

Cesc rescues Barca

AFP, Barcelona



LFP

A clinical Cesc Fabregas strike rescued a point for champions Barcelona in a 2-2 draw away to top of the table Valencia on Wednesday.

After the first weekend of fixtures there had been complaints that La Liga was already a two-horse race as both Barca and Real Madrid won by large margins.

But since then it has not gone their way and Valencia lead the standings with ten points.

Indeed Real dropped further points on Wednesday as they followed up their shock defeat to Levante last weekend by being held 0-0 by modest Racing Santander.

Valencia went ahead after just eleven minutes when Eric Abidal put a Jeremy Mathieu cross into his own net but, just two minutes later, Pedro Rodriguez equalised after a neat interchange between Cesc and Lionel Messi.

Valencia enjoyed plenty of possession in the middle of the pitch and they went ahead again as Pablo Hernandez put away a Mathieu cross.

Then before half time Roberto Soldado missed an open goal.

It was not until the final stages of the match that Barca asserted themselves and it was once again the Messi and Fabregas combination which has worked so well this season that made the difference.

The Argentinian found the former Arsenal man, who kept his head and placed the ball past the keeper.

RESULTS
Malaga 1 (Cazorla 62) Athletic Bilbao 0
Atletico Madrid 4 (Lora 28-og, Dominguez 68, Falcao 72, 81)
Sporting Gijon 0
Racing Santander 0 Real Madrid 0
Rayo Vallecano 1 (Tamudo 72)
Levante 2 (Valdo 10, Ballesteros 29)
Valencia 2 (Abidal 11-og, Pablo Hernandez 22) Barcelona 2 (Pedro 13, Fabregas 76)

In injury time Valencia were reduced to 10 men as defender Jordi Alba was given a straight red card for a comment he made to the referee.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola said that he had never considered the title race would be a two club affair.

"People not directly involved in the sport perhaps said that the league was between two teams but the coaches and players would never say that," said Guardiola.

"Valencia showed here that they are a strong team and can go out and win games.

"Apart from talking about the result, the game itself was good to watch.

"Valencia played well in the first half and we will learn our lesson from how it went.

"I am not disappointed with the result as we still have options to win everything."

Real coach Jose Mourinho rang the changes after the defeat by Levante but despite that it was another ineffective performance.

Cristiano Ronaldo had a header well saved by keeper Tono Rodriguez before the break and in the second half the introduction of Angel Di Maria did make some difference.

In the closing stages Real were reduced to pumping the ball forward hopefully and Racing were able to hang on. The draw leaves Real Madrid on seven points, three adrift of Valencia.

Elsewhere on Wednesday Atletico Madrid recorded their second successive 4-0 win as they beat pointless Sporting Gijon with Colombian striker Falcao scoring a double following on from his hattrick at the weekend.



Barcelona midfielder Cesc Fabregas (C) is the toast of his teammates after scoring the equaliser against Valencia during their Primera Liga encounter at the Mestalla on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Milan probe Pato fitness

AFP, Rome

AC Milan chief executive Adriano Galliani has held a meeting to try to discover why Brazilian forward Pato is suffering so many muscular injuries.

Pato limped off during Wednesday night's 1-1 draw with Udinese at the San Siro, continuing a run of injuries that blighted his campaign last season.

He will now miss four weeks with a pulled hamstring and Galliani wants to find out why this keeps happening.

"This morning I called a meeting between the coach (Massimiliano Allegri), the fitness coaches and the medical staff to try to understand why a lad who in 2008 and 2009 never had any problems but now has broken down for the umpteenth time with a muscular injury," said Galliani.

Milan already had injury problems in attack with Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Robinho and Kevin-Prince Boateng all missing the game.

The club have had a poor start to the league season, picking up just two points from their first three games.

Apart from the Italian Supercup in August, Milan have yet to win a competitive game this season having also drawn 2-2 with Barcelona in the Champions League.

With one point less from their first three games, Inter Milan fired coach Gian Piero Gasperini and replaced him with Claudio Ranieri.

But Galliani insists the champions won't be making any knee-jerk reactions.

Ranieri replaces Gasperini

AFP, Rome



Lega Calcio

New Inter Milan coach Claudio Ranieri has vowed to get the team back to playing their best again following their disastrous start under Gian Piero Gasperini.

Ranieri was speaking on a TV programme in the early hours of Thursday morning before being official unveiled as Inter's new coach in the afternoon.

He has signed a two-year deal tying him to the club until the end of June 2013.

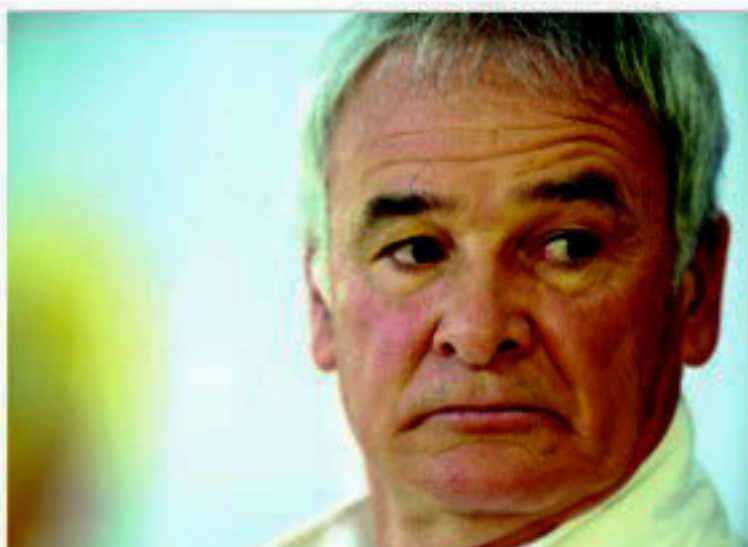
Inter have lost four and drawn one of their five official matches this season and sit in the bottom three in Serie A, just 16 months after winning the Champions League.

Gasperini paid for that start when

he was unceremoniously dismissed on Wednesday less than three months into the job.

But Ranieri believes he can turn their fortunes around.

"Gasperini wanted to bring his



own ideas (namely a back three), he tried to make it work at all costs and he didn't succeed," Ranieri told the "Domenica Sportiva" (Sporting Sunday) programme on Rai TV.

"I will try to get this team back to

playing with all their force, as they used to know how.

"Gasperini didn't mess up, he has his footballing ideas. You have to congratulate him because he tried everything with his ideas."

First and foremost, Ranieri intends talking with the players to try to find out what when wrong.

"Inter are a great team, they've had a false start. I need to speak with the whole squad to understand why," he added.

"But I have to bring enthusiasm and change course because this team has everything necessary to turn it around.

"I don't like promising that we will win this or that but I believe the lads still have a lot to give and they must prove that."

Ranieri is no stranger to this situation having taken over the reins at

Roma two years ago in a similar position.

Roma had lost their opening two games of the season, after which Luciano Spalletti walked out and Ranieri took over, just a few months after he was fired by Juventus.

Although Roma initially struggled under him, he managed to take them on a 23-match unbeaten run which sent them top with four matches remaining.

However, a home defeat by Sampdoria let Jose Mourinho's Inter reclaim top spot and Ranieri's Roma had to settle for second place.

Even so, he believes that experience will help him resurrect this Inter side.

"That was an amazing ride, it was an exhilarating comeback. I'm very much a fatalist, we dreamed but it was written that we wouldn't manage it," added Ranieri.

Anelka happy at Chelsea

AFP, London



Nicolas Anelka insists he could still sign a new contract with Chelsea despite claims from Blues boss Andre Villas-Boas that the French striker wants to leave.

Villas-Boas suggested over the weekend that Anelka had indicated to him that he wished to leave the Premier League club when his contract expires at the end of the season.

Anelka turns 33 in March and his future at Chelsea looked under threat when former boss Carlo Ancelotti was sacked at the end of last season.

But the former Arsenal and Real Madrid star has featured regularly under Villas-Boas and he made it clear he has yet to decide if it is time to leave Stamford Bridge.

"I am linked everywhere but, when you are linked, it doesn't mean you want to leave," Anelka told Chelsea's website.

"I like Chelsea and first of all wanted to stay -- that's why I am still here.

"I am happy here, I like the club and everyone here."

Milan snatch a draw

AFP, Rome



Lega Calcio

Teenager Stephan El Shaarawy saved AC Milan's blushes as he came off the bench to snatch an equaliser in the 1-1 draw with Udinese at the San Siro on Wednesday.

The result left Milan just a point above the relegation zone and means that neither of the two Milan giants have a victory after three games of the new season.

Inter Milan's 3-1 defeat at Novara on Tuesday, which led to coach Gian Piero Gasperini being sacked on Wednesday, means they are in the bottom three, a point behind Milan.

Genoa are the early Serie A leaders on goals scored, ahead of Juventus and Udinese, after they beat Catania 3-0.

In Milan the champions were hoping to avoid the pitfalls that befell their neighbours the day before but in the end were lucky to escape with a point.

In a quiet start the only clear chance came from an Alexandre Pato header that drifted well off target.

That was just about the Brazilian forward's only contribution before he limped off to be replaced by Italo-Egyptian teenager El Shaarawy, an Italy youth international who spent last season on loan at Serie B Padova.

Milan shot themselves in the foot on 29 minutes as goalkeeper Christian Abbiati spilled a Gabriel Torje cross from the left and Antonio Di Natale accepted the gift to shoot into an empty net.

The closest Milan came in the first period was a bullet free-kick from Dutch veteran Clarence Seedorf that beat Samir Handanovic but crashed back off the post.

In first half injury time Antonio Cassano teed up Antonio Nocerino but Handanovic was out quickly to block at his

feet before Ignazio Abate fired the rebound wide.

The champions turned up the pressure after the restart and Handanovic had to make another crucial stop from Cassano at point-blank range after Seedorf's clipped ball over the top.

It was backs to the wall for Udinese and they crumbled on 63 minutes as Cassano slipped the ball to his right and El Shaarawy pulled the ball back across a wrong-footed Handanovic and inside the far post.

That sparked Udinese out of their shell and they almost had the lead again 15 minutes from time when Di Natale teed up Giampiero Pinza who cracked a shot against the inside of the post, the ball rolling across the line before going wide of the far post.

In the closing stages Milan were indebted to Abbiati for holding onto a point.

First he scrambled across his line to claw away a header from Morocco centre-back Mehdi Benatia before moments later getting down quickly to save a snap-shot from Di Natale.

Rodrigo Palacio, a transfer window target for Milan, scored twice before Guinea midfielder Kevin Constant added the third to send Genoa top.

Juventus remain just behind after a 1-1 draw at home to Bologna.

Mirko Vucinic opened the scoring for the hosts before getting sent off before half-time.

Daniele Portanova scored the equaliser seven minutes into the second period.

Napoli dropped off the top after losing 1-0 at Chievo as coach Walter Mazzarri's team selection backfired spectacularly as he left out five first-team regulars.

Atalanta moved off the bottom following a 2-1 win at Lecce that means they even moved above Inter and out of the relegation zone despite starting the season with a six-point penalty.

RESULTS
AC Milan 1 (El Shaarawy 63)
Udinese 1 (Di Natale 29)
Cesena 1 (Mutu 14) Lazio 2 (Hernanes 48-pen, Klose 54)
Chievo 1 (Moscaredelli 72) Napoli 0
Fiorentina 3 (Jovetic 46, 81, Cerci 61) Parma 0
Genoa 3 (Palacio 29, 34, Constant 79) Catania 0
Lecce 1 (Mesbah 25) Atalanta 2 (Denis 3-pen, 56)
Juventus 1 (Vucinic 29)
Bologna 1 (Portanova 52)
Palermo 3 (Zahavi 1, Bertolo 15, Miccoli 76) Cagliari 2 (Conti 84, Nainggolan 90)

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