



Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos is overjoyed after scoring against Valencia in their Primera Liga match at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Saturday.

Real overcome Valencia

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid players had been saying all week that they had to beat Valencia to stay in the Spanish title race and they did just that with a 2-1 victory over the 2002 and 2004 champions on Saturday.

Goals from Ruud Van Nistelrooy and Sergio Ramos means that Real move up to second place, at least overnight.

"It was a big day for us. We played well and if we keep playing like this then we can still lift the league," said Van Nistelrooy.

The 29-time Spanish champions, who have not topped La Liga this season, are now two points ahead of Sevilla but still two points behind the league leaders and their eternal foes Barcelona with seven games to go.

Both of Real's two main rivals for the La Liga crown also have a game in hand and play Sunday.

Van Nistelrooy scored his 17th league goal of the season -- and one of the best by Real this year -- with a spectacular right-foot volley from just inside the area after an inch-perfect pass from Miguel Torres on the left wing.

"It was the passes before that set up the goal but it was a great centre from Miguel," added Van Nistelrooy.

Real then had a purple patch of around 15 minutes when Van Nistelrooy and club captain Raul Gonzalez should have added to their tally.

However Valencia got back into the game just before the break and shortly afterwards Fernando Morientes scored against his old club, where he had spent eight seasons and been part of teams that had won the Champions League three times.

Morientes found the net seven minutes after the break after finding the space to side foot home a

Joaquin Sanchez cross, after the Spanish international winger had outprinted Torres down the right wing.

Real were clearly determined to maintain their championship challenge against a team that had beaten them in the Santiago Bernabeu last season.

Sergio Ramos got the winner 17 minutes from time when he rose above the Valencia defence to head home a David Beckham free-kick.

It was a huge contribution from the former England captain after only being on the pitch barely five minutes and was playing his first game for six weeks after recovered from a knee injury.

Real were overall the better side but still had to survive some nervous moments in the final as Valencia pressed hard for a draw and Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas had to work hard to deny his fellow Spanish internationals Aitor Del Horno and David Villa in the final minutes.

"It was important to win the way we did against a very good side. In

the first half Gago and Higuain played well and in the second half (substitutes) Beckham and Guti were crucial," reflected Real coach Fabio Capello.

Real Sociedad continued to keep alive their won hopes of avoiding relegation with their third win in four games, beating Atletico Madrid 2-0 on Saturday.

Sociedad took an early lead with Darko Kovacevic stabbing the ball home from the edge of the six-yard box, following a cross from the left wing by Savio, after seven minutes.

Atletico then had their French midfielder Peter Luccin sent off for trying to con the referee about an in-existent foul 20 minutes from time and shortly afterwards the visitors were left with nine men when Fabiano Eller picked up his second yellow card.

Savio then secured three points for Sociedad with six minutes remaining.

Becks won't be released early

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello said here on Sunday that neither he nor the club would consent to releasing David Beckham early so that he could join his new American club Los Angeles Galaxy.

"It's not an issue for either me or the club. He has a signed contract and he's not going to go before the end of the season," said Capello.

With Beckham having a contract at Real until the end of June, the former England captain is now expected to start playing in Major League Soccer in July, although the league has already started.

Beckham made headlines around the world when he announced on January 11 that he was moving across the Atlantic for a breathtaking five-year deal worth potentially as much as 250 million dollars.

Two days later Capello axed him from the Real team.

"He's not going to play anymore. He can train but not play. I think you can't play with the same motivation if you have signed for another team," said Capello infamously on January 13.

Injuries and loss of form forced Capello to recant on his hard-line stance a month later but many pundits have continued to speculate that the Los Angeles Galaxy or the club's owners Anschutz Entertainment Group would try to buy out Beckham's contract or reach an agreement with Real to get the player released.

Gekas signs for Leverkusen

AFP, Berlin

The Bundesliga's top-scorer VfL Bochum's Theofanis Gekas has signed a four-year contract with Bayer Leverkusen, their club manager Rudi Voeller revealed on Saturday.

The 26-year-old 14-times capped Greek international scored his 18th goal of the season in Bochum's 3-0 win at Eintracht Frankfurt.

Gekas has been on a one-year loan at Bochum from Greek side Panathinaikos.

A prolific scorer, Gekas was the Greek League's top goalscorer in 2005 with 17 goals and was runner-up in 2006 with 15.

Leverkusen boss Voller, whose side won 2-0 at home to Nuremberg, did not disclose how much they will pay for Gekas, who has also been chased by AS Roma.

Eusebio may need surgery

AFP, Lisbon

Former Portugal star striker Eusebio may need to undergo surgery on his carotid arteries, doctors in the Hospital of Light in Lisbon said Sunday.

The 65-year-old is suffering from a blockage to the arteries that carry blood to the brain.

"After conducting some tests we have found some obstructions to the internal carotid arteries. We believe an eventual operation will be necessary," said Germano do Carmo, a doctor at the hospital.

"It would require a delicate but uncomplicated operation."

According to the hospital director Jose Roquette, Eusebio is well and not complaining of anything.

The "Black Panther", as he was known in his playing days, hails originally from former Portuguese colony Mozambique and lit up the 1966 World Cup, scoring nine goals as Portugal reached the semi-finals.

He was a major star for Benfica during the 1960s and 1970s, winning 10 titles, five cups and one European Cup, whilst also playing in three other finals of Europe's top competition.

England forever

AFP, London

Chelsea and England captain John Terry insists he would never play for a club outside the Premiership.

The 26-year-old's future at Stamford Bridge remains uncertain after he admitted recently that talks over a new contract had broken down.

Terry, whose present deal with the Premiership champions expires in 2010, would be a target for Europe's biggest clubs.

But he has given no indication that he wants to leave and claims a move to Italy or Spain does not appeal after speaking to his former Chelsea teammate Eidur Gudjohnsen about life at Barcelona.

"Abroad? No, that doesn't appeal to me at all," he told the News of the World. "It's not what I'm about."

"I'm English through and through, the old English style centre-half. I still speak to Eidur Gudjohnsen at Barcelona and he says the training over there is quite relaxed."

"I couldn't settle in that environment. I couldn't let that happen. I want to go into training knowing I'm going to get kicked."

Lyon crowned champions

AFP, Paris

Lyon were crowned French champions for a record sixth time in a row without even having to lace up their boots on Saturday.

Gerrard Houllier's men had already all but mathematically ensured they would win the title despite being held to a 0-0 draw by Rennes in midweek.

But having spoilt their title celebration aspirations on Wednesday, Rennes did the league leaders a favour by beating Toulouse 3-2 on Saturday, removing the one remaining obstacle to Lyon's celebrations.

Houllier insisted that winning the title without playing took away none of the gloss.

"This title is confirmation in my mind for what we as good as achieved with our win over Nancy (last month)," he said.

"We had 65 points (then) and I knew that for our chasers that would be difficult to match, especially with our goal difference advantage."

He added: "It's very satisfying. Last year was a five-in-a-row record, this year it's a European (big leagues) record."

Former Liverpool striker Bruno Cheyrou scored the Rennes winner with just three minutes to play, ending Toulouse's all but extinct hopes of winning the league.

Toulouse suffered a double blow as

they also lost second place -- and direct entry into the Champions League group stages next season -- to Lens who beat Le Mans 1-0 at home.

Lyon thus beat the record five titles in a row that they set last season, although such is their domination domestically that it may be many years and records before they are dethroned.

Earlier a double from Portuguese striker Pauleta lifted Paris Saint Germain to a 4-0 win over relegation-rivals Nantes, a victory which could prove vital to the Parisians' bid to beat the drop.

Rockbottom Nantes, however, look set for the second division next season just six years after they won the last of their domestic titles, as the side from southern Brittany showed a lack of fighting spirit during a match in which they rarely threatened their hosts.

PSG are now riding a four-game unbeaten streak that includes three victories and a solitary draw.

But boss Paul Le Guen warned against complacency, despite his side moving six points clear of the drop zone with just five games to play.

Asked if the win would be enough to guarantee safety, Le Guen replied: "Definitely not! After the match against Rennes (the last game PSG lost) there were headlines such as: Paris are sinking and Paris are going straight down."

"But I don't think the same way. Today we have the opposite: Paris are saved. I don't believe that either."

"We have to stay on our guard and

ready. It would be dangerous to think that way (that we are saved). But for sure the 10 points from 12 has done us a lot of good and we can allow ourselves to be a little more confident."

Pauleta -- who had been left out of the starting team for the past few matches -- opened with a superb free kick taken after 17 minutes with midfielder Jerome Rothen finding the net for the first time this season two minutes before the break.

Pauleta claimed his second on 65 and a minute later helped Peguy Luyindula score the fourth which compounded the misery of Nantes.

PSG now have 38 points and Le Guen believes that his side need 43 points to survive, but the Parisians face a tough end to the season with ties against Toulouse, Lyon, Nice, Troyes and Lorient on the cards.

Only a miracle can save the Canaries who look set for the drop for the first time since their first division adventure began in 1963.

Modest M'Bami scored a winner four minutes from time as Marseille leaped into a UEFA Cup qualification place with a 2-1 home win over Troyes who remain third from bottom.

Lyon play away to Auxerre on Sunday in a match that will now have a party atmosphere from the visiting supporters.

Ronaldo double fires Milan

AFP, Milan

A Ronaldo double fired AC Milan to a 3-1 Serie A win over Cagliari at the San Siro on Saturday as the Italian side warmed up in style for next week's Champions League semifinal against Manchester United.

Goals from the Brazilian in either half and a late free-kick from Italy midfielder Andrea Pirlo gave AC Milan a four-point cushion in fourth place.

Carlo Ancelotti rested many of the players who are expected to start against Manchester United.

Ronaldo's opening goal on 14 minutes was not without controversy with the Sardinians protesting a tackle by Cafu on Cristiano Del Grosso, but the referee waved play on, allowing the Brazilian to tap in.

There was no arguing with his second after 69 minutes, though, Ronaldo scoring with his chest from a Cafu centre.

With seven goals in 10 matches, the Brazilian, who cannot compete in the Champions League because he has already played this season with Real Madrid, has more than met expectations since his winter transfer.

Pirlo rounded off the scoring with 10 minutes to go with a free-kick ending the hopes of Cagliari who six minutes earlier had pulled one back through a penalty converted by Suazo.

"I was particularly delighted with Pirlo's free-kick because it allowed us to finish off a tie which we allowed them back into. We have to be on our guard at all times," said Ancelotti.

"Since the winter break, thanks to the return of key players (from injury) and the arrival of Ronaldo, we've improved considerably," said the Milan coach.

"The determination of the team to

fight back has also played an important role in this."

Thanks to their fourth straight success, the Milan outfit have fulfilled their aim of reaching the coveted fourth and final qualifying spot for the Champions League next season and are just a point behind third-placed Lazio who host seventh-placed Fiorentina on Sunday.

Earlier, two late goals gave Sampdoria a 3-1 win at home against relegation-threatened Messina.

Reto Ziegler scored the opener after 13 minutes and created the second for Daniele Franceschini seven minutes from time after Christian Rigano had levelled for Messina after 54 minutes.

Gennaro Delvecchio claimed Sampdoria's third in the final minute, seeing them move to within two points of Fiorentina.



AC Milan forward Ronaldo (R) skips over a tackle from Cagliari midfielder Davide Marchini during their Serie A match at San Siro in Milan on Saturday.

A bout of the bests

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson believes the clash between Cristiano Ronaldo and Kaka in Manchester United's Champions League semifinal clash with AC Milan on Tuesday will showcase the two best players in the world.

Manchester United manager Ferguson has singled out Brazil's play-maker as the Serie A outfit's outstanding player ahead of the Premiership leaders bid to maintain their challenge for honours on three fronts.

And the Scot believes Ronaldo's displays this season have justified claims the Portuguese winger is currently the game's number one talent.

Ferguson, though, has warned his side cannot afford to focus their efforts solely on halting Kaka if they are to retain hopes of claiming a second successive Italian scalp

following the emphatic 8-3 aggregate demolition of AS Roma.

United lost to Carlo Ancelotti's side at the quarter-final stage two seasons ago but Ferguson is convinced his side has improved immeasurably since then.

"I wouldn't disagree with people who say Ronaldo and Kaka are currently the best two players in the world," he said.

"But Milan have a lot of good other players too. Paolo Maldini is great and Clarence Seedorf has won the Champions League three times with three different teams."

"They have fantastic experience in their team. But I think we'll be better than the last time we played them and hopefully they won't be as good."

"The speed we're playing at and the penetration is creating chances," the manager said. "Lots of players are chipping in with their share. Ronaldo has 21 and Wayne Rooney has 20. Louis Saha 13 and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer 11. That's quite good. We have 19 different goalscorers this season. That's very high."

United's 7-1 second leg victory over Roma established the Old Trafford club as favourites to win the competition but the manager knows Milan will present a much tougher challenge.

"Our tactics will be different from the Roma game," he added. "In the last game two years ago the thing that impressed me about AC Milan there was great professionalism in both games."

"There was no diving about and they played the game properly. They've been in 10 finals. It's a fantastic record and they have a great history."

Ferguson insists he would be satisfied if his side just managed to win one major trophy and claims his side are showing no signs of feeling the pressure ahead of the season's climax. He singled out midfielder Michael Carrick as an example of his team's development this year.

"At this time of the season you are always looking for signs from players," he said. "You're hoping you don't see the signs but you are always looking for them. And I've not seen any signs."

"We know we can play football and we are just going to have to muck it out when it's necessary. We're showing great determination to get through games. I think they're playing so well and enjoying their football that they are all leading by their own baton."

"They all know their own jobs and are expressing their own personalities in matches. You look at Michael Carrick for instance. In the last few weeks he has been absolutely sensational and got six goals now."

"So there's no doubt that success develops players quicker. We knew about Carrick when he was a gangly kid at Newcastle. And last season I thought it was the right time to get him when he was 25."

"Physically he has matured. You can see the strength in him now. He has done a lot of work with that without our people. But I must say the last few weeks he has been absolutely brilliant."

Stuttgart down Bayern

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld was left bitterly disappointed after his side's 2-0 defeat at VfB Stuttgart on Saturday leaves them almost certain to miss a Champions League place next season.

Brazilian Cacau floored Bayern's defence with two goals in as many minutes to open a five-point gap between Stuttgart, in the final Champions League qualifying place, and Bayern in fourth, with only four games left.

Should Bayern fail to finish third or higher it will be the first time in eleven years the German giants have missed out on a Champions League place.

"I am very disappointed with my

team," said Hitzfeld.

"We have lost too many duels on the pitch and in the first-half we barely threatened their goal and even after the break, we never really worried their defence."

After scoring with a freak goal on 24 minutes when the ball re-bounded off him, Cacau scored again a minute later when Stuttgart midfielder Sami Khedira whipped in a cross for the Brazilian to slip his markers and bury his shot.

"The first goal was a bit funny. I felt it hit me and then fly into the net, but I was really pleased with the second goal," said 26-year-old striker Cacau.

Bayern's German international goalkeeper Oliver Kahn was so incensed with his leaky defence that he earned himself a yellow card as he vented his frustration at Munich's defence.

Cacau was again allowed too much space with the goal at his mercy four minutes later, but his shot went

wide.

Stuttgart coach Armin Veh was delighted at the result which means his side are in pole-position for a Champions League berth and also keeps alive their title hopes.

"This was a very good achievement of us," he said.

"We were very good defensively and we had lots of chances to go further ahead. The team is as fit as a fiddle and after all the euphoria of beating Bayern Munich, we must now concentrate on our last four games."

Schalke 04 went back to the top of the Bundesliga having lost pole-position for less than 24 hours -- thanks to Werder Bremen's 3-1 win over Alemannia Aachen on Friday night -- with a 2-0 victory at Energie Cottbus.

Cottbus midfielder Timo Rost scored an own goal on the hour mark and Brazilian Bordon scored with a header four minutes later to make it 2-0.

Bayern Leverkusen took oppo-

nents Nuremberg's fifth-place -- and potential UEFA Cup spot -- with a 2-0 home win.

German international midfielder Bernd Schneider gave his side the lead with a right-footed shot after 20 minutes and bagged his second on 59 minutes to make the result safe.

Aminia Bielefeld clawed up one place to 15th and out of the relegation zone with a superb 3-2 win over VfL Wolfsburg.

After scoring an early goal through defender Heiko Westermann after eight minutes, Bielefeld fell behind to goals from Brazilian Marcelo Marcelinho after 16 minutes and striker Isaac Boakye on 53 minutes.

But Bielefeld equalised through striker Christian Eigler on 72 minutes and Polish striker Artur Wichniarek sealed the win on 86 minutes.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Take up weapons

4 Barton or Bow

9 Fast-forward past the ads

12 The girl

13 Storms

14 Bullying

15 Ragtime piano style

17 A Bobbsey twin

18 Atmosphere

19 "Revenge of the Sith" role

21 Hispanic

24 Capital of Togo

25 Lennon's lady

26 "Pygmalion" writer's monogram

28 Fussies

31 Dresses in

33 Listening device

35 Santa's laundry woe

DOWN

1 Fire residue gun

2 Plato's P

3 Fellows bit

4 Lachrymose

5 Pittsburgh suburb

6 Past

7 Kidney-related

8 Start of a JFK quote

9 In a stupor

10 Jail follower

Solution time: 24 mins.

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CONCENTRATION
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SON **WEB** **DINER**
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AREA **BOON** **OTTO**
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DORM **LESS** **SKY**

11 Actor Sean

16 Chiang --shek

20 Andy's pal

21 California city

22 Unsigned (Abbr.)

23 Artificial vanilla source

27 Potential syrup

29 Leak slowly

30 Mix

32 -- precedent

34 Old movies in new form

37 Doctrines

39 Lead ore

42 Simeone

44 007, for one

45 Bulletin-board item

46 Hodge-podge

50 Zero

51 Weep loudly

52 Perfume-label word

53 Work unit

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CRYPTOQUIP

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P X S U Z ' P X Q A O S Q Z E E Z O ?

Saturday's Cryptoquip: WHEN A PURPLE FLOWER KEEPS BRINGING SOMEBODY GOOD FORTUNE, MAYBE IT'S THE LUCK OF THE IRIS.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: P equals S