

C'Ron on the double

AFP, Madrid



A brace from Cristiano Ronaldo helped Real Madrid to a 3-0 win over Xerez on Saturday that put them just two points behind Spanish league leaders Barcelona, who are in action on Sunday.

Returning from a two-game suspension, Ronaldo was the chief protagonist throughout for the visitors but in the first half Real did not have it all their own way.

Chances for both sides saw Jeronimo Momes and Ronaldo hit the woodwork at either end but after the break Real began to dominate.

Defender Alvaro Arbeloa made the breakthrough after 64 minutes before Ronaldo wrapped the game up with two goals in two minutes.

Kaka was the provider on both occasions for the Portuguese, who scored first with his head and then via a simple side-foot finish.

"Scoring is tough, no matter who the opponent is. We were up against a good Xerez team in the first half," said Real coach Manuel Pellegrini.

"The field of play wasn't in the best of shape, but we maintained our discipline. This team is mature and ready to battle for 90 minutes. We know we can't demolish every opponent.

"Cristiano Ronaldo attracts a lot of defenders. Scoring upon his return from suspension was the best thing that could happen to him."

Earlier, a cool Juan Mata finish rescued a point for a battling Valencia side, who drew 1-1 against Sporting Gijon.

Despite going into the game on the back of four straight defeats, it was Sporting who began the livelier and they went ahead through a fine curling strike from Diego Castro.

Valencia were struggling in defence without David Navarro and Alexis Ruanoes but going forward they began to find their feet, with David Villa -- returning to the club where he began his career -- denied by an inspired Juan Pablo in the Sporting goal.

It appeared as though it was not going to be Valencia's day after they hit the post twice and Mata missed a one-on-one chance with the goalkeeper, as Sporting were forced further and further back.

However, with 14 minutes to go, Ever Banega supplied Mata with an excellent through ball and this time he made no mistake, finishing clinically.

In Saturday's late match, Villarreal overcame Athletic Bilbao 2-1 in a hot-tempered game that culminated in three red cards.

Villarreal left-back Joan Capdevila gave his side the lead after ghosting into the box in the fifth minute but the visitors drew level 20 minutes later when Igor Gabilondo cracked an unstoppable 30-yard shot into the top corner.

Brazil international striker Nilmar re-established Villarreal's lead just before half-time and Bilbao spurned a golden opportunity to equalise when Andoni Iraola's penalty was saved by Diego Lopez at the death.

Frustrations boiled over in the game's closing stages, with red cards shown to Villarreal defender Diego Godin and visiting pair Pablo Orbaiz and Javi Martinez.

Villarreal climb one place to ninth, four points behind seventh-placed Bilbao.

Montpellier go top

AFP, Paris



French top-flight surprise package Montpellier moved level on points with leaders Bordeaux by beating Grenoble 1-0 on Saturday, while title-chasing Marseille edged south coast rivals Monaco 2-1.

Montpellier, promoted from Ligue 2 last season, took the lead in the 28th minute when striker Victor Montano provided an emphatic finish to a sweeping move and his goal was enough to secure all the points.

"We're joint-leaders with Bordeaux, who play tomorrow, but that doesn't change anything," said Montpellier coach Rene Girard.

"Things can change quickly. We're playing for as many points as possible. There is a pack behind us. We're taking the games one at a time."

Defending champions Bordeaux, who were eliminated from the French Cup by Monaco in mid-week, can restore their three-point advantage on Sunday if they win at home to fifth-bottom Saint-Etienne.

Marseille dominated the first half of the Mediterranean derby, with Argentine playmaker Lucho Gonzalez at the heart of their aggressive start and Mathieu Valbuena twice denied by Monaco goalkeeper Stephane Ruffier.

The visitors broke the deadlock in controversial circumstances in the 37th minute, when Mamadou Niang converted a typically cool penalty that he himself had won with a dramatic tumble under minimal pressure from Cedric Mongongu.

Monaco levelled the score three minutes later when striker Moussa Maazou's volley took a deflection off Stephane Mbia and crept inside Steve Mandanda's near post.

Niang and Souleymane Diawara both threatened to put OM ahead before Monaco midfielder Nicolas Nkoulou finally obliged by heading Valbuena's inswinging cross past his own goalkeeper in the 89th minute.

Monaco captain Alejandro Alonso compounded his side's misery in injury time when he was yellow carded for a sly kick on Teye Taiwo and then sent off for sarcastically applauding the referee.

"It's a big result, but it wasn't just about the

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Ruud awakening

AFP, Berlin



Former Real Madrid and Manchester United striker Ruud van Nistelrooy was in double form on only his second run out since joining Hamburg on Saturday.

The Dutch forward scored in the 75th and 77th minutes to add to Marcus Berg's first-half opener to lift Hamburg to a 3-1 win over VfB Stuttgart that maintained their hold on fourth place.

Van Nistelrooy left Real Madrid on a free transfer in the January transfer window and has made an instant impression for his new team despite being well short of full fitness after spending much of the season in

Spain on the bench.

Later Bayern Munich stretched their winning run in the league to nine games and 12 overall with a 3-1 victory over Borussia Dortmund to draw level on points with Bayer Leverkusen, who remain top by the slenderest of margins on goal difference -- 30 to 29. Leverkusen, who have topped the table since October, held onto the lead with a 2-1 home win over reigning champions VfL Wolfsburg.

Stefan Reinartz gave them a 48th-minute lead with an own goal from Andre Lenz increasing their advantage on 67 minutes when the Wolfsburg keeper knocked the ball over his own line after a rebound from Eren Derdiyok's header hit his leg.

Bosnia and Herzegovina striker Edin Dzeko gave Wolfsburg reason to hope 11

minutes from time but Leverkusen held on.

This was Wolfsburg's ninth match without a win and left them in a lowly 13th place.

Louis van Gaal's Bayern went into Saturday's late kick-off on a high after brushing aside second division Furth 6-2 in the German Cup in mid-week and with France international Franck Ribery fit to play after a four month league lay-off with injury.

They fell behind when Dortmund's Egyptian Africa Cup of Nations winner, Mohammed Zidan, struck in the fifth minute but Bayern captain Mark van Bommel grabbed a 21st-minute equaliser with a 20-yard thunderbolt.

The second half was only five minutes old when Ribery set up Dutch international Arjen Robben to tap in for his fifth goal in as many matches.

Mario Gomez completed a good day for Bayern with the third goal in the 65th minute.

Bottom club Hertha Berlin grabbed a point against mid-table Mainz 05 but remain four points off second-from-bottom side Nuremberg, who lost 2-1 to Borussia Muenchengladbach on Friday.

Ruud van Nistelrooy knew he had to take matters into his own hands as his first two goals for Hamburg on Saturday secured them an important 3-1 away win over Stuttgart.

The Dutchman entered the field of play in the 65th minute and, little over ten minutes later, he found the back of the net twice to determine the encounter and confirm why the northern Germany club have made him one of the top earners in the Bundesliga.

"For Ruud to score twice straight after coming on is extraordinary," said Hamburg coach Bruno Labbadia. "But we know how strong he is in the penalty area. And he has proven that impressively."

Stuttgart coach Christian Gross acknowledged that Van Nistelrooy had been "decisive" in his first defeat since taking over as coach last December. And Van Nistelrooy was delighted with the start he has made to life with Hamburg.

"These two goals are fantastic for me but above all they are important for the team," he said. "It was 1-1 and we really wanted to win this game. Therefore, I kept looking at the clock and when I was brought on, I knew that I had to do something about it. This victory will give us the further motivation for the coming weeks."



Real Madrid defender Alvaro Arbeloa (L) celebrates with forward Cristiano Ronaldo (R) after scoring the opening goal against Xerez during their Primera Liga match at the Chapin stadium in Xerez on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

'I will be back to Man Utd one day'

SOCCERNET

Despite making a world record £80 million move to Real Madrid last summer, Cristiano Ronaldo has said he envisages himself returning to play for Manchester United again in the future.

Ronaldo spent six seasons at Old Trafford before moving to the Bernabeu - winning three Premier League titles, the Champions League in 2008 and a number of personal accolades - and has adjusted well to life in Spain.

Two goals against Xerez on Saturday night took his tally in Madrid to 15 goals in 16 games in all competitions but despite his success in La Liga, Ronaldo admits that United still have a place in his heart and that he would like to return to the club.

"Of course I miss playing for Manchester United," Ronaldo said in the News of the World. "I played there for six years and that's a long time."

"I am still interested in watching Manchester United and, you never know, maybe in the future I could return to play there. It's always possible."

"I want to fulfil my contract here but, in the future, only God knows. I will not say I am not happy here at Real Madrid. I am really happy and everyone knows this is my club but, of course, I miss Manchester United, the boss, the players, because I left family there."

Sir Alex Ferguson brought an 18-year-old Ronaldo to United from Sporting Lisbon when paying £12.24 million in the summer of 2003.

Becks not sure of start

INTERNET, undated

David Beckham is not guaranteed a place in the AC Milan team which faces Manchester United next Tuesday, although his chances look promising after coach Leonardo praised his versatility.

After starting Milan's first five league games of 2010, Beckham has been a substitute in their last two, although he did play the final 15 minutes of the 3-2 win over Udinese last night.

But Leonardo discarded the notion that former United midfielder Beckham was being saved for his 'special match' next week, insisting he had and will continue to pick the team he believes is best suited for each individual game.

"We know it's a very special match for him," said Leonardo. "It's very special to play in the Champions League against his own team, let's say it like that."

"But we have got to analyse everything and we have a lot of players in good condition."

"We'll see how everybody is to choose the best team."

Amantino Mancini last night took the role Beckham has occupied since arriving at the Rossoneri in December, but he is ineligible to face the Red Devils having already appeared in the competition for his former club Inter Milan.

His position will therefore be up for grabs.

Mancini was replaced by Alexandre Pato last night while Beckham had to wait until late on before taking the place of Ronaldinho, whose place in the team on Tuesday does not appear to be in any doubt after another inspirational performance against Udinese.

But Leonardo's praise of Beckham's adaptability means the former England captain has a good chance of featuring against his former employers.

"I think he can play anywhere," added Leonardo.

"He's smart and intelligent and tactically he's perfect. There are no problems choosing a system or a position for him."

"He's been doing very well this year. He arrived in December and he knows the team and how we play."

"I think David has nothing to prove to anybody."

"His career speaks for itself because what he did in football is something very big."

IN BRIEF

Etherington talks of gambling losses

SOCCERNET

Stoke winger Matthew Etherington has admitted he lost £1.5 million before giving up gambling and claims card games between team-mates were a problem during his time at West Ham.

Etherington, 28, revealed he was asked by family members to seek help for his addiction last year, and he recently disclosed he had been attending meetings of Gambling Anonymous in Birmingham.

He joined Stoke from West Ham in January 2009, and confirmed he had heavy debts when he moved to the Britannia Stadium.

"I managed to pay off some debt but there was still some outstanding, about £800,000," Etherington told the Mail on Sunday. "But I lost more than that in all. About £1.5 million. Definitely."

He explained how a card-playing culture at West Ham affected his emotions heading into matches, and claims the club's then manager, Alan Pardew, put a halt to the games.

Etherington said: "There were card schools at West Ham and it did get a little bit out of hand. People were taking three, four, five grand on the bus with them. When that was gone, you were borrowing more."

"You could win 20 grand or lose 20 grand on a single journey, which is ludicrous. Then some would play in their rooms. It wouldn't just stop on the bus."

"It can't be good for team morale. Any normal human being, if you are losing a lot of money, you are not going to be happy about it and you are going to resent the person taking it off you."

"You could be going out onto a pitch knowing that your win bonus or appearance money that day is more or less down the drain because you have lost it already. Alan Pardew stopped it, which he was right to do."

Roma irrepressible

AFP, Rome



Unstoppable AS Roma roared back up to second in Serie A after a 4-1 home success against Palermo extended their unbeaten run to 20 games.

Claudio Ranieri's team have now won 17 and drawn three of their last 20 matches in all competitions and show no signs of letting up.

Brighi scored a brace while Brazilian substitute Julio Baptista and Norway left-back John Arne Riise added the others with Fabrizio Miccoli scoring a late consolation for the Sicilians from the spot.

The victory brought Roma to within six points of leaders Inter Milan, having played a game more, and Brighi suggested his team believe they can overhaul the champions, who travel to fourth-placed Napoli on Sunday.

"Things are going well for us and we're aiming for as high as possible. Tonight was difficult, we struggled but we took home the three points."

"Tomorrow we'll be supporting Napoli. Of course we're well behind and we know that Inter are a great team."

"They need to drop points but we'll do what we can and then see what they do."

But this victory, much like Roma's 1-0 win away to Fiorentina last week, owed as much to early resilience as later brilliance.

In Florence Roma had been outplayed for almost the entire game before picking their hosts' pockets with a late winner.

And here in the capital they were second best throughout the first half but still turned around

with a 1-0 lead at the interval.

Fifth placed Palermo had much to play for knowing they could move into the Champions League places with a win but they could not match Roma's clinical finishing.

There was a touch of fortune about their opener on 33 minutes as Francesco Totti's corner found Brighi just inside the area and his volley looked like it might drift wide but Cesare Bovo got his head on it and diverted the ball past his goalkeeper Salvatore Sirigu.

Palermo came roaring back and Fabio Liverani's cross to the back post found Edison Cavani whose volley from a tight angle was kicked away by Julio Sergio.

Moments later the Brazilian stopper tipped another shot from the Uruguayan forward away at full stretch.

Miccoli then curled a free-kick just past the near post with the unsighted Sergio a static spectator.

Palermo came out for the second period fired up and reported Manchester United and City target Simon Kjær headed over from five yards.

But they soon fell further behind when Brighi teed up Baptista, who had replaced Totti at the break.

And just after the hour mark Brighi surprised Sirigu from distance to make it 3-0.

Ten minutes from time Palermo got on the scoresheet from a controversial penalty as Rodrigo Taddei and Daniele De Rossi sandwiched Javier Pastore, although that appeared suspiciously just outside the box.

But then just three minutes later Riise settled any doubts as he met David Pizarro's cross at the far post and thrashed a shot into the roof of the net.



AS Roma striker Julio Baptista (C) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Palermo during their Serie A match at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Hamburg's striker Ruud van Nistelrooy is congratulated by his teammates after scoring during their Bundesliga clash against Stuttgart on Saturday.