



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona striker David Villa (R) scores one of his two goals past Malaga goalkeeper Asenjo during their Primera Liga encounter at Nou Camp on Sunday.

Barca soar high, Milan stumble

Football

AFP, Paris

Mighty Barcelona took their season's goals tally to 61 on Sunday, opening up a four-point gap in the Spanish League as Real Madrid, hamstrung by a lack of firepower, slipped off the pace.

Fellow former European champions AC Milan were also under pressure as they saw their lead in Italy pegged at four points.

Barcelona swept past Malaga 4-1 while Real Madrid were held to a 1-1 draw at bottom side Almeria.

Andres Iniesta scored the opening goal for Barcelona before World Player of the Year Lionel Messi set up David Villa for the first of his two goals. Pedro Rodriguez added the other goal.

Barcelona reached the halfway stage of the season with 52 points from 19 matches having hit 61 goals while conceding just 11.

Esteban Granero rescued a point in the 77th minute for misfiring Real against Almeria who had broken the deadlock through Jose Ulloa.

In Italy, AC Milan were held to a 1-1 draw at Lecce as three of their title rivals bagged late winners to close in on the leaders.

RESULTS

Almeria 1 (Ulloa 60) Real Madrid 1 (Granero 77)
Valencia 2 (Mathieu 78, Pablo Hernandez 90+3) Deportivo La Coruna 0
Barcelona 4 (Iniesta 8, Villa 18, 74, Pedro 36) Malaga 1 (Duda 68)
Cesena 0 Roma 1 (Pellegri 89-og)
Juventus 2 (Del Piero 43, Aquilani 79) Bari 1 (Rudolph 57)
Lecce 1 (Olivera 82) AC Milan 1

IN brief

Asian Cup clean so far

AFP, Doha

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said on Monday that it has conducted 64 doping tests at the Asian Cup and all have been negative.

"There are two types of doping tests -- after the match and random out-of-competition," said AFC Asian Cup tournament director Tokuaki Suzuki.

"We are very pleased to announce that since the day the teams arrived we have conducted 64 out-of-competition tests and all turned out to be negative."

The tournament features 16 teams and runs until January 29.

CONCACAF wants 4 spots

AFP, Panama City

Jack Warner, the president of the North America, Central America and Caribbean football confederation (CONCACAF) said on Sunday he was optimistic that his region would have four automatic places at the 2014 World Cup.

"We are very optimistic of gaining four places for direct qualification into the 2014 World Cup finals in Brazil," said Warner.

At the moment, the region has three automatic places as well as a play-off allocation of one spot.

Qatar left red-faced

AFP, Doha

Red-faced 2022 World Cup hosts Qatar were forced on Monday to explain the rows of empty seats at many Asian Cup matches after barely 3,500 people watched a crunch group game.

Tournament organisers also addressed concerns as to why the apparently sell-out must-win final group game between the hosts and Kuwait at the 40,000 capacity Khalifa Stadium on Sunday saw many seats unoccupied.

That same evening, only 3,529 people were at Al Gharafa Stadium -- capacity 22,000 -- to see a thrilling 2-2 draw between China, the world's most populous country, and Uzbekistan.

"We try our best to attract people to come here," said tournament director Tokuaki Suzuki, adding it was particularly hard to draw large crowds to stadiums when there are two games going on at the same time.

"There are not so many people who came to Qatar from China," he said. "We are trying our best to attract fans to the stadiums."

Everton accept Pienaar bid

AFP, Liverpool

Everton manager David Moyes confirmed Sunday the club has accepted an offer from Chelsea for unsettled South African international forward Steven Pienaar.

Speaking after Everton's 2-2 draw with Liverpool at Anfield, Moyes said the club had granted permission for Pienaar's representatives to enter into talks with Chelsea but had rebuffed a bid from Tottenham.

"We have accepted an offer from Chelsea. Steven has not agreed terms with Chelsea," Moyes said. "We've given his representatives a chance to talk to Chelsea but they've not got permission to talk to Tottenham because they've not offered the same money."

The likely departure of Pienaar is a blow to Everton, but with the player out of contract at the end of the season the Toffees had little choice but to cash in during the January window.

British press reported on Saturday that Pienaar was holding out for a move to Tottenham, with

Vermaelen set for op

AFP, Brussels

Arsenal's Belgian international central defender Thomas Vermaelen will undergo surgery on a torn Achilles tendon on Tuesday and expects to be out of action for a further six weeks.

"I'll undergo this operation in Sweden," said Vermaelen, 25, who has not played for the Gunners since August 28 after suffering the injury while on international duty.



NEO Cricket
New Zealand v Pakistan
Second Test, Day 4
Live from 4:00am
TEN Cricket
South Africa v India
Third ODI
Live from 6:30pm
ESPN
AFC Asian Cup
South Korea v India
Live from 7:30pm

Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live at 9:30pm
STAR Sports
Australian Open
Live from 6:00am
AFC Asian Cup
Australia v Bahrain

Real after Tevez

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid may try to sign Manchester City striker Carlos Tevez if they fail to lure Hamburg striker Ruud van Nistelrooy, sports daily Marca said Monday.

Tevez made a shock transfer request in December, blaming bad relations with the City management, but withdrew the demand later in the month after clear-the-air talks with the Premier League club.

Real Madrid had already contacted City, Marca said. There were two big hurdles, the paper said: firstly, that City would insist on a transfer rather than a loan, and secondly that a transfer would cost 40 million euros and the Argentine's annual salary was eight million euros.

Hamburg has rebuffed Real Madrid's efforts to bring over 34-year-old Van Nistelrooy, saying he will not be allowed to leave and must complete his contract.

Real Madrid are trying to fill the gap left by Gonzalo Higuain, who could be out of action for another four months following surgery on January 12 for a slipped disc and may not return to full fitness for a year.

Alves picks up calf injury

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Brazilian defender Dani Alves will be out for about 10 days after picking up a calf injury against Malaga, the club said Monday.

Tests confirmed a right calf injury with a recovery time of "about 10 days," the club said in a statement.



Bangladesh League
Farashganj v Ctg Abahani
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal

Hosts thru', China out

Football

AFP, Doha

Qatar and Uzbekistan battled into the Asian Cup quarterfinals on Sunday on a night of high drama which saw perennial under-achievers China crash out.

The unbeaten Uzbeks squandered a 2-1 lead before settling for a nervy 2-2 draw with China to seal top spot in Group A while Qatar saw off Kuwait 3-0, ensuring both sides joined already-qualified Iran in the last eight.

China -- who were in with a chance of qualifying going into the final game -- finished third and Kuwait last.

Qatar and Uzbekistan will next play one from Japan, Jordan and Syria of Group B, on Friday.

The placings for that group will be decided on Monday, with the Uzbeks playing the team that finishes second and Qatar playing the group winner. Japan, one of the tournament favourites, currently top the group.

Qatar coach Bruno Metsu said their tournament was only just beginning.

"We have qualified and being the host nation in this tournament it was very important for us to qualify. Today I am very happy," the Frenchman said.

Qatar stormed into the quarterfinals for only the second time in their history with a commanding performance.

Captain Bilal Mohammed got the opening goal on 11 minutes at the Khalifa Stadium after a blistering start from the 2022 World Cup hosts with Mohamed El Sayed scoring the second five minutes later.

Brazilian-born substitute Fabio Cesar put the game beyond doubt four minutes from time with a beautifully weighted free-kick that left the goalkeeper stranded.

It capped a remarkable comeback by

Qatar, who lost their opening match to the Uzbeks 2-0 then rebounded to beat China by the same scoreline.

The other deciding game on the night was a topsy-turvy affair at the Al Gharafa Stadium.

Having fallen behind early on, Uzbekistan equalised and then went ahead early in the second period through a fine



PHOTO: AFP

Qatar midfielder Fabio Cesar is ecstatic after scoring the third goal against Kuwait during their Asian Cup clash at the Khalifa Stadium in Doha on Sunday.

long-distance effort from one-time CSKA Moscow forward Alexander Geynrikh.

Schalke midfielder Hao Junmin brought the East Asian champions level with a magnificent free-kick but despite sustained pressure China could not find a winner that would have brought qualification down to head-to-head records.

Yu Hai had given China the lead in the sixth minute, in front of a disappointing crowd of just 3,529, with Odil Akhmedov replying for Uzbekistan.



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool midfielder Raul Meireles (2nd from R) is the toast of his teammates after scoring the opening goal against Everton during their Premier League Merseyside Derby at Anfield on Sunday.

MU back atop

AFP, London

Ten-man Manchester United returned to the top of the Premier League here Sunday after holding Tottenham to a 0-0 draw in a match that failed to live up to expectations.

United's hard-earned point saw them reclaim top spot from Manchester City on goal difference, although Sir Alex Ferguson's unbeaten side have two games in hand over their bitter local rivals.

An open encounter at White Hart Lane never quite caught fire, and United were forced onto the defensive in the final stages after Rafael Da Silva was sent off for his role in the result.

The Spurs on 37 point and one point behind Chelsea, who occupy the fourth Champions League spot.

It was the fourth draw of a packed Premier League fixture list on Sunday, which had earlier seen Liverpool draw 2-2 with Merseyside rivals Everton in an emotional Anfield homecoming for Kenny Dalglish.

Dalglish appeared to be heading for his third consecutive defeat since taking over from Roy Hodgson after two second-half goals in seven minutes from Sylvain Distin and Jermaine Beckford gave Everton a 2-1 lead.

But Liverpool -- who had taken a first-half lead through Raul Meireles -- fought back to secure a draw courtesy of a Dirk Kuyt penalty on 68 minutes after Everton goalkeeper Tim Howard upended Maxi Rodriguez.

RESULTS

Birmingham 1 (Johnson 49) Aston Villa 1 (Collins 73)
Liverpool 2 (Meireles 29, Kuyt 68-pen)
Everton 2 (Distin 46, Beckford 52)