

Barca held at Bilbao

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona dropped two costly points in a 1-1 draw at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday to fall a point behind new leaders Real Madrid ahead of next Sunday's eagerly-anticipated 'El Clasico' at Camp Nou.

Brazilian Dani Alves put Barca ahead early in the second half but substitute Gaizka Toquero, only on the pitch a few minutes, equalised soon after as Barca surrendered top spot to Real.

"It is a bad result when you consider the opportunities we had," said Alves. "We now have a tough Champions League game Inter and then Real. We just have to be positive and believe in ourselves."

Real produced a nervy 1-0 home win over Racing Santander on Saturday thanks to a Gonzalo Higuain strike and supplant their rivals at the summit.

"It is always complicated after a two-week break and coming off the back of the Kings Cup loss," explained Real coach Manuel Pellegrini.

"When you get towards the end of the match with only a goal cushion it is always risky but we had several chances and also hit the post twice."

Losing top spot now is an untimely blow for Barca who have two huge home games next week, beginning with a crucial Champions League match against Inter Milan on Tuesday and then the Clasico against Real at Camp Nou.

The media spotlight was on Barca forward Thierry Henry after his controversial handball which helped France eliminate the Republic of Ireland in the World Cup play-off.

However, coach Pep Guardiola took the forward out of the firing line starting him on the substitutes' bench, only introducing him in the 84th minute.

Barca opted for a small front three of Lionel Messi, Andres Iniesta and Pedro with Zlatan Ibrahimovic out with a thigh injury which also makes him a doubt for the Inter game on Tuesday.

Messi should have scored in the 13th minute after being put clean through but couldn't get the ball out of his feet and his shot was blocked.

Messi wreaked havoc again when he rounded Iraizoz to set up a chance for Xavi who could not get a good enough contact to guide the ball in.

Bilbao had been second best but with seconds left in the first half Xavi Martinez should have put the hosts in front but mistimed his header to miss the target and a sea of Athletic players held their heads in disappointment.

Barca got an early breakthrough in the second half with Xavi feeding a delightful pass to rampaging right back Alves who finished like a striker on 53 minutes.

However Toquero, only on the pitch five minutes, raced onto a headed flick to equalise nine minutes later.

Holders Barca now must focus on Inter in a must-win game with their title defence in the balance.

Real host FC Zurich on Wednesday needing a win with AC Milan on the same points and Marseille just a point behind.

Cristiano Ronaldo has missed ten consecutive games due to his troublesome ankle but could return ahead of the Barca clash.

Without Ronaldo Real have struggled in front of goal at times but got a helping hand from Racing goalkeeper Tono who foolishly pushed Kaka's cross into the danger zone and Higuain had an easy tap in on 22 minutes.

Sevilla kept up their own title charge with a 2-1 win at promoted Tenerife to stay three points behind leaders Real.

Argentine winger Diego Perotti and Brazilian Renato were on target as Sevilla kept pace with Barcelona and Real.

Manolo Jimenez's side now travel to Unirea Urziceni in the Champions League on Tuesday with qualification for the knockout stage secure.

Elsewhere Deportivo La Coruna moved up to fourth with a dramatic 2-1 home win over Atletico Madrid.

Mexican Andres Guardado converted a controversial penalty five minutes into stoppage time to down Atletico who stay in the bottom three with coach Quique Sanchez Flores still waiting for his first league win in charge.

"We weren't expecting that ending but things like that can happen in football," said Flores. "It is not going to be easy to bounce back in the league."



Real Madrid striker Gonzalo Higuain (C) scores past a diving Racing Santander goalkeeper during their Primera Liga clash at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Saturday.

Ancelotti oozes Essien's praises

INTERNET, undated

Carlo Ancelotti acclaimed Michael Essien as one of the best midfielders in the world after his two-goal super show against woeful Wolves at Stamford Bridge.

Former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho nicknamed Essien 'The Train', but Ancelotti is not one for off-the-cuff monikers. But asked if he had his own personal pet name for Essien, boss Ancelotti replied: "No, his name is Michael. I think Essien is one of the most important players in midfield in the world."

He added: "He can play everywhere in midfield with the same result. He has shown a lot of consistency this season and maintained a good physical condition. He is very strong but he also has a lot of quality."

The Italian coach also claimed that the emergence of youngsters like Gael Kakuta, Fabio Borini and Nemanja Matic could prevent him from having to do any business in the January transfer market.

Kakuta made his debut and looked completely at home in the top flight. He was originally suspended for four months when FIFA imposed their transfer ban on the club in September for inducing him to breach his contract with Lens two years ago.

But the Court of Arbitration for Sport suspended the bans until the outcome of Chelsea's appeal has been heard in full and Kakuta seized the chance to shine when he replaced Nicolas Anelka in the second half.

"Kakuta has a lot of talent and he showed that in 30 minutes," said Ancelotti. "He is young and he has to improve and work. After two or three weeks of his ban he had some difficulty because he is very young. But we had him train with the first team and now he is happy. I hope he will do better in the future."

Messi injury concerns Pep

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola said he was concerned over an injury to Lionel Messi that forced the Argentine forward to be substituted during their 1-1 La Liga draw at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

The timing of the news couldn't be worse with new league leaders Real Madrid preparing to visit Nou Camp next Sunday, with their star signing Cristiano Ronaldo hopeful of a return from his own lay-off, while Barcelona's Champions League hopes are on the line in midweek.

Messi was replaced in the 75th minute by Bojan Krkic at San Mames with what appeared to be a torn left thigh muscle, Barcelona said.

"We took him off because he was in pain. We'll do more tests tomorrow but the outlook is not good," Guardiola said after the match.

Sweden striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic also missed the game with a thigh strain, while Eric Abidal and Yaya Toure were laid low with the HINI virus and Rafael Marquez also missed the trip to Bilbao with suspected swine flu.

The European champions host Inter Milan in the Champions League on Tuesday when a defeat combined with a win for Rubin Kazan would put them out of the competition.

Werder wreak havoc

AFP, Berlin



Portuguese striker Hugo Almeida netted twice as Werder Bremen went top of the Bundesliga on Saturday thanks to their 6-0 hammering of Freiburg.

With unbeaten leaders Bayer Leverkusen playing Bayern Munich at the Allianz Arena Sunday, Bremen seized on the opportunity to top the table and now lead Bayer, who also have 26 points, by superior goal difference.

"We put in a good performance," said Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf, whose side looked sharp despite the fortnight-long break for the international matches.

"I must praise my team who played well despite the long break, we have been improving steadily and I must congratulate them on that."

Bremen's Germany midfielder Mesut Oezil found huge gaps in the Freiburg defence and Almeida, 25, headed home after an Oezil cross on 33 minutes.

Winger Marko Marin then netted a free-kick on 55 minutes before Almeida scored his second just two minutes later.

Oezil grabbed one of his own on 67 minutes and was then fouled on 73 minutes before Brazilian defender Naldo slotted home the penalty.

With time running out Swedish striker Markus Rosenberg completed the rout on 82 minutes after a pass from Oezil.

Schalke 04 are third after their 2-0 win over grieving Hanover 96, who played their first game since their goalkeeper Robert Enke committed suicide 11 days ago.

The 61,000-strong crowd at Schalke's Veltins Arena gave the entire Hanover squad a standing ovation when they walked out. Enke was buried last Sunday following an emotional memorial service.

Florian Frommowitz took

over between the posts for Hanover with the whole team wearing special shirts in memory of their former captain.

But Schalke were not in charitable mood as Peru striker Jefferson Farfan put the Royal Blues ahead with a header on 69 minutes before Czech midfielder Jan Moravek added a second in injury time.

"I am very proud of my team, we matched Schalke and we created more possibilities in the first-half," said Hanover coach Andreas Bergmann.

"We lost our concentration and strength after the goal went in, but we have made the best of the situation."

Bottom side Hertha were denied their first win since the opening day of the season when they were held 1-1 at Stuttgart.

Hertha's Columbia striker Adrian Ramos scored in the

49th minute, only for Stuttgart's Serbian striker Zdravko Kuzmanovic to equalise on 85 minutes but then earn himself a second yellow card and a red two minutes later.

Hoffenheim are fourth after their 4-0 win over Cologne with star striker Vedad Ibisevic scoring his second goal in two games when he netted a 90th-minute penalty.

Defending champions Wolfsburg were beaten 3-2 at home by Nuremberg after Swiss striker Albert Bunjaku scored twice for the guests before midfielder Peer Kluge hit the winner in injury time.

Mid-table Eintracht Frankfurt were beaten 2-1 by Borussia Moenchengladbach while Dortmund and Mainz laboured to a goalless draw on Saturday night.



Werder Bremen star Mesut Oezil (L), midfielder Marko Marin (C) and striker Hugo Almeida celebrate the latter's goal during their Bundesliga match against SC Freiburg on Saturday.

IN BRIEF

Henry tops rogue list

INTERNET, undated

Thierry Henry's self-confessed handball to secure France a win over Ireland and a place in next year's World Cup has shot him to the top of sport's rogue's gallery, Australia's Daily Telegraph said Saturday.

It claimed Henry had "outplayed some of the greatest scammers, hoaxers, match-fixers, ball-tamperers and blatant rule-benders to earn a place in infamy as one of the biggest cheats in world sport."

The paper said Henry's hand-job installed him atop its list of the 10 Biggest Cheats in Sport, with Argentina's Diego Maradona runner-up for his Hand of God goal against England in the 1986 World Cup, and third place going to Spain's non-disabled 2000 Paralympic basketball team.

Boris Onischenko, the Russian fencer who at the 1976 Olympics rigged his sword, also featured in the Hall of Shame, as did Fred Lorz, the US marathon runner who snuck a lift in a car at the 1904 Olympics.

Fergie doesn't fancy Eng for WC

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has sensationally written off England's chances of winning the World Cup - even though nine of his squad are battling to win a place in Fabio Capello's plans.

The Manchester United manager declared he "can't see past Brazil" to triumph for a record sixth time in South Africa next summer and said England do not have enough players with regular Champions League experience to be world champions.

His comments will draw comparison with another Scot, tennis player Andy Murray, who faced a huge backlash when he joked that he wanted 'any team' to beat England at the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

Although Ferguson - who has lived in England since 1986 when he first became Manchester United manager - did not say he wanted England to fail, his verdict will be a blow to Capello and key United players such as Wayne Rooney and Rio Ferdinand, who hope to lead England to World Cup glory for the first time since 1966.

An under-strength England were outplayed by a Brazil side led by Kaka last weekend, but Ferguson is unsure whether Capello's full team would get the better of the South Americans.

Ferguson said: "I can't see past Brazil, actually. They are going to be the ones in South Africa. They are going to be hard to beat. You just have to think of the players they can bring in - they are a supplier of great players."

Last season, there were 103 Brazilians in the Champions League and only 15 Englishmen. More Scots played in the Champions League last season than English players. I thought the 11/10 on Brazil to beat England was the bet of the century."

Inter back on track

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan got back to winning ways in Serie A on Saturday with a convincing 3-1 win over Bologna at the Dall'Ara stadium extending their lead at the top to eight points ahead of

Sunday's games.

In the late match, Parma beat Fiorentina 3-2 to move temporarily up to third spot.

The 10th win from 13 games this season for Italian champions Inter will undoubtedly instill confidence ahead of Inter's Champions League match at Barcelona on Tuesday.

However Inter coach Jose Mourinho said: "The Barcelona game will be a real test for my players."

Diego Milito scored his eighth goal of the campaign to give Inter the lead midway through the first half, and despite an immediate equaliser from Marcelo Zalayeta, the 'Nerazzurri' regained the lead four minutes before the break through Mario Balotelli.

With 18 minutes left, Esteban Cambiasso's low strike wrapped up a comfortable win spoiled only by the stoppage-time sending off of Maicon for dissent.

"We won without too many problems and we deserved it," added Mourinho before being questioned about the half-time substitution of striker Balotelli.

"He played a normal first half - he missed a chance, scored and then got a yellow card. Some players know how to play with a booking but he plays in the same way so I didn't want to risk going down to 10 men."

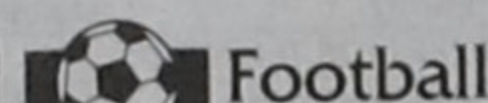
Looking fresh after the two-week break, Inter quickly forced the home side onto the back foot and midway through the first half Milito, latching onto a downward Lucio header, was allowed time to turn and rifle home from six yards. It looked ominous for Bologna but right from the kick off they equalised with their first attack.

Martins Adailton's fine left-foot chipped the ball over the Inter defence for Zalayeta, who showed composure to bring the ball down before firing into the top corner as Julio Cesar rushed out.



Inter Milan forward Mario Balotelli (L) celebrates with teammate Lucio after scoring against Bologna in their Serie A clash at the Dall'Ara Stadium in Bologna on Saturday.

Tough times for football



AFP, Paris

It is just as well football is the most popular and perhaps most lucrative sport in the world because the publicity it has had in the past fortnight could have killed lesser ones off.

The suicide of German national goalkeeper Robert Enke did not help the macho image of the game given that he had sought to hide his battle with depression fearful that it would harm his image in the sport.

Then there came the 'hand of frog' - Thierry Henry's blatant handball which effectively put France into the World Cup finals at the expense of the Republic of Ireland in Wednesday's play-off.

As if that was not bad enough allegations surfaced on Friday of widespread matchfixing from Germany to Bosnia-Herzegovina filtering down to even regional matches and Under-19 level.

Enke's suicide after years of battling depression was at least treated with great dignity - not least by his widow Teresa whose behaviour makes her definitely worthy of role model status - and decorum with a tribute at his club Hanover's stadium.

However, if any good can come out of such a tragedy it was highlighted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel who said that his death should serve as a means of making German society a more transparent and caring one.

"We must send a clear signal," Merkel told German weekly newspaper Die Zeit.

"We can help to change the social climate so that taboos like depression, and also issues like homosexuality, are no longer impossible to discuss. "If someone is affected by either issue, they should be able to talk about it in peace," she added.

Whether Henry, one of the formerly more respected players in a sport not exactly awash with role models, can rebuild his reputation is a moot point.

Even the Barcelona forward's calls for the match with the Irish to be replayed fell on deaf ears as FIFA had already ruled that possibility out before he issued his statement.

Henry is caught in the eye of the storm after his handball gave William Gallas the chance to score the goal which took the 1998 champions through, leaving the Irish distraught and the former Arsenal striker sheepish as he admitted his misdeed.

"Of course the fairest solution would be to replay the game but it is not in my control," the France captain said.

"Naturally I feel embarrassed at the way that we won and feel extremely sorry for the Irish who definitely deserve to be in South Africa."

"The ball bounced and it hit my hand," added Henry, though he insisted that "I am not a cheat."

The circumstances, while not as blatant as Diego Maradona's slam dunk past England keeper Peter Shilton in the 1986 finals, may now sadly prove the abiding memory of a player who has worn French blue for 12 years, won the Champions League with Barca and lit up the English Premiership with Arsenal.