



# Magical Messi

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi hit a second successive La Liga hattrick, and his eighth goal in a week, as the magical Argentine inspired Barcelona to a 4-2 win at Real Zaragoza on Sunday.

Messi has now scored eleven of Barcelona's last 14 goals, virtually single-handedly keeping the champions neck-and-neck with Real Madrid at the top of the table.

It was his fifth career hattrick for Barcelona and followed his triple in the 3-0 win over Valencia last weekend and double strike in the 4-0 win over Stuttgart which ensured a spot in the Champions League quarter-finals.

Guardiola gave his backing to Ibrahimovic, who has been struggling in front of goal.

"He has returned to playing how he was in September and October when he was moving very well. The question of him scoring goals is the least important. What is crucial is that he is involved in the play."

Meanwhile, Zaragoza coach Jose Aurelio Gay felt that Messi was the difference between the teams.

back on track with a 2-0 win over Almeria.

Following three matches without a win, Valencia put to one side defensive absenteees and tiredness after playing in the Europa League in mid-week.

Only poor finishing and vital saves from keeper Diego Alves were responsible for Valencia not going ahead before half-time.

Alves made an excellent block to deny David Villa and then Ruben Baraja inexplicably missed from a few yards out.

After the break Juan Mata made the breakthrough from a delightful pass by David Silva. Then it was Silva who assured the win by sliding the ball home from close range.

Real Mallorca continued their impressive home record with an emphatic 4-1 win over Atletico Madrid which took them up to fourth place, four points behind Valencia.

With just one loss all season at home it was always going to be a tough task for Atletico and they went behind after ten minutes with an unmarked Victor Casadesus slotting past the keeper.

The Atletico defence was struggling and while Diego Forlan drew them level it was only to be a brief respite as two minutes later Artiz Aduriz headed home.

Chances of a comeback were shattered by the second-half dismissal of Raul Garcia, and from there on Mallorca took control.

Luis Perea rounded off a poor personal performance with an own-goal and then Felipe Mattioni hit a fine strike to wrap up the scoring in the final minutes.

**■ ■ Messi did well, I'll leave it for others to find the adjectives to describe him ■ ■**

**--Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola.**

"We were unable to stop an incredible player. We battled to the end, we never gave up and we were able to hold our own except against Messi," he said.

"It was like watching Maradona again but this time with more turns and a lot faster."

Valencia got their Champions League ambitions

Malaga 2 (Baha 65, 85) Villarreal 0
Osasuna 1 (Flano 32) Racing Santander 3 (Colsa 35, Fernandez 52, Diop 89)
Real Mallorca 4 (Castano 10, Aduriz 28, Perea 86-og, Mattioni 90) Atletico Madrid 1 (Forlan 26)
Valencia 2 (Mata 63, David Silva 70) Almeria 0
Real Zaragoza 2 (Colunga 85, 89) Barcelona 4 (Messi 5, 66, 78, Ibrahimovic 90+1-pen.)

CAN'T STOP SCORING: Barcelona star Lionel Messi (L) celebrates his yet another goal with teammate Dani Alves during their Primera Liga encounter against Real Zaragoza at the La Romareda Stadium on Sunday. Messi scored his second successive hattrick in the Spanish league.

## Diouf denies Chelsea

AFP, Blackburn



EI-Hadji Diouf delivered a significant blow to Chelsea's title challenge as the Blackburn striker scored his first goal this year to salvage a 1-1 draw at Ewood Park on Sunday.

Carlo Ancelotti's side had been coasting towards another three points when Didier Drogha put them ahead after just five minutes with his 28th goal of the season.

But the Blues missed several chances to extend their lead and paid the price midway through the second half when Diouf rose above the flat-footed Paulo Ferreira to head home his third goal of the season.

At Craven Cottage, Manchester City beat Fulham 2-1 to move above Liverpool into fifth place.

Fulham looked tired after their stunning Europa League victory against Juventus on Thursday and City raced into a two-goal lead before half-time.

Paraguay striker Roque Santa Cruz claimed his first goal since December in the seventh minute after Craig Bellamy hit a post, then Carlos Tevez jinked past Chris Smalling in the 36th minute to score his seventh goal in eight

appearances.

Danny Murphy got one back for Fulham with a 75th minute penalty after Gareth Barry was penalised for handball.

It could and should have been so different for Chelsea, yet this major setback leaves them in third place in the table, now four points behind leaders Manchester United, with a game in hand to come at Portsmouth on Wednesday.

Blackburn boasted a good home record going into this contest, having won their last goal of the season.

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saw his curling effort go just wide.

Yet he went one better just two minutes later as the visitors made the perfect possible start. Lampard released Nicolas Anelka down the right and he weaved beyond the feeble challenge of Keith Andrews courtesy of a cheeky nutmeg before pulling the ball back for the unmarked Droghba, who drilled a low shot beyond Jason Brown.

The lead could have been doubled moments later when Salomon Kalou headed Lampard's corner inches over as Chelsea threatened a run riot.

Blackburn's pride was hurting though and a series of unflinching challenges from several of Allardyce's players towards the interval lifted the crowd and showed Chelsea they still had some fight in them and wouldn't be bullied.

Rovers even threatened to score just after the re-start when Morten Gamst Pedersen's long throw was flicked on by Chris Samba but substitute Yuri Zhirkov was well placed on the line to clear.

Moments later Pedersen blazed well wide when he had time and space to at least hit the target.

But Diouf spared his colleague's blushes in the 70th minute when he met Michel Salgado's far post cross to beat Ross Turnbull and slow Chelsea's title charge.

## BUNDESLIGA Schalke held in Hamburg

AFP, Berlin

Schalke spurned the chance to go top of the Bundesliga after being held to a 2-2 draw at Hamburg on Sunday, leaving Bayern Munich top of the pile despite their defeat at Eintracht Frankfurt.

Substitute Jonathan Pitroipa hit a late equaliser for Hamburg, who took the lead through Ruud van Nistelrooy but were pegged back by goals from Kevin Kuranyi and Ivan Rakitic.

With Bayern losing 2-1 after two late goals at Frankfurt on Saturday, Schalke's draw leaves them second behind Louis van Gaal's side, who meet in the German Cup semifinals on Wednesday.

Hamburg took the lead in the 40th minute when Germany midfielder Piotr Trochowski floated in a free-kick that Schalke goalkeeper Manuel Neuer parried straight into the path of van Nistelrooy.

Schalke equalised in the 62nd minute when midfielder Alexander Baumjohann, who only came on after 46 minutes, swung in a cross from the left and ex-Germany striker Kuranyi headed home.

And Baumjohann then won a penalty for the Royal Blues when he was hauled down by Hamburg's Dutch defender Joris Mathijsen, with Rakitic netting at the second attempt to give the away side a 2-1 lead.

But the home side drew level when Trochowski fired in a cross on 77 minutes for Pitroipa to slot home.

## Milan waste chance

AFP, Rome



AC Milan squandered the chance to leapfrog Inter and go top of Serie A after a 1-1 with Napoli on Sunday, while Antonio Cassano's 35-yard stunner gave Sampdoria victory over a sorry Juventus.

Milan's Filippo Inzaghi's 26th-minute header cancelled out Hugo Campagnaro's 13th-minute opener in an attacking encounter at the San Siro with both sides having chances to claim all three points.

"We're in a great position to fight for the title," said Milan coach Leonardo, whose side remain one point behind Inter and three above third-place Roma.

Inter, who had a 10-point advantage over their city rivals in October, were held to a 1-1 draw by Champions League hopefuls Palermo on Saturday.

"I can't reproach the boys for lacking desire but a lot of things are needed to win. I don't think today's result will have a major bearing on who wins the scudetto," added Leonardo, who had lost David Beckham and Alessandro Nesta to serious injuries in the week.

Napoli coach Walter Mazzari, whose side are seventh, five points off the top of the league places, felt his team deserved better against a Milan outfit who were bidding to go top for the first time this season.

"We should have had it won by half-time but we just couldn't take our chances. We showed today that we are at the same level as Milan," said Mazzari.

Milan, who last won the title in 2004, were hit with a double blow inside the first 15 minutes.

The returning Alexander Pato limped off, while calamitous defending allowed Napoli to take the lead in the 13th minute.

Ezequiel Lavezzi's cross was side-footed into an empty net

gave it our all," said Ronaldinho.

"We need to take the positives from the game and keep our feet on the ground. If we do, the scudetto is a real possibility."

In the late game in Genoa, Juventus, who had conceded seven goals in the past two matches and were knocked out of the Europa League in mid-week by Fulham, were undone by Cassano as Sampdoria jumped into fifth place, two points ahead of Juve and level with fourth-placed Palermo.

Back in the starting line-up for the first time in two months following Nicola Pozzi's injury, Cassano had three good chances in the first half to add to his three goals this season.

First he failed to control Giampaolo Pazzini's early centre, then saw his 36th-minute header nodded off the line by Claudio Marchisio before finishing weakly on 42 minutes when clean through against Antonio Chimenti.

But after Alessandro Del Piero had chipped over just before the hour, Cassano struck with a wonder goal to give Sampdoria the points.

Showing fine technique to take down a long ball, the forward instantly smashed a dipping 35-yarder that a surprised Chimenti could only help into the top corner.

At the other end of the table, Livorno replaced Siena at the bottom after falling to goals from Simone Padoin, Javier Chevanton and Adriano Ferreira Pinto in a 3-0 defeat at fellow strugglers Atalanta.

There are ten games left to

## Bordeaux regain lead

AFP, Paris



Champions League quarter-finalists Bordeaux hit back from a goal down to beat 10-man Lille 3-1 on Sunday and re-establish their lead at the top of the French first division table.

Laurent Blanc's defending champions, who will face domestic rivals Lyon in the Champions League last night, lead the standings on goal difference from Montpellier, who defeated Valenciennes 2-1.

Lyon, meanwhile, slumped to a 2-1 defeat at Marseille who moved into fourth spot, three points behind the leaders.

Playmaker Yoann Gourcuff was beginning to establish Bordeaux's rhythm when they fell behind in the 24th minute at a sun-splashed Stade Chaban-Delmas following an error from recent France call-up Michael Ciani.

The centre-back's hesitant pass was intercepted by Florent Balmont and he set Belgian teenager Eden Hazard free to fire through the legs of Cedric Carrasso for his fifth league goal of the season.

Ciani made amends five

minutes before the change of ends with a crisp equalising volley after Ricardo Costa's defensive header fell to him 15 yards from goal.

"We conceded a goal from a mistake, then it was all about equalising to get back into the match," said Ciani.

"I'm pleased to have scored but tonight I'd preferred not to have scored and not to have let a goal in."

The game turned in the 65th minute when Costa dragged down Marouane Chamakh as he sought to capitalise on a rebound, prompting a red card.

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"There are nine matches left and 27 points to play for," said Lille coach Rudi Garcia, whose side host Montpellier next weekend.

Marseille, dumped out of the Europa League in mid-week, opened the scoring in the 66th minute against Lyon through Charles Kabore, but the visitors were level 12 minutes later when substitute Bafe Gomis headed in a long free-kick by Kim Kallstrom.

Defender Taye Taiwo hit the winner for Marseille in the 80th minute with a 20-metre drive.

In Montpellier, Victor Hugo Montano put the hosts ahead in the fifth minute when he capitalised on a handling error from Valenciennes goalkeeper Nicolas Penneteau to steer the ball home following an Alberto Costa free-kick.

The sides exchanged chances in an engaging first half before Joris Marveaux gave Montpellier breathing space 11 minutes into the second period when his faint touch guided Costa's floated free-kick into the net.

Fahid Ben Khalfalla gave the visitors hope with a calm finish 16 minutes from time but Montpellier, promoted from Ligue 2 last term, held firm to sustain their unexpected title charge.

## Riquelme to join EPL?



INTERNET, undated

Reports in Argentina suggest that former Villarreal and former Argentinean international Juan Roman Riquelme is keen to test his wits for one last time in Europe, with rumours circulating that he has ambitions to ply his trade for the final time in the Premier League. Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur have been named as possible destinations, however a return to Spanish La Ligaside Villarreal is a reported option.

The 31-year-old midfielder had promised the former Boca Juniors President that he would retire at the club following his 2007 move to the Argentine giants, however the midfielder admitted that he could U-turn on the decision.

Media reports in the player's homeland have named Manchester City, Tottenham Hotspur and the players former club as possible destinations.

City boss Roberto Mancini could show interest in the talented playmaker while Spurs manager Harry Redknapp, previously linked with the player when he was Portsmouth manager could make an offer depending on price.

Riquelme, whose contract finishes in June responded to the Tottenham Hotspur, Manchester City and Villarreal speculation on the weekend. He replied to questions from journalists: "I'm committed to Boca until June and after that we'll see what happens."

"Anything is possible. I gave my word to our last president that I would retire here but he has since moved on. We are nearing the end of the season now so then I will make a decision."

## IN BRIEF

### FA probing Kirkland attack

AFP, London

Football Association (FA) officials are looking into an incident that saw Wigan goalkeeper Chris Kirkland struck by a missile from the crowd during a Premier League match on Saturday.

Kirkland was hit by an object, believed to be a coin, thrown from the away section during Wigan's 1-0 victory at home to Burnley.

The FA, English football's governing body, are to speak to referee Mike Jones after considering his match report and then contact both clubs.

"The first priority for us during this period will be ensuring any individual responsible was identified and we would like to see anyone found guilty of coin-throwing to be banned from attending football matches in this country," an FA spokesman said.

### Zola's crucial two games

SOCCERNET

Gianfranco Zola has two games left to prove he is the right man to manage West Ham with crucial games coming up against Wolverhampton Wanderers and Stoke City.

The unhappy Hammers are rapidly losing patience after a catastrophic run of four straight defeats which now sees the East End club in peril of the drop.

Zola has to pull West Ham out of their current slide in two crunch games this week. If they can get positive results against Wolves, on Tuesday night, and Stoke then he will be safe.

### Verbeek to step down after WC

AFP, Sydney

Australia's coach Pim Verbeek on Monday said he would step down following this year's World Cup, after steering the team to the tournament in South Africa and their highest ever FIFA ranking.

Verbeek, who has also guided Australia to next year's Asian Cup in a successful two-year stint, said he has decided not to renew his contract, which expires after the June-July World Cup.

"It has been a very difficult decision for me after more than two years but it is time for me to look for a new challenge," Verbeek said in a statement.



Milan's veteran striker Filippo Inzaghi (top) celebrates his equalising goal with teammate Clarence Seedorf during their Serie A clash against Napoli at San Siro on Sunday.