

Inter clinch a thriller

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan ruined Walter Zenga's homecoming by beating Palermo 5-3 in an eight-goal thriller at the San Siro on Thursday.

Zenga had threatened to upset his former employers as his battling team fought back from a 4-0 half-time deficit to within a goal with a quarter of the game remaining before Diego Milito settled things late on.

Former Italy goalkeeper Zenga, who spent 12 years as an Inter player, was given a standing ovation when he arrived but his team was then ripped apart in a painful first 45 minutes, seemingly making a mockery of his pre-match claims that his side would challenge for the title.

And while the first goal was due to some horrible home-team refereeing, thereafter Palermo simply could not handle Inter's bristling attacking play as Samuel Eto'o and Mario Balotelli each bagged a brace.

The lead came on 7min when the referee laughably awarded the hosts a penalty after Balotelli tried to run through an inexistent gap between two defenders and fell over.

The teenager then tried to take the penalty off Eto'o only to be dragged away by captain Javier Zanetti and he threw a mini tantrum as Eto'o lashed home the spot-kick.

If that goal had been unfair on Palermo, the Sicilians could have no complaints about what happened in the rest of the half.

After Palermo goalkeeper Salvatore Sirigu, who played very well, had tipped a deviation off defender Dorin Goian from Eto'o's cross onto the post, Esteban Cambiasso's driven centre came too quick for Balotelli who headed wide with his eyes closed.

Just past the hour mark Cambiasso lashed a close range shot over the bar but on 34min it was two as Balotelli rose above Australian Mark Bresciano to head home Maicon's corner.

Palermo collapsed just before the break as Sirigu and Simon Kjaer got in each other's way leaving Cambiasso free to head goalwards before Balotelli got the last touch on the line.

And two minutes before the break the 19-year-old teed up Eto'o to beat Sirigu at his near post.

At 4-0 at the break the game seemed over but Palermo came out after the restart in determined mood and showed just why Zenga has so much faith in them.

Miccoli started the comeback on 49min as he latched onto a long Simplicio through ball, held off Ivan Cordoba and chipped Julio Cesar.

But seven minutes from time a tired-looking Palermo defence wilted and Maicon teed up substitute Milito to tap home the eighth goal of the night from close range.



Inter Milan striker Diego Milito (L) is chased by teammates as he celebrates his goal against Palermo during their Serie A encounter at San Siro on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

MU look to rebound

AFP, London



Manchester United will go in search of a return to winning ways in the Premier League when the champions welcome swine-flu hit Blackburn Rovers to Old Trafford on Saturday.

Last weekend's 2-0 loss to bitter rivals Liverpool left United two points behind leaders Chelsea.

But Ferguson challenged his players to put their disappointment behind him by saying: "We lost 4-1 to Liverpool at home last season, which was a travesty but the players buckled down and we went on to win the league."

Whatever else the long-serving Scot has to worry about, the problem of job security is unlikely to be uppermost in his mind.

It's a far cry from the position Hull boss Phil Brown finds himself in.

The relegation-threatened Tigers' match against Burnley is their first fixture since chairman Paul Duffice resigned on Thursday, a move that led to renewed speculation about Brown's position a day after Hull took the unusual step of insisting their manager had not been sacked.

But Brown has taken heart from Hull's recent win over Wigan and even a goalless draw with basement club Portsmouth.

"A manager always relies on results, and at this moment in time we've got four points from three games. If we put our best foot forward again and get something from the game that would be a good return from October.

Portsmouth, beset by a transfer ban and continuing uncertainty over their financial position, welcome Wigan to Fratton Park on Saturday.

Wigan manager Roberto Martinez is wary of what lies in store on the south coast, even though Pompey have won just once so far in the league this season.

"They are beginning to gel as a team and have been unfortunate not to get better results," Martinez said.

"They do not reflect where Portsmouth are - and they have not been getting the credit they deserve," the Spaniard added.

"It is always a tough place to visit, and we will have to be

ready - because they will be very competitive."

And competition is likely to be the watchword when Arsenal and Tottenham meet for a north London derby that promises to be especially lively.

That the Gunners are third in the table is no great shock; that Spurs are fourth, on goal difference alone, is something of a surprise.

"I think at the start of the season a lot of people wrote off Arsenal," said Tottenham forward Peter Crouch.

"They've got a young squad but they seem to have shown everyone that they can still play," the England striker added.

"But I think we've also surprised a few people by the way we've started. We're in the top four at the minute and we want to stay there as long as we possibly can."

Staying in the top four is not the issue for fellow capital side Chelsea, who are determined to wrest the title from United.

They face Bolton for the second time in three days following their 4-0 thrashing of the Trotters in the League Cup.

"We are playing very well and scoring a lot of goals, we have to keep doing that," said Blues striker Salomon Kalou.

Elsewhere on Saturday second-bottom West Ham travel to Sunderland while Everton are at home to Aston Villa and Stoke play Wolves.

Sunday's match sees big-spending Manchester City away to Birmingham.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)
Saturday
 Arsenal v Tottenham (1245GMT), Bolton v Chelsea, Burnley v Hull, Everton v Aston Villa, Fulham v Liverpool, Manchester United v Blackburn (1730GMT), Portsmouth v Wigan, Stoke v Wolverhampton, Sunderland v West Ham
Sunday
 Birmingham v Manchester City (1600GMT)

Bayer without Jupp

AFP, Berlin



League leaders Bayer Leverkusen may have to do without coach Jupp Heynckes for Saturday's trip to Schalke 04 in the Bundesliga with buoyant Bayern Munich in the chasing pack behind them.

Leverkusen are at Schalke's Veltins Arena on Saturday night, but flu-victim Heynckes has been unable to train the team this week and his doctor will tell the 64-year-old on Friday whether he can sit on the bench at Schalke.

Both midfielder Renato Augusto (calf strain) and Germany star Simon Rolfes (knee) are definitely out with injury.

"The knee still needs a little time," said Rolfes, who is set to miss Germany's friendlies against Chile on November 14 and Ivory Coast on November 18.

"Giving a date when I will play again will help nobody, I am not overly concerned."

"I regained my fitness very quickly in the summer."

Reports broke here last

Sunday that Schalke on the verge of bankruptcy with substantial debts in excess of 100 million euros, but the club replied on Thursday saying they have sliced 25.5 million euros off their debt.

They have sold part of their Veltins Arena's stadium for 15 million euros, while they have secured a loan for 10.5 million euros in a bid to balance their books.

The Royal Blues are fourth in the table and only two points behind Leverkusen with Hamburg and Werder Bremen also capable of taking over the lead this weekend should results go their way.

Fifth-placed Bayern are four points off the pace and they have a chance to close the gap at Stuttgart on Saturday having been buoyed by the 4-0 win at

Eintracht Frankfurt in the German Cup on Wednesday.

Strikers Miroslav Klose and Luca Toni both scored their first goals of the season with Klose in superb form having scored the first two himself before setting up the third.

Stuttgart are facing their sixth consecutive defeat after crashing out of the German Cup at Greuther Fuerth on Tuesday which led to a crisis meeting where it was decided coach Markus Babel would keep his job.

But Babel can ill afford more defeats with his side hovering above the relegation zone.

Bremen are on a run of good form having been beaten just once all season and they should have few problems against struggling Nuremberg, who were beaten 3-0 by Hoffenheim last weekend.

Defending champions Wolfsburg are up to seventh in the league and are beginning to find the way back to home strength with two successful recent wins on their own turf against Hannover 96 and Borussia Monchengladbach.

They are looking for a third over Mainz who are holding their own in midtable after being promoted last season, but are erratic in the league.

FIXTURES

Saturday
 VfL Wolfsburg v Mainz 05, VfB Stuttgart v Bayern Munich, Hamburg v Borussia M'gladbach, Cologne v Hannover 96, Nuremberg v Werder Bremen, Schalke 04 v Bayer Leverkusen
Sunday
 Freiburg v Hoffenheim, Eintracht Frankfurt v VfL Bochum

Messi hot favourite

AFP, Paris

Six Spaniards have been named in the 23-strong shortlist for the FIFA World Player of the Year award.

They include three players from Barcelona, Real Madrid goalkeeper Iker Casillas and Liverpool striker Fernando Torres.

England are the next best represented nation on the shortlist with four players in the running including two from Chelsea in John Terry and Frank Lampard.

Last year's winner Cristiano Ronaldo, who was with Manchester United then and is currently with Real Madrid, is listed again but the hot favourite to lift the award is Barcelona's Argentine playmaker Lionel Messi.

With voting restricted to the coaches and captains of national selections, a final shortlist of five players will be named in early December with the winner announced on December 21.

SHORTLIST

Spain (6): Iker Casillas (Real Madrid), Andrés Iniesta (Barcelona), Carles Puyol (Barcelona), Fernando Torres (Liverpool/ENG), David Villa (Valencia), Xavi (Barcelona)
 England (4): Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Frank Lampard (Chelsea), Wayne Rooney (Manchester United), John Terry (Chelsea)
 Brazil (3): Diego (Juventus/ITA), Kaka (Real Madrid/ESP), Luis Fabiano (Sevilla/ESP)
 France (2): Thierry Henry (Barcelona/ESP), Franck Ribery (Bayern Munich/GER)
 Germany: Michael Ballack (Chelsea/ENG)
 Argentina: Lionel Messi (Barcelona/ESP)
 Cameroon: Samuel Eto'o (Inter Milan/ITA)
 Ivory Coast: Didier Drogba (Chelsea/ENG)
 Ghana: Michael Essien (Chelsea/ENG)
 Italy: Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus/Turin)
 Portugal: Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid/ESP)
 Sweden: Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Barcelona/ESP)

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Park, who recently signed a new two-year contract with the Premier League champions, sustained the problem while flying home from a 2-0 friendly win against Senegal earlier this month.

The 28-year-old has made just four appearances this season due to injury - he last featured in the 4-3 win over Manchester City on September 20.

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Park, who recently signed a new two-year contract with the Premier League champions, sustained the problem while flying home from a 2-0 friendly win against Senegal earlier this month.

The 28-year-old has made just four appearances this season due to injury - he last featured in the 4-3 win over Manchester City on September 20.

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Park, who recently signed a new two-year contract with the Premier League champions, sustained the problem while flying home from a 2-0 friendly win against Senegal earlier this month.

The 28-year-old has made just four appearances this season due to injury - he last featured in the 4-3 win over Manchester City on September 20.

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Getafe test for Real

AFP, Madrid



It has been called Real Madrid's most humiliating defeat ever in the local media with Tuesday's 4-0 first leg Cup thrashing by third division Alcorcon giving coach Manuel Pellegrini and Cristiano Ronaldo is still out injured with an ankle problem.

Real's form has slumped in the absence of Ronaldo with defeats against Sevilla, AC Milan and Alcorcon along with a 0-0 draw at Sporting Gijon.

While Real have failed to score in their last three matches and the shambles in Alcorcon - a team from the Madrid suburbs that have never played in the top-flight - has cranked up the pressure on Pellegrini for the derby duel with Getafe.

"It is embarrassing and a difficult defeat to stomach," confessed Pellegrini. "We have to show our character and every single person has to take responsibility so that we can turn things around in the next game."

Getafe have proved a difficult customer for Real in the past - triumphing 3-1 at home

last season in a match that nudged Bernd Schuster closer to the exit door - and Real can't afford to slip up any more with champions Barcelona three points clear at the top.

Pellegrini can bring in the rested Kaka who sat out the Alcorcon debacle but Cristiano Ronaldo is still out injured with an ankle problem.

Real's form has slumped in the absence of Ronaldo with defeats against Sevilla, AC Milan and Alcorcon along with a 0-0 draw at Sporting Gijon.

While Real have failed to score in their last three matches and the shambles in Alcorcon - a team from the Madrid suburbs that have never played in the top-flight - has cranked up the pressure on Pellegrini for the derby duel with Getafe.

"It is embarrassing and a difficult defeat to stomach," confessed Pellegrini. "We have to show our character and every single person has to take responsibility so that we can turn things around in the next game."

Getafe have proved a difficult customer for Real in the past - triumphing 3-1 at home

last season in a match that nudged Bernd Schuster closer to the exit door - and Real can't afford to slip up any more with champions Barcelona three points clear at the top.

Pellegrini can bring in the rested Kaka who sat out the Alcorcon debacle but Cristiano Ronaldo is still out injured with an ankle problem.

Real's form has slumped in the absence of Ronaldo with defeats against Sevilla, AC Milan and Alcorcon along with a 0-0 draw at Sporting Gijon.

While Real have failed to score in their last three matches and the shambles in Alcorcon - a team from the Madrid suburbs that have never played in the top-flight - has cranked up the pressure on Pellegrini for the derby duel with Getafe.

"It is embarrassing and a difficult defeat to stomach," confessed Pellegrini. "We have to show our character and every single person has to take responsibility so that we can turn things around in the next game."

Getafe have proved a difficult customer for Real in the past - triumphing 3-1 at home

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Park, who recently signed a new two-year contract with the Premier League champions, sustained the problem while flying home from a 2-0 friendly win against Senegal earlier this month.

The 28-year-old has made just four appearances this season due to injury - he last featured in the 4-3 win over Manchester City on September 20.

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Park, who recently signed a new two-year contract with the Premier League champions, sustained the problem while flying home from a 2-0 friendly win against Senegal earlier this month.

The 28-year-old has made just four appearances this season due to injury - he last featured in the 4-3 win over Manchester City on September 20.

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Park, who recently signed a new two-year contract with the Premier League champions, sustained the problem while flying home from a 2-0 friendly win against Senegal earlier this month.

The 28-year-old has made just four appearances this season due to injury - he last featured in the 4-3 win over Manchester City on September 20.

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

Park, who recently signed a new two-year contract with the Premier League champions, sustained the problem while flying home from a 2-0 friendly win against Senegal earlier this month.

The 28-year-old has made just four appearances this season due to injury - he last featured in the 4-3 win over Manchester City on September 20.

Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-Sung will be out of action for another three weeks after suffering a knee injury while on international duty with South Korea.

fielded a string of youngsters. Elsewhere, Quique Sanchez Flores is ready for his managerial league bow with Athletic Bilbao beginning with a trip to Athletic Bilbao on Saturday night.

Former Valencia coach Flores was presented on Monday following Abel Resino's sacking and Atletico, a point above the relegation zone, hope he can guide the club back into the top four.

Flores won his first match in charge with a 2-0 victory over Marbella in the Kings Cup on Wednesday and Bilbao are

on the slide losing four out of their last five league outings. Villarreal are another top side struggling down at the bottom although they got their first win of the season last weekend to move off the foot of the table.

Brazilian striker Nilmar scored his long-awaited first goal for the club following a club record 11 million euro move in the summer and hopes for more goals in the next match at home to promoted Tenerife on Sunday.

In other matches, third-placed Sevilla want to hit the goal trail again at Xerez on Saturday having failed to score in their last two league matches.

Valencia are just a point behind Sevilla in fourth and travel to basement boys Malaga on Sunday.

Malaga thrashed Atletico Madrid 3-0 on the opening day of the season but have not won since.

FIXTURES

Saturday
 Real Madrid v Getafe (1600 GMT), Osasuna v Barcelona (1800 GMT), Xerez v Sevilla (1800 GMT), Athletic Bilbao v Atletico Madrid (2000 GMT)
Sunday
 (all 1500 GMT unless stated)
 Real Zaragoza v Almeria, Real Mallorca v Racing Santander, Villarreal v Tenerife, Espanyol v Valladolid, Malaga v Valencia (1700 GMT) Deportivo La Coruna v Sporting Gijon (1900 GMT)

Rivals chase champs

AFP, Rome



It will be a case of damage limitation this weekend for Inter Milan's Serie A title rivals.

The reigning four-in-a-row champions went four points clear of the pack on Thursday following a thrill-a-minute 5-3 win over Palermo.

And the worry now for Inter's rivals and neutrals alike is that the gap could keep on growing if the leaders don't slip up soon.

Inter travel away to newly-promoted Livorno on Sunday in a game they will be expected to win comfortably, even if they do ring the changes to keep some players fresh ahead of a long trip to Ukraine to tackle Dynamo Kiev in midweek.

Livorno may have won two straight games since Serse Cosmi took over from Gennaro Ruotolo just 10 days ago with the club rock bottom and winless, but beating Inter will be a whole different proposition for the team with the worst attack in the league.

Inter's main rivals have a 24-hour start on the champions to try to put some pressure on them and provoke a slip.

AC Milan and Juventus host Parma and Napoli respectively on Saturday -- Inter play on Sunday -- but come into their matches in vastly differing states of morale.

Juve are on a high after

climbing to second in the table following Wednesday's 5-1 thrashing of Sampdoria, who had been above them at kickoff.

That victory convinced Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon that his Juve team are back to their best.

"Scintillating? No, I'd call it a nuclear explosion," he said about the performance against Samp.

"That's the quality we have and we knew it. We wanted to win and to do so convincingly."

"We've always performed against the big teams, but unfortunately it's the other matches that make the difference."

"We need to try to stop dropping points in those to give ourselves a chance of reaching our goals."

Napoli are one of the teams who probably fall into the category of other matches for Juve and they will be buoyed by their stunning late comeback against Milan on Wednesday when they netted a 2-2 draw despite reaching 90min at 2-0 down.

FIXTURES

Saturday
 AC Milan v Parma, Juventus v Napoli
Sunday
 Cagliari v Atalanta, Chievo v Udinese, Fiorentina v Catania, Livorno v Inter Milan, Palermo v Genoa, AS Roma v Bologna, Sampdoria v Bari, Siena v Lazio

IN BRIEF

Fergie slams lucrative int'l friendlies

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has slammed international friendlies like England's clash against Brazil in Doha next month as money-making exercises for Football Association bosses.

Ferguson is furious that the majority of his squad will jet off around the world for meaningless friendlies in November, with Wayne Rooney and Rio Ferdinand among the Manchester United stars set to embark on a 6,500-mile round journey to Qatar for the November 14 meeting with Brazil.

They host a newly-promoted team but one holding a Champions League qualification berth and with a lot to defend on Saturday night.

At the bottom Marco Baroni takes over Siena for the first time following the sacking of Marco Giampaolo as the Tuscans host Lazio, whose own coach Davide Ballardini is surely perilously close to the boot after they slumped to 15th with Wednesday's 1-0 home loss to Cagliari.

Meanwhile, Samp will be hoping to bounce back from their Turin humiliation at home to Bari while Palermo and Fiorentina will both look to boost their Champions League qualification hopes as they host Genoa and Catania respectively.

Sosa loaned to Estudiantes

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich midfielder Jose Ernesto Sosa has been loaned to Argentinian side Estudiantes de la Plata until the end of the season, the German giants announced on Thursday.

The 24-year-old Argentina international was signed for 10 million euros in the summer of 2007, but has had few chances to play under Bayern coach Louis van Gaal this season with his contract set to run until June 30, 2011.