

Sports

Messi shows his worth but Suarez double stretches Atletico lead

Report claims Leo's four-year contract earns him 555 million euros

MADRID: Lionel Messi underlined his worth to Barcelona by scoring a sensational free-kick on Sunday but Atletico Madrid are in charge of La Liga after beating Cadiz to stand 10 points clear at the top of the table. Messi's stunning effort in a 2-1 win over Athletic Bilbao had been matched by the Argentinian's friend and former team-mate Luis Suarez, who earlier curled in a superb free-kick of his own in Atletico's 4-2 victory over Cadiz.

Atletico end the weekend even further ahead after Real Madrid's defeat by Levante on Saturday, which means Zinedine Zidane's side are now level with Barca on points, both of them struggling to keep pace in the title race. "Every game is an important step towards reaching the goal we set ourselves at the start of the season," said Diego Simeone. "We have to keep pushing each other."

Barca's win at least maintains their momentum while Messi's 650th club goal may have carried extra satisfaction for the Argentinian, who had the details of his contract published in the Spanish newspaper El Mundo on Saturday night. El Mundo claimed the deal signed by Messi in 2017 shows he could earn up to 555 million euros over its four years, describing it as "the colossal contract that ruined Barcelona".

"Someone has done it with bad intentions to cause problems," said Ronald Koeman. "You have to respect a player who has given so much to Spanish football and to this club. I didn't have any doubts that it wouldn't affect him on the pitch." Few can argue with Messi's contribution in that regard, with the 33-year-old showing against Bilbao why the club have gone to such lengths to keep him.

Bilbao briefly drew level through a Jordi Alba own-goal early in the second half but Antoine Griezmann's strike secured Barca their third consecutive victory, with Ousmane Dembele and Frenkie de Jong both impressive again. Asked what Messi worth is to the team, Griezmann said: "What a question, we are enjoying him, he is a legend. I hope we can keep enjoying him for many more years."

Suarez haunts Barca

But Barcelona continue to be haunted by the spectre of Suarez, whose tremendous free-kick and then a penalty helped Atletico push their advantage into double figures. While Messi's free-kick was closer and bent perfectly into the top right-hand corner, Suarez's shot was further out and hit harder, a fizzing effort that curled into the left side of the net. "The other day they were practicing free-kicks," said Simeone. "I told him we had not seen him score many goals from free-kicks so that's why I smiled when I saw him score this one."

"After spending so long at Barca with Messi, it was difficult," added Suarez. He was the driving force again, his two goals making it nine in his last eight games and 14 now for the season. His goals and assists have now earned Atletico 12 extra points in the league, with Barcelona's decision to let him leave, especially for title rivals, seeming more misjudged by the week.

It could get even worse for them and Real Madrid, given Simeone's side still have a game in hand over each of them. Both would have been given hope by a rousing display from newly-promoted



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi scores a goal during the Spanish league football match FC Barcelona against Athletic Club Bilbao at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Sunday. —AFP

Cadiz, who were inspired by the relentless Alvaro Negredo. The 35-year-old scored twice, could have had a hat-trick and certainly did not deserve to be on the losing side. But Suarez's double, between

goals from Saul Niguez and Koke late on, sealed another three points for Atletico, who now have the La Liga crown within reach, even with half of the season left to play. —AFP

PSG suffer first loss under Pochettino, Lille move to top

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain suffered their first defeat under Mauricio Pochettino as lowly Lorient fought back to claim a dramatic 3-2 victory on Sunday, allowing Lille to go top of Ligue 1. Neymar scored two penalties but the visitors collapsed late on at the Stade du Moustoir, as Nigerian Terem Moffi netted an injury-time winner.

PSG drop to third, one point behind second-placed Lyon, with Lille a further two points ahead after their 1-0 win over Dijon. "We have to keep the positive aspects and move forward," said former Tottenham manager Pochettino. "Accidents happen in football. We have to keep working. It makes us realize that it can happen if we don't play at 100 percent."

It was the first defeat in six games as PSG coach for Pochettino since he took over from the sacked Thomas Tuchel. The win takes struggling Lorient into the relegation play-off spot. "(Moffi's goal) was magical. Against PSG, it's even crazier," said Lorient's Laurent Abergel, who scored the opening goal. "For a Marseille fan like me, the first dream is perhaps to play for OM and the second to beat PSG."

Lorient started brightly and had the

first real shot in anger in the 30th minute, as Adrian Grbic's long-range strike had to be pushed away by PSG goalkeeper Sergio Rico. The hosts did take the lead six minutes later, though, as PSG failed several times to clear and Abergel picked out the top corner with the outside of his left boot.

Neymar leveled on the stroke of half-time from the penalty spot with his fifth league goal of the season. PSG improved after the break and took the lead in the 57th minute as Houboulang Mendes, who also conceded the first penalty, brought down Mauro Icardi and Neymar again made no mistake.

It was the first time since Zlatan Ibrahimovic in 2015 that a PSG player had netted two spot-kicks in a Ligue 1 match. The visitors pressed for a third, but Lorient goalkeeper Matthieu Dreyer made an excellent stop to keep out an Icardi header. That proved to be crucial, as the stubborn home side equalised in the 80th minute. Substitute Yoane Wissa scored an excellent individual goal, his sixth of his first full campaign as a top-flight player.

PSG went in search of a winner, but the closest they came saw full-back Layvin Kurzawa's drive fly narrowly wide. They over-committed in the second minute of added time, leaving no defenders within 60 yards of their own goal as Moffi was sent racing clean through. The 21-year-old, on as a sub, slotted the ball into the bottom corner to spark wild celebrations for the home team.



LORIENT: Paris Saint-Germain's Argentinian forward Mauro Icardi reacts as Lorient's players celebrate at the end of the French L1 football match between FC Lorient and Paris Saint-Germain at the Stade Yves-Allainmat stadium, in Lorient, western France, on Sunday. —AFP

Lille march on

Christophe Galtier's Lille took full advantage of PSG's slip-up with their fourth straight league success. Sven Botman missed an early chance for the home side against Dijon, but Lille took a 29th-minute lead through Yusuf Yazici. It was the 24-year-old Turkish international's sixth league goal of the season, despite having only made seven starts in the Ligue 1 campaign.

Jonathan Bamba wasted an excellent opportunity to double the lead midway through the second half when he headed over from close range, but Lille comfortably saw out victory.

"Now, we are in the shoes of the hunted," said Lille coach Galtier. "You have to appreciate it and take it on. We'll see how we react." Lille are bidding for their first major trophy since winning both Ligue 1 and the French Cup in 2011.

Monaco are also in the hunt after their fifth win on the bounce, 2-1 at Nantes, which puts Nico Kovac's side six points behind leaders Lille and just three behind PSG in the hunt for Champions League spots. Guillermo Maripan headed home the opener in first half stoppage time, and Kevin Volland doubled their lead just before the hour mark. —AFP

Spurs stunned as Trossard boosts Brighton

BRIGHTON: Jose Mourinho admitted his "sad" Tottenham flops "lacked energy" after Leandro Trossard rocked their top four challenge as the Brighton forward sealed a shock 1-0 win on Sunday. Mourinho's side were hoping to get back on track after losing to Liverpool on Thursday, but instead they suffered a damaging second successive defeat.

Trossard netted in the first half at the Amex Stadium and, with Tottenham's Harry Kane sidelined by injury, the visitors lacked the quality to salvage an equalizer. Tottenham are languishing in sixth place, with just two wins in their last nine Premier League matches.

They trail six points behind fourth placed Leicester, albeit with a game in hand, after only their second defeat in 10 away league games this season. Mourinho conceded his players were feeling sorry for themselves and couldn't find the drive to rescue a point.

"We didn't start well. In the first half I felt the team was probably too sad with the goal conceded and the situation," Mourinho said. "There was a lack of energy. In the last 25, 30 minutes they gave everything but of course with some limitations. The boys showed great spirit in the second half

and showed they are suffering. They tried to fight against that sadness."

The title bid that looked possible for Tottenham in December is fading fast as leaders Manchester City are now 11 points clear of the north Londoners. A victory against seventh-placed Chelsea on Thursday is essential to halt Tottenham's sudden decline away from the Champions League plays.

"I have nothing negative to say about them. I leave the game with a good feeling about my boys because they tried hard in the second half," Mourinho added. Fourth-bottom Brighton moved seven points clear of the relegation zone after extending their unbeaten league run to three matches. The Seagulls were the only team in the top four divisions in England without a home league victory this season, but they finally ended that dismal sequence at the 11th attempt.

Spluttering Spurs

Gareth Bale was handed only his second league start since returning for his second spell at Tottenham. The on-loan Real Madrid forward replaced Kane, who suffered his latest in a long list of ankle problems against Liverpool, but once again he failed to impress. Brighton nearly made the perfect start when Pascal Gross hit the outside of the post after good work from Alexis Mac Allister.

Mac Allister fired over from long range soon after as Brighton's vibrant start pushed Tottenham onto the back foot. The hosts deservedly took the



BRIGHTON: Brighton's Belgian midfielder Leandro Trossard turns to celebrate after scoring the opening goal during the English Premier League football match between Brighton and Tottenham Hotspur at the American Express Community Stadium in Brighton, southern England on Sunday. —AFP

lead with a flowing move in the 17th minute. Mac Allister picked out Gross and his cut back found Trossard for a clinical close-range finish.

Son Heung-min led Tottenham's first incisive raid when he found Steven Bergwijn on the edge of the penalty area, but the forward dragged his shot wide. Bale was subdued in attack but the Wales star came in useful at the other end when he nodded clear just as Lewis Dunk's header was flying towards the top corner. Mourinho sent on Carlos Vinicius in place of center-back Davinson Sanchez at half-time.

The on-loan Benfica striker made an immediate impact with a towering

leap to meet Bale's corner with a header that was blocked by Brighton keeper Robert Sanchez. Tottenham still couldn't find their rhythm and, after Hugo Lloris saved well from Ben White's deflected effort, Mourinho hauled off the disappointing Bale and introduced Lucas Moura.

It made no difference and Brighton could have doubled their lead when Mac Allister shot into the side-netting from a tight angle before Neal Maupay headed wide from Solly March's cross. Vinicius offered a glimmer of hope with a powerful effort from the edge of the area that Sanchez pushed away, but it was too little too late for spluttering Tottenham. —AFP

Roma punish Verona to keep pressure on Milan teams

MILAN: Roma maintained third spot in Serie A on Sunday with a 3-1 win over Hellas Verona to keep the pressure on the Milan teams leading the title race. Captain Edin Dzeko was again sidelined after a fall-out with coach Paulo Fonseca, but Roma shrugged off his absence to stay six points behind leaders AC Milan and four adrift of Inter. "The team is showing that it does not depend on a single player," said Fonseca. "Our first-half was perfect. It wasn't easy to score three goals against one of the best defenses in the league."

The capital side were three goals up after half an hour at the Stadio Olimpico, despite losing English defender Chris Smalling to a muscular injury early in the first half. Gianluca Mancini rose to head in a corner in the 20th minute to get Roma into their stride, and two minutes later Borja Mayoral teed up Henrikh Mkhitaryan for a second.

Mayoral added the third himself just before the half-hour, finishing off after Verona goalkeeper Marco Silvestri cleared a Lorenzo Pellegrini volley into the Spaniard's path. Verona coach Ivan Juric made four substitutions 10 minutes after the break, with Ebrima Colley coming off the bench and nodding in just after the hour mark.

But it failed to spark a fightback for ninth-placed Verona, with Roma getting maximum points before next week's trip to Juventus, who are one point behind in fourth. Napoli, in fifth, a further two points adrift, rebounded from last weekend's loss at Verona, with a 2-0 win against 19th-placed Parma.

Eljif Elmas broke through after half an hour in Naples, collecting the ball in midfield, beating four opponents and finishing off the solo effort from an angle. Matteo Politano added a second eight minutes from time with a shot which took a deflection off Parma defender Yordan Osorio.

Coach Gennaro Gattuso hit out at the criticism he faces from "keyboard fans, in the era of lockdown" despite the team being in the running for a Champions League return. "I get slaughtered every day and it's difficult," complained the former AC Milan coach. "I'm taking slaps to the right and left every day, you'd think we are last in the standings."

Lazio rebound

Gattuso's side are equal on points with sixth-placed Lazio who rebounded after their midweek Italian Cup defeat to Atalanta with a 3-1 win on their return trip to Bergamo. The Roman side gained revenge with a dominant display at the Gewiss Stadium for their fifth consecutive league win.

Lazio went ahead in just the third minute with Adam Marusic curling in from a distance. Joaquin Correa doubled the lead from a tight angle six minutes after the break. Mario Pasalic pulled a goal back for Atalanta with 10 minutes to go, sending in a rebound after Luis Muriel hit the post.

Andreas Pereira and Vedat Muriqi both came off the bench after 80 minutes with the pair combining to create Lazio's third which Muriqi tapped in two minutes later. "The goal at the beginning changed the game," said Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini after his team fell to their first league defeat in two months. Atalanta drop to seventh, one point behind Lazio. —AFP