



Birmingham City defender Liam Ridgwell (R) celebrates his equalising goal against Liverpool during their Premier League encounter at St Andrew's on Sunday.

## L'pool lose ground

AFF, Birmingham



Liverpool's challenge for a Champions League place suffered another setback as Liam Ridgwell's goal gave Birmingham a 1-1 draw at St Andrew's on Sunday.

Rafael Benitez's side took the lead early in the second half through Steven Gerrard's seventh Premier League goal of a worryingly unproductive season.

But Ridgwell equalised soon after to leave Liverpool without an away win in seven league outings, their worst run away from Anfield in four seasons.

The Reds remain four points adrift of fourth-placed Manchester City, having played a game more than Roberto Mancini's side.

Benitez also opted to substitute Fernando Torres 25 minutes before full-time in an attempt to save the legs of the Spanish international ahead of Thursday's second leg against Benfica.

For all Benitez's promises of a fourth place finish and Torres's assertion they needed to win their remaining six games, the lack of urgency in Liverpool's first half performance was alarming.

Benitez's decision to play two holding midfielders was far too cautious and they will surely have to be more adven-

turous to achieve the bare minimum of Champions League qualification.

Birmingham had already deprived Manchester United, Chelsea, Tottenham, Arsenal and Manchester City of points at St Andrew's, so it was hardly surprising to see Liverpool struggle to break down the home side's defence.

Yet Maxi Rodriguez will take some time to work out how he did not register his first Liverpool goal at the end of an injury move begun by Pepe Reina's throw out to Dirk Kuyt.

There was more than a hint of good fortune in the way Glen Johnson's attempted shot from the edge of the area found its way to Gerrard after the England international's corner had been headed clear by Stephen Carr.

There was nothing remotely fortunate about the way Gerrard wrong-footed Lee Bowyer and produced devastating power in his right boot to defeat Hart from an acute angle.

But Gerrard's hard work was undone by dreadful defending

### RESULTS

Birmingham 1 (Ridgwell 56)	Liverpool 1 (Gerrard 47)
Everton 2 (Bilyaletdinov 24, Yakubu 85)	West Ham 2 (Da Costa 60, Ilan 87)
Fulham 2 (Okaka 47, Hangeland 58)	Wigan 1 (Scotland 34)

Yossi Benayoun and Torres combined to set up the Argentinian's volley from six yards, but somehow Joe Hart managed to push the shot up onto the bar and away to safety.

That was as exciting as it got in the first 45 minutes, but the game burst into life with two goals in nine second half minutes.

Gerrard is the first to admit his form has been far from the high levels he sets himself this season and the fact that his 47th minute intervention was only his second league goal in 2010 underlines his concerns.

with no one within five yards of Ridgwell as he bundled in James McFadden's cross at the far post in the 56th minute.

Bowyer could have won it for Birmingham, but contrived to miss from six yards when unmarked at the far post and David Ngog, Torres's replacement, could easily have finished with two goals of his own.

Rodriguez's pass set up Ngog, who shot wide from 15 yards and in stoppage time the Frenchman missed from closer range after Gerrard's long diagonal pass.

## Real back on top

AFF, Madrid



Real Madrid's deadly strikeforce of Cristiano Ronaldo and Gonzalo Higuain engineered a 2-0 win at Racing Santander on Sunday to put their side back on top of La Liga and push Barcelona into second place.

Ronaldo won and converted a penalty for his 18th league goal in just 21 games before Argentine Higuain netted for the 24th consecutive game to make it 24 goals for the season.

The duo have scored 42 out of Real's 83 goals this campaign and Madrid have now notched 12 consecutive league wins to move above Barcelona on goal difference.

Champions Barcelona also have 77 points after their 4-1 win over Athletic Bilbao on Saturday to set up the mouthwatering 'El Clasico' clash in Madrid next Saturday between the two great rivals.

"I don't think there is a favour for the match as both teams are on form and winning a lot of games," said Real coach Manuel Pellegrini.

"In these matches the team that makes the fewest mistakes wins. We need to recover the points we lost at Camp Nou (where they lost 1-0) and I am sure we can win."

German defender Christoph Metzelder made just his second Real appearance of the season with Sergio Ramos suspended and Pepe out for the season.

Starlet Sergio Canales who has already reached a deal to join Real in the summer for a reported 4.5 million euros.

The 4.5 million euros. The first opening fell to Canales on the quarter hour mark. Iker Casillas's clearance went straight to the teenager but with an open goal he lobbed his shot wide.

Real were looking dangerous and Ronaldo won a penalty on 23 minutes with several step-overs confusing defender Jose Moraton who clipped the Portuguese star and the winger went down easily to win the spot-kick.

Ronaldo converted the penalty with a fierce drive to the left for his 18th goal of the season.

Racing had failed to score in their last four outings against Madrid and have the worst

home record in the league so the omens didn't look good for the hosts.

After the break Racing improved but struggled to create clear-cut chances while Real went off the boil and Guti was introduced on the hour mark.

It was a poor second half from Real but Alvaro Arbeloa produced a sublime pass to Higuain on 76 minutes and the

home record in the league so the omens didn't look good for the hosts.

With fifth-placed Real Mallorca falling eight points behind after a 1-1 draw at Almeria, Valencia, in third, now look odds-on to net one of the four Champions League spots.

Atletico beat Deportivo La Coruna 3-0 at home on Sunday to move five points off the top six.

Defender Juanito's first goal of the season put Atletico in front before Diego Forlan

### RESULTS

Valladolid 0	Villarreal 2 (Angel 9, Nilmar 59)
Sporting Gijon 2 (Rivera 13, de las Cuevas 56)	Xerez 2 (Bermejo 52, Alustiza 79)
Getafe 1 (Manu 26)	Espanyol 1 (Osvaldo 50)
Almeria 1 (Uche 4)	Real Mallorca 1 (Webo 87)
Valencia 3 (Joaquin 47, Villa 89, 90-pen)	Osasuna 0
Racing Santander 0	Real Madrid 2 (Ronaldo 23-pen, Higuain 76)
Atletico Madrid 3 (Juanito 22, Forlan 56, Tiago 60)	Deportivo La Coruna 0



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid striker Gonzalo Higuain (R) is ecstatic after scoring the second goal against Racing Santander during their Primera Liga clash at the El Sardinero Stadium on Sunday.

Argentina raced through to cooly sloth home.

Elsewhere, Spanish international striker David Villa took his season's league tally to 20 with a late brace as Valencia defeated Osasuna 3-0 to reinforce their bid for a Champions League place.

Joaquin netted the opener before Villa scored two late goals scoring on 89 minutes and then converted a penalty three minutes into stoppage

scored his 16th of the campaign and Tiago added a third.

Real Mallorca's away form continues to undermine their Champions League hopes as the islanders drew 1-1 at Almeria as they missed the chance to go back above Sevilla into fourth.

In other matches, Villarreal moved two points behind sixth-placed Athletic Bilbao with a 2-0 win at Valladolid.

## Robben in Bayern squad

AFF, Munich

Dutch international star Arjen Robben is in the Bayern Munich squad for his club's Champions League quarterfinal return against Manchester United, the Bavarian giants said Sunday.

Bayern, who came from behind to record a 2-1 win in the first leg, had to do without the Dutchman for Saturday's success by the same score at Bundesliga title rivals Schalke as he races to overcome a calf injury.

His club said a final decision on whether he starts at Old Trafford will be taken on the day of the match.

## Wolfsburg rekindle Euro hopes

AFF, Berlin

German champions Wolfsburg rekindled their hopes of European football next season with a 4-0 home win against Hoffenheim on Sunday.

Bosnian striker Edin Dzeko scored a double which put him joint top of the Bundesliga scorers list as his team sit ninth in the table, 16 points behind leaders Bayern Munich with five games remaining.

Dzeko opened after 25 minutes, before Italian World Cup winner Andrea Barzagli claimed the hosts' second six minutes into the second half with Bosnian midfielder Zvezdan Misimovic netting the third on 74.

Dzeko put the game beyond doubt with his second a minute later as his 18th Bundesliga goal of the season put him joint top with Schalke's Kevin Kuranyi and Bayer Leverkusen's Stefan Kiessling.

Wolfsburg, who have won six of their past seven Bundesliga ties, could still qualify for the Europa League, as they trail just five points off the fifth spot in the league.

In Sunday's late game, Hamburg could only muster a goalless draw at home against second-from-bottom Hanover, as they remain sixth in the table with just 14 points since the return from the winter break.

### IN BRIEF

#### Arsenal lose Song

AFF, London

Arsenal suffered another injury blow on the eve of their Champions League quarterfinal second leg match with holders Barcelona on Monday as Cameroon midfielder Alex Song was ruled out, according to the BBC.

The 22-year-old will be unable to take his place in the starting line-up as he has a groin injury, joining captain Cesc Fabregas, Russian playmaker Andrey Arshavin and veteran French defender William Gallas on the injured absentee list.

#### Guerrero in hot water

AFF, Hamburg

SV Hamburg's Peruvian striker Paolo Guerrero is facing club sanctions after launching a bottle at the head of an angry supporter following a scoreless draw with Hanover on Sunday.

According to television pictures Guerrero -- who recently returned from a seven-month injury absence -- was leaving the pitch when the fan targeted the player with insults, telling him to go back to his country.

Guerrero reacted by throwing a bottle at the supporter, striking him on the head. He was then ushered into the dressing room by one of his teammates.

It was not clear whether the bottle was plastic, or made of glass.

Hamburg president Bernd Hoffmann said Guerrero was now facing certain sanctions.

"No matter what the supporter said, this is something that simply should not happen. It's unacceptable, and we will make sure his is punished," said Hoffmann.

The German league's disciplinary federation could also become involved in the affair.

After a promising start this season Hamburg are currently sixth in the Bundesliga, 16 points behind leaders Bayern Munich.

## Marseille move up

AFF, Paris



Marseille overcame being reduced to 10 men to defeat Lens 1-0 on Sunday to hammer home their French league title credentials, just a week after they snapped a 17-year silverware drought.

Marseille, who lifted the League Cup last weekend, moved into fifth spot, just a point behind leaders Lyon and, like fourth-placed Bordeaux, boosted by the luxury of having two games in hand.

Lyon have 57 points and lead the way on goal difference ahead of Montpellier and Auxerre who both missed opportunities to take pole position after 0-0 and 1-1 draws against Monaco and Paris St Germain respectively.

Marseille coach Didier Deschamps admitted the match had not been pretty as they played the last 15 minutes a man down when Stephane Mbia was red-carded for a push on Issam Jemaa.

"It wasn't our best match, but the job was done," said the former World Cup winner. "The most important was the result, above all at this point in time."

"It wasn't long ago that we were 11 points behind. It will be a race right until the end."

On Saturday, Lyon returned to the top after coming back from a goal down to defeat Rennes 2-1 and deposed Champions League quarter-final opponents Bordeaux who lost 2-1 at home to Nancy.

Lyon coach Claude Puel gambled by resting a number of key players ahead of Wednesday's all-French Champions League second leg clash, where they will be defending a 3-1 lead.

With Cris and Jeremy Toulalan on the bench, Lyon slipped a goal down after just 14 minutes when Ghanaian international Asamoah Gyan found the net following Jimmy

Briand's shot coming off the post. Brazilian midfielder Michel Bastos levelled for Lyon in the 52nd minute before Argentine centre-forward Lisandro headed in a 61st-minute winner from Ederson's cross.

It was Lisandro's 13th league goal of the season.

"It's not important to be first in the table, not with this schedule. For us, the most important thing was to win," said Puel.

"It's important to continue to have ambition in this championship. It was a match between two Champions League games, so I say 'bravo' to the players who showed their desire and quality."

Bordeaux coach Laurent Blanc, with one eye on the midweek Champions League clash, started with star striker Maroune Chamakh on the bench and the decision quickly backfired when Youssef Hadji gave Nancy a 17th-minute lead.

Argentine striker Fernando Cavenaghi levelled 10 minutes later, but Issar Dia made sure of the three points 20 minutes from time with a fine piece of individual skill.



PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal players Niklas Bendtner (L), Mikael Silvestre (C) and Samir Nasri warm up during a training session in London Colney on Monday on the eve of their Champions League quarterfinal second leg against Barcelona.