

Chelsea a step away Battle royal for fourth

AFP, Liverpool

Chelsea are on the brink of their first Premier League title in four years after Steven Gerrard's mistake helped the leaders secure a vital 2-0 win at Liverpool on Sunday.

Carlo Ancelotti's side are now four points clear of second-placed Manchester United and, even if the champions keep the title race alive with a win at Sunderland later on Sunday, the Blues will be crowned kings of English football if they beat Wigan at home next weekend.

Gerrard had used his programme notes to insist that the hosts would not throw in the towel against Chelsea, even though a Liverpool victory would have aided the title aspirations of bitter rivals United.

Yet the England midfielder's horrendous back pass allowed Didier Drogba to score his 26th Premier League goal of the campaign before Frank Lampard wrapped up a comfortable victory after more lacklustre defending from Rafa Benitez's team.

This game had long since been earmarked as a must-win for Chelsea and a match that would test both their title-winning mentality and mettle. They delivered on both counts.

Rumours of a conspiracy had been sweeping Merseyside in the days before that Liverpool would not mind losing to Chelsea as it would help prevent United from winning a record 19th title.

A banner draped over the Centenary Stand at Anfield before the game "Cockneys For A Day" did little to dispel that theory.

But those suggestions should have been laid to rest inside the opening three minutes. Javier Mascherano's shot from 25-yards deflecting narrowly wide for a corner as Liverpool made the brighter start.

Chelsea were strangely lethargic considering the prize that was at stake.

Despite early attempts by



CROSSING THE ANFIELD HURDLE: Chelsea striker Didier Drogba hurdles the challenge of Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher during their Premier League match at Anfield yesterday.

Salomon Kalou and Nicolas Anelka, it was Liverpool who came closest to breaking the deadlock in the opening exchanges as Alberto Aquilani went close to delivering a crushing blow to Ancelotti with a cracking 25-yard effort that clipped the top of the bar.

Aquilani then crumpled under a challenge from Branislav Ivanovic in the area but the referee adjudged there was no foul before Gerrard's clanger 12 minutes before half time brought Chelsea within touching distance of the title.

Gerrard, under no pressure whatsoever, attempted a needless back pass that provided Drogba with an open invitation to pounce, round Jose Reina and slot home in front of the Kop.

That brought the Ivory Coast striker level with Wayne Rooney at the top of the Premier League scoring charts - more importantly it left Chelsea on the verge of their third title in six seasons.

Suddenly, Chelsea were going for the kill. It required a superb challenge by Liverpool's

Greek defender Sotirios Kyrgiakos to prevented Nicolas Anelka from making it 2-0, while the visitors felt they should have been awarded a penalty in the dying moments of the first half after claiming that Lucas had clipped Kalou.

Liverpool had started the day with an outside chance of securing a place in the Champions League qualifying rounds, but Benitez's side struggled to recover from falling behind.

Kalou and Florent Malouda,

AFP, London



Spurs will go all-out to beat Manchester City in their clash for fourth place, Harry Redknapp said, while his opposite number Roberto Mancini refused to say his job depended on a win.

Mancini's City kicked Aston Villa out of the race to finish fourth in the English Premier League with a 3-1 win on Saturday while Redknapp's Tottenham beat Bolton 1-0 to set up a battle royale for the final Champions League spot.

Spurs go into Wednesday's crucial clash between the pair at Eastlands with a one-point advantage although Liverpool could still spoil the party and bag fourth.

"We're right there. We have two big games to come," Redknapp said.

Meanwhile Mancini refused to be drawn on how the result against Spurs would affect his position.

"Everyone asks me this but I don't know. It's not important for me, it's important that the squad win the next game and get the fourth position," the Italian said.

At Eastlands, Norway striker John Carew put Villa ahead in the 16th minute, beating City's emergency goalkeeper Marton Fulop.

But Argentina striker Carlos Tevez converted a 41st-minute penalty and Emmanuel Adebayor put the Blues ahead two minutes later. Wales forward Craig Bellamy sealed the victory in the 89th minute.

Totti keeps Roma ticking

AFP, Rome



Roma moved a point clear of Inter Milan at the summit of Serie A on Saturday after goals from

Francesco Totti and Rodrigo Taddei earned a nervous 2-1 win at Parma.

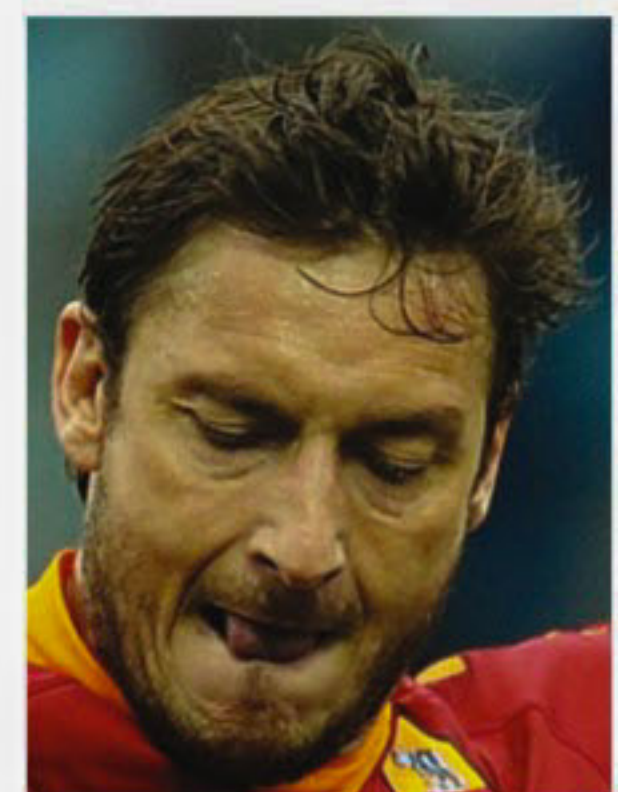
Ahead of Inter's away match in Rome against Lazio on Sunday, Totti struck after five minutes and Taddei doubled the lead with a quarter of an hour to go after Parma had bossed the match.

Substitute Davide Lanzafame's 81st-minute strike set up a tense finale, but Roma, seeking their first scudetto since 2001, held on and with two matches to play will now be cheering on their city rivals.

"I told my players to battle and then see if the ball would run for us. Last week it went against us but today it went for us," admitted Roma coach

Claudio Ranieri, whose team slumped to a 2-1 home defeat to Sampdoria last weekend.

Roma skipper Totti gave his team the perfect start with a



FRANCESCO TOTTI

superbly taken goal on five minutes.

Chesting down a fine through ball from fellow Roman Daniele De Rossi, Totti calmly lobbed a stranded Antonio Mirante for the simplest of strikes.

At White Hart Lane, Spurs stretched their impressive home run to eight straight wins thanks to midfielder Tom Huddlestone's stunning 22-yard strike in the 38th minute.

Spurs therefore held onto fourth place on 67 points, with City one point behind them. Both have one more game after their midweek clash.

Aston Villa, with one game left, are on 64 points with Liverpool, who have two matches to go, on 62.

Everton blew their slim chances of grabbing seventh place and a Europa League spot with a goalless draw at the Britannia Stadium.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

RESULTS

| |
|---|
| Birmingham 2 (Jensen 29-og, Benitez 41) Burnley 1 (Thompson 87) |
| Man City 3 (Tevez 41-pen, Adebayor 43, Bellamy 89) Aston Villa 1 (Carew 16) |
| Portsmouth 3 (Dindane 20, Utaka 39, Brown 67) Wolves 1 (Doyle 35) |
| Stoke 0 Everton 0 |
| Tottenham 1 (Huddlestone 38) Bolton 0 |



Barcelona forward Lionel Messi (C) lifts the ball over the Villarreal goalkeeper to score his second goal in their Primera Liga match at the El Madrigal on Saturday.

Barca back in groove

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona bounced back in style from their heartbreaking Champions League exit with a 4-1 win at Villarreal on Saturday which put them four points clear at the top of La Liga.

Villarreal striker Nilmar Honorato missed a couple of excellent chances before Barcelona, dumped out of the Champions League semifinals by Inter Milan in midweek, asserted themselves.

A deflected Lionel Messi shot put the Catalans in the lead and then a Xavi Hernandez free-kick doubled the advantage.

Bojan Krkic, playing instead of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, rounded his marker before beating the keeper for Barca's third, still before half-time.

Joseba Llorente pulled a goal back, but Messi wrapped up the scoring with three minutes to go.

"We didn't take too long to find our rhythm and we managed a good result against a strong side," said Barca coach Pep Guardiola.

Elsewhere, a brace from substitute Nicola Zanicchi saw Valencia beat Espanyol 2-0 and consolidate third place.

Espanyol suffered their first defeat at home since last December having appeared in control of the game until Zanicchi struck.

Valencia coach Unai Emery replaced David Villa with Zanicchi on the hour mark and it had almost immediate reward with the beanpole striker slotting home a Vicente Rodriguez cross.

After having another goal wrongly called off-side, Zanicchi was on target again to ensure the victory.

Meanwhile, Getafe's Europa League hopes suffered a blow after they were held 0-0 away to relegation threatened Valladolid.

Tenerife beat Racing Santander 2-1 but remain in the bottom three on goal difference after Malaga drew 1-1 with Sporting Gijon.

A fine header from Roman Martinez put Tenerife in front and Ayoze Garcia added to the lead from the penalty spot before Xisco Jimenez pulled a goal back.

Meanwhile, a strike from Salvador Caicedo earned Malaga a point after an own-goal from Antonio Apono had earlier put Sporting in front.

A late injury time header from Mario Bermejo saw bottom side Xerez beat Almeria 2-1 but they are still five points from safety.

Deportivo la Coruna's dismal run continued as they were beaten 1-0 at home with Adrian Colunga scoring the only goal of the game.

RESULTS

| |
|--|
| Tenerife 2 (Martinez 45+1, Garcia Pérez 56-pen) Racing Santander 1 (Xisco J. 71) |
| Deportivo La Coruna 0 Real Zaragoza 1 (Colunga 50) |
| Malaga 1 (Caicedo 79) Sporting Gijon 1 (Apoño 43-og) |
| Valladolid 0 Getafe 0 |
| Xerez 2 (Armenteros 27, Bermejo 90+3) Almeria 1 (Soriano 33) |
| Espanyol 0 Valencia 2 (Zanicchi 61, 73) |
| Villarreal 1 (Llorente 67) Barcelona 4 (Messi 19, 88, Xavi 34, Bojan Krkic 42) |

IN BRIEF

Mueller admits to relief

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich's hattrick hero Thomas Mueller admitted it was a relief to finally capture some silverware after Saturday's 3-1 win over Bochum effectively handed them this season's Bundesliga title.

"It's a huge weight off our shoulders, because we're there at last," said Mueller, who scored his first two goals inside 20 minutes and completed his hattrick on 69 minutes.

"We've worked for this the whole season. We're proud of the way we pulled together as a team and escaped the alleged crisis situation we were in.

"Winning the title is a just reward for the club and the players."

Having already made his Germany debut against Argentina in March, Mueller is set to travel to next month's World Cup in South Africa.

PSG add gloss to poor season

AFP, Paris

An extra-time goal from Guillaume Hoarau handed Paris St Germain their eighth French Cup success on Saturday to deny Monaco 1-0 at Stade de France.

The 26-year-old Hoarau, from Saint Louis on La Reunion island in the Indian Ocean, struck seconds before the turnaround in the final half hour to add some gloss to what has been a poor season for the capital club.

After a largely turgid affair, veteran Claude Makelele fed Christophe Jallet on the right and although Monaco keeper Stephane Ruffier parried the effort, Hoarau snapped up the rebound.

With a place in the Europa League at stake, both sides had every reason to go for the jugular - particularly as neither club has shone in the league this season with both mired in mid-table.

The Parisians last lifted the trophy in 2006 whereas their rivals won their fifth and most recent pot back in 1991.

AFP, Berlin



Germany's rising star Thomas Mueller scored a hattrick on Saturday as Bayern Munich secured a 3-1 home win over Bochum which, barring a last weekend miracle, guarantees them this season's Bundesliga title.

With second-placed Schalke 04 losing 2-0 at home to Werder Bremen, the Royal Blues now trail Bayern by three points while Munich have a vastly superior goal difference of plus-17 with just one game left each.

It means Bayern's Dutch coach Louis van Gaal will win the Bundesliga title in his first season in charge with his side still on course for the treble of German League, German Cup and Champions League crowns.

The Dutchman can also now add the Bundesliga title to the La Liga crown he won with Barcelona in Spain and last season's Dutch league with AZ Alkmaar.

"The board of directors told me a year ago that this is the most important title to win: now we have achieved it, I am very proud," said van Gaal.

"We played the best football I have seen in this arena for 20 to 25 minutes. Then we heard what happened at Schalke."

Bayern were 2-0 up after just 20 minutes as 20-year-old Mueller did his World Cup chances the power of good with two goals in as many first-half minutes before completing his hattrick on 69 minutes.

After Ivica Olic scored a hattrick in Bayern's 3-0 win at Lyon last Tuesday to put them in the Champions League final, Mueller stole the limelight with three goals of his own at Munich's Allianz Arena.

A Philipp Lahm cross found Mueller unmarked in front of goal and the ball went in off his chest on 18 minutes.

Just two minutes later, Lahm linked up with Franck Ribery and the Frenchman's volley was headed home by Mueller.

Mueller then grabbed his



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich starlet Thomas Mueller (L) celebrates with his teammates after bagging his hattrick in their Bundesliga match against VfL Bochum in Munich on Saturday.

third when captain Mark van Bommel played him into area and he drilled his shot in the top left-hand corner on 69 minutes, before Bochum pulled back a late consolation goal.

Schalke coach Felix Magath's dream of winning the German league with three different teams is on ice for another year as the Royal Blues lost at home to Bremen.

Third-placed Bremen took the lead when Germany midfielder Mesut Ozil hit a left-footed shot just after half-time.

The guests then played a big part in deciding the title will go to Munich when striker Hugo Almeida scored on 64 minutes to make it 2-0.

Stuttgart's chances of a top five finish to claim a European spot for next season suffered a blow when they were held 2-2 at home by Mainz as Romanian striker Ciprian Marica rescued them with two second-half goals.

Hamburg bounced back from last week's Europa League exit with a 4-0 win over Nuremberg which leaves their opponents in the relegation zone.

Hertha's relegation was confirmed by their 1-1 draw at Leverkusen as the league's bottom side are four points from safety and face Bayern in the final game of the season next Saturday.

Hanover gave themselves a strong chance of staying in the Bundesliga with an incredible 6-1 win over Borussia Moenchengladbach.

This was only their eighth win of the season, but they led 4-0 at half-time as Gladbach's defence capitulated.

The win leaves Hanover 15th - just above the relegation zone - and Mirko Slomka's side must beat Bochum next Saturday on the last day of the season to be sure of survival.

TOP SIX

| Team | P | W | D | L | GF | GA | Pts |
|-------------------|----|----|----|---|----|----|-----|
| Bayern Munich | 33 | 19 | 10 | 4 | 69 | 30 | 67 |
| Schalke 04 | 33 | 19 | 7 | 7 | 53 | 31 | 64 |
| Werder Bremen | 33 | 17 | 9 | 7 | 70 | 39 | 60 |
| Bayer Leverkusen | 33 | 15 | 13 | 5 | 64 | 37 | 58 |
| Borussia Dortmund | 33 | 16 | 9 | 8 | 53 | 39 | 57 |
| VfB Stuttgart | 33 | 15 | 9 | 9 | 50 | 40 | 54 |

RESULTS

| |
|--|
| Borussia Dortmund 1 (Stiepermann 81) VfL Wolfsburg 1 (Dzeko 69) |
| Bayer Leverkusen 1 (M. Friedrich 59) Hertha Berlin 1 (Raffael 12) |
| Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Schwegler 20) Hoffenheim 2 (Tagoe 80, 88) |
| Schalke 04 0 Werder Bremen 2 (Ozil 55, Hugo Almeida 64) |
| Bayern Munich 3 (Thomas Mueller 18, 20, 69) VfL Bochum 1 (Fuchs 85) |
| Hanover 96 6 (Haggui 16, Pinto 23, Ya Konan 27, Hanke 39, Sofian Chahed 53, Bruggink 74) Borussia M'gladbach 1 (Herrmann 69) |
| Cologne 2 (Tosic 9, Freis 84) Freiburg 2 (Idrissou 31, 57) |
| VfB Stuttgart 2 (Marica 73, 75) Mainz 05 2 (Fathi 52, Schuerle 63) |
| Hamburg 4 (Pitroipa 10, Petric 19, 25, van Nistelrooy 73) Nuremberg 0 |