



Barcelona striker David Villa (C) hardy got any space from a feisty Sporting Gijon's defence. But he seized one half chance to give the champions a point at El Molinon Stadium in Gijon on Saturday. The pulsating Primera Liga match ended in a 1-1 draw.

PHOTO:
AFP

Van Persie keeps Gunners in hunt

AFP, London



Robin Van Persie struck twice as Arsenal moved within four points of Premier League leaders Manchester United following a comfortable 2-0 home victory over Wolves on Saturday.

United's win in the Manchester derby earlier in the day meant Arsene Wenger's side kicked off seven points adrift.

But the second-placed Gunners were never in danger of failing to reduce the deficit, completing a routine win that left Wolves bottom of the table.

The news that United had won will have filtered through to the home dressing room around 15 minutes before kick-off but if it had any effect, it served only to increase Arsenal's motivation.

The Gunners quickly assumed control over a Wolves side locked in a desperate battle for Premier League survival.

And any concerns Arsenal would suffer a hangover from events at Newcastle disappeared when Van Persie volleyed them into a 16th minute lead.

Jack Wilshere, fresh from an impressive full international debut for England in Den-

mark midweek, made the first meaningful foray with the midfielder's surging run halted by a foul on the edge of the box.

Van Persie was unable to make the subsequent free kick count but he was far more precise when connecting with Cesc Fabregas's low cross in the 16th minute.

Fabregas, who awoke to reports he is a 54 million pound (70 million dollars) target of

Real Madrid, picked out Van Persie and the Holland international struck an acrobatic first time volley past Wolves keeper Wayne Hennessey.

Wolves offered little by way of reply although they did have a good shout for a penalty when Adam Hammill went down under a clumsy challenge from Johan Djourou.

But their hopes should have been snuffed out immediately after the restart when Walcott missed a glaring opportunity.

The chance arose after another mazy run forward from Wilshere who opted to square the ball to his England colleague instead of shooting himself and Walcott fired wide from close range.

The winger made amends shortly afterwards, however, when he broke from half-way and picked out Van Persie, who drilled home his 56th minute second from the edge of the box.

RESULTS

Arsenal 2 (van Persie 16, 56) Wolverhampton 0
Birmingham 1 (Zigic 90) Stoke 0
Blackburn 0 Newcastle 0
Blackpool 1 (Grandin 14) Aston Villa 1 (Agbonlahor 10)
Liverpool 1 (Meireles 24) Wigan 1 (Gohouri 65)
Manchester United 2 (Nani 41, Rooney 78) Manchester City 1 (Silva 65)
Sunderland 1 (Gyan 11) **Tottenham 2** (Dawson 44, Kranjcar 57)
West Bromwich 3 (Dorrans 2, Thomas 8, Reid 32-og) West Ham 3

Gijon end Barca run

AFP, Madrid



League leaders Barcelona saw their record winning run come to an end with a shock 1-1 draw at Sporting Gijon and it could have been worse had David Villa not scored a brilliant 79th-minute equaliser to salvage a point.

Barcelona had won 16 consecutive league games to beat the old mark of the great Real Madrid side of 1960/61. But the champions saw their historical sequence broken and the two dropped points are a real boost for title rivals Real.

Barcelona are now eight points ahead of Real in the Spanish first division and Jose Mourinho's side will want to capitalise on the rare slip by winning at Espanyol.

Unfashionable Sporting, two points above the relegation zone, took the lead through David Barral after 16th minutes and Barcelona needed a delightful chip from Villa late on to snatch a point.

"We managed to get a draw and we have to be happy with a point," said Villa. "Barcelona never settle for a draw because we always like to win, but it is true that Sporting were superior to us in

certain aspects."

It was the first away points dropped all season for Barcelona, who had won all 10 of their away games prior to this game, and coach Pep Guardiola will hope for a better display on Wednesday when his side travel to Arsenal for the first leg of their last 16 Champions League tie.

Elsewhere the future of Atletico Madrid coach Quique Sanchez Flores is hanging by a thread after a brace Valencia 2 - 1 back to the Caldero Saturday. Joaquin scored an 86th minute winner to punish Atletico, who have won just once in 2011 under Flores, and Valencia move two points above Villarreal into third place.

Atletico are seven points off the top six, with the pre-season target of Champions League football out of sight, and Flores could face the axe with his old team Valencia, where he played for 10 years and who he managed for two seasons, possibly putting the final nail in his coffin.

"The fans cheer me up because they appreciate things and that's why I will do everything I possibly can to turn things around," said Flores. Atletico got the perfect start with Jose Antonio Reyes putting them ahead after just three minutes, however, Joaquin levelled for Valencia on 41 minutes.

RESULTS

Atletico Madrid 1 (Reyes 3)
Valencia 2 (Joaquin 41, 86)
Sporting Gijon 1 (Barral 16)
Barcelona 1 (Villa 79)
Racing Santander 3 (Christian 12, Rakitic 19-og, Arana 90) Sevilla 2

Diego Forlan missed a crucial penalty on 56 minutes and Joaquin scored a fine winner curling in a right-footed shot from just outside the area with four minutes left.

It propelled Valencia into third and was the perfect preparation for their Champions League last 16 first leg match at home to Schalke on Tuesday.

In other matches, 10-man Racing Santander defeated Sevilla 3-2 in an enthralling match on Saturday to give new coach Marcelino a winning start.

Substitute Manuel Arana scored a stoppage time winner to lift Racing four points above the relegation zone while Sevilla stay six points off the top six.

Racing went two goals up inside the first 19 minutes, however, goalscorer Christian Salas was sent off on 39 minutes for violent conduct and Sevilla levelled at 2-2 before Arana's sensational winner.

Bayern's Messi & Xavi

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal insisted Saturday Holland's Arjen Robben and France's Franck Ribery are just as important to the German champions as Lionel Messi and Xavi are to Barcelona.

Dutch star Robben netted twice as he combined with Ribery to inspire Bayern's 4-0 win over Hoffenheim at Munich's Allianz Arena.

Flying Dutchman Robben and midfield maestro Ribery -- dubbed 'Robbery' by the German media -- tore Hoffenheim to pieces and van Gaal insists the pair are Bayern's answer to Argentina's Messi and Spain's Xavi.

"With Robben and Ribery, we have far more creativity," said van Gaal.

"They are unbelievably important to Bayern, like Messi and Xavi for Barcelona or Ronaldo and (Mesut) Ozil for Real Madrid."

Milan maul Parma

AFP, Rome



AC Milan bounced back to winning ways with a 4-0 thrashing of Parma at the San Siro on Saturday to maintain their grip on the Serie A leadership.

Coming into the game off the back of two straight draws and only two wins in their previous six league games, Milan were starting to come under pressure from the chasing pack, notably a revitalised Inter Milan and surprise package Napoli.

And second-placed Napoli remained hot on their heels three points back as league top scorer Edinson Cavani bagged a brace to down Roma 2-0.

First half goals from Clarence Seedorf and Antonio Cassano, his first for the club, put this game to bed before the break.

Substitute Robinho then scored a second half brace to emphasise Milan's superiority.

Napoli all but mathematically ended Roma's title chances by claiming their first win away to the giallorossi in 17 years.

Cavani opened the scoring on 49 minutes from the penalty spot after Juan had clipped Marek Hamsik's heel in the area.

And the Uruguayan finished things off seven minutes from time as he stabbed home Paolo Cannavaro's cross from six yards.

Roma now trail Milan by 13 points, although with a game in hand.

RESULTS

AC Milan 4 (Seedorf 8, Cassano 17, Robinho 61, 65) Parma 0
Roma 0 **Napoli 2** (Cavani 49-pen, 83)

Bullish Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Hot-shot Germany striker Mario Gomez hit his 17th league goal of the season on Saturday as

defending Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich routed Hoffenheim 4-0 in the Bavarian capital to go third.

Gomez, the German league's top-scorer, brushed off last week's knee injury to convert his chance after just two minutes having been set up by Dutch winger Arjen Robben.

His Germany team-mate

Thomas Mueller then put the hosts 2-0 up on 15 minutes at Munich's Allianz Arena after a strong run through the Hoffenheim defence by France wing Franck Ribery.

Robben turned from goal-provider to goal-scorer when he netted twice in the second-half.

Second-placed Leverkusen blank mid-table Nuremberg 3-0 at Eintracht Frankfurt.

Midfielder Simon Rolfes, Brazil's Renato Augusto and Hanno Balitsch scored the goals.

Bottom side Borussia Muenchengladbach took another step towards relegation when they were beaten 3-1 at St Pauli.

RESULTS

Bayern Munich 4 (Gomez 2, Mueller 15, Robben 63, 81) Hoffenheim 0
Schalke 04 1 (Farfan 49) Freiburg 0
VfB Stuttgart 1 (Funk 45)
Nuremberg 4 (Simons 11, Schieber 28, Chandler 51, Ekici 63)
VfL Wolfsburg 0 **Hamburg 1** (Petric 32-pen)
Eintracht Frankfurt 0 **Bayer Leverkusen 3** (Rolfes 9, Renato Augusto 32, Balitsch 84)
St. Pauli 3 (Kruse 38, Asamoah 53, Lehmann 58) Borussia

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