



Villarreal winger Robert Pires (R) hurdles the challenge of Racing Santander defender Ezequiel Garay during their Primera Liga clash at El Madrigal on Sunday.

More woe for PSG

AFP, Paris

French giants Paris St Germain plunged closer to the relegation trapdoor on Sunday when they squandered a one-goal lead to lose 2-1 at bitter rivals Marseille.

The defeat left PSG just two places and three points off the drop zone and piled further pressure on coach Paul Le Guen while Marseille moved into fourth place and still hopeful of a European place next term.

Meanwhile, Bordeaux humiliated Monaco 6-0, and embarrassed the watching Prince Albert, to move within a point of league leaders Lyon who lost 1-0 at Le Mans on Saturday.

At the Stade Velodrome, PSG took the lead on the half hour mark when Laurent Bonnat brought down Amara Diane which allowed Jerome Rothen to score from the penalty spot.

But Nigerian star Teye Taiwo, who had scored in the midweek UEFA Cup win over Spartak Moscow, levelled with a drive from an acute angle in the 35th minute before Mamadou Niang added a crucial second just before half-time.

Mathieu Valbuena created the opportunity for Niang to register his 12th league goal of the season.

"We felt we were on top in the first half hour so it is really annoying to lose like that," said Le Guen.

"It's been a long time since Marseille have been tested like that at the Velodrome so it's even more annoying not to be rewarded with points."

At the Stade Louis II, Laurent Blanc's Bordeaux side scored all their six goals in the second half to increase the pressure on Lyon.

Bordeaux opened the scoring six minutes after the interval when Argentinian import Fernando Cavenaghi converted a Johan Micoud pass.

Micoud added a second with a drive off the underside of the crossbar on the hour mark before Cavenaghi added his second, and his team's third, four minutes later.

Monaco's problems deepened in the 65th minute when Diego Perez was red-carded for a cringing foul on David Bellion leaving the way clear for Micoud, Marouane Chamakh and Gabriel Obertan to complete the rout.

Porto relish Veltins return



AFP, Gelsenkirchen

Bundesliga side Schalke 04 face Porto at the Veltins Arena here on Tuesday in the first-leg of the Champions League first knock-out round with the Portuguese relishing a return to the scene of their most recent European triumph.

Porto lifted the Champions League in Gelsenkirchen in May 2004 when they inflicted a 3-0 defeat on Monaco and Angolan defender Pedro Emanuel was overjoyed when his side drew Schalke.

"Schalke was my personal wish," said Emanuel, one of a handful of survivors in the current squad, under then manager Jose Mourinho, who won the Champions League almost four years ago.

"We have some great memories of that night, it'll be great to walk back into the stadium again and let the memories come back."

But such nostalgic talk is of little interest to current coach Jesualdo Ferreira as his side chase a third Champions League title.

"The gossip about 2004 must stop," he said.

"This is a crucial away game for us and Schalke are a strong side, probably stronger than Monaco," said the 61-year-old.

Porto come into Tuesday's first-leg clash on the back of a 3-0 win away to Maritimo at the weekend having conceded only seven goals all season as they sit top of the Portuguese Liga.

In contrast, Schalke suffered a shock when they were humbled 2-

1 at home to VfL Wolfsburg on Friday which cost them third place in the German league which left coach Mirko Slomka far from happy.

But Schalke, who won the UEFA Cup in 1997, only conceded four goals in their Champions League Pool B as they finished second behind group winners Chelsea.

Porto's main play-makers come from their strong midfield with Brazilian Paulo Assuncao and Portugal international Raul Meireles playing alongside "El Comandante" - Argentinian Lucho Gonzalez.

Schalke have Germany strikers Gerald Asamoah and Kevin Kuranyi to rely on and will be looking to make the most of home advantage before the return leg on the Algarve in the 50,000 seater Estadio do Dragao stadium on March 5.

Fiorentina back in it

AFP, Rome



Fiorentina moved back into Champions League contention with a 2-1 home win over Catania on Sunday as they reclaimed fourth spot in Serie A from reigning European champions AC Milan.

Zdrko Kuzmanovic gave Fiorentina the lead after 41 minutes heading in a Mario Alberto Santana cross.

But Catania levelled on the hour when Juan Vargas unleashed a powerful long-range drive which was too hot for goalkeeper Vlada Avramov to handle.

It was a tough top flight debut for Avramov, who had replaced Sebastian Frey, who had picked up a thigh injury, in the first half.

Romanian striker Adrian Mutu, however, hit his 14 league goal of the season to give Fiorentina the three points with a 20-metre strike.

Fiorentina now have 41 points, three more than Milan, who were held to a 0-0 draw by Parma on Saturday.

Sampdoria won the Genoa derby, and kept their UEFA Cup qualification hopes alive, with a 1-0 win thanks to an 87th-minute winner from Christian Maggio after the home side were reduced to 10 men following the sending off of Brazilian defender Danilo on Saturday.

Inter Milan took another huge step closer to the title after extending their lead at the top to 11 points.

Defending champions Inter saw

off Livorno 2-0 at the San Siro while closest challengers Roma lost 1-0 at third-place Juventus.

There was also disappointment for AC Milan who could not provide veteran defender Paolo Maldini with a victory on his 1,000th match in professional football as they drew 0-0 at lowly Parma.

Honduran forward David Suazo scored both Inter goals within four minutes of each other in the first half.

Inter had rested first-choice strike pair Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Julio Cruz ahead of their midweek Champions League trip to Liverpool, giving Suazo and Argentine Hernan Crespo a rare start up front.

France captain Patrick Vieira was suspended and Chilean midfielder playmaker Luis Jimenez was out injured but it made no difference as Inter proved too powerful for opponents who only three days earlier had come away from the San Siro with a 1-1 draw against Milan.

Inter coach Roberto Mancini turned his attentions to the Liverpool match on Tuesday but refused to get carried away by the English team's embarrassing FA Cup defeat to second tier Barnsley on Saturday.

"The important thing was to win and now we can concentrate on the Champions League," said Mancini.

"Cup football is like this, you can lose despite coming close to scoring on many occasions," he added referring to Liverpool's defeat.

Inter had the game sewn up after 18 minutes as Suazo headed home a delightful inswinging free-kick from Romanian centre-back

Cristian Chivu.

He was then on hand to tap home the loose ball after two defenders got in each other's way and failed to clear a cross from Brazilian left-back Maxwell, who had done well to skip past two challenges and get to the byline.

Inter have won 18 and drawn just five of their 23 matches this season. They also have the best attack and the meaneast defence.

Roma missed the chance to keep pace with the champions as veteran Juve forward Alessandro Del Piero's bullet free-kick on the stroke of half-time settled the match.

"We knew we could play a great match and that's exactly what we did," said the match-winner.

It means Juve are just one point behind Roma in third now and will rest up in midweek as Roma tackle Real Madrid in the Champions League.

Del Piero rifled an unstoppable shot into the top corner after Czech winger Pavel Nedved had drawn a foul from French centre-back Philippe Mexes just over 20 yards from goal.

TOP SIX							
Italian league table after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points)							
Inter Milan	23	18	5	0	48	13	59
Roma	23	14	6	3	40	23	48
Juventus	23	13	8	2	43	19	47
Fiorentina	23	11	8	4	36	22	41
AC Milan	23	10	8	5	34	17	38
Udinese	23	10	6	7	28	28	36

Hitman delights Hitzfeld

AFP, Berlin

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld was full of praise for Luca Toni who bagged his first Bundesliga hat-trick to fire Bayern Munich back into a three-point lead at the top of the table in the 3-0 win at Hanover.

The 30-year-old overtook Borussia Dortmund's Mladen Petric to return to the top of the Bundesliga scoring chart with 13 goals as the Italian World Cup winner's treble killed off Hanover's challenge.

Toni has scored 22 goals in 25 games for Bayern in 25 seasons since his 11 million euros (16 million US dollars) switch from Italy's Fiorentina last summer and all of his second-half goals were well taken.

"Luca is a match winner, who is just getting better and better for us," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

"He has the killer instinct and is a quality forward who works tirelessly in front of goal, he showed why he is a World Cup winner."

And Hitzfeld singled out Germany star Bastian Schweinsteiger for special praise after a superb performance in leading Bayern's midfield in attack having struggled for form in recent weeks.

"He is really concentrating again and distributing the ball well."

"I am very pleased for him to see he is back to the level we hope to see every week from him."

Italian Toni began his scoring spree with a superb turn on the volley after a header from Dutch hardman Mark van Bommel on 58 minutes and then slammed home a pass to make it two on 64 minutes before he lobbed the goalkeeper on 82 minutes.

The win puts Bayern on 43 points - three clear of second-placed Werder Bremen.

Balotelli wants Italian cap

INTERNET, undated

Inter's teenage striking sensation Mario Balotelli has snubbed Ghana's advances to represent Italy.

Balotelli was born in Palermo, but both his parents are Ghanaian citizens. When he turns 18 in August, the Nerazzurri prodigy will be able to choose to adopt Italian citizenship as he has lived his whole life in the peninsula.

It now seems that Super Mario will opt to pursue a career in the Azzurri shirt after he rejected the chance to represent Ghana.

"The Black Stars asked Mario to accept a call-up to the national side, where he would have been a first-choice, but he declined," Balotelli's brother Corrado revealed in the Guerriero Sportivo.

"He just didn't want to lose the chance to play for Italy in the future."

Corrado acts as an agent to his gifted sibling and also outlined the latest contract situation, as reports suggest that a large extension is on the horizon.

"For now there is nothing on the table," he explained. "I have heard that we will be signing a renewal until 2013, but we think we will talk about it further when Mario is legally an adult and can get his Italian citizenship."

Atletico miss chance

REUTERS, Madrid



Atletico Madrid missed the chance to tighten their grip on a Champions League place when they surrendered an early lead to slip to a 2-1 defeat at home to Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

Third-placed Villarreal also lost ground on the leaders when they were held to a 0-0 draw at home by Racing Santander, with Italian striker Giuseppe Rossi missing the chance to secure the win when he fluffed a penalty early in the second half.

The title race has effectively boiled down to a two-way fight between Real Madrid and Barcelona.

Barca closed to within five points of Real Madrid on Saturday when they scrambled a 2-1 win away to Real Zaragoza while the leaders slumped to a 2-1 defeat at Real Betis.

Real lead the standings on 56 points, Barca follow on 51 and Villarreal are now eight points further back on 43, two clear of Atletico.

Atletico went ahead at the Calderon after five minutes when an Antonio Lopez cross skidded off the greasy surface in front of Sergio Aguero and Bilbao defender Fernando Amorebieta and spun inside the far post.

Bilbao threatened little in the opening half hour but turned the tables on the home side with two sharp finishes in the closing minutes of the first period.

Midfielder Markel Susaeta scored the first, drilling home inside the post after Javi Martinez had won the ball inside his own area and charged up field through the ragged Atletico midfield.

Gangly striker Fernando Llorente made it 2-1 on the stroke of halftime when he stole in behind centre-back Pablo Ibanez to touch a Fran Yeste free kick into the net with his calf.

Atletico suffered another blow when midfielder Raul Garcia was sent off after picking up a second

yellow card after the break and they never looked like getting back into the game.

Basement side Levante clinched only their fourth win of the season when they came from behind to beat Osasuna 2-1 at home but the Valencia-based side remain seven points adrift at the bottom of the table.

Recreativo Huelva also fought their way back from a goal down to clinch a 3-2 victory over Deportivo Coruna in a tense battle between two more relegation candidates, Uruguayan defender Martin Caceres heading in the winner two minutes from time.

TOP SIX							
Spanish league table after weekend matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points)							
Real Madrid	24	18	2	4	54	20	56
Barcelona	24	15	6	3	44	16	51
Villarreal	24	13	4	7	41	34	43
Atletico Madrid	24	12	5	7	39	25	41
Espanyol	24	11	6	7	35	30	39
Sevilla	24	11	3	10	30	33	36

Hostile crowds greet Japan

AFP, Chongqing

Japan coach Takeshi Okada has warned his squad to prepare for hostile Chinese fans head of a game against the hosts in the East Asian championship here on Wednesday.

"It will be worse than this when we play China," he said after Chinese spectators booed and jeered Japanese players in their 1-1 draw with North Korea on Sunday.

The Blue Samurais came to this inland industrial city with bitter memories of the 2004 Asian Cup when Chinese spectators jeered while the Japanese national anthem was played.

They also hurled paper cups and plastic bottles at Japanese supporters during matches.

Japan went on to beat China in the final in Beijing for their third continental title, sparking a near riot, with a Japanese diplomat's car vandalised at the venue.

It was a time when Japan and China were at the height of a territorial row over East China Sea islands, as well as simmering antipathy dating to Japan's World War II aggression in China and other Asian nations.

At Sunday's game, Chinese spectators started jeering when a giant Japanese national flag was brought onto the pitch for the opening ceremony.

The booing continued as Japan's national anthem was played. In contrast, they stood upright in respect for the anthem of communist North Korea.

"I was somewhat disappointed because their manners remain much the same," said Hiroshi Shiomi, the local director of a major Japanese trading house, who had expected better behaviour ahead of the Beijing Olympics which will be held under worldwide scrutiny in August.

Shiomi, who also watched the 2004 Asian Cup matches here, was in a well-guarded pocket of some 30 Japanese supporters among 30,000 fans at a half-filled stadium.

"They were less violent now but a few paper cups were thrown," he added.

Jong Tae-Se, a Japan-born ethnic Korean who plays for J-League Kawasaki Frontale, opened the scoring in the sixth minute, sending the audience to their feet.



Fiorentina striker Adrian Mutu (R) challenges for the ball with Catania defender Alvarez during their Serie A match at the Artemio Franchi Stadium in Florence on Sunday.

Henin warms up well

AFP, Antwerp

Seven-times Grand Slam champion Justine Henin is setting her long-term sights on a Wimbledon crown after winning her first career title at home in Belgium on Sunday.

The Belgian lifted her spirits after a dismal Australian Open as she won the home WTA Diamond Games 6-3, 6-3 over Italian challenger Karin Knapp.

The world number one is keen to complete her missing link of trophies at majors with a title run at the All England Club this summer.

The success in front of a hugely partisan crowd of 15,000 at the Sportpaleis went a long way to boost Henin, who had to take a cortisone shot and rest after losing in the Melbourne quarterfinals.

The Antwerp win was particularly cherished as it came at the event's final edition. A WTA calendar shake-up has wiped the tournament from the 2009 schedule.

"This is a very emotional moment

for me," said the world number one, now a winner of 41 career titles, including her seven Slams.

"I've had tough matches but came through. It's just perfect to win at home in Belgium. I've thought about this for a long time. There was a lot of pressure on me to do well at home."

"It has been my goal this week, I'm so happy I've been able to do it."

But Henin, now with 41 titles, hints at more to come: "Wimbledon is now a huge goal for me, it's the only grand slam I've never won."

The win was her 11th of the season against the Melbourne defeat to Maria Sharapova.

Henin has now won ten finals in a row, last tasting defeat against Serena Williams in Miami, April, 2007. The Belgian came good on her third appearance in Antwerp after a 2002 final and 2003 semifinal.

She returned home to play for the first time in five years and kept the tournament on its feet financially as more than 100,000 fans came through the doors over the concluding week.

Her success may give organisers

long-odds hopes of soon returning to the WTA fold.

"Selling 100,000 tickets was the aim we had set for 2008 and we'll make it," promoter Bob Verbeeck said.

"I still hope to organise a WTA tournament in the future. We have a loyal and satisfied title sponsor who wants to keep on supporting a successful project."

"In Dubai we will have a meeting with WTA boss Larry Scott. We will bring along our briefing of the Diamond Games 2008, and witness reports by the players."

"Our ambition remains to organize a WTA tournament with a minimum of 3 top ten players and 6 to 7 players from the top 20 - of course including Justine Henin."

"Time will tell, but we should know more by the end of March."

Henin's victory was her second title of 2007 after Sydney in January.

She will next play in Dubai in a week after pulling out of next week's required WTA event in Doha, which will cost her at least 125,000 dollars in year-end bonus pool money.



Belgian star Justine Henin poses with the trophy after winning the WTA Tennis Diamond Games beating Italian Karin Knapp in the final at Antwerp on Sunday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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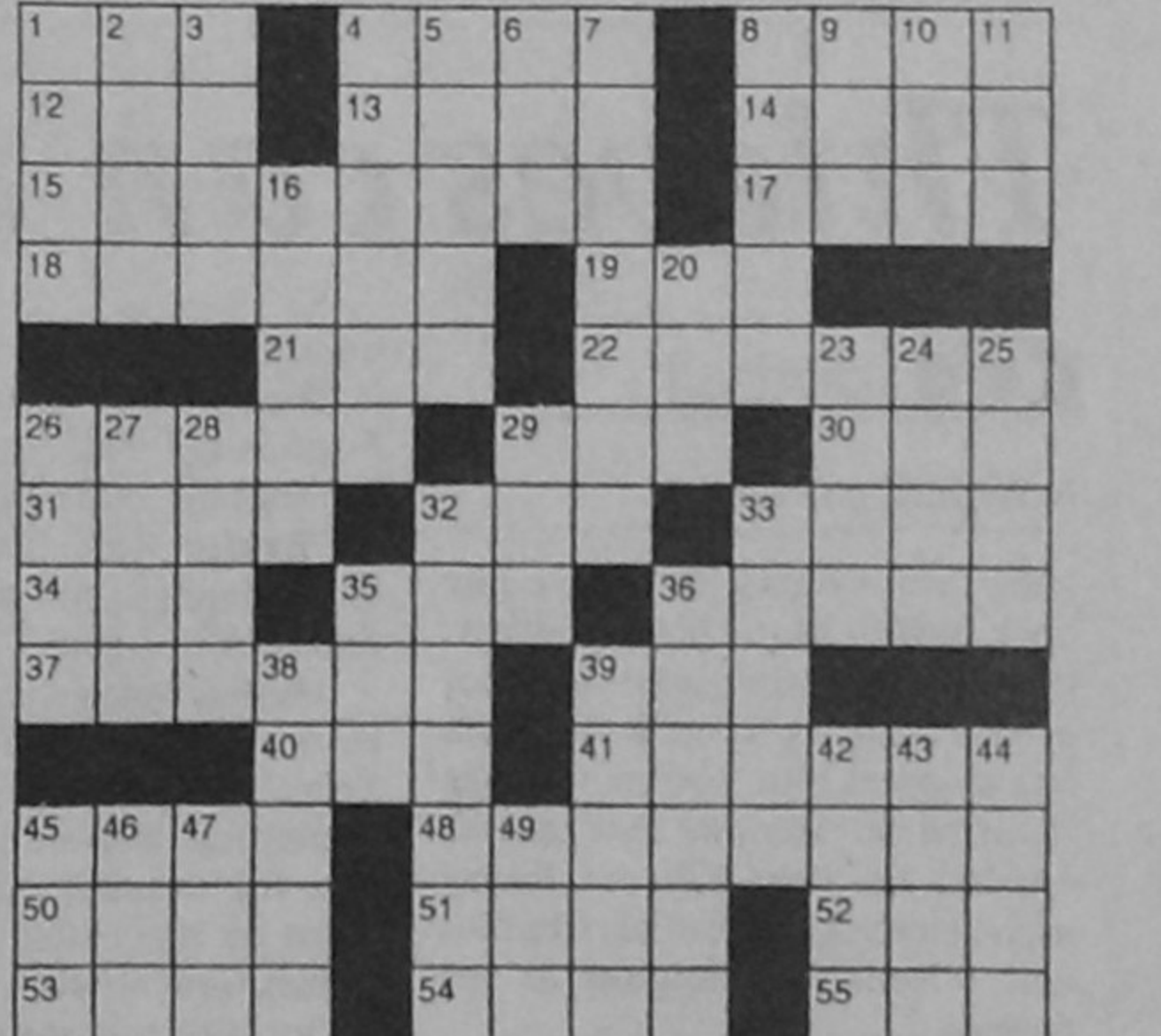
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CRYPTOQUIP

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EDUTPUGE PUUC BHNXPDL HV  
HMU CTQUWUDH? LJWEMVU.  
Yesterday's Crypticquip: YOU MIGHT SAY  
ACTRESS GARR IS UNDUPLY FUSSY. SHE WILL  
ONLY USE TOWELS MADE OF TERTI CLOTH.  
Today's Crypticquip Clue: S equals W