



Real Madrid striker Ruud van Nistelrooy celebrates after scoring the second of his four goals during their Primera Liga encounter against Osasuna in Pamplona on Sunday.

Ronaldinho magic follows Ruud rage

REUTERS, Madrid



A magnificent Ronaldinho led Barcelona to a dramatic 3-1 comeback win over Real Zaragoza in the Nou Camp on Sunday which moved them back to the top of the Primera Liga.

After the European and Spanish champions had fallen behind to an early strike from Zaragoza's Gabriel Milito, the Brazilian playmaker headed Barca level in the 30th minute.

Then, with both sides reduced to 10 men, he curled a superb free-kick into the top corner with four minutes remaining, and in time added on struck another against the crossbar which Javier Saviola put in with his head.

Barcelona are top with 23 points, one ahead of Sevilla who were held to a goalless draw away to Racing Santander.

Four goals from Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy earned Real Madrid a convincing 4-1 away win over Osasuna that put them third on 20 points.

The former Manchester United frontman scored three before halftime and rounded off an impressive display with a fourth near the end.

He became the league's joint top

scorer with eight goals along with Ronaldinho, Sevilla's Frederic Kanoute and Zaragoza's Diego Milito.

It was his second hat-trick of the season. The other was against Levante in a 4-1 away win in September.

"Two years ago I also scored four in a Champions League match against Sparta Prague but today was different because we only had four or five chances and every one went in," said Van Nistelrooy.

Getafe are level on 19 points with Zaragoza but fifth on goal difference after midfielder Nacho pounced on an error from Real Mallorca goalkeeper Toni Prats to give Bernd Schuster's side a 1-0 win.

Valencia who drew 1-1 at home against Athletic Bilbao on Saturday are a point back in sixth place.

The traditionally hostile reception given to Real in Pamplona ensured a turbo-charged opening as Osasuna tried to impose themselves early on.

Cameroon striker Pierre Webo had just headed over the bar from a good position when Real struck in the 12th minute to take the wind out of the home side's sails.

Robinho's long-range effort was too powerful for goalkeeper Ricardo to hold and Van Nistelrooy, who scored two in the King's Cup during the week, was on hand to slot the loose ball into the net.

Real doubled the lead in the 27th minute when Guti and Robinho

combined well on the edge of the area, but as a defender intervened the ball spun clear to Van Nistelrooy, who poached his second at the far post.

The game was effectively settled just before the break when Raul's pass put Van Nistelrooy through on goal and he scored left-footed inside Ricardo's near post.

Former Real player Valdo pulled a goal back for Osasuna with a header from a corner in the 64th minute as they resorted to increasingly physical methods to try and get back into the game.

But it was Van Nistelrooy who had the last word, collecting a pass from Emerson wide on the left, advancing and then curling a side-footed shot into the far post from the edge of the area, six minutes from time.

Two attack-minded teams put on a pulsating display of open football in the Nou Camp as Zaragoza decided to take Barcelona on at their own game.

After being forced to soak up

intense early pressure Victor Fernandez's side scored from a corner in the 16th minute when Argentine defender Gabriel Milito arrived unmarked to volley home from close range.

Barca's defence looked shaky but they drew level when Ronaldinho rose to head Deco's corner in at the far post.

The game erupted in controversy midway through the second half as Diego Milito's theatrics got Barca's Thiago Motta sent off in the 72nd minute, as he fell to the floor clutching his face after Motta's hand brushed his chest in a challenge.

After three minutes of heated protests from Barca the game resumed and immediately Saviola was pulled back by Gabriel Milito after he let the ball slip under his foot as the last man back. A red was shown and he followed Motta down the tunnel.

Ronaldinho proved the decisive figure at the end with two stunning freekicks to bring to an end a breathless match.

The only dark spot on the night for Barca was losing Brazilian Edmison and Argentine forward Lionel Messi to injury in the first half.

Barca fear Messi may have broken a metatarsal in his foot which could put him out for up to three months.

TOP SIX

TEAM	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	PTS
Barcelona	10	7	2	1	23	9	23
Sevilla	10	7	1	2	19	10	22
Real Madrid	10	6	2	2	18	7	20
Zaragoza	10	6	1	3	21	14	19
Getafe	10	6	1	3	10	7	19
Valencia	10	5	3	2	15	8	18

Donadoni set to experiment

AFP, Rome

Roma's Alberto Aquilani and AC Milan's Cristian Brocchi were both rewarded for their impressive club performances this season with their first call-ups to the Italy squad on Sunday.

The two midfielders were named in Roberto Donadoni's experimental 20-man group for next Wednesday's friendly against Turkey in Bergamo, northern Italy.

AC Milan trio Andrea Pirlo, Filippo Inzaghi and Alessandro Nesta are all rested together with Inter Milan's Fabio Grosso.

Gennaro Gattuso, Luca Toni, Alessandro Del Piero and Simone Perrotta are all ruled out for the world champions due to injuries.

Roma captain Francesco Totti is again absent having asked Donadoni to leave him out while he considers his international future.

SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS: Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus), Marco Amelia (Livorno)
DEFENDERS: Andrea Barzagli (Palermo), Fabio Cannavaro (Real Madrid/ESP, capt), Marco Materazzi (Inter Milan), Massimo Oddo (Lazio), Manuel Pasqual (Fiorentina), Cristian Zaccardo (Palermo), Gianluca Zambrotta (Barcelona/ESP)
MIDFIELDERS: Alberto Aquilani (Roma), Simone Barone (Torino), Cristian Brocchi (AC Milan), Mauro Camoranesi (Juventus), Daniele De Rossi (Roma), Stefano Mauri (Lazio), Angelo Palombo (Sampdoria)
STRIKERS: Antonio Di Natale (Udinese), Alberto Gilardino (AC Milan), Vincenzo Iaquinta (Udinese), Tommaso Rocchi (Lazio)



Arsenal centre-back William Gallas (C) is surrounded by joyous teammates after he scored the team's third goal against Liverpool in their Premiership clash at the Emirates Stadium on Sunday.

Liverpool Gunned down

AFP, London

Arsenal finally found their killer instinct to effectively end woeful Liverpool's title hopes with a 3-0 win on Sunday.

Arsene Wenger's side have shown an acute lack of ruthlessness this season but they cruised to victory at the Emirates Stadium thanks to goals from Mathieu Flamini, Kolo Toure and William Gallas.

After several weeks bemoaning their team's poor finishing, Arsenal fans were able to hail three unlikely heroes as Flamini and Toure, who began the day without a goal between them this season, scored either side of half time before centre-back Gallas added a late third.

Liverpool had arrived in north London on the back of five consecutive wins but this lacklustre display, reminiscent of their surrender against Manchester United last month, condemned them to a fifth consecutive away league defeat.

Rafa Benitez's side are now 14 points behind leaders United and, with just one away league goal this season, it is unlikely they will end their 17-year wait to win the title.

Victory was a massive relief for Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger after a torrid week in which he had gone into hiding after his touchline row with West Ham counterpart Alan Pardew last Sunday.

The Gunners move into third place in the table with this win but are still ten points behind United themselves.

Alexander Hleb surged in from the right wing and slipped a reverse pass to Fabregas, who cut the ball back for Flamini, taking advantage of a borderline offside decision, to mark his first league start this season with a close range finish.

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard was once again stuck out on the right wing despite the absence of injured midfielder Momo Sissoko and he responded with a subdued display that was perfectly summed up by a woefully miscued shot early in the second half.

Arsenal could only be heartened to see one of Liverpool's main threats so marginalized and they took full advantage in the 54th minute.

Fabregas and Henry combined to feed van Persie but when he momentarily lost control it appeared the danger had passed.

But Liverpool's ponderous defence allowed van Persie time to recover and slide a simple pass to Toure. The centre-back cantered past Sami Hyypia and rolled his shot under Reina for his first goal of the season.

Liverpool wasted a chance to hit back immediately when Boudewijn Zenden, unmarked just six yards out, headed over from Gerrard's free-kick.

Gallas completed a miserable day for Liverpool, who finished with Gerrard arguing with John Arne Riise, when he punished terrible marking to head home Fabregas's free-kick in the 79th minute.

TOP SIX

TEAM	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	PTS
Man United	12	10	1	1	27	5	31
Chelsea	12	9	1	2	22	7	28
Arsenal	11	6	3	2	19	6	21
Aston Villa	12	5	6	1	15	9	21
Bolton	12	6	3	3	12	11	21
Portsmouth	12	6	2	4	17	10	20

Messi out for three months

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona forward Lionel Messi will be out of action for three months after injuring his left foot in a league game against Zaragoza on Sunday.

The Catalan club said that the young Argentine star had broken a bone in his foot after an eighth minute tackle, but had stayed on the field only to come off 15 minutes later after another blow to the injury.

Messi's injury is a further blow to Barcelona's hopes of retaining the Spanish league title and the Champions League trophy with striker Samuel Eto'o also out for five months with a bad knee injury.

Brazilian midfielder Edmison was also injured in the game against Zaragoza twisting an ankle and he will be out for around 10 days.

England lose eight

AFP, London

England's preparations for their friendly clash with Holland in Amsterdam on Wednesday were further disrupted on Monday when Aaron Lennon withdrew from the squad.

The tricky Tottenham winger, whose emergence was one of the main factors in David Beckham being cast into the international wilderness, had been expected to make his first England start on Wednesday night.

But a knee injury prompted England's medics to send him back to his club for treatment on Monday, forcing head coach Steve McClaren into a rethink.

Lennon is the eighth player to withdraw from the 28-man squad McClaren named last week for a match he hopes will restore morale after last month's disappointing Euro 2008 qualifying displays, in which England drew with Macedonia at home and lost in Croatia.

Manchester United full-back Gary Neville, who has suffered a recurrence of calf problems that have dogged him this season, is the most significant absentee.

But McClaren will also have to do without Charlton striker Darren Bent, Middlesbrough wide-man Stewart Downing, Newcastle captain Scott Parker and Lennon's Tottenham team-mates Ledley King and Jermaine Jenas, all of whom are ruled out by injury.

Wigan goalkeeper Chris Kirkland was excused the trip in order to

Inter, Palermo roll on

REUTERS, Rome



A dramatic stoppage-time strike by Julio Cruz gave Inter Milan a 2-1 win at Parma on Sunday to keep pace at the top of Serie A with Palermo who enjoyed a comfortable 3-0 victory over Torino.

Inter seemed set to slip back to second in the division after Zlatan Ibrahimovic's early goal was countered by Parma striker Igor Budan.

But Cruz's late goal gave Inter 27 points from 11 matches, level with Palermo who had brushed aside Torino in an earlier match with goals by Eugenio Corini, David Di Michele and Amauri.

AS Roma lie third on 23 points after Francesco Totti scored twice in a 2-1 win at AC Milan on Saturday.

Inter started aggressively at Parma's Tardini stadium. Fabio Grosso hit the bar then in the 15th minute Ibrahimovic gave them the lead, chipping down a ball on the edge of the area before turning his marker and thumping a shot into the bottom corner.

Parma, however, raised their game, and equalised in the 26th minute, when Antonio Bocchetti

burst down the left and crossed for Budan to turn the ball neatly past visiting keeper Julio Cesar.

They continued to threaten the Serie A giants at the start of the second half, Domenico Morfeo whipping the ball fractionally over the bar.

As the game entered its final 15 minutes Inter took control and it was only the acrobatics of home keeper Alfonso De Lucia that kept the scores level.

A skidding free-kick by Grosso was turned behind for a corner. De Lucia then pulled off a fingertip save to keep out a Cruz header and pushed a Santiago Solari shot on to his post.

Inter finally hit the target in the second minute of stoppage time. Javier Zanetti crossed into the box. De Lucia beat away Cruz's initial header, but could not prevent the Argentine international volleying

home the rebound.

Palermo's victory, their fifth in a row in Serie A, equalled the club's best winning run in the division, which dates back to the 1961-62 season.

Torino, who have been treading water just above the relegation zone since earning promotion last season, rarely looked capable of causing an upset.

Di Michele created the first goal just before halftime, breaking down the right and cutting the ball across the area for Simplicio to turn smoothly into the path of Corini who swept it into the net.

Di Michele himself scored in the 69th minute when he went through alone on goal and chipped keeper Christian Abbiati.

Di Michele was also involved in Palermo's third goal, providing the defence-splitting pass for Amauri to angle a shot past Abbiati.

"It was a tight match for about 15 minutes. At that stage it could have gone either way, but after that I think we took control," said Palermo coach Francesco Guidolin.

"We played an excellent match today. We showed the solidity that we've been looking for, without giving up some of the other aspects of our game."

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

TOP SIX

TEAM	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	PTS
Palermo	11	9	0	2	26	15	27
Inter Milan	11	8	3	0	24	13	27
Roma	11	7	2	2	19	8	23
Siena	11	4	5	2	12	10	16
Atalanta	11	4	4	3	17	16	16
Catania	11	4	4	3	16	17	16



Inter Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic (R) runs away from teammates Fabio Grosso (L) and Ivan Cordoba to celebrate his goal against Parma during their Serie A encounter at the Tardini Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP