



PHOTO: AFP
AC Milan striker Mario Balotelli celebrates his winning goal against Parma during their Serie A encounter at San Siro on Friday.

Balotelli leads Milan

REUTERS, Milan



A stunning Mario Balotelli free-kick gave AC Milan a 2-1 win over mid-table Parma in Serie A on Friday that put them level with third-placed

Lazio and a point ahead of rivals Inter Milan in the race for European places.

Balotelli's strike 13 minutes from time capped a bustling display by the controversial forward and sealed the points for Massimiliano Allegri's side after an own goal from home defender Gabriel Paletta in the 39th set them on their way to victory.

Nicola Sansone got a consolation for Parma in added time but it was too late to stop in-form Milan moving up to fourth place, a point above city rivals Inter, who they face next weekend, and level with Lazio in the Champions League playoff spot.

Milan, who have 44 points from 25 games, have now gone six games unbeaten which should give them confidence ahead of their Champions League last 16, first-leg match at home to Barcelona on Wednesday. Juventus are top with 55 points.

However, Balotelli was unhappy with his treatment by Parma's defenders and with the referee for allowing his opponents too much leeway and suggested that officials treat him differently.

"If I committed fouls like these I would be booked or sent off. Maybe if the referee blew for fouls every now and again I wouldn't be leaving the field with all these marks," the Italy striker told Sky Sport Italia, showing the cuts and bruises on his legs to the cameras.

However, rough treatment did not stop him scoring the winner with a deft free-kick for his fourth goal in his first three games for Milan.

"I'd taken a few kicks and couldn't really hit the ball hard like I usually do so I decided to lift it over the wall instead," added the 22-year-old.

Parma, despite suffering eight away defeats this season, were a match for Milan, especially in the first half when Amauri had two good chances to give his side the lead in the 25th.

He headed too close to Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati from Marco Marchionni's corner and then attempted a backheel from a

cross by the impressive Jonathan Biabiany with team mates lining up behind to tuck the ball into an empty net.

However, Paletta's own goal knocked the stuffing out the visitors and if Milan had been more clinical on the counter attack against a very high defensive line, they could have sealed the win long before Balotelli's pearl of a set piece.

"Mario was fouled a lot tonight but was very good," said Milan manager Allegri. "Every now and again he loses his temper, but that will improve."

"When players like him arrive, the level of skill in the team goes up. He was a great buy by the club and now we're on for a great comeback in the league."

Next Sunday's match with Inter, as well as a fight for bragging rights in Milan, could be crucial in deciding who qualifies for next season's Champions League.

However, Milan played down any derby talk, with Balotelli insisting that the focus for now was on Barcelona.

"All I'm going to do is stay close to my teammates for the Barcelona game and then worry about the Inter match," he said.

Mancini fires Cup caution

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini has insisted his multi-million pound side will not underestimate giant killers Leeds in their FA Cup fifth round tie at Eastlands on Sunday.

Mancini's side are effectively out of the Premier League title race, with the defending champions trailing cross-town rivals and leaders Manchester United by 12 points with 12 games remaining, and were knocked out of the Champions League in the group phase.

Italian boss Mancini accepts there is now an even greater incentive for his team to look to secure the FA Cup and he believes the season will still be viewed as a success if they lift a trophy they last won in 2011.

But he admitted Leeds would offer a stiff test after the second-tier club knocked Premier League Tottenham Hotspur out in the fourth round.

"Now the FA Cup is different," said Mancini. "It is clear that it will not be easy because they beat Tottenham. I don't think to play against Leeds is easy."

"In the FA Cup, every game is diffi-

cult. This is another way to do better in the last three months. It is possible to play in the final."

Mancini had threatened to make widespread changes in the wake of the comprehensive 3-1 defeat at Southampton last weekend.

Romanian goalkeeper Costel Pantilimon is set to start ahead of Joe Hart, who is rested.

But otherwise Mancini wants to use a largely first-choice side against Neil Warnock's team, as he did in wins over Watford and Stoke that took City into the fifth round.

"Warnock is a top manager, he has big experience," said Mancini. "I played against him last year with QPR, we had big problems when we won 3-2 in London. He knows football very well."

"I will make some changes because I have two or three players injured but after that, I will play with the best team."

City captain Vincent Kompany will again be absent due to a calf injury while Gareth Barry is sidelined with an ankle problem.

However, Serbia defender Matija Nastasic is available again after missing the trip to Southampton through injury.

Leeds have already pulled off several cup shocks this season.

As well as knocking Tottenham out

of the FA Cup, they also beat Everton and Southampton in the League Cup.

"We've done brilliantly in the cups so far," said Warnock, whose side are well off the pace in the race for a play-off spot and promotion to the lucrative Premier League.

"We've shown what ability we've got in the squad and that's what makes it more frustrating with our league form."

"This is by far the toughest cup game we've had this time, because it's against the (Premier League) champions and it's the only competition they've got left to win."

"They're under pressure because they're in second place in the league," added Warnock. "Anyone would love that kind of pressure, but they're not going to win the league this season."

"They've come across the maestro that is Alex Ferguson at United."

"He's the only difference because City are way above the rest of the pack and if it wasn't for Sir Alex, City would be right in it."

"The lesson is that you don't ruffle his feathers by winning the league, that's what they've found out."

Warnock could rest veteran midfielder Michael Brown ahead of Leeds' return to league action at home to Blackpool 72 hours after they visit Eastlands.

Rodgers slams EPL fixtures

AFP, Liverpool

Sevilla climb up

REUTERS, Madrid



Sevilla gave their bid to climb into the European qualification places a boost when Gary Medel scored twice in a 3-1 win at home to bottom club Deportivo La Coruna in La Liga on Friday.

Sevilla sacked coach Michel and replaced him with Unai Emery in January and have now won three of their five league games since he took charge.

They are 10th on 32 points, five off the European berths.

Croatia midfielder Ivan Rakitic headed the Andalusian side in front after five minutes at the Sanchez Pizjuan stadium although the ball appeared to brush Medel's hand on its way into the net.

The Chilean doubled the home side's lead in the 27th when he turned in a Jesus Navas cross before Riki pulled a goal back for Depor five minutes later.

Medel, a defensive midfielder who rarely gets on the scoresheet, clipped home his second goal in the 40th and Sevilla goalkeeper Beto then pulled off a couple of fine saves in the second half to deny Depor a way back into the match.

The financially-troubled Galician club, who have fallen a long way since winning La Liga in 2000 and reaching the Champions League semifinals four years later, remain in last place on 16 points.

They were relegated in the 2010-11 season and came straight back up to the top flight but have recently entered administration and appear doomed to second-division football again next term.

"There are a lot of matches left and a lot of work still to be done to pull ourselves up the table," Rakitic said in an interview with Spanish television broadcaster Marca TV.

"It was very important to win at home and we want to try to win all our games here if we can," he added.

Sturridge set to return

REUTERS, London

Striker Daniel Sturridge was declared fit to return to the starting lineup for Liverpool's Premier League match against Swansea City on Sunday and his presence will boost the side after they suffered successive defeats in his absence.

Manager Brendan Rodgers confirmed the forward, who signed from Chelsea in the January window, is ready to return after missing Monday's defeat to West Bromwich Albion with a thigh problem.



Bangladesh Premier League
Abahani v Sk Russell
Time: 4:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
BPL
Sylhet Royals v Chittagong Kings
Time: 6:00pm

Bayern warm up well

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich went 18 points clear at the top of the Bundesliga on Friday with a 2-0 victory at VfL Wolfsburg as they move ever closer to the German title.

With Tuesday's trip to Arsenal looming in the Champions League last-16, first-leg tie, Bayern did enough to see off 12th-placed Wolfsburg without picking up injuries.

It was Munich's 18th win from 22 matches and with second-placed Borussia Dortmund hosting Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday, Bayern took the chance to further extend their massive lead.

Mario Mandzukic again proved why Germany's Mario Gomez must be content with a place on Bayern's bench as the Croat gave Munich a first-half lead to claim his sixth goal in four Bundesliga games, taking his tally in all matches to 17 for the season.

Gomez and Arjen Robben, who has also been relegated to the bench recently, came on for the last 10 minutes and the Dutch star hit his first league goal of the season to double Bayern's lead in stoppage time.

The win was Munich's 10th away victory in 11 league matches this season and their fifth consecutive clean sheet away from home in the Bundesliga.

Jupp Heynckes, who will step down as coach at season's end to be replaced by Pep Guardiola, looks set to end Bayern's three-year wait for silverware in May with at least the Bundesliga shield.

Having conceded just seven goals in 22

games all season, Bayern have leaked just one of those away from home -- in the 1-1 draw at Nuremberg last November.

If they keep winning, Bayern can be crowned champions as early as mid-April and are on course to break their own record of 30 matches, set in the 1972/73 season, for the earliest confirmed league title victory.

Despite their current rich-vein of form, this was a below-key performance from Bayern, who were lacking Spain's Javi Martinez in the defensive midfield.

His replacement, Brazil's Luiz Gustavo, did not provide the same fluid service alongside Germany star Bastian Schweinsteiger as Bayern are used to, while France wing Franck Ribery had a quiet night on the left flank.

The opener came on 36 minutes as Toni Kroos' free-kick clattered the post, Schweinsteiger won the battle for the ball and his header was gratefully drilled home by Mandzukic for his 15th goal to make him the league's top scorer.

Robben seized his chance to remind Heynckes of what he can do as he collected Thomas Mueller's decent pass and buried his shot past Wolfsburg goalkeeper Diego Benaglio just before the final whistle.



Bayern Munich winger Arjen Robben (2nd from R) celebrates his goal with teammates during their Bundesliga clash against Wolfsburg on Friday.