

C'Ron sinks Atletico

Football

AFP, Madrid

Cristiano Ronaldo fired in a first-half goal as Real Madrid edged bitter city rivals Atletico 1-0 on Thursday to reach the Spanish Cup semifinals 4-1 on aggregate.

Real will tackle holders Sevilla in the last four while Barcelona, who saw off Real Betis 6-3 on aggregate, despite losing the second leg of their quarterfinal 3-1 on Wednesday, will meet Almeria.

Almeria had seen off Deportivo La Coruna 4-2 on aggregate in their last eight encounter.

Ronaldo, the Spanish League's top scorer, found the target in the 23rd minute from eight yards.

Xabi Alonso created the goal with a sweet, crossfield pass to Sergio Ramos who in turn found the unmarked Ronaldo.

Atletico, last year's runners-up, were desperately disappointing and created few chances on their home ground having lost 3-1 in the first leg last week.

Fran Merida had Atletico's best opportunity but fired weakly into the arms of Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas in the 51st minute.

Real's win came just hours after general manager Jorge Valdano Thursday denied reports of a rift between him and coach Jose Mourinho.

"I have no problems at all with Mourinho," the Argentine told reporters.

"Crazy things are being said. All this commotion that has happened in recent days doesn't make any sense," he said, according to sports newspaper AS.

"Since Sunday, we have had dinner together... We speak constantly, we messaged each other just yesterday."

Rumours of friction between the two were fuelled by comments Valdano made after Madrid's shock 1-1 draw against bottom club Almeria on Sunday, a result which left them four points behind league leaders Barcelona.

The general manager said French striker Karim Benzema, who spent the much of the match on the bench, was suffering "a great injustice".

Real Madrid are on the hunt for a new striker to replace injured Argentine Gonzalo Higuain, who could be out for the rest of the season, but Valdano is reportedly pushing for Benzema to start alongside Cristiano Ronaldo up front.

On Wednesday, in what was interpreted as a rebuke to Valdano, Mourinho said he had spoken about the need for a new striker in November when it was obvious that Higuain would be out for some time.



Real Madrid star Cristiano Ronaldo fires a shot during their Copa del Rey encounter against Atletico Madrid at the Vicente Calderon Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

City alert on Bent

AFP, London



Manchester City are determined to prevent lightning from striking twice when they line up against Darren Bent and his new club Aston Villa in the Premier League on Saturday.

Bent, who moved to Villa in a shock 24-million-pound transfer from Sunderland this week, has already tasted victory over City this season scoring an injury-time penalty in a 1-0 win at the Stadium of Light in August.

The 26-year-old striker has been saddled with the responsibility of scoring the goals that will preserve Aston Villa's Premier League survival after a poor start to the season that has left the club hovering above the drop zone.

Bent will line up against a City side that has not kept a clean sheet since a dour 0-0 draw against Arsenal earlier this month.

Since then City have leaked seven goals in three matches, including three against struggling Wolves at Eastlands last weekend.

The bad news for Bent is that Villa have the second worst defensive record in the league, and were routed 4-0 by City as recently as December.

Manchester United, level on points with City but with two games in hand, will keep their noses in front provided they beat Birmingham.

United's healthy position at the top of the table is made even all the more remarkable for the fact they remain unbeaten past the season's halfway mark.

Arsenal meanwhile will attempt to build on a stylish mid-week dismissal of Leeds in the FA Cup as they take on struggling Wigan at the Emirates.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated):
Saturday
Arsenal v Wigan, Aston Villa v Man City (1730), Blackpool v Sunderland, Everton v West Ham, Fulham v Stoke, Man Utd v Birmingham, Newcastle v Tottenham, Wolves v Liverpool (1245)
Sunday
Blackburn v West Brom (1600)
Monday

Barca in box seat

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona have won 13 league games in a row with their last league loss back in mid-September and aim to continue that sequence with three points at home to Racing Santander on Saturday.

"Maybe you could say four points were a good lead with another team, but if there is a team that has lots of lives it is Real Madrid and that advantage is nothing," said Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola.

Guardiola, who turned 40 on Tuesday, watched his side surrender their 28-game unbeaten run in all competitions with a 3-1 Kings Cup second leg loss to second division Real Betis on Wednesday, although their 5-0 first leg win saw them reach the semifinals of the tournament.

Racing are up next and Barcelona must do without Brazilian Dani Alves due to a calf injury so Adriano could fill in or the versatile Carles Puyol may be asked to move to right back.

Real Madrid, four points behind Barcelona in second, can't afford many more slips

ups if they are to overhaul their rivals and hope to maintain their perfect home record with victory over Real Mallorca at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

Real, who saw off Atletico Madrid in the second leg of the Kings Cup quarterfinal on Thursday, dropped two crucial points in a 1-1 draw with bottom side Almeria last weekend.

In other matches, Sevilla aim to build on their midweek cup success - they beat Villarreal 3-0 on Wednesday to move into the semifinals of the Kings Cup - and use the second half of the season to push up into the Champions League places.

Sevilla host promoted Levante on Saturday needing the win as they currently lie 11 points off the top four.

Villarreal are third and hope to put their cup setback behind them with a home win over Real Sociedad on Sunday.

At the mid-way point in the season, Valencia have their desired fourth place and host struggling Malaga on Saturday trying to fend off the teams below with Espanyol just three points behind in fifth.

After drawing against Real last weekend, Almeria reached the Kings Cup semifinals - where they will face Barcelona - for the first time in their history by overcoming Deportivo La Coruna.

Despite the impressive cup run, staying up is the main priority for Almeria who prop up the table ahead of Sunday's home match against Osasuna.

Udinese test for Inter

REUTERS, Milan



Serie A leaders AC Milan are unlikely to bring in any more players during the January transfer window after talks to take Genoa defender Domenico Criscito, Sampdoria left back Reto Ziegler and Cagliari midfielder Andrea Lazzarri broke down.

"I think we'll stay like this, at the moment there are no agreements. We thought the requests were excessive but if the chance arises, we'll take it," Milan chief executive Adriano Galliani, who has already signed Antonio Cassano from Samp, told reporters.

Striker Filippo Inzaghi will be included in Milan's Champions League squad in case he makes a quicker than expected recovery from what was thought to be a season-ending knee injury, Galliani added.

Milan could be without defender Thiago Silva for Sunday's home clash with Cesena (1945 GMT) after he missed Thursday's Italian Cup last 16 win over Bari with an intestinal problem.

Inter Milan striker Diego Milito, who looked back to top form after a series of niggles, is doubtful for Sunday's match at in-form Udinese (1130) after yet another thigh strain.

A club statement also said injured duo Julio Cesar and Wesley Sneijder were still working away from the squad in training so their return to action looks some way off.

After a dreadful start to the season with Rafa Benitez, the champions have won five games in a row in all competitions under new coach Leonardo and have rocketed up to fourth spot in Serie A, just six points behind Milan with a game in hand.

FIXTURES
(1400 GMT unless stated):
Saturday
Palermo v Brescia (1700), Parma v Catania (1700), Roma v Cagliari (1945)
Sunday
Udinese v Inter Milan (1130), Bari v Napoli, Bologna v Lazio, Chievo v Genoa, Fiorentina v Lecce, Sampdoria v

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
Are you satisfied with the Tigers squad for the World Cup?
Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote
Follow The Daily Star Sport on twitter
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What to WATCH

NEO Cricket
New Zealand v Pakistan
First ODI
Live from 7:00am
ESPN
English Premiership
Wolves v Liverpool
Live from 7:00pm
Man United v Birmingham City
Live from 9:00pm
Aston Villa v Man City
Live from 11:30pm
STAR Sports
Australian Open
Live from 6:00am
English Premiership
Arsenal v Wigan
Live from 9:00pm
TEN Action+
La Liga
Barcelona v Racing
Live from 1:00am (Sunday)
Valencia v Malaga
Live from 3:00am (Sunday)
TEN Sports
Serie A

Cassano starts in Bari win

AFP, Rome

Antonio Cassano made his first start for AC Milan as the Serie A leaders thumped basement sitters Bari 3-0 on Thursday to reach the Italian Cup quarterfinals.

All the pre-match talk was about January transfer-window signing Cassano's first start for the club since his move from Sampdoria and the 28-year-old lasted 65 minutes before making way for the returning Andrea Pirlo.

Cassano, however, was upstaged by strike partners Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Robinho, who both found the net, as well as young German midfielder Alexander Merkel, who notched one and made another.



Milan forward Robinho is about to score the third goal against Bari during their Italian Cup clash in San Siro on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Fergie fuming over red card

AFP, Manchester



Sir Alex Ferguson admitted he is still fuming over Rafael Da Silva's suspension and joked he could thwart the ban by playing him and pretending it's his twin brother Fabio.

Rafael is out for Saturday's clash against Birmingham at Old Trafford following his red card in the goal-less draw at Tottenham and was later charged with improper conduct for his protests.

The Manchester United manager could now turn to playing Fabio in his place at right-back, but joked that he could play his identical twin Rafael and no-one would be any the wiser.

Ironically, the Da Silva twins were involved in a case of mistaken identity during a Carling Cup match against Barnsley last season.

"I might put Rafael in there," said Ferguson.

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League
Mohammedan v Brothers
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal

IN brief

Carew joins Stoke

AFP, Birmingham

Aston Villa's Norwegian international striker John Carew has joined Stoke on loan until the end of the season, it was confirmed on Friday.

Stoke swooped on Carew after Villa clinched the surprise signing of Darren Bent from Sunderland earlier this week.

The 31-year-old, whose career has also included stints at Valencia and Lyon, has completed a medical and will be available for Stoke's Premier League clash with Fulham on Saturday.

"This is a fantastic signing," manager Tony Pulis told stokecityfc.co.uk.

"John's record speaks for itself because he has scored goals at the highest level throughout his career."

Top EPL clubs eye Honda

AFP, Doha

Japan's World Cup hero Keisuke Honda is being eyed by several major English clubs including Liverpool, Arsenal and Aston Villa, reports said Friday.

The 24-year-old CSKA Moscow midfielder, in Doha with Japan for the Asian Cup, has set up meetings with officials from the teams, Honda's agent Kees Pleogmsa was quoted as saying by Qatari media.

"Several clubs have confirmed their interest," he said, adding that AC Milan were also keen.

"But we'll have to wait and see who is seriously interested in Honda. I really hope something can happen, but I don't know. We must wait and see."

Klose demands start

AFP, Berlin

Germany striker Miroslav Klose has demanded he starts for Bayern Munich against ex-club Kaiserslautern on Saturday and has told coach Louis van Gaal he is not interested in a place on the bench.

Although he is second-choice at Bayern behind Germany colleague Mario Gomez, the 32-year-old Klose has an impressive goal-scoring record and is desperate to face his former club in the German league at Munich's Allianz Arena.

After more than a decade he has scored 113 goals in 279 Bundesliga games for Kaiserslautern, Werder Bremen and Bayern and with 58 goals for Germany, he is second on the list of all-time German goalscorers.

"I am fit, I am in form," Klose told German daily Bild.

"I want to fight to get my place back in the starting line-up."

"My place is not on the bench."

Rovers, Pascal part company

AFP, London

Blackburn have parted company with wantaway defender Pascal Chimbona by mutual consent, the club confirmed Friday.

Chimbona, 31, had been told by former Rovers boss Sam Allardyce that he was free to leave in January and new manager Steve Kean stuck to the agreement.

"We came to an agreement, mutual consent, that his contract is terminated and we wish him all the best wherever he goes," Kean said.

The French full-back has been linked to several clubs, including promotion-chasing Championship