

# Unstoppable Barca

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona moved eight points clear of Real Madrid at the top of the Spanish league with a comfortable 3-0 win at lowly Valladolid on Saturday to round off an impressive first half of the season.

Two goals in as many minutes from Xavi (20 min) and Dani Alves (22) set the tone before Lionel Messi scored his sixth goal in three games to take his season's tally to 15.

Real, beaten 1-0 by Athletic Bilbao last time out, are now under extreme pressure to respond with a home win over Malaga on Sunday or risk Barcelona running away with the title.

It is exactly halfway through the season and Barca are still unbeaten and their tally of 49 points from 19 games is just one less than their record set last season.

"Two goals in two minutes changed the game for us and made it more comfortable," said Barca coach Pep Guardiola. "We got 50 points last season and 49 this season so we are on same track but there are lots of games left in the season."

The statistics make impressive reading with Barcelona notching 15 wins and four draws while they have the best defence conceding 10 goals and the best attack with 49 goals.

Barcelona become only the fifth team to go unbeaten for the first half of the season, joining Real Madrid, Athletic Bilbao, Espanyol and Real Sociedad in the elite club.

With Sergi Busquets injured midfielder Seydou Keita made a timely return from the African Cup of Nations following Mali's elimination.

Keita spurned a good chance early on with a header while Messi went close on 10 minutes before the breakthrough goal created and scored by Xavi on 20 minutes.

Xavi started the move with a neat flick and raced into the penalty area to volley in a pinpoint cross from Alves.

Alves was causing havoc down the right and scored himself two minutes later when his overhit cross floated into the top corner and the Brazilian celebrated with a samba dance.

Valladolid had their chances with Diego Costa forcing a fine save from Victor Valdes three minutes prior to Xavi's opener but there was a sense of inevitability that Barca would win after going 2-0 up so early on.

After 54 minutes Messi, who at 22 became the youngest Barca player to reach 100 goals last weekend, finished a fine move lashing home after a fine lay-off from Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

In other matches, Deportivo La Coruna climbed up to fourth with a 3-1 home win over Athletic Bilbao at the Riazor Stadium on Saturday.

Brazilian international Filipe Luis scored the opener on 49 minutes but injured his ankle as he collided with the goalkeeper and was stretchered off with what looked like a serious injury that could potentially endanger his World Cup dream.

Compatriot Juca added a second after 59 minutes before a Diego Colotto (79) own goal tested Depor's nerves in the closing stages but Pablo Alvarez made it 3-1 late on and the Depor players held up three fingers as a tribute to Filipe Luis who dons the number three shirt.

The win helped Depor put their 3-0 Kings Cup loss to Sevilla behind them and go fourth a point above Sevilla and Real Mallorca.

Bilbao come crashing back down to earth after their 1-0 win over Real and stay down in seventh.

Earlier, Sevilla enjoyed a huge slice of luck as they ended a run of four straight defeats with a 1-0 home win over Almeria on Saturday and move level on points with fifth-placed Real Mallorca.



Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi (R) fires a left-footer during their Primera Liga match against Valladolid at Jose Zorrilla Stadium in Valladolid on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

# Forget finances, relish Rooney

AFP, Manchester



Sir Alex Ferguson has pleaded with Manchester United supporters to put their dissatisfaction with the club's owners behind them and back his team as they attempt to retain their Premier League title.

Before Saturday's 4-0 victory over Hull, which featured an astonishing four-goal performance from Wayne Rooney, Ferguson used his programme notes to appeal for United's increasingly militant fans to cease their campaign against the Glazer family.

"The family of Manchester United is under pressure as a result of all the issues and controversies surrounding the ownership and financial situation of our club," wrote Ferguson. "Some of our fans are clearly unhappy with the financial position, but we mustn't allow the situation to become divisive."

"I could see our opponents rubbing their hands with glee at the thought of watching us fall out among ourselves if we don't all think carefully about what we are doing."

During the victory over Hull, which took United to the top of the table for the first time in over three months, supporters sporadically broke into chants against the Glazers although Ferguson insisted that was no problem for his players.

"I don't think it was dissenting against them at all and I don't think it affected the players," he said.

Instead, Ferguson focused upon Rooney's performance, which took his season's tally to 20 goals, three short of his personal best.

"Wayne's goals were, without a doubt, the highlight," said Ferguson.

"It's the first time he has scored four for us and the first time a United player has scored four since Ole Gunnar Solskjaer some years ago."

"That was pleasing. He's in great goal scoring form at the moment. I think he'll better 23, I'm sure of that. He's in great goalscoring form and that's an encouragement for Wayne. He'll want to develop himself as a scorer and today there were some terrific finishes."

Ferguson was also content with the return of England defender Rio Ferdinand for the first time since October.

He said: "I thought, apart from a spell with 20 minutes to go, that the back four looked very comfortable. Rio's presence, composure and balance stands out."

United now stand top of the Premier League for the first time in over three months, the sort of position Ferguson insisted he wanted to be in at the start of the year.

"Goal difference could be important and it's significant being top at this time of the season," he added. "I know opponents have games in hand but they have got to win those games. We're in the right place. It's better being top in January than anywhere else."

Opposite number Phil Brown joined in the praise for Rooney's astonishing efforts.

"When you've got the quality of Wayne Rooney playing against you, you don't feel hard done by with that scoreline," he said. "Half chances came along, we didn't take them and he did."

"Just because of his work rate, his application, he puts defenders under constant pressure and forces them to make mistakes."

"I would have to say Wayne is the best in Europe right now, having witnessed what I have just witnessed. It certainly bodes well for England this summer!"



FOUR-STAR ROONEY: Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney (3rd from L) scores the first of his four goals against Hull City during their English Premiership match at Old Trafford. PHOTO: AFP

# Robben sends Bayern top

AFP, Berlin



Dutch star Arjen Robben hit a second-half wonder goal on Saturday as Bayern Munich came from behind to win 3-2 at Werder Bremen as the German giants went top of the league.

Robben's stunning direct free-kick gave Louis van Gaal-coached Bayern their sixth straight league win while the Holland star hit his fifth league goal of the season on his 26th birthday.

"I am a very happy coach," beamed van Gaal.

"Werder Bremen took a few risks and we exploited them this time."

"I liked that we played with so much aggression, but we didn't take all the chances we created."

of saving on 78 minutes.

Van Gaal slipped over on the sidelines in his joy at the winning goal just before his compatriot Robben leapt on top of him to celebrate taking first place in the league.

"It must have looked a bit bizarre the way we celebrated, but we were both pretty happy," grinned Robben.

"We created something like ten chances, but we could not convert them."

"That is the way it goes sometimes - the ball just won't always go in."

"The win is important, it shows we are on the right path, we are playing good football."

It was a bitter blow for the home side who had opened the scoring after midfielder Aaron Hunt slotted home from close range after 10 minutes.

Bayern hit back when rising star Thomas Mueller scored after good work by Germany midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger on 25 minutes before Croatia striker Ivica Olmec netted from a Philipp Lahm cross ten minutes later.

since suffering a knee injury on October 3.

Bremen equalised when Portugal striker Hugo Almeida slotted home a top-class goal on 75 minutes before Robben's stunning winner.

An injury time goal from Bochum's Slovakia striker Stanislav Sestak robbed Schalke of the chance to go top as the Royal Blues were held 2-2.

Schalke took the lead when Uruguay striker Vicente Sanchez converted a pass from Jefferson Farfan in the fifth minute before ex-Germany striker Kevin Kuranyi made it 2-0 to the hosts just before the half-time whistle.

Borussia Dortmund are up to fourth in the table after their 1-0 win at home to Hamburg on Saturday evening.

Having picked up only their second win of the season last weekend, bottom side Hertha Berlin were held 0-0 at home by Borussia Moenchengladbach.

## IN BRIEF

### Honduras hammer USA

AFP, Los Angeles

Honduras trounced the United States 3-1 Saturday in a friendly football match between two teams bound for the World Cup in South Africa in June.

Honduras had goals from Carlos Pavon - who converted a penalty in the 19th minute - Jerry Palacios in the 37th and Roger Espinoza in the 53rd.

Clarence Goodson scored the Americans' lone goal in the 70th.

The hosts were a man down for much of the match, after defender Jimmy Conrad was ejected by Mexican referee Benito Archundia in the 17th minute for his second yellow card.

### No Egyptian journalist allowed

AFP, Benguela

Cameroon officials here on Saturday refused to allow accredited Egyptian journalists to cover their training.

Defending champions Egypt will face Cameroon in one of the quarterfinals of the Africa Cup of Nations on Monday at the Ombaka Stadium in Benguela.

Egyptian journalists, who included AFP photographer Khalid Desouki, were told they could not cover the training of the Indomitable Lions because Cameroonian journalists were also turned back by Egypt when they tried to cover their training in Benguela.

### SA opens WC stadium

AFP, Cape Town

South Africa's venue for one of this year's World Cup semi-finals staged its first test match on Saturday after it was completed last month.

Local clubs Ajax Cape Town and Santos kicked the first ball in the 68 000 seater Greenpoint stadium, in a match marked by colourful music celebrations and vuvuzela cries.

Only 20,000 tickets were made available for the game, in a move to test the capacity of the stadium. The venue will then be filled during a rugby match in two weeks time.

### Hamburg rope in Ruud

AFP, Berlin

Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy signed an 18-month contract on Saturday with Bundesliga side Hamburg having left Spanish giants Real Madrid on a free transfer.

His new club announced the news on Saturday night, after Hamburg's 1-0 defeat at Dortmund which left Bruno Labbadia's side fifth in the table, and the 33-year-old Dutchman has signed a contract until June 2011.

# Juve can't stop losing

AFP, Rome



Norway left-back John Arne Riise popped up in injury time to head home the winner as AS Roma condemned 10-man Juventus to an eighth defeat in 11 matches with a 2-1 success in Turin on Saturday.

The defeat will surely leave Juve coach Claudio Ranieri on the brink as his mis-firing team slumped to a sixth defeat in eight Serie A clashes, and to make matters worse Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon was dismissed.

The win moved in-form Roma to within two points of second-placed AC Milan, who play Inter Milan on Sunday.

They now have eight wins and three draws in their last 11 league matches but club captain Francesco Totti doesn't want to get carried away.

"We're going through a great period in terms of results, we stood up to Juve," he said. "Where do we want to get to? Right now we're not thinking about anyone else than ourselves."

Roma coach Claudio Ranieri, who was fired by Juve two games before the end of last season, earned his first win as a coach away to Juve but denied there was any extra satisfaction.

"The city (Rome) is starting to believe in this team, we're having fun and we're playing well," he said.

"I feel nothing personal, I'm part of Roma and I'm happy because we're in top four."

"It's an important win because Juve want to stay in race for a Champions League finish and a win today puts

them further behind us."

Ferrara sprung a surprise in his line-up, leaving out former World Player of the Year Fabio Cannavaro in favour of Nicola Legrottaglie, possibly in order to combat the aerial threat posed by Roma forward Luca Toni.

But both coaches' plans were thrown out the window as a couple of minutes in as Toni was pulled up with a calf injury and was replaced by Totti, making his comeback from injury.

The switch seemed to suck any attacking threat out of Roma and Juve dominated the first 45 minutes.

Bosnia veteran Hasan Salihovic fired well over from distance on nine minutes before Brazilian forward Amauri rose highest in a crowded box to meet Zdenek Grygera's right wing cross, heading wide under pressure from Nicolas Burdisso.

Juve's best chances were coming from the flanks and Amauri won another header on 31 minutes, this time from Fabio Grosso's left wing cross but again he directed it wide.



AS Roma's Norwegian defender John Arne Riise celebrates his late winner against Juventus during their Serie A clash at Olympic Stadium in Turin on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

# Eto'o wants to conquer Pharaohs

AFP, Benguela



Cameroon skipper Samuel Eto'o has said he wants his team to beat Egypt in Monday's Africa Cup of Nations quarterfinal here and bring to an end a poor run against the defending champions.

In the past five years, the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon have only managed a draw at home with Egypt, who have won the three other clashes between the two teams.

"We will fight and do our best because they have humiliated us for some time now, but I'm not God to say we will win," said Eto'o at a press conference here on Sunday.

"I have always tried to give the best of myself in every game and that's what I will do against Egypt."

"We have a squad of capable players, who are all here to defend the national colours. No player is here on a holiday and we will continue to work hard and stay focused."

Egypt were forced to a draw by Cameroon in a decisive 2006 World Cup qualifier in 2005, paving the way for the Ivory Coast to qualify for their first-ever World Cup, while at the 2008 Nations Cup in Ghana, the Pharaohs beat Cameroon 4-2 in a group game before they again defeated them

1-0 in the tournament final.

"Cameroon did not go to the 2006 World Cup in Germany because of Egypt, but because of Cameroon: we did not score the last-minute penalty to take us there," argued the Inter Milan striker, who added that he has fulfilled his promise to qualify the team to the last eight of the competition.

"And we would have won the final of the last Nations Cup after they beat us 4-2 in our first match of the tournament."

"Egypt are an experienced team, but on Monday it will be 11 players against 11 players and so we have to run faster than the Egyptians to win. No Egyptian player has four legs."

Cameroon coach Paul Le Guen said he has been worried that his team have let in early goals in their group match in Lubango.

"My concern is that at the start of our group matches, we conceded three early goals and it was difficult to come back after these goals," acknowledged the former Lyon coach.

"But I am satisfied with the team spirit. This is the most important thing and it is getting better and better."

The four-time champions had to come back against Zambia to win with a late goal, while they forced Tunisia to a 2-2 draw in an all-important final group game after going down within a minute.