

Lamps rescues Blues

AFP, London



Chelsea were left four points clear at the top of the English Premier League table after a hard-fought 1-1 draw away to London rivals West Ham on Sunday.

Former Hammers midfielder Frank Lampard kept his nerve to draw Chelsea level from the penalty spot in the 61st minute, three-times having to strike the spot-kick after referee Mike Dean twice ordered a re-take for encroachment.

The penalty award was controversial in itself, with Hammers captain Matthew Upson adamant he had played the ball before bringing down Chelsea substitute Daniel Sturridge.

West Ham, managed by former Chelsea hero Gianfranco Zola, would have gone bottom if they had lost this match.

They went ahead at Upton Park when Alessandro Diamanti scored from the penalty spot after Ashley Cole had fouled Jack Collison.

The result saw the Blues pull away from second-placed reigning champions Manchester United, who themselves lost ground in the title race with a 3-0 loss away to Fulham on Saturday.

In Sunday's other matches, Wolves climbed out of the relegation zone with a 2-0 win at home to Burnley while Birmingham's five-match winning streak in the top flight ended with a 1-1 draw away to Everton.

Goals from Nenad Milijas and Kevin Doyle ensured Wolves finished a controversial week in style by moving up six places in the table.

Wolves manager Mick McCarthy had been widely criticised for his line-up during a 3-0

away defeat by champions Manchester United on Tuesday.

At Old Trafford, McCarthy changed all 10 outfield players from the side that beat Tottenham the previous weekend, with American goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann the only survivor.

But he ended up with the outcome he wanted as Wolves heaped yet more away-day misery on Burnley.

"Did the win justify my midweek team selection? I'm not looking for it at all, justification or vindication," McCarthy said.

"We've had nine points out of 12 since the Birmingham game and people who were here when we played Birmingham would never have thought that.

"It is about all the games, not just about today."

At least McCarthy was still in a job.

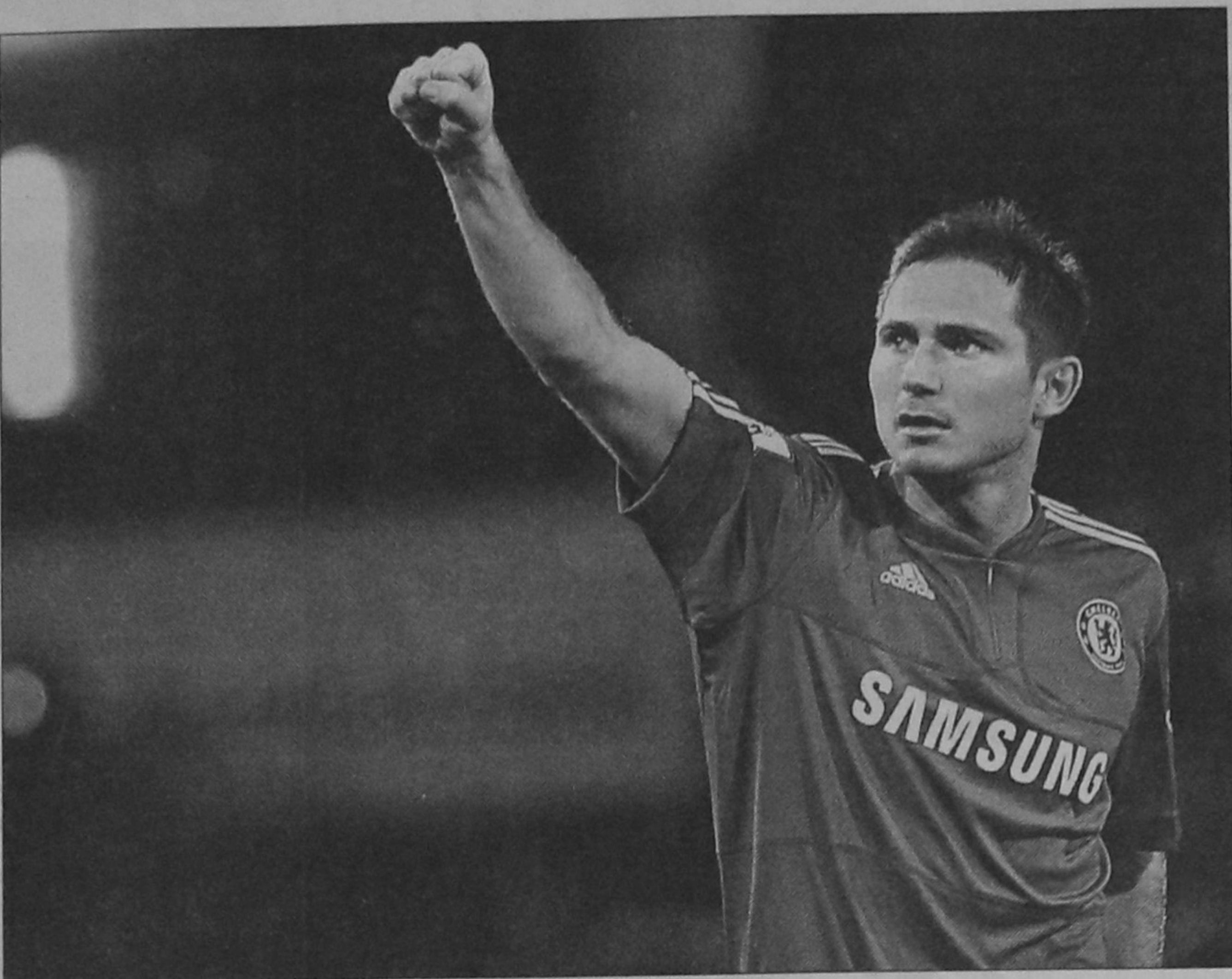
Manchester City manager Mark Hughes was sacked on Saturday, just hours after his side defeated Sunderland 4-3 in an Eastlands thriller, and replaced by former Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini.

City's billionaire owner Sheikh Mansour wanted a greater return on his 200-million-pound (£225-million-euro) player investment than two wins in 11 Premier League matches.

Hughes though was taken aback by his exit, saying Sunday: "I was given no forewarning as to the club's decision."

"Given the speed with which my successor's appointment was announced, it would appear that the club had made its decision some considerable time ago."

"I am extremely disappointed not to have been given the opportunity to see through my plans at the club," the Welshman added.



Chelsea star Frank Lampard celebrates after scoring the equaliser from a penalty during their Premiership encounter against West Ham at Upton Park on Sunday.

Messi hits back at critics

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona star Lionel Messi, the favourite to win the FIFA World Player of the Year award on Monday, has hit back at critics in his native Argentina who are angered over his failure to translate his club form to the international stage.

The Argentine media have suggested the striker does not show the same enthusiasm when he plays for the national team as when he hits the pitch for the Catalan side, which he joined at the age of 13 as a youth team player.

"It really gets me when they say I do not feel the Albiceleste. Nothing hurts me more than when they say I am not Argentine," he said in an interview with daily El Pais, using the Spanish name for the Argentine national team.

"It does not bother me when they call me 'the Catalan' but it really bugs me that they think I am not Argentine," the 22-year-old added.

Messi clinched an extra-time winner as Barcelona beat Estudiantes 2-1 Saturday to win the Club World Cup final, the European champions' sixth trophy of the year.

Minutes after he hit the winner for Barcelona, fans took to the streets in the Argentine province of La Plata where Estudiantes is based to protest against the player, Argentine daily newspaper Clarin reported.

The fans left insulting graffiti against Messi on walls throughout the province and chanted "Messi is no Argentine," it said.

Messi told El Pais that the Club World Cup win was one of his best moments of the year.

"It is much better than an individual prize because it is a collective prize that makes many people happy," he said.

Keita blow for Mali

AFP, Bamako

Mali midfielder Sidi Yaya Keita was on Sunday ruled out of the African Nations Cup because of a knee injury, a team official said.

Keita, who plays for struggling Spanish side Xerez, will be replaced in the squad for the January 10-31 tournament in Angola by Samba Sow of French side Lens.

Mali also have fitness worries over Barcelona midfielder Seydou Keita, who suffered a high injury playing in the World Club Cup semi-final in Abu Dhabi last week.

Mancini has tough task ahead

AFP, Rome

Roberto Mancini may have got the Manchester City manager's job but there has been little pomp and fanfare back in his homeland.

As the latest Italian coach to lift Serie A with Inter Milan and the latest addition in the burgeoning English-based Italian connection, Mancini's appointment at mega-rich City might have been expected to create more excitement at home.

But the reaction has been muted with the Italian press speculating that he has one sole objective - finish in the top four or pack his bags.

"Sheikh Mansour is in a hurry to win and he wants only stars," claimed the Gazzetta dello Sport, who suggested Mancini will be given a war chest despite the more than 200 million pounds City's owners have already shelled out.

"Mansour is in a hurry to dominate the Premier League and Europe and if Mancini manages to penetrate the big four, replacing Liverpool, he will get a blank cheque in the summer."

But La Gazzetta claims failure to attain that objective will result in a quick return to his homeland.

"At City some people claim there is a clause in the contract that he will only be retained beyond June if City finish at least fourth."

Corriere dello Sport believes he's been set an even higher target than that.

"Now he's asked to guide the Citizens at least into the Champions League zone and hopefully win the League Cup as well."

According to Tuttosport this move had been in the offing for some time.

"Mancini dedicated himself to learning English these last few months so he could hit the ground running," it said.

"He met several times with the Sheikh Mansour and was even ready to take over from (Mark) Hughes at the end of last season."

Lyon challenge fading

AFP, Paris



Misfiring Lyon extended their run of indifferent form with a 1-1 draw at Monaco on Sunday that leaves them in fourth place in the French top flight, 10 points behind league leaders Bordeaux.

The dominant force of the past decade, Lyon have now won just once in their last seven league matches and their title challenge appears to be fading by the week.

Michel Bastos fired Lyon into a 22nd-minute lead with a sublime 30-yard free-kick that zipped into the bottom-left corner but Monaco left-back Djimi Traore beat him to the ball, flicking it back over his head into the penalty area where Park Chu-Young volleyed into the unguarded net.

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Monaco exerted sustained pressure in the second half, with 20-year-old French winger Yohan Mollo going close on three occasions, but their only reward was a point that maintains their hold on 12th place.

Earlier, Lille's phenomenal run of form continued as they beat third-bottom Le Mans 3-0 to secure their fifth straight win.

The northern club had scored four goals in each of their four previous league wins, while also qualifying for the last 32 of the Europa League, and prevailed through goals from Aurelien Chedjou, Gervinho and Eden Hazard.

Chedjou headed Lille in front from Hazard's 12th-minute free-kick and they could afford the luxury of a missed Florent Balmont penalty before Gervinho finished a slick move to put the hosts 2-0 up on 27 minutes.

Hazard, the 18-year-old Belgian international midfielder, stretched Lille's advantage barely two minutes later when he ran from the centre circle before beating visiting goalkeeper Didier

Ovono. Victory takes Rudi Garcia's side, who will meet Fenerbahce in the Europa League knockout stage, up to third place, nine points behind leaders Bordeaux.

In the day's other match, Auxerre rescued a 1-1 draw at home to Toulouse thanks to a last-minute equaliser from Roy Contout.

Auxerre climb to seventh while Toulouse, who were eliminated from the Europa League following a 1-0 group-stage defeat at Belgians Club Brugge on Thursday, slip to 13th.

Defending champions Bordeaux pulled clear at the top of the division after cruising to a 4-1 victory at home to Lorient on Saturday, with striker David Bellion twice on target and Yoann Gourcuff in typically influential mood.

Marseille could have closed to within six points of the leaders but they were held to a 0-0 draw at Saint-Etienne despite the home side having to play with 10 men for over 80 minutes after the eighth-minute dismissal of Greek defender Efsthathios Tziavlaridis.

Hamburg edge Bremen

AFP, Berlin



Ten-man Hamburg beat Werder Bremen 2-1 in the north Germany derby on Sunday to go fourth in the Bundesliga and put themselves back in the title race behind leaders Bayer Leverkusen.

First-half goals from Dutch defender Joris Mathijsen and Germany defender Marcell Jansen came either side of the dismissal of Hamburg's Jerome Boateng who was shown a straight red card for bringing down Bremen's Marko Marin.

Hamburg took the lead when Jansen's cross found Mathijsen unmarked at the far post after nine minutes and the Dutchman headed home.

The home side's hopes looked to have suffered a hammer blow on 32 minutes when Boateng - who was also sent off on his Germany debut in Moscow in October - brought down Marin on the edge of the area.

Referee Florian Meyer brandished the red card, but Hamburg responded immediately when Dutch midfielder Eljero Elia slipped a superbly-timed pass to Jansen.

The Germany defender, who has converted to a midfield role for his club, won the race to the ball against Bremen goalkeeper Tim Wiese and slotted home from well outside the penalty area on 36 minutes.

Hamburg defended well for the whole of the second half and although Bremen's defender Naldo headed a consolation goal deep into injury time, it was too late and the result leaves Hamburg fourth while Bremen are now sixth.

Jansen, who had fought his way back into the Germany squad, finished the game in considerable pain after landing awkwardly and had to be helped off.

Cologne pulled away from the bottom three with a 3-0 win against Nuremberg in heavy

snow which leaves them 12th in the table while their visitors are now second from bottom, four points away from 16th-placed VfL Bochum.

On Saturday, Stuttgart enjoyed a timely confidence booster ahead of their Champions League match against defending holders Barcelona in the last 16 clash in February.

German squad members Cacau and Sami Khedira hit second-half goals to seal the 3-1 win over Hoffenheim to pull their side out of the bottom three.

This was Stuttgart's first win under coach Christian Gross who took over from Markus Babbel on December 6 and

their first success in ten league games since their last victory against Eintracht Frankfurt on September 26.

Earlier, teenager Toni Kroos scored twice to fire Bayer Leverkusen back to the top of the Bundesliga as the home side came from behind to inflict a 3-2 defeat on Borussia Moenchengladbach.

Bayern Munich stay third and were ruthless against bottom-side Hertha Berlin in a 5-2 rout at Munich's Allianz Arena.

But Berlin are still relegation candidates as they finish the first half of the season with just six points and are six points adrift at the foot of the table.



Bayern Munich forward Arjen Robben (L) celebrates his goal with teammate Mario Gomez during their Bundesliga clash against Hertha Berlin at Allianz Arena on Saturday. Bayern won 5-2.

IN BRIEF

'Pressure could hurt Spain'

AFP, Madrid

Spain's status as one of the favourites to win the 2010 World Cup could end up hurting the squad's chances, Liverpool's Spanish international Fernando Torres said in an interview published Sunday.

"Everyone expects a great deal from us and that pressure is not always good for a player," the 25-year-old striker told XLSemanal, the weekly magazine supplement of daily Spanish newspaper ABC.

"We have good players who have played harmoniously for three or four years now. If we miss this chance to win the World Cup, it is possible that we will not have a second opportunity. The pressure is enormous," he added.

Spain are in Group H alongside Chile, Honduras and Switzerland.

Slovenia opt for Johannesburg WC base

AFP, Ljubljana

Slovenia will be based in Johannesburg for the 2010 World Cup finals, the country's football federation announced on Sunday.

Slovenia will train at a school pitch in the Hyde Park district and will arrive in the city at the start of June 2010.

Matjaz Kek's side are in Group C at the finals along with England, USA and Algeria.

Almeria sack Sanchez

AFP, Madrid

Almeria have sacked their Mexican coach Hugo Sanchez following the Spanish club's 2-0 defeat away to Espanyol on Sunday which left it just one point above the relegation zone.

"We are forced to take this step to provoke a reaction from the team," the club said in a statement posted on its website.

The low-budget Andalusian team has lost eight of its 15 games this season.

The manager of Almeria's B team, former Steaua Bucharest midfielder Constantin Galca who is best-known in Spain for his spell with Espanyol, will take over on a temporary basis.

Sanchez is the fourth coach to part ways with a top-flight Spanish club this season following the departure of Abel Resino from Atletico Madrid, Juan Carlos Mandia from Racing Santander and Marcelino Garcia Toral from Real Zaragoza.

The 51-year-old, a former star striker for Atletico and Real Madrid in the 1980s, took over at Almeria in July 2008 after Unai Emery left for Valencia.

Juve suffer setback

AFP, Rome



Juventus suffered a serious Serie A title setback on Sunday when rock-bottom visitors Catania clinched a 2-1 win, handing the Turin giants a third straight defeat.

Substitute Mariano Izco escaped three minutes from time to hammer the final nail in Juve's coffin on a dreadful day for Ciro Ferrara's team in which their fans once again chanted racist slogans.

That loss was compounded later in the day when league leaders Inter Milan beat Lazio 1-0 at the San Siro to open up a nine-point gap over Juve heading into the winter break.

AC Milan remained second, eight points behind Inter, despite their game at Fiorentina on Saturday being called off due to the weather.

Ferrara's side came into Sunday's match with four defeats from their last five games in all competitions, and with goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon and defensive rock Giorgio Chiellini both out injured.

After surviving an early penalty scare as Japanese forward Takayuki Morimoto went down under a challenge from Nicola Legrottaglie, Tiago then gave one away as he tugged Nicolas Spolli's shirt in the box.

Jorge Martinez made the hosts pay as he stroked home the penalty.

Even that failed to spark much life into Juve and on 32 minutes, Ferrara had seen enough and hauled off 20-million-euro Brazilian flop Felipe Melo, throwing on Bosnian veteran Hasan Salihamidzic in his place, with Melo roundly jeered as he trooped off.

Juve were lively at the start of the second period with Diego, another expensive signing who has failed to live up to his billing, shooting over before Amauri shot straight at goalkeeper Mariano Andujar and Salihamidzic sent an effort inches wide of the far post.

However, the Bosnian drew Juve level on 66 minutes when a delightful ball over the top from Diego found him free behind a static defence and he turned smartly to shoot under Andujar.

Andujar spread himself to deny David Trezeguet with a quarter of an hour left and as

Juve pilled on the pressure, Catania hit them with a rapier counter-attack, with Gianvito Plasmati releasing Izco to beat Alex Manniger.

Worse may be yet to come for Juve as some Ultras chanted "there are no black Italians" during the first half -- the same chant that saw Juve forced to play a game behind closed doors last season.

Struggling Lazio put up little fight against Inter and the only surprise was that the champions did not manage to score more goals.

Samuel Eto'o scored the only one in 14th minute at the second attempt after Dejan Stankovic found him with a cross, also at the second attempt.

Fernando Muslera saved Eto'o's header but the ball fell kindly to the Cameroon striker to lash home past the grounded goalkeeper.

For Lazio it was the 10th game in a row their strikers have failed to hit the net, but Inter boss Jose Mourinho said this time it was due to how his team played.

"We managed the game well, we scored and then we controlled the game and had chances for a second," he said.

"Lazio's problems in front of goal are nothing to do with me, what interests me is how we controlled the game for 90 minutes."

"It's three important points given that Juve got none and Milan didn't play."

In other games, Napoli beat Chievo 2-0 at home to extend their unbeaten run to 11 games since coach Walter Mazzarri replaced former Italy boss Roberto Donadoni in early October.

Roma leapfrogged Parma to go fourth after beating the promoted side 2-0 in the capital.

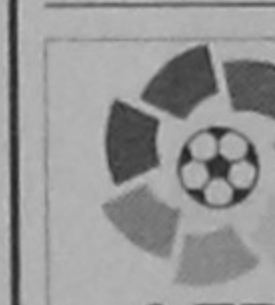
There were protests at lowly Livorno against the club's owners and the game was held up for two minutes due to smoke bombs before the hosts beat free-falling Sampdoria 3-1.

TOP SIX

| | played | won | drawn | lost | goals for | goals against | points |
|-------------|--------|-----|-------|------|-----------|---------------|--------|
| Inter Milan | 17 | 12 | 3 | 2 | 36 | 14 | 39 |
| AC Milan | 16 | 9 | 4 | 3 | 23 | 17 | 31 |
| Juventus | 17 | 9 | 3 | 5 | 30 | 21 | 30 |
| Roma | 17 | 8 | 4 | 5 | 27 | 22 | 28 |
| Parma | 17 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 22 | 22 | 28 |
| Napoli | 17 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 26 | 27 | |

C'Ron planning glory

AFP, Madrid



Cristiano Ronaldo, the world's most expensive footballer, believes Real Madrid are perfectly placed to snatch the Spanish title from bitter rivals Barcelona.

The Portuguese star scored a memorable goal in Real's 6-0 demolition of Real Zaragoza as his side closed the gap to leaders Barcelona to just two points ahead of the winter break.

"I'm working well and I want to carry on this way until the end of the season. I'm doing better every day. I missed two months and coming back was difficult, but things are working out for me," Ronaldo told the club's official website.

"It was important to seal the year with a victory, so we are happy about that. We must now think of the New Year, which we should start as well as we've ended this one."

On Sunday, Champions League hopefuls Deportivo La Coruna and Valencia battled to a draw 0-0 stalemate.

A victory at the Riazor would have put Valencia in third place, behind Barcelona and Real Madrid, while Deportivo also had the chance to move into the top four, but the game failed to live up to its billing.

Deport shaded the match thanks in part to the excellent Juan Carlos Valeron but

Valencia's strong organisation made them difficult to break down.

The best chances fell to Adrian Lopez and Sergio Gonzalez while Valeron himself came closest ending the deadlock with a header which came back off the crossbar before half-time.

Valencia stay in fourth spot, 10 points behind leaders Barcelona while Deportivo are sixth, 12 points off the top.

Atletico Madrid continued their disappointing run with a 1-1 draw at Tenerife, a result of little benefit to the relegation-threatened sides.

Juan 'Nino' Martinez put Tenerife ahead after three minutes, converting a knock-down by Alejandro Alfaro, but Jose Jurado equalised for Atletico, who were without their talismanic striker Sergio Aguero through injury.

Nino missed several chances to give Tenerife victory, none better than a penalty before half-time which goalkeeper Sergio Asenjo parried well.

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