



Atletico Madrid striker Radamel Falcao (C) is the toast of his teammates after scoring against Deportivo La Coruna during their Primera Liga encounter at the Vicente Calderon Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Unforgettable night: Falcao

REUTERS, Madrid



Radamel Falcao hailed an "unforgettable night" after the coveted Atletico Madrid striker hit five goals past Deportivo Coruna to become the first man to achieve the feat in Spain's top league in more than a decade.

Fernando Morientes was the last player to score five in a match playing for Real Madrid against Las Palmas in February 2002 and Falcao was the first to do so for

Atletico as they thrashed Depor 6-0 to stay in second place, six points behind leaders Barcelona.

"I scored five in a game when I was little in Bogota," the Colombian known as "the tiger" said on Atletico's website.

"And I got four playing for Porto against Villarreal but never five as a professional," he added.

"I was very excited when I came to Atletico Madrid. It was a personal challenge to play in this great league with such a lot of good players

"I am enjoying it. I have a great squad around me who are supporting me and helping me a great deal to develop as a professional."

Falcao took his tally in La Liga this season to 16 in 15 matches, three more than Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo and seven behind top scorer Lionel Messi of Barcelona.

RESULTS

Levante 4 (Martins 43, Navarro 49, Santos 54, Iborra 58) **Real Mallorca 0**
Athletic Bilbao 1 (Aduziz 34)
Celta Vigo 0
Atletico Madrid 6 (Diego Costa 23, Falcao 28, 42, 64-pen, 67, 71)
Deportivo La Coruna 0
Real Betis 1 (Ruben Castro 39)

Henry set for third spell

AFP, London

French World Cup winner Thierry Henry is set for another loan return to English Premier League giants Arsenal, the club where he remains an icon and all-time top scorer, Britain's press reported Monday.

The New York Red Bulls striker could make his debut in the Gunners' FA Cup clash against Swansea on January 6 with talks between the two clubs reportedly at an advanced stage.

It would be his third spell at Arsenal following a similar loan arrangement in January of this year.

Under-fire Gunners boss Arsene Wenger hopes to keep the 35-year-old forward until the end of the English season in May, but his parent club are keen to have him back by the start of the US season in March, according to the Daily Mail.

Hulk makes peace

AFP, Moscow

Zenit Saint Petersburg's big-money Brazilian signing Hulk has made his peace with the club after threatening to leave following an early substitution last week, he said in an interview Monday.

Zenit's Italian manager Luciano Spalletti brought off Hulk with 10 minutes to go in the Champions League clash against AC Milan, prompting him to threaten to leave in the new year.

But Hulk told the Sport Express daily that such reactions were just normal behaviour for a passionate player who wanted to do the best for his team.

"I play and train not just for myself but for the team. I think the desire to play until the final whistle is natural for a footballer," he said.



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Reds turn it around

AFP, London



Liverpool staged an impressive fightback as the Reds scored twice in the closing stages to secure a 3-2 win over West Ham at Upton Park on Sunday.

Brendan Rodgers' side were in danger of suffering the latest setback of a disappointing campaign after Mark Noble's penalty and a Steven Gerrard own goal put the Hammers 2-1 up following Glen Johnson's early opener.

But, to their credit, Liverpool dug deep to equalise through Joe Cole before West Ham defender James Collins turned a Jordan Henderson cross into his own net with 11 minutes remaining.

Liverpool's second successive Premier League win lifted them up to 10th place and remarkably they are now within four points of the top four despite their early-season struggles.

The result was all the more impressive as they achieved it without suspended star striker Luis Suarez.

Rodgers' team took the lead in the 11th minute when Gerrard played the ball out to Johnson on the touchline and the England right-back cut inside Matt Jarvis with ease before arrowing a strike into the top corner of Jussi Jaaskelainen's goal.

Johnson did not celebrate out of respect for his former club, but Liverpool should have been further ahead soon after.

Raheem Sterling had two chances to

double Liverpool's advantage, the teenager first firing wide of Jaaskelainen's near post and then sending a low drive just off target.

But, after a tepid start, West Ham started to threaten and they equalised in the 36th minute.

A set-piece was cleared as far as Guy Demel whose shot hit the arm of Joe Allen as the Liverpool midfielder closed him down.

Referee Lee Probert deemed the block to be intentional and pointed to the spot, with Noble stepping up to convert the penalty.

It got worse for Liverpool two minutes before half-time when they switched off after conceding a free-kick which Noble took quickly to find Jarvis in space on the left.

Jarvis sent over a cross and Gerrard rose to nod clear, but instead powered his header past the stunned Jose Reina and into his own net.

Sterling came close to equalising after the break as his effort from the edge of the area forced Jaaskelainen to flick the ball over his bar.

Rodgers sent on Henderson for Brazilian midfielder Lucas in the 71st minute and the change sparked Liverpool's late revival.

It was Cole, who has endured a miserable time with Liverpool since joining from Chelsea three years ago, who equalised in the 76th minute when he took Sterling's pass and curled a superb shot past Jaaskelainen.

Inter overtake Napoli

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan moved up to second and closed the gap to Juventus to four points in Serie A Sunday thanks to a

clinical but hard-fought 2-1 win over fellow title chasers Napoli.

A pair of goals from south Americans Fredy Guarin and Diego Milito settled Inter's nerves before half-time and despite Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani reducing the arrears just before the hour the visitors failed to pull level in a tighter second half.

With the players' still warming up in freezing temperatures at the San Siro, the roof was raised when Guarin ghosted in at the back in the eighth minute to volley Antonio Cassano's curling corner past a helpless Morgan De Sanctis.

Napoli looked dangerous going forward but spurned the few half-chances they created.

Slovakian playmaker Marek Hamsik sent an angled shot wide from 10 yards from Cavani's lay-off and Cavani was ruled offside after a missed header from close range after Lorenzo Insigne's perfect delivery at the back post.

Cassano, meanwhile, was making himself a nuisance for the Napoli defence and twice got into the area after one-tuos with Milito, only to be left needing treatment after being

sandwiched between Cannavaro and Gamberini.

When Inter scored their second, it came from nothing but put the Nerazzurri well on their way to securing the three points.

The lively Guarin pounced on a poor Napoli clearance, strode forward to feed Milito who did well to hold off Alessandro Gamberini and sidefoot the ball into the net despite a desperate parry by De Sanctis.

Inter emerged in positive fashion

RESULTS

Palermo 0 **Juventus 1** (Lichsteiner 50)
Pescara 2 (Abbruscato 52, Vukusic 73) **Genoa 0**
Cagliari 0 **Chievo 2** (Paloschi 67, Thereau 87)
Siena 1 (Rosina 10) **Catania 3** (Castro 50, Bergessio 66, 82)
Torino 2 (Santana 28, Bianchi 80) **AC Milan 4**
(Robinho 40, Nocerino 53, Pazzini 61, El Shaarawy 76)
Inter Milan 2 (Guarin 8, Milito 39) **Napoli 1**

after the interval, although Guarin drove his long-range effort from Alvaro Pereira's pass well wide and when the Uruguayan fed Cassano the Italian hit his close range shot straight at De Sanctis.

Napoli, however, pressed forward and when the ball fell to Gohkan Inler on the edge of the area the Swiss midfielder's well-struck volley brought a diving save from Samir Handanovic.

Napoli had the ball in the net moments later with Cavani pounc-

ing at the back post after Samir Handanovic had performed heroics to somehow keep out desperate efforts. The goal galvanised Napoli but their claims for a penalty after Christian Maggio had fallen under pressure from a defender were waved away.

Andrea Stramaccioni bolstered his Latin contingent when he replaced Cassano with Rodrigo Palacio on the hour mark, and the Argentine had an almost immediate effect when he nodded down for Guarin only for the latter's shot across goal to find no takers.

Napoli had stalled and after an Inter counter the hosts held court in the visitors' area but when Guarin found time and space after deftly sidestepping defender Valon Behrami his through ball went astray.

Milito made way for Brazilian midfielder Coutinho but it was wingback Yuto Nagatomo who next threatened De Sanctis, the keeper being forced to block as the Japanese chased down Guarin's chip with seven minutes to play.

Inter lived dangerously at the other end when Cavani powered down the left and sent in a cross which a backtracking Pereira somehow spun out for a corner.

Cavani then won a freekick and when Insigne sent in an inviting curling ball for Maggio at the back post his headed effort went straight to Handanovic.

Mueller hails 'giant' Messi

AFP, Berlin



Germany great Gerd Mueller on Monday described Lionel Messi as a "giant" after the Argentine broke his calendar year goalscoring record that had stood for 40 years.

"My record of 85 goals in 60 matches, which stood since 1972, was beaten by the best player in the world, Lionel Messi, and I'm very happy for him,"

Mueller said, according to a spokesman for his former club, Bayern Munich.

The former Germany striker added that he thought Messi was "an incredible player, a giant who is at the same time very nice and a polished professional".

Messi, still just 25, on Sunday equalled then surpassed Mueller's record with two first-half goals that secured a 2-1 win for his side Barcelona against Seville club Real Betis. "I hope he'll score one or two goals again in the matches that remain in 2012 and that his record will stand for the next 40 years," added Mueller, who was nicknamed "Der Bomber" (The Bomber).

Mueller, who was at his peak between 1964 and 1979 but battled alcoholism since his retirement in 1981, joked that Messi only had one fault: "He doesn't play for Bayern Munich."

Messi has previously beaten the record for the most goals in Spain's La Liga in a season -- 50 -- and is favourite to win an unprecedented fourth Ballon d'O award in succession when the prize is announced on January 7.

At 67, Mueller is by far the best goalscorer in the history of the Bundesliga with 365 in 427 matches.



Inter Milan forward Diego Milito (R) is ecstatic after scoring against Napoli during their Serie A clash at San Siro on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP