

## We aren't good enough: Ranieri

AFP, Rome

Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri admitted his team simply aren't good enough to win the Serie A crown after a second successive draw virtually killed off their title hopes.

Juve were held 0-0 at home by Sampdoria on Sunday, a week after they needed a last-gasp Alessandro Del Piero penalty to salvage a point and a 1-1 draw at Catania.

Those two results have left them 12 points behind champions and leaders Inter Milan and with little chance of finishing top of the pile come May.

"We're not at the same level as the big teams," admitted Ranieri after watching his team be frustrated by a dogged rearguard action from Sampdoria.

"Congratulations to Sampdoria, they played well. We had the chances but we needed to convert them."

Despite being held to the goalless draw Ranieri's team were a little gung-ho going forward and the former Chelsea boss defended that approach.

"I've said before that if you want to try to fight for the Scudetto you have to fire-up the players," he explained.

"Today the game reminded me a lot of the one against Udinese (a 1-0 loss at home), frantically trying to score a goal and taking the risk to concede one."

With Inter, who came from behind to beat struggling Parma 3-2, disappearing over the hill, Ranieri admitted he is keen to dip into the January transfer window to bolster his squad.

"We will certainly do something but we have to find the right player for us. If they're looking at Milan or Inter, then they certainly won't be joining us."

Rather than looking above them to try to catch Inter, or even second-placed Roma, goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon admitted the Old Lady of Turin were more worried with the teams behind them in the race for the four Champions League berths.

"I've said before that we expect Milan to come back into the Champions League race and they've proved me right and are looking dangerous once again," said Buffon. Milan have won both their matches since the season resumed following a three-week winter break.

## Fergie denies gesture

AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson has denied making offensive gestures during Manchester United's Premier League victory at Reading.

The United manager was caught by television cameras appearing to make obscene hand movements in the direction of home supporters at the Madejski Stadium following Wayne Rooney's goal.

After Cristiano Ronaldo scored a late clincher for United, Ferguson embarked on an aggressive clenched fist gesture which seemed to be aimed towards the Reading bench and coach Wally Downes.

But the Scot insisted he was only celebrating his side's goals.

"All I was doing was expressing my relief at winning what was one of our hardest games of the season," Ferguson said.

"Reading always make it tough for us. We ran so much that we clocked up more kilometres than we have in any game this season."



Real Madrid strikers Ruud van Nistelrooy (L) and Raul celebrate after the former scored in their derby match against Atletico Madrid at the Vicente Calderon on Sunday.

## Milanese grab late wins

AFP, Rome

Ten-man Parma came within minutes of inflicting a first league defeat on champions Inter Milan this season but were robbed by a refereeing error at the San Siro on Sunday, losing 3-2.

Parma had put in a spirited performance and with the clock ticking down, they held a slender 2-1 advantage.

But a dreadful penalty decision gave Inter the chance to equalise and then top scorer Zlatan Ibrahimovic snatched the three points deep into injury-time to leave Parma broken-hearted and the rest of Serie A despondent.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini admitted his side had been lucky. "We didn't play particularly well, Parma fully deserved a draw," he said.

Esteban Cambiasso had escaped in the box to fire Inter in front on the half hour but a clinical finish from Luca Cigarini 10 minutes later restored parity and 21 minutes from time Andrea Gasbarroni fired Parma in front.

Inter turned on the pressure and in the dying minutes were awarded a highly controversial penalty for an apparent goal-saving handball by veteran Portuguese defender Fernando Couto.

Swede Ibrahimovic stepped up to blast home the spot-kick on 88 minutes but television replays showed it should never have been awarded.

While that goal was contentious, the winner was emphatic. Ibrahimovic controlled a cross from substitute Julio Cruz before thrashing the ball home from close range.

That result will not only have upset Parma, but also Roma, who comfortably beat Catania 2-0 at home, as they were minutes away from finally cutting Inter's seven-point lead at the top, but it was not to be.

Alberto Gilardino scored an injury-time winner to give AC Milan a vital boost in their bid to secure Champions League qualification for next season as they won 1-0 at Udinese.

The three points meant Milan closed the gap on fourth-placed Fiorentina, who beat Torino 2-1 on Saturday, to 10 points, although the European champions still have three games in hand.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti allowed himself to get a little carried away as he praised his match-winner, whom he only introduced for the final eight minutes.

"Gilardino is a great player, in eight minutes he did more than Pato and Ronaldo did in 90 minutes," he said.

"I've always said it's not the amount of playing time that counts but the quality for a player who is getting less playing time. But he is a great player and is always ready when called upon."

Milan had the first clear sight of goal in Udine on 26 minutes when Brazilian superstar Ronaldo broke free and crashed a fierce drive against the upright but then it was Milan's stand-in Australian goalkeeper Zeljko Kalac who kept the scores even.

He made saves from Simone Pepe and Italy international pair Antonio Di Natale and Fabio Quagliarella to keep the scores even at the break.

But then substitute Gilardino stole the show in the dying moments, finishing off a sumptuous move that saw teenage Brazilian starlet Pato back-heel the ball to world player of the year Kaka, who flicked it through for the Italy striker to hold off Christian Zapata and finish low past Samir Handanovic.

## Couto admits 'stray hand'

AFP, Rome

Veteran Portuguese centre-back Fernando Couto admitted that he did handle the ball before the controversial penalty that helped Inter Milan salvage a 3-2 victory over Parma from the jaws of defeat.

Parma were clinging onto to a slender 2-1 lead in the dying minutes at the San Siro on Sunday night, on the brink of inflicting a first league defeat of the season on the champions.

But a dubious penalty award against Couto for handling in the box allowed Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic to level from the spot before he scored a sumptuous injury-time winner.

Couto threw himself in front of the goal and seemed to divert an Ibrahimovic shot away for a corner with his head before the referee pointed to the spot and gave the former international defender his marching orders.

But the veteran later admitted that the ball had touched his hand. "I got my head to the ball but then it touched my hand, but it wasn't intentional," he said after the match.

"I was diving, I don't know if the ball was going in or not."

"We always give our all until the last minutes where we have lost many goals and many points," added Couto.

"Our league position (in the bottom half) is very disappointing. We're not blaming bad luck, it's just driving us on to be determined all the way to the final whistle."

## Ghana coach slams pitch

AFP, Accra

Ghana coach Claude Le Roy described the pitch used for Sunday's African Nations Cup curtain raiser against Guinea as the worst he had ever seen.

The uneven turf and long grass at the Ohene Djan Stadium made flowing football hazardous, with in particular Ghana's finishing suffering with chances going begging in the first half.

Ghana eventually prevailed 2-1 thanks to a last gasp winner from Portsmouth midfielder Sulley Muntari but despite the hosts' three points Le Roy was seething.

"The first thing is not the quality of the armchair in the VIP room, but the quality of the pitch," he told the BBC.

"In more than 20 years in Africa, it's the worst pitch I've ever seen."

"We have a technical team which likes to play one-touch football and this pitch badly affected our game."

The win did not come without a price with Ghana defender John Pantil complaining of dizziness and having to be carried off in a stretcher at the end of the game.

Ghana take on underdogs Namibia, who play Morocco later Monday, next in Accra on Thursday where they will be out to wrap up their passage to a quarterfinal berth against likely Nigeria or Ivory Coast.

## Real triumph in derby

AFP, Madrid

First half goals from Raul Gonzalez and Ruud van Nistelrooy gave Spanish league leaders Real Madrid a hard-earned 2-0 derby victory at neighbours Atletico Madrid on Sunday.

The Spanish giants now have 50 points from 20 games and retained their seven-point lead over rivals Barcelona who beat Racing Santander 1-0.

"It wasn't spectacular but we did what was necessary. We had to suffer for much of the game but in the end we had a winning formula," admitted Real coach Bernd Schuster.

"What made me happy was that unlike on Wednesday (when Real lost to Real Mallorca 1-0 for a shock Cup defeat at home) we made the most of our chances."

"We might only have had two in the first half but we scored two goals. It wasn't a lucky victory. In the second half, they didn't have a good chance to score and we almost got a third."

Raul got Real off to the best possible start by finding the net after just 32 seconds, with Atletico leaving him unmarked to side foot the ball into the net from two metres after Robinho had done the hard work down the left.

Atletico immediately went on the attack to try to get back on level

terms and relentlessly kept the pressure on for the next 40 minutes.

Thiago Motta put a header against the bar, Raul Garcia forced an outstanding save from Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas and Kun Aguero saw a sizzling shot from the edge of the area also skim the bar.

However, against the run of play, Real added a second when van Nistelrooy got his 12th goal of the season four minutes before the break.

The Dutchman was on target after a corner from his compatriot Wesley Sneijder.

Atletico goalkeeper Christian Abbiati succeeded in getting a hand to the left foot effort but he could only push the ball onto the post and it rebounded into the net.

The Spanish headlines in the coming days are likely to be about Real's two goalscorers but huge credit should also go to Casillas who kept a clean sheet for the sixth consecutive league game.

Atletico now lie in fourth place, 13 points off the lead, and have not won a derby clash with Real in front of their own fans since October 1999.

Barcelona's Thierry Henry got the only goal of a tepid game after 31 minutes to leave visitors Racing cursing the fact that they ended up without a point.

Henry can thank the luckless Racing defender Cesar Navas, who badly miscued his clearance following a Deco corner, for his sixth goal of the season and his team's three points.

The Frenchman was on hand to

tap the spinning ball into the net from close range after Navas' slice ended up at his feet.

Barca looked unimpressive until Lionel Messi came on after 66 minutes for his first game in a month after recovering from a torn left thigh muscle.

The Argentine winger, who was second in the voting for the 2007 FIFA World Player of the Year last month, immediately added a bit of pace and bite to the Barca attack although they failed to add another goal.

Goals from Robert Pires, Joan Capdevila and Nihat Kahveci helped Villarreal to an emphatic 3-0 victory over local rivals Valencia on Saturday.

The win meant Villarreal move up to third while Valencia's winless streak, which began in November, has now gone to eight league games.

Espanyol's ambitions of moving up to third virtually vanished 7.3 seconds into their game at Valladolid on Sunday, when Joseba Llorente scored the second fastest goal in Spanish first division history.

Malaga's Dario Silva holds the record of the fastest goal in La Liga when he found the net after 7.2 seconds, ironically against Valladolid, on December 10, 2000.

Lorente got another after 33 minutes, to help Valladolid on their way to a 2-1 win over the Barcelona-based side.

Espanyol's Marc Torrejon got one back for the visitors after 58 minutes but they couldn't find an equaliser and remain fifth while Valladolid, after their fourth successive win, climb to seventh.

## Ghana ride on Muntari

AFP, Accra

Portsmouth midfielder Sulley Muntari struck in the last minute to lift hosts Ghana to a 2-1 win against Guinea in the opening game of the African Nations Cup here on Sunday.

Udinese forward Asamoah Gyan put Ghana in front from the penalty spot early in the second half only for Guinea's Oumar Kalabane to equalise.

But just as it looked as though the hosts would have to settle for a share of the points up popped Muntari with a long-range, left footed, angled shot to send the capacity crowd at the 44,000 Ohene Djan Stadium wild.

Ghana's Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien, awarded the fair play award, said: "It's a good start for us. The game was very difficult but we're happy we won. This will help our confidence."

Winning coach Claude Le Roy added: "It's a long way to February 10th (the final) but we knew it was very important to win the opening game, now we can concentrate on our next match against Namibia."

Ghana coach Robert Nouzaret insisted his team will bounce back in Group A which also includes Namibia and Morocco.

"I'm disappointed because we didn't show our true character today," said the Frenchman.

"We are in a difficult position but I am still optimistic because we can't play that badly again."

The sides were all square after the first half, but it was a mystery how Ghana hadn't scored.

Le Roy's men hit the post three times, had a goal disallowed and an adventurous overhead scissor kick edged wide.

Credit for the goalless scoreline should also go to Guinea keeper Kemoko Camara, who was up to

grabbing Muntari's early dangerous floating shot from the left.

Nottingham Forest's Junior Agogo then had his head in his hands after his angled header ricocheted off the inside of the far post and away to safety.

Minutes later Gyan, allowed to play despite being sent off in Ghana's last competitive match against Brazil at the 2006 World Cup for diving, came up with his scissor kick which inched the wrong side of the far post.

Another shot hit the woodwork before Ghana had the ball in the back of Camara's net but Gyan's

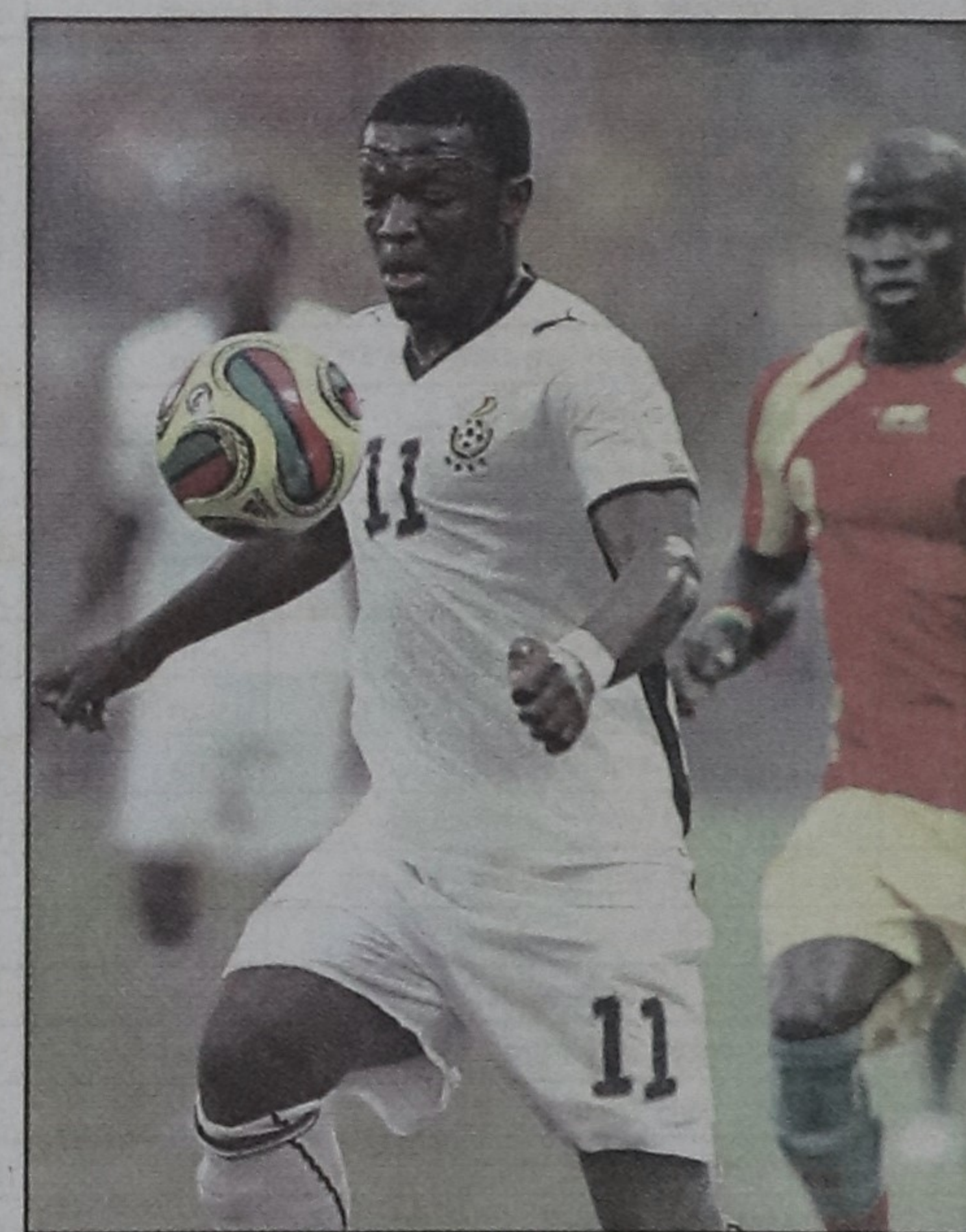
effort was disallowed after Seychelles' referee Eddy Maillet caught the forward pushing the Guinea defender.

It was Muntari's turn to test the solidity of the Guinea goal frame in the 40th minute when the Pompey man shot from the left, but again Ghana's luck held.

Ghana finally got the goal they deserved eight minutes after the break when Kalabane brought down the charging Agogo with Maillet immediately pointing to the spot.

Up stepped Gyan to convert with a curling kick into the top left

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Ghana midfielder Sulley Muntari controls the ball during the inaugural match of the African Nations Cup against Guinea in Accra on Sunday.

## OPEN SECRETS



AGENCIES, undated

There could hardly have been a more appropriate guest in the VIP box of the Rod Laver Arena than actress Nicole Kidman, the star of 'Eyes Wide Shut'.

Lleyton Hewitt, whose sleep patterns had been ruined by the 4.34am finish on Sunday to his previous match, went out of the Australian Open last night after losing in the fourth round to Novak Djokovic.

If this was the sort of script with which Nicole Kidman is used to working, Lleyton Hewitt would have stormed back heroically from two sets behind to beat Serbia's Novak Djokovic at Melbourne Park last night and gone on to win the Australian Open. There might even have been a part in it for Kidman, the most famous court-side face last night, though not as Hewitt's wife, since she is herself an actress.

But last night, there was no repeat of Hewitt's epics.

A despondent Hewitt admitted that he had been beaten by the better man after his dreams were ended.

"He was too good tonight," Hewitt told reporters. "He's shown in big matches and over best-of-five sets in the big tournaments that he is the worthy world number three at the moment."

"And he's a lot better player than he was 12 months ago, I think, when he lost to Roger (Federer)

here last year. He's got a great court game."

### GIANT WIN

A contented James Blake had double reason to celebrate at the Australian Open on Monday.

The 28-year-old American advanced to his first overseas grand slam quarter-final by beating Croatia's Marin Cilic 6-3 6-4 6-4 in the fourth round after seeing his

beloved New York Giants make their first Super Bowl since 2001.

Blake watched the entire NFC Championship game against the Green Bay Packers, which the Giants won 23-20 in overtime, in the locker room while waiting for his match to begin.

"Thank goodness the girls before me went three sets, otherwise I would've missed it and been won-

dering (the) whole match," a grinning Blake told reporters. "It was just a good day for the Giants fans."

After the nail-biting finish at Green Bay's frozen Lambeau Field, the 12th seed composed himself and produced a solid performance against his 19-year-old opponent, seizing three of his five break opportunities.

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Hollywood actress Nicole Kidman (L) and her husband, singer, Keith Urban watch the men's fourth round match between Lleyton Hewitt and Novak Djokovic at the Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne on Monday.