



WILL THE TIDE TURN? Real Madrid striker Klaas Jan Huntelaar (L) is delighted at scoring a brace against Real Betis just as Espanyol midfielder Ivan de la Pena (R) runs off to celebrate his two-goal haul against Barcelona during their respective Primera Liga games on Saturday. Huntelaar was instrumental in Real's 6-1 win at the Santiago Bernabeu while De la Pena hit an exquisite winner at Nou Camp to settle the Catalan derby as Real closed in on runaway leaders Barca.

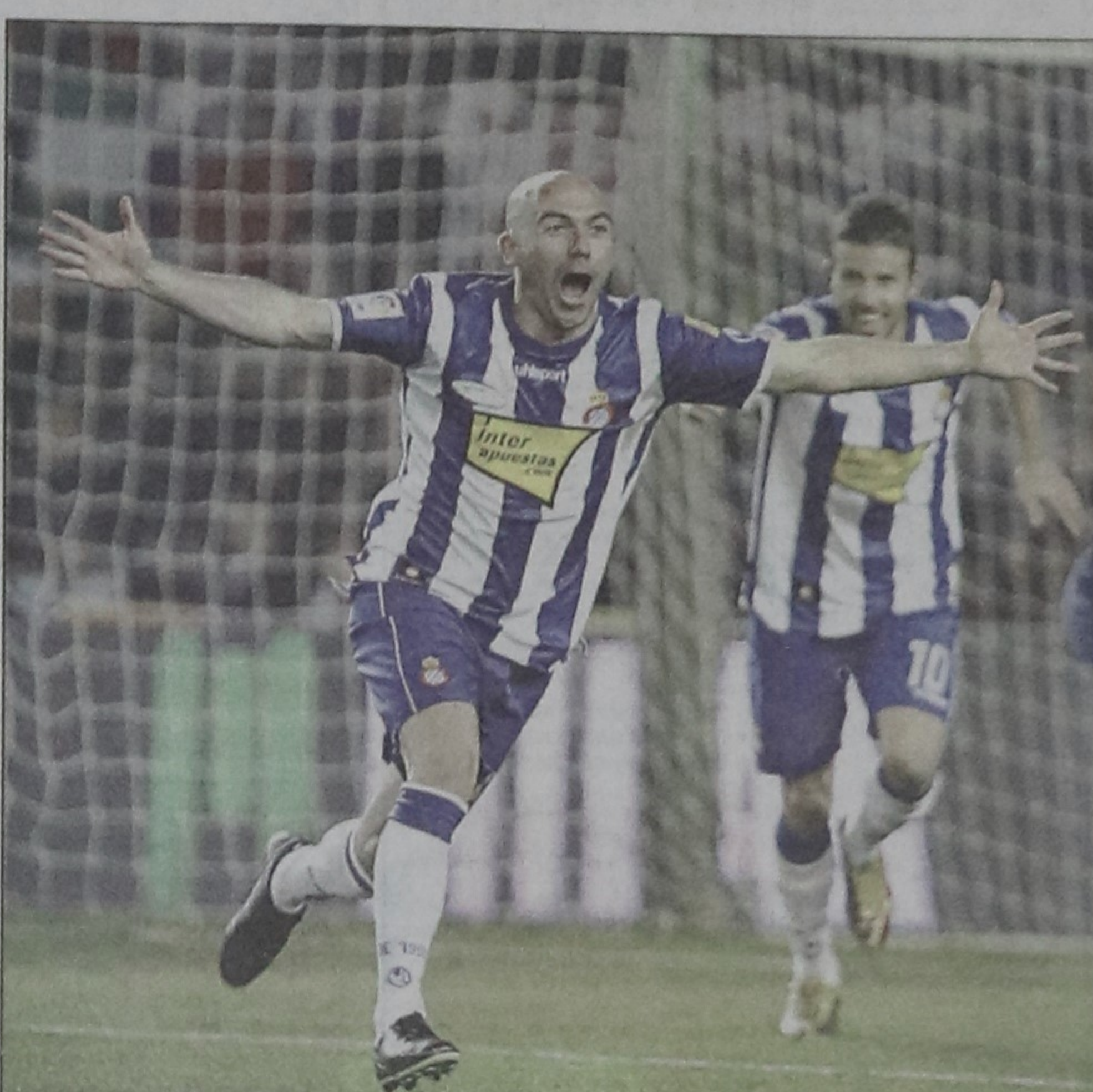


PHOTO: AFP

DERBY PAIN FOR BARCA

Real go goal crazy

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid sent an emphatic warning to Champions League opponents Liverpool on Saturday when they thrashed Real Betis 6-1 to move seven points behind leaders Barcelona, who suffered a shock 2-1 derby defeat against Espanyol.

Real scored all their goals in a terrific first half to record a ninth straight league win and they are brimming with confidence for Wednesday's last 16 Champions League match with Liverpool at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"I never said the league wasn't on," said Real coach Juande Ramos.

"Just like we had a dip in the first half of the season - due to injuries and other factors - other teams will have the same experience over a long season.

"We are closer to Barcelona but they still have a significant advantage and seven points is still a lot."

Barcelona travel to Lyon on Tuesday for their European clash and will be kicking themselves after the loss to Espanyol, who won at Camp Nou for the first time since 1982.

Old boy Ivan de la Pena, who played at Barcelona from 1995 to 1998, scored twice to gun down his old club, who had Seydou Keita sent off after 37 minutes.

It was Barcelona's first defeat since the

opening day of the season, ending their 22-match unbeaten run and in just a fortnight Real have sliced their lead from 12 points to seven.

"Nobody said it was going to be easy," said Barca coach Pep Guardiola. "We have lost today but we are still in a strong position and will recover from this setback."

Guardiola refused to criticise referee Delgado Ferreira for sending off Keita but teammate Xavi didn't mince his words.

"The referee got it (Keita's sending off) wrong," fumed Xavi. "He decided the game and apart from that he didn't allow it to flow at all."

Real took full advantage with Gonzalo Higuain opening the scoring in the seventh minute with his 14th goal of the season before Klaas-Jan Huntelaar scored twice.

Liverpool needn't worry about Dutch forward Huntelaar scoring against them as UEFA rules forced Real to omit the 20-million-euro signing from the Champions League squad with Lass Diarra grabbing the final place.

Captain Raul will be available though, and the veteran striker scored a quick-fire brace, in the 36th and 42nd minutes, as Real led 6-1 at the interval.

Ricardo Oliveira, a nine-million-euro signing from Real Zaragoza, had pulled a goal back on the half hour mark for Betis and it was the first goal Real had conceded in five league matches.

Sergio Ramos completed the first half rout.

Barcelona have been cruising for most

of this season but have hit a rocky patch with the Betis draw followed up by defeat to Espanyol.

Thierry Henry spurned a great chance after 13 minutes heading over from close range after Lionel Messi's great cross.

It was a fast-paced match and on 37 minutes Keita was red-carded for a late tackle on Moises Hurtado giving Barcelona an uphill task.

Guardiola was furious about the decision while Keita looked stunned, probably expecting a yellow card rather than a red.

Five minutes into the second half it got worse for Barcelona when old boy de la Pena headed the visitors in front. The 32-year-old then scored again five minutes later with a terrific chip.

Yaya Toure gave Barcelona hope with a 62nd-minute strike but Espanyol held on to triumph in a heated game which produced ten yellow cards and one red.

For Espanyol it was a first victory since the beginning of November and they move off the foot of the table with Numancia taking their place.

Elsewhere, Villarreal went fourth thanks to a 2-1 win over Sporting Gijon with a Joan Capdevila free-kick securing the win.

Sevilla cemented their third position with a late 1-0 win over Champions League rivals Atletico Madrid.

Jesus Navas scored the winner four minutes from time to help Sevilla move three points clear of Villarreal while Atletico stay sixth eight points adrift of Sevilla.

Isinbayeva misses out on WR

AFP, Birmingham

Russia's Olympic polevault champion Yelena Isinbayeva missed out on a 27th world record at the Birmingham indoor meeting on Saturday.

Isinbayeva had set seven world records in the UK and was hoping to improve upon the five-metre indoor record she set in Donetsk in Ukraine last weekend.

The world athlete of the year cleared 4.82m at the second attempt to win the competition easily, but failed with all three attempts at 5.01m.

"From the beginning I didn't feel so fresh because I was still tired from jumping in Donetsk," said Isinbayeva.

America's Lolo Jones equalled her world season lead of 7.82sec, which she set last weekend in Karlsruhe, with a confident 60m hurdles victory.

The world indoor champion, whose Olympic dreams were shattered last year when she crashed into a hurdle, led from the start with Cuba's world indoor bronze medalist Anay Tejeda the nearest to the American in a time of 8.00sec.

"There are still one or two things I can see that need tightening up," confirmed Jones. "It's good though because I can see there's room for improvement."

American compatriot Carmelita Jeter, who was a late arrival in Birmingham and had only three hours sleep, blasted to a world season lead and personal best of 7.11sec for the 60m.

The 29-year-old Jeter was never pressed by a field which included veteran Chandra Sturup, who was third in 7.20sec, and reigning world indoor champion Angela Williams who clocked 7.23sec for fourth place.

Tahesia Harrigan was second in 7.18sec.

Britain's Olympic 400m champion Christine Ohuruogu was pleasantly surprised to win the 200m in 23.42, just overtaking veteran Donna Fraser on the line.

"I'm shocked because I hadn't been training for this, it was just a matter of coming out and supporting the sport," said Ohuruogu, who is not

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Abidal out for eight weeks

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona have lost French international defender Eric Abidal for around eight weeks due to a leg injury, the club said on Saturday.

Abidal was forced off 22 minutes into Saturday's 2-1 derby defeat by Espanyol and will now be sidelined for the next two months.

It is bad timing for Abidal who will miss out on an emotional return to former club Lyon who Barcelona face in the Champions League on Tuesday. Barcelona paid Lyon 15 million euros for Abidal in June 2007 after the player made his mark for France at the 2006 World Cup finals.

Inter consolidate

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan maintained their nine-point lead at the top of Serie A after a battling 2-1 victory at lowly Bologna while Juventus won 2-0 at Palermo on Saturday.

It was the perfect warm-up for coach Jose Mourinho's men ahead of Tuesday's crucial Champions League round of 16, first leg clash against Manchester United.

But despite the European encounter three days away, Mourinho resisted the temptation to make wholesale changes to his starting XI, bringing in Brazilian Maxwell for Serbian Dejan Stankovic in midfield and handing Colombian centre-back Nelson Rivas a rare start in place of Argentine Nicolas Burdisso.

He was rewarded for fielding a strong line-up as teenage forward Mario Balotelli hit the winner direct from a free-kick from wide on the left eight minutes from time to secure the three points.

Mourinho refused to start popping the champagne corks.

"Is the title race over? We still need another 30 points, it's still too early," he said before looking ahead to the United match.

"I want my players to take great pleasure in playing in the match against Manchester United without fear of going out in the second round."

In Bologna, Inter dominated from the off with Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic as influential as ever.

But it wasn't until the 57th minute that Inter finally got the lead they deserved when Adriano headed down Maicon's corner to Esteban

Cambiasso, who was left unmarked to calmly control the ball on his high and then rifle it into the roof of the net.

But on 79 minutes Miguel Britos rose highest to meet a corner and glanced his header in off the far post, despite Cambiasso standing next to the upright.

Mourinho threw young striker Balotelli into the fray and he proved the match-winner as his late free-kick was missed by everyone before bouncing in off the far post.

Juventus were mighty relieved to come away from Sicily with the three points after having been put under the cosh for the first half hour. As Palermo dominated, Fabrizio Miccoli beat Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon but not the bar on four minutes.

Juve took the lead against the run of play on 27 minutes as Momo Sissoko strode forward unchallenged before thrashing a shot into the top corner.

Palermo continued to push for a goal while Juve contented themselves in playing on the counter-attack.

That play worked 11 minutes from time when former France forward David Trezeguet finished off from close range to celebrate his first start of the season by opening his goalscoring account for the campaign.

"I'm very happy because after four difficult months for me I've finally returned to the starting side," said Trezeguet.

AS Roma moved up to fourth with a narrow 1-0 home victory over Siena courtesy of Brazilian Rodrigo Taddei's second-half goal.

The result leaves them only two points behind AC Milan in third and seven behind second-placed Juventus.

Feisty Rovers fall short

AFP, London



Manchester United let in their first goal in the Premier League in three months, but still stretched their lead at the top of the table with a 2-1 win on Saturday against an unlucky Blackburn at Old Trafford.

United's victory means second-placed Liverpool will be eight points adrift of the English, European and world champions when they kick-off at home to Manchester City on Sunday.

England striker Wayne Rooney put United ahead in the 23rd minute.

However, after 1,337 minutes - more than 22 hours - without a dent in their goals against column, United's defence was pierced after the half-hour mark.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson, presumably with an eye on Tuesday's last 16 Champions League clash with Inter Milan, opted to play Tomasz Kuszczak in goal rather than Edwin van der Sar, who recently broke the British record for most minutes without conceding a league goal.

But Paraguay striker Roque Santa Cruz, released by Andre Ooijer's precise pass, rounded Kuszczak before finishing from a tight angle.

Rovers, belying their status as a bottom three club, nearly went ahead just before the hour mark when New Zealand defender Ryan Nelsen hit the post with a well-struck shot.

Two minutes later United's Cristiano Ronaldo, booked for diving by referee Howard Webb having escaped a yellow card for earlier kicking out, made it 2-1 with a brilliant curling free-kick from the left edge of the box.

Rovers were then denied a legitimate penalty when Morten Gamst Pedersen was pulled back in the box by United full-back Rafael da Silva.

A relieved Ferguson said: "We deserved it - just - no more than that. When you consider how we've defended over the last few weeks it was a very soft goal to give away."

"This is a great lesson. It tells us exactly what this league is like. I've said all along there is no way we can predict we are going to win the league when we get difficult games like this."

Blackburn boss Sam Allardyce was furious

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FA, fans reject extended halftime

AFP, London

The English Football Association says it plans to oppose forecast plans to extend the half-time interval from 15 to 20 minutes, a proposal that has been slammed by fans.

The idea, which is backed by FIFA chief executive Sepp Blatter with an eye on extra advertising revenue, is due to be raised at an International Football Association Board meeting in Belfast next week.

Senior figures within the English game feel it takes scant regard of supporters' needs, particularly in countries with less temperate climates, such as the UK.

And the idea of fans being forced to spend an extra five minutes waiting for the second half to start is not one that appeals.

Publicly, the FA are steering a delicate political path but privately it is thought they will lobby hard to retain the status quo.

"It is very unlikely we will be supporting it in the discussions next week," said an FA spokesman.

"We are mindful of supporters' views and also our clubs in the Premier League."

The stance will be welcomed by Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore who has also spoken out against the move.

"We wouldn't be in favour of that at all," he told BBC Radio Five.

"It is up before the International Board but we believe 15 minutes is enough."

"It is all very well for a per

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Alarm bells at Bayern

AFP, Munich



Bayern Munich goalkeeper Michael Rensing insisted his side owe their fans an apology after they slumped to their third loss in four league games on Saturday with a 2-1 defeat by Cologne.

Bayern found themselves 2-0 down to a mediocre Cologne side at half-time at Munich's Allianz Arena and although Belgian defender Daniel van Buyten pulled a goal back with time running out, it was not enough.

Bayern have lost to Hamburg, Hertha Berlin and now Cologne in their last four league games and could drop to fifth in the table on Sunday if Bayer Leverkusen beat Hamburg.

"I believe that after today we must apologise to all our fans for this defeat," said Rensing, who had said the week before he was "fed up to the back teeth" with his defenders.

"The first half time was inexplicably bad, Cologne could have won by more."

"Today was one of those days when nothing went right."

"We didn't deserve a point, never mind a win."

"If we had not acted so stupidly, we would already be top of the league, that is irritating."

First-half goals by Cologne's French midfielder Fabrice Ehret and teenage debutant Daniel Brosinski meant the guests were 2-0 up at half-time and never looked like losing.

It was hardly the ideal

warm-up for Bayern's Champions League Round of 16 first-leg tie on Wednesday against Sporting Lisbon on Portugal and chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said it was a bad day at the office.

"Until today, we had played well even in our defeats at Hamburg and Hertha, but today for the first time we played badly," he said.

"We need to get out of this rut very quickly, starting with Wednesday's game in Lisbon."

And Germany striker Lukas Podolski, making his first start after three months on the sidelines, lasted just 45 minutes before he was substituted.

Podolski, voted the best young player at the last World Cup, will re-join Cologne in the summer and said anyone of the Bayern team deserved to be taken off.

"We didn't play well and

'I will stay if we are fourth'

AFP, Birmingham

England midfielder Gareth Barry has told Aston Villa he is willing to stay at the Premier League club if they qualify for next season's Champions League.

Barry, who will be 28 on Monday, was close to joining Liverpool last year after setting his sights on a move to a team playing in Europe's elite club competition.

But Liverpool refused to meet Villa boss Martin O'Neill's asking price and Barry was forced to stay at Villa Park.

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Cologne deserved the victory," he said.

"It wasn't just any old Bundesliga fixture for me."

"I tried my best, but I didn't play well."

"I accept being substituted at half-time."

"Any of us could have been substituted, it was not a good afternoon."

Hertha lost top spot on Saturday when they were beaten 2-1 at Wolfsburg - who remain unbeaten at home this season.

A goal from Brazilian Cicero was cancelled out by second-half strikes from Wolfsburg's Edin Dzeko to put Berlin second.

"We are, of course, very disappointed, because we could have taken at least a point," said Hertha coach Lucien Favre.

"In the second-half, we were actually the better team and we made Wolfsburg look strong, so it's hard to accept this defeat."

Hoffenheim went back to the top after a battle royal at Stuttgart as Senegal striker Demba Ba hit a hat-trick which was cancelled out by strikes from Cacau and a pair by Germany forward Mario Gomez as it finished 3-3.

Hoffenheim midfielder Sejad Salihovic missed a penalty in injury time to leave his side on 40 points with Hertha, but top by virtue of goal difference.

"The spectators certainly got their money's worth today," said Hoffenheim coach Ralf Rangnick.

"It was an intense game which would we could have won, albeit unexpectedly."

"Mario Gomez was impressive today, so we can live with 3-3."