

Soccer English Premier League

Impressive Leicester pile misery on Chelsea

Champions a shadow of the side they were as Leicester move back to top of the table
Superbly taken goals from Vardy and Mahrez seal another deserved victory

Leicester 2
Vardy 34, Mahrez 48
Chelsea 1
Remy 77

DANIEL TAYLOR
at King Power Stadium

If anyone wanted evidence of what a wild and eccentric season this has become, it came during those moments when Leicester City – the team, lest it be forgotten, that began the season as 2,000-1 outsiders to win the title – started showboating against the side that can still call themselves Premier League champions but are hovering only a point above the relegation zone.

Wes Morgan shimmied with the ball and eluded a couple of challenges. Riyad Mahrez went looking for nutmegs. Jamie Vardy wanted to take on everyone and Leicester, almost implausibly, are back on top of the league, enjoying the view.

They were brilliant, once again, and if the chasing pack are underestimating Claudio Ranieri's team the story of this match should remove any complacency. Chelsea, in turn, have now lost five of their last seven league fixtures, leaving them fifth from bottom and bringing yet more scrutiny on their increasingly beleaguered man-

er. José Mourinho substituted his captain, John Terry, and switched to an experimental three-man defence shortly after Mahrez had made it 2-0 and, if nothing else, he can be mildly encouraged by the way his team fought to save themselves during the final exchanges.

Ultimately, though, this was another chastening experience for Mourinho in a season full of them. Chelsea also lost Eden Hazard to a first-half injury and there is now a 22-point swing between these sides since the start of April. Jamie Vardy added another goal to his collection and Leicester played with enough vibrancy to merit another breathless victory.

Relegation worries

The indignities for Chelsea these days not only stretch to opposition fans singing about their relegation worries but, in Leicester's case, a lacerating putdown of "Jamie Vardy, he's scored more than you". It was not strictly true – though not way out, at 18-15 – but the man who has just won back-to-back Premier League player-of-the-month awards looked like he wanted to ensure there was no time for pedantry.

Vardy's speed and directness were prominent features from the start. Ramires is no slouch but found himself being chased down early on. When Thibaut Courtois and Kurt Zouma al-



Chelsea goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois is beaten as Riyad Mahrez scores Leicester's second goal. PHOTOGRAPH: CARL RECINE/REUTERS

most got in a tangle shortly afterwards it was because Vardy was loitering with intent. Vardy was always on the move, ensuring he was an influence on the match, and his goal was another demonstration of his understanding with Riyad Mahrez. The cross came from the right, clipped over with the lovely, soft touch that has made Mahrez arguably the most effective wide player in the league. Vardy had already been involved in the build-up and as the ball was moved out to the wing via Leonardo Ulloa he was already getting into position, anticipating the cross and then catching out Terry and Zouma

with his superior movement. Zouma hesitated for a split second and Vardy was suddenly clear in the six-yard area, sending his volley past Courtois with the confidence of a man who expects to score.

Hazard injury

Chelsea's position had been weakened shortly beforehand when Vardy, trying to win the ball in midfield, banged into Hazard twice in quick succession and the second of those challenges jarred the Belgian so badly the pain flashed across his face. Chelsea's medical staff sprayed Hazard's lower back and hip but when it became obvious he needed to come off Mourinho initially instructed him to stay on while Pedro took off his tracksuit to warm up. Within moments the ball was played to Hazard but he was in

How they stand

Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Leicester City	16	10	5	1	34	22	35
Arsenal	16	10	3	3	29	13	33
Manchester City	16	10	2	4	32	17	32
Manchester Utd	16	8	5	3	21	12	29
Tottenham	16	8	2	6	26	14	26
Crystal Palace	16	8	2	6	21	15	26
Watford	16	7	4	5	18	16	25
West Ham Utd	16	6	4	25	21	24	24
Liverpool	16	6	4	20	19	24	24
Everton	16	5	8	3	29	21	23
Stoke City	16	5	5	5	13	14	23
Southampton	16	5	6	5	13	21	21
West Brom	16	5	5	6	16	21	20
AFC Bournemouth	16	4	4	8	20	31	16
Newcastle Utd	16	4	4	8	18	31	16
Chelsea	16	4	3	9	18	26	15
Swansea City	16	3	5	8	15	24	14
Norwich City	16	3	5	8	18	28	14
Sunderland	16	3	3	10	17	30	12
Aston Villa	16	1	3	12	13	30	6

so much discomfort he could barely move. Leicester had lost one of their own key players by the stage because of a hamstring injury that meant Danny Drink-

water being replaced by Andy King after 16 minutes. Yet there was a streak of confidence running through Ranieri's team, perhaps encapsulated by that moment just before half-time when Mahrez slipped the ball through Ramires's legs.

Three minutes into the second half, there was another glorious demonstration of Mahrez's gifts but this time with even greater effect. Mahrez was on the right-hand side of the penalty area when Marc Albrighton's long, crossfield pass picked him out.

His control and footwork teased and tormented César Azpilicueta. The angle was tight but Mahrez applied just the right mix of curl and pace and, with an elegant swish of his left foot, the ball curled around Azpilicueta and high into the far corner. A lot will be made of Terry's

withdrawal but Mourinho's change improved his team. For the first time in the match, Chelsea started to play with width and penetration.

Willian, in particular, played with great spirit and in the space of 10 minutes Chelsea created more chances than the rest of the match put together. Pedro crossed from the left found Remy whose close-range header ensured it would be a nerve-shredding finale.

Attendance: 32,054
Referee: Mark Clattenburg (Tyne & Wear).

Soccer

Blatter and Platini likely to escape life bans

Sepp Blatter and Michel Platini are likely to escape lifetime bans for corruption but investigators expect the pair to receive lengthy suspensions of at least seven years when their hearings take place this week, according to insiders.

Blatter and Platini will have disciplinary hearings before Fifa ethics judge Hans-Joachim Eckert in Zurich on Thursday and Friday, over a €1.85 million payment made to Platini by Fifa in 2011 and signed off by Blatter.

Outgoing Fifa president Blatter and Uefa president Platini face charges including corruption, conflict of interest and non-cooperation. Sources with knowledge of the case say that it will be difficult to prove corruption, which carries a lifetime ban, but believe there is clear evidence of a conflict of interest in the payment being made.

Football politics

That should carry a ban of at least seven years, but it is likely any suspension for wrongdoing will effectively end their careers in football politics.

Blatter's case will be heard on Thursday with Platini's following on Friday. A decision is expected to be announced by Monday next week.

The two million Swiss franc payment was made to Platini in February 2011. The Frenchman and Blatter say the payment was honouring an agreement made in 1998 for work carried out between 1998 and 2002 when Platini worked as a technical advisor for the Fifa president. However, the payment was not part of Platini's written contract – they have insisted that it was an oral agreement which is illegal under Swiss law.

The timing of the payment has raised eyebrows, however – it took place nine years after Platini had stopped working for Fifa, and was made while Blatter was seeking support for a fourth term as president. Several weeks after the payment was made, Platini and Uefa's executive committee endorsed his candidacy.

Soccer

round-up

Results
English Premier League – Leicester City 2 Chelsea 1.
Italian Serie A – Lazio 1 Sampdoria 1.
English League – Championship: Blackburn Rovers 0 Nottm Forest 0.
Irish League – Portadown 5 Glentoran 3.
Scottish Cup – Third round: Wick Academy 1 Linlithgow F.
Fixtures
(7.45 unless stated)
English FA Cup – Second round replays: Hartlepool v Salford City; Scunthorpe v Leyton Orient; Shrewsbury v Grimsby; Walsall v Chesterfield.
English League Championship: Cardiff City v Brentford; Charlton Ath v Bolton Wanderers; Derby Cov v Bristol City; Fulham v Ipswich Town; Huddersfield v Rotherham Utd; Middlesbrough v Burnley; Milton Keynes Dons v Sheffield Wed; Preston NE v Birmingham City; QPR v Brighton.
League Two: Wycombe v Notts County.
Scottish League Two: Arbroath v Berwick; Montrose v Annan Athletic.
Irish League Cup – Semi-finals: Ards v Coleraine; Warrenpoint Town v Cliftonville.
Spanish Copa del Rey – Last 32, second legs: Deportivo la Coruna v UE Llagostera (7.0); Sporting Gijon v Real Betis (7.0); Espanyol v Levante (8.0); Sevilla v UD Logrones (8.0).
Italian Cup – Last 16: Genoa v Alessandria (6.15); Inter Milan v Cagliari (8.0).

Gaelic Games News

O'Sullivan looking forward to a return to competitive action

JOHN O'SULLIVAN

There's a bit of a difference between the All-Ireland football final and the opening stages of the O'Byrne Cup but Cian O'Sullivan is looking to bridge that exact playing gap in hopefully resuming his intercounty career in early January.

Looking fit and tanned having just returned from Dublin's team holiday in Thailand, he braved the wind and rain by the Martello tower in Sandymount, to help launch GOAL's Christmas miles (www.goalglobal.org) which will number over 130 events in this their 34th year.

O'Sullivan defied a hamstring injury to help the Dubs beat Kerry in September and relishes a return to competitive fare. "We are all looking forward to getting back into training and kicking off with the year with the O'Byrne Cup."

"That is the enjoyable part. It is going to be a tall order; we set our sights on the O'Byrne Cup, the league and the championship. We had our team holiday there and we will have our

medal presentation on Friday, and that really is the last of it.

"We will meet up over the next couple of weeks and set out the stall for New Year. The O'Byrne Cup is coming now on January 3rd, and we have the Blue Stars game on the January 2nd. That's when it really kicks off again, start playing games again. I think all the



Cian O'Sullivan: 'Looking forward to getting back training'

lads are looking forward to getting back into the mix and getting training again.

"The hamstring is fully healed at this stage," he added although he pointed out he hadn't fully tested it out from a competitive perspective, just doing some training with the club.

"I'm hoping to get a good block of pre-hab in the first couple of weeks of training. I'll

just see how the leg responds to that and see how the body is feeling.

"I'm just looking forward to getting back training and playing games is what you want to do. So hopefully I'll be involved for the first couple."

Impending retirements

He hadn't heard of any impending retirements within Jim Gavin's squad, pointing out that they had a pretty clean bill of health with Eoghan O'Gara on course to return from his cruciate knee injury in March or early April.

When asked about the prospect of his Kilmacud Crokes club-mate Paul Mannion re-joining the Dublin squad he ventured: "I hope so. He's back doing his exams in UCD at the moment. He's playing with the club, playing very well. He was over in Chicago for the summer and playing ball over there."

"Yeah, it would be great to see him back if he does; he's an incredible talent. But you know that's up to the management."

Ó Fearghail: U-21 grade likely to remain

EAMON DONOGHUE

GAA president Aogán Ó Fearghail has said the likelihood of the U-21 competition being discontinued in order to battle burnout now appears very slim.

The GAA last month published a raft of proposals that included scrapping the All-Ireland U-21 Football Championships and changing the inter-county minor grade to under-17, as part of a discussion paper on player burnout.

While the Cavan native is glad the topic is now at least being discussed, the proposal to scrap the U-21 grade has not proved a popular one.

"We've been to the four provinces. There has been a positive discussion. At least now people are thinking of player burn-out. Now addressing issues of fixtures, that clubs need more space," said Ó Fearghail talking in Austin, Texas, at the Opel GAA/GPA All Stars trip.

"There has been a positive reaction in general to the document. I'd have to take note that there is a strong feeling that the U-21 competition shouldn't go. I have to be honest and admit

that."

The proposed scrapping of the under-21 championship had been in football, and not in hurling, with the latter being played in the summer months and only requiring 11 games to complete.

The football equivalent is played in the spring, when the Allianz League and university competitions are in full flow.

Major issue

"I'm not so sure it can be retained in its current format, maybe a different time of year. But that is something that both Padraic (Duffy) and I will have to review. We have to take on board the views of counties and I'd say a good number of them wouldn't like to see the under-21 championship disappear."

"That's the major issue. The other issue that I have a strong view on, I feel a lot for the international units. I said this before. When Britain said to me that they wouldn't like to see the junior championship go because they are a part of it, I agree with them. I think they're right. The counties haven't a big interest in junior but we

could review that, make it a genuine junior championship for 10 or 11 of the weaker counties. With the same standard. At the moment anyone can play junior. It could be the second 15 or it could be the junior clubs. Ulster took the view a few years ago that they don't even run it."

Another of the 11 proposals was to discontinue the All-Ireland junior football and inter-

again. "Other than that, I think the rest of the discussion paper proposals will go to central council and Congress."

Any contact

Meanwhile, Ó Fearghail said there's yet to be any contact with the UFC over a possible title defence fight for Conor McGregor in Croke Park. "He won a fight last night. I'm not aware of any application. Croke Park has to be open for our own sports first but we're also open for business. If an application comes in for anything, it's looked at. If any application (for McGregor) came in, it would be looked at but I'm not aware of any application."

Pressed further on whether or not he felt the violent nature of the mixed martial arts sport would be something the GAA would like to be linked with, he added:

"I think it would be unfair, unfair of anyone to make that comment about another sport. I don't think, I wouldn't want to cast an aspersions on the players or the followers of any sport really. I don't think that would be a wise thing to do."



Aogán Ó Fearghail: Little chance of U-21 competition being discontinued

mediate hurling championships, which along with the proposal on the Under-21 competition has proved largely unpopular and will hence he says have to be readdressed.

"We'll have to re-examine our proposal on that. It should be kept for Britain and the weaker counties."

"The U-21 championship, we'll have to review that. We'll have to think that through

Briefs

Rugby

England coach Jones clears out Lancaster's backroom team

All three of former England coach Stuart Lancaster's assistants have been released by England as new boss Eddie Jones sets about putting his own team in place, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) said yesterday.

The RFU announced that Graham Rowntree, Andy Farrell and Mike Catt would all leave, following Lancaster who left "by mutual consent" last month in the wake of England's pool-stage exit of the Rugby World Cup. All three signed six-year contracts, along with Lancaster, just over a year ago.

"Having met with all of the coaches to talk through the future direction, we felt it was the right time to make

changes," Jones said in a statement.

"They are all experienced guys and have contributed greatly to this England team over recent years and I know everyone at the Union is appreciative of their hard work and commitment."

Jones has yet to announce any replacements but former England captain Steve Borthwick, who worked as a forwards coach with the Australian when he was in charge of Japan, and Saracens defence coach Paul Gustard are expected to join him.

England's first game under Jones is away to Scotland in the Six Nations on February 6th.

Soccer

Mignolet close to agreeing new contract

Simon Mignolet is close to signing a new contract at Liverpool, with negotiations over extending his Anfield career set to be concluded before the end of the month.

The Liverpool goalkeeper has attracted criticism for several errors this season but Jurgen Klopp has backed the Belgium international, and insisted he has no plans to move for a new Nol in January. That stance is likely to be reinforced by a new contract for the 27-year-old.

Mignolet has two and a half years left on the five-year contract he signed in 2013 but Liverpool are willing to raise his \$60,000-a-week deal.

Sports awards

Serena Williams named SI's Sportsperson of the Year

Serena Williams was named Sports Illustrated's Sportsperson of the Year yesterday. The 34-year-old American is the first female athlete honoured on her own by the famous sports magazine in more than 30 years.

Williams won three Grand Slam events – Australian Open, French Open and Wimbledon – en route to a 53-3 record and her seventh WTA Player of the Year award. She now has 21 career Grand Slam titles, one behind Steffi Graf.

"This year was spectacular," Serena Williams said in a statement. "For Sports Illustrated to recognise my hard work, dedication and sheer determination with



Serena Williams: won three Grand Slam events

this award gives me hope to continue on and do better. As I always say, it takes a village – not just one person. This is not just an accomplishment for me, but for my whole team and all my fans. I am beyond honored."

Williams was ranked No. 1 throughout 2015 and won a WTA-high five titles.

Motor Racing

Alfa Romeo could return to Formula 1

Fiat Chrysler could bring the Alfa Romeo brand back to Formula One as a competitor to Ferrari, chief executive Sergio Marchionne said yesterday.

"It's incredible how the Alfa marque remains in people's hearts," Marchionne, who is also Ferrari president, told reporters in an end-of-season news conference at the Italian team's Maranello headquarters.

"For that very reason we are thinking about bringing it back, as our competitor, to racing, to Formula One. It's important for Alfa to return."

Basketball

NBA referee Bill Kennedy comes out as gay after confrontation

One of the NBA's top referees has come out as gay.

Bill Kennedy, an 18-year veteran who has refereed more than a thousand regular-season games and five NBA finals contests, made the revelation on Sunday night.

"I am proud to be an NBA referee and I am proud to be a gay man," Kennedy said. "I am following in the footsteps of others who have self-identified in the hopes that will send a message to young men and women in sports that you must allow no one to make you feel ashamed of who you are."

Kennedy's announcement came less than two weeks after the NBA suspended



Bill Kennedy: suffered verbal abuse from a player

Sacramento Kings point guard Rajon Rondo one game without pay for "directing a derogatory and offensive term towards a game official".

The incident occurred after Kennedy ejected Rondo during a game between the Kings and Boston Celtics in Mexico on December 3rd.