

Platini seeks re-election

AFP, Tel Aviv

French football great Michel Platini announced on Thursday that will stand for re-election as president of European football's governing body UEFA next year.

The 54-year-old Platini was first elected to the position in March 2007, when he beat off the challenge of the sitting president Lennart Johansson of Sweden after an at times bitter campaign.

Seen as being close to Sepp Blatter, the head of world governing body FIFA, Platini has been an advocate of widening the scope of football in Europe to smaller countries and has railed against the influence of big business concerns buying up clubs and inflating transfer prices.

His first mandate has also been marked by the decision to award the organisation of Euro 2012 to Poland and Ukraine, the first time the continent's showpiece tournament has gone to countries in the former Soviet bloc.

Platini is regarded as one of greatest French players of all time with the peak of his career coming in the 1980s when he starred as a multi-talented, goal-scoring No. 10.

He had spells with Nancy, Saint Etienne and Juventus and won the coveted Ballon d'Or (European footballer of the Year) three years consecutively -- in 1983, 1984 and 1985.

In 1984, he inspired France to the European Championship title on home soil, but twice he fell to West Germany in the semi-finals of the World Cup in 1982 and 1986.

After retiring, he had a four-year stint as coach of the France team but failed to qualify the team for the 1990 World Cup in Italy.

He resigned in 1992 after France exited the European Championships at the first round and turned his attentions towards football administration notably the organisation of the 1998 World Cup in France.



Barcelona striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic pumps his fist after scoring the opening goal against Osasuna during their Primera Liga encounter at Nou Camp on Wednesday.

Barca battle to a win

AFP, Madrid



Record signing Zlatan Ibrahimovic scored his 14th league goal of the season as champions Barcelona

went back to the top of the Spanish league with a hard-fought 2-0 home victory over Osasuna at Camp Nou on Wednesday.

Swede Ibrahimovic struck on 72 minutes to break Osasuna's resilience and substitute Bojan Krkic netted a second two minutes from time as Barca moved three points ahead of Real Madrid, in action at Getafe on Thursday, at the summit.

The win maintained Barca's momentum for 'El Clasico' at Real Madrid on the weekend of April 10/11 and now the pressure is on Real to respond against Getafe.

Brazilian defender Dani Alves saluted goal hero Ibrahimovic who has had a lean spell in front of goal of late after starting the season so promisingly.

"He (Ibrahimovic) lives for that (scoring goals) and when he scores he is happy," said

Alves. "We are all happy for him and hope the run continues and the goals start coming again."

Osasuna were the last team to beat Barcelona at Camp Nou in the league on the penultimate day of last season, although Barca had already been crowned champions, and coach Pep Guardiola resisted the temptation to rest top-scorer Lionel Messi, scorer of successive league hat-tricks, with the Argentine making his 200th appearance for the club at the age of just 22.

With two minutes gone a slick passing move gave Ibrahimovic a sight of goal and the Swede drilled in a low shot but Ricardo Lopez palmed the effort to safety.

It was a frantic opening and Osasuna should have scored in the fourth minute when a neat move released Kristian Valdez but the Hungarian midfielder watched in agony as Victor Valdes turned away his fierce shot.

A Thierry Henry lob and a blocked Ibrahimovic shot was all Barca could muster in a disappointing scoreless first half against Osasuna who drew 1-1 with the champions in Pamplona earlier in the campaign.

Guardiola hauled off the

disappointing Henry at half-time with Pedro Rodriguez, the latest youth team product, coming on in the Frenchman's place.

Pedro almost had an immediate impact producing a vintage pass in the 53rd minute but the onrushing Messi, who had scored in his last five games, couldn't arrive in time. Osasuna were being

Barcelona 2 (Ibrahimovic 72, Bojan 88) Osasuna 0
Tenerife 2 (Nino 60, Culebras 76) Villarreal 2 (Nilmar 45, Rossi 88)
Valladolid 0 Espanyol 0
Racing Santander 0 Real Mallorca 0
Almeria 1 (Uche 61) Real Zaragoza 0
Valencia 1 (Villa 13) Malaga 0

pushed back and Yaya Toure combined with Ibrahimovic five minutes later but Toure delayed his run into the box and it proved vital as the ball was just in front of him.

Substitute Seydou Keita went close with a header before Barca finally made the breakthrough on 72 minutes with Andres Iniesta releasing Maxwell to fizz a low cross in to give the alert Ibrahimovic an

easy tap-in.

Swede Ibrahimovic was substituted almost immediately afterwards and his replacement Bojan got the second two minutes from time in a carbon copy of the first goal only this time Iniesta provided the cross.

"If they (Barcelona) press you back like they did in the second half they win in the end," confessed Osasuna coach Jose Antonio Camacho.

Real Madrid make the short trip to neighbours Getafe seeking a tenth successive league win against a side that beat them 3-1 in the corresponding fixture last season.

In other matches, Valencia notched a third straight win beating Malaga 1-0 at home to consolidate third position.

David Villa scored the winner on 13 minutes for his 18th goal of the season as Valencia took advantage of slips from rivals Real Mallorca and Sevilla, who both drew, to strengthen their position.

Valencia lie six points ahead of Real Mallorca, who drew 0-0 at Racing Santander, with Sevilla eight points behind in fifth.

Elsewhere Villarreal missed the chance to close in on the top six with a 2-2 draw at struggling Tenerife and are five points off the top six.

Eto'o fires Inter

AFP, Rome



Cameroon forward Samuel Eto'o scored a brace as Serie A leaders

Inter Milan ended their recent blip with a 3-0 victory over rock bottom Livorno to move four points clear at the top of the table.

AS Roma won 2-0 away to Bologna to join AC Milan in joint second place after the seventh time European champions crashed 1-0 at Parma.

Inter came into this match reeling from a dire run of one win in seven league matches and a measly eight points from a possible 21 that had seen neighbours Milan reduce their lead to just one point at the weekend.

But a top versus bottom clash was just the tonic Jose Mourinho's men needed to emphatically return to winning ways ahead of their crucial title trip to Roma on Saturday.

Inter had been far from impressive in the early stages and it was the basement sitters who had the best chances.

But it was from one of those very opportunities, when Nico Pulzetti failed to beat Julio Cesar from close range, that Inter charged up the other end to take the lead.

On 36 minutes Julio Cesar threw the ball out to captain Javier Zanetti who helped it on to Portugal winger Ricardo Quaresma, making a rare start,

and he fed Thiago Motta whose slide-rule pass found the Cameroon forward on the left of the area and he cut inside his marker before unleashing an unstoppable right foot shot past goalkeeper Rubinho.

Four minutes from the break it was two as Goran Pandev collected Cristian

Atalanta 3 (Tiribocchi 53, Valdes 64-pen, 73) Cagliari 1 (Conti 90)
Bari 2 (Meggiorini 58, Barreto 86) Sampdoria 1 (Cassano 20)
Bologna 0 AS Roma 2 (Riise 48, Baptista 82)
Catania 1 (Mascara 2) Fiorentina 0
Genoa 2 (Bocchetti 75, Kharja 90-pen) Palermo 2 (Hernandez 34, Pastore 78)
Inter Milan 3 (Eto'o 36, 41, Maicon 61) Livorno 0
Lazio 2 (Lichtsteiner 6, Cruz 67) Siena 0
Parma 1 (Bojinov 90) AC Milan 0
Udinese 0 Chievo 0

Chivu's crossfield pass and chipped the ball into the area where Eto'o connected with an overhead bicycle kick to double the champions' advantage.

In between those two strikes, Eto'o had actually missed his best chance as Quaresma's inch perfect cross from the left found him eight

yards out but he shot too close to Rubinho who saved.

Any doubts about the final result were dispelled just past the hour mark as Thiago Motta fed the overlapping Maicon in the box and the Brazil full-back lashed a fierce drive past his countryman at the near post.

Milan, who had missed the chance to go top on Sunday after they were held to a 1-1 home draw by Napoli, were in uninspired form throughout and fell to a last minute goal from on-loan Manchester City forward Valeri Bojinov.

The Bulgarian substitute pounced to prod home the loose ball after Jonathan Biabiany's shot was parried by Christian Abbiati.

Roma were made to work hard for their victory in the north but now know that a win over Inter at the weekend will move them to one point from top spot.

They opened the scoring three minutes into the second period as John Arne Riise stuck out a foot to divert Daniele De Rossi's drilled long range effort past wrong-footed goalkeeper Emiliano Viviano.

Two substitutes combined on 82 minutes to clinch the victory with a goal identical to Maicon's at the San Siro, with this time Alessio Cerci slipping in Julio Baptista to beat Viviano at his near post.

Palermo stayed fourth after a controversial 2-2 draw at Genoa, during which the hosts equalised eight minutes into time added on through Houssine Kharja's penalty.

IN BRIEF

Spain to play in Argentina

AP, Madrid

Spain is set to play away friendlies against Argentina and Mexico after this summer's World Cup.

Spanish football federation spokesman Jorge Carretero said Wednesday that Spain will meet Argentina "in September or October" and Mexico on Aug. 11.

Sports daily Marca says the Argentina match is likely to be on Sept. 7 at River Plate's Monumental stadium.

Spain beat Argentina 2-1 in November when coach Vicente del Bosque's squad defeated Diego Maradona's team at the Vicente Calderon stadium in Madrid.

European champion Spain faces Chile, Honduras and Switzerland in the World Cup group stage beginning June 11. Argentina plays Nigeria, Greece and North Korea.

CSKA deny Riera interest

SOCCERNET

CSKA Moscow have denied holding an interest in Albert Riera, but the Liverpool winger is still expected to move to the Russian Premier League.

Riera was suspended by Liverpool following his outspoken criticism of Rafael Benitez on a Spanish radio station and the midfielder also revealed in the same interview that a move to Russia was a possibility.

It has since been reported that CSKA Moscow were close to completing a £6 million transfer for Riera, who is hoping that a move away from Anfield will increase his chances of featuring at the World Cup finals for Spain.

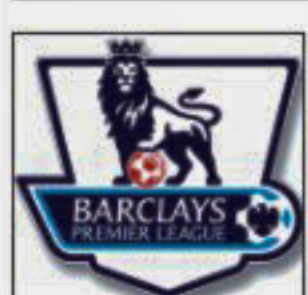
But CSKA, who can sign players as the Russian transfer window is currently open, have denied any interest in Riera.

"We know that the CSKA brand is very attractive for any player who is searching for a new challenge but Albert Riera is not in our plans," said a club spokesman. "It has come as a surprise to us that we are interested in this player."

Riera's wife is from Russia and it is reported that Spartak Moscow are now hoping to arrange a loan deal for the 27-year-old.

Chelsea destroy Pompey

AFP, London



Chelsea closed to within just a point of Premier League leaders Manchester United with a 5-0 victory away to bottom-of-the-table Portsmouth on Wednesday.

Didier Drogba scored twice to take his tally to 24 goals in 27 league matches as Chelsea bounced back from the disappointment of dropping points in a draw with Blackburn last weekend.

Florent Malouda also scored twice at Fratton Park with England midfielder Frank Lampard adding a fifth goal late on.

Elsewhere, Australia's Tim Cahill scored for Everton in a 2-0 victory over Manchester City as the Merseysiders became the first away side to win in the league at Eastlands this term - a result that dented their hosts' hopes of Champions League qualification.

Meanwhile Aston Villa and Sunderland drew 1-1 and Blackburn defeated

Birmingham 2-1.

On a day when cash-strapped Pompey, hit last week with a nine-point penalty for entering administration, were given permission to sell players outside of the transfer window, one of their few prize assets helped gift Chelsea the lead.

Chelsea went ahead in the 32nd minute thanks to the latest howler to befall Portsmouth goalkeeper David James.

Nicknamed 'Calamity' for a series of high-profile mistakes, the England international wasn't helped by a bad bounce as he missed completely with an attempted kick in a bid to clear Deco's header.

James's error let in Drogba, who shot into the empty net. Malouda, booked earlier for elbowing Ricardo Rocha, doubled Chelsea's lead early in the second half with a fierce shot.

France winger Malouda then put the result beyond doubt on the hour mark when, after James palmed out Lampard's shot, he followed up to score.

And there was still time for

Ivory Coast striker Drogba to get his second goal, in the 77th minute, when he ran onto Jon Obi Mikel's pass, shrugged off Steve Finnan and scored at the near post.

Manchester City kicked-off fifth in the table.

With only the leading quartet at the end of the season guaranteed Champions League football next term,

Aston Villa 1 (Carew 30) Sunderland 1 (Campbell 22)
Birmingham 2 (Dunn 5, 67) Blackburn 1 (McFadden 55)
Manchester City 0 Everton 2 (Cahill 33, Arteta 85)
Portsmouth 0 Chelsea 5 (Drogba 32, 77, Malouda 50, 60, Lampard 90)

Roberto Mancini's men were looking to leapfrog Tottenham Hotspur into fourth place with their rivals involved in an FA Cup quarterfinal replay against Fulham that Spurs won 3-1 on Wednesday.

But it was the visitors who took the lead when Cahill headed in a cross from Leighton Baines's through a crowd of players in the 33rd

minute.

Cahill's clever dummy then set up Spanish midfielder Mikel Arteta, who sealed victory five minutes from time before Mancini and Everton counterpart David Moyes were both sent to the stands after a touchline row.

Sunderland went ahead at Villa Park when Frazier Campbell latched onto Kieran Richardson's defence splitting pass in the 22nd minute.

However, eight minutes later Villa, still in the hunt for fourth place, were level after in-form Norway striker John Carew headed in England international winger Ashley Young's fine cross.

At Ewood Park, David Dunn put Blackburn ahead against his former club in the fifth minute with a fine strike from the edge of the penalty area.

Scotland international James McFadden equalised for Birmingham in the 55th minute with a perfectly-placed free-kick, but Dunn grabbed the winner in the 67th minute, heading home El-Hadji Diouf's corner.

GERMAN CUP

Bayern reach final

Football

AFP, Berlin

Dutch winger Arjen Robben produced a wonder goal in extra-time to seal Bayern Munich's 1-0 win over Schalke on Wednesday in their German Cup semifinal to set up a final against holders Werder Bremen.

With the scores locked at 0-0, the game went into extra-time at Schalke's Veltins Arena before Robben settled the tie to put his side in the final against Werder Bremen on May 15 as Bayern chase their 15th German Cup title.

"We were the better side tonight and we proved our fitness in extra time," said Robben who said his wife and new-born baby were the inspi-

ration for his goal celebrations. "I had the feeling things were going well for me and I was pleased with my goal, I dedicate the goal to my wife and my new daughter."

With Bayern set to face Manchester United in the first leg of the Champion League quarterfinals at Munich's

Schalke 04 0 Bayern Munich 1 (Robben 112) after extra-time

Allianz Arena on Tuesday, this was a testing rehearsal for Louis van Gaal's side against their Bundesliga rivals.

The Royal Blues are second in the German league to leaders Bayern and battled their illustrious rivals for every ball.

Robben had arguably the best chance of the first 90 min-

utes when he was clear on goal with just ten minutes gone, but could not beat Schalke goalkeeper Manuel Neuer.

With less than 30 minutes left, French midfielder Franck Ribery came on for Bayern having shaken off an ankle injury but could not break the deadlock.

Germany striker Miroslav Klose went close, until Robben settled the issue in the 112th minute.

The former Real Madrid star cut in from the right wing and beat the Schalke defence before drilling his shot past Neuer.

Holders Werder Bremen beat Augsburg 2-0 on Tuesday to seal their place in the final.

Goals in either half from the first division club's Marko Marin and Claudio Pizarro put paid to their second division rivals.



Portsmouth defender Steve Finnan (R) slide tackles Chelsea striker Didier Drogba during their Premier League clash at Fratton Park on Wednesday.

Wenger defends managers

AFP, London



The touchline clash between David Moyes of Everton and Roberto Mancini of Manchester City on Wednesday night shows that managers are human after all according to Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger.

The two coaches faced off as the Premier League game between their clubs at the City

of Manchester Stadium last night went into injury time with Everton 2-0 up.

The pair needed to be separated by fourth official Howard Webb after City boss Mancini took exception to Moyes picking up the ball - an action the Italian interpreted as time-wasting.

The incident ended with both being sent to the dressing rooms for the closing moments by referee Peter Walton.

Although both managers

played down the incident afterwards and apologised to each other in the tunnel, they could yet face a misconduct charge, resulting in a possible touchline ban, from the Football Association.

Arsenal manager Wenger is no stranger to clashes in the technical area, having fronted both Tottenham manager Martin Jol and West Ham boss Alan Pardew in recent seasons.

The Frenchman, however, insists such flashpoints are understandable when pas-

sions run high, with so much at stake.

Wenger said: "I had some incidents, but we are all under pressure."

"During a game at one specific moment it can happen that, for a fraction of a second, we lose it a little bit."

"It can happen to anybody. Even if after the game, 'come on let's behave properly' it can still happen."

"It just shows that we are humans like everybody and that we care."