

BARCA HELD, VALENCIA SINK DEEPER Real prevail in thriller

AFP, Madrid



Defending champions Real Madrid went nine points clear at the top of La Liga on Sunday with a 3-2 win over Villarreal.

Barcelona's 1-1 draw at Athletic Bilbao gave Real the perfect chance to extend their points advantage and they took it with both hands courtesy of a brace from Brazilian winger Robinho, who celebrated his 24th birthday on Friday, and a Wesley Sneijder strike.

"This has been a great birthday for me," said Robinho.

"The title race is not over yet because there are lots of games left but we have taken an important step for sure."

It was an eighth consecutive win for Real who have not dropped a single point at the home and are ruthless on the road.

"We won at Camp Nou, at the Calderon and other tough venues to put this pressure on our rivals," said Real coach Bernd Schuster.

"We can afford to slip up but we can't relax and think that the title is won because you can drop points and things can change quickly in football."

Last season, they were six points behind Barcelona at a similar stage and went on to win the title but nine points now looks too tall an order for their rivals to chase.

Real have made a habit of scor-

ing early goals this season and they did it again with Robinho racing onto Guti's brilliant defence-splitting pass to put his side in front after eight minutes.

With the 5-0 drubbing by Real earlier this season still fresh in their memories Villarreal could have feared the worse but showed real character to equalise through Giuseppe Rossi on the quarter-hour mark.

It was the first league goal Real keeper Iker Casillas had conceded in 564 minutes.

But Villarreal always looked fragile at the back and Robinho put the champions back in the lead after goalkeeper Diego Lopez had produced two fine saves.

Joan Capdevila then equalised after some awful marking from a corner but the lead lasted barely sixty seconds as Sneijder scored the winner.

However, Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard refuses to throw in the towel despite watching Bilbao peg back his team through a Lilian Thuram own-goal cancelling out Bojan Krkic's first-half opener.

"We are not going to give up," said Rijkaard.

"Psychologically it is a big blow for the team but it doesn't mean that we have given up. The team fought a lot and if we continue like this we can cut the gap."

"We couldn't score the second goal but I don't think it was a question of a lack of ambition or physical problems. We did everything to make it 2-1 after they equalised but it didn't happen for us."

Rijkaard is having a difficult

period but he can take some comfort that he is not in compatriot Ronald Koeman's shoes.

Koeman's three-month grip on power at Valencia looked to be slipping as fans called for his head after the embarrassing 1-0 home defeat against Almeria.

Valencia defeated Atletico Madrid 1-0 in their quarterfinal Kings Cup match in midweek but their league form is awful and Almeria, a region better known for its food than football, became the sixth team to win at the Mestalla this season.

Koeman arrived in October with the task of pushing Valencia nearer the top but the team have gone backwards falling to win in nine league games and crashing to 11th in the standings.

"I am not going to run away after a few months," said Koeman. "The club is in a crisis but now is not the time to look for someone to blame."

"If you lose at home you know that the coach comes in for criticism. I accept that and will continue to work hard. I am calm but concerned."

It was a day of surprises in the Spanish top-flight with Champions League contenders Athletic Bilbao and Espanyol both falling to defeats.

Atletico, who rested top-scorer Kun Aguero, lost for the third time in a week with Mallorca coming out 1-0 winners thanks to a Juan Arango goal.

Espanyol could have gone above Atletico into fourth but fell to a late 2-1 home defeat against Real Betis.



Real Madrid forward Robinho (R) mimics wiping the boot of teammate Guti in a unique celebration after the midfielder provided a superb assist to the Brazilian during their win over Primera Liga rivals Villarreal at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

Titanic clash in fifth round

AFP, London

English Premier League giants Manchester United and Arsenal will face-off in the last 16 of the FA Cup following the fifth round draw made here Monday.

United currently top the Premier League on goal difference from Arsenal.

Both clubs are in with a shot of landing the treble of League, FA Cup and Champions League titles that United achieved in 1999 but this draw means yet one more of the favourites for the oldest senior Cup competition in world football will be knocked out before the quarterfinals.

United, last season's beaten finalists, have won the Cup 11 times, Arsenal 10.

Two years ago Arsenal beat United 5-4 on penalties at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff in the first FA Cup final to be settled by a shoot-out, having defeated the Red Devils 3-2 in a thrilling Wembley final back in 1979.

Only six Premier League sides have made it through to the last 16 although these include the 'big four' of Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool and United who between them have monopolised the FA Cup since Everton's victory in 1995.

Cup holders Chelsea have been drawn at home to Huddersfield, from the third tier of English football, who won the FA Cup back in 1992.

Meanwhile seven-times Cup winners Liverpool, who on Saturday twice fell behind at Anfield to non-league Havant and Waterlooville before winning 5-2, are at home to second-tier

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Scandals, drama & goals

AFP, Accra



The deluge of goals in the first week at the African Nations Cup has been matched only by the flood of scandals and dramas off the pitch.

Ahead of the decisive round of opening round games starting in Accra Monday Didier Drogba's Ivory Coast are the only one of the 16 teams to have secured their place in the quarterfinals.

Benin are the only team so far definitely heading for the airport after the group stages.

With a goal tally which climbed to 54 after Sunday's games from Tamale (compared to 33 at this stage in 2006) this has the makings of a vintage Nations Cup.

It's certainly been a vintage edition away from the fields of play. Things got off on the wrong foot in Ghana with chaotic accreditation arrangements with the local organising committee buckling under the weight of interest generated by this biennial competition from the world's media.

No sooner had the LOC got its act together when the shadow of

match-fixing emerged.

Benin coach Reinhard Fabisch claimed he'd been approached by a man representing an Asian betting syndicate interested in fixing Benin's opening Group B game with Mali.

Barely had the Confederation of African Football had time to digest this bombshell than the Namibia players announced they'd been offered 30,000 dollars a man to throw their Group A game with Guinea on Monday.

Reacting to the rigging claims CAF official Soulemane Huboubat told AFP: "We are launching an investigation into both cases."

"We're following this with great concern."

He added that despite these two cases "match-fixing was not rampant in Africa."

Over at the Ghana camp the hosts have not been spared their own drama with the near walkout of star striker Asamoah Gyan after the torrent of abuse he received for his lacklustre display against Namibia on Thursday.

Coach Claude Le Roy reported the 22-year-old Udinese forward and his older brother Baffour had decided to quit the squad, but were persuaded to stay after lengthy talks with him and federation officials.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Le Roy.

"It was more than just unfair criticism. He was threatened, his mother was threatened, his father was threatened. It's the stupidity of the world that we live in."

How quickly people forget.

Gyan was the hero of this west African nation when he scored the fastest goal at the 2006 World Cup, his 68-second strike earning the Black Stars a 2-0 win over the Czech Republic in Cologne.

Over in Kumasi it has not been all plain sailing for defending champions Egypt, who reportedly changed hotels three times before finding suitable accommodation.

Then midfielder Mohamed Aboutrika picked up a booking and a warning from CAF for displaying a slogan in support of Palestinians on the Gaza Strip.

Aboutrika lifted his jersey to reveal a t-shirt with "Sympathy with Gaza" written on it after he'd scored in Egypt's 3-0 win over Sudan on Saturday.

CAF said Aboutrika had been warned after the incident that the display of political slogans was against football regulations.

Group C rivals and Nile neighbours Sudan have had their own problems after some of their players came to blows with an Egyptian television crew.

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Ivanovic moves up rankings

AFP, Paris

Australian Open runner-up Ana Ivanovic has reached a career-high second in the ATP world rankings behind Justine Henin of Belgium.

The 20-year-old Serb moves clear of Svetlana Kuznetsova of Russia with her Serbian compatriot Jelena Jankovic staying in fourth and the winner in Melbourne, Maria Sharapova, remaining at fifth.

Venus Williams meanwhile moves back ahead of younger sister Serena standing four places ahead at sixth.

ATP rankings top 10:
1. Justine Henin (BEL) 6680 pts
2. Ana Ivanovic (SRB) 4126 (+1)
3. Svetlana Kuznetsova (RUS) 3760 (-1)

4. Jelena Jankovic (SRB) 3700
5. Maria Sharapova (RUS) 3256
6. Venus Williams (USA) 2720 (+2)
7. Anna Chakvetadze (RUS) 2720 (-1)

8. Daniela Hantuchova (SVK) 2677 (+1)
9. Marion Bartoli (FRA) 2133 (+1)
10. Serena Williams (USA) 2022 (-3)

What a reaction!

AFP, Creteil

A French amateur footballer fired two shots from a handgun after being sent off, police said on Sunday, although there were no reports of injuries.

The player from the Saint-Maur-des-Fosses team, to the east of Paris, had been shown a red card in the game. The man, who was not named, then returned to the changing rooms and then came back to the pitch with a pistol and fired two shots.

The other players took cover in the changing rooms while waiting for the police, who found two empty cartridges at the scene. The player was then arrested and taken to the Saint-Maur-des-Fosses police station.

Djokovic closes gap

AFP, Paris

Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic has closed the gaps on long-time ATP World Rankings leaders Roger Federer and Raphael Nadal.

The 20-year-old Serb's Melbourne triumph, his first in a Grand Slam tournament, sees him move to just 815 points behind the Spaniard, who will be looking forward to the claycourt season in the spring.

Federer, who lost to Djokovic in the Australian Open semifinals, retains the rankings leadership 650 points clear of Nadal who could have deposed him had he won in Melbourne.

The biggest mover among the top players was made by losing finalist in Melbourne Jo-Wilfried Tsonga of France who climbs 20 places to 18th while the man he beat in the fourth round, Mikhail Youzhny of Russia, is up six to a career-best eighth.

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Inter unworried

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan were celebrating their continued dominance over Serie A despite seeing their eight-match winning run brought to an abrupt halt as they were held to a 0-0 draw at Udinese.

Inter played three-quarters of the match with 10-men after Brazilian midfielder Rodriguez Cesar was harshly sent-off for two bookings midway through the first half.

Forward Julio Cruz had the best chance of the game, dragging his effort wide just before the break while strike partner Zlatan Ibrahimovic did put the ball in the net after half-time but saw his sublime chip ruled out for a push on his marker.

Despite the two dropped points and seeing Roma claw back Inter's lead at the top of the table to five points, the champions still felt buoyed by the draw.

"We drew but we played really well," said Ibrahimovic. "We created many chances and could and should have scored."

Captain Javier Zanetti paid tribute to his team's fighting spirit. "If there's a team that should win it's Inter, even with a numerical inferiority we demonstrated our strength, character and calmness."

"We stayed compact and this allowed us to create many chances and not give up too many against dangerous opponents. And all this with 10 against 11."

It was the second game in a row, following the 2-2 midweek Italian Cup draw against Juventus, where Inter have played the majority of the match a man down but still come out of it on level pegging.

And Zanetti is not worried either about Roma closing the gap at the top a little.

"Roma at five points? We took a step forward on our path and like Wednesday against Juventus we showed how strong we are."

Coach Roberto Mancini was delighted with his team's effort.

"It was an amazing performance because we played with 10 against 11 against a team of great quality and in great form," he said.

Despite going a man down, Mancini persisted with two strikers and was almost rewarded as both had a glorious chance to win the game.

"When we go a man down and we keep the two strikers, we ask the midfielders to bust a gut and as the game goes on they get tired, but you don't give the other team's defenders the chance to push up."

"We keep them under pressure and that's our aim."

INTER'S RUN ENDED Pato stakes his claim

AFP, Rome



Udinese helped breathe life back into the Serie A title race as they held champions and league leaders Inter Milan to a 0-0 draw at home on Sunday.

That coupled with second-placed Roma's 1-0 success in the Stadio Olimpico against Palermo on Saturday meant the gap at the top of the table was cut to just five points.

It was the first time that Inter had failed to win in the league since early November and came after a run of eight straight victories.

But they were not helped by the controversial first-half dismissal of Brazilian midfielder Rodriguez Cesar for two yellow cards.

The first appeared harsh while the second seemed unfortunate as he claimed he had won the ball in a tackle with Fabio Quagliarella.

Inter continued their media boycott, due to their perceived mistreatment in the press, but Udinese coach Pasquale Marino paid tribute to the courage of the 10 men.

"You never noticed Inter's numerical disadvantage," Marino said.

"They played a great match. They created many chances, they're a great team and deserve to be top."

Despite playing with 10 men, Inter came closest to winning the game.

In-form Argentine striker Julio Cruz beat his marker just before half-time but then fired wide.

After the break star Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic had the ball in the net from a rapier counter-attack but his exquisite lob over goalkeeper Samir Handanovic was disallowed because he had eased his marker off the ball before finishing.

AC Milan bounced back from their disappointing midweek loss at Atalanta by beating Genoa 2-0

for their second victory of the season at the San Siro.

Teenage Brazilian striker Pato was the star of the show, bagging both goals in a dazzling performance.

He scored his first with a simple header after Dutch veteran Clarence Seedorf headed Andrea Pirlo's cross back across goal to the unmarked Brazilian.

Pato then escaped the backline only to see goalkeeper Rubens Rubin handle his attempted chip outside the box and receive his

marching orders.

Pato was not to be denied a second, though, as he finished past substitute goalkeeper Alessio Scarpai at the second attempt.

Those two goals took Pato's tally to three in four games since making his debut following the three-week winter break.

"Pato is just doing what we expect of him," said Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti.

"He is young and at times lacks a

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Serbia toast champion

Tennis

AFP, Belgrade

Serbian newspapers lavished praise Monday on Novak Djokovic, declaring him a tennis 'tsar' after he claimed his first Grand Slam crown in the Australian Open on Sunday.

The 20-year-old World No. 3 overcame a powerful challenge from unseeded Frenchman Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in Melbourne to take the title with a 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) victory.

"Nole, the tsar of Serbia," the daily Sportski Zurnal extolled in a bold headline on its front page, which carried a picture of the young Serb kissing the Australian Open trophy.

"A new era of tennis history began in Melbourne, a new page was turned, a new chapter opened," said Zurnal.

"Australian Open 2008 will be remembered as the Grand Slam at which Novak Djokovic, one of the biggest talents of this game, won his first big trophy, putting the name of Serbia on it as a Grand Slam nation."

Djokovic's victory capped a triumphant tournament for the former Yugoslav republic, which has emerged as a major force in tennis in the past year.

Fellow countryman Nenad Zimonjic on Sunday claimed the Australian mixed doubles crown along with China's Sun Tiantian, a day after Serbia's Ana Ivanovic lost in the final of the women's singles to Russia's Maria Sharapova.

Djokovic's victory capped a triumphant tournament for the former Yugoslav republic, which has emerged as a major force in tennis in the past year.



Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic displays his crown during a photocall on the banks of the River Yarra in Melbourne on Monday.

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AC Milan's Brazilian sensation Alexandre Pato celebrates after scoring against Genoa in their Serie A match at the San Siro on Sunday.

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Sharapova woos Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russian newspapers on Monday sung the praises of Maria Sharapova for winning her third Grand Slam title on Saturday at the Australian Open in Melbourne.

"Keep it going!" headlined the front page of the country's oldest sports daily Soviet Sport as it reported on the year's opening Grand Slam event.

The newspaper also expressed the hope that Sharapova would make a winning start to her Fed Cup debut for title-holders Russia away to Israel in Tel Aviv later this week.

Another daily newspaper, Sport Express, called Sharapova the pride of the Russian nation adding that she would be a good bet to win Olympic gold in Beijing in August if selected.

The newspaper also published an interview with Russian Fed Cup skipper Shamil Tarpishev, who said he had been impressed with Sharapova's performance at the Australian Open.

"Maria (Sharapova) looked in command throughout the tournament due to her strong mentality," he said. "I hope she will manage to keep her good form for the matches in Israel."

Russian President Vladimir Putin also sent his congratulations to Sharapova after her win at Melbourne wishing the player further successes in the future.

The 20-year-old US-based glamour girl of tennis defeated Ana Ivanovic of Serbia 7-5, 6-3 in Melbourne to add the Australian Open to her 2004 Wimbledon and 2006 US Open crowns.

Playing in the Fed Cup will make Sharapova eligible to take part in the Beijing Olympics despite opposition from other Russian players who question her patriotism.