

GUNNERS HELD, MU WIN

Chelsea castle Hammers

AFP, London

Arsenal left it late to stay top of the Premier League as second-placed champions Manchester United closed to within a point on Saturday. The Gunners were seconds away from being knocked off top spot at the Emirates Stadium when Nicklas Bendtner cancelled out an early Philippe Senderos own-goal to secure a 1-1 home draw against Aston Villa.

United, who would have gone top on goal difference had Arsenal lost, maintained the pressure on the leaders with a 3-0 win away to Fulham.

Chelsea, now seven points behind Arsenal with a game in hand, bounced back from last weekend's League Cup defeat with a 4-0 win away to West Ham.

The Blues played more than half the game with 10 men after Frank Lampard was sent-off against his old club after opening the scoring.

It was a different story for League Cup winners Tottenham as Birmingham City pulled clear of the relegation zone with a 4-1 win at St Andrews.

Third-bottom Reading ended a run of eight defeats with a 1-0 victory away to Middlesbrough thanks to James Harper's last-minute goal.

Sunderland, still without an away league win this season, missed a chance to pull clear of the bottom three after they were held to a goalless draw at basement club Derby County.

Newcastle were still left searching for their first win since the return of manager Kevin Keegan as Blackburn Rovers won 1-0 at St James' Park.

The home side squandered several chances before Rovers' Matt Derbyshire scored in the last minute.

Manchester City's hopes of European football next season suffered a setback when they were held to a goalless draw at home to strugglers Wigan in Saturday's late kick-off.

United manager Sir Alex

Ferguson, who rested Wayne Rooney, Cristiano Ronaldo and Nemanja Vidic ahead of next week's Champions League clash against Lyon, said it had been great

Cottage when Owen Hargreaves scored his first goal for the club from a free-kick. Then, just before half-time, South Korea international Park Ji-

run-in," Ferguson said. Arsenal, in their first match since star striker Eduardo suffered a season-ending broken leg at Birmingham last weekend, fell behind when Swiss defender Senderos turned Gabriel Agbonlahor's cross into his own net.

Villa then defended impressively despite seeing Curtis Davies go off with an Achilles tendon injury that ended the centre-back's season before Bendtner stole in from close range late on to secure a precious point for the Gunners.

"We were dominated physically and technically in the first half," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger. "But we battled to the last second to get a point. That point can have a vital importance for the rest of the season."

In the London derby at Upton Park, Chelsea scored three goals in the space of five minutes.

Lampard started the spree with a 17th minute penalty after Anton Ferdinand fouled Salomon Kalou on the edge of the box.

Minutes later Joe Cole, another Hammers' old boy, made it 2-0 with a powerful shot. Germany midfielder Michael Ballack's well-struck half-volley made it 3-0.

Chelsea were reduced to 10 men in the 36th minute when Lampard was sent-off for a push on Luis Boa Morte.

However, that didn't stop Chelsea adding a fourth when former Arsenal full-back Ashley Cole scored his first goal for the club in the 64th minute.

At St Andrew's, Birmingham went ahead in the seventh minute when Mikael Forssell headed in a cross from James McFadden.

Sebastian Larsson's 55th minute free-kick made it 2-0 while Forssell completed his first club hat-trick. Jermaine Jenas's late goal was little consolation for Spurs.

Sunday sees attention focused on the race for Champions League qualification with fourth-placed Everton at home to Portsmouth while Liverpool, three points behind their city rivals, are away to Bolton Wanderers.

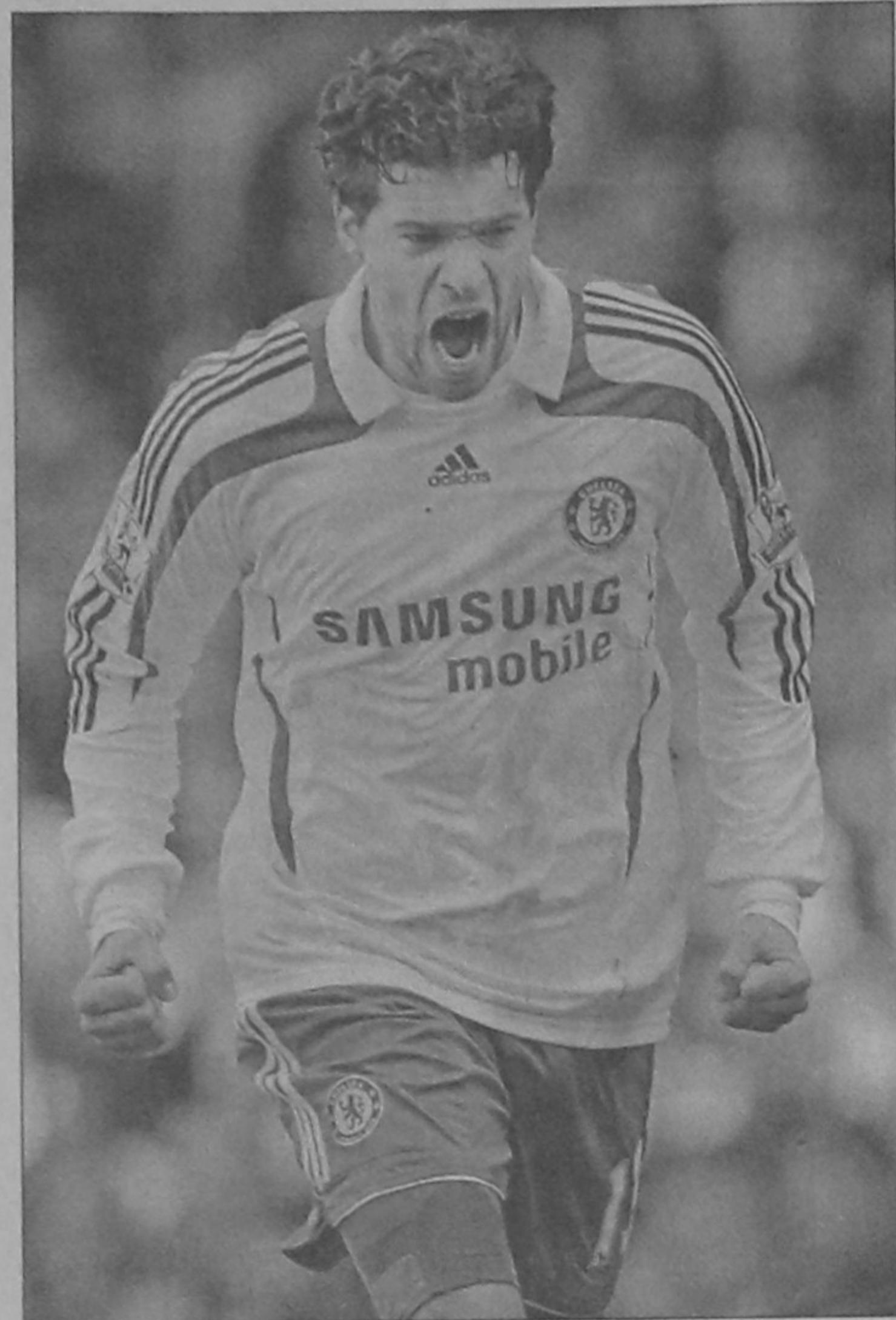


PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack celebrates his goal against West Ham during their Premiership tie at Upton Park on Saturday.

to give such key players a break. "We did the job well. The pleasing thing was I was able to use my squad."

"We've got a massive game on Tuesday and resting Rooney and Ronaldo, it was vital for us to do that."

United took the lead at Craven

Sung doubled United's lead with a header from a Paul Scholes cross. An own-goal from second-bottom Fulham's Simon Davies made it 3-0 in the 72nd minute.

"Goal difference can make a big difference but the see-saw way it's been going in the last few weeks, it looks as if it is going to be a fantastic

Trouble at Villa Park

AFP, London

Trouble flared at Arsenal's Emirates stadium on Saturday after a section of Aston Villa supporters sang songs mocking the serious injury sustained by Gunners striker Eduardo last week.

The Croatian is facing at least nine months on the sidelines after suffering a compound fracture of his left leg following a tackle from Birmingham defender Martin Taylor at St Andrews.

Eduardo was saluted by Arsenal fans in the club's first game since the incident.

But a minority of the travelling support was not so sympathetic, comparing the player to amputee Heather Mills, the estranged wife of pop legend Sir Paul McCartney.

Chants of "He used to have silky skills, now he walks like Heather Mills" prompted a furious response from a handful of home fans next to the visitors' enclosure.

Stewards were forced to make several ejections and there were reports of further trouble outside the ground after the final whistle.

Both managers were united in their condemnation of the abuse, with Arsene Wenger, the Arsenal manager, observing that "unfortunately there are no limits to either intelligence or stupidity."

Ironically, moments after Villa's fans had sparked Arsenal's fury mid-way through the first half, their own centre-half Curtis Davies was stretched off with a ruptured Achilles tendon following an innocuous-looking incident.

The centre-half - who was recently included in Fabio Capello's first provisional England squad - was undergoing an operation on Saturday night but will definitely miss the rest of the season.

"I'm really disappointed for us," Martin O'Neill, his manager, said.

"He was devastated, because he has done so well for us. Getting picked by Fabio Capello gave him a big boost of confidence and it's really unfortunate."

Ali Daei Iran's coach

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Sunday in a shock move chose former star player and world record international scorer Ali Daei as the new coach of the national team, the ISNA news agency reported.

"After examining Ali Daei's plans, he was officially named as head coach of the national team," ISNA quoted the Iranian football federation's head Ali Kafashian as saying.

"Initial talks were held with Ali Daei over the past days and today we held a meeting with him where he submitted his plans to the federation."

Keegan will stay

AFP, London

Kevin Keegan has been given a vote of confidence by Newcastle chief executive Chris Mort despite his failure to win a game since taking over as coach at the club for a second time.

The Magpies have not won in seven matches since Keegan's unexpected return to Tyneside and have slumped just three points above the Premier League relegation zone.

Keegan's appointment, following the departure of Sam Allardyce in January, was greeted with much enthusiasm and Mort has no doubt he is the right man for the job.

"Clearly Kevin wants to turn results around, that's what he has come in to do," the chairman told BBC Radio Five Live's Sportsweek programme.

"It is disappointing but it will come. Kevin has got the players playing very well and I am sure the results will follow."

"He has come to a club that didn't change its manager in the middle of the season because things were going well. It wasn't going well and the team were playing poorly."

"Results reflected that and Kevin came in knowing it was going to be difficult to turn it round. That's what he's working on and he's got the team playing in a manner everyone in this part of the world appreciates."

Mort also said he had no concerns that Keegan could last the pace and pressure involved in one of the toughest jobs in English football despite his having resigned here in 1997 and three years later walking away as England coach.

"There is no doubt or worry. Kevin is enjoying being back in Newcastle," he said.

"He is clearly at home in the city and has been made very welcome. Once the football turns round I am sure he will be thoroughly enjoying it."

Mort also dismissed suggestions the club have unsettled Keegan by going behind his back with the appointments of Dennis Wise and Chris Hughton to the coaching staff.

Dubai Dementieva's

Tennis

AFP, Dubai

Elena Dementieva produced a major surprise when she captured the ninth title of her career with a victory over her Russian compatriot Svetlana Kuznetsova in the Dubai Open.

Not only did Dementieva overcome a strong favourite, the second seeded former US Open champion, but achieved her triumph as an unseeded player in a field containing almost every leading woman in the game.

It was Dementieva's first visit to the money-laden Gulf tournament and she surprised herself with an instant success which suggested that the 26-year-old from Moscow has recovered from the rib injury which kept her out for nine weeks last year and can work her way back up the world's top ten.

"Now I realise how good I can be on the court," she said.

Her win, she said, was for her mother, Vera.

"All I have done in my life - it's for her," Dementieva said.

"I'm so glad she's here to share it with me. I'm so happy for her. To see her smiling is a pleasure for me."

The victory was a triumph for superb ground strokes, fine court coverage, and a developing ability to mix up the pace as well as applying withering speed to the ball. But it was a patchy match with 14 breaks of serve.

"It's my first time here and it's such a big win," she smiled.

"It's the best match I have played in a long time."



PHOTO: AFP

Russian Elena Dementieva holds aloft the Dubai Open trophy after beating her compatriot Svetlana Kuznetsova in the final on Saturday.

Asked how she achieved it, she said: "I was playing it wrong tactically in the first set. I had to move her more and be aggressive, to mix it up but really attack her a lot." Kuznetsova acknowledged Dementieva was an outstanding

player who may challenge again for Grand Slam titles, but was felt her own level had dropped lower and lower.

"I had my opportunities but I am very disappointed that I couldn't take them," she said.

Lyon extend lead

AFP, Paris

Lyon warmed up for their Champions League return with a 2-1 Manchester United and bolstered their quest for a seventh straight league title on Saturday with a 1-0 away win over Lille before a record first division crowd at the Stade de France.

Brazilian striker Fred smacked a low drive past Lille keeper Tony Sylva on the half hour to take the champions onto 55 points from 27 games - six ahead of Bordeaux, who tackle Paris St Germain on Sunday.

Lyon ended a ragged stretch of away form in securing their first success on their travels since November 24.

Coach Alain Perrin afterwards had to defuse talk of tension between strike star Karim Benzema and teammate Hatem Ben Arfa.

Benzema walked straight past

his colleague when the latter replaced him on the hour mark.

"They aren't the greatest of friends - it's a personal thing," admitted Perrin.

"It's nothing to do with Hatem," countered Benzema, who scored a fine goal in the home leg against United, insisting he was just irritated at being asked to play to the left of his preferred central role.

"I don't like this position," said the 20-year-old.

Marseille kept up their push for a Champions League spot next season in moving fourth with a 2-1 home win over Auxerre, former Liverpool striker Djibril Cisse claiming the crucial second for his tenth league goal of the campaign.

Saturday saw a drought of goals with third-placed Nancy suffering from the shortage most as they could only draw 0-0 at Lorient to move onto 45 points - still four adrift of Bordeaux.

Marseille now have 42 having leapfrogged a Le Mans side who went down 1-0 at home to

Strasbourg to complete a miserable week after a league cup semifinal exit.

Lens, who made it through at their expense to face PSG in the March 29 final, drew 1-1 at home to Toulouse which temporarily pushed the Parisians into the bottom four.

Monaco could only eke out a scoreless home draw with Valenciennes while Metz beat Caen for only their third win of the season although they are 13 points adrift at the bottom.

As Marseille look to return to Europe's premier club competition, which they remain the only French side to win, Lyon keeper Gregory Coupet warned Manchester United that their last 16 tie is far from over ahead of Tuesday's Old Trafford return.

"They'll be the favourites on their own patch. But we'll go there with a view to containing them," said Coupet, glad for a clean sheet against Lille after his recent return from injury.

Robben out of Roma clash

AFP, Madrid

Arjen Robben will almost certainly miss Real Madrid's Champions League last 16 second leg match against Roma on Wednesday, according to officials of the Spanish club.

The injury-prone Dutch winger suffered a severe sprain to his left ankle in the 67th minute of Real's 3-2 win at Recreativo Huelva on Saturday following a wild challenge by the home side's Quique Alvarez.

Alvarez was subsequently sent off for the reckless challenge.

Robben's compatriot Ruud van Nistelrooy missed the trip to Huelva with a right ankle injury and officials are also doubtful that he will be fit in time to face the Italians.

Roma lead 2-1 after the first leg in the Italian capital.

One man already confirmed as being unable to play on Wednesday is Real's suspended Spanish international defender Sergio Ramos.

Ramos could also find himself facing a hefty domestic ban because of the abuse he heaped on referee Eduardo Iturralde Gonzalez after he received his second yellow card, and his marching orders, early in the second half at Huelva.

"In the 55th minute, after I'd sent off Sergio Ramos Garcia, he approached me saying, 'Shit, you are a shit, you've been shit', and he had to be restrained by his teammates from approaching me," said Iturralde Gonzalez.

Seedorf doubtful

AFP, Rome

Veteran AC Milan midfielder Clarence Seedorf could miss Tuesday's Champions League clash with Arsenal because of an injury picked up in Saturday's 1-1 draw with Lazio.

"Seedorf (who came off in the 37th minute) has a muscle problem," said Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti.

"We'll see but it will be very difficult for him to recover."

Milan, the defending European champions, are level at 0-0 with Arsenal ahead of the second leg of their first round knockout tie.

They could also be without Brazilian midfielder ace Kaka, who has a knee injury, as well as experienced central defender Alessandro Nesta.

Ribery inspires Bayern

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich star Franck Ribery reinforced Franz Beckenbauer's opinion that the German giants rely too much on the star midfielder by setting up the only goal in Saturday's 1-0 win at title-rivals Schalke 04.

Germany striker Miroslav Klose scored his tenth Bundesliga goal to seal the win at the Veltons Arena in Gelsenkirchen as Schalke fell to their third straight league defeat leaving Bayern top with a four-point lead.

Werder Bremen stay second after their 2-0 win over Borussia Dortmund.

Since his summer switch from Marseille, Ribery has become the Bundesliga's brightest star and was instrumental in his side's first win at Schalke for 10 years.

But in his weekly column in German tabloid Bild Beckenbauer says Bayern rely too much on Ribery, who returned from injury to put his side in the German Cup semifinals with a winning penalty against 1860 Munich in midweek.

"The cup win shows how much Bayern depend on Ribery and in my opinion, it is too much,"

wrote Beckenbauer, Bayern's president.

"Without him, the team is static and shows no imagination. His return from injury gave the team an electric shock. Suddenly, the other players move more and are more motivated."

Ribery ruled the midfield against Schalke and Bayern had several chances to improve the lead through Klose and the Bundesliga's top-scorer Luca Toni, while Schalke offered little apart from a handful of near-misses by Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi. "The game went well for us," said Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

"We encountered an under-pressure opponent and they gave us very few chances. "We counter-attacked very well, but the final goal did not come. It made us a little nervous at the end and Schalke tried everything."

The future of Royal Blues coach Mirko Slomka now hangs in the balance after three-straight league defeats, but a Champions League win at FC Porto next week would put his side in the quarterfinals.

"The 1-0 defeat was poison for us," said Slomka.

"Bayern didn't play particularly well and we had a few serious chances in the first half. We

didn't show the courage and determination I would have wanted."

Werder Bremen remain four points adrift of Bayern with their 2-0 win over Borussia Dortmund thanks to a double-strike from Swedish striker Markus Rosenberg.

In the days other results, Karlsruhe moved into fifth place with a 3-1 win over VfL Wolfsburg. Strugglers Hansa Rostock and Arminia Bielefeld shared a point in their 1-1 draw as they both remain just above the relegation zone.

After their humiliating German Cup quarterfinal defeat at the hands of second division relegation candidates Carl Zeiss Jena, defending champions VfB Stuttgart had their game with Energie Cottbus cancelled by bad weather.

Nuremberg's misery continues as they remain locked in the bottom three after their 2-1 defeat by Hanover.

On Friday, Hertha Berlin remain in midtable after picking up three points when they beat bottom side Duisburg 2-0 at the Olympic Stadium.

And on Sunday, third-placed Bayer Leverkusen are at VfL Bochum while fourth-placed Hamburg take on Eintracht Frankfurt.



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich star Franck Ribery (R) passes the ball to teammate Miroslav Klose (C) to score past Schalke goalkeeper Manuel Neuer (L) during their Bundesliga match at the Veltons Arena on Saturday.

MILAN ONLY DRAW Roma capitalise on errors

AFP, Rome

Three comical errors from Parma helped gift hosts AS Roma a 4-0 victory at the Stadio Olimpico on Saturday and moved them to within six points of leaders Inter Milan.

AC Milan missed the chance to

move back into the top four and a Champions League qualification place as they were held to a 1-1 draw at home to 10-man Lazio.

Parma goalkeeper Luca Bucci handed a goal to Roma midfielder Alberto Aquilani in the first half and after the break Parma captain Giulio Falcone scored an own goal before Francesco Totti, making a record 388th league appearance for

Roma, scored a third 10 minutes from time.

Deep into stoppage time another mistake, this time from Damiano Zenoni presented Roma substitute Mirko Vucinic with an easy finish from inside the six yard box as Roma enjoyed an easy ride ahead of their midweek trip to Real Madrid in the Champions League.

"The match seemed to be easy but that's credit to our lads," said Roma coach Luciano Spalletti whose side will take a 2-1 lead to Madrid.

"We showed that we're in good shape. The pressure will increase ahead of the match with Real. The second leg in the Champions League at the Santiago Bernabeu is an opportunity for us to show what we're made of."

"If we play like we did tonight, we'll achieve a good result."

Inter Milan can reopen the gap at the top to nine points if they win at Napoli on Sunday.

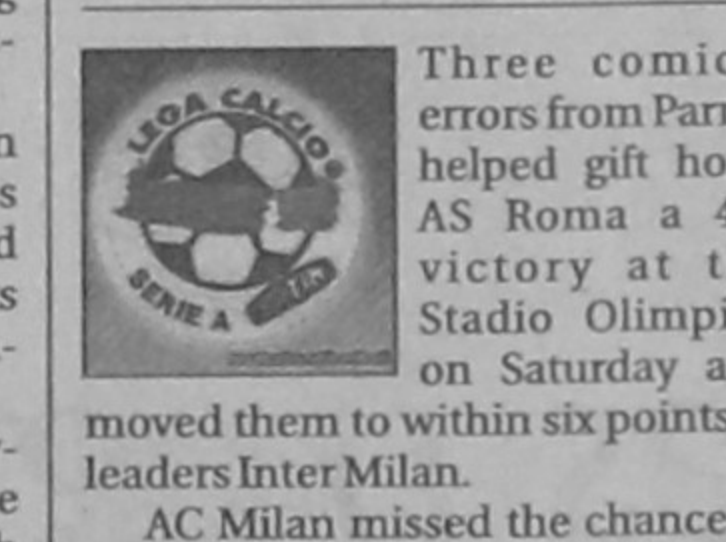
At the San Siro, Milan were without key playmakers Kaka and Andrea Piro as they kept one eye on Tuesday's Champions League second round, second leg clash against Arsenal.

The reigning European champions put in an insipid display as they failed to exert any sort of domination on their mid-table opponents. Lazio took the lead nine minutes after half-time as former Manchester City forward Rolando Bianchi turned home a cross from Tommaso Rocchi from close range.

Milan needed a helping hand from the referee to get back on level terms as he awarded a penalty after Georgia defender Kakha Kaladze slumped theatrically to the turf at a corner.

Massimo Oddo fired home the spot-kick low to goalkeeper Marco Ballotta's right but Milan were indebted to their Australian shot stopper Zeljko Kalac for earning them a point as he made smart saves from Rocchi and Goran Pandev.

"I'm happy because I made three important saves in a short space of time," said Kalac.



AC Milan missed the chance to



PHOTO: AFP

Milan defender Massimo Oddo retrieves the ball after scoring against Lazio during their Serie A encounter at the San Siro on Saturday.