

# Ibra-cadabra

REUTERS, Milan

Zlatan Ibrahimovic celebrated his return from a three-match ban by scoring a 15-minute first-half hat-trick as leaders AC Milan demolished Palermo 4-0 away in Serie A on Saturday.

The win took title holders Milan three points clear of second-placed Juventus who only managed a 1-1 draw at home to mid-table Chievo despite taking a first-half lead through Paolo De Ceglie.

Boukary Drame levelled for Chievo in the 76th minute as Juventus, who are still unbeaten, drew for the fourth time in their last five Serie A outings.

Milan moved onto 54 points from 26 games while Juventus have a game in hand. Third-placed Udinese, who host Atalanta on Sunday (1400), and Lazio, who face arch-rivals AS Roma (1400), have 45 points.

Robinho set up the first two of Ibrahimovic's goals while Thiago Silva completed the scoring as eighth-placed Palermo, who beat Lazio 5-1 in their last home game, were overwhelmed.

"We are playing the way we want, we are always dangerous when we attack," said Ibrahimovic, who completed his ban with last week's 1-1 draw at home to Juventus and joined Udinese's Antonio Di Natale as Serie A leading scorer on 18 goals.

"It's my second hat-trick in Italy but the goals are a bonus for me," added the Swede. "I didn't like missing the Juventus match, I've suffered and I've paid but the team has done well without me."

Juventus repeated their habit this season of starting well at home and then fading in the second half.

De Ceglie headed Juventus in front in the 18th minute after Giorgio Chiellini's header rebounded off the post following a free kick.

**RESULTS**  
Palermo 0 AC Milan 4 (Ibrahimovic 21, 31, 35, Silva 58)  
Juventus 1 (De Ceglie 18)



AC Milan sharpshooter Zlatan Ibrahimovic (2nd from L) gets in between a host of Palermo players to score in their Serie A clash at the Renzo Barbera stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Balotelli takes City forward Sizzling Dortmund

REUTERS, London

Manchester City raced five points clear in the league with a 2-0 win over Bolton Wanderers on Saturday while Chelsea's woes under Andre Villas-Boas continued after a 1-0 defeat at West Bromwich Albion.

With second-placed Manchester United visiting Tottenham Hotspur on Sunday, City stretched their lead as an own goal from Greter Steinsson and a Mario Balotelli effort sealed their 19th successive home league victory.

Arsenal have not been in the title race all season but strengthened their claims for a top-four finish with Robin van Persie striking twice in a 2-1 triumph at Liverpool.

Van Persie's stoppage-time winner was his 31st goal of the season in all competitions and helped Arsenal move three points ahead of fifth-placed Chelsea who were beaten at West Brom by a late Gareth McAuley goal.

City have won all 14 home fixtures this season and are slowly edging towards their first top-flight title since 1968.

Roberto Mancini's team went in front after 23 minutes against Bolton when a shot by defender Gael Clichy took a big deflection off Steinsson.

Balotelli, back from a three-game suspension, then made the points safe after 69 minutes.

Chelsea are 20 points behind City after losing to West Brom in the Premier League for the first time.

Villas-Boas's side produced another lacklustre display which will again fuel media speculation about the Portuguese manager's future.

Frank Lampard wasted a glorious late chance for the visitors after McAuley's scrappy 82nd-minute goal had put West Brom in front.

"It was not good enough by Chelsea's standards," Villas-Boas told Sky Sports. "West Brom were far superior and we have to do much better."

While Chelsea, who have won just three of their last 12 league games, are faltering, London rivals Arsenal are flourishing.

A fourth consecutive league victory for Arsenal on Saturday means they are now only four points behind third-placed Tottenham.

Lethal Dutchman Van Persie volleyed the winner at Liverpool during eight minutes of stoppage time having earlier headed an equaliser after Liverpool had gone ahead with an own goal from defender Laurent Koscielny.

"It means a lot to score at Anfield," said Van Persie after netting at the ground for the first time.

"We're proud of the win but I don't think we deserved it if I'm honest. Liverpool played better but to nick it at the end is pleasing."

Liverpool, who won the League Cup on Sunday to ensure Europa League qualification, surrendered their unbeaten home league record and remain in seventh place, 10 points adrift of Arsenal with a game in hand.

Manager Kenny Dalglish was scratching his head wondering how his team had been beaten after they missed a first-half penalty and twice struck the woodwork through Luis Suarez and Dirk Kuyt.

Kuyt's spot kick and immediate follow up effort were both brilliantly saved by Polish keeper Wojciech Szczesny who was in inspired form throughout.

Martin Kelly also missed a glaring second-half opportunity for Liverpool.

"We had two men of the match today, one at the back and one at the front," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger referring to Szczesny and Van Persie.

Bottom of the table Wigan Athletic went down 2-0 at home to Swansea City as second from bottom Bolton lost at Manchester City.

Blackburn Rovers, one place above Bolton, drew 1-1 at home to Aston Villa while Queens Park Rangers moved up a place to 16th after a 1-1 draw with Everton.

REUTERS, Berlin

Borussia Dortmund continued their march to the Bundesliga title on Saturday, beating Mainz 2-1 to go seven points clear of second-placed Bayern Munich who slumped to a 2-0 defeat at Bayer Leverkusen.

Japan international Shinji Kagawa snatched the winner in the 77th minute as Dortmund set a club record of eighth straight league wins and extended their unbeaten run to 18 games.

Jakub Blaszczykowski had put the champions in front in the 26th minute before their former player Mohamed Zidan levelled for Mainz in the 74th.

"To react to the equaliser in such a way was really good," said Dortmund coach Juergen Klopp.

Klopp's team were on top throughout but missed half a dozen clear opportunities. Kagawa's goal was his eighth of the season in the league.

Bayern's title hopes were dealt a blow as their sixth defeat of the season meant they stayed on 48 points.

Germany international Stefan Kiessling tapped in the first Leverkusen goal 11 minutes from time after taking advantage of confusion in the opposition box.

Karim Bellarabi made it 2-0 in the 90th

minute after Bayern had squandered a host of chances mainly through Arjen Robben.

"There is no need to talk about the Bundesliga title today," said Bayern sports director Christian Nerlinger.

"It is not that we have written the title off yet but... we are bitterly disappointed."

Despite starting with France playmaker Franck Ribery on the bench due to a minor thigh injury, the Bavarians created several chances.

Dutch winger Robben, who scored twice in the 3-2 midweek win by Netherlands over England at Wembley, was repeatedly denied by keeper Bernd Leno.

Bayern keeper Manuel Neuer produced the save of the game when he stopped a volley by Kiessling from point-blank range.

Neuer was powerless though to stop Kiessling when the striker was left unmarked in front of goal as he converted an overhead kick from Gonzalo Castro.

Bayern then poured forward for the equaliser and were caught out when the 20-year-old Bellarabi grabbed his first Bundesliga goal.

VfB Stuttgart went goal crazy at Hamburg SV, winning 4-0. Two penalties by Zdravko Kuzmanovic and a goal apiece for Vedad Ibisevic and Martin Harnik took the visitors up to eighth position on 32 points.

Hamburg had striker Paolo Guerrero sent off for a flying challenge from behind on goalkeeper Sven Ulreich near the corner flag

**RESULTS**  
Bayer Leverkusen 2 (Kiessling 79, Bellarabi 90) Bayern Munich 0  
Freiburg 2 (Freis 18, Caligiuri 66) Schalke 04 1 (Pukki 72)  
Hertha Berlin 1 (Rukavitsya 62) Werder Bremen 0  
Hamburg 0 VfB Stuttgart 4 (Ibisevic 23, Kuzmanovic 31-pen, 47-pen, Harnik 90)  
Kaiserslautern 0 VfL Wolfsburg 0  
Hanover 96 2 (Haggui 33, Diouf 69)  
Augsburg 2 (Bellinghausen 12, Calsen-Bracker 89-pen)  
Borussia Dortmund 2 (Blaszczykowski 26,

# Mourinho still coy on future

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho on Saturday refused to be drawn into discussion on his future at the club after he was spotted visiting London in midweek.

The lightning trip last Tuesday fuelled speculation that the Portuguese coach is ready to accept a role in England at the end of this season, but speaking ahead of his side's match with Espanyol on Sunday Mourinho was blunt.

"It's not my problem," he said, referring to the speculation.

"I don't have to explain my private life to anyone. When anyone from the club leaves the city, out of courtesy we inform the club. I left on my last day off and I told the chairman and the chief executive, I don't have to ask the permission of the press or anyone else," he said.

He was, however, happy to discuss the future of Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain, linked to a summer move to both Manchester City and Chelsea in recent weeks.

"Higuain is one of the best strikers in the world and only a stupid manager would want him to leave the club, he is very special for me and I have no intention of allowing him to go," he said.

# Despite red, Barca keep pace

REUTERS, Madrid

**LFP**  
Seydou Keita and Xavi struck in the last 11 minutes to earn 10-man Barcelona a nervy 3-1 home win over lowly Sporting Gijon that kept their La Liga title hopes alive on Saturday.

With leading scorer Lionel Messi suspended for the first time in his career, the champions lacked a cutting edge until Andres Iniesta fired them in front just before halftime at the Nou Camp.

The game was turned on its head a minute into the second half when home defender Gerard Pique was shown a harsh red card as he got in a tangle with Miguel de las Cuevas on the edge of the Barca area.

Almost immediately substitute David Barral stole in front of keeper Victor Valdes to nudge in the equaliser for second from bottom Sporting.

The magnificent Iniesta drove Barca forward in search of the winner and it was Keita who struck the decisive goal with a stunning shot into the top corner from an Alexis layoff.

Iniesta then conjured a third goal for Xavi who finished with a neat lob at the end as Barca closed the gap on leaders Real Madrid to



Barcelona wing-back Daniel Alves celebrates after their win against Sporting Gijon in their La Liga clash at the Camp Nou on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

seven points until Jose Mourinho's side host Espanyol at the Bernabeu on Sunday.

"With Messi it would have been easier because he is the best player in the world," Mali international Keita told Spanish television.

"I don't know if I have saved the team. It was just important to win three points."

Keita refused to speak about referee Carlos Velasco Carballo but Pique was highly critical when he spoke to reporters.

"I have seen it on television and I didn't even commit a foul," he said. "It felt like it was a premeditated decision."

"I told the referee at halftime he should have signalled a penalty in

favour of Keita and he remembered this."

Real, on course for a first league title in four years, have 64 points and second-placed Barca 57.

Big-spending Malaga moved up to fourth on 37 points with their first away win since November.

Manuel Pellegrini's side climbed into the Champions

**RESULTS**  
Getafe 1 (Diego Castro 42)  
Malaga 3 (Eliseu 57, Toulalan 82, Cazorla 90+3)  
Rayo Vallecano 4 (Michu 45, 64, Tamudo 67, Piti 72) Racing  
Santander 2 (Torrejon 9, Colsa 27)  
Real Mallorca 1 (Nsue 71)  
Osasuna 1 (Alvaro 45)  
Barcelona 3 (Iniesta 42, Keita 79, Xavi 88)  
Sporting Gijon 1 (Barral 49)  
Sevilla 1 (Baba 53) Atletico

League qualification places with a 3-1 comeback win at Getafe courtesy of three spectacular long-range strikes.

Portugal's Eliseu fired Malaga level after 57 minutes, France midfielder Jeremy Toulalan crashed a second in off the post and Spain's Santi Cazorla caught out the home keeper from just over the halfway line with a wonderful lob in stoppage time.

Atletico Madrid stayed ninth with 33 points after being held to a 1-1 draw at tenth-placed Sevilla, a point doing little for either side's European aspirations.

Salvio headed Atletico in front after only nine minutes but Baba grabbed an equaliser for the hosts after a counter-attack in the 53rd.

Rayo Vallecano came back from 2-0 down to beat 10-man Racing Santander 4-2 while Real Mallorca drew 1-1 at home to Osasuna.

# Sanchez tears thigh muscle

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona forward Alexis Sanchez has torn a thigh muscle and will be out of action for 10 to 15 days, the European and Spanish champions said in a statement on Saturday.

The Chile international limped off at the end of Barca's 3-1 home win over Sporting Gijon after having come on as a second-half substitute, and will miss their Champions League last 16 second leg at home to Bayer Leverkusen on Wednesday.

"Alexis is 22, he has to develop and know what it is to play every three days," coach Pep Guardiola told reporters.

# Trial request saw Ibra snub Gunners

AFP, London

AC Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic has revealed he snubbed the chance to join Arsenal because Gunners boss Arsene Wenger wanted him to have a trial period.

Ibrahimovic told the Sun: "Arsene gave me the famous red and white jersey - the number nine shirt with Ibrahimovic on it and I was so pleased I even posed for a picture wearing it."

"It was a fantastic moment for me. Arsenal had a great team then and here was an Arsenal shirt made just for me.

"So then I waited for him to convince me that I should join Arsenal. But he didn't even try."

"He never actually made me a serious offer, it was more, 'I want to see how good you are, what kind of player you are. Have a trial'."

"I couldn't believe it. I was like, 'No way, Zlatan doesn't do auditions'."

**SPORTS POLL**  
WEEKLY QUESTION  
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