

Brighton travel with renewed belief

Morata return boosts spluttering Chelsea

LONDON, Dec 25, (AFP): Alvaro Morata's return will be welcomed by Antonio Conte but the Chelsea manager knows his side face Brighton at Stamford Bridge with their Premier League title defence all but over.

Morata was forced to sit out the visit to Everton on Saturday while he served a one-match suspension and in his absence, the Blues lacked the firepower to break down Sam Allardyce's side in a goalless draw.

That led to Conte being forced to defend his decision not to replace the Spaniard with a conventional target man.

Chelsea goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois was among those who appeared to question Conte's approach after a result that, combined with Manchester City's defeat of Bournemouth, left them 16 points behind the leaders at the halfway stage of the season.



Mata

"I think we could have had more shots on target but we didn't have a big guy up front despite lots of crosses into the box," said Courtois, after a game in which Chelsea failed to turn their territorial dominance into goals.

The onus will again be on third placed Chelsea to take the initiative against a Brighton side who ended a run of seven games without a win with a timely victory over Watford.

Morata's return will undoubtedly help, but Conte's decision to overlook Michy Batshuayi until late in the game at Everton will be taken as another indicator of the coach's lack of trust in the Belgium international.

Forward reinforcements will clearly be at the top of Conte's wish-list for the January transfer window, with Chelsea still involved in three over competitions, even if their Premier League challenge has been reduced to ensuring a top four finish.

Conte had predicted this would be a testing campaign even before the start of the season because of the club's return to European football.

And the evidence of the opening half of the campaign has justified Conte's standpoint, even if his side have shown flashes of the outstanding form that took them to the title last year.

Brighton will travel to London

with renewed belief after moving towards mid-table following the win against Watford.

Pascal Gross's second half goal - Brighton's first from open play in over 10 and a half hours - secured the points at a time when it looked as though the newly promoted side were set for another afternoon of frustration.

Seagulls manager Chris Hughton admitted the result was exactly what his side needed before facing the champions. "It's one that we needed," he said. "We've got Chelsea on Boxing Day and there won't be too many that fancy us or expect us to get anything there."

Man U vs Burnley beIN SPORTS

2HD, 11HD

18:00 local

Watford vs Leicester beIN SPORTS

5HD

18:00 local

West Brom vs Everton beIN SPORTS

7HD

18:00 local

Huddersfield vs Stoke beIN SPORTS

8HD

18:00 local

Bournemouth vs Brighton beIN

SPORTS 9HD

18:00 local

Liverpool vs Swansea beIN SPORTS

2HD, 11HD

20:30 local

Newcastle vs Man City beIN

SPORTS 2HD, 11HD

22:45 local (Wednesday)

Palace vs Arsenal beIN SPORTS

2HD, 11HD

23:00 local (Thursday)

"With that being the case in particular, it was important that we picked up something and that allows us to go into that Chelsea game with a little bit more confidence.

"We need to make sure that in the games where we know we have a better chance of getting something, that we put in performances like we did today.

"It was a good all-round performance and we certainly need to take that on."

Shane Duffy sat out the Watford game while serving a one-match suspension but is expected to return to the starting line-up in place of Connor Goldson.



Leicester City's Christian Fuchs (left), and Manchester United's Romelu Lukaku battle for the ball during their English Premier League soccer match at the King Power Stadium, Leicester, England on Dec 23. (AP)

Burnley looking to respond to home defeat by Tottenham

Mata expects strong response from angry United

MANCHESTER, United Kingdom, Dec 25, (AFP): Manchester United midfielder Juan Mata admits his teammates are furious after dropping two points at Leicester City, but he hopes they can channel that frustration into a strong response against Burnley on Tuesday.

Jose Mourinho's side were stunned by a late goal from 10-man Leicester in a 2-2 draw that saw United fall a staggering 13 points behind leaders Manchester City at the halfway stage of the campaign.

Mourinho angrily spoke of missing "joke chances" and "childish" errors from his players after Saturday's draw.

But Mata, who scored both United goals in an excellent personal display, hopes his side responds positively to the frustration of the evening at the King Power Stadium.

"You have to keep going. It's Christmas time, you play every two or three days obviously," Mata said.

"Now we feel frustrated and angry but we need to keep going and, from tomorrow, rest and think about the next game and have the will of finishing the next game with a much better feeling.

"We got a point but it feels like a defeat because we were so close to winning, had chances to kill the game and they were with one less player."

Mata put United 2-1 ahead with a superbly-taken free-kick and revealed afterwards that his goal celebration was a dedication to Indian children with whom his charitable foundation Common Goal works.

"It was because when the kids from the Oscar Foundation - one of the foundations we work with - came to Old Trafford to visit me

they asked if I could do this kind of 'namaste' celebration for them," explained Mata.

"The first goal I didn't do it because we needed a second goal but for the second goal I thought of them and it was dedicated for those kids in the slums of Mumbai."

Mourinho may feel less charitable when it comes to selecting his team for the visit of Sean Dyche's side, although injuries will limit his options at Old Trafford.

Eric Bailly is a long-term absentee while Michael Carrick, Antonio Valencia and Marouane Fellaini have been ruled out of the holiday games.

Matteo Darmian missed the Leicester game, while centre-half Chris Smalling was hampered by a late injury.

At least United have history on their side in the Boxing Day fixture,

having not lost at home to Burnley since September 1962, a sequence of eight wins and five draws.

And United's run of 19 wins from the 23 Boxing Day games they have played in the Premier League era is a record for the division.

Burnley will be looking to respond to the 3-0 home defeat by Tottenham Hotspur at the weekend and will be without in-form defender James Tarkowski, who serves the second game of a three-match ban.

But Claret's manager Dyche has every reason to be pleased with the first half of the season as his team visit Old Trafford just three points from the Champions League places.

"We've got good points on the table," he said. "Whichever team we put out there, we've always been competitive."

"That's the key, even going into these games, which are tough games."

"The key is to be competitive. As long as we're doing that, and we perform, over a longer period, we'll get results. That's what we've done over the season."

"We'll have to continue to do that. It's probably the first time we've been stretched this season."

"Adding a suspension does stretch it, but I've great faith in the players."

Southampton striker Charlie Austin was Sunday banned for three matches after kicking Huddersfield goalkeeper Jonas Llossl in the face, the Football Association announced.

Llossl was left with a bloodied face and a suspected broken nose following the incident in Saturday's 1-1 draw at St Mary's.

Austin avoided punishment for the incident at the time, but the FA handed out a three-game suspension after he accepted the charge.

In-form Austin netted Southampton's opener midway through the first half against Huddersfield, but came off with a hamstring injury after the interval.

Chelsea vs Brighton beIN SPORTS

1HD

18:00 local

"Charlie Austin will be suspended for Southampton's next three matches after he was charged with violent conduct. He accepted the charge but argued the suspension was excessive. This was rejected by an Independent Regulatory Commission," the FA said.

"The striker was involved in an incident which was not seen by the match officials but caught on video during Saturday's game against Huddersfield Town."

Best of the Rest

Carvalho leaves Sheff Wed:

Sheffield Wednesday manager Carlos Carvalho left the Championship strugglers by mutual consent on Sunday.

Carvalho guided Wednesday to the play-offs in his first two seasons at Hillsborough, but a miserable seven-match winless run has cost him his job.

The Portuguese coach's exit came just hours after Wednesday chairman Dejphon Chansiri released a statement of support after fans chanted for Carvalho's dismissal in the wake of Saturday's 2-1 home defeat to Middlesbrough.

Thai businessman Chansiri changed his tune less than 24 hours later, saying: "Both parties believe the time is right to go our separate ways."

"I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Carlos for the time, effort and commitment he has given Sheffield Wednesday over the last two and a half years."

"I maintain a huge amount of respect for Carlos as a coach and as a

person and he will always be welcome at Hillsborough.

"I wish him every success in the future." (AFP)

Sydney FC to end 2017 on top:

Defending champion Sydney FC will end the year atop the A-League after beating last-placed Wellington 4-1 on Saturday.

A hat trick by Brazil striker Bobo, who also set up a goal for Adrian Mierzejewski, gave Sydney its 10th win in 12 games and lifted it five points clear of Newcastle with one round remaining before the end of 2017.

Newcastle laid down the gauntlet to Sydney with a 4-0 win over the troubled Western Sydney Wanderers on Friday.

Western Sydney assistant coach, former Socceroo Hayden Foxe resigned after the loss which continued the troubled tenure of coach Josep Gombau. (AP)

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