

KUN TRUMPS MESSI

# Barca lose a thriller

AFP, Madrid



Sergio Aguero's late goal helped Atletico Madrid come from behind to beat Barcelona 4-3 on Sunday and blow the Spanish title race wide open.

Barcelona, who led 2-0 and 3-2, have now failed to win in four matches and have seen their lead over Real Madrid cut from 12 points, just three weeks ago, to four.

Thierry Henry put Barcelona ahead with a fine strike from 25 yards which flew into the top corner after 18 minutes before Lionel Messi, on the half-hour mark, produced a trademark dribble before finishing in style.

Diego Forlan brought Atletico back into the match with a spectacular 30-yard drive before Aguero got the first of his brace after 56 minutes.

Barcelona, who were stunned by struggling Espanyol last weekend, re-established their lead when Eidor Gudjohnsen unselfishly played in Henry for his second from close range in the 73rd minute.

But Atletico were not finished and Forlan again scored, this time from the penalty spot in the 80th minute, before Aguero struck in the 89th minute to win the match.

Barcelona coach Josep Guardiola insisted the defeat will not affect his team's title push.

"We lost a game which was up and down, very exciting and I have to give credit to Atletico but we will now continue as before," he said.

"We have had a big advantage in the lead

and they (Real Madrid) have cut it back by eight points in three weeks but we will continue forward."

Meanwhile, the pressure is growing on Valencia coach Unai Emery as his side followed their mid-week UEFA Cup elimination with a 2-1 home defeat by Valladolid.

After a bright start to the season, Valencia have tumbled to sixth in the table and have now gone more than a month without a win.

It took just six minutes for Valladolid to go ahead with Jonathan Sesma heading home but then chances came and went for both sides before Raul Albiol scored an own goal to double the lead.

Valencia continued to create openings but missing David Villa through suspension they lacked a finishing touch.

They did eventually manage to find the back of the net through Carlos Marchena after 73 minutes but it was only to be a consolation.

Malaga's hopes of European qualification suffered a setback when they were beaten 2-0 at home by mid-table Recreativo Huelva.

Deportivo La Coruna are just below seventh-placed Malaga on goal difference after they beat bottom side Numancia with a Juan Rodriguez strike mid-way through the second half.

Mallorca continued their fight against relegation by beating Sporting Gijon to secure their third successive win with a freekick from Juan Arango to give the visitors the win.

A Walter Pandiani goal in first-half injury time rescued a point for Osasuna who drew 1-1 with Racing Santander but they are still encamped in the bottom three.



MATCH WINNER: Atletico Madrid starlet Kun Aguero (L) shoots to score the first of his two goals against Barcelona during their Primera Liga encounter at the Vicente Calderon Stadium in Madrid on Sunday.

MAN UTD WIN CARLING CUP

# Foster pulls out heroics

Football

AFP, London

Ben Foster kept Manchester United's bid for an unprecedented five trophies on track with a man-of-the-match performance in a penalty shoot-out win over Tottenham in the League Cup final here on Sunday.

The England goalkeeper produced two crucial saves to deny Tottenham victory in open play, where the teams finished locked at 0-0, before pulling off a superb stop to keep out Jamie O'Hara's opening penalty for the visitors.

That handed United the edge and, after David Bentley had sent Spurs' third spot-kick wide, Brazilian midfielder Anderson coolly converted to ensure United won the shoot-out 4-1 and lifted the trophy for only the third time in the club's history.

Having already bagged the World Club Championship in December, Sir Alex Ferguson's side now have a chance to emulate the great Celtic side of 1967 by completing a domestic treble as well as bringing home the European Cup.

It was a triumph that United probably just about deserved after coming agonisingly close to sealing victory in the third minute of injury time at the end of the first 90 minutes.

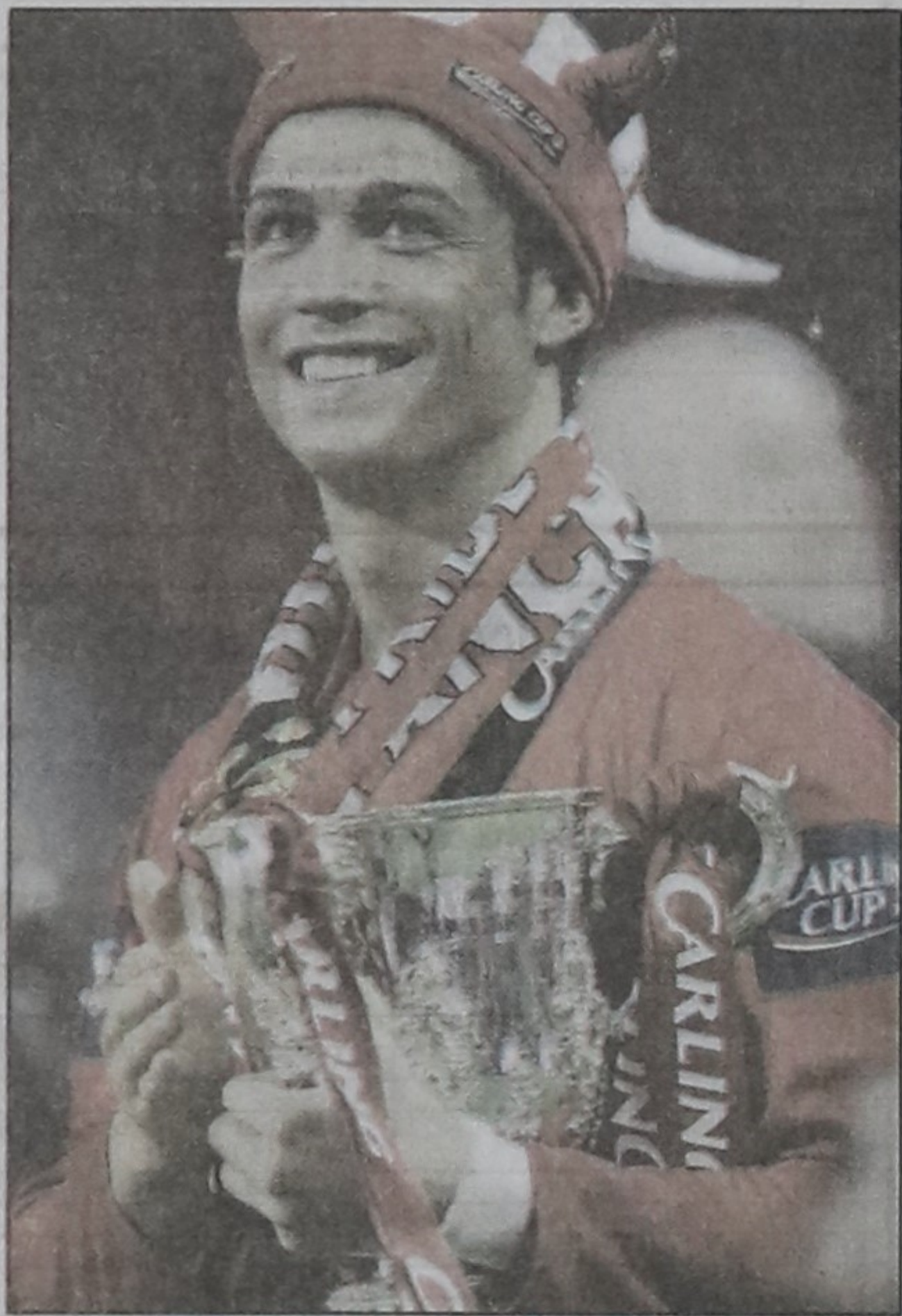
Collecting Darron Gibson's pass on the right of the box, Cristiano Ronaldo cut inside and beat Heurelho Gomes at his near post with a shot that clattered off the inside of the upright at such pace that Nani was unable to direct the rebound on target.

That capped a frustrating 90 minutes for the Portugal winger, who had earlier been booked for diving when he might easily have won his side a penalty.

Tottenham, too, might have dispensed with the need for extra-time if Aaron Lennon had been able to beat Foster from ten yards out midway

through the second half.

Such an outcome would have been an unfair reflection of a contest in which United mostly held the upper hand, although United had reason to be grateful to Foster once more he thwarted Darren Bent with his legs, five minutes before the end of the second period of the time.



Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates with the Carling Cup after defeating Tottenham Hotspur in the final at Wembley on Sunday.

# Lampard defies MU

AFP, London

Frank Lampard has warned Manchester United that Chelsea are determined to take the Premier League race down to the wire.

The Blues are seven points behind leaders United and have played a game more than the reigning champions, but Lampard believes the feelgood factor created by Guus Hiddink's arrival as Chelsea manager has provided a timely boost at Stamford Bridge.

Hiddink has led Chelsea to three successive wins since replacing sacked Brazilian Luiz Felipe Scolari and the west Londoners can close the gap on United to four points if they beat Portsmouth at Fratton Park on Tuesday.

Lampard is hoping Sir Alex Ferguson's men slip up at Newcastle on Wednesday, opening the way for a late Chelsea challenge.

"Considering the crisis everyone says we're having this season, we're still in second position," England midfielder Lampard said.

tance behind Manchester United, but we'll keep going. We closed the gap last year and only fell a little bit short.

"There are a lot of points still available, although to be fair to Manchester United they have been on a fantastic run.

"They can't go on winning forever, one day they might start getting some penalty decisions against them at home. The luck can change and do so very quickly."

While Chelsea remain confident of pushing United all the way, morale at Liverpool is at rock bottom heading into their vital home clash against Sunderland on Tuesday.

Raphael Benitez's side led the table for several weeks but a dismal run of two wins in

seven matches has allowed United to overhaul them.

Saturday's 2-0 defeat at Middlesbrough saw the Reds drop to third place and defender Fabio Aurelio admits they need to win every game now to have any chance of ending their 19-year wait for the title.

"We lost a great opportunity to try to get closer to Manchester United but we must bounce back now and beat Sunderland at Anfield on Tuesday," Aurelio said.

"We will still keep on fighting because we know in football that anything can happen. We won't give up and we will now try to win every game."

While Liverpool's meltdown is causing plenty of anguish at Anfield, at least they will be able to take the consolation of Champions League action next season.

At Arsenal, the grim realisation that a place in top four could be out of reach is growing stronger by the week.

The Gunners travel to bottom of the table West Bromwich Albion on Tuesday six points adrift of fourth-placed Aston Villa after five successive draws.

United's trip to Newcastle will be a test of Ferguson's resources after an energy-

# Hamburg humbled

AFP, Berlin

Hertha Berlin finished the weekend as Bundesliga leaders after Hamburg were beaten 3-1 at home on Sunday by Wolfsburg for whom Brazilian striker Grafite signalled his return from injury with two goals.

Hamburg's bid to regain top spot suffered a setback in the 12th minute when midfielder Dennis Aogo fouled Wolfsburg striker Edin Dzeko and Grafite slotted home the penalty.

The Brazilian grabbed his second on 24 minutes when Wolfsburg's attack pulled the Hamburg defence to pieces and the Brazilian again fired home past Hamburg goalkeeper Frank Rost.

Despite missing the last three games with a knee injury, Grafite has now scored nine goals in his last six league games.

Hamburg pulled a goal back through Peru striker Jose Guerrero on 72 minutes, but Wolfsburg pulled 3-1 ahead when Dzeko scored his sixth goal in the last four league games on 76 minutes.

The result leaves Wolfsburg fourth - four points off Hertha - and pushed defending champions Bayern Munich further down the table to fifth after they drew 0-0 at ten-man Werder Bremen.

"We have lacked the necessary penetration," said midfielder player Tim Borowski as Bayern have now taken just four points from their last five games.

"We struggled to create some chances to score and maybe we are just missing that little bit of luck."

Stuttgart moved up to seventh after their 2-0 win over strugglers Karlsruhe after Brazilian midfielder Elson scored in the 50th minute before Sami Khedira added a second with a late strike.

The kick-off was delayed by 15 minutes after rival groups of fans fought outside Karlsruhe's Wildparkstadion.

# Socceroos set Ireland date

AFP, Dublin

Australia will face the Republic of Ireland in a August friendly at Limerick's Thomond Park Stadium, it was announced on Monday.

It will be the first time Ireland have played a senior international game in Limerick, and the first time the recently redeveloped home of Munster Rugby has hosted a major football fixture.

Giovanni Trapattoni's Ireland, who are currently level on points with Italy at the top of World Cup qualifying Group 8, will use the friendly, scheduled for Wednesday August 12, as preparation for their vital qualifier against Cyprus in September.

Australia have several World Cup qualifiers of their own in the Asian sector before then. They face Uzbekistan on March 31, travel to Qatar on June 5 and then host Bahrain and Japan on June 9 and 16.

# Booking baffles C'Ron

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo insists referee Chris Foy was wrong to book him for diving during Sunday's League Cup final victory against Tottenham.

Ronaldo is no stranger to controversy over his theatrical tumbles but the Portugal star appeared to be harshly treated by Foy at Wembley.

Television replays showed Tottenham defender Ledley King clearly made contact with Ronaldo before the United player fell to the turf in the penalty area.

Foy was quick to flash a yellow card at Ronaldo after the incident, much the bemusement of the World and European Footballer of the Year.

"If you see the replay you will see that their player kicked me in the foot," Ronaldo said.

"The referee did not make the right decision then and he didn't give me a lot, all match, I don't know why. But in every game, the ref-

eree's decision has to be respected."

At least Ronaldo could console himself with United's penalty shoot-out victory.

Ronaldo missed a penalty when United beat Chelsea in a shoot-out to win last season's Champions League, but he kept his nerve this time to stroke his spot-kick past Heurelho Gomes.

He admitted he changed the side he aimed for because he thought Gomes may have seen the miss against Chelsea.

"It's always important to choose a side and put the ball there," he said.

"After Moscow I thought the goalkeeper would think I put it in the same corner but I changed."

Ronaldo believes there is a chance United could complete a clean sweep if they remain humble.

"It is quite hard," he said. "We have to think game to game. We won this cup now, we are top of the league and still in the Champions League and FA Cup."

"With United there is always an opportunity to win everything but we need to keep our feet on the ground."

# Inter's super fightback

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan twice came back from two-goal deficits against AS Roma to snatch a thrilling 3-3 draw at the San Siro on Sunday and extend their lead at the top of Serie A to seven points.

Jose Mourinho's team looked to be heading for more heartache following their footballing lesson by Manchester United in the Champions League in midweek as they trailed 2-0 and 3-1.

But a brace from teenager Mario Balotelli and a late equaliser from Hernan Crespo stole a share of the spoils and helped to maintain a sizeable gap to second-placed Juventus, who beat Napoli 1-0 on Saturday.

"That's a golden point for us," said Mourinho. "We lacked intensity and concentration following our Champions League efforts."

"At 3-1 down the match seemed over, even I thought it was. But the team's character made the difference."

Roma were the better team in the first period and on 23 minutes young full-back Marco Motta cut in from the right and crossed left-footed into the box where Daniele De Rossi arrived late to out-jump Javier Zanetti and glance home a fine header.

Jon Arne Riise notched a second on 29 minutes after galloping down the left onto a David Pizarro through ball, sneaking in behind Maicon and squeaking the ball through Julio Cesar's legs and in from a seemingly impossible angle.

But straight after the break Inter were given a lifeline as Adriano teed up Balotelli to beat Doni at his near post.

But Inter's reprieve didn't last long as Matteo Brihi ran through a gap in the home defence on 57 minutes before rifling home from outside the

area. Inter quickly pulled a goal back as Balotelli scored from the spot after the referee had given a penalty for a foul on the teenage forward.

That decision left Roma boss Luciano Spalletti livid. "From the bench it seemed to me as if Balotelli dived, and the TV images confirm that. It's obvious it wasn't a penalty," he said.

Inter kept plugging away and two veteran substitutes fashioned an equaliser as Luis Figo crossed for Crespo to nod home 11 minutes from time.

AC Milan crashed to a 2-1 defeat at Antonio Cassano-inspired Sampdoria as the heat on coach Carlo Ancelotti

cranked up another notch.

Just three days after blowing a 2-0 lead at the San Siro and exiting the UEFA Cup at the hands of Werder Bremen, Sampdoria, and Cassano in particular, heaped further pressure on the under-fire Milan coach.

On 18 minutes Daniele Bonera brought down Paolo Sammarco on the edge of the box and Cassano forced Christian Abbiati into a flying save from the freekick.

But on 33 minutes Sampdoria were ahead as Andrea Raggi rose highest to meet Angelo Palombo's corner and his header found Cassano unmarked at the back post.

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# Stoke stun Villa

AFP, London

Aston Villa handed Arsenal a lifeline in their bid to bag a Champions League place as free-spending Manchester City's away day blues worsened in the English Premier League on Sunday.

Villa blew their chance to open an eight-point gap over the Gunners as lowly visitors Stoke scored two last-gasp goals in a shock 2-2 draw at Villa Park.

Villa could have moved one point behind Chelsea and Liverpool, whose hopes of catching leaders Manchester United have all but faded.

But Stoke's heroes left Martin O'Neill's team three points off second and third place and only six points clear of Arsenal.

Inconsistent Manchester City were sunk 1-0 at West Ham, who moved up to seventh.

Meanwhile, Blackburn claimed a 2-1 win in a relegation battle at Hull City and Bolton beat visitors Newcastle 1-0.

Stiliyan Petrov and John Carew scored for Villa but Stoke's Ryan Shawcross scored in the 88th minute before Glenn Whelan blasted in a superb equaliser.

The Potters remain second-bottom in the table. Blackburn gave their Premier League survival hopes a boost in a fiery game at the KC Stadium.

Stephen Warnock and Keith Andrews scored for Rovers in the first half.

Hull's Dean Marney and Blackburn's Morten Gamst Pedersen were sent off.

Ian Ashbee pulled a late goal back for Hull, who have

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# PSG close gap

AFP, Paris

Champions Lyon dropped two precious points in an entertaining 1-1 draw with visitors Rennes Sunday, boosting Paris Saint Germain's unlikely bid for a first league title in 19 years.

PSG had earlier closed the gap with a commanding 4-1 win over Nancy which moved them back up to second place. They are now four points behind the champions.

After a frustrating first half in which both sides spurned chances Lyon looked to have re-established their six-point lead through an unstoppable Kim Kallstrom goal in the 66th minute.

However, Rennes, pulled level in the last minute with Jimmy Briand finally finding the net after spurning a host of chances in the game.

Earlier a brace from striker Guillaume Hoarau, either side of Ludovic Giuly's 13th minute strike, gave PSG a 3-1 half-time lead after Julien Ferret had briefly reduced the arrears for Nancy in the 29th minute.

A fourth goal from Stephane Sessegnon after the interval put a share of the points firmly beyond Nancy's reach.



Inter Milan's veteran striker Hernan Crespo runs off to celebrate scoring against Roma during their Serie A tie at San Siro on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

## FIXTURES

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| <b>Tuesday</b><br>(1945GMT unless stated)  |
| Liverpool v Sunderland (2000GMT), Portsmouth v Chelsea, West Brom v Arsenal  |
| <b>Wednesday</b>   |
| Blackburn v Everton (2000GMT), Fulham v Hull (2000GMT), Man City v Aston Villa, Newcastle v Man Utd, Stoke v Bolton, Tottenham v Middlesbrough (2000GMT), Wigan v West Ham |