

'Persie the difference'

REUTERS, London

Robin van Persie's decision to join Manchester United instead of Manchester City is proving the difference in the race to the Premier League title, according to City manager Roberto Mancini.

The Dutch striker joined United from Arsenal for a reported 24 million pounds (\$39 million) last August and his 14 goals in 20 league games have helped Alex Ferguson's team open a seven-point Premier League lead over defending champions City.

"At the moment, he is the difference between us," Mancini told local media. "He has scored 14 Premier League goals and it is clear he has changed their situation."

"We were very close three or four months before he joined United. We were sure he was for us but it didn't happen."

"We wanted Van Persie because we knew he was totally different from our other strikers. We wanted to improve our team, particularly for the Champions League. We were very close to signing him, I know what the reason was (why he opted for United) but I won't say. It was not about money."

Gibson out for a month

AFP, London

Everton midfielder Darron Gibson has been ruled out for a month after suffering a thigh strain.

Gibson missed Everton's 2-1 defeat against Chelsea on Sunday as a result of the problem and Toffees manager David Moyes confirmed on Monday that the Republic of Ireland international won't be back in action until February.

The 25-year-old spent more than two months on the sidelines earlier in the season with a similar problem and missed 10 Premier League games.

"I think he's going to be out for about four weeks," Moyes said.

Gibson's absence is a significant blow to Everton, who are challenging for a top four finish.

What to WATCH

TEN Cricket
South Africa v New Zealand
First Test, Day 1
Live from 2:30pm
STAR Cricket
Australia v Sri Lanka
Third Test, Day 1
Live from 5:30am (Thursday)
ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm
English Premiership
Liverpool v Sunderland
Live from 2:00am (Thursday)
STAR Sports
English Premiership
Chelsea v QPR

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh Cricket League
(Four-day match, Day-1)
Walton Central Zone v BCB North Zone
Time: 9:15am
Venue: Shaheed Chandu Stadium, Bogra
Islami Bank East Zone v Prime Bank South Zone
Time: 9:15am
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National



Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo (C), his son Cristiano Jr. (R) and girlfriend Irina Shayk (L) arrive at the Madeira Airport in Funchal on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Nasri handed 3-match ban

AFP, London

Samir Nasri has been suspended for three matches after Manchester City opted not to appeal against the French midfielder's controversial red card in the Premier League champions' 4-3 win against Norwich.

Nasri was sent off in the first half at Carrow Road on Saturday for appearing to head-butt Norwich defender Sebastien Bassong.

However, there was minimal contact between the players and City manager Roberto Mancini was furious with the decision.

Mancini criticised referee Mike Jones and his linesmen after the match and suggested an appeal would be lodged.

But City announced on Monday that they will not attempt to overturn the decision, meaning former Arsenal star Nasri will be suspended for his side's next three matches.

"The Football Association have confirmed that Samir Nasri will serve a three-match suspension," a statement on City's website confirmed.

'Chelsea transform race' Fulham edge West Brom

AFP, London



Frank Lampard says Chelsea's dramatic upturn in form has transformed the Premier League

title race.

Lampard struck twice in the 2-1 victory over Everton at Goodison Park that moved the Blues back up to third place and ensured they face bottom club Queens Park Rangers at Stamford Bridge looking for a seventh win in eight games.

Four successive league wins have moved Rafael Benitez's side to within eleven points of leaders Manchester United with a game in hand.

And after having dropped off the pace during a disastrous dip in form in November and early December, Lampard believes the club can once again be considered serious contenders.

"We have to keep believing," said the midfielder. "There is a long way to go and things have changed around."

"It can only happen if we win our games but if we go on performing like we have done in the last few league games and keep doing that, it's all we can do."

"We need to keep this form and this attitude."

Lampard's double at Everton highlighted the midfielder's uncertain future with the 34-year-old yet to receive an offer of a new contract despite becoming a free agent at the end of the season.

Chelsea manager Benitez has steered clear of the debate surrounding Lampard's future and faces a more immediate problem with goalkeeper Petr Cech a doubt for the visit of QPR.

Cech was replaced at half-time against Everton and Benitez said: "He felt something in his adductor so we didn't want to take any risk. We'll have to do a scan and see and this depends on the doctors."

QPR's home defeat to Liverpool left Harry Redknapp's side eight points

adrift of safety although Benitez has cautioned against underestimating Chelsea's near neighbours.

"Obviously they're in a difficult position and that means they will be more dangerous," he said.

"So we have to carry on doing our job and focus on the things that we are doing well and trying to improve the things that we're not."

"It's a team that is fighting to avoid relegation and it will be a totally different challenge - we'll have to check how each player is after the tough game at Everton."

"And after that we will decide but our idea is to play in the same way, to play good football if we can, and if we can't at least show some character."

Chelsea skipper John Terry is not expected to recover from a knee injury.

"He's getting closer but we have to wait and see every day when he is training with the physios and we will see," said Benitez. "I think QPR is too early for him."

AFP, West Bromwich



Fulham turned over a new leaf in the first Premier League game of 2013 by winning 2-1 at West Bromwich Albion on New Year's Day to record only their second win in 13 matches.

Dimitar Berbatov claimed the first goal of the calendar year to put Fulham in front, with Alex Kacaniklic netting a 58th-minute winner after Romelu Lukaku had equalised for West Brom with his seventh goal of the campaign.

It was only Fulham's second away win of the season and lifted Martin Jol's side two places to 12th, while Steve Clarke's West Brom remain seventh.

The final weekend of Premier League football in 2012 had dissolved in a blitz of 41 goals, but the first half at the Hawthorns showcased a sleeper side to the English top flight.

West Brom centre-back Gabriel Tamas headed wide from a corner in the 29th minute, before Berbatov spurned the game's first real chance when he blazed

over from 25 yards after Chris Brunt mis-kicked a back-pass.

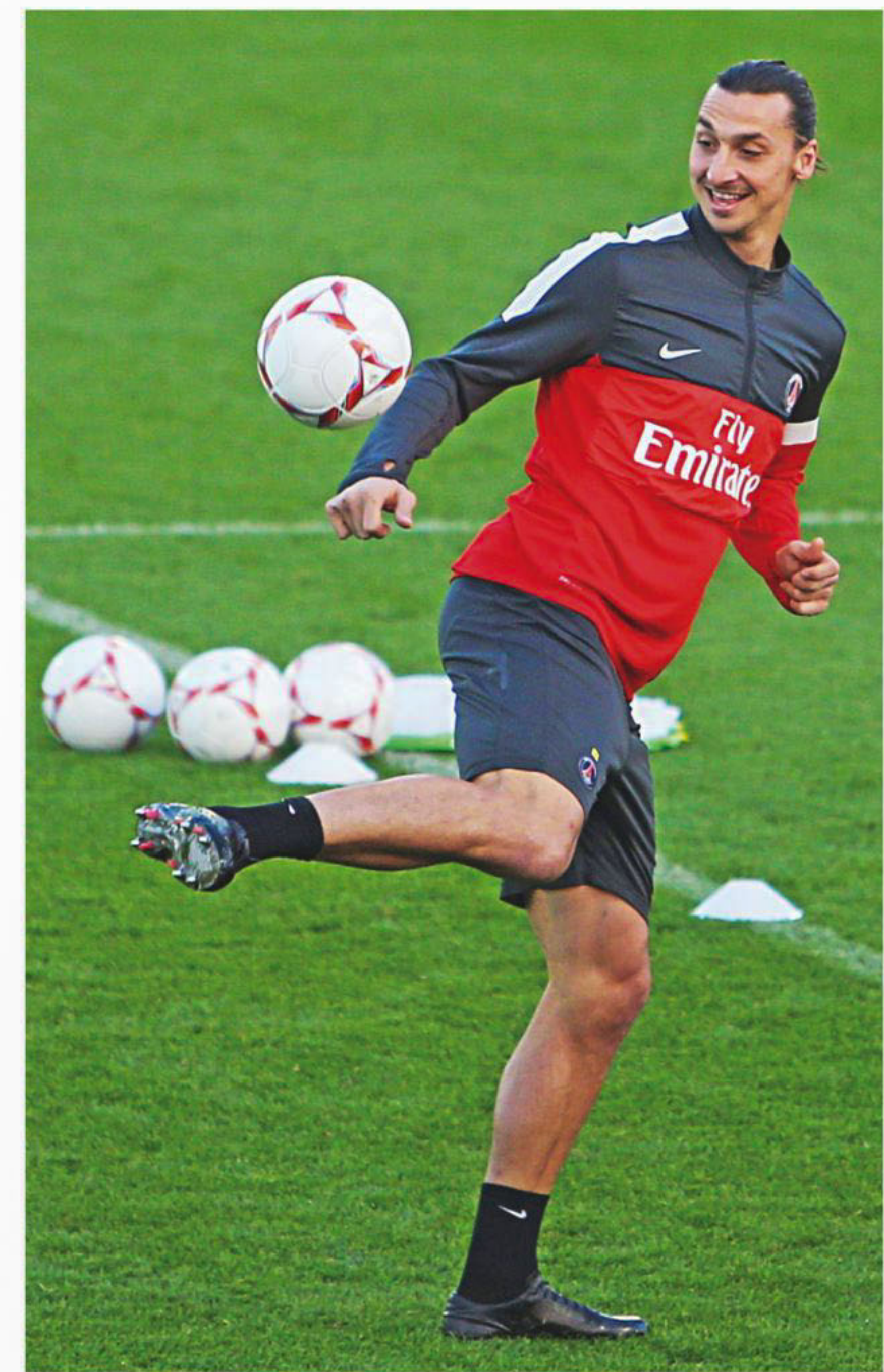
When the breakthrough arrived, following a rapid Fulham counter-attack in the 39th minute, its quality was completely at odds with what had come to pass before.

Defending a corner, Fulham saw the ball pop out to Giorgos Karagounis, who helped it on to Berbatov in the centre circle.

The Bulgarian sprayed a pass wide to Ashkan Degajah, and he took a touch before cutting the ball back for the inrushing Berbatov to tuck a first-time shot between the legs of goalkeeper Ben Foster.

In response, Youssouf Mulumbu headed wide from Liam Ridgeway's left-wing cross, but West Brom had to wait only four minutes to level in the second half.

Billy Jones was the creator, bamboozling Matthew Briggs wide on the right by darting inside and then out, before rolling the ball square for Lukaku -- lingering on the offside boundary -- to tap in from five yards.



Paris Saint-Germain star Zlatan Ibrahimovic controls the ball during a training session at the Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence in Doha on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Olsen advises Eriksen to stay put

REUTERS, Copenhagen

Denmark coach Morten Olsen has advised playmaker Christian Eriksen to stay with Dutch club Ajax and not be tempted by a move to another European league.

"He's still only 20 years' old, but he's a player who is developing all the time," Olsen told Denmark's TV2 Sport.

"(A move) would be a bad idea. There are many positives (with Ajax), they play for the title, they're at the top, they're regularly in the Europa League playing big games."

PSG deny Sneijder, Cole link

AFP, Doha

Paris Saint-Germain's sporting director Leonardo on Monday said the club had no interest in signing Inter Milan's Dutch wideman Wesley Sneijder or Chelsea defender Ashley Cole.

"We have never spoken with Ashley Cole, there has never been any contact."

He added: "Sincerely, we have never contacted Wesley Sneijder to come to PSG."

**Lucas relishing PSG challenge**

AFP, Doha

Brazilian international midfielder Lucas Moura said Tuesday he is ready to embrace the "challenge" at an evolving Paris Saint-Germain.

Lucas, 20, signed from Sao Paulo in the summer on a four-and-a-half-year deal worth 40 million euros as PSG held off competition from the likes of Manchester United and Real Madrid to snare a player hailed as one of the bright hopes of the Brazilian team. "It's a real challenge for me," said Lucas, who has scored three goals in 22 appearances for Brazil.

"PSG is in full evolution. (Sporting director) Leonardo helped me a lot to take the decision to sign when I could have continued with my former team in Brazil until season's end."

"It's a very important step in my career. There are stronger competitions in Europe. PSG has a long history with Brazilian players and I hope I'll be able to write a new page in this history."

PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi added: "We're very happy to start the year with one of the world's best players."

Lucas, who has joined his new teammates at a training camp in Qatar, could make his debut in a friendly against Qatari champions Lekhwiya on Wednesday, four days before PSG's French Cup round-of-64 match against Arras in Calais.

Fergie quashes retirement talk

AFP, London

Alex Ferguson has quashed retirement talk by revealing he has no plans to step down as Manchester United manager in the near future.

Ferguson, who turned 71 on Monday, has been forced to deal with questions about his retirement plans since the time he reversed his decision to leave the club in 2002.

With Pep Guardiola due to end his post-Barcelona sabbatical in a few months, Jose Mourinho tipped to leave Real Madrid and David Moyes' Everton contract close to expiring, three of the main candidates to replace Ferguson could be available at the end of the season, prompting a new round of speculation about the Scot's future.

But Ferguson, who has been in charge at Old Trafford since 1986, marked the new year by making it clear he won't be leaving United for some while.

"I'm hoping to stay on for a bit of time," he said in an interview with the Abu Dhabi Sports channel.

It is widely accepted few will get to know when Ferguson is ready to call it a day.