

Serie A Who else but Vieri

Football

AFP, Milan

Christian Vieri was once again basking in glory Monday morning after his late goal gave Inter Milan a 1-0 derby victory over AC Milan - and a one-point lead in Serie A with nine games remaining.

Vieri has almost single-handedly piloted Inter to the top with 18 goals in just 17 Serie A starts in a season where he missed eight matches through injury but his strike on Sunday sets up Inter perfectly for Saturday night's home match with closest challengers Juventus.

Hector Cuper's side approach Saturday's showdown with Juve at the San Siro with a one-point lead over Juve who only defeated Bologna 2-1 courtesy of a late and farcical own goal by Bologna defender Massimo Tarantino.

A further point behind are defending champions Roma who slipped up with a 1-1 draw at Lecce.

It promises to be another weekend of drama with Roma hosting rivals Lazio in the Eternal City derby on Sunday night just 24 hours after Inter and Juve clash at the San Siro.

With Brazilian Ronaldo still getting back to fitness in Rio de Janeiro Vieri has been a talisman for Inter's title challenge as they seek to win the Scudetto that has eluded them since 1989-90 when Giovanni Trapattoni's side featuring German aces Lothar Matthaus, Jurgen Klinsmann and Andreas Brehme won the title.

Sierra Leonian Mohamed Kallon started the season well but has not added to his tally of nine goals since before Christmas while Nicola Ventola is also failing to impress.

Next up for Vieri is a date with his former club Juve whom he nearly rejoined last summer in a swap deal which would have seen Juve's French striker David Trezeguet move the other way.

Roma coach Fabio Capello admitted he would love a striker like Vieri.



PHOTO:INTERNET

VIRTUOSO VIERI: Inter Milan superstar Christian Vieri (R) is over the moon as he takes off his shirt in celebrating his goal against AC Milan at the Meazza Stadium in Milan on March 3.

"I envy Cuper for having Vieri," said Capello. "He always scores goals at the least likely moments. We have drawn so many games because we are not scoring as often as we did last year although I am sure we will get back on track."

Argentinian Cuper returned the

compliment to Capello, saying: "Well I envy the way his team does not concede any goals."

But Vieri is certainly the player of the season so far, his 18 goals bettered only by Piacenza's Dario Hubner who has netted 20 and has played all his club's 25 matches.

His goal at the San Siro came against the run of play but it was a move he started and finished himself, ending Inter's recent poor run against their old foes and banishing memories of the 6-0 thrashing by AC Milan last May.

Juve are still in fine fettle, however, although Tarantino's headed own goal was certainly a candidate for clanger of the season.

Tarantino admitted so himself, saying: "If someone could have given me a spade I would have dug myself a grave and had myself buried."

The goal in effect also buried Bologna's slender title chances and now it is clearly a three-horse race between Inter, Juve and Roma.

Serie A's top six

Italian First Division table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Inter Milan	25	15	7	3	44	21	52
Juventus	25	14	9	2	47	19	51
AS Roma	25	13	11	1	35	15	50
Bologna	25	12	5	8	28	26	41
Chievo	24	11	6	7	42	35	39
AC Milan	25	9	11	5	35	26	38

Ramzy owes it to victim

AFP, Kaiserslautern

A sexual harassment victim appealed to German club Kaiserslautern not to sack the culprit Hany Ramzy, a club statement said on Sunday.

The Egyptian international, 32, was sacked Friday following the court case where he received an eight month suspended prison sentence in connection with an incident in a city centre restaurant.

The victim, a woman in her twenties, has since moved to Australia, but appealed on behalf of the player for his job.

"Ramzy has been punished sufficiently by the court, I want Kaiserslautern to lift their sanction," she said in a statement.

The club subsequently reversed their decision to fire Ramzy.

"Hany is going to donate a significant sum of money to charity and this affair is now closed," said club president Jürgen Friedrich.

The defender, married with one child, was signed by Kaiserslautern from Bundesliga rivals Werder Bremen in 1998.

Urzaiz set to leave

AFP, Bilbao

Athletic Bilbao are resigned to losing their Spanish international striker Ismael Urzaiz, probably to an English or Scottish club, the club said here on Sunday.

Urzaiz, 30 years old with 25 caps to his name, becomes a free agent at the end of the season after six years at the Basque club.

According to the Spanish media over the last week, English Premiership sides Arsenal, Aston Villa, Blackburn, Newcastle and West Ham have all declared an interest in Urzaiz, along with Scottish clubs Rangers and Celtic, and teams in Italy and France.

"There is a big difference between what the club has offered Urzaiz and what Urzaiz wants," said Athletic president Javier Unia on Sunday.

Urzaiz is one of the Spanish First Division's leading scorers this season with 10 goals but this has not impressed Athletic coach Jupp Heynckes.

"Ten goals isn't enough for us to consider renewing his contract at any price," said the German coach recently.

Spanish newspapers have said that Urzaiz is demanding six million euros per year, a figure far beyond Athletic's limited means.

Urzaiz has played nearly 300 Spanish First Division games, and scored 81 goals, in a 12 year career that includes stints at Albacete, Celta Vigo, Rayo Vallecano and Espanyol.

French Cup Lorient set Bordeaux date

AFP, Paris

Lorient booked a League Cup final place with a 1-0 victory over Brittany rivals Rennes in the semi-final on Sunday.

The Stade de France final on April 20 against Bordeaux, who beat Paris Saint Germain 1-0 on Saturday, should feature two of the league's most exciting marksmen.

Jean-Claude Darcheville, one of the revelations of the season with 15 league goals for the second bottom club Lorient, tapped home the second-half winner on Sunday after being gloriously set up by Pascal Feindouano.

Portugal international Pedro Pauleta, with 20 league goals this campaign, gave Bordeaux a 1-0 win over a wasteful PSG in a full blooded encounter at the Parc Des Princes on Saturday.

Phillips going nowhere

AFP, London

Sunderland striker Kevin Phillips has dismissed rumours that he could be on his way out of the Stadium of Light.

Speculation has mounted that Phillips is ready to quit the Premiership strugglers, possibly even for north-east rivals Newcastle.

Sunderland's slide into the relegation mire has heaped pressure on boss Peter Reid and raised suggestions he could be ready to sell his star man to fund an improvement in his squad.

But Phillips' agent Phil Smith rejected any suggestion of a move on Monday.

"We can only reiterate that there have been no discussions of any kind with regards to Kevin Phillips and the story regarding a possible transfer to Newcastle United," he said.

"Kevin wishes to reassure all Sunderland fans that his only efforts at this time are entirely focused on helping Sunderland attain the best possible league position this season," Smith added.

Primera Liga

Valencia back atop

Football

AFP, Madrid

Valencia reclaimed the Spanish league leadership, after relinquishing it for a little under 24 hours to Real Madrid, with a 1-0 win at Real Zaragoza on Sunday.

Francisco Rufete's header after 25 minutes was enough to give Valencia three points from a dire game and return them to the top of the table.

Valencia have 50 points from 28 games while defending champions Real Madrid drift back to second, despite winning 1-0 at Celta Vigo on Saturday, one point in arrears.

In a duel marked by tight defending, both Valencia and Zaragoza had few clear-cut opportunities to score.

Zaragoza's best chances fell in the first half to Martin Vellisca and

Goran Drulic, while Kily Gonzalez twice went close for Valencia.

However, it was left to Rufete to nod home a Salva Ballesta cross for Valencia to notch up a typical victory, by the narrowest of margins.

Inevitably, Valencia coach Rafa Benitez found himself under fire for his tactics, but he defended his position as well as his team had done earlier on Sunday.

"We knew what we had to do, and did it. We were not obsessed with getting the first goal and I was worried about a Zaragoza counter-attack if we went forward and left ourselves exposed.

"I think my tactics justify themselves because we have three more points," said the laconic coach.

By contrast, Barcelona enjoyed themselves at Malaga's expense, with a 5-1 victory over the Costa Del Sol club,

The cornerstone of Malaga's worst defeat in more than two years was a hat-trick by Patrick Kluivert.



PHOTO:INTERNET

TOO HOT TO HANDLE: Barcelona's star striker Patrick Kluivert (L), has his jersey being pulled by Malaga's Fernando Sanz at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on March 3.

Primera Liga's top six

Spanish league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Valencia	28	13	11	4	33	22	50
Real Madrid	28	14	7	7	53	31	49
Deportivo La Coruna	28	14	5	9	41	33	47
Barcelona	28	13	7	8	47	26	46
Real Betis	28	12	10	6	32	24	46
Athletic Bilbao	28	12	9	7	40	39	45

Bundesliga

Dortmund miss out

AFP, Berlin

Borussia Dortmund drew 1-1 with lowly St Pauli and Kaiserslautern edged a five goal thriller at home to Wolfsburg on Sunday but the Bundesliga's prime movers were Bayern Munich.

On form Bayern, on track for an historic fourth consecutive title, beat Stuttgart 2-0 on Saturday to climb within three points of leaders Bayer Leverkusen, who drew 2-2 at Freiburg.

With nine games to go Leverkusen are top with 50 points, Dortmund have 49 after taking just three points from the last 12. Kaiserslautern are third on 48 and resurgent Bayern are breathing down their necks in fourth with 47 points.

It was a great weekend all round for Bayern, who saw rivals Schalke 04 beaten 2-0 at Energie Cottbus, Dortmund drop two points at St Pauli with a 1-1 draw, and Hertha Berlin drop from the title race proper with a 1-1 draw in Cologne.

Despite talk at the Bavarian club that third place in the Bundesliga is their target after a slow start to the season, a fourth straight title is now well within their capabilities.

Coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said he believed things had clicked finally into place for his side.

"I am very happy with the result, as it puts us back in touch with the top.

"We saw the necessary solidity in our game and we now want to keep our positive series going. I'm happy we're in with a chance of another title," said the Bayern boss.

Dortmund's faltering title campaign took a fresh blow and they needed a late penalty to draw level with St Pauli and escape with a point.

Marcio Amoroso converting a spot kick after 82 minutes to save Borussia's blushes after the second bottom side took a 32nd minute lead through Nico Patschinski.

Premiership

MU survive Derby scare

Football

AFP, London

Premiership leaders Manchester United blew the chance to open up a three point gap on second-placed Arsenal Sunday after being held to a 2-2 draw by a struggling but spirited Derby at Pride Park.

But United, who hit the woodwork twice, were lucky to escape with a point when Derby striker Malcolm Christie had a stoppage-time goal disallowed for kicking the ball out of Fabien Barthez's hands before slotting home.

The United goalkeeper had both hands on the ball but did not appear to have full control of it. However, referee Steve Dunn penalised Christie and United were let off the hook.

Moments before that incident Derby had claims for a penalty dismissed by Dunn when Barthez came rushing from his line to punch the ball clear but caught Christie on the back of the head.

Christie scored Derby's equaliser 13 minutes from time after Argentina international Juan Sebastian Veron had given United a deserved 2-1 lead.

Derby went in front early through

Premiership's top six

English Premiership table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Man Utd	29	18	4	7	69	37	58
Arsenal	28	16	9	3	57	31	57
Liverpool	29	16	8	5	47	25	56
Newcastle	28	17	4	7	52	35	55
Leeds	28	11	12	5	37	29	45
Chelsea	27	11	11	5	47	28	44



PHOTO:INTERNET

Ruud Van Nistelrooy (L), Manchester United's Dutch striker, being tackled by Derby County defender Danny Higginbotham at Derby's Pride Park stadium on March 3.

It's a matter of time?

Football

AFP, London

England captain David Beckham expects to sign a new contract with Manchester United before this summer's World Cup finals, it was reported Sunday.

Beckham wants his future settled before he leads his country's bid for glory in Japan and South Korea.

Contract negotiations have been ongoing with the Old Trafford club he joined as a 14-year-old.

Image rights have been the stumbling block, but the 26-year-old midfielder is now close to agreeing a deal which is likely to make him the highest paid player in Britain.

"We are getting closer, and while I don't expect anything to be settled for a few weeks yet, I have a feeling it will be done before the end of the season," Beckham told the News Of The World.

"In a perfect world it will be sorted out before the World Cup finals and I can join up with England with my future settled.

"I recognise that I am only a small cog in the big United machine, and that no individual could ever be bigger than the greatest football club in the world.

"But we live in a commercial world and I am only seeking a fair reward for my contribution to the club's success.

"Even at this late stage in my contract negotiations, I am adamant that the deal has got to be right.

"Over the last few months we have been making progress, and United chief executive Peter Kenyon and managing director David Gill have shown a great willingness and fairness in trying to find a solution."

If Beckham decided to leave United the biggest clubs in the world would be scrambling for his signature, and he admits the challenge of playing in Italy or Spain appeals to him.

"I have daydreamed on occa-

"It was an easy victory and we could have had more goals. After the first goal, everyone relaxed, but it was important to win this game because this season we have thrown away games against theoretically 'weak' teams like Rayo and Osasuna," said Barcelona coach Charly Rexach.

Philip Cocu opened the scoring after just four minutes, by heading home a Kluivert corner, and then Javier Saviola got Barcelona's second after 25 minutes.

Kluivert then scored twice from the spot after 36 and 76 minutes, both penalties coming in similar fashion after a frustrated Vicente Valcarlos had hacked down Saviola.

The Catalan's Dutch international striker then ended his day with his third goal a minute from the whistle, getting on the end of a Rivaldo cross and finishing it off from close range.

Kluivert now has 15 goals to his name, the second highest tally in the Spanish First Division, and just one less than Real Madrid's Fernando Morientes.

Barcelona move up to fourth place with 46 points, one point behind Deportivo La Coruna, who won 1-0 at Sevilla on Saturday to go third.

Real Mallorca won the relegation battle at fellow strugglers Rayo Vallecano, triumphing 2-0 through goals from Cameroon international striker Samuel Eto'o and Veljko Paunovic.

The victory meant Mallorca climbed out of the three-team relegation zone, on goal difference.

Real Sociedad also edged closer to escaping the drop after drawing 1-1 at Osasuna to move up to 16th place.

Las Palmas, who have now not won in their last eight games, descended to 18th after losing 3-1 at Athletic Bilbao.

Athletic's first goal from Francisco Yeste, after 40 minutes, was a 30-yard thunderbolt and possibly the best goal of the week-end in the Spanish First Division.

Bottom club Tenerife drew 1-1 with Espanyol but the point was not enough to lever the Canary islanders out of last place.

Tenerife's Argentine striker Bichi Fuentes got the quickest goal of the day after three minutes, but Espanyol's Raul Tamudo equalised 16 minutes later with his 12th goal of the season, consolidating his late bid for inclusion in Spain's World Cup squad.

Alaves, league leaders before Christmas, ended their run of four consecutive losses with a convincing 3-1 win over Valladolid.

The Basques got an early shock when Valladolid's Fernando Fernandez blasted the ball under the body of Alaves goalkeeper Kike Burgos to put the visitors ahead after nine minutes.

However, Alaves' striker Magno Mocellin equalised after 39 minutes and two second half goals from Delfi Gelf gave Alaves a well-deserved, and increasingly rare, win.