

Falcao fires Atletico

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Atletico Madrid took a big step towards the King's Cup semifinals when Radamel Falcao set them on the way to a 2-0 win at home to Real Betis in their last-eight first-leg on Thursday.

Colombia striker Falcao, coveted by several of Europe's richest clubs, nodded the opener in the 11th minute at the Calderon and Brazilian fullback Filipe Luis added a second 12 minutes later.

Betis had their chances and dominated possession for long periods in the second half but Atletico's Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, on loan from Chelsea, was in inspired form.

"We knew that Betis were going to pressure us in the second half," Atletico captain Gabi said in a pitch side interview with television broadcaster Telecinco.

"But we played a great first half and we were able to hold on to the advantage and get a very good result," the midfielder added.

"I think it's still 50-50, we have to go to their stadium and they are playing very well but we will work hard to get through."

If Atletico can protect their lead in next week's second leg in Seville they would meet Sevilla, who beat them in the 2010 final, or Real Zaragoza in the last four.

New Sevilla coach Unai Emery, appointed this week to replace the sacked Michel, had a disappointing debut when the Andalusian club were held to a 0-0 draw at Zaragoza on Wednesday.



Atletico Madrid star Radamel Falcao (L) scores the opening goal during their Copa del Rey quarterfinal first leg against Real Betis at the Vicente Calderon Stadium in Madrid on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

City aim to close gap

AFP, London



With Premier League leaders Manchester United not playing until Sunday, champions Manchester City can close to within four points of their title rivals by beating Fulham on Saturday.

United have looked imperious in recent weeks, picking up 31 points from a possible 33 to establish a seven-point lead over second-place City, who have let 10 points slip over the same period.

However, on Sunday United visit Tottenham Hotspur, who have lost just once in 10 matches and who won 3-2 at Old Trafford when the sides last met in September.

With third-place Chelsea also preparing for a problematic assignment at home to Arsenal on the same day, City will hope this weekend marks the start of their fightback in the title race.

Whereas United and Chelsea were both in action in mid-week -- United edging West Ham United in an FA Cup third-round replay and Chelsea drawing 2-2 at home to Southampton in the league -- City have benefited from a week off.

Roberto Mancini's side have also been boosted by captain Vincent

Kompany's successful appeal against the red card he was shown in last weekend's 2-0 win at Arsenal, which would have ruled him out of the home game with Fulham.

Although United show no sign of slowing, City full-back Pablo Zabaleta says his colleagues have not lost hope and will draw inspiration from the way they pipped Alex Ferguson's men to the English crown

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Further down the standings, Liverpool host Norwich City, knowing that victory, allied with a defeat for Spurs on Sunday, would take them to within six points of the Champions League places.

Brendan Rodgers' side went down 2-1 at United last weekend but there was good news in the return from injury of Italian striker Fabio Borini.

A close-season acquisition from Roma, Borini broke his foot just five league games into his Anfield career and after three months on the sidelines, he is desperate to make up for lost time.

"All the memories of the last three months and the things I've been through went from my mind," said the 21-year-old of his comeback at Old Trafford.

"My Liverpool career is actually starting now, I think. I'd only played five league games and six or seven games in the Europa League, which is not a lot.

"It really starts now with great intensity week in, week out to get playing again."

Saturday could also be an important day at the other end of the table, with the bottom five clubs all in action.

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"We know that we are up against a rival in United who are in a very good moment," he said.

"They have seven points more, but that is not much in this league. There is still a long way before the title is decided and there is still a margin to lose and recover.

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Barca on a roll

AFP, Madrid



The records continue to tumble for Barcelona, who finished the first half of the season with the highest ever points total in La Liga.

But talisman Lionel Messi is still not taking the league for granted as they

prepare to take on Real Sociedad.

Their remarkable total of 55 points from a possible 57 is three more than Pep Guardiola's Barca side managed in the 2010-11 season after 19 games and gives them an 11-point lead over Atletico Madrid while Real Madrid languish 18 points adrift.

On a personal level, Messi has hit an unrivalled 28 goals in the first half of this campaign and faces Sociedad knowing that a goal would see him equal the Barca and Liga record of scoring in 10 straight matches for the second time after scoring 18 goals in 10 matches during the 2011-12 campaign.

He currently shares that mark with Ronaldo who scored 12 in 10 games during the 1996-97 season while Mariano Martin put away 18 in 10 matches

between 1942 and 1943.

"We are in a strong position in the league with the advantage we have but we cannot ease off. There is Atletico who are a strong side and then Real Madrid cannot be forgotten as they will fight to the end," said Messi.

"There is a long way to go but we are confident and our aim is to maintain the same level although we know it won't be easy for us."

David Villa is expected to miss the trip to San Sebastian through injury and so Messi is again set to play alongside Pedro Rodriguez and Andres Iniesta as Alexis Sanchez struggles for form.

The Chilean was booed by sections of the crowd as a weakened Barca drew 2-2 with Malaga in the King's Cup semi-final first leg on Wednesday night.

Real Madrid avoided any hiccups with a 2-0 win over Valencia but there remains plenty of tension in the camp as was shown with an argument between Jose Mourinho and Cristiano Ronaldo at the end of the match.

One of the main questions now is who will be in goal as Madrid face Valencia again in the league, with Spain international Iker Casillas having been replaced by Antonio Adan before Adan was suspended.

Valdes on way out

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona keeper Victor Valdes will not renew his contract when it expires June 30 next year, his agent said Friday.

Valdes' representatives told the club of the decision in a meeting Thursday, his agent Gines Carvajal said in a statement sent to AFP and other media.

"The agents of Victor Valdes have informed Barcelona FC in a meeting... of the player's irrevocable decision not to renew his contract, thus avoiding entering into financial discussions," the statement said.

The 31-year-old keeper has been at Barcelona since 2002.

Fletcher out for season

REUTERS, London

Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher has been ruled out for the rest of the season after having surgery to resolve a bowel condition, the Premier League leaders said on Thursday.

The 28-year-old Scotland international missed most of last season and the start of the current campaign because of the problem but returned to make 13 appearances for club and country since September.

His last match was an 89th-minute substitute appearance in United's 4-3 win over Newcastle on Dec. 26.

"Darren Fletcher will be unavailable for the remainder of this season having undergone surgery to resolve his ulcerative colitis condition," the club said in a statement on their website.

What to WATCH

Channel 9
BPL
Chittagong Kings v Durrani Rajshahi
Live from 2:00pm
Dhaka Gladiators v Rangpur Riders
Live from 6:00pm
BTV World
Bangladesh Premier League
Brothers Union v Sk Jamal
Live from 4:30pm
STAR Sports
Australian Open
Men's & Women's Third Rd
Live from 6:00am
English Premiership
Man City v Fulham
Live from 9:00pm
Primera Liga
Getafe v Sevilla
Live from 1:00am (Sunday)
Malaga v Celta de Vigo
Live from 3:00am (Sunday)
STAR Cricket
India v England
Third ODI
Live from 12:30pm
TEN Cricket
South Africa v New Zealand
First ODI
Live from 2:00pm
ESPN
English Premiership
Liverpool v Norwich City
Live from 9:00pm
Primera Liga
Real Sociedad v Barcelona
Live from 11:00pm



French star Thierry Henry (R) watches courtside as the New York Knicks play the Detroit Pistons during their regulation NBA basketball game at the O2 Arena in London on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Special help for Cape Verde coach

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

Cape Verde Islands coach Luis Antunes will have an advantage over his 15 rivals when the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations kicks off here Saturday.

Anxious that his debutants do not suffer the same three-loss humiliation as Botswana and Niger in the previous edition last year, the 46-year-old air traffic controller sought the help of Real Madrid manager Jose Mourinho.

The self-proclaimed "Special One" agreed that Antunes could spend one week shadowing him as he went about his work with superstars like Cristiano Ronaldo at one of the most famous football clubs in the world.

Mourinho, who has won league titles with Porto, Chelsea, Inter Milan and Real Madrid, was impressed by the man who plotted the downfall of four-time champions Cameroon in a 2013 Africa Cup eliminator.

"Antunes is an intelligent coach. He has his own ideas, is well-organised, methodical and ambitious. He is a very good coach," was the glowing Mourinho assessment of the Cape Verdean.

On a sabbatical from his air traffic controller post at Nelson Mandela airport on the island of Sal since 2010, Antunes played down local media comparisons with Mourinho and Brazilian World Cup winner Luis Felipe Scolari.

"They are two coaches who operate on quite a different level and can draw on a different realm of experience. The comparison simply is not justified, but I would give anything to be a Mourinho or Scolari," he told reporters.



BPL

Chittagong Kings v Durrani Rajshahi
Time: 2:00pm
Dhaka Gladiators v Rangpur Riders
Time: 6:00pm
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, Mirpur
Bangladesh Premier League
Brothers Union v Sk Jamal
Time: 4:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National