

Serie A Ronaldo fires Inter

Football

AFP, Milan

Two late goals from Brazilian striker Ronaldo allowed Inter Milan to pull off a thrilling 2-1 comeback victory over struggling Brescia at the San Siro here Sunday and remain two points clear in the Italian First Division.

With three rounds of games still to play Ronaldo's pair keeps Inter two points ahead of defending champions AS Roma who dispatched Parma 3-1 at Rome's Olympic Stadium.

Third-placed Juventus are still in the hunt a point further back thanks to a 1-0 win over AC Milan earned by an own goal by Argentinian defender Jose Antonio Chamot.

But it was Ronaldo's virtuoso show that ensures Inter remain favourites in the three-way battle for the Scudetto.

With memories still fresh of the home defeat by Atalanta last week Inter made a shaky start and the nervy crowd's worst fears were realised after 29 minutes.

Inter defender Marco Materazzi fouled his fellow Italian international Daniele Bonera and Spaniard Josep Guardiola stepped up to convert the penalty.

Brescia's temperamental coach Carlo Mazzone was banished from the touchline in the second period but then Ronaldo produced his most decisive intervention in what has been an injury-blighted season with two goals in three minutes.

"The team did not play well," admitted Inter's Argentinian Hector Cuper. "But we got the victory through true grit and that was paramount after the defeat by Atalanta."

But Roma remain very much in the hunt. Italian international Marco Delvecchio gave the champions a seventh-minute lead at home to Parma, only the second of the season for the striker who Italy coach Giovanni Trapattoni has already said will feature in his World Cup squad.

And teenage substitute Antonio Cassano made it 2-0 to further lift the spirits of the Roma fans who had cheered wildly when they heard that Brescia had taken the lead at the



PHOTO:INTERNET

Superstar Ronaldo takes off his shirt in celebration after his second goal against Brescia at Milan on April 14.

San Siro.

Parma reduced the arrears with a goal credited to Frenchman Sabri Lamouchi although Roma's Argentinian defender Walter Samuel appeared to get the decisive touch but Samuel atoned immediately after the restart, heading a Cassano corner past Parma's French goalkeeper Sebastien Frey.

"We played really well today," said Roma coach Fabio Capello. "We are in this race right until the finish."

The match at Turin between Juventus and AC Milan was a relatively dire affair.

Despite all the pre-match hype it was settled when Alessandro Del Piero's freekick was deflected into

his own goal by Chamot, thus denying AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti a revenge win over the club that sacked him last year.

Juventus coach Marcello Lippi said: "The result was all important and even if it was not the most convincing way to win the own goal came as a result of our pressure and these things happen in football."

Away from the title fight dark horses Chievo pulled off a 3-2 win over Lecce, a result that puts them into the fourth position which would secure them Champions League football next season.

Chievo defender Nicola Legrottaglie headed his side in front after 16 minutes but Uruguayan Javier Chevanton hit back with two first-half goals as the southerners went in at the break with a 2-1 lead.

But after the interval Manchester-born Simone Perrotta restored parity for Chievo before Brazilian Eriberto snatched the winner, leaving Lecce facing almost certain relegation.

Fiorentina are already condemned thanks to their 1-0 home defeat by Lazio earned by the visitors' Argentinian winger Lucas Martin Castroman.

Bologna lost fourth place thanks to a 2-1 defeat at home by Piacenza who took a two-goal lead through defenders Vittorio Tosto and Eusebio Di Francesco.

Salvatore Fresi pulled one back for Bologna but it was to no avail.

Atalanta also struck early at home to Torino when Daniele Berretta gave the side from Bergamo the lead but after the interval the visitors restored parity through Uruguayan Jose Franco. It finished 1-1.

There was more misery for already-relegated Venezia who lost 2-0 to Perugia thanks to goals from Juventus-bound Davide Baiocco and Fabio Bazzani.

Udinese's relegation plight worsened with a 1-0 defeat by Verona. Liechtenstein international Mirko Frick gave Verona a first-half lead.

The sending-off of Mirko Pieri further damaged Udinese's cause before a second Udinese player - leading goalscorer Roberto Muzzi - and Verona's Marco Zanchi also saw red.

Italian First Division standings after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Inter	31	19	8	4	55	28	65
Roma	31	17	12	2	52	24	63
Juventus	31	17	11	3	56	23	62
Chievo	31	13	11	7	53	44	50
Bologna	31	14	7	10	38	36	49
Milan	31	12	12	7	42	32	48

Primera Liga Real suffer Osasuna blues

Football

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish championship chase became a three team contest again on Sunday, as Real Madrid went down to a 3-1 shock defeat at struggling Osasuna while Deportivo La Coruna cruised to a 3-1 victory over Espanyol.

With just four games to go, Valencia lead with 64 points after their 1-1 draw at Real Mallorca on Saturday while Real Madrid slip to second with 63 points.

Deportivo stay in third but close the gap on the leading pair with 62 points.

Real were the overwhelming favourites to come away from Pamplona with at least a point, visiting a club that had not won in its previous eight contests, but found Osasuna determined to restore their reputation as a club to reckoned with.

Fernando Sanchez, a product of Real's youth teams, showed little sympathy towards his former club by blasting a free kick with his left foot from more than 20 metres after 32 minutes, which found the net after spinning off the fingertips of Real goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez.

His namesake Alfredo Sanchez, another Madrid-born player, added Osasuna's second goal seven minutes later, latching onto a cross from Ivan Rosado.

Real's woes increased three minutes later when Ivan Helguera - the goal scoring hero of Wednesday's European Champions League win over Bayern Munich - was sent off for a tackle on Fernando.

Real Madrid came out for the second half determined to go down fighting despite being reduced to 10 men and Fernando Morientes clawed one back for the defending champions just three minutes after the break, rounding Osasuna goalkeeper Juan Carlos Unzué after a deflected Luis Figo shot fell to his feet.

The goal was Morientes' 18th of the season and his 100th in the Spanish first division.

However, it was not enough to bring Real completely back into the game and Ivan Rosado got Osasuna's third with a spectacular left foot volley after 74 minutes.

Deportivo La Coruna departed from the European Champions League last week after two defeats by Manchester United, but the Spanish Cup winners kept alive their hopes of a domestic double on Sunday.

Two first half goals from Dutch international striker Roy Makaay which sandwiched a strike from Spanish international Diego Tristan,



PHOTO:INTERNET

Luis Figo, the Real Madrid superstar is brought down by Osasuna's defender Patxi Puna (ground) at El Sadar stadium in Pamplona on April 14.

his 19th of the season which maintains his place as the Spanish first division's leading scorer, gave the Galicians a comfortable lead at half-time.

However, the game descended into a scrappy affair after the break. Pablo Rotchen got a consolation goal for the Barcelona-based visitors after 69 minutes but Deportivo hung on win 3-1 and extend their unbeaten streak to eight games.

Both sides ended the match with 10 men after Espanyol's Toni Soldevilla and Deportivo's Mauro Silva were dismissed.

The sending off of Deportivo's club captain means that the Brazilian 1994 World Cup winner will miss next weekend's crucial match at Valencia.

Barcelona remain fourth with 57 points but enhanced their chances

of qualifying for next season's Champions League, regardless of what they do in this season's competition in which they face Real Madrid in the semi-finals, by beating Alaves 3-2.

The Catalan's Argentine striker Javier Saviola got two of their goals to take his tally to 15 for the season. Brazilian Fabio Rochemback got Barca's other goal.

At the other end of the table, Tenerife got a rare win but remain routed to the foot of the table after a weekend in which the bottom eight teams all got a point or more.

The Canary islanders beat Real Betis 2-1 and ended the Andalusians' 14-game unbeaten streak thanks to second half goals from Bino Morin and Bichi Fuentes, which cancelled out Denilson's strike after just five minutes for

Betis.

Rayo Vallecano helped their chances of escaping relegation by edging Valladolid 1-0, three vital points coming from the head of Rayo's French defender Jean Francois Hernandez during injury time at the end of the first half.

Villarreal and Real Sociedad put some distance between themselves and the relegation zone with a pair of 2-1 victories, over Celta Vigo and Malaga respectively.

Two goals in six minutes from Villarreal's Victor Fernandez gave them the points, after Jesuli Mora had put Celta ahead just after the hour.

Victor showed his prowess from dead ball situations by blasting home a free kick with his right foot after 71 minutes and then getting the decisive goal from the spot six minutes later.

Villarreal earned the penalty after Catania had brought down the Argentine striker Martin Palermo, who had only come onto the field 10 minutes after four-and-a-half months out of action with a broken leg.

To complete a miserable day for Catania, the Brazilian-born Spanish international striker missed a first half penalty when the game was still goalless.

The 'Phenomenon' answers

Football

REUTERS, Milan

Twice World Player of the Year Ronaldo scored both goals for Inter Milan as they beat Brescia 2-1 on Sunday to maintain their lead at the top of Serie A and then said his team had beaten their toughest opponent - fear.

Inter's hopes of their first Italian title since 1989 were cast in doubt when, after last week's shock home defeat to Atalanta, they trailed by a goal at home to lowly Brescia.

But with just 11 minutes left Ronaldo equalised and then just four minutes later the Brazilian fired home a spectacular winner that maintains Inter's two-point advantage over AS Roma.

"We certainly won with our heart today and we believed in ourselves right until the end," said Ronaldo.

"This was such an important win because we needed it to defeat the fear that could have effected the mood, the team and the fans," added the Brazilian.

Ronaldo, who played all the game, was making his first start in Serie A since December 23 - when he suffered his latest injury setback against Piacenza.

The past four months saw the striker, returning this season after two years out of action, head back to Brazil to undergo a personal recuperation programme.

But the timing of his return home, which coincided with the Rio Carnival, led some to suggest he may not be totally dedicated to getting fit again for Inter.

After his match-winning display Ronaldo could not resist taking a

swipe at those critics.

"That is the reply to all those journalists who dealt with my trip to Brazil in such a heavy manner, talking only about parties and carnivals," said the striker.

The former Barcelona striker admitted, though, that the game had taken a toll on him physically.

"I can feel it and I got some cramp but that's okay. Today the fans helped all the time and were really behind me throughout the game," said Ronaldo.

Inter coach Hector Cuper has been wary of using the Brazilian in recent weeks, preferring to limit him to a phased return in UEFA Cup games.

The Argentine coach said Sunday's performance justified his refusal to rush the Brazilian back.

"Today Ronaldo played a full 90 minutes I can only think that my decision to slowly have him come back and play was the right decision to make," Cuper told RAI television.

Ronaldo's Inter team-mate, Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba, said the whole team was delighted with the impact made by the shaven-headed striker.

"He did what we all saw and he ran a full 90 minutes. I am very happy for him. He is a great person who has suffered through such a lot. Today it was a very special day for all of us," said Recoba.

With three games between Inter and their long-awaited 14th league title, Recoba believes Ronaldo's two goals against Brescia could prove to be decisive.

"Up until he scored we were in really bad shape. Now I think that we have 100 percent chance to win the league."



PHOTO:INTERNET

Manchester United's Dutch international striker Ruud van Nistelrooy (L), receiving the prestigious PFA trophy from Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier.

Van Nistelrooy players' favourite

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United's Holland international striker Ruud van Nistelrooy won England's Professional Footballers' Association players' player of the year award at London's Grosvenor House Hotel Sunday and said it was "the proudest moment of my career".

Arsenal's France duo of Thierry Henry and Robert Pires were second and third respectively.

Van Nistelrooy also saw off competition for the trophy from Manchester United team-mates Roy Keane (Republic of Ireland) and England captain David Beckham as well as compatriot and Chelsea striker Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink.

"This is the proudest moment so far in my career. I have been voted by the players of the Premier League and that is the best league in Europe at the moment, said van Nistelrooy.

"That makes me feel proud," added the striker who earlier in the season became the first player to score in eight consecutive Premiership matches.

Van Nistelrooy, 25, English football's leading scorer with 32 goals so far this season in all competitions, is the third United player in three years to win the award after club captain Keane (2000) and last year's recipient, England striker Teddy Sheringham, who is now with Tottenham.

The award capped a remarkable turnaround in van Nistelrooy's fortunes as barely a year ago he was still recovering from a knee injury that had already delayed his move from PSV Eindhoven to Old Trafford by a season.

Another striker, Newcastle's Wales forward Craig Bellamy, won the PFA young player of the year award.

Sunderland's veteran Republic of Ireland target man Niall Quinn received a merit award while Liverpool's French manager Gerard

Houllier won a special achievement award after his successful return from heart surgery.

Players from all of England's 92 Premiership and Football League clubs were eligible to vote for the player and young player of the year awards.

The next major individual honour to be handed out here is the Footballer of the Year award which is given by members of England's Football Writers' Association (FWA).

For the past four years the winner of the PFA award has also collected the FWA trophy.

Premiership Owen inspires Liverpool

Football

AFP, London

Michael Owen praised team-mate Steven Gerrard for supplying the killer pass that helped him fire Liverpool within a point of Premiership leaders Arsenal on Saturday.

Gerrard's superb through-ball set up fellow England international Owen to lob Sunderland goalkeeper Thomas Sorensen for the only goal of the game at the Stadium of Light.

Liverpool, the only top three side on league duty this weekend, leapfrogged Manchester United into second place with 71 points from 34 matches, one less than leaders Arsenal who have a game in hand on Gerard Houllier's men.

"It was a great ball, he's great at those types of passes, and when I saw the keeper off his line I knew exactly what to do," Owen said.

The win kept Gerard Houllier's side firmly in contention for the league title with four games remaining - four games they will probably have to win to overhaul table-toppers Arsenal.

"We've got a lot of hard games. Tottenham away is never easy, and we've got three home games but we have to do that (win them all) to stand any chance," Owen added.

Gerrard admitted his side needed a little luck if they were to win the league title for the first time in 12 years.

"We have to concentrate on what we're doing and hope Arsenal slip up but they are looking strong."

Owen, who has suffered from injury and a dip in form of late, settled the match in the 55th minute, collecting Gerrard's defence-splitting pass before lifting the ball over Sorensen from 18 yards.

Sunderland's misery was completed a minute from time when American international Claudio Reyna was sent off for clattering Owen, his second bookable offence.

Newcastle kept their hopes of qualifying for the Champions League alive as they came from 2-0 down to beat Derby 3-2 and leave their opponents requiring a miracle to avoid the drop.

Goals from Frenchman Laurent Robert, Kieron Dyer and Lomana Lua Lua moved Newcastle into the last Champions League slot of fourth place - three points ahead of Chelsea and with a game in hand while Derby are now seven points adrift of safety with just three matches to play.

Victory came at a price for Newcastle with striker Alan Shearer suffering a suspected fractured nose in a clash with former team-mate Rob Lee.

Newcastle manager Bobby Robson said: "It's a nasty cut, which caused him problems as well with his teeth and that will need some attention."

"I think his nose is fractured as the blood was coming out in spurts and it looks as though he'll be out for a couple of weeks."

English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Arsenal	33	21	9	3	68	33	72
Liverpool	34	21	8	5	56	26	71
Man Utd	34	22	4	8	83	44	70
Newcastle	34	19	7	8	65	46	64
Chelsea	35	16	13	6	63	32	61
Leeds	35	16	12	7	51	3	60

FA Cup Londoners' final battle

Football

AFP, London

John Terry's first-half goal gave Chelsea a 1-0 win over arch London rivals Fulham at Villa Park to set up a capital FA Cup final against double-chasing Arsenal.

Earlier Sunday last season's beaten finalists went through, by the same scoreline, against Middlesbrough courtesy of a Gianluca Festa own-goal.

Former Arsenal favourite turned Chelsea midfielder Emmanuel Petit told the BBC: "It will be a big game for both clubs and especially for me."

It seemed as if Chelsea had wasted a golden chance to take the lead when, following a surging run into the box, Mario Stanic saw his shot blocked by the legs of Fulham keeper Edwin van der Saar with Frank Lampard waiting for a cross on the edge of the six-yard box.

But from Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink's resulting corner defender Terry, who earlier in the week had been in court on affray and grievous bodily harm charges, forced the ball home, his 42nd minute shot deflecting off Fulham forward Louis Saha.

At Old Trafford, Festa's 39th minute own-goal, the first goal conceded by Middlesbrough in this

season's FA Cup, was good enough for Premiership leaders Arsenal to secure a return to Cardiff's Millennium Stadium.

Relieved Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger told Sky Sports: "It was a very tough game. Middlesbrough played very well and we needed a lot of character, a lot of mental strength."

And he added that Campbell's injury did not threaten the defender's World Cup prospects.

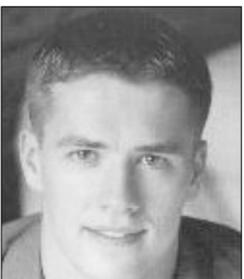
"Campbell's done his hamstring and will miss the international game on Wednesday. But for the World Cup there's no problem."

"If you say 20 days out for this type of injury you are close to the right figure and we hope to have Campbell back for the Cup Final."

Disappointed Middlesbrough manager Steve McClaren said: "It was a good advert for football. We had chances and they had chances and you have defining moments in games and you have to take them," he said.

Arsenal should have won more comfortably but wasted two chances early in the second half to kill off the match.

First, Sylvain Wiltord blasted over the top from barely six yards out after a poor attempt at chesting the ball from Franck Queudrue played the Frenchman in.



MICHAEL OWEN

Robson has set his side a target of seven points from the last four games, which he feels will be enough for a top four finish.

"Two wins and a draw will do us," he said. "That would make sure we finish fourth and that's our ambition."

Elsewhere, Leeds kept themselves in the Champions League race by beating Aston Villa 1-0 - Mark Viduka with his 15th of the season - to extend their opponents' winless streak to eight.

Leeds boss David O'Leary was full of praise for the resolute character shown by his players following another tough week for the club.

O'Leary was without four centre-backs after Jonathan Woodgate threw the Irishman's plans into disarray.

Woodgate suffered a fractured jaw during a night out with friends in his home town of Middlesbrough on Tuesday, ruling the 22-year-old out for the season.

Woodgate joined skipper Rio Ferdinand, Michael Duberry and Lucas Radebe on the sidelines, forcing O'Leary into playing right-back Danny Mills at the heart of the defence alongside captain Dominic Matteo.

O'Leary was delighted with Mills' performance, one which was tarnished as the England international picked up his 10th booking of the season and a two-match suspension.

"I thought Danny Mills was outstanding and after 90 minutes like that I felt his booking was unjust," said O'Leary.

"I don't want to dwell on his suspension now. We will worry about it in a couple of weeks' time."

"I am just delighted with the three points, particularly under the circumstances and with the amount of players we have out, especially centre-backs."

Everton fought back from 2-0 down to draw 2-2 at home to already relegated Leicester City, Duncan Ferguson grabbing the equaliser.

The other two matches ended in 1-1 draws as Southampton came back to grab a point at Charlton.

West Ham defender Ian Pearce hit home a stunning drive from well outside the penalty area on his 100th appearance to get a point for the Hammers off Spurs, for whom Teddy Sheringham had given them the lead.

substitute Ray Parlour's cross in the 61st minute, he missed the ball as it went narrowly behind him.

In between those efforts veteran Arsenal defender Lee Dixon was on the line to stop a goalbound Dean Windass header.

In the 71st minute, Middlesbrough's Alen Boksic was on the end of an Alan Johnston cross but his header lacked power and Richard Wright, Wenger's FA Cup keeper this season rather than England number one David Seaman, saved.

Earlier Arsenal took the lead against the run of play.

A rare attack was halted by veteran Middlesbrough midfielder Robbie Mustoe's clearing header from a Wiltord cross with another of Arsenal's French stars, Patrick Vieira, waiting to strike.

But from the resulting corner substitute defender Festa, on for England's Ugo Ehiogu, put Henry's cross into his own net.

Middlesbrough without four first-choice players because of injuries, suspension and cup-tied Italian forward Benito Carbone, had their best chance in the 23rd minute.

Windass' header found Croatia striker Boksic but when the ball broke to Luke Wilkshire the Australian midfielder fired

And then it was the turn of another Frenchman, Thierry Henry, to miss an opportunity when, from