

SPORTS
sports

Barca race towards title

Jordi Alba's goal gave Barcelona a 2-1 win over Real Sociedad

AFP | Madrid

Barcelona are closing in on their eighth La Liga title in 11 years after Clement Lenglet and Jordi Alba both scored in a 2-1 win over Real Sociedad on Saturday.

Victory means Barca only have to beat Alaves on Tuesday and then Levante next Saturday to be crowned champions at Camp Nou, while three points against Alaves will be enough on its own if Atletico Madrid then lose to Valencia on Wednesday.

Whether in three days or seven, it is now surely only a matter of when rather than if Ernesto Valverde's side successfully defend their trophy, despite Atletico keeping the gap to nine points after they edged past Eibar earlier on Saturday.

"We have to get it out of our heads that we are nine points clear," Valverde said. "We now have three days until we play again and it will be difficult."

Wrapping it up early though would allow Barcelona the luxury of focusing completely on the Champions League, which could give them an advantage over their semi-final opponents Liverpool, who seem to be embroiled in a Premier League race to the finish with Manchester City.

But this was no stroll, with Real Sociedad pulling level in the second half thanks to Ju-



Barcelona's Spanish defender Jordi Alba shoots to score his team's second goal

anmi's equaliser, even if parity lasted less than two minutes.

Lionel Messi might not have scored but it was his cute pass that teed up the excellent Alba to score the winner after Lenglet had earlier powered in a header from Ousmane Dembele's cross.

Barcelona racing towards title

Barcelona stumbled out of the blocks this season but they are now tearing down the home straight.

This was their 21st league

game without defeat while Real Madrid sit 16 points behind them ahead of their game at home to Athletic Bilbao.

"You always look at the matches of Real Madrid because you always consider them a rival," Valverde said. "In their case, they may be thinking about next season."

It was a surprise when Messi failed to score with two free-kicks in the first half while Sociedad could have been in front but Juanmi was denied by

Marc-Andre ter Stegen and Wilian Jose spurned the rebound.

There was nothing complicated about Lenglet's opener, the Frenchman rising high above two defenders and heading into the corner for his first league goal in a Barcelona shirt.

Ter Stegen and Alba were fortunate not to be punished for a mix-up and then La Real did score, in the 62nd minute, as Juanmi slid to connect with Mikel Merino's brilliant through ball. But in the 64th minute, Barca

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were ahead again as Messi weaved one way and then the other before finding Alba to his left. The defender jinked inside and drove a shot into the far corner.

Earlier, Atletico Madrid had needed Thomas Lemar to come off the bench and find an 85th-minute winner against Eibar as they stretched their lead over Real Madrid to seven points.

Without Antoine Griezmann and Diego Costa, who were both suspended, Diego Simeone's side looked set for a stalemate that would have given Real at least a sniff of second place.

Instead Lemar, on as a substitute, tucked in Koke's cross to deliver another timely boost to Atleti's morale, in the same week their star goalkeeper Jan Oblak extended his contract with the club until 2023.

Australia beat Belarus to make first Fed Cup final since 1993

AFP | Brisbane, Australia

Australia powered into its first Fed Cup final since 1993 yesterday with Ashleigh Barty and Samantha Stosur clinching the deciding fifth rubber in Brisbane against Belarusian pair Victoria Azarenka and Aryna Sabalenka.

Their battling 7-5, 3-6, 6-2 win set up a title match against either France or Romania in November.

The tie was sent into the crucial doubles match after Azarenka crushed Stosur 6-1, 6-1 in the reverse singles, following Barty sweeping past Sabalenka 6-2, 6-2.

Belarus, a losing finalist in 2017, was scheduled to pit Lidziya Marozava and Vera Lapko against the Australian duo, who were playing together for the first time. But with so much on the line team captain Tatiana Poutchek opted instead for the more accomplished pairing.

But they fell short to give seven-time champions Australia a crack at their first title since last winning in 1974.

"I could not have picked two more perfect athletes to compete. Ash and Sam are superstars," said elated Australian captain Alicia Molik.



Ashleigh Barty of Australia hits a return to Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus

Barty called making the final "unbelievable" while Stosur said it was "super exciting".

"We knew it was going to be a tough one and we just so happy with how we played," added Stosur. "All the girls have worked so hard throughout the year and we really stick together."

Watched on Pat Rafter Arena by Evonne Goolagong, who led Australia to that last Fed Cup win, the home team grabbed an early break against the Sa-

balenka serve in the opening game.

Belarus evened it up in game six and they exchanged breaks again before the Australians attacked the Azarenka serve to break and go 6-5 in front, with Stosur securing the set with an overhead smash.

The second set went with serve until a powerful Sabalenka forehand off the Stosur serve gave Belarus the edge and Sabalenka served out the set to take the tie to the wire.

Ronaldo '1,000 per cent' committed

AFP | Milan

Cristiano Ronaldo said he was "1,000 per cent committed to staying" with Juventus next season as he claimed his first Serie A title and Juventus their eighth in a row on Saturday.

Massimiliano Allegri's side had needed just one more point for a 35th Scudetto and their latest title triumph helped ease some of the pain of their shock Champions League exit at the Juventus Stadium to Ajax on Tuesday.

A come-from-behind 2-1 win over Fiorentina was enough to give them a 20-point lead on nearest rivals Napoli with five games to play.

Serbian defender Nikola Milenkovic put Fiorentina ahead after less than six minutes.

But Alex Sandro's diving header on 37 minutes and an own goal from Fiorentina defender German Pezzella after a Ronaldo cross in the 53rd minute sealed another title to ease their European disappointment.

"It was a great season and I adapted well. We won the Scudetto and the Italian Super Cup, which is not easy to



Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo in action with Fiorentina's Bryan Dabo

achieve," said Ronaldo.

"It didn't go well in the Champions League but next year is a new page, the fans all want it and so do we.

"I'm staying at Juve, 1,000 per cent."

Ronaldo makes history

It was the 34-year-old's sixth domestic league title, having won three with Manchester United and two with Real Madrid, as he becomes the first player to win the Premier League, La Liga and Serie A.

Juventus purchased the five-time Ballon d'Or winner for 100 million euros (\$112 million) last summer.

BOC conducts symposium on recovery and restoring sports activity

TDT | Manama

A course on recovery and restoring sports activity, organized by the Bahrain Olympic Committee's Olympic Academy, got underway yesterday with a group of coaches representing sports clubs and federations, taking part.

This programme is part of the annual plan of the Olympic Academy in an attempt to develop and qualifying national technical staff.

It is being run by Dr. Nicolas Berryman, assistant professor of sports studies at Sherbrooke University, lecturer at Physical Activity and Research Faculty at the University Studies Centre at the University of Montreal.

The Olympic Academy aims to enhance the capacity of national technical competencies in the field of recovery and restoring sports activities due to their great contributions in improving the players' abilities and avoid injuries.

Dr. Berryman himself gave a lecture on Saturday, April 20, entitled "Integrating Muscle Strength and Fitness Training", which was held at the Olympic Academy in Manama, Juffair with the participation of men and women national teams' coaches.

Japan avoid Fed Cup drop

AFP | Osaka, Japan

Misaki Doi thrashed Bibiane Schoofs 6-3, 6-2 yesterday as Japan completed a 4-0 Dutch white-wash in a one-sided Fed Cup world group two relegation playoff.

The Netherlands, who just three years ago reached the Fed Cup semi-finals, slipped into the Europe/Africa group one after an abject display in Osaka.

Doi and Nao Hibino had put Japan firmly in control of the tie on Saturday, despite the absence of world number one Naomi Osaka.

World 104 Doi finished the job with a clinical performance against Schoofs, before Shuko Aoyama and Eri Hozumi added insult to injury for the Dutch by beating Lesley Kerkhove and Demi Schuurs 6-3, 3-6, 10-6 in the dead doubles rubber.

The final singles match was subsequently scratched.

"It took a while to find my rhythm but the crowd got behind me and gave me a lift," said Doi after overpowering Schoofs with a barrage of backhand winners.

"To stay in the world group gives us something to aim for. It's a victory that gives hope to women's tennis in Japan."