

Primera Liga
Valencia
stumble

AFP, Madrid

Valencia's grip on top of the Spanish league weakened Saturday after the reigning champions were held to a lacklustre 1-1 draw at Real Betis.

Claudio Ranieri's side had pole position on the basis of having scored more goals, but they have now just a one-point lead on Barcelona, who on Sunday host newly-promoted Numancia, who have never beaten Barca on the previous occasions they have been in the top flight of Spanish football.

Valencia were hit after inspirational left winger Vicente Rodriguez was ruled out for two weeks with a sprained left ankle, an injury sustained in their 2-1 Champions League loss at Werder Bremen midweek.

But after taking the lead after 10 minutes when Italian marksman Marco Di Vaio scored his fifth goal of the season to join Osasuna's Serbian striker Savo Milosevic and Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o on the top of the scorers list, Valencia failed to fire.

A drop in effort saw Brazilian Edu grab the equaliser after 30 minutes following a pass from Valencia reject Ricardo Oliveira.

In Saturday's late match Atletico Madrid, missing a host of first team players, fell 1-0 at Real Sociedad.

The San Sebastian outfit jumped out of the relegation zone to 13th position thanks to a header from Serbian Darko Kovacevic off a shot from Russian Valeri Karpin five minutes before the break.

Atletico were unfortunate to have three efforts at goal hit the posts as they dropped one spot to fifth position with their second loss of the season.

TOP SIX

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

Valencia	6	4	2	0	15	6
14						
Barcelona	5	4	1	0	12	3
13						
Espanyol	5	3	1	1	7	3

What a kick!

AFP, London

Preston goalkeeper Andy Lonergan became a goalscorer on Saturday when he struck a bizarre equaliser against Leicester City from inside his own penalty area.

Mid-table Championship side Preston were losing 1-0 after Trevor Benjamin headed home after just four minutes at the Walkers Stadium.

But Lonergan came to the rescue six minutes before half-time when he punted a kick upfield, which defender Matt Heath left for Foxes goalkeeper Kevin Pressman to handle.

However, the hapless Pressman slipped and the ball bounced over him and into the goal.

The game ended 1-1 as Preston remained in 13th place, two places behind Leicester.

Beckham
stays
skipper

AFP, London

David Beckham will remain as England skipper despite his poor recent form, national coach Sven-Goran Eriksson said on Sunday.

"I have no intention of changing the captain - not today, tomorrow, not even the day after. There is no reason why I should do it," said Eriksson reacting to some press reports here which hinted that Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand could lead his country "in the future."

Eriksson, who announces his squad for next week's World Cup qualifiers against Wales and Azerbaijan later Sunday, also confirmed his backing for striker Michael Owen, whose place is under threat as he struggles to win a place in the Real Madrid team.

An
understanding
club

AFP, Gelsenkirchen

Schalke 04 have allowed their struggling Brazilian striker Ailton a one-week holiday in his homeland for personal matters, general manager Rudi Assauer confirmed on Saturday.

"Ailton has told us about a few private matters that he needs to attend to in Brazil," declared Assauer. "We have given him some time off as he has a thigh injury and can not train anyhow."

Ailton, 31, has yet to score for Schalke in the Bundesliga and was sent off in the 2-0 defeat by Hansa Rostock at the end of August.

Last season the Brazilian scored 28 league goals to help Werder Bremen to the Bundesliga crown but he has yet to recapture that form since joining Schalke in the close season.

Premiership

Gunners close in on magic 50

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal ended a turbulent week on a high by sweeping Charlton aside to move to within two matches of a phenomenal 50-game unbeaten run in the English Premiership.

In the wake of a disappointing Champions League performance in midweek and the subsequent post-match scuffle between skipper Patrick Vieira and right-back Lauren, the Gunners badly needed to present a unified, cohesive front to the world.

That was exactly what they did with an emphatic 4-0 victory over their London rivals who have a record of creating problems for Arsene Wenger's side at Highbury.

"Overall we played collectively well with a great spirit after there was a question mark over the unity of our spirit in the camp and they gave the right response on the pitch," said Wenger.

"It was important to show that we had no problem with that. I think the performance of Lauren and Vieira were outstanding today."

"It was a great team performance, we needed to be patient, did not get frustrated and we kept the quality of our passing going."

Freddie Ljungberg's close-range finish from a Dennis Bergkamp cross put Arsenal ahead in the 33rd-minute and Wenger's men cut loose after the interval.

Thierry Henry took his tally for the season to seven goals with a double before providing the pass that allowed Jose Antonio Reyes to round off the rout.

The win means Arsenal have now gone 48 games without defeat in the league and there was little sign that they are likely to crack soon.

Avoiding defeat at home to Aston Villa on October 16 will give them the opportunity to bring up their half century against Manchester United at Old Trafford on October 24.

At the other end of the table, West Brom became the first of the newly-promoted sides to register a win this season when they held on for a 2-1 win over Bolton that lifts Gary Megson's side out of the relegation zone.

Second-half goals from Nwankwo Kanu and Zoltan Geraput the Baggies on track but their fans had to endure a nerve-shredding finale - and nearly five minutes of injury time -- after Greece international Stelios Giannakopoulos pulled a goal back for Bolton with just over quarter of an hour left.

"It takes pressure off in terms of having started the season without a win," said Megson. "I am only reassured in terms of the effort and the honesty that the players have put in."

At Goodison Park, Tottenham withstood a fierce onslaught from Everton before taking all three points from an ill-tempered match when French defender Noe Pamerot scored against the run of play eight minutes after the break.

Spurs' former England midfielder Jamie Redknapp was lucky to stay on the pitch after a shocking studs-first tackle on Australia's Tim Cahill.

It was only Everton's second defeat of the season, and manager David Moyes was livid that Redknapp hadn't been dismissed.

"I've had a good chance to look at it again and I think most referees would have given a red card for the tackle," Moyes said.

Cahill was left writhing on the Goodison Park turf and later left the ground on crutches, ruling him out of Australia's forthcoming Confederations Cup qualifiers against the Solomon Islands.

Blackburn and Aston Villa settled for a point apiece in a feisty 2-2 draw at Ewood Park.

Australian midfielder Brett Emerton had put Blackburn within sight of victory when he fired them into a 2-1 lead just after the hour mark after Barry Ferguson had cancelled out Juan Pablo Angel's opener for Villa.

But Swedish defender Olof Mellberg salvaged a point for the visitors with an equaliser ten minutes from time.

Simon Charlton's first league goal in nine years rescued a point for Premiership newcomers Norwich at home to Portsmouth in a pulsating 2-2 draw at Carrow Road.

Nigerian striker Aiyegbeni Yakubu had given the visitors a first half lead with his fourth goal of the season but a burst of three goals in the space of four minutes mid-way through the second half ensured the points were shared.

Darren Huckerby equalised on the rebound after his own penalty

TOP SIX

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

Arsenal	8	7	1	0	26	7	22
Chelsea	7	5	2	0	7	1	17
Everton	8	5	1	2	9	7	16
Tottenham	8	3	4	1	5	3	13
Bolton	8	3	3	2	13	1	1

was saved by Shaka Hislop. Patrik Berger promptly restored Portsmouth's lead with one of his trademark long-distance strikes only for Charlton to head Norwich back on to level terms.

Earlier in the day, Southampton

were relieved to hold out for a 0-0 draw after being outclassed by Manchester City, although Kevin Phillips might have snatched the points for the Saints had he managed to lift a superb stoppage time chance over the head of City

keeper David James.

Sun Jihai squandered the best of a string of chances enjoyed by the visitors, screwing his left-foot shot across goal when he had only Antti Niemi to beat.

Football

REUTERS, London

Thierry Henry's cheeky back-heeled goal against Charlton Athletic bears testament to a player at the top of his art but he will not rest on present laurels.

There's more to come

Football

REUTERS, London

"Now I know that whenever I feel that the time has come for me to make a difference in our games, I can and I will," he added by way of explanation of the self-awareness he has developed.

Those might read like the statements of an individualist yet the 27-year-old is very much a team player who delights in the quality of Arsenal's football and creates almost as many goals for team mates as he scores himself.

Arnold Catalano, the scout who discovered the teenaged Henry for Monaco in 1990, was quoted as saying: "The ball is alive when Arsenal are playing and you can see Thierry takes a lot of pleasure from the technique and movement of the players around him." Henry has won the World Cup and European championships with France and the Premier League and FA Cup with Arsenal, including the double in 2002, he is the 2003 English footballer of the year and a candidate for the 2004 FIFA world player of the year yet there will almost certainly be more to come.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said: "He has intelligence and ambition. When you put those two things together you have a player who wants to improve. "He will get better because he wants to get better."

Serie A

Zola turns back the years

Football

AFP, Rome

Chiavari moved up to second in Serie A on Saturday thanks to a 2-1 home victory over Lecce.

A win for Lecce would have taken them to the top of the table, but they rarely threatened until the closing stages and saw their unbeaten record come to an abrupt end in Verona.

In the day's other match, Gianfranco Zola inspired Cagliari to a 2-1 victory at home to Brescia which lifted the promoted Sardinian side up to third, behind Chiavari on goal difference.

After a dull first half at the Bentegodi stadium, Chiavari broke the deadlock in the 48th minute when Roberto Baroni's powerful right-footed shot went through a sea of legs and past Vincenzo Sicignano in the Lecce goal.

The home side doubled their advantage 11 minutes from time, Simone Tiburio bundling the ball home with the help of a deflection off Souleymane's shoulder.

Mirko Vucinic halved the deficit in stoppage time with a superb 20-yard shot that arrowed into the top corner, but Lecce's late surge was to

no avail as Cagliari maintained their unbeaten run.

Zola got Cagliari off the mark in the 13th minute from the penalty spot, only for Andrea Caracciolo to equalise for the visitors shortly before half-time.

But Zola, who spent seven years in England playing for Premiership side Chelsea, refused to be beaten and a moment of magic from the 38-year-old striker set up the winning goal for Antonio Langella seven minutes from time.

Zola's inch-perfect angled pass picked out his overlapping teammate, who cut inside his marker before striking a powerful right-footed shot off the post.

Tempers flared after Langella had restored the home side's lead and Cagliari's Mauro Esposito and Brescia's Davide Zoboli were both sent off.

TOP SIX

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

Juventus	4	3	1	0	9	1	10
Chiavari	5	2	3	0	6	4	9
Cagliari	5	3	0	2	7	6	9

Ligue 1

Not so nice for Monaco

Football

AFP, Paris

Monaco will probably never know how they came to squander a three goal lead with half an hour to go against Nice on Saturday, last season's Champions League finalists ultimately going down 4-3 in a match they could have won.

Dider Deschamps' Champions League finalists were cruising to victory after goals from Javier Saviola and Emmanuel Adebayor.

But then came seven minutes of madness as Nice snatched victory from the jaws of defeat thanks to a Victor Agali hat-trick with Marama Vahirua clinching this most improbable of all wins.

Argentine attacker Saviola, on-loan from Barcelona, gave Monaco a four-minute lead when he took the ball home off a deflection taken freekick from Uruguayan international Javier Chevanton.

Togolese striker Adebayor then looked to have killed off the game with a double, the first a header after good work from Saviola and Chevanton - the second a lob over keeper Damien Gregorin on the hour mark.