

Serie A Inter remains team to beat

Football

AFP, Rome

League leaders Inter Milan stretched their unbeaten run to eight games in Italy after edging Empoli 4-3 in a seven-goal thriller to stay firmly on top of Serie A on Wednesday.

But a hard-fought victory in Tuscany failed to open up a bigger gap on challengers AC Milan and Juventus who also picked up maximum points against Udinese and Piacenza respectively.

Inter coach Hector Cuper was pleased to chalk up the seventh win of the campaign but still expressed concerns over his side's defensive frailties.

"The first 20 minutes was good and when we scored our second we appeared to be in control of the game," he said.

"But when Empoli pulled a goal back it seemed to throw our concentration and we started making mistakes.

"We have to stay focused for the whole 90 minutes or we may not be so lucky next time."

Inter's victory had a South American flavour with Argentine internationals Hernan Crespo and Javier Zanetti joining Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba on the scoresheet.

Crespo's close-range toe-poke gave Inter an early lead before Zanetti's low drive put the visitors in the driving seat.

Empoli, without a home win this season since being promoted from Serie B, hit back through rising star Antonio Di Natale, only for Recoba to restore Inter's two-goal cushion five minutes after the break.

Ighli Vannucchi's superb free-kick from outside the box halted Empoli back into the match, until former Fiorentina defender Daniele Adani made it 4-2 eight minutes from the time.

There was still time for Francesco Tavano to give Inter a late scare by grabbing Empoli's third goal with a minute left, but Cuper's men held on to maintain their 100 percent away record this season.

A lucky 89th minute goal from Rivaldo gave Milan a 1-0 win over Udinese at the San Siro.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti had hoped to rest Rivaldo ahead of his side's Champions League match next week, but with his team struggling to score Gennaro Gattuso was



PHOTO: AFP

Alvaro Recoba, Inter Milan's Uruguayan international, scoring against Empoli at the Castellani Stadium in Empoli on November 6.

replaced by the Brazilian superstar.

The move paid off when the World Cup winner floated a free-kick into the box which everybody missed including visiting goalkeeper Morgan De Sanctis, and the ball sailed into the back of the net.

Udinese coach Luciano Spalletti was cursing his luck at the end of an evenly-balanced contest.

"One slack moment cost us the match," he said.

"We merited a draw and were a minute away from an excellent result, but we fell asleep at the end and were punished."

Filippo Inzaghi should have scored a second in stoppage-time but fired his late penalty, awarded after Serginho was fouled in the box, away over the crossbar.

Reigning champions Juventus remain in third after sneaking a 1-0 win at Piacenza thanks to Czech international Pavel Nedved's 70th minute strike.

Davide Baiocco found Marcelo Zalayeta on the edge of the penalty box and he fed Nedved whose low drive with the outside of his right boot found the bottom corner.

Juve coach Marcello Lippi praised his players for another professional performance which followed the victory by the same scoreline at Modena.

"At this level there are no easy games and this is always a difficult place to come and get points," he said.

Fourth-placed Lazio kept the pace with a 3-0 win at Reggina.

A heavily-deflected shot from Stefano Fiore gave the Roman side an early advantage before Dejan Stankovic's low drive and Bernardo Corradi's close-range effort settled the match.

Chievo, last season's surprise package in Italy, rose to fifth after a 3-0 home win over Perugia, their third victory on the trot.

AS Roma returned to winning ways by edging Como 2-1 at the Stadio Olimpico where captain Francesco Totti scored the winner.

Former Italy international Roberto Baggio scored twice for Brescia but still ended up on the losing side after a 4-3 defeat at Parma.

TOP SIX

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

| | | | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
| Inter | 8 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 18 | 7 | 22 |
| Milan | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 22 | 5 | 19 |
| Juventus | 8 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 12 | 4 | 18 |
| Lazio | 8 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 15 | 7 | 17 |
| Chievo | 8 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 14 | 9 | 15 |
| Roma | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 18 | 13 | 14 |

Barca eying Eriksson?

INTERNET

Barcelona are reportedly lining up a move for England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson.

Barca president Joan Gaspart is believed to be losing patience with current boss Louis van Gaal.

And club insiders are said to have revealed that Eriksson is first choice to replace him.

Gaspart was behind the summer appointment of Van Gaal to a second term at Nou Camp.

Given what's happened over the past week nothing should surprise anyone

But, although Barcelona have impressed in the Champions League, they lie eighth in La Liga, eight points behind leaders Real Sociedad.

And they were beaten by Third Division Novelda in the Copa del Rey.

Now it has been reported that Van Gaal has until the end of the month to turn the team's domestic fortunes around.

And if the Dutchman goes, Eriksson is believed to head Gaspart's short-list of potential replacements.

The former Lazio boss still has two more years to run on his £3m-a-year England contract.

But he has been linked with several high profile jobs, including succeeding Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United and returning to Italy as coach of the national team.

Increasing difficulties on and off the field have heightened speculation that Eriksson could become disillusioned with the England job.

He has had to endure the resignation of FA chief executive Adam Crozier and the revelation of his affair with Ulrika Jonsson.

And as well as an unimpressive draw with Macedonia, the Swede has seen assistant Steve McClaren step down and been criticised over his tactics and selection policy.

The latest speculation will increase the pressure on FA chairman Geoff Thompson to reassure Eriksson when the two meet for talks on Thursday.

While Eriksson has maintained he is not thinking of resigning, senior FA officials are concerned that failing to get the assurances he needs could see him change his mind.

One official said: "Given what's happened over the past week nothing should surprise anyone."

Worthington Cup Hammers, Gunners gone

Football

REUTERS, London

Premier League strugglers West Ham United suffered a humiliating home defeat in the third round of the English League Cup on Wednesday when they were beaten 1-0 at home by Second Division Oldham Athletic on a night of shocks.

Arsenal, fielding a virtual reserve side, led Sunderland 2-0 at

Oldham, flying high in second place in division two and unbeaten away in the league, got the only goal three minutes before halftime when Canada striker Carlo Corazzin powered a header from a corner past England goalkeeper David James.

Goals for Robert Pires and striker Francis Jeffers had a virtual Arsenal reserve team two up at the break against Sunderland.

The visitors, also playing an unfamiliar line-up, pulled one back through Kevin Kyle in the 56th

minutes.

"Scoring again at the end was a bigger blow."

Gus Poyet headed Spurs into a 17th minute lead but Robbie Blake got a deserved equaliser in the 57th and Steve Davis headed Burnley's winner three minutes later.

Ireland striker Robbie Keane missed a hat-trick of great chances for Spurs when clean through then crashed a spectacular volley from 25 metres against the bar in injury time.

But Burnley held out to collect a famous victory in the 100th meeting of the clubs.

"We didn't deserve anything tonight, Burnley were the better side," said Spurs boss Glenn Hoddle.

Chris Kirkland produced an astonishing display in his first match of the season for Liverpool, the young English goalkeeper making endless great saves to deny Southampton.

Liverpool then went ahead just before halftime with a deflected Patrik Berger free kick.

Kirkland produced a remarkable triple save early in the second half but was beaten at the fourth attempt as Agustin Delgado scored in the 55th minute.

But Liverpool restored their lead immediately through El Hadji Diouf and Milan Baros tucked in the third to leave Southampton down and out and wondering just how they lost.

At St James' Everton went ahead with a Kevin Campbell header after 11 minutes before England winger Kieron Dyer scored two in a minute to swing it round only for Steve Watson to equalise for Everton in the 85th to take the game into extra time.

An Alessandro Pistone own goal edged Newcastle ahead but a David Unsworth penalty took the game to a shoot-out where the hosts scored their first two spot-kicks then missed the next three to give Everton a 3-2 win.

Seventeen-year-old Wayne Rooney was one of Everton's on-target penalty takers but Newcastle's 18-year-old debutant Michael Chopra blazed his over the bar.

Carlton Cole, Chelsea's 18-year-old striker, made the most of his first start of the season by scoring both goals in their 2-1 home win over Gillingham.

Andy Johnson was another two-goal man as he took his tally to 10 in five games in Crystal Palace's 3-0 home win over Coventry City.

Latvian international striker Andrejs Stolcers got two in Fulham's defeat of Bury with Lee Clark also on target.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Marcus Stewart (bottom) is being congratulated by ecstatic Sunderland teammates after his winner against Arsenal at Highbury on November 6.

Highbury but lost 3-2, while First Division Sheffield United scored twice in the last two minutes to beat Yorkshire rivals Leeds United 2-1.

Last season's runners-up Tottenham Hotspur also went out, losing 2-1 at Burnley, while fellow first-division side Ipswich Town claimed another Premier League scalp with a 3-1 home win over Middlesbrough.

Defending champions Blackburn Rovers edged past First Division strugglers Walsall on penalties after a 2-2 draw at Ewood Park. Everton also got through on a shoot-out after a 3-3 draw with Newcastle United at St James' Park, while Liverpool, winners in 2000, beat Southampton 3-1 at Anfield.

The dream ended for the two remaining Third Division clubs as Oxford lost 3-0 at home to Aston Villa and Bury lost 3-1 at Fulham.

The woe continued for West Ham manager Glenn Roeder, whose team have won just three games in the Premier League and none at home.

Roeder put out a full-strength side but they created very little in another disappointing display.

minute and Marcus Stewart levelled with a 70th-minute header.

Two minutes later defender Darren Williams scored with a bullet header to hand Arsenal their fifth defeat in six games.

Blackburn took a first-half lead at home to Walsall with a Corrado Grabbi penalty but Zigor Aranalde equalised for the First Division side with another penalty the 67th minute.

The game went into extra time when Australia striker David Zdrilic raised Walsall's hopes only for an Ian Roper own goal to take the game to penalties.

Blackburn won the shoot-out 5-4, the action finishing shortly before 11pm (2300 GMT) local time.

A Steve Yates own goal gave Leeds the lead after 24 minutes at Bramall Lane but Phil Jagielka equalised for Sheffield United with a spectacular 30 metre effort in the 90th minute.

Peter Ndlovu stunned under-pressure Leeds boss Terry Venables by scrambling in the winner seconds later.

"We lost the lead through one of the best strikes I've ever seen," said

FA's security privilege for Beckham

Football

AFP, London

The Football Association will help improve security surrounding England captain David Beckham following revelations of an alleged plot to kidnap the family of the Manchester United midfielder.

Football Association executive director David Davies said in The Sun on Thursday: "There are particular circumstances surrounding David because of his profile - and we would be foolish to ignore them."

"We had certain arrangements in place for him at the World Cup and we will look at the need to do similar things again."

"There is no such thing as guaranteed 100 percent security but you have to get as close as you can."

Four Romanians and a Kosovo



A file photo showing England superstar David Beckham with his pop-star wife Victoria and eldest son Brooklyn.

King's Cup Valencia crash out

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Third Division Alicante came back from 3-1 down in extra-time to beat Spanish champions Valencia on penalties and provide the shock of the night in the second round of the King's Cup.

Two other top flight sides suffered defeats. Athletic Bilbao losing 2-1 to Third Division Real Union de Irun and Malaga going down 2-0 to Second Division leaders Xerez.

The big surprise was not served up until late, though, as Valencia somehow contrived to lose a match they had sewn up.

After the first 90 minutes finished 1-1, Rafa Benitez's side moved into a commanding lead with goals from Juan Sanchez, a fine angled shot

from Miguel Angel Angulo's pass, and Mista.

Alicante scored twice in two minutes through Juli and Toni Garcia, though, and the home side clinched the win 5-4 on penalties as Valencia's Brazilian fullback Fabio Aurelio missed with the last kick of the game.

Real Betis had been facing a big upset as they trailed Third Division Palamos 3-1 early in the second half.

Goals from Fernando and Rivera forced extra-time, though, and the Andalusians ran out 6-3 winners. Joaquin, Marcos Assuncao and Fernando Varela sparing their blushes.

Real Madrid had no such problems, the European champions moving smoothly through to the third round as what was virtually a reserve side won 4-0 away to Second Division Real Oviedo.

Fergie's sweet sixteen

Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson celebrated 16 glory-filled years in charge at Old Trafford on Wednesday and admitted he never thought he would have lasted so long.

The Scot took over from Ron Atkinson on November 6, 1986, hand-picked by the United board on the strength of his record at Aberdeen, where he achieved the remarkable feat of breaking Rangers and Celtic's monopoly on Scotland's major trophies.

His first few years at United were far from easy as he struggled to break up cliques of powerful but ageing star players and put in place the youth structure that was to yield stars like David Beckham and Ryan Giggs.

But after narrowly avoiding the sack in 1990 - when the FA Cup replay win over Crystal Palace probably saved his career - he has gone on to become the most successful manager in the club's illustrious history.

"Sixteen years - it's a long time. I'm a bit greyer now!" Ferguson joked in an interview on Manchester United radio.

"I didn't think I'd still be here. I'd just completed eight and a half years at Aberdeen which I thought was a lifetime in management

terms. I've had two lifetimes here! "I've been lucky - you need luck no question about that. But you need resilience, determination and stamina to see the job through, it's not an easy job. I enjoy it, you've got to enjoy this job."

Since that first trophy, Ferguson has delivered three more FA Cups, seven Premiership titles, the 1991



ALEX FERGUSON

European Cup Winners Cup and the 1999 European Champions League trophy, earning himself a knighthood in the process.

"The (1999) Treble was probably the achievement that you always hope will happen, but I must say that winning the League for the first time (1992-93) was one of the most important trophies to win, though," Ferguson admitted.

"They'd gone 26 years without

winning the League - that's a long time, a quarter of a century. Winning that settled everyone down and brought stability and control. We progressed tremendously from there."

Ferguson was initially planning to retire at the end of last season, having always said he did not want to risk the fate of his legendary compatriot Jock Stein, who collapsed and died of a heart attack during a Scotland World Cup qualifier against Wales.

But he rescinded on that decision early on in the season and is now planning to continue until the end of the 2004-05 season, by which time he will be 63.

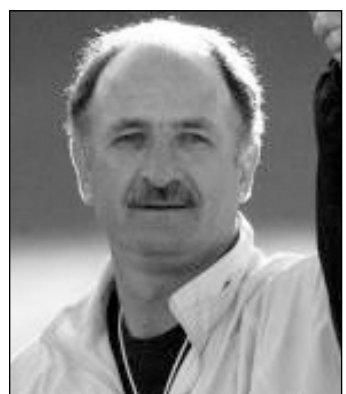
"Sixteen years have gone very quickly," he said. "When you get old time seems to go quicker, and in this job you don't get much time to think and the day flies by."

Having spent so long in the Manchester area, Ferguson says he has no plans to return to Scotland.

"I don't think I'll be leaving the area," he said. "I've got grandchildren not far from us and we're settled here. Even after I finish managing I think I'll still come to United on a Saturday - that will be an important part of my week."

Retirement will also give Ferguson more time to indulge his other great passions, horse racing and fine wine, as well as a less well known pastime - playing the piano.

Scolari ready for Portugal



LUIZ FELIPE SCOLARI

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's World Cup-winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has not been approached about becoming Portugal coach yet but he would be prepared to talk terms, his agent said on Wednesday.

Portugal's football federation said this week it had been authorised to hire a foreigner to revive the fortunes of the national team after a disappointing World Cup performance in South Korea which cost Antonio Oliveira his job.

Press reports said Scolari, who stepped down after landing Brazil's fifth World Cup this year, was Portugal's top target but his agent Acac Fellenger said no approach had yet been made.

"For the moment we haven't had any contact from the Portuguese federation," said Fellenger. "If they did get in touch then there is a possibility of talks."

Scolari, who turns 54 on Saturday, said this week he would prefer to stay in Brazil and coach a club.

"I've decided I would prefer to work in Brazil at the start of next year, for a club on a contract of at least two years."

"I'll only change my mind if an unexpected opportunity arises in the next ten days. But I don't think that will happen," he said.

Scolari, nicknamed Big Phil, has received an offer to coach the Mexican national team and press reports say he has also been approached by the Italian and Uruguayan national teams.

German Cup Bayern breathe at last

Football

AFP, Berlin

Under-pressure Bayern Munich qualified for the third round of the German Cup by beating fellow First Division club Hannover 96 2-1 at the Olympic Stadium in Munich on Wednesday.

Bayern, recently eliminated in the first phase of the Champions League and beaten at the weekend in the league by Werder Bremen, won the match with two goals in the space of three second-half minutes.

Hasan Salihamidzic converted from the penalty spot in the 56th minute before Paraguayan international Roque Santa Cruz scored two minutes later.

Hannover pulled a goal back with a last minute penalty hammered home by Blaise N'Kufo.

Bayern could not afford to suffer the same fate as Bundesliga champions Borussia Dortmund who were knocked out on Tuesday by Second Division SC Freiburg.

But, watched by just 8,000 fans in the cavernous arena, Bayern were pinned back by Hannover in a tight first half.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Bayern Munich's Paraguayan international striker Roque Santa Cruz (top) wins a header against Hannover's Polish player Darius Zuraw at the Olympic Stadium in Munich on November 6.