

Serie A

Totti special inspires Roma

Football

AFP, Milan

Francesco Totti's unstoppable free-kick gave Roma a 1-0 win at struggling Modena on Sunday and kept alive their hopes of catching AC Milan at the top of Serie A.

The Italy international's stunning 25-yard strike 10 minutes after half-time, which arrowed into the top corner, enabled Roma to close the gap on Milan to nine points, setting them up nicely for Wednesday's match against local rivals Lazio, their game in hand on the league leaders.

Roma also have to play Milan at the San Siro on May 2 in what could turn out to be a Scudetto showdown.

Roma have 66 points from their 29 matches played, three more than third-placed Juventus, who drew 2-2 at Parma earlier in the day.

Modena's defeat left them fourth from bottom on 27 points, one behind Reggina, who were held to a goalless draw at Chievo.

The bottom three will automatically be relegated from Serie A with the team finishing fourth from bottom facing a play-off against the side finishing sixth in the second division.

On Saturday Milan maintained their push towards a 17th league title and their first since 1999 with a 2-1 victory away to Siena. Brazilian midfielder Kaka grabbed the decisive goal, stooping low to head in Marco Borriello's flick 10 minutes from time.

Earlier Sunday, Inter Milan boosted their hopes of claiming a place in next season's Champions League by defeating Bologna 4-2 at the San Siro.

Victory for Inter, who were dumped out of the UEFA Cup by French side Marseille on Wednesday, saw them leapfrog Parma into fourth place.

Inter's win was made even sweeter as they achieved it without leading goalscorer Christian Vieri, who fell out with coach Alberto Zaccheroni before the match.

Vieri refused to go on the substitutes' bench after being told by Zaccheroni he was not fit to play for the whole 90 minutes.



PHOTO: AFP

AS Roma captain Francesco Totti is ecstatic after scoring a stunner against Modena in Modena on April 18.

Alvaro Recoba swept in Adriano's left-wing cross to give Inter a half-time lead before Fabio Cannavaro's glancing header and Dejan Stankovic's tap-in put the game beyond Bologna's reach.

Explosive Nigerian forward Obafemi Martins, Vieri's replacement, then got on the scoresheet himself, tormenting three defenders with a superb dribble before striking right-footed past former Italian international Gianluca Pagliuca.

Claudio Bellucci scored both of Bologna's goals either side of Martins' superb effort.

Parma fell to fifth after drawing with reigning champions Juventus, still looking to pip Roma for the runners-up spot.

Juve's Croatian defender Igor Tudor headed a 93rd minute equaliser to snatch a point for the title-holders after Alberto Gilardino's 18th goal of the season had given Parma the lead 10 minutes from time.

Journeyman striker Benito Carbone's header gave Parma a first-half advantage, only for Marco Di Vaio to level the scores for the visitors with a fierce half-volley.

Parma are on 51 points, one behind Inter but one ahead of sixth-placed Lazio.

Lazio remained in the hunt thanks to a 4-2 win over relegated Ancona at the Olympic stadium where Portuguese defender Fernando Couto was on target twice for the Rome side.

Perugia are on the verge of joining Ancona in Serie B after losing 3-2 at Sampdoria for whom Francesco Flachii scored twice.

Perugia president Luciano Gaucci was so upset that his team were denied a penalty when Francesco Flachi handled Jose Ze Maria's free-kick in the area that he said they will not play their remaining four

matches in the championship.

Perugia remain second from bottom on 22 points, five behind Empoli who were held to a 1-1 draw at home to Brescia.

In Saturday's other match, Lecce improved their chances of staying in the top flight after coming from behind to defeat Udinese 2-1.

Lecce are sixth from bottom on 31 points, behind Siena on goal difference.

TOP SIX												
Italian football league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, for, against, points):												
Milan	30	23	6	1	59	20	75					
Roma	29	20	6		3	6	3					
Lazio	66											
Juventus	30	19	6	5	59	3	6					
63												
Inter	30	15	7		8	5	4					

Coelho steps down

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's Portuguese coach Humberto Coelho stepped down Monday as coach of the World Cup semi-finalists after a string of poor results.

The 53-year-old coach's departure followed South Korea's goalless draw with lowly Maldives on March 31 and defeats to Oman and Vietnam earlier in the year.

Coelho hinted that he had not gone willingly and complained that South Korean football officials had failed to give him adequate support.

"The coach cannot deliver unless he has the support he needs. There were difficulties," he said.

"What I think you will have to give to your next coach is the support that I never got."

During his term, he said that he had only been allowed 62 hours of training with the national squad.

"I think that that is not very much given the one year and two months that I have been here," he said. "I regret that I didn't get more opportunity to work."

KFA officials said Coelho's departure was by mutual agreement.

"Both parties reached a mutual agreement. Nobody was fired," said Korean Football Association spokesman Moro Chung.

Coelho's contract, which began on March 1 last year, was set to run until the end of August this year with an option for renewal.

The coach took over from legendary Dutchman Guus Hiddink, who led the side to the last four of the 2002 World Cup.

Under Coelho, South Korea played 18 matches, winning nine, drawing three and losing six.

Primera Liga

Mista's last gasp rescue

Football

AFP, Madrid

Mista Ferrer's last minute goal gave Valencia a 2-2 draw with Real Sociedad to keep them on top of the Spanish first division while, at the other end, Murcia were relegated after they lost 1-0 to Real Betis on Sunday.

Valencia stay in the lead in the title race, but only on goal difference from Real Madrid, who won 2-1 at Atletico Madrid on Saturday.

Both teams have 70 points from their 33 games.

Real Sociedad went ahead after 64 minutes thanks to a thunderbolt from the edge of the area by Xabi Alonso.

The Basques added to their tally five minutes later when Valery Karpin scored from the spot after Oscar De Paula was judged to have been tripped in the box.

Valencia then threw everything into attack and late goals from Vicente Rodriguez and Mista Ferrer got them a share of the points, although their six game winning streak came to an end.

"This game showed the true qualities of these players. They showed great spirit in recovering from being two goals down. The supporters should also take great credit for never giving up and always supporting the players," said Valencia coach Rafa Benitez.

Barcelona moved up to third after their comfortable 3-0 win over Malaga, the goals from

Javier Saviola, Luis Garcia, Philip Cocu all coming in the first 33 minutes.

The Catalans are now seven points behind the leading pair, with five games remaining, after now going unbeaten for 15 games.

The John Toshack-coached Murcia, last season's second division champions, returned to that level after Betis' Brazilian midfielder Assuncao scored the only goal of the game after four minutes, from a free kick just outside the box.

The victory was Betis' first in nine games.

"Going down has been likely for some time, this just fulfils all the predictions. Nevertheless, I have never seen a team put in such an effort week-after-week for so little reward, although they are rather innocent in front of goal," said Toshack glumly.

The next task for the Welsh coach is to ensure that his side do not go down in history as one of the worst teams in Spanish first division history.

If Murcia fail to win any of their remaining five games then they will finish the season with just three victories. Only two other teams in the last 50 years have ended the season with less wins to their name.

Espanyol and Celta Vigo, the other sides in the relegation zone, gave themselves a stay of execution when they both managed battling away wins.

Celta, fourth last year, finally found the form that has eluded them this season and won 2-0 at Albacete.

Juanfran Garcia opened the scoring midway through the first half and then Gustavo Lopez found the net from Juan Valesco's centre barely a minute after the break.

Espanyol got three points with a 3-1 win at Osasuna thanks to the brilliance of Spanish international Raul Tamudo.

Tamudo scored Espanyol's opener after 42 minutes and then made Alex Fernandez and Maxi Rodriguez's second half goals.

Real Mallorca, who are now just two points above the relegation zone, went down 2-1 at home to UEFA Cup semi-finalists Villarreal.

Mallorca squandered a golden opportunity to salvage a point with the last kick of the game when Samuel Eto'o, who had earlier scored from the spot, had his second penalty saved by Villarreal keeper Jose Manuel Reina and the Cameroon international left the field in tears.

TOP SIX												
Spanish league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):												
Valencia	33	21	7	5	65	23	70					
Real	33	21	7	5	67	41	70					
Barcelona	33	18	9	6	55	34	63					
Deportivo	33	18	7	8	53	31	61					
Bilbao	33	14	9	10	46	40	51					
Osasuna	33	11	15	7	36	30	48					

Celtic Scottish champions

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic won the Scottish Premier League title after a 1-0 victory away to Kilmarnock on Sunday.

The result left Martin O'Neill's men with an unassailable 16-point lead over second-placed arch-rivals and reigning champions Rangers.

Bulgarian star Stilian Petrov's 32nd minute goal at Rugby Park effectively handed Celtic their third title in four seasons.

Victory was some consolation for Celtic, who were last season's beaten finalists in the UEFA Cup and went out to Spanish side Villareal in the quarter-finals in midweek.

But the win was not without controversy. Kilmarnock thought they had scored in the 16th minute when Kris Boyd netted.

However, referee Mike McCurry disallowed the effort and instead penalised Killie's Eric Skora for a foul on Celtic defender Bobo Balde.

Celtic's victory meant they regained the title without losing a match, winning 29 and drawing three of their 32 league games so far this season, scoring 98 goals and conceding a mere 18 in the process.

After 33 league games the Scottish Premier League splits in two, with the top six teams and bottom six teams playing one match against each team in their half of the table to finish on a total of 38 games played.

Premiership Magpies hold on for draw

AFP, Birmingham

Newcastle, forced to play most of the match with 10 men, battled their way to a goalless draw against Aston Villa here on Sunday.

The result left both sides hot on the heels of fourth-placed Liverpool in the pursuit for the last Champions League spot with Newcastle level on points with their Anfield rivals - and a game in hand - and Villa just a point behind.

Newcastle's performance was all the more creditable as in the ninth minute they saw defender Andy O'Brien sent-off for a challenge on Villa striker Darius Vassell.

And in the 51st minute, Newcastle striker Craig Bellamy was stretched off with a hamstring injury which looked as if it could rule the Wales international out of Thursday's UEFA Cup semi-final first leg match at home to Marseille.

TOP SIX												
English Premiership table after Sunday's match between Aston Villa and Newcastle (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):												
Arsenal	33	24	9	0	67	22	81					
Chelsea	34	22	6	6	60	27	72					
Man Utd	33	21	5	7	59	32	68					
Liverpool	34	13	11	10	48	36	50					
Newcastle	33	12	14	7	45	33	50					
Villa	34	13	10	11	44	40	49					

Sagnol feels bitter

AFP, Munich

France international Willy Sagnol has criticised Bayern Munich for allowing compatriot Bixente Lizarazu to leave the Olympic Stadium at the end of the season.

World Cup winner Lizarazu, 34, announced his decision to tread a new career path on Friday but Sagnol believes Bayern are making a mistake in letting the experienced defender go.

"I am really annoyed," Sagnol told the Munich press. "As far as I am concerned it is a sign that the club lacks ambition."

"Bixente can play at least one more season at the highest level and help Bayern to push on."

Lizarazu, capped 92 times by France, arrived from Athletic Bilbao in 1997 and has collected four German championships, three German Cups and the Champions League at Bayern.

English Premiership side Tottenham Hotspur are reportedly interested in the 2000 European championship victor.

Fresh twist in Becks soap

Football

AFP, London

A media storm surrounding the love life of David Beckham raged on as a third woman came forward to claim, in a British tabloid newspaper Sunday, that she had a fling with the England football captain.

Stoking the press frenzy further, a separate report claimed the soccer star had confessed to his pop star wife Victoria he had an affair with one of the women, and his wife was now considering a trial separation.

Celina Laurie, a 27-year-old vicar's daughter, told The People weekly that she had sex with

Beckham on August 7, 2002, in a hotel in the Danish city of Aarhus, after a Manchester United game there.

According to Laurie, after chatting her up in a bar, Beckham told her: "I've got a king-sized bed at the hotel. Would you like to join me?"

The blonde added: "He showed no remorse for Victoria and his family. What we did was wrong but I'm not responsible for his actions."

Beckham has already rejected as "ludicrous" earlier claims by his erstwhile personal assistant Rebecca Loos, 26, that they had sex together after he moved from Manchester United to Real Madrid last July while Victoria stayed in Britain.

The furore intensified when

Malaysian-born Sarah Marbeck, 29, told the News of the World - Britain's best-selling tabloid newspaper - she had a two-year affair with Beckham that started during a Manchester United tour in Singapore in July 2001.

Citing "close friends" of Victoria, the same tabloid on Sunday reported that Beckham had confessed to his wife that he had an affair with Loos.

Victoria was so hurt that she was now considering a trial separation, the paper added.

"Yes, I did have the affair," the tabloid said Beckham had told his wife in a phone call on April 8.

Loos is reported to have been paid 500,000 pounds (750,000 euros, 900,000 dollars) for going public with her story.

Marbeck meanwhile claimed on Monday that Beckham's pop star wife Victoria discovered their secret.

She alleges she and the Real Madrid superstar exchanged hundreds of text messages using the code names Peter Pan and Tinkerbell after they met in July 2001 in Singapore.

"I hadn't heard from him in a while and he contacted me and I said 'why haven't I heard from you?' and he said she'd (Victoria) found some of the messages," Marbeck said in an interview with Australian Nine Network television.

Marbeck, who admitted she had been paid for the television interview, said she kept three diaries containing text messages including comments like: "Baby I want you so much."

She alleged she first met Beckham in Singapore in 2001 when he invited her back to his room. "My heart was thumping ... he's a great lover," she said. "He's an amazing guy ... not sleazy at all."

Their second meeting came in Leeds, England in March 2002 following a national match against Italy, she claimed.

After she returned to Australia, she said she was thinking: "I don't know what's going on in his marriage but he's calling me, texting me to come to England."

"I was getting text messages from someone who was so powerful, so romantic, someone so great," she added. But then Beckham stopped contacting her, Marbeck said.

Marbeck sobbed when she was asked how Victoria Beckham would have felt on learning of the affair but said she still wanted to know why Beckham had stopped calling her.

However the boss of an escort agency where Marbeck worked said she had confessed that she never slept with Beckham.

David Wade, who runs the Miss Fleiss escort agency in Sydney, said: "She said to me: 'I never had sex with him, I wanted him to think I was a good girl and not like that.'"

Puma take on FIFA

Football

AFP, Munich

Sportswear manufacturers Puma are to take FIFA to court as they seek compensation for FIFA's decision to ban their controversial one-piece kits worn by Cameroon at the 2004 African Nations Cup.

FIFA's decision to ban the body-suits has left Puma counting the cost in lost revenue and the sports giant have reportedly put their case to a court in Nuremberg.

"Someone has to go to FIFA," explained Puma representative Horst Widmann to the German sports agency SID.

"It can not carry on like this." "There is nothing in the rules of the game that the shorts and the shirts can not be connected."

Cameroon were hit with a six-point World Cup penalty for wearing Puma's one-piece outfits in the African Cup of Nations in Tunisia.

The Indomitable Lions have vowed to fight the punishment.

It is not the first time FIFA has reacted angrily to Puma and Cameroon's fashion statements.

The 2002 African Nations Cup in Mali saw Cameroon wear a sleeveless shirt that angered FIFA who subsequently banned the kit.