

Eto'o the difference

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona's weary collection of international globe-trotters produced a workmanlike performance to beat Valladolid 1-0 on Saturday with Samuel Eto'o scoring the only goal.

Barcelona remain six points ahead of Real Madrid, who beat Malaga 1-0, in the race for the Spanish title with nine games left to play.

Having lost three out of four matches following World Cup and international breaks this season, Pep Guardiola's Barcelona team knew they could not afford to drop points.

Barcelona began the game with Lionel Messi and Thierry Henry on the bench but while they controlled the game they struggled to create openings.

That was until Eto'o coolly beat the Valladolid keeper shortly before half-time with a match-winning lob.

The second half was more even and Messi and Dani Alves were introduced to bolster a Barcelona team whose next mission is a home Champions League quarterfinal first leg clash with Bayern Munich in midweek.

"Valladolid made the game difficult for us by creating a high tempo and this was on top of the ten days away with international teams," said Guardiola.

"The players responded well and you have to value who we were up against and these three points are very important.

"Valladolid have been the only team in the league who have had the bravery to actually attack us and the response from my players was very good."

Meanwhile, Real Madrid stayed in second place with a sixth successive away victory.

Real coach Juande Ramos was forced to field a weakened team with several players out injured,

most notably Arjen Robben who has been a key performer this season.

After a goalless first half, Gonzalo Higuain made the breakthrough powering through the Malaga defence and finishing well.

"We have not concentrated too much on Barcelona, all we can do ourselves to win the league is to win all our games and wait for them to make mistakes," said Ramos.

"We had a lot of players who came into the match tired after playing with their national teams but in general terms the team did well."

Villarreal, who tackle Arsenal in the Champions League on Tuesday, slumped to a 3-0 defeat against Almeria who won through first half goals from Alvaro Negredo, Pablo Piaty and Jose Mane.

Villarreal's miserable night got even worse when Robert Pires, a former Arsenal player, was sent-off with 30 minutes left while midfielder Santi Cazorla suffered a broken leg and will miss the rest of the season.

Sevilla consolidated their third place with an important 1-0 win away to Recreativo Huelva courtesy of a Frederic Kanoute penalty after 33 minutes following a foul by Poli Fernandez on Renato.

Real Betis looked to have ended their winless streak against Numancia in their relegation battle but a late penalty, which also saw keeper Ricardo Pereira sent-off, was converted by Carlos Aranda and it earned the visitors a point in a 3-3 draw.

Aranda earlier equalised Sergio Garcia's opener for Betis and then Jose Barkero put Numancia ahead before Jesus Capi and Ricardo Oliveria turned the game around late on.

Numancia had the final say though through Aranda's spotkick.

Athletic Bilbao ended a seven-match streak without a win with a 2-1 victory over in-form Mallorca.

Fran Yeste converted a penalty after just three minutes following a David Navarro handball and then Javi Martinez put them back ahead after Jose Jurado had equalised.



Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o (L) scores the all-important goal against Valladolid during their Primera Liga encounter at the Jose Zorrilla Stadium in Valladolid on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

Button wins again

Storm cuts Malaysian GP short

AFP, Sepang



Jenson Button won a chaotic Malaysian Grand Prix on Sunday for a second straight victory after

after pushing for a 5:00 pm start instead of its regular 3:00 pm slot to satisfy European television audiences.

With tropical Malaysia routinely getting wild storms, it was clear that if one hit during the 56-lap race they would have trouble finishing with

sensational start with pole-sitter Button half asleep as the lights turned green.

The Briton, who won last week in Melbourne, went to the first corner in fourth behind Rosberg, Trulli and Fernando Alonso.

Undeterred, Button soon woke up and sped past Alonso before the opening lap was over and started closing on the leaders.

Barrichello, who started ninth with a five place grid penalty for changing his gearbox, stormed up to fourth and the top four started to pull away.

Only Williams, Toyota and Brawn have them fitted and they have been the subject of protests by BMW Sauber, Ferrari, Renault, Red Bull who claim they are contrary to the rules, generating more downforce.

While the top four were flying, there was disaster for the troubled McLaren team with Heikki Kovalainen careering onto the gravel on the opening lap and crashing out.

Leader Rosberg made his first pit stop on lap 15 and came out fourth. Trulli followed a lap later, along with Button and Barrichello.

They all elected slick tyres despite the threat of rain and when the dust settled Button was leading ahead of Rosberg, Trulli and Barrichello.

It was a mistake as the rain started to fall just minutes later and they were forced back in to get their wets, but all emerged in the same 1-4 formation.

Button was firing, pulling 18 seconds clear of Rosberg by lap 27 but Glock, running on intermediate tyres, was clocking four seconds a lap faster and rapidly making inroads.

The leaders soon realised that's what they needed too and all went into the pits again but as soon as they came out it started raining again, so back in they went.

As the conditions worsened, the safety car was deployed and the red flag was raised.

The race was finally abandoned 50 minutes after it was first stopped.

Lovenkrands in hospital

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle winger Peter Lovenkrands was taken to hospital wearing breathing apparatus after suffering an injury during his side's 2-0 defeat by Chelsea on Saturday.

Lovenkrands, 29, was hurt in a collision with Chelsea's Florent Malouda, who appeared to catch the Dane accidentally in the back with an elbow at St James' Park.

Lovenkrands received treatment on the pitch and then off it before being carried away on a stretcher.

Newcastle manager Alan Shearer revealed after the match that Lovenkrands had experienced difficulty in breathing, but had been stabilised after being taken to hospital.

Shearer said: "He got a very, very nasty knock on his back and he was actually struggling to breathe."

"They had to put the breathing apparatus on when he got into the dressing room."

"Thankfully, he went off to hospital and they have now stabilised him and hopefully, he will be okay."

Cazorla breaks his leg

AFP, Madrid

Villarreal, who tackle Arsenal in the Champions League quarterfinals on Tuesday, suffered a major blow on Sunday when midfielder Santi Cazorla broke his right leg in the 3-0 Spanish league defeat to Almeria.

"Santi Cazorla suffered a fracture of the fibula in his right leg and won't play again this season," said a statement on the Villarreal website.

Liverpool leave it late

AFP, London



Rafael Benitez claimed Liverpool's last-gasp winner at Fulham was proof of the "winning mentality" his squad has developed in their pursuit of Manchester

United. Yossi Benayoun's 92nd-minute winner sent the Reds to the top of the Premier League for the first time in almost three months and Benitez's uncharacteristic celebratory leap into the air spoke volumes about the significance of the Israel captain's strike.

"It was a very, very important goal at a crucial time," the normally stoic Spaniard explained. "There was relief. You cannot say you will score in the last minute but we always play to the end."

"We have the winning mentality. It is better not to say things but to do things and the players always believe they can score in the last minute."

United, looking to close out a third straight title, retain two games in hand but, after back-to-back defeats by Liverpool and Fulham in their last two outings, their nerve was set to be tested by the visit of Aston Villa to Old Trafford on Sunday.

They may have left it late, but Liverpool deserved their win after hitting the woodwork four times in the first half.

Chelsea remain three points behind the

Merseysiders after giving Alan Shearer a painful introduction to the life of a Premier League manager with a 2-0 win at Newcastle.

Shearer was encouraged by the way his side matched their guests for the first 45 minutes but Frank Lampard made the difference after the interval, heading in his side's first then making the second for Florent Malouda.

Despite the defeat Shearer was upbeat. "They gave me fantastic effort and we're going to need every ounce of effort they've got until the end of the season," he said.

"We are not playing Chelsea every week, that's the plus point."

Emmanuel Adebayor celebrated his return to the Arsenal line-up with a double as the Gunners took revenge over Manchester City, the last side to beat them in the league, with a 2-0 win at the Emirates.

It was also a comeback match for Gunners captain Cesc Fabregas, who set up both goals to put manager Arsene Wenger in buoyant mood ahead of the midweek Champions League trip to Villarreal.

"There is a lightness in the team now which I enjoy and we are playing without the handbrake," the Frenchman purred.

Blackburn took a huge step towards ensuring their top flight status with a battling 2-1 win over ten-man Tottenham.

Trailing to Robbie Keane's first-half penalty, Rovers snatched the points with

late goals from South Africa striker Benni McCarthy and Dutch defender Andre Ooijer after Wilson Palacios had been sent off for Spurs.

Middlesbrough's chances of survival suffered another hammer blow as a 4-1 defeat at Bolton left Gareth Southgate's second-from bottom side five points from safety.

Gary O'Neil had cancelled out Kevin Davies' early strike to give Boro hope but Gary Cahill restored Bolton's lead just before the break and Matt Taylor and Ricardo Gardner added second-half strikes.

Portsmouth had David James to thank for a goalless draw at Hull, the England goalkeeper producing a superb stop to deny Craig Fagan. Pompey had Glen Johnson sent off with ten minutes left but held out to edge a point further away from the drop zone.

Stoke had an even better day as goals from Ricardo Fuller and James Beattie gave them their first away win of the season -- a 2-0 triumph at bottom side West Brom.

It was also a bleak day for Sunderland, who slipped into the last survival spot, only three points above local rivals Newcastle, after a 2-0 defeat at West Ham in which both goals came from home-grown youngsters, Junior Stanislas and James Tomkins.

Benzema fires Lyon

AFP, Paris



Karim Benzema scored twice for seven-time reigning champions Lyon in a 3-1 victory at Le Mans on

Saturday to boost their French title chances and ensure they finished the weekend at the top of the table.

Bordeaux, meanwhile, warned they were still up for a fight with a last-gasp 1-0 victory at home to Nancy to give them second spot thanks to Marouane Chamakh, three points behind the leaders.

Lille are also in the title hunt and their 2-0 win at Nantes left them fourth while Toulouse drew 0-0 at lowly Caen in the late match for fifth place.

Third-placed Marseille, who travel to St Etienne on Sunday without president Pape Diouf who had an emergency eye operation on Saturday, would tuck in a point behind Lyon in second spot should they win.

Benzema's 13th and 14th league goals for Lyon ended a mini-drought as he had not found the net since February 21 but hapless Le Mans keeper Pele, who will be leaving the club at the end of the season, hardly gave his future employers a good impression.

Lyon boss Claude Puel, who has endured huge criticism lately, admitted afterwards: "The result was flattering."

Former Glasgow Rangers striker Jean-Claude Darcheville scored after just 26 seconds in Valenciennes' 2-0 victory over Auxerre to register the fastest goal in the French

championship this season.

It beat the previous fastest goal this season of 52 seconds, which was scored by Thomas Kahlenberg for Auxerre against Le Havre on February 21.

The fastest goal of all time in the French top flight was scored by Michel Rio after eight seconds playing for Caen against Cannes in February 1992.

Another striker who has been catching the eye lately is Lille's Michel Bastos, who scored his 13th goal of the season from the spot in their 2-0 win at Nantes.

On Sunday, apart from the St Etienne versus Marseille battle, attention will be drawn to the Parc des Princes where PSG, who have major absences in defence, host Nice hoping to keep in touch with the leading teams.

Jens ready to make int'l comeback

AFP, Berlin

Ex-Germany goalkeeper Jens Lehmann said on Saturday he would like to come out of international retirement having extended his contract with Bundesliga club Stuttgart for another year.

The 39-year-old, who joined the German club from Arsenal last summer, made the last of his 61 appearances for the national side when they lost the Euro 2008 final against Spain last June in Vienna.

"If the need exists and I am enough good, the chance to play for Germany again would be a big incentive for me," Lehmann told German television Premieriere after his side's 2-1 win at Bochum on Saturday.

On Friday, Lehmann signed a year's extension to his contract which will keep him in Stuttgart until after next year's World Cup.

"I said after Euro 2008 I would not be part of the team's plans as I would only play on for one more year," he added.

"But now there is a completely different situation. I enjoy seeing an international match on the television, but the special motivation is missing for me now."

Since Lehmann announced his retirement, neither Leverkusen's Rene Adler nor Hannover's Robert Enke have made Germany's Number One shirt their own.

But Lehmann was at fault when Bochum took the lead over Stuttgart on Saturday when he caught a corner kick, but carried the ball over his own goal-line.

Wolfsburg bury Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Wolfsburg strikers Edin Dzeko and Grafite both struck twice on Saturday to inflict a humiliating 5-1 defeat on defending champions Bayern Munich to put their side top of the Bundesliga.

Between them Brazilian Grafite and Bosnian Dzeko have now scored 35 goals in 41 games this season as Wolfsburg defended their unbeaten home record and went top after Hertha Berlin lost at home to Dortmund.

For Wolfsburg's ex-Bayern

coach Felix Magath, it was a sweet revenge against the club which sacked him in February 2007 as his side went top of the table for the first time this season while Bayern drop to fourth.

Every single Bayern player refused to be interviewed live on television after the game and coach Jurgen Klinsmann admitted the result was devastating, especially ahead of Wednesday's daunting Champions League trip to Barcelona.

"Nothing about the game was pleasing," said the glum ex-Germany boss.

With the scores level at 1-1 after an hour, Dzeko struck twice in two minutes - showing top-class finishing for his second goal.

It started when Wolfsburg goalkeeper Diego Benaglio rolled a pass to play-maker

Zvezdan Misimovic which the Bosnia midfielder flicked on to compatriot Dzeko who placed his shot with pin-point accuracy.

Not to be outdone, Grafite underlined his place as the league's top scorer with 20 goals so far this season as he struck twice in three minutes to seal Bayern's humiliation.

For his second on 77 minutes, he beat three defenders and goalkeeper Michael Rensing before back-healing into an empty net to leave Bayern red-faced.

Hertha are now third after they lost 3-1 to Dortmund at Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

After Swiss striker Alexander Frei put Dortmund ahead on 25 minutes, Berlin equalised early in the second half when Brazilian Rafaela dribbled his way through the defence and curled his shot

home for a superb individual effort.

But Dortmund reclaimed the lead when ex-Germany midfielder Sebastian Kehl headed home on 63 minutes before striker Nelson Valdez hit a late third.

Hamburg are second in the table only on goal difference after their 1-0 win over Hoffenheim, who drop to sixth.

With Hoffenheim fading from the title race, Hamburg claimed the winner when midfielder Jonathan Pitroipa tapped the ball into an empty net on 28 minutes.

Stuttgart are up to fifth in the table after their 2-1 win at Bochum and Energie Cottbus remain in the bottom three after their 2-1 defeat at mid-table Eintracht Frankfurt.



Lyon striker Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring one of his two goals against Le Mans during their League One clash at the Le Mans Stadium on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP