

Reds Crouch Galatasaray

AFP, Liverpool



Peter Crouch scored twice, the second a stunning volley, as Liverpool held off an extraordinary

second-half fightback to beat Galatasaray 3-2 in their Champions League Group C clash here on Wednesday.

There had been a thought that Crouch, a player who struggled in front of goal last season when his confidence was low, might return to his shell after a lengthy spell after four straight games as a substitute, but it had dissipated long before the 6-foot 7-inch forward leapt horizontally at the back-post to smash Steve Finnan's cross into the corner.

His partnership with Dirk Kuyt, a 10 million pounds summer signing from Feyenoord, seemed as natural as if they had played together for years.

The only puzzle was why Rafa Benitez had never tried pairing the before. Liverpool's opener came in the ninth minute but had sounded an even earlier warning.

Luis Garcia, cutting in from the left after Crouch had delivered a Kuyt knockdown into his path,

forced Colombian goalkeeper Faryd Mondragon into an awkward parry as early as the fifth minute as Liverpool mounted the sort of early onslaught that did for Juventus two seasons ago.

Perhaps, having failed to score a European goal in 11 months, they

recognised the psychological dangers in failing to strike early and allowing Galatasaray a foothold in the game.

When it came, the left flank was again the source as Steven Gerrard, restored to his central role, spread the ball wide, Fabio Aurelio arced in a superb cross, and Crouch was there to extend a long leg and sidefoot the ball home.

With former Liverpool central defender Rigobert Song and Stjepan Tomas looking uncomfortable in the air, it seemed only a matter of time before the second arrived, and sure enough it came five minutes after the first.

A horribly sliced clearance fell for Jermaine Pennant, who darted into the box, and chipped a clever cross over Mondragon at the near post for an untended Garcia to nod in at the far.

There could hardly have been a better riposte to those who have criticised Benitez's rotation policy this season: none of the four players who scored or made the assists for the opening two goals had started the 3-0 win over Tottenham on Saturday.

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WEDNESDAY'S RESULTS

Group A

Werder Bremen (GER) 1 (Puyol 56-og) Barcelona (ESP) 1 (Messi 89) Levski Sofia (BUL) 1 (Ognyanov 89) Chelsea (ENG) 3 (Drogba 39, 52, 68)

Group B

Spartak Moscow (RUS) 1 (Boyarintsev 5) Sporting Lisbon (POR) 1 (Nani 59) Inter Milan (ITA) 0 Bayern Munich (GER) 2 (Pizarro 81, Podolski 90)

Group C

Liverpool (ENG) 3 (Crouch 9, 52, Luis Garcia 14) Galatasaray 2 (Umit 59, 65) Bordeaux (FRA) 0 PSV Eindhoven (NED) 1 (Vayrynen 65)

Group D

Valencia (ESP) 2 (Angulo 12, Villa 29) AS Roma (ITA) 1 (Totti 19-pen) Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 2 (Hubschman 34, Marica 70) Olympiakos (GRE) 2 (Konstantinou 24, Castillo 68)



PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba celebrates after scoring the opening goal against Levski Sofia during their Champions League match in Sofia on Wednesday.

Drogba puts Sofia to the sword

AFP, Sofia



A hat-trick by Ivory Coast international striker Didier Drogba inspired English Premier League champions

Chelsea to a 3-1 victory over Levski Sofia in their Champions League group clash here on Wednesday.

The 28-year-old's treble -- his second in the competition but first for the Blues -- not only pushed Chelsea to the top of Group A --

Barcelona were held to a 1-1 draw by Werder Bremen -- but also once again outshone record 30 million pound signing Andriy Shevchenko.

The Ukrainian superstar was goalless again but he literally sweated blood for Chelsea as a vicious elbow to his face in the first-half left him bloodied.

However despite the victory manager Jose Mourinho was not totally satisfied with all his players.

"We have six points and lead our Champions League group and lead the Premiership, but we still have players with space to improve,"

said Mourinho.

"When we are winning 3-0 we have to keep a better control of the game. Petr Cech had to make four or five saves."

However Mourinho, who has stoutly defended the out of form Shevchenko, was full of praise for Drogba, who has reacted brilliantly to the signing of the Ukrainian.

"He's scoring goals and he's on fire at the moment. He is scoring in England and in Europe, but he is playing well and not just scoring goals."

"He is very confident and this is a

beautiful moment for him."

Chelsea dominated the first-half and could have gone in at the break at least 3-0 up.

However they had only Drogba's goal to their credit the Ivorian star tapping in after Georgi Petkov had pulled off a fantastic save from Nigerian international Jon Obi Mikel's shot but with the net unguarded Drogba put the ball away.

Drogba had nearly opened Chelsea's account earlier with a more spectacular effort but it hit the crossbar as did German captain

Michael Ballack's before him, though, Petkov should be credited with another fantastic save, palming the ball onto the crossbar.

Whether Mourinho was disenchanted with his multi-million pound set of stars or was simply playing one of his mind games he kept the hosts waiting for the second-half kick-off which hardly endeared the visitors to the home spectators.

Drogba, though, quickly took the wind out of Levski's sails as he chested down the ball and saw his

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PHOTO: AFP

IT'S CROUCH TIME: Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard jumps on Peter Crouch (L) after the beanie striker scored a super goal against Galatasaray during their Champions League encounter at Anfield on Wednesday.

Bayern end Italian jinx

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan's hopes of reaching the knockout stages of the Champions League hang in the balance after they lost 2-0 to Bayern Munich here on Wednesday.

Goals in the last nine minutes from Peruvian international Claudio Pizarro and Lucas Podolski secured Bayern's second win in as many Group B matches and left Inter still looking for their first point.

The Serie A leaders also had Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Italy international Fabio Grosso sent off as they crashed to their second successive defeat, leaving them with a mountain to climb to reach the last 16.

Ibrahimovic trudged off near the hour mark after picking up a second yellow card and Pizarro broke the deadlock nine minutes from time with a cool finish.

Grosso joined the Swede for an early bath before a swift breakaway

goal by Bayern substitute Podolski sealed Bayern's first win away to Italian opponents in European competition since the 1988-89 season.

The win meanwhile ends Bayern's Italian jinx as they scored their first win in seven matches against opposition in Italy.

Inter sorely missed the grit and determination of their French midfielder Patrick Vieira, whose sending-off against Sporting Lisbon two weeks ago earned him a one-match ban.

Despite back-to-back losses in Europe, Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini insisted his team would still qualify from the group.

"The defeat this evening was a lie," he said defiantly.

"We were controlling the match until Ibrahimovic was sent off and the first goal could have been avoided.

"But there are four games left to play in the group and we will qualify in second place."

Bayern coach Felix Magath agreed with Mancini that Ibrahimovic's dismissal swung the match in his favour.

"That was the turning point," he said. "After we took the lead, Inter were chasing the game and that allowed us to snatch a second goal."

Magath said the victory did not taste any sweeter given the poor record they had against Italian clubs away from home.

"We don't look at statistics," he said dryly.

Wednesday's match at the San Siro saw the captains of both teams reach significant landmarks.

Inter's Argentine midfielder Javier Zanetti played in his 500th match for the club, while German international goalkeeper Oliver Kahn made his 100th Champions League appearance for Bayern.

Kahn, Bayern's hero when they won the 2001 Champions League on penalties against Valencia, came to his side's rescue in the 12th minute.

Inter's Serbian midfielder Dejan Stankovic stole possession from Pizarro before sweeping the ball wide to the left wing where Ibrahimovic was prowling.

The giant Swedish international sped towards goal but allowed the

Italy win 'a tragedy': Blatter

INTERNET, undated

FIFA President Sepp Blatter said it was "a tragedy" that Italy won the 2006 World Cup on penalties and that the system will be changed.

The Final ended 1-1 with France after extra time and the Azzurri buried all five of their spot-kicks to lift the trophy in Berlin on July 9.

"When it comes to the World Cup final it is passion, and when it goes to extra time it is a drama," said Blatter.

"But when it comes to penalty kicks it is a tragedy. Football is a team sport and penalties is not a team, it is the individual."

The FIFA chief suggested a replay -- which would cause massive organisational problems -- or gradually taking players off the field in extra time until a Golden Goal is scored.

"We have four years or so before South Africa 2010, so I think we have time," he told a Swiss Chamber of Commerce event in Zurich.

The World Cup Final has been decided twice on penalties both involving Italy.

In 1994 the match ended 0-0 before Brazil emerged victorious. In 2006 the Azzurri saw off France from the spot.

Blatter has already courted

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Messi magic saves Barca

AFP, Bremen



Argentine international Lionel Messi scored a vital late equaliser as Champions League holders

Barcelona snatched a 1-1 Group A draw with Werder Bremen here on Wednesday.

Barcelona looked to be heading for their first defeat in this competition for 18 months after their captain Carlos Puyol, who lifted the trophy for the Spaniards last season, had scored a terrible own goal on 56 minutes.

But in the 89th minute 19-year-old substitute Messi, on the pitch for just over 20 minutes, latched onto a fantastic pass from Portuguese international Deco to rifle in an equaliser.

"It was a difficult game and a real fight right until the last minute," said Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard.

"There were two good teams out there tonight and I think a draw was the fair result."

"I said there were no easy games in the Champions League and that was emphasised tonight. It was a good result for Barcelona."

Barcelona now have four points, after their 5-0 hammering of Levski

Sofia in their first match, while Chelsea top Group A with a perfect six points having beaten Levski 3-1 on Wednesday.

Bremen, who lost 2-0 to Chelsea in their first match, have just one point to show for their efforts and could rue that late Messi equaliser.

Barcelona's next match is at Chelsea, who they eliminated at the last 16 stage last season, on October 18, while Bremen take on Sofia on the same day.

"We are all bitterly disappointed and should not allow that to happen -- particularly in the 89th minute," said Bremen goalkeeper Tim Wiese.

"We did enough to win but Barcelona are a great team and can always create something."

"Messi took his goal brilliantly but the fact that it was so late on makes it even more painful."

Rijkaard drafted in French international defender Lilian Thuram and midfielder Thiago Motta after resting the pair in the weekend's 1-1 draw with Valencia.

Bremen sprung a few surprises in their line-up with German international defender Per Mertesacker, a five-million-euro signing from Hannover, making his debut for the club.

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PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona sensation Lionel Messi (R) hurdles the challenge of Werder Bremen defender Naldo during their Champions League encounter at Bremen on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

DELIGHT AND DESPAIR: Bayern Munich forward Lukas Podolski (R) runs off to celebrate after scoring his team's second goal as Inter Milan defender Ivan Cordoba lies on the ground in despair during their Champions League clash at San Siro on Wednesday.

Mancini feeling the heat

Football

INTERNET, undated

Roberto Mancini says he isn't looking for excuses after Inter's embarrassing defeat to Bayern Munich, but insists his squad has been shrunk by injuries and bans.

"I think the game changed after we went down to 10 men. We had planned to take no risks in the first half and then push after the break, but unfortunately there was this dismissal and a mistake on the opening goal," he said of the 2-0 home loss.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic saw red for a second bookable offence on the hour mark and Fabio Grosso left them in nine men for an elbow on Willy Sagnol in the final minutes.

"I don't want people to say I look for excuses, so I have nothing to say about the referee. The players have to stay calm, because despite being

in 10 men we were pushing forward and should've kept our heads."

Patrick Vieira was already suspended for this tie after his dismissal in the 1-0 defeat at Sporting Lisbon.

"We've had three red cards in two games and you really can't expect to get away with that in Europe. You end up paying for those mistakes."

Nonetheless, Mancini remains confident that Inter can reach the knock-out stage despite propping up Group B with 0 points after two games.

"It's very possible, as we need 10 points to qualify. I think if we win the next three then we'll at least end up second, so there's no need to panic. Yes, the situation is more complicated, but we still have that visit to Munich."

The Nerazzurri were accused of having too large a squad to maintain the peace, but Mancini insists

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