

# Stalemate hurts St Etienne

AFP, Paris



Champions League hopefuls Saint-Etienne saw their bid for a place in Europe's top club competition next season suffer a blow as they were held to a goalless draw at home to

Bordeaux on Friday.

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang missed the hosts' best chances as a resolute Cedric Carrasco kept Saint-Etienne at bay in a dour contest at Stade Geoffroy-Guichard as the Gabonese marksman failed to add to his season's tally of 19 goals.

The result extended Saint-Etienne's unbeaten run in Ligue 1 to 16 matches but the stalemate saw Christophe Galtier's side stay a point behind arch rivals Lyon, who travel to Nancy on Sunday, in the race for the final Champions League spot, while a third straight draw enabled Bordeaux to move above Montpellier into eighth.

A cagey opening period saw Aubameyang fire a low strike that flashed narrowly wide of Cedric Carrasco's far post, while the Bordeaux goalkeeper reacted well to keep out Romain Hamouma's angled

shot before Henri Saivet's miscued clearance sent the ball crashing against the frame of his own goal from the ensuing corner.

Joshua Guilavogui was thwarted by a flying save from Carrasco just after half-time, while Brandao sent a tame header straight at the visiting custodian.

Aubameyang was then again off target as he could only find the side netting from a tight angle when per-

haps squaring to Brandao may have proved the better option with neither side ultimately able to find a breakthrough.

Second-place Marseille are in action at home to Bastia on Saturday, when anything but a victory for Elie Baup's side would leave the door open for Paris Saint-Germain to secure their first Ligue 1 crown in 19 years should they beat visiting Valenciennes on Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

Saint-Etienne forward Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (L) takes a shot during their League One match against Bordeaux at the Geoffroy-Guichard Stadium on Friday.

## Fergie to have hip operation

AFP, London

Alex Ferguson could miss the start of next season as he is to undergo a hip operation, sources at Manchester United have confirmed.

The 71-year-old manager is booked in for surgery immediately after the club return from a three-week pre-season tour at the end of July.

Ferguson will take his summer break before travelling with his players to Thailand, Australia, Japan and Hong Kong before the operation.

United will face either Manchester City or Wigan in the Community Shield at Wembley on August 11, with their title defence due to begin the following weekend.

No timescale is being put on Ferguson's likely absence but it would require a rapid recovery from the 71-year-old in order for him to be back in charge by then.

Ferguson has always said his health would dictate how long he would carry on as United manager.

He was taken ill at a function in Scotland almost 12 months ago, although his nosebleeds were put down to the amount of short flights he had undertaken.

## 'Exploited'

AFP, London



Queens Park Rangers' Malaysian owner, Tony Fernandes, says the club's relegation from the Premier League has left him feeling "exploited".

Fernandes, who has made his wealth in the airline and music industries, acquired QPR in August 2011 and he estimates that he has ploughed around £50 million (\$78 million, 59 million euros) into the London club since he took over.

The 49-year-old admits that he has occasionally let people take advantage of him, but he has vowed that he will not make the same mistakes again.

"I don't think I will be exploited any more," he said, in comments reported by several British newspapers on Saturday.

"I think I allowed myself to be exploited, but that's my choice. Agents are trying to get the best contracts and there's no two ways about it -- I had to pay premiums.

"I've seen all of the parts that make football quite -- maybe 'immoral' is a strong word, but they would sell their grandmother to do something. It's all part of the football ecosystem."

Fernandes expressed regret over the club's decision to allow outspoken midfielder Joey Barton to join French side Marseille on a season-long loan deal.

"We missed Joey," he said. "We needed a workhorse midfielder and we tried to get (Tottenham Hotspur midfielder) Scott Parker.

"We missed a real leader. We tried to get (Tottenham centre-back) Michael Dawson. To be fair to (former manager) Mark Hughes, he said we needed two centre-halves.

"This has been a tragic season in many ways. It is a Shakespearean play in the making."

Fernandes also revealed that manager Harry Redknapp and the majority of the playing squad would be forced to accept pay cuts in the second-tier Championship next season.

"Do we have relegation clauses? Yes. Do all the players have them? No. But at least 60 per cent do," he said.

Questioned about Redknapp, who is due to stay on in his position, Fernandes said: "Yes. His salary goes down as well.

"We have been made out not to be sensible, stupid. Guys on TV have torn me apart. We are not stupid."

## Gerrard not bothered

AFP, London

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard has played down the significance of Sunday's Merseyside derby by claiming that it does not matter if his team finish below Everton in the Premier League this season.

Everton visit Anfield on Sunday knowing that victory will guarantee they finish above their city neighbours for the second season in a row.

However, Gerrard has dismissed talk of a power shift, pointing to Everton's 18-year trophy drought and the fact neither team has mounted a challenge for the league title this season.

"If Everton finish above us and their supporters are really happy and their players and everyone is really happy, then that's up to them," he said, in comments reported by several British newspapers on Saturday.

"But if we finish above Everton there will be no celebrating or anything around here, because it's nothing, really.

"It's no big deal. We want to win the derby; of course we do. We want to finish above Everton; of course we do. In the big picture, is it really important? I don't know. Maybe not."

## MU look to enjoy

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson has called on his already crowned Premier League champions to play with freedom for the remainder of the season.

United welcome top-four chasing Chelsea to Old Trafford on Sunday and Ferguson wants his side to impress even if they do have their 20th English league title secured.

A draw at Arsenal last week ended United's hopes of overhauling Chelsea's record Premier League points tally of 95, but Ferguson remains focused.

"It is time for us to play with a good enthusiasm, relax and enjoy ourselves," he said. "That is what I want to see and hopefully we can have a good end to the season."

Having been enjoying title celebrations and the Professional Footballers' Association Awards ceremony recently, United's players have certainly been kept busy off the field.

They also have their trophy parade coming on May 13 following the presentation after the Swansea game at Old Trafford the day before, but Ferguson does not want it all to get out of hand while the season is still ongoing.

"It is inevitable that these things happen," Ferguson said. "I never took into account of all the things that were happening, the PFA awards and our own player of the year awards, and then the parade.

"Then (club captain Nemanja) Vidic came to me and asked could they go to Chester Races next Wednesday and I said without thinking 'yes of course' and then we put all these things together and I was saying 'bloody hell, I hope they don't forget there are games of football to be won'.

"It is difficult, they have had a fantastic season and they deserve to celebrate as a team. They have had a hard season but they still have to win games."

Ferguson will be without striker Danny Welbeck for the visit of Chelsea but Paul Scholes could make an appearance on the substitutes' bench as the veteran midfielder has recovered from the knee injury that has kept him out since January.

Rafael Benitez's success in guiding Chelsea towards a successful climax to a frustrating season -- an achievement that has been marked with the April manager of the month award -- has been overshadowed by the growing speculation Jose Mourinho is poised to return to Stamford Bridge.

Benitez's departure from his post as interim manager has never been in doubt, but it is in keeping with his turbulent reign that recognition of his achievements in west London comes when focus is fixed elsewhere.

Should Mourinho leave Real Madrid and succeed Benitez, there is a growing possibility he will take over a team on the rise.

The midweek victory over Basel secured Chelsea's place in the Europa League final when they will start as firm favourites to beat Benfica in Amsterdam.

And a return of 10 points from a possible 12 means they are on course to finish third and claim a place in the Champions League group stage.

Defeat at Old Trafford, however, could change the balance of that three-way battle with London rivals Arsenal and Tottenham for the two remaining places in the top four, particularly as Spurs visit Stamford Bridge three days later.

Chelsea striker Fernando Torres said: "I've been scoring goals, helping the team to win matches and now we're really looking forward to the final."

## Messi returns to training

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona were able to welcome back Lionel Messi and Sergio Busquets to training on Saturday morning after they missed the 3-0 defeat to Bayern Munich in midweek, but Victor Valdes has been ruled out of Sunday's match with Real Betis due to plantar fasciitis in his left foot.

Both are therefore expected to be in contention for the Betis game when Barca could mathematically seal the league title.



TEN Cricket	
2nd ODI	Zimbabwe v Bangladesh
Live from 1:00pm	SET Max
Indian Premier League	
Mumbai v Chennai	Live from 4:30pm
Rajasthan v Pune	Live from 8:30pm
ESPN	
Serie A	AC Milan v Torino
Live from 7:00pm	STAR Sports
English Premiership	
Liverpool v Everton	Live from 6:30pm
Man Utd v Chelsea	Live from 9:00pm
Serie A	
Napoli v Inter Milan	Live from 12:45am (Monday)



West Bromwich Albion striker Shane Long celebrates his opening goal against Wigan Athletic during their Premier League encounter at the Hawthorns yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Spirited Reading win

AGENCIES, London



Reading showed the spirit that they will need next season in trying to regain their Premier League status with a fine 4-2 away win over Fulham in the Premier League on Saturday.

A double by Hal Robson-Kanu provided the basis for what was Reading's first win in 11 games -- their last victory being on February 2 -- and first under manager Nigel Adkins.

Defeat for Fulham puts at risk manager Martin Jol's impressive record of always finishing in the top half of the table as they are presently 13th on 40 points.

Reading took an early lead when Norwegian veteran John Arne Riise brought down Robson-Kanu.

The winger picked himself up and calmly converted the penalty past Australian veteran Mark Schwarzer, who was making his 550th appearance in English football.

The visitors deservedly double their lead just after the hour mark through Robson-Kanu as he collected a deflected

Garath McCleary shot and curled it past Schwarzer.

Brian Ruiz, though, pulled one back shortly afterwards after a neat one-two with Rodallega but Adam Le Fondre restored the two goal cushion with 15 minutes remaining after being found by a superb pass by playmaker Jem Karacan.

Fulham reduced the deficit again two minutes later as Costa Rican international Ruiz rose to head home Alex Kakaniklic's cross to set up a nervy finale.

Meanwhile, Wigan Athletic and Aston Villa boosted their Premier League survival hopes with late victories at West Bromwich Albion and Norwich City.

Midfielder Callum McManaman pounced in the 80th minute at the Hawthorns to give Wigan a

3-2 win over West Brom after they had twice fallen behind.

Villa left Carrow Road with a 2-1 triumph courtesy of Gabriel Agbonlahor's double, including an 89th-minute winner. Newcastle United were held to a 0-0 draw at West Ham United, leaving the Magpies three points above the relegation zone.

### RESULTS

Fulham 2 (Ruiz 70, 77) Reading 4 (Robson-Kanu 12-pen, 62, Le Fondre 75, Karacan 83)  
Norwich 1 (Holt 74-pen) Aston Villa 2 (Agbonlahor 55, 89)  
Swansea 0 Manchester City 0  
West Brom 2 (Long 29, McAuley 50) Wigan 3 (Kone 39, McArthur 58, McManaman 80)  
West Ham 0 Newcastle 0