

Primera Liga

Ronaldinho inspires Barca

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish giants Barcelona, buoyed by the return of Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho from injury, won their first game in five outings, beating local rivals Espanyol 3-1 in incident-filled derby on Saturday.

Six players got their marching orders as a number of old scores were settled.

Espanyol took the lead after just

Both de la Pena and Cruyff started their professional careers at Barca but left under a cloud after disagreements with the then coach Louis van Gaal.

However, Espanyol were soon woken up by their dreams of scoring a memorable win over their more illustrious neighbours.

Barely a minute had elapsed before Ronaldinho, playing his first game in five weeks, equalised against the team coached by his former coach Luis Fernandez, although the ball took a deflection off the heel of Espanyol defender

was on hand to tap home the loose ball.

The Dutch striker was on target again 10 minutes before the break after Toni had fumbled the ball in the air from a Ronaldinho corner.

After the scoring came the sending offs which left both coaches both angry and perplexed.

"I can't talk about football after a game in which there were six sent off," fumed Fernandez.

His opposite number, Barca's under-fire Frank Rijkaard, was only slightly more diplomatic.

Michael Reiziger four minutes before the break.

Referee Alfonso Pino Zamorano's complete loss of control of the game made sure the procession to the dressing rooms continued after half time.

Barcelona were soon down to nine men after Rafael Marquez and then Ricardo Quaresma picked up their second yellow cards shortly after the restart.

Soldavilla departed just after the hour and Barca's Philip Cocu was then given a direct red card for dragging down Raul Tamudo as he advanced on goal.

The exodus finally came to a conclusion two minutes from the whistle, and meant both sides ended with eight men, when Espanyol's Alberto Lopo was sent off for the fourth time this season.

Barcelona move up to seventh, one place behind Villarreal who beat Real Sociedad 2-0 on Saturday with first half goals from Juan Ramon Riquelme and Sonny Anderson.

Atletico Madrid stay in fifth after a 2-2 draw at struggling Celta Vigo, salvaging a point late in the game thanks to a bizarre goal from Argentine defender Matias Lequi.

Diego Simeone had put Atletico ahead after 16 minutes only for goals from Peter Luccin and Savo Milosevic to give Celta the lead at the break.

However eight minutes from time Lequi - a central defender who suddenly found himself alone in the opposition box - took a surprise chance at glory with both hands.

After the ball bounced off his shoulder, he promptly chipped the ball over the heads of two Celta defenders before dashing around them and scoring from a tight angle with a volley.

League leaders Real Madrid play host to third-placed Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday while second-placed Valencia, one point behind the reigning Spanish champions, travel to Real Betis.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona's Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho (L) trying to get the better of with Espanyol's Lopo at the Olympic stadium Luis Companys in Barcelona on December 13.

seven minutes when former Barca player Ivan de la Pena sent a free kick to the head of Jordi Cruyff.

The son of the Dutch legend scored his first league goal for the club he joined in the summer with a looping header from the edge of the box.

Toni Soldevilla.

Barcelona then went on to lay claim to all three points thanks to two goals from Patrick Kluivert after a pair of howling errors by Espanyol goalkeeper Toni Jimenez.

After 19 minutes, Toni flapped at a Gabri Garcia cross and Kluivert

"The referee was, how can I say, a little pedantic. Perhaps he was right but the game wasn't such a bloodbath to deserve six sendings off," commented the Dutchman.

De La Pena was the first to be shown a red card, for a wayward tackle on former team-mate

TOP SIX						
Spanish league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):						
Real	15	10	3	2	31	16 33
Valencia	15	9	4	2	29	12 31
Deportivo	15	9	3	3	23	11 30
Osasuna	15	7	5	3	18	12 26
Atletico	16	8	2	6	21	20 26
Villarreal	16	6	6	4	17	16 24

Bundesliga

Bayern owe Makaay one

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich were again indebted to record signing Roy Makaay as they ended the unbeaten record of VfB Stuttgart with a 1-0 win at the Olympic Stadium on Saturday.

The result allowed ten-man Werder Bremen to nudge Stuttgart off top spot in the Bundesliga thanks to their 3-1 away win over title rivals Bayer Leverkusen.

Dutch international Makaay, 28, fired his club into the last sixteenth of the Champions League in midweek and showed he was the man for the big occasion once again when he netted the decisive goal on 75 minutes.

"There was not a lot going forward but Roy Makaay, who does not know what nerves are, managed to score what was a difficult chance," lauded Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld. "We needed to

win and we did."

Stuttgart, who have not won in Munich since September 1999, surrender top spot to Bremen while Bayern close in ominously on the pretenders to their crown.

Visitors Stuttgart can feel hard done by. Makaay's goal was like a sucker punch after Felix Magath's side had tested the cat-like reflexes of Oliver Kahn on more than one occasion.

Timo Wenzel, Philipp Lahm and Kevin Kuranyi all went close to breaking the deadlock while Bayern were restricted to long-range shots which did little to appease the bulk of the 63,000 fans.

The match looked destined to end in stalemate until a glaring error from Portuguese international Fernando Meira allowed Makaay a glimpse of goal.

Meira misjudged a lofted ball and his tame header allowed the alert Makaay to lash home clinically past Timo Hildebrand.

"We conceded the goal because of a silly mistake and the game was over," raged Magath.

Ten-man Werder Bremen took full advantage of Stuttgart's slip with a 3-1 triumph over Bayer Leverkusen at the BayArena.

Bremen's French playmaker Johan Micoud had a mixed afternoon, creating both of Werder's goals in the first half before losing his cool and getting sent off with just over 20 minutes remaining following two rash challenges.

A reverse pass from the 30-year-old Frenchman sliced open the Bayer rearguard shortly before the interval, allowing Ivan Klasnic to feed Brazilian striker Ailton for his 15th goal of the season.

Micoud then produced a sublime diagonal ball two minutes later for Serbia and Montenegro defender Mladen Krstajic to bullet home a header.

Needing to overcome a two-goal deficit Bayer pushed forward in numbers but could not make the breakthrough until Micoud pressed the self-destruct button on 67 minutes.

"We only found it difficult after the dismissal of Micoud," explained Bremen manager Thomas Schaaf. "But we took our chances and that was vital."

Five minutes after the dismissal Bayer captain Jens Nowotny fumbled an effort home for his first goal in more than three years.

A frantic finale followed with Leverkusen throwing everyone forward but a swift counter attack saw Klaus Augenthaler's side come undone.

Ailton raced clear and Nowotny upended the Brazilian in the penalty area and promptly received his marching orders.

Krisztian Lisztes clinched the spoils for Bremen after converting the resultant penalty.

TOP SIX						
German league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):						
Bremen	16	11	3	2	42	20 36
Stuttgart	16	10	5	1	22	4 35
Leverkusen	16	9	5	2	31	15 32
Bayern	16	9	5	2	34	19 32
Bochum	16	7	4	5	28	20 25
Dortmund	15	7	3	5	27	22 24



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich's Dutch international striker Roy Makaay is elated after scoring the winning goal for his team against Stuttgart at Munich's Olympic stadium on December 13.

Hands-off Henry!

AFP, London

Arsenal have rejected a 40 million pound (70m dollars) bid from Chelsea for striker Thierry Henry and issued a hands-off warning to other potential suitors of the France international.

Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, who has invested 111m pounds in new players since buying the club in July, made the offer in person at Highbury on Wednesday, The Sunday Mirror reported.

Arsenal vice-chairman David Dein told the paper: "Roman Abramovich came to Highbury and presented us with a formal offer for him (Henry)."

"But we told him the same as we will say to Real Madrid or any other club if they are planning to present an offer to us - Thierry Henry is not for sale."

Arsene Wenger reiterated that stance. Asked by BBC Radio what he would say to an offer the Arsenal coach replied: "No. Simply number."

"When you have the money but not the players it does not help you a lot. The target is not to have a bank full of money but good players on the pitch."

"People will never understand if you sell your best players. That would be the wrong signal to send."

Henry is in the running to be named FIFA's Player of the Year - he faces competition for the award from Ronaldo and Zinedine Zidane with the winner due to be announced on Monday.

Wenger meanwhile hinted that he may see out his coaching days at Highbury.

"As long as you feel you can push the club higher you want to be part of it. As a manager it could be my last job."

"I don't think I have to move at some stage at any cost. But as well I must accept the short-term, every week or sometimes three days you have an exam and you have to be successful and pass that exam."

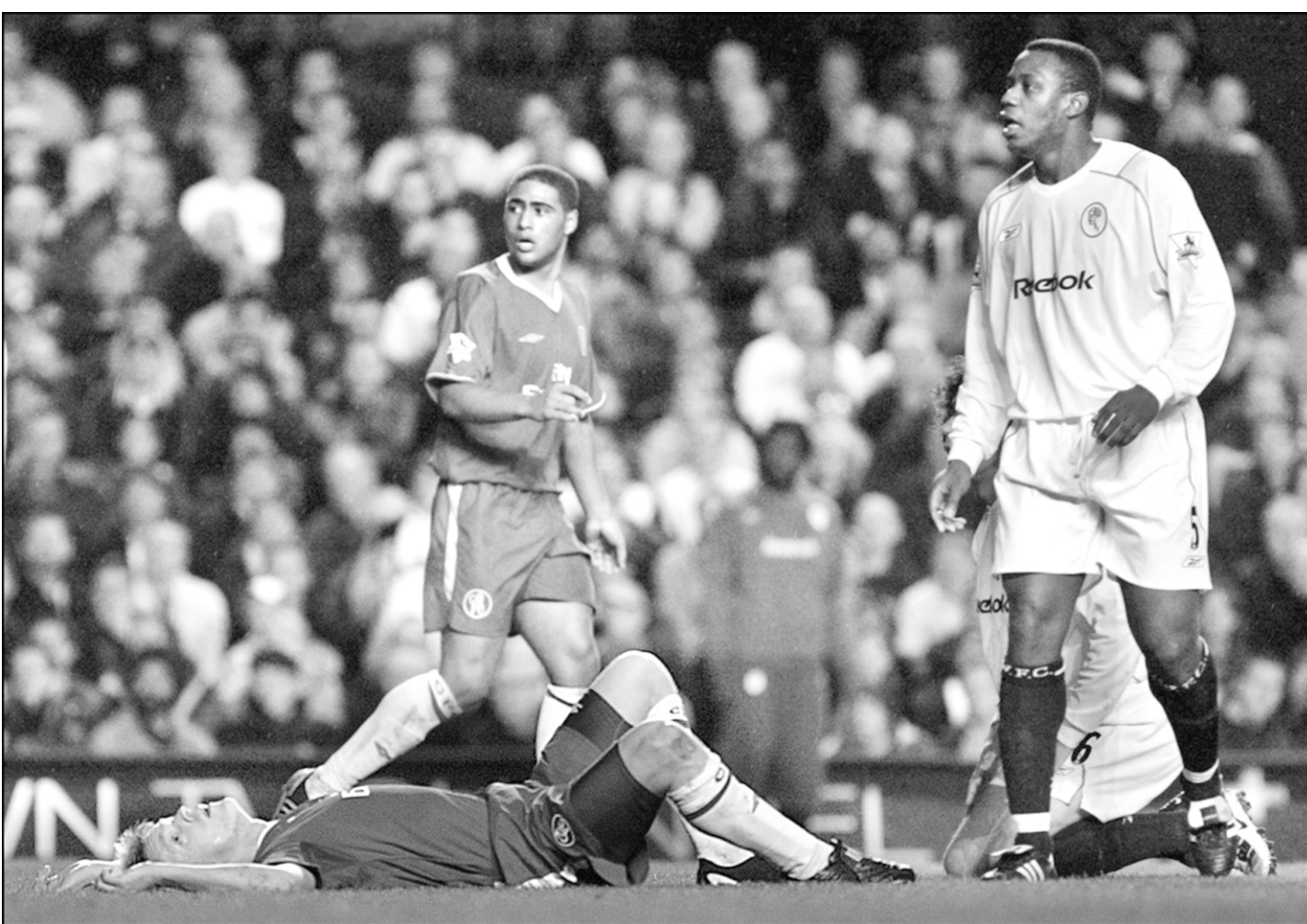


PHOTO: AFP

IT'S THAT KIND OF A NIGHT! Chelsea's Damien Duff (on the ground) and Glen Johnson (behind) rue another close miss while Bruno N'Gotty of Bolton looks on at Stamford Bridge on December 13.

Premiership

United take advantage

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United returned to the top of the Premiership on Saturday after London rivals Chelsea slipped badly by losing to a last-minute goal against Bolton.

Chelsea coach Claudio Ranieri's drive to turn Roman Abramovich's millions into silverware was stalled by a late own goal from John Terry which gifted Bolton an unlikely 2-1 victory at Stamford Bridge.

The Italian boss kept his players locked in the dressing room for an hour after the match before emerging to accuse them of "losing the plot."

"The first half was very good for us, we played very well and dominated the match," said Ranieri. "But we must score more goals when we have the opportunity to score a goal."

"We then defended badly and conceded a goal by leaving their player unmarked, and in the second half we were tired and lost the plot."

Chelsea's first domestic defeat at home since the summer takeover by Abramovich allowed United to go top by a point after a 3-1 victory over local rivals Manchester City earlier in the day.

Arsenal can leapfrog both Chelsea and United if they beat Blackburn at Highbury on Sunday.

Everything appeared to be going according to the script when Hernan Crespo put Chelsea ahead with a close range header mid-way through the first half after Terry had headed Damien Duff's corner back across goal.

But Bruno N'Gotty equalised six minutes before the break and Bolton, who had managed barely four attacks all game, snatched a sensational victory when Terry deflected a low cross past a helpless Carlo Cudicini.

Paul Scholes was the hero of United's win against a City side that had taken four out of six points off the champions last season.

The England midfielder marked his first Premiership start in two months with a pair of headed goals and also had a hand in the move that led to Ruud van Nistelrooy's 16th goal of the season.

Shaun Wright-Phillips briefly gave City hope in the second half with his solo run and shot but Scholes' second, 17 minutes from time, killed off Kevin Keegan's side.

United boss Alex Ferguson paid tribute to the influence of Scholes.

"He picked the right day but we know he's always capable of that," Ferguson said. "I thought we could have been three or four up at half-time - but credit Manchester City, they came back and made it a real contest until Paul put it beyond doubt."

The pressure on Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier was cranked up another notch by a 2-1 home defeat at the hands of Southampton, who stunned Anfield by taking the lead after just 72 seconds with a breakaway goal by Brett Ormerod.

A Michael Svensson header mid-way through the second half doubled Saints' lead and the pain for Houllier, who was suffering from flu.

Emile Heskey pulled one goal back 15 minutes from time but

Liverpool's intense late pressure failed to yield an equaliser and the players were booed off the pitch.

"I understand the fans' frustration, we are suffering together," the Frenchman croaked.

"But we just have to keep our heads up and keep going, but I admit this is a difficult period, I must say, for us."

Houllier was without Michael Owen, Harry Kewell and Milan Baros and admitted the loss of their combined firepower was hurting the team.

"We were without six first-teamers and all our first-choice strikers. In the end we paid for a lack of finishing," Houllier said.

"Only Chelsea with their vast squad, could cope with the loss of as many players as we are having to handle. If Manchester United lost van Nistelrooy and Scholes and Arsenal were without Henry and Pires, they would struggle too."

Leicester had two players and manager Mick Adams sent off as Birmingham halted their slide towards the bottom half of the table with a 2-0 win at the Walkers Stadium.

After skipper Matt Elliot was dismissed in the first half, the Foxes saw their chances of getting anything from the match destroyed when goalkeeper Ian Walker was sent off just after an hour for handling outside his area.

Birmingham capitalised with goals shortly after each red card. Clinton Morrison, restored to the side in place of the injured Christophe Dugarry, and Mikael Forsell were the scorers.

A miserable afternoon for the home side was summed up when Adams was sent to the stand just before half-time for remonstrating with referee Mike Riley over Elliot's dismissal, which will result

in a three-match ban.

Middlesbrough made it seven clean sheets in a row but were unable to exploit their defensive quality at the other end as their meeting with Charlton ended goalless.

Newcastle were at their rampant best in a 4-0 thrashing of Tottenham at St James Park that was inspired by a virtuoso display from Laurent Robert.

The French winger followed up a first-half volley with an equally spectacular long-range effort ten minutes after the break. Skipper Alan Shearer also grabbed a brace as Spurs were torn apart and the Magpies moved up to fifth place.

Wayne Rooney came off the bench to score Everton's winner against Portsmouth.

On-loan striker Jason Roberts had fired Pompey ahead after a quarter of an hour but Everton hit back through Lee Carsley and Rooney secured the three points with a shot on the turn three minutes before the break.

It was a much-needed confidence boost for the England striker who has struggled to find any form for his club this season and had not scored for them since August.

Defensive Houllier

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Gerard Houllier was forced to admit he could understand why his side had been booed off the pitch after a 2-1 defeat by Southampton that was Liverpool's fourth home loss of the season.

A flu-hit Houllier looked on disconsolately from the touchline at Anfield as Saints loosened his increasingly tenuous grip on his job.

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"Only Chelsea with their vast squad, could cope with the loss of as many players as we are having to handle. If Manchester United lost van Nistelrooy and Scholes and Arsenal were without Henry and Pires, they would struggle too."

"We know now that we have to dig deep, this is a tough period for us. I believe the fans who were here at least understand the problem even if they are frustrated. I doubt whether the phone-in fans will understand."

Matthaeus resigns

Football

AFP, Belgrade

Lothar Matthaeus has resigned as Partizan Belgrade coach for personal reasons, television station RTS reported on Saturday quoting a club statement.

RTS speculated that Matthaeus, who was hired by the Belgrade club in December last year, would become the new coach of the Hungarian national team.

Matthaeus, who stopped playing in 2001, made a record 150 appearances for the German national team and won the World Cup title in 1990 before becoming the first ever FIFA Player of the Year in 1991.

Tanjung agency reported there had been serious disagreements between Matthaeus and club director Nenad Bjekovic.

Partizan denied reports this week that Matthaeus had signed a three-year contract with Russian club CSKA Moscow.

TOP SIX						
English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):						
Man Utd	16	12	1	3	32	10 37
Chelsea	16	11	3	2	30	12 36
Arsenal	15	10	5	0	29	11 35
Fulham	15	7	4	4	26	19 25
Newcastle	16	6	6	4	25	20 24
Southampton	16	6	5	5	15	12 23