

# Totti steals the show

AFP, Milan



A Paulo Dybala brace kept Juventus's title push on track but Francesco Totti stole the show in Serie A with two goals in a 3-2 win over Torino that moved Roma closer to Champions League qualification.

Juve's closest rivals Napoli had fired a warning shot after putting six unanswered goals, including a hat-trick from Belgium midfielder Dries Mertens, past Bologna on Tuesday.

But the Turin giants were not to be fazed as they continued their bid to emulate their 1935 feat of winning five consecutive titles by beating Lazio 3-0.

After Mario Mandzukic put the Turin giants in front six minutes before the interval, the Croatia striker turning Paul Pogba's pacy drive into the net, Juventus moved up a gear against Simone Inzaghi's visitors.

Amid a turbulent season for the capital side, Lazio travelled north with some hope having claimed two consecutive victories under Inzaghi after he replaced Stefano Pioli two weeks ago.

But the Lazio coach had warned of Juve's "invincibility" and after the visitors lost right-back Patric for a second bookable offence against Dybala the writing was on the wall.

From the free-kick, Brazilian midfielder Hernanes forced Federico Marchetti into action but the Lazio keeper could do nothing minutes later when Dybala sent him the wrong way from the spot after Leonardo

Bonucci was hauled down in the area.

Dybala completed his brace with his 16th league goal of the campaign, the Argentine collecting Sami Khedira's ball to beat Marchetti from distance just after the hour.

Juve's 26th win of the season maintained their nine-point lead on Napoli with four games remaining.

Third-placed Roma were trailing 2-1 with four minutes remaining after Josef Martinez had added to Andrea Belotti's first half penalty in the 80th minute for visiting Torino.

That meant Napoli looked likely to open up an eight-point gap on Luciano Spalletti's side, but the Italian coach had other ideas.

Roma had seen several penalty claims waved away during the game and Spalletti played his final card five minutes from the end.

Totti had levelled late when he made a late cameo appearance in a 3-3 draw at Atalanta on Sunday.

But the 39-year-old playmaker, in which could be his final weeks as a player at the club, went one better.

Seconds after replacing Seydou Keita, Totti slid in at the back post to meet Miralem Pjanic's free-kick to guide the ball past Daniele Padelli on 86 minutes.

Three minutes later Roma won a controversial penalty for handball in the area, and although Padelli got a touch on Totti's drive it was not enough.

The ageing captain was mobbed by the bench and fans were seen crying in the stands as Roma kept the pressure on to sit five points behind Napoli.



Roma star Francesco Totti celebrates his second goal against Torino during their Serie A encounter at Rome's Olympic Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Diego receives highest honour

AFP, Managua

Argentine football legend Diego Maradona has been honoured by Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega with the highest award bestowed by the Central American country, where Maradona is visiting with girlfriend Rocío Oliva.

The official Nicaraguan government website El 19 reported on Wednesday that Ortega had awarded Maradona the insignia of the Order of Augusto Cesar Sandino, praising the footballer as a "fighter, a gladiator of peace and justice" during a private ceremony in his office on Tuesday.

Photographs of the event showed Maradona, clad in a black shirt, embracing Ortega before kissing the medal in appreciation.

"Thanks Daniel, I'm going to take care of it like the one I got in '86 -- like the World Cup," Maradona said, recalling Argentina's World Cup triumph of that year.

The presidential decree bestowing the award emphasized Maradona's "sporting greatness and human qualities" as well as his friendships with Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, the late leftist president of Venezuela.

## Klopp not getting carried away

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp refused to get carried away after his rampant side crushed neighbours Everton 4-0 in a one-sided 226th Merseyside derby at Anfield.

Wednesday's Premier League encounter was little short of a humiliation for the visitors, who finished the match with 10 men after Ramiro Funes Mori's second-half red card.

In truth, the match was already over by then as first-half headers from Divock Origi and Mamadou Sakho set the Reds on the path to victory.

Straight after the break, Funes Mori clattered Origi in a shocking tackle, for which he received his marching orders, and Liverpool then twisted the knife even further with a second-half showing of complete dominance.

Substitute Daniel Sturridge -- on for Origi, who was stretchered off -- slotted past Joel Robles to add a third after an hour before a wonderful strike from Philippe Coutinho capped off a memorable night for the home side with 14 minutes remaining.

But while Klopp admitted that his team are enjoying their football, Origi's injury took some of the gloss off the win and the German said that the margin of victory could be partly explained by Funes Mori's exit.

"We did well. Usually after a 4-0 win I don't know how to keep the smile of my face, but tonight it's pretty easy," Klopp said.

"In the first half it was a derby, so it was more wild than a normal football game, but it's a derby so you accept this.

"We could have done better, but lost some patience in the wrong moments. We forced some things too early and we didn't have the movements, especially not behind the line.

"But of course the two goals were at the

perfect moment and what can I say about the second half?

"It changed completely with the second half and when (Everton's John) Stones also had to come off. It was not easy for Everton.

"We are in a good moment -- that's how it is. We made good chances and we could have scored more."

Origi's injury marred Liverpool's victory, but Klopp allayed initial fears that the Belgian striker had broken his leg.

"I didn't see the pictures, but it was a big shadow on the game," Klopp said.

"It's not broken. I went into the medical room and saw him smiling. The ankle is twisted and we have to wait to see what happens to the ligaments now."

Everton manager Roberto Martinez is now under fire like never before.

After a series of insipid displays this season, particularly at Goodison Park, the Spaniard is rapidly running out of support on the terraces.

He hit back at his critics in the week and claimed he has moved the club on since replacing David Moyes in 2013.

But he had no excuses following this destructive defeat and admitted that it was the worst possible preparation for Saturday's FA Cup semi-final clash with Manchester United at Wembley.

"It was disastrous," he said. "It was a horrible showing that started with the best intentions, but ended with an inability to do the basics right.

"It was shocking, it was a horrible experience for everyone connected to the football club and it was a game that turned on us not defending well enough before half-time.

"We lost concentration. We give them a soft cushion with two goals before half-time and that was a massive blow."

## BFF ELECTIONS 2016

# DDSOC reaffirms support for Salahuddin

SPORTS REPORTER



The Districts and Divisional Sports Organisers' Council (DDSOC) yesterday reiterated its full support for the Kazi Salahuddin-led panel for the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) elections to be held on April 30.

"As we have announced earlier after finalising our candidates, we have given the panel [Salahuddin-led panel] our full support for the elections. And today [Thursday] I reaffirm this as the president of the District and Divisional Sports Organisers' Council," said AJM Nasiruddin, who is also the president of Chittagong Football Association, at the BFF House.

Nasir, the mayor of Chittagong City Corporation, also explained their involvement with other sports as well as the elections of different sports federations.

"We are producing athletes at the district and divisional levels. We are also representing our respective districts at different national federations, and so we have a role in the elections of the national sports federations to elect the right persons, those who are fit and qualified for their posts.

"We have competed in some elections with a united front. We have also nominated our candidates [seven candidates] for the BFF elections in a transparent and democratic way. And we are going to compete in the upcoming elections with a united front once again," continued Nasir, who arrived in the capital from Chittagong yesterday morning after hearing a rumour that the Salahuddin-led panel was under pressure from a certain group.

"There may have been rumours regarding the elections but as far as I know there is no influence on us. The voters [councillors] will cast their votes

for whomever they like," said Nasir, whose council have so far garnered 67 votes out of 134.

In response to a query, Nasir said, "As far as I know, she [Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina] has not said anything about the BFF elections to anyone. If she had any preferences, I would have come to hear of it as the president of DDSOC and District Football Association, the general secretary of [Chittagong] Metropolitan Awami League and Mayor of Chittagong City Corporation."

However, there were whispers in the football arena that incumbent senior vice-president Abdus Salam Mursheedy has struck a deal with the Save Football panel to clear his way to retain his post for the third successive term. Following the withdrawal of three candidates on Wednesday, Mursheedy -- who could not be reached for comment yesterday afternoon -- has been elected unopposed to the senior vice-president's post.

## Ronaldo plays down injury concern

AFP, Madrid

Three-time World Player of the Year Cristiano Ronaldo has eased concerns he suffered a significant hamstring injury after limping off minutes before the end of Real Madrid's 3-0 win over Villarreal on Wednesday.

"All good. Thanks for your support," Ronaldo posted to his over 55 million followers on social media network Instagram on Thursday.

Madrid sports daily Marca reported that Ronaldo remains a serious doubt for Saturday's trip to Rayo Vallecano with Real keen to protect the Portuguese for next week's Champions League semi-final first leg away at Manchester City.

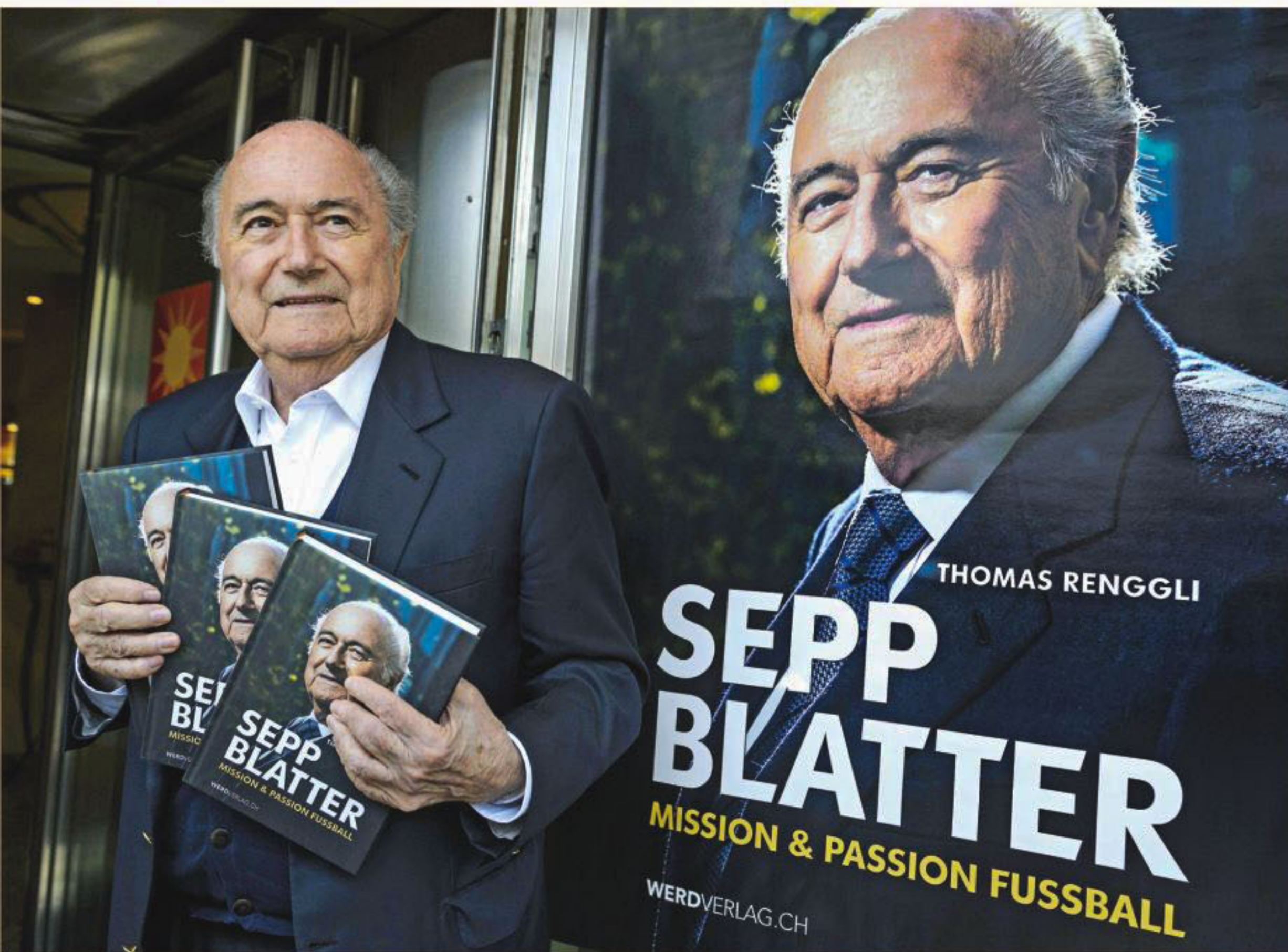
Before hobbling off towards the end of Madrid's eighth consecutive La Liga win to remain just a point behind leaders Barcelona and Atletico Madrid, Ronaldo had played all but one minute of Real's previous 43 La Liga and Champions League games this season. And Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane admitted he should have taken more precaution to rest the 47-goal forward in recent weeks.

"I am calmer now than when I saw him leave the pitch," said Zidane.



Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo gestures during their La Liga match against Villarreal at the Bernabeu on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP



FIFA ex-president Sepp Blatter poses with his autobiography during the book's presentation in Zurich yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Roy defends Vardy

AFP, London



Leicester City striker Jamie Vardy should not have been sent off for diving during last weekend's 2-2 draw with West Ham United, England manager Roy Hodgson said on Wednesday.

Vardy, capped six times by Hodgson, was shown a second yellow card after appearing to invite a foul from Angelo Ogbonna and then going to ground during the second half of Sunday's game at the King Power Stadium.

Vardy's furious reaction to his dismissal saw him hit with a Football Association misconduct charge, meaning he could be banned for two matches, but Hodgson felt that he had every reason to feel hard done by.

"Vardy got sent off at the weekend, but once again I will go out on a limb -- I don't see that. I don't see that as a dive," Hodgson told journalists during an FA media briefing in London.

"I think he was unbalanced. I don't think it was a penalty either. I think he was unbalanced, running at that speed.

"I think there was a very slight contact with the defender, who was trying to cover. I think he went down because he was unbalanced. I don't think he was trying to dive.

"But of course all the pundits I hear say he was trying to dive, look how he dived. I don't see it. I wouldn't blame him for that. I sympathise with him. I think he was very, very unlucky."

The image of Vardy, 29, angrily berating referee Jon Moss was splashed across British newspapers' sports pages on Monday, but Hodgson said that his reaction, though unfortunate, was understandable.

"He has reacted like human beings sometimes react," Hodgson said.

"He hasn't just said to the ref, 'that is alright, I understand' and shakes hands and have a good game. He has called him a few names. But he is a human being and that can happen."