

Sports

Ronaldo late winner pulls Juventus 11 points clear

Roma throw away three-goal lead as Zapata rescues Atalanta

MILAN: Cristiano Ronaldo converted a penalty to seal a hard-fought 2-1 win for Juventus against Lazio in Rome on Sunday to pull 11 points clear in Serie A. Juventus had trailed after an Emre Can own-goal after an hour before substitute Joao Cancelo pulled the champions level and then earned the penalty which Ronaldo slotted in with two minutes to go.

An eighth straight Serie A title beckons for Massimiliano Allegri's side who soar clear of second-placed Napoli who were held to a goalless draw at AC Milan on Saturday. Inter Milan are 19 points behind the leaders after losing 1-0 at Torino earlier on Sunday.

Lazio drop to eighth place—three points off the Champions League spots—after their second defeat in a row after losing to Napoli by the same score last weekend. "It must have been the kitman's fault, giving us ten shirts of different colours because we couldn't pass the ball to each other," said Allegri.

"For sixty minutes it was the worst Juventus of the year," continued captain Giorgio Chiellini. "Paradoxically after the goal disadvantage we found the motivation to win it. 'We've got players who make the difference. (Goalkeeper Wojciech) Szczesny kept us on our feet, we were lethal in the end.'"

The champions had struggled for the first hour in the Stadio Olimpico as Lazio piled on the pressure. Daniele Rugani pulled off a goal-line clearance, after Joaquin Correa dribbled past Can and Leonardo Bonucci, with Szczesny denying Luis Alberto and Marco Parolo.

German midfielder Can's woes were compounded just before the hour mark when he ducked down and instead deflected the ball into his own net off a corner. But Allegri's side could count on the depth of their bench with second half substitutes Cancelo and Federico Bernardeschi proving pivotal.

A solo run by Bernardeschi down the left set up the equaliser which Cancelo fired in off a rebound after

Lazio goalkeeper Thomas Strakosha had initially cleared a Paulo Dybala shot. Ronaldo—whose penalty was saved last week against Chievo—finished off to score in his eighth consecutive away match to bring his league tally to 15 goals.

ROMA WASTEFUL

Inter Milan fell at Torino with defender Armando Izzo scoring the only goal, as Roma threw away a three-goal lead to draw 3-3 against Atalanta. Roma could have overtaken AC Milan in fourth but Colombian forward Duvan Zapata continued his goal-scoring streak to snatch a point.

Roma had been three goals up following an Edin Dzeko brace, with Stephan El Shaarawy adding a third five minutes prior to the break, before the Romans faded under the driving rain in northern Italy. Roma coach Eusebio Di Francesco lamented: "What drives me crazy is the lack of consistency from this team, even during the same match. 'It's absurd to see a team with the same players put in such a different performance from one half to the next. 'We were fortunate to get a draw.' Dzeko broke through after just three minutes for his first goal in Serie A since October, adding a second half an hour later, with teenage compatriot Nicolo Zaniolo providing two assists.

Atalanta fought back with Zapata heading just wide before Roma doubled their lead against the run of play with Steven Nzonzi finding a way through for Dzeko to finish off. Zaniolo set up El Shaarawy to make it 3-0 five minutes before the break but Timothy Castagne headed Atalanta back into the game before the interval.

Di Francesco's men struggled after the break with former Roma defender Rafael Toloi nodding in Atalanta's second just before the hour off a Papu Gomez cross. Zapata missed a chance for a third ten minutes later sending a penalty kick over the bar.



ROME: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo shoots to score a penalty during the Italian Serie A football match Lazio Roma vs Juventus on Sunday at the Olympic stadium in Rome. — AFP

But a minute later he fired in his 14th goal in the last eight league games, for a total of 15 this season. Both sides also drew 3-3 when they met in Rome last August,

a game in which the Romans had come from 3-1 down. Atalanta are now seventh, three points off the elite European places. — AFP

Madrid get third win in a row with victory at Espanyol

BARCELONA: Gareth Bale marked his return from injury with a goal as Real Madrid continued their impressive turnaround in results by thrashing Espanyol 4-2 away on Sunday, racking up a third consecutive win in La Liga.

Third-placed Real usually fare well on trips to Espanyol and they got off to a flying start on this visit when Karim Benzema scored in the fourth minute on the rebound, beating former Real goalkeeper Diego Lopez who had parried a shot from Luka Modric.

Captain Sergio Ramos headed home a cross from Modric in the 15th minute to score his fourth goal in January and put Madrid further at ease, although Espanyol pulled themselves back into contention with a strike from Leo Baptistao 10 minutes later.

Santiago Solari's side restored their two-goal advantage when Benzema struck again just before halftime, playing a one-two with Vinicius Jr and curling the ball into the bottom corner after a delightful backheel from the Brazilian teenager.

Madrid had a setback at the end of the half as Ramos was forced off with an injury and was unable to continue, although Solari said the defender only had a knock and would not be sidelined for long.

Bale came off the bench midway through the second half after more than three weeks out injured and the Wales forward scored within three minutes of his return, collecting a pass and escaping from two defenders with a drag of the heel before smashing into the net.

Madrid were reduced to 10 men later in the game when Raphael Varane was given a straight red card for



CORNELLA DE LLOBREGAT: Real Madrid's Welsh forward Gareth Bale (R) kicks the ball past Espanyol's Spanish defender Lluís Lopez to score a goal during the Spanish league football match between RCD Espanyol and Real Madrid CF at the RCDE Stadium in Cornellà de Llobregat on Sunday. — AFP

blocking a goalscoring chance with a foul, and Espanyol pulled back another goal with a wonderful strike from Venezuelan Roberto Rosales. "We played with great intensity and pace and we were always looking to score, and we had the game under control until the sending-off," Solari told reporters after a fifth win from six games in all competitions. Madrid are third on 39 points, 10

behind leaders Barcelona who beat Girona 2-0 earlier on Sunday, while Espanyol dropped to 15th.

"We've scored four goals but the most important thing is how we played. Our hard work is coming off," added Madrid winger Lucas Vazquez. "The key thing for us has been our intensity. When we play with this much intensity, we are an entirely different team." — Reuters

Zaccheroni wary of 'outstanding' Qatar in Asian Cup semi

ABU DHABI: United Arab Emirates coach Alberto Zaccheroni indulged in some mind games yesterday before the Asian Cup semi-finals, suggesting opponents Qatar were favourites to win.

The Italian, who steered Japan to a record fourth title in 2011, sought to take the pressure off his players before Tuesday's politically charged clash in Abu Dhabi by highlighting the strengths of 2022 World Cup hosts Qatar.

"They are an outstanding side who haven't conceded a goal yet in this tournament," said Zaccheroni, whose team stunned holders Australia 1-0 in the quarter-finals. "Their results even before the Asian Cup were excellent. They are solid in all departments but they have some dangerous individuals too.

"They've been together for many years," noted the former AC Milan and Lazio boss before a game that will be bristling with regional tensions over the long-running Gulf blockade of Qatar. "That stability is a source of great strength for them." The winners of semi-final between Iran and Japan await in the final on February 1.

The Emiratis reached the final the last time they hosted the Asian Cup in 1996 and reached the last four in Australia four years ago. Zaccheroni promised his side had extra incentive to go one better than in 2015 with key players Khalifa Mubarak and Mohamed Ahmed ruled out of the semi-final through injury and set to undergo surgery. "The players who are fit are highly motivated and all aware of the importance of this game," he said. "We have faced our difficulties in this tournament in the group stage and in the last 16," admitted Zaccheroni, whose side benefitted from con-



ABU DHABI: File photo shows Qatar's players celebrate their victory during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup quarter-final football match between South Korea and Qatar at Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi on January 25, 2019. — AFP

troverial late penalties against Bahrain in their opening game and Kyrgyzstan in the knockout phase.

"But we are growing into the tournament and our performance against Australia has boosted our confidence." However, UAE have failed to set the world on fire and fans have hardly been flocking to see them, with swathes of empty seats visible at their matches.

Zaccheroni, though, brushed off criticism of his team's somewhat laboured style in the absence through injury of mop-top playmaker Omar Abdulrahman.

"I don't speak Arabic so I don't read the newspapers

to read what critics say," sniffed the Italian. "My focus is on getting my team to the final and we are confident we can do that." Qatar's run to their first Asian Cup semi-final is all the more remarkable given the animosity shown towards them from local crowds. But Portugal-born defender Pedro Miguel welcomed the pressure of being favourites after Qatar shocked co-favourites South Korea 1-0 in the quarter-finals. "We want to be the favourites," he told AFP. "All the players have the confidence to win this games. It's important for the players, the staff and all of Qatar." — AFP

Juventus maintain unbeaten run

MILAN: Even playing badly seven-time reigning Italian champions Juventus maintained their unbeaten run in Serie A with a 2-1 win over Lazio in the Stadio Olimpico to pull 11 points clear in Serie A.

Second-placed Napoli were held to a goalless draw by AC Milan while Inter Milan lost 1-0 at Torino to slip a distant third 19 points behind the leaders. Cristiano Ronaldo once again shrugged off his personal problems to seal Juventus's victory from the penalty spot with two minutes to go in Rome for his 15th goal this season.

The five-time Ballon d'Or winner was fined millions and handed a two-year jail sentence which was also reduced to a fine by a Spanish court during the week for committing tax fraud while at Real Madrid. "When you play like this and win it's a good signal on a mental level," said Allegri of his side's battle with Lazio. "It's an important step for the Scudetto."

Sampdoria forward Fabio Quagliarella has moved back into the Italy frame eight years after last playing for the national side after his brace against Udinese equalled Gabriel Batistuta's record of scoring in 11 consecutive Serie A games.

Quagliarella, who turns 36 this week, is the in-form striker in Italy with 16 goals, five more than Lazio's Ciro Immobile. Italy boss Roberto Mancini watched in the stands in Genoa and former Napoli and Torino coach Walter Novellino says it would be impossible to overlook a player who has scored more goals than Ronaldo.

"Mancini's project is important but we have to look at reality and today Fabio is the in-form striker," Novellino told Gazzetta dello Sport. "Age doesn't count for anything, he's a leader."

Inter Milan captain Mauro Icardi drew another blank as he went a fifth consecutive game without scoring. The Argentine, the joint top scorer last season is currently in contract negotiations with Inter and reports have linked him to Real Madrid and Chelsea. — AFP

Live		Matches on TV (Local Timings)	
ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE			
Arsenal FC v Cardiff City	beIN SPORTS HD 3	22:45	
Fulham FC v Brighton & Hove Albion	beIN SPORTS HD 4	22:45	
Wolverhampton Wanderers FC v West Ham	beIN SPORTS HD 8	22:45	
Huddersfield Town v Everton FC	beIN SPORTS HD 6	22:45	
Manchester United v Burnley FC	beIN SPORTS HD 5	23:00	
Newcastle United FC v Manchester City	beIN SPORTS HD 2	23:00	
SPAIN COPA DEL REY			
Valencia C.F. v Getafe CF	beIN SPORTS HD	23:30	
ITALIAN CUP			
AC Milan v SSC Napoli	beIN SPORTS	22:45	
ASIAN NATIONS CUP 2019			
Qatar v United Arab Emirates	beIN SPORTS	17:00	