

Joaquin brace fires Valencia

AFP, Madrid



Two goals in three minutes from Joaquin Sanchez gave Valencia a vital 2-0 win over Recreativo Huelva and moved the 2002 and 2004 Spanish champions up to fourth place in La Liga on Saturday.

Joaquin got his first right on the hour from the right-hand edge of the six yard box after a defence-splitting cross by David Villa.

The second from the right winger, one of the quickest men in the Spanish first division, was a wonderful chip from just inside the penalty box after a pass from David Silva.

Valencia also nearly got a third when Miguel Angel Angulo hit the post 15 minutes from time.

Joaquin's form in recent games could herald a recall to the national side, for whom he has won 42 caps but not played since August 2006, ahead of Spain's Euro 2008 qualifiers against Latvia and Liechtenstein in June.

Spanish national coach Luis Aragones conceded this week that "the moment has come when he (Joaquin) could return but sometimes he needs a psychologist".

Valencia now have 56 points from 32 games and keep up the pressure on Spain's top trio, who are contesting the tightest three-way title race for five years and who all play on Sunday.

Atletico Madrid and Real Betis battled each other to a standstill with a 0-0 draw earlier on Saturday, a result which did little to help either side.

Betis remain embroiled in the fight to avoid going down and although they are three places and five points above the relegation zone, all the rest of the Spanish first division strugglers have a game in hand.

By contrast, Atletico stay in sixth place but are still hoping to return to Europe next season after an eight-year absence.

The best chance to break the deadlock came five minutes from time when Atletico's Bulgarian international striker Martin Petrov had a right foot shot which just skimmed the crossbar.

Petrov came on to the field as a second-half substitute, to a massive ovation from the Atletico fans, after 56 minutes to play in his first game in more than six months after recovering from a serious knee injury.

League leaders and reigning



PHOTO: AFP

Valencia winger Joaquin Sanchez (L) celebrates one of his brace with teammate David Silva during their Primera Liga match at the Mestalla in Valencia on Saturday.

champions Barcelona have 59 points but are just one point ahead of second-placed Sevilla with Real Madrid just another point further back in third.

Barcelona have an unbeaten record at home in the La Liga this season but still can't afford to drop even a point against relegation-threatened Levante in the wake of their 2-0 loss at Villarreal last Sunday.

"The team is under an obligation to react (to the Villarreal loss). There is no alternative," added Barca coach Frank Rijkaard on Saturday.

Sevilla, who are still in the Spanish Cup and UEFA Cup, have ambitions to notch up a unique treble and play host to fellow UEFA Cup semifinalists Espanyol in what could be a rehearsal

for the final in Glasgow on May 16.

Espanyol, are expected to rest several of their players after their 3-0 win over Werder Bremen on Thursday and will also face Sevilla without two of their main strikers, Luis Garcia and Walter Pandiani, who are both suspended.

Real Madrid have a potentially tricky trip to struggling Athletic Bilbao.

The Basques are still only two points clear of the bottom three but are fighting hard in recent weeks to preserve their historic status of never having been relegated from the Spanish first division.

"Madrid are not at their best but each day we are improving," said Real coach Fabio Capello at a press

conference on Saturday.

"But playing Athletic in their San Mames stadium is always difficult. What worries me is that Athletic seem to have the habit of bouncing back after a bad game," added the Italian coach well aware that the Basques went down 4-1 to Real's championship rivals Sevilla last week.

David Beckham made a big contribution in his first game for two weeks when he came on as a substitute last week and the former England captain, sporting yet another new haircut, could start in place of Gonzalo Higuain.

Gattuso fit, Maldini doubt for MU tie

AFP, Rome

AC Milan's tigerish midfielder Gennaro Gattuso will be fit for next Wednesday's Champions League semifinal, second leg at home to Manchester United after recovering from a right foot injury.

The 29-year-old Italian World Cup winner suffered the injury in last Tuesday's 3-2 first leg defeat at the hands of the English Premiership leaders.

While Gattuso was given the all-clear, AC Milan captain Paolo Maldini, who aggravated a left knee injury at Old Trafford, remains a doubt for the six-time European champions.

"Gattuso will definitely be there, but we will have to see about Maldini," AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said after his side's 1-0 Serie A win at Torino on Saturday.

Ballack undergoes ankle op

AFP, Frankfurt

Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack has undergone an operation on his left ankle, the German football federation (DFB) announced on Saturday.

The Germany captain picked up the knock in the scoreless draw against Newcastle last week, and was operated on Friday after consulting the German national side's staff doctor.

The DFB said they did not know how long Ballack would be sidelined while he recovers. The statement did not say whether the 30-year-old will play again this season.

Chelsea's chances of defending their Premiership crown took a knock on Saturday when they drew 2-2 with Bolton and leaders Manchester United beat Everton 4-2 to secure a five-point lead.

Jose Mourinho's men play the second leg of their Champions League semifinal against Liverpool with a 1-0 first leg lead this week.

Juninho, Coupet set for Lyon stay

AFP, Lyon

Lyon's Brazilian midfielder Juninho and international goalkeeper Gregory Coupet are set to extend their contracts until 2010, club president Jean-Michel Aulas said Saturday.

"I've accepted the principle of according the third year wanted for Juninho but we have to now discuss the terms. It's a matter of business," said Aulas.

"I've also accepted a third year for Gregory Coupet, who is a very important leader within the squad. We must also talk terms as well as things that should allow Lyon to still be at the top for years to come.

"We're doing all we can to keep them by agreeing to their request for a three-year contract, which for some fellows who already have a bit of experience is a great vote of confidence because they are players much admired by the public."

Lyon wrapped up the French championship a week ago, their record-breaking sixth consecutive league title.

EPL won't tempt Strachan

AFP, Glasgow

Manager Gordon Strachan won't be tempted to quit Celtic for a move to the English Premiership, the Scottish champions' chief executive Peter Lawwall claimed on Sunday.

The former Southampton boss has been linked with Manchester City and Newcastle in a season where he led Celtic into the last 16 of the Champions League and a second successive title.

And the absence of a long-term contract has added fuel to the fire.

But Lawwall said: "We have got him on a 12-month rolling contract and we have full protection, as does Gordon. It's better than a fixed term.

"We have had no indication that Gordon wants to leave. He says he's perfectly happy and we're happy with him.

"I have never had to ask Gordon about his future - I have never been in any doubt."

Lawwall praised Strachan for winning silverware while cutting the wage bill.

The chief executive revealed Celtic now have three categories of salaries - the top for star signings, a middle one for "scouted" players such as goalkeeper Artur Boruc and a lower one for homegrown players.

He said: "We had the sixth highest wage bill in the UK when Gordon started and were 25-30 percent ahead of Rangers.

"We had to bring our expenditure back and Gordon has been fantastic in his understanding."

Bayern stumble again

AFP, Berlin



VfB Stuttgart coach Armin Veh was delighted by his side's "thankless" 1-0 victory at bottom-side Borussia Moenchengladbach which took them up to second and in sight of the Champions League.

Midfielder Roberto Hilbert's 53rd minute goal was enough to give Stuttgart the three points which allowed them to leapfrog Werder Bremen, who play on Sunday away at Arminia Bielefeld.

"That was a thankless win," said Veh. "Playing the league's bottom side really puts you under pressure and you feel the expectation to get three points."

Stuttgart's win means Bayern Munich are now virtually sure to miss out on a Champions League place next season after they lost 2-1 at home to Hamburg.

Bayern's Peruvian Claudio

Pizarro gave the home side the lead after 35 minutes, but Hamburg's Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart, who is being courted by Bayern, cancelled out the advantage with a 71st minute goal.

And Hamburg's Jose Paolo Guerrero grabbed the 76th-minute winner.

The defeat leaves Bayern in fourth, seven points behind third-placed Bremen with three games left.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said: "The disappointment is huge. We didn't work hard enough and we were not firm enough in attack, while in midfield we lost too many personal battles."

Hertha Berlin trounced hosts Alemannia Aachen 4-0 to go seventh in the league as Brazilian midfielder Gilberto opened the scoring with a goal after just seven minutes.

VfL Wolfsburg drew 1-1 at Nuremberg after Polish midfielder Jacek Krzynowek slotted home a left-footed shot after a 40-metre run on 18 minutes for the guests.

But the home side were back level just five minutes later when defender Andreas Wolf headed them on level terms.

Midtable Hanover had Dutch midfielder Arnold Jan Bruggink's right-footed shot for their opening goal in their 2-1 win at second-from-bottom Mainz 05.

And Hanover's Bulgarian midfielder Chavdar Yankov extended their lead to 2-0 with a right-footed shot from a 50th minute corner before Mainz's Egyptian international Mohamed Zidan grabbed a late consolation goal.

And Thomas Doll's Borussia Dortmund moved away from the relegation dog-fight after Swiss international Alexander Frei gave them a 2-0 win at home to Eintracht Frankfurt with two well-struck free-kicks either side of half-time.

Third-placed Werder Bremen now have a golden opportunity to go top on Sunday when they travel to relegation-threatened Arminia Bielefeld after leaders Schalke 04 lost 2-1 at VfL Bochum on Friday.

Revamped Milan get win

AFP, Rome



Rejuvenated Dutchman Clarence Seedorf fired a superb solo strike to secure a fifth win on the trot for a slimline AC Milan side with a 1-0 win over their hosts Torino on Saturday.

AC Milan's 19th Serie A win of the season also moved them up to third, their highest position so far this campaign, ahead of Sunday's Roman derby between fourth-placed Lazio and Roma, who sit second behind Inter Milan.

With one eye on the return leg of their Champions League semifinal against Manchester United at the San Siro on Wednesday, Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti rested a number of his big name stars.

Brazilian star Kaka, who hit a potentially decisive brace of goals in the 3-2 defeat to United at Old Trafford last Tuesday, stayed on the bench for the entire match - but he was not alone.

Apart from Seedorf and fellow midfielder Andrea Pirlo, only three other players who started against Torino are set to face United at the San Siro in midweek: Brazilian 'keeper Dida, defender Alessandro Nesta and Massimo Ambrosini.

Seedorf was substituted late in the second half while Ambrosini played just one half.

Ancelotti admitted he had to spare his top players for a match which could save their season on Wednesday.

"The players have been tired, but we still had to go out and make sure we took all three points without paying too much for it. In that respect, I think we've succeeded," said Ancelotti, who claims United will be under less pressure.

"They will have less pressure than us because they won the first leg.

"It will be a hard fought match and to beat Manchester United we will really have to be at our best."

Milan dominated Torino, who sit 14th in Serie A, throughout the first half and when Seedorf was given time and space with the ball at his feet in the 26th minute he did not squander the opportunity.

Torino's future in the Italian top flight is far from secure, and perhaps that uncertainty played on their minds in a shaky second half in which they pushed Milan hard for an ultimately elusive equaliser.

Ahead of Sunday's important derby in the capital, AC Milan's win means they have put some more distance on fifth placed Empoli, who have played one match less.

The top four in Italy's Serie A qualify for the Champions League, with the fourth placed finisher joining the competition at the third qualifying round.

For Milan midfielder Andrea Pirlo, the win was crucial.

"It was fundamental for us to take all three points from this match to reinforce our position in the league," he said.

"Now, we can look forward with confidence to Wednesday's match (with Manchester United)."

"We're all in good shape. We worked tirelessly out there, but come Wednesday I'm sure we'll all be ready."

FA probe Leeds pitch invasion

AFP, London

English football's ruling body the Football Association (FA) on Sunday announced it was holding an investigation into the pitch invasion by Leeds United fans at Elland Road on Saturday.

Several hundred supporters spilled on to the pitch and forced a 30-minute delay after a late Ipswich equaliser all but sealed fallen giants Leeds' relegation from the Championship which will see them playing outside the top two tiers for the first time in their proud history.

But any fears the Yorkshire club might have had of a points reduction for the start of next season was described as highly unlikely by FA chiefs.

FA spokesman Mark Hooper said: "In the first instance it's a criminal offence to encroach on the pitch and we will be liaising with the police on that matter.

"We will be making various enquiries. We will wait to see the reports from our crowd observers and the referee's match report and will also be seeking observations from the club as to what happened.

"We will work with the relevant authorities and see if the police are taking any action.

"It's too early to say what action the FA would find appropriate, but it would be very unusual for that to be a points deduction.

"It's more likely any individual found guilty of an offence will be banned and we'd make sure the club is taking the right steps to ensure it doesn't happen again."

Referee Michael Jones and the players ran for the tunnel after a section of Leeds fans ran on to the pitch before the final whistle.

Jones brought the players back out to complete the last 60 seconds of play after stewards had managed to clear the pitch.

But the referee's decision was criticised by Ipswich manager Jim Magilton, who claimed he had feared for his players' safety.

Magilton said: "It was a sham-bolic but brave decision to come back out.

"I was involved in something similar at West Ham when the referee called the game off. He should have called this one off.

"It was a poor decision. The players were worried about going back out.

"If any of them had got injured or hurt, I would have been knocking on the referee's door."

PSG boost survival hopes

AFP, Paris



Paris St Germain continued their late season fight-back by edging further away from the drop zone with a precious 3-1 away defeat at Toulouse on Saturday.

PSG's 10th league victory and fourth from their last five matches - in a season which has seen them come disastrously close to the relegation zone's bottom three - was however bad news for their hosts' European aspirations.

Toulouse's first home defeat of 2007 has left them in fourth place and compromised their unlikely bid to finish second and claim a spot in next season's Champions League.

The hosts however were given good reason to believe this was their night.

Toulouse took a ninth minute lead through Fode Mansare, who slalomd his way through five PSG defenders before beating Mickael Landreau in the PSG goal.

However PSG regathered their confidence to hit back with goals from Peguy Luyindula, Edouard Cisse and Jerome Rothen.

PSG may not yet be mathematically assured of top flight survival. But for their manager Paul Le Guen, who took on the job of saving their season after being ousted from Rangers, they might as well be.

"I'm very optimistic (of beating relegation), even though mathematically we're not in the clear yet," said the Frenchman, whose side moved up to 14th nine points ahead of third-from-bottom Troyes.

"But to look at the league standings, for sure we've given ourselves a huge boost."

Toulouse had what seemed like a perfectly good goal refused two minutes after their opener when the referee decided the ball had gone out of play just before Emana had beat Landreau.

Toulouse coach Elie Baup believed that decision threw a spanner in the works.

"Refusing us that goal was the turning point because we would have been much better placed for the rest of the match," said Baup.

"I don't see what was wrong with it. But we have to just keep going and keep our heads up in the next few matches."

PSG midfielder Jerome Rothen slid a superb through ball to Luyindula just after the half-hour mark, the Frenchman beating the

off-side trap to level for PSG.

Edouard Cisse then handed the visitors a shock half-time lead after seeing his 20-yard take a slight deflection to land in the top corner of Nicolas Douchez's net.

Luyindula was sent off for a second bookable offence nine minutes before the final whistle, but despite their handicap PSG battled till the end and were rewarded with a third goal from Rothen in the third minute of injury time.

"We would have quite happily settled for a draw," said the midfielder.

"So you can imagine how (happy) we feel, even though, mathematically, we're still not safe from the drop."

Lyon meanwhile finally had the pleasure of showing off their sixth consecutive league trophy to their home fans after a 2-1 win over Le Mans.

At the other end of the table, the future is looking decidedly down for former champions Nantes, who suffered a 2-0 home defeat to stay rooted to the bottom of the table.

With four games remaining the 'Canaries' are five points behind third-from-bottom Troyes and a point behind Sedan.

Bordeaux host Lens on Sunday, when Sochaux travel to Marseille.



PHOTO: AFP

Lyon players celebrate their sixth French League title in a row at the end of their match against Le Mans at Gerland Stadium in Lyon on Saturday.



PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan forward Ronaldo twists and turns to evade a challenge from Torino's Gianluca Comotto during their Serie A match at the Olympic Stadium in Turin on Saturday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP

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Saturday's Cryptquip: IF YOU CLAIM SOMEBODY LIVES IN FLORIDA RATHER THAN GEORGIA, HAVE YOU MIS-STATED THE FACTS?

Today's Cryptquip Clue: N equals T