

Real thrash Villarreal

AFP, Barcelona



A double from Argentinian striker Gonzalo Higuain helped Real Madrid coach Manuel Pellegrini celebrate a 6-2 victory over his former team Villarreal as the winners kept up the pressure on Barcelona on Sunday.

Real - who are just two points behind Barcelona - started like a dream with Cristiano Ronaldo scoring from a brilliant freekick and dedicated it to the flood victims of his home island of Madeira, and then Brazilian star Kaka put them 2-0 to the good with a penalty.

Villarreal, though, struck back through Brazilian Nilmar before Real added a third as Higuain struck for the first time, but Villarreal gamely replied through Spanish international midfielder Marcos Senna.

However, the visitors hopes were finally dashed with 20 minutes remaining when Higuain was on hand to tap home Marcelo's low pass from the left side of the penalty area.

Kaka somewhat cruelly for Villarreal added a fifth near fulltime and Xabi Alonso scored a penalty to give the scoreline an unbalanced look but gave Real the perfect pep-up following their 1-0 defeat by Lyon in last Tuesday's Champions League last 16 first leg match in France.

Athletic Bilbao have a European place in their sights after a convincing 4-1 win over ten-man Tenerife.

The Basque side are now one point off sixth-

placed Mallorca after a game in which they never looked back following a penalty taken by Fernando Llorente, after a foul by Jose Culberas on Gaizka Toquero for which he was sent-off.

Toquero scored himself from a flick-on by Llorente and then after the break Andoni Iraola added another before Alejandro Alfaro pulled a goal back.

Igor Gabilondo, though, restored the three-goal advantage with just less than half an hour to go.

Malaga continued their good run which has seen them pick up ten points from a possible 12 with a 2-1 win over Espanyol.

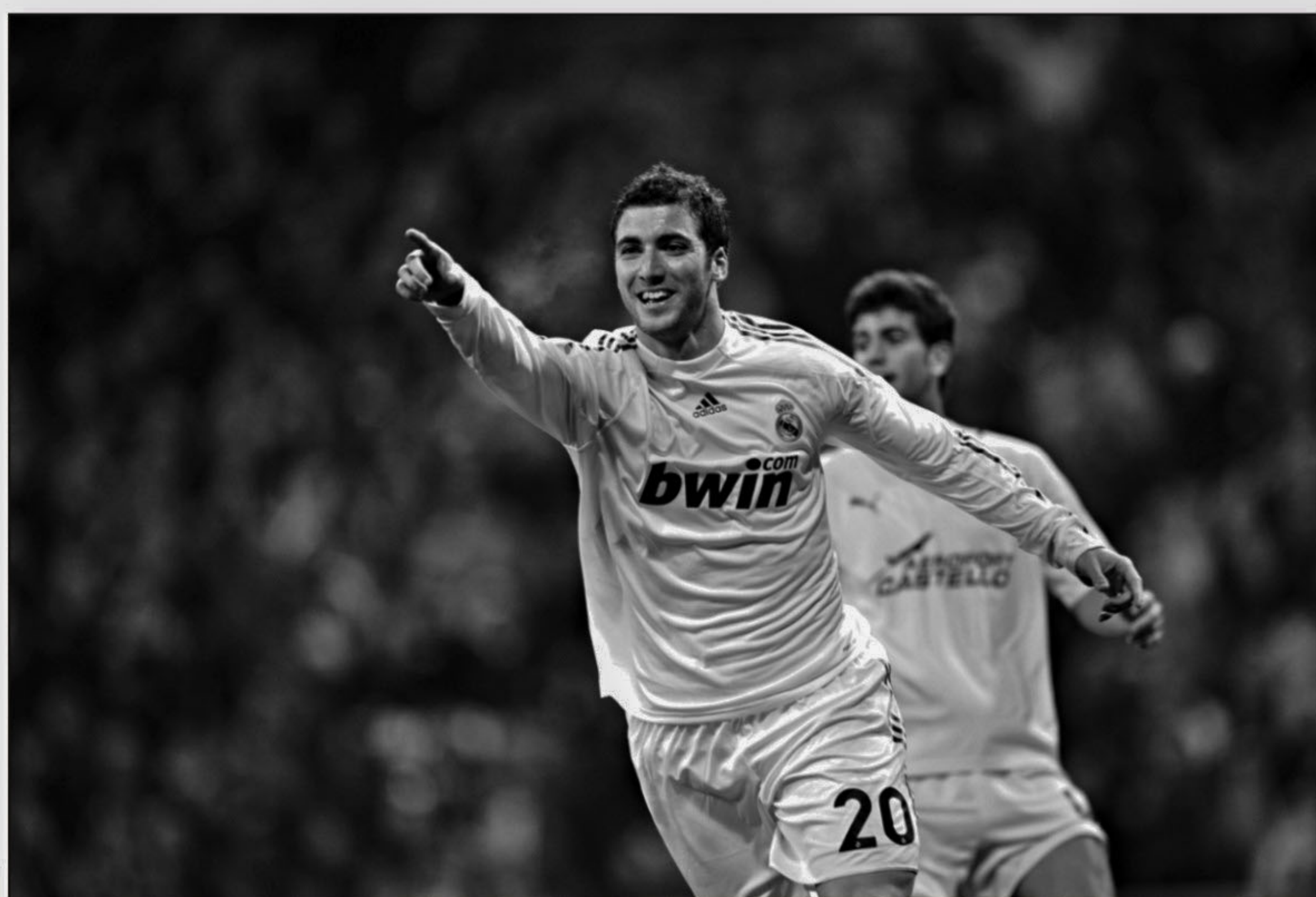
The home side went ahead through Fernando Fernandez but Victor Ruiz drew Espanyol level before half-time and while it was they who had the better of the second half, Victor Obinna scored the vital goal to give Malaga victory.

Valladolid lost the chance to win three key points in their battle against relegation as a late goal from Camunas saw Osasuna draw 1-1.

In a frantic finale Haris Medunjanin put the visitors ahead but Javier Camunas gave Osasuna a share of the spoils with four minutes left. Zaragoza are now just one point above Valladolid after they lost 3-1 at home to Sporting Gijon.

Mate Bilic and Luis Moran put Sporting into a commanding lead and then in injury time there goals for either side from Angel Arizmendi and David Barral.

On Saturday leaders Barcelona put their injury concerns to one side as they cruised to a 4-0 win over Racing Santander.



Real Madrid striker Gonzalo Higuain celebrates one of his two goals against Villarreal during their Primera Liga encounter at Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Stiff test awaits Barca

AFP, Stuttgart



Reigning European kings Barcelona travel to Stuttgart on Tuesday for a Champions League last-16 first leg clash that a few months ago looked as if it would be a formality for the Spanish giants.

But with the German side on rampant form of late, winning six of their last seven matches including a 5-1 drubbing of Cologne away on Saturday, the Catalans might find themselves with anything but a walk in the park.

"We want to create an upset," said Brazilian-born striker Cacau, who scored four of Stuttgart's goals on Saturday.

Barca's captain Carles Puyol is aware that they will have to be careful.

"We know that it will not be easy and if we are not fully concentrated then things will go badly. At this stage mistakes can be very expensive," he said.

"But I think the team is playing well and we are looking forward to playing in the Champions League."

Barca won a historic six trophies last year, including the league, Champions League and Cup treble, and this season they have lost just three games.

But their defence of the Champions League title got off to a slow start and in the group stages they were on the ropes after a defeat at home by Russian side Rubin Kazan.

They won a crucial home game though against Italian giants Inter Milan to help them through to the next round.

Their first league defeat of the season came two weeks ago against Atletico Madrid but on Saturday they put any thoughts of going off the

boil to bed with an emphatic 4-0 win over Racing Santander.

Key players Dani Alves and Xavi Hernandez all missed out due to injury, as did Zlatan Ibrahimovic, but the Swede's boots were filled by Frenchman Thierry Henry who returned after several weeks on the bench to score Barca's second.

Still, coach Pep Guardiola called for more from his stars.

"There were good things about the performance but at the highest level you need to play better and demand more of yourself.

"We need to play the ball around more simply and play a bit better in order to go to Germany with confidence."

Alves, Xavi and Ibrahimovic are all in the squad due to fly over.

Stuttgart meanwhile have had a roller coaster few months to follow up their stellar 2008-9 season when they came within a whisker of winning the Bundesliga, only to lose out in a seat-of-their-pants last day.

This season, a 4-0 hammering by Bayer Leverkusen on the first day set the tone, and by late November, Stuttgart had crashed to 17th in the table, with only the hapless Hertha Berlin below them.

But since firing their coach Markus Babel and bringing in the Swiss Christian Gross at the start of December, the worm has turned, with the team rising to ninth in the table.

They won five games on the trot, including a confidence-boosting 3-1 victory against reigning Bundesliga champions Wolfsburg and a 4-1 hammering of Borussia Dortmund.

After a slip-up against Hamburg, Saturday found Stuttgart back on form with a vengeance, with Cacau running rings around Cologne's defence to score a first-half hat-trick before making it four on 74 minutes.

Jose feels unloved

AFP, London

Inter Milan manager Jose Mourinho has dropped another hint that his long-term future lies away from the San Siro after a report in England on Sunday claimed the former Chelsea boss feels unloved in Italy.

Although Mourinho led Inter to the Serie A title last season, the Portuguese coach has appeared unhappy with the way he is treated in Italy on several occasions since his arrival in 2008.

He has been involved in numerous spats with rival coaches as well as being fined for arguing with a journalist.

Mourinho, who faces an emotional first reunion with Chelsea in the Champions League on Wednesday, has been linked with Manchester City and Liverpool and he admits he misses the respect shown to foreign coaches in England.

"I am the only foreign coach in Serie A. Life is difficult here," Mourinho is quoted as saying in The Observer.

Roma, Milan close gap

AFP, Rome



A S R o m a closed the gap to leaders Inter Milan at the top of Serie A to just five points with a narrow 1-0 win over Catania at the Stadio Olimpico in the capital on Sunday.

And AC Milan stayed in the hunt as well, bouncing back from Tuesday's 3-2 Champions League defeat at home to Manchester United with a 2-0 success at Bari.

Montenegro forward Mirko Vucinic scored the only goal of the game as Roma took their unbeaten run in the league to 15 matches with their seventh Serie A win in a row.

It means Roma have now shaved six points off Inter's lead over the last three matches having drawn three in a row, including Saturday's 0-0 stalemate at home to Sampdoria, in which Jose Mourinho's team were reduced to nine men after just 38 minutes following the dismissals of centre-backs Walter Samuel and Ivan Cordoba.

Roma had three wins, two draws and five defeats in their first 10 games of the season but have since taken 39 from a possible 45 points.

Even so, coach Claudio Ranieri dismissed title talk, saying the race was not back on.

"No, no it's not. We're doing great things at the moment but we're still on the big curve and then we'll see how things pan out when we enter the final straight," he said.

"Now our minds return to the (Europa League second leg) where we want to progress and do well, also to improve

Italy's ranking coefficient. "We have many irons in the fire and we don't want to burn any of them."

Despite their fine run, though, they had been stuttering in recent weeks and lost their 20-match unbeaten run in all competitions on Thursday when two late goals by Panathinaikos gave the Greeks a 3-2 win in Athens in the Europa League.

But they settled this affair in the 18th minute as Ciro Capuano lost Vucinic at a corner, allowing the striker to prod home unmolested from six yards out.

In the south Milan domi-

nated the ball against their hosts who nonetheless looked dangerous on the break.

Bari should have had a penalty when Daniele Bonera got Paulo Barreto to a bear-hug at a corner and wrestled him to the ground but the referee waved away the hosts' pleas.

Milan took the lead two minutes before the break with a spectacular goal as Ronaldinho chipped the ball over the defence and, falling backwards, Marco Borriello hit a sideways scissor-kick that beat Jean-Francois Gillet at his near post.

The visitors doubled the lead on 69 minutes as

Ronaldinho tricked his way into the box and although Gillet saved his shot, the ball came out to Pato who shot home through a crowd of players.

Milan trail Inter by seven points but have a game in hand, away to out of form Fiorentina on Wednesday and Ronaldinho insisted his team are focussed on that game and not yet their Champions League return leg at Old Trafford.

"We're just thinking about the next match against Fiorentina, which will be really hard, and trying to earn three points to get closer to Inter," he said.

"But were taking things one step at a time; slowly, slowly. When the time comes to think about Manchester then we'll think about a way to play to score two goals."

Juventus moved up to fourth and back into a Champions League qualification place after their third win in a row, including Thursday's 2-1 Europa League triumph away to Ajax, with a 2-1 success at Bologna.

They were off to a flying start as Diego surged forward on four minutes, hitting a shot from the edge of the area that goalkeeper Emiliano Viviano couldn't hold and although he also stopped Amauri's follow-up, Diego then swept home the next rebound.

The rebuffed Bologna equalised thanks to a defensive horror show from Juve as Federico Casarini's inswinging cross was missed by everyone and came back off the post where the unmarked Antonio Busce bundled home.

Juve scored the winner completely against the run of play as Alessandro Del Piero slipped in substitute Antonio Candreva to score his first goal for the club.



Milan striker Alexandre Pato is ecstatic after scoring against Bari during their Serie A clash at the San Nicola Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pavlyuchenko lifts Spurs

AFP, London



Tottenham moved ahead in the race to qualify for the Champions League after a 3-0 win at Wigan following Manchester City and Liverpool's dour 0-0 draw on Sunday.

Harry Redknapp's team had started the day in sixth place but, with City and Liverpool forced to settle for a stalemate, it was Spurs who ended the weekend in the final Champions League slot thanks to Jermain Defoe's goal and a late double from Roman Pavlyuchenko at the DW Stadium.

At Eastlands, there were far fewer opportunities for either side to steal a march on their rivals as Liverpool opted for a cautious approach that City completely failed to overcome.

It was hardly the performance to dispel reports of dressing room unrest at City, although boss Roberto Mancini and Liverpool counterpart Rafael Benitez insisted the result was fair to both teams.

Benitez said: "We were working very hard and we had control for most of it. I think a draw was a fair result, we have to be a little bit better in attack in future."

Mancini added: "Every time we don't win a game I am disappointed, but both teams defended very well and a draw was a fair result in the end."

At the DW Stadium, Tottenham won for just the second time in seven league games and are above City on goal difference.

Defoe looked offside when he turned in Gareth Bale's 27th minute cross but the flag stayed down and the England forward was able to celebrate his 22nd goal of the season.

Pavlyuchenko came on for Defoe in the closing stages and delivered the perfect response



Aston Villa winger Stewart Downing is about to score his first goal against Burnley during their Premier League tie at Villa Park on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

after he was quoted as saying Redknapp treated him like a joke.

The Russian struck in the 84th minute when he converted Luka Modric's pass and he added his second in stoppage time following a goalmouth scramble.

Aston Villa remain firmly in the hunt for a Champions League place after thrashing Burnley 5-2.

Martin O'Neill's team kept hot on the heels of City and Liverpool thanks to an astonishing second half goal spree at Villa Park.

Second bottom Burnley had taken the lead in the 10th minute through Steven Fletcher, but Ashley Young equalised before half-time.

Stewart Downing put Villa ahead with his first goal for the club in the 56th minute and the former Middlesbrough winger notched his second in the 58th minute as his shot deflected in off Danny Fox.

Emile Heskey turned in Villa's fourth goal three min-

utes later before Gabriel Agbonlahor added the fifth in the 68th minute.

Martin Paterson's stoppage time strike was no consolation for Burnley, who have now lost 13 of their 14 away league games.

Fulham striker Bobby Zamora fired the Cottagers into ninth place as his stoppage time free-kick secured a dramatic 2-1 win over Birmingham.

Roy Hodgson's team fell behind in the third minute at Craven Cottage when defender Chris Baird headed Lee Bowyer's cross into his own net.

But Republic of Ireland winger Damien Duff equalised for the hosts in the 59th minute as he exchanged passes with Zoltan Gera before shooting home off a post.

Just as the match appeared to be heading for a draw, Zamora stepped up to smash in a free-kick that Birmingham goalkeeper Joe Hart could only help into the net.

At a snowy Ewood Park,

Bolton were buried under an avalanche of goals as Blackburn romped to a 3-0 win over their struggling Lancashire rivals.

Blackburn, managed by former Bolton boss Sam Allardyce, took the lead in the 41st minute through Croatian forward Nikola Kalinic.

Jason Roberts came off the bench to add Rovers' second goal in the 73rd minute before French defender Gael Givet's 84th minute strike left Bolton stuck in the relegation zone.

Xavi, Alves included

AFP, Madrid

Midfielder Xavi and defender Dani Alves were both included in Barcelona's squad to face Stuttgart on Tuesday in the Champions League despite still recovering from injuries.

"Even though they still have not received the medical green light, Alves and Xavi are part of the 20-man squad that will travel to Stuttgart," the club said Sunday on its internet site.

Both players did not train on Sunday with the rest of the squad and instead worked with a physical therapist ahead of the first leg of Barcelona's last-16 clash with the German side.

Barcelona announced on February 15 that Xavi would be sidelined for about a fortnight due to a right thigh muscle strain while Alves has been off the pitch since earlier in the month due to a muscle problem in his right leg.

AFP, Athens



L a u r e n t Blanc's Bordeaux go into Tuesday's Champions League clash with Olympiakos.

Olympiakos as the competition's best performers but the Girondins are wary of the Greek titleholders causing an upset.

The defending French champions boast five wins and a draw from the group stages of Europe's elite tournament. They conceded just two goals and dropped only two points in a 1-1 draw in their opening game with Juventus.

Bordeaux's Argentinian defender Diego Placente believes they will need to show a similar kind of performance to overcome the Greek champions.

"We need to play a big game. We have to try and get a goal to make the return match much easier but our defence will be key to get through this round. I think that if we play as we did in the group stage, we've got a huge chance," the 32-year-old said.

Bozidar Bandovic's men have not lost a European

home game this season and their defence, marshalled by former Aston Villa defender Olof Mellberg, have conceded just one goal at the Karaiskakis Stadium during this season's campaign.

Olympiakos' Moroccan international Jaouad Zaïri expects the club's supporters to help them extend that winning run on Tuesday, promising a feisty atmosphere.

"It's very intense. The supporters are fanatical. For us, the fans are our twelfth man. They can change the way a game is going," the former Sochaux striker said.

"We beat Arsenal in our stadium. We will give our all to win on Tuesday."

Bordeaux had the perfect preparation for their European trip with a resounding 4-1 victory over Lorient in the semi-final of the French League Cup last Wednesday.

Olympiakos, meanwhile, could only manage a 1-1 draw with midtable Ergotelis in their league game on Saturday.

Blanc will have to do without his influential captain Alou Diarra, while Czech midfielder Jaroslav Plasil is a major doubt after picking up an injury in midweek.

Despite their Champions League exploits, Olympiakos are a club embroiled in crisis. They have already sacked two high-profile coaches former Newcastle United star Temuri Ketsbaia and Brazilian legend Zico over a string of bad results and crashed out of the Greek Cup in the fourth round earlier this season.

BUNDESLIGA Bayer back on top

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen equalled a Bundesliga record of 23 straight games unbeaten on Sunday as they overhauled Bayern Munich on goal difference at the top of the table with a 2-2 draw away to Werder Bremen.

Following a disappointing 1-1 draw away at lowly local rivals Nuremberg, Bayern are one goal behind Leverkusen, who were left to rue a lack of concentration that allowed Bremen to score an agonising last-minute equaliser.

Despite drawing two games the in-form leaders would have hoped to win, they nevertheless stretched their lead over third-placed Schalke to four points after they shipped up 2-1 to last season's champions Wolfsburg.

Leverkusen's German international defender Manuel Friedrich, however, was bitter at the last-minute header from Bremen's Per Mertesacker, after a spectacular strike from Bayern Munich old-boy Toni Kroos had put them ahead.