



Arsenal playmaker Santi Cazorla (L) celebrates his hat-trick goal against Reading during their Premier League encounter at the Madejski Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Cazorla lifts Arsenal

AFP, Reading



Santi Cazorla scored a hat-trick to lift Arsenal's spirits as the Gunners bounced back from their League Cup humiliation with an emphatic 5-2 victory at Reading on Monday.

Spanish midfielder Cazorla struck twice in the first half after Lukas Podolski's opener and completed his treble after the break to shatter Reading's hopes of inflicting more misery on Arsene Wenger's spluttering side.

Adam Le Fondre and Jimmy Kebe reduced the deficit for Reading, but Theo Walcott's late strike confirmed Arsenal's rise to fifth place, two points behind Chelsea and Tottenham, and left the hosts bottom of the table and six points adrift of safety.

It also gave Wenger and his players some much needed breathing space after heavy criticism following last week's shock League Cup quarterfinal defeat at League Two minnows Bradford.

Inevitably Wenger made changes from the side that had flopped so badly against Bradford.

Ivory Coast forward Gervinho was dropped to the bench as Wenger opted for an attacking formation featuring Walcott, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Podolski.

Walcott's return to fitness following a calf

injury was particularly well-timed as the England international had scored a hat-trick at Reading in October in the League Cup when the Gunners recovered from being 4-0 down to win 7-5 in extra time.

Walcott began as the central attacker, the position he insists he prefers, with Oxlade-Chamberlain on the right and Podolski on the left.

Oxlade-Chamberlain was quickly into the action, exchanging passes with Cazorla before forcing Reading goalkeeper Adam Federici into a diving parry.

Reading's Noel Hunt headed over from a corner but Arsenal's reply was a 14th-minute opener from Podolski, who took Kieran Gibbs' cross from the left down with one touch and rammed the ball past Federici with his next.

Reading were rocking and Podolski created the next Arsenal chance with a cut back from the left and although Gibbs' initial effort was blocked Wilshere's follow-up forced Federici into another save.

Arsenal doubled their lead when Podolski's cross from the left was nodded in by the smallest man on the pitch, Cazorla, in the 32nd minute.

And the Gunners needed only two minutes and 41 seconds to extend their lead, with Cazorla again the man on target.

Gibbs headed down Walcott's cross from the right and the Spaniard swivelled to beat Federici from eight yards.

Spain reign supreme

Football

AFP, London

With a performance of breath-taking technical mastery in their Euro 2012 final humbling of Italy, Spain proved this year that they are one of the greatest national teams ever to have graced the game.

The 4-0 victory over the Azzurri in Kiev on July 1 made Vicente del Bosque's side the first team to successfully defend the European crown and the first nation to win three consecutive major international titles.

Beyond the silverware, their stylistic legacy looks set to be remembered with the kind of reverence previously reserved for the Brazilian World Cup winners of 1970 or Rinus Michels' Netherlands side of 1974.

In the build-up to the final, however, Spain had found themselves assailed by accusations that their intricate passing football had become 'boring'.

After beating France 2-0 in the last eight, they needed penalties to overcome Iberian rivals Portugal in the semifinals, and there were claims that their style had become mechanical.

The critics' pens were poised, but Xavi and player of the tournament Andres Iniesta blew off the cobwebs in the final to inspire a thrilling demolition of Cesare Prandelli's Italy.

"We're talking about a great generation of footballers," said Del Bosque.

"They have roots, and they know

how to play together because they come from a country where they learn to play properly.

"We've done a great job. We have some great lads who play abroad, which was impossible before. We didn't really have players abroad and now foreign clubs want our players, so this is a great era for Spanish football."

Spanish thoughts quickly turned to the next World Cup, in Brazil in 2014, when the hosts will hope to exorcise the spectres that still linger from their shock loss to Uruguay when they last hosted the tournament in 1950.

FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke had to apologise after suggesting earlier in the year that Brazil needed "a kick up the backside" in order to get ready for the event.

The world governing body now appears satisfied with Brazil's infrastructural preparations, but ahead of next year's dry run in the Confederations Cup, there are fears the team itself may not come up to scratch.

Brazil endured a trying year, notably failing to add a long sought-after Olympic gold medal to their trophy collection after being upset by Mexico in the competition final in London in August.

Coach Mano Menezes ultimately paid with his job, but his replacement, 2002 World Cup-winner Luiz Felipe Scolari, faces a challenge to steel the Selecao for a tilt at a sixth world crown.

Despite the glittering talent of

Santos striker Neymar, Brazil's squad is short on international experience, and Scolari knows that excuses for failure will simply not be accepted.

"We have an obligation to win -- we are playing at home," he said.

"Don't you think our players are aware of the importance of winning the trophy on home soil?"

"We are not favourites right now, but we intend to turn ourselves into favourites during the tournament."

Brazil's problems were not helped by the sight of Argentina storming to the top of the South American World Cup qualifying table in the host nation's absence.

Lionel Messi's 12 goals in nine international games, meanwhile, suggest he has finally found the secret to reproducing his Barcelona form in the colours of his country.

The year began with a memorable underdog tale, as unfancied Zambia defeated the mighty Ivory Coast -- Didier Drogba and all -- on penalties in Gabon to claim their first ever Africa Cup of Nations title.

There were first-time successes in the continental club tournaments as well, with English giants Chelsea, Corinthians of Brazil and South Korea's Ulsan Hyundai triumphing in Europe, South America and Asia.

Football also began to adjust to the arrival of goal-line technology, with two systems -- HawkEye and GoalRef -- trialled during December's Club World Cup in Japan, which saw Corinthians edge Chelsea 1-0 in the final.

Napoli docked two points

AFP, Rome

Napoli have been docked two points and fined 70,000 euros (\$92,000, 57,000 pounds) in connection with a long-running probe into illegal betting, the Italian football federation (FIGC) said on Tuesday.

The southern Italy club's captain Paolo Cannavaro and fellow defender Gianluca Grava were banned for six months for "failing to report evidence of corruption", the federation added.

Napoli, who have said they would appeal the sanction, were in third spot before the ruling but now fall to fifth, 10 points behind defending champions and league leaders Juventus, in a severe blow to their title hopes.

The FIGC disciplinary committee also said it had suspended former goalkeeper Matteo Gianello for three years and three months for his involvement in an attempt to fix the match between Napoli and Sampdoria on May 16, 2010.

This season, Serie A sides Siena have been docked six points, Atalanta two and Torino one as a result of the illegal betting investigation.

Messi signs new deal

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona's star Argentinian striker Lionel Messi has pledged to stay with the Spanish giants until June 2018 by renewing his contract, the club said Tuesday.

Currently leading the league by a huge nine points, Barcelona also said that they had agreed contract renewals with Spain internationals and longtime club stalwarts Carles Puyol and Xavi Hernandez.

A statement from the club said that an agreement had been agreed with Messi, 25, whose current contract expires in 2016, and that he would sign his new deal "in the coming weeks".

Veteran defender and captain Puyol, 34, and midfielder Xavi, 32 - one of the heroes of Spain's Euro victory this year - have each signed up to stay until 2016. Puyol's current contract expires next year and Xavi's in 2014.

"This news means that FC Barcelona has secured its ties with three of its most important players," the club said in its statement.

Barcelona are 13 points clear of their fierce rivals, title holders Real Madrid, at the top of the Spanish league, and nine points ahead of second-placed Atletico Madrid, whom they beat 4-1 last weekend.

The Catalan giants are unbeaten in the league this season with 15 wins and one draw.

"It is very satisfying for the board to extend a successful project by renewing Xavi, Puyol and Messi," a spokesman for the club's management Toni Freixa told a news conference.

Messi - who has been at the club since 2004 - is the top scorer in the league with 25 goals so far this season, ahead of Atletico's Radamel Falcao who has 17 and Real's Cristiano Ronaldo on 14.

The Argentine recently broke Gerd Mueller's 40-year record for the most goals in a calendar year.

Mueller scored 85 in 1972 and Messi has scored 90 so far this year, though there are claims that Godfrey Chitalu of Zambia and Zico of Brazil netted more.

Messi is also Barca's highest ever scorer, having broken Cesar Rodriguez's record from the 1950s.

Bin Hammam steps down

AFP, Paris

Mohamed Bin Hammam on Monday announced that he had resigned from his roles on FIFA's executive committee and as president of the Asian Football Confederation.

The Qatari told AFP in an emailed statement that he had stepped down from the positions 10 days after the ethics committee of football's world governing body FIFA, launched a new probe into corruption claims against him.

FIFA responded to bin Hammam's statement by saying it had received his resignation letter but stressed its ethics committee remained competent to make and maintain a judgment "even if a person resigns".

The 63-year-old has been accused of trying to buy the result of a vote to the world governing body's top job in 2011 and was banned by FIFA from all footballing activities.

Last month, the AFC said it was looking to replace bin Hammam following a unanimous decision to hold presidential elections next year.

According to insiders, interim president Zhang Jilong of China is favourite to claim the post full-time.

Samp sack Ferrara

AFP, Rome

Sampdoria have sacked coach Ciro Ferrara and replaced him with Delio Rossi, the Serie A side said Monday following a weekend loss to Catania which left the Genoans just three points off the drop zone.

Ferrara had briefly looked to have saved himself after ending a recent run of seven straight losses with two wins - including a derby meeting with Genoa. But one point from the last three games sealed his fate.

Delio Rossi, 52, has previously coached Lazio, Palermo and Fiorentina, where he was fired last season after hitting one of his players, the just substituted Adem Ljajic.

Fellaini given 3-match ban

AFP, London



Everton midfielder Marouane Fellaini was given a three-match suspension on Monday after accepting a charge of violent conduct for headbutting Stoke's Ryan Shawcross.

Fellaini wasn't punished by referee Mark Halsey, who missed the incident which occurred in the 59th minute of Everton's 1-1 draw against Stoke at the Britannia Stadium on Saturday.

But the 25-year-old was charged retrospectively after the Football Association reviewed footage of his clash with Stoke defender Shawcross, who had grappled with the Belgian just before the incident as they prepared for a corner.

A statement from the FA also referred to two other clashes between Fellaini and Shawcross, but Halsey has confirmed he saw both and did not consider them violent conduct.

Fellaini had already apologised for his conduct and Everton manager David Moyes also condemned the incident.

"I apologise completely to Ryan Shawcross, my team mates and to our fans at the game," Fellaini said in a statement released soon after Saturday's match.

"There was a lot of pushing and pulling going on inside the Stoke penalty area and I didn't feel I was getting any protection from the officials.

"Nevertheless I know I shouldn't have done what I did. I have also apologised to the manager and the staff.

"I have no excuses. I was disappointed with the way I was being treated and I lost my temper, which was unprofessional of me."



Celta Vigo winger Michael Krohn-Dehli (R) evades a slide-tackle from Real Betis midfielder Nosa Igiebor (C) during their Primera Liga tie at the Balaidos Stadium on Monday. Real Betis won 1-0.

PHOTO: REUTERS