



Catania stun Inter

AFP, Catania



Serie A leaders Inter Milan suffered just their third loss of the season as they fell 3-1 at Catania on Friday, in a defeat that throws the Italian title chase wide open.

The Sicilians claimed their first win in 44 years over their Serie A rivals who were reduced to ten men, thanks to second half goals from Maxi Lopez, a Giuseppe Mascara penalty, and a last-gasp Jorge Martinez winner.

Argentine striker Diego Milito had looked as if he had put Inter on their way to victory when he scored the opening goal after 54 minutes under the driving rain in the Stadio Angelo Massimino.

But coach Jose Mourinho could only watch aghast from the stands as he served out the last game of a three-match touchline ban, as his side were demolished in the last 15 minutes of play.

Maxi Lopez got the equaliser for Catania with a

close range shot after 73.

And they moved ahead with a penalty after Ghana midfielder Sulley Muntari got his second yellow card nine minutes from time for a blatant hand ball less than two minutes after coming on in place of Argentine Esteban Cambiasso.

The stadium erupted in joy as Martinez picked up a high clearance to put the result beyond any doubt.

Catania 3 (Maxi Lopez 74, Mascara 81-pen, Martinez 90) Inter Milan 1 (D. Milito 54)

It was Inter's heaviest defeat this season as Mourinho's side leave Sicily with a four-point advantage on AC Milan, who could move to within just a point of the leaders when they host midtable Chievo on Sunday.

The game at Catania has been brought forward to Friday to allow Mourinho's side to prepare for their Champions League trip to Chelsea on Tuesday where

they are defending a 2-1 lead.

Catania had started the livelier side in the first half, taking the game to Inter.

Inter goalkeeper Julio Cesar did well to keep out an Adrian Ricchiuti effort after 13 minutes after the Catania midfielder latched on to Mascara cross.

Cesar cleared but Ciro Capuano then picked up the rebound only to fire the ball over the bar.

Ricchiuti again missed a glorious chance to get on the scoresheet just before the break when he controlled Mariano Izco's cross only to hit wide.

Inter moved up a gear after the break with Milito netting his 19th goal of the season when Samuel Eto'o latched onto a Wesley Sneijder through ball before setting up Milito to roll into an empty net.

Inter will go to London with plenty to prove. After Milan's and Fiorentina's Champions League exits, the Italian champions are Serie A's last representatives in the competition this season.

DIVING FOR JOY: Catania players celebrate their shock win over Inter Milan at the end of their Serie A encounter at the Massimino Stadium on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Kuranyi leads Schalke to top

AFP, Berlin



Former German international striker Kevin Kuranyi grabbed a 55th-minute winner to fire Schalke 04 back to the top of the Bundesliga on Friday in a 2-1 win over Stuttgart.

The victory gave Schalke a one-point lead over Bayern Munich who face relegation-threatened Freiburg on Saturday.

It was Schalke's third successive win and their eighth at home this season while Kuranyi's timely strike was his 14th of the campaign.

The Ruhr-based side opened the scoring just after the break through Edu but Serdar Tasci took advantage of a Schalke defensive mix-up to level for Stuttgart in the 50th minute.

"This is an important victory, but we can't rest on our laurels," said Kuranyi.

There are very important matches coming up against Hamburg, Bayer Leverkusen and Bayern Munich."

Schalke, coached by Felix Magath, are trying to win a first league title since 1958 while Stuttgart suffered only their second defeat since former Tottenham boss Christian Gross took over in December.

"We are the leaders, but that's not the most important thing," said Magath.

"We will talk about our ambitions after our match against Bayern, who are the title favourites, on April 3," added Magath, who led Wolfsburg to the championship last season.

Vidic-Rio partnership key

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic believes there is still more to come from his partnership with Rio Ferdinand as the pair gear up for the closing stage of the Premier League title race.

Ferdinand's season has been interrupted by back problems and Vidic's appearances have also been restricted by an ankle injury.

But the central defenders are set to play together for just the third time this year when Fulham visit Old Trafford on Sunday.

They have returned in front of goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar, who has also struggled with his fitness this season, with successive clean sheets in the 1-0 victory over Wolves and the 4-0 thumping of AC Milan.

Serbia international Vidic feels it will take a while longer for him and Ferdinand to reach peak form despite such an impressive start to their renewed relationship.

"We've both been injured for a while and I think we need a few more games before we hit top form," Vidic said.

"But nothing has changed since we've been out - we always know how to play together."

"We understand each other - he knows how I will react in certain situations and

it's the same the other way round.

"It's frustrating when you're out and hard to watch the games because you want to be out there helping your team. But we're back now and hopefully the injuries are behind us."

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson also feels that the return of his first-choice centre-back pairing will be key to United's run in.

As they prepare to face Roy Hodgson's Fulham, who have won just once at United in 47 years, their home form is already ominous.

Since the shock FA Cup third round defeat to League One club Leeds, they have won six straight matches, never hitting fewer than three goals in each, scoring a total of 22 goals and conceding just once.

Ferguson thinks that Vidic and Ferdinand rekindling their partnership will give United even more of an edge.

He said: "They haven't played a lot of games this season and to have them back is fantastic for us. They were brilliant on Wednesday against Milan and it gives us a big chance, that consistency and experience."

"I see the two of them together and there's a sense of security."

"When you have those two back together you have the experience, the authority, the understanding with each other, it was great to see."

"I think that and having Van der Sar

back because he was out with a long-term injury. Having those three back, it makes an unbelievable difference."

Ferguson continues to insist that a record fourth straight Premier League title and winning a record 19th in total is his only motivation, not the fact that United could beat bitter rivals Liverpool's tally of 18.

"I think the record we're chasing is four titles in a row and that would be fantastic," Ferguson said.

"It would be the 19th title, the most in the league. It doesn't matter who you beat to that, it's a record. We have got a chance."

Fulham's American forward Clint Dempsey could make his first Premier League appearance for two months after recovering from a knee injury.

The Cottagers' trip to Old Trafford comes just three days after their 3-1 Europa League defeat to Juventus in Turin.

Fulham will look to overturn that deficit against the Italian giants at Craven Cottage on Thursday.

But Australian goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer insists his team can only afford to focus on United as they prepare for a vital week.

He said: "It's a great position to be in and there are a lot of clubs that would love to be in the situation we're in and we'll try to take advantage of it."

"We'll focus on Sunday's game now and see what we can do at Old Trafford."

Shots fired at WC buses

AFP, Johannesburg



A third passenger was injured in March.

The new public transport system connecting Soweto and Johannesburg has angered the mafia-like minibus taxi industry that dominates the city's commuter routes.

The taxis fear they will be put out of business by the sleek modern buses. Protests by taxi operators often turn violent, while rival fleets have waged deadly turf wars over their routes.

President Jacob Zuma had to delay the BRT's launch to try to win over the taxi industry, preventing the use of the buses at the 2010 World Cup curtain raiser Confederations Cup tournament last June.

Since then, the government has pressed ahead, seeing the buses as the first step in overhauling the nation's public transport.

IN BRIEF

Pompey chief Storie quits

AFP, London

Portsmouth chief executive Peter Storie has decided to leave his job at the financially-crippled Premier League club.

Storie had taken a 40-per cent pay cut after 85 of the club's staff were made redundant in midweek.

A statement from the club's administrator Andrew Andronikou revealed Storie had left "in the best interests of the club" after speaking with family and friends, although he will continue to advise them in a consultancy role.

Hull boss Brown says sorry

AFP, London

Hull manager Phil Brown has apologised after Tigers midfielder Jimmy Bullard and team-mate Nick Barmby were involved in a bust-up in a public park.

A report on Friday claimed Bullard and former England star Barmby came to blows on a team training exercise in a Hull park 24 hours after the side's 5-1 defeat at Everton last Sunday.

The pair had apparently argued after the Everton loss and the row boiled over again in front of members of the public, including an elderly woman's Institute group.

Brown insists the matter has been dealt with and he is keen to put the incident behind him after saying sorry for the unedifying spectacle.

"I'd like to apologise to the Women's Institute, I didn't realise there was a rally going on there and there was apparently 50-100 women going on a march across the Humber Bridge and the incident was unsavoury, it was unfortunate," Brown said.

FORMULA ONE SEASON STARTS TODAY

Vettel grabs Bahrain pole

AFP, Manama



German Sebastian Vettel upstaged returning Formula One legend Michael Schumacher and the other three world champions on show when he grabbed pole here Saturday for Sunday's season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix.

The 22-year-old rising star picked up where he left off last season, when he won the closing race in Abu Dhabi, by showing that a 19-years age gap does make some difference as he blitzed to the best time for Red Bull in the final minutes of a closely fought session.

Schumacher, 41, making his comeback after three years, wound up in seventh place and was outpaced by not only Vettel, but also his own Mercedes team-mate and compatriot Nico Rosberg, 24, who qualified fifth.

It was a better day for Schumacher's old team Ferrari who finished with Brazilian Felipe Massa second on the grid and new boy, two time former champion Fernando Alonso, third.

Lewis Hamilton won McLaren's private battle of the two British world champions by taking fourth place with team-mate and defending champion Jensen Button down in eighth after a stressful session.

Vettel's Red Bull team-mate, Australian Mark Webber, was sixth and Pole Robert Kubica ninth for Renault with German Adrian Sutil taking 10th place for Force India.

On a fine, dry and hot day at the Sakhir circuit, where the air temperatures touched 33 degrees Celsius, there was high anticipation ahead of the first qualifying session of the season, notably to see Schumacher tackling the 'new' three-part format of the session which puts great onus on delivering single flying laps each time.

The veteran German admitted on Friday that he had struggled to find the rhythm and bite required in his driving for such a challenge after three years out of the cockpit in retirement.

The first mini-session, Q1, saw the two Ferraris deliver early fastest laps as the top teams calculated their tyre performances carefully knowing that all of the top ten qualifiers have to start the race on the tyres used to set their best times.

In effect, this could mean they go to the grid with worn or flat-spotted rubber unless they are careful with their performances.

The session ended with Alonso on top ahead of Vettel, Sutil and Webber with seven men eliminated - Spaniard Jaime Alguersuari of Toro Rosso, in 18th, heading the six cars from the three new teams

Virgin, Lotus and Hispania. Of these, it was German Timo Glock who did best with 19th place ahead of the two Lotuses. Schumacher went through in ninth.

Q2 saw unexpected drama and tension for two of the champions with both defending champion Button and Schumacher scrapping in the final minutes to claw through to Q3 in the top ten.

Button was 11th but finally made it through in 10th spot as his race engineers held their heads in the McLaren garage and Schumacher finally took ninth. This time Vettel set the pace.

This session saw a further seven cars dropping out with Brazilian Rubens Barrichello winding up 11th for Williams and his rookie team-mate German Nico Hulkenberg 12th.

They went along with Italian Vitantonio Liuzzi (Force India), Spaniard Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber), Swiss Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso), Japanese Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) and Russian Vitaly Petrov (Renault) filling the grid down to 17th.

The most impressive run was that of Sutil to go through to the top ten shootout in 10th place ahead of Barrichello, but the wily Brazilian veteran will start Sunday's race on the preferred harder-compound tyres and that could give him a surprise opportunity to score a podium for Williams.

THE CONTENDERS

Driver	Team	Age	Height	Weight	World championship wins	1st GP	Wins	1st win	Pole positions	Most recent championship win
Jenson Button	McLaren	30	1.82 m	69 kg	1	Australia (2000)	7	Hungary (2006)	7	1st (2009)
Lewis Hamilton	McLaren	25	1.74 m	67 kg	1	Australia (2007)	11	Canada (2007)	17	1st (2008)
Michael Schumacher	Mercedes	41	1.74 m	68 kg	7	Belgium (1991)	91	Belgium (1992)	68	1st (2004)
Sebastian Vettel	Red Bull	22	1.76 m	60 kg	0	United States (2007)	5	Italy (2008)	5	2nd (2009)
Fernando Alonso	Ferrari	28	1.71 m	66 kg	2	Australia (2001)	21	Hungary (2003)	18	1st (2006)

Team	2010 Championship, March 14 - Nov 14	Championships won
McLaren (8)	1st season: 1966 Race wins: 184	Jenson Button (GBR) 30 172 7 Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 25 52 11
Mercedes	1st season: 2010 Race wins: 0	Michael Schumacher (GER) 41 250 91 Nico Rosberg (GER) 24 70 0
Red Bull	1st season: 2005 Race wins: 6	Sebastian Vettel (GER) 22 43 5 Mark Webber (AUS) 33 140 2
Ferrari (16)	1st season: 1950 Race wins: 210	Felipe Massa (BRA) 26 116 11 Fernando Alonso (ESP) 28 140 21
Williams (9)	1st season: 1978 Race wins: 113	Rubens Barrichello (BRA) 37 268 11 Nico Hulkenberg (GER) 22 0 0
Renault (2)	1st season: 1977 Race wins: 35	Robert Kubica (POL) 25 57 1 Vitaly Petrov (RUS) 25 0 0
Force India	1st season: 2008 Race wins: 0	Adrian Sutil (GER) 27 52 0 Vitantonio Liuzzi (ITA) 28 44 0
Toro Rosso	1st season: 2006 Race wins: 1	Sebastien Buemi (SUI) 21 17 0 Jaime Alguersuari (ESP) 19 8 0
Lotus F1 (7)	1st season: 1958 Race wins: 79	Jarno Trulli (ITA) 35 219 1 Heikki Kovalainen (FIN) 26 52 1
Hispania	1st season: 2010 Race wins: 0	Karun Chandhok (IND) 26 0 0 Bruno Senna (BRA) 26 0 0
Sauber	1st season: 1993 Race wins: 1	Pedro de la Rosa (ESP) 39 72 0 Kamui Kobayashi (JPN) 23 2 0
Virgin Racing	1st season: 2010 Race wins: 0	Timo Glock (GER) 27 36 0 Lucas di Grassi (BRA) 25 0 0