

Xabi rules out EPL title

INTERNET, undated

Liverpool midfielder Xabi Alonso believes the Premiership title is already beyond them this season.

Speaking ahead of the Super Sunday clash at Arsenal, the Spain international sees The Reds 14 points behind leaders Manchester United in the table.

Liverpool have yet to win away from home in The Premiership this season, and a win at The Emirates Stadium is required if Liverpool have any hope of making a title push.

With The Gunners also in need of a win to boost their title chances, Alonso is more concerned with claiming the three points in North London.

"Liverpool winning the title is a remote possibility," Alonso told the News of the World. "And if Manchester United or Chelsea go further ahead, it will be too much for us."

"Sincerely, I believe victory is possible against Arsenal."

"Now we are better than The Gunners, this is the opportunity to profit."

"A win for us will be a blow to Arsenal and show people that Liverpool are still there fighting."

The former Real Sociedad star knows the Merseysiders are in better shape in the UEFA Champions League than with domestic matters.



Bayern Munich defender Martin Demichelis (R) jumps in joy as striker Claudio Pizarro looks on after the former scored against rivals Bayer Leverkusen during their Bundesliga clash at the Bay Arena in Leverkusen on Saturday.

Schalke on par with Bremen

AFP, Berlin

Schalke 04 moved level on points with Werder Bremen at the top of the Bundesliga after a convincing 4-0 home win over strugglers Mainz 05 on Saturday.

Pacesetters Werder Bremen had lost 3-1 against Borussia Dortmund on Friday and Schalke took full advantage with former German international Kevin Kuranyi and Turkish striker Halil Altintop both scoring a brace to help the Gelsenkirchen club join Bremen on 23 points.

"We exploited the gaps very intelligently and scored some great goals," said Schalke coach Mirko Slomka.

"We are delighted with the result and the performance. It is nice for both our strikers to score too as there is no better tonic for forwards than goals."

Bayern Munich also capitalised on Bremen's slip in a thrilling 3-2 win at Bayer Leverkusen.

Reigning champions Bayern looked to be heading for their second loss in a week, following their humiliating 1-0 home defeat to Hannover, with Brazilian

Athirson putting Leverkusen ahead 2-1 in the 80th minute.

However Martin Demichelis levelled three minutes later and Peruvian striker Claudio Pizarro scored an 86th minute winner in a thrilling finale.

"Of course I am relieved. On Friday it looked like we would be nine points behind Bremen and now we are three points adrift," said Bayern coach Felix Magath.

"We knew it would be a difficult season and it really has been. Now we just need to try and be at the top going into the winter break."

Bayern go fourth with the win, a point behind VfB Stuttgart, who are two points behind Bremen and Schalke and have the chance to claim top spot with victory over Hannover on Sunday.

Schalke, out of the UEFA Cup and the German cup, have pinned all their hopes on the league this season and they go from strength to strength with the latest triumph moving them into second.

The game was wrapped up by half-time with Kuranyi scoring twice inside 32 minutes while Altintop was also on target after a brilliant 70 metre run from Brazilian full back Rafinha gave him a tap-in.

Altintop's delicate chip for his second goal reflected the growing confidence in the Schalke camp.

Bayern found it tougher going in their see-saw match at Leverkusen with Stefan Kiessling cancelling out the 33rd minute opener from Hasan Salihamidzic. Athirson then put Leverkusen in front with just ten minutes left but Bayern showed the spirit of champions to score twice in the next six minutes to claim the spoils.

"I am so annoyed that we were not able to control the game at 2-1 and could not put it to bed," explained Leverkusen coach Michael Skibbe.

At the wrong end of the table SV Hamburg manager Thomas Doll was left seething as his team drew 1-1 with Borussia Monchengladbach.

Daniel Ljuboja scored on 66 minutes to put Hamburg ahead but Oliver Neuville equalised six minutes from time.

It was Doll's 100th game in charge and prior to the game there was speculation that defeat against Gladbach, who had lost all their other away matches, would cost him his job.

A draw leaves Hamburg fourth from bottom and Doll's future remains unclear.

"A 1-1 is not enough as we wanted much more," admitted Doll. "It has been a bad week for us and we need to start cutting out the mistakes."

Totti rejects Azzurri again

INTERNET, undated

Francesco Totti and Christian Panucci have again rejected calls for their return to the Azzurri squad ahead of Wednesday's friendly with Turkey.

"I am focusing on Roma right now and don't want to think about anything else," said Totti after his brace in Roma's 2-1 victory at Milan.

"I want to enjoy this great victory that hadn't happened in 20 years. With all these away wins against the big clubs and this squad, we definitely believe in our title chances. The whole team proved it's a great side that can challenge anyone."

The captain caused controversy when he insisted he'd take a time out from the Italy side until 2007 so that he could fully recover his form from a fractured ankle.

He certainly seems to be on the right track with four Serie A goals this season, but rejected the questions about Wednesday's friendly against Turkey.

Roma teammate Panucci was frozen out of the Azzurri by Coach Marcello Lippi and, despite his fine form, suggests a recall under Roberto Donadoni is unlikely.

"You have to know when to call it a day at international level and put an end to that chapter of your career," said the full-back.

"At nearly 34 years of age, I can say I'm happy with what I've achieved and how I'm doing at Roma. The Nazionale is a happy memory, nothing more."

Another international in the Giallorossi side is Alberto Aquilani, albeit only at Under-21 level for the moment.

His spectacular 'rabona' -- crossing his legs and chipping the ball with the back foot -- inspired the winning goal in the 2-1 victory over Milan.

"I think I did something pretty good. The rabona was spontaneous," smiled the youngster. "It wasn't easy to come on as a substitute in a big game like this, but it went well and we're happy, especially as Roma hadn't won here in 20 years."

Greed leading to burn-out?

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf has hit out at the international fixture list claiming there are excessive matches borne out of greed rather than necessity.

"The number of friendly matches and qualification games need to be reduced," Schaaf said in Focus magazine. "Our product should not be harmed out of financial interests."

Schaaf's comments come four days before Germany's Euro 2008 qualification match against Cyprus in Nicosia.

Klitschko retains heavyweight title

Boxing

AFP, New York

Ukraine's Wladimir Klitschko knocked out previously unbeaten American Calvin Brock in the seventh round here Saturday to retain the International Boxing Federation heavyweight world title.

Klitschko, considered the best of a lacklustre collection of heavyweight champions, started slowly but came alive in the fifth round of their scheduled 12-round bout, punishing Brock with his stinging left jab.

Brock, who had settled down after a skittish first round to land some solid body blows in the earlier rounds, couldn't find a way to get to the energized champion, who suffered a bloody cut over his left eye from an accidental head butt in the sixth.

Klitschko didn't have to spend much time worrying if the cut would prove a factor in the outcome.

The champion hurt Brock repeatedly in the seventh before felling him with massive right that saw Brock fall face down on the canvas. He managed to rise, but referee Wayne Kelly waved it off at 2:10 of the round.

"It took me time to get my rhythm and distance," Klitschko said.

Brock was trying to follow the lead of fellow American Shannon Briggs, who defeated Sergei Liakhovich last Saturday to claim the lightly regarded World Boxing Organization heavyweight title.

"He had a better jab than I thought," Brock admitted. "I saw the punch coming, but couldn't get out of the way. He's the best fighter I have ever fought."

Klitschko, who was making the first defence of the title he won with a seventh-round stoppage of Chris Byrd on April 22, improved to 47-3 with 42 knockouts while Brock fell to 29-1.

After the bout, Klitschko reiterated his desire to unify the title. "I will fight anybody with a belt," he said of his preferred next opponent.

Nicolay Valuev holds the World Boxing Association crown while Oleg Maskaev owns the World Boxing Council version of the title.

On the undercard, undefeated Laila Ali, daughter of legendary former heavyweight champ Muhammad Ali, made her Madison Square Garden debut with a fourth-round stoppage of Shelley Burton.

Her father watched from ring-side giving a wave to acknowl-

edged an ovation from the Garden Crowd.

Laila Ali had too much experience and power, improving to 23-0 with 20 wins inside the distance when the fight was stopped with two seconds left in the fourth.

"I'm on a high fighting here," she said. "It feels great to be fighting in front of my father."

Egypt waiting on Mido fitness

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt are hoping Tottenham Hotspur striker Mido recovers in time from a knee injury to play against South Africa in London on Wednesday.

The forward, who did not play against Reading in the English premier league on Sunday, has been named in a 20-man squad for the match at Griffin Park.

Egypt coach Hassan Shehata has called up uncapped striker Ahmed Hassan to a 20-man squad.

Hassan, not to be confused with the team's captain, who plays at Anderlecht, is the top goal scorer in the Egyptian premier league.

The squad includes five players from Al Ahli, who won the African Champions League on Saturday.

Llorente steal Valencia's meat

REUTERS, Madrid

Valencia surrendered their 100 percent home record this season when a last-minute equaliser from Athletic Bilbao striker Fernando Llorente earned the beleaguered Basque side a 1-1 draw at the Mestalla on Saturday.

Valencia had looked on course for victory after Fernando Morientes scored his fifth league goal of the season when he angled a shot low into the far corner after fullback Miguel had crossed into the area a minute before halftime.

But they spurned several good chances to extend their lead and paid the price when the lanky Llorente outjumped the defenders to head in past Santiago Canizares after a fine cross from winger Joseba Etxeberria in the 89th minute.

The draw moved Valencia up to fourth place in the table on 18 points, three behind leaders Sevilla, but with all their immediate rivals yet to play they are likely to drop down the standings on Sunday.

Earlier, Atletico Madrid reignited their season when they came from behind to notch up their first win in four games with a classy 3-1 home victory over Villarreal that lifted them to sixth spot, level on 17 points with Real Madrid.

Javier Aguirre's side fell behind in the 13th minute when centre back Fabricio Fuentes made the most of poor defending to head in at the far post from a Juan Roman Riquelme free-kick.

Atletico responded well to the setback and Portuguese centre-back Ze Castro equalised in the 37th minute when he stooped low to head the ball past Barbosa after Mariano Perna had fired a free kick in from the right.

Atletico extended their lead in added time at the end of the first half after a great piece of individual skill from Fernando Torres.

The striker, who was dropped from the Spain squad on Friday, spun past two defenders on the byline and won his side a penalty when Villarreal defender Pascal Cygan scythed him down as he darted into the area.

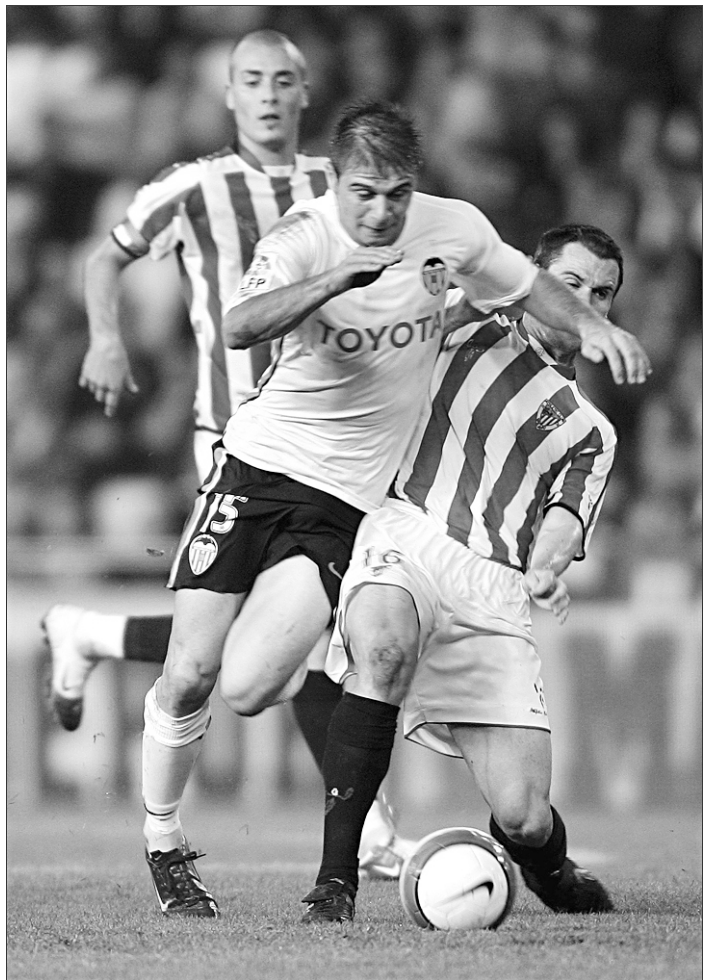
Torres sent Barbosa the wrong way with his coolly taken spot kick to score his third goal of the season.

Argentine teenager Sergio Aguiro put the icing on the cake with a stunning goal 19 minutes into the second half that condemned Villarreal to a first defeat in seven

games.

The 18-year-old slipped between the Villarreal back four to meet a fine through ball from midfielder Jurado, kept his feet after a defender had clipped his heels and finished off with a delightful chip over the keeper.

Villarreal's disappointment was compounded when former Atletico forward Jose Mari was sent off for a reckless two-footed challenge on full back Yourkas Settaridis 18 minutes from time.



Valencia's Spanish winger Joaquin Sanchez (C) skips past the challenge of Athletic Bilbao's Pablo Orbaiz (R) during their Primera Liga encounter at the Mestalla on Saturday.

I deserve to be number one: Henin

AFP, Madrid

Battling Belgian Justine Henin-Hardenne warned Saturday that she was not finished yet after claiming the year-end world number one spot despite a series of health worries.

The Belgian qualified for her fifth major final of the year beating Russian Maria Sharapova 6-2, 7-6 (7/5) and at the same time reclaiming the world number one ranking which she held for 45 weeks in 2003 and 2004.

She meets reigning champion Amelie Mauresmo for the third time in a major final this year after the Frenchwoman beat Belgian Kim Clijsters 6-2, 3-6, 6-3 in their semi-final Saturday.

"I've had an exceptional season and I think that yes I deserve this," she said.

"I was the most consistent player. Of the 13 tournaments I competed in this year I reached the final in ten. And it's not easy to reach the finals of four Grand Slams. I feel really proud to have been so solid."

Despite an injury-plagued season Henin-Hardenne won five titles bringing her total to 28.

She reached the final of all four Grand Slams to become the seventh player in the Open Era to achieve the feat and the first since Martina Hingis in 1997.

Lowly Lorient stun Nancy

REUTERS, Paris

In-form Nancy slumped to a 2-0 clumsy defeat at promoted Lorient on Saturday to let runaway leaders Olympique Lyon

maintain a 12-point lead at the top of the Ligue 1 table.

Nancy, who lost to Lyon two weeks ago, suffered their second league defeats in three months to surrender second place to Racing Lens, who were held to a goalless draw by Stade Rennes.

Midfielder Ulrich Le Pen scored with a powerful strike from 20 metres to give Lorient the lead before Hamed Namouchi sealed the win with a last-gasp effort.

Nancy gave everything in the last 20 minutes but Lorient's defence hung on.

"We are a bit disappointed because we played rather well tonight," said Nancy defender Pape Diakhate. "This is a defeat but we must not take it too hardly. Our main goal is still to stay with the elite."

Nancy in third are now level on points with fourth-placed Sochaux, who snatched a 0-0 draw at Nice.

Olympique Lyon, who stumbled to their first defeat of the season at Stade Rennes last week, bounced back to beat Valenciennes 2-1 at home on Friday thanks to two late goals by defender Cris and Sebastien Squillaci.

On Saturday, struggling AJ Auxerre hung on to hold injury-hit Girondins Bordeaux to a goalless draw.

The Burgundy club put an end to Bordeaux's run of four consecutive home league wins and were helped by the hosts being without strikers Jean-Claude Darcheville and Marouane Chamakh.

Rio Mavuba had Bordeaux's best chance, arrowing a shot against the crossbar 15 minutes from time in an otherwise lacklustre game.

St Etienne salvaged a 2-2 at Nantes thanks to an injury time goal by Vincent Hognon, a result which leaves them sixth in the table.



PSG winger Jerome Rothen (R) surges past the challenge of Le Mans defender Jean Calve during their French Ligue 1 clash at Rennes on Saturday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	36 Nap letters	DOWN	11 Fender bender
1 Sound of contentment	37 Big Apple	1 Quick kiss	20 Breakfast site
5 Semalme portion	38 Incense	2 Word often following "once"	24 Where the elated walk
9 Digital readout (Abbr.)	39 Make sport	3 Former attorney general	25 Aries
12 Duel tool	42 U.K. fliers	4 Dinner site	26 Flightless bird
13 Partner in crime	44 Trade general	5 Dog's wild kin	27 Supporting wild
14 Stout cousin	48 Pump up the volume	6 Hodge-podge	29 "Monty Python" opener
15 Puts one over on	49 Trans-mitted	7 During the truck	30 On pens.
16 Write a footnote	50 Aesopian also-ran	53 Finished the truck	31 History chapter
17 Delivery truck	51 Through	54 \$ dispenser	35 1996 Wes Craven movie
18 Gordius' poser	52 Scalp	55 In the thick of the place?	36 Used a colander
19 Pond carp	53 Finished the truck	56 Moun-taineer's goal	39 AI Hirt hit
20 Kirk or Queeg, for ex.	54 \$ dispenser	57 Moun-taineer's goal	40 Release
21 Wanted poster	55 In the thick of the place?	58 Moun-taineer's goal	41 Unwanted e-mail
23 Cattle call	56 Moun-taineer's goal	59 Moun-taineer's goal	43 Con
25 Get more gas	57 Moun-taineer's goal	60 Moun-taineer's goal	45 Bleachers
28 Burning "Moon-struck" subject	58 Moun-taineer's goal	61 Moun-taineer's goal	46 Neck of the woods
33 Chasing Diego	59 Moun-taineer's goal	62 Moun-taineer's goal	47 Fringe benefit
	60 Moun-taineer's goal	63 Moun-taineer's goal	49 Resort

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CRYPTOQUIP

G N X W N Y W N Y Q W G Z H O
 S M Z S Z Y V H Y W I R W L H W Y Q W O
 R M N S N P L Z R M W L X B G S S L V
 S N P W S X N L W W I R N G B L W .
 Yesterday's Cryptquip: WHEN A LEASEHOLDER VIEWS A MOVIE OR A TV SHOW, WOULD YOU SAY THAT'S RENTER-TAINMENT?
 Today's Cryptquip Clue: S equals T

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.