



AC Milan striker Alberto Gilardino (R) dinks the advancing goalkeeper Lorenzo Squinzi to put his side ahead during their Serie A clash against Chievo at the San Siro on Saturday.

Normalcy restored

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan tightened their grip on the Serie A title after they won 2-1 at Livorno and a second-placed Roma only managed a 1-1 draw at bottom club Ascoli.

The results left Inter, whose Serie A record of 17 consecutive wins was ended on Wednesday after a 1-1 home draw with Udinese, with a massive 16-point lead over their closest rivals, with 12 games left to play.

Inter fell behind to Cristiano Lucarelli's superb free-kick before goals from Julio Cruz and Zlatan Ibrahimovic sealed victory for the Scudetto holders.

Inter had to play the last eight minutes with 10 men following the late dismissal of Maicon for sarcastically applauding the referee after the Brazilian defender had been shown his first yellow card.

Reigning champions Inter

remain unbeaten on 70 points, followed by Roma on 54 points.

AC Milan boosted their chances of claiming a Champions League place for next season with a 3-1 home win over Chievo in the day's late match.

Sergio Pellissier gave Chievo a 17th-minute lead, before AC Milan responded with goals from Alberto Gilardino, Massimo Oddo and Clarence Seedorf.

Victory left AC Milan tied for fourth place on 40 points with Lazio, who play Sampdoria on Sunday.

AC Milan host Celtic in the last 16 of the Champions League on Wednesday after drawing 0-0 in the first leg.

Ibrahimovic, whose goal for Inter was his 12th of the season, refused to go as far as to say that the title race was effectively over.

"Everything is in our hands and we have to make sure we don't make any mistakes from now until the end of the season," the 25-year-old Sweden said.

Inter's gritty victory on the Tuscan coast was the ideal way to

go into Tuesday's crunch Champions League last 16, second leg away to Valencia. Inter threw away a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 in the first leg.

Ibrahimovic insisted Inter were capable of getting the win they need in Valencia that would take them through to the Champions League quarter-finals.

"We're going to Valencia to win," he said. "We're strong and playing with confidence."

Any lingering hopes Roma may have had of catching Inter were practically extinguished after they were held at relegation-threatened Ascoli.

Andrea Sorcin gave Ascoli a first-half lead before Swedish midfielder Christian Wilhelmsson salvaged a point for Roma with an 85th-minute equaliser.

Roma now have to pick themselves up for Tuesday's vital Champions League last 16 match away to French champions Lyon. The first leg in Rome ended in a goalless draw.

Inter came within inches of taking the lead in the 21st minute at

Livorno when Dejan Stankovic's right-footed shot rattled the inside of the post.

The visitors had nothing to show for a bright start, and they fell behind against the run of play in the 27th minute.

Marco Materazzi chopped down Lucarelli just outside the box and the Livorno captain bent the resulting free-kick around the wall and into the top corner.

Inter were again denied by the woodwork when Marco Amelia tipped Fabio Grosso's strike onto the post.

Inter persevered and deservedly levelled the score in the 32nd minute.

Grosso crossed for Ibrahimovic whose flick fell perfectly for Julio Cruz, and the Argentine striker fired past Amelia from close range.

Inter enjoyed a large slice of luck to take the lead in the 66th minute.

A free-kick was touched short to Ibrahimovic whose low shot clipped the feet of Livorno defender Rahman Rezaei, completely sending Amelia the wrong way.

United face test of depth

AFP, Liverpool



Manchester United's strength in depth is set to be tested for the first time this season in the wake of a last-gasp win over Liverpool that has significantly shortened the odds on Sir Alex Ferguson's side reclaiming the Premiership title.

John O'Shea's stoppage time winner at Anfield on Saturday allowed ten-man United to claim all three points against the run of the play and preserve a nine-point advantage over Chelsea at the top of the table.

But the win came at a price with Paul Scholes set to miss the next three domestic matches after being red-carded for aiming a punch at Liverpool's Spanish midfielder Xabi Alonso.

Ferguson was also left sweating over the availability of Wayne Rooney for Wednesday's Champions League second round,

second leg tie with Lille after the forward was forced off with a knee injury he suffered as a result of a challenge by England colleague Jamie Carragher.

With Ole Gunnar Solskjaer out for a month following knee surgery last week and on-loan Henrik Larsson due to return to Sweden next week, United's attacking options are rapidly diminishing as the season nears its climax.

No doubt with that in mind, Ferguson made it clear he was distinctly unimpressed with the lack of self-discipline displayed by Scholes, one of the most experienced members of his squad.

"I've seen it again and Paul has raised his hand and you just can't do that sort of thing," the Scot fumed.

Although Chelsea minimised the damage inflicted by United's win by beating Portsmouth later on Saturday, the nature of their rivals win inevitably strengthened the sense that the title is on its way back to Old Trafford.

"It was a massive result for us,"

Ferguson said. "You need that bit of luck to win titles and we got that last weekend against Fulham and again here. Liverpool will be disappointed they didn't get anything from the game."

Despite the loss of Scholes, Ferguson is confident his squad is strong enough to avoid a repeat of the late collapse that gifted Arsenal the Premiership title in 1998.

"I don't think anything is impossible in modern-day football. But in 1998 we had some terrible injuries and the pool then was nothing like as strong as it is today though. That helps us."

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez ordered his players to bounce back from the defeat by finishing off Barcelona in the Champions League on Tuesday.

"It's unbelievable how we lost it," Benitez said of Saturday's match. "We were attacking and had all the corners while United weren't really attacking. We created some very good chances but we didn't score."

"We are really disappointed but we have to be positive and think about Barcelona. If we play like that against Barcelona and have some luck then we have a good chance of going through."

The Liverpool boss acknowledged that United will be very hard to catch in the final run-in.

"United are really close to the title. Chelsea are a good team and can win games in a row but United can do the same."

The decisive moment in the match came in the second minute of added-on time after Ryan Giggs won a freekick on the left of the Liverpool box.

The angle looked too tight for a shot but Cristiano Ronaldo tried his luck anyway and, when Jose Reina proved unable to hold his low drive, O'Shea pounced to smash the ball high into the net from close range.

"I don't know if Reina could have done any better for the goal, I'll have to see it again," Benitez said. "But we should have scored before then."

Mourinho warns against slip-ups

AFP, Portsmouth



Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has warned his players they cannot afford to drop any more points if they are to stop Manchester United wrestling the Premiership title from their grasp.

The defending champions cut United's lead at the top to nine points with a nervy 2-0 win at Portsmouth, inspired by goals from Ivory Coast duo Didier Drogba and Solomon Kalou and some heroic goalkeeping from Petr Cech.

Mourinho believes the Londoners must take maximum points from their final ten league games to keep alive hopes of an historic Premiership, FA Cup, Carling Cup and Champions League clean sweep.

Portuguese Mourinho, whose side have a game in hand over

United, said: "Last season when we were top of the league and everyone said the pressure was on I said 'no, the pressure is on the team in second.'"

"This season it is the same - we are the ones under pressure. The realisation is that we cannot afford to make any mistakes and we cannot lose any more points."

"United have the gods on their side but we have the belief because in football anything is possible."

"We have one game in hand and if we win that the gap will be back to six points. We still have to play against them and we have to be positive. We are still in three competitions and have already won the Carling Cup."

"I spoke with my players before the game about the fact we would know the United result by the time we played and I told them we could not relax if they lose and not be disappointed if they won."

Chelsea came into the game knowing United had beaten Liverpool courtesy of a stoppage

time winner in the lunchtime kick off.

Mourinho's side overcame an edgy start to take the lead 12 minutes before half-time thanks to Drogba's sublime volley into the far corner from fit-again Ashley Cole's cross.

Cech pulled off two match-winning saves to deny Andy Cole and Nwankwo Kanu in the space of as many minutes late on as battling Portsmouth threatened to hand United the title.

Substitute Kalou sealed the points eight minutes from time, capping a breakaway move by converting Cole's flick from close range.

Cech's heroics prompted Mourinho to claim the gap at the top would be much closer but for the Czech Republic star's horrific head injury at Reading in October.

Mourinho added: "We had control for 80 minutes but for 10 minutes in the second half Portsmouth came back into it. Petr Cech had to step up and prove he

was the best.

"With Cech in goal all season, how many more points would we have had? He is the best goalkeeper in the world."

The defeat leaves Portsmouth's own European hopes in the balance after winning only one of their eight Premiership games since the turn of the year.

Manager Harry Redknapp believes Mourinho's team will fight United all the way to keep hold off their trophy.

Redknapp said: "I cannot fault the way we played and I was a bit disappointed to go in 1-0 down at half-time."

"They have some fantastic players and Chelsea will not give up on the title. Beating Liverpool was a massive result for United and they are strong favourites but Chelsea are still in there."

"Jose Mourinho always plays his strongest team. He never rests his best players and that could be important."

Taddei fit for Roma

AFP, Rome

Roma's Brazilian midfielder Rodrigo Taddei is expected to be fit for Tuesday's crucial Champions League last 16, second leg away to Lyon, despite missing the last two league games through illness and injury.

Taddei, who played in the 0-0 first leg draw at the Olympic stadium, was laid low by a fever after the 3-0 home win against Reggina on February 25 before suffering a thigh strain.

On Saturday he trained alone in Rome while his team were drawing 1-1 with Ascoli, Serie A's bottom club.

Italian media reports said Taddei was almost certain to start in France on the right-hand side of midfield, with Simone Perrotta in the centre and Brazilian Mancini on the left.

Francesco Totti will probably play as a lone striker.

Philippe Mexes and Christian Chivu are expected to play in central defence, flanked by Christian Panucci at right-back and Max Tonetto at left-back.

Montenegrin striker Mirko Vucinic should be on the bench despite picking up an ankle injury against Ascoli that required stitches.

Cahill out for season

INTERNET, undated

Everton midfielder Tim Cahill looks set to miss the rest of the season after breaking a metatarsal during his side's 1-1 draw at Sheffield United.

The Australia international was helped off the pitch by Phil Jagielka in the 40th minute before being attended to by Everton medical staff.

Toffees boss David Moyes confirmed: "Tim has broken the first metatarsal in his left foot."

"He will probably be out for the season. I'm really disappointed because he is a very important player to us."

"He showed that in periods during the first half. He will be a big miss."

Pardew targets great escape

AFP, London

Charlton manager Alan Pardew insisted his side's point at fellow strugglers Watford "felt like a win" even though it meant they fell further behind in the scramble for Premiership survival.

The team to make the most significant forward step on Saturday turned out to be Wigan, who beat Manchester City for their second consecutive victory and moved eight points clear of the bottom three.

But Paul Jewell's side still face a trip to Charlton and Pardew, whose team are six points from safety, remained upbeat despite having seen his side out-played in the first half and requiring a late equaliser from Darren Ambrose to salvage a point.

"We have got two home games coming up against Newcastle and Wigan," he said. "And this point could turn out to be very useful."

"The gap isn't huge - it would only be if we weren't putting in performances like the one in the second half today."

Charlton had demolished West Ham 4-0 last week but never looked like inflicting a similar scoreline on Adrian Boothroyd's side, who climb ahead of the Hammers on goal difference to move off the foot of the table for the first time since early December.

Tamas Priskin fluffed an early chance after Talal El Karkouri's slip had put him through but it was not long before Hameur Bouazza fired the Hornets ahead on the rebound after goalkeeper Scott Carson could only parry a Damien Francis header.

Francis doubled the lead in the 21st minute by converting a Tommy Smith cross beyond the back post and the home players went in at the break to huge applause.

Pardew made changes at the break, replacing the out of sorts Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink with China captain Zheng Zhi and the improvement was immediate.

Matt Holland wasted a fine chance after Alexandre Song had opened up the Watford defence but when the on-loan Arsenal midfielder repeated the trick seconds later Luke Young made no mistake to put his side back in the game.

Ambrose converted a cross from substitute Dennis Rommedahl with a minute remaining and there was also a chance in stoppage time for another replacement, striker Kevin Lisbie, to win it for the visitors.

His shot was blocked but Pardew was upbeat nonetheless.

"I'm still trying to get over the last moment but it was a great fight-back," he said. "It feels like a win."

"The players are a little bit dejected but I have told them this is still a win for us because coming back from 2-0 down at Watford is a tough, tough order."

Pardew believed the draw had also been a "killer blow" to Watford's chances of staying up and Boothroyd admitted his players have an inability to close out games.

"In terms of draws we must be a coupon player's dream," he said. "In the first half we were the better side by a long way but it is not a 45-minute match, it's a 90-minute one."

Wenger wants sharp Gunners

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger has warned Arsenal they must rediscover their ruthless streak if they want to preserve their dreams of Champions League glory after a nervy 2-1 win over Reading.

The Gunners missed a clutch of chances but still appeared primed for a comfortable victory after second-half strikes from Gilberto and Julio Baptista, before Cesc Fabregas's own goal set up a frantic finale.

The Royals failed to capitalise on their hosts' profligacy, but PSV Eindhoven are unlikely to be as generous in Wednesday's Champions League second round, second leg clash at the Emirates stadium.

Arsenal trail 1-0 from the first leg and Wenger is demanding a more clinical approach as he bids to avoid a second consecutive season without a trophy.

"We were shaky and the one regret is that we didn't kill the game off earlier," the Frenchman said.

"It's important that we are relaxed against PSV and take our chances. We have to believe in what we do and play the football we can play. Hopefully that will be enough."

"They will be cautious, wait for us in their own half and hope that we

become impatient. We have to be dynamic and patient at the same time and that is not very easy but I believe that we can do it."

"In Champions League games, I think players have that little bit extra focus and concentration which makes them a bit more efficient in the final third. I am confident we will have that against PSV."

Victory ensured that a dreadful week for Arsenal at least had a happy ending. The north Londoners had endured three successive defeats - their worst run for four-and-a-half years - and been knocked out of two different competitions in the space of seven days, as well as enduring a host of negative headlines thanks to Wenger's highly vocal criticisms of the English Football Association.

But this win tightens the club's stranglehold on fourth place and slashed the gap to third-placed Liverpool as the race to secure qualification for next season's Champions League intensifies.

"After the week we had, it was very important for us to get the win," Wenger added. "A bad result for us today would have pushed us into a bit of a crisis, confidence-wise, but three points gets us into a good position in terms of qualifying for the Champions League and takes off some of the pressure."

Victory against Reading was well merited, even if it was only secured by

a hair's breadth. Gilberto shot Arsenal in front from the penalty spot in the 50th minute after Gael Clichy had been hauled down by Andre Bikey, and 11 minutes later Baptista added a second after barging past Graeme Murty.

Arsenal should have built on that lead but Reading sparked into life after falling behind, and after Steve Sidwell missed two good chances, Fabregas diverted an inswinging corner into his own net when he was placed under pressure from Leroy Lita.

The visitors piled on the pressure in the dying moments and Sidwell saw one fierce near-post drive well saved by Jens Lehmann but Reading ran out of time in their attempt to avoid a third straight defeat.

"We could have got something, although it wouldn't have been in the manner that we had imagined," manager Steve Coppell admitted.

"But given the opportunities and Lehmann's terrific save right at the death, we could have got a point."

"We're new kids on the block in this league and they are European Cup finalists so it's not a level playing field. They are bigger and better than us and we can only aspire to be competitive. We still have a long way to go."

Title race thrown open

AFP, Berlin



The German title race is back on after Werder Bremen and Bayern Munich both won Saturday and Stuttgart lost, leaving just six points separating the top four clubs.

Leaders Schalke 04 suffered a shock 2-0 defeat at home to suddenly resurgent Hamburg on Friday, and Saturday's results have blown the title race wide open.

Werder, who had been in a slump recently, rebounded with a 3-0 thrashing of lowly VfL Bochum at home while Bayern won a thrilling match at Hertha Berlin 3-2.

Stuttgart, who were second at the start of the day's play but have now dropped below Bremen, lost 3-1 at Bayer Leverkusen.

It leaves Schalke still on top with 49 points but Werder have closed the deficit to three with Stuttgart one point further back and Bayern now just six points off the summit.

Just two weeks ago Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld had all but given up on the title after his side claimed just four points from five matches.

He admitted his aim was simply to finish third and qualify for next season's Champions League.

But goals from Hassan Salihamidzic, Lukas Podolski and Roy Makaay ensured Bayern returned from the capital with three-points and renewed hope of retaining their title.

It was brace of goals just 60-seconds apart that set Bayern on the way to victory, with first Salihamidzic and then Podolski finding the net.

Christian Jimenez reduced the arrears for Hertha early in the second period but Makaay restored the two-goal advantage with 22 minutes to play.

Defender Dick van Burik ensured a nail-biting finale by cutting the deficit with just eight minutes left to play but Bayern gamely held on.

A hat-trick from Aaron Hunt gave Werder a comfortable win over second bottom Bochum as the hosts made light of their ravaged forward line to record their first league win in five attempts.

Stuttgart were well beaten by Leverkusen, falling 3-0 behind before Brazilian Cacau scored a late consolation.

It was another game where two quick goals settled the affair as Andriy Voronin on 20 minutes and Paul Freier two minutes later gave Leverkusen a dream start before Juan added a finishing touch just after the hour mark for a 3-0 lead.

On Friday Hamburg won their fourth match in a row under new coach Huub Stevens to stun the leaders on their own patch.

Hamburg, who finished third last season, had won only one league match all season and were rock bottom when Stevens took over but the Dutchman has re-instilled belief into the north coast side.

Thanks to two late goals courtesy of Dutch playmaker Rafael van der Vart and Croatian striker Ivica Olic, Hamburg are now 11th in the 18-team league but still only three points above the relegation zone.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski celebrates after scoring a goal in their Bundesliga clash against Hertha Berlin at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin on Saturday.

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	36 Fellow occupant	37 Radar screen spot	54 First intrigue
5 Pita sandwich	38 Hawk-eye abbr.	40 French article	41 Production number?
9 Autumn	39 Eye	3 Smell	4 Show anger, maybe
12 Fellow	40 French article	5 Radiance	6 Thither
13 Places	41 Production number?	43 Ignite	47 Samovar
14 Greek consonant	43 Ignite	48 Unreal	51 —
15 Not stoic	47 Samovar	51 —	8 Lubricated
17 Stannum	48 Unreal	51 —	9 Yours if you want it
18 Bone content	52 Salver	53 Medley	54 First st.
19 Decree	53 Medley	55 Withered	10 Stylish
21 Fashionable	54 First st.	56 Rote of	11 Hue
22 Walkman, perhaps	55 Withered	16 Charged bit	
24 Distortion	56 Rote of		
27 Kitten's comment	16 Charged bit		
28 Hose woe			
31 Historic time			
32 Mess up			
33 Literary collection			
34 "Little Women" woman			

DOWN	1 The same	2 Russian legisla- ture	20 Affront (Sl.)	22 Old show	23 Off	24 Symbol of	25 Exist	26 Sane	27 Grand- scale	29 Black bird	30 Diastema	35 Stolen	37 Caused to go	39 Lightly travels on air	40 Main-lander's memento	41 Campus area	42 Incite	43 Eyelid problem	44 Sole	45 Not even get a D	46 Ice mass	49 Rage	50 Automobile
-------------	-------------------	--------------------------------	-------------------------	--------------------	---------------	---------------------	-----------------	----------------	------------------------	----------------------	--------------------	------------------	------------------------	----------------------------------	---------------------------------	-----------------------	------------------	--------------------------	----------------	----------------------------	--------------------	----------------	----------------------

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
12					13				14		
15				16					17		
18							19	20			
			21			22	23				
24	25	26			27			28	29	30	
31					32				33		
34			35		36			37			
			38		39			40			
41	42						43		44	45	46
47					48	49	50				
51					52				53		
54					55				56		

CRYPTOQUIP

RLZ PSGX SGCEZG HZEEX -

QC - ECMVGT TC HMWL

RLSR TLZ LSG LZE VSHZ

WLSVQZG RC WSES TZPPZ.

Yesterday's Cryptquip: WHEN I SAID "THE CARNIVAL ENDS AFTER TONIGHT," YOU COULD SAY I WAS GIVING FAIR WARNING.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: R equals T