

Irresistible Chelsea

AFP, London



Chelsea reasserted their credentials as Premier League title favourites on Saturday with a 7-2 demolition of Sunderland that manager Carlo Ancelotti hailed as their best performance of the season.

Manchester United, who have played a game more than the leaders, remained one point off the pace after a 3-0 win over Burnley at Old Trafford.

But it was another frustrating day for Liverpool, who conceded a last-minute equaliser at Stoke and wasted an opportunity to close the gap on Manchester City and Tottenham in the battle for top-four places.

With City going down to a 2-0 defeat at Everton, their first loss since Roberto Mancini took over as manager last month, Spurs were able to edge them out of the Champions League qualifying places thanks to a goalless draw at home to Hull.

Chelsea were irresistible at Stamford Bridge, where Nicolas Anelka and Frank Lampard both scored twice on an afternoon when they might easily have reached double figures.

Florent Malouda, Ashley Cole and Michael Ballack also found the net with Boudewijn Zenden and Darren Bent providing consolation efforts for Steve Bruce's outclassed side.

Ancelotti was delighted to see his side prove they could thrive in the absence of Didier Drogba, Michael Essien, John Mikel Obi and Salomon Kalou, all of whom are away at the African Cup of Nations.

There were no such fireworks at Old Trafford, where the Manchester United faithful had to wait until the 56th minute before Dimitar Berbatov broke Burnley's resistance.

Wayne Rooney's 16th goal of the season and

substitute Mame Biram Diouf's first for the club made sure that Brian Laws's first match in charge of Burnley ended in defeat.

A second-half goal from Sotirios Kyrgiakos had looked like it would be enough to ease the pressure on Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez following the club's FA Cup exit to Championship side Reading earlier in the week.

But the defensive frailty that has hampered Liverpool throughout the campaign was exposed again in the 90th minute when Robert Huth scrambled in an equaliser after the visitors had failed to clear a corner.

Having been denied what appeared to be a clear penalty in the first half, Liverpool suffered further frustration when Dirk Kuyt headed against the post in the fifth minute of injury time.

The draw left Liverpool languishing in seventh place, although the failure of Tottenham and Manchester City to win limited the damage for Benitez's men.

City had begun life under Mancini with four straight wins but they flunked their first serious test at Goodison Park.

A Steven Pienaar free-kick and a Louis Saha penalty earned Everton a thoroughly deserved victory and lifted David Moyes's side into the top half of the table for the first time this season.

Wigan pulled away from the relegation zone with a 2-0 win at fellow strugglers Wolves in a match both teams ended with ten men.

Wolves defender Richard Stearman received a second yellow card when he conceded a first-half penalty. Marcus Hahnemann saved Hugo Rodallega's spot-kick but Wigan made their numerical advantage count though James McCarthy on the hour.

The numbers were evened up when Wigan midfielder Hendry Thomas was ordered off shortly afterwards but Charles N'Zogbia made sure of the points for the visitors.



Chelsea winger Florent Malouda (R) prepares to shoot under pressure from Sunderland defender Jordan Henderson during their English Premier League encounter at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

Messi joins 100 club

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi scored his 100th Barcelona goal on Saturday as the Spanish champions thumped Sevilla 4-0 at Camp Nou to go five points clear of Real Madrid.

Messi, 22, scored twice in the final five minutes to make it five goals in his last two matches and take his career total to 101, becoming the youngest player in the club's illustrious history to reach the landmark.

An own goal from Julien Escude and a Pedro Rodriguez strike capped a miserable second half for Sevilla who paid a heavy price for knocking Barcelona out of the Kings Cup in midweek.

Real had crashed to their third defeat of the season with a 1-0 loss at Athletic Bilbao earlier on Saturday and Barca made them pay for the slip-up notching their first home win of 2010 to open up a five-point cushion.

"There is the whole second half of the season to go so we shouldn't get too complacent," said Messi, who leads the goalscoring charts with 14 goals.

It was the third meeting between Barca and Sevilla in 11 days and after losing out in the cup Barcelona set the score straight as Sevilla fell to a fourth consecutive league defeat and now languish down in sixth.

Bilbao are now level on points with Sevilla after their battling 1-0 win over Real at San Mames.

Spanish international forward Fernando Llorente headed the decisive goal after just two minutes and Bilbao survived an onslaught - with Karim Benzema, Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo all going close - to hold on for an historic win.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic returned from suspension for Barcelona and should have scored in the sixth minute but arrived too early to convert Thierry Henry's cross.

Henry almost scored himself on 12 minutes but Andres Palop rushed out to block the French striker's poked effort.

Palop also tipped over a Lionel Messi deflected shot before half-time.

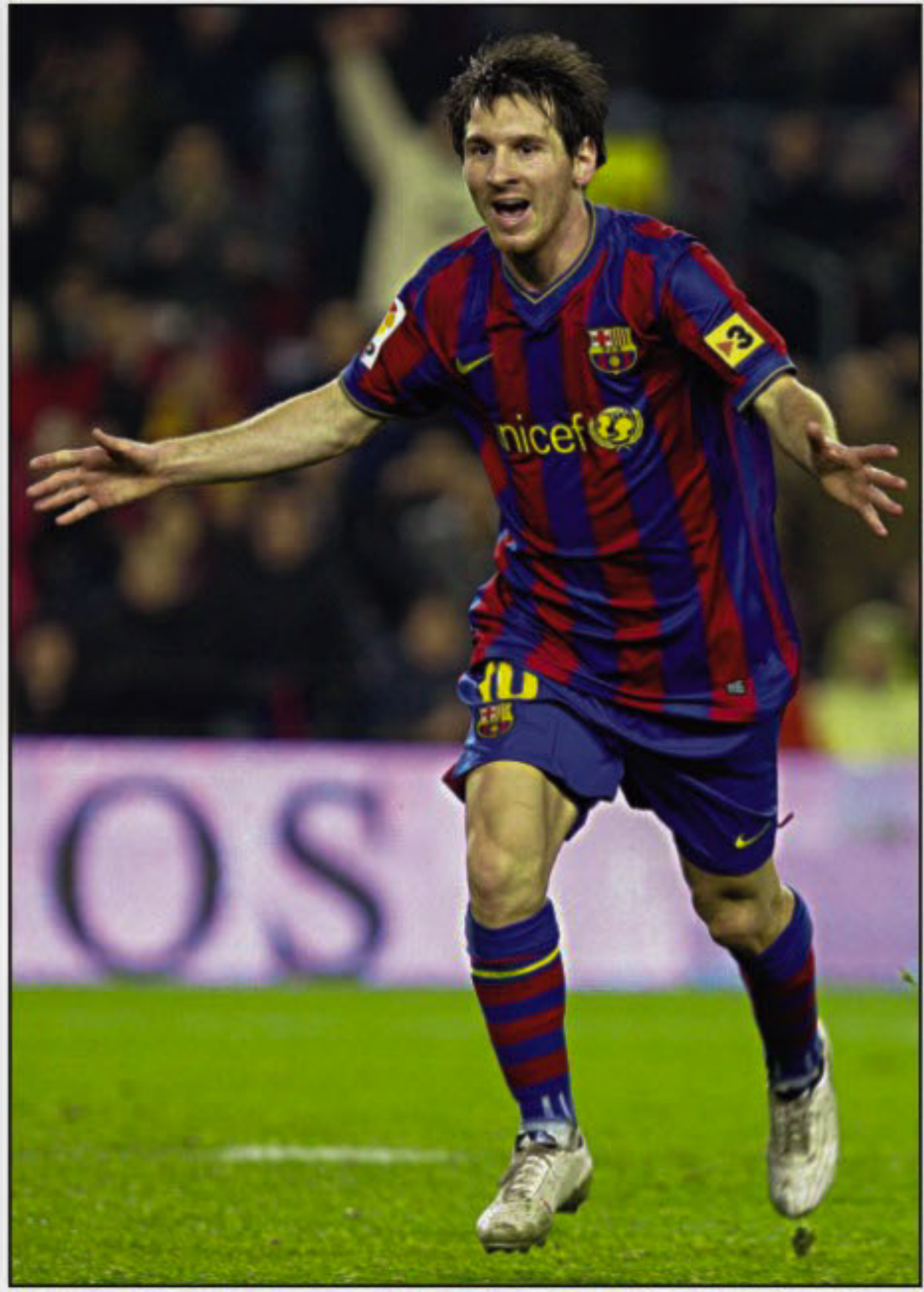
Barca got the early breakthrough with Gerard Pique's shot deflected in off Escude.

For the subsequent quarter hour Barca put their foot down as Palop made three saves to deny Messi and Henry while

Gaizka Toquero who crashed his shot against the other upright from close range.

It was a warning, but Real didn't take enough notice as they conceded a minute later.

A corner from the left took a



Barcelona star Lionel Messi celebrates his second goal against Sevilla during their Primera Liga clash at Nou Camp on Saturday.

Ibrahimovic had a header ruled out for offside.

A second goal was coming and arrived 20 minutes from time with Xavi threading an incredible pass to substitute Pedro who lobbed Palop and the goal had the whole crowd on their feet applauding.

Messi scored five minutes from time and added his second in stoppage time.

The result was bad news for Real whose away form is threatening to shatter their title bid.

Real dropped two points in their last away match with a 0-0 draw at Osasuna and fired blanks again at Bilbao.

Bilbao hit the woodwork twice in the first minute. Carlos Gurpegi thumped the left hand post and the ball came out to

slight deflection and Llorente powered a header past international team-mate Iker Casillas.

Real had kept three consecutive clean sheets so the goal was a shock and they responded in the best fashion with Benzema forcing a save from Gorka Iraizoz.

Real thought they had equalised when Kaka's threaded pass found Benzema but the Frenchman's shot came back off the post into Iraizoz's grateful arms.

Ronaldo, constantly jeered by the home fans, almost equalised on the hour mark but Iraizoz thwarted him and it was the same story in stoppage time with the goalkeeper keeping out a low drive from the Portuguese star.

Pele backs Maradona

AFP, Bogota

Brazilian legend Pele threw his support behind Diego Maradona on Saturday, insisting that the controversial Argentina coach was not to blame for his team's lacklustre form.

Pele said that responsibility for Argentina's mediocrity, which almost cost them a place in the World Cup finals, should be laid at the feet of the country's soccer bosses.

"Maradona wasn't an experienced coach. He started only last season (2008) so it's not his fault," Pele told a news conference here.

"I don't believe that he's guilty. Perhaps the guilty one is the person who agreed to appoint him as coach."

Despite the two countries' bitter rivalry, Pele believes that Argentina will be a force to be reckoned with at this year's World Cup finals in South Africa.

"They will be very strong," he said. "They will be well-prepared, a team to beat."

Neuer will stay at Schalke

AFP, Berlin

Manchester United and Bayern Munich target Manuel Neuer said Sunday he will stay at Bundesliga title-contenders Schalke 04, providing the Royal Blues qualify for the Champions League next season.

The 23-year-old is battling Leverkusen's Rene Adler and Bremen's Tim Wiese for the Germany goalkeeping shirt at this June's World Cup in South Africa with Schalke fourth in the Bundesliga before Sunday's game with Nuremberg.

Both United and Bayern have been reported to be tracking Neuer, but with a contract at Schalke until 2012, the shot-stopper says he will stay in Gelsenkirchen providing they reach the Champions League next season.

"I have a contract here (at Schalke) until 2012," Neuer told Bild on Sunday.

"If we reach the Champions League, I will stand in Schalke's goal next season."

"Even if some people might not believe me, I do not pay attention to what happens at Bayern or Manchester United."

"Our priority is to get into the top three of the Bundesliga and make a name for ourselves in the Champions League."

"Our coach Felix Magath has given us the best possible chance to achieve that."

Neuer made his Germany debut in June last year in the 7-2 win over the United Arab Emirates and was also in goal for Germany's last match in November in the 2-2 draw with the Ivory Coast.

Bookies pick Federer

Season's first Grand Slam starts today

AFP, Melbourne



Roger Federer is the bookmakers' pick to win the Australian Open and it is hard to go past his Grand Slam dominance but influential pundits are tipping it's Andy Murray's time.

All-time Grand Slam leader Federer is gunning for his 16th major title over the next fortnight after passing Pete Sampras's previous best of 14 following last year's Wimbledon triumph.

Underlining his incredible consistency, Federer has only missed playing in one of the last 18 Grand Slam finals, his sole slip-up coming when he lost to Russian Marat Safin in the semifinals of the 2008 Australian Open.

Yet flying in the face of the weight of opinion are seven-times Grand Slam champion John McEnroe and Australian Darren Cahill, the former coach of Grand Slam champions Andre Agassi and Lleyton Hewitt.

They are predicting a breakthrough triumph for the young Scot Murray, who has a 2008 US Open final appearance as his best effort from 16 Grand Slams.

Murray is saddled with the burden of national expectation of becoming the first British player to win a Grand Slam since Fred Perry's 1936 US Open triumph.

Murray could face a fourth round duel with Frenchman Gael Monfils and is projected to meet second seed Rafael Nadal in the quarters.

Federer, who is bidding for his fourth Australian Open title, opens against Russian Igor Andreev on Tuesday and could face either Lleyton Hewitt or Marcos Baghdatis in the fourth round before a potential quarter with Russian bogeyman Nikolay Davydenko.

Davydenko, the sixth seed, has beaten the Swiss legend at their previous two meetings and could pose another test.

Nadal kicks off his campaign against Australian Peter Luczak on Monday night, while third seeded Novak Djokovic takes on Spaniard Daniel Gimeno-Traver in the first round.

Djokovic is drawn to face French Open finalist Robin Soderling of Sweden in the quarters before a potential tilt at Federer in the semis.

Another prospective quarterfinal looms between US Open champion Juan Martin del Potro, the fourth seed, and Wimbledon finalist Andy Roddick.

In the women's side defending champion Serena Williams insists she is fit, well and ready to defend her Australian Open title from a strong field led by the returning Justine Henin and Kim Clijsters.

Williams appeared to be struggling with a left knee problem in her Sydney International final loss to Elena Dementieva on Friday but was moving freely during a charity doubles match for the Haiti earthquake victims here on Sunday.

She starts her tournament against Poland's Urszula Radwanska on Tuesday as she guns for her fifth Australian title.

Williams is one of only three players in the field to have lifted the trophy -- Maria Sharapova and Henin are the others.

World number two Safina is back to try and avenge her humiliating defeat to Williams in less than an hour last year, but she has been hampered by a back injury.

She leads a strong Russian challenge which also includes Svetlana Kuznetsova, Dementieva, and Vera Zvonareva -- all top 10 players.

Also back in business after a long lay-off with a shoulder injury is Sharapova, the 2008 champion and former world number one.

Serena's sister, Venus, will also be a threat but it is the return to Melbourne of Clijsters and Henin that has whetted appetites.

Pompey taking legal steps

AFP, London

Portsmouth have sent a legal letter to the English Premier League over their transfer embargo and withholding of television rights revenues, the beleaguered club's chief executive Peter Storrer said.

Pompey's seven million pound (£11.4 million dollar, 7.9 million euro) share of the latest payment of television income is being diverted by the EPL to clubs they owe money to over unpaid transfer deals.

The division's bottom team are unable to sign new players during the January transfer window because of an embargo placed upon them by the league.

The club are on the verge of trying to force the Premier League to relax the restrictions so they can bring in loan players to Fratton Park.

"I can confirm we have issued a legal letter to the Premier League to demand that the transfer embargo should be lifted," Storrer was quoted as saying by the Sunday Mirror newspaper.

"We believe we've a very good case against them. They have absolutely no right to withhold television money in advance of future payments or payments to foreign clubs."

Bari hold Inter

AFP, Rome



Bari breathed new life into the Serie A title race by holding champions Inter Milan to a draw for the second time this season after a 2-2 stalemate that included three penalties.

Inter, who were 2-0 down at one stage, now lead city rivals AC Milan by nine points, but the Rossonero have two games in hand with the derby to come next weekend.

But while Inter coach Jose Mourinho may feel this was two points dropped, as was the case when Inter hosted the southerners on the opening day of the season, this result was testament to Inter's powers of recovery.

Two Paulo Baretto penalties looked to have given Bari victory but Macedonia striker Goran Pandev pulled a goal back before Argentine strike partner Diego Milito's penalty earned the champions a share of the spoils.

Few clear-cut chances were created in the first half but Bari clearly had the better of things with Honduran winger Edgar Alvarez's pace causing considerable problems for makeshift left-back Ivan Cordoba.

And it was Alvarez who had the first clear sight of goal on 28 minutes as Massimo Donati's pass found a gap between Cordoba and centre-back Lucio with the Honduran racing on to the ball but with only Julio Cesar to beat he fired against the goalkeeper's legs.

Four minutes later

Hungarian Vladimir Koman slipped the ball wide to overlapping left-back Alessandro Parisi and his fierce drive was beaten away by Julio Cesar.

Inter seemed to be coming back into the match early in the second period as Wesley Sneijder struck a powerful free-kick from distance wide out on the left only for Belgian goalkeeper Jean-Francois Gillet to tip the ball around the post.

From the resulting corner Milito's shot was blocked and Cordoba sliced the rebound wide.

But the game changed on two penalties, the first given when Riccardo Meggiorini's cross from the left hit Walter Samuel's arm.

Baretto sent Julio Cesar the wrong way to open the scoring on the hour.

And just three minutes later Lucio gave away another penalty after clumsily bundling Parisi over in the box.

Baretto shot to the other corner this time, again sending Julio Cesar the wrong way.

Mourinho's response was immediate, throwing on winger Ricardo Quaresma and full-back Davide Santon.

Inter were soon level after some shoddy Bari defending.

A Mario Balotelli shot from distance on 69 minutes hit Andrea Masiello and Pandev was quickest to react to the loose ball to slot home.

Five minutes later a ricochet played Pandev in behind the Bari defence and Leonardo Bonucci brought him down with Milito despatching the third spot-kick of the game.

Alvarez had a chance to win the game when played in by Baretto but his first touch was far too heavy and Julio Cesar cleared.

Earlier in the day Cagliari went sixth, just three points off a Champions League position, with a 3-0 defeat of Livorno.

Surgery impasse over Berbatov

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson will on Monday make a decision on whether Dimitar Berbatov, a scorer in the 3-0 win over Burnley, requires knee surgery.

The Bulgarian striker has been struggling for a number of weeks with the injury and United had hoped he would be able to play through the discomfort, but he was bothered by his knee once again despite going on to score in United's victory at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Ferguson took him off in the closing stages and will now consider whether he needs an operation.

He said: "Dimitar was feeling his knee again. We'll look at it on Monday and we'll see (about surgery). He could have come off at half-time but he wanted to stay on again and that's good."

"Let's hope the goal does Dimitar some good. I thought he was the one that looked like scoring and it was one of those days when he kept knocking it past the post or over the bar."

"He had so many attempts, he must have had about 10 attempts and he'll be relieved to get his goal."

Egypt in last eight

AFP, Luanda



Egypt extended their record Africa Cup of Nations run to 14 games without defeat when securing their quarter-final berth with a 2-0 win over Mozambique on Saturday.

"We are very proud of this record," said Egypt skipper Ahmed Hassan. "But most importantly, we won today against a very strong Mozambique."

Earlier, in the first leg of Saturday's double header from Benguela, Nigeria moved closer to joining the champions in the last eight with a 1-0 defeat of Benin.

Egypt went ahead after

Dario Khan scored an own-goal - for the second successive game here in Angola - one minute after the restart.

Substitute Mohamed 'Gedo' Nagy put the game beyond doubt in the 81st minute to ensure The Pharaohs' progress.

Egypt, who cannot be dislodged from top spot in Group C, join competition favourites Ivory Coast, who assured their qualification from Group B 24 hours earlier.

After their opening loss to champions Egypt, Nigeria went into their game with enormous pressure on their shoulders, and duly netted the match winner after 42 minutes.

Everton striker Yakubu Aiyegbeni was the man on the spot, converting the penalty awarded after Romuald Boco handled a goal-bound header

by Osaze Odemwingie.

The goal atoned for Yakubu's miss earlier in the first-half, when put through on goal by Kalu Uche after 15 minutes, the big striker drilled his shot from inside the box inches away from the target with goalkeeper Rachad Chitou beaten.

This was Nigeria's third win in as many Nations Cup clashes with their neighbours and it moves the Eagles up to second on three points.

The result cost Benin striker Razak Omotoyossi 25,000 dollars after he struck a private wager on the game with his best friend, Nigerian striker Obafemi Martins.

Sunday's action from Lubango features Gabon against Tunisia with Cameroon taking on Zambia.