

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 Valery 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 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.

"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 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 Gera put 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	

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.



PHOTO: AFP

BLAZING IN THE RAIN! The Arsenal team celebrate the third goal against Charlton scored by Thierry Henry at Highbury under pouring rain on October 2.

Bundesliga

Bayern getting there

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich underlined their determination to wrestle the German crown back from Werder Bremen with a 2-1 victory over the German champions at the Westerstadion on Saturday.

Bayern had not won in Bremen since December 1999 but broke that hoodoo with German internationals Michael Ballack and Bastian Schweinsteiger on target.

It was sweet revenge for Bayern who surrendered their German title to Bremen with a 3-1 loss at the Olympic Stadium last season.

The German titans are starting to click into gear, building on their 4-0 Champions League demolition of Ajax in midweek, and leapfrogged Bremen into third with the three points.

Surprise package VfL Wolfsburg still set the pace at the top following a 2-1 win over Borussia Monchengladbach.

Magath drafted German international Sebastian Deisler back into the starting eleven after 'resting' him for the past few matches and Deisler did not take long to have an impact.

He whipped over a brilliant 20th minute corner from the right and Ballack rose highest to head home his fourth goal of the season.

Croatian international Ivan Klasnic should have equalised for Bremen on the half hour mark but somehow headed wide with the goal at his mercy.

Greece's Euro 2004 hero Angelos Charisteas, who scored the winner against Valencia in midweek, replaced Klasnic at the interval as coach Schaaf revamped his front line.

Hosts Bremen asserted more pressure after the pause but Ghana defender Sammy Kuffour, back in favour after it looked like he would leave Munich, had an inspired game in the backline.

Substitute Schweinsteiger then staked a claim for a place in the first

team curling home a 75th minute shot that caught goalkeeper Andreas Reinke off guard.

The second goal proved important as Miroslav Klose reduced the deficit with a header in the 81st minute, his fourth goal in his last two Bundesliga outings, but Bayern held on.

Bremen's miserable afternoon was capped off when it was confirmed that German international Frank Fahrenhorst had broken his nose after Ballack's stray elbow forced him to leave the field after seven minutes.

Elsewhere Bayer Leverkusen ended a five match winless streak with a 3-0 triumph over SV Hamburg at the BayArena.

In the 10th minute Krzynowek unleashed a 25 yard shot from his cannon left foot and the ball crashed into the roof of the net.

Brazilian international Juan (73) and Bulgarian international Dimitar Berbatov (86) struck late on for Leverkusen spoiling the return of Hamburg chief Klaus Toppmoller.

Toppmoller guided Bayer to the Champions League final in 2002.

Borussia Dortmund fans are still pining for their first home win in the Bundesliga following a 2-2 draw with FC Nuremberg.

A hectic first period saw three goals scored in five minutes at the Westfalen Stadium.

Marek Mintal (23) and Robert Vittek (25) shocked the 75,000 fans with quick fire goals for FC Nuremberg, but Czech international Jan Koller salvaged a point with his brace (28, 45) completing an action-packed first half.

TOP SIX

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

Wolfsburg	7	6	0	1	13	6	18
Stuttgart	6	4	2	0	13	5	14
Bayern	7	4	2	1	12	9	14
Bremen	7	4	0	3	15	8	12
Mainz 05	7	3	3	1	11	9	12

There's more  
to come

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.

"I'm obsessed by the idea of making my mark on history," the Frenchman said in an interview published on Sunday.

Henry scored twice as Premier League leaders Arsenal crushed Charlton 4-0 at Highbury on Saturday to extend their unbeaten league run to 48 matches.

For his first goal, he took a pass from Jose Antonio Reyes with his back to goal close to the near post and with defender Jonathan Fortune breaching down his neck.

Henry shocked Charlton, thrilled the Highbury faithful and astonished the neutral observer by back-heeling the ball between Fortune's legs and past goalkeeper Dean Kiely into the net.

"Some players, you know when they have the ball that something is going to happen," Henry, top Premier League scorer with 30 goals last season, said of himself in the interview with the Observer Sport Monthly.

Serie A

Zola turns back  
the years

Football

AFP, Rome

Chievo 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 Chievo on goal difference.

After a dull first half at the Bentegodi stadium, Chievo broke the deadlock in the 48th minute when Roberto Baronio's powerful low drive went through a sea of legs and past Vincenzo Sigicnano in the Lecce goal.

The home side doubled their advantage 11 minutes from time, Simone Tiribocchi 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

"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 championship 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."

no avail as Chievo 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 in 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
Chievo	5	2	3	0	6	4	
Cagliari	5	3	0	2	7	6	
9							



GIANFRANCO ZOLA



PHOTO: AFP

RIISING TO THE OCCASION! Nice's Nigerian Victor Agali (C) leaps above Monaco's Patrice Evra during their match at the Louis II stadium in Monaco on October 2.