



Tottenham Hotspur winger Aaron Lennon (L) is tackled by Sunderland defender Matthew Kilgallon during their Premier League encounter at the Stadium of Light yesterday.

Spurs climb to 3rd

AFP, Sunderland



Tottenham climbed to third place in the Premier League after Aaron Lennon's strike capped his side's fightback in their 2-1 win against Sunderland on Saturday.

André Villas-Boas' team

trailed

when John O'Shea notched his first goal for Sunderland late in the first half at the Stadium of Light.

But the north Londoners hit back with two goals in three minutes early in the second half as Carlos Cuellar's own goal was followed by the winner from England winger Lennon.

That double blast was enough to seal Tottenham's sixth win in their last eight league matches and lift them one point above Chelsea, who travel to Everton on Sunday.

The only dark cloud for Spurs was the latest diving controversy involving Wales winger Bale.

Not for the first time this season, Bale fell theatrically after a slight tug from Craig Gardner in the penalty area, earning a booking that rules him out of Tottenham's next match against Reading.

Bale, who scored a hat-trick in his side's win at Aston Villa on Boxing Day, showed

the more positive side to his game early on when he surged away from Gardner and crossed for Emmanuel Adebayor, whose shot lacked the power to beat Sunderland goalkeeper Simon Mignolet.

Mignolet had to be quick off his line to block Adebayor's shot after Lennon, capitalising on a mistake from James McClean, slipped a pass behind the Sunderland defence.

Bale couldn't keep his header on target from Lennon's cross as Tottenham pushed for the opener.

Sunderland were wobbling at the back and a blunder from Spanish defender Cuellar almost gifted Spurs the lead on the halfhour.

When Jermain Defoe curled a cross in from the left, Cuellar completely misjudged his attempt to clear and the ball ran through to Adebayor. But from no more than four yards out the Togo striker could only prod his shot onto the crossbar.

After that narrow escape Sunderland took the lead against the run of play in the 40th minute.

Sebastian Larsson's free-kick caused chaos in the Tottenham defence and Steven Fletcher pounced with a close-range effort that Hugh Lloris could only palm into the path of O'Shea who fired home from six yards.

But Sunderland's advantage was short-lived as the visitors took over at the start of the second half.

Vilanova can return in weeks

AFP, Dubai

Barcelona coach Tito Vilanova, who underwent surgery on December 20 for a recurrence of a cancerous tumour, can envisage a return to work in 15 to 20 days, club chairman Sandro Rosell said Friday.

"I think he will return to work in 15 to 20 days," Rosell said on the sidelines of the Dubai International Sports Conference.

"He will be obliged to have occasional check-ups but the doctor has assured (me) that will not preclude him from taking charge of the team," Rosell added.

Vilanova, 44, left hospital on December 22, barely 48 hours after his surgery to remove a tumour from a salivary gland. He had similar surgery a year ago.

He now faces some six weeks of radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

Mohun Bagan banned for 2 years

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's oldest soccer club, Mohun Bagan, have been kicked out of the league and banned for a further two years after refusing to take the field for the second half of their crowd trouble-hit derby against East Bengal earlier this month.

Mohun Bagan were trailing their arch-rivals 1-0 on December 9 in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata when one of their players was hit by a stone hurled from the stands.

The match resumed after a near 15-minute interruption but Mohun Bagan, founded in 1889, did not return to the field.

The All India Football Federation (AIFF) appointed a retired judge to look into the case and his finding got the approval of an I-League Core Committee on Saturday.

An AIFF statement said Mohun Bagan had been thrown out of the ongoing I-League competition, their matches had been declared null and void, and they would be disqualified from the next two editions of the league.

PHOTO: AFP

Rafa's Everton test

AFP, Liverpool



Chelsea manager Rafael Benitez expects a hostile reception at Goodison Park on Sunday after branding Everton a small club during his days as Liverpool boss.

Benitez knows Everton supporters are unlikely to have forgotten the jibe, nor will it have been dismissed by Toffees manager David Moyes and his players.

That will only add to challenge confronting Benitez's side when they attempt to extend their recent revival and mark their ninth game in a gruelling December with a seventh win in eight games.

With Everton lying just two points behind Chelsea, this game will provide a telling test of Benitez's claim his side are ready to force their way back into the thick of the title race.

"I think Everton are doing a good job," Benitez said. "They are doing well, they have fewer resources than other teams and are still competing. They are near the top of the table so credit to them."

"It is a good team and a tough game for sure. For us, we have to be ready physically as well as mentally for the game. They have been doing well in the past year and we know that Goodison is a difficult place to go to."

Chelsea have struggled on their trips to Everton in recent seasons, losing their last three league fixtures at Goodison Park.

But recent victories, in particular the 8-0 thrashing of Aston Villa, have helped ease concerns about the effects of their contested recent programme that has included a trip to Japan for the Club World Cup.

Benitez, though, insists the flurry of games has taken its toll and he will again rotate his squad.

"Always when you win, it's easy to say, 'No' (the players haven't been affected)," he said. "But, to be fair, it's not easy to keep the same players."

"I like to change players, to move play-

ers around, because if we don't manage the squad they will be really tired."

Everton could begin 2013 third place in the Premier League table if they overcome Chelsea.

The closest Everton have come to the Champions League group stage was in the 2005-06 campaign when they entered at the third qualifying round only to lose to Spanish side Villarreal 4-2 on aggregate.

But the Merseyside club, who start the weekend in fifth spot, are well placed to join the elite at Europe's top table next season after an impressive first half to the season.

They reached the midway stage with a 2-1 home win over struggling Wigan on Wednesday, and defender Phil Jagielka believes his team can carry on the good work during the second half of the campaign.

Although Everton are blessed with talented individuals such as South African midfielder Steven Pienaar and Croatia striker Nikica Jelavic, they have a thin squad compared to their rivals.

Yet Moyes' side have won their last two games without influential midfielder Marouane Fellaini, and Jagielka believes the Belgium international could struggle to earn an automatic recall after he serves the final leg of a three-match suspension against Chelsea.

"Felli has been a massive player for us for the first part of the season, but we've done okay while he's been suspended so far which really bodes well," said England international Jagielka.

"The manager knows he has a couple of options he can try and they've worked in the last two games."

"Victor Anichebe has come in and give us that presence up there, Steven Naismith has done really well when he came on."

"Felli is a big talent and when we heard we were losing him for three games we knew it wouldn't be ideal - but at this rate he might struggle to get back in."

Prankster Pique!

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona defender Gerard Pique irked much the world's media Friday by announcing his girlfriend Colombian pop star Shakira had given birth -- but then revealing it was a prank.

Pique, expected to become a father within months, announced on Twitter that Shakira had given birth: "Our boy has already been born! We are very happy! Thank you all for your messages!"

But the message came on the "Day of the Innocents" when people in Spain play practical jokes on each other, and strangely there was no confirmation of the happy news from Shakira.

Later Pique seemed to be letting fans know it was a joke in a second message: "He already has a name! He is called Innocent! Happy Day of the Innocents to all!"

Britain's Daily Mirror said in its online gossip column: "We're not very happy with Gerard Pique today."

The news site said it "got all excited" by Pique's first message. "But don't get carried away like we did," the paper advised readers.

Spain's leading newspaper El Pais was equally unimpressed, running the headline: "Shakira and Pique are parents... of the worst joke of the year."

Moura would suffice

AFP, Doha

Paris Saint-German coach Carlo Ancelotti has ruled out any further signings during the January transfer window, saying that the arrival of Brazilian starlet Lucas Moura would suffice.

The Italian has taken his expensively assembled squad out to Doha during Ligue 1's short winter break to take advantage of the superb sporting facilities and favourable weather conditions at this time of year in the Gulf.

With them for the first time is 20-year-old Lucas, following the completion of his transfer from Sao Paulo, and much is expected of him as PSG chase what would be just their third French league title and first since 1996.

They currently lead Ligue 1 on goal difference from the two other biggest sides in France, Lyon and Marseille, and there is much anticipation over the forthcoming battle between the three for the title in 2013.

Ancelotti was full of praise for Lucas, describing him as "a great player".

"He will be the only player to arrive during the transfer window," said the former Chelsea manager.

"He is young and he represents the future of the club. He has so much talent and will fit in well with the other players as he can play in several different positions."

"My coaching team think that the team is very good and very competitive."

Lucas' arrival gives Ancelotti a surfeit of options in the attacking positions and he said the Brazil international would play "either on one flank, or behind a striker".

PSG's wealthy Qatari owners were hyper-active during the close-season break as the club became the biggest spenders in Europe, bringing in star

striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic, as well as Thiago Silva and Ezequiel Lavezzi.

Results so far have been positive, with PSG also coasting into the knockout stages of the Champions League as the top side in their group, while they start their French Cup campaign against fifth-tier Arras on January 6.

Ancelotti, who was brought in at PSG a year ago by the club's sporting director, close friend Leonardo, said that good progress had been made since his arrival.

PSG were in danger of falling off the pace in Ligue 1 after winning just once in five games in November and December, but they have since stormed to the summit following a run of four consecutive victories.

"It has all been very positive so far because for me it was a new club, new players, a new atmosphere and a new championship," he said.

"We have had some tough moments, but each time the team has reacted well especially after our (2-1) loss to Nice (on December 1).

"The players have shown a good attitude and have been more consistent, both on and off the field."

"We are the favourites to win the championship but that is understandable. We have a team with a lot of talented players."

"We will have to work hard to win the title, but it will not be easy. Lyon and Marseille have started well and it will remain very competitive -- a real battle."

"In the Champions League, we have a big game coming up against Valencia, but we can make it into the quarter-finals."

Ancelotti also ruled out any move to sign David Beckham following the former England midfielder's departure from Major League Soccer in the United States.

"I know that he is leaving the Los Angeles Galaxy, but we are not interested," he said.

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