

Messi hits 50

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi notched up his 50th club goal of the season with a double on Sunday as Barcelona beat Racing Santander 2-0, but the Catalan club still remain 10 points off La Liga leaders Real Madrid.

After scoring a remarkable five in the Champions League in midweek against a reeling Bayer Leverkusen, Messi found the net in both halves, the second a strike from the penalty spot.

The Argentine has 10 more goals overall than Cristiano Ronaldo, although the Portuguese star leads the way in La Liga with 32.

Ronaldo hit a brace on Saturday as Real Madrid beat Real Betis 3-2 to maintain their surge towards a first title since 2008.

Barca, without the injured Eric Abidal and suspended Gerard Pique, started with a three-man defence which included Carles Puyol who was passed fit.

They quickly began to dominate a struggling Racing side who have not won in eight matches and appointed Alvaro Cervera as the new coach last week.

Messi had a free-kick tipped over by the keeper while Andres Iniesta hit the top of the crossbar with an excellent chip as Barca began to find a cutting edge.

Racing were battling hard, and on occasions went overboard with crude challenges, but they had no match for Barca's movement and passing.

Cesc Fabregas had a shot well saved by the keeper before he set up Messi for the opening goal, with the Argentine sliding the ball home from the centre of the penalty area.

Barca were knocking the ball effortlessly through the midfield but had to wait until the 56th minute to go further ahead from the penalty spot.

Domingo Cisma was adjudged to have pulled down Fabregas and Messi sent the keeper the wrong way from 12 yards.

Racing were unable to respond and Barca could have extended the lead with Juan Cuenca hitting a post and Messi for once having his shot saved when one-on-one with the keeper.

RESULTS

Atletico Madrid 2 (Miranda 38, Falcao 90+1) Granada 0

Espanyol 5 (Uche 3, 44, 68, Coutinho Correia 9, 22) Rayo Vallecano 1 (Tamudo 54)

Valencia 2 (Costa 23, Aduriz 42) Real Mallorca 2 (Nsue 57, Victor 66)

Racing Santander 0 **Barcelona 2** (Messi 29, 56-pen)

Osasuna 2 (Iturraspe 9-og, Raul Garcia 31) Athletic Bilbao 1 (Llorente 55)

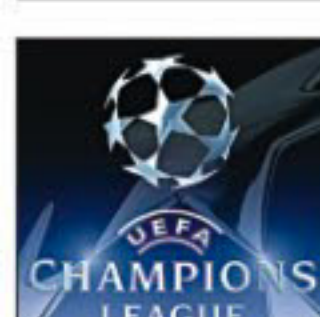


PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi celebrates one of his two goals against Racing Santander during their Primera Liga encounter at the El Sardinero Stadium on Sunday.

Giants under threat

AP, London



The Champions League could have one of the most diverse and understated quarterfinal lineups in its 20-year history if four of Europe's major powers fail to up their game in this week's last-16 second legs.

Unheralded APOEL, the first Cypriot team to reach the knockout stage of the competition, and Benfica, whose best days in Europe came in the 1960s, reached the last eight last week along with Barcelona and AC Milan.

Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Inter Milan and Chelsea--England's sole remaining team--are bidding to join the qualified quartet, yet all are far from sure of progress in one of the Champions League's more unpredictable campaigns.

Madrid goes into Wednesday's home game against CSKA Moscow in its best form in years, having just set a club-record 10 straight away wins in the Spanish league, but the nine-time European champions were held 1-1 by the Russian team three weeks ago.

Bayern is down 1-0 to FC Basel after the first leg in Switzerland, 2010 winner Inter lost 1-0 at Marseille and Chelsea slumped to a 3-1 loss at Napoli.

The English Premier League--Europe's richest division--will be without a representative in the Champions League quarters for the first time in 16 years if Chelsea fails to recover against Napoli on Wednesday.

Chelsea winger Juan Mata is taking inspiration from Arsenal nearly turning around a 4-0 loss against AC Milan last week, as well as his side's perfect European record at Stamford Bridge this season.

Since the defeat in Italy, Chelsea has dismissed manager Andre Villas-Boas and put

his assistant, former Italy midfielder Roberto Di Matteo, in temporary charge. Di Matteo has won his first two matches at the helm.

Napoli thrashed Cagliari 6-3 Friday for its sixth consecutive win in all competitions despite resting top striker Edinson Cavani for much of the match.

After seeing Barcelona light up the Champions League with its sparkling, Lionel Messi-inspired 7-1 demolition of Bayer Leverkusen last week, it is Madrid's turn to try to show why many people believe the team is ready to end its 10-year wait for an unprecedented 10th title.

Cristiano Ronaldo's double in a 3-2 victory at Real Betis on Saturday gave the Portugal forward 40 goals in all competitions this season and maintained his team's 10-point lead over Barcelona.

"The game against CSKA will be very difficult," said Madrid defender Marcelo. "There are no easy games (at this stage)."

After a long and dark stretch, Inter's form is finally starting to return ahead of the second leg against Marseille at the San Siro on Tuesday.

Inter beat Chievo Verona 2-0 Friday with late goals from Walter Samuel and Diego Milito to end an eight-match winless streak and bring tears to the eyes of coach Claudio Ranieri.

"This win comes just at the right time. It should give us the enthusiasm necessary to turn the result around," Ranieri said.

Three-time competition winner Bayern has doubts over striker Mario Gomez (shin and hip), winger Arjen Robben and defender Jerome Boateng (both minor knocks) after a 7-1 victory over Hoffenheim in the Bundesliga on Saturday, a result that provided the Bavarians with a timely boost ahead of Basel's visit.

"We have to keep playing this way. It can't be that we play differently again on Tuesday," Robben said.

'Title race will go to the wire'

AFP, Swansea

Roberto Mancini insists Manchester City will take the Premier League title race down to the wire after his side surrendered top spot to Manchester United in a shock 1-0 defeat against Swansea.

With United cruising to a 2-0 win over West Bromwich Albion, City were pushed off pole position by their bitter rivals for the first time since October.

Despite a frustrating afternoon in south Wales, at the end of a week which also featured a 1-0 Europa League loss to Sporting Lisbon, Mancini remains confident City are still in the right frame of mind to take the title fight to the final weeks.

"We shall fight against them until the end. We have another 10 games to finish this Championship," he said.

"The season is long and the situation changes every week. It is important that we stay together. But this result changes nothing.

"It is better to stay at the top, of course, but we are now a point behind. It does not change our target. I don't see it as a critical game. I think this championship will be decided with two games to go."

Conflict over Neymar



Football

AP, Sao Paulo

Brazil coach Mano Menezes says Neymar needs to play to Europe to gain more experience and improve as a player.

In an interview with the daily O Globo on Sunday, Menezes said a move to Europe would help Neymar "develop" his game and allow him to gain more "respect."

"In relation to his environment, to feeling at home, it's good that he is staying," Menezes said. "But for a complete development, to gain more respect, it's important that he goes to Europe."

Menezes said that in Brazil, being close to home and his fans, Neymar gets too much attention and is required to do a lot more than he would if he were in Europe, which ends up hurting him in some areas.

"Being there, he won't be as exposed," Menezes said. "Staying in Brazil demands contracts that take a lot of his time. We see that he is exposed. You need to execute three things in order to be well: train, eat and rest."

Neymar's club Santos wasn't happy with Menezes' comments and responded by saying that the coach should praise the player for wanting to stay in Brazil despite many offers from top European clubs.

"A comment like that, coming from the coach of the Brazilian national team, is regrettable," Santos vice president Odilio Rodrigues Filho told local media. "It's the same thing to say that someone needs to coach an European club before coaching the national team, which is not true."

Menezes never coached outside Brazil before being picked to lead the national

team. He was the second choice at the time, after Muricy Ramalho turned down an offer from the Brazilian federation because of club commitments.

Last year, Neymar agreed to a contract that ties him to Santos until the South American country hosts the 2014 World Cup. At the time there were widespread rumours of a possible move to Real Madrid or Barcelona. He said he believed he would be the happiest by being closer to friends and relatives in Brazil.

Santos was highly praised by fans and local media for rejecting the multimillion dollar offers from European clubs.

The 20-year-old Neymar, who already is a father, is one of Brazil's most promising stars and is widely expected to lead the Brazilian national team when it hosts the World Cup in two years.

Menezes also said a good performance by Brazil at the Olympics in London will be important to give the team confidence ahead of the World Cup and next year's Confederations Cup.

"These players really need a good performance to come out invigorated," Menezes said. "The coach is included in that context. You have an idea, and if it doesn't bring victories, you feel it."

In the interview, the coach also defended two-time FIFA player of the year Ronaldinho, who has been summoned to the Brazilian squad despite poor performances with Flamengo. On Sunday, Ronaldinho scored a goal but was sent off in the first half of the team's 2-0 win over rival Fluminense in the Rio Cup, the first stage of the Rio de Janeiro state championship.

Menezes said it's important that Ronaldinho "keeps trying to improve."

Ibra loses his cool

AFP, Rome

Zlatan Ibrahimovic was involved in a new controversy on Sunday as his infamous temperament got the better of him during a post-match interview.

Rumours all week suggested Ibrahimovic had had a bust-up with Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri over the club's 3-0 defeat at Arsenal in the Champions League.

Ibrahimovic had complained to Swedish journalists following the game that he felt out of position due to the formation his side adopted.

Although Allegri denied there had been a disagreement, in his pre-match press conference on Saturday, Ibrahimovic was asked about it following Sunday's 2-0 win over Lecce, in which he grabbed the second goal.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Will AC Milan keep the Serie A title this season?

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ESPN

Sportscenter India

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Live at 8:30pm

English Premiership

Liverpool v Everton

Live from 2:00am (Wednesday)

TEN Sports

UEFA Champions League

Bayern Munich v FC Basel

Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)

TEN Action

UEFA Champions League

Inter Milan v Marseille

Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)



Asia Cup Cricket

India v Sri Lanka

Time: 2:00pm

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium

Premier League

Muktijoddha v Sk Russel

Time: 3:45pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium



PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan star Zlatan Ibrahimovic (R) celebrates his goal with teammate Robinho during their Seria A clash against Lecce at San Siro on Sunday.

Milan extend lead

AFP, Rome



AC Milan extended their lead to four points at the top of Serie A with a 2-0 win over Lecce as Juventus were held 0-0 at Genoa on Sunday.

Goals from Antonio Nocerino and Zlatan Ibrahimovic gave Milan a comfortable victory.

Juve, who were facing a defensive selection crisis, drew for the fourth game in a row and sixth time in their last seven outings although they hit the woodwork three times on Sunday.

Although unbeaten, they have now drawn more than half their league matches this season.

And that is what has allowed champions Milan to not only haul them in but streak past as they bid for a second title in a row.

The rossoneri never looked in any danger of dropping points against Lecce and took the lead after just seven minutes.

Robinho chipped the ball into the box and

Ibrahimovic's back-heel flick found Nocerino, whose volleyed finish deflected off Leonardo Miglionico and beat goalkeeper Massimiliano Benassi.

Milan created plenty of shooting chances around the box but produced nothing to unduly worry Benassi.

But they moved further in front on 65 minutes as another Robinho chip into the box found Urby Emanuelson, whose cushioned headed back to Ibrahimovic was lashed ruthlessly into the net.

Lecce remain third from bottom and are now six points from safety following Siena's 2-0 win at Cesena and

Parma's 1-1 draw at Atalanta. Juventus, who refused to talk to the press after the game, may have been missing all three of their Italy centre-backs but they showed few ill effects as they dominated in Genoa.

After a quiet first half Juve came storming out after the break and hit the woodwork three times in the first 15 minutes of the second period.

RESULTS

AC Milan 2 (Nocerino 7, Ibrahimovic 65) Lecce 0

Atalanta 1 (Manfredini 5) Parma 1 (Paletta 55)

Catania 1 (Lodi 58-pen) Fiorentina 0

Cesena 0 **Siena 2** (Brienza 75, Bogdani 81)

Genoa 0 Juventus 0

Lazio 1 (Rubin 56-og) **Bologna 3** (Portanova 11, Diamanti 28, Krhin 60)

Novara 1 (Jeda 16) Udinese 0