

Barca, MU atop



Football

REUTERS, Undated

Barcelona maintained their three-point lead in Spain after an inspired Andres Iniesta pulled the strings in a 4-0 win at Levante and Manchester United reclaimed top spot in the Premier League after a 3-1 victory over Queens Park Rangers.

Serie A table-toppers Juventus slipped up with a 1-0 defeat at AC Milan and Paris St Germain went top of Ligue 1 following a shining performance by Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

SPAIN

Champions Real Madrid slipped further off the pace when they were upset 1-0 at Real Betis on Saturday, a third defeat of the campaign for Jose Mourinho's stuttering side.

Leaders Barcelona and second-placed Atletico Madrid took full advantage of Real's stumble on Sunday, Barca winning 4-0 at Levante and Atletico thumping visiting Sevilla by the same

scoreline at the Calderon.

Andres Iniesta was the star of unbeaten Barca's victory in Valencia after the Spain playmaker created two goals for Lionel Messi and one for Cesc Fabregas and netted a brilliant effort of his own in a sparkling performance.

With 13 matches played, Barca have 37 points, Atletico 34 and Real 26. Malaga are fourth on 22 after they thrashed Valencia 4-0 on Saturday, level with fifth-placed Betis and two ahead of Levante in sixth.

ENGLAND

Manchester United returned to the top of the Premier League standings with a 3-1 home win over Queens Park Rangers as champions Manchester City were held to a 0-0 draw at Chelsea in Rafa Benitez's first game in charge of the London club.

United fell a goal behind to bottom club QPR, watched by their new manager Harry Redknapp, but sealed a trademark comeback victory with three goals in eight second-half minutes from Jonny Evans, Darren Fletcher and Javier

Hernandez.

Spaniard Benitez received a hostile reception from the Chelsea fans after replacing Roberto Di Matteo as manager and his players struggled for inspiration at a rainy Stamford Bridge against well-organised City.

United top the table with 30 points from 13 games, one ahead of City, four clear of third-placed West Bromwich Albion, who continued their fine start with a 4-2 win at Sunderland, and five above Chelsea.

ITALY

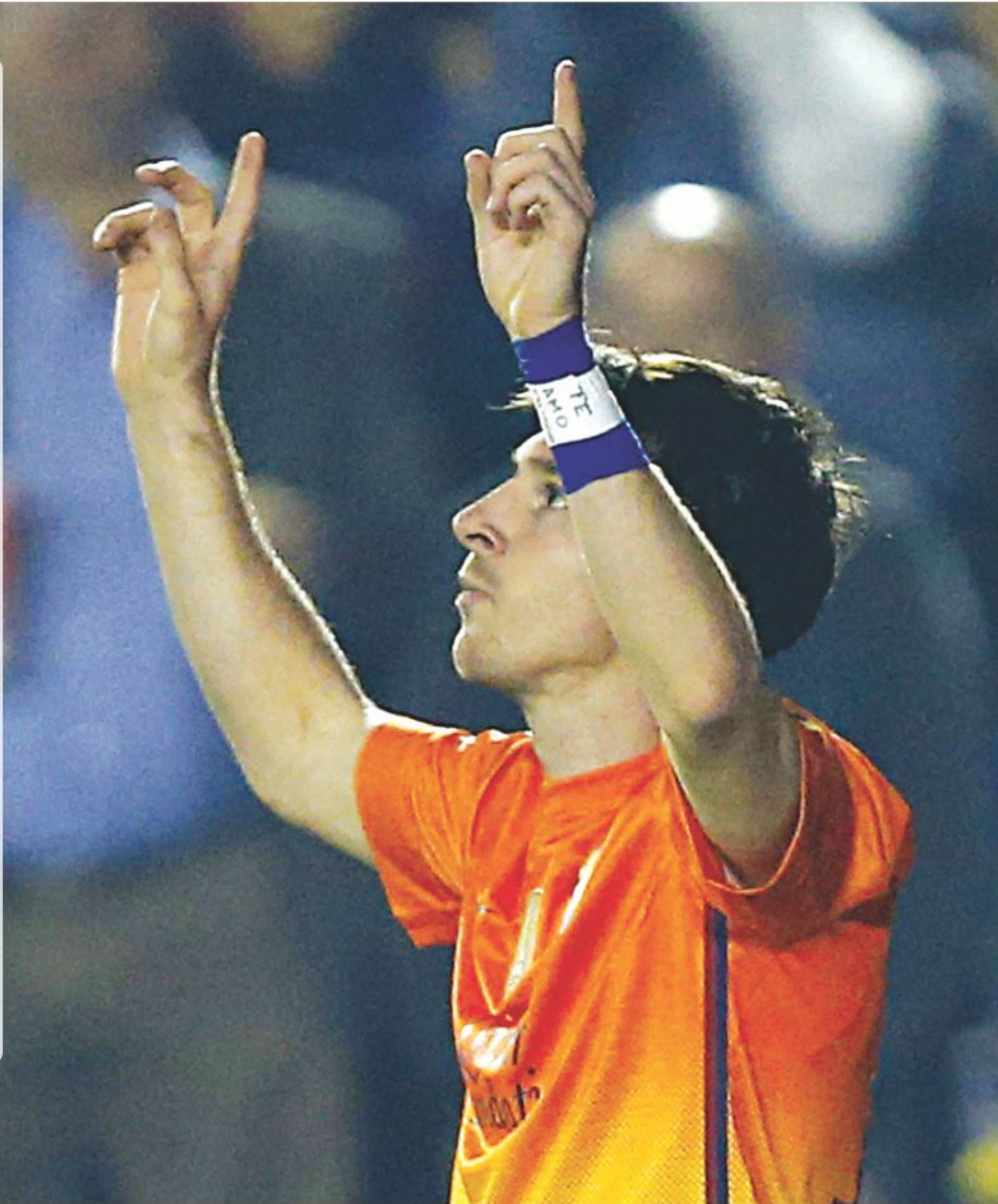
Leaders Juventus suffered a second defeat in quick succession when they were beaten 1-0 by AC Milan after a controversial Robinho penalty.

Juve lead with 32 points from 14 matches with Inter Milan four points behind in second before their trip to Parma on Monday.

Third-placed Fiorentina left it late to grab a point in a 2-2 draw at Torino as Mounir El Hamdaoui came off the bench to score an equaliser six minutes from time.

PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi celebrates one of his two goals against Levante during their Primera Liga encounter at the Ciutat de Valencia Stadium on Sunday.



No tensions with Perez

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho boasted of "very, very, very good" relations with club bosses on Monday, after their latest 1-0 away loss to Real Betis.

Some Spanish media had speculated about tensions between Mourinho and Real Madrid president Florentino Perez as the club trails 11 points behind league leaders Barcelona.

"I have very, very, very good relations with the president," as well as managing director Jose Angel Sanchez and other club members, the Portuguese coach told a news conference.

"Relations could not be better," he said.

Some Spanish newspapers said Mourinho wanted Real Madrid to show greater support for his complaints about refereeing and the fixtures calendar, which he judged unfair to the team.

But the coach said he was not calling on the club to say anything. "The club is sovereign. It is up to the club to decide if it is happy with this line," Mourinho said.

Mourinho refused to discuss Saturday's loss against Betis at the news conference, held on the eve of Real Madrid's domestic King's Cup clash against Alcoyano.

"Now is the time to talk about the Cup. At the end of the season, with all the results in hand, we will set down calmly and analyse the situation," the Portuguese said.

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Five-star Bayern

AFP, Berlin



Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich romped to a 5-0 win at home to Hanover 96 on Saturday to extend their lead at the top to nine points as champions Borussia Dortmund moved up to second with a win at Mainz.

Having secured their place in the knock-out phase of the Champions League in midweek with a draw at Valencia, Bayern ran riot at the Allianz Arena and added a point to their lead.

"We were deadly, aggressive and we played with a high level of concentration," enthused Bayern coach Jupp Heynckes. "We really turned it on in both halves."

"Everything has to be earned at the top level and I am really pleased for Dante, Javi Martinez and Mario Gomez."

Bayern set another Bundesliga record of 34 points after the first 13 games and the hosts took the lead with only four minutes gone when Spain midfielder Javi Martinez netted his first goal since his August transfer from Athletic Bilbao.

Germany midfielder Toni Kroos doubled the Bavarians' lead with a superbly taken half-volley from a Philipp Lahm cross on 24 minutes.

The third came on 37 minutes when French winger Franck Ribery fired home while Brazil centre-back Dante made it 4-0 when he met Kroos' free-kick at the far post on 63 minutes.

Germany striker Mario Gomez needed just 26 seconds to claim the fifth after coming off the bench on 67 minutes for

his first appearance for Bayern in three months following ankle surgery.

Dortmund came from behind at Mainz to claim their third straight away win.

Mainz's Marco Caligiuri put the hosts ahead on four minutes, but Germany midfielder Marco Reus equalised when he hit the top corner from 17 metres out just eight minutes later.

Dortmund went ahead just before the break when Mario Goetze put Poland striker Robert Lewandowski into space to flick the ball over the Mainz goalkeeper and claim the three points and wrest second place from Ruhr neighbours Schalke 04.

Schalke dropped to third after drawing 1-1 with Eintracht Frankfurt, who are fourth, in Gelsenkirchen.

Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, who has been linked with a move to Arsenal in the winter break, opened the scoring on 11 minutes to claim his first Bundesliga goal in 580 minutes.

The lead lasted only 105 seconds as Stefan Aigner headed Frankfurt level, but Eintracht were reduced to 10 men when Karim Matmour was dismissed for a second yellow card on 87 minutes.

Wolfsburg held Werder Bremen to a 1-1 draw as Wolves' director of sport Klaus Allofs met the north German team he left earlier this month after 13 years.

It was goalless in the Bundesliga's first Franconian derby as Nuremberg were held by their neighbours Greuther Fuerth as both sides finished with 10 men.

On Friday, Hamburg's Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart looks to have been ruled out for the rest of this year after suffering a suspected hamstring tear in his team's 2-0 defeat at Fortuna Duesseldorf.



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich striker Mario Gomez (R) scores the fifth goal during their Bundesliga match against Hanover in Munich on Saturday.

FA to probe sick taunts

AFP, London

The Football Association (FA) are ready to probe allegations that West Ham fans aimed sick anti-Semitic taunts at Tottenham supporters during Sunday's Premier League clash at White Hart Lane.

A section of West Ham's support were reported to have mocked the gassing of Jews in the Holocaust and chanted about Adolf Hitler during the London derby which Tottenham won 3-1.

Just days after Tottenham fan Ashley Mills was stabbed before a Europa League game against Lazio in Rome in an apparently anti-Semitic attack by Italian hooligans, West Ham supporters also sang 'Viva Lazio', 'Can we stab you every week?' and hissed on several occasions, mocking the mass execution of Jews during the Second World War.

Tottenham have a significant fanbase in the Jewish community and an FA spokesman said it was "likely" that the governing body would launch a formal investigation once the match officials' reports had been received.

Ibra propels PSG

AFP, Paris



A brace from in-form striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic propelled Paris Saint-Germain to a 4-0 win over promoted Troyes on Saturday as they provisionally returned to the top of Ligue 1.

Maxwell netted a first-half opener for PSG, while two second-half strikes from Ibrahimovic and a goal from Blaise Matuidi snapped their domestic two-match losing streak in the French capital, sending Carlo Ancelotti's side one point clear of Saint-Etienne and Lyon at the summit.

"We played an intelligent match. We didn't want to inject too much pace. We travelled Wednesday, it was hard to recover. We used a counter-attacking strategy and we did it very well," said Ancelotti, referring to PSG's 2-0 victory at Dynamo Kiev that secured the club's progression to the Champions League knockout phase.

The Italian also praised the impact of Ibrahimovic, who put the visitors to the sword on his return from a two-match suspension.

"Ibra is a very important player. Naturally, we are more effective up front when he's there. He's one of the best forwards in the world."

Meanwhile, an eighth defeat of the season for Troyes leaves Jean-Marc Furlan's men languishing in 19th.

Troyes goalkeeper Yohann Thuram endured a busy afternoon and was forced to display quick reflexes to turn over an early effort from Matuidi, while the usually lethal Ibrahimovic shot tamely at

Thuram after he was played through by Marco Verratti.

The home side eventually drew first blood on 17 minutes as Ibrahimovic advanced down the byline after escaping Rincon before crossing low for Maxwell to steer home.

Ezequiel Lavezzi then tested Thuram with a header, while Troyes' Fabien Camus saw his deflected strike land on the roof of the net.

On-loan striker Jean-Christophe Bahebeck, playing against his parent club, drew a low save out of Sirigu and was unfortunate not to be awarded a penalty just before half-time after he was sent sprawling by Verratti.

The Italian midfielder -- already on a yellow card -- clattered through the back of Bahebeck, but replays indicated that Verratti got a faint touch on the ball as referee Bartolomeu Varela waved away appeals.

PSG capitalised on that let-off as Matuidi double the hosts' advantage on 63 minutes with an adroit finish after Ibrahimovic had slipped the ball into the path of the French midfielder.

The talismanic Swede then got on the scoresheet himself, drilling a fierce left-footed strike past Thuram via the underside of the crossbar seven minutes later before tapping home a Lavezzi cross for his league-leading 12th goal of the campaign a minute from the end to complete the rout.

Elsewhere, Rennes saw their three-game winning streak come to a halt as Zouhaier Dhaouadi's 80th-minute strike earned Evian a 1-0 win in Brittany to move the visitors out of the relegation zone.

Sneijder on way out?



Football

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan have paved the way for Wesley Sneijder to leave the club in January after confirming the Dutch midfielder will not play again until he has agreed to an "adjusted" contract.

Sneijder has been on his way back to full fitness recently having been sidelined after suffering a minor injury at the end of September.

Speculation, however, has linked the Netherlands international with a move away from the Nerazzurri and that has gathered pace as Andrea Stramaccioni's side have become serious Serie A title challengers to Juventus in his absence.

Sneijder's contract with the San Siro side ends in 2015, and Inter sporting manager, Marco Branca, confirmed the Dutchman will not play again until he has decided on whether or not to accept a reduced offer.

"The situation with Wes, who is part of the history of this club and a player we all care about, is that we've been discussing a possible - and for us necessary - adjustment to his contract for a while," Branca told www.inter.it.

"We want to give the player and his entourage all the time they need to consider the terms of our proposal carefully, so the coach and the club have decided not to use the player in this period until things are clearer."