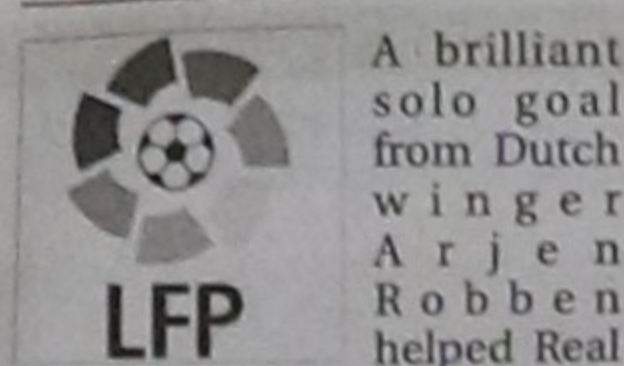


Robben the difference

AFP, Madrid



A brilliant solo goal from Dutch winger Arjen Robben helped Real Madrid close the gap on runaway leaders Barcelona to 12 points as the champions defeated Villarreal 1-0 at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

Real coach Juande Ramos handed debuts to French midfielder Lassana Diarra and Dutch international striker Klass-Jan Huntelaar - 40 million euros worth of talent - but it was Robben that proved the difference.

The former Chelsea man jinked his way past several opponents - leaving Spanish star Marcos Senna sprawling on the ground - before unleashing an unstoppable 31st minute winner.

"We are getting some good results and that is the best way for us to move forward and gain confidence," explained Ramos. "We were tired because there were a lot of players who hadn't played for a while and it was a tough second half."

It was Ramos's second league win in charge and Real climb to third but they need Barcelona, who came from behind to defeat Real Mallorca 3-1 on Saturday, to start slipping up.

Barcelona are 11 points clear of Valencia who hold on to second spot after Sevilla drew 1-1

with bottom side Osasuna on Sunday.

Jesus Navas's goal looked set to propel Sevilla up to second but Walter Pandiani equalised in the final minute to stun the home fans.

Sevilla are now level on 32 points with Real while Villarreal's third straight league defeat leaves them 15 adrift of pacesetters Barca.

Ramos had no hesitation in giving league debuts to Diarra, who he signed for 20 million euros from Portsmouth during the transfer window, and Huntelaar who was a 20 million euro buy by former manager Bernd Schuster.

"Lass (Diarra) did an excellent job and was shattered while Huntelaar had a decent first half and then got tired too," added Ramos.

The Christmas break also allowed Real to recover injured players and they welcomed back Pepe and Gabriel Heinze to strengthen the back four.

Real hit the woodwork on 11 minutes when Robben's deflected shot took a ricochet off the top of the crossbar for a corner.

Robben was Real's stand-out player and the Dutch star scored a terrific goal just after the hour.

Cutting in from the right flank Robben faked to shoot - deceiving Spanish international Senna who threw himself to the ground in a last ditch block - before firing a fierce drive into the top corner with his left foot.

Six minutes before the break Huntelaar should have got a debut goal but Diego Lopez foiled the Dutchman with a reflex save.

Villarreal coach Manuel Pellegrini's severe half-time dressing down seemed to work and they were transformed in the second period putting Real on the back foot with a series of corners.

"Real were good up until the goal and then we took control of possession and looked like the home side," said Pellegrini. "It is three consecutive defeats and although they were narrow we still lost them."

Ramos decided to make a change with Huntelaar, still short of match fitness, taken off for Roysten Drenth just 10 minutes into the second half.

Villarreal pushed forward and their best chance came on 70 minutes when Giuseppe Rossi's header was pushed onto the crossbar by Casillas.

The visitors were the better side in the second half but the ball wouldn't go in.

Former Real legend Hugo Sanchez, who won five consecutive league titles in Real colours from 1985 to 1990, had a great start with new club Almeria with his first match in charge ending in a 1-0 win over Real Betis.

Elsewhere Recreativo Huelva did their chances of staying up a power of good with a 3-1 win over Numancia on Sunday that lifted them out of the bottom three.



Real Madrid winger Arjen Robben goes airborne to celebrate his stunning goal in their Primera Liga match against Villarreal at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Sunday. Robben's fantastic strike saw Real home against the spirited Yellow Submarines and made sure that they stay within sight of league leaders Barcelona.

Clijsters loses her father

AP, Brussels

Lei Clijsters, the father of tennis player Kim Clijsters and a former Belgium soccer international, died Sunday. He was 52.

Derniere Heure newspaper in Belgium reported Clijsters died after a yearlong battle with lung cancer.

He played 40 matches for Belgium's national team, participating in the 1986 and 1990 World Cups. In 1986, Belgium reached the semifinals.

Clijsters played defense for several Belgian clubs and captained FC Mechelen when it won the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1988 by beating Ajax in the final.

After retiring in 1993, Clijsters managed his daughter's tennis career until her retirement in 2007. Kim Clijsters won the U.S. Open in 2005.

Downing wants a move

AFP, London

Middlesbrough's England winger Stewart Downing took a step closer to joining Premier League rivals Tottenham Hotspur by handing in a transfer request on Monday.

Downing's move came just hours after Middlesbrough chairman Steve Gibson insisted the 24-year-old would not be leaving the north-east club during January's transfer window.

Although he signed a new five-year contract with Middlesbrough in February last year, Downing has grown increasingly frustrated with what he regards as his home town club's lack of ambition.

Downing's father, Stewart senior, told Middlesbrough's Evening Gazette on Monday: "Stewart's been frustrated since the summer, really."

"When he signed his new contract he was assured that there would be significant investment in the squad."

"He feels that the club haven't matched those expectations. He's also frustrated that the team is once again struggling in the Premier League."

"Obviously as a Middlesbrough lad, he's thought long and hard about the decision to hand in a transfer request, and he also hopes the fans will understand his reasons for doing so."

Boro are understood to want 15 million pounds (16.5 million euros) for Downing with Spurs opening their bidding at only 11 million pounds.

Beckham set for debut

AFP, Rome

English football icon David Beckham is set to make his much anticipated debut for AC Milan in a friendly against German side Hamburg on Tuesday, club coach Carlo Ancelotti said Monday.

Speaking on Monday from Dubai, where the squad is at a training camp, Ancelotti said: "There has been a lot of curiosity surrounding David Beckham."

"And I can calmly say that he is available and that he can therefore play."

Ancelotti added: "The past few days he (Beckham) has been working hard and I've noticed his commitment to showing that he wants to play for the team."

Former Manchester United and Real Madrid star Beckham plays for Los Angeles Galaxy in the United States but has joined AC Milan on a short-term loan as he bids to extend his England career.

LA Galaxy resume competition in March.

AC Milan's first official match of 2009 is Sunday's Serie A league encounter against AS Roma.

However Ancelotti has indicated that Beckham, who plays as a creative midfielder, faces stiff competition from the likes of Andrea Pirlo, Clarence Seedorf, Ronaldinho and Kaka.

Beckham admitted he is thrilled to be playing with Milan and added, in an interview with Sky Sports, he is waiting patiently for the nod from Ancelotti.

"When will I play? I am always ready but it's up to the coach to decide. Physically I know I have to work hard to reach 100 percent. I want to play well instead of just play," he said.

He added: "I love my team Los Angeles Galaxy but for me this is a great experience. Not everyone has managed to play in what everyone considers the best club in the world."

Osim bids bye

Football

AFP, Tokyo

Former Japan coach Ivica Osim has bid an emotional farewell to the country that has been his home for the last few years.

He left for Austria on Sunday at the end of a six-month contract as an advisor to the Japan Football Association, which followed his recovery from a serious stroke that cost him the national coaching job 13 months ago.

"I have cried only a few times in my life and today may be one of those days," the 67-year-old Bosnian told reporters at Tokyo's Narita airport, surrounded by some 300 sup-

porters, according to reports in sports dailies on Monday.

"Everyone may have had moments when they could not control their emotions. But there are many more important things in life than crying," said Osim, famous for guiding the former Yugoslavia to the 1990 World Cup quarterfinals.

Osim, who was to focus on rehabilitation at home in Austria, said he had no plans to come back to Japan.

"I am very glad to be sent off by many supporters," added Osim, who has amused many Japanese with his pithy but often cynical remarks.

His translator Zen Chida said it was the first time he had heard Osim use the word "glad."



Manchester United midfielder Michael Carrick (top) tries to squirm away from the challenge of Southampton defender Chris Perry during their FA Cup tie at the St Mary Stadium in Southampton on Sunday.

It's comfortable for MU

AFP, Southampton



Sir Alex Ferguson may have said it was "not realistic" for Manchester United to win a unique European and domestic quadruple but he still believes his squad can compete on four fronts.

United opened their FA Cup campaign with a comfortable 3-0 win away to Championship strugglers Southampton at St Mary's here Sunday.

Goals from youngsters Danny Welbeck and Darron (attn eds: correct) Gibson either side of a controversial Nani penalty maintained Ferguson's proud record of having never lost a third round tie in his 22-year reign at Old Trafford.

United, well placed in their quest for a third successive Premier League title, are also through to the last 16 of the Champions League and face Derby in the first leg of their League Cup semifinal on Wednesday.

No team have ever won all four trophies in the same season but Ferguson said: "I think we have a good enough squad to compete in every competition, as long as we do not pick up any injuries. That is the most important thing."

situation so you never know what is going to happen," the 67-year-old Scot added.

"We have some good young players at the club and these games are an opportunity for them to get some experience under their belts."

"Players like Welbeck and Gibson have shown today they have the confidence and the right temperament."

United's next FA Cup opponents are Tottenham, whose manager Harry Redknapp was in charge of Portsmouth when the holders defeated Ferguson's men in a quarterfinal at Old Trafford last season.

"It's a mouth-watering game. Matches between us are always very competitive and we beat them at the same stage last season."

"Their manager Harry Redknapp was in charge at Portsmouth when they knocked us out in the quarterfinals so hopefully we can get our own back."

Ferguson was able to rest star winger Cristiano Ronaldo while England striker Wayne Rooney was left on the bench until the final 27 minutes.

Teenager Welbeck was not even born when Ferguson lifted the first of his five FA Cups in 1990 but the 18-year-old showed he has ability beyond his years by opening the scoring in the 20th minute.

John O'Shea headed against the underside of the crossbar from Ryan Giggs's corner and Welbeck was quickest to react

and nod the rebound into an empty net.

Southampton's hopes of an upset were all but ended eight minutes before half-time when striker Matt Paterson was shown a straight red card for a reckless two-foot lunge on Nemanja Vidic.

Nani doubled United's lead from the penalty spot three minutes into the second half after referee Mike Riley harshly adjudged David McGoldrick to have handled the Portugal international's free-kick.

Victory was secured nine minutes from time when substitute Gibson applied the finish to Rooney's pinpoint cross to register his first United goal.

Ferguson singled out Welbeck for praise, saying: "Danny did fine. We know about his temperament, he has got quality and is learning all the time."

Southampton, who upset the odds to beat United in the 1976 FA Cup final, are now second from bottom in the second-tier Championship.

They were always likely to struggle against a United team, which also featured Edwin van der Sar, Michael Carrick, Dimitar Berbatov, Anderson and Gary Neville.

Saints manager Jan Peortvliet said his side had been on the wrong end of several bad decisions by Riley.

"Their first goal was offside, in my opinion, it was not a sending-off and it was not a penalty," the Dutchman insisted.

Villa wants to stay at Valencia

AFP, Madrid

Spanish international forward David Villa said on Sunday he wanted to stay with Valencia for "another six years" despite reports he will leave in the summer.

Valencia had on Sunday denied any agreement on his leaving and in a statement through the club Villa said that media reports to the contrary were "erroneous."

He added that he was only interested in "fulfilling my six-year deal."

Villa, 27 and a star of Spain's Euro 2008 win last summer, scored in Saturday's 3-1 win over Atletico Madrid to take his campaign haul to 13 - two behind league top scorer Samuel Eto'o of Barcelona.

Barca and Real Madrid head a long list of clubs at home and abroad who would like to sign Villa - but he would cost around 40 million euros.

Villa last summer extended his contract to 2014 and earns around three million euros a year.

Schalke banish duo to reserves

INTERNET, undated

Schalke 04 Sunday banished midfielder Albert Streit and Danish striker Peter Loevenkrands from their Bundesliga squad. Both players have been told they will be training in future with the reserves.

"It's a decision taking purely for sporting reasons. Both players have stated they wish to leave Schalke," club general manager Andreas Muellers said.

"We need a squad in which everyone is fully concentrated on Schalke and not already somewhere else with their thoughts."

Brazilian midfielder Ze Robert can also expect sanctions after failing to turn up for the resumption of training Saturday or contact the club following the players' brief winter holiday.

Meanwhile Schalke have ended their contract with Uruguayan midfielder Gustavo Varela with effect from December 31, 2008.

Varela, 30, had a contract until the end of the season but injuries have prevented him playing a single game this season.

Poldi-Olic swap mooted

Football

INTERNET, undated

Bundesliga club SV Hamburg are interested in signing Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski in exchange for Ivica Olic, according to German media reports on Sunday. According to the dailies Welt and Hamburger Abendblatt in their online editions, Hamburg would be prepared to release Croatia striker Olic in the winter break if they can get Podolski in exchange.

Hamburg would have to pay some 7 million euros (9.7 million dollars) for Podolski plus Olic who would otherwise join Bayern on a free transfer at the end of the season.

The report said the deal would benefit both sides in many ways, including the fact that both players would still be eligible to play in the Champions League (Bayern) and UEFA Cup (Hamburg).

Hamburg in addition have just extended their contract with main sponsors Emirates for an improved deal bringing in some 7 million euros a year, Abendblatt said.

Bayern general manager Uli Hoeness is quoted as telling Welt: "If Podolski comes to us and says he wants to go to HSV (Hamburg) then we can talk about it."

Both Bayern and Hamburg are in Dubai for winter training camps and are staying at hotels a few minutes drive from each other.

Bayern are said to want at least 10 million euros for Podolski who would be interested in rejoining his former club Cologne.

Hoeness confirmed Saturday that Olic, 29, is set to join Bayern at the end of the season on a three-year contract.

However, Hamburg coach Martin Jol said in Dubai he could not rule out the Olic transfer "taking place sooner."

Podolski, who is been recovering from flu, will fly out to join the Bayern squad in Dubai on Monday.

Bayern coach Juergen Klinsmann said: "Uli Hoeness will be trying to wrap up talks in January so that everything is sorted out to the satisfaction of Lukas and the club."

Klinsmann meanwhile said Sunday he would also be seeking talks in Dubai with Argentinian midfielder Jose Sosa over the player's future.

Klinsmann would like to release the midfielder on loan to enable him to get more match practice.

"It's a very difficult situation with Jose to get him more match practice so that he can develop further. The competition is very, very great. But it depends on him what he wants to do."

US striker Landon Donovan will be hoping to impress his claim to stay at Bayern after arriving on loan from LA Galaxy. A decision will be taken in March on whether the deal may be extended.

Villa scrape home

AFP, Gillingham



James Milner scored twice on his 23rd birthday as Aston Villa avoided becoming the latest Premier League club to make an early FA Cup exit with a 2-1 third round win away to Gillingham.

But victory at the Priestfield Stadium here on Sunday was anything but assured for Martin O'Neill's men.

In between Milner opening the scoring and netting a penalty 11 minutes from time, Villa - fourth in the Premier League and 74 places above Gillingham - were given a torrid time by their hosts from the fourth-tier League Two.

The lively Simeon Jackson drew Gillingham level in the 56th minute after a superb turn and shot left the Villa defence floundering.

"We knew it would be tough," O'Neill told ITV. "It was very hard. I'm delighted we got through, delighted for the supporters and we went as strong as we possibly could."

"They (Gillingham) are very strong, they played very well and good luck to them this season."

Jackson said that his side had put up a good team performance.

"As a team we did very well but unfortunately we couldn't get the result. A bit of trickery from Ashley Young got the penalty and that's how it goes sometimes."

Villa, who in common with all clubs in England's top two divisions were playing their first FA Cup tie of the season, went ahead in the

13th minute when they seized possession as an over-confident Gillingham paid the price for trying to play the ball out of defence.

Milner shrugged off Gills skipper Adam Miller, exchanged passes with Stiliyan Petrov and then beat goalkeeper Simon Royce with a well-directed shot into the far corner from the edge of the box.

Jackson's pace, however, was a constant problem for the visitors' defence and only a last-ditch tackle by Zat Knight prevented him surging into the box.

But Gillingham continued to press forward and forced three successive corners, the last of which was gathered by Villa keeper Brad Friedel.

Villa, for all that they were struggling in the possession stakes, could have doubled their lead through Nathan Delfouneso shortly before half-time but the teenage striker volleyed wide from eight yards out.

However, the goal the south-east side had been threatening came shortly before the hour mark.

Jackson was quickest to latch into Gary Mulligan's flicked-on header and then sped past Knight before unleashing a fierce strike which gave Friedel no chance at all.

Tempers began to fray as tackles flew in and Gillingham looked just as likely to score on the counter-attack as Villa.

But the game turned again when Villa's Ashley Young was awarded a penalty after drawing a foul as he went across defender Miller inside the box.

Milner made no mistake with the 79th minute spot-kick, shooting low and hard past the diving Royce's right hand.