

Serie A Vieri once again

Football

AFP, Milan

Striker Christian Vieri kept Serie A leaders Inter Milan on course for the Italian First Division title on Saturday...

The unconvincing performance was enough for Inter to remain three points ahead of defending champions AS Roma...

That leaves Juve six points behind Inter with five rounds of matches remaining while, at the other end of the table, bottom club Venezia...

At Fiorentina's Stadio Artemio Franchi the hosts took the game to Inter and Portuguese striker Nuno Gomes had already had a goal chalked off for offside...

A corner drifted into the area and the home defenders hesitated, allowing Italian international Vieri to bundle home his 20th goal...

Argentinian Cuper admitted his side's performance had dipped after last Sunday's brilliant display but said: "You can't expect a team to play well every week."

"I knew this would be a difficult week," said Cuper who had cautioned his side against the euphoria that swept the club after last

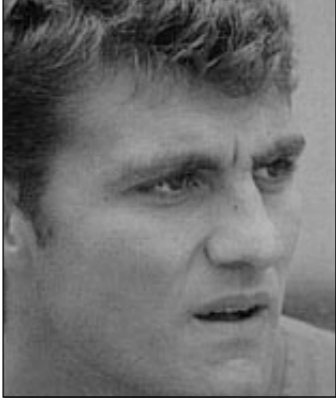
Sunday's match. "We had a lot of players away with their national teams but we managed to do the job."

At Rome, a Roma side depleted by four suspensions and the absence of injured playmaker Francesco Totti broke through after 32 minutes through Montella.

Montella linked up with Argentinian Gabriel Batistuta before putting his side ahead, his 11th goal in five weeks for Roma and Italy since opening his Serie A account for the season on February 24.

Three minutes before the interval Brazilian Emerson made it 2-0 for Roma with his trusty left foot and the same player struck again early in the second period before Argentinian Julio Cruz grabbed a consolation for Bologna.

Roma coach Fabio Capello said:



CHRISTIAN VIERI

"We had a lot of key players missing but this was just what we needed and we will keep going all the way to the wire."

At Turin's Stadio Delle Alpi Argentinian Lopez headed Lazio in front only for Frenchman Trezeguet to square the match before the interval from close range.

Juve coach Marcello Lippi did not duck the issue, saying: "We played badly in the first half while Lazio did well. We still believe in the Scudetto - even if a little less than we did before the match. We know it will be difficult."

Elsewhere AC Milan moved fifth by winning 3-1 at home to Parma.

Marco Di Vaio's 17th of the season put Parma ahead at the San Siro but, in the second half, Filippo Inzaghi scored two and Andrea Pirlo

one from a freekick for Milan.

Chievo, like AC Milan pushing Bologna for the fourth-place spot that would qualify the holders for the Champions League, had to settle for a 2-2 draw at Perugia.

Chievo striker Bernardo Corradi twice gave his side the lead only for Fabio Bazzani and then Mauro Milanese to grab equalisers for Perugia.

It only took Lecce five minutes to make the breakthrough at home to Venezia with Uruguayan midfielder Guillermo Giacomazzi the man but Venezia, who have been bottom since day one, levelled through youngster Patrizio Balleello early in the second period.

However, Giacomazzi's compatriot Javier Ernesto Chevanton wasted little time in sealing Venezia's fate.

Venezia coach Alfredo Magni said: "We must accept our fate and live our last few weeks in Serie A with dignity."

Another Uruguayan on the mark was Torino's Jorge Franco who gave his side a 1-0 win at Verona whose midfielder Vincenzo Italiano was sent off.

Atalanta's Gianni Comandini gave the Bergamo club the lead against Piacenza in first-half injury-time but Giuseppe Cardone hit back after the break to make the final score 1-1.

In another relegation dogfight a Latin American combination gave Udinese a 3-2 win over Brescia.

Goals in the first 14 minutes from first Brazilian Marcos Paulo and then Argentinian Roberto Sosa put Udinese 2-0 up before Jonathan Bachini reduced arrears for Brescia after just 17 minutes.

Early in the second half Sosa bagged his second to make Spanish midfielder Josep Guardiola's late goal irrelevant for Brescia.

TITLE CONTENDERS' FINAL GAMES

Remaining fixtures for three clubs still in Italian First Division title race:

Inter Milan: Inter v Atalanta, Inter v Brescia, Chievo v Inter, Inter v Piacenza, Lazio v Inter

AS Roma: Venezia v Roma, Roma v Parma, AC Milan v Roma, Roma v Chievo, Torino v Roma

Juventus: Perugia v Juventus, Juventus v AC Milan, Piacenza v Juventus, Juventus v Brescia, Udinese v Juventus

Serie A's top six

Italian football league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points

FA's tribute to Queen Mum

AFP, London

The Football Association (FA) have joined the tributes to the Queen Mother who died Saturday at the age of 101.

FA head of communications Paul Newman said: "We join the rest of the sporting world and the country in mourning the loss of the Queen Mother."

"Like everyone else, our thoughts are with the other members of the Royal Family at this time. Football will pay its own tribute in due course."

While Easter Monday matches are expected to go ahead, the FA are now in discussion with the Premier League and Football League as to how best to pay their respects.

They will also organise the date when a minute's silence will be held at all games and players will wear black armbands.

French Cup Bastia reach final

AFP, Paris

Former French international striker Tony Vairelles fired Bastia into the final of the French Cup on Saturday in an emotional semi-final clash against Sedan.

Vairelles, captain for the day, was on target in the third minute of extra-time after the two sides were deadlocked after 90 minutes.

There was added poignancy to the game in Corsica as Bastia had not reached the semi-final stage since 1992 when a stand at their Stade Furiani collapsed as they were about to kick off against Marseille. Seventeen people died and more than 2,000 were injured in the accident and the match, and the rest of the competition, was abandoned.

The victims were honoured on Saturday as a minute's silence was held in their honour before the kick-off.

In this year's final Bastia will face either Lorient or Second Division Nimes who are playing their semi-final on Sunday.

The decisive goal came in the 93rd minute when Vairelles slotted home a pass from Fabrice Jau to register his second goal in the cup this season to add to his 11 league goals.

CECAFA boost for Hayatou

AFP, Nairobi

Issa Hayatou's bid for the most powerful job in world football was boosted here Saturday when an influential regional body announced their support for the African official.

Premiership Liverpool stay focused

Football

AFP, London

Liverpool maintained their dream of a first English Premiership crown in 12 years Saturday with an easy win over Charlton as title favourites Arsenal trounced Sunderland 3-0.

Liverpool, who had briefly seen their lead at the top pass to rivals Manchester United following their 4-3 win over Leeds earlier Saturday, downed Charlton 2-0.

Goals from Czech international Vladimir Smicer and England star Michael Owen secured the points for Gerard Houllier's men at Anfield.

Liverpool's assistant boss Phil Thompson praised the contribution of midfielder Danny Murphy, whose pinpoint free-kick had set up Smicer's goal.

"At times our passing and movement was exceptional and Danny had an absolutely outstanding game," Thompson said.

"The quality of his free-kick for the first goal was excellent and anybody just needed to get any part of their body to that and it would have been a goal."

Arsenal powered past Sunderland in a one-sided game at Highbury that saw the Gunners take a 2-0 lead after four minutes thanks to goals from Patrick Vieira and Dennis Bergkamp.

Sylvain Wiltord scored Arsenal's other goal in a result that leaves Arsene Wenger's side in third place, with Sunderland hovering just over the relegation zone.

Arsenal are now two points behind leaders Liverpool but have two games in hand over the Merseysiders.

"We decided to try to start quickly today and did so," said Wenger. "We caught Sunderland by surprise, it looked as if they had a problem with lack of confidence."

Manchester United, second in the standings, bounced back from their shock defeat against Middlesbrough last week by holding on for a 4-3 victory over Leeds in the day's early match at Elland Road.

United had surged into a 4-1 lead early in the second half thanks to two goals from Ole Gunnar Solskjaer plus one each from Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs.

But a thrilling fightback from David O'Leary's side ensured a nervous finish for the champions, after a brilliant Ian Harte free-kick and a header from Lee Boywer made it 4-3 going into the final 10 minutes.

At Stamford Bridge, Chelsea kept up the pressure on fourth-placed Newcastle when French international Emmanuel Petit scrambled in a goal three minutes

from time to give the Blues a 2-1 win over Derby.

Claudio Ranieri's side had taken the lead when centre-half John Terry headed in a corner from Graeme Le Saux shortly after half-time.

But John Gregory's Rams battled back and deservedly levelled through Belgian international Branko Strupar on 60 minutes, before Petit's heart-breaking late winner.

Derby boss Gregory said his side will probably need to win four of their final six games to avoid the drop.

"We feel hard done by," admitted Gregory. "We put a lot of effort into the game but have nothing to show for it again, other than the way we performed."

"I wish there were 16 matches left, not six and in all probability we will have to win four to stay up."

At the Reebok Stadium, Bolton's Kevin Nolan scored with a superb curling free-kick to give Sam Allardyce's strugglers a 3-2 win over Aston Villa and a precious three points in their battle to beat the drop.

A freak own goal from Mark

Delaney put Bolton ahead after eight minutes only for Villa to level through a Paul Warhurst own goal moments later. Ian Taylor put Villa in front with a header on 17 minutes before Bolton's Fredi Bobic restored parity shortly before half time.

Blackburn's relegation worries deepened when they fell 2-1 to Leicester at Filbert Street, the Foxes' Paul Dickov scoring twice with Mark Hughes netting for Rovers.

At St Mary's, Fulham's French international Steve Marlet carried on where he left off in midweek by scoring the first before Rory Delap equalised for Southampton.

West Ham edged nearer to safety at Upton Park when goals from Steve Lomas, Paolo Di Canio and Jermain Defoe handed them a 3-1 victory over Ipswich, whose goal came through Marcus Bent.

Middlesbrough drew 1-1 with Tottenham in a match played late Saturday. Steffen Iversen grabbed a first-half lead for Spurs at the Riverside Stadium but 'Boro's French midfielder Franck Queudrue equalised in the 69th minute.

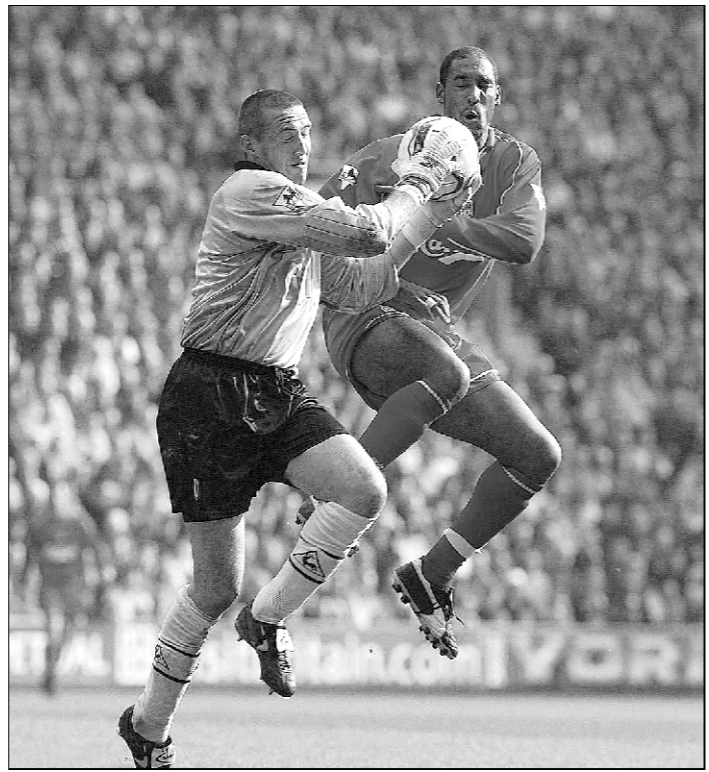


PHOTO: AFP

Charlton custodian Dean Kiely retrieves the ball before Nicolas Anelka (R), the Liverpool striker can get to it at Anfield on March 30.

Premiership's top six

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

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points

CUP CORNER



AFP, Tunis

Outgoing Tunisia coach Henri Michel said Saturday he only had himself to blame for his failed four-month tenure with the World Cup-bound north Africans.

The experienced Frenchman agreed to an 'amicable' parting of the ways with his Tunisian Football Federation (FTF) paymasters earlier this week, bringing a short and stormy reign to an end.

Michel, who had been a relentless critic of his players since taking charge of the 'Carthage Eagles' last year, said he was ultimately responsible for Tunisia's poor form.

"I take full responsibility for everything," Michel said at a farewell ceremony given in his honour by the FTF.

"It's better that I step down. I was not on the same wavelength as the players, and couldn't get my message across," added Michel, who successfully guided France to third place at the 1986 World Cup.

Michel's departure had been expected after Tunisia's flop at the African Nations Cup in Mali earlier this year, when they failed to win a match and exited in the first round.

The Frenchman launched a series of tirades against the performances of the squad during the tournament, warning that Tunisia were heading for a disaster at this summer's World Cup unless they improved.

Meanwhile FTF president Belhassen Fkih said the federation was grateful for Michel's work.

"We thank him for his efforts in charge of the Tunisian team," he said. Tunisia assistant coaches Ammar Souayah and Khemayes Laabidi will take charge in the interim with a permanent replacement for Michel expected to be named next week.

Tunisia play host Japan, Belgium and Russia in Group H at the World Cup finals.

ERIKSSON INJURY WARY

London

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson has admitted that his greatest fear ahead of this year's World Cup finals is injuries to his key players.

Eriksson said he finds himself crossing his fingers when leading squad members such as Liverpool pair Michael Owen and Steven Gerrard are injured during club matches that he is attending.

The Swedish coach's preparations for South Korea and Japan have been hampered by persistent injuries to both Owen and Gerrard this season.

Eriksson also said West Ham youngster Joe Cole was not yet ready for the World Cup after his inconsistent performance in Wednesday's 2-1 defeat to Italy.

And he said he already had his first-choice team in his mind, even if Newcastle midfielder Kieron Dyer still needs to prove his fitness.

"Injuries are the only big worry that I have," said Eriksson. "I'm not worried that we lost to Italy this week, although I don't like it. I'm not worried that Joe Cole made a mistake, that happens. But I am worried about injuries."

"I suppose I'm stupid as I can't do anything about it. But if I go to games and see a player on the ground, you cross your fingers. You think 'not again!'"

Dyer, who has also had injury problems but is back in Premiership action, has told Eriksson he is determined to play in next month's friendly against Paraguay to seal his World Cup place.

"I know he's desperate to play in that game. I talked to him this week. Hopefully he will stay fit and in that case he will play," said Eriksson. If Dyer is not fit, Eriksson said he had considered combining Arsenal's Ashley Cole and Southampton revelation Wayne Bridge on the left flank and "if we don't find a better solution then it might be possible to test it in training at least."

However, if Dyer does prove his fitness, the England coach will have decided on all but four or five members of his 23-man squad.

He has made no final decisions yet, but revealed that not all of his fringe choices would be youngsters, giving hope to older players such as Martin Keown, Andy Cole and Phil Neville.

Joe Cole, just 20, remains far from a certain choice having shown his talent in setting up Robbie Fowler's goal in midweek before giving the ball away for Italy's equaliser.

"I like Joe Cole as he is a very talented young player, full of qualities that it is difficult to have in a footballer," said Eriksson. "He's not yet ready as a footballer but we will see if he can be before the World Cup. It's possible but whether he is picked or not, he should have a very good future."

He added: "I don't think we can go to the World Cup with seven or eight under-21 players as we'd just be going there to give them experience."

"You can't beat Sweden, Argentina and Nigeria with a team of under-21 players. Some of them, for sure, will be under-21 players but not half the squad," he said.

Premiership preview

Gunners plan Easter party

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal are poised to nudge ahead in the gripping neck-and-neck race for domestic superiority in England on Monday as their title rivals prepare for duty on foreign fields.

Having spent most of the season lurking on the shoulders of the English Premiership leaders, Arsene Wenger's men are ready to make a break for home when they travel across London to face Charlton.

With first place Liverpool and second-placed Manchester United preparing for midweek Champions League duty, the Gunners know victory in the Easter Monday game at the Valley will elevate them to top spot.

All three points against Alan Curbishley's Addicks would put Arsenal one point clear with a game in hand, leaving the pressure back on the Londoners' rivals for the championship.

"We know it is down to our quality and how well we play," Wenger said after Arsenal swept aside Sunderland 3-0 on Saturday. "It takes the pressure out of our game, because we know the issue will be decided on our games."

Charlton could conceivably put a spanner in the works on Monday however. Curbishley's men have a superb record against opposition from the capital, and have now gone 12 games without defeat against London sides.

The Charlton manager, whose team were beaten 2-0 by Liverpool on Saturday, believes the title race is too close to call.

"I think the form of the top sides is ferocious and they're matching each other game for game at the moment," he said. "I can't see it being sorted out until right at the

end."

Just behind the battle for the title, a nip-and-tuck duel is unfolding for fourth place and a place in next season's Champions League.

Newcastle are the current owners of fourth spot, but both Leeds and Chelsea are pressing hard.

Leeds' challenge faltered with Saturday's 4-3 defeat to Manchester United, but Chelsea remain in the hunt after their late scramble win against Derby on Saturday, which put them ahead of Leeds.

FIXTURES (1500 GMT unless stated)

Monday: Blackburn v Southampton (2000), Charlton v Arsenal, Derby v Middlesbrough, Everton v Bolton, Fulham v West Ham, Ipswich v Chelsea, Sunderland v Leicester, Tottenham v Leeds

"Obviously I'm delighted to get above Leeds, but we seem to change positions quite often. I'm sure we are both going to be challenging Newcastle until the last game," Ranieri said.

At the other end of the table, a desperate battle for Premiership survival sees Peter Reid's troubled Sunderland entertain bottom club Leicester.

Leicester - seven points adrift of second-bottom Derby and near-certainties for the drop - clinched their first win in nearly four months with a 2-1 win over Blackburn Rovers on Saturday.

Graeme Souness' Rovers are struggling to pull clear of the bottom three, fourth from bottom but level on points with Ipswich one place behind.

But with a difficult run in - four of their seven remaining fixtures are away - Rovers now have a real fight on their hands to stay in the top-flight.

Primera Liga

Real keep advantage

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid were a class apart from their hosts Sevilla in a 1-0 victory on Saturday although it was far from their most attractive victory of the season.

Real Madrid now have 59 points from 32 games with Valencia still second on the same number of points after they won 1-0 at bottom club Tenerife.

However, Valencia have a vastly inferior goal difference.

French international midfielder Claude Makelele got Real's vital strike after 22 minutes when Ivan Helguera's long-range shot struck his heels, leaving Sevilla goalkeeper Antonio Notario rooted to the spot as the wicked deflection flew past him.

Real controlled the game in midfield, content to threaten from counter-attacks and Sevilla could not break through Real's solid back four.

The best chance Sevilla had to equalise came from a Fredi Lobiera free kick late in the second half, which struck the crossbar, and Real's hoodoo over Sevilla in their own Sanchez Pijuan stadium will extend into a second decade.

The last time Sevilla beat Real Madrid in front of their own fans was in 1992, when Diego Maradona was in their side.

However, inflamed by controversial pre-match comments of Sevilla captain Jose Miguel Prieto, the match was bad-tempered, with nine yellow cards being shown including bookings for both coaches for their touchline protestations.

Argentine winger Santiago Solari and the former World Player of the Year Zinedine Zidane both limped from the field after robust challenges.

But the Real Madrid medical staff indicated that both players were expected to train on Monday and would be fit to face Bayern Munich in their European Champions League quarter-final first leg in Germany on Tuesday.

"I wasn't too happy with the way Sevilla decided to play," commented Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque.

"Sevilla made life uncomfortable for us at times during the second half but their attacks didn't have

Primera Liga's top six

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

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points

Bundesliga

Leverkusen's best chance

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen stretched their lead at the top in Germany with a 4-2 victory over Kaiserslautern on Saturday as their closest rivals Borussia Dortmund crashed to a 3-2 defeat at VfB Stuttgart.

Leverkusen are four points clear of Dortmund with just five matches left to play and their chances of winning a first ever title were further helped by third-placed Bayern Munich, who could only draw 0-0 at SV Hamburg.

Veteran striker Ulf Kirsten put Leverkusen ahead in the first minute at Kaiserslautern's Fritz-Walter stadium and German international Oliver Neuville added the second on 16 minutes.

But Kaiserslautern drew level with goals from Egyptian international defender Hany Ramzy, on the stroke of half-time, and Vratislav Lovkenc after 55 minutes.

Leverkusen's pressure paid off in the 77th minute as Thomas Brdaric was fouled in the penalty area by Kaiserslautern goalkeeper Georg Koch and Michael Ballack slotted home the resulting penalty.

Klaus Toppmoller's side, who face Liverpool in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals

much penetration. At this stage in the season, with just six games to go, getting three points is very important however you do it," added Del Bosque.

"Their goal was clearly offside," said Sevilla coach Joaquin Caparros.

Valencia's win at Tenerife was a scrappy affair only enlivened by a superb goal from Argentine international striker Pablo Aimar.

He unleashed a thunderbolt from 35 metres which went in off the post, leaving Tenerife goalkeeper Julio Iglesias stranded.

Valencia have now got 12 of their 16 league victories this season by just the odd goal.

Deportivo La Coruna threw away the chance to close the gap on the leading pair after drawing 1-1 at Real Sociedad. The Galicians remain in third with 55 points.

Real Sociedad's Inigo Idiakez found the net after 35 minutes, connecting with a long cross from Aitor Lopez Rekarte, but Deportivo's Spanish international Juan Carlos Valeron equalised nine minutes after half-time, after Dutch international Roy Makaay headed the ball to his feet.

However, Real Sociedad remain undefeated in the three games since Roberto Olabe took over as coach from Welshman John Toshack.

Celta Vigo's Brazilian-born Spanish international striker Catanha moved to the top of the Spanish First Division goal-scoring charts by getting his 17th goal of the season in Celta's 3-1 win over Alaves.

Brazilian midfielder Vagner got Celta's first two before Catanha found the net after 82 minutes.

Alaves' Argentine defender Fabricio Colocini got a consolation goal for the Basques less than a minute before the whistle.

Barcelona's chances of finishing in a Champions League position diminished further after they were held to a 1-1 draw in the Nou Camp by relegation-threatened Las Palmas.

Luis Enrique Martinez put the Catalans ahead after 20 minutes but Orlando Suarez equalised early in the second half.

Both sides ended with 10 men after Barcelona's Patrick Kluivert and Las Palmas' Angel Lopez were sent off in the last eight minutes.

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points

Bundesliga's top six

German league standings after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Table with 6 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points

on Wednesday, completed the job with a strike from Bulgarian international Dimitar Berbatov two minutes from time.

Toppmoller was delighted with his side's fighting spirit after Kaiserslautern had levelled the scores.

"The way the team came back was sensational," he said. "We've got five games left and if we avoid any injuries, then we've got a very good chance of winning the championship."

Dortmund were never ahead at mid-table Stuttgart who took a 2-0 lead by half time through Sean Dundee and Silvio Meissner.

Christian Worns put Borussia back in the match in the 52nd minute but Romanian international loan Ganea secured the victory for Stuttgart midway through the second half and Jan Koller's 78th minute goal was in vain.

Bayern's chances of retaining their title look slim after they fell seven points behind the leaders following a goalless draw against a Hamburg side fighting back after a miserable start to the season.

In other games, Hertha Berlin damaged their European prospects with a 3-1 defeat at Borussia Monchengladbach and Munich 1