committee, which investigates wrong-doing within soccer's corruption-plagued governing body.

Other reforms suggested by Mark Pieth, a Swiss professor called in to head FIFA's newly-created independent governance panel, were put on hold for at least a year, sparking criticism from anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International.

There were a myriad of other announcements from the two-day executive committee meeting, including a warning for Indonesia over its breakaway league and a move to smooth South Sudan's acceptance as a FIFA member.

FIFA also announced a \$36 million profit for 2011 on revenues of \$1.07 billion and said "cooling breaks" had been approved for matches in hot and humid conditions, considered to be over 31 Celsius.

Blatter hailed "an historic day for FIFA's reform process" after his unanimous approval for plans to split the ethics committee in investigative and judicial chambers, a move which still needs to be passed by FIFA's Congress.

He said the newly reformed committee would also be responsible for vetting candidates within FIFA and would be able to investigate investigations of its own initiative.

However, FIFA said it would tackle other issues "later in the roadmap."

Pieth's report has suggested limiting the FIFA president and his executive committee members to two four-year mandates.

"We are disappointed. We had expected a more comprehensive introduction of new procedures," said Sylvia Schenk, Transparency's sports advisor for the Berlin-based watchdog.

Blatter also failed to address several points in Pieth's report, which was published by FIFA shortly after the end of his media conference.

Elsewhere, FIFA approved a suggestion from the European Clubs Association (ECA) to cut the number of international matches to 18 over a two-year period, abolishing controversial February and August friendly dates in the process.

This would begin in 2015.

FIFA also agreed to set up an insurance scheme, putting aside \$100 million, to compensate clubs whose players were injured on international duty. Both measures need to be approved by Congress.

But any goodwill generated by those measures could be outweighed by the announcement, buried deep in a press released after Blatter had already spoken, that it will be "compulsory" for clubs to release players for the Olympic soccer tournament.

Fans show Magdeburg the way

AFP, Berlin

Cheeky fans of German minnows FC Magdeburg decided to help their team end a five-match goalless streak with huge fluorescent arrows to show their players the way to the goal.

With their team bottom of the northern regional league, Germany's fourth division, a group of fans under the banner "We'll Show You Where The Goal Is!" gathered behind their opponents' net, each armed with a giant arrow.

The trick worked as Magdeburg finally found the back of the net after 558 minutes without a goal when US striker Chris Wright equalised in the 78th minute of their 2-1 defeat at home to Berliner AK 07 last Sunday.

Jose rates Raphael highly

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid teenager Raphael Varane has been tipped to become a better player than Laurent Blanc, the former World Cup and European champion and existing France coach.

The prediction was made Friday by the 18-year-old French central defender's club manager, Jose Mourinho.

"Varane has the same intelligence, the same calmness, the same presence as Laurent Blanc on the pitch. But, putting aside the respect I have for Blanc, Varane is a lot quicker."

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Were you happy with Mushfiqur Rahim's captaincy in Asia Cup?

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 Newcastle v Liverpool
 Live from 6:25pm
 Tottenham v Swansea City
 Live from 8:55pm

TEN Action

Serie A

Siena v Udinese
 Live from 6:55pm

NEO Sports

Serie A

Juventus v Napoli
 Live from 1:00am (Monday)