



League glory Barca's

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona were crowned Spanish champions for the third successive season

with a 1-1 draw at Levante on Wednesday clinching a 21st domestic title with two games to spare.

Barcelona needed just a point to retain the title and they duly obliged to become the first side to win three consecutive league titles since 1993 when Johan Cruyff's Barcelona 'Dream Team' won the third of their four straight league crowns.

Mali midfielder Seydo Keita headed in a 27th minute opener for Barcelona only for Ecuadorian striker Felipe Caicedo to equalise on 40 minutes, but it didn't matter as a draw gave the Catalan side the title.

Barcelona stand six points ahead of second-

placed Real Madrid and they lift the title courtesy of their superior head to head record over their rivals.

Guardiola vowed not to rest his stars and was true to his word as the likes of Lionel Messi, David Villa and Xavi started although Andres Iniesta began on the bench.

French international Eric Abidal also started at left back in his first league start since mid-March having successfully undergone surgery on a liver tumour.

Levante sounded an early warning with Valdo firing just wide but the visitors drew first blood through Keita on 27 minutes.

Xavi picked out Keita as he made a late run into the box and he produced a terrific header.

Barcelona had one hand on the trophy but got complacent with Spanish international Gerard Pique making a schoolboy defensive mistake to confuse goalkeeper Victor Valdes and Caicedo was on hand to equalise.

Messi went close with a free-kick before the interval but at the break the title was in their hands despite a below-par display.

The champions came out with more urgency in the second half and Messi took centre stage on 57 minutes with a neat turn and dribble past three men with his quick feet but his shot crashed against the left hand post to safety.

The Ballon D'Or holder then went on another mazy run but his shot crept wide as Barcelona waited for a goal to ease their nerves.

Both teams appeared happy with the draw, with Levante moving four points above the relegation zone, as the game petered out and Barcelona popped the champagne corks.

In other matches, Valencia missed the chance to seal third spot in the league following a 2-2 draw at Espanyol.

Ernesto Galan scored a 76th minute equaliser for Espanyol to salvage a point

ROLL OF HONOUR

2007	Real Madrid
2008	Real Madrid
2009	Barcelona
2010	Barcelona

RESULTS

Almeria 0 Villarreal 0
Real Sociedad 2 (Tamudo 24, Aramburu 89) Real Zaragoza 1 (Gabi 53)
Levante 1 (Caicedo 40)
Barcelona 1 (Keita 27)
Hercules 2 (Sendoa 12, 41) Real Mallorca 2 (Victor 76, Webo 80)
Espanyol 2 (Osvaldo 19, Galan 76)
Valencia 2 (Soldado 9, Mata 25)
Osasuna 3 (Sola 46, 86, Lekic 89)

and leave Valencia, five points ahead of fourth-placed Villarreal, needing a point from their remaining two games to clinch third and the automatic Champions League berth.

Villarreal drew 0-0 with relegated Almeria on Wednesday and have guaranteed fourth spot and a place in the Champions League qualifying rounds.

Down at the bottom promoted Hercules, one of only two teams to beat Barcelona in the league this season, were relegated following a 2-2 home draw against Real Mallorca on Wednesday.

Hercules led 2-0 but two goals in four minutes late in the second half sees them six points adrift of safety and Getafe's superior head to head record means they join Almeria in being relegated from the Spanish top-flight.

Osasuna staged the comeback of the day, however, coming from two goals down to defeat Sevilla 3-2 on Wednesday in a crucial win for their survival bid.

Alvaro Negredo had scored a brace to put Sevilla two goals up but Osasuna scored twice in the final five minutes to turn the game.

Substitute Dejan Lekic scored an 89th minute winner as Osasuna moved five points clear of the bottom three, while Sevilla missed the chance to go above Athletic Bilbao into fifth.

Pep praises stars

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola praised his weary players after watching them win a third successive league title with a 1-1 draw at Levante on Wednesday and said it had been even harder on the back of the 2010 World Cup.

Barcelona won the league with two games to spare to retain the title and become the first team to win three straight league crowns since 1993 when Johan Cruyff's great Barcelona 'Dream Team' won the third of four consecutive championships.

"It has been a difficult league, just like the last one was. If we are champions it is because we deserve to be," said Guardiola.

"It is our fifth league title in 10 years and I ask the players to celebrate it with their families as you can't forget these things."

Guardiola admitted his team had suffered to keep up their high standards in recent months but pointed out that a number of his players had arrived worn out after playing the entire World Cup in the summer as Spain tasted glory in South Africa.

"We were fantastic for the first three quarters of the league and in the final quarter the goals dried up," said Guardiola.

"If we have dropped our standards at the end of the season it is simply because the team has barely stopped for the past two seasons."

"It was difficult coming off the back of the World Cup. Nine Barcelona players won the World Cup (with Spain) and I didn't know how they were going to react. The attitude of all the players has been fantastic and the title is for them."

Barcelona are now targeting a league and European double as they switch their focus to the Champions League final against Manchester United at Wembley on May 28 -- a repeat of the 2009 final which Barcelona won.

"We can celebrate now and then prepare for the most beautiful game of the season which is the Champions League final," added Guardiola.

Spanish World Cup winner David Villa, a 40 million euro signing from Valencia, echoed the sentiments of his manager after lifting his first league title with Barcelona.

"This is the result of nine months hard work," said Villa. "Now we have to celebrate it and think about the Champions League final at Wembley."

Legends laud chief



AFP, Moscow

Legends of world football issued effusive praise Thursday for the strongman chief of war-torn Chechnya, a hate figure for rights activists, after playing a bizarre friendly in the region's capital.

Retired stars including Diego Maradona and Luis Figo walked on to the pitch of Grozny's gleaming new stadium Wednesday to gasps of delight from 30,000 fans who are still rebuilding lives from the legacy of nearly two decades of war.

Their 5-2 defeat to a team spearheaded by Chechnya's controversial leader Ramzan Kadyrov -- who scored three goals to the Argentinian superstar's one -- seemed only to reaffirm the diplomatic significance of the match.

"Grozny is developing. Its infrastructure is getting better all the time," Figo told the Sport Express daily after the match ended in the early hours Thursday.

"Things are only going to improve in Grozny. People are living well," Figo said.

The comments carried by Russian news agencies from the likes of Italy's Franco Baresi and Alessandro Costacurta echoed that praise.

"The atmosphere was just wonderful," Baresi told state-run RIA Novosti.

Costacurta told the same Russian news agency that he enjoyed the concert put on by Kadyrov's government and "was happy to come here".

The team of internationals slipped into Chechnya under tight security only hours before the match for a late night kick-off to play the second such exhibition in the North Caucasus in two months.

Kadyrov had already led a local squad against a group of retired Brazilian World Cup champions on March 8.

That event was also billed as an effort to revive Chechnya's spirit through sport and prove to the sceptical world media that the

region was not such a dangerous place.

But at least one member of the Brazilian squad later admitted he deeply regretted giving his stamp of approval to the rule of a man who is accused by right groups of over-seeing government-sanctioned abductions and torture.

"I took part in something that I strongly condemn, I participated in a manifestly political event in a context that was unknown to me, without understanding the consequences or the intentions," Rai wrote in his blog after returning to Brazil.

It was not clear what the terms of the players' contracts were.

Rights activists said Kadyrov has skilfully struck a cord with the locals by using football to revive Chechnya's self-belief and invigorate support for his rule.

He has used the financial backing of the Chechen diaspora across Russia to hire former Dutch great Ruud Gullit to coach the local squad and has even suggested using his new stadium to host formal international events.

"I know the significance football has in Chechnya," said Memorial rights group Caucasus expert Alexander Cherkasov.

"When they held their first match (after the wars) three years ago, it was celebrated across the entire republic," Cherkasov said.

But activists also questioned why few in Russia wonder where Kadyrov gets the resources to build stadiums and finance trips by global stars while the region struggles through post-war reconstruction.

"The Chechens love their football. But the kind of resources being poured into a show like this -- that is just a populist move," said Human Rights Watch researcher Tatyana Lokshina.

The match was broadcast in full on late-night state television and featured a special segment listing Kadyrov's accomplishments in Chechnya.

The bearded former field commander later told the network that this was only the start.

Inter see off Roma



AFP, Rome

Inter Milan joined Palermo in the Italian Cup final after seeing off Roma 2-1 on aggregate following a 1-1 draw at the San Siro on Wednesday.

Inter's top scorer Samuel Eto'o bagged the opening goal of the night, taking his tally for the season in all competitions to 34, before Marco Borriello equalised for the visitors.

Palermo had booked their place in the May 29 final with a 4-3 aggregate success against AC Milan.

And it was a double celebration for Inter as captain Javier Zanetti played his 1,000th match as a professional.

In an uneventful first period, Roma had the better chances.

Borriello fired over from inside the box after a slip from Maicon had let him in.

And then Danielle De Rossi met a Simone Perrotta cross on the turn but couldn't bend the ball inside the post.

On 19 minutes De Rossi set his sights again and sent a rocket from outside the area just past the corner of bar and upright.

There was a visible change of momentum in the second half as Inter hit back.

They took the lead on 58 minutes as Houssine Kharja crossed and Eto'o sent a precise side-foot through Perrotta's legs and around Doni in the Roma goal.

Inter could have extended their lead when Giampaolo Pazzini determinedly bundled past Juan and John-Arne Riise but Doni made a stunning one-handed save from his fierce shot.

On 72 minutes Milito fashioned a chance as he turned inside a sliding challenge from Nicolas Burdisso but his left foot finish was weak and Doni saved with his feet.



Inter Milan striker Samuel Eto'o is elated after scoring the opening goal against Roma during their Italian Cup semifinal in San Siro on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Roma hit back, though, and Mirko Vucinic slipped a pass through to Borriello who shrugged off Lucio and smacked a right foot effort that hit both posts before rebounding to safety.

Full-back Marco Cassetti stung goal-

keeper Julio Cesar's fingers with a shot from distance before Roma equalised.

Perrotta crossed from the right and Borriello peeled off his marker at the back stick to send a towering header back across goal and in on 84 minutes.

Magath donates his car

AFP, Berlin

VfL Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath has donated a sports car worth 250,000 euros (\$353,990) to charity as his side prepare for Saturday's crunch battle to stay in the Bundesliga.

The 57-year-old indulged in some mind games with his players by confidently donating to charity a Bentley Cabrio he has been promised for keeping his team in the Germany league -- even though his side could still be relegated.

Wolfsburg, the 2009 champions, must win at Hoffenheim on Saturday to guarantee their place in the Bundesliga and Magath says he wants to give the car to charity to show his players the sacrifices they need to make.

"Through my waiver, I would like to make it clear that now everyone must be prepared to give everything to stay in the league," said Magath, who has traded the car for six buses, which will be given to three charities.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

In this season's EPL, who has been the best player?

Visit the sports page of

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SET Max

Indian Premier League

Kochi v Punjab

Live from 8:30pm

TEN Cricket

West Indies v Pakistan

First Test, Day 2

Live from 8:00pm

ESPN

Sportscentre India

Sports News



National Cricket League

FINAL

(Five-Day Match, Day-4)

Dhaka v Rajshahi

Time: 9:30am

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur

Bangladesh League

Abahani v Ctg Mohammedan

Time: 4:15pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

Mohammedan v Rahmatganj

Time: 4:15pm

Venue: Bishreshtha Mostafa Kamal