

Bayern cut gap to one

AFP, Berlin



Defending champions Bayern Munich beat Karlsruhe 1-0 Saturday, without injured striker Luca Toni and Miroslav Klose, to close the gap behind league leaders Hertha Berlin who were humbled in Stuttgart.

Bayern welcomed back Franck Ribery, who had been suffering with a shin injury, and the French midfielder maestro made his mark in the 34th minute when he split the Karlsruhe defence to set up Argentina striker Jose Ernesto Sosa.

Sosa was partnering Lukas Podolski up front for Bayern, with both Toni and Klose suffering from ankle injuries, he took his chance by darting through the penalty area to drill Ribery's pass under Karlsruhe goalkeeper Markus Miller.

Bayern had Brazilian midfielder Ze Roberto to thank for the three points in the dying seconds as he deflected an effort from Karlsruhe's Michael Mutzel over the bar.

"For us, it was most important that we brought three points in," said Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

"We missed a few chances in the first half to pull away and in the second half things were a bit too jerky and hectic, we rushed things a little. But it is good we are only one point behind Hertha."

Karlsruhe stay bottom while the win keeps Bayern second, but just one point behind Hertha who were brought crashing down to earth after hosts Stuttgart scored two goals in

four minutes to continue their rise up the table to sixth.

Brazilian striker Cacau scored just two minutes after the break to put the hosts ahead before a header from Germany Under-21 midfielder Sami Khedira to double the lead on 51 minutes.

"Stuttgart were clearly better than us," said Hertha coach Lucien Favre. "We saw two different teams, one played very well, the other one very badly. If the team doesn't function properly, you will concede goals."

"We had an off day, as a coach you have to accept that."

Third-placed Wolfsburg are also just a point behind Hertha after they won 3-0 at Arminia Bielefeld.

Brazil striker Grafite netted in the 58th minute to become the league's joint top-scorer with 18 goals in 16 games to go level with Hoffenheim's injured striker Vedad Ibisevic.

With fourth-placed Hamburg in action against Schalke 04 on Sunday, Hoffenheim dropped further back in the title race as their 2-2 draw at Hanover left them five points off the leaders in fifth. Bayer Leverkusen are seventh after their 1-1 draw with Eintracht Frankfurt.

Although they hammered Stuttgart 4-0 the week before, Werder Bremen continue their erratic season as Borussia Dortmund captain Alexander Frei slotted home a 61st minute penalty to take the three points as his side are ninth, with Bremen tenth in the table.

Cologne remain in mid-table after their 2-0 win at second-from-bottom Energie Cottbus, while on Friday night Borussia Moenchengladbach remain in the bottom three as they lost 1-0 at home to fellow strugglers VfL Bochum.



Bayern Munich midfielder Jose Ernesto Sosa (R) slots home past Karlsruhe goalkeeper Miller during their Bundesliga encounter at the Allianz Arena on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Form to be Becks's marker

AFP, London

England coach Fabio Capello insists David Beckham's form will dictate the player's World Cup destiny and not his advancing years.

The 35-year-old Beckham is set to win a record 109th cap in next Saturday's friendly against Slovakia, just the latest match for the midfielder in what promises to be an exhausting run-up to the World Cup finals in South Africa.

Beckham, who is desperate to play in a fourth World Cup, faces a diet of non-stop action as he flits between AC Milan and LA Galaxy in the United States.

"When I choose a player, age is not important," said Capello. "(Italy skipper) Fabio Cannavaro is 35 but he is still picked."

"I am looking for the player, the man and other things. Not age. I am just looking for the best players."

"The only important thing for me is how well Beckham plays. He is playing well, so if he is fit, he has a chance of being in my next squad. I will decide for certain when the time comes."

Although Beckham may no longer lay claim to an automatic starting berth, the former Manchester United contribution is cherished by Capello after he helped him claim the Spanish title when they were both at Real Madrid in 2007.

"It hasn't surprised me how well David is doing at Milan because I know him very well," added Capello.

"He is a good player. Now with AC Milan he is played in a position which suits his technical characteristics."

Meanwhile, Capello is expected on Sunday to break his long-standing rule never to pick players who cannot get a regular game for their clubs by selecting Ben Foster in his squad to tackle Slovakia and then Ukraine in a World Cup qualifier on April 1.

Germany lose Frings, Friedrich

AFP, Frankfurt

Veteran midfielder Torsten Frings and central defender Arne Friedrich are both out of Germany's upcoming World Cup qualifiers, the German Football Federation (DFB) announced on Saturday.

Germany face minnows Liechtenstein in Leipzig next Saturday before travelling to Cardiff to face Wales on April 1, but expect to be without Werder Bremen's Frings and Hertha Berlin captain Friedrich.

Frings, who has scored ten goals in 79 appearances for Germany, picked up an ankle injury against St Etienne in the UEFA Cup last Thursday and is out for seven days.

And Germany coach Joachim Loew is also without Friedrich, who picked up a thigh injury as the Bundesliga leaders were beaten 2-0 at Stuttgart on Saturday.

"This is my first muscle injury," said Friedrich, "so I can't estimate how long I will be out for until the injury is investigated."

Hundred 100s in Sachin's sight

Cricket

AFP, Hamilton

Sachin Tendulkar may not want to talk about it, but the foremost batsman in the world today has in sight what once seemed an unachievable record -- a century of centuries.

The "little master", cricket's leading run scorer, already has 85 centuries -- 42 in Tests and 43 in one-day internationals -- more than anyone else in both forms of the game, and 15 more for the ultimate 100 is not beyond him.

Fast approaching his 36th birthday, there are not too many years left for Tendulkar although it's likely he will be around until the 2011 World Cup.

Between now and then there is ample opportunity to complete a remarkable record.

Tendulkar has scored hundreds in his last two out-

ings on India's current tour of New Zealand with 163 in the one-day series followed by 160 in his only bat in the first Test which India wrapped up by 10 wickets here on Saturday.

But he is reluctant to speculate on the opportunities

"I'm a bit superstitious. Let the others count the 100s and let me go and bat."

Indian captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni has nothing but admiration for his batting cornerstone.

"You can't get better than that, that's for sure," he said of Tendulkar.

"It's a pleasure to see him bat. Whenever he scores those big hundreds you can't see anything better than the way he plays those innings."

Tendulkar debuted on the international stage as a baby-faced 16-year-old selected to play Pakistan in 1989.

His maiden Test century came in a match-saving innings the following year against England at Old Trafford and he has continued on to be widely regarded now as the most complete batsman of his time.

He is the only player of the current generation to be included in the dream team of Sir Donald Bradman.

As for where the future 100s

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SACHIN TENDULKAR

ahead. "I wouldn't want to think about all those things," he said after his magnificent 397 minutes at the crease in the first Test.

Juve rout Roma

AFP, Rome

Juventus beat injury-ravaged AS Roma 4-1 at Rome's Stadio Olimpico on Saturday to keep alive their faint Serie A title hopes.

Vincenzo Iaquinta starred with a brace of goals as second-placed Juve cut Inter Milan's lead at the top of the table to four points, ahead of the champions' match against rock-bottom Reggina on Sunday.

It was a fifth straight league win for Juventus whose belief in their title chances is growing week by week.

Even so, coach Claudio Ranieri said he didn't want to think about his team's title rivals.

"I like our shape, our determination and the way we knew how to manage the match against difficult opponents," he said.

"I knew Roma would cause us problems but we played well and we didn't over-complicate things. I'm not expecting anything from this team. At Juventus we always want to do our best and we're trying to improve. We have a winning mentality."

"We have to think only about ourselves, without looking ahead or behind. A team that wants to win has to think only of doing its best but Inter are the mega-favourites."

Roma have now won only two of their last eight league matches and this result will have hit their hopes of finishing fourth and claiming a place in next season's Champions League.

Roma came into this game missing an entire team of players with seven injured and four suspended.

"I'm scratching my head to try to see how we lost this match 4-1," said coach Luciano Spalletti.

"I couldn't prepare prop-

erly for this match because of things out of our control. I have players who are only half-fit for a variety of reasons and then things went against us in the match."

Their patchwork outfit saw the likes of Brazilian youngster Filipe, French winger Jeremy Menez and centre-back Simone Loria make rare starts while Max Tonetto was played out of position on the right of midfield.

The first half was a dull affair until John Arne Riise escaped down the left past a napping Zdenek Grygera and crossed to Tonetto six yards out but his shot was blocked.

On 34 minutes, Juventus went in front with a goal of sublime simplicity.

Sebastian Giovinco played a one-two with Christian Poulsen and then fed Iaquinta who cut inside Loria and curled a shot around Brazilian goalkeeper Doni.

Juve's lead lasted only three minutes after the restart.

Menez swung over a poor corner but somehow the ball found its way through Loria in middle of the box and his first time finish was crisp and precise.

It did not take long for Juventus to restore their lead, though, with a touch of fortune about it.

Grygera's cross flicked off Riise's head and looped up for Iaquinta to head home at the back post despite the attentions of Philippe Mexes.

Any hope of a Roma comeback took a severe blow midway through the second half when Olof Mellberg rose unopposed to head home an Alessandro Del Piero corner.

Czech veteran Pavel Nedved wrapped up the scoring a quarter of an hour from the end with a 20-yard volley into the bottom corner.

In the day's other game a Michele Paolucci goal gave Catania a 1-0 home win over Lazio.



Juventus veteran Pavel Nedved gives the thumbs-up sign after scoring during their 4-1 rout over AS Roma in the Serie A match at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

SA deny Dalai Lama entry

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa's embassy in New Delhi has denied travel documents to Tibet's exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, barring him from attending a peace conference in Johannesburg, activists said Sunday.

The Dalai Lama had planned to join other Nobel peace prize winners including Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk at a conference Friday to discuss ways of using soccer to fight racism and xenophobia, as South Africa prepares to host the 2010 World Cup.

South African Friends of Tibet said in a statement that the Dalai Lama has been denied travel documents, saying the country's high commissioner in New Delhi had asked the Dalai Lama to postpone his trip.

"We believe that the barring of his holiness from the peace conference makes a mockery of the intentions of this conference," the group said in a statement.

The Sunday Independent newspaper quoted China's minister counsellor at the embassy in Pretoria, Dai Bing, as saying that his government had urged South Africa to deny the visit, warning it would harm bilateral relations.

Dai told the paper that it was an "inopportune time" for the Dalai Lama to visit, coming just after the 50th anniversary of a failed uprising against China's rule of Tibet, which led to the exile of the Dalai Lama, the region's most revered spiritual figure.

Klinsmann a happy man

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich boss Jurgen Klinsmann was delighted the defending Bundesliga champions ground out a 1-0 win over Karlsruhe to narrow the gap on leaders Hertha Berlin to just a point.

"The three points were what mattered," said Klinsmann despite his side's average performance as a single first-half strike from Argentina striker Jose Sosa gave Bayern the three points.

With leaders Hertha Berlin losing 2-0 in Stuttgart, both Bayern and third-placed Wolfsburg are now only a point off the top, but Munich's performance at their Allianz Arena against rock-bottom Karlsruhe was far from impressive.

"We've won the way Hertha have won seven or eight times this season, which is OK from time to time," added Klinsmann.

"Especially in the second half, it didn't go the way we wanted it to. We were too hurried, Karlsruhe fought back and made chances."

"We failed to wrap it up in the first half. Nevertheless, we're satisfied enough. It's good we're only a point behind Berlin."

"The players are allowed an occasional off day."

With Bayern facing Barcelona in the Champions League quarterfinals next month, captain Mark van Bommel was also demanding more from his side.

"There's nothing much to say. We played badly, but won," said Bayern's Dutch skipper who signed a year's extension to his contract in midweek.

Treble for Kanoute

AFP, Madrid



A hat-trick from Mali international Freddie Kanoute masterminded Sevilla's 4-1 win over Valladolid on Saturday as they stayed six points ahead of Villarreal in the Champions League race.

Kanoute was the star of the show with two first half goals, including a spectacular volley, and a brilliant second half header to seal his treble and take his season's tally to 15.

Villarreal had beaten Athletic Bilbao 3-1 to close to within three points of Sevilla but Manolo Jimenez's team responded with their 16th win of the season to consolidate third place.

Kanoute, 31, put the hosts ahead in the seventh minute showing great control to take the ball in his stride before finding the target.

A Henok Goitom header on 21 minutes pulled Valladolid back into the game but Kanoute restored Sevilla's lead with a fantastic first-time volley two minutes before the interval.

Fabiano added a third as Valladolid got their offense trap horribly wrong and Kanoute showed great technique to wrap the game up in the 70th minute with a header that sealed his hat-trick.

Earlier, Villarreal put the pressure on



Sevilla striker Freddie Kanoute (R) pokes home the second of his three goals in their Primera Liga match against Valladolid at the Sanchez Pizjuan on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Marseille end 10-year wait

AFP, Paris



Renato Civelli and Brandao fired Marseille to a 2-0 victory over Nantes on Saturday to shoot Eric Gerets' men to the top of the French championship for the first time since the 1989/99 season.

Blanc, who had been in France's World Cup-winning squad earlier that season, was an integral part of the Marseille side which reached the UEFA Cup final and lost by a point to Bordeaux in the French championship under coach Roland Courbis.

Back to the present, it was Dutchman Boudewijn Zenden who created both goals for Marseille against Nantes.

His freekick found the head of Civelli for the first goal and then another cross shortly afterwards meant Brandao converted another header for the second.

they are not thinking about the championship," said Gerets.

Marseille, who beat Paris Saint Germain 3-1 at the Parc des Princes last weekend and who moved into the UEFA Cup quarterfinals in midweek at the expense of Ajax, now sit proudly at the top of the French table for the first time since the 1989/99 season.

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Marseille have 55 points, two more than both Bordeaux and Lyon, and three more than Lille and Paris Saint Germain, who visit Toulouse on Sunday. Also on Sunday, Lyon have the chance to regain top spot in their home match against Sochaux.

This form gives Gerets' men hope of a successful season run-in though they will surely hope to improve their home record of just seven league wins out of 14 at the Velodrome stadium this season.

Goals from star player Yoann Gourcuff, Souleymane Diawara and Brazilian Wendel earned Bordeaux's win over Le Havre.

Blanc had said before the Marseille result was known: "Our sitting on top of the league is no fluke. The notion of winning the title is not taboo to me."

Meanwhile, mid-table Monaco had a useful away win, with South Korean Park Chu-young on target in a 1-0 victory at Nancy.