



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi celebrates his goal during their Primera Liga encounter against Valencia at Nou Camp on Sunday. Messi struck four times to destroy Valencia 5-1.

Stevenage shock Spurs

AFP, London

Premier League high-flyers Tottenham Hotspur were held to a shock goalless draw away to third tier Stevenage in the FA Cup fifth round on Sunday and face a replay to reach the quarterfinals.

League One Stevenage demonstrated excellent defensive organisation and no little skill in attack to keep a Spurs side managed by Harry Redknapp, favourite for the permanent England job, at bay.

Tottenham, third in English football's top-flight and eight-times FA Cup winners did see Stevenage goalkeeper Chris Day, a former Spurs player, make a good save to turn Gareth Bale's 25-yard effort round the post early in the second half.

Spurs then had the ball in the back of net when Louis Saha steered in Danny Rose's cross only for the effort to be ruled out after a linesman spotted the striker's shot had clipped the offside Scott Parker before hitting the net.

However, few could deny Stevenage deserved a money spinning replay trip to Spurs' White Lane ground.

"I've managed lower league sides that have knocked Premier League teams out (of the FA Cup) and managed Premier League teams who've been knocked out," Redknapp told ITV.

"They (Stevenage) made it difficult and worked hard. The ball was bobbling around, it was difficult to pass the ball on that pitch."

Delighted Stevenage boss Gary Smith said: "We had one or two opportunities we could have made more of but, overall, the players were outstanding."

There no stumbles for the other two Premier League sides involved in Cup action on Sunday.

Liverpool and Stoke will face each other in an Anfield quarterfinal after the Reds thrashed Championship Brighton 6-1 and Stoke triumphed 2-0 away to fourth-tier Crawley Town.

RESULTS

Crawley Town 0 **Stoke City 2**
(Walters 42-pen, Crouch 52)
Liverpool 6 (Skrテル 5, Bridcutt 44-og, 71-og, Carroll 57, Dunk 74-og, Suarez 85) Brighton and Hove Albion 1 (K. LuaLua 17) Stevenage Borough 0 Tottenham

Mesmerising Messi

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi hit four goals to inspire Barcelona to a 5-1 victory over Valencia on Sunday, but the champions still remain 10 points behind leaders Real Madrid.

Messi took his league goals tally to 27 for the season and 42 in all competitions although third-placed Valencia had stunned the Spanish and European champions by taking a shock early lead.

The pressure was on the Catalan side after defeat last weekend away to Osasuna and they got off to a poor start with Pablo Piatti giving Valencia the lead after nine minutes following a defensive mix-up.

Youngster Martin Montoya, in the side with Dani Alves suspended, and Gerard Pique left Piatti unmarked and keeper Victor Valdes came and failed to reach a Sofiane Feghouli cross allowing the diminutive striker to tuck the ball in.

The home fans were becoming restless but Messi responded once again when his side needed him most with two goals in five minutes.

Adil Rami failed to clear a cross and Messi coolly finished from a tight angle.

The Argentine then got ahead of the Valencia defence to meet an Eric Abidal cross and while the keeper Diego Alves saved his initial shot, he was able to sweep in the rebound.

Barcelona had clicked into gear but some excellent goalkeeping prevented them seeing off Valencia earlier.

Alexis Sanchez and Cesc Fabregas were both denied by Alves while the former Arsenal player then hit the woodwork with an acrobatic effort.

The home side continued to push forward after the break with Alves stopping a Messi header with a wonderful save and Fabregas badly miscued before Messi gave Barca a cushion by firing in a rebound after another Alves block.

Messi completed his hat-trick with 15 minutes to go and then notched up his 42nd goal of the season after running clear of the defence and clipping the ball over the keeper.

With the Valencia defence in disarray substitute Xavi Hernandez lobbed the ball over the keeper for the fifth in

injury time.

Despite the rout, Barca are still struggling to retain their title after Real Madrid had swept past Racing Santander 4-0 on Saturday.

Levante's miserable form continued when they dropped out of the European places, losing 5-3 at home to Rayo Vallecano.

The modest side from Valencia have spent most of the season among the top four after a surprising start which also saw them briefly lead the table, but they now haven't won in two months and have tumbled down to seventh place.

In a keenly-fought opening, Lass Bangoura put the visitors ahead but Jose Barkero brought Levante level at the start of the second half with a penalty after substitute Abdelkader Ghezzal was felled by Jorge Pulido.

Levante were in the ascendancy but against the run of play Diego Costa hit a quickfire double and then Lass gave them a commanding lead after 69 minutes.

Rubin Suarez pulled a goal back and then Andrija Delibasic added a fifth for Rayo.

There was still time for Suarez to score again for Levante with a spot kick and Pulido was sent off for a second yellow card after giving away the second penalty.

Atletico Madrid squandered the chance to move up to fourth as they were held to a 1-1 draw by relegation-threatened Sporting

Gijon under new coach Javier Clemente. The visitors have set their goal on winning a place in the Champions League following an impressive start under coach Diego Simeone with the side unbeaten in eight matches in all competitions.

Atletico striker Radamel Falcao missed the first opening inside the first five minutes when he shot straight at keeper Juan Pablo and then Diego Godin headed over from close range.

Atletico did take the lead after 20 minutes but it was through a stroke of good fortune as Adrian Lopez scuffed a shot and the ball came off Roberto Canella for an own goal.

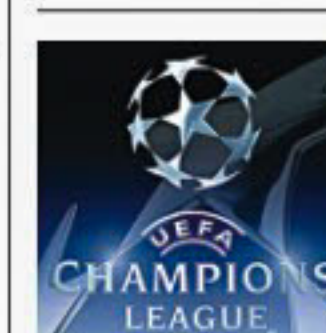
Sporting got back into the game through a scrappy goal from Sebastian Eguen before half-time.

RESULTS

Granada 4 (Lopez 12, Jara 57, Uche 60, 86) Real Sociedad 1 (Gonzalez 10)
Athletic Bilbao 3 (Amorebieta 58, Dominguez 60, Toquero 61) Malaga 0
Real Mallorca 4 (Victor 41, 65, Marti 53, Nunes 67) Villarreal 0
Sporting Gijon 1 (Eguren 37) Atletico Madrid 1 (Canella 20-og)
Levante 3 (Barkero 49-pen, Ruben Suarez 78, 90+1-pen) **Rayo Vallecano 5** (Bangoura 34, 69, Diego Costa 62, 63, Delibasic 84)
Barcelona 5 (Messi 22, 27, 76, 85,

Pressure on Villas-Boas

AFP, Naples



Chelsea will be playing for more than just simple qualification when they travel to Napoli in the Champions League second round, first leg on Tuesday.

It's a tie that could have far wider reaching consequences for both their coach Andre Villas-Boas and English football as a whole.

Villas-Boas, for many people's money, is living on borrowed time in the Stamford Bridge hot-seat.

Rumours of dressing room dissent and some unsatisfactory results have made his position appear precarious.

Chelsea face a fight to finish in the top four in the Premier League, battling alongside Arsenal and Newcastle for that crucial fourth spot, and hence qualification for next season's premier European club competition.

They came close to bowing out of the FA Cup at home to Championship Birmingham City at the weekend too, before snatching a draw.

Villas-Boas admits he doesn't know if he will still be in a job if they fail to beat the Italians.

"It's not up to me to decide that, you have to ask that question to the right person," he said, referring to owner Roman Abramovich.

But the Portuguese manager says his side is lacking in belief due to their recent poor results.

"The situation is we don't have enough good results for us to feel a bit strong," he said.

"But we are still in these competitions and will continue to push for them. It will be a difficult game against Napoli but we have shown in the group games we can overcome adversity."

Chelsea went into their final group game at home to Bayer Leverkusen knowing that if they didn't win they risked crashing out.

They did win 2-0 and topped the group but now there is the added pressure that they are realistically England's last representatives.

The dominant teams in this season's Premier League, Manchester rivals United and City, both crashed out in the group stages while Arsenal's 4-0 thrashing at AC Milan last week even had their manager Arsene Wenger admitting they had no chance of progressing.



AC Milan midfielder Urby Emanuelson (R) scores the second goal against Cesena during their Serie A clash in Cesena on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Milan back atop

AFP, Rome



AC Milan stormed back to the top of Serie A with a 3-0 win at lowly Cesena on Sunday as they made light of the absence of Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

In two games since the big Swede has been suspended for slapping Napoli's Salvatore Aronica, Milan have won.

Ghana midfielder Sulley Muntari, on his debut, and versatile Dutchman Urby Emanuelson both scored their first goals for the club with Robinho adding the third as Milan went a point clear of Juventus, although having played a game more.

The two Italian giants meet next week in a top of the table clash at the San Siro.

Daniel Pudil scored Cesena's consolation goal and defeat sees them go bottom of the table.

Milan were quick out of the blocks and could have had three goals inside the first

10 minutes.

Muntari turned smartly in the box from Ignazio Abate's deflected cross but shot just past the upright.

Francesco Antonioli then tipped over an Emanuelson shot from distance before the two Milan midfielders combined to put in captain Massimo Ambrosini one-on-one but the goalkeeper saved with his legs.

Robinho almost caught out Cesena when nipping onto a deflected cross but he headed wide.

The breakthrough came on 29 minutes as Thiago Silva thumped a free-kick goalwards that Antonioli spilled, allowing Muntari to nip in and score.

And just two minutes later Emanuelson countered with Robinho before cracking in a low shot from outside the post inside the corner.

And 10 minutes into the second period it was game over as Robinho took a pass from Abate, surged between two defenders and finished into the far corner for his third goal in a week.

RESULTS

Cesena 1 (Pudil 65) **AC Milan 3** (Muntari 29, Emanuelson 31, Robinho 55)
Genoa 0 **Chievo 1** (Thereau 30)
Lecco 4 (Muriel 32, Di Michele 68-pen, Cuadrado 82, Brivio 90) Siena 1 (Del Grosso 25)
Novara 0 Atalanta 0
Palermo 5 (Barreto 9, Donati 19, Silvestre 41, Budan 46, Miccoli 50)
Lazio 1 (Kozak 84)
Roma 1 (Borini 26) Parma 0

SPORTS POLL

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Napoli v Chelsea