



Barcelona defender Gerard Pique celebrates after scoring the only goal of the game in their clash against Villarreal at the El Madrigal on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Barca shoe-in for title

Mourinho loses nine year home record

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona are on course for a third successive league title after a 1-0 win at Villarreal on Saturday moved the double champions eight points clear of bitter rivals Real Madrid in the title race with just eight games left.

Spanish World Cup winner Gerard Pique scored a 67th minute winner as Barcelona capitalised on Real's surprise 1-0 home loss to unfashionable Sporting Gijon on Saturday, which ended coach Jose Mourinho's infamous 150 game league home record.

Barcelona needed a heroic late save from goalkeeper Victor Valdes to clinch all three points and take a huge step towards the 2010/11 league title.

"It is an important step towards the title," said Pique. "We just have to keep on going now. Real Madrid will never give up but we have everything in our hands."

Madrid host Barcelona on the weekend April 16/17 at the Santiago Bernabeu, but Mourinho openly admitted that the title race was virtually over after his side surrendered their 100 percent home record with a 1-0 loss against Gijon.

Miguel de las Cuevas stunned Real with a 78th minute winner as Mourinho lost his first home league match in over nine years with his last league home loss back in February 2002 when his FC Porto side lost 3-2 at home to Beira Mar.

"Luck is a part of football and our opponents had it all, while we didn't have any," said Mourinho

"We had Cristiano (Ronaldo), Marcelo, (Karim) Benzema and Xabi (Alonso) missing and had to play a bit more direct tonight. We had lots of goalscoring chances from two or three metres but they just didn't go in."

The return of Argentine international forward Gonzalo Higuain, out of action with a back problem since late November, was the only positive on a terrible night for Real, who must pick themselves up for Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal first leg against Tottenham Hotspur at the Bernabeu.

The Gijon loss was a real boon for Barcelona, who started Lionel Messi on the bench with coach Pep Guardiola not taking any chances on his leg injury ahead of the Champions League quarterfinal first leg at home to Shakhtar Donetsk on Wednesday.

Messi came on for Seydou Keita on 52 minutes to lift Barcelona, but the inspiration came from Pique who controlled a cross on his chest before volleying home the winner.

Valdes pulled off a wonder save in stoppage time to stop Santi Cazorla's thumping drive and the goalkeeper was congratulated by his celebrating team mates after the final whistle.

Villarreal's second home defeat of the season sees them fall to fourth, three points behind Valencia who beat Getafe 4-2 on Saturday.

Valencia striker Roberto Soldado bagged a second half quadruple to down his old club Getafe as Valencia came from a goal down to win 4-2 on Saturday and move above Villarreal into third.

RESULTS

Villarreal 0 **Barcelona 1** (Pique 67)
Real Madrid 0 **Sporting Gijon 1**
(de las Cuevas 78)
Getafe 2 (Manu del Moral 12, Sardinero 88) **Valencia 4** (Soldado 46, 64, 66, 77)

Dortmund all but champions

AFP, Berlin

Borussia Dortmund came from behind to floor Bundesliga title rivals Hanover 96 on Saturday with a 4-1 victory which maintained their seven-point lead at the top of the table.

With six games left after this weekend, Dortmund move ever closer to their first Bundesliga title since 2002 with second-half goals from Germany's rising star Mario Goetze, two by Paraguay's Lucas Barrios and Kevin Grosskreutz.

Hanover took the lead

when Norway striker Mohammed Abdellaoue netted after 57 minutes, but Dortmund equalised less than two minutes later.

Wunderkind Goetze, 18, put his side level on 52 minutes before Poland defender Lukasz Piszczek fired in a perfect cross from the sidelines which Barrios buried in the net with a 64th-minute header.

Goetze then turned provider when his clever pass nine minutes later which allowed Barrios to fire home again before Grosskreutz completed the rout in the 83rd minute.

Second-placed Leverkusen stayed in the title race thanks to a single goal from midfielder Sidney Sam which gave them a 1-0

win and three crucial points at Kaisterslautern.

Bayern Munich leapfrogged Hanover into third, thanks to their 1-0 win over bottom-side Borussia Moenchengladbach, who are destined to be in the second division next season.

With the game played at a

RESULTS

Bayern Munich 1 (Robben 77)
Borussia M'Gladbach 0
Werder Bremen 1 (Frings 34) VfB Stuttgart 1 (Hajnal 13)
Borussia Dortmund 4 (Goetze 59, Barrios 64, 73, Grosskreutz 83)
Hanover 96 1 (Abdellaoue 57)
Mainz 05 1 (Allagui 74)
Freiburg 1 (Cisse 1)
Kaiserslautern 0 **Bayer Leverkusen 1** (Sam 74)
Hoffenheim 0 Hamburg 0

low tempo, Dutch winger Arjen Robben spared Bayern's blushes with his ninth goal in 10 league games after missing the start of the season with injury.

The win puts Bayern seven points behind second-placed Leverkusen -- and an automatic Champions League place next season -- while Gladbach are seven points from safety.

Former German champions Stuttgart and Werder Bremen drew 1-1 with both sides still dangerously close to the drop-zone.

Fifth-placed Mainz 05 remain on course for a European place next season thanks to their 1-1 draw at home to Freiburg.

Silvio takes moral high ground

AFP, Rome

AC Milan president and Italy Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi sprang to the defence of his former coach Leonardo after the Brazilian received a hot reception at the San Siro.

Inter Milan coach Leonardo was roundly jeered by Milan fans at Saturday night's derby, won by 3-0 by Milan, for his supposed treachery in switching city colours this season.

A huge banner was unveiled at one end of the stadium depicting Leonardo as the historical Judas Iscariot in a parody of the famous Last Supper fresco painted by Leonardo Da Vinci and housed in the city's Santa Maria delle Grazie church.

But Berlusconi, who is involved in defence trials against accusations of fraud, corruption and paying for sex with underage prostitutes, insisted that he is a better man than the club's fans and defended his former coach.

He even took no offence at claims Leonardo had described him as a narcissist.

"He's right, I am a narcissist," he said on Sunday. "You can't talk about unfaithfulness," added the 75-year-old, who is accused of hosting orgies with underage prostitutes at one of his Milan homes and whose last wife Veronica Lario left him over his playboy antics.

"It's the professionalism of football and you can't use this term to describe a player, an official or a coach who moves from one team to another," he said.

And when asked why the fans didn't see things from his point of view, the under fire Prime Minister added: "Not everyone is as good a person as me."

Redknapp thinks Bale will be fit

AFP, Wigan

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp is hopeful Gareth Bale will be fit to face Real Madrid in the Champions League quarterfinal first leg on Tuesday.

Bale was sorely missed as Spurs were held to a 0-0 draw by struggling Wigan at the DW Stadium on Saturday, but Redknapp is confident the Wales winger will recover from a hamstring injury in time to feature in Spain on Tuesday.

Redknapp said: "Gareth is okay, he has got a chance. He should be fit for the game."

"As for Gallas he is struggling. Unless there is a big improvement in his knee I doubt if he will be fit."

SPORTS POLL

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Dhaka v Barisal at Sylhet
Khulna v Sylhet at Rajshahi

Man Utd winners in decisive day

AFP, London



Wayne Rooney scored a hatrick as Manchester United seized control of the Premier League title race with a 4-2 victory over West Ham while rivals Arsenal slipped up against Blackburn.

United's come-from-behind victory against the Hammers gave Sir Alex Ferguson's side a seven-point lead at the top as Arsenal's dismal run continued with a 0-0 draw against Blackburn in the late kick-off at the Emirates.

It was Arsenal's third consecutive draw and means that the title race is no longer in the hands of the Londoners, whose last league win was in February.

Earlier, United manager Ferguson said his side had shown championship-winning pedigree by coming back to take all three points after finding themselves 2-0 down at half-time.

"I thought we played like champions today," Ferguson said.

"We kept our heads up, we didn't lose faith in our ability and that was a great boost. We dominated that second half and deserved to win. It was a real championship performance as far as I'm concerned."

A good day for United got even better in the late game, as Arsenal dominated Blackburn but were unable to land the knockout blow against a Rovers side reduced to 10 men for the final 14 minutes after Stephen Nzonzi's dismissal.

Boos rang out around the Emirates as Arsenal trooped off disconsolately following another damaging hammer blow to their season.

Elsewhere Saturday, third placed Chelsea -- who face United in the Champions League quarterfinals next week -- saw their hopes of mounting a late title charge dashed as they were held 1-1 at Stoke.

Jon Walters fired Stoke ahead on eight minutes, surging past David Luiz near half-way before unleashing a shot beyond Chelsea keeper Petr Cech.

But Chelsea got back on level terms just after the half hour mark, Didier Drogba powering in a diving header from a Nicola Anelka cross.

Fifth-placed Spurs also missed the chance to ramp up the pressure on fourth-placed Manchester City after being held to a 0-0 at bottom club Wigan.

Meanwhile, West Bromwich Albion manager Roy Hodgson revelled in a 2-1 victory over former club Liverpool at the Hawthorns.

The Baggies sealed victory in dramatic circumstances, skipper Chris Brunt scoring an 88th-minute penalty to put his team ahead -- his second spot-kick of the match. Martin Skrtel had given Liverpool the lead on 50 minutes.

It was the first West Brom victory over Liverpool since 1981 but more importantly put Hodgson's side four points clear of the drop zone.

In a tumultuous match at Goodison Park, Everton grabbed a 2-2 draw courtesy of an 83rd-minute penalty from Leighton Baines.

Baines equaliser was a form of justice served after David Moyes had a legitimate second half goal from Jermaine Beckford ruled out.

Everton took the lead through Leon Osman on 38 minutes before Darren Bent levelled just after half-time.

Beckford thought he had given Everton the lead midway through the second half when his shot crashed off the underside of the bar and appeared to have crossed the line.

But the match officials disallowed the "goal" and as Everton rued their misfortune, Villa swept upfield to score through Bent.

Birmingham meanwhile eased their relegation fears with a hard-fought 2-1 win over Bolton at St Andrews.

RESULTS

Arsenal 0 Blackburn 0
Birmingham 2 (Phillips 4, Gardner 59) Bolton 1 (Elmender 70)
Everton 2 (Osman 38, Baines 83-pen) Aston Villa 2 (Bent 47, 68)
Newcastle 4 (Nolan 22, Ameobi 45, Lovenkrands 50, Gutierrez 90) Wolves 1 (Ebanks-Blake 58)
Stoke 1 (Walters 8) Chelsea 1 (Drogba 33)
West Brom 2 (Brunt 62-pen, 88-pen) Liverpool 1 (Skrtel 50)
West Ham 2 (Noble 11-pen, 25-pen) **Man Utd 4** (Rooney 65, 73, 79-pen, Hernandez 84)
Wigan 0 Tottenham 0

Pato tricks enough for city honours

Afp, Milan



Pato scored a brace and threw himself cunningly to the ground to get Cristian Chivu sent off as AC Milan took charge of the Serie A title race by beating Inter Milan 3-0 at the San Siro here on Sunday.

It was Brazilian Pato who was the show's central figure as he produced two clinical finishes and a dubious fall to turn the most eagerly-anticipated Milan derby in years the way of the rossoneri.

Substitute Antonio Cassano added a late penalty after he tumbled under a Javier Zanetti challenge.

The result leaves Milan five points clear of the champions at the top of Serie A with only Napoli capable of closing that gap if they beat Lazio on Sunday.

However, what had until then been a pulsating affair was ruined somewhat on 54

minutes with the controversial dismissal of Chivu.

Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati denied this victory was a significant step towards the title.

"It isn't even though of course it was an important game because it was a derby," he told Sky Sport.

"But there are still another seven games and a lot of points to be won. We can't relax and we have to try to keep getting results right to the end."

Inter coach Leonardo refused to give up on the title.

"I don't believe it's over but five points are five points and that's a lot," said the Brazilian.

"The early goal set the tone for the game and had a psychological impact."

"If we'd managed to equalise before the break it would have been a different game but the sending off of Chivu also conditioned the game."



AC Milan forward Pato is ecstatic after scoring during their Serie A derby against Inter Milan at the San Siro on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP