



PHOTO: AFP

IL FANTASTICO: AS Roma captain Francesco Totti embarks on his trademark celebration after scoring against Atalanta in their Serie A match at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Saturday.

TOTTI FIRES BRACE Inter unbeatable

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan beat Siena 2-0 at home in an Italian league match on Saturday to stretch their

winning sequence to 11 in all competitions for their best victory run in more than half a century.

Nicolas Burdisso got on the scoresheet in the 11th minute followed by Hernan Crespo nine minutes after the break to secure Inter's seventh consecutive league victory.

Roberto Mancini's side are unbeaten since the start of the league season, with 11 wins and three draws, giving them 36 points and a four-point lead on AS Roma, who beat Atalanta 2-1 in Saturday's late game.

Since October 27, Inter have won all their matches including seven in the league, two in the Italian Cup and two in the Champions League.

Apart from the header by

Burdisso from a corner and the flick over Siena keeper Alex Manninger in the 54th minute by Crespo for the two goals, Inter also excelled at the other end with Brazilian keeper Julio Cesar saving a penalty from Liechtenstein striker Mario Frick five minutes after the break.

Mancini, speaking to Italian television, said afterwards: "We played better against Reggina (1-0 victory in their last home match), but this game was difficult.

"If Siena had converted their penalty, the complexion of the match could have changed. However we controlled the game well and were able to continue that until the end of the game. It wasn't easy but the boys were up to it."

Inter now hold a 25-point lead over city rivals AC Milan, who started the season with an eight-point penalty and currently sit sixth from bottom.

They are also through to the knock-out stages of the Champions League but need to beat Bayern Munich away on Tuesday to top the group.

Roma are second with Palermo third, nine points off the lead, and Livorno come next a mammoth 16 points behind Inter.

Roma's victory was no easy matter and they had fallen a goal behind by the break following the 19th minute strike from Atalanta's Riccardo Zampagna after a good move.

Lack of discipline in the second half however meant Atalanta conceded two penalties after fouling Simone Perrotta then Francesco Totti and it was the latter who converted both in the 50th and 63rd minutes to complete the fightback.

Before the game, three Atalanta supporters were injured in clashes with Roma fans, and one was in a serious condition in hospital after being stabbed, Ansa newsagency reported.

Two coaches of Atalanta supporters got stuck in heavy traffic and fans got off, probably to walk the rest of the way, about an hour before kick-off. They then came into contact with Roma fans also walking to the Olympic stadium which sparked off the incidents.

L'POOL BANISH AWAY BLUES United stretch lead

AFP, London



Sir Alex Ferguson's belief that Manchester United can reclaim the Premier

title has been bolstered after his side emerged victorious from a scrap with Middlesbrough to pull six points clear of Chelsea.

"Consistency is what wins championships and we have got that at the moment," Ferguson said after watching his side claim a 2-1 victory that ensured they avoided the fate of Chelsea, who lost at the Riverside in August.

"It was a very important result for us because Middlesbrough is not an easy place to come, they have shown that in the past," the United manager added.

"But the lads have shown great resolution and we have got a good result."

Chelsea, who did not play this weekend, could find themselves nine points behind the leaders by the time they kick off against Arsenal on December 10, if United can overcome Manchester City 24 hours earlier.

Elsewhere, Arsenal moved up to

third and gave their frustrated fans a much-needed tonic with a convincing 3-0 win over north London rivals Tottenham.

Liverpool registered a first away win this season with a 4-0 win at Wigan while Sheffield United escaped from the relegation zone by beating bottom side Charlton 2-1.

Scotland midfielder Darren Fletcher was United's match-winner, heading in from close range two minutes after Boro sub James Morrison had cancelled out Louis Saha's first-half penalty.

Emmanuel Adebayor's early strike and two penalties from stand-in captain Gilberto Silva allowed Arsenal to make light of the absence of injured skipper Thierry Henry with a 3-0 win over Spurs.

The 152nd north London derby was a match the Gunners could not afford to lose after successive defeats at Bolton and Fulham.

"We were under a lot of mental pressure," acknowledged manager Arsene Wenger afterwards, "but the team responded well."

With Portsmouth drawing 2-2 with Aston Villa and Bolton losing 1-0 at Reading, the win sent Arsenal into two crucial matches on high and in third place.

Wenger's men travel to Porto on

Wednesday needing a point to reach the knockout stages of the Champions League, four days before their showdown with Chelsea.

Spurs boss Martin Jol bemoaned what he regarded as a missed opportunity after watching Steed Malbranque squander a glorious early chance to give his side the lead.

"We saw that Thierry Henry was not playing and we knew Arsenal had lost recent games," said the Dutchman. "We sensed this was an opportunity, so we are disappointed."

Liverpool's dismal run on the road ended with a 4-0 demolition of Wigan. Craig Bellamy's early double was followed by a Dirk Kuyt strike and an own goal by Wigan forward Lee McCulloch inside the first 35 minutes.

Reds boss Rafa Benitez is hopeful that Bellamy's performance is a sign of things to come from the Welsh striker, who was cleared of assault charges in a Cardiff court on Wednesday.

"I think he knew he needed to show people he is a good player and maybe his mind is clear now and it's easier for him," Benitez said.

Bolton's push for Champions League football suffered a setback with Kevin Doyle the hero for

Reading once again. A 33rd-minute strike was the Ireland striker's eighth league goal of the season.

At Fratton Park, a deflected strike from Colombia's Juan Pablo Angel earned Aston Villa a point eight minutes from time.

The equaliser came just two minutes after Matt Taylor had claimed his second goal of the afternoon, from the spot, to put Portsmouth ahead. Gareth Barry had given Villa the lead with a first-half penalty.

Blackburn's African connection helped them overcome Fulham 2-0, with Congolese striker Shabani Nonda and South Africa's Benni McCarthy both on the mark at Ewood Park.

Club captain Chris Morgan and veteran winger Keith Gillespie scored second-half goals for Sheffield United as Neil Warnock's side came from behind to claim a precious win over Charlton.

Ireland midfielder Andy Reid's 17th-minute strike had given the visitors hope of a first win under new boss Les Reed but they ultimately succumbed to their tenth defeat of the season.

Totti breaks penalty hoodoo

INTERNET, undated

Roma captain Francesco Totti believes he's well and truly buried his spot-kick doubts after his brace against Atalanta last night.

"It was too much of an important moment and I remained cool-headed until the last second, which wasn't at all easy," said the Roma captain following the 2-1 victory.

The Giallorossi were trailing 1-0 at half-time before Totti successfully scored two - technically three, as the second had to be repeated due to encroachment.

He had been on the verge of forgoing spot-kick duties after missing three penalties this season between Serie A and the Champions League.

"I always attempt to forget the mistakes of the past. Of course, when you step up in a tense situation, you just try to do your best."

Pele jibes at Ronaldo weight

INTERNET, undated

Pele has hit out at the weight of his compatriot Ronaldo again during a meeting in Vienna on Friday.

The former football superstar made his remarks to Spanish press agency EFE. "Ronaldo's problem, as ever: his weight. He should do something about it. If he wants to become the Ronaldo he was again he needs to train to slim down. Else he will, as he does now, stagger towards an unglorious end of his career."

It is not the first time Pele criticises the Real Madrid striker, and the relationship between the two has been cold at best.

Ronaldo has yet to comment.

Boo-boys confuse Emerson

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Brazilian midfielder Emerson has said he is mystified after being jeered by his club's fans.

Emerson, 30, who arrived at the start of the season from Juventus, was speaking in an interview published in El Pais Saturday.

He and fellow defensive midfielder Mahamadou Diarra - another pre-season recruit by Italian coach Fabio Capello - have both suffered at the hands of boo-boys this season.

"Here they have no respect. This has never happened to me before," said Emerson. "Maybe it's because I have just arrived and the fans don't know me."

Real notoriously impatient fans have not warmed to Capello's defensive style of play and the two defensive midfield anchors seem to be taking the brunt of their dissatisfaction.

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PHOTO: INTERNET

Two-goal Liverpool striker Craig Bellamy (L) places the ball in the top corner of the net over the despairing dive of the Wigan goalkeeper during their Premiership match at the JJB Stadium on Saturday.

'Ronaldo is a cheat'

Football

AFP, Middlesbrough

Cristiano Ronaldo was accused of cheating by an angry Gareth Southgate after the midfielder's controversial role in Manchester United's 2-1 Premiership victory at Middlesbrough.

A clearly upset Boro manager labelled the Portuguese international a serial diver for the way he helped to break the deadlock by going to ground to earn a crucial first-half penalty.

Louis Saha banished the memory of his Champions League spot kick miss at Celtic to bury his 10th goal of the season, paving the way to a victory that increased the leaders' advantage over second-placed Chelsea to a commanding six points.

Ronaldo made the most of an innocuous first-half challenge with Boro's Australian international keeper Mark Schwarzer, as replays revealed minimal contact, and Southgate said: "The man's cheated on the night, it's as simple as that."

"It's very difficult for the referee,

because it happens very quickly and I can't blame him, but how many times are we going to see it?"

"The lad's got a history of doing it, and in the end it's cost us the game because it gave us a mountain to climb. There's clearly no contact whatsoever, the keeper's done everything to get out of the way and the lad goes down once again, there's a history of it. It's never a penalty."

"I don't know what you do to stamp it out, and it happened again in the game after that for a free-kick. It's for people who are better qualified than me to deal with."

Southgate could barely bring himself to discuss Ronaldo's pivotal role, such was his annoyance, and he added: "To be honest, I'm not interested in talking about him. He plays the way he obviously thinks is the right way and that's fine."

"You'd hope some players would perform in a manner they should do and when they've got a chance to stay on their feet they don't try to look for a penalty."

Alex Ferguson insisted the 19th-minute clash merited a penalty, although the Manchester United

manager admitted his sympathy for referee Chris Foy. He said: "It was hard for the referee but of course it was a clear cut penalty."

"It looks as though the keeper hasn't touched him, but there was clearly intent. What's Cristiano going to do? He was going to get carted anyway."

Southgate, who revealed defender Jonathan Woodgate should be fit to face Tottenham Hotspur on Tuesday after being forced off at half-time through illness, believes United can hold-off Chelsea to end the London club's two-season title domination. "United are an excellent side," he added.

Only a fine Schwarzer display kept Boro in the hunt following Saha's confident penalty, as United dominated en route to a ninth victory in their last 10 league games.

Despite Abel Xavier hitting the post with a first-half header, it came as a surprise when the hosts equalised through substitute James Morrison's angled second-half volley, as Argentine defender Gabriel Heinze failed to clear Stewart Downing's cross.

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PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona's diminutive midfielder Xavi (C) shifts between the challenges of Levante players Juan Francisco Nino (R) and Alvaro during their Primera Liga encounter in Valencia on Saturday.

Levante hold Barca

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard paid for his decision to rest Brazilian playmaker Ronaldinho as his league leaders slipped up at Levante where

they were held 1-1. Rijkaard had decided to rest the world player of the year ahead of Tuesday's crucial Champions League clash with Germany's Werder Bremen.

The reigning European champions must win that game or become the first reigning Champions to be eliminated at the first league stage since the Champions League was formed in 1992.

Andres Iniesta was brought into to replace the samba star with Deco afforded the task of pulling the strings behind lone striker Eidur

Gudjohnson.

But the gamble did not pay off despite Portuguese midfielder Deco's brilliant first half freekick giving the visitors the lead on 40 minutes.

The Brazilian born star, who was also a Champions League winner with Porto in 2004, picked himself off the floor after he was brought down 20 yards from goal to curl a delightful freekick in off the near post.

Barcelona dominated but made a number of mistakes at the back and goalkeeper Victor Valdes was often called into action to save his defence's blushes.

And Barca were made to pay for that sloppiness as Brazilian defender Luis Alvaro found himself unmarked at the back post to score from an Olivier Kapo freekick.

The dropped points mean Barca could lose top spot on Sunday if their city rivals Espanyol lose at home to second placed Sevilla.

Bitter rivals Real Madrid could also close their gap to the Catalans

to a single point if they win at home to Athletic Bilbao.

Meanwhile freefalling Valencia are stuck in eighth spot, 12 points off the pace, after their third league defeat in a row and sixth match without a win.

Crippled by a long injury list that includes the likes of David Villa, Fernando Morientes, Luis Miguel and David Albelda, Valencia fell to an embarrassing 2-0 defeat to newly-promoted Recreativo Huelva.

Earlier in the season Valencia topped the table but two points from their last six games has all but ended their title hopes.

Aitor Tomavaca opened the scoring in the first minute after latching onto the rebound when Javi Guerrero's shot came back off the woodwork.

French former Liverpool forward Florent Sinama-Pongolle sealed the win eight minutes from time to move Recreativo into fifth place.