

Arsenal go 3rd

AFP, London

Arsenal returned to third place in the Premier League table with a 1-0 win at 10-man Fulham on Saturday, while Reading and Queens Park Rangers slipped ever closer to relegation.

Arsenal, who started with England midfielder Jack Wilshere on the bench, were given a huge advantage in the 12th minute at Craven Cottage when Steve Sidwell was shown a straight red card for catching Mikel Arteta on the ankle with his studs.

RESULTS

Fulham 0 Arsenal 1

(Mertesacker 43)

Norwich 2 (R. Bennett 50, E. Bennett 52) Reading 1 (McCleary 72)

QPR 0 Stoke 2 (Crouch 42, Walters 77-pen)

Sunderland 1 (Sessegnon 45) Everton 0

Swansea 0 Southampton 0 West Brom 1 (Jones 64)

Newcastle 1 (Gouffran 8) West Ham 2 (Jarvis 21,

Sidwell had only just returned from a three-match ban following a red card at home to QPR and Arsenal quickly asserted their advantage, with Olivier Giroud grazing the post in the 35th minute.

The breakthrough arrived from an unfamiliar source two minutes before half-time.

Theo Walcott's free-kick was headed across goal by Laurent Koscielny and the Frenchman's centre-back partner Per Mertesacker arrived unmarked to head the ball home from close range.

It should have been a straightforward victory, but the visitors were unable to kill the game off and then lost Giroud to a late red card after he clumsily fouled Stanislav Manolev.

Victory lifted Arsenal above Chelsea, but both the Stamford Bridge club and fifth-place Tottenham Hotspur now have two games in hand on Arsene Wenger's side.

Chelsea will regain third place if they win at Liverpool on Sunday, while Spurs can close to within two points of their north London rivals if they overcome second-place Manchester City.



Arsenal defender Per Mertesacker (2nd from R) celebrates his opening goal with teammates during their Premier League clash against Fulham at Craven Cottage yesterday.

Balotelli out of Juve clash

REUTERS, Rome

AC Milan striker Mario Balotelli will miss Sunday's top of the table clash at Juventus despite having his three-match suspension cut to two games.

"The Federal Court of Justice has partially upheld an appeal by Milan and reduces the matches Mario Balotelli is banned for by three to two games, adding a fine of 20,000 euros (\$26,200) in exchange for the third match," the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) said on its website on Friday.

The Italian international was suspended after picking up his fourth booking of the season for aiming an insult at referee Paolo Tagliavento in the 2-2 draw at Fiorentina two weeks ago.

He will now return for next week's home match against Catania.

Last-gasp Lyon

AFP, Paris

A goal in the third minute of injury time from Clement Grenier gave Lyon a 2-1 win at champions Montpellier on Friday to keep their slim French title hopes alive.

The win moved Lyon into second place on 59 points, one ahead of Marseille, who have a game in hand, but eight behind leaders Paris Saint-Germain.

Grenier's potentially decisive strike came after a corner from Yoann Gourcuff was only half-cleared by an Abdelhamid El-Kaoutari header.

The ball fell for Grenier whose half-volley from the edge of the penalty area found the net off the crossbar.

Lisandro Lopez had put Lyon ahead in the 26th minute after being set-up by Gourcuff and Grenier.

But Moroccan international Younes Belhanda levelled five minutes before the interval with a fine individual goal.

Despite the three points, Lyon can be replaced in second place on Saturday when Marseille host relegation-threatened Brest.

Terry snubs FA chief

AFP, London



John Terry has admitted he snubbed Football Association chairman David Bernstein's attempt to shake hands during the official Champions League trophy handover on Friday.

Terry ignored Bernstein in a show of contempt for the man who stripped the Chelsea defender of the England captaincy after he was accused of racially abusing QPR defender Anton Ferdinand during a match last season.

Bernstein's decision provoked then England coach Fabio Capello to resign in protest.

Terry is also unhappy with the FA chairman's comments about him during the court case into the racism claims.

Terry was cleared of racist abuse in court, but was later banned for four matches by the FA for the same offence.

Asked by Sky Sports News if he shook Bernstein's hand during the ceremony to return the European trophy Chelsea won last season, Terry replied: "No. Listen, it's a difficult one for me.

"Obviously he was the one who spoke about me in the court case and said things. I don't want to talk on air. It's probably a subject that we should maybe just avoid."

Bernstein advised Terry he had been removed as captain during a phone call after it had been confirmed the Chelsea defender would stand trial in July last year.

And in September, just before his FA disciplinary hearing started, Terry quit international football and accused the FA of making his position "untenable".

Bernstein, who shook hands with several other Blues players including Fernando Torres, Petr Cech and Branislav Ivanovic in the Banqueting House on Whitehall, insisted he was unaware of the Chelsea captain's snub.

Real sweat at home

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid warmed up for their Champions League semifinal first-leg with Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday with a hard-fought 3-1 victory over Real Betis at the Santiago Bernabeu.

After a slow opening by the hosts they went ahead just before half-time when Mesut Ozil latched onto Karim Benzema's through ball to slot home.

Benzema then made it two in similar fashion as he took advantage of Cristiano Ronaldo's pass to beat Betis keeper Adrian, but Jorge Molina's penalty halved the deficit for the visitors after Ruben Castro had been brought down by Nacho.

Castro then came close to stealing a draw for Betis as he hit the bar two minutes from time before Ozil settled it in stoppage time.

Jose Mourinho had sprung a surprise by handing a debut to Brazilian midfielder Carlos Henrique Casemiro as he made a raft of changes with Wednesday's match in mind.

Rodgers not afraid

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers insists he is not intimidated by Rafael Benitez as the Chelsea manager prepares for an emotional return to Anfield on Sunday.

The walls at Anfield and also at Liverpool's Melwood training ground are covered with iconic images of the club's domestic and European triumphs during Benitez's reign.

Chief among them is the Champions League final success in 2005, when Benitez's Liverpool side famously fought back from 3-0 down against AC Milan in Istanbul to win on penalties.

But ahead of the Spaniard's first return to Liverpool since his 2010 departure, Rodgers admitted he is not unsettled trying to match Benitez's achievements.

"They are not intimidating for me," Rodgers said when asked about the pictures of Benitez.

"I said to the players 'your job is to put yourself on the wall here'.

"If I was only worried about myself then maybe having people around with great histories would worry me. But it doesn't one bit.

"This club is full of great legends with guys like Alan Kennedy who work on match days, Ian Rush, Jan Molby, John Aldridge, all great guys around the place. That doesn't intimidate me, I enjoy speaking with these people."

Benitez, who also won the FA Cup with

Liverpool in 2006 and guided them to another Champions League final defeat against AC Milan a year later, should get a fine reception from his old club's supporters.

However, there is a hint of tension in the relationship between Rodgers and Benitez since the Spaniard, whose family still live on Merseyside, expressed his wish to one day return to Liverpool.

"I don't know Rafael Benitez as a person. I know him as a manager. He is a fantastic manager there's no question about that.

"Rafael Benitez will deserve a great welcome when he comes back. He won the European Cup during his time here, which is a great achievement."

Benitez has found friends hard to come by at Stamford Bridge following his controversial comments about the Blues during his six-year reign at Liverpool.

So it would be little surprise if Liverpool supporters sing his name far more often than their Chelsea counterparts on Sunday.

Benitez can't afford to be distracted by his emotional return as Chelsea seek the three points that will guarantee the Blues hold onto third place ahead of the remaining five games of the campaign.

Benitez's side showed impressive resilience in recovering from the disappointment of losing the FA Cup semifinal to Manchester City to beat Fulham 3-0 midweek.

But with Arsenal, Tottenham and Everton also contesting for the final two places in next season's Champions League, a slip at Anfield could prove costly to Chelsea's ambitions.

Rosberg takes Bahrain pole

AFP, Manama

German driver Nico Rosberg will start from pole for the seventh time in his career after Saturday posting the fastest time in qualifying for Sunday's Bahrain Grand Prix.

The 27-year-old - whose sole win in Formula One came in last year's China Grand Prix - timed 1min 32.330sec to give Mercedes their second successive pole position.

Team-mate Lewis Hamilton started from pole in the Chinese Grand Prix last Sunday.

Rosberg edged out Red Bull's three-time defending world champion Sebastian Vettel while Spain's two-time world champion Fernando Alonso will start from third on the grid in his Ferrari.

Players want Jose out

AFP, Madrid

Up to 15 Real Madrid players, including five senior members of the squad, do not want Jose Mourinho to continue as manager next season, Spanish newspaper El Pais reported on Saturday.

The Portuguese has a contract with the Spanish champions until 2016, but has consistently been linked with a move away from the Santiago Bernabeu at the end of the season.

The report in El Pais claims though that an informal poll carried out by Perez among the squad found the majority would not be in favour of Mourinho staying on.

Meanwhile Xabi Alonso is stalling on the offer of a new contract by the club with his current deal set to expire in 2014.



Lyon midfielder Clement Grenier (L) heads the ball under pressure from Montpellier midfielder Jonas Martin during their League One encounter at the Mosson Stadium on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Conte holds Ibra talks

AFP, Milan



Juventus coach Antonio Conte has spoken to Zlatan Ibrahimovic about a possible return to the club, an Italian newspaper report claimed Saturday.

Ibrahimovic's 26 goals in 28 Ligue 1 games for Paris Saint-Germain have put the French capital club within sight of a first title since 1994.

However, recent speculation suggests the Swedish international striker is keen on a quick return to Italy, where he has previously played for Juventus (2004-2006), Inter (2006-2009) and AC Milan (2010-2012).

A report in Gazzetta dello Sport in midweek claimed Ibrahimovic and his wife had been house-hunting in Milan.

And on Saturday Gazzetta claimed Juventus coach Conte had personally contacted Ibrahimovic to express his admiration for the player.

The report added, however, that Juventus would only be prepared to pay PSG 10 million euros (\$13m) for Ibrahimovic, who would be paid 7.5m euros annually plus bonuses.

PSG bought Ibrahimovic for a reported 21 million euros from AC Milan last summer.

Despite lacking a centre forward with a killer eye for goal this season, Juventus have been Serie A's strongest side and require seven points from their next six league games to secure their second consecutive Scudetto under Conte.

After losing out on Didier Drogba, who signed for Galatasaray, Juve agreed terms with Athletic Bilbao and Spain striker Fernando Llorente, who will sign a four-year deal with Juve on July 1 when his Athletic deal ends.



SET Max

Indian Premier League

Delhi v Mumbai

Live from 4:30pm

Punjab v Pune

Live from 8:30pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership

Liverpool v Chelsea

Live from 9:00pm

Italian Serie A

Juventus v AC Milan