



'Happiest day of my life'

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona boss Pep Guardiola hailed Saturday's victory over Real Madrid as one of the happiest days of his life after his side thrashed their arch rivals 6-2 at the Bernabeu.

Barca are now seven points clear of Real with four matches left to play, and seem all but guaranteed to win the league.

"We have taken a giant step towards the title and are so close now," said the jubilant Barcelona coach.

"We didn't want to hide here and tried to be brave like we have been all season and go for the win.

"It is not easy to win at the Bernabeu and this is one of the happiest days of my footballing life as we have made a lot of people happy."

Barca now go into Wednesday's Champions League semi-final second leg match at Chelsea - with the first leg finishing 0-0 - in high spirits.

"This win gives us a lot of confidence for the Chelsea game," explained Guardiola. "Rome (where the final will be played) is so close. We don't feel tired and just have to brave and go for it."

Real coach Juande Ramos admitted Barcelona were worthy winners and were on a pedestal.

"I think Barcelona are a cut
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Barca annihilate Real

All but confirm league title

SID LOWE



Real Madrid's pursuit was for nothing. Even 17 victories in 18 unbeaten matches were not enough; in the 19th match, Barcelona, the last side to beat Real, arrived at the Bernabeu and beat them again. Destroyed them, in fact. It was not just that Barcelona's 6-2 victory, secured with two each from Thierry Henry and Leo Messi, plus one from Carles Puyol and Gerard Pique, -carried their seven points clear with four matches remaining. It was that they left their rivals in tatters, turning the Santiago Bernabeu's battle cry, briefly revived in the second half, into a murmur of impotence.

When Messi played a precise, short one-two with Xavi Hernandez, strolled into the Madrid penalty area and calmly beat Iker Casillas to make it 5-2 with 15 minutes remaining, it was the portrait of a wonderful performance. When centre-back Pique ended a move he had begun from an almost ludicrously tight angle to get Barca's sixth, it was appropriate. This was a brilliant demonstration of their arts and perhaps an indication of just how impressive Chelsea's 0-0 draw at the Camp Nou had been.

The league title was supposed to be at stake, the pressure on the -Catalans unbearable, but Barcelona glided through as if playing Real was not a risk but an opportunity to put their pursuers out of their misery, to make a point. They

could hardly have made it any better. Madrid tried to be aggressive, -pressing Barcelona high and snapping into challenges. They even got the first goal, Sergio Ramos stepping away from Eric Abidal after 14 minutes to deliver for Gonzalo Higuain to head in. Ramos headed in an Arjen Robben free-kick early in the second half to reduce the deficit to 3-2 and bring excitement.

But they were brief moments especially for Ramos, who was finding -Thierry Henry constantly spinning away from him. Twice Ramos gave Madrid hope; twice Henry snatched it away in minutes.

The only bad news for -Barcelona was that when he was -withdrawn after an hour, Henry looked as tired as he had been brilliant, with an ice-pack strapped to his shin.

Within four minutes of Madrid opening the scoring, Henry reached Messi's pass behind the Madrid full-back and, -opening out his body, coolly slotted into the corner beyond Casillas. And just three minutes after that, the Frenchman yet again evaded Ramos. Fabio -Cannavaro pushed him to the floor and Carles Puyol headed Barcelona's second from Xavi's free-kick.

Madrid may have succeeded in closing the gap on Barcelona in the league, but the reality of the two sides was brought home here. Xavi and Andrés Iniesta were simply too good for Fernando Gago, shipped wrecked in midfield as Barcelona flitted around him. Meanwhile, Messi seemed to be able to move the ball at will.

For a long time, though, it appeared that what Messi could not do was finish.

He almost got one with a cheeky chip, he hit another at Casillas, then put one wide and failed to round off what would have been a dream goal a wonderfully smooth, slick, 10-pass move that began with Xavi turning on the edge of his own penalty area and ended with Iniesta and Messi playing a one-two on the edge of the Madrid six-yard box. Inexplicably, Messi put his shot straight into the arms of Casillas. As the game wore on in the second half, you could accuse Barcelona of -trying to score the perfect goal; here, they very nearly had.

Messi did get on the scoresheet for the first time after 36 minutes, when -Lassana Diarra was caught in possession by -Iniesta, who fed Messi to slip the ball into the net with the outside of his foot. Barcelona were strolling; Madrid barely saw the ball. It was so smooth, so -effortless, it was almost insulting. The game was only just over 35 minutes old, but enough had -happened for three clásicos.

There was more to come, too. But, despite Ramos's header from Arjen Robben's swirling free-kick briefly igniting Real, this was essentially a Barcelona monologue. Henry again outspurred the Madrid defence and curled home a neat finish into an empty net to restore Barcelona's two-goal lead and make it 4-2. By the final whistle, the lead was four goals and seven points. It could have been 10. The league title is Barcelona's; the Champions League awaits. Chelsea, though, will be a different proposition.

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Agger to stay at Anfield

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool defender Daniel Agger has ended the uncertainty surrounding his future at Anfield by agreeing a four-year extension to his current contract.

The 24-year old Dane joined the Reds from Brondby in 2006 and his contract was due to expire at the end of this season. He will now remain on Merseyside until 2014.

Agger has endured a frustrating season as injuries and the impressive form of Martin Skrtel have kept him out of the team for long periods, prompting him to underline his "need to play regularly" and placing doubt over his Anfield future.

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez moved quickly to make sure Agger joins teammates Steven Gerrard and Dirk Kuyt in committing their long-term future to the club.

Manager Rafael Benitez told the club's website, www.liverpoolfc.tv: "This is extremely good news for Liverpool moving forward and demonstrates our intention to build on the progress we have already made this season.

"Daniel is still young, but with great quality and will be a very important player for us in the years ahead.

"I'm sure there were many other clubs monitoring the situation closely, but through our discussions, Daniel made it clear that he wanted to stay at Liverpool and achieve success here.

"I'm delighted we've secured his future at Anfield."

Inter coast clear

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan quashed almost any hope their city rivals AC Milan had of winning the Serie A title by jumping 10 points clear at the top following Saturday's 2-0 win over Lazio at the San Siro.

Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic was the inspiration behind the win, scoring one goal and creating the other for the reigning champions.

Inter came into this game without a win in their last three matches and having seen Milan halve a previous deficit of 14 points to their bitter city rivals.

But any thoughts that Jose Mourinho's team might be cracking under the pressure were dispelled by Ibrahimovic's magical right boot.

And Mourinho said it is only a matter of time before his team, who need two wins from their final four matches to do so, can celebrate the title.

"I think we'll do it. It seems like the scudetto will never arrive but it will," he said.

"It's my first year here and I've given my all to the team. I like Inter and I'll be happy to celebrate the scudetto with these fans."

Inter made a bright start and Brazilian winger Mancini, making a rare start, shot wide

of the near post from 12 yards inside two minutes.

Ibrahimovic almost opened the scoring on 23 minutes when veteran Portuguese winger Luis Figo picked him out in the box with a pinpoint cross but his header went just wide of the far post with Fernando Muslera well beaten in the Lazio goal.

The Swede then turned provider on 31 minutes as he clipped a cross into the box for Muntari Sulley whose flying header from eight yards sailed wide of the near post, although the Ghana midfielder should at least have hit the target.

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Inter Milan hitman Zlatan Ibrahimovic shushes the jeers after scoring a stunning goal in their Serie A clash against Lazio at the San Siro in Milan on Saturday.

LIGUE 1

It's close at the top

AFP, Paris

Marseille's hopes of a first French league title since 1992 suffered a setback Saturday when they had to settle for a share of the points in a tense and sometimes thrilling 2-2 home draw with Toulouse.

Leaders Marseille began the match with a two-point lead over Bordeaux and a six-point cushion on Lyon, but instead of capitalising on Lyon's shock 2-0 defeat to Valenciennes earlier Eric Gerets side dropped two precious points.

It means Bordeaux, themselves bidding for a first league crown since 1999, can draw level on points with Marseille on Sunday, albeit with an inferior goals difference, if they beat visitors Sochaux.

Gerets dropped a bombshell on the club in midweek when he announced his departure at the end of this season due to "unjustified" criticism from club owner Robert Louis-Dreyfus at the start of the year.

But that did not stop the Belgian from getting emotional on the sidelines about a match in which both sides had victory within their grasp.

Andre-Pierre Gignac, who recently made his debut for France, opened the scoring for Toulouse in the 48th minute.

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Dzeko Wolves Hoff

AFP, Berlin

Wolfsburg striker Edin Dzeko hit a second-half hat-trick to seal a 4-0 win at home to Hoffenheim on Saturday which kept the Bundesliga leaders three points clear at the top with four games remaining.

Having suffered a shock 2-0 defeat at Energie Cottbus the weekend before, Wolfsburg returned to winning ways when Dzeko hit his 17th, 18th and 19th league goals of the season at home to former league leaders Hoffenheim.

"We were nervous at the beginning and we allowed Hoffenheim into the game," admitted Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath.

"In this phase, our goalkeeper Diego Benaglio kept us in the game.

"But the first goal settled our nerves and we became much stronger.

Dzeko needed just 13 minutes to wrap up his hat-trick and then strike partner Grafite slotted home an 89th minute penalty, after Hoffenheim's Andreas Beck was sent off, to remain the league's top-scorer with 23 goals in 21 games.

The rout leaves Wolfsburg three points clear at the top

from defending champions Bayern - whom Magath used to coach - who go second as fellow title candidates Hamburg and Hertha Berlin are playing on Sunday.

After Jurgen Klinsmann was sacked as head coach by Bayern last Monday, caretaker coach Jupp Heynckes began his five games in charge, while a successor is found, with a 2-1 win at home to Borussia Muenchengladbach.

"Particularly in the second half, we found it hard work against Borussia," admitted Heynckes.

Bayern took the lead after a Luca Toni cross was fired home by midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger on 33 minutes, but Gladbach equalised when Filip Daems converted a 38th minute penalty.

Turkey midfielder Hamit Altintop put the hosts back in front at Munich's Allianz Arena with what proved to be the winner just before half-time.

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Wolfsburg striker Edin Dzeko (R) hugs teammate Grafite after netting his hat-trick in their 4-0 rout of TSG Hoffenheim in Wolfsburg on Saturday.

Premier League

L'pool close gap at top

AFP, London

Liverpool moved back to within three points of Premier League leaders Manchester United after beating relegation-threatened Newcastle 3-0 at Anfield on Sunday.

Two goals in six first-half minutes from Yossi Benayoun and Dirk Kuyt sent second-placed Liverpool, who have played one game more than United, on the way to victory against a Newcastle side who had Joey Barton sent-off 13 minutes from time for a wild challenge on Xabi Alonso.

Brazil midfielder Lucas added a third goal, his first in the Premier League, three minutes from time.

Defeat left Newcastle three points adrift of safety with just three games remaining in which to secure their Premier League status, starting with the north-east derby against fellow drop candidates Middlesbrough a week on Monday.

Sunderland, the third north-east side in the top flight, face Everton in Sunday's other Premier League match.

Chelsea's derby delight

AFP, London

Premier League leaders Manchester United piled the pressure on second-placed Liverpool by moving six points clear at the top with a 2-0 win away to relegation-threatened Middlesbrough on Saturday.

Goals either side of half-time from Ryan Giggs and Park Ji-Sung ensured an easy win for Sir Alex Ferguson's reigning champions at the Riverside Stadium.

Defeat left Middlesbrough second bottom in the table and still three points short of safety.

Chelsea, at full strength ahead of the second leg of their Champions League semifinal second leg against Barcelona, moved level on points with Liverpool after a 3-1 home win in the west London derby against Fulham, the first three goals coming in the opening 10 minutes.

The match at Stamford Bridge was not yet 60 seconds old when Nicolas Anelka scored after Florent Malouda's cross was held up by Didier Drogba.

But Chelsea's lead lasted just three minutes before Erik Nevland unleashed a shot which Petr Cech got a hand to

but could not keep out.

Fulham, the surprise package of the Premier League season, were behind again in the 10th minute when John Pantsil was unable to cut out Drogba's cross and Malouda scored at the back post.

Drogba got on the score-sheet early in the second-half after strike partner Anelka returned the Ivorian's earlier favour.

"I was happy with the result but we had too many moments in this game when we were a little bit sloppy," said Chelsea manager Guus Hiddink.

Elsewhere Arsenal's 3-0 win away to Portsmouth at Fratton Park ensured the 'Big Four' - United, Liverpool, Chelsea and the Gunners - would all look down on the rest of the table come the end of the season.

Victory left fourth-placed Arsenal 13 points clear of Aston Villa with only a maximum of 12 available to the Midlands club, who play Hull on Monday.

The Gunners, much changed ahead of the second leg of their Champions League clash with holders United, were helped on their way when England goalkeeper David James made his latest high-profile mistake by letting Nicklas Bendtner's weak header slip through his fingers.

Danish striker Bendtner made it 2-0 four minutes before half-time from the penalty spot following a disputed foul by Sean Davis on Andrey Arshavin.

Pompey were punished for missing chances early in the second-half when Carlos Vela added a third Arsenal goal and the hosts then saw Noe Pamarot sent-off for a foul on Arshavin.

"We were sharp, composed and mobile with a great attitude," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

Manchester City left Blackburn Rovers nervously looking over their shoulders after a 3-1 win at Eastlands where South American trio Felipe Caicedo, Robinho and Elano all scored before the break.

Caicedo sent City on their way from the edge of the six-yard box before Robinho added a second with a shot that gave keeper Paul Robinson no chance.

Elano made it 3-0 from the penalty spot after handball in the box before Rovers pulled one back through Keith Andrews.

Elsewhere, Tottenham beat bottom-of-the-table West Brom 1-0 thanks to Jermaine Jenas's 25-yard curling shot while Diego Tristan's free-kick from a similar distance gave European contenders West Ham a 1-0 win away to Stoke.