

Barca rout Cordoba

 Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona's David Villa proved he still has a sharp eye for goal by scoring twice as the holders cruised into the King's Cup quarterfinals by beating second division Cordoba 5-0 at the Nou Camp on Thursday.

The Spain striker, his country's leading all-time scorer, has had to be content with a secondary role this season, but has continued to score when called upon and took his tally to five in four Cup games.

The 31-year-old netted twice in five first-half minutes to ease Barca's passage into the last eight, while a double from Alexis Sanchez after the break to add to the early opener from Thiago Alcantara gave the hosts a 7-0 aggregate victory.

"Villa has played a great game. He has showed us what we all already knew, that he should be an important player for us," Barca assistant coach Jordi Roura told a news conference as he stood in for the absent Tito Vilanova.

"He will return to be more important for us, without any doubt."

Barca set up a meeting with Champions League last-16 side Malaga in the next round, and could meet Real Madrid in the semifinals, if Jose Mourinho's side overcome Valencia.

On the other side of the draw, Atletico Madrid also made the quarters with a drab 0-0 draw at near neighbours Getafe after a 3-0 first-leg win.

Their task was made easier by a red card

for Getafe defender Rafa Lopez after 33 minutes and they will next meet Real Betis after the Andalusians scraped through 2-1 on aggregate against second division Las Palmas thanks to a late winner.

Betis had to work hard for their victory, having drawn 1-1 in the Canary Islands, and had to wait until five minutes from time before Ruben Castro pounced on an error to fire the only goal of the second leg.

Las Palmas's strikers Macauley Christianus and Thievy will look back on some glaring misses.

Real Zaragoza take on 2010 winners Sevilla in the remaining quarterfinal. The first legs are to be played next week.

Barca had left players such as Gerard Pique, Xavi and Andres Iniesta out of the squad and newly-crowned World Player of the Year Lionel Messi stayed on the bench, but they still dominated against Cordoba.

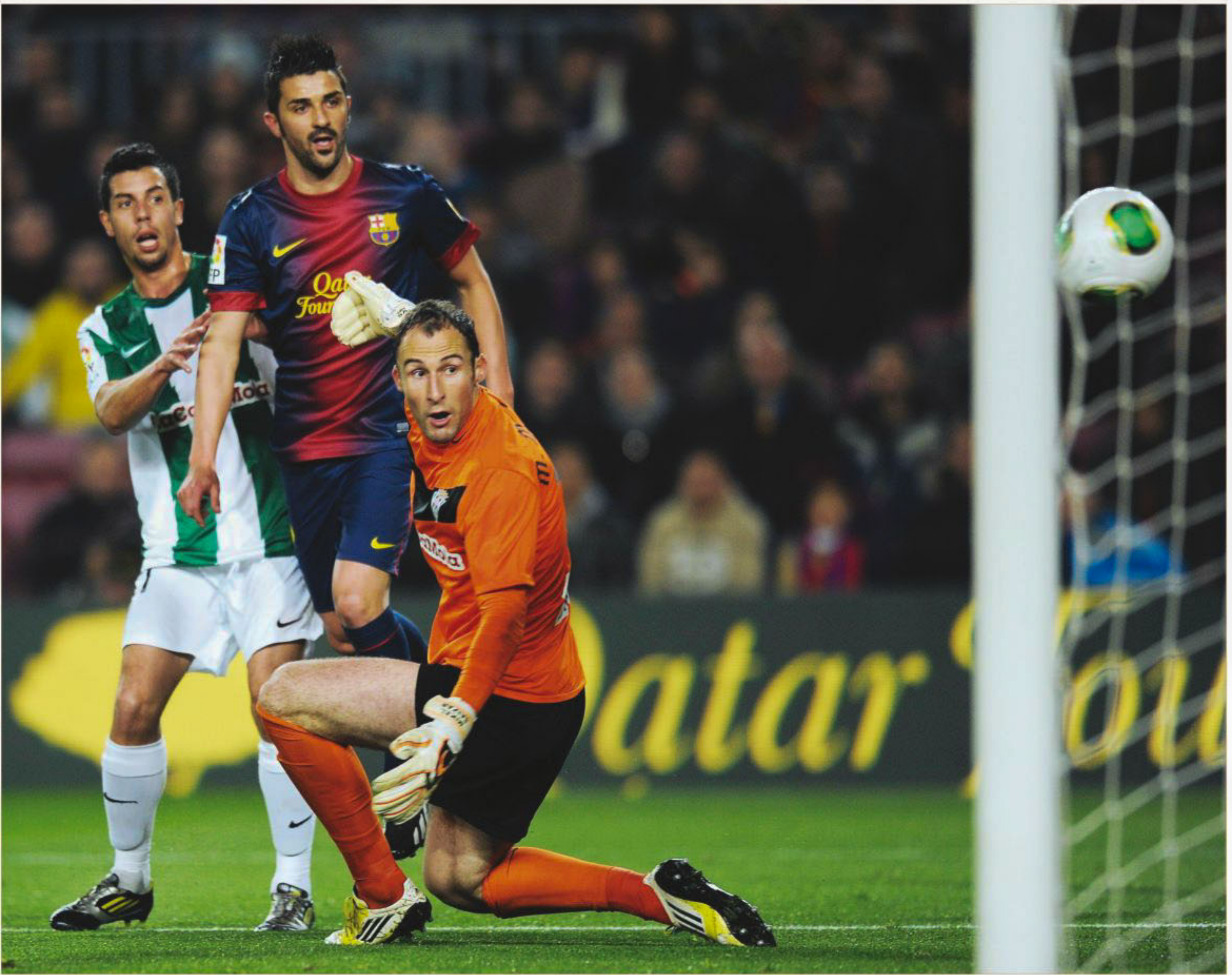
Thiago burst though the middle to slot home the first after 17 minutes, and Villa scored a superb second soon after.

The former Valencia frontman showed quick feet to skip around a defender in the area, and then from a tight angle dinked the ball over the keeper.

Five minutes later, he fired a snapshot in off the far post.

Chile striker Alexis, one of the players keeping Villa on the sidelines, headed a fourth soon after the restart and grabbed his second and Barca's fifth in the 85th.

The evening ended on a sour note for Villa as he was forced to limp off with what looked like a thigh muscle problem 12 minutes from time, though the club later said it had only been as a precaution.



Barcelona forward David Villa (C) scores one of his two goals against Cordoba during their Copa del Rey match at Nou Camp on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Walcott talks on: Wenger

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said on Friday that he is increasingly optimistic that winger Theo Walcott will sign a new contract at the club.

Walcott will be out of contract at the end of the season and has reportedly been offered a five-year deal worth £90,000 (\$145,000, 110,000 euros) per week that would make him one of the best-paid players at the Emirates Stadium.

"We are on a good road but in this situation, as long as nothing is signed, you are cautious, but I am optimistic we will get to a happy conclusion," said Wenger, ahead of Sunday's home game with Manchester City.

"I was optimistic last week, but I am a bit more optimistic this week. Discussions progress smoothly, but slowly."

Asked if he thought an agreement would be reached by the end of the month, Wenger replied: "Yes."

Walcott is thought to want assurances that he will be given opportunities to play as a central striker.



TEN Cricket
South Africa v New Zealand
Second Test, Day 2
Live from 2:30pm
ESPN
English Premiership
Stoke City v Chelsea
Live from 9:00pm
STAR Sports
English Premiership
Everton v Swansea City
Live from 9:00pm
Primera Liga
Espanyol v Celta de Vigo
Live from 11:00pm
Osasuna v Real Madrid
Live from 1:00am (Sunday)
Valencia v Sevilla



Bangladesh Premier League
Brothers Union v Arambagh
Time: 4:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National

Inter aim to rebound

AFP, Rome



against Pescara on Saturday, although the Serie A giants approach their first home match of the year facing major problems.

Prior to the winter break Inter's youthful but defiant coach Andrea Stramaccioni, 36, strode the touchline confidently as his South American-flavoured side kept close tabs on champions and leaders Juventus.

Since then, however, they have dropped to fifth place, nine points behind Juventus having taken just a single point from their last three games.

With experience



Corinthians' latest signing Alexandre Pato walks on a field before a news conference in Sao Paulo yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

enced Argentine Walter Samuel an injury doubt (Achilles tendon) and the Wesley Sneijder transfer saga still unsettled, Inter can ill afford another slip-up like the 3-0 defeat away to Udinese last weekend.

Although Inter beat league new boys Pescara 3-

0 in their first game of the campaign last August, recent media reports have speculated that Inter's poor form is down to their treatment of Sneijder.

The Dutchman, one of the club's top performers in recent years, is effectively being squeezed out of the club for refusing to drastically cut his annual salary of six million euros.

Galatasaray on Wednesday stepped in with an offer which Sneijder is reported to be considering.

Inter president Massimo Moratti, meanwhile, says the ball is firmly in the playmaker's court.

"We had a meeting with Galatasaray the other day which went well, now it's up to the player," Moratti told Inter.it.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Bologna v Chievo (1600), Inter v Pescara (1845)

Sunday
Torino v Siena (1030), Cagliari v Genoa, Catania v Roma, Lazio v Atalanta, Napoli v Palermo, Parma v Juventus, Udinese v Fiorentina (all 1300),

Title talk off Messi's agenda

AFP, Madrid



ground regarding the title race.

The Argentinian is taking nothing for granted as Barca prepare to face one of the toughest trips in La Liga when they visit fourth-placed Malaga on Sunday.

"The league is still not resolved, Madrid have made up a similar lead to this in the past, we know that we can't take anything as won and we must continue without errors or relaxing," he said.

"I would have liked to have won more titles last year, my goal is always to keep getting better and not be content with what I have, I always say I have to improve everything," he added, ominously for La Liga defences after finishing 2012 with a

Barcelona may be nine points ahead of their nearest rivals, Atletico Madrid, but Lionel Messi, who this week won his fourth consecutive Ballon d'Or, is keeping his feet on the

record 91 goals.

Second-placed Atletico also reached the quarterfinals in mid-week and welcomed back top-scorer Radamel Falcao who they missed through injury in the 1-1 league draw at Mallorca last Sunday.

The Colombian should be available for the home clash with

FIXTURES
Saturday
Valladolid v Mallorca (1500 GMT), Espanyol v Celta Vigo (1700 GMT), Osasuna v Real Madrid (1900 GMT), Valencia v Sevilla (2100 GMT)
Sunday
Betis v Levante (1100 GMT), Real Sociedad v Deportivo La Coruna (1600 GMT), Atletico Madrid v Zaragoza (1800 GMT), Malaga v Barcelona (1700 GMT)
Monday

Zaragoza on Sunday where the side from the capital will look to make it 10 league wins from 10 in their own stadium.

Real Madrid go to bottom club Osasuna having hit eight goals in two wins since their return from the winter break.

Five of those have come from

Cristiano Ronaldo who will not be available for the game due to a suspension for an accumulation of cards.

Ronaldo was quick to call for unity from all at the club on Wednesday after his hat-trick eased his team into the quarter-finals of the Cup with a 4-0 win over Celta Vigo.

And now the tension caused by Jose Mourinho's decision to leave captain Iker Casillas out of the last two league games has ended with the goalkeeper expected to continue in place of the suspended Antonio Adan at Osasuna.

Casillas himself spoke on Thursday, taking advantage of a promotional event to smooth out any perceived problems he may have with Mourinho.

"It has not bothered me at all that Mourinho said that I was a bit too comfortable. I have to train harder and get back my confidence", he said.

Another player who will miss the trip to Pamplona is Sergio Ramos who received a five-game ban for words directed at the referee in the aftermath of a sending-off against Celta Vigo.

Battle of the giants

AFP, London



English football's two most successful clubs meet again in the Premier League this weekend when Manchester United face north-west rivals Liverpool at Old Trafford on Sunday.

And for United great Paul Scholes, no other fixture quite comes close even though it's now 23 years since Liverpool were last crowned champions of England.

In that time United have surpassed what was Liverpool's national record of 18 championship titles, although the Merseysiders still have the edge when it comes to the Champions League, having lifted the European Cup five times compared to the Old Trafford club's three final victories.

However, there is no denying the current domestic gap between the two clubs with Premier League leaders United a huge 21 points in front of eighth-placed Liverpool heading into Sunday's match.

United's closest pursuers are cross-town rivals Manchester City, the reigning English champions. City too are in action Sunday but could be 10 points behind by the time they kick-off against Arsenal if United beat Liverpool.

Now, as was the case in the late 1960s, the Manchester derby has become a pivotal fixture in the destiny of the title, with Chelsea key players as well, but for 38-year-old midfielder Scholes, who came out of retirement last season, the rivalry created by the Liverpool match still mat-

ters. "Liverpool historically are our biggest rivals, they're always the biggest games and the best atmospheres," Scholes told Inside United magazine.

Sunday's match will be the first time United have met Liverpool at Old Trafford since Luis Suarez refused to shake Patrice Evra's hand in last season's corresponding fixture.

However, the pair did manage to get through the return clash at Anfield in September without incident.

"Last year it was unfortunate with the Suarez behaviour," said United manager Alex Ferguson. "I think hopefully it is

behind both clubs now and we can just look forward to the game."

Liverpool great Steven Gerrard would love nothing more than to bolster a seasonal tally of four goals in 21 Premier League appearances thus far by scoring at Old Trafford and the midfielder believes he's nearing top form.

"I think my performances are getting closer to where I want them to be so if I can add goals to those performances then maybe people will start saying the old Steven Gerrard is back," he said.

Only a week ago temperamental Manchester City striker Mario Balotelli had to be pulled away from manager Roberto Mancini during a training ground row.

But the 22-year-old forward was quickly welcomed back into the fold and this latest spat could recede into the background should Balotelli help City win away to Arsenal in the league for the first time since 1975.

Inter claim first refusal on Balotelli

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan have confirmed they could exercise their right of "first refusal" on Mario Balotelli if the troubled Manchester City striker is put on the market.

The report by Panorama.it, citing Inter sporting director Piero Ausilio, comes the same day City are reported to have agreed to let Balotelli go if they are offered 30 million euros (£25 million) for the Italian international.

Inter have slipped to nine points behind champions Juventus in Italy's Serie A but will look to get their title bid back on track at home against Pescara on Saturday.

Ausilio, meanwhile, appears to have given embattled fans of the Nerazzurri hope for the second half of the campaign. He said Inter included a 'first right of refusal clause' in Balotelli's contract when they sold him to City in 2007.

"If Inter decide to exercise it, then that choice will be made when and if City decide to sell," Ausilio said.