

Sports

Giroud sinks Liverpool to keep Chelsea's top four bid alive

Chelsea head to Newcastle and Tottenham entertain Leicester

LONDON: Olivier Giroud boosted Chelsea's bid to snatch a place in the Premier League's top four as the France striker sealed a 1-0 win over Liverpool that brought the Champions League finalists back down to earth yesterday.

Giroud's first-half header at Stamford Bridge lifted fifth-placed Chelsea to within two points of fourth-placed Tottenham in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League. A fourth successive victory equalled Chelsea's longest league winning streak this season, keeping them in the hunt for a top four finish while denting third-placed Liverpool's challenge for the same target. It was a frustrating return to domestic action for Liverpool after their Champions League semi-final success against Roma in midweek. In a dramatic conclusion to the top four battle, Chelsea, who are three points behind Liverpool, host struggling Huddersfield on Wednesday and Tottenham face Newcastle the same evening. On the final day of the season next Sunday, Chelsea head to Newcastle and Tottenham entertain Leicester. With only one win in their last five league games, Liverpool have made their top four status an unnecessarily tense affair. Jurgen Klopp's team should still be able to guarantee a Champions League berth if they beat Brighton at Anfield yesterday.

Even if they don't finish in the top four, Liverpool can return to Europe's elite club competition by defeating Real Madrid in the Champions League final on May 26. Liverpool fans crowded into one corner of the Bridge were still in party mood after their side's

Roman conquest and regular renditions of their "Allez, Allez" European anthem served as the soundtrack to a bright opening from the visitors.

Picked out by Trent Alexander-Arnold's pass, Roberto Firmino made an intelligent run down the right-hand side of the penalty area and tested Thibaut Courtois with a dipping half-volley. Eden Hazard was the victim of a thunderous tackle from James Milner that left the Chelsea playmaker in need of treatment and the Liverpool midfielder fortunate to avoid a booking. Hazard dusted himself down and was able to play on, moments later teeing up Marcos Alonso for Chelsea's first shot on target. That was a rare incursion into the Liverpool area from Chelsea as Klopp's men dominated possession early on.

Mane in a personal duel with Courtois

Liverpool area from Chelsea as Klopp's men dominated possession early on.

PERSONAL DUEL

Sadio Mane's 25-yard drive forced a sprawling save from Courtois and from the resulting corner, the Chelsea keeper needed to be alert to stop Virgil van Dijk heading in from close range. Mane was in a personal duel with Courtois, who kept out another powerful blast from the Senegal winger, then scrambled to his feet to deny him again from the rebound.

But despite their pressure, Liverpool were caught with a sucker punch in the 32nd minute as Giroud justified Conte's decision to select him at the expense of the out of form Alvaro Morata.

Victor Moses teased Andrew Robertson as he worked space to swing over a cross and Giroud, steal-



LONDON: Chelsea's Spanish defender Cesar Azpilicueta (CR) vies with Liverpool's Senegalese midfielder Sadio Mane (CL) and Liverpool's Brazilian midfielder Roberto Firmino (L) during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Liverpool at Stamford Bridge in London yesterday. — AFP

ing in front of the slow to react Dejan Lovren, glanced a fine header into the far corner of the net.

Giroud celebrated his fifth Chelsea goal since his January move from Arsenal by sprinting over to the bench and clambered up to hug team-mate David Luiz, who wasn't involved in the matchday squad.

Suddenly there was more verve about Chelsea and Cesc Fabregas almost doubled their lead with a low effort that flashed across goal. Mohamed Salah was anonymous in the first half until the Liverpool star was

booked for diving, a decision that drew an angry response from Klopp as he berated the fourth official.

Moses threatened with a stinging strike soon after the interval and Hazard followed suit, bringing Liverpool goalkeeper Loris Karius into action after a thrusting run. Egypt star Salah was finding it impossible to escape the close attention of Chelsea defenders. Liverpool were impotent as a result and Chelsea salted away the points after Liverpool substitute Dominic Solanke headed over. — AFP

United fans and rivals rally round stricken Ferguson

LONDON: Messages of support continued to pour in as legendary football manager Sir Alex Ferguson fought for his life yesterday following emergency surgery for a brain haemorrhage. Considered the most successful manager in the history of British football, Ferguson won 38 major trophies in just over 26 years in charge of Manchester United, including 13 Premier League titles and the UEFA Champions League twice.

It is a measure of the Scot's success on the pitch, and his stature off it that tributes poured in from around the world of sport, and beyond, to wish the 76-year-old a speedy recovery after he underwent surgery on Saturday.

"Everyone at AC Milan wishes Sir Alex Ferguson a full and speedy recovery," said a statement by the seven-time European champions on their official Twitter page early yesterday morning. Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri, who is on the verge of leading the Turin giants to a seventh successive Serie A crown, said: "Stay strong Alex Ferguson."

News of Ferguson's condition also had an impact beyond the world of football. Top American baseball side the Chicago White Sox posted a heartfelt message on their Twitter page weeks after one of their players, Danny Farquhar, recently suffered a brain haemorrhage while sitting in the team dugout.

"The #WhiteSox stand with the @ManUtd community in sending our positive thoughts to Sir Alex Ferguson," said the message on @whitesox. "Having been recently impacted by a brain hemorrhage in our own family, we know the dramatic impact it causes, and the strength that can be drawn from those who care."

Ferguson, who retired from management five years ago, appeared in good health when presenting a commemorative vase to old rival Arsene Wenger, who is stepping down as Arsenal manager, at United's Old Trafford ground last week. But on Saturday an ambulance was called to the Scot's home in Cheadle, near Manchester, at 9:00 am (0800 GMT). Concerns for Ferguson's health mounted when it was announced his son, Darren, the manager of English third-tier club Doncaster, would miss his side's match against Wigan because of "family reasons". News of Ferguson's operation was made public by United in a statement that appeared to be cautiously opti-



OLD TRAFFORD: A visitor walks past a billboard featuring football greats, including legendary football manager Sir Alex Ferguson, (top-R), outside the Manchester United Museum at Old Trafford football stadium, Manchester yesterday. — AFP

mistic about his prospects for recovery. "Sir Alex Ferguson has undergone emergency surgery today for a brain haemorrhage," the statement said on Saturday.

"The procedure has gone very well but he needs a period of intensive care to optimise his recovery. His family request privacy in this matter." Pending updates—none of which had been given by medical officials or Manchester United by 1230 GMT Sunday—on Ferguson's condition, messages of support from all walks of life continued to pour in. "I wish Sir Alex Ferguson a speedy and full recovery," said British Labour MP John McDonnell, the Shadow Chancellor. "A brilliant manager and a good man, who won the respect of all of us football supporters worldwide."

Wenger, a long-time rival on the touchlines, offered his support in a short statement to the Daily Mail yesterday. "I am concerned and I'm thinking about him and his family," said the Frenchman. "I trust his strength and his strong character will get him well very quickly."

Ferguson also recently met with Pep Guardiola, taking

the Spaniard to dinner to congratulate him on winning this season's Premier League title with Manchester City. Guardiola, who is good friends with Ferguson, told Sky Sports ahead of City's match against Huddersfield: "Brian Kidd, who is here now, was with (Sir Alex) for a lot of time. "So a big hug and our thoughts are with his wife Cathy and the Manchester United family. I was glad to have dinner with him two weeks ago, and hopefully he can recover as quickly as possible."

A brain haemorrhage is bleeding in or around the brain following the rupture of a blood vessel, which can be caused by elevated blood pressure, aneurysms or physical trauma. Operations to relieve the pressure of excess blood in the brain, as has been the case with Ferguson, are crucial if sufferers are to avoid brain damage or even death. That prospect has prompted an outpouring of support from among Ferguson's former players and clubs. Former United goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel perhaps summed up best the feelings of many well-wishers when he wrote: "Please Be strong Win this one." — AFP

Napoli draw all but hands title to Juventus

MILAN: Juventus are practically assured of winning a seventh successive Serie A title after second-placed Napoli were held 2-2 by Torino yesterday. Juventus have a six-point lead in Serie A with two games left to play. Both teams are equal in head-to-head clashes but Juventus are well ahead of their southern rivals on goal difference.

The champions now need just one point to officially retain their crown with games to come against Roma in the Stadio Olimpico and already-relegated Verona in Turin. Torino twice battled back from a goal down to steal a point from Maurizio Sarri's side who had been bidding for a first title since the days of Argentina legend Diego Maradona in 1987 and 1990.

"Unfortunately there is a bit of regret, we didn't deserve these recent results," said

Napoli captain Marek Hamsik. "Juventus are a very strong team but I think from what we showed on the pitch we deserved a little more."

The mood in the Stadio San Paolo was one of support for Sarri after club president Aurelio De Laurentiis laid the blame on the coach after last week's 3-0 defeat at Fiorentina effectively ended their title challenge. Napoli's last win was against Juventus in Turin two weeks ago. Dries Mertens celebrated his 31st birthday by putting Napoli ahead after 25 minutes after a shocking defensive error by Torino's Nicolas Burdisso, with Hamsik coming off the bench to add a second for the hosts after 71 minutes.

But Torino dug deep with Daniele Baselli pulling the visitors level 10 minutes into the second half and Lorenzo De Silvestri heading in seven minutes from time to cancel out Hamsik's goal.

Juventus had recovered from a goal down to beat Bologna 3-1 on Saturday to open up a seven-point lead. Massimiliano Allegri's Juventus would have to lose their final two matches and Napoli to achieve high-scoring wins against Sampdoria and Crotone to make up the goal difference.

Napoli and Juventus both won 1-0 away

from home against each other this season, but the Turin giants (+61) have a considerable edge over Napoli (+45) in terms of goal difference.

With Juventus and Napoli in the top two spots, Inter Milan kept their Champions League hopes alive with a 4-0 win over Udinese to move to within two points of Lazio, who are third after being held 1-1 by Atalanta.

Lazio—without Serie A top scorer Ciro Immobile—can be overtaken by Roma who play at Cagliari later. Lazio fell behind to a Musa Barrow strike after just two minutes before Felipe Caicedo grabbed the equaliser on 24 minutes following good work by Luis Alberto.

Inter assured fifth place and seal at least Europa League action next season while keeping their Champions League challenge alive. Inter have 69 points with two games left and cannot be caught by AC Milan, who are nine points behind, or Atalanta, who have 59.

"We're still convinced that we can get to the Champions League," said Inter coach Luciano Spalletti. Inter put last week's last-gasp 3-2 defeat to Juventus behind them, sealing victory with first-half goals from Andrea Ranocchia, Rafinha and captain Mauro Icardi. — AFP



NAPLES: Napoli's midfielder from Slovakia Marek Hamsik (C) shoots and scores a goal during the Italian Serie A football match between Napoli and Torino at the San Paolo stadium in Naples, yesterday. — AFP

Cardiff back in Premier League

LONDON: Cardiff City returned to the Premier League yesterday when a goalless draw at home to Reading was enough to give veteran manager Neil Warnock a record eighth promotion. Only the top two at the end of the regular season were guaranteed a place in English football's lucrative top flight and second-tier title-winners Wolves had already secured one of those spots heading into Sunday's final round of regular-season Championship matches.

A draw left Cardiff waiting on Fulham's result at Birmingham, but the Cottagers 3-1 loss left the London club facing the lottery of the play-offs, where the teams finishing third-sixth compete for the lone remaining promotion place.

The draw saw Cardiff return to the Premier League after a single season in the competition in 2013/14. When Warnock took over some 18 months ago, Cardiff were at the other end of the table but Malaysian owner Vincent Tan's decision to bring the experienced manager to the Welsh capital paid dividends. Birmingham were still facing relegation when they kicked off but first-half goals from Lukas Jutkiewicz (15) and Harlee Dean (43) settled their nerves. Tom Cairney scored for Fulham with six minutes left but Che Adams's 89th-minute goal put the result beyond doubt.

Barnsley's 4-1 loss at Derby ended their brief stay in the Championship, with Burton—managed by Nigel Clough—also relegated after a 2-1 loss at Preston. Meanwhile Bolton beat the drop in remarkable fashion after beating Nottingham Forest 3-2.

Bolton were going down with three minutes left when Forest led 2-1 after goals from Ben Osborn (70) and Jack Colback (79) overturning Adam Le Fondre's early volley. But David Wheeler (87) and Aaron Wilbraham (88) scored to keep northwest side Bolton in the division to the delight of their delirious home crowd. Elsewhere, bottom club Sunderland stunned champions Wolves 3-0, in front of prospective new owner Stewart Donald. On-loan pair Ovie Ejaria (19) and Ashley Fletcher (45) put the hosts 2-0 up before Paddy McNair scored Sunderland's third midway through the second half. — AFP