

Sports

Real fall 16 points behind Barca after draw with Celta

Madrid stay fourth in the standings on 32 points

BARCELONA: Real Madrid's faltering title defence continued as they were held to a thrilling 2-2 draw at Celta Vigo on Sunday which saw them fall 16 points behind runaway leaders Barcelona, who beat Levante 3-0 to stay nine points clear at the top of La Liga.

Real looked to be heading for a second successive league defeat after their 3-0 loss to Barca in their last outing when Daniel Wass lobbed over Keylor Navas to put Celta ahead in the 33rd minute. Gareth Bale instantly responded by scoring twice in three minutes to put the stuttering champions in front before halftime but Celta came right back at Zinedine Zidane's side, with Iago Aspas squandering a penalty before Maxi Gomez levelled with a header in the 82nd minute.

Aspas was denied another penalty late in the game while down at the other end Real's Lucas Vazquez hammered the ball straight at Celta goalkeeper Ruben Blanco, while Cristiano Ronaldo fired wide of the near post.

Real stay fourth in the standings on 32 points while Barca have 48 although they have played one game more. Real travelled to Vigo without Dani Carvajal, striker Karim Benzema and captain Sergio Ramos while Celta, who knocked Real out of the King's Cup last season, were emboldened after drawing 1-1 with Barca in the Cup on Thursday.

Bale made his first start in the league since Sept. 20 after finally recovering from persistent muscle problems and pulled Real level after Wass's strike with a slick first-time finish before giving them the lead by knock-

ing a pass from Isco in with his back heel.

Celta appealed for Navas to be sent off when he felled Aspas and was only shown a yellow card while the Costa Rican was also let off when he stepped off his line before diving to his right to palm away the striker's spot-kick.

"We made a lot of errors, we gave the ball away a lot, something we don't normally do and we did it at important moments in the game, when we could have caused them more damage," Real coach Zinedine Zidane told reporters.

"We have to stop making these errors and be more consistent."

Barcelona had seen their lead over nearest challengers Atletico Madrid reduced to six points on Saturday but restored the gap to nine after Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Paulinho scored in a routine win over Levante.

“We made errors, we gave the ball away a lot”

CUSHIONED HEADER

Messi was back in the starting line-up after missing the King's Cup draw with Celta Vigo on Thursday and marked his 400th game in La Liga by opening the scoring in the 12th minute, volleying Jordi Alba's cushioned header into the net.

Suarez struck his fifth goal in four games running by controlling a cross from Sergi Roberto and slamming the ball high into the net in the 38th minute.

Brazilian international Paulinho added an extra shine to the win by tapping in as the game drew to a close.

"We wanted to continue our run of wins and



VIGO: Real Madrid's midfielder Lucas Vazquez (C) jumps for a header during the Spanish league football match Celta de Vigo vs Real Madrid at the Balaidos stadium in Vigo on Sunday. — AFP

although we were favourites we knew Levante were a strong side that hadn't lost away from home in the league since September," said Barca coach Ernesto Valverde. "We were very good in the first half but the pace changed in the second half and Levante could

have scored." After the game club record signing Philippe Coutinho appeared at the Nou Camp to pose for photographs a day after completing his 142-million-pound (\$192.54-million) move from Liverpool to Barca. — Reuters

Shocks and sackings, FA Cup talking points

LONDON: Arsenal were dumped out of the FA Cup by an inspired Nottingham Forest on a day of major shocks in the competition a day after Mark Hughes was sacked by Stoke City.

West Ham and Leicester survived testing ties against lower-league opponents while Manchester City came from behind to crush fellow Premier League side Burnley 4-1.

And Virgil van Dijk made an instant impact for Liverpool following his mega-money move from Southampton.

Here are some of the major talking points from the third round of the FA Cup.

ROMANCE NOT DEAD

The FA Cup weekend was a throwback to the time when the third round used to be a red letter day in the English football calendar, giving the game's minnows a

chance to give the big boys a bloody nose. In the biggest shock, Nottingham Forest ejected holders Arsenal from the competition on Sunday, while former winners Leeds United were sent packing by a feisty Newport County, who play their football in the fourth tier of the English game. Stoke City crashed out to Coventry City the previous day. The increasing dominance of the Premier League and the high-profile Champions League have pushed the FA Cup down clubs' list of priorities but there are flickers of life in the world's most famous domestic cup competition.

HUGHES RUNS OUT OF TIME

Mark Hughes ran out of time at Stoke City-becoming the seventh Premier League manager to be sacked this season after his side's ignominious FA Cup defeat to League Two Coventry. Hughes, 54, was in charge at Stoke for exactly 200 games, following managerial spells with QPR, Fulham, Manchester City, Blackburn and Wales. Speaking after the defeat, Hughes suggested that going out of the Cup could help the club, who are in the relegation zone. "The fact we've gone out, even if it's a little bit raw at the moment, might help us," Hughes said. "At the moment we don't want to discuss Premier League games, but maybe when we wake up on Monday the reality clearly has to be our league form." But it was not to be.

VAN DIJK FITS THE BILL FOR LIVERPOOL

Virgil van Dijk's debut for Jurgen Klopp's side could not have gone much better. The most expensive defender in history, who joined from Southampton this month for £75 million (\$102 million, 85 million euros) added presence at the back and powered home a late winner from a corner against Everton for a 2-1 win. Liverpool, buoyed by their impressive array of attackers, have been on a good run in recent weeks but questions about their defence have never completely disappeared. Klopp will be hoping that the Dutch defender can help his side end their long trophy drought, which dates back to 2012.

MOURINHO V CONTE

The war of words between Chelsea boss Antonio Conte and Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho shows no sign of abating. Conte dubbed his Stamford Bridge predecessor "a little man" following his team's goalless draw against Norwich. Responding to Mourinho talking about Conte in relation to a past match-fixing scandal in Italy, the former Juventus boss said: "We all know him very well. But it's always the same. This is his way. It's not a surprise for me. I think when you try to hurt a person, especially if you know very well the truth of what happens, the court proved my innocence, when you do this it means you are a little man." — AFP

City need trophies to be 'big club'

LONDON: Pep Guardiola says Manchester City must match Manchester United and Liverpool by winning trophies in order to become one of the game's giants-and dazzling football is not enough. The runaway Premier League leaders maintained their relentless charge in four competitions by sweeping into the FA Cup fourth round at Burnley's expense on Saturday.

They are now eyeing a place in the League Cup final as they host Championship side Bristol City in the first leg of their semi-final today. "A win helps to win more, then we are there, going to go to London to play the final," said the City manager.

"It's important (to win trophies). To become a big club like the teams I have faced, or teams like (Manchester) United or Liverpool, with a really big history, you have to win. "Nobody can take away what we have lifted so far—the pleasures from this team of the last three or four months, they belong to us. In the process, when you live in good moments, I say to the players, 'Enjoy it'. It is so complicated it may not happen again.

"But after, of course, to give real value to what we have done so far, what we are going to do in the future, you have to lift the titles. Without that, it's OK, it's good, but not enough." The former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss was pleased to see Leroy Sane back on the scoresheet in the 4-1 victory against Burnley.

The winger has been one of several standout City performers this season but the strike was the 21-year-old's first since October and Guardiola feels he still has much to do to reach his full potential.

"He has a special talent," said Guardiola. "Of course it was important to score another goal. We need his goals, but also his assists, crosses, how he defends backwards. "He made a lot of very good things but at 21, 22 years old—I met only one player in my life at that age who knew absolutely everything and he could do absolutely everything. The other guys have many, many things to improve, and Leroy especially." —AFP

Neymar, PSG run riot in French Cup

PARIS: Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and Angel Di Maria all scored twice as a rampant Paris Saint-Germain shrugged off the absence of Edinson Cavani to win 6-1 away to Ligue 1 rivals Rennes in the French Cup on Sunday.

PSG are bidding to win the trophy for the fourth season running, something no club has ever done before, and they showed Rennes no pity in Brittany. Leading scorer Cavani was not involved after returning late from his Christmas and New Year break in Uruguay, so Di Maria came into the attack alongside Mbappe and Neymar.



Cavani was not involved after returning late

Mbappe opened the scoring inside nine minutes, finishing after being picked out by Thiago Silva's long ball over the top. A brilliantly worked goal saw PSG double their lead, with Adrien Rabiot and Marco Verratti combining to tee up Neymar for the finish.

Di Maria turned in a Yuri Berchiche cross from the left for the third goal midway through the first half and the pick of the bunch came as Neymar made it 4-0 two minutes from half-time.

PSG started the move in their own penalty box before Neymar broke downfield and eventually applied the finish from Mbappe's pass. Rennes did pull one back in the second half from a Benjamin Bourigeaud penalty after a Thiago Motta handball, but there was still time for Unai Emery's side to score twice more.

Mbappe set up Di Maria to make it five and the



RENNES: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe (L) vies with Rennes' French midfielder Benjamin Andre during the French cup football match Rennes vs Paris SG at the Roazhon Park in Rennes. — AFP

Argentine returned the favour with an assist for Mbappe to complete the rout. PSG have now won their last 34 consecutive domestic cup ties, a run they can extend further as they go to Amiens in the League Cup quarter-finals on Wednesday.

Ligue 1 clubs were entering the French Cup in their first outings of 2018 after a two-and-a-half-week winter break, and most of the leading sides made it through. Guido Carrillo scored a hat-trick as Monaco won 5-2 at fourth-tier Yzeure on Saturday, while Maxwell Cornet's last-gasp free-kick saw Lyon win 3-2

at Ligue 2 side Nancy and a Jordan Amavi goal in extra time gave Marseille a 1-0 victory at home to second-tier Valenciennes.

With Mario Balotelli out and Wesley Sneijder allowed to leave to complete a move to Al Gharafa of Qatar, Nice were beaten 1-0 at Toulouse. The biggest shock came as Bordeaux went down 2-1 away to fourth-tier Granville in Normandy despite having taken the lead through Younesse Sankhare. Last season's beaten finalists Angers were also eliminated, losing 2-0 at home to second-tier Lorient. —AFP



Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

ENGLISH LEAGUE CUP

Manchester City v Bristol City 22:45
beIN SPORTS HD 2

SPAIN COPA DEL REY

Atletico de Madrid v Lleida Esportiu 21:30
beIN SPORTS
Valencia v Las Palmas 23:30
beIN SPORTS

FRENCH COUPE DE LA LIGUE

Nice v Monaco 23:00
beIN SPORTS