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Man City 4 Aston Villa 1: Who needs Tevez with Super Mario in top form?

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'Carlos who?' City manager Roberto Mancini was asked when he sat down to talk about yesterday's inspirational performance from a 'weakened' team.

The strength in depth that City enjoy took on almost frightening proportions as they reached the Barclays Premier League summit with consummate ease.



Over and out: Balotelli scored a fine bicycle kick to open the scoring for Man City at Etihad Stadium



Cheer up, Mario: Balotelli is mobbed by Lescott and Kompany after scoring City's first goal against Aston Villa

MATCH FACTS

Man City: Hart, Richards (K Toure,66) Lescott, Kompany, Clichy, De Jong, Barry, Milner, Johnson (Hargreaves, 77), Toure Yaya (Silva, 66), Balotelli. **Subs not used:** Pantilimon, Dzeko, Kolarov, Nasri

Goals: Balotelli, 28, A Johnson, 47, Kompany, 52, Milner, 71

Aston Villa: Given, Hutton, Dunne, Clark, Warnock, Delph (Albrighton, 76), Petrov, Ireland (N'Zogbia, 55), Heskey (Bannan, 63), Agbonlahor, Bent.

Subs not used: Guzan, Cuellar, Weimann, Herd.

Goal: Warnock, 65

Referee: Anthony Taylor.

No Sergio Aguero, David Silva rested for an hour, Samir Nasri and Edin Dzeko for longer still. And then, of course, there was the absence of the unspeakable one.

Absurdly, the smiling Mancini was forced to remind his audience that he was still forbidden from uttering the name Tevez. Even so, he seemed to appreciate the 'Carlos who?' sentiment.

And he readily embraced the contrast between the maverick Mario Balotelli, whose spectacular overhead goal set the ball rolling yesterday, and the destructively obstinate Tevez.

Both have been left on the bench in recent times, decisions by Mancini that have been the making of one and the breaking of the other. Unlike the Argentine, Super Mario has emerged with credit.

Mancini said: 'It is difficult for any player to stay on the bench and watch others score goals, but after four or five times Mario understood. Now he has done well for 40 or 50 days.'



On target: Johnson scores Man City's second goal shortly after the interval

Balotelli took centre stage in the 28th minute and played both hero and villain almost in the same instant. Villa striker Darren Bent accidentally helped on Adam Johnson's corner, which then hit a surprised Micah Richards.

Seizing control of this chaotic situation in the blink of an eye, Balotelli conjured a piece of spontaneous magic to send his overhead kick between Stephen Warnock and Shay Given on Villa's line.



Heads, you win: Kompany leaps above Darren Bent to net the home side's third goal with 52 minutes gone

He did not want to celebrate with his team-mates, because moments earlier he had been insulted by Villa fans while stumbling among photographers behind the goal.

The Midlands supporters had reacted furiously when Balotelli had raised a finger to his lips to silence them.

So you can imagine their fury when he broke free of congratulatory hugs in order to pose in front of the Villa fans again, a happy and defiant heartbreaker. And there was much worse to come for those he teased.



Over the line: James Milner scored against his former club to give City their fourth goal of the day

Seconds after Emile Heskey saw his 47th-minute header blocked by desperate defenders, Yaya Toure launched a pass at Johnson and Warnock came up short. England winger Johnson wasted no time in side-footing City's second with great composure and five minutes later another Johnson corner found the head of Vincent Kompany for a third.

'It doesn't matter whether you are playing City or an amateur team if you cannot defend set-pieces,' Villa manager Alex McLeish pointed out. 'I'm extremely disappointed and needless to say we will be out on the training ground in the coming week, trying to put it right.'

Villa did get one thing right, when Warnock cracked in a consolation off the underside of the crossbar, but City were out of sight again when Johnson fed Gareth Barry and James Milner rounded off the move with a sizzling finish.

Now the dream of a League title might just turn to reality, especially if City get something at Old Trafford next weekend.



Clash of heads: City defender Micah Richards is treated for a head injury

First, there is the small matter of Villarreal in the Champions League on Tuesday. City are finally leading the sort of life neighbours United have enjoyed for years.

'Sir Alex Ferguson has more experience than me and he has a fantastic team,' said Mancini with a humility that was almost convincing. But when asked if his own team were now earning extra respect across the way here in Manchester, he replied. 'I hope.'

And he concluded. 'We should be happy to go to Old Trafford on top. But we have played only eight games, the important thing is to stay there and we need to keep fighting if we are going to do that. And we need to improve more.'

But those who watched this richly entertaining performance might just struggle to see how City could have played any better.

There can be no way back for Tevez. But a more interesting question remains: is there a way back into the Premier League title race for United if City win next Sunday?

Such a thought would have been considered outrageous not long ago. But Ferguson is now the man who dare not lose the Manchester derby, not Mancini.

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