

# Barca inch closer

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi netted his 30th and 31st league goals of the season as Barcelona inched closer to retaining their La Liga title with a 4-1 home win over relegation-threatened Tenerife at Camp Nou on Tuesday.

The Catalans are now four points clear of Real Madrid at the summit with just two games left, but Real have a game in hand and must win at fourth-placed Real Mallorca on Wednesday to keep their title hopes alive.

Messi put Barcelona ahead on 17 minutes and added a second in the final minute to stay on course to win the Pichichi crown for the league's top scorer, as he is currently six goals ahead of his nearest rival, Real striker Gonzalo Higuain.

Argentine Roman Martinez stunned the champions by equalising for Tenerife shortly before half-time following an error from home captain Carles Puyol.

But second-half goals from Bojan Krkic (in the 63rd minute) and substitute Pedro Rodriguez (77) turned the game in Barca's favour before Messi rubbed salt in the wound with his late strike.

"It was a difficult night due to the weather and the fixture list is already taking its toll but we gave our all," said Barcelona goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

"It is a very competitive league and we have won our game and now we just have to wait."

Barcelona will hope Mallorca can do them a favour against Real as they turn their focus to Saturday's tough trip to Champions League hopefuls Sevilla.

Promoted Tenerife, who have won just once on their travels all season, stay third from bottom, although they are level on points with Malaga above them.

Valencia sealed a place in the Champions League qualifying round after coming from behind to defeat bottom side Xerez 3-1 at the Mestalla later on Tuesday.

Spain international winger Juan Mata scored a brace before setting up David Silva for a third as third-placed Valencia made sure of a

top-four finish and moved to within a point of an automatic place in next season's Champions League.

Xerez prop up the table, as they have done for most of the season, lying five points from safety and could be relegated on Wednesday if results go against them.

A rain-soaked night and the mid-week fixture kept some Barcelona fans away for the visit of Tenerife at Camp Nou and the wet surface made passing tricky for both sides.

On 12 minutes Barcelona right-back Dani Alves had the first real opening but chose to pass when shooting seemed the best option and the chance went begging.

Barca got the early goal they craved on 17 minutes with Ibrahimovic heading down an Xerez cross and Messi chipping in from close range for his 30th league goal of the campaign.

The hosts should have made it 2-0 on 34 minutes but Maxwell chose to shoot from an acute angle rather than squaring to Ibrahimovic.

The miss was punished six minutes before half-time when captain Puyol produced a rare stray pass to gift possession to Tenerife and Argentine

Roman slotted the ball past Valdes.

Bojan restored Barca's lead just after the hour, latching onto a neat pass from the active Alves before finishing coolly into the bottom-left corner.

A lightning counter-attack then released Pedro, who chipped his shot just wide, but on 77 minutes the substitute found the net after racing onto Messi's pass and sliding a shot under the goalkeeper.

In the dying seconds of the game Messi controlled Alves's lofted pass in the penalty area before dinking in to cap an ultimately comfortable win.

Elsewhere, Almeria defeated Villarreal 4-2 to dent the visitors' hopes of qualifying for the Europa League.

Villarreal had Argentine centre-back Mateo Musacchio sent off after just 16 minutes and Almeria took full advantage, racking up a 3-0 lead by half-time.

Villarreal fall to seventh, behind Getafe on goal difference after the Madrid-based side drew 1-1 at home to strugglers Sporting Gijon.

## RESULTS

Getafe 1 (Soldado 47) Sporting Gijon 1 (De las Cuevas 17)

Barcelona 4 (Messi 17, 90, Bojan 63, Pedro 77) Tenerife 1 (Roman 39)

Almeria 4 (Crusat 14, Uche 28, 42, Piatti 90) Villarreal 2 (Marcano 53, Ibagaza 66)

Valencia 3 (Mata 45, 57, Silva 67) Xerez 1 (Armenteros 37)



Barcelona star Lionel Messi (R) celebrates one of his two goals with teammate Dani Alves during their Primera Liga encounter against Tenerife at Nou Camp on Tuesday.

## Injuries worry Del Bosque

AFP, Madrid

Spain coach Vicente Del Bosque is concerned by the injuries plaguing several key Spanish internationals like Liverpool striker Fernando Torres ahead of the World Cup in South Africa.

"We are worried because it is something that he cannot control," he said in comments published on Wednesday in sports daily Marca.

Liverpool's new medical chief Peter Brukner said on Tuesday that Torres, who is recovering from a second operation in three months to repair damage to his right knee, may not be fit in time for Spain's opening World Cup clash with Switzerland on June 16.

Fellow current walking wounded include Arsenal midfielder Cesc Fabregas, Barcelona playmaker Andres Iniesta and Brazil-born Villarreal holding midfielder Marcos Senna.

Del Bosque said "expectations were good" that the players would recover in time for the June 11-July 11 World Cup.

He also said he was confident that Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola would not put midfielder Xavi Hernandez, who has been playing with a tear in a leg muscle, "at risk".

Del Bosque is scheduled to announce his 23-man World Cup squad on May 20 before the group heads to Austria for a training camp ahead of the start of the tournament.

Spain, one of the favourites to take the trophy, face Chile and Honduras in addition to Switzerland in Group H of the opening round.

The Spanish national team holds the distinction of being the only side to ever be ranked number one in the FIFA standings without winning a World Cup. Their best placing remains fourth place in 1950.

## Paraguay call up Barrios

AFP, Asuncion

Paraguay coach Gerardo Martino on Tuesday called up Borussia Dortmund striker and freshly nationalised Argentine Lucas Barrios as he unveiled his preliminary World Cup squad.

Barrios was named in a 30-man squad that will be cut to 23 at the end of the month, in time for the start of the finals on June 11.

"Nobody can doubt the capabilities of Lucas Barrios," Martino, himself an Argentine, told a press conference.

Barrios, whose mother is Paraguayan, has enjoyed a fine season with Dortmund, as has clubmate Nelson Haedo Valdez, who also made the 30 along with fellow strikers Oscar Cardozo of Benfica and Manchester City's Roque Santa Cruz.

"I can imagine Paraguay causing some surprises in South Africa," said Barrios, who has scored 18 goals in the Bundesliga this season.

## Ribery attends hearing

AFP, Nyon



Bayern Munich's Franck Ribery arrived for a UEFA hearing on Wednesday to try to overturn a three match ban which threatens to keep him out of the Champions League final.

Ribery is set to miss the match against Inter Milan on May 22 unless Bayern can persuade UEFA's appeal hearing to cut the three-match ban imposed on the French player after he was sent off in the semi-final.

Ribery arrived at the headquarters of European football's governing body here accompanied by Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and a club lawyer.

The German team are anxious to get their star midfielder back for their first final since 2001. Rummenigge said earlier this week that he would try to convince the appeals body "that it was not an assault, only a rough foul."

Ribery was shown a straight red card for a dangerous tackle on Lyon striker Lisandro Lopez in the first-half of Bayern's 1-0 win over Lyon on April 21.

He has already been kept out of one match, the 3-0 second-leg win in Lyon last week. Only European matches count towards a ban, not domestic league games, a UEFA spokeswoman con-

firmed.

A ruling was likely to be issued later on Wednesday after the hearing, she added.

Ribery has endured a difficult few weeks after he

was questioned by French police a fortnight ago during an investigation into the under-age call-girl scandal which has rocked the France football team.



Bayern Munich winger Franck Ribery (top) follows club chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge during his arrival for a UEFA hearing in Nyon on Wednesday.

## IN BRIEF

### Silva open to MU move

SOCCERNET

Valencia star David Silva has revealed he would be interested in joining Manchester United this summer.

Silva, 24, has long been linked with a move away from the Mestalla due to the club's financial problems, and United are rumoured to be interested.

The Spain star insists he would be happy to stay at Valencia but, should they cash in during the summer, he would welcome a move to Old Trafford.

"When you hear a club like Manchester United is interested in you it is an honour," he said in the Daily Express. "I am very aware of the Premier League, and in recent years it has been the stand-out league in the world."

"If it came calling, especially if it was a club like Manchester United, it would be very hard to resist. I am happy at Valencia but every player has his price and if they get an offer they think is good business anything is possible."

### Skrテル returns to training

AFP, Liverpool

Martin Skrtel, the Liverpool centreback, returned to full training on Wednesday, the club announced in a boost to the defender's hopes of making Slovakia's World Cup squad.

The 25-year-old has not played since breaking a metatarsal bone in his right foot in February but is hopeful he can prove his fitness in time to make the trip to South Africa.

Slovakia, who have reached the finals for the first time, open their campaign against New Zealand on June 15 and also face Italy and Paraguay in their first round group.

### Colombia reappoint Gomez

AFP, Bogota

Colombia have brought back Hernan Dario Gomez to coach their national side after they failed to reach the World Cup finals.

The 54-year-old Gomez was in charge of Colombia previously between 1995 and 1998 which included the World Cup in France.

He then was coach of Ecuador between 1999 and 2004 and Guatemala between 2006 and 2008.

Gomez has signed a four-year contract.

# Jose demands respect

Football

AFP, Rome

Enraged Inter Milan boss Jose Mourinho hit out at AS Roma president Rosella Sensi on Tuesday ahead of the pair's meeting in the Coppa Italia final on Wednesday, demanding respect for his team.

For the fifth time in six years Inter and Roma will clash at Rome's Stadio Olimpico for the Italian Cup but Mourinho was more concerned with things Sensi said at the weekend.

Inter and Roma are also neck and neck in the Serie A title race with the champions Inter leading the pretenders by two points with two matches to go.

But on Sunday, Roma's bitter city rivals Lazio sparked a major controversy when they played Inter and put in an abject performance in a 2-0 defeat while their fans celebrated - more concerned with stopping Roma winning the title than their own team escaping relegation.

And Sensi provoked Mourinho's ire by saying Inter should be ashamed for having won that way.

"Only thieves should be ashamed and we've got to this point playing two finals (also the Champions League) and for the title not because we were born in a golden cradle but thanks to our hard work," fumed Mourinho.

"We don't deserve respect, we demand it. That lady (Sensi) can be a president, a doctor or born in a golden cradle but she has to respect us."

Mourinho was also angered by the fact that this match was to be played in Roma's home stadium rather than a neutral venue, although he paid tribute to Roma's powers of recovery following a disastrous start to the season.

Back in November, Roma trailed Inter by 14 points before eventually catching and passing the champions last month.

"Two years ago Roma took the title to the wire against Inter, last year wasn't so good but

I've always recognised the potential in their team," he said.

"And with a squad like theirs they could not continue the way they started the season, it seemed logical to me that they would finish in the top four."

"Now they have the good fortune to be playing the Cup final at home, something which happens nowhere else in the world."

"I don't know any other cup competitions where one team plays the final at home. It would be different if we were playing in Naples, Florence or Bologna."

Inter have four more matches to play this season and if they win them all they will have achieved a remarkable treble of Champions League, Serie A and the Coppa Italia.

But Mourinho said even if they win nothing he will still be satisfied, while also taking a dig at the anti-Inter brigade that hopes they fail - Mourinho has made no secret of his belief this season that the authorities are doing everything in their powers to prevent Inter winning.

"No trophies would not be a drama if you fight to the end in all competitions."

"It's something else if you finish fifth, 30 points back from the champions. "If we win all three it will be historic, if we win one or two it will be positive but there would be no shame in winning none."

"We're playing every three days while others are already on holiday and the ironic thing about destiny is that Italian football wants us to lift the Champions League so we can keep a fourth team in the competition."

Mourinho also dismissed the significance of the game being played on May 5.

That was the date eight years ago when Inter lost the scudetto on the last day of the season in the same stadium and has become indicative of Inter failures over the years.

"The only thing that May 5 means to me is that it's the day Napoleon died. I wasn't born an Inter fan and I haven't followed their history, for me that's all May 5 is."



Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho attends a press conference on the eve of the Coppa Italia final against Roma at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Tuesday.