

Barca keep firing

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona's formidable attacking trio of Lionel Messi, Samuel Eto'o and Thierry Henry came up trumps again as the league leaders crushed Numancia 4-1 at Camp Nou on Saturday.

Barcelona's victory opened up a 15-point cushion over Real Madrid and Sevilla at the top of the Spanish league table.

Numancia had defeated Barca 1-0 on the opening day of the season - their only league defeat of the whole campaign - and revenge was sweet as Barca stretched their unbeaten run to 19 games.

Real Madrid are in action against Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday desperate to cut Barca's lead back down to 12 points.

Messi grabbed a brace scoring the 49th minute opener and on 76 minutes to make it 14 goals for the season while Eto'o and Henry grabbed a goal apiece.

Eto'o now has 19 goals in as many games while Henry has 12 underlining Barca's potency in front of goal.

It was a sombre mood in Barcelona after strong winds had ripped the roof off a sports centre in the city taking the lives of four children who had been inside preparing for a

baseball game. The players paid a minute's respect for the victims before the kick-off.

Dani Alves almost put Barca in front after just five minutes when his cross deflected onto the crossbar.

Numancia had lost nine out of their 10 away matches while Barca had the best home record in the division but it was the visitors who had the ball in the net first.

Javier del Pino rose highest to head past Victor Valdes but the goal was disallowed with Del Pino accused of climbing on Andres Iniesta.

At half-time it was a frustrating 0-0 for Barca but Alves set Messi up for an opener four minutes after the break and Eto'o showed great strength to add another four minutes later.

Josep Guardiola got his side back in with a brilliant free-kick but Henry and Messi wrapped up the game late on.

Villarreal's Champions League hopes suffered a setback as they dropped two more points in a 1-1 home draw with lowly Osasuna on Saturday.

Giuseppe Rossi struck on 28 minutes to put Villarreal in front at El Madrigal and they looked set to climb to fourth in the table until Osasuna levelled through Eduardo Dady in the 64th minute.

It was a repeat of the 1-1 draw between the two sides in Pamplona and Villarreal stay fifth, four points behind Real Madrid and Sevilla who both

have a game in hand. For Osasuna it was an important point in their survival battle.

They have moved off the foot of the table at Real Mallorca's expense but are still six points from safety.

Real host Deportivo La Coruna on Sunday searching for a fifth straight win against a team that defeated them 2-1 on the opening day.

Real coach Juande Ramos has been impressed by Deportivo this season claiming they could become a magnificent team if they continue progressing.

"Deportivo were an excellent team that reached the Champions League semifinals (in 2004), but the current squad is young and under construction," said Ramos.

"They've made some interesting changes recently and I believe that they could become a magnificent team if they carry on playing like this."

Valencia can pull three points clear of Villarreal on Sunday when they take on struggling Mallorca.

Valencia have been busy in the transfer market this week recruiting 37-year-old goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez from Tottenham as cover for the injured Renan Brito.

"I am like a 17 or 18-year-old and I have a real desire to help out," said Sanchez. "This shirt comes with a certain responsibility."



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona sensation Lionel Messi (R) plucks the ball over the onrushing challenge of Numancia goalkeeper Juan Pablo to score during their Primera Liga encounter at the Nou Camp on Saturday.

Jose fancies Liverpool

AFP, London

Liverpool have "everything they need" to win the English Premiership title this season, according to ex-Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho, now coaching Inter Milan.

Rafael Benitez's Reds sit second in league, level on points with leaders Manchester United but behind on goal difference having also played one game more.

"It has been interesting watching Liverpool this season," Mourinho wrote in the Sunday Telegraph. "I think they have everything they need to do it this season? Of course they can."

"I still can't understand why they didn't do it in the last four years. Why wouldn't they be able to do it this season? Of course they can."

"The manager is good, the players are good, the crowd is unique, the tradition of the club is big, so why can't they do it? I think they can."

Mourinho warned, however, that the resumption of the Champions League at the end of next month could again be a distraction for the Anfield club.

"Usually it is when the Champions League starts that they lose their focus on the Premiership," he continued. "It was like this in previous years when they did very well in the Champions League but they lost too many points in the championship."

Meanwhile, Mourinho hailed the decision of Kaka to snub the advances of Manchester City and remain in Serie A with AC Milan.

"I am happy that Kaka didn't go there," he said. "I want the best players to be in my league."

Balotelli left out again

AFP, Milan

Teenage forward Mario Balotelli has again been left out of Inter Milan's squad for Sunday's visit of Sampdoria.

Earlier this month Inter coach Jose Mourinho criticised the 18-year-old's lack of commitment to training and a poor attitude.

Balotelli had been pushing for a transfer window loan move to get more playing time as he has been only intermittently used by Mourinho this campaign.

But the former Chelsea boss insisted the young Italy under-21 star should stay and learn how to train properly.

He also told Balotelli that he would not be considered for selection until the end of the window but put the youngster on the bench in midweek for the Coppa Italia clash against AS Roma.

Balotelli didn't come on during the 2-1 victory and now finds himself out of the match-day squad once again, despite Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic being suspended.

Juve go level with Inter

AFP, Rome

Juventus went level on points with Inter Milan at the top of Serie A for the first time this season as a Claudio Marchisio goal gave them a hard-fought 1-0 win over Fiorentina at Turin's Olympic Stadium on Saturday.

Both Juventus and Inter Milan have 43 points, but Jose Mourinho's defending champions can reclaim top spot outright if they avoid defeat at home to Sampdoria on Sunday.

For Fiorentina it was a third straight Serie A defeat which leaves them in danger of losing touch in the race for a top four finish and Champions League football next season.

Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri said Fiorentina's recent troubles had fired them up.

"We knew Fiorentina were going through a tough time and had already won here last season, so they were fired up and we knew they would give us real problems," he said.

Juventus had an early penalty appeal on 10 minutes as Stevan Jovetic weaved his way into the box but he went down far too easily under contact from Olof Mellberg when he seemed to have created a shooting opportunity.

Juventus then went ahead on 21 minutes after a delightful pass from Alessandro Del Piero.

"I'm offended by what I saw," he moaned. "There's a certain behaviour that is apparent during our matches. I'm disgusted by what I saw. These things need explaining."

Fiorentina were unlucky to not find themselves level.

Manuel Pasquale sent an inviting cross from the left and the diminutive Mario Santana beat centre-back Nicola Legrottaglie in the air only to see his header crash back off the bar.

Juve failed to clear their lines and Riccardo Montolivo shot from distance, an effort that Gianluigi Buffon failed to hold, allowing Alberto Gilardino to slot home the rebound.

But the linesman wrongly flagged for offside as TV replays showed Marco Marchionni was playing Gilardino onside at the time of Montolivo's shot.

That decision left Fiorentina president Andrea Delle Valle fuming.

"I'm offended by what I saw," he moaned. "There's a certain behaviour that is apparent during our matches. I'm disgusted by what I saw. These things need explaining."

Marchionni should have sent Juventus into the break 2-0 ahead when he had a chance late on in the half but he dithered, shot straight at Frey and then hit the keeper again when the rebound fell to him.

In the last minute of the half Fiorentina came close again

but Alessandro Gamberini and Per Koldrup got in each other's way diving for the ball at the back post.

On the hour mark, Juventus stretched Fiorentina down the right and Marchionni pulled the ball back for Zdenek Grygera to shoot but Frey made a spectacular one-handed save.

Juventus were enjoying success down their right and Marchionni up Del Piero on 69 minutes but the veteran forward skied his effort.

The hosts were almost made to pay two minutes later but Buffon made a miraculous reaction save with his leg from a close-range Gilardino flick.

In the day's other game, Chievo won the basement battle 1-0 at Reggina. The two sides started the day level on 13 points at the bottom but Chievo won their second straight match to boost their survival hopes.

MU, CHELSEA WIN Holders crash out

AFP, London



Holder's Portsmouth crashed out of the FA Cup on Saturday.

Meanwhile, Mourinho hailed the decision of Kaka to snub the advances of Manchester City and remain in Serie A with AC Milan.

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Balotelli left out again

AFP, Milan

It was Nathan Dyer, on loan from Pompey's bitter rivals Southampton, who scored the Welsh club's opener.

That was the first Pompey conceding in 651 minutes of FA Cup action. The second followed when Jason Scotland converted from the spot after Jordi Gomez was brought down by Nadir Belhadj in first-half stoppage time.

Swansea boss Roberto Martinez said the win showed his side, promoted from League One to the Championship only last season, could aspire to joining the top flight.

"We were able to come to a Premier League environment and be ourselves," he said.

"I'm extremely proud of the

way the players dictated things from the beginning."

Portsmouth boss Tony Adams admitted his side had been "out-played and out-fought."

A makeshift United line-up was rattled when Roman Pavlyuchenko headed Spurs into an early lead at Old Trafford.

But a deflected shot from Paul Scholes and Dimitar Berbatov's 10th goal of the season sent United into Sunday's 5th round draw and kept alive the possibility of a clean sweep of every tournament entered for the reigning English, European and World Club champions.

Kettering were left heartbroken after goals in the last

two minutes from Andrew Johnson and Bobby Zamora gave Fulham a barely deserved 4-2 win at Rockingham Road.

The Conference side had dominated after Craig Westcarr had cancelled out Simon Davies' early strike ten minutes before half-time.

Danny Murphy's 77th minute strike restored Fulham's lead but Kettering equalised again through Westcarr's penalty before finally running out of steam.

Torquay's exit was equally cruel, Coventry's Elliot Ward scoring the only goal of the game in the 87th minute.

A Michael Ballack double helped Chelsea to a 3-1 win over Ipswich at Stamford Bridge. Alex Bruce, son of Wigan manager Steve, cancelled out Ballack's opening goal before the break but the Germany captain settled the contest with a 59th-minute free-kick and Frank Lampard added a late third.

West Ham's passage into the last 16 was easily by a blunder from referee Lee Mason, who mistakenly whistled for a penalty after a handball by Hartlepool defender Michael Nelson that was clearly outside the box.

Valon Behrami had just given the Hammers a barely deserved lead and Mark Noble converted the spot-kick to make it 2-0, which was how it finished.

Aston Villa were taken to a replay they could have done without after a goalless draw at Doncaster and the all-Premier League clash between Sunderland and Blackburn also ended goalless.



Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack takes a free-kick to score in their FA Cup match against Ipswich at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.