

# Maicon inspires Roma

AFP, Rome



Brazilian star Maicon inspired Roma's 3-1 win over Udinese on Wednesday which moved them back to the top of Serie A while defending champions Juventus slumped to a 1-0 defeat at Sassuolo.

Hot on the heels of Roma are Napoli, Fiorentina, and Inter Milan, who beat Bologna 1-0 on Tuesday, with all three clubs just two points behind in the standings.

Maurizio Sarri's Napoli overcame Palermo 2-0 and La Viola were victorious at Verona by the same scoreline.

At the Stadio Olimpico, Roma were two goals up inside 10 minutes, first Miralem Pjanic bagged his fifth goal of the season, tapping in a Maicon cross from close range.

Then the Brazilian full-back doubled the lead after a surging run down the right and toe poke past Orestis Karnezis.

Rudi Garcia's men comfortably controlled the game and Gervinho guaranteed the three points midway through the second half, though Cyril Theureau pulled one back for the visitors with 13 minutes left.

Napoli extended their winning streak to seven matches in all competitions, and have

## RESULTS

Atalanta (Basta 69-og, Gomez 86)	2 - 1	Lazio (Biglia 16)
Hellas Verona	0 - 2	Fiorentina (Marquez 25-og, Kalinic 57)
Napoli (Higuain 39, Mertens 80)	2 - 0	Palermo
AC Milan (Antonelli 52)	1 - 0	Chievo
Roma (Pjanic 4, Maicon 9, Gervinho 63)	3 - 1	Udinese (Thereau 77)
Sassuolo	1 - 0	Juventus

now gone 12 games without defeat.

Gonzalo Higuain got the opener just before half-time, then Dries Mertens sealed the win 10 minutes from the end.

Fiorentina had Nikola Kalinic to thank against Verona.

The 27-year-old Croatian caused Rafael Marquez to put the ball into his own net, before he grabbed his sixth of the season after 57 minutes.

Sassuolo heaped more misery on Juventus as they took all three points at the Mapei Stadium thanks to a magnificent



Sassuolo forward Nicola Sansone (C) celebrates his all-important goal with teammates after his magnificent freekick found Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon's top-left corner during their Serie A clash at the Mapei Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Mascherano admits to tax fraud

AFP, Gava

Barcelona's Javier Mascherano admitted to two counts of tax fraud totalling just over 1.5 million euros (\$1.64 million) before a judge on Thursday.

Mascherano arrived at the court in Gava, a coastal town on the outskirts of Barcelona where the player resides, at 0900 local time (0800GMT) accompanied by his lawyers.

His testimony before the court lasted barely five minutes as he recognised having committed the crime.

Spanish state prosecutors alleged the former West Ham and Liverpool midfielder failed to declare over 1.5 million euros in earnings in 2011 and 2012 by ceding his image rights to companies he owns in Portugal and the United States.

"Mascherano admitted the facts of the two counts of tax fraud, so there was no need to interrogate him," said a judicial source.

A court filing released last month confirmed Mascherano deposited nearly 1.75 million euros with the tax authorities on September 9 to repay the amount owed plus interest.

The judge must now decide whether the case proceeds to trial.

# Messi won't leave Barca, Neymar might

INTERNET

Lionel Messi will never leave Barcelona, according to former president Joan Laporta, who believes Manchester United target Neymar might be sold.

Messi - sidelined with a knee injury - has been linked with a move to the Premier League after a tax case in Spain.

The Argentina captain is reportedly tired of the ongoing investigation.

Barca teammate Neymar has also been linked with a move to Manchester United, a rumour that has not subsided since the transfer window shut last month.

Laporta was asked about the pair's future and the 53-year-old is convinced Messi will remain at Camp Nou but thinks Neymar might leave in order to balance the books.

"Messi will never leave Barca. It is part of our emblem and our heart," Laporta said.

"I received many proposals when I was president. Notably Inter, who wanted to pay his release clause but I always refused."

# 'I'm best candidate'

AFP, Paris



European football supremo Michel Platini insisted Thursday that he remains the best man to lead scandal-hit FIFA despite currently being suspended from the sport.

The French legend, one of seven candidates to succeed Sepp Blatter as FIFA president, believes that his experience as a player, coach and administrator far outstrips any of his rivals.

"In all modesty, I am the best-placed to lead world football," Platini, 60, told Swiss daily Le Matin in an interview in which he even went on to compare himself to a medieval knight.

"I am the only one to have a broad vision for football."

Platini and Blatter are both suspended for 90 days while an investigation is carried out into a controversial 1.8 million euro payment made by the FIFA chief to the Frenchman in 2011.

"I have been a player, coach of the French team, a club official at Nancy, organiser of the World Cup and, today, the head of the most powerful football confederation, a mission that I have accomplished with honesty," he added.

Platini faces competition from Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein, Musa Bility, Jerome Champagne, Gianni Infantino, Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa and Tokyo Sexwale for the FIFA top job.

Infantino is the general-secretary of UEFA and was a shock candidate for the February 26 vote which will decide who will

succeed Blatter.

Platini said that Infantino's nomination represented a "plan B" on the part of UEFA.

"I am delighted. The day that I am cleared, everything will be fine," added Platini.

"The executive committee, Gianni and me, we will meet to re-evaluate the situation. And we will choose the best solution for football."

The Platini camp claimed on Monday that Infantino had given an "oral" reassurance to the UEFA executive committee that he would quit the FIFA race if Platini was cleared of wrongdoing.

However, a source close to the Frenchman also added: "The truth in politics today is not the same on the day after."

Platini blasted the suspension and its negative effect on his chances of putting across his case.

"It has prevented me from campaigning and fighting on equal terms," he said before waxing lyrical over his current predicament.

"I feel like I am a medieval knight facing a fortress. I am trying to storm it for football but instead all I get is boiling oil poured on my head."

Despite his weariness with the ongoing investigation, Platini is adamant that he will be cleared.

"I was always assured that the payment (from FIFA to himself) had followed the rules of internal compliance."

Platini refused to entertain thoughts that he had fallen victim to an elaborate plot engineered by Blatter to blacken his name and reputation.

"I do not want to believe in a conspiracy



MICHEL PLATINI

# Dortmund run riot

AFP, Berlin

Borussia Dortmund ran riot on Wednesday as they demolished second-division Paderborn 7-1 to book their place in the third round of the German Cup.

With top scorer Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang on the bench, right-winger Gonzalo Castro was Paderborn's main tormentor with two goals and two assists in Dortmund's biggest win of the season so far.

Paderborn took a shock lead through ex-Wolfsburg striker Srdjan Lakic after 21 minutes, but it lasted just four minutes as Thomas Tuchel's team let the goals fly.

Colombia striker Adrian Ramos slotted home the hosts' first, then set up Castro before Japan midfielder Shinji Kagawa netted just before the half-time whistle to make it 3-1 at the break.

Dortmund's Germany midfielder Ilkay Gundogan then netted a penalty before Castro claimed their fifth.

Henrikh Mkhitaryan set up Lukasz Piszczek for a tap in, then slammed home the seventh himself just before the final whistle.

This was the first defeat for Paderborn's new coach ex-Germany international Stefan Effenberg.

# Villanovense hold Barca

AFP, Madrid



Spanish third-tier minnows Villanovense enjoyed the most famous night of their history as they held an under-strength Barcelona 0-0 in the first leg of their Copa del Rey tie on Wednesday.

Villanovense play at the same level as Barca's B team in the regional Second Division B, but they more than held their own in a game of very few chances and came closest to scoring just before half-time when Victor Calatrava's flick flew inches over the bar.

The sides will meet again for the right to reach the last 16 at the Camp Nou on December 2.

Barca coach Luis Enrique made nine changes to the side that beat Eibar 3-1 at the weekend with Marc Bartra and Sandro Ramirez the only two players to keep their places.

Indeed, five Barca players were making their first start of the season, including Cameroonian midfielder Wilfrid Kaptoun, who made his first-team debut.

Roared on by a capacity crowd of under 4,000, the hosts started brightly and had the first attempt on goal when Pablo Angel Moraga fired just wide of the far post.

Barca keeper Jordi Masip was also forced into the first save of the game when he collected Elias's effort.

However, the visitors slowly began to take control of the game as Gerard Gumbau flashed a shot wide before Munir El Haddadi ought to have opened the scoring when he failed to hit the target from close range.

Villanovense's chance for glory came just before the break when Calatrava acrobatically flicked on a corner at the near post and the ball flew just over with Masip beaten.

Barca had the better chances after the break as Sandro's pile driver went just over and another debutant, substitute Aitor Cantalapiedra, had a strong penalty appeal turned down.

Villanovense had to rely on goalkeeper Jose Antonio Fuentes for the first time in the final 10 minutes as he made smart stops from Bartra and El Haddadi, but the hosts held out for a famous result.

# Di Maria was desperate to leave MU

AFP, Madrid

Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Angel di Maria has recognised he was desperate to leave Manchester United to join the French champions after an ill-fated solo season in England.

Di Maria's near £60 million (\$92 million) move from Real Madrid to United in 2014 remains a British transfer record.

The Argentine failed to live up to the form he had shown in Madrid's Champions League winning campaign in 2014, though, as he left having scored just four goals in 32 appearances.

However, he confirmed that a terrifying attempted robbery at his Manchester home in February had precipitated his desire to join the French champions.

"I started very well, but then I had problems with people at the club," Di Maria told Spanish sports daily Marca on Thursday.

"I started to be put on the bench. Then my house was robbed, all of it made me want to leave there quickly."

Di Maria will return to Madrid with PSG in the Champions League next week having spent four years with Los Blancos.

The 27-year-old was pushed out of the club to make way for James Rodriguez after his stellar performances at the 2014 World Cup despite Di Maria's major role in finally delivering Madrid's 10th

# Ranieri delivers the pizza

AFP, London

Leicester manager Claudio Ranieri is delivering on his promise to treat his players to pizzas after an early season incentive.

The Italian had vowed to treat the high-flying Premier League squad to pizzas if they kept a clean sheet.

And last weekend they finally managed the feat at the 12th time of asking when they beat Crystal Palace 1-0 at the King Power Stadium.

True to his word, Ranieri is footing the bill at a city centre restaurant on Thursday.

"Yes, I pay," said the former Chelsea, Valencia, Juventus and Monaco boss.

"I pay. They deserve this pizza and today we will eat."

"It is good to get together to eat and talk about football," said Ranieri who has guided the team to the lofty perch of fifth in the Premier League and just three points behind leaders Manchester City.

# Boro stun Man Utd, Klopp off the mark

AFP, London



Wayne Rooney failed to convert a spot-kick as Manchester United lost 3-1 on penalties to second-tier Middlesbrough in the League Cup on Wednesday, while Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool edged Bournemouth.

After 120 goalless minutes at Old Trafford, the fourth-round tie went to penalties and with Rooney, Michael Carrick and Ashley Young all fluffing their lines, Championship side Middlesbrough pulled off a memorable win.

United followed holders Chelsea and Arsenal in exiting the competition, while Middlesbrough set up a home quarterfinal with Everton.

A low-key game that saw Van Gaal make nine changes to his starting XI sprang to life mid-way through the second half, with home defender Daley Blind the central figure.

The Dutchman was involved in two huge scares for United -- first hacking the ball into his own net, only for the goal to be ruled out for offside, and then dispatching a back-pass that stand-in goalkeeper Sergio Romero almost allowed to bobble in for what would have been a comical own goal.

As the game ticked into injury time there was a flurry of chances,



Middlesbrough defender Ben Gibson (C) and teammates celebrate their penalty shoot-out victory against Manchester United in the English League Cup fourth round match at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

with Jesse Lingard hitting the post for United and Romero saving from Grant Leadbitter and Stewart Downing at the other end.

United pair Anthony Martial and Marouane Fellaini each had penalty shouts rejected in extra time and went close with headers, and the home side were left to rue their missed opportunities.

Rooney's opening penalty was brilliantly saved by Tomas Mejias and with Carrick blazing over the bar and Mejias also denying Young, spot-kicks from Leadbitter,

Downing and Ben Gibson took Aitor Karanka's men through.

Liverpool's new manager Klopp tasted victory at the fourth attempt as his side beat Bournemouth 1-0 at Anfield.

Liverpool had recorded draws against Tottenham Hotspur, Rubin Kazan and Southampton in Klopp's first three games after succeeding Brendan Rodgers, but Nathaniel Clyne's first-half strike got the German off the mark.

"It's better than a draw," Klopp told Sky Sports with a wry smile.

"I'm really satisfied tonight because this team never played together since I'm here -- young players, new players, players who didn't play for a long time because of injuries -- and they did really well."

Clyne struck in the 17th minute, following up after Joao Teixeira's audacious back-heel had been cleared off the line to score his first Liverpool goal and set up a quarter-final at his former club Southampton.

Premier League leaders Manchester City will host Hull City

in the last eight after a routine 5-1 home victory over Crystal Palace, which came at the cost of an injury to right-back Pablo Zabaleta.

Wilfried Bony headed City in front from Aleksandar Kolarov's 22nd-minute corner before Kelechi Iheanacho teed up Kevin De Bruyne to tap in his sixth goal in nine club games shortly before half-time.

Zabaleta was stretchered off early in the second half after hurting his knee in a collision with Wilfried Zaha, with Bacary Sagna replacing him.

City manager Manuel Pellegrini said the Argentine had damaged the medial ligament in his right knee and would undergo tests on Thursday.

Second-half goals by Iheanacho, Yaya Toure, from the penalty spot, and 17-year-old substitute Manu Garcia sealed victory, with Palace replying through Damien Delaney's 89th-minute header.

Meanwhile, Aston Villa began life without sacked manager Tim Sherwood by losing 2-1 at Premier League rivals Southampton, who won courtesy of second-half goals from Maya Yoshida and Graziano Pelle.

Tuesday's results opened up the competition, with holders Chelsea losing 5-4 on penalties at Stoke City after a 1-1 draw and a second-tier Arsenal team crashing 3-0 at second-tier Sheffield Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP