



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Portuguese defender Diogo Dalot (left) vies with Crystal Palace's Ivorian striker Wilfried Zaha during the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Crystal Palace yesterday. — AFP

Man United's Rangnick kicks off in style

Tottenham crush Norwich 3-0 to extend their revival

LONDON: Manchester United started the Ralf Rangnick era with a 1-0 win against Crystal Palace yesterday as Tottenham crushed Norwich 3-0 to extend their recent revival under Antonio Conte. Leeds struck late to draw 2-2 with Brentford as new Aston Villa manager Steven Gerrard prepared to lock horns with his former boss at Liverpool, Brendan Rodgers, in the late match against Leicester.

Rangnick, taking the reins for the first time, named an unchanged side at Old Trafford after United beat Arsenal 3-2 in midweek and was rewarded with a high-energy performance in the first half, backed by a vocal crowd. Cristiano Ronaldo had the hosts' best chances as Palace initially struggled to get a foothold but the game remained goalless at half-time.

United's performance levels dipped in the second period and Rangnick threw on Mason Greenwood and Anthony Elanga for Jadon Sancho and Marcus Rashford to inject fresh energy into his attack. But it was often-maligned Brazil midfielder Fred who broke the deadlock, curling home a superb strike past Palace

goalkeeper Vicente Guaita from outside the box after a pass from Greenwood. The three points lifts United to sixth place in the table, three points behind fourth-placed West Ham.

Spurs stroll

Spurs are one point ahead of United with a game in hand after cruising to a 3-0 win against bottom side Norwich - their third straight victory in the Premier League. Lucas Moura opened the scoring in the 10th minute. After a nice piece of skill to round a Norwich defender, he played a one-two with Son Heung-min, turned his marker and thundered an unstoppable drive into the top corner from 20 yards.

Tottenham doubled their lead midway through the second half when Davinson Sanchez smashed home a loose ball from a corner. Son made it 3-0 in the 77th minute with a fine goal as Ben Davies and Oliver Skipp combined before the South Korean fired into the bottom corner. Conte took over from the sacked Nuno Espirito Santo early last month, with Spurs languishing in mid-table after a poor run of results and is starting to

make an impact.

Brentford were denied a win at Elland Road as Patrick Bamford scored deep into stoppage time to rescue a point for his side. Tyler Roberts gave Leeds a 27th-minute lead, sliding on to Raphinha's cross from the left to stab the ball home. Shandon Baptiste equalized for Brentford from the edge of the penalty area in the 54th minute and Sergi Canos put the Londoners ahead seven minutes later. But Bamford had the last word, poking home from close range in the 95th minute following a corner.

Man City 3 Watford 1

Bernardo Silva backed up Pep Guardiola's claim he is the best player in the Premier League right now by scoring twice as Manchester City briefly cruised to the top of the Premier League with a 3-1 win at Watford. Silva's sumptuous cushioned volley against Aston Villa in midweek earned Guardiola's glowing praise and he produced two more fine finishes to take his tally to seven goals in his last 12 Premier League games. "Thanks to Bernardo because he made me not wrong," said City boss Guardiola.

"I know he's so humble, there are top players in the Premier League and he is doing so well."

In stark contrast to Manchester United's 4-1 humbling at Vicarage Road a fortnight ago that ended Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's reign, City virtually killed the match as a contest within four minutes. Phil Foden picked out Raheem Sterling at the back post for the simplest of headers to open the scoring. Silva slotted home from a narrow angle to double the visitors' lead and produced a stunning strike into the top corner after the break.

"The game could have been over after 15 minutes," added Guardiola, whose side took advantage of Chelsea's 3-2 defeat at West Ham to move one point clear of Liverpool at the top of the table. "The most important thing is that we won. We played in a consistent way, controlled, we played a good game again." Guardiola also has a clean bill of health for his squad heading into the hectic festive period as Foden and record signing Jack Grealish returned to the starting line-up, while Kevin De Bruyne made his comeback from coronavirus as a sec-

ond-half substitute.

Foden made an immediate impact by picking out Sterling, who was given an incredible amount of space to head in his 99th Premier League goal. A slick City move soon doubled their lead as Silva fed Ilkay Gundogan and when the German's effort was saved by Daniel Bachmann, the Portuguese international followed up to slot in at the near post. Silva made clear his desire to leave City in the summer, but the 27-year-old is back to playing some of the best football of his career.

Mohamed Salah's free-scoring form for Liverpool may deny him individual awards come the end of the season, but Silva is also putting together his best goalscoring campaign in the Premier League. His second of the game was a thing of beauty as he turned onto Kyle Walker's pass and curled the ball high into Bachmann's right-hand corner. City have now won seven consecutive games with their form looking ominously like the beginning of a similar run to the 21-game winning streak that started last December and saw them streak towards the title. — AFP

Pressure piles on Puel after Rennes thrash St Etienne

PARIS: Rennes heaped more misery on floundering St Etienne yesterday whipping the Ligue 1 tailenders 5-0 and adding to the mounting pressure on their manager Claude Puel. Martin Terrier's first hat-trick at this level along with a strike by Lovro Majer and a comical own goal by Yvann Macon propelled Rennes into second spot in the table, albeit 11 points adrift of leaders Paris Saint Germain.

PSG needed an equalizer by Dutch international Georginio Wijnaldum in time added on Saturday to draw 1-1 with Lens. Defeat leaves former Leicester boss Puel's side on 12 points-with just two wins in 17 matches-and bottom due to a worse goal difference than Metz. The latter played Monaco later yesterday. "That really hurts," St Etienne midfielder Zaydou Youssouf told Prime Video. "It is a disaster, to lose 5-0 at home is inadmissible, we have no right to lose like that. "We have to show a different side to ourselves because that was rubbish."

Puel for his part bemoaned failing to take their chances during a "decent 20 minute spell" but admitted once Rennes broke the deadlock their heads went down. "We were very fragile,"



SAINT-ETIENNE: Rennes' French midfielder Baptiste Santamaria (right) fights for the ball with Saint-Etienne's French midfielder Mahdi Camara during the French L1 football match between AS Saint-Etienne and Stade Rennais FC yesterday. — AFP

said Puel, who coached Monaco to the 2000 Ligue 1 title. "They are a team packed with quality and are ruthless if you show any sign of weakness. "The group will pick itself up and fight. "We cannot afford to give up."

Rennes, though, were all smiles as they rebounded from a loss to Lille-the only one in their last 14 matches in all competitions. "The priority was to resume our positive dynamic after the defeat against Lille," said Rennes coach Bruno Genesio. "That has been achieved with a very good win and we are very happy." Rennes face a near impossible task of catching PSG, although the Qatar-owned club are hardly playing like a side filled with superstars.

Meanwhile, Georginio Wijnaldum's injury-

time equalizer allowed Paris Saint-Germain to snatch a 1-1 draw away to Lens in Ligue 1 on Saturday in a match which confirmed Lionel Messi's difficulties adapting to the physical nature of French football. Messi was felled by a strong tackle and some PSG players stopped playing in the build-up to Seko Fofana's goal which gave Lens a 62nd-minute lead in northern France. It looked as if that would be enough for Lens to claim a victory which would have been just reward for an outstanding performance that delighted the crowd of close to 37,000. However, PSG equalized in the second minute of injury time as Kylian Mbappe crossed for fellow substitute Wijnaldum to head home. — AFP

Real ease past Real Sociedad

MADRID: Real Madrid stretched their lead at the top of La Liga to eight points on Saturday with a slick 2-0 win over Real Sociedad but the victory was tarnished by an injury to Karim Benzema. Carlo Ancelotti said Benzema is likely now to miss Tuesday's Champions League game at home to Inter Milan although was hopeful the striker could return to face Atletico Madrid next weekend.

Madrid's eighth consecutive win proved even more valuable after both Atletico and Barcelona lost, with Atletico undone by Mallorca and Barca succumbing to the impressive Real Betis for their first defeat under Xavi Hernandez. Barcelona stay seventh, now a hefty 16 points behind Real Madrid, while Atletico drop to fourth, six points in front of Barca, but 10 points off the top.

"We have an advantage but the league is still open," said Ancelotti. "We can't think now about winning La Liga. I don't want anyone to think like this." Barcelona and Atletico will now have to pick themselves up ahead of crunch Champions League group games in midweek. Barca need to win away at Bayern Munich to guarantee their place in the last 16 and could be without Gavi after the midfielder

was taken to hospital with a head injury. Atletico have to beat Porto in Portugal to even have a chance of going through.

Madrid, meanwhile, face Inter in a decider for first place in Group D, almost certainly without Benzema. The 33-year-old was forced off in the first half at the Reale Arena with what appeared to be a problem around his left hamstring. Yet Madrid marched on without their star striker to register another impressive win over high-flying Real Sociedad as Vinicius Junior continued his brilliant run by scoring the opener before Luka Jovic, Benzema's replacement, added a second.

Vinicius' 12th goal of the season came in the 47th minute as he weaved in from the left and played a clever reverse pass into Jovic, who held the ball up and turned it back to Vinicius, who drove in. Jovic has endured a torrid time since joining Madrid for 60 million euros in 2019 but he could be given a run now in Benzema's absence. After teeing up Vinicius, he stooped low to head in Casemiro's flick-on from a corner for his first goal of the season. Xavi had begun with two league wins out of two but even he admitted the results against Espanyol and Villarreal owed a lot to good fortune. — AFP