



Magical ravenous

Messi, Ronaldo

AFP, Madrid



Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid will have the upper hand for the Clasicos showdown at Barcelona's Camp Nou in nine days time after Cristiano Ronaldo scored a hat-trick in a 5-1 home win over Athletic Bilbao on Saturday moving them back to the Spanish first division summit a point above their bitter rivals.

Barcelona had earlier crushed Almeria 8-0 with Lionel Messi bringing up a century of league goals for the club with a hat-trick even as Ronaldo's treble helped Real maintain their perfect home record with a sixth win.

Ronaldo took his league season's tally to 15 with a hat-trick (30 minutes, 62, 90) as unbeaten Real made it 32 points from a possible 36 and now they hope to end a run of four successive defeats against Barcelona.

Ronaldo's 15 goals take him top of the goalscoring charts two above Messi who is on 13 after his treble helped bring up a century of goals and he is now on 101 goals with Samuel Eto'o mark of 108 goals the next target.

The 23-year-old Messi opened the scoring on 16 minutes and netted again on 36 minutes to make it 100 league goals in a Barcelona shirt in just 154 games before completing his hat-trick with a tap-in on 66 minutes.

Barcelona were 5-0 up at half-time and Messi's third goal

RESULTS

Villarreal 1 (Rossi 73) Valencia 1 (Aduriz 20)
Almeria 0 Barcelona 8 (Messi 16, 36, 66, Iniesta 18, Acasiete 26-og, Pedro 34, Bojan 61, 72)
Real Madrid 5 (Higuain 19, Ronaldo 30, 62, 90-pen, Ramos 57-pen) Athletic Bilbao 1 (Llorente 40)

Barcelona sensation Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring his hat-trick against Almeria during their Primera Liga clash at Almeria on Saturday. Messi's treble propelled Barca to an 8-0 rout over their rivals. PHOTO: AFP

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Almeria sack coach

INTERNET, Undated

Almeria have sacked coach Juan Manuel Lillo in the wake of the 8-0 home defeat at the hands of Barcelona.

The club said on its website the decision was taken right after the match at Juegos Mediterraneo Stadium due to "the poor results in the last rounds of the championship." The loss left Almeria rooted in the bottom three of the Primera Division with just one win and nine points from their opening 12 games.

Lillo did recently guide Almeria into the last-16 of the Copa del Rey, though, his side beating La Liga rivals Real Sociedad home and away to record a 5-3 aggregate victory.

The 45-year-old took over as coach of Almeria last December following the sacking of Hugo Sanchez and helped the Andalusian side finish the campaign in 13th place.

Shearer unsure of Capello



AFP, London

Former England striker Alan Shearer believes England are not progressing under Italian coach Fabio Capello, bemoaning a lack of clear strategy and consistency in team selection.

Shearer told BBC radio on Sunday: "Fabio has been here two-and-a-half years now and I'm not sure we've gone forward in that time.

"If every England player was fit I'm not sure he would actually know what system he wanted to play or what team he wanted to play." "If you look at before we went into the World Cup our qualifying campaign was a huge success but it seems that we have gone slightly backwards from that."

"I'm not sure what system we'd play or what XI we would play if everyone was fit. I don't know if the manager would either."

But former Blackburn and Newcastle star Shearer said the problems were likely deeper-lying than the man in charge of the senior squad.

"The problem lies with the kids coming through. How are they taught? What are they taught?" "That is where you have to start from and it will take a long time. Unfortunately in this country we don't have patience."

"We always put so much pressure on our players that we go into every tournament wanting and expecting to win the tournament. Is that fair? I'm not sure it is."

Chelsea have the blues

AFP, London



Manchester United piled the pressure on Chelsea with a 2-0 win over nine-man Wigan, while the Premier League leaders crashed to a 1-0 defeat at Birmingham on Saturday.

Sir Alex Ferguson's second-placed side are now level on points with Chelsea and only goal difference is keeping United behind the champions, who suffered their third defeat in four matches.

Elsewhere, Tottenham staged a stunning fightback from two goals down to clinch a 3-2 win over bitter rivals Arsenal in the north London derby.

At St Andrew's, Carlo Ancelotti's Chelsea, without injured England stars John Terry and Frank Lampard, fell behind in the 17th minute when Lee Bowyer produced a fine finish from Cameron Jerome's header to notch his

first goal in nearly a year.

The Blues laid siege to Birmingham's goal after that but couldn't find a way past England goalkeeper Ben Foster as their poor run continued.

Ancelotti said: "We played good football with good spirit and good attitude and made a lot of chances, but it is not enough as sometimes you need to be lucky. This is football."

At Old Trafford, United took the lead on the stroke of half-time when French left-back Patrice Evra headed in Park Ji-Sung's cross for his first Premier League goal in four years.

Wigan self-destructed after half-time as Antolin Alcaraz and Hugo Rodallega were sent off in quick succession for needless challenges.

Alcaraz got his marching orders for a second yellow card after a foul on Darren Fletcher, then Rodallega saw red after a two-footed lunge on Rafael da Silva.

Mexico striker Javier Hernandez ensured United

RESULTS

Arsenal 2 (Nasri 9, Chamakh 27)
Tottenham 3 (Bale 50, van der Vaart 67-pen, Kaboul 85)
Birmingham 1 (Bowyer 17) Chelsea 0
Blackpool 2 (Varney 3, Harewood 44) Wolves 1 (Doyle 86)
Bolton 5 (Davies 18-pen, 90-pen, Lee 39, Elmender 50, 72) Newcastle 1 (Carroll 52)
Liverpool 3 (Johnson 18, Kuyt 27-pen, Maxi 38) West Ham 0
Man Utd 2 (Evra 45, Hernandez 77) Wigan 0
West Brom 0 Stoke 3 (Etherington 55-

pushed home their numerical advantage when he headed home Rafael's cross in the 77th minute, while Wayne Rooney came on to make his long-awaited return from an ankle injury after his contract row.

"Wayne got a great reception and that has taken a lot of pressure off the boy," Ferguson said. "He will play a full 90 against Rangers on

Wednesday and that will help his fitness."

Liverpool demolished bottom of the table West Ham before half-time in a 3-0 victory at Anfield.

Former Hammers star Glen Johnson scored against his old club in the 18th minute and Dirk Kuyt added a second for Roy Hodgson's team with a 27th minute penalty following Danny Gabbidon's handball.

Maxi Rodriguez scored Liverpool's third goal in the 28th minute as the Reds bounced back from last week's defeat at Stoke despite the absence of injured captain Steven Gerrard.

Bolton maintained their fine form with a 5-1 rout of 10-man Newcastle at the Reebok Stadium.

Blackpool climbed further away from the relegation zone with a 2-1 win over second-bottom Wolves at Bloomfield Road.

Stoke's Jon Walters scored twice to inspire a 3-0 win at West Bromwich Albion.

Kaiser throws in the towel

SOCCERNET

Bayern Munich's honorary president Franz Beckenbauer insists the record German champions are simply not good enough to win the Bundesliga this season on Saturday's evidence.

The Bavarians were held to a 1-1 draw by Bayer Leverkusen and are now 14 points adrift of league leaders Borussia Dortmund with four games to go before the midway stage of the season.

"They made mistakes like in playschool," lamented Beckenbauer. "They are not good enough to win the league like this."

Beckenbauer believes that Dortmund will win the title, with the rest of the league playing for second place behind them.

He said: "They are simply in another league at the moment. They are light years away from the rest."

Bayern coach Louis van Gaal refused to see everything so negatively, however.

"We have now gone nine games without defeat and our game is better and we are scoring goals," he said.

"When you don't win games, you don't realise this. We could have won today also and I think we still have a chance, but Dortmund certainly have the best chance."

"We have thrown away two points again, just like against Borussia Monchengladbach."

Cut salaries, says Kolo Toure

INTERNET, Undated

Manchester City defender Kolo Toure says the club should cut the wages of his teammates unless they start working harder and playing better after an erratic start to the season.

Toure, 29, who joined City from Arsenal last year, told the News of the World newspaper on Sunday that a number of players are not doing enough to justify their huge salaries.

"You need to be honest, even if you hurt people, and there are some players here, I am not scared to say, who are not working hard enough for the team," the Ivory Coast international said.

"Some don't do enough in training but still expect to play. We all get big wages at City but some need to work harder."

"You cannot have a place in the team - even if you are an international - if you don't show what you can do in training."

"As players, we have the best job in the world and if the manager said: 'You haven't worked hard enough, you will only get half your wages this week' it would make players fight harder."

"I'm a professional footballer and, to me, playing regularly is the most important thing. Money is secondary."

Zlatan sets Milan apart

AFP, Rome



A touch of brilliance from Zlatan Ibrahimovic earned AC Milan a 1-0 win over Fiorentina on Saturday to lift them four points clear at the top of Serie A.

One week after he had sunk his former teammates at Inter Milan Ibrahimovic once again proved the match winner.

On 45 minutes, with his back to goal, the Swede juggled the ball and executed an acrobatic bicycle kick which totally flummoxed Fiorentina keeper Artur Boruc, the ball thudding into the top far corner.

Ibrahimovic then thumped his chest so hard in celebration he appeared to have injured his arm, but he duly emerged intact for the second half.

AC Milan thought they'd won a penalty in the 23rd minute after Per Kroldrup collided with Mathieu Flamini in the box, but the referee turned down their appeals.

On the half hour Boruc, standing in for long term injury victim Sebastien Frey, two-fisted Clarence Seedorf's shot out of danger.

With coach Massimiliano Allegri fielding his three-pointed midfield formation of Gennaro Gattuso, Massimo Ambrosini and Flamini, Milan, the goal aside, never produced dream

football but were nevertheless solid and good for the three points.

They maintained their dominance after the break, and should have doubled their lead when Alessandro Nesta failed to convert a free header from eight yards, holding out to move onto 29 points.

Fiorentina finished a man down after Kroldrup was sent off after picking up one yellow card for a foul and then a second for having a verbal joust with referee Antonio Damato seconds from the finish.

Lazio are placed second to Milan on 25 points but can cut the deficit to one point if they get a result at Parma on Sunday.

"We're improving week by week," Allegri noted. Turning to Ibrahimovic's moment of magic Allegri added: "That's par for the course for him to do that! He has other qualities rather than just physical. I don't know what Milan would be without him."

Earlier, a Jeremy Menez-inspired Roma beat Udinese 2-0 to move into provisional third place ahead of the remainder of the weekend's action.

Menez scored a superb solo goal in the 24th minute before setting up Marco Borriello for Roma's second in the 56th minute to wrap up the points for the capital club.



Birmingham midfielder Lee Bowyer (R) scores the only goal of the game past Chelsea goalkeeper Peter Cech (L) during their Premier League clash at St Andrews on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP

Bayern lose more ground

AFP, Berlin



Defending champions Bayern Munich were held to a 1-1 draw at Leverkusen on Saturday evening to find themselves lagging 14 points behind leaders Bundesliga leaders Borussia Dortmund.

With top side Dortmund earlier coming from behind to win 2-1 at Freiburg to pick up their 11th league win from 13 games, Bayern are leaving themselves a considerable gap to bridge with more than a third of the season now played.

Bayern are up to eighth in the league while Leverkusen are third.

"The point is ok, but we

could have won," said Bayern goal-scorer Mario Gomez.

"Dortmund are mentally strong and believe in themselves, but if they lose a few games, we need to be there."

Gomez was left kicking himself after missing a late chance, while Bastian Schweinsteiger had a header disallowed for offside after just two minutes, but Gomez said his side had to be happy to leave Leverkusen with a point.

"It was bitter to draw, because I could have scored in the last few minutes," he said.

Munich took the lead when national players Thomas Mueller, the top-scorer at the World Cup, Schweinsteiger and Gomez combined for a dream goal.

Mueller lobbed in a cross from the flank, Schweinsteiger, who led Germany in the goalless draw against Sweden in midweek, chipped Leverkusen goal-keeper Rene Adler and striker

Gomez volleyed into the net on 34 minutes.

It was Gomez's fifth league goal in four games and his eighth in the Bundesliga this season.

But Leverkusen drew level when Bayern's Croatia defender Danijel Pranjcic brought down midfielder Sidney Sam on the edge of the penalty area in added time and Chile striker Arturo Vidal fired home the 47th minute spot-kick.

Earlier, Bundesliga leaders Borussia Dortmund came from behind to earn a 2-1 win at title rivals Freiburg to keep their seven-point lead over second-placed Mainz who ended their three-game losing streak.

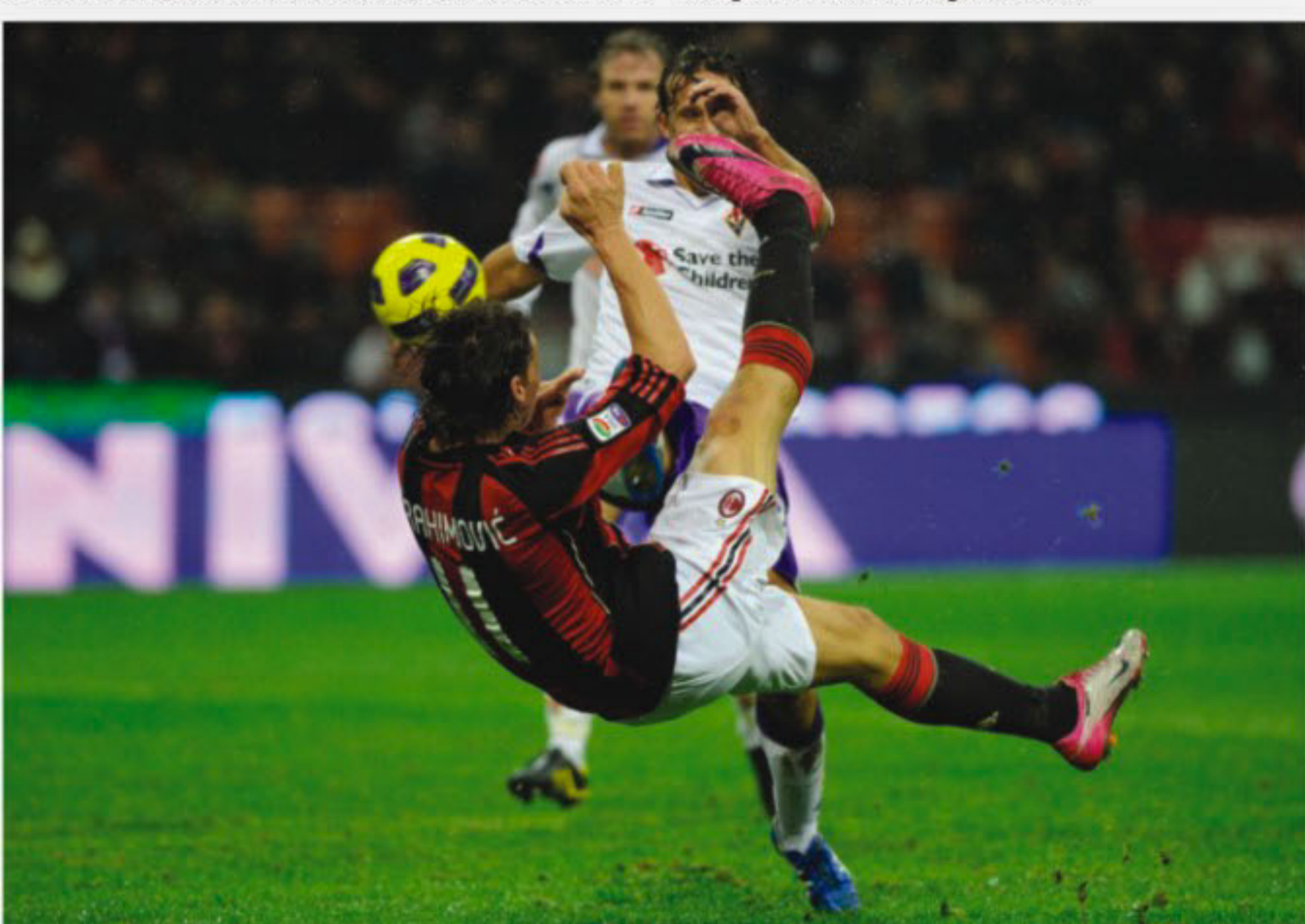
The winner came on 78 minutes when Freiburg defender Mensur Mujdza slid the ball into his own net as Dortmund attacked in waves to seal their 11th win from 13 league games.

Mainz are back up to second after they also fought back with a 3-2 win over Borussia Muenchengladbach.

Schalke hammered fellow Champions League side Werder Bremen 4-0 as former Spain and Real Madrid iconic striker Raul scored a hat-trick.

RESULTS

Schalke 4 (Metzelder 22, Raul 45+2, 56, 71) Werder Bremen 0
Eintracht Frankfurt 0 Hoffenheim 4 (Vukcevic 31, Ilievic 69, 70, Milapa 90)
Borussia M'gladbach 2 (Reus 53, 69)
Mainz 05 3 (Schuerrle 64, Allagui 76, 88)
Freiburg 1 (Hummels 26-og) Borussia Dortmund 2 (Lewandowski 75, Mujdza 78)
Hanover 96 3 (Stindl 31, Schulz 59, Hanke 90+1) Hamburg 2 (Son 40, 54) Nuremberg 1 (Mak 67)
Kaiserslautern 3 (Rivic 4, Ilievic 12, Laticic 33)
Bayern Leverkusen 1 (Vidal 45+2-pen)



AC Milan forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic scores a fantastic goal against Fiorentina during their Serie A match at the San Siro in Milan on Saturday. PHOTO: AFP