

Setback for Barca

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona suffered a major setback to their hopes of retaining their La Liga title when they were held to a 1-1 draw by city rivals Espanyol on Sunday, a result which left them five points behind Real Madrid.

Barcelona took a 16th-minute lead through a header from Cesc Fabregas -- the club's 100th goal in all competitions this season -- but were rocked when Alvaro Vazquez scored an 86th-minute equaliser with a low header.

Gerard Pique hit the woodwork in injury-time as Barca's last chance for the three points went begging, leaving Real Madrid, who had coasted to a 5-1 win over Granada on Saturday, in control of their title destiny.

Espanyol have an exciting young side and coach Mauricio Pochettino promised that they would go out to attack which they did.

Joan Verdu was denied twice inside the opening minutes -- first by keeper Victor Valdes and then Pique, who cleared the follow up off the line.

At the other end, Espanyol keeper Cristian Alvarez played a ball straight to Lionel Messi in front of goal but fortunately for the shot-stopper the Argentine handled it and was yellow-carded.

Barca did take the lead when Fabregas, left unmarked, headed home inside the penalty area after 16 minutes and again the keeper was slow to react as the ball went underneath his dive.

Espanyol had chances from distance, notably from Sergio Garcia, while Thievy Bifouma also looked dangerous.

It was far from a vintage performance from Barcelona but they looked in control and they could have had a second from Messi who clipped the post with 12 minutes to go.

But then Espanyol stunned the champions when Thievy headed on a cross to Vazquez who powered it home in front of goal with a diving header.

Pique crashed a shot against the woodwork in stoppage time but Espanyol hung on for a point.

New Villarreal coach Jose Francisco Molina was denied a perfect start in his new job as a late goal from Ariz Aduriz saw Valencia earn a 2-2 draw after having been two goals down on Sunday.

It was a baptism of fire for Molina who replaced Juan Carlos Garrido, dismissed before Christmas after a woeful start to the campaign, as they faced local rivals Valencia who were looking to reinforce their Champions League claims.

Marco Ruben put Villarreal ahead after 14 minutes with a clinical finish.

Valencia had no time to respond when they went further behind as Gonzalo Rodriguez headed home a Borja Valero free-kick.

Sofiane Feghouli reduced the arrears before the break while Roberto Soldado and Feghouli both fired wide at the start of the second half.

Villarreal appeared to be heading for their first win in nine attempts until sloppy defending from Florian Lejeune allowed in Aduriz to fire an equaliser.

Elsewhere, there was no movement among the European places with goals at a premium as Levante drew 0-0 with Mallorca on Saturday and there were also no goals for Osasuna and Malaga who drew 0-0 against Real Sociedad and Atletico Madrid respectively.

RESULTS

Rayo Vallecano 2 (Michu 45+1, Tamudo 52) Sevilla 1 (Escude 62)
Getafe 0 Athletic Bilbao 0
Villarreal 2 (Rubén 14, Gonzalo 18)
Valencia 2 (Feghouli 41, Aduriz 87)
Real Betis 2 (Santa Cruz 23, Molina 90+2) Sporting Gijón 0
Espanyol 1 (Vazquez 86) Barcelona 1



Barcelona forward Cesc Fabregas celebrates his opening goal against Espanyol during their Primera Liga encounter at the Cornellà-El Prat Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Top three break free

AFP, Rome



AC Milan, Juventus and Udinese all won on Sunday to put daylight between themselves and the pack in the Serie A title race.

Milan won 2-0 at Atalanta to remain level on points with Juve, who beat Lecce 1-0, but Udinese are just two points back after they thumped 10-man Cesena 4-1 earlier in the day.

Milan, who have a better goal difference than Juve, had what on paper looked the toughest task of the day but they were given a helping hand in the first half.

Brazilian forward Alexandre Pato collided with Thomas Manfredini as the pair chased a loose ball in the box, with both crumpling to the ground.

The referee pointed to the spot and Zlatan Ibrahimovic shot home, low to goalkeeper Andrea Consigli's right.

Pato struck the upright in the second half before Atalanta also hit the post as a corner was flicked on by Simone Tiribocchi, touched by Matias Schelotto and then German Denis at the back post from a yard out just failed to turn it inside the woodwork.

Udinese went back in front nine minutes into the second period and it

was a goal that veteran goalkeeper Francesco Antonioli won't want to see again in a hurry.

Ghana international Kwadwo Asamoah, who will now head off to the Africa Cup of Nations, hit his shot from 20 yards with power but it went straight at the 42-year-old who somehow managed to allow past him.

Seven minutes later Maurizio Lauro was dismissed for a second booking and 15 minutes from time Romanian full-back Dusan Basta hit a stunning strike from distance that seemed to catch Antonioli by surprise as it dipped just inside the far post.

Late on Di Natale took a pass from Armero, turned smartly on the edge of the box and fired home into the top corner to add insult to injury.

Udinese are five points ahead of Lazio, who suffered a shock 4-0 defeat at Siena on Saturday, with Inter Milan, 5-0 winners over Parma, a point further back.

Napoli are two points behind Inter after continuing their rich goalscoring form -- they ended 2011 with a 6-1 win over Genoa -- by winning 3-1 at Palermo.

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RESULTS

Atalanta 0 **AC Milan 2** (Ibrahimovic 22-pen, Boateng 82)
Bologna 2 (Cherubin 50, Di Vaio 90) Catania 0
Cagliari 3 (Larrievy 13-pen, Ibarbo 56, Granqvist 72) Genoa 0
Lecce 0 **Juventus 1** (Matri 27)
Novara 0 **Florentina 3** (Jovetic 20-pen, 49, Montolivo 42)
Palermo 1 (Miccoli 89) **Napoli 3** (Pandev 35, Cavani 54, Hamsik 60)
Roma 2 (Totti 34-pen, 78-pen) Chievo 0
Udinese 4 (Di Natale 1, 82, Asamoah 54,

Cruyff a Messi fan

AFP, Madrid

Football

AFP, Madrid

Dutch legend Johan Cruyff on Sunday backed Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi to win up to seven Ballon d'Or awards in his career.

"Messi will be the player to win the most Ballons d'Or in history. He will win five, six, seven. He is incomparable. He's in a different league," former Barcelona player and coach Cruyff told Ole newspaper.

Messi will find out on Monday if he has become the first man since Michel Platini to win the Ballon d'Or for three years running when the winner of the 2011 award is announced at a ceremony in Zurich.

The 24-year-old Barcelona superstar won the inaugural FIFA Ballon d'Or -- a combination of the France Football Ballon d'Or prize and FIFA's World Player of the Year award -- last year, having picked up both awards in 2009.

Meanwhile, Barcelona defender Gerard Pique said Messi deserves to win the Ballon d'Or, praising the Argentine forward for helping turn the Spanish club into "one of the best in history".

"It is clear, Messi, he has been playing at a high level for years. And Leo is the best in the world," Pique said in an interview published

in Catalan daily La Vanguardia on Sunday when asked who deserved to win the prize.

"He is driving this team to be one of the best in history. Thanks to him we have won many of the titles that we have in our windows.

"It is a pleasure to have him with us, he plays like when he was 13 years old, except now he does it in a professional way and before the best players. We just have to hope that he maintains this level for as long as possible."

Pique also said he hopes that coach Pep Guardiola signs a new contract with Barcelona.

Guardiola's current deal expires at the end of the season and the fact that he has so far not renewed it has led to media speculation that he plans to leave the Spanish and European champions.

Last week Guardiola said he has "not taken any decision" about his future.

"Pep is much of the essence of this team, since he arrived he has defended his ideas to the death, he has achieved everything that he wanted to," said Pique.

"If he departed now, Pep would leave a huge gap, it would be very difficult to find a substitute. But you can't think of this, you have to enjoy yourself, and learn everything that he can teach you, which is a lot," he added.

QPR sack Warnock

AFP, London

Neil Warnock was sacked as manager of Premier League strugglers Queens Park Rangers on Sunday, the club confirmed.

"Queens Park Rangers Football Club has today parted company with manager Neil Warnock," said a statement.

The west London side are currently just a point above the relegation zone and have lost six and drawn two of their last eight league matches.

And they needed a last-minute goal to secure a 1-1 draw at third division Milton Keynes Dons in the FA Cup third round on Sunday.

It was all too much for QPR's Malaysian businessman owner Tony Fernandes, who took over the club early in the season.

Now Mark Hughes, who has been in charge of several Premier League clubs, as well as Wales, is among those linked with replacing Warnock at Loftus Road.

Size doesn't matter

AFP, Phnom Penh

Italian World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro on Monday reassured Cambodia's diminutive players that size was no barrier to success.

"Size has never been a problem for me," Cannavaro, 38, told reporters in the capital Phnom Penh during a visit to boost the profile of the beautiful game in the Southeast Asian country, currently ranked 170th in the world by FIFA.

Asked his advice for Cambodian footballers who are often shorter than their rivals, Cannavaro, who at 1.76 metres (5 foot 9) is small for a defender, said it was a question of mentality rather than height.

"I was strong inside my head," the 2006 World Player of the Year said.

"Big or short, for me what was important was to win the game with my team. The dream when you start playing football is to win something special and we won something special."

Cannavaro retired last July following a nagging knee injury, but remains on the management staff with current club Al-Ahli in Dubai.

Rooney slams Mancini

AFP, Manchester



The FA CUP

Wayne Rooney has slammed Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini's claim he got Vincent Kompany sent-off in Manchester United's 3-2 FA Cup derby win over the holders at Eastlands.

Italian boss Mancini felt Rooney influenced referee Chris Foy into showing defender Kompany a red card for a two-footed challenge on Nani just 12 minutes into Sunday's incident-packed third round clash.

But the England striker, who scored goals either side of Kompany's exit in a first half where Danny Welbeck also netted for United, defended himself on Twitter on Monday by saying: "Funny how people think I got Kompany sent off. Im not ref. I didn't give red card. But it was a clear red card. 2 footed tackle."

Mancini compared the actions of Rooney, seen speaking to Foy after Kompany's tackle and before the sending-off, to his own in waving an imaginary red card during City's win over Liverpool last week.

"It was not a red card," Mancini said after a defeat that saw City's defence of the FA Cup they won last season end after just one match.

"Rooney told him his decision.

"When I did this against Liverpool, people told me not to do it."

As City captain Kompany now faces a four-match suspension, the Premier League leaders are set to lodge an appeal against his red card before Monday's deadline expires.

If an appeal is rejected, City will be without Kompany for both legs of their League Cup semifinal with Liverpool and Premier League games against Wigan and Tottenham Hotspur.



AC Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic takes a shot during their Serie clash against Atalanta in Bergamo on Sunday.

PHOTO:
AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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Fed Cup Football

Muktijoddha v Mohammedan

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

Team BJMC v Cox City

Venue: Kamalapur Stadium

Both matches start at 3:00pm

Bangladesh A v England Lions

Second One-dayer

Venue: Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury