

Malaga move to fifth

AFP, Madrid



Venezuelan forward Solomon Rondon scored twice as Malaga beat Rayo Vallecano 4-2 on Thursday to move into fifth position in La Liga, level on 44 points with Levante and just three behind third-placed Valencia.

Rayo went ahead with a Diego Costa penalty on five minutes after Jesus Gamez had tripped Emiliano Armenteros.

However, Rondon got a goal in either half, first with a header and then with a great piece of finishing to put the home side ahead.

Enzo Maresca made it 3-1 on 70 minutes with his first touch, scoring a header from a pinpoint Jesus Gamez cross.

Roberto Trashorras converted another penalty on 84 minutes for the side from Madrid to make it 3-2.

However, two minutes later, another Malaga substitute, Duda, scored when he hit a left footed shot from 30 yards to round off a deserved win for the side from the Costa del Sol.

Sevilla had an easy 3-0 away win at struggling Racing Santander to boost their hopes of European competition next season.

Spanish international Jesus Navas got the opener in the first-half for the visitors before Manu del Moral hit a second-half double.

Racing had Papa Diop sent off with a straight red card for a foul on Piotr Trochowski with 12 minutes remaining and stay in the relegation zone.

Real Betis drew 1-1 at home to Espanyol for whom Walter Pandiani grabbed a last-minute equaliser after Ruben Castro had headed the home side into the lead on 78 minutes.

RESULTS

Racing Santander 0 Sevilla 3 (Jesus Navas 34, Manu 52, 90+1)
Real Betis 1 (Ruben Castro 80) Espanyol 1 (Pandiani 90+1)
Malaga 4 (Rondon 35, 58, Maresca 70, Duda 86) Rayo Vallecano 2 (Diego Costa 5-pen, Trashorras 84-pen)



Malaga forward Solomon Rondon (L) is about to score one of his two goals against Rayo Vallecano during their Primera Liga encounter at the Rosaleda Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

City eye top return

AFP, London



Manchester City will look to return to the top of the Premier League and pile the pressure on title rivals Manchester United when they travel to Stoke on Saturday.

Victory at the Britannia Stadium would put City two points in front of current leaders and reigning champions United, who are not in action again until they host Fulham at Old Trafford on Monday.

However, for many fans attention will turn to the Reebok Stadium.

Normally, a match between the relegation threatened Lancashire duo of Bolton Wanderers and Blackburn Rovers would only be of local interest.

But this will be Bolton's first match since Fabrice Muamba collapsed with a cardiac arrest during last week's subsequently abandoned FA Cup quarterfinal at Tottenham.

Bolton postponed Tuesday's scheduled league match against Aston Villa but, with medical bulletins on 23-year-old midfielder Muamba increasingly encouraging, they have decided to go ahead with Saturday's fixture.

Legendary Liverpool manager Bill Shankly was quoted as saying "football is not a matter of life or death, it's more important than that".

But Bolton boss Owen Coyle, unsurprisingly, disagrees.

"Football is not more important than what has happened," said Coyle.

"Nobody is more passionate about football than me. Is the game important? Yes in the context of the Premier League, and we will do our best.

"But football is not the be all and end all. What happened to Fabrice on Saturday puts everything in perspective and our first thoughts will be with him,"

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday

Arsenal v Aston Villa, Bolton v Blackburn, Chelsea v Tottenham (1245GMT), Liverpool v Wigan, Norwich v Wolves, Stoke v Man City (1730GMT), Sunderland v QPR, Swansea v Everton

Sunday

West Brom v Newcastle (1600GMT)

Monday

Man Utd v Fulham (2000GMT)

Coyle added.

Manchester City's 2-1 win over Chelsea at Eastlands on Wednesday witnessed the return of controversial striker Carlos Tevez after three months of self-imposed exile in his native Argentina following a falling-out with manager Roberto Mancini.

There are many -- including former City favourite Rodney Marsh -- who fear Tevez's return for the final nine

league games of the season could destabilise the club's bid for a first English title since 1968.

But, with Tevez coming off the bench to lay on the winner for Samir Nasri against Chelsea, it appears the forward is well and truly back in the fold.

"I don't know if it was a champions' performance but we gave a very good performance in a difficult game," said Mancini after the Chelsea match.

"We have a very difficult game on Saturday against Stoke and this game was important for the three points."

Arsenal, back in third and on course for a Champions League place, will look to continue their recent resurgence at home to Aston Villa with Gunners boss Arsene Wenger, whose judgment was being called into question earlier in what was a faltering season, warning his team not to let-up now.

"We want to keep going and we must not think now that the most difficult thing is done," Wenger said.

Tottenham were looking as if they would end the season as London's top club, but their recent dip in form has come at just the wrong time for Harry Redknapp's side, with the manager insisting speculation linking him with the England job is not behind their slump.

They face Chelsea on Saturday with both clubs now battling for a top four finish and the Champions League place that goes with it.

Real aim to rebound

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid insist they have not been paralysed by stage-fright despite seeing their 10-point lead in La Liga slashed to six by bitter rivals Barcelona.

Jose Mourinho's side, who tackle Real Sociedad on Saturday, have dropped

four points in the past week after two 1-1 draws at home to Villarreal, where they also had two players sent off.

Defending champions Barcelona, meanwhile, go to in-form Mallorca, unbeaten in four games.

Madrid were surprised by a last minute leveller from a free-kick by Malaga's Santi Cazorla last Sunday, before losing Sergio Ramos and Mesut Ozil to red cards against Villarreal on Wednesday after Marcos Senna had equalised with another late free-kick.

Mourinho and assistant Rui Farias were sent from the bench in a sign that nerves may be creeping in as Madrid get closer to breaking Barca's dominance of the last three La Liga titles.

After the game Mourinho refused to speak to the press or allow anyone else from his camp to discuss the match.

Having lost only once in 22 league games - 2-1 at home to Barcelona in December -- it was a major shock for 'Los blancos' to drop points twice in a matter of days.

But Madrid president Florentino Perez sent out a message of defiance in the wake of Wednesday's setback.

"Madrid and their fans never give up," he said.

Real Sociedad lost 3-1 at home to Levante in midweek, having to play the second-half with 10 men after midfielder Gorka Elustondo was sent off.

Centre-half Mikel Gonzalez believes the feeling of injustice will spur them on in the Santiago Bernabeu.

"There is no point in complaining about referee decisions, both teams have a lot at stake on Saturday but if we can survive to the last period of the game alive, we have a chance of getting something from Madrid," he said.

Barcelona will go to Mallorca in good spirits.

Lionel Messi will be in celebratory mood after becoming the club's all time leading goalscorer on Tuesday with a hat-trick in the 5-3 win over Granada, taking his tally to 234 career goals.

The little Argentinian will also be defending his position for the prize of 'Pichichi' at the top of La Liga's goalscoring charts, where he now leads Cristiano Ronaldo by one with 34 league strikes.

Del Nero replaces Teixeira

AFP, Asuncion

Sao Paulo lawyer Marco Polo del Nero will replace Ricardo Teixeira on the FIFA executive committee after his fellow Brazilian quit following allegations of corruption, South American football body Conmebol announced.

Teixeira, who resigned his positions as president of the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) and chief of the 2016 World Cup organizing committee last week, had sat on FIFA's executive committee since 1994.

Del Nero, 71, will join two other South Americans on the FIFA body -- Paraguay's Nicolas Leoz and Julio Gronzona, the president of the Argentina football federation since 1979.

Suarez to get new deal

AFP, London

Liverpool managing director Iain Ayre admits Luis Suarez is likely to be offered a new contract in the close-season to stop the Uruguay striker being lured away from Anfield.

Suarez, 25, signed a five-and-a-half year contract on his arrival in January 2011, but the Reds are keen to extend that deal following reported interest from big-spending French club Paris Saint Germain.

The former Ajax star has endured a difficult season after being banned for eight games for racially abusing Manchester United defender Patrice Evra.

But his form has remained strong and he caused concern on Merseyside by reportedly suggesting he would be interested in linking up with international team-mate Diego Lugano at PSG.

Liverpool are keen to stave off any interest from elsewhere and Ayre said: "Listen, he's got a contract until 2016, he has said he wants to stay. I am sure (technical director) Damien (Comolli) will be speaking to his agent.

"Who wouldn't want Luis Suarez? He is absolutely fantastic. He is such a popular member of our team.

"But they are the things we talk about behind closed doors, and we will further that discussion when it is right and proper.

"Luis is a vital and important part of our set-up, and long may that continue."

Madrid theme park in the Gulf

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid football club will spread its brand to the Middle East and Asia by lending its name to a \$1 billion theme park on a man-made island in the United Arab Emirates, it said on Thursday.

Executives unveiled plans for the "Real Madrid Resort Island", featuring an ocean-side stadium and hi-tech club museum in the northern Emirate of Ras Al-Khaimah, on the doorstep of the lucrative football-mad Asian market.

"Real Madrid Resort Island will be a major tourist and sporting centre of great dimensions and the highest level," club president Florentino Perez told a news conference.

"This extraordinary complex will attract millions of people looking for quality leisure services," he added at the event, also attended by Real players including captain Iker Casillas and striker Karim Benzema.

"This is a decisive and strategic step which contributes to strengthening our institution in the Middle East and Asia," Perez said. "Real Madrid will be present permanently in a key region of the world."

The complex, with \$1 billion (758 million euros) of investment and backed by the government of the Emirate, is scheduled to open in January 2015, the club and executives said.

It will include a five-star hotel, beachside buildings and an amusement park with a rollercoaster and hologram show recreating



Real Madrid's goals.

Sports facilities will include training pitches and swimming pools plus a marina for yachting, as well as the 10,000-seat football stadium open on one side to a view of the sea.

Benzema and fellow French football ace and Real hero Zinedine Zidane posed holding white team shirts bearing the logo of the resort, along with coach Jose Mourinho, goalkeeper Casillas and defender Sergio Ramos.

Executives of the investment group behind the project, the RAK Marjan Island Football Investment Fund, said its location, 45 minutes from Dubai airport, put it in reach of 2.0 million visitors.

"The Emirates and Ras Al Khaimah is really the gateway to the Middle East and to Asia and that's really our target here today," said Louis Armand de Rouge, a French executive on the project.

Rouge said that more than half of Real Madrid's 300 million fans were in Asia.

"Football is the most popular sport in the world (and) Asia is also the world's fastest growing sports market," he said.

Real Madrid ranked top this year in the Money League of richest football clubs published by consultancy Deloitte, with revenues of 480 million euros in the 2010-2011 season.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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Live from 9:00pm

TEN Action

La Liga

Mallorca v Barcelona

Live from 11:00pm

Real Madrid v Rayo Vallecano

Live from 1:00am (Sunday)

NEO Cricket

New Zealand v South Africa

Third Test, Day Three

Live from 3:30am (Sunday)