

Who else but Larsson



AFP, Porto, Rome

Henrik Larsson scored his 40th goal of the season to fire Celtic into the final of the UEFA Cup against Portuguese giants FC Porto on Thursday with a 1-0 win over Boavista in a wretchedly poor semi-final at Porto.

Porto meanwhile booked their place in the final after holding Lazio to a goalless draw at Rome to secure a 4-1 semi-final aggregate win over the cash-strapped Italians.

BOAVISTA 0(1); CELTIC 1(2)

Swede Larsson, who scored once and then missed a penalty in the 1-1 first leg draw in Glasgow two weeks ago, created and converted the goal to brighten up a dismal match which brought European football crashing down to earth after the highs of Wednesday's Champions League classic in Manchester.

After struggling to find a way through the Boavista defence all evening, Larsson made the telling difference in the 79th minute when he tried to play a one-two on the edge of the box with

John Hartson.

The ball came off the foot of Pedrosa as the defender tackled the big Welsh striker and dropped fortunately into the path of the Swede who tucked the ball into the corner past Ricardo in the Boavista goal.

The win gave Martin O'Neill's side a place in the final in Seville on May 21 against another Portuguese side Porto who drew 0-0 with Lazio in Rome for a 4-1 aggregate win.

"It's just fantastic. I am thrilled for everyone at the club," said O'Neill as Celtic looked ahead to their first European final in 33 years.

"I think that over the two games we deserved it. They were very negative when they came to our place and wasted a lot of time.

"The one chance was enough and we are in the final," added the manager who was also scathing of the Portuguese side's gamesmanship as they tried to protect what could have been a crucial away goal from the first leg.

"We saw the fourth officials because all the spare balls disappeared - but after we scored there were plenty of them around," said O'Neill.

"I'm delighted with the win for everyone at the club, the players and the supporters - to be perfectly honest the

only people we could hear were our supporters."

The win also rescued Celtic's season with the team's Scottish title challenge almost extinguished as they sit eight points behind rivals Rangers.

But it was a dire first half with the only real chance falling to the Portuguese side two minutes before the interval.

LAZIO 0(1); FC PORTO 0(4)

Lazio gave themselves a mountain to climb after their heavy first leg defeat to the Portuguese champions-elect, who rarely looked in danger of squandering their advantage to the goal-shy Romans. Lazio's misery was compounded by a 57th minute penalty miss by Claudio Lopez and the first-half dismissal of Cesar, who was sent for an early bath along with Porto's Helder Postiga for fighting just before half-time.

Lazio coach Roberto Mancini lamented Lopez's spot-kick flop when the South American's effort was saved by Victor Baia.

"It's a shame it didn't go in as it would have opened up the game with half an hour left to play," he said.

"But Porto deserved to go through as they played better than us over the two

legs. "Tonight we relied too much on crosses, while they played the ball on the ground.

"Now we must turn our attention back to the league and try to qualify for next season's Champions League."

Mancini appealed to Lazio fans to get behind the team and the club's board responded by slashing ticket prices for women and children.

As a result the stadium was close to full, but despite huge support the home side played nervously, repeatedly giving possession away cheaply.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Results in the UEFA Cup semi-final, second leg on Thursday:

At Porto: Boavista (POR) 0 Celtic (SCO) 1 (Larsson 79)

Celtic won 2-1 on aggregate

At Rome: Lazio (ITA) 0 FC Porto (POR) 0

FC Porto won 4-1 on aggregate

FINAL Celtic v Porto (Seville, May 21)

Barthez on way out?

AFP, London

Real Madrid may or may not be looking to land David Beckham in time for next season - but Fabien Barthez could beat him to the exit door at Manchester United as the club rebuild following their midweek Champions League exit.

According to Friday's Daily Mail, the France international goalkeeper is to be sold in order to clear the way for the arrival of Leeds' highly-rated 23-year-old Paul Robinson.

Leeds are under pressure to reduce debts estimated at around 120 million dollars and United see Robinson as the man to step into the shoes of the eccentric Barthez, criticised for Real Madrid's opening goal in Wednesday's Champions League quarter-final return when Ronaldo beat him inside his near post.

"Barthez will be first out," the Mail predicted in allusion to United's impending revamp of an ageing squad.

Roeder's condition stable

AFP, London

West Ham manager Glenn Roeder remains in a stable condition, the club said Friday, four days after he was hospitalised with a suspected stroke.

"The family of Mr Glenn Roeder would like people to know that the situation is as it was and Glenn continues to be in a stable condition," West Ham said in a joint statement with the Royal London Hospital where Roeder is being cared for following his collapse with a minor blood clot in his brain.

The club have brought in former star Trevor Brooking to take charge for the final three matches of the season as they struggle against relegation from the English Premiership.

Brooking's first match in temporary charge will be Sunday's clash against Manchester City, coached by his former England teammate Kevin Keegan.

Campbell loses appeal

AFP, London

Arsenal and England defender Sol Campbell will miss his club's title run-in after Friday losing his appeal against his red card for violent conduct against Manchester United.

Campbell will now have to serve a four-match ban, starting next week, which effectively ends his season and will force him out of the FA Cup final.

Campbell appealed against referee Mark Halsey's decision to dismiss him for elbowing United forward Ole Gunnar Solskjaer.

But the Football Association's video advisory panel ruled the dismissal should not be overturned.

The player has no further right of appeal.

Primera Liga preview

Real concentration needed



AFP, Madrid

After securing their place in the European Champions League semi-finals this week, Real Madrid have to adjust their sights to domestic duties and get a win at Sevilla on Sunday.

The European champions lead the Spanish league with 61 points from their 30 games but have only a one point advantage over both Deportivo La Coruna and Real Sociedad.

Coach Vicente Del Bosque's big worry is how to fill the gap at right back produced by the suspension of Michel Salgado, who was sent off in the 1-1 draw against Barcelona last Saturday.

Salgado's natural replacement is Oscar Minambres but the Spanish under-21 international has had an injured left ankle, didn't travel to Manchester for their mid-week triumph over United, and only trained for the first time in several weeks on Thursday.

If Minambres is not match fit, then Del Bosque may be forced to use French international midfielder Claude Makelele as an emergency defender.

Sevilla, who are sixth and bidding to get into Europe for the first time in eight years, have disciplinary problems of their own with defenders Javi Navarro and David Castedo banned, but the Andalusians are camping at the bit to bring Real down to earth.

"We don't have anything to fear from Real. We are not going to throw in the towel, not going to give up and, above all, we're going to get three points," said Sevilla defender Pablo Alfaro.

If Alfaro and his colleagues leave their mark on Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and the rest of Real then the stage could be set for Deportivo to take over at the top.

The 1999-2000 champions have had a quiet week away from the limelight in preparation for their trip to Real Mallorca on Sunday and are looking for revenge for the 4-1 defeat there last season.

Atletico Madrid will celebrate regardless of the result against Osasuna on Saturday as the game commemorates the club's centenary.

They were officially formed on April 26, 1903, by displaced Basques who were supporters of Athletic Bilbao, hence the similarity between the two clubs' colours.

Atletico had an erratic season but are still hoping their centennial year ends on a high note.

"We've still got plenty of options of getting into Europe. The club is enjoying some of its best form since we won the league and Cup seven years ago," said Atletico club captain Santi Denia.

Santi is one just two survivors from their memorable season of 1995-96 when they lifted the Spanish double under Radomir Antic and he gets a rare

chance to start this season due to the suspension of Argentine defender Fabricio Coloccini.

Antic these days is plying his trade with Barcelona and the Serb must try and lift the dispirited Catalans against third-placed Real Sociedad after they crashed out of the Champions League to Juventus.

Barca languish down in 12th place and although they are just five points away from sixth place they also face the possibility of being absent from European competition for the first time since 1959 and finishing in the lower half of the Spanish first division for the first time in 61 years.

"I wouldn't blame the directors if they wanted to get rid of the lot of us and sign 24 new players. We've had the chance to lift titles and we haven't done it," said captain Carles Puyol.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off GMT): Athletic Bilbao v Real Betis (1800), Atletico Madrid v Osasuna (1930)
Sunday: Celta Vigo v Valladolid (1600), Malaga v Racing Santander (1600), Real Mallorca v Deportivo La Coruna (1600), Recreativo Huelva v Villarreal (1600), Rayo Vallecano v Espanyol (1600), Valencia v Alaves (1600), Sevilla v Real Madrid (1700), Barcelona v Real Sociedad (1830)

Premiership preview

Ruud looking ahead



AFP, London

Manchester United striker Ruud Nistelrooy insisted his side would have no problems bouncing back from their Champions League exit against Real Madrid when they face Tottenham in the Premiership at White Hart Lane on Sunday.

Dutch forward van Nistelrooy scored United's first in a thrilling 4-3 win over Champions League holders Real. But Alex Ferguson's men lost the quarter-final tie 6-5 on aggregate.

But despite that defeat they go into Sunday's match against Tottenham leading the Premiership by three points from Arsenal although Arsene Wenger's team do have a game in hand.

And goal machine van Nistelrooy, who has now netted 39 times in all competitions this campaign, said: "It will be no problem lifting ourselves for the rest of the season," he said.

"We are not feeling down because we didn't perform to our capabilities, we played the European Cup winners and beat them 4-3," the 26-year-old added as United, beaten by Liverpool in the League Cup final, battle to avoid a second successive trophyless season.

Arsenal meanwhile are sweating on the fitness of skipper and France midfielder Patrick Vieira who is still struggling with a knee injury.

Vieira had hoped to be back in time for the May 4 match against Leeds United.

However, Wenger still hopes to have Vieira back for the last two Premier

League fixtures, against Southampton and Sunderland, as well as The FA Cup final where holders Arsenal take on Southampton again.

But on the upside, Wenger said he hoped to have England trio David Seaman (virus), Ashley Cole (ankle) and Martin Keown (hamstring) all fit for Saturday's match away to Bolton.

Wenger told the club's website, www.arsenal.com: "Martin was in the squad at Middlesbrough and should be all right."

"Ashley should be okay too, he'll have a final test tomorrow (Friday) morning."

"David Seaman is in a better condition and looks to be okay as well, but I'll also make a decision on him tomorrow."

Everton boss David Moyes has been attempting to ensure teenage England striker Wayne Rooney doesn't suffer for playing too many matches.

He had indicated that after a run of five successive Premiership matches he was preparing to rest Rooney for this weekend's match against Aston Villa at Goodison.

But with Tomasz Radzinski struggling to get over a hamstring injury and Everton pushing for a European place, Rooney could yet start again.

"Tomasz may not be ready for the weekend," Moyes said. "He has done plenty of running but doesn't feel comfortable kicking the ball."

"He hasn't played for five weeks either so we have to bear that in mind too before we start thinking about putting him straight back in."

"We have to wait and see and hopefully we will know more on Friday

morning."

But of Rooney, Moyes told the Liverpool Echo: "In recent games Wayne has been a little bit below the standard he has set himself."

"We would have given him a breather had Tomasz been fit. But we had to play him and this is why I am concerned about him having too many games. You cannot expect something wonderful from him every game."

At the other end of the table, West Brom and Sunderland have already been relegated.

West Ham currently occupy the final drop spot and are four points adrift of Bolton.

On Thursday West Ham confirmed that Trevor Brooking, a legendary figure as a midfielder with the Hammers in a one-club career, had been brought in as a caretaker boss following the stroke suffered by manager Glenn Roeder after last weekend's win against Middlesbrough.

Brooking's first match in charge sees him up against his friend and former England team-mate Kevin Keegan, now manager of Manchester City.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated)
Saturday: Birmingham v Middlesbrough, Bolton v Arsenal (1130GMT), Charlton v Southampton, Chelsea v Fulham, Everton v Aston Villa, Leeds v Blackburn, Sunderland v Newcastle, West Brom v Liverpool
Sunday: Manchester City v West Ham (1300GMT), Tottenham v Manchester United (1505GMT)

MAKING THE DIFFERENCE: Celtic ace Henrik Larsson (R) scoring against Boavista at Do Bessa stadium in Porto, Portugal on April 24.

PHOTO: AFP

Becks rumour intensifies



AFP, London

England captain David Beckham is seeking a way out of Manchester United amid mounting speculation that he will be off to join Real Madrid's star-studded squad this summer, media reports said Friday.

Beckham was furious to find himself starting on the substitutes bench for last Wednesday's Champions League thriller against Real Madrid, who edged out United 6-5 on aggregate despite a 4-3 loss at Old Trafford in which 'Becks' scored twice in his half-hour appearance.

Manager Alex Ferguson started with Norwegian forward Ole Gunnar Solskjaer instead of Beckham and insisted afterwards he was happy with his tactics - but Friday's British press were adamant a parting of the ways is now inevitable.

"Becks: Get me out of United," was how The Sun tabloid headlined a front page story in which it asserted Beckham had had talks on his future with agent Tony Stephens minutes after the match, adding the star had left Old Trafford in tears.

"End it like Beckham," the paper headlined another two-page story, as it insisted the 27-year-old Beckham

skipper had come to the end of his "love affair" with the club.

The Daily Mail showed Beckham trudging through the rainy streets of Manchester the day after his team's cup exit and likewise suggested a change of club was on the cards.

"Defeated on the pitch, humiliated by his manager, moaned at by his wife. So what does Becks do? Why, go on a 10,000 pound shopping spree of course," the paper splashed on its front page.

"Becks is so upset he just has to go shopping again, the Mail explained, informing its readers the star had shelled out on three shirts, a jacket and two pairs of trousers.

Although the gear came from an Italian fashion designer and although Beckham's wife Victoria has long been rumoured to fancy a move to the sunnier climes of Italy, Real see Beckham, worth an estimated 75 million dollars, as the man to turn them into a global brand like no other signing.

How the Spanish giants would fit yet another superstar into their ranks is another question entirely - but Real could dangle one of their current squad, such as Portugal midfielder Luis Figo, as bait while additionally offering United a huge cashpile to get their man.

Relations between Beckham and Ferguson have been strained recently,

the latter having accidentally caught Beckham in the face after kicking a boot across the dressing room in February following an FA Cup loss to Arsenal.

The resulting wound required stitches.

Ferguson also left the England captain out of a crucial Premiership encounter with title rivals the Gunners earlier this month.

Real believe a deal is worth doing commercially given the huge spin-offs they could reap in marketing terms, while in sporting terms Beckham could theoretically just squeeze into the right hand side of a midfield already staffed by Zinedine Zidane and Figo, supplying his trademark crosses for Raul and Ronaldo in attack.

United's Spanish goalkeeper Ricardo revealed earlier this month that Beckham, who has two young sons, Brooklyn and Romeo, had been asking him about the quality of schools in Madrid, fuelling speculation on a move.

Real president Florentino Perez has meanwhile been quoted as saying he wants to "copy and beat United" in commercial terms.

In footballing terms the 'mergings' have seen off the Red Devils twice in three years.

In commercial terms luring Beckham to the Spanish capital would be the icing on an already talent-laden

Bundesliga preview

All Leverkusen woes



AFP, Berlin

Two decades ago they habitually gave Bayern Munich a run for their money in the title race - but while Bayern race towards yet another championship two famous names of yesteryear are fighting the drop as they prepare to meet on Saturday.

Should Bayer Leverkusen lose at fellow strugglers Borussia Monchengladbach they would be on the brink of relegation with just four matches to save themselves, 11 months after throwing away the championship on the final day of the season.

Many of their woes go back to the psychological shock of not just losing out on the title to Borussia Dortmund but going on to taste defeat in the Champions League final to Real Madrid.

Having proved themselves to be one of the top clubs in Europe, Leverkusen then saw moneybags Bayern cream off their best talent in German midfield star Michael Ballack and Brazilian Ze Roberto. Since then they have essentially been in freefall.

Coach Klaus Toppmoller was sacked in mid-season but Thomas Horster, his replacement, has been unable to halt the slide.

Worse still, German international midfielder Bernd Schneider will not be on hand Saturday to whip over his trademark crosses as the 29-year-old is out for a fortnight with a calf strain.

"It never rains but it pours," said Horster morosely of the latest blow to his club's hopes of staying alive.

Monchengladbach themselves are fourth-bottom but will look to home advantage to stretch the gap between the two fallen giants to six points and all but save themselves.

Only the bottom of the table is now of much interest to German fans long resigned to Bayern walking off with an 18th championship. They lead second-placed Stuttgart by 11 points despite some recent hiccupus such as a first home loss in two years to Bremen followed by defeat in Dortmund.

"There's no need to panic - two

losses won't destroy our season," was coach Ottmar Hitzfeld's philosophy on his side's form ahead of a trip to a Wolfsburg side still theoretically interested in a UEFA Cup slot.

If Stuttgart fail to see off Hansa Rostock at home Bayern will be putting their favourite beers on ice ready for a title celebration.

And Ballack will be involved as Hitzfeld said Thursday his star man would be back after seven weeks out with torn ankle ligaments.

"Michael will certainly play. But I'll have to wait and see if I play him from the start. He helps the team with his mere presence," said Hitzfeld.

Bayern's eminence grise Franz Beckenbauer complained on Thursday that Bayern's rivals should have made more of a title battle.

"It's all too soon in my view," he said of Bayern's impending coronation.

"It would be better to be held in suspense through to the end of the season," added the head of Bayern's non-executive supervisory board.

Stuttgart have in recent weeks managed to muscle in on a second place which looked set to go to Dortmund and the latter, with a point to make up, face having to win in Bayern's Olympiastadion to close the gap.

Fortunately, it's Bayern's co-tenants 1860 Munich rather than the runaway leaders that Dortmund have to contend with.

If Matthias Sammer's outgoing champions slip up Hertha Berlin could go level on points if they see off Hanover 96.

FIXTURES

Saturday: Hertha Berlin v Hanover 96, VfB Stuttgart v Hansa Rostock, Schalke 04 v VfL Bochum, Borussia Monchengladbach v Bayer Leverkusen, 1860 Munich v Borussia Dortmund, Hamburg SV v FC Nuremberg, VfL Wolfsburg v Bayern Munich
Sunday: Kaiserslautern v Werder Bremen, Arminia Bielefeld v Energie Cottbus

PSG have a new president



AFP, Paris

Canal Plus, main shareholder in French first division outfit Paris Saint Germain, on Friday said Francis Graille will take over from Laurent Perpere as club president this summer.

Canal Plus confirmed a story in sports daily L'Equipe, which had stated that the 48-year-old Graille, former president of Lille, would take over at season's end as the first head of the club

not to come from within the broadcaster since the company took its stake in 1991.

"The Canal Plus group is to name Francis Graille president of Paris Saint Germain football club," the broadcaster said in a statement, adding he would be at liberty to select his own choice of club staff for next season.

Perpere has been at the helm since 1998 - but the club have not won any silverware in that period.

They have not won the league title in nine years and current coach Luis Fernandez is leaving of his own accord at the end of another season of underachievement.

Speculation also abounds that Brazilian maestro Ronaldinho, the club's only world class player, will follow him out of the door - possibly to Inter Milan or Manchester United.

The club, in midtable in the league, face Bordeaux on Sunday in a French Cup semi-final.

Repeated failure to reach the lucrative Champions League has taken a financial toll and the club is set to slash its budget for next season by around a third from 78 million euros to 50 million.

Club sources said Thursday that the current economic climate "does not

FIXTURES

Saturday (all kick-offs 1300 GMT unless stated): Atalanta v Torino (1600 GMT), AS Roma v AC Milan (1830 GMT)
Sunday: Bologna v Chievo, Como v Modena, Empoli v Udinese, Inter Milan v Lazio (1830 GMT), Juventus v Brescia, Piacenza v Perugia, Reggina v Parma