

English League Cup

Vieira's victorious return

Football

AFP, London

Patrick Vieira's return to action was the icing on the cake as a youthful Arsenal romped into the last eight of the League Cup with a 5-1 thrashing of Wolves on Tuesday.

Despite making his first start for over two months, Vieira played the full 90 minutes without any apparent reaction from the thigh problem which has kept him sidelined recently.

The Arsenal skipper is now certain to take centre stage in the Gunners' crucial Champions League match at home to Lokomotiv Moscow next week, which will decide whether they progress to the knockout phase of the competition.

"When you're winning so easy you want to stay on the pitch," the Arsenal captain said after the match, adding that he was also keen to figure in Saturday's Premiership encounter with Leicester.

"I'm fit and it's up to the boss to see if I can play or not."

The Gunners captain suffered a thigh injury against Newcastle on September 26 and aggravated it as a substitute against Dynamo Kiev a month later.

But the French midfielder is eager to restore Arsenal to the top of the Premiership after last weekend's draw with Fulham saw them drop to second in the table, a point below Chelsea and three above Manchester United.

"There's a really long way to go but it will be a race between the three teams," Vieira said.

The captain paid tribute to 20-year-old compatriot Jeremie Aladiere, who scored twice, both with cultured finishes that evoked comparisons with Thierry Henry.

"He worked really hard and deserved his two goals," Vieira enthused. "He showed the manager he's ready for the top."

"When you have Thierry Henry and Dennis Bergkamp as an example, you can only learn from this."

"He's training with the first team, he wants first team football. He's worked really hard and now it's up to him to keep going."

Nwankwo Kanu and Sylvain Wiltord were also on target for Arsenal while 16-year-old Francesc Fabregas Soler became the club's youngest scorer.

In the night's other match, Southampton defeated Portsmouth 2-0 in a south coast derby, England forward James Beattie making the difference with a 32nd-minute strike and an injury time penalty.

Arsenal made 11 changes from the side that drew 0-0 with Fulham

on Saturday with Wiltord, Vieira and Kanu the only experienced players.

But it was still no surprise when they took the lead on 24 minutes when Aladiere drilled a right-footed shot from the centre of the penalty box into the bottom right-hand corner of Andy Marshall's net.

The floodgates finally opened on 68 minutes when Wiltord laid on a right-wing cross for Nigerian Kanu to slot home his first goal in over a year from six yards out.

Just three minutes later, Kanu turned provider for Aladiere to grab his second. The 20-year-old curled a delightful right-footed finish past Marshall.

Wiltord took advantage of some slack defending with 11 minutes left when Vieira played him through to score from six yards.

Alex Rae blasted a consolation

between the two bitter rivals in nearly eight years.

Beattie broke the deadlock 32 minutes when he got between two defenders to get to Chris Marsden's low cross from the left for his ninth goal of the season.

"The goal took a while after a tense start," said Beattie. "It was a great ball by Chris Marsden and all I had to do was get a contact."

"It was fast and furious but we settled down after the goal and in the second half we were the better team."

Beattie confirmed the Saints' place in the quarter-finals with a contentious penalty two minutes into injury time.

There seemed little intent when De Zeeuw accidentally collided with Beattie as the forward dribbled across his path, but the Dutch



PHOTO: REUTERS

Arsenal's French international Patrick Vieira (R) going past Wolverhampton Wanderers' Keith Andrews at Highbury on December 2.

strike that crashed in off the underside of Graham Stack's crossbar two minutes later.

The Gunners' youngest ever player, Spanish forward Fabregas, became their youngest scorer when he tapped in a Wiltord cross with two minutes left.

Southampton's win over Portsmouth was the first meeting

defender was dismissed.

Smiccek dived the right way but the penalty shot to the right was well-placed to give Southampton local bragging rights for just over two weeks.

"It was definitely a penalty," Beattie said. "I would have scored anyway so there can't be any complaints."

Rivaldo in demand

AFP, London

Brazil World Cup winner Rivaldo could be playing in the English Premiership next month after receiving three offers since being released by European champions AC Milan on Monday.

"We have three offers from English Premiership teams who are interested in Rivaldo," the player's associate Jorge Gama told the BBC Sport website.

"At the moment, they are the only three offers that will be put in front of him."

Gama would not name the clubs but he did rule out any interest from Liverpool.

"I know there has been speculation in the English papers linking Rivaldo with Liverpool, but all I can tell you is that they are not one of the clubs whose offer will be put before him," Gama said.

Rivaldo has already expressed an interest in joining Chelsea and his wage demands narrow down the possible Premiership clubs who could afford the 31-year-old.

He was reported to be on 215,000 euros (258,000 dollars) a week at Milan.

"His contract with Milan made him the highest paid player in the world," Gama said.

"He had an offer to play in Qatar for one million dollars a month, but he turned that down."

"It's not a question of money with him, he wants to play in the right team."

The former FIFA World Player of the Year joined Milan after Brazil's World Cup triumph in Japan.

But Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti limited him to just 16 Serie A matches, and eight Champions League games last season, when he only made the bench in the Champions League final against Inter Milan.

This season has been even worse for Rivaldo, who has made only one substitute appearance in the Champions League, and has not played in Serie A.

But he has kept his place in the Brazil team, playing five internationals for the World Champions, including four World Cup qualifying matches.

German League Cup Villagers oust Leverkusen

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga high-flyers Bayer Leverkusen suffered an embarrassing Cup exit at the hands of regional side TSG Hoffenheim who hung on for a historic 3-2 win on Tuesday.

Unbeaten Bundesliga leaders VfB Stuttgart also crashed out of the competition with Borussia Monchengladbach triumphing 4-2 at the Bokelberg.

Cup winners in 1993 Bayer were expected to cruise past minnows Hoffenheim but fell two goals behind inside 30 minutes at the sold-out stadium named after Dietmar Hopp, the computer software tycoon who backs the club.

Brazilian defender Lucio (54) and Dimitar Berbatov (67) looked to have averted a disastrous exit with second half strikes but Hoffenheim - a small village club - scored with less than a quarter hour remaining to triumph 3-2 and send a full-strength Bayer back home with their tails between their legs.

"I warned my team," fumed Bayer coach Klaus Augenthaler. "If they think that they can play with the handbrake on then they are deceiving themselves."

"Perhaps this will do certain players some good."

Champions League big-guns Bayer Stuttgart had conceded just three goals in the Bundesliga all season but went down to a 4-2 defeat against Gladbach despite taking the lead through Kevin Kuranyi on 42 minutes.

The hosts came out firing on all cylinders after the break and 19-year-old Czech striker Vaclav Sverkos stole the show with a hat-trick and a late strike from Arie van Lent clinched the win after Imre Szabics had equalised at 2-2.

Gladbach now move into the quarter-finals with few teams looking forward to playing the cup specialists who have already eliminated Borussia Dortmund and Stuttgart.

Notts County live

AFP, London

Notts County, the world's oldest professional soccer club, has been saved from extinction after a deal to take over the club was agreed Wednesday.

The Second Division side have been in existence for 140 years and were facing expulsion from the Football League which on Wednesday approved a take-over.

County will now be able to end their 17-month spell in administration.

"The club's future has been secured after one of the most difficult times in its history," said a statement by the administrators.



PHOTO: AFP

Galatasaray's Goktan Berkan (C) tries to break clear of Juventus' Mark Iuliano (L) and Ciro Ferrara (R) at Dortmund on December 2.

Sukur supplies lifeline



AFP, Dortmund

A double strike by fit-again Turkish star Hakan Sukur kept Galatasaray's hopes of qualifying for the Champions League final 16 alive with a 2-0 win over Italian side Juventus here on Tuesday.

The victory puts Fatih Terim's side on six points, and means that he is second place in Group D will be decided on the final matchday against second-placed Real Sociedad.

Juventus, who are already qualified for the last 16, need to collect a point against the already-eliminated Olympiakos to be sure of winning the group.

The Istanbul side were able to count on the massive support of Germany's Turkish immigrant workers with 65,000 fans mostly on their side during the tie which had been moved from Turkey on November 25 after the bomb attacks in Istanbul.

There were so many Turkish

supporters in the ground that the start was delayed by 15 minutes due to traffic congestion.

"We don't even see such support in Istanbul. We needed them, they came, and I thank them," Terim said.

Juventus coach Marcello Lippi rested David Trezeguet, Gianluigi Buffon and Pavel Nedved, while Galatasaray were boosted by the return of 32-year-old Sukur, who has recovered from an ankle injury.

The Turks were saved in the first half by a string of saves by goalie Faryd Mondragon and Sukur put

them ahead two minutes into the second half, heading in a cross from Hakan Unsul.

The goal gave the Turkish team confidence, as Lippi's side struggled to get past their opponents' well-organised defence with their best effort, a long-range effort from Edgar Davids, easily saved by Mondragon.

The Turkish team created more chances as the match progressed with Sukur grabbing the second following a Hasan Sas through-ball in stoppage time.

Sukur said his team's win over

taught ruling body UEFA a lesson after its decision to move the fixture to Germany from Istanbul.

Turkey had accused UEFA of favouring Europe's big teams when it moved the fixture and the Champions League match between Besiktas and Chelsea citing security concerns after four bomb attacks in Istanbul in November that killed 61 people.

"I said before the game that we would give the correct reply to UEFA and Juventus on the pitch. I guess we taught them both a personal lesson," Hakan said on his personal website.

UEFA's decision sparked uproar in Turkey's fiercely partisan press. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan accused UEFA of bowing to terrorism after Galatasaray and Besiktas were banned from playing their home fixtures in Istanbul.

"One for UEFA, one for Juve," was the headline in Turkish daily Hurriyet on Wednesday. "The Galatasaray lions set off a bomb on the pitch," said popular daily Sabah.

| STANDINGS  |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| European Champions League Group D standings after Tuesday's re-arranged match between Juventus and Galatasaray (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points): |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| Group D  |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| Juventus   | 5 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 10 |
| Sociedad   | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 8  |
| Galatasaray  | 5 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 5 | 7  |
| Olympiakos   | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 4  |
| * Juventus qualify for next stage  |   |   |   |   |   |    |

Sheikh eyeing Leeds

Football

AFP, London

Bahrain Sheikh Abdulrahman Al Khalifa confirmed to the Stock Exchange on Tuesday that he was "exploring a number of options to assist" troubled English Premiership club Leeds United.

The Elland Road side are 78 million pounds (135 million dollars) in debt and warned last week they are on the brink of administration.

In a statement released to the London Stock Exchange, Sheikh Abdulrahman confirmed rumours that he may come to the club's financial rescue.

"Further to recent press speculation and comments attributed to His Excellency, the Sheikh confirms that he is at an early stage in exploring a number of options to assist the Company in its present financial position that may or may not lead to an offer being made for the Company's issued share capital."

"A further announcement will be made as appropriate."

The Sheikh, a member of Bahrain's royal family and a long-time Leeds fan, confirmed to AFP on Saturday that he was part of a group of investors from the Gulf involved in the venture and expected the deal to be completed within a week.

"It's a group of investors from the Gulf, not just Bahrain, that I am leading and that will take over the English club," he said in a telephone interview.

He did not however give any figures on the buyout although London's Daily Mirror said the Yorkshire outfit was offered for 20 million pounds (34 million dollars).

"I prefer not to give a figure because the club is heavily indebted and is looking to be rescued and that's what I am trying to do."

"My relations with the club go back 25 years and I am saddened by the current situation since they are bottom of the Premiership," said the Sheikh who is also chairman of

Bahraini side Al-Najma.

And he insisted that the club's top players will not be sold if he takes over.

"Alan Smith and all the jewels of the club will not be sold off - they are the heart of Leeds United," the Sheikh told the BBC Sport website.

"I am still hurting over the sale of Jonathan Woodgate."

Leeds made no official comment on Tuesday but earlier in the week described the Sheikh's reported interest as "pure speculation".

If the Sheikh does inject money

into Leeds, he will follow in the footsteps of Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich who in July paid 230 million dollars for London-based club Chelsea -- small change for a man reported by Forbes magazine this year to be worth 5.7 billion dollars.

Chelsea immediately went on a spending spree, signing big-name players including Juan Sebastian Veron, Hernan Crespo and Damien Duff. They went top of the Premiership at the weekend and have qualified for the next phase of the Champions League.

Leeds, who in the 2000-2001 season made it to the semi-finals

of the Champions League, are currently bottom of the English Premiership and without a permanent manager following the sacking of Peter Reid last month.

In the last financial year, the club registered a loss of just under 50 million pounds, the largest ever for a quoted English football club.

The club is now facing the prospect of relegation to the first division, an outcome which, refinancing package or not, would almost certainly force the club into administration and could even see it wound up entirely.

Primera Liga

Valencia muff chance

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spanish league leaders Valencia missed a chance to pull clear of title rivals Real Madrid when they were held to a 0-0 draw at lowly Real Sociedad Tuesday.

Valencia went top with 28 points, one point ahead of champions Real Madrid who face city rivals Atletico on Wednesday ahead of an explosive trip to arch-rivals Barcelona on Saturday.

Real Sociedad, lying dangerously close to the relegation zone and now in 15th position, needed a good

result from their home tie and swiftly moved into attack but were unfortunate when an opening goal after two minutes from Russian midfielder Valeri Karpin was ruled as offside.

Sociedad closed down the visitors' attempts at attack for the first 20 minutes before Valencia's inspirational Argentine playmaker Pablo Aimar fed the ball to Vicente who shot high.

Valencia moved into the attack but Real remained in the chase and Serbian striker Darko Kovacevic netted just before the break but the goal was disallowed.

Back on the pitch Real went searching for a goal and came close after 67 minutes through second half

substitute Nihat Kahveci whose shot from the right tested Valencia's Spanish international goalkeeper Santiago Canizares.

| TOP SIX  |    |   |   |   |    |    |    |  |  |  |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|----|----|--|--|--|
| Spanish league table after Tuesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points): |    |   |   |   |    |    |    |  |  |  |
| Valencia   | 14 | 8 | 4 | 2 | 27 | 11 | 28 |  |  |  |
| Real   | 13 | 8 | 3 | 2 | 27 | 15 | 27 |  |  |  |
| Deportivo  | 13 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 21 | 10 | 26 |  |  |  |
| Atletico   | 13 | 7 | 1 | 5 | 17 | 16 | 22 |  |  |  |
| Barcelona  | 13 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 17 | 13 | 20 |  |  |  |
| Osasuna  | 13 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 14 | 10 | 20 |  |  |  |



PHOTO: AFP

LET'S GET GROOVY! Argentine football legend Diego Maradona (L) in a lively mood with his Chinese friends and associates at a dinner party in the eastern Chinese city of Wenzhou on December 1, where he is reportedly on a business trip. The 42-year-old is now living in Cuba where he went to seek treatment for cocaine addiction.