

REAL MAINTAIN LEAD

Sensational Messi

AFP, Madrid



Argentine sensation Lionel Messi scored for the sixth game in succession as Barcelona overpowered Atletico Madrid 3-0 on Sunday to stay in touch with leaders Real Madrid.

AC Milan's Brazilian Kaka may have won the FIFPro award for Player of the Year, where votes are cast by his fellow professionals, but Barcelona believe Messi is the best player on the planet and on current form it is hard to disagree.

The 20-year-old Argentine was sensational at Camp Nou scoring his sixth league goal to stay at the top of the goalscoring charts.

It was Barcelona's fourth straight league win but they still trail Real Madrid by two points after the champions defeated Recreativo Huelva 2-0.

Dutch international Ruud van Nistelrooy, the league's top-scorer last season, scored on 72 minutes before Gonzalo Higuain netted in the final minute to keep Real at the summit.

"It was a deserved victory against a rival that we have had problems with in the past," explained Barca coach Frank Rijkaard.

"We scored twice in quick suc-

cession and then we controlled the match using aggression and with the team attacking and defending as a unit."

Rijkaard drafted Ronaldinho back into the starting line-up with the Brazilian, who had missed the last three league matches with a calf injury, starting alongside Thierry Henry and Messi in attack.

Barcelona had thumped Atletico 6-0 on their own ground towards the latter end of last season so the visitors were out for revenge but their quest was not helped when they conceded twice inside four minutes.

On the quarter hour mark Italian goalkeeper Christian Abbiati let a routine Messi cross slip out of his hands and Deco could not believe his eyes as he rolled home into the empty net.

Four minutes later Messi played a great one-two with Ronaldinho and rifled a shot past Abbiati for his sixth goal of the season and Xavi added a third late on.

"Conceding two early goals inside four minutes is not easy to turn around especially against Barcelona," admitted Atletico coach Javier Aguirre.

Atletico had won their last three matches but Barcelona were streets ahead and Atletico's promising Argentine striker Kun Aguero, 19, was overshadowed by compatriot Messi - as everyone was.

Barcelona are playing scintillating football at the moment and that

has turned the spotlight on Real coach Bernd Schuster who promised free-flowing football but is grinding out workmanlike results reminiscent of his predecessor Fabio Capello.

Real have made their best start since 1991 but Schuster's rotation policy has been questioned with the German chopping and changing his team.

Schuster admitted his team had been lucky at times this season saying somewhat tongue-in-cheek that because the Pope is German God is on his team's side.

Luck deserted them when Wesley Sneijder hit the post but Van Nistelrooy scored in the final quarter hour before Higuain struck to keep them two points clear at the top.

"It was an important victory because it is the final match before we go away on international duty," said Dutch winger Arjen Robben.

"We are now top for the next two weeks and can build on that when we return."

Elsewhere Villarreal, now four points behind Real, lost for only the second time in 15 matches with a 3-2 reverse against Osasuna.

Sevilla, third last season, are in a crisis after losing their fourth league game in a row with a goal from Riki handing Deportivo La Coruna a surprise 1-0 win.

Sevilla have just six points from their first six matches and are 13 points behind pacesetters Real.

'More to come from us'

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard is still keen to squeeze more out of his in-form team despite seeing them beat bogey side Atletico Madrid to record their sixth successive victory.

Atletico had won two and drawn one of their previous three visits to the Nou Camp, but goals from Deco, Lionel Messi and Xavi earned Barca an impressive 3-0 triumph and lifted them up to second in the standings, two points behind Real Madrid.

Barca have now won seven of their nine European and domestic matches this season, drawing the other two, but Rijkaard believes there is more to come from his players.

"The team has done well and fulfilled its work," he said after the Atletico game. "(But) there is still room for improvement and we can grow more."

Barca took the lead after 17 minutes when Atletico goalkeeper Christian Abbiati spilled a cross and allowed Deco the simplest of goals.

Messi doubled the lead soon after before Xavi wrapped up the win with Barca's third in the final moments.

Rijkaard believes Deco's opener was a vital breakthrough for his side.

"We have started quite nervously, but after the first goal we have played with much more confidence and speed," the Dutchman said.

"We were not always at the highest level, and were a little tired for the effort we had to put into to take the lead. (But) the team deserved to win."

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Ajax agree ten Cate release

INTERNET, undated

Ajax have reached an agreement with Chelsea over the transfer of coach Henk ten Cate to the Premier League club.

The Amsterdam club made the announcement today after it was revealed Ten Cate held talks with the Blues last week.

A statement on the club's official website said: "Following talks with Chelsea, Ajax have agreed the direct transfer of Henk ten Cate to Chelsea."

Ten Cate will now have to negotiate a contract with the London club.

The Ajax statement continued: "Last week, Ten Cate informed the club he wanted us to negotiate with Chelsea after he had been approached personally."

"Ajax discussed it internally and it is now down to Henk ten Cate to discuss his own contract with Chelsea."

Ten Cate had said he would be willing to move to Stamford Bridge to work under Avram Grant if the two clubs could come to an agreement.

He would certainly not have many Ajax fans begging him to stay despite the club getting off to a fine start in the Eredivisie.

Ten Cate's men lie second in the Dutch league but it is in European competition where they have struggled, crashing out of two competitions.

They lost to Slavia Prague in Champions League qualifying before going down to Dinamo Zagreb in the UEFA Cup first round.

Fan frustration boiled over during Sunday's 2-2 draw at Sparta Rotterdam when fans aimed abuse

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Concussion rules out Vidic

AFP, Belgrade

Concussion has ruled Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic out of Serbia's upcoming Euro 2008 qualifiers against Armenia and Azerbaijan, team doctor Dragoslav Djordjevic said Monday.

Vidic would be out of action for up to ten days after suffering a head injury in the English club's 4-0 victory over Wigan on Saturday, Djordjevic said in a report by Beta news agency.

Manchester United had told Serbia's football federation that the 25-year-old had not suffered a broken cheekbone in the incident, in spite of earlier fears to the contrary, he added.

"After the injury, he felt even worse, so bad in fact that he was taken to hospital overnight between Saturday and Sunday," said the Serbian official.

"Now Nemanja feels good, only with a slight headache, but he won't be able to train for five days and head the ball for 10 days," he said of Vidic, who is reportedly set to sign a new deal with United.

The injury is a major blow to Serbia, who have not named a replacement for Vidic and are also without defender Ivica Dragutinovic after he received a two-match ban for clashing with and that's the end of it."

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PHOTO: AFP

DRAMATIC FINALE: Liverpool striker Fernando Torres (R) rises above the Tottenham defence to head in a last minute equaliser during their Premiership encounter at Anfield on Sunday.

CHELSEA FINALLY WIN Torres rescues L'pool

AFP, London



Robbin van Persie fired Arsenal back to the top of the Premier League on Sunday but Liverpool's title credentials took another hit when they were held at home by struggling Tottenham.

Fernando Torres produced a last-minute header to earn Liverpool a 2-2 draw they scarcely deserved, denying embattled Spurs boss Martin Jol a win that might have ended speculation over his immediate future.

Robbie Keane had scored twice either side of half-time to give Spurs the lead after Andriy Voronin had opened the scoring for Liverpool.

Rafael Benitez's side are now six points adrift of the league leaders and another uninspiring performance at home will have done little to stem growing scepticism about the Spaniard's leadership in the wake of the midweek defeat by Marseille which has left them battling for survival in the Champions League.

"We made two bad mistakes on their goals," Benitez fumed. "We showed character to come back and get a draw in the end but we must be disappointed not to have taken the three points."

In contrast, Arsenal go from strength to strength.

Arsene Wenger's side made it 10 wins in a row in all competitions with a 3-2 win over Sunderland at the Emirates Stadium.

Van Persie's second goal of the afternoon secured three points which lifted the Gunners back above Manchester United, who had beaten Wigan 4-0 24 hours earlier.

Arsenal were two up inside 13 minutes thanks to Van Persie's free-kick and a close-range strike by Philippe Senderos.

But Ross Wallace and Kenwyne Jones got Sunderland back on level terms and Roy Keane's side were a little unlucky not to take something from the match.

Wenger admitted his side may have got complacent after their early goals, but praised their response to Sunderland's fightback.

"It was a test of our resilience and quality," the Frenchman said.

"It's always difficult after a Champions League game, so if you get the three points it is good."

Arsenal remain unbeaten this season and Wenger added: "What is very good for us is we have won seven and drawn one in the league, that shows consistency and stamina. It is down to us if we want to win every game."

Salomon Kalou scored Chelsea's first goal in five league outings to secure a 1-0 win at relegation-threatened Bolton, their first in the league since last month's departure of Jose Mourinho.

But Avram Grant's new charges remain seven points adrift of Arsenal and this was not a display that suggested they will easily close that gap.

Another two superb goals by Brazilian Elano helped Manchester City to a 3-1 win over Middlesbrough and kept Sven-Goran Eriksson's side in third place, just one point behind their crosstown rivals United.

An own goal by Chris Riggott provided City's other goal with Ben Hutchinson's first goal for Boro coming once the home side were sure of maintaining their 100 per

cent league record at the City of Manchester Stadium.

Michael Owen came off the bench for Newcastle seven days after undergoing stomach muscle surgery in Germany and marked his return with a goal as the Magpies beat Everton 3-2.

Nicky Butt's opener for Newcastle was cancelled out by Andrew Johnson's first goal since February. A superb long-range effort from Emre Belozoglu and Owen's late header then made the points safe before a late own goal by goalkeeper Shay Given.

Blackburn beat Birmingham 2-1 with a first-half goal from David Bentley and a Benni McCarthy penalty. Cameron Jerome pulled one back for Birmingham.

Reading pulled away from the relegation zone by beating bottom side Derby 1-0 thanks to a second-half header from Ireland striker Kevin Doyle.

Two goals in two second-half minutes from Zimbabwean striker Benjani Mwaruwari and Hermann Hreidarsson gave Portsmouth a 2-0 win at Fulham, who slipped into the relegation zone as a result.

MILAN ROUT LAZIO Mutu derails Juve

AFP, Rome



Former Juve forward Adrian Mutu scored a late penalty to deny his former club Fiorentina a priceless victory at the Stadio Franchi on Sunday.

Juventus started the day in second place but dropped to third after the loss of two points allowed Roma, who cruised to a 3-0 win at Parma, to leapfrog them as Inter Milan's closest challengers.

Fiorentina came into the game with one of only two unbeaten records this season but needed the Romanian striker's successful penalty two minutes from time to snatch a share of the spoils.

Juve boss Claudio Ranieri, returning to his former club, had surprisingly left Alessandro Del Piero on the bench but his replacement Vincenzo Iaquinta opened the scoring on 23 minutes, pouncing on a loose ball after a collision between Fiorentina pair Dario Dainelli and Alessandro Gamberini left the striker free in the box.

Despite almost snatching the win, Ranieri admitted his side would struggle to keep up with the best teams this season.

"We want to compete, but we can only do so if the other big clubs give us the opportunity. We did enough to win today, but weren't sharp enough in those final minutes."

Fiorentina looked naturally jaded following their penalty shoot-out victory over FC Groningen of the Netherlands in the UEFA Cup on Thursday night.

After the break Fiorentina coach Cesare Prandelli went for broke, pushing Christian Vieri into the fray in an attacking line-up.

Chances came thick and fast at

both ends before Nicola Legrottaglie blocked a Vieri header with his arm and the referee pointed to the spot, allowing Mutu to rifle home the equaliser.

"We were in the thick of the action right from the start and until Vincenzo Iaquinta's opening goal, Juve did not have a single chance," said Prandelli, who praised his team's effort.

"All we were missing was a little bit of sharpness, but I could not have asked for more from my men. Despite the fitness worries, they

overcame that obstacle with sheer heart."

Francesco Totti scored a brace as Roma bounced back from their midweek Champions League defeat at Manchester United (1-0) to move back above Juventus to second.

It was the Giallorossi's first win in four league games and Parma were the ideal opponents to end Roma's recent poor run of results, that included a 4-1 home defeat to Inter last weekend.

"It is true we did not lock the result away immediately, but nei-

ther did we struggle," said Roma boss Luciano Spalletti.

"We maintained our balance and showed great character in reacting to the defeats with Inter and Manchester United. I am sure my men will be able to take the right things from this win without letting themselves get over-excited."

They opened the scoring on three minutes as Mirko Vucinic robbed Paolo Castellini to set up Totti with an easy tap-in.

Amantino Mancini made it 2-0

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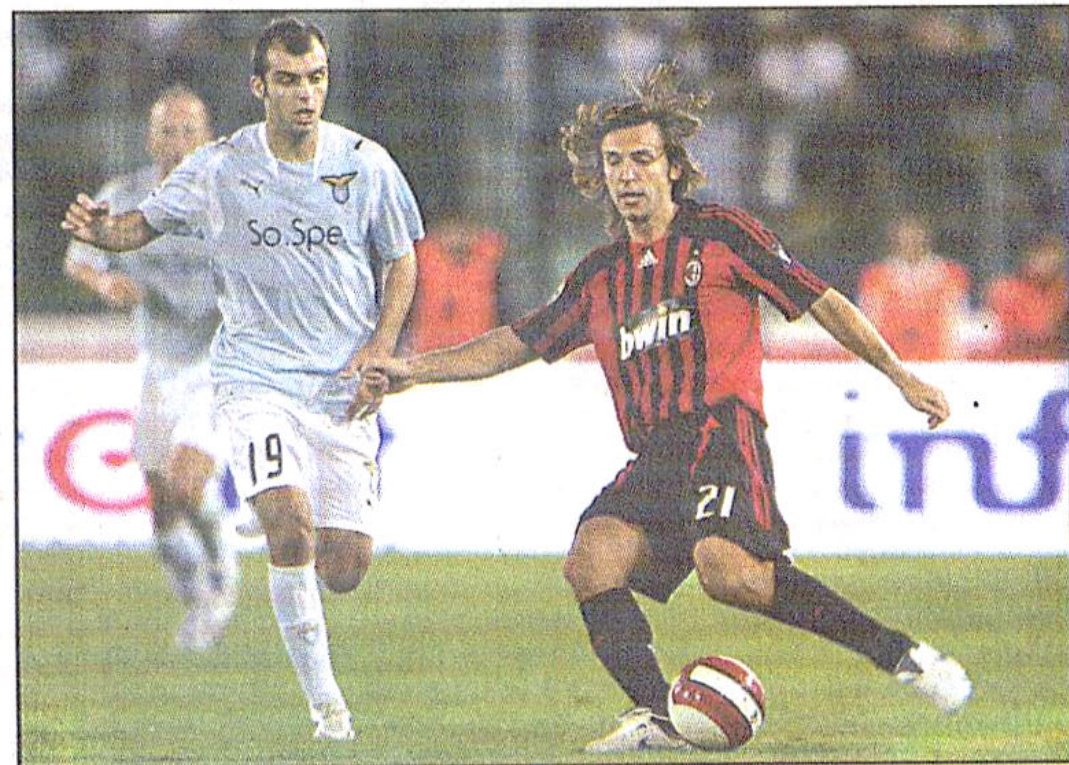


PHOTO: AFP

Milan midfielder Andrea Pirlo (R) prepares to thread a pass through the Lazio defence during their Serie A clash at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

FRIENDS FOREVER: Barcelona forwards Lionel Messi (L) and Ronaldinho are arm-in-arm in celebration of the former's goal against Atletico Madrid in their Primera Liga clash on Sunday.

Grant denies Sheva rift

Football

AFP, Bolton

Avram Grant insists Andriy Shevchenko still has a future at Chelsea despite leaving the Ukraine striker on the substitutes bench for his side's win at Bolton.

With Didier Drogba suspended, Grant opted to field Salomon Kalou as the lone forward as the Blues sought their first league goal in five games.

And when Kalou was withdrawn at half-time with a hamstring strain immediately after the Ivory Coast international had netted the 41st minute match-winner, the manager asked Claudio Pizarro to lead the line.

Shevchenko - who was dropped for the midweek visit to Valencia - finally appeared with just 17 minutes remaining suggesting he has fallen further down the Stamford Bridge pecking order.

But Grant was adamant the former AC Milan star will get his chance - although he denied he was under pressure from Roman Abramovich, the club's owner and close friend of Shevchenko, to play him regularly.

"We have a long season and every player will have good times

and bad times," Grant said. "Sheva is trying hard, he is a great player, and I'm sure he will be good for Chelsea. In these games we use other players but it is a long season and I'm sure there will be good parts for him."

"When I got the job nobody told me who has to play. I need to take the decisions for the good of Chelsea. We have a big squad and we need all the players including Sheva."

"They pay me to be in charge so I have to be in charge and I have to take the decisions for the present and for the future. I came into the job to take the team forward and it's good to do it through wins."

Grant admitted he was relieved to have secured his first league win as Chelsea manager but conceded his side was far from the finished article.

He added: "It will take time. I think we need to see how we develop from month to month to be better in terms of football but sometimes you need the points, especially when you play away. Especially after a long time without a win."

"So the target for today was the three points. And the target for the long and short time is to build the style of how I want the team to play and play good football. The base before was good, but this season hasn't been so good, so we are

improving this."

Shaun Wright-Phillips was once again absent from the Chelsea squad with a knee injury, but Grant claimed the winger would join up with Steve McClaren's England squad to face Estonia and Russia if he proves his fitness over the next 24 hours.

"He is almost fit but we will see what he is like tomorrow," said the manager. "We will not stop him playing for England. I was a national coach and I know what is needed by a national team. But we need to know if he will be fit to play. If he's fit I will not stop him, even though he has not played for us for the last two weeks."

Bolton manager Sammy Lee rejected suggestions of player discontent following his surprise decision to exclude skipper Kevin Nolan and player-coach Gary Speed from the 16-man squad that faced Chelsea.

The pair had also been omitted for the midweek UEFA Cup victory over Macedonian side Rabotnicki but Lee insisted: "It's my job to pick the team and I choose the best side to win any game at any given time."

"It's for no other reason than that. I've said we are competing on all fronts and I need to make sure everybody has game minutes under their belts. I pick the team and that's the end of it."