

Semi-final first leg  
No-goal show at Milan



AFP, Milan

Inter Milan survived a second-half onslaught to escape with a 0-0 draw against local rivals AC Milan in the first leg of their European Champions League semi-final here at their shared San Siro stadium on Wednesday.

Meeting for the first time in Europe, Inter, the 'away' side in the tie, spurned several early chances to score a valuable away goal that would have given them the edge in the all-Italian encounter going into Tuesday's second leg.

But after the opening 20 minutes it was one-way traffic with Milan camped in Inter's half, but failing to cash in on their superiority, despite enjoying the bulk of the possession.

Although Inter spent most of the time defending, they almost clinched a dramatic late winner when Hernan Crespo lobbed Milan keeper Dida, but the Argentine's clever effort sailed agonisingly over the crossbar.

A surprisingly open game without a hint of catenaccio was also notable for the fact that despite being a derby, no bookings were made by Russian referee Valentin Ivanov.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti was relatively pleased with his side's performance, despite failing to breach Inter's watertight defence.

Asked if he thought the glass was half empty or half full, he replied:

"Definitely half full, because we played well and we created plenty of chances - I'm happy with the result.

"They may perhaps feel they hold a small advantage, but everything is equal.

"From a spectators point of view it was a great game to watch with a superb atmosphere - it's a shame it ended goalless."

Ancelotti complimented Inter's

back three of Fabio Cannavaro, Ivan Cordoba and Marco Materazzi for denying his team the goal their second-half display perhaps merited.

"Inter were particularly strong in the centre of defence and there was little space out there, so that's why we started using the flanks," he added.

Inter coach Hector Cuper was equally satisfied, but lamented Inter's failure to pinch a goal in the early part of the match when they enjoyed their best spell.

"I'm happy as we were excellent in the first-half, all that was missing was a goal," he said.

"In the second-half they dominated and were the better team, but I think a draw was the right result."

Asked if he thought that a 0-0 draw was a dangerous scorline going into the return leg, Cuper said: "Look, if we win the game we're through - that's the bottom line.

"We're expecting another similar match, but confidence is high and we feel we can win."

Inter's Uruguayan midfielder Alvaro Recoba was asked to play up front alongside Crespo as first choice striker Christian Vieri is still recovering from injury.

Vieri, Serie A's leading goalscorer with 24 goals, damaged ligaments in his right knee in the quarter-final second leg against Valencia and his fellow Italy international Cristiano Zanetti was also missing for Inter because of the yellow card he received in the same match.

Dutch international Clarence Seedorf returned to bolster Milan's midfield in place of the suspended Massimo Ambrosini, having made a surprisingly swift recovery from a similar injury to Vieri's.

Winners of five European Cups to Inter's two, Milan began nervously and almost paid for their anxiety in the seventh minute.

Crespo's delightful flick sent Recoba clear of the Milan defence, but the nippy South American

rushed his shot which rolled tamely into Dida's grateful hands.

Recoba quickly had an opportunity to make amends for his poor shooting when Emre Belozoglu's right-wing cross found him unmarked, but his weak header failed to trouble the busy Dida.

Having survived those early scares, Milan grew in confidence and only Francesco Toldo's palms prevented Andriy Shevchenko's curler from just outside the box giving the 'home' side a barely deserved lead.

The battle between Milan's Manuel Rui Costa and Inter's Luigi Di Biagio provided a fascinating sub-plot with both players working tirelessly to try and control the midfield.

With Rui Costa edging it, Milan finished the half on top, but their inability to deliver a decent final ball meant they went in at the break without anything to show for their efforts.

Milan started the second 45 minutes just as they finished the first and they almost made the breakthrough five minutes after the interval.

With the help of Seedorf, a former Inter player, Kakha Kaladze carved open the Inter defence and crossed for Shevchenko whose close-range shot was blocked by a forest of legs, allowing Toldo to easily collect the ball.

Milan kept up the momentum and created their best chance in the 59th minute.

Rui Costa's superbly-timed angled pass put Shevchenko in the clear, but with just Toldo to beat, the Ukrainian inexplicably crossed for Filippo Inzaghi who was in a far worse position to score.

Inzaghi was unable to save his strike partner's blushes as the pass was woefully short and easily cut out by Inter's defence.

Milan continued to press but their cavalier approach almost cost them dear in the final minute when Crespo nearly scored for the visitors against the run of play.



PHOTO: AFP

Francesco Coco (R) of Inter Milan being challenged by AC Milan playmaker Rui Costa (L) and defender Alessandro Costacurta at Milan's San Siro Stadium on May 7.

Premiership  
Rookie dazzles for Gunners



AFP, London

Youngster Jermaine Pennant hit a stunning first-half hat-trick as Arsenal hammered Southampton 6-1 in an FA Cup final dress-rehearsal at Highbury Wednesday.

On his first Premiership start, the 20-year-old winger scored two right-footed strikes and a header to mark his debut in some style.

It will only add fuel to the fire of the critics that he and not Sylvain Wiltord should have played in the run-in to the title race which saw them lose their crown to Manchester United when they lost 3-2 to Leeds last Sunday.

Robert Pires also claimed three for himself to give Southampton a

real fright ahead of the Cup final in Cardiff on May 17 and prolong their miserable run which has delivered just one victory in the last eight matches.

The floodgates opened just eight minutes in when Pires blasted into the roof of the net from an acute angle.

Ray Parlour played a one-two with Kanu and sprinted through towards Paul Jones. The Wales keeper got a hand to Parlour's cross shot but only managed to deflect it into the path of the grateful Pires.

Pennant made it two just nine minutes later.

Footballer of the Year Thierry Henry cut into the box and squared the ball for Giovanni van Bronckhorst.

The Dutchman unselfishly squared again for Pennant who hit

a great low drive across Jones to claim his first goal for the club.

Within three minutes Pennant extended the lead with a simple header. Jones did well to get a leg to Henry's deflected shot but the ball spooned up kindly for the youngster to double his tally.

The goals kept coming and Pires made it four, coolly slotting home after Henry played him in.

Pennant only had to wait a further three minutes to complete his hat-trick. Henry was again the provider, jinking through the midfield before playing in Pennant who once more hit a right foot shot across Jones for a spectacular treble.

Pennant, signed from Notts County aged just 15, has spent most of the season on loan at first division Watford but had thus far been restricted to a handful of substitute and League Cup appearances in Arsenal colours.

His hat-trick will go a long way towards redeeming himself for going absent without leave on England under-21 duty.

Norwegian striker Jo Tessem converted Wayne Bridge's cross to pull one back ten minutes before half-time but Pires restored the difference a minute after the interval.

The Frenchman claimed his own hat-trick with a stunning first-time lob over poor Jones a that brought a standing ovation from the Highbury faithful.

The Gunners are desperate to win some silverware this season after squandering a five-point lead in the Premiership and exiting the Champions League at the second group stage.

On this evidence, Southampton will do very well to prevent six-gun Arsenal from retaining the FA Cup in ten days' time.

TOP SIX												
English Premiership table after Wednesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):												
Man Utd	37	24	8	5	72	33	80					
Arsenal	37	22	9	6	81	42	75					
Newcastle	37	21	5	11	61	46	68					
Chelsea	37	18	10	9	66	37	64					
Liverpool	37	18	10	9	60	39	64					
Everton	37	17	8	12	47	47	59					

PHOTO:AFP

Ray Parlour (L) rushes to congratulate youngster Jermaine Penannt who is delighted during one of his three goals against Southampton at Highbury on May 8.

Becks' loyalty to be tested



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United are set to put David Beckham's professed loyalty to the test by offering him a new contract without a pay rise.

The England captain, who earlier this week moved to dispel speculation that he was on his way to Real Madrid, has two years of his current deal to run.

But, according to newspaper reports on Thursday, he will be offered a new contract this summer that will keep him at Old Trafford into his 30s.

Crucially, however, there will be no significant increase on Beckham's current wages, which are reported to be around 95,000 pounds (152,000 dollars) including his cut of the money earned by the club through Beckham-based

marketing.

United's chief executive Peter Kenyon has made no explicit statement about Beckham, the highest-paid player at United, but did recently outline the case for a general cap on wages.

"There are absolute ceilings and I think in terms of wages we have reached it," Kenyon said.

Real are reportedly ready to offer Beckham a pay rise in the region of 20 percent if he agrees to move to Madrid.

If Beckham takes that as the basis for negotiations with his current employers, United could be tempted to sell this summer to ensure they get the maximum possible transfer fee rather than risk Beckham being able to move for free when he becomes a free agent in 2005.

Beckham, now 28, said on Tuesday that he would not trigger a transfer away from Old Trafford.

"My feelings for Manchester United, the club itself, the players, the fans and the backroom staff, are as strong as ever," he said.

"Theres been lots of stuff in the media about me and my future, but I can honestly say that there has been no contact between either me or my adviser, with Real Madrid, or any other club.

United skipper Roy Keane meanwhile has urged United boss Sir Alex Ferguson to strengthen the squad this summer.

"It is good to hear the manager talking about wanting to do well in Europe and wanting to improve the squad," Keane said.

"You can't afford to stand still in football. You have to think ahead and we were one or two players short against Real Madrid (in the Champions League quarter-final).

"If you go back to the years when Liverpool were dominant, they bought top players every

A breath of  
fresh air?



AFP, Milan

Desperately trying to shake off a reputation for being dull and defensive, Wednesday's Milan derby here at the San Siro proved Italian football is determined to repair its tarnished image.

Anyone who witnessed the Champions League league semi-final, first leg between AC Milan and Inter Milan could be forgiven for thinking they were watching a blood-and-thunder English Premiership match.

Packed to the rafters, the majestic stadium they both share saw two sides going hell-for-leather with a place in European football's most prestigious final at stake.

Without a trace of catenaccio, the only surprise is that the game ended goalless and that nobody was booked.

The moment which perhaps epitomised the game's Englishness was when Gennaro Gattuso made a bone-crunching tackle on an Inter opponent, jumped to his feet and raised both fists in the air, urging the Milan fans to get behind their team.

No doubt the former Rangers midfielder picked up a thing or two during his short spell in Glasgow, where derbies against bitter rivals Celtic are certainly not for the faint-hearted.

Milan will perhaps feel they should have won their 'home' leg, having dominated for most of the match, but Inter carved out a string of opportunities in the first 20 minutes.

After surviving a second-half onslaught, Inter almost snatched a vital away goal in the final minute when Hernan Crespo's lob sailed inches over the crossbar.

Milan midfielder Clarence

Seedorf, who made a surprising swift recovery from a knee ligament injury he suffered against Ajax in the first leg of the quarter-final, said the match was a joy to play in.

"It was a really tense game played in the right spirit," said the Dutchman, who left Inter to join their neighbours in the summer.

"The atmosphere was excellent and I think the fans enjoyed it, even if there were no goals."

Inter goalkeeper Francesco Toldo believes the contest is wide open going into next Tuesday's return leg, when his side are at home.

"It's anyone's match, there's nothing to choose between the two teams," he said.

"We're happy to come away with a draw, although it's a shame we couldn't score.

"The game was in our favour in the first-half, but the second-half belonged to Milan."

Toldo blamed tiredness for Inter's less impressive second-half in which they rarely threatened the Milan goal.

"We ran out of steam and Milan put us under plenty of pressure," he added.

"But we held out and nearly scored at the end. Overall I think we have to be happy with the result."

Milan defender Alessandro Nesta said he thought his side should have won, having enjoyed the majority of possession.

"In the first-half there was little space and no width," he said.

"But after the break we exploited the wings and always looked dangerous going forward. We deserved something better than a 0-0 draw."

The winner of the two-legged encounter will play either Serie A rivals Juventus or Real Madrid in the final at Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium on May 28.

World Cup extension  
Blatter not  
in favour

AFP, Berlin



FIFA president Sepp Blatter has revealed he opposes a pending decision by the organisation's executive committee to boost the number of countries participating at the 2006 World Cup finals.

World football's governing body said last Saturday in Geneva it would delay ratifying a decision on a potential increase for the tournament in Germany until next month - but has agreed to the expansion in principle.

Blatter, however, made his opposition plain in an interview with Thursday's Kicker magazine.

"I am against 36 teams. The technical commission and the football commission (of FIFA) are opting for 32 teams - but the decision will fall to the executive committee," Blatter said.

"Up to now people have been talking about more places, but not about the consequences for television, marketing, the length of the tournament and the transparency of the calendar. All the contracts have been drawn up for a 32-team World Cup.

"With this initiative, the executive committee has therefore clearly made a mistake," said Blatter, who is fully aware that Franz Beckenbauer, the president of the German World Cup organising committee, is fiercely against a bigger tournament.

Blatter conceded the point. "On this point I can understand the annoyance of Beckenbauer", he admitted.

"Thirty six teams cannot be the

model for the future - the current format of 32 is the best."

The executive committee, meeting last Saturday at Geneva, put off ratifying their decision until a further meeting on June 28 and 29 in Paris and warned they would only ratify the move 'on condition that a match schedule be drawn up that ensured the sporting credibility of the event.'

Beckenbauer last weekend blasted the idea.

"They want an increase only if it's feasible in relation to the calendar, but there's no such possibility. This is a weak compromise, said Beckenbauer.

"To go from 36 teams to 16 for the quarter-finals is impossible, it won't work," added the dual World Cup



SEPP BLATTER

winner.

The South American confederation Conmebol's idea is to split 36 teams into nine groups of four, with the leaders in each group winning through to the quarter-finals joined by the seven best runners-up and thus avoid losing at least half a South American place compared with 2002.

The four extra places would be filled by two teams from Europe and one from South America.

For the fourth slot the existing play-off between Asia and the North American football confederation Concacaf will be scrapped with both federations gaining an extra place.

Blatter stressed he had not fallen out with Beckenbauer.

"There is no conflict with Mr Beckenbauer. I just countered his allegation that our finances are not in order and his criticism that we are money-grabbing," said the Swiss.

Regarding Beckenbauer's threats that he might resign from the organising committee if there are 36 teams or further disagreements Blatter said he believed the pair could iron out their differences.

"He won't step down. It would be a great shame if he did."

But Blatter did criticise the German organisers for having set up two organisational centres - at Munich and Frankfurt - instead of one.

"We would like one interlocuter alone," said Blatter in allusion to the logistical difficulty of having had two at last year's finals which were spread between Japan and South Korea.