

Primera Liga Real half way there

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid were crowned as the winter champions in Spain, the traditional name given to the First Division leaders at the halfway point in the season, after beating Deportivo La Coruna 3-1 on Saturday.

The victory propelled Real back to the top with 35 points from their 19 games.

Deportivo, who started the day in pole position, slipped to second and stayed on 33 points, and have now gone more than 36 yeras since they last won a league match in the Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

Fittingly for a holiday fixture - the day before Twelfth Night is celebrated with gifts for all and some extensive feasting - the match proved to be the perfect present for football fans.

Three goals within the first eight minutes proved to be a heady aperitif for an exciting main course and although only one more goal was added, the thrills rarely stopped until the players were back in the dressing rooms.

Just four minutes had elapsed before Real's Spanish international striker Fernando Morientes was whistled up for being fractionally offside while clear in front of goal and with the ball at his feet.

However, it took Morientes just another minute before he deceived his Deportivo marker again and was clear on the left side of the box.

Raul Gonzalez found his team mate with an inch-perfect flick from the edge of the penalty area and Morientes had no trouble notching up his seventh goal of the season.

However, the hosts' lead only lasted a matter of 90 seconds before Deportivo's Dutch striker Roy Makaay equalised from the spot after Fernando Pavon had brought down former Real Madrid player Victor Sanchez with a late lunge.

One might have expected both sides to take a brief breather but Zinedine Zidane was not content to sit back and he produced a piece of individual brilliance which in the eyes of many Real Madrid fans will justify alone his world record 64.9



Real Madrid superstar Zinedine Zidane being congratulated by teammate Roberto Carlos on scoring against Deportivo la Coruna at Madrid on January 5.

million dollars transfer fee last summer.

He picked up the ball on the edge of the area, tantalised the visitors' defenders with four touches before blasting it past Francisco Molina in the Deportivo goal.

Raul completed the scoring on 63 minutes after controlling the ball with his left foot and then unleashing a thunderbolt with his right for his 10th goal of the season.

Rayo Vallecano spend their lives looking enviously across the

Primera Liga's top six

Spanish league table after Saturday's late matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):						
Real Madrid	19	10	5	4	36	22 35
Deportivo	19	10	3	6	33	25 33
Celta Vigo	19	8	8	3	36	22 32
Real Betis	18	9	4	5	19	15 31
Athletic Bilbao	18	8	7	3	26	23 31
Alaves	17	9	3	5	19	10 30

Spanish capital at Real and for several months have also been looking up from the bottom of the Spanish First Division at the rest of the top flight of Spanish soccer.

The side from Madrid's industrial suburbs have also been the victim of two robberies in the last four days but turned into bandits themselves on Saturday as they got a late goal to draw 2-2 at Celta Vigo.

Bosnian international striker Elvir Bolic found the net a minute into injury time to give the strugglers from the Spanish capital a surprise share of the spoils, only their third away point this season and the first time since April that they have scored more than a solitary goal on the road in the league.

The draw meant Celta stay in third with 32 points from 19 matches.

Rayo opened the scoring after 36 minutes when Bolo Perez headed home a Jordi Ferron corner.

However, Celta's Brazilian-born Spanish international Catanha headed home a Juanfran Garcia cross just eight minutes after the break, and Edu got the Galician's second goal with a long-range effort on 65 minutes, to put Celta in front until they lowered their guard in the final few seconds.

The draw brings a little solace at the end of a wretched week for Rayo.

On Wednesday, four players had their clothes stolen from their dressing room while they were training and on Friday the club offices themselves were subject to an armed robbery, while team coach Gregorio Manzano was giving a press conference in an adjoining room.

However, Rayo are still propping up the Spanish First Division with just 13 points from 18 games.

Sevilla got an impressive 2-0 away victory at Villarreal on Saturday.

Francisco Casquero drilled home a free kick after 26 minutes and then the hosts were reduced to 10 men eight minutes before half time when former Spanish international Guillermo Amor was given his marching orders.

The Andalusian visitors confirmed their superiority with a second goal just before the whistle from Moises Garcia.

Serie A Milan third for the moment

AFP, Lecce

AC Milan made a winning start to the year 2002, winning 1-0 at Lecce to move provisionally into third place in the Italian First Division which resumes this weekend after the Christmas break.

The victory at the Stadio del Mare was courtesy of their Spanish striker Jose Mari who headed home a late cross from midfielder Andrea Pirlo to lift Milan, fifth at the start of play, above Chievo who nonetheless have two games in hand over the San Siro outfit and Juventus.

Deep into injury time Lecce missed a glorious chance to equalise when AC Milan's experienced defender Alessandro Costacurta conceded the ball and Max Tonnetto raced clear only to fire his shot straight at the legs of visiting goalkeeper Christian Abbiati.

It was a vital three points for Milan - who, deprived of key injured players Paolo Maldini, Filippo Inzaghi and Portugal's Manuel Rui Costa - were far from convincing against their relegation-threatened opponents, the last side from the south of Italy left in the First Division.

Jose Mari's decider came after Lecce goalkeeper Antonio Chimenti made a fine flying save to push a shot from AC Milan's Brazilian midfielder Serginho just over the bar for a corner.

At the other end Abbiati did well to save after a shot from Lecce's Slovenian defender Sebastjan Cimirotic took a wicked bounce just in front of him.

The first half was a dire affair with neither side creating a clear chance. Lecce's best effort came when Alessandro Conticchio fired just wide while AC Milan had the occasional half chance.

Milan's Argentinian defender Jose Antonio Chamot should have directed his shot on target when played in by Pirlo while Jose Mari's header also missed the mark after a clever floated ball by Costacurta.

AC Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso fired just over in the closing seconds of the first period.

On Sunday leaders Inter Milan entertain Lazio in the evening match although by that stage they may have lost top spot to defending champions AS Roma who host Torino.



PIERLUIGI COLLINA

Collina 2001's top referee

Football

REUTERS, Wiesbaden, Germany

Italy's Pierluigi Collina has been named the world's best referee for the fourth time by the International Federation of Football History and Statistics.

Collina, noted for his bald head and piercing stare, topped the voting for 2001 by a jury of media

specialists from 78 countries. He polled a record 129 points.

The 41-year-old financial consultant's fourth success equals the record of Hungarian Sandor Puhl.

Sweden's Anders Frisk (47 points) was placed second with Kim Milton Nielsen (34) of Denmark third.

The top 18 features 14 Europeans, three from South America and one from Central America, but none from Africa, Asia or Oceania.

TOP 10 REFEREES OF 2001

1. Pierluigi Collina (Italy)	129 points
2. Anders Frisk (Sweden)	47
3. Kim Milton Nielsen (Denmark)	34
4. Vitor Manuel Melo Pereira (Portugal)	23
5. Horacio Marcelo Elizondo (Argentina)	22
6. Hugh Dallas (Scotland)	21
7. Dick Jol (Netherlands)	19
8. Markus Merk (Germany)	18
9. Urs Meier (Switzerland)	17
10. Stefano Braschi (Italy)	15



Alan Shearer (C), Newcastle United's veteran striker, piercing the Crystal Palace wall to score at St James' Park on January 5.

FA Cup

No hiccups for big guns

Football

AFP, London

The romance of the FA Cup dimmed Saturday as all the Premiership sides save Sunderland came through safely against lower division opposition in their third round matches.

Only First Division West Brom held their heads high as they pulled off the major shock when they beat Sunderland 2-1 coming back from a goal down.

Both non-league clubs exited - Canvey Island were always behind against Burnley losing 4-1 with Ian Moore grabbing a hat-trick, but Dagenham at least led Ipswich Town 1-0 before falling away to lose 4-1.

Kevin Phillips' ninth goal of the season, a spectacular overhead kick, gave Sunderland the lead in the 11th minute against West Brom.

But a Neil Clement penalty and Andy Johnson's second-half header secured victory for West Brom, who twice hit the woodwork in their third half.

Dejected Sunderland manager Peter Reid said: "It's obviously a massive disappointment. I wouldn't say it's the lowest I've been but I'm certainly not a happy chappy."

At Anfield, Cup holders Liverpool beat Birmingham 3-0 with Frenchman Nicolas Anelka scoring his first for the club since joining on loan. England striker Michael Owen

had earlier put Liverpool 2-0 ahead.

The game was a repeat of last season's English League Cup final which Liverpool won only after a penalty shoot-out.

Phil Thompson, continuing to deputise as Liverpool boss while Gerard Houllier recovers from heart surgery, said: "It was great for Michael to score another couple of goals."

"His second was reminiscent of Cardiff in the Cup final. It was a similar position and he was going away from goal, but he has finished it magnificently."

"It was the goal of a man in form. Other players might not have tried that. He linked up well with Nico (Anelka) and Nico thoroughly deserved the third goal."

"He worked extremely hard and they have both played their part in a great overall team performance."

Former Liverpool captain Thompson also responded to Birmingham chairman David Gold's claim earlier in the week that Liverpool had "stolen" the League Cup.

"We deserved to win the Cup, contrary to what other people may think," he said.

"It's been a difficult time and people have been disrespectful to the boys."

"I thought they showed a great attitude because in these games it can be very, very difficult if your concentration and focus are not right."

"If you don't go out there and do it, then there's a banana skin wait-

ing for you. I thought they were excellent."

Others thinking about what might have been were Second Division Blackpool and First Division Barnsley who poked their noses in front against Premiership opponents Charlton Athletic and Blackburn Rovers respectively before Charlton won 2-1 and Blackburn drew 1-1 with Barnsley.

Meanwhile Chelsea had goalkeeper Carlo Cudicini to thank for a goalless draw against First Division Norwich, the Italian making a series of fine saves.

Chelsea defender John Terry, arrested and charged with affray following an incident at a nightclub on Friday, came off the bench in the second half.

On the south coast Third Division Leyton Orient produced a minor shock, Portsmouth's Japanese goalkeeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi repeatedly picking the ball out of the net in a 4-1 reverse at the First Division strugglers Fratton Park ground.

But Everton kept a clean sheet with a hard fought 1-0 win away to Stoke City.

Everton's former Celtic central defender Alan Stubbs eased the pressure on manager Walter Smith as his cracking 53rd minute freekick saw off the highflying Second Division side.

Newcastle had a 2-0 home win against Crystal Palace to earn the Tynesiders a place in the fourth round.

Former England captain Alan

Shearer blasted home a first-half free-kick and Clarence Acuna added a second for the Magpies.

Earlier, Arsenal, last season's beaten finalists, had no problem clinching a 4-2 victory away to First Division Watford at Vicarage Road, going 2-0 up early on thanks to goals from Thierry Henry and Fredrik Ljunberg before Gifton Noel-Williams pulled one back for Watford.

But the second half belonged to Arsenal with goals from Nwankwo Kanu and substitute Dennis Bergkamp before Marcus Gayle scored a consolation goal for Watford in extra time.

"I am happy we have qualified for the fourth round. At 2-0 up we took it too easy but we came back. Overall we did the job," Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger said.

"We were patient and scored the third and fourth goals. We came back and dictated the game and were not really under threat."

On Sunday Premiership champions Manchester United come up against their former goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel when they travel to Aston Villa while Leeds have a potentially tricky encounter in Wales against Second Division Cardiff.

Premiership strugglers are also up against Second Division opposition, Bristol Rovers, while West Ham are away to Third Division Macclesfield in what could equally be another Cup upset.

Di Canio relishing the prospect of playing for the Premiership champions.

The 33-year-old striker has been linked with United for weeks and he is expected to complete a 3.5million pound (5.5 million dollar) move from West Ham to Old Trafford within the next few days.

He told the Sunday People: "Of course, everybody should feel very good when you listen to good words from Sir Alex Ferguson, one of the best managers in the world, talking about you and seeing you in his club and his team."

Di Canio relishing the prospect

AFP, London

The on-off saga of West Ham star Paolo Di Canio's mooted move to Manchester United looked imminent Sunday after the Italian said he relished the prospect of playing for the Premiership champions.

The 33-year-old striker has been linked with United for weeks and he is expected to complete a 3.5million pound (5.5 million dollar) move from West Ham to Old Trafford within the next few days.

He told the Sunday People: "Of course, everybody should feel very good when you listen to good words from Sir Alex Ferguson, one of the best managers in the world, talking about you and seeing you in his club and his team."

"We are talking about the best team - alongside Real Madrid in my opinion - in the world. Playing for them has to be fantastic."

"You have to be happy because the people recognise the job you do and that you are a talent and a character and a personality for playing at the top level."

Di Canio also told prospective new team-mate David Beckham to stay with United rather than move abroad.

"I don't think he needs to go abroad. If he wants a new cultural or footballing experience then that's his choice, but if it was him, I'd never change. I would never leave Manchester United," said the Italian - who himself looks about to arrive.

Crespo, Batistuta patriotic as ever

AFP, Rome

Lazio striker Hernan Crespo and AS Roma forward Gabriel Batistuta said Saturday they were both proud of their Argentinian nationality and were convinced that the politico-economic crisis gripping their home country was just temporary.

Both men saw at first hand the difficulties facing the country as they had returned home for Christmas but both expressed solidarity with the protesters who have forced president Fernando de la Rúa and his interim replacement Adolfo Rodriguez Saa to resign with street protests.

Crespo said: "I feel really sad to see my country on its knees and even if my family is OK people close to me have still been affected."

"I am not embarrassed at my wealth because I have not stolen it from anyone."

"This crisis affects me because it has hurt my people, my country. But I am struck by the pride of my compatriots and their desire to react. I am sure Argentina will rise again."

"I am proud of the dignity with which the protests have been carried out, apart from the looting in the supermarkets," said the former Parma player.

Batistuta, a long-time playing rival of Crespo, agreed, saying: "It is a sad and grave situation to see people suffering. The fault is with the politicians who have always failed. The people no longer have faith of those driving the car."

"In Argentina they were good and bad politicians - the bad ones won and are in the majority. We need someone who will give faith back to the people. I am optimistic, I am Argentinian and Argentinians are optimists."

Tommasi wins sportsperson award

AFP, Milan

AS Roma's Italian international midfielder Damiano Tommasi has been voted sportsperson of the year by foreign journalists based in Italy.

Tommasi was the revelation of Roma's Championship-winning season and he also established himself firmly in the Italian national side and - barring injury - is a certain first-choice for coach Giovanni Trapattoni in the 2002 World Cup.

The former Verona player, a devout Catholic, also regularly hits the headlines for his political activities, notably his missions of reconciliation to the former Yugoslavia, his role as a prison visitor and his condemnation of American-led bombing of Afghanistan in retaliation for the September 11 terror attacks.

Lazio's Argentinian striker Hernan Crespo was named foreign sportsman of the year. He finished last season as 'capocannoniere' (Serie A top scorer) with 26 goals - the vast majority after Dino Zoff replaced Sven Goran Eriksson in January 2001 - and this season has netted eight.

Brescia's veteran coach Carlo Mazzone - at 64 a Serie A coach since 1967 - won the lifetime's achievements award.

Last year (2000) the same awards were presented respectively to AS Roma's Francesco Totti, Zinedine Zidane and Zoff.