

Button top in thrilling race

REUTERS, Melbourne

McLaren's Jenson Button won the Australian Grand Prix for the third time ahead of world champion Sebastian Vettel in an incident-packed season opener on Sunday.

Button's fellow Briton and team mate Lewis Hamilton, who started on pole, finished third behind the German to round out the podium while Vettel's team mate Mark Webber was fourth, his best ever finish in his 11th attempt to win his home race.

"Oh fantastic, what a great way to start the year, guys! Seriously, fantastic!" former world champion Button said on the team radio after his 13th career victory.

"Shows what a winter does. The car is beautiful and she's quick. Thanks guys."

Fernando Alonso drove a spirited race to finish fifth for Ferrari ahead of the Sauber of Japan's Kamui Kobayashi after Williams driver Pastor Maldonado crashed out on the final lap while running sixth.



Juventus star Arturo Vidal (L) and Leonardo Bonucci celebrate after a goal during their 5-0 win against Serie A rivals Fiorentina at the Artemio Franchi stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

United hunt Wolves

AFP, London

Reigning champions Manchester United won 5-0 away to 10-man Wolves on Sunday, moving four points clear at the top of the English Premier League table.

Goals from Jonny Evans, Antonio Valencia, Danny Welbeck and Javier Hernandez's second-half double sent Wolves, already in the relegation zone, to the bottom of the table.

The heavy defeat for the Molineux club was made worse by the 39th minute red card shown to defender Ronald Zubar for two bookable offences.

Central defender Evans scored his first goal for United in the 21st minute with a close range shot after being teed up by Michael Carrick following a United corner.

Victory left United four points clear of title rivals Manchester City before their cross-town foes' match at home to Chelsea on Wednesday.

20 in three as Bayern run riot

REUTERS, Berlin



Bayern Munich continued their astonishing scoring run by demolishing Hertha Berlin 6-0 away on Saturday with Arjen Robben scoring a hat-trick as the Bavarians took their tally to 20 goals in three matches.

Having beaten Hoffenheim 7-1 in the Bundesliga one week ago and FC Basel 7-0 in the Champions League on Tuesday, Bayern raced into a 3-0 lead after 19 minutes at Hertha Berlin on an evening when three of their goals came from penalties.

Thomas Mueller, Toni Kroos and Mario Gomez, who took his tally to eight in three games, shared the other goals.

"That was a very impressive performance from the first seconds, the team has played outstanding football on a very difficult pitch," said Bayern sports director Christian Nerlinger.

Bayern kept up the pressure on leaders Borussia Dortmund, who beat Werder Bremen 1-0 with an early Shinji Kagawa strike, while Hamburg SV's relegation worries increased with a 3-1 home defeat by fellow strugglers Freiburg.

Kagawa scored his ninth goal of the season as Dortmund, who also hit the woodwork twice in the first half, extended their unbeaten

Bundesliga run to a club record 20 games.

The champions have 59 points from 26 games, five clear of Bayern. Borussia Moenchengladbach, who snatched a 2-1 win at Bayer Leverkusen with Igor de Camargo's 88th-minute goal, are third on 51.

Bayern winger Franck Ribery, who tormented Hertha all match, began by bursting down the left and pulling the ball back for Thomas Mueller to score from close range in the ninth minute.

Mueller turned provider to set up the second for Robben three minutes later and the Dutchman was on target again in the 19th minute, converting a penalty awarded for a foul on Mueller.

Toni Kroos cleared an Adrian Ramos header off the line as Hertha tried to claw their way back into the game but two goals in as many minutes after halftime killed off the contest.

Ribery went down after Adrian Morales appeared to touch his shoulder and Mario

Gomez scored the penalty in the 50th minute for his 22nd league goal of the season.

One minute later, Christoph Janker lost possession to Robben as he tried to play his way out of defence. The Dutchman's shot was saved by Thomas Kraft only for Kroos to fire in the rebound.

Robben completed his hat-trick by converting another soft penalty, awarded for an innocuous challenge by Ramos on Ribery.

Juve shrug off the cobwebs

REUTERS, Milan



Juventus ended their run of four successive Serie A draws with an emphatic 5-0 thrashing of Fiorentina, who played for more than one hour with 10 men on Saturday.

Still unbeaten this season, second-placed Juventus stayed four points behind AC Milan after the leaders won 2-0 at Parma with a Zlatan Ibrahimovic penalty and a brilliant solo goal by Urby Emanuelson.

Milan, who brought on Gennaro Gattuso late in the game for his first appearance since suffering an eye problem in September which led to speculation he may have to abandon his career, have 60 points from 28 games.

Club president Silvio Berlusconi was among the crowd for Milan's fourth successive away win.

"The presence of the president away from home was a good sign. When he's here there's more motivation to do well," said coach Massimiliano Allegri.

"He's happy with the performance and with the win. The players played a good game and when it was time to grit their teeth they did so."

Juventus had drawn six of their last seven games, allowing Milan to overhaul them in the process, but got off the mark in style at Fiorentina as Mirko Vucinic curled in an exquisite effort from the edge of the area after 15 minutes.

Six minutes later, Fiorentina had Alessio Cerci sent off for kicking Paolo De Ceglie off the ball and when Chilean Arturo Vidal scored a second for the visitors before the half hour, it was all over as a contest.

Claudio Marchisio, Andrea Pirlo and substitute Simone Padoin were on target after the break as Juve chalked up their biggest win of the season.

Predictably, Fiorentina fans jeered their team in the second half. Their side are 15th in the table with 32 points, only seven clear of the relegation zone.

Xavi, Messi keep Barca ticking

REUTERS, Madrid



A Xavi free kick and an exquisite lob from Lionel Messi fired Barcelona to a 2-0 win at Sevilla that cut Real Madrid's lead at the top of La Liga back to seven points on Saturday.

Xavi curled a shot over wall after 18 minutes and World Player of the Year Messi bagged his 31st after the league campaign soon after.

The Argentine started the move deep in midfield playing a one-two with Andres Iniesta, he nutmegged a defender as he skipped into the area, and calmly lifted the ball over the advancing Andres Palop.

Having carved a host of first-half chances, however, Barca spent much of the second period pegged back as both goalkeepers Palop and Victor Valdes made top-class saves.

The champions held firm and moved on to 63 points from 27 games.

"We played very well in the first half and we scored two goals and could have got more, but the second half was a different story," Pique told Spanish television.

"We have done our job now we need to see what happens tomorrow. At least they (Real) go out knowing we are there behind them and we are still in the fight."

Both sides came out at the start of the match wearing shirts in support of Barcelona's French defender Eric Abidal, who found out he needed a liver transplant during the week.

When asked about Abidal Barca's Argentine defender Javier Mascherano told Spanish television: "I don't like to mix football with things that happen off the pitch, but if the victory serves to give him a lift, all well and good."

Osasuna climbed to fifth with 29 points after grabbing a late equaliser to draw 1-1 at basement side Real Zaragoza.

Portugal striker Helder Postiga had struck from outside the area to give Zaragoza the lead with five minutes to go but three minutes later Osasuna defender Roversio headed in from a corner.

Rayo Vallecano climbed to eighth with 37 points after beating another promoted club Real Betis 3-0 in the late game, with second-half goals from Emiliano Armenteros, Diego Costa and Raul Tamudo. Zaragoza stayed 20th with 19 points, eight short of safety and five behind 19th-placed Sporting Gijon.

Sporting, whose 62-year-old coach Javier Clemente was celebrating his 500th game in La Liga, lost 2-1 at fellow strugglers Granada to first-half strikes from Carlos Martins and Guilherme Siqueira.

Real Sociedad's Inigo Martinez put the ball in his own net to give Getafe a 1-0 home win.

Daei stable after crash

AFP, Paris

Asian football chiefs have offered their "thoughts and prayers" after Iranian football great Ali Daei was reported to have been involved in a serious car accident.

According to reports early Sunday, former Iran captain Daei, who played for Bayern Munich in Germany's Bundesliga, was "critically injured in a car accident while returning to Tehran from Isfahan".

The PressTV.com report said the crash occurred Saturday night when Daei, manager of Iranian club Rah Ahan, was travelling in a car with his brother and a club coach.

Muamba 'critical' after collapse

REUTERS, London



Bolton Wanderers midfielder Fabrice Muamba remained in a critical condition after suffering a cardiac arrest during the FA Cup quarter-final at Tottenham Hotspur on Saturday, the hospital and club said in a joint statement on Sunday.

The 23-year-old collapsed on the pitch at White Hart Lane and was given CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) by medicals before being taken to The London Chest Hospital where he is still in intensive care at the Heart Attack Centre.

The match was abandoned at 1-1 just before halftime after Muamba fell to the turf near the centre circle. No other player was involved in the incident and after a delay of several minutes referee Howard Webb took the teams off the field.

"Fabrice received prolonged resuscitation at the ground and on route to The London Chest Hospital, where his heart eventually started working," Sunday's hospital statement said.

"As is normal medical practice, Fabrice remains anaesthetised in intensive care and will be for at least 24 hours. His condition continues to be closely monitored by the cardiac specialists at the hospital."

Messages of support for the England under-21 international have come flooding in from players, clubs and fans for Muamba with flowers and messages being delivered to the hospital and laid outside Bolton's Reebok stadium.

Bolton manager Owen Coyle said in Sunday's statement: "Fabrice's family have asked me to pass on their thanks for the many, many kind messages of support from not only Bolton fans but also fans from clubs across the country and abroad."

"All our thoughts and prayers are for Fabrice and his family at this time. The family would also like to thank the media for respecting their privacy at this time."



PHOTO: AFP

Bolton manager Owen Coyle (R) and Tottenham players, Benoit Assou-Ekotto (L), William Gallas (2nd L) and Carlo Cudicini (2nd R) are shell-shocked as midfielder Fabrice Muamba (not pictured) is treated by medical staff after collapsing during the English FA Cup quarterfinal match at White Hart Lane.

Afellay back in training

REUTERS, Madrid

Ibrahim Afellay trained with his Barcelona team mates for the first time since tearing a left knee ligament six months ago, the European and Spanish champions said on Sunday.

The Netherlands midfielder, who picked up the injury in training in September, is battling to be fit in time to make the Dutch team for Euro 2012.

The European Championship in Poland and Ukraine runs from June 8 to July 1.

Afellay, 25, was a part of the Netherlands squad that lost to Spain in the World Cup final in South Africa two years ago.



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