



Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates his opening goal against Almeria during their Primera Liga encounter at the Juegos Mediterraneos Stadium on Thursday.

Real bounce back

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid showed they have not waved their white flag in the title race bouncing back from their demoralising 'El Clasico' defeat to Barcelona with a 2-1 win at Almeria on Thursday to move three points behind Barcelona at La Liga summit.

Albert Crusat shot Almeria into a shock 14th minute lead but Real recovered with Cristiano Ronaldo's 19th league goal of the season and a 69th minute strike from Rafael van der Vaart sealing a comeback win.

"I missed a lot of chances so it was nice to finally score," said goal hero van der Vaart. "We want to win the title and have to win our remaining six games."

"We have had a great season but Barcelona have just been a bit better."

Barcelona had followed up their Real win with a resounding 3-0 home victory over Deportivo La Coruna on Wednesday to move six points clear and put the pressure on their rivals.

Madrid responded with a seventh consecutive away win to stay in the title race although they will have to win the six remaining games and hope Barca slip-up if they are to take this season's title.

Valencia are Real's next opponents at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday and they warmed up for the match with a 2-0 home win over Athletic Bilbao on Thursday.

Spanish international midfielder David Silva scored both goals (34min, 62) as third-placed Valencia moved seven points clear of fourth-placed Mallorca and look certain to secure one of the Champions League spots this season.

Bilbao stay sixth and face a real fight to hold on to the Europa League place with Getafe and Villarreal lurking behind.

Real made just one change from the team that lost to Barcelona with Guti coming into to midfield as Argentine defender Ezequiel Garay missed out through injury.

Almeria, just below mid-table, had nothing to play for except the pride of beating Real and the visitors almost scored after three minutes with van der Vaart shooting at goalkeeper Diego Alves from close range.

Six minutes later Ronaldo forced a save from Alves with a trademark free-kick as a goal looked coming, however, it was Almeria who scored it.

Real were all at sea at the back and Kalu Uche cut the ball across goal for Crusat to arrive on cue and smash the ball home.

Real were shocked but Ronaldo restored parity on 27 minutes gliding past two defenders with a step-over before firing in a left-footed shot.

Guti hit the post shortly afterwards but Almeria spurred a fantastic chance to go back in front on the half four mark.

Nigerian Uche looked destined to score a metre from goal but for some reason tried a fancy flick rather than a side-foot and it backfired as the ball rebounded on to his other foot and the chance went begging.

In the second half Real carved Almeria open time and time again with Gonzalo Higuain seeing his shot scrambled off the goal-line on 56 minutes and Brazilian Marcelo was denied by the excellent Alves three minutes later.

It looked like it was going to be a frustrating night for Madrid but van der Vaart fired in a left-footed drive on 69 minutes to finally beat Alves.

Four minutes later Uche looked poised to equalise after a terrible mistake from defender Raul Albiol but goalkeeper Iker Casillas saved the day rushing out to thwart the forward.

RESULTS

Almeria 1 (Crusat 14) Real Madrid 2 (Ronaldo 27, van der Vaart 69)

Valencia 2 (Silva 34, 62) Athletic Bilbao 0

Bayern crying foul over Lyon

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich are crying foul after Lyon were given permission to hold over a domestic league match scheduled to be played between the first and second legs of their Champions League semifinal.

Lyon face Bayern in the first leg on April 21, and now have a clear six days to recover before the second leg on April 27 after succeeding in having their French first division match with Monaco on April 24 postponed until May.

"The French authorities believe that they can with this decision give Lyon a better chance of reaching the (Champions League) final, and I reckon they are right," Bayern coach Louis van Gaal said in an interview with German daily tz.

Despite having their noses put out of joint Bayern are stopping short of lodging a protest with Champions League organisers UEFA as requested by van Gaal.

"There is no official procedure, this decision is sovereign as it comes from the French League," a Bayern spokesman explained.

The French League announced the postponement of the Lyon v Monaco match on Thursday, explaining that "this game has been moved to May 12 in order to get Lyon in the best condition".

Whilst Lyon can prepare for the return leg without any domestic distractions Bayern must travel to Munchengladbach on April 24 for a Bundesliga game.

Arsenal suffer Vermaelen blow

AFP, London

Arsenal's derby defeat by north London rivals Tottenham Hotspur has been compounded by an injury suffered by Thomas Vermaelen that threatens to rule the defender out of the rest of the season.

Vermaelen lasted just 19 minutes during the 2-1 loss at White Hart Lane on Wednesday that all but scuppered Arsenal's English Premier League title hopes, before going off with a calf injury.

Gunnars boss Arsene Wenger told the Arsenal website, www.arsenal.com, on Thursday: "Certainly it is a calf strain. (He will be out for) two to three weeks...That means the season is over for him."

Brazil star Denilson is doubtful for Sunday's match away to Wigan with a groin problem but Wenger was more upbeat about Dutch striker Robin van Persie, who returned against Tottenham after five months out with torn ankle ligaments.

"He came back very well," the Frenchman added. "We have to check him today (Thursday) and we see how he responds to that. It was a massive gamble as he had not played."

"But we'll see how he is and hopefully he'll get a few games now."

Defeat by Spurs left third-placed Arsenal six points behind Premier League leaders Chelsea with four games to play.

Barca's tricky derby

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona are strong favourites to win this season's league title but coach Pep Guardiola warned that this Saturday's derby game at Espanyol will be the most difficult in the title run-in.

Barcelona have tricky trips to Sevilla and Villarreal but first up are neighbours Espanyol who beat Barca 2-1 at Camp Nou last season and the champions also laboured to a 1-0 home win in the current campaign.

"It will be like a final and it is the key game in this part of the season," said Guardiola, whose side lead Real Madrid at La Liga summit.

He added: "(Mauricio) Pochettino is his coach and it is the hardest game we have left. We must prepare well because they will be up for it."

Real Madrid bounced back from their demoralising defeat to Barcelona in 'El Clasico' with a 2-1 comeback over Almeria on Thursday to keep the title race alive but have a tough test at home to Valencia on Sunday.

With six games left Real need to win all their games to close the three-point gap, although technically it is four points as Barca have a better head-to-head record and would win if the teams finished level on points.

Real saw their 100 percent home record in the league ended by the painful Barcelona defeat and under-

fire coach Manuel Pellegrini will hope to appease the home fans with a convincing win against Valencia at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"We said before El Clasico that whoever won the match still cannot afford to think they are the champions and that whoever lost cannot believe the league is over," said Pellegrini. "We just have to go out to win every game."

Valencia are third, seven points ahead of Mallorca and a win over Real would push them even closer to their desired Champions League berth.

With six games left Real Mallorca are surprisingly occupying fourth and the final Champions League spot, a point ahead of Sevilla.

Mallorca's season has been based around their home form with 13 wins from 15 games and they are back at their fortress stadium on Monday to host Osasuna.

Sevilla fell to a shock 2-1 loss at Valladolid Tuesday for

their ninth away defeat so will be glad to be home for Saturday's match against Sporting Gijon.

Atletico Madrid will face Sevilla in the King's Cup final but their league form continues to infuriate their fans who watched in shock as their team crashed to a 2-1 home reverse against bottom side Xerez on Wednesday.

In the league Atletico are down in 10th with 14 defeats leaving them eight points off the top six going into Saturday's game at Villarreal before the Europa League semi-final first leg against Liverpool on Thursday.

Like Atletico, Villarreal were aiming for the Champions League but they may also miss out on Europe lying two points off the top six at present.

Athletic Bilbao occupy sixth and are even in with an outside shot of the Champions League places, four points behind Mallorca, heading into Monday's home game against Real Zaragoza.

At the bottom, things are tense and two of the most endangered sides, Valladolid and Malaga, face off in a vital six-pointer on Sunday.

Valladolid took the scalp of Sevilla on Tuesday and former Spain coach Javier Clemente has revitalised the club with four points from six.

Promoted Xerez have looked doomed for months but the win over Atletico Madrid gives the bottom side a chance of a Houdini-like escape although they still lie six points from safety.

Xerez host fellow strugglers Racing Santander on Sunday.

But they, like Inter, have stuttered recently and have drawn their last three home games, dropping six points that would have been enough to see them go top.

It has left everyone involved with the club feeling frustrated at missed opportunities and club captain Massimo Ambrosini says they simply can't afford further setbacks.

"As for the title, right now the others have match-point," he said. "There is bitterness but there's no use looking backwards, what's happened has happened."

"Now we'll try to finish the season with as few regrets as possible."

It won't be easy against a resurgent Sampdoria, who have enigmatic forward Antonio Cassano back in form.

Sampdoria are level on points with fourth-placed Palermo and battling for a Champions League qualification finish.

At the bottom, Livorno will be relegated if they lose away to Chievo on Saturday and Bologna win at Udinese on Sunday with Lazio getting at least a draw against AS Roma.

IN BRIEF

Liverpool up for sale

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool's American co-owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett said British Airways chief Martin Broughton had been appointed chairman to oversee the sale of the Premier League side, according to a club statement issued on Friday.

Broughton has been brought in to supervise what Liverpool's statement was a "formal sale process".

Liverpool added they had engaged merchant Barclays Capital to advise on the sale "following numerous expressions of interest" from third parties, with some analysts reportedly valuing the club at 500 million pounds (772 million dollars).

Hicks and Gillett have owned Liverpool for the past three years, but their time in charge has been marked by disputes between the pair over the direction of the club.

Ibra set to face Inter

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic is set to face his old club Inter Milan in the Champions League semifinal on April 20, two weeks after suffering a leg injury, his club said Thursday.

The 28-year-old Swede injured a thigh muscle as he warmed up for Barca's match against Athletic Bilbao on April 3.

He trained with the squad on Thursday, and could return to the pitch in the derby match against Espanyol this weekend, Barcelona said.

He missed Barca's 4-1 win over Arsenal in the Champions League quarterfinal second leg and their 2-0 defeat of Real Madrid in 'El Clasico' on Saturday.

Lazio test for Roma

AFP, Rome



AS Roma face city rivals Lazio in the Rome derby Sunday knowing it could be their last big test in the run-in for a largely unexpected Serie A title.

Roma will have relinquished their league lead come kick-off at the Stadio Olimpico if champions Inter Milan, who sit a point adrift, beat visiting Juventus at the San Siro on Friday.

But should Roma prevail, their path to a first scudetto since 2001 will appear decidedly easier.

After Lazio and Cagliari host Sampdoria and Cagliari have trips to Parma and Chievo -- hardly a daunting run-in, especially as Cagliari and Chievo have virtually nothing left to play for, Sampdoria are poor on their travels while Parma only have an outside chance of Europa League qualification.

Roma, meanwhile, have not lost in 23 league matches although relegation-threatened Lazio, too, have been much improved recently and are unbeaten in their last five matches with three victories.

Still, Roma's players have to pinch themselves to make sure they're not dreaming when they look at the league table.

Roma began the season

with three wins and five defeats in their opening 10 matches, leaving them hovering above the relegation zone, 14 points behind then leaders Inter.

Since then, though, they have not been beaten.

"Of course, when you think about how we started and where we are now it seems unreal," club captain Francesco Totti told Il Romanista.

"But we've earned top spot on the field through sacrifice and team spirit and we've never given up, even when we weren't playing as well."

Roma went top for the first time this season with a 2-1 home win against Atalanta last weekend but Totti recognises that staying at the summit is harder than reaching it.

"On Sunday we managed to go top but now we have to consolidate that by approaching the next five matches as if they were five finals," he added.

"Lazio are an in-form team who are in good shape physically."

Should Roma, Inter or both

Slip up this weekend, AC Milan would get a much needed lifeline as they too are still in the running for the 'scudetto'.

Milan trail Roma by four points and have a tough trip to Sampdoria to contend with on Sunday.

But they, like Inter, have stuttered recently and have drawn their last three home games, dropping six points that would have been enough to see them go top.

It has left everyone involved with the club feeling frustrated at missed opportunities and club captain Massimo Ambrosini says they simply can't afford further setbacks.

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FIXTURES

Saturday
Chievo v Livorno
Sunday
Atalanta v Fiorentina, Bari v Napoli, Cagliari v Palermo, Catania v Siena, Lazio v AS Roma, Parma v Genoa, Sampdoria v AC Milan, Udinese v Bologna

Tevez's point to prove

AFP, London



Roque Santa Cruz believes his fellow Manchester City striker Carlos Tevez will still have a point to prove when the forward lines-up against former club Manchester United on Saturday.

Tevez was controversially let go by United boss Sir Alex Ferguson before the start of this season.

The Argentine international has responded with 28 goals this term as City, backed by their wealthy Middle East owners, have moved into the top four of the Premier League as they push for a place in next season's Champions League.

Tevez scored against United in both legs of a thrilling League Cup semifinal earlier in the season only to finish on the losing side.

Victory for English champions United would see them close to within a point of Chelsea before the leaders kick-off against Tottenham later Saturday, but Santa Cruz reckons Tevez is in a mood to put a dent in Ferguson's title hopes.

"Carlos has been fantastic for the whole season," said Santa Cruz.

"He has been scoring braces and hat-tricks, but this will be a massive game for him," the Paraguay interna-

tional added.

"He wants to prove himself against United, and possibly try to ruin their hopes for the title."

"It makes everything a bit more interesting, the fact that they are playing for the league and we are in the last part of the fight for fourth spot."

But United veteran Ryan Giggs insisted that while his team were down, they were far from out.

"We've just got to bounce back from the disappointment of the last couple of weeks and we're definitely not going to give up. We're going to keep fighting until the end," he said.

Chelsea will move closer towards the title, and a possible domestic double, if they win away to fifth placed London rivals Tottenham Hotspur.

Spurs, a point behind City, effectively ended Arsenal's title ambitions in midweek

with a 2-1 win in the north London derby and will fancy their chances against Carlo Ancelotti's team.

Chelsea's Brazilian defender Alex admits the title is in his side's hands.

"I think it is our trophy to lose," he said. "I saw yesterday (Wednesday) Arsenal lose and now they are six points behind."

"I hope we can win the next game against Tottenham, Manchester United have a difficult game."

Everton and Aston Villa, both still in with a chance of playing in next season's Europa League, are away to Blackburn and Portsmouth this weekend while sixth-placed Liverpool face West Ham at Anfield on Monday.

Portsmouth have already been relegated but which two clubs will join them in the Championship next season has still to be decided.

Hull and Burnley are currently in the relegation zone, four points adrift of safety. Hull, thrashed 4-1 by Burnley last weekend, are away to Birmingham while Burnley travel to Sunderland.

Bolton and Wolves are still in danger, along with Wigan. Bolton are away to Stoke while Wolves head to London to face Europa League semi-finalists Fulham.

Arsenal will hope to return to winning ways at Wigan on Sunday.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Birmingham v Hull, Blackburn v Everton, Fulham v Wolves, Manchester City v Manchester United (1145GMT), Stoke v Bolton, Sunderland v Burnley, Tottenham v Chelsea (1630GMT)
Sunday
Wigan v Arsenal (1230GMT), Portsmouth v Aston Villa (1500GMT)
Monday
Liverpool v West Ham (1900GMT)



Chelsea winger Joe Cole (R) poses with his friend professional boxer Kevin Mitchell during a photocall at the TKO Ultrachem gym in London on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP