

IN BRIEF

Much ado about beach ball!

AFP, Sunderland

Instant notoriety is guaranteed for a young spectator who effectively condemned Liverpool to a 1-0 defeat against Sunderland here at the Stadium of Light.

The 'supporter', who was wearing a dark blue top - the colour of Liverpool's city rivals Everton - has been captured on YouTube throwing a beach ball into the Liverpool penalty area during a Sunderland attack.

He could not have imagined the consequences before a shot from Darren Bent struck the ball and diverted it past goalkeeper Pepe Reina for the decisive goal in Saturday's match.

It was an incident which provoked surprising responses from the two managers, with Liverpool's Rafael Benitez remarkably sanguine about a goal that brought about his team's third successive defeat.

Asked if the goal should have been disallowed, Benitez said: "It's a technical question. It could be a goal, but it's difficult to say. In this case, I think it should be a goal."

Bent didn't care who was right. He was just happy to claim a goal which meant he'd scored in each of Sunderland's last five games.

It also moved him level with Liverpool's Fernando Torres as the Premier League's top scorer with eight goals.

Bent, who is staking a powerful claim for an England return, said: "It was a strange goal, but I will take it."



Real Madrid's captain Raul Gonzalez (top) celebrates with teammate Marcelo after scoring his second goal in their Primera Liga match against Valladolid at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Saturday.

Teen sets sail across world

INTERNET, undated

Australian teenager Jessica Watson set off from Sydney Harbour Sunday on her quest to become the youngest person to sail solo around the world. Her voyage is controversial following a collision with a 63,000-ton coal carrier last month that maritime safety authorities said highlighted a lack of preparedness for an eight-month solo sail.

Watson's 10.4-metre yacht, Ella's Pink Lady, was dismantled in the accident that came just a day into her journey down the east coast to Sydney to begin her record attempt.

Watson has refused to say whether she was asleep below decks when her fibreglass boat almost sank and needed repairs costing 70,000 Australian dollars (64,000 US dollars) to put right.

The mishap prompted a chorus of pleas for her to call off her voyage - calls echoed by Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard just as Watson's boat was slipping out the world-famous harbour.

"Ultimately people have to make their own decisions," Gillard said. "I think a lot of Australians are nervous for Jessica. I'm nervous for Jessica."

Watson hopes to beat a record set 10 years ago by fellow Australian Jesse Martin, who at 18 circumnavigated the globe on his own and unaided.

"I do actually have a lot of experience behind me and I suppose a lot of people don't realize that," Watson told national broadcaster ABC as she stowed a Christmas pudding and other treats below decks.

"You know, the first leg of my trip will be through the Pacific so it's kind of a calmer, easier time for me to get settled in, feel confident with the boat."

Watson sailed east out Sydney Harbour and will traverse the Pacific before taking on the Atlantic and then the Indian Ocean. Her route tracks that of fellow Australian Kay Cottee, who became the first woman to sail solo and unassisted round the world 21 years ago.

Bordeaux lose again

AFP, Paris

Bordeaux's hopes of landing a second successive French title suffered a blow on Saturday when they slid to a surprise loss at Auxerre, while the side they deposed as champions, Lyon, went down at home to Sochaux.

Bordeaux's 1-0 reverse at the Stade de l'Abbe-Deschamps was equally out of character in that it came on the back of a lacklustre loss two weeks ago at St Etienne.

This time, the tale was one of two penalties - the first missed in the opening period by Fernando Cavenaghi, who saw home keeper Olivier Sorin block his 31st minute effort.

Despite their greater creativity Bordeaux were lacking a cutting edge in the final third of the field and paid for their complacency when Auxerre took their penalty chance when it fell their way rather fortuitously on 72 minutes.

Valter Birsa sent keeper Cedric Carrasso the wrong way with his strike after Mickael Ciano was harshly adjudged to have fouled Cedric Hengbart in the box.

The loss left Bordeaux a point behind Lyon, who have 20 points from their nine games after they inexplicably slumped at 2-0 home to Sochaux for their first loss of the campaign.

While the leading pair failed to fire on all cylinders following the international break Montpellier and Marseille were able to take advantage.

Marseille roared past Nancy 3-0 away with goals from Matthieu Valbuena, Brandao and Fabrice Abriel while Montpellier edged St Etienne 2-1 with Karim Ait Fana 54 and Souleymane Camara on target.

Montpellier's win was arguably the most significant of the day as it lifted the southerners level on points with Lyon.

Champs back on top

AFP, London



Manchester United regained top spot in the Premier League with a 2-1 victory over Bolton Wanderers at Old Trafford on Saturday as Liverpool's title bid suffered a potentially fatal blow.

Reigning champions United are a point ahead of Chelsea, who started the weekend in first place, but were beaten 2-1 by Aston Villa in Saturday's early kick-off.

Liverpool's quest for a first top-flight title since 1990 could now be over after a 1-0 loss away to Sunderland - their fourth league defeat in nine games, twice as many as they suffered in the whole of last season.

Tottenham remain third as former Portsmouth manager Harry Redknapp saw his current side hang on to beat the basement club 2-1 in a Fratton Park match where both sides finished a man down.

Spurs's north London rivals Arsenal moved into the top four with a 3-1 win at home to Birmingham.

Manchester United went ahead in the fifth minute when Bolton defender Zat Knight put through his own net after Patrice Evra's cross was flicked on by Michael Owen.

They doubled their lead when Antonio Valencia turned in Gary Neville's cross at the near post to score his first United goal since his pre-season move from Wigan.

Matthew Taylor's header 15 minutes from time gave Bolton hope.

Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti was frustrated after setpiece errors cost his side dear at Villa Park.

They took a 15th minute lead when Didier Drogba's long-range shot bounced awkwardly in front of goalkeeper Brad Friedel.

But Villa levelled before the break when a poor header by England midfielder Frank

Lampard allowed Richard Dunne to equalise from a corner.

Early in the second-half Villa again made Chelsea pay at a corner when James Collins rose highest to head the hosts back into the lead.

"We lost this game because there were two setplays from which Aston Villa scored two goals," said Ancelotti.

"We need to be more focused in these situations."

Sunderland took the lead against Liverpool in extraordinary fashion at the Stadium of Light when striker Darren Bent's fifth minute shot hit a stray balloon on its way past Pepe Reina.

Liverpool, without injured stars Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard, also survived seeing Bent glance a header just wide before the striker hit the post with an angled shot.

The match ended with tempers boiling over with rival managers Rafael Benitez and Steve Bruce exchanging angry words.

At Fratton Park, Redknapp saw Spurs go ahead in the 29th minute when Niko Kranjcar - one of several former Portsmouth players in the visitors' line-up - crossed for Ledley King to head home.

Before the break they were 2-0 up when Pompey old boy Jermain Defoe turned in Jermaine Jenas's cross.

But in a twist former Spurs midfielder Kevin-Prince Boateng fired home for Pompey from close range just before the hour and shortly afterwards Tottenham were down to 10-men when Defoe was red-carded for lashing out at South Africa's Aaron Mokoena.

Goalkeeper Heuerlo Gomes preserved Spurs's lead before Pompey's Michael Brown was sent-off just before the finish for a second yellow card.

At the Emirates, goals from Robin van Persie and Abou Diaby gave Arsenal an early lead before Lee Bowyer pulled one back for

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Sunderland striker Darren Bent's (L) strike is about to take a deflection of an errant beachball and beat Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina for the only goal of the game in their Premier League match at the Stadium of Light on Saturday.

Barcelona streak ends

Real ravage Valladolid

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona's perfect start to the Spanish League season ended on Saturday when the champions were held to a 0-0 draw at Valencia.

A seventh successive win would have been Barcelona's best ever beginning to a league campaign, but Pep Guardiola's side had to settle for a draw against a resolute Valencia side and now sit one point above Real Madrid at the summit.

"We knew it would be a difficult game here and it was," said Barcelona's Dani Alves. "There are a lot of teams that are going to compete for this title and it will be a long fight."

Earlier Real captain Raul celebrated breaking the club's all-time appearance record with a brace as Real bounced back

from their Sevilla defeat with a 4-2 home win over Valladolid.

"It was a good victory and a much-needed one," said Raul. "Games like this after the international fixtures can be dangerous but we won and that is all that counts."

Xavi shrugged off a knock to start for Barcelona but Thierry Henry missed out through injury and Zlatan Ibrahimovic began on the substitutes bench.

Lionel Messi was up front but looked to be suffering from fatigue after hours of travelling for Argentina's vital World Cup qualifiers.

Valencia coach Unai Emery chose not to risk flaring up David Villa's injury relying on the counter-attacking pace of Juan Mata and Pablo Hernandez.

A stray pass allowed Valencia to spring a lightning counter-attack after just two minutes but Hernandez could not beat Victor Valdes in the Barcelona goal.

Guardiola resisted the temptation to make any changes at half-time and his

team raised the standard in the second half.

Pedro Rodriguez had the best chance close to the hour mark but could not squeeze his shot past the goalkeeper.

Hernandez almost scored a sensational long-range goal from his own half only for Valdes to tip it over the crossbar.

Real did not have such problems in front of goal with Raul overtaking the record of Manolo Sanchis with his 711th appearance in the white shirt and scoring twice inside five first half minutes (13min, 18min) as Real made hard work of overcoming Valladolid.

Brazilian Marcelo and substitute Gonzalo Higuain were also on target to fend off a brave Valladolid as Real won to boost confidence for Wednesday's Champions League home match against AC Milan.

With 13 minutes gone Raul neatly flicked in with his heel for the opener and five minutes later he arrived on cue to

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Dour draw for Bayer

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen were held 0-0 at second-placed Hamburg on Saturday while Bayern Munich moved up to fifth as hot-shot midfielder Thomas Mueller helped seal a 2-1 win at Freiburg.

The stalemate at Hamburg's HSH Nordbank Arena left the top two locked on 21 points with Bayer top by virtue of goal difference.

Earlier, Mueller, who has made a name for himself with six goals in all competitions this season, was set up by Italian World Cup winner Luca Toni to put Bayern on the path to victory.

Toni's effort on goal was deflected into the path of Mueller and the midfielder slammed home his shot on 42 minutes as Bayern went fifth, six points behind the leaders.

Bayern were without their main strike-force of striker Ivica Olic, plus wingers Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery, but Munich made sure of the three points when Freiburg's South Korean defender Du-Ri Cha scored an own goal.

Under pressure from Mueller, Cha attempted to pass back to his goalkeeper, but could only watch as the ball rolled into his own net on 68 minutes.

Freiburg hit a consolation goal in injury time when striker Stefan Reisinger met a cross from striker Mohamed Idrissou.

Schalke are third after they sealed a 2-1 win over Stuttgart as ex-Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi hit the second-half winner.

Werder Bremen are fourth after they sealed a 2-0 win over Hoffenheim with goalkeeper Tim Wiese saving a first-half penalty from Carlos Eduardo after only 14 minutes.

Inter hammer Genoa

AFP, Rome



Champions Inter Milan opened up a three-point lead at the top of Serie A on Saturday with a thumping 5-0 win at hapless Genoa.

Inter's joy was further boosted by the 1-1 draw between title rivals Juventus and Fiorentina in Turin.

Sampdoria could still join Inter on 19 points at the scudetto summit if they win at Lazio on Sunday.

But this was a day when Jose Mourinho's Inter struck a significant blow in the title race, earning a crushing victory on one of the toughest grounds to visit and where they had already lost once this season to Sampdoria.

First half goals from Esteban Cambiasso, Mario Balotelli and a Dejan Stankovic stunner put the leaders out of sight before the break.

Cambiasso's opener on six minutes had a touch of fortune about it.

As Maicon rose highest to meet Wesley Sneijder's free-kick, the ball dropped to Cambiasso whose weak shot towards goal was set to bounce harmlessly into Marco Aurelia's hands before Salvatore Bocchetti inadvertently diverted it.

On 31 minutes Inter won back the ball in midfield and Sneijder quickly released Balotelli to shoot home first time from the edge of the box.

Inter were playing well but Genoa were not helping their cause and Amelia's fluffed punt upfield dropped to Stankovic out wide on the right

and almost on the halfway line.

The Serbian then met the ball full on the volley to score from 50 yards with Amelia an embarrassed spectator.

Substitute Patrick Vieira added the fourth and Maicon wrapped up the victory as Inter continued to dominate after the break.

In rainy Turin, both Juventus and Fiorentina could have gone top, if only for a couple of hours, with a win but had to settle for a share of the spoils on a tricky pitch.

Juan Vargas opened the scoring for the visitors but Brazilian Amauri scored his first goal of the season for the hosts.

Worryingly for Juventus, this was their fourth Serie A game and fifth in all competitions in a row without a victory. They have won only one of their last seven matches.



Inter Milan midfielder Patrick Vieira prepares to shoot and score against Genoa during their Serie A clash at the Ferrari's Stadium in Genoa on Saturday.

BALLON D'OR Messi heads nominees

AFP, Paris

Barcelona's Argentinian star Lionel Messi headlines the 30-strong list of nominees for the Ballon d'Or, or European Player of the Year award, released by the France Football magazine on Sunday.

Messi is one of the main favourites for the award after scoring one of Barcelona's goals in their 2-0 Champions League final win over Manchester United last season, and helping his country qualify for the 2010 World Cup.

Last year's winner, Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo, and the English quartet of Steven Gerrard, Franck Lampard, Wayne Rooney and John Terry all made the list but there was not a single Italian player among the 30 nominees.

Manchester United's veteran Welsh winger Ryan Giggs got the nod as well as Barcelona's Thierry Henry after his omission last year - the first time since 2000.

The Ballon d'Or shortlist is compiled by France Football and is based on nominations from football writers around the globe. This year's winner is to be announced on December 1.

Shortlist (country, club)
Andrei Arshavin (RUS, Arsenal), Karim Benzema (FRA, Lyon then Real Madrid), Iker Casillas (ESP, Real Madrid), Cristiano Ronaldo (POR, Manchester United then Real Madrid), Diego (BRA, Werder Bremen then Juventus), Didier Drogba (CIV, Chelsea), Edin Dzeko (BIH, Wolfsburg), Samuel Eto'o (CAM, Barcelona then Inter Milan), Cesc Fabregas (ESP, Arsenal), Fernando Torres (ESP, Liverpool), Diego Forlan (URU, Atletico Madrid), Steven Gerrard (ENG, Liverpool), Ryan Giggs (WAL, Manchester United), Yoann Gourcuff (FRA, Bordeaux), Thierry Henry (FRA, Barcelona), Zlatan Ibrahimovic (SWE, Inter Milan then Barcelona), Iniesta (ESP, Barcelona), Julio Cesar (BRA, Inter Milan), Kaka (BRA, AC Milan then Real Madrid), Frank Lampard (ENG, Chelsea), Maicon (BRA, Inter Milan), Lionel Messi (ARG, Barcelona), Luis Fabiano (BRA, Sevilla), Franck Ribery (FRA, Bayern Munich), Wayne Rooney (ENG, Manchester United), John Terry (ENG, Chelsea), Nemanja Vidic (SRB, Manchester United), David Villa (ESP, Valencia), Xavi (ESP, Barcelona), Yaya Toure (CIV, Barcelona).

Diego's new video

INTERNET, undated

Newly released video Saturday showed Argentina football coach Diego Maradona making obscene gestures after Wednesday's key game even as controversy swirled over his obscene verbal remarks after that match with Uruguay. The film raised even higher the likelihood that football's world governing body, FIFA, will take disciplinary steps against the fabled 1986 world champion footballer.

The video was taken right after Wednesday's 1-0 high pressure win against Uruguay in Montevideo that rescued Argentina - and Maradona's reputation - for play in the 2010 World Cup.

On Friday, Maradona refused to take back crude comments he made to reporters after the game when he lashed out at their pre-game criticism of his capabilities as a coach. The historic football nation had lost a series of qualifiers and stood to lose a place in South Africa if it hadn't won Wednesday night.

"I don't forget things: those who did not believe, those who did not believe - may the ladies excuse me - let them s*** my d***," an

angry Maradona said in Montevideo. "I am either white or black, I am never going to be grey in my life. You treated me like you treated me."

On Friday, Maradona told Argentine sports TV channel TyC Sports that he would "not take it back."

However, he accepted criticism to some extent.

"I won't do it again, I won't repeat it," he said. "I apologize to my mother and to women around the world."

In other comments, he said his rude comments were the result of "a very great relief after a week with a lot of criticism."

"I don't have to apologize. (Reporters) looked anti-Argentinian, and I will not forgive them. They wanted Argentina to be left out of the World Cup," Maradona told radio Continental.

FIFA president Joseph Blatter indicated the matter would be investigated by a disciplinary committee, US sports broadcaster ESPN reported.

"The reports we have received so far leave us no other alternative but to ask the disciplinary committee of FIFA to open a case against Maradona," Blatter was quoted as saying.