



LONDON: Arsenal's Danny Welbeck (center) celebrates with teammates in this file photo. —AP

## ARSENAL, SOUTHAMPTON LAUNCH TOP-FOUR TUSSLE

**SOUTHAMPTON:** Arsenal will hope to begin the new year by reclaiming the top-four position in the Premier League table that has traditionally been theirs.

Arsene Wenger's side travel to Southampton on New Year's Day in the knowledge that victory at St Mary's will see them leapfrog their hosts into the Champions League places.

But Southampton, who drew 1-1 with leaders Chelsea on Sunday, will be determined to defend their position and Wenger has admitted he had not foreseen 2014 ending with the south-coast club so high in the standings.

That was mainly because Ronald Koeman, installed as manager during the close season, had to make a series of buys to replace a host of departed stars.

No fewer than five players who had helped fire Southampton to a surprise eighth-place finish left the club, but new-

comers Sadio Mane, Graziano Pelle and Dusan Tadic have all made instant impacts.

"He has done a remarkable job," Wenger said of former Netherlands star Koeman, who left Feyenoord to take over from Mauricio Pochettino. "He has done very well and bought very well. He gets them to play very good football."

"They were the surprise because there was a big exodus there at the end of the season last year. They did very well, unexpectedly, because they've benefited from the stability at the back and in midfield from last year. "They added Mane, Pelle and Tadic, who have done very well very quickly. That's why they are where they are."

Arsenal recorded victories over fellow London clubs Queens Park Rangers and West Ham United over the festive period, but will take on Southampton without the suspended Olivier Giroud, who was sent off against QPR. And with England striker Danny

Welbeck a doubt because of a groin problem, little-used Germany forward Lukas Podolski may get a rare run-out.

Podolski has been linked with a move to Inter Milan once the January transfer window opens, but Wenger has declared that an Italian exit is not an option for the World Cup-winner.

"He is a player of Arsenal Football Club and I want him to stay," he said. "I hope that he will still be an Arsenal player at the end of January. Inter? That is a joke. Inter is not serious."

Midfielder Aaron Ramsey remains sidelined by injury, but former Saints starlet Theo Walcott could feature, although he is not yet match fit following a lengthy absence due to a serious knee injury. "Walcott is involved because he was already in the squad," Wenger said. "Of course I judge him a bit short on the competition front, but on the fitness front he is ready to play."

Southampton have selection dilemmas of their own as defensive midfielder Morgan Schneiderlin, a player thought to be on Wenger's radar, is suspended following his dismissal in the Chelsea match for two bookable offences.

That will put the onus on Victor Wanyama to protect the defence and the Kenya international believes that Southampton cannot expect any of their opponents to underestimate them anymore.

"Now everyone knows what we can do," said the former Celtic player, whose side have gone three league games without defeat following a sticky patch in late-November and early-December. "At the beginning, nobody gave us a chance. We deserved three points against Chelsea and were unlucky. There was a foul before they got their goal. "We are at home so we need to have the same spirit and hopefully we can get a good result." —AFP

## EVERTON FACE GOALKEEPER DILEMMA

**LONDON:** Everton's bid to arrest an alarming run of form has been hit by an injury to goalkeeper Tim Howard ahead of today's trip to Hull City in the Premier League.

Howard will be out for up to six weeks after damaging his calf in the 1-0 Boxing Day defeat by Stoke City, leaving Everton with only 24-year-old Joel Robles who has made only 11 top-flight starts-as back-up. Aside from the Spaniard, the only other goalkeepers on Everton's books are 18-year-olds Jindrich Stanek and Russell Griffiths, and manager Roberto Martinez has hinted the club may be forced to bring in reinforcements.

"That is something we are going to assess," Martinez said. "Joel had his first start in the league and that was a great way of him having an introduction."

"We've just found out about Tim so we're going to make a decision. We only have Russell and Jindrich, so we need to assess that over the next few days."

Christmas defeats against Stoke and Newcastle United have left Everton on a run of six defeats from their last eight games in all competitions and with just one victory from their last seven league matches. The visit to Hull presents an opportunity to rectify that run, although Everton's injury problems extend beyond the goalkeeper position.

England defenders Phil Jagielka and John Stones are expected to be missing with ankle injuries, while full-back Tony Hibbert is two weeks from match fitness.

Leon Osman, another potential defensive stand-in, has a split tendon in his foot, with no return date currently scheduled, while midfielders Darron Gibson and Steven Pienaar also remain on the long-term injured list. There is even a doubt for Thursday over the fitness of influential midfielder James McCarthy. "At the moment, we're a little bit weak and we need to get stronger," said Martinez.

"When you don't get results, you are going to get a lot of doubts and a lot of opinions from outside. Now our focus has to be very narrow, on a positive performance and result from the Hull game."

Hull's preparations for the match have been carried out amid speculation surrounding their manager, Steve Bruce. Bruce has been linked with a move to take over as manager of Newcastle United, with Alan Pardew expected to be named Crystal Palace manager.

Bruce, who turned 54 yesterday, supported Newcastle as a boy and has previously expressed regret at rejecting the chance to manage the club in 2004. But his immediate priority is to lift his current team's morale after their defeat at Leicester City on Sunday.

The Tigers had ended a run of 10 matches without a win by beating Sunderland 3-1 on Boxing Day, but were brought back down to earth at the KC Stadium as Leicester snatched a 1-0 victory.

"They are deflated," said Bruce, whose side have won only once at home this season. "If you get beaten and deserve to, then fine. But when you don't deserve it, of course it leaves a bad taste."

"For all the good work at Sunderland, it has unravelled a bit. That is the way this league works and we have to stay with it. We have a big game on Thursday and we go again."

Bruce will be without midfielders Tom Huddlestone and Stephen Quinn, who are both suspended, but defender James Chester will return, having served a one-match ban.

Andy Robertson could also return after suffering with a knee problem, but Mohamed Diame and Michael Dawson remain sidelined. —AFP

## CELTIC AIM TO GET BACK TO WINNING WAYS

**GLASGOW:** Celtic striker Leigh Griffiths says his side need to take their chances as they aim to get back to winning ways against Partick Thistle in the Glasgow derby today.

After an eight-match winning run, the Hoops have failed to record a victory in their past two matches following a defeat to Dundee United and Sunday's frustrating goalless draw at home to bottom of the table Ross County. The Glasgow giants passed up a host of chances in both matches and Griffiths is backing the club's strikers to find their form as they aim to remedy their failings against Thistle.

"We dominated the game and when we are dominant like that we need to win," Griffiths said of the draw with Ross County. "They came here to frustrate us and did that, but we will bounce back and will look forward to Partick Thistle away. "We can't keep controlling games and not win them but we are back in training and looking forward to today."

"We were just unlucky on Saturday - Callum McGregor had the shot that came off the bar and John Guidetti was in the right place at the right time, but he just put the ball wide when nine times out of 10 he would score, so hopefully on Thursday we can put things right."

"It's a Glasgow derby and Partick will be up for it and so will we. We will take a massive travelling support and hopefully we can get the right result."

Elsewhere today, Dundee United host Dundee at Tannadice in the Dundee derby. After a good start to their campaign, newly-promoted Dundee have failed to record a win in the league since 1 November.

And despite losing the two previous matches against United this season, Dundee manager Paul Hartley is hoping the derby can act as the inspiration to kick start their season again. "I don't think you should need motivated for a game like this," Hartley said. "It's a derby with a full house and it's on TV. It's a game where you want to go and do well in."

"Sometimes the form goes out the window in derby games. It's a match where the players are focused on doing well in. "We know we let ourselves down on Saturday and I don't think there's a better game for us now."

Hamilton host a revitalised Motherwell in the Lanarkshire derby at New Douglas Park. After a poor start to the season, new manager Ian Baraclough has led Motherwell to two successive victories with the Fir Park side eager to avenge the 4-0 thrashing they suffered at Hamilton's hands back in September. Bottom of the table Ross County welcome Inverness Caledonian Thistle to Victoria Park for the Highland derby. Twenty-two points and seven positions separate the sides but County will take a boost from the point they picked up at Celtic Park on Sunday.

Aberdeen have the chance to temporarily go top of the table if they can defeat St Johnstone at Pittodrie before Celtic kick-off against Partick Thistle in the evening match. —AFP



LONDON: Chelsea's Eden Hazard (centre) is congratulated by his teammates after scoring a goal during the English Premier League soccer match in this file photo. —AP

## CHELSEA TO VISIT RIVALS SPURS

**LONDON:** Eden Hazard is on course to becoming one of the world's top players, according to Chelsea team-mate Filipe Luis as the Blues travel to White Hart Lane today.

Jose Mourinho's side will attempt to respond to Sunday's 1-1 draw with Southampton by claiming victory at Tottenham Hotspur to guarantee they retain their place at the head of the Premier League table.

And left-back Luis believes winger Hazard will be one of the key figures as the Blues attempt to extend their 10-game unbeaten run against their London rivals.

The Brazil defender said: "Eden Hazard can easily win a game for you and open a closed defence, and he can be in the top three in the world in the next few years because he has a lot of quality and ambition to be there. "I am really happy to be his team-mate because he is one of the greatest players I have played with."

Chelsea remain three points clear despite dropping points at St Mary's Stadium thanks to Manchester City's unexpected failure to beat struggling Burnley at home in a 2-2 draw. And Luis believes there were enough signs in the performance at Southampton to suggest the Blues can continue to fend off all

challengers during the second half of the campaign. "We know that we lost two points in a difficult stadium but the team did really well in the second half, and if we play like we did in the second half we can be in this situation until the end and keep going at the top of the league," he told the club's official website.

"It is going to be really difficult because when you are top, everybody wants to take you off there and play like Southampton did because they played really well, but we did enough to win this game. If we play like this, of course we can win things. "We are still top of the league and the first half of the season is over now."

"The second half of the competition is the more difficult one and we have to keep the level really high because we know it is going to be really difficult, but we are happy because it is not easy being top of the league for the whole competition until now."

"We feel that if we keep playing in the second half [of the season] like we are playing now we can be there at the top of the league at the end."

Luis is being eased into his first season in England and could make way for Cesar Azpilicueta after starting at Southampton while Oscar could return

in place of John Obi Mikel.

Tottenham are beginning to find their feet under new manager Mauricio Pochettino and Sunday's scoreless draw with Manchester United consolidated their standing in seventh, two points off fourth place.

Pochettino's side are keen to avenge the one-sided 3-0 defeat to Chelsea at Stamford Bridge in early December and winger Nacer Chadli is convinced the outcome could be different this time around.

Speaking to the club's official website, the Belgium winger said: "Manchester United was a difficult game. We showed patience and we had some chances but we have to be realistic also - United had the bigger chances in the first half and they played well."

"In the end we did our best and we got one point, but I think we put on a good performance. "I think we have a lot of confidence at this moment, we had a good draw on Sunday and we have been winning games as well. "No games are easy but Newcastle beat Chelsea so why can't we beat them?" he added. "We have to play our game and we'll see how we go." Kyle Walker is back in contention and will challenge Vlad Chiriches for the right-back slot. —AFP