



Real Madrid striker Gonzalo Higuain (L) scores the opening goal against Valencia during their Primera Liga encounter at Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

Real hot on the heels

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid striking duo Cristiano Ronaldo and Gonzalo Higuain grabbed a goal apiece as Real moved to within one point of leaders Barcelona at the top of La Liga with a 2-0 home win

over third-placed Valencia on Sunday to set up a thrilling finale to the title race.

Barcelona's 0-0 draw at neighbours Espanyol 24 hours earlier had given Real a chance to close the gap and Real capitalised on the slip with Higuain netting his 25th goal of the season after 25 minutes before Ronaldo finished the game off on 77 minutes with his 20th goal of the season.

With five games left Real are just a point behind their arch rivals although if the two teams finish level on points Barcelona, who face Inter Milan on Tuesday in the semifinal of the Champions League, will win the title due to their superior head-to-head record.

It was a 16th league home win of the season

from 17 games by Real - with a defeat to Barcelona the only blemish - and Higuain is just two goals behind compatriot Lionel Messi who has scored 27 for Barcelona to lead the race for the 'Pichichi' or top-scorer crown.

Valencia, a massive 24 points behind Real in third, are five points ahead of fourth-placed Sevilla following their eighth defeat of the campaign and they will rue David Silva's shot hitting the post minutes before Ronaldo grabbed the second goal.

There was no Kaka again for Real with the Brazilian still not fully fit while Sergio Ramos continued in central defence in the absence of Ezequiel Garay.

For Valencia the spotlight was on midfielder Silva with the Spanish international strongly linked with big-spending Real in the local media.

With eight minutes gone Rafael van der Vaart, who scored the winner in the 2-1 win

over Almeria in midweek, shot wide with his weaker right foot.

Guti should have scored on 19 minutes after a great cut-back from Ronaldo but the midfielder pulled his left-footed shot wide.

It was back to the wall for Valencia and Higuain struck on 25 minutes with a neat turn to beat his man before dispatching past former Real goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez.

Four minutes later Higuain set up van der Vaart but the Dutchman could not apply the finishing touch with defender Alexis Delgado blocking the effort on the line.

Alexis was then in action at the other end on 33 minutes with his header forcing Iker Casillas into a scrambling save.

Brazilian Marcelo forced save from Cesar early in the second half as Real continued to dominate.

Valencia stayed in the game, however, and Silva thumped a brilliant 25 yard shot off the left

RESULTS

Tenerife 3 (Nino 30, 69, 76)	Getafe 2 (Leon 10, Casquero 75)
Malaga 0	Valladolid 0
Xerez 2 (Orellana 6, Sanchez 72)	Racing Santander 2 (Tchite 43, 57-pen)
Deportivo La Coruna 0	Almeria 0
Athletic Bilbao 0	Real Zaragoza 0
Real Madrid 2 (Higuain 25, Ronaldo 78)	Valencia 0

hand post on 74 minutes with international teammate Casillas well beaten.

Four minutes later Marcelo raced down the left and set up Ronaldo for the decisive second goal to

end Valencia's resistance.

Elsewhere Tenerife striker Juan Nino scored a hat-trick to help the promoted side defeat European hopefuls Getafe 3-2 on Sunday and move one point from safety with five games left.

Getafe went ahead through Pedro Leon on 10 minutes but Nino, top-scorer in the second division last season, replied on 30 minutes with his first goal and then scored twice inside seven minutes (69 min, 76) to complete his treble.

Tenerife lie third from bottom but are now just a point behind 17th placed Malaga while Getafe fall two points off the top six.

Athletic Bilbao missed the chance to go above Villarreal into sixth following a 0-0 home draw with strugglers Real Zaragoza on Sunday.

Bilbao, now level on points with Villarreal, had won five out of the last six at their San Mames home but came up against a resilient Zaragoza side who are two points above the bottom three.

Ribery in scandal

AFP, Paris

French international footballer Franck Ribery may be charged over alleged relations with an under-age call-girl, but says he did not know she was a minor, a judicial official said on Monday.

The case falls less than two months before Ribery, the Bayern Munich midfielder and one of the stars of his national team, is due to play for France in the football World Cup in South Africa.

The prosecution service official, who declined to be named according to regular French practice, told AFP that Ribery had admitted having relations with the prostitute but says he did not know she was underage.

"It is up to the judge Andre Dando to decide whether or not to bring charges against him," the source said.

Soliciting sex with an under-age minor in France carries a three-year jail term and a fine of 45,000 euros (60,000 dollars).

On Sunday, Ribery's lawyer Sophie Bottai told AFP the player was quizzed as a witness by French police investigating prostitution in a case centred on a Paris night club frequented by certain French internationals.

The judicial official said on Monday that investigators had found evidence of prostitution involving minors at the club.

Bottai said 27-year-old Ribery was summoned by police to explain his relationship with an acquaintance who had connections with a call girl ring and stressed that no charges had been brought against him.

L'Equipe newspaper reported Sunday that a third French international player could be questioned in the coming weeks as part of the same investigation.

"There is no reaction to give on a matter like this," the president of the French Football Federation Jean-Pierre Escalettes told AFP on Sunday.

"An investigation is underway and I have no information on that. At the moment it is not possible to make a comment," he added.

Ribery is a key player in the French international side, taking over in the midfield from Zinedine Zidane who was a mainstay in the French team that won the World Cup in 1998 and reached the final four years ago.

He made his breakthrough into football's big-time with Marseille in France before transferring to Bayern Munich. He has been linked with a high-profile transfer to Spain or possibly England in the close season this summer.

Torres out for season

AFP, London

Liverpool striker Fernando Torres requires surgery on his problem knee and will miss the rest of the season, a club spokesman announced on Sunday.

The operation, due to take place in Spain later Sunday, will rule the 26-year-old Spanish international out of action for around six weeks, not leaving him much time to be fit for the start of the World Cup on June 11.

He will miss not only the Premier League run in but also the remainder of Liverpool's Europa League campaign, which continues this week with a semi-final against Torres' former club Atletico Madrid.

A Liverpool spokesman told the club's official website: "Fernando saw a specialist in Spain earlier today (Sunday) and it was decided that he would need surgery on a torn cartilage in his right knee.

"This will be carried out later tonight.

"We cannot comment ahead of the operation, but as a guide, the usual rehabilitation period for this type of procedure is around six weeks."

Torres missed Liverpool's draw with Fulham last weekend as a result of the problem.

Fulham tie to go ahead

AFP, London

Fulham's Europa League semifinal first leg with Hamburg is to go ahead this week despite the travel chaos engulfing Europe as a result of volcanic ash grounding huge numbers of flights, the English club confirmed on Monday.

The match is due to be played in Hamburg on Thursday evening and the Fulham squad have to be in the German port 24 hours earlier.

Cottagers boss Roy Hodgson is hoping flights will be resumed by Wednesday but the club has made alternative arrangements in case that does not happen.

"The team has a contingency plan for travel to enable them to arrive in Hamburg in time for their scheduled match preparations on Wednesday evening," a club statement read.

Although the squad will be able to get to Hamburg, Fulham fans who had planned to fly to Germany may miss out on the biggest European match in the west London club's history.

The club statement added: "At this stage the Club still cannot confirm whether the planes scheduled to depart on Wednesday and Thursday to transport fans and media will be able to travel, and is in regular dialogue with the aviation authorities to enable it to inform all parties at the earliest opportunity when a decision is made."

Wenger left fuming

AFP, Wigan

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger criticised his side's lack of concentration after they squandered a two-goal lead in the last 10 minutes to lose 3-2 against struggling Wigan.

The Gunners seemed certain to beat Roberto Martinez's side on Sunday after goals from Theo Walcott and Mikael Silvestre gave them a comfortable advantage going into the last 10 minutes at the DW Stadium.

But Ben Watson reduced the deficit and Titus Bramble punished an error by goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski before an injury-time winner from Charles N'Zogbia shattered Arsenal's title dreams and lifted Wigan clear of the relegation zone.

Wenger was furious with his team's failure to close out a victory that would have moved them to within three points of leaders Chelsea.

"It is difficult to understand," Wenger said. "Maybe the players felt too much comfort and you have to keep focused for 90 minutes or you get punished.

"You cannot be happy with the way we conceded the goals. There was a lack of urgency there and we were punished.

"I believe at our level you don't want to give excuses and you want to show your character in every single game. You can always find an excuse but that is not important."

Wenger wants his side to react in a positive

way in the remaining fixtures against Manchester City, Blackburn and Fulham, although lifting the dressing room after gifting three points to the opposition as they did here will be no easy task.

The French coach refused to discuss his side's title hopes and said only: "We have to focus and try to win our next games."

Walcott's classy finish after a fine through ball from Nicklas Bendtner and Silvestre's glancing header from Samir Nasri's corner sent Arsenal into cruise control after 48 minutes.

But, led by N'Zogbia and 19-year-old Victor Moses, Wigan poured forward and no-one in the ground was surprised when Watson slotted home from 12 yards out with 10 minutes to go to breathe some life back into the home side.

With the final whistle approaching, Fabianski -- playing because of an injury to Manuel Almunia -- made the fatal mistake of dropping a corner onto Bramble's head and he nodded in before N'Zogbia thrashed home a 25-yarder with practically the last kick.

Martinez said: "Without a doubt that was (our) best win of the season. We have folded many times this season.

"We have been through some painful lessons this season, from the 9-1 against Spurs and, to come back from 2-0 down, I don't think too many do that, so I think we have learnt from our experiences.

"You don't get results like by accident, we deserved it."

Montpellier stumble

AFP, Paris

An injury-time equaliser by Colin Kazim-Richards gave Toulouse a 1-1 draw at Montpellier on Sunday that checked the hosts' push for a Champions League place.

Montpellier led through Alberto Costa's 32nd-minute opener and weathered heavy pressure in the second period, with Andre-Pierre Gignac sending a diving header just wide, Paulo Machado clipping the crossbar with a free-kick and substitute Adrien Regattin firing over late on.

The equaliser finally arrived in the 92nd minute when Regattin beat two defenders and squared for on-loan Fenerbahce forward Kazim-Richards to score from close range.

"I'm a competitor, so I'm disappointed to lose two points like that in the last minute of the game," said Montpellier coach Rene Girard.

"But I'm not annoyed. I was a player, so I know that a mistake like that can happen."

The draw leaves Montpellier fourth, level on 59 points with third-place Lyon but behind them on goal difference.

Lille leap-frogged Bordeaux into fifth place with a comprehensive 4-0 victory at home to French Cup finalists Monaco.

Midfielder Yohan Cabaye was the star for Lille, teeing up Aurelien Chedjou for a 14th-minute header and doubling the hosts' advantage with a penalty on the cusp of half-time awarded for a foul on Mathieu Debuchy by Igor Lolo.

Cabaye made the game safe with 15 minutes remaining, sending a sweet volley past Stephane Ruffier from Gervinho's deft touch, before substitute Tulio De Melo added an injury-time coup de grace with a header.

"What we wanted to do was win because we knew that by winning we'd go into the top five," said Lille coach Rudi Garcia.

"It's job done. We were very efficient and solid defensively. The third goal was magnificent. I'm really satisfied with what the players did."

Monaco coach Guy Lacombe, meanwhile, apologised after he was sent off at half-time for reacting to Lille's second goal by throwing a water bottle towards the match officials.

"You know me, it's not the first time I've thrown a bottle," he said.

"I realise it's inappropriate. I regret what I did, which was stupid. I was just angry."

IN BRIEF

Gallas confident of playing WC

SOCCERNET

William Gallas says he is "confident" of proving his fitness ahead of the World Cup finals.

Gallas, who has managed just 44 minutes of club football for Arsenal in the last two months, is currently sidelined with a calf injury and faces a race against time to make the France squad for South Africa.

The central defender still remains a vital part of coach Raymond Domenech's plans, and has until the day before France's first game against Uruguay in Cape Town on June 11 as FIFA allows replacements for injured players until this time.

Gallas attempted a comeback against Barcelona in the Champions League but didn't make it to half-time before his calf problem flared up again. He also defended his decision to play in such an important game.

"I wanted to play this game against Barcelona, because I am a competitor," Gallas told French TV station Canal Plus.

"I want to play against the best players and I had an agreement from the medical staff and fitness coach.

"Now my objective is not to suffer any relapse and I am confident. If you are not confident, you can forget about the World Cup."

Mutu banned for 9 months

AP, Rome

Florentina striker Adrian Mutu has been suspended for nine months by the Italian Olympic Committee's antidoping tribunal.

The 31-year-old Romanian twice tested positive for stimulant following games against Bari and Lazio in January, and will be unable to play until Oct. 29.

"I'm not happy," Mutu said on Monday. "A suspension this long for a laxative seems excessive."

In 2004, Mutu received a seven-month ban for testing positive for cocaine during his time with Chelsea.

His lawyer said they hadn't ruled out an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Anderlecht win record 30th title

AFP, Brussels

Anderlecht won their 30th Belgian league title on Sunday thanks to a 2-1 away win at FC Bruges.

With four matches remaining in the Belgian first division play-offs Anderlecht have 49 points and an unassailable lead of 14 points over second placed FC Bruges who have 35.

Triumph for the club from the Belgian capital comes after two years of league domination by Standard Liege.

Anderlecht remain the most decorated club in Belgian football, both in domestic competition and in Europe, where they have won five trophies including the UEFA Cup in 1983.



Roma striker Mirko Vucinic (L) is ecstatic after scoring one of his two goals against Lazio during their Serie A clash at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP