

Betis keep up push for Europe

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Betis drew level on 31 points with fourth-placed Malaga after Ruben Castro and Jorge Molina struck in a 2-1 win at Real Zaragoza in La Liga on Friday.

Betis continued their fine form away from home with a sixth victory in nine games on the road keeping them fifth in the table with an inferior goal difference to Malaga who visit Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday.

Castro fired Betis ahead in the 44th minute at the Romareda when he galloped on to a pass from Nigerian midfielder Nosa Igiebor and finished low past Zaragoza goalkeeper Roberto.

Molina doubled the lead 13 minutes into the second half when he made the most of an error by defender Alvaro Gonzalez before Francisco Montanes pulled a goal back for Zaragoza 13 minutes from time.

Gonzalez's night went from bad to worse when he was shown a straight red card after the final whistle for verbally abusing the referee.

"Away from home we are playing better

and starting the year with three points is not a bad thing," Castro, 31, said in an interview with Spanish broadcaster MarcaTV.

"There is still a lot of time left in the season and we know it's going to be tough but I think we have a good team, we are doing things well and we'll see if we can keep it up."

Seville-based Betis, who beat champions Real Madrid 1-0 at the end of November, are looking good for a place in Europe next term.

They last took part in European competition in 2005-06 when they finished third in their Champions League group behind Liverpool and Chelsea.

Betis were relegated in 2008-09 before winning promotion back to Spain's top flight two years later.

Unbeaten leaders Barcelona will seek a 17th win in 18 matches when they host city rivals Espanyol on Sunday (1800 GMT) and may be boosted by the return of coach Tito Vilanova who is recuperating from a throat operation.

Also on Sunday, Atletico Madrid, nine points behind Barca in second, visit Real Mallorca (2000) and Real Madrid, a further seven points back in third, are at home to Real Sociedad (1600).



Real Betis forward Jorge Molina celebrates scoring the second goal during their Primera Liga clash against Real Zaragoza at the La Romareda Stadium on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pressure on Wenger

AFP, Swansea



Arsene Wenger's record in the FA Cup means the competition will always be special to the Arsenal manager but this season it could be critical to his efforts to prove he is still the right man to lead the club.

Wenger has already emerged from one sustained bout of criticism this season that intensified when his side were beaten at home last month by Swansea.

A month on from that defeat, Arsenal will head to South Wales for Sunday's FA Cup third round meeting with Swansea in better shape following an improved run of form in the league.

However, they remain in sixth place in the Premier League, 18 points adrift of the leaders Manchester United and destined once again to play a supporting role in the title race.

Eliminated from the League Cup by League Two minnows Bradford and facing Bayern Munich in the last 16 of the Champions League, the FA Cup represents Arsenal's best chance of ending their eight-year wait for silverware.

Their last trophy came in this competition in 2005 -- the fourth time Wenger had lifted the cup with Arsenal -- and another triumph this season would rekindle some of the support the manager has lost in recent years.

An early exit though, would put increased pressure on the Frenchman's transfer dealings this month, with Arsenal's supporters frustrated at the failure to adequately replace favourites like Robin van Persie and Cesc Fabregas.

And Wenger, who has allowed striker Marouane Chamakh to join West Ham on loan until the end of the season, admits this is not a time to rest players.

"I will play the team I think has the best chance to win the game, without considering any rotational desire," Wenger said.

"If you look at Queens Park Rangers' victory at Chelsea on Wednesday, you see there is nothing between the teams now.

"The teams are well-organised, they are physically strong and if you are not at your best, you don't win the game. It is the same for everybody.

"Manchester United are top of the League but they have already lost three games this season, so I believe the teams at this level are very competitive. Then, the FA Cup is something special because it is something exciting.

"I am always sad when we don't win it or when we go out and we will put in our maximum effort on Sunday to win the game."

Swansea's victory at the Emirates Stadium was achieved thanks to two goals from Michu and the Spanish forward will again pose the greatest threat to Arsenal's chances of making the fourth round.

Fiorentina snap up Rossi

REUTERS, Rome

Second tier Spanish club Villarreal have agreed to let former Manchester United striker Giuseppe Rossi join Fiorentina.

"Fiorentina and Villarreal confirm they have reached an agreement for the sale of Giuseppe Rossi subject to the signing of the contract by the player," the Serie A club said on their website.

According to media reports, Italian international Rossi is to sign a five-year deal and will cost an initial fee of 11 million euros (\$14.35 million) plus add-ons.

The 25-year-old has been out of action since April with a cruciate knee ligament injury and is not expected to return until March.

Third-placed Fiorentina, who are nine points behind league leaders Juventus, host struggling Pescara on Sunday.

Mourinho coy about Casillas return

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho spoke about the need for competition in the squad when he was asked on Saturday about the possible return to the starting lineup of goalkeeper and captain Iker Casillas against Real

Sociedad.

Mourinho stirred up controversy when he dropped Spain's number one and played reserve keeper Antonio Adan for the last La Liga game before the mid-season break away at Malaga in December, when the champions slipped to a 3-2 defeat.

"To be permanently in the comfort zone isn't good for players," Mourinho told a news conference ahead of their return to action on Sunday at home to the Basque club.

"All positions on the pitch are about confidence, it is fundamental for all the players, not only for the keepers.

"This translates into performance, but just as confidence is important so is competition, and we will try and strike that balance."

City fan gets 3 year ban

AFP, London

A Manchester City fan who confronted Manchester United star Rio Ferdinand on the Eastlands pitch in an ugly incident following last month's Premier League clash has been banned from attending matches for three years.

Matthew Stott, 21, had to be restrained by City goalkeeper Joe Hart as he tried to reach Ferdinand, who was already bleeding from a cut caused by a coin thrown from the stands.

Ferdinand had been celebrating Robin van Persie's late goal, which gave United a 3-2 win over their bitter rivals, when tempers boiled over.

Television footage of the incident was played at Manchester Magistrates Court showing Stott, who had been drinking heavily before kick-off, trying to get at the United defender.

Andy Holt, prosecuting, told the court after police caught him and cuffed him on the pitch he shouted a stream of abuse, even mocking the victims of the 1958 Munich disaster which saw several United players killed in a plane crash.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Bayern Munich star Arjen Robben practises shooting during a training session at the Aspire Academy for Sports Excellence in Doha yesterday.

Prince would do it again



Football

AFP, London

AC Milan star Kevin-Prince Boateng has vowed to walk off the pitch again if he suffers more racist abuse no matter what the significance of the match.

Boateng was subjected to racist taunts by Pro Patria fans during a friendly on Thursday and the German-born Ghanaian forward responded by storming off the pitch in protest followed by his Milan team-mates.

The 25-year-old has been backed by Milan owner Silvio Berlusconi and he is adamant the racists must not be allowed to win.

Boateng's zero tolerance policy means the former Tottenham player is even willing to leave the pitch in a big Champions League or Serie A match if it helps draw attention to racist abuse.

"I don't care what game it is -- a friendly, Serie A or Champions League match, I'd walk off the pitch again and I think everyone would support me," Boateng told CNN.

"I saw massive support from England and massive players like Rio Ferdinand and Patrick Vieira, and I want to say thank you. I'm sad and angry that I'm the one that has to take action."

Boateng had complained to the referee three times about the abuse in the Pro Patria match and he finally reacted when no action was taken by the officials and the taunts continued.

"I said to him if it happens again I'm not going to play any more. The referee said 'don't worry' but I said I do worry, it's not very nice," he said.

"I was angry and I was sad, but it all came together and I said I didn't want to play any more. There were so many negative emotions that came up in me.

"I'm surprised we're still hearing these things in 2013. It's not the first time in my life I've had to hear or see things like this but I'm 25 and don't want to take this any more."

Berlusconi has claimed his players will always walk off the pitch in future in protest at racist abuse.

Drogba linked with Milan, Juventus

REUTERS, Rome

Former Chelsea striker Didier Drogba could move to either AC Milan or Juventus in the January transfer window, according to his agent Carlos Arino Bajo.

In an interview with the Italian website tuttomercatoweb.com, Bajo said Drogba had been in contact with both Serie A clubs over a potential transfer after only six months with Chinese club Shanghai Shenhua.

"I think there is a good chance that he might come to Italy now," Bajo said. "There is genuine interest from Juventus, AC Milan and Didier himself regarding the transfer."

"There has been contact with Milan and Juventus to understand the contract situation with the Chinese and we will have further contact and meetings with them both next week.

"He would love to compete in one of the world's best leagues like the Italian Serie A."

However Juventus coach Antonio Conte said on Saturday he knew nothing about a possible transfer by the 34-year-old Ivory Coast captain.

"I keep reading about Drogba but the club have never proposed him to me or vice versa," he said at Juve's pre-match news conference on Saturday ahead of their clash with Sampdoria (1500 GMT). "There are economic issues that need to be taken into account. Any transfers must be smart and low cost."



STAR Cricket

Australia v Sri Lanka

Third Test, Day 4

Live from 5:30am

India v Pakistan

Third ODI

Live from 12:30pm

ESPN

FA Cup

Swansea City v Arsenal

Live from 7:30pm

Mansfield Town v Liverpool

Live from 10:00pm

STAR Sports

Primera Liga

Real Madrid v Real Sociedad

Live from 10:00pm

Barcelona v Espanyol

Live from 11:55pm

Mallorca v Atletico Madrid