

Serie A Lazio go second

AFP, Rome Lazio drew 0-0 at Brescia but a point was enough to move them up a place to second spot in the Italian football league on Saturday night.

Leaders AC Milan, Lazio and third-placed Inter Milan all have 33 points though that is likely to change on Sunday when AC travel to Bologna and Inter host Modena.

Lazio have seven victories and one draw in their eight league matches away from home this season in an astonishing record on their travels.

In Saturday's other game, Empoli drew 1-1 at home to Torino though the match had been goalless after 90 minutes.

Brazilian defender Sanchez Cribari scored an own goal for Torino in the first minute of injury time and then striker Tommaso Rocchi equalized for Empoli in the third additional minute.

TOP SIX Italian football league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points): Milan 15 10 3 2 30 10 33 Lazio 16 9 6 1 31 15 33 Inter 15 10 3 2 31 16 33 Chievo 15 9 2 4 26 13 29 Juventus 15 8 5 2 23 12 29 Bologna 15 7 6 2 19 11 27



THAT WAS EASY! Real Madrid superstar Ronaldo (R) starts celebrating his goal while Celta de Vigo goalkeeper Pablo Cavallero lies on the ground at Balaidos stadium in Vigo on January 11.

Primera Liga

Real hot on Sociedad's heels

AFP, Madrid

Real Sociedad hung on to the Spanish league leadership and their unbeaten record after coming back from two goals down to draw 2-2 at Valencia on Saturday.

However Real Madrid kept up the pressure and closed the gap on their Basque rivals by winning 1-0 at Celta Vigo, the European champions' sixth consecutive league victory.

Real Madrid are now only one point adrift of Real Sociedad, with 36 points from 17 games compared to Sociedad's 37, and have a better goal difference.

Sociedad looked for the majority of the match against the reigning Spanish champions as though their unbeaten streak was going to come to an end after 16 games but late goals from Darko Kovacevic and Nihat Kahveci saved their day.

Valencia had gone ahead after 18 minutes when Fabio Aurelio sent home a thunderous header from the edge of the box after connecting with an excellent cross from Curro Torres.

The home side went further

ahead on the hour thanks to one of the most bizarre own goals of the season.

Real Sociedad's Agustin Aranzabal rounded two Valencia men on the edge of the box to seemingly ease the danger but then passed back to his goalkeeper Sander Westerveld.

Clearly one of them wasn't watching where the other was, as Westerveld was standing at the post closest to Aranzabal but the Spanish international defender sent the ball 20 metres, neatly into the net by the far post.

At that point, Valencia looked well on the way to getting their revenge for Sociedad ending their own unbeaten streak at 13 from the start of the season last year, but they reckoned without Kovacevic.

The Yugoslav international scored his first ever Spanish league goal against Valencia in his first stint at Real Sociedad in 1996, and on Saturday produced a piece of individual brilliance in the box to get his tenth goal of the season after 68 minutes.

With the scent of a point in their noses, Sociedad then started attacking in numbers for the first time in the game.

The pressure paid off as Nihat

also got his 10th goal of the season after 79 minutes.

Valencia nearly bounced back to get a winner just before the whistle but John Carew was harshly judged to have touched the ball with his arm before scoring and the goal was disallowed.

They were doubly unlucky as television replays showed that Sociedad defender Bjorn Kvamme had also clearly impeded his Norwegian compatriot.

Ronaldo continued to pay off the 45 million euros (47.5 million dollars) that Real Madrid paid for him during the summer by getting his seventh goal of the season, appropriately enough after seven minutes.

The Brazilian World Cup winner and FIFA World Player of the Year had an easy tap in after a Raul Gonzalez shot had been mishandled by Pablo Cavallero, although the Celta goalkeeper had little time to react after a deflection by one of his defenders.

Celta huffed and puffed to try and get an equaliser throughout the rest of the first half with Gustavo Lopez doing sterling work down the left wing, but his excellent service was squandered due to some abysmal finishing by

Catanha and Edu.

The only occasion that Real goalie Iker Casillas was worried came eight minutes from time when he had to dive at full stretch to turn an Edu header away for a corner.

Catanha was so ineffectual that Celta coach Miguel Angel Lotina sent on the disgruntled Benni McCarthy, who has been linked with various moves during the Spanish transfer window, after an hour to see whether he could do a better job than the Brazilian-born Spanish international but the South African also failed to find the net.

However Real also failed to make the most of their chances. Ronaldo and Raul, who was playing his 300th Spanish league game although only 25, both had opportunities to increase Real's

TOP SIX Spanish football league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points): Sociedad 17 10 7 0 33 20 37 Real 17 10 6 1 37 16 36 Valencia 17 8 5 4 27 14 29 Deportivo 16 8 5 3 23 17 29 Celta 17 8 3 6 20 17 27 Betis 16 7 5 4 26 19 26

Molina wins cancer battle

AFP, La Coruna

Deportivo La Coruna keeper Francisco Molina is due to return to action after treatment for testicular cancer, the Spanish press reported on Saturday.

"Following a conversation between (club president) Augusto Cesar Lendoiro, Jose Molina and the medical services, the Deportivo president announces that on Jan. 20 the soccer player will resume his activities in La Coruna," ran the statement on the club's Web site www.canaldeportivo.com.

The 32-year-old former Spain international started chemotherapy treatment in mid-October last year after further cancerous cells were found in a routine check although he had had an operation to remove a tumour in June 2001.

Spanish newspapers Saturday said that Molina's teammates had reacted to the news with delight.

"We're all very happy, it was something we'd been waiting to hear for a long time. It's a great boost for the squad," the club's Argentine midfielder Aldo Duscher was quoted as saying by the leading daily Marca.

Molina, who has played nine times for Spain, joined Deportivo from Atletico de Madrid in 2000. He was a key member of the Atletico team which won the league and Copa del Rey double in 1996.

Molina, who also played for Albacete and Villarreal, has appeared in 282 Spanish First Division matches and has been the undisputed number one keeper at Deportivo for the last two seasons.

Keane next MU boss!

AFP, London

Ruud van Nistelrooy believes that Manchester United team-mate Roy Keane should be the next manager at Old Trafford.

Sir Alex Ferguson has another two-and-a-half years left on his current contract and the Dutch striker feels their inspirational captain is the natural successor once the Scot decides to retire.

"I think Roy Keane should be the next manager of Manchester United," said van Nistelrooy.

"He is already the most popular player at the club, he is the working-class hero, and I know he could be the new manager. And I think he will be a great manager."

"He is already the boss of Manchester United in the dressing room. When he comes in, he is the main man in there."

"He stays above all the other players and we accept that. And he takes all the decisions for the players."

"His football brain is perfect out on the pitch and in the dressing room."

Van Nistelrooy, 26, told the News of the World that he was interested in signing a new long-term deal and hopes to end his career at Old Trafford.

"I feel at home here and I want to play as long as possible with this club or I know I will be very sorry when I'm an old man," said van Nistelrooy.

"My contract ends on July 1, 2006 - the same day that I become 30 years old. But when the club wants to give me a new contract I will be happy to agree to stay longer."

League One

Nice going strong

AFP, Paris

Little Nice continued to surprise football pundits by regaining the top of the French championship on Saturday night following their 2-0 victory over northernners Lille.

Nice became the third side in barely 24 hours to top the league in the first round of matches after the winter break.

Nice regained pole position after defending league champions Lyon had been atop the table for 24 hours thanks to Friday's 1-0 defeat over Marseille, who had spent a happy festive as league leaders.

After 21 matches, Nice have 37 points, one ahead of Lyon, two more than Marseille, with fourth-placed Monaco and fifth-placed Guingamp three points further back.

Abdelmalek Cherrad put Nice ahead in the 57th minute after good work from Everson and then Kaba Diawara.

Just four minutes later, things looked even worse for Lille. Argentine midfielder Fernando D'Amico was sent off after a second yellow card for feigning injury and keeper Gregory Wimbee was also cautioned for dissent soon after.

Lille's bad fortune was compounded when a handball by Eric Abidal gave Nice a penalty and Diawara found the net in the 79th minute with a powerful spot kick.

Meanwhile a first-half header from Pegguy Luyindula saw reigning champions Lyon edge a battle royal against Marseille on

Friday.

A fully-deserved win for the hosts propelled Lyon from fifth to provisional top of the table and inflicted Marseille's sixth defeat of a season in which they hope to land their first silverware in a decade.

Monaco defender Eric Cobilier was sent off for a high-footed tackle on Bastia's Greg Vanney in the 42nd minute to put Didier Deschamps' men up against it in the Principality, but the home side at least held on for a point in a 0-0 draw.

A vociferous Deschamps however was sent from the bench for dissent in the closing spell by referee Bruno Derrien.

Burgundy side Auxerre were quick off the mark in the freezing conditions, with Senegalese midfielder Amdy Faye firing home the game's only goal against Troyes after just five minutes.

Yann Lachuer kicked a perfect corner to the far post and Faye made contact after rising higher than Troyes' Olivier Thomas to give GUY ROUX's side an early lead.

Midtable Bordeaux got the better of Montpellier 3-1 though they had an early setback.

Montpellier went ahead on 11 minutes through Bertrand Robert whose powerful cross cum-shot surprised France's third choice 'keeper Ulrich Rame who failed to block the shot to safety.

A superb freekick by Savio from the left on 26 minutes brought Bordeaux the equalizer. The ball shot over the

Montpellier wall to beat keeper Rudy Riou although he made a valiant dive.

David Jemali put the home side ahead three minutes after the break at the far post after the ball came to him off the head of Brazilian midfielder Eduardo Costa. Then Portuguese striker Pauleta secured the points for Bordeaux with a goal in injury time.

Corsican side Ajaccio drew 0-0 with visitors Paris Saint Germain though the islanders had to hold out for the closing spell after Moroccan Hoalid Regragui was sent off midway through the second half after throwing a punch at Hugo Leal.

Luis Fernandez's men were also down to 10 men for the final quarter hour when Bartholomew Ogbeche was given his marching orders for following through on a tackle on David Terrier.

In Saturday's early match, Guingamp missed a rare chance to go top, for a few hours anyway, when they fell 2-1 at Rennes in the Breton derby.

Meanwhile Le Havre versus Strasbourg, Lens against Sedan and Nantes' hosting of Sochaux were all called off because of

TOP SIX French league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points): Nice 21 10 7 4 26 14 37 Lyon 21 10 6 5 37 25 36 Marseille 21 10 5 6 21 20 35 Monaco 21 9 7 5 32 20 34 Guingamp 21 10 4 7 32 26 34 Sochaux 20 9 6 5 23 14 33

The Rooney hitch!

INTERNET

Everton's attempts to secure Wayne Rooney on a long-term contract have hit trouble.

They are unable to reach an agreement with the teenage whizkid's representatives over either personal terms or image rights.

Rooney, 17, remains technically a free agent and could walk away at any time.

If that happened, a tribunal would place a valuation on his head.

That is the nightmare scenario Everton are desperate to avoid.

And, yesterday, they held another meeting with Rooney's advisers in an attempt to resolve the deadlock.

He could have signed a professional contract in November.

But Rooney decided to wait until he switched agents and joined Paul Stretford's Pro Active Sports Management team last month.

Rooney's loyalty to the Goodison Park club is not in question.

He is now a red-hot property, though, following his spectacular success this season and has become a household name throughout the country.

Premiership Closing in on Gunners

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United came from behind to give their English Premiership title hopes a lift on Saturday with a 3-1 win at relegation-haunted West Bromwich Albion.

With Arsenal not playing at Birmingham until Sunday, United trimmed the gap at the summit to two points.

The Gunners have 46 points from 22 matches with United on 44 from 23, three ahead of Chelsea, who beat Charlton 4-1 at Stamford Bridge.

Faltering Liverpool meanwhile made it 11 league outings without a win bonus as they allowed Aston Villa to bag a point in a 1-1 draw at Anfield.

United striker Ruud van Nistelrooy, whose quick equaliser after West Brom had taken the lead through Jason Koumas got the visitors back on track, told Sky Sports: "You know you are going to have fight against teams who have got relegation problems."

"But we kept playing and every player wanted the ball. We attacked and defended together."

West Brom gave United an early fright when Koumas smacked home a 25-yarder after just six minutes - but van Nistelrooy levelled barely 100 seconds later from a David Beckham cross and Paul Scholes put United in front in the 23rd minute, Roy Keane the provider.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer netted the clincher in the 55th minute.

Dejected West Brom manager Gary Megson, whose side are bottom of the table by a point from West Ham, said: "Our game plan is always to work hard and do the best we can. Again we've scored first and lost."

"The goals we've conceded, apart from the first one which came from a great cross by Beckham, we should have defended the crosses better than we did."

Meanwhile Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier saw his side continue their worst barren run in the league in half a century after a draw against a Villa team yet to win on

their travels this term. "We're going through a difficult period," said Houllier, who admitted his team did not deserve to win."

Michael Owen swept in his ninth league goal of the season on his full return from a hamstring injury after Senegalese forward El Hadji Diouf provided the cross after 38 minutes.

But Dion Dublin equalised four minutes after the restart from the penalty spot, the kick given for a Sami Hyyppia foul on Gareth Barry.

"It's a pity we could not embed our lead," Liverpool's French boss added.

West Ham were unable to upset the form book, despite the midweek acquisition of England midfielder Lee Bowyer from Leeds, as the East Londoners drew 2-2 at home to Newcastle - although they did move off the foot of the table.

But the result still left them without a league win at Upton Park this season.

After Jermaine Jenas rescued a point for Newcastle with a belting drive nine minutes from time, West Ham manager Glenn Roeder said: "Jenas' equaliser was just a great strike. I'm just disappointed we did not defend well enough from the throw-in that led to the goal."

Roeder added he expected great things from Bowyer. "He's got tremendous ability with the ball and clever with his passes."

Bowyer was soon in the thick of the action, testing Shay Given in the visitors' goal with an early right-foot drive.

But it was Newcastle, without the suspended Alan Shearer, who took the lead in the ninth minute.

Wales striker Craig Bellamy celebrated his new five-year deal with Newcastle by firing home a left-footed shot from seven yards after good work by Jenas.

But the Hammers were level within five minutes, Joe Cole driving home from the edge of the box.

Seconds before the break Jermaine Defoe drove home West Ham's second.

Chelsea, looking to wrest a Champions League slot off Newcastle this season, swamped Charlton as Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink with a third-minute penalty, William Gallas and Eidur Gudjohnsen made the points safe with a three-goal opening salvo

inside 34 minutes. Jason Euell pulled one back from the spot before the break but Graeme Le Saux hit the fourth for the Blues.

Manchester City brought Leeds United's recent rich vein of form to a halt with a 2-1 win at Maine Road as Shaun Goater scored on the half hour and Niclas Jensen scored with a brilliant volley after the break.

Leeds' Australian striker Harry Kewell pulled one back but the result meant City are now eighth in the table.

United's former England coach Terry Venables said his team had been beaten by a wonder strike. "The second goal was a great goal. There's nothing you can do about that."

Southampton's in-form striker James Beattie scored his 14th and 15th goals of the season but the Saints, pressing for a top five-finish, had to make do with a 2-2 draw at Middlesbrough.

Noel Whelan's goal gave Boro a lifeline before Massimo Maccarone was brought down and scored from the resulting penalty in the 82nd minute.

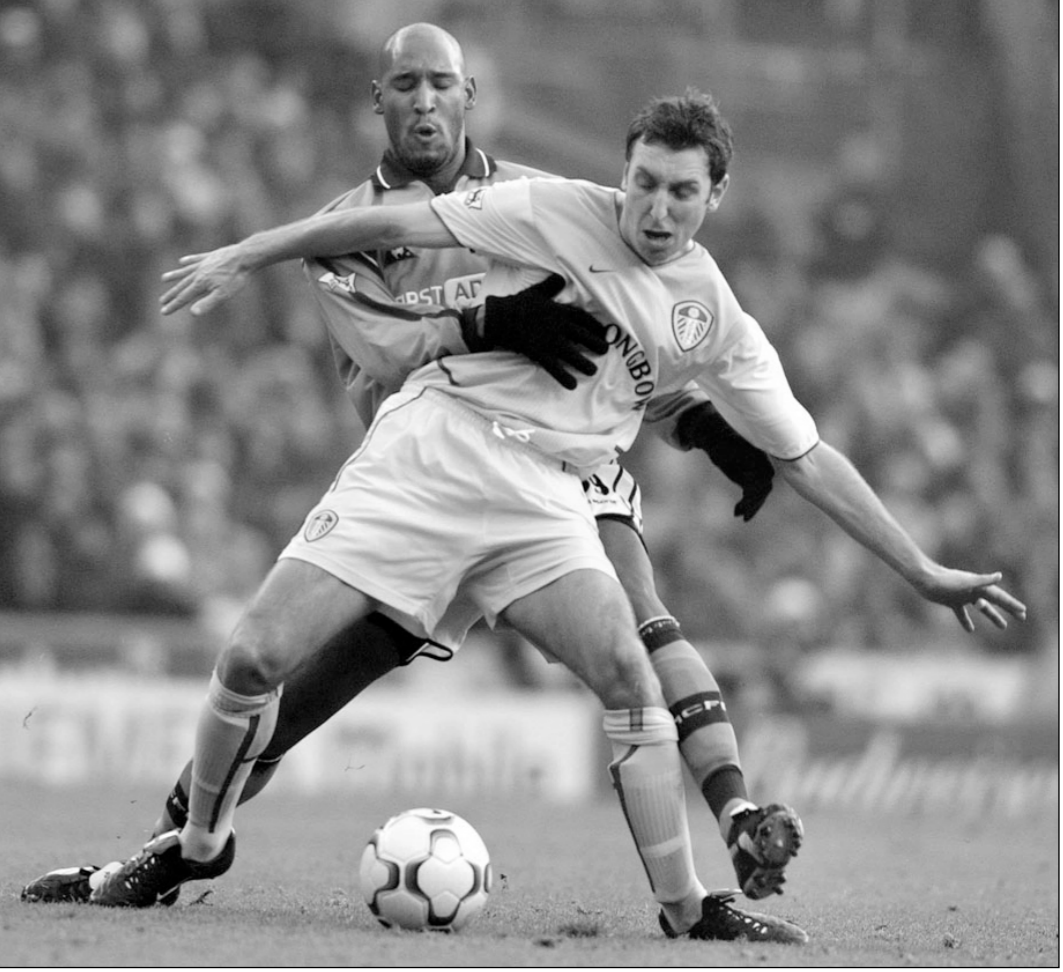
Elsewhere, Bolton and Fulham produced a goalless stalemate and Sunderland and Blackburn also finished 0-0.

Bolton manager Sam Allardyce, whose side are just a point clear of the relegation zone, made no attempt to hide his frustration at seeing his side fail to move further away from danger.

"We've drawn this game when we should have had three points," Allardyce said.

Everton travel to Tottenham on Sunday hoping to snatch back fifth spot from Southampton.

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Manchester City's French striker Nicolas Anelka (behind) being resisted by Leeds United's Jason Wilcox at Maine Road on January 11.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS 40 Ostrich's kin 1 Carry on 5 Chewing gum quantity 8 Simpleton 12 Always Actor 13 Stephen 14 Tony's cousin 15 Photog's choice 16 Citric quencher 17 Misfortunes 18 First verb in "Rebecca" 20 Pinnacle 22 Ball-bearing item 23 Zaba-glione base 24 "Desafinado" saxophonist 27 Problem-free 32 Blond shade 33 Coffee-shop vessel 34 Up to 35 Alarmed somewhat 38 Appear 39 Fresh

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58

CRYPTOQUIP

K ' S J G U B E F R U O B U I E - I J P O U I D K I H F V W G J B I Q U M K R F B I K U D I F P I U H H U I U I E B J U H S U V M W

Yesterday's Cryptquip: SUPPOSING A CAT WERE FULL OF RADIOACTIVE WASTE, WOULD IT HAVE EIGHTEEN HALF-LIVES?

Today's Cryptquip Clue: I equals N The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.