

Inter close in

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan closed in on the Serie A title despite being held to a 2-2 draw at lowly

Chievo on Sunday after rivals AC Milan failed to take advantage with a 1-1 stalemate against Juventus.

Inter, who lead by seven points with three matches left, could have wrapped up the title this weekend had they won and Milan lost but now they can do so next weekend if either they beat Siena at home or Milan lose away to Udinese.

Coach Jose Mourinho, though, was still confident enough about his team's scudetto chances to predict they will seal it next weekend.

"Our destiny is in our own hands and that's something extremely positive," he said.

"Almost always what I say happens: who knows if what I predict will happen or not but we'll win the scudetto at home to Siena."

Inter got off to a flying start as former Argentina international Hernan Crespo made the most of a rare start - only his second in the league all season due to Zlatan Ibrahimovic's suspension.

After just three minutes Chievo goalkeeper Stefano Sorrentino spilled a tame

strike from Esteban Cambiasso, allowing Crespo to prod home the rebound.

The visitors threatened to run away with things as veteran Portuguese winger Luis Figo's shot deflected off Nicolas Frey and came back off the post after another Sorrentino mistake.

But on 27 minutes Chievo struck back in stunning fashion as Michele Marcolini lashed in a left-foot drive from 25 yards out and slightly left of centre. Inter goalkeeper Julio Cesar could do nothing but stand and admire it.

Inter were back in front on 65 minutes through teenage forward Mario Balotelli with a goal even better than Marcolini's: a rocket of a volley from just inside the area.

That appeared to be that, but the hosts struck back as Andrea Mantovani sent a deep cross over from the left to Brazilian Luciano at the back post on 73 minutes.

Inter full-back Maxwell had been drawn into the middle and he could not get back across quickly enough to stop Luciano side-footing home across Julio Cesar from 15 yards.

At the San Siro, Milan dominated but Juve created the more clearcut chances in an entertaining end-to-end game.

Milan went ahead fortu-

itously when Filippo Inzaghi crossed for Massimo Ambrosini and his scuffed shot wrong-footed Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon and ran into the path of Clarence Seedorf to tap home into the empty net.

The lead lasted only three minutes, though, as Juve equalised on the hour when Vincenzo Iaquinta held off Mathieu Flamini to convert Mauro Camoranesi's cross with a diving header from close range.

The result ended Milan's run of five straight victories and took Juve's spell without a win to six games.

Juve did at least put in an improved performance and under-fire boss Claudio Ranieri denied he was worried for his job.

"There are critics but I'm not worried about them because the important thing is who they are," he said. "I know I'm on the right track."

In the day's other matches, Fiorentina opened up a three-point lead over Genoa in the race for fourth place and Champions League football next season as they won 2-0 at Catania, while Genoa were held 1-1 at Atalanta.

At the bottom Torino relegated one point above the relegation zone after drawing 1-1 at home to Bologna, who are one place below them.



Inter Milan striker Hernan Crespo (C) scores the opening goal against Chievo during their Serie A tie at the Bentegodi Stadium in Verona on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Last chance for Poldi

Football

INTERNET, undated

Although he slapped captain Michael Ballack in his last international, Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski will be in the German squad for a two-match tour of Asia, Germany coach Joachim Loew said on Monday. In an interview published in Monday's edition of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Loew said that Podolski was on his last chance.

"He has reached the limit. The next time he makes such a mistake there would be consequences," he said.

"If he does something like that again, he will not play for Germany as long as I am national team coach."

Loew said that before slapping Ballack, Podolski had always been at his best behaviour, which is why the coach decided not to punish him.

Podolski will not be meeting up with Ballack on the Asia trip as the Chelsea midfielder will be competing in the FA Cup final against Everton on May 30.

Loew said that Podolski had used up his credit, but that it made no sense to fine him, as happens in clubs.

He also said Podolski's case was very different from that of Kevin Kuranyi, who drove home during the half-time break of a national team game after he was not nominated as a substitute. Loew subsequently kicked him out of the team permanently.

"The one action was some-

thing that happened at the spur of a moment, whereas the other one was planned," Loew said.

The coach would find it difficult not to take Podolski for the two games on May 29 in Shanghai against China and in Dubai on June 2 against the United Arab Emirates, as he has so many other withdrawals.

Of the four goalkeepers that are in contention for next year's World Cup in South Africa, only Robert Enke is available and in total Loew will be without more than a dozen other players who have club commitments.

Joining Ballack on the list of players not available are Werder Bremen's Torsten Frings, Clemens Fritz, Per Mertesacker and Mesut Ozil.

MU, Barcelona players lose

appeals

AFP, Geneva

UEFA's disciplinary body confirmed Monday that Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher will miss the Champions' League final on May 27 along with Barcelona's Eric Abidal and defender Daniel Alves.

European football's governing body said in a statement that the body rejected protests by both clubs against the suspensions.

"All three players are therefore suspended for one UEFA club competition match and will serve their suspensions when Barcelona FC meet Manchester United FC in the UEFA Champions League final in Rome on 27 May," it added.

Fletcher was suspended for the final against Barcelona after collecting a red card in United's semifinal victory against Arsenal last week.

Abidal also received a red card during the Spanish side's semifinal against Chelsea, while Alves collected a yellow card in his second match in the Champion's League.

Drogba decision may take weeks

AFP, Geneva

UEFA said Monday that Chelsea striker Didier Drogba might have to wait weeks for a disciplinary decision following his outburst during the club's Champions League tie against Barcelona.

A spokesman for European football's governing body told AFP that Drogba's case was likely to be reviewed by a regular meeting of UEFA's Control and Disciplinary body.

Chelsea are no longer involved in European competition this season and there is no urgency for a ruling, he explained.

"This can wait for a while."

The next plenary meeting of the control body is scheduled for July 23.

Drogba faces potentially severe sanctions over his confrontation with Norwegian referee Tom Henning Ovreba after Barcelona's injury time goal sent the London side crashing out of the Champions League semifinal last Wednesday.

His case was further aggravated by him screaming into a television camera that the official had been a "f---ing disgrace."

UEFA said in a statement last week that it was examining both the referee's and the delegate's reports and was gathering additional evidence.

Meanwhile, a special meeting of UEFA's Control and Disciplinary Body on Monday afternoon was due to examine Manchester United's appeal against Darren Fletcher's Champions League Final suspension.

Fletcher was given a red card during his club's game against Arsenal, and would have to sit out the final against Barcelona in Rome on May 27 unless he wins the appeal.

Blues thrash Gunners

AFP, London



Chelsea found the perfect cure for their European misery as the Blues won 4-1 against Arsenal on Sunday to guarantee a top-three finish in the Premier League.

Guus Hiddink's side arrived at the Emirates Stadium still smarting from their controversial Champions League exit to Barcelona, but first half goals from Alex and Nicolas Anelka followed by a Kolo Toure own-goal and Florent Malouda's late effort helped salve the wounds from Wednesday's defeat.

Although Chelsea's biggest league victory at Arsenal since 1970 mathematically keeps their title challenge alive, more importantly it seals a place in next season's Champions League group stages and condemns Arsenal to fourth place and the pressure of a qualifier, potentially against a formidable opponent from Italy, Spain or Germany.

Nicklas Bendtner got one back for Arsenal but defeat capped a miserable week for Arsene Wenger's team, who lost their 21-match unbeaten run in the Premier League five days after being brushed aside by Manchester United in Europe.

Hiddink said: "I was very proud of the reaction of the team. Everyone knows after Wednesday that it's very difficult to make it happen."

"I think the team reacted perfectly except for the first 15 minutes. It shows that this team is one of the strongest in Europe."

Wenger was furious that Didier Drogba appeared to dive to win the free-kick that led to Chelsea's first goal. He said: "It was (a dive). We live in

a league now where the divers are rewarded.

"It is not right but it is like that. I don't want to go into any individual assessment. It is down to the referee to do his job."

"I don't think the free-kick should have been given but we should still clear the cross."

Hiddink had resisted the temptation to take Drogba out of the firing line following his rant at referee Tom Henning Ovrebo in the aftermath of Barcelona's last-gasp victory.

Wenger was less forgiving to Togo striker Emmanuel Adebayor, who was dropped after another lacklustre display against United.

Arsenal's Theo Walcott raided down the right dangerously in the early stages, forcing Petr Cech into action

when he met Samir Nasri's astute pass with a close-range shot that the Chelsea keeper parried for a corner.

Walcott was at the heart of an equally incisive move that should have led to the opening goal.

Nasri turned to pick out Walcott and his low cross was perfectly weighted for Abou Diaby. But with just Cech to beat the French midfielder scuffed tamely wide.

Diaby tried to make amends as he teased Alex with a powerful run and cross that gave Walcott a clear sight of goal. Once again, poor finishing let the hosts down as Walcott side-footed wide.

Those misses came back to haunt Arsenal as the Blues snatched the lead completely against the run of play.

Inevitably it was a moment of controversy involving

Drogba that produced the 28th minute goal. He went down easily under pressure from Cesc Fabregas, earning the Arsenal captain a booking when he protested Drogba had dived.

From the resulting free-kick, Drogba curled over an inviting delivery that Alex, climbing above Mikael Silvestre, met with a powerful header which beat Lukas Fabianski via the crossbar.

Chelsea had become the first side to score a league goal at Arsenal since Robbie Keane struck for Liverpool in December.

Fabregas's frustration poured out and he was fortunate to escape a second booking for a lunge on Malouda moments later.

There was worse to come as former Arsenal forward Anelka increased Chelsea's lead in the 39th minute.

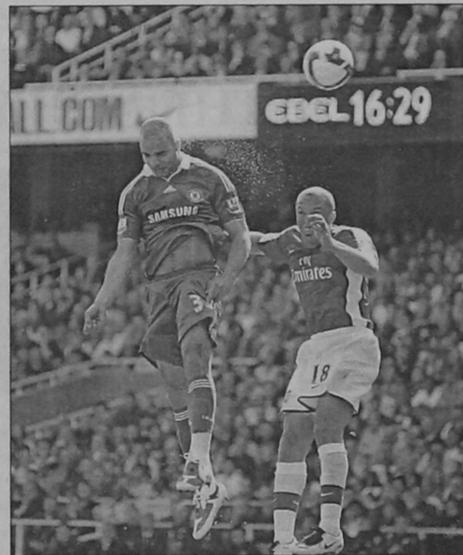
Taking possession just inside the Arsenal half, Anelka made a surging run towards the penalty area and, with the Gunners defence backing off, he lashed a fierce swerving strike past Fabianski.

Chelsea's sheer size and power had worn down Wenger's more fragile talents and the visitors scored again in the 49th minute with the assist coming from another former Gunner.

Ashley Cole, taunted as usual by the home fans, made a forceful run down the left and, when he crossed into the penalty area, Toure diverted the ball into his own net.

Bendtner provided a brief respite from the gloom in the 70th minute when he rose to power Bacary Sagna's cross past Cech.

But Malouda put the seal on Chelsea's day - and Arsenal's heaviest home league defeat since 1977 - when he tapped in after Anelka's shot hit a post in the 86th minute.



Chelsea centre-back Alex (L) rises above his Arsenal counterpart Mikael Silvestre to score the opening goal during their Premiership encounter at The Emirates Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Barca party crashed

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona must wait another week to clinch the Spanish title after Jose Llorente scored a dramatic 90th-minute equaliser as Villarreal gatecrashed the party with a 3-3 draw at Camp Nou on Sunday.

Barcelona were on course to win their 19th title in front of their fans when they held a 3-1 lead, but Villarreal scored twice in the final 12 minutes to put the celebrations on hold.

Barcelona need just one point from the final three matches, with the next league match at Real Mallorca, to win their first league title since 2006.

Real Madrid's 3-0 defeat at Valencia on Saturday meant Barcelona could have won the title in front of their own fans and they came so close.

"It is a real shame we couldn't celebrate the title with all the people who came to the stadium today," admitted Barca coach Pep Guardiola.

"We did the same thing (scoring a late goal) at Stamford Bridge (in the Champions League semifinal) with (Andres) Iniesta and today it was Llorente."

"We have to pick ourselves up quickly, put a smile on our faces and prepare for the Kings Cup final on Wednesday."

A 28th goal of the season from Samuel Eto'o and a Dani Alves free-kick built on Seydou Keita's opener as Barcelona held a 3-1 advantage at half-time.

However, Eric Abidal was sent off for Barcelona late on after conceding a penalty which Matias Fernandez converted and the hosts were hit with the sucker punch in stoppage time as Llorente scored his second goal.

Barcelona fans were understandably disappointed and must now wait for the title while the players need to concentrate on Wednesday's Kings Cup final against Athletic Bilbao at the Mestalla Stadium.

Barca got off to a flying start

when Keita saw his deflected shot loop in on 12 minutes.

Villarreal, still without injured captain Marcos Senna, equalised through Llorente on 22 minutes after Yaya Toure lost possession.

Eto'o restored Barcelona's lead after 36 minutes and Alves, suspended for the Champions League final, curled in a free-kick seconds before half-time to make it 3-1.

Frenchman Abidal was sent off for the second time in a week, after being dismissed against Chelsea, for giving away a spot-kick and Fernandez converted to ensure a tense final 12 minutes.

Llorente then took advantage of the nerves to equalise and spoil the party. Barca now have 103 goals for the season and are just four from equaling Real's all-time record of 107 set back in 1990.

The champions-elect have amassed 86 points and have three games to try to overtake Real's all-time points record of

92 set back in 1997, although there were 42 games then instead of the current 38.

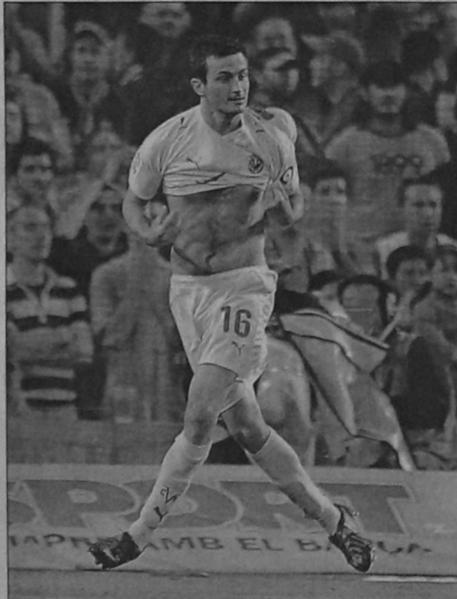
For Villarreal the point leaves them three points adrift of fourth-placed Valencia in the Champions League race.

Atletico Madrid moved a point behind Valencia with a 3-2 comeback win over Espanyol with Villarreal old boy Diego Forlan scoring a sensational 90th minute winner.

Atletico had been reduced to 10 men with the dismissal of Luis Perea and trailed 2-0, but came storming back with Kun Aguiro scoring and Forlan grabbing a brace to take his season's tally to 27 - just one behind Eto'o.

Valencia and Atletico face each other next weekend at the Vicente Calderon in a Champions League decider.

Espanyol saw their run of four straight wins come to an end and they are not safe yet lying four points above the drop zone.



Villarreal striker Joseba Llorente celebrates after scoring the equalising goal in the last minute against Barcelona during their Primera Liga clash at Nou Camp on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Wolves look to rebound

AFP, Berlin



Wolfsburg midfielder Zvezdan Misimovic says the Bundesliga leaders must avenge their shock defeat in Stuttgart to get their title push back on track when they welcome Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday.

Wolfsburg went into last weekend three points clear at the top of the German league, but after Stuttgart striker Mario Gomez hit all four goals in Saturday's 4-1 rout, Wolfsburg only lead now by virtue of goal difference.

Only two points separate leaders Wolfsburg and fourth-placed Stuttgart with Bayern Munich and Hertha Berlin also within touching distance of the lead.

Wolfsburg take on Borussia Dortmund who have made a late bid for the title and a place in Europe next season with seven consecutive wins to go fifth in the table.

"We played poorly right from the outset against Stuttgart and you could even see that from our body language," said Wolfsburg playmaker Misimovic who has helped strikers Grafite

and Edin Dzeko score 43 goals between them this season.

"On Tuesday against Dortmund, we'll have the opportunity to put this bitter defeat behind us."

Defending champions Bayern Munich are now level on points with Wolfsburg and only stay second by virtue of an inferior goal difference with three games remaining.

Having won 3-1 at Energie Cottbus last Saturday, Bayern's caretaker coach Jupp Heynckes wants three more points at Munich's Allianz Arena on Tuesday against Bayer Leverkusen to keep the pressure on Wolfsburg.

"We need to think about Leverkusen now and not about anything else," said Heynckes who is in charge only until the end of the season while a replacement is

sought for sacked coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

"We played well against Cottbus, but in my opinion, if we'd been on really top form, we'd have won 6-1. We should have scored more goals."

"It's very important not just to play convincingly, but also to put away the chances we create, and there were plenty."

Third-placed Hertha Berlin are just a point behind leaders Wolfsburg and they want three more points to stake their claim for the title when they travel to strugglers Cologne.

"Now we have to remain focused for our trip to Cologne," said Hertha coach Lucien Favre after strikers Marko Pantelic and Raffael sealed a 2-0 win over Bochum last Saturday at Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

"It was a very difficult game, Bochum worked with five defenders at times, and we failed to find a way through at first."

"We created more chances in the second half and we have to keep up the momentum against Cologne."

With Germany striker Mario Gomez having scored nine goals in his last five games, fourth-placed Stuttgart are at Schalke 04 on Wednesday eager to keep up their impressive run having won six of their last seven games.

Iniesta hopes to make UCL final

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Champions League semifinal hero Andres Iniesta says he still hopes to play in the final against Manchester United on May 27 despite suffering a thigh injury at the weekend.

"I will be in Rome. It's a small tear. It's not so serious, I suppose it's caused by stress linked to the end of the season," the Spanish international midfielder said on Monday after leaving a Barcelona hospital where he underwent tests on his leg.

"The desire I have to play in the final of the Champions League will help me a lot in recovering quickly."

The club said "doctors are working to ensure that he can be in the final in Rome."

Iniesta's injury-time strike against Chelsea in London last week took Barcelona through to the final on the away goals rule.

The injury to his right thigh, sustained in a 3-3 league draw against Villarreal on Sunday, has ruled him out of the final of the Spanish Cup on Wednesday against Athletic Bilbao.

Another key player for Barca, French striker Thierry Henry, has also been ruled out of the Spanish Cup final through injury, but could also recover in time to face Manchester United in Rome.

FIXTURES

Tuesday
Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen, Karlsruhe v Hannover 96, Cologne v Hertha Berlin, VfL Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund
Wednesday
Eintracht Frankfurt v Werder Bremen, Schalke 04 v VfB Stuttgart, Hamburg v VfL Bochum, Energie Cottbus v Borussia M'gladbach, Arminia Bielefeld v Hoffenheim