

Real ride on di Maria

AFP, Madrid

Argentine international winger Angel di Maria scored a vital 77th minute winner as 10-man Real Madrid defeated Sevilla 1-0 at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday to close to within two points of league leaders Barcelona ahead of the Christmas break.

The 22-year-old di Maria, a 25-million-euro summer signing from Benfica, squeezed a shot past Andres Palop at the near post to maintain Real's 100 per cent home record and ensure Jose Mourinho's side begin 2011 within touching distance of Barcelona.

Real had been reduced to ten men on 63 minutes with the sending-off of Portuguese centre-back Ricardo Carvalho, but the hosts overcame their numerical disadvantage to triumph through di Maria's goal.

Sevilla had sensed victory after the dismissal but fell to their fifth successive league defeat and lie down in 11th place eight points off the top four.

Real were without suspended duo Marcelo and Xabi Alonso but were boosted by the return of Sergio Ramos against the team that launched his career.

In the absence of the injured Gonzalo Higuain, French forward Karim Benzema was given a chance to make an impact on the day of his 23rd birthday, while Sevilla striker Alvaro Negredo had a point to prove against old club Real.

Madrid began with a string of corners but Sevilla had the first real opening with defender Julien Escude heading over from close range on 25 minutes.

Three minutes later di Maria had a swerving shot punched away by Palop in Real's only notable effort on goal in a flat first half.

The Bernabeu were not impressed as Sevilla looked more dangerous with Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas fumbling a free-

Real were then reduced to ten men just after the hour mark when Carvalho collected a second yellow card for an unnecessary aerial challenge on Negredo.

The dismissal seemed to spur Madrid on and a mistake from goalkeeper Palop, who failed to defend his near post, allowed di Maria to fire home from an acute angle on 77 minutes.

Defender Mouhamadou Dabo was sent off for a reckless challenge on di Maria late on as Sevilla lost their cool and the match.

Elsewhere Atletico Madrid got over their disappointing Europa League exit with a comfortable 3-0 win at lowly Malaga on Sunday to move sixth in the Spanish first division.

Tiago, on loan from Juventus, opened the scoring on 22 minutes and grabbed the final goal of the game on 69 minutes as Atletico moved above Getafe on goal difference into sixth and stay in contention for a Champions League place.

It was an 11th defeat of the season for Malaga who stay third from bottom of the standings.

In other matches, in-form Getafe recorded a fourth consecutive league win to go seventh in the Spanish first division following a sensational 3-2 comeback victory over Almeria on Sunday.

Almeria had gone two goals up inside 24 minutes, but Getafe, unbeaten since mid-November in all competitions, stormed back and Ghana international midfielder Derek Boateng scored a 70th-minute winner to lift the club level on points with Atletico.



RESULTS

Almeria 2 (Uche 7, Ulloa 24) **Getafe 3**
(Manu del Moral 29,
Miku 48, Boateng 70)
Osasuna 0 Real Zaragoza 0
Malaga 0 **Atletico Madrid 3**
(Tiago 22, 69, Dominguez 66)

kick but centre-half Pepe saved the day with a last ditch challenge.

A half-time bust-up between the two dug-outs provided off-the-field spice that was sorely missing on it.

The hosts failed to improve after the break and Negredo should have scored on 57 minutes after latching on to a Luis Fabiano pass but blazed over the crossbar to the relief of the home crowd.



Real Madrid winger Angel di Maria is ecstatic after scoring the all-important goal against Sevilla during their Primera Liga encounter at Bernabeu on Sunday.

Moratti mum on Benitez

REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti refused to comment on Monday amid media reports Rafael Benitez was to be sacked as coach following his outburst over signings.

"I prefer not to talk today to avoid the risk of creating controversies," Moratti told reporters.

Monday's Gazzetta dello Sport said Benitez, only in the role for six months, was being removed with Zenit St. Petersburg coach Luciano Spalletti favourite to take over the World, European and Italian champions.

On Sunday, club owner Moratti had labelled comments by Benitez after their World Club Cup win on Saturdays "inappropriate". The coach told a stunned news conference in Abu Dhabi that Inter had to make signings or else he would speak with his agent about his future.

Their fifth trophy this year had appeared to have secured the Spaniard's job after a sticky domestic spell but with Inter not playing again until Serie A resumes on Jan. 6, Moratti has time to make a decision.

Former Liverpool coach Benitez only took over in June after treble-winning Jose Mourinho left for Real Madrid.

Benitez asked for new players for the start of the campaign but no signings materialised and a subsequent injury crisis has contributed to champions Inter lying 13 points behind leaders AC Milan at Serie A's mid-season break.

Loew eyeing glory

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew said Monday his side can win Euro 2012 or the 2014 World Cup after showing itself to be one of football's most consistent teams in recent years.

"My gut feeling... is that our team can win a title in 2012 or in 2014," Loew told sports weekly Kicker in an interview.

"Looking back, together with Spain we really are one of the most consistent teams. In the last two years our performances have got better and better."

Germany finished third in the World Cup in South Africa earlier this year, demolishing England 4-1 and Argentina 4-0 in some of the tournament's most exciting football.

Lazio close gap

AFP, Rome



Lazio and Napoli closed the gap on leaders AC Milan to just three points with victories Sunday but Juventus failed to keep pace as they were held to a 1-1 draw at Chievo.

Lazio edged out Udinese 3-2 in a thrilling match decided by Christian Zapata's own goal two minutes from time.

Napoli looked to be heading for a frustrating stalemate until Edinson Cavani struck deep into injury time to thrash a stunning winner from 25 yards into the top corner.

Juventus, on the other hand, were the victims of a late equaliser as Sergio Pellissier popped up at the back post to stroke home in time added on.

Those results left Napoli second ahead of Lazio on goal difference with Juve two points further back.

Milan had lost 1-0 at home to Roma on Saturday night to give their chasers a boost.

The game of the day came in Rome where Lazio had taken

the lead twice through Hernanes and Giuseppe Biava but were pegged back on each occasion by Alexis Sanchez and then German Denis.

But Zapata inadvertently headed a corner past his own goalkeeper under pressure from Libor Kozak to give the home fans a pre-Christmas treat.

Lazio were off to a dream start as Brazilian Hernanes gave them the lead after just two minutes, squeezing a shot from 20 yards inside the post from Tommaso Rocchi's pass, although Udinese goalkeeper Samir Handanovic was perhaps taken by surprise.

Udinese dominated for large spells thereafter but Kwadwo Asamoah and Antonio Di Natale shot wide while Pablo Armero missed an open goal.

Lazio struck the woodwork on 25 minutes as Hernanes beat Handanovic for the second time but his shot crashed back off the post.

However, on 49 minutes the visitors were level as Lazio's defence went to sleep.

Di Natale crossed from the right and Sanchez, one of the smallest players on the pitch, ghosted into the six yard box to head home unmarked.

RESULTS

Lazio 3 (Hernanes 2, Biava 52, Zapata 88-og) Udinese 2
(Sanchez 49, Denis 61)
Bari 1 (Masiello 54-pen)
Palermo 1 (Ilicic 45)
Catania 1 (Maxi Lopez 33) Brescia 0
Chievo 1 (Pellissier 90) Juventus 1
(Quagliarella 31)
Napoli 1 (Cavani 90) Lecce 0

Gomez routs Stuttgart

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich striker Mario Gomez claimed a hat-trick as an early Christmas present in an eight-goal thriller on Sunday as the German champions routed struggling Stuttgart 5-3 at home.

This was the Germany star's second Bundesliga hat-trick of the season as he capitalised on a poor Stuttgart defence to leave him with 12 league goals and 19 in all competitions for Bayern.

All five of Bayern's goals -- especially Gomez's three -- came from mistakes in the Stuttgart defence as coach Bruno Labbadia had a baptism of fire in his first league game in charge since taking over from Jens Keller last weekend.

Gomez opened the scoring with a well-taken strike on 31 minutes after Bayern's Thomas Mueller latched onto a mistake in midfield.

Gomez then returned the favour to set up his Germany team-mate as Mueller netted Munich's second just five minutes later.

France midfielder Franck Ribery then scored a



RESULTS

Bayer Leverkusen 2 (Vidal 16, Helmes 75) Freiburg 2 (Rosenthal 24, Reisinger 65)
VfB Stuttgart 3 (Harnik 50, 64, Gentner 70) **Bayern Munich 5** (Gomez 31, 52,

superb individual effort when he took on the defence before unleashing an unstoppable shot on 43 minutes as it stayed 3-0 at the break.

Stuttgart fought back when second-half substitute striker Martin Harnik pulled a goal back for the hosts on 50 minutes, but Gomez struck twice in two minutes to complete his hat-trick just five minutes later.

Harnik grabbed a second before Germany squad member Christian Gentner made it 5-3 with 20 minutes remaining.

The result leaves Bayern fifth and 14 points behind leaders Borussia Dortmund, who lost 1-0 at Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday, as the Bundesliga signs off for its customary winter break while Stuttgart are second from bottom.

Earlier Germany striker Patrick Helmes came off Bayer Leverkusen's bench to score the late equaliser which sealed a 2-2 draw with Freiburg to keep his side third.

The result leaves Freiburg sixth while Mainz went second on Saturday after a tense 4-2 win at wintry St Pauli.



Bayern Munich striker Mario Gomez scores the opening goal against Stuttgart during their Bundesliga clash in Stuttgart on Sunday.

Valbuena denies Lyon

AFP, Paris



A second-half equaliser by French international Mathieu Valbuena saw champions Marseille draw 1-1 with Lyon and deny the visitors top spot in the league table on Sunday.

Valbuena's third league goal of the season got Marseille back on level terms after Argentinian Lisandro had given Lyon the lead in the 34th minute for his eighth of the season which saw the game end with a heated argument between Marseille's veteran Argentinian fullback Gabriel Heinze and Lyon's Jimmy Briand.

The result sees Lyon in fourth place a point behind leaders Lille, who have a game in hand, while Marseille are another two points adrift.

Lyon took the lead as Lisandro's crisply struck shot, after being well found by Brazilian Michel Bastos, beat Steve Mandanda, though the goalkeeper could look askance at the defence who had left the Argentinian star

unmarked.

The visitors went into the break as leaders of the league but were back among the also rans in the 51st minute when Valbuena nipped in behind the static Lyon defence and flicked Benoît Cheyrou's ball past Hugo Lloris.

Lyon went close to restoring their lead in the 64th minute as Cheyrou was dispossessed by Cameroon midfielder Jean Il Makoun and his pass found Bafetembi Gomis, but his shot slid the wrong side of the post.

The day's only other match to survive the inhospitable weather sweeping across Europe saw 2009 French champions Bordeaux held to their fourth successive draw, a 1-1 stalemate with Sochaux.

Brazilian striker Jussie had given Bordeaux the lead in the 28th minute with a header from Czech Republic international midfielder Jaroslav Plasil's corner, the 11th goal this season out of a total of 21 conceded by the hosts to come from dead ball play.

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