



Inter Milan playmaker Wesley Sneijder (L) is about to score the third goal against Bari during their Serie A encounter at the San Nicola Stadium on Thursday.

Inter move up

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan moved up to third in the Serie A table after labouring to a 3-0 victory at rock bottom Bari on Thursday.

Following league leaders AC Milan's 0-0 draw with Lazio on Tuesday, Inter closed the gap to their bitter city rivals to seven points and with a game in hand.

Although the final score appeared comfortable it did not tell the story of a game that for 70 minutes seemed destined to finish in a sterile goalless stalemate.

But 20 minutes from time Morocco midfielder Houssine Kharja struck his first goal for the champions in his first start for the club.

Fellow transfer deadline day signing Giampaolo Pazzini then took his tally for the nerazzurri to three goals in two games with the first of two added time strikes before Wesley Sneijder on his injury comeback added the third.

The best chance of the first half came on 10 minutes when Bari's Sergio Almiron set his sights from a free-kick just outside the box but Julio Cesar made a diving one-handed save.

Inter rarely threatened with a pair of half chances from right-back Maicon the closest they came to

creating a breakthrough.

At the start of the second half Cameroon captain Samuel Eto'o worked his way into the Bari box but his shot was deflected behind.

Dutch playmaker Sneijder came on early in the second period to make his injury comeback after almost two months on the sidelines but his rustiness showed as he blazed over when well-placed.

The opening goal came 20 minutes from time after some uncharacteristically slick play in an otherwise stalemate.

Kharja slipped the ball inside to Eto'o and continued his run, taking the forward's reverse pass and then finishing crisply left-footed across Jean-Francois Gillet in the Barigoal.

That at least sparked the Serie A basement sitters into life and Alessandro Gazzzi burst forward to hit a dipping ball on the volley but Cesar got both hands behind it to parry.

Gazzzi was presented with a great chance five minutes from time but on the turn he failed to get a true contact and the ball trickled harmlessly into Cesar's arms.

As Bari pushed up late on to try to rescue something from the game, Pazzini escaped on the break and finished clinically inside Gillet's far post before Sneijder volleyed home with the last kick of the match.

PHOTO:
AFP

IN brief

Henry backs Dalglish

AFP, London

Liverpool owner John Henry has hinted that Kenny Dalglish may be given the manager's job permanently following the successful start to his temporary stewardship of the club.

Dalglish was given the task of steady the ship at Anfield following the departure of Roy Hodgson, and despite defeats in his first few games, Liverpool have won their last three matches while moving to seventh in the title.

Dalglish, 58, who has made no secret of his desire to do the job on a permanent basis, was also given freedom to splash out in the transfer market this week with the 56-million-pound acquisition of Andy Carroll and Luis Suarez.

Henry told Fox Soccer Channel that Fenway Sports Group could not have been happier with Dalglish since he took over.

Real eye Aguero swoop

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will offer 28 million euros and striker Alvaro Negredo, who they would buy back from Seville, to land Atletico Madrid's Argentine striker Sergio 'Kun' Aguero, sports daily Marca reported Friday.

Real sold Negredo to Sevilla in 2009 for around 14 million euros but they have the option of buying him back in the first two years for 17 million euros to include him in their offer for the player, it said.

"The operation is planned by Real Madrid and it now only needs to run its course this summer," the newspaper wrote without citing sources.

Rovers chairman quits

AFP, London

Blackburn chairman John Williams has quit after 14 years, in the latest high-profile departure involving a senior official at the Indian-owned Premier League club.

Williams said in a statement on the club's website Rovers faced a "new dawn" under Indian company Venky's and the time was right for him to quit.

"With our new owners the Venky's Group, I have no doubt this is a new dawn for the club," Williams said.

"There is a new order, a new way of doing things and I believe the time is right for me now to move on."

Man City great dies

AFP, London

Neil Young, a striker in Manchester City's trophy winning teams of the late 1960s and early 1970s, has died aged 66 from cancer, the English Premier League club announced Thursday.

Young, who scored the winning goal in the 1969 FA Cup final, was also a member of the City side that won the English Championship in the 1967/68 season and was also on target when the club won the European Cup Winners' Cup final in 1970.

Young was City's top scorer, with 19 goals in 40 appearances, as a talented team featuring the likes of Colin Bell and Mike Summerbee under the management of Joe Mercer and Michael Allison were crowned champions of England in 1968.

But perhaps Young's most celebrated performance came when he scored the only goal of the game as Manchester City beat Leicester 1-0 in the 1969 FA Cup final at Wembley.

Yet for all his club success, Young never won an

Reds face Blues and Torres

AFP, London



Liverpool could discover just how much they may miss Fernando Torres should the Spain striker make his debut for Chelsea against his old side on Sunday just days after completing a £50 million move.

Liverpool make the trip to Stamford Bridge, having effectively used the Torres cash and more to sign club record signing Andy Carroll and Luis Suarez for a combined £57.8 million.

Liverpool may have enjoyed something of a resurgence under Kenny Dalglish, having won their last three games with clean sheets to move up to seventh place in the Premier League table.

But that still leaves them nine points adrift of Chelsea and

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday

Aston Villa v Fulham, Everton v Blackpool, Manchester City v West Brom, Newcastle v Arsenal, Stoke v Sunderland (1245GMT), Tottenham v Bolton, Wigan v Blackburn, Wolves v Manchester United (1730GMT)

Sunday

Chelsea v Liverpool (1600GMT), West

a whopping 19 adrift of leaders Manchester United -- something that's tough to take for Liverpool's loyal followers who remember the glory years of the mid 1970s and 1980s.

The injured Carroll may still be waiting in the wings for a while yet but Uruguayan striker Suarez scored on debut after coming off the bench in a 2-0 win over Stoke on Wednesday.

Chelsea meanwhile signalled their intent to close on United by spending a combined £75 million on Torres and Brazil defender David Luiz, who arrived in west London from Portuguese giants Benfica.

The duo joined too late to feature in Wednesday's 4-2 win against Sunderland but both men could play against Liverpool.

Chelsea captain John Terry told the London Evening Standard: "To sign Torres and Luiz is a huge statement."



Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti (L) poses with record signing Fernando Torres at their training ground in Cobham yesterday.

Bayern wait on Robben

AFP, Berlin



Defending champions Bayern Munich are waiting to see if Dutch winger Arjen Robben recovers from a heavy cold in time to face Bundesliga strugglers Cologne on Saturday.

Robben has been in stellar form for Bayern recently, despite missing the first half of the season with a thigh injury and has scored three goals in four games, including two in the German league.

The 26-year-old sat out training on Thursday and a decision on whether he plays in Cologne will only be made closer to kick-off with Turkey midfielder Hamit Altintop on standby to deputise for the World Cup runner-up.

Cologne are third from bottom and locked in the battle to avoid relegation, but a rare win over Bremen two weeks ago shows they will not be easy to beat.

There is some good news for Bayern with French midfielder Franck Ribery expected to be on the bench after an impressive display in Thursday's training nearly three weeks out with an ankle injury.

The 27-year-old sprained his knee in the first post-Christmas fixture away to Wolfsburg three weeks ago, and has not played since then, but he resumed training last Sunday and could feature as a sub in Cologne.

Bundesliga leaders Dortmund are 11 points clear at the head of the table with Leverkusen second and Bayern third, 14 points adrift of the top team, so Munich cannot afford to leave Cologne without three points.

Second-placed Leverkusen are at mid-table Nuremberg on Saturday with Germany captain Michael Ballack set to make his second start after a leg injury kept him out since last September.

FIXTURES

Saturday

Mainz 05 v Werder Bremen, Hoffenheim v Kaiserslautern, Cologne v Bayern Munich, Hanover 96 v VfL Wolfsburg, Nuremberg v Bayer Leverkusen, Borussia M'gladbach v VfB Stuttgart

Sunday

Hamburg v St. Pauli, Freiburg v

Masche warns Barca

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona midfielder Javier Mascherano has warned his team to put any thoughts of the Copa del Rey final with Real Madrid to one side and focus fully on the visit of Atletico Madrid in La Liga this weekend.

"We need to forget about the final now as otherwise we will have problems in other competitions," said Mascherano.

"It is important that we arrive at this game (the Cup final) in a good position but as the rival is Real Madrid everything will be built up."

"We are not machines but humans and any weekend we can lose although I am not concerned at the moment because I do not see signs of relaxation, in fact quite the opposite."

"Atletico are a strong side and we will not be granted. They won the Europa League last season and beat the world champions (Inter Milan) in the Super Cup."

With Barcelona having dropped so few points it will be a tough task for Real Madrid to claw back the difference in the league but

they start against Real Sociedad.

Villarreal came away with a victory from Espanyol's fortress like Cornellà stadium and now are within six points of Real Madrid as they prepare to take on struggling Levante, while below them Valencia face Hercules.

With bigger clubs having underperformed this season, Espanyol have taken their chances and can further consolidate their European position against second-from-bottom Almeria.

Athletic Bilbao, who play Sporting Gijón, are two points behind Espanyol in sixth but traditional powerhouses Atletico Madrid and Sevilla are well off the pace.

While Atletico are at the Nou Camp, Sevilla face a tricky Andalusian derby against Malaga, who have a better squad than their bottom place would suggest, former Real Madrid trainer Manuel Pellegrini also having signed some experienced players in the winter transfer window.

However, while they have brought in players like Julio Baptista, Martin Demichelis and Enzo Maresca they still need the results to follow and have lost their last three matches.

'Cesc a target of witch hunt'

AFP, London



Angry Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger claimed on Friday that his skipper Cesc Fabregas has become the target of a witch hunt.

The 23-year-old midfielder was at the centre of controversy in midweek when he was involved in an angry confrontation with match officials after Everton striker Louis Saha scored despite being in an offside position.

After the match at the Emirates, in which Arsenal hit back to win 2-1, Everton manager David Moyes claimed Fabregas made unrepeatable comments to the officials.

Asked if he thought there was a witch hunt against the Spanish international, Wenger replied: "Yes."

"We are long enough in the job to know that somebody picks on you for a while, and you are in the heat of the moment."

"But for me what is the most important is the player behaves well."

"When Cesc is on the pitch, he tries to play football - I cannot say everybody who plays against him tries to do that."

"For example, some people reproach him for not exchanging shirts with a player after the game - but I hope he will not exchange shirts with players who try to kick him for 90 minutes and them come to say 'please can I get your shirt'?"

"I think that is a normal and natural reaction."

"Overall this guy is an example on the football pitch and shows you how to play football."