

Juve rout Atalanta

AFP, Milan

Juventus extended their lead over title challengers Inter Milan to seven points thanks to a 3-0 rout of Atalanta on Sunday as AC Milan continued their Serie A resurgence with a 4-1 defeat of Pescara.

Champions Juve held a four-point lead going into their 17th match of the campaign but took full advantage of Inter's 1-0 defeat away to Lazio on Saturday to pull clear of the pack.

In Sunday's late match Napoli spurned the chance to leapfrog Inter into second place after two late goals gave Bologna a shock 3-2 away win.

Montenegrin striker Mirko Vucinic opened the scoring for Juve with barely 90 seconds on the clock, and midfield veteran Andrea Pirlo doubled the hosts' lead on the quarter-hour with a sublime, curling freekick.

Claudio Marchisio made it three for Juve with a low drive from the edge of the area after latching on to Sebastian Giovinco's squared pass.

Atalanta's Thomas Manfredini was red carded for a second bookable offence just before the half hour after a rash challenge on defender Giorgio Chiellini, and although they battled there was no way back for the Bergamo side.

Despite the growing gap, Juve coach Antonio Conte remained cautious: "It was a good result for us against a difficult team, but the season is far from over.

"Winning the title is never easy but through our good organisation and solid play we hope to show it's within our grasp."

Milan's resurgence, following a disastrous start to the season, continued as they outclassed Pescara.

Alberto Nocerino finished off a great move to tap home from Stephan El Shaarawy's squared pass in the first minute and then Pescara striker Elvis Abbruscato headed home Robinho's cross to double the hosts' lead.

Although Christian Terlizzi rose to meet a free kick and reduce the arrears on the hour, Pescara scored another own goal through Brazilian striker Jonathas, who

headed El Shaarawy's corner past keeper Mattia Perin.

El Shaarawy was finally rewarded after powering down the left to slot home Giampaolo Pazzini's low cross for his league-topping 14th goal of the season.

Nocerino dedicated his goal to the victims of the latest shooting disaster to hit the United States.

"I dedicate this goal to the families of the children who were killed in America," he said.

Fiorentina's 4-1 rout of Siena, complete with a brace from former Italy striker Luca Toni, saw them leapfrog Roma into fifth place.

Roma had hoped to restore order on their away trip to Chievo, a match played in heavy fog, but suffered a 1-0 defeat following a late goal by Chievo striker Sergio Pellissier.

At the San Paolo stadium, Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani gave Napoli a 70th

minute lead after team-mate Alessandro Gamberini had bundled the ball home to level Manolo Gabbiardini's 10th minute opener.

The three points looked to be secured, however Napoli's concentration dipped in the final 10 minutes and Bologna punished their hosts with two quick goals in succession.

Panagiotis Kone levelled in spectacular fashion with a bicycle kick effort on 81 minutes and seven minutes later Daniele Portanova rose to direct his header past a beaten Morgan De Sanctis to secure a shock win.

Bologna's fifth win of the season moved them up three places to 13th.

And Portanova, making his first appearance since serving a four-month ban for his role in a match-fixing affair while at former club Siena, believes they can improve.

"I suffered a lot, so this goal is dedicated first to my family, and then to a true friend, a brother, Gabriele Bordoni," said Portanova. Bordoni is the lawyer who assisted Portanova during his legal wranglings.

"Bologna are playing some good football this season and today we won by fighting all the way to the 90th minute and never giving up."

RESULTS

Napoli 2 (Gamberini 50, Cavani 70) **Bologna 3** (Gabbiardini 10, Kone 81, Portanova 88)
Fiorentina 4 (Toni 15, 79, Pizzaro 18-pen, Aquilani 44) Siena 1 (Reginaldo 70)
Catania 3 (Pagliarunga 55, Bergessio 65, Castro 90) Sampdoria 1 (Maresca 29-pen)
Chievo 1 (Pellissier 87) Roma 0
Genoa 1 (Granqvist 29) Torino 1 (Bianchi 19)
Juventus 3 (Vucinic 2, Pirlo 14, Marchisio 27) Atalanta 0
Milan 4 (Nocerino 1, Abbruscato 51-og, Jonathas 79-og, El Shaarawy 81) Pescara 1 (Terlizzi 56)
Parma 4 (Belfodil 21, 86, Biabiany 54, Valdes 65-

Unstoppable Barca

REUTERS, Madrid



Atletico and Real Madrid all but throwing in the towel before the midway point of the season.

Any doubts about Tito Vilanova's abilities to take up where Pep Guardiola left off after four trophy-laden seasons look to have been misplaced with Barca nine points clear of Atletico and 13 ahead of champions Real Madrid after only 16 games.

A 4-1 thrashing of Diego Simeone's pretenders on Sunday, with another double from Messi, served to underline their dominance in a league where they have swept up 46 of 48 points so far.

Third-placed Real were held to a surprise 2-2 draw by Espanyol at the Bernabeu.

"Barca are left without rivals," Catalonia-based daily Sport gloated on Monday. "The league isn't won yet... but everyone thinks it is."

"Those who thought it would be impossible to better Guardiola's era were short-sighted. Last night, Barca won two games in one. Madrid were knocked out, and Atletico brought to their knees."

Argentina forward Messi, who is favourite to collect a fourth World Player award next month, may not have been the outstanding figure against Atletico but he won his personal duel with the league's other form striker Radamel Falcao.

Adriano's spectacular equaliser for Barca was the pick of the goals at the Nou Camp, but Messi bagged two second-half goals to help cancel out Colombia

striker Falcao's deft 31st minute opener.

The 26-year-old Falcao, on the wish list for a number of top European clubs, glanced a header against the post, pulled another shot just wide and grabbed his 17th goal in La Liga with a cool one-on-one finish past Victor Valdes.

Messi, however, topped that with his brace. He has scored the same as or more than 17 other sides in La Liga with 25 so far, and took his 2012 tally for club and country to 90.

"Barcelona's overall play is very important, but he opens up and finishes off many of the matches. He is different," Simeone said of his Argentine compatriot.

Atletico's title credentials may have been dented by their failures at Real and Barca, but La Liga's only remaining 100 per cent home record means the Calderon could still play a part in deciding the outcome.

Just as Atletico so far

have replaced their city rivals as Barca's closest pursuers, so Falcao has usurped Cristiano Ronaldo as Messi's nearest challenger in the goal-scoring charts.

With Gonzalo Higuain and Karim Benzema both out injured, Ronaldo scored one and set up a second for Fabio Coentrao against Espanyol, taking his league tally to 14, but it was not enough.

"Cristiano played a good game, but his team mates didn't," under-pressure Real coach Jose Mourinho told a news conference. "The overall attitude was good but we lacked composure and luck."

Real face another tough trip before the winter break, away at fourth-placed Malaga on Saturday, when Barca visit Valladolid.

"We aren't stupid, we know we are in a good position in the league, but we must be prudent because the league is far from over yet," Spain and Barca midfielder Xavi told reporters.

RESULTS

Real Zaragoza 0 **Levante 1** (Santos 19)
Valencia 0 **Rayo Vallecano 1** (Dominguez 83-pen)
Real Madrid 2 (Cristiano Ronaldo 45+1, Coentrao 48) Espanyol 2 (Sergio Garcia 31, Albin 88)
Barcelona 4 (Adriano 36, Busquets 45, Messi 57,

Vertonghen fires Spurs

AFP, London



Tottenham Hotspur rekindled their push for Champions League qualification by overcoming Swansea City 1-0 on Sunday to return to the Premier League's top four.

Jan Vertonghen claimed the game's only goal with 15 minutes remaining at White Hart Lane, crisply dispatching a free-kick from Kyle Walker to register his first goal in the English top flight.

Walker had come closest to breaking the deadlock in the first half, only for his rasping 25-yard drive to be parried by visiting goalkeeper Gerhard Tremmel.

Tremmel also denied Jermain Defoe in the closing stages, while injury time saw England midfielder Scott Parker make his first Spurs appearance of the season after a spell on the sidelines

with an Achilles problem.

Spurs had slipped out of the top four after shipping two late goals in a 2-1 loss at Everton last weekend, and Vertonghen said he was relieved that his side had held firm in the closing stages on this occasion.

"(The goal) was at the perfect time," the Belgian centre-back told Sky Sports.

"Swansea play good football, but I think we made lots of chances today. We were strong to the end, because we know what's happened in six or seven other games."

There were worrying scenes for Swansea in stoppage time when top scorer Michu was pole-axed in a collision with Spurs goalkeeper Hugo Lloris.

The Spaniard was able to return to the fray, but visiting coach Michael Laudrup criticised referee Mike Dean for not bringing play to a halt.

"I was very angry and it wasn't because I wanted a free-kick or a red

card for Lloris, or a penalty, or whatever, but there is a debate -- should we kick the ball out?" he said.

"I watched it afterwards on the television and when it happened, when Michu is going down to the ground, the referee is watching them, the linesman is watching them, and still they let the game go on.

"It is such a poor decision, and dangerous as well."

West Bromwich Albion remain in sixth place, two points below Spurs, after a 0-0 draw at home to West Ham United extended the Baggies' run of matches without victory to four.

West Brom midfielder James Morrison twice hit the woodwork in the second period for the hosts, while Winston Reid, Gary O'Neil and Joey O'Brien all narrowly failed to find the target for the visitors.

"We created half-chances, but they didn't fall for us," Morrison told Sky Sports.

Jose gives up title race

AFP, Madrid

With Real Madrid trailing La Liga leaders Barcelona by 13 points, Jose Mourinho admits that the title race is virtually over, even in December.

While Barcelona kept up their prolific form with their 15th win in 16 games by beating second-place Atletico Madrid 4-1, Mourinho's stuttering Real could only draw 2-2 against lowly Espanyol.

"The league is now impossible," said Mourinho. "It is the first time that I have been in a situation like this where my team are a long way off their objectives."

"Thirteen points is too big a gap to overcome but what we have to do is go out and play each game. We shouldn't be thinking about who is first, second or third.

"We have to be stronger. I don't want to make a drama out of it, I will treat it as another stage of my life."

SA launches fixing probe

AFP, Johannesburg

The South African Football Association (SAFA) Monday launched a probe into match fixing of friendlies before the 2010 World Cup and asked its president to step down for an undetermined period.

A retired judge is to head the probe, which will also call former CEO Lesley Sedibe and former head of referees Steve Goddard.

Vice-president Mwelo Nonkonyana will act as interim president.

PSG edge Lyon to take top spot

AFP, Paris



A first half injury-time goal from Blaise Matuidi gave Paris Saint-Germain a 1-0 victory in their top-of-the-table clash with Lyon at the Parc des Princes on Sunday as the capital club moved top on goal difference.

Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic, whose steady supply of goals has constituted the bedrock of PSG's tilt at a first league crown since 1994, this time turned provider, cutting in from the right to whip over a cross for Matuidi, lurking on the edge of the box.

The French-born midfielder, whose parents are both Angolan, promptly launched himself to nod past Lyon keeper Remy Vercoutre.

PSG's success before a 43,000 crowd saw them move ahead of both Lyon and Marseille on goal difference with all three having garnered 35 points from 18 games.

Lyon's third defeat of the campaign was a further blow after they had dropped two home points in a midweek draw with rock-bottom Nancy while PSG had been grateful to an Ibrahimovic hat-trick in a 4-0 thrashing of Valenciennes.

And this loss extended their winless sequence against the Parisians to eight encounters.

Lyon gave as good as they got in the early exchanges despite Remi Garde's men missing the midfield creativity of the injured Yoann Gourcuff.

PSG coach Carlo Ancelotti left out Brazilian attacking midfielder Nene, who was dropped for the past two league outings after his attitude to being left on the bench for a Champions League match against Porto came in for criticism - although Ancelotti insisted "his attitude has changed - (but) he has a small calf problem".

The Parisians, floating on a sea of cash from their Qatari owners but still trying to find the right blend in what has been an inconsistent campaign - will now hold on to pole position if they can win their final match of the year on Friday at Brest.

Lyon complete their 2012 programme on Saturday at home to Nice while Marseille finish off the year at the Stade Velodrome against fallen giants Saint Etienne.

Lyon might have easily bagged a point but Argentine striker Lisandro Lopez hit the post.

That was a rare excursion into the danger zone from a visiting side playing five at the back and once PSG had their lead the hosts rarely looked like conceding their advantage.

Arfa facing long layoff

AFP, London

Newcastle's French international midfielder Hatem Ben Arfa is in danger of missing the Christmas programme after aggravating a hamstring injury.

The 25-year-old missed Saturday's 3-1 Premier League defeat by Manchester City and coach Alan Pardew has said that his absence could be prolonged.

"Hatem looks like he is going to miss the next two or three with the injury he has got. We can't risk him," he said

Ben Arfa suffered the original damage during the 1-1 Europa League draw with Maritimo at St James' Park on November 22 and sat out the following four games as a result.

He returned and scored in the 2-1 defeat at Fulham on December 10, but later reported discomfort in the hamstring and fearing an escalation, Pardew has decided to rest him fully in a bid to avoid a much lengthier lay-off.

Ben Arfa is likely to miss Saturday's vital home clash with QPR, who finally recorded their first win of the campaign at the weekend.



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Tottenham Hotspur defender Jan Vertonghen (R) celebrates his all-important goal with teammates during their Premier League encounter against Swansea City at White Hart Lane on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP