

Imperious MU crush Arsenal

AFP, London



Manchester United closed the gap on Premier League leaders Chelsea as the champions swept to an impressive 3-1 win against title rivals Arsenal on Sunday.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side stunned the Gunners with two goals in four minutes in the first half at the Emirates Stadium and were never in danger of surrendering their lead.

Arsenal goalkeeper Manuel Almunia pushed Nani's cross into his own net before Wayne Rooney put the champions in complete control with his 100th Premier League goal.

South Korea winger Park Ji-Sung added United's third goal in the second half to ensure Ferguson's men moved within one point of Chelsea thanks to their most emphatic performance of the season.

England star Rooney demonstrated the predatory instincts that make him, on current form, the most lethal forward in the world, but it was Portugal winger Nani, revitalised in recent weeks, who stole the show with a superb display.

Arsenal, beaten for the first time in 11 league games, had no answer to either player and, although Thomas Vermaelen got one back late on, Arsene Wenger's team looked edged needed to win the title.

Rio Ferguson, who was without defensive duo Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic, selected Nani ahead of in-form Antonio

Valencia and Ryan Giggs and it proved an inspired decision.

With Chelsea's victory at Burnley on Saturday moving the leaders four points clear of United and five ahead of Arsenal, both teams knew a defeat could be disastrous to their title hopes.

Arsenal's Andrey Arshavin was a thorn in United's side in the early stages and the Russian twice threatened to open the scoring.

He curled a shot wide of Edwin van der Sar's far post, then went closer when he teased Wes Brown before tricking his way past the United defender and shooting narrowly wide.

Nani, playing on the right flank instead of his usual left wing berth, led United's response in imperious fashion.

He was causing Gael Clichy problems with his pace and nearly scored with a close-range shot after a goalmouth scramble.

Clichy had been warned but the French left-back had no answer to Nani again in the 33rd minute.

Faced with Clichy and Samir Nasri on the touchline, Nani cleverly flicked the ball past both opponents and surged into the penalty area.

Denilson couldn't stop Nani either and the United star was able to loft a cross goalwards. Almunia had a chance to tip it over, but mistimed his attempted save and could only push the ball into his own net.

Arsenal were rocked by Almunia's mistake and, just as in United's Champions League semi-final victory over the Gunners last season, Ferguson's

team were able to take full advantage on the counter-attack.

Back in May it was Cristiano Ronaldo administering the killer blow, this time it was Rooney who capped a stunning break in the 37th minute.

When Park cleared to Rooney from inside his own penalty area, there was no immediate sign of danger. But in an instant Rooney had passed possession onto Nani, who sprinted towards the Arsenal box.

Rooney had continued his run and the England forward met Nani's precise pass with a first-time shot that gave Almunia no chance.

It was a sublime finish to a breathtaking move and Ferguson and his staff rose as one to acclaim Rooney's 22nd goal of the season.

United had failed to win any of their last six away games against 'big four' rivals, but this one was in the bag just after half-time.

Rooney served notice that United weren't going to settle for two goals with an audacious effort that Almunia scrambled to save, but it was Park who put the result beyond doubt in the 52nd minute.

Running onto Michael Carrick's chipped pass, Park was able to break into the penalty area without a single Arsenal player making a challenge and the South Korean was still unopposed as he slotted a low shot past Almunia at his near-post.

Belgian defender Vermaelen reduced the deficit in the 80th minute when his acrobatic volley from the edge of the area deflected in off Brown.



Manchester United star Wayne Rooney (R) celebrates scoring the second goal with teammate Nani during their Premier League encounter against Arsenal at the Emirates on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Juventus, Milan both held

AFP, Rome



Alberto Zaccheroni was unable to deliver a winning start as Juventus coach on Sunday when the troubled Turin side were held 1-1 at home by lowly former club Lazio.

Stefano Mauri volleyed home in the 78th minute to earn the Roman visitors a draw just after Alessandro Del Piero had converted a dubious penalty to give Juve the lead.

The draw left Juventus, who also hit the woodwork with a crisp Diego shot, joint fifth in the Serie A table alongside Palermo on 34 points, and four points behind Napoli who currently occupy the final Champions League qualifying place.

Zaccheroni had replaced the sacked Ciro Ferrara on Friday.

Second-placed Milan's hopes of taking a big chunk out of Inter Milan's lead after their city rivals' visit to Parma was snowed-off, were dashed when they were held 1-1 at home by Livorno.

Cristiano Lucarelli's 53rd-minute goal earned the Tuscan visitors a point after Massimo Ambrosini had put Milan in

front just before half-time.

Third-placed Roma took advantage to pull level with Milan on points, having played one game more, by beating basement side Siena 2-1 despite missing captain Francesco Totti, Luca Toni and Mirko Vucinic who were all unfit.

Milan have 41 points from 21 games, eight points less than Inter, at the end of a disappointing eight days in which they were knocked out of the Italian Cup by Udinese and lost last weekend's derby 2-0.

Livorno were well organised at the San Siro and proved difficult to break down until Ambrosini hooked in with the help of a blunder by keeper Francesco Benussi, who gifted the midfielder the ball in front of goal when he flapped at a David Beckham cross. Ronaldinho had come closest before that when he thumped the post with a right-footed strike from the edge of the area in the 36th minute.

Both sides had penalty appeals turned down after Lucarelli poked in a mis-hit Claudio Bellucci shot while Benussi produced a fine save to keep out an Ambrosini header.

"We lacked that little something," Milan coach Leonardo said. "We went

into the game after these (bad) results and we needed a good performance.

"We didn't play a great match but it wasn't bad either. We didn't take our chances against a side that came to defend."

In the capital, John Arne Riise, who scored a stoppage-time winner against Juventus last weekend, gave Roma a deserved lead with a spectacular left-footed volley into the far corner in the 29th minute.

The visitors responded four minutes before half-time when Simone Vergassola touched in the rebound of a Mato Jajalo effort.

But Stefano Okaka, who is set to join Premier League side Fulham on loan on Monday, back-heeled a cross from fellow substitute Adrian Pit to seal victory for Roma in the 88th minute.

Fiorentina, rocked in the week by Romania forward Adrian Mutu's failed drugs tests, drew 2-2 at 10-man Cagliari.

Sampdoria, who denied reports they plan to loan out injured fan favourite Antonio Cassano after tension with coach Luigi Del Neri, beat second-from-bottom Atalanta 2-0 with first-half goals by Angelo Palombo and Giampaolo Pazzini.



PHOTO: AFP

Juventus's veteran striker Alessandro Del Piero is ecstatic after scoring the opening goal against Lazio during their Serie A clash at Turin's Olympic Stadium on Sunday.

Bayer blitz Freiburg

AFP, Berlin



Bayer Leverkusen on Sunday took over from Bayern Munich as Bundesliga leaders for the second week running after blitzing Freiburg with three goals in four minutes on their way to a 3-1 win.

Leverkusen remain the only side unbeaten in the Bundesliga this season and stunned Freiburg with first-half goals by Germany striker Steffen Kiessling, Swiss forward Eren Derdiyok and ex-Liverpool defender Sammi Hyypia.

Although Bayern picked up their seventh consecutive league win with a 3-0 victory over Mainz on Saturday, Leverkusen went back to the top and two-points clear after Sunday's win.

"We changed our playing style going into this game and opted to take fewer risks," said Bayer coach Jupp Heynckes.

"We had difficulties in the game's opening stages, but if we raise the pace of the game, goals tend to follow."

"Freiburg played quite defensively, but we showed our morale is high by breaking them down. We want to play in Europe,

that has to be our aim."

Germany squad member Kiessling remains the league's top scorer after he bagged his 13th goal of the season on 36 minutes with a well-taken header.

Then Derdiyok bagged his eighth of the season when he capitalised on a mistake in the Freiburg defence just 60 seconds later for his eighth league goal of the season.

Hyypia made sure of the win with his second goal in two games when his header beat Freiburg goalkeeper Simon Pouplin five minutes before the half-time whistle.

Defender Felix Bastians pulled a consolation goal back for Freiburg, but the defeat leaves them 15th in the table, just one off the relegation zone.

Earlier, Stuttgart coach Christian Gross picked up his fourth straight win and remains undefeated after seven games in charge as his side enjoyed a 4-1 win over Borussia Dortmund.

Goals by Russia forward Pavel Pogrebnyak and Serbian striker Zdravko Kuzmanovic put Stuttgart in charge before Romanian striker Ciprian Marica and Christian Traesch scored late goals to put the result beyond doubt.

The result means the home side have

now claimed 12 points from their last four league games with Spanish giants Barcelona beheading in the Champions League last 16 clash on February 23.

Schalke 04 are third after their 2-0 win over Hoffenheim on Saturday with goals by striker Kevin Kuranyi and midfielder Lukas Schmitz while the defeat leaves Hoffenheim ninth in the table.

Dutch winger Arjen Robben, Germany striker Mario Gomez and defender Daniel van Buyten all scored in Bayern's win over Mainz in snowy conditions which leaves Bayern second at the end of the weekend.

Elsewhere, Werder Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf is in a precarious position as his side have now gone seven German league games without a win after they went down 4-3 at midtable Borussia Moenchengladbach.

Second from bottom Nuremberg picked up only their second win in their last 10 games when they won 3-1 at Hanover and the result leaves bottom side Hertha Berlin five points adrift after a scoreless draw with Bochum in the capital.

Cologne are up to 13th after their second consecutive win having beaten Eintracht Frankfurt 2-1.

On Friday, defending champions Wolfsburg drew 1-1 draw at Hamburg.

Egyptians rejoice

AFP, Cairo

Cairo erupted with joy on Sunday after the national football team's 1-0 triumph over Ghana in the Africa Cup of Nations final that secured Egypt's third successive championship on the continent.

A huge roar rose over the teeming Egyptian capital as national hero Mohamed "Gedo" Nagy scored in the 85th minute, clinching victory for the Pharaohs in the final played in the Angolan capital.

Dancing and drumming broke out in the streets -- from Giza in the south to Nasr City in the north -- as delirious Egyptians rushed out onto the streets from homes and cafes, draped in the national flag and setting off bangers.

"Egypt, Egypt!" cried dozens of fans as they darted between cars in the Dokki district, blocking traffic.

"It was a bit of a crazy game! I can't express how happy I am," cried Hisham, an overwhelmed young man in the Maadi district. Hani, a 35-year-old resident of Heliopolis, said it was "a footballing miracle!"

Amid patriotic music on television stations, President Hosni Mubarak sent personal congratulations to the team which remain champions of Africa despite the disappointment of not reaching the World Cup finals in South Africa.

Egypt's victory in the Africa Cup of Nations was the country's seventh and also took the Pharaohs into the record books as it was their third win of the title in a row.

The joy was shared by thousands of Palestinians in the neighbouring Gaza Strip, where cars took to the streets of Gaza City blowing their horns accompanied by cries of "Egypt, Egypt!"

Supporters waved Egyptian and Palestinian flags as police of the Islamist movement Hamas which controls the territory looked on.

Edmilson back in Spain

AFP, Madrid

Real Zaragoza have signed Brazilian international Edmilson from Palmeiras until the end of the season, with the option of keeping him for a further year, the Spanish club said on Sunday.

The 33-year-old defensive midfielder is no stranger to La Liga, having played for European champions Barcelona for four seasons and then spent six months at Villarreal, before returning to Brazil with Palmeiras last year.

Edmilson has Italian as well as Brazilian citizenship so he will not occupy one of the positions reserved for players from outside the European Union, the club added.

He has earned more than 40 caps for Brazil and was part of the Brazilian side that won the World Cup in 2002.

The player becomes the seventh new arrival at struggling Zaragoza since the start of the month, following defender Matteo Contini, goalkeeper Roberto Jimenez, strikers Adrian Colunga and Humberto Suazo, and midfielders Jiri Jarosik and Eliseu.

Zaragoza climbed one place to 18th in the table on Sunday after defeating minnows Tenerife 3-1.

Negredo leads Sevilla

AFP, Madrid



Sevilla breathed new life into their Champions League ambitions with a 2-1 victory over fellow European hopefuls Valencia on Sunday with Alvaro Negredo grabbing both goals.

It was a key game for Sevilla who had suffered a worrying slump since Christmas, losing three of their last four games but they rose to the occasion against third-placed Valencia.

Sevilla took the game to the visitors and were a constant threat down the right-wing while Alexis Ruano struggled in defence.

From a 22nd-minute corner Sevilla went ahead as Julien Escudé flicked on the ball for Negredo to slot home.

Midway through the second half Negredo finished off a well-worked move for Sevilla's second, and his seventh of the season.

Valencia battled gamely in the later stages with top-scorer David Villa conjuring up a couple of chances before David Navarro scored a consolation goal in injury time.

The result moved Sevilla up to fourth place on 36 points, three behind Valencia in third. Barcelona still lead the table with 52 points, five ahead of rivals Real Madrid.

Villarreal sacked coach Ernesto Valverde following the club's 2-0 defeat at home to

Osasuna. Valverde, who previously coached Espanyol and Greek side Olympiakos, is the sixth La Liga coach to lose his job this season.

Juanfran Torres scored both Osasuna's goals.

"This was the worst since I have been here. We lost and played really badly," said Valverde after Sunday's loss.

Atletico Madrid coach Quique Sanchez is another man under pressure after his side crashed 2-0 at home against relegation-threatened Malaga.

Malaga took an early lead with an unmarked Sergio Duda firing home after just three minutes.

On the counter-attack after the break Malaga grabbed a second though through Javi Lopez as the visitors moved three points off the relegation zone.

A brace from Carlos Calvo helped bottom side Xerez come from behind to beat high-flying Mallorca 2-1.

Xerez had only one win to their name all season but they took the game to Mallorca from the start.

Although they had the bulk of the possession Pierre-Webb scored against the run of play for Mallorca mid-way through the first half.

In the second half, Xerez deservedly drew level with Calvo firing a right-foot rocket home from 30 yards and then completed the turnaround with a second 12 minutes from time.



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla midfielder Alvaro Negredo celebrates one of his two goals against Valencia during their Primera Liga tie at the Sanchez Pizjuan Stadium on Sunday.

Lyon grab lifeline

AFP, Paris



Lyon fought back from a goal down to beat 10-man Paris Saint-Germain 2-1 at the Stade Gerland on Sunday and move up to fourth in the table, breathing new life into their flagging campaign.

The seven-time champions were looking for a positive response after being knocked out of both domestic cup competitions earlier in the week but they fell behind to an early goal from Mevlut Erding.

The hosts struggled to establish any kind of foothold in the match but in the 60th minute the game changed when PSG centre-back Mamadou Sakho was shown a straight red card for a last-man foul on Bafetimbi Gomis.

Gomis brought Lyon level by lashing home a rebound following a corner in the 77th minute and three minutes later Cris rose above the Paris defence to send a looping header over Apoula Edel that completed the turnaround.

Lyon climb above Monaco and Auxerre to fourth, a point behind third-place Lille and nine behind leaders Bordeaux, while PSG remain 14th after their third straight league defeat.

Lyon coach Claude Puel had called on his side to bounce back from their cup heartache but they started lethargically and were caught cold when Erding touched home an 11th-minute corner from Sebastien Bassong.

Goalkeeper Remy Vercoutre then twice denied PSG's Guillaume Hoarau, first by blocking his low effort from the left and then by acrobatically turning a close-range header over the bar.

Lyon belatedly came to life at the end of the first half and Jeremy Toulalan saw a long-range effort take a deflection off Sammy Traore and roll against the left-hand post before Hoarau hacked clear.

Booted off at half-time by the home fans, Lyon almost fell 2-0 down early in the second period when Vercoutre was forced into two close-range saves by Erding after Hoarau's initial shot was blocked.

Sakho's dismissal handed Lyon a route back into the match and PSG's goal was soon under siege.

Edel saved athletically from Cesar Delgado and Gomis crashed a shot against the post, but the visitors' luck soon ran out and Gomis could have claimed a second when his thumping strike clipped the woodwork in injury time.

Auxerre boosted their bid for European football next season by beating relegation-threatened Saint-Etienne 1-0 at the Stade Abbe Deschamps.

Centre-back Jean Pascal Mignot scored the decisive goal 12 minutes from time when he dispatched Valter Birsa's right-wing corner at the near post.

The visitors appeared to have brought themselves level when Gonzalo Bergessio netted four minutes from the end but his strike was controversially ruled out for offside.

Valenciennes drew 1-1 at home to Sochaux, with Johan Audel's 21st-minute opener for the hosts cancelled out by Damien Perquis's equaliser nine minutes into the second period.

In Saturday's matches, leaders Bordeaux were held to a surprise 0-0 draw at home to second-bottom Boulogne, enabling second-placed Montpellier to move to within six points of the champions by beating Marseille 2-0.