

Barca's nervy win

AFP, Madrid



Pedro Rodriguez netted a brace as champions Barcelona started 2011 with a nervy 2-1 home win over Levante on Sunday to move five points clear of Real Madrid at the Spanish first division summit.

Pedro struck on 47 and 59 minutes to clinch an 11th successive league victory for Barca and Real must now defeat derby rivals Getafe on Monday to move back to within two points of their bitter rivals.

Brazilian Dani Alves set up the opener for Pedro, faking to shoot twice before laying the ball back for the forward to drill home Barcelona's first goal of the new year two minutes after the break.

Alves was the provider for the second goal as well, teeing up Pedro to curl a controlled shot into the corner.

With seven minutes gone Andres Iniesta had a chip tipped over and David Villa then sliced a shot wide as Levante, who lost 8-0 to Real Madrid in the King's Cup last time out, rode their luck.

Barcelona got the perfect start in the second half, however, as Pedro scored two

minutes after the restart.

Pedro made it four goals in his last two league games with his second, curling a fine shot into the left-hand side of the goal just before the hour.

Uruguayan substitute Christian Stuani gave the champions a late scare by brilliantly volleying home on 80 minutes but Barcelona survived a tense final 10 minutes to take the points.

Bilbao sank to a 2-1 defeat against Deportivo La Coruna earlier on Sunday, with Adrian Alvarez scoring both goals as the visitors recorded only their second away win of the campaign.

Elsewhere 10-man Valencia defeated Champions League rivals Espanyol 2-1 on Sunday thanks to a controversial late winner from Spanish international Juan Mata.

Mata looked to be offside as he scored the decisive goal in stoppage time as fourth-placed Valencia moved three points clear of Espanyol and two points behind Villarreal in third.

Sevilla moved six points off the top four ending a run of five consecutive league defeats with a 1-0 home win over Osasuna on Sunday.

Malaga moved out of the bottom three with a 2-1 win at relegation rivals Sporting Gijon.

RESULTS

Athletic Bilbao 1 (Llorente 86)
Deportivo La Coruna 2
 (Adrian 22-pen, 52)
 Sporting Gijon 1 (Castro 42-pen)
Malaga 2 (Weligton 45,
 Apono 59-pen)
Barcelona 2 (Pedro 47, 59)
 Levante 1 (Stuani 80)
Sevilla 1 (Kanoute 35) Osasuna 0
Valencia 2 (Aduriz 29, Mata 90)



PHOTO: AFP

Valencia winger Juan Mata is ecstatic after scoring the second goal against Espanyol during their Primera Liga clash at the Mestalla on Sunday.

Kaka back in squad

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian attacking midfielder Kaka, who has been out since the start of the season, was on Sunday named in the Real Madrid squad for Monday's trip to Getafe by coach Jose Mourinho.



STAR Cricket
 Australia v England
 Fifth Test, Day 2
 Live from 5:00am

TEN Cricket
 South Africa v India
 Third Test, Day 3
 Live from 2:30pm

ESPN
 Sportscentre India
 Sports News
 Live at 8:30pm

English Premiership
 Man United v Stoke City
 Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)

STAR Sports
 Hopman Cup
 Serbia v Australia
 Live from 3:00pm

English Premiership

MU aim to extend lead

AFP, Manchester



Rio Ferdinand has no qualms about Manchester United making an "ugly" charge for the Premier League title as the leaders look to extend their advantage at the top against Stoke on Tuesday.

Ferdinand insists United will take three points in any way, shape or form if that is what it takes to regain the Premier League crown from Chelsea.

Sir Alex Ferguson's team have been anything but fluent so far this term but remain unbeaten in the league and sit at the Premier League summit, ahead of Manchester City on goal difference and with two games in hand on their local rivals.

Their 2-1 win over West Brom on Saturday encapsulated their season so far as it was ugly and scrappy but ultimately successful.

United defender Ferdinand said: "You've got to dig deep in these games; these are the type of games that make up big ground in the league.

"Other teams watching would probably have been thinking we'll just nick a draw maybe, but to take three points against West Brom was great for us.

"You've got to win games, it's as simple as that. I don't care how we win.

"Ideally we'd like to play well, but in these situations when you're not playing at your best, the most important thing is to get the three points and go back to Manchester happy."

Worryingly for Stoke, Wayne Rooney looks to be regaining the form that made him one of the world's leading strikers 12 months ago.

Last season he was comfortably United's best player but he has gone off the boil in recent times, hindered by an ankle problem and lurid revelations about his personal life.

However, he scored the opener against West Brom and also set up Javier Hernandez for the winner and Ferguson is confident the old Rooney is returning.

"People talk about world class players. That was a world class performance," Ferguson said.

"He was absolutely magnificent, he drove us the whole way. Wayne was a bit unlucky not to score an extra couple of goals. But the goal he did score will give him unbelievable confidence and hopefully he kicks on from here."

Another striker who has needed a goal to boost his confidence is Stoke's Kenwyne Jones and he duly delivered that in the Potters' 2-0 victory over Everton on Saturday.

That win means Stoke will visit Old Trafford in a positive frame of mind and with manager Tony Pulis hoping Jones can start scoring more goals after a recent dry spell.

United will go into the encounter without Paul Scholes (groin), John O'Shea (calf) and Antonio Valencia (ankle), while Stoke will be missing Mamady Sidibe with a shin complaint.

Real planning without Higuain

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho said on Sunday that he will have to reconstruct his team in the absence of injured Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain.

Higuain is out of action with a slipped disc in his back and Mourinho compared his absence to that of Brazilian playmaker Kaka, who has been out since the start of the season with a knee problem.

"We were missing (Kaka) for six months and we built a team," Mourinho said at a press conference prior to Monday's trip to Getafe.

"Now we have to build a team without Higuain. The team has to adapt to the circumstances. Some players will have to play in positions that are not theirs, in a different system."

Mourinho added that Higuain "will have to have an operation, without any doubt".

Higuain, who typically starts in attack for Real alongside Cristiano Ronaldo, has been unable to play since the end of November.

Ameobi the difference

AFP, Wigan



Shola Ameobi fired Newcastle to a 1-0 victory at Wigan on Sunday that left the struggling Latics deep in relegation trouble.

Ameobi's first-half goal was enough to seal Newcastle's second win under new boss Alan Pardew and leave Roberto Martinez's team just one point and one place above the bottom three.

While Newcastle are safely in mid-table at the start of the New Year, Wigan face a grim struggle to beat the drop.

Newcastle created the first chance after just two minutes as Danny Simpson swung a cross into the box from the right.

Ameobi was allowed the space to meet it

but the striker was unable to find the target, heading the ball back across the face of goal.

Wigan went close themselves as a failed clearance from Ben Watson's free-kick fell to Tom Cleverley, whose curling shot drew a smart save from Steve Harper.

Cleverley was presented with another chance on the quarter-hour mark after receiving a neat pass from Mohamed Diame, but the on-loan Manchester United youngster volleyed over the bar.

Just as Wigan were beginning to hit their stride, they fell behind in the 19th minute.

Steven Gohouri was robbed by Joey Barton, who struck an effort that Ali Al Habsi managed to parry. Peter Lovenkranz prodded the loose ball against the post and Ameobi was on hand to tuck away the rebound.



Premier Division Cricket League
 Mohammedan v Old DOHS
 Venue: SBNC

Biman v Cricket Coaching
 Venue: DCS

Abahani v Victoria
 Venue: BKSP-2

Bangladesh League
 Rahmatganj v Soccer Club, Feni
 Time: 4:00pm
 Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa

IN BRIEF

Becks to star in 2012?

AFP, London

David Beckham could star at the London 2012 Olympics by playing or coaching the Great Britain football team, according to organising committee chairman Sebastian Coe.

Although football is played as an Under-23 tournament at the Olympics, the rules allow for three over-age players and Coe believes Beckham or players like Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard should feature because their global profile would attract more interest in the event.

Karim lacked ambition

AFP, Madrid

French striker Karim Benzema, who has struggled to hold down a first-team place at Real Madrid, says he did not try hard enough in the past to earn time on the pitch in an interview published Monday.

"I know when I play well and when I do it badly and if at any moment I have played less, it is because I did not make enough of an effort to deserve it. Today I know that I make an effort and that is why I am playing," he told sports daily AS.

"What is key is that I have recovered my speed, I can't guarantee that I will score three goals in every match but I will do everything possible to score at least one," he added.

Adriano's heart in Brazil

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

AS Roma's Brazilian striker Adriano indicated Monday that he is eyeing a return to Rio de Janeiro club Flamengo this year.

In an interview published Monday in the O Dia newspaper the player said that he wanted to follow his heart back to Brazil.

"A part of my heart remains in Brazil. However I have to respect my commitments... But I'll be back in June despite a two-and-a-half year contract (with Roma)," said Adriano.

Bremen close in on Avdic

AFP, Berlin

Werder Bremen are poised to sign Swedish striker Denni Avdic to replace Portuguese forward Hugo Almedia, who has joined Turkish giants Besiktas, German magazine Kicker reported on Sunday.

Avdic, 22 and of Bosnian descent, currently plays for Swedish first division side Elfsborg, where he is under contract until the end of the year.

Considered one of his country's most promising talents, he made his Sweden debut in 2009.



WALKING ON WATER: Tennis icons Rafael Nadal (L) and Roger Federer perform modern day miracles as they take part in an exhibition game on a floating court at the West Bay in Doha on Sunday to mark the start of the ATP Doha Open.

PHOTO: AFP