

No winner in Clasico in the time of protests

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99,000-seat Camp Nou held up red, blue and yellow square cards to form a mosaic during the playing and singing of the club hymn. Separatists unfurled a large banner reading "SpainTandTalk" and "FREEDOM" as calls for the Spanish government to accept a negotiation over a possible referendum on secession. When the hymn was over, some spectators held up blue signs with the same message while shouting for the release from prison for several leaders of the movement.

The separatists want the wealthy north-western region to break away from the rest of Spain. Catalonia's 7.5 million residents are roughly split by the secession question, according to polls. While both teams are more known for their high-powered attacks, it was defenders who stood out in the game as Barcelona's Gerard Pique and Madrid's Sergio Ramos both cleared goal-bound shots from their lines.

Ramos sets record

Ramos set a new record for the most clásicos by a player from either side with 43. The Spain captain blocked Lionel Messi's best chance in the 31st minute. Led by Messi, who thrilled the crowd from the start with several runs through Madrid's midfield, the hosts appeared in control.

Madrid, however, took the initiative by trying to take advantage of its superior height and bombarded the box with crosses. Pique cleared Madrid's best opportunity, a header from Casemiro in the 17th.

The second half was one of the tamest between the fierce rivals in recent memory. Neither generated much in attack. And even Messi was off key when he scuffed a shot from close range.

As smoke from outside wafted down, the tension shifted from the pitch to the clashes outside. The match ended with an eerie silence. There were no cheers and the tradition of playing the hymn was forgone.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BARCELONA, DECEMBER 19

BARCELONA AND Real Madrid played out a 0-0 draw for the first time in 17 years in a politically supercharged 'clásico' match played amid a large separatist protest that turned violent outside Camp Nou stadium. The game inside the stadium was completed without any major incidents - either on the field or in the stands. But in the streets outside on Wednesday, a detachment of riot police clashed with protesters soon after the start, and plastic trash cans were set on fire.

The smell of smoke from the streets outside reached the stands in the final minutes of the match.

The draw left both teams locked on points atop the Spanish league with Barcelona in front on goal difference. It was the first scoreless match between the fierce rivals since November 2002. Despite concerns by police that the protesters could also try to delay or interrupt the match, both teams arrived safely and on time to the stadium escorted by a heavy police detail. Fears of a pitch invasion by protesters in the stands also proved unfounded.

Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane said he was pleased with both the performance and the fact that the game went ahead despite the abnormal circumstances. "Everything went well for Barca and for Real Madrid, and for football," Zidane said. "So we can all be happy."

Play was held up around a minute shortly after halftime when some spectators threw dozens of inflatable beach balls on the side of the pitch while shouting “independence.” Stewards quickly cleared them away.

The public speaker also asked the around 100,000 spectators at Europe's biggest stadium to not use exits at one end of the stadium, apparently for security reasons. Barcelona coach Ernesto Valverde said his team was not affected by the protest since there is always an intense atmosphere surrounding games against Madrid.

"With the tension that the game had already, I saw there were a few yellow balls, but not many. We tried to treat it as normally as possible. People protested, but nothing more," Valverde said. "As a social event, I don't have an opinion. As a sporting event, we drew."

Before kickoff the spectators at the



WITH A JUMP of 2-foot-3-inches, Cristiano Ronaldo headed home Alex Sandro's cross in Juventus's 2-1 win over Sampdoria in Serie A on Wednesday. At the peak of his jump, the 6-foot-1-inch striker was 8-foot-5-inches above the ground, according to Juventus's website. This wasn't the first time he executed a gravity-defying jump: he had earlier scored goals from a height of 9-foot-6-inches and 8-foot-5-inches against Man United in 2013 and Wales in 2016 respectively, *AFP* reported. *Screenshots/Reuters*

Ronaldo did something that you see in the NBA; he was up in the air for an hour and a half. There's nothing you can say about it..."

CLAUDIO RANIERI
SAMPDORIA COACH

1 MOVEMENT: Brazilian defender Sandro received the ball on the left wing late in the first half. He had two teammates to aim inside the box, which was flooded by four Sampdoria defenders. Ronaldo was lurking on top of the box when the move began. But by the time crossed the ball, he was already moving towards the back post.

2 ANTICIPATION: As the ball sailed towards the far post, Ronaldo slipped behind the defenders. As much as the jump, Ronaldo's anticipation was equally inspiring. He calculated the trajectory of the cross, and knew exactly where to meet the ball mid-air, as well as finding the angle and space to beat the goalkeeper with the header.

3 AIR TIME: The Portuguese striker leapt above a defender and hung in the air for 1.5 seconds to meet the cross, before cushioning the header into the top of the net for the winning goal on the stroke of halftime. After the match, Ronaldo compared his jump to Michael Jordan's. He tweeted: "CR7 AIR JORDAN" with an airplane emoji.

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