

Rafa forced on to the back foot

Stoke City 0 Liverpool 0

Neil Faskin at the Britannia Stadium

LIVERPOOL manager Rafael Benitez insisted his outburst against Sir Alex Ferguson had no impact on his players after this potentially costly draw.

The Barclays Premier League leaders missed an opportunity to go six points clear at the top ahead of today's clash at Old Trafford between fellow title hopefuls Manchester United and Chelsea.

Benitez launched a surprising tirade against United manager Ferguson in his pre-match press conference on Friday, railing at what he sees as the Scot's transgressions against the Football Association's Respect campaign towards officials and his complaints about the Premier League fixture list. After a goalless 90 minutes at the Britannia Stadium though, Benitez stressed the game had not been affected by his outburst.

"I don't think so," the Spaniard said when asked if the comments had been a distraction. He added: "When you are top you want to win, it doesn't matter which game it is. Today we needed to win, with or without the press conference."

"After 22 years with Ferguson in charge it could have been any moment (to bring it up) so why not the other day? I think it was the right moment to say, 'That's it, now we will talk about everything'. I was thinking about defending my team. I thought 'enough is enough' and that's it."

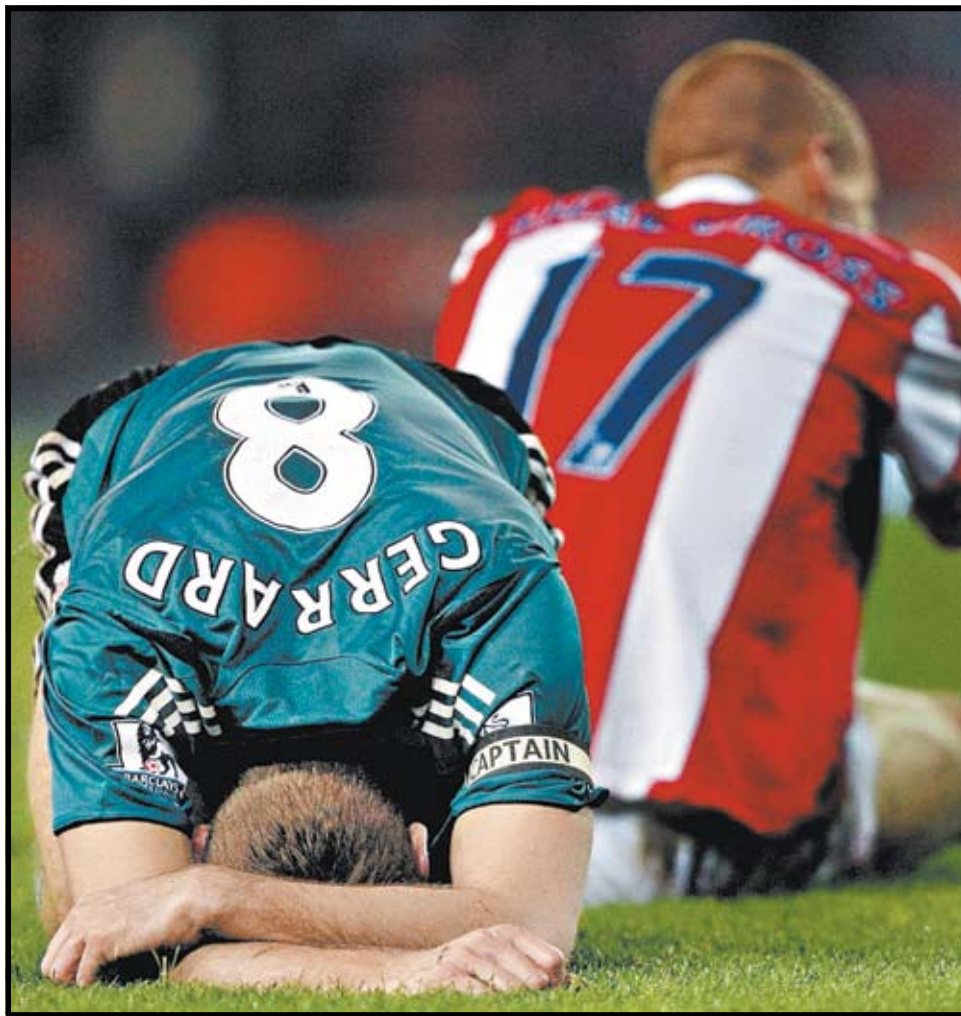
Liverpool stretched their lead to four points with the draw, but Chelsea could trim that down to one today.

United, meanwhile, go into that encounter eight points behind their north-west rivals but armed with three games in hand.

Yesterday, Argentina coach Diego Maradona was guest of honour at the Britannia Stadium, no doubt keen to see at first hand visiting midfielder Javier Mascherano, his national team captain, but he would have found it almost as hard going as did Liverpool.

In the eighth minute Dirk Kuyt sent a free header wide of the post following a cross from Albert Riera.

Stoke hit back and should have taken the lead five minutes later when Liverpool failed to clear a high, hopeful ball from Amdy Faye.



Steven Gerrard came close for Liverpool at the death Photograph: Darren Staples/Reuters

Rory Delap then found himself clear on goal inside the six-yard area but only succeeded in blasting a shot against the underside of the crossbar before Richard Cresswell failed to take advantage of the rebound.

Stoke had the ball in the net in the 31st minute when Ryan Shawcross got on the end of a ball from Matthew Etherington, only for his effort to be ruled offside.

The home side continued to press and, after the restart a poor clearance from Jose Reina put Liverpool in danger. Dave Kitson latched on to the ball and skipped away from

the goalkeeper but his effort from an acute angle ended in the side-netting.

Benitez then decided to shake things up in the 60th minute and brought on Fernando Torres for Riera in a bid to beef up the attack.

Of more concern to the Liverpool manager, though, will have been the number of high balls Stoke were winning.

Lucas squandered a great chance for the visitors in the 68th minute when he failed to connect properly with a header on goal, before, at the other end, Kitson headed over following a throw-in from Delap.

Liverpool almost took the lead in the 85th minute but Gerrard's free-kick rattled the crossbar, and on the stroke of full-time another effort from Benitez's captain came off the post.

"We're not happy but it was a difficult game. We could have won at the end," the Spaniard said afterwards. "It's better than losing. Stoke is a very difficult team to play against so every throw-in, free-kick and corner is a problem."

When pressed on how the result affected the title race, he added: "I think we are at the top of the table so we are still in a very good position."

ROUND-UP

NICKLAS Bendtner's late winner spared Arsenal's blushes as they beat Bolton 1-0 at home to avoid losing further ground in the race for Champions League qualification.

After Aston Villa's 2-1 victory over West Brom at lunchtime, the pressure was on Arsenal. They made the breakthrough with seven minutes to go, substitute Bendtner sliding in to convert Robin Van Persie's low centre.

Villa's victory saw them maintain a three-point lead over Arsenal. Curtis Davies headed the opening goal before Gabriel Agbonlahor's shot was put into the net by Albion goalkeeper Scott Carson. James Morrison's goal gave West Brom hope but an equaliser was not forthcoming.

Sunderland striker Kenwyne Jones secured his side a 1-1 draw in the north-east derby at Middlesbrough.

Wantaway winger Stuart Downing created Middlesbrough's goal before the break when he centred for Afonso Alves to fire home. However Jones equalised eight minutes from time.

Everton enjoyed a routine 2-0 win at home to Hull.

Marouane Fellaini headed home Leighton Baines' left-wing cross midway through the first half before Mikel Arteta added a second with a fierce free-kick.

Andy Carroll headed a late equaliser as Newcastle drew 2-2 with West Ham.

Michael Owen's stylish 19th-minute opener gave Newcastle the lead but Craig Bellamy levelled matters.

Carlton Cole put the visitors 2-1 up but Carroll headed home Damien Duff's cross to secure a point.

The freezing temperatures saw Fulham v Blackburn and Portsmouth v Manchester City postponed.

Where football really is a matter of life and death

THE INSIDER ANDREW JENNINGS



THE career with the best long-term prospects in Balkan football isn't player, coach or owner. It's funeral director. In some Eastern European countries and clubs, say farewell to your loved ones before taking the top job and give your measurements to the local morticians and embalmers.

If you want to buy into a local club, steer clear of Bulgaria's Slavia FC. A bomb put a lift into orbit at the holding company's offices. Scoreline:

one director and three bodyguards deceased. Eight months later another director, this time with five bodyguards, terminated by low-flying lead in the club's grounds. Four weeks on, another director took a bullet in the heart.

All this and more has come to light in a remarkable investigation by a cross-border group of reporters in Eastern Europe who've uncovered a world of untouchable football gangsters. Assassinations, frauds, tax dodging, thieving, money-laundering, match-fixing, organised crime controlling the game – that's everyday life in some clubs and leagues.

Another club much loved by the Bulgarian funeral industry is Lokomotiv of Plovdiv. Former wrestler George Kalapatirov got control of the club – but not for long. A bullet ended his reign and George Prodanov took over. When the cops extracted the remains of this George from his car they found the brake hoses had been severed.

All was quiet for three years – then the gunfire resumed. Another director took a single hit from a Kalashnikov. Seven remarkable death-free years

followed and then 2005 saw three more directors assassinated.

In Bosnia they kill less and steal a lot more. Around £1 million has gone missing that the national association should have paid in taxes. The general secretary and the treasurer are charged with abuse of office. When they weren't giving each other interest-free loans, they lost the documents explaining what happened to another £250,000.

The make-up of the national association's executive committee helps explain. One member was convicted of robbing and shooting a man who resisted extortion threats. Another was arrested last year on organised crime charges while a third denies allegations of drug trafficking.

Bosnia's top league reflects all that's wrong with the officials. Endemic match-fixing means that during the 2007-8 season only 10% of visiting teams won. In England and Germany the figure is 27% and in Spain 29%.

The leading Sarajevo supporters club, the Fanaticos, have called for Fifa and Uefa to intervene. Rangers defender Sasa Papac has turned his back on the national association and withdrawn from international football.

3 directors assassinated at Slavia FC

£1.25m missing from Bosnian FA's accounts

6 directors assassinated at Plovdiv

160 Polish officials charged with match-fixing

Two clubs in Ukraine have been labelled "headquarters for organised crime gangs" by police. A raid on Zakarpattya's offices saw 36 armed men arrested.

The report reveals many famous names of players and agents plus obscure off-shore companies from the Caribbean to Luxembourg, Dublin, Andorra and Gibraltar that stink of tax evasion and other scams.

The man you might expect to wave Uefa's big stick at these rogues is president Michel Platini. But when asked about the 160 Polish officials charged with match-fixing, Platini said: "I am neither a judge, nor a policeman," adding that national problems should be solved at home.

When the Polish government did just that in October, suspending the national association, Platini and Blatter backed the shamed officials and threatened Polish football with suspension. Electoral support for Blatter and Platini remains rock-solid in Eastern Europe.

The investigation was assisted by the UN Democracy Fund. The report can be found at www.reportingproject.net