

HIDDINK WANTS LOFTUS-CHEEK TO MAKE HIS MARK

LONDON: Guus Hiddink has challenged Ruben Loftus-Cheek to put in the hard work required to fulfil his potential after the teenager scored his first Chelsea goal in their 2-0 FA Cup win over Scunthorpe.

Loftus-Cheek gave a glimpse of his talent when he came off the bench to sweep home Cesar Azpilicueta's pass with a composed finish in the 68th minute at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

The 19-year-old finished off third tier Scunthorpe after Diego Costa had given Chelsea an early lead in the third round tie, but Hiddink claims the gifted midfielder still has a lot of work to do before he is the finished article.

London-born Loftus-Cheek has been regarded as the jewel in Chelsea's academy crown for some while, but previous

boss Jose Mourinho was critical of his attitude and rarely used him.

After pumping millions into overhauling the youth system of a club that hasn't produced a star of their own since John Terry, Blues owner Roman Abramovich is desperate for more homegrown players to emerge. Abramovich celebrated in unusually exuberant fashion when Loftus-Cheek scored, but Hiddink made a point of highlighting both the youngster's potential and areas where improvement is needed.

"Ruben came in and he had a beautiful goal, not just in the execution but the way he prepared himself, and that was good to see," Hiddink said.

"It's important he also has a hard-working role. If you play number 10 it's a role where you can maybe get away without so

much hard work, but that's not what we want. "I start knowing these youngsters now. I can see the possibilities they have and what they have to work on also."

Asked if he felt pressured by Abramovich to introduce more youngsters into the first-team, Hiddink insisted he is free to pick who he likes, but the Dutchman did concede Chelsea were right to expect more from such a heavy investment. "It is normal when you have the academy with a lot of investment you must develop players in the Premier League," he said. "If you see three or four of these players coming into the team that is what you want. "It is not said (by Abramovich) but that is the consequence of the academy; you have to use them, under the conditions that they learn. "Our position in the league gives a few options for putting

young players in the team."

REHABILITATION

Hiddink has overseen a four-match unbeaten run, including successive victories against Scunthorpe and Crystal Palace, since replacing Mourinho.

But the savvy veteran is well aware that Chelsea's rehabilitation after their remarkable collapse under Mourinho is still far from complete. "There were some vulnerabilities in the second half, it is true. We have to improve," Hiddink said.

"It was a difficult game, which we expected. We got a little bit sloppy in finishing it off after a good start."

With their Premier League title defence already in tatters, Hiddink says reclaiming the FA Cup—a competition he won with the

club in his previous interim spell in 2009—would help salvage a troubled campaign.

"We are aiming for the FA Cup, we have the Premier League which is difficult to get to fourth place, so it was a very important game to get to the next round," he said.

"We are very determined to go on to get silverware." To enjoy a successful end to the season, Hiddink will need Costa to stay fit and in form. The Spain striker's fourth goal in his last three appearances was well timed after his midweek training ground row with Oscar once again raised questions about his explosive temper.

"If you see his goal in slow motion it was a difficult goal, but he was so focused and concentrated to get the flick on it. It's nice to see when he is focused on the right things," Hiddink added. — AFP

VILLA WELL ON WAY TO JOINING LIST OF FALLEN ENGLISH GIANTS

LONDON: Evoking memories of Operation Desert Storm during the Gulf War, an American board member at Aston Villa recently urged fans of the Premier League's last-place club not to give up hope in its increasingly desperate bid to escape relegation. "We were standing next to minefields separating Saudi Arabia and Kuwait," Gen. Charles C. Krulak, a former Commandant of the Marine Corps, recounted in British newspaper The Sun. "There were trenches filled with gas, massive artillery ready to rain down on us and the threat of chemical attack."

"My next-in-command looked at me and said, 'How are we gonna get through this?' I said, 'We're gonna do it, we're gonna go through this like a knife through butter.' It's easy to give up, but you can't do that."

This particular call to arms, however, looks to be in vain. Villa, a seven-time English champion and European Cup winner in 1982, is an odds-on favorite to lose its unbroken status as a Premier League club. Winless since the opening day of the season on Aug. 8, the biggest team from central England—boasting famous fans in Prince William and British Prime Minister David Cameron—heads into a home match against Crystal Palace on Tuesday 11 points from safety with 18 games remaining, and in turmoil on and off the field.

Two weeks ago, disgruntled supporters chanted, "You're not fit to wear the shirt," as Villa players prepared to leave the stadium in Sunderland after a 3-1 loss to the league's next-to-last team.

On Saturday, the atmosphere became more heated, with players requiring a police escort to get on the team bus as angry Villa fans vented their fury following a humiliating 1-1 draw at fourth-tier club Wycombe in the FA Cup.

How has it come to this? How has a team that finished sixth in the Premier League for three straight seasons in 2008-10 and has long been one of the most celebrated clubs in English soccer fallen this far? It's a story of inertia and apathy

in the boardroom, of strategic failures in recruitment, and of a squad that has been regularly stripped of its best players. The people in key positions at the club appear to be either unsuited to the task, not up to it, or simply don't want to be there. Randy Lerner, the former owner of the Cleveland Browns, bought Villa in 2006 for \$104 million but has been looking to sell the club since May 2014, saying he was drained by the "week-in, week-out battles."

Villa's current manager is Remi Garde, hired in November as its sixth coach since 2010. Garde is a Frenchman with no previous coaching experience in England. Thrust immediately into a relegation dogfight, he has yet to win a game after 10 in charge. It sums up Villa's plight that in welcoming Garde to Villa Park, the club misspelt his name, saying on Twitter: (hashtag) WelcomeRemy.

Villa has an American chief executive, Tom Fox, whose background is mainly in marketing and who risked intensifying fan ire by saying last week that the club was "making progress" because it has "generated more revenue on both our shirt and kit deals and in our ability to control costs."

Fox arrived from Arsenal, as did newly hired sporting director Hendrik Almstadt, who brought with him the risky transfer strategy of buying young to get better value-for-money signings so they can be sold for a profit. The so-called "Moneyball" policy has been a disaster so far. Thirteen players—many unproven youngsters from overseas—joined last offseason for 50 million pounds (\$72.5 million), but for a reported net spend of only 7 million pounds (\$10 million) as Villa used the cash recouped from selling Belgium striker Christian Benteke and England midfielder Fabian Delph—its two best players.

Garde has the January transfer window to work a miracle, but which potential savior wants to join a club destined for relegation? Garde may just have to work with the current set of players, who have proven this season they are simply not good enough.

Since the departure of manager Martin O'Neill in 2010, Villa has been on the slide and only narrowly avoided relegation the last three seasons. A late-season surge under Tim Sherwood, Garde's predecessor, saw Villa escape the drop and reach the FA Cup final, where the team lost 4-0 to Arsenal at Wembley Stadium.

Villa hasn't recovered from that loss, and is set to lose its top-flight status just when Premier League teams are about to carve up a record 9 billion pounds (\$13 billion) from domestic and overseas TV deals over the next three years. The timing couldn't be worse and there's no telling when Villa will recover.

Once upon a time, Leeds, Nottingham Forest and Coventry were established top-division teams. Relegation led to financial problems and they've been unable to rebound. Could Villa be next? That 1-0 win over Bayern Munich in the 1982 European Cup final seems a long, long time ago. — AP



FUNCHAL: Benfica's Brazilian defender Jardel Vieira (R) heads the ball during the Portuguese league football match CD Nacional vs SL Benfica at the Da Madeira stadium in Funchal yesterday. The match was suspended yesterday due to the fog. — AFP

VAN GAAL CLINGS TO RESULTS AS MANCHESTER UTD TOIL ON

NEWCASTLE: Manchester United manager Louis van Gaal admits that his side need to play better, but they will go in search of a third successive victory at Newcastle United today. United last managed that in November, when victory over CSKA Moscow in the Champions League followed by Premier League wins over West Bromwich Albion and Watford had everything in the Old Trafford garden looking rosy. United, briefly, were second in the league, but after that they would not record another win until January 2, during which time they also limped out of the Champions League in the group phase.

United have eased some of the pressure on Van Gaal by recording back-to-back home wins, but Saturday's FA Cup victory over third-tier Sheffield United, secured by Wayne Rooney's injury-time penalty, was far from convincing. "The result is all right, but the performance was not all right," said Van Gaal, whose side were ironically applauded by their own fans as they toiled to break down their third-tier opponents.

But as long as United keep winning, Van Gaal has a defence and his team are looking to record a fourth successive Premier League win over struggling Newcastle in meetings at St James' Park. Victory would take United level on points

with Tottenham Hotspur, who occupy the fourth and final Champions League qualification place and host second-place Leicester City on Wednesday. "As we enter the second half of the season the games come quickly, so we want to build and move up the league as fast as we can," Van Gaal added. "This won't be easy, but I know that we are all determined to do this." Only Tottenham have conceded fewer league goals than United this season, but it is in attack where Van Gaal's side badly need to improve. Van Gaal hinted that Memphis Depay and Jesse Lingard could come into the team after coming off the bench against Sheffield United.

'ANGRY AND FRUSTRATED'

"I think that we have to play with wingers, who make the pitch as big as possible," he said. "And with Memphis and Lingard, I know it is like that." Newcastle manager Steve McClaren is under increasing pressure after his side's poor recent league form transferred to the FA Cup with a third-round defeat at Watford.

It is 412 minutes since they last scored and the reverse at Vicarage Road was their fourth successive 1-0 loss. They go into the game third from bottom in the Premier League and two

points from safety. McClaren hopes to welcome back midfielder Jack Colback from injury as he attempts to win round supporters who are growing frustrated with the lack of progress made during his eight-month tenure.

There were calls for him to go from some travelling fans at Watford and he must halt a record that has seen his side win just four of their last 20 home games if he is to orchestrate a climb up the table. "We're frustrated and angry at being out of the FA Cup, and we have to channel that in a positive way against Manchester United," said the former Manchester United assistant coach.

"At this stage, I can't ask for more from the players. We have to get on with it, that's the nature of football. The players have to be big enough, bold enough and show courage."

"It's Manchester United next. We'll have 50,000 people who have to get behind this side and support them."

"We have to stick together. It's difficult for all of us to show a little bit of patience, but there's work going on and today is the next challenge." Newcastle remain without long-term injury victims Tim Krul, Gabriel Obertan and Papiis Cisse. — AFP

Live Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

Newcastle v Man United 22:45
BeIN SPORTS

Bournemouth v West Ham 22:45
BeIN SPORTS

Aston Villa v Crystal Palace 22:45
BeIN SPORTS

SPAIN COPA DEL REY

Deportivo v Mirandes 22:30
BeIN SPORTS

Sevilla v Real Betis 22:30
BeIN SPORTS



BORDEAUX: This file photo taken on November 29, 2015 shows Bordeaux' Senegalese forward Henri Saivet running with the ball during the French L1 football match between Bordeaux and Caen at the Matmut Atlantique stadium in Bordeaux, southwestern France. Bordeaux captain and Senegalese international midfielder Henri Saivet has agreed terms to join English Premier League side Newcastle United, the French club's coach Willy Sagnol said yesterday. — AFP

FEAST AND FAMINE AS ARSENAL FACE REDS

LONDON: Two teams coping very differently with English football's high-intensity mid-season fixture programme meet tomorrow when Premier League leaders Arsenal resume their pursuit of the title at injury-ravaged Liverpool.

While Arsenal could afford to make five changes as they breezed past Sunderland in the FA Cup on Saturday, Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp's decision to field a youthful starting XI at fourth-tier Exeter City on Friday almost backfired as his side scraped a 2-2 draw.

First-team regulars like Mesut Ozil, Aaron Ramsey and Per Mertesacker will come back into the Arsenal team at Anfield and right-back Hector Bellerin believes such strength in depth bodes well for the months ahead.

"The legs are fine and we have shown that we have very good players on the bench also and the rotation helps us get good results," said the Spaniard, who set up goals for Ramsey and Olivier Giroud in the 3-1 success against Sunderland.

"We have a lot of games and they are all hard games, but we have to respond in the way we did (against Sunderland) and I'm sure we will be fine. "The team was up to the challenge. We didn't rush the games and we knew we had to be patient. It is nice to get the three goals and that is confidence for the team as we had a difficult week ahead."

Klopp can only envy the riches at Arsenal counterpart Arsene Wenger's disposal as he contemplates an injury list that currently features 11 senior players.

Seven of those—including playmaker Philippe Coutinho, striker Daniel Sturridge and centre-backs Dejan Lovren and Martin Skrtel—have hamstring problems, but Klopp has dismissed suggestions that his hard-running playing style is to blame.

Assessing the situation after the draw at Exeter, he said: "The main problems we have is because our centre-halves are injured in this moment. "We had five centre-halves at the beginning of the season and at this moment no centre-halves. That's the situation, but next week it could be different."

Leicester City, two points behind Arsenal in second place, return to White Hart Lane to face Tottenham Hotspur, just three days after a 2-2 draw between the teams there in the FA Cup.

Leicester were a minute from victory when Harry Kane equalised from the penalty spot for Spurs, but having made seven changes to his lineup, Leicester manager Claudio Ranieri was satisfied with the outcome.

WELL DONE!

"I was very pleased with our performance because eight players without play some play

sometimes, in the League Cup—and now they play in the FA Cup, and I think they deserve a positive result," he said.

"Two-two is a positive result. Well done!" Spurs start the week in fourth place, but Manchester United can go draw level on points with Mauricio Pochettino's men if they win at struggling Newcastle United in Tuesday's stand-out fixture.

United required a stoppage-time Wayne Rooney penalty to see off third-division Sheffield United in the FA Cup on Saturday, but midfielder Marouane Fellaini believes there was no shame in being made to toil by well-drilled opposition. — AFP



ZURICH: Vila Nova's Brazilian forward Wendell Lira, formerly of Goanesia, poses after receiving the 2015 FIFA Puskas Award for the "goal of the year" award, which he scored with Goanesia, during the 2015 FIFA Ballon d'Or award ceremony at the Kongresshaus in Zurich yesterday. — AFP