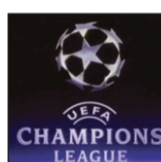




AC Milan forward Kaka celebrates after scoring the first of his three strikes in their Champions League encounter against Anderlecht at the San Siro in Milan on Wednesday.

Milan cruise on Kaka

REUTERS, Milan



Brazilian playmaker Kaka struck a hat-trick as AC Milan beat Anderlecht 4-1 to tighten their grip at the top of Champions League Group H on Wednesday.

The win gave the six-times European champions 10 points, five ahead of second-placed Lille with two games to play.

A draw in their next match at AEK Athens would be enough to send Milan through to the knockout phase.

It was another inspired performance by Kaka, who also scored a superb long-range goal when Milan beat Anderlecht 1-0 in Belgium two weeks ago.

The 24-year-old put the hosts ahead from the penalty spot in the seventh minute, after Roland Juhasz tripped Alberto Gilardino, then scored once more in each half before Juhasz pulled one back for

the visitors just after the hour mark.

Any lingering hopes Anderlecht's players might have harboured about fighting their way back into the contest were blown away, however, when Alberto Gilardino restored Milan's three-goal cushion late on.

"He's exceptional. He can do absolutely anything," delighted Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said of Kaka.

"For me, he's the best player in the world at the moment. I don't think anyone could complain if he won the Golden Ball.

"Overall, we played very well tonight, particularly at the start of the game, when we were running at them."

Milan were in control for long periods of the match and Kaka's penalty was the result of sustained early pressure.

His second goal -- a lovely, curling shot into the top corner after a one-two with Cafu -- followed near misses by team mates Ricardo Oliveira and Dario Simic.

Anderlecht played more aggressively after the break. Congolese

striker Mohamed Tchite got in a couple of snapshots, though neither was on target.

After Kaka's third, though, the odds were heavily stacked against an Anderlecht comeback.

Once again the goal came out of a solo run by the Brazilian but this time, instead of running directly at the opposition, he cut round a defender on the edge of the area before angling a right-footed shot past keeper Daniel Zitka.

When Juhasz headed Anderlecht's consolation goal from a corner, Milan briefly looked rattled.

Left back Marek Jankulovski almost complicated what should have been a trouble-free night when he botched a clearance and the ball skewed off the post, while Tchite fired in a dangerous ball from close range that Dida managed to smother on his line.

Two minutes from time, however, Cristian Brocchi launched a long ball forward for Gilardino who broke the offside trap and thumped in Milan's fourth goal.



Real Madrid star Robinho (top) jumps to evade a sliding tackle from Steaua Bucharest defender Banel Nicolita during their Champions League match at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday.

Ancelotti heaps praise on Kaka

REUTERS, Rome

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti described playmaker Kaka as the best in the world after he scored a hat-trick in a 4-1 win over Champions League rivals Anderlecht.

"There are lots of great players in circulation, but nobody is worth as much as him," Ancelotti was quoted as saying in Corriere dello Sport on Thursday.

"Nobody has more determination or is capable of making such a difference in a match. He is better than Ronaldinho."

The 24-year-old Brazilian's hat-trick against Anderlecht on Wednesday took his tally in the Champions league this season to five -- the same as Chelsea's Didier Drogba.

He has scored 16 goals in the competition since joining Milan from Brazilian club Sao Paulo as an unknown 21-year-old in July 2003.

According to Ancelotti, it was not only his ability to score that marked Kaka out from his peers.

"Ricky has always scored goals, he's an excellent finisher. But he was not always so good at setting up his team mates," said Ancelotti.

"Now, however, he has improved even that aspect of his game."

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Lyon breeze into last 16

AFP, Paris

Karim Benzema's winner for Lyon in a 1-0 victory over Dynamo Kiev here on Wednesday propelled them into the Champions League knockout stages and continued their remarkable victory run.

Benzema's 14th-minute goal separated the sides in a match Lyon dominated for long periods to earn their fourth win out of four, and no goals conceded, to reach the last 16 from Group E.

Lyon have never got past the quarterfinals of this competition but their form this year gives notice they may go further next spring.

Lyon, unbeaten this season in all competitions, have only failed to win once -- in a 1-1 draw at home to Toulouse in their second French league match.

Their coach Gerard Houllier was understandably delighted with the run continuing.

"I think we were pretty dynamic tonight but we just couldn't put the chances away that we got."

"However I think 3-1 would have been a fairer reflection of the game."

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Juve celebrate in style

AFP, Rome

Juventus celebrated their 109th anniversary by defeating Brescia 2-0 on Wednesday for their eighth consecutive win in Serie B.

The match had originally been scheduled for October 8, but was postponed due to several members of the Juventus squad being called up for international duty.

Italian World Cup winner Alessandro Del Piero opened the scoring in the sixth minute -- taking his Juve goal tally to 201 in all competitions -- before Brescia's Corrado Colombo put through his own net.

Another victory for Juve, who were relegated from Serie A for match-fixing but saw their additional 30-point penalty reduced to nine points after successful appeals, gave their promotion push more momentum, leaving them on 16

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United caught in the cold

AFP, Copenhagen



Manchester United's seven-match winning run came to an abrupt halt as Sir Alex Ferguson's men crashed to a 1-0 Champions League defeat by FC Copenhagen on a freezing night in the Danish capital.

The Premiership leaders failed to reproduce anything like the form they had displayed in their three previous matches in group F and, despite generating enough chances to have won fairly comfortably, could have few complaints about going down to Marcus Allback's 73rd-minute strike.

With nine points already in the bag, United remain favourites to top the group but the battle for second place is now wide open between the Danes, Celtic and Benfica.

The Dane's coach Stale Solbakken said: "It is a great, great achievement and I am really proud to be FC Copenhagen's coach on a night like this."

Ferguson had arrived in Copenhagen pledging to field the strongest team available to him. If that was his intention, the

injury-friendly combination of the inhospitable weather and a potato field of a pitch must have persuaded him otherwise.

Both Rio Ferdinand and Paul Scholes were left on the bench at the start, allowing Mikael Silvestre a rare start in the centre of defence and Michael Carrick the opportunity to play a more adventurous role in midfield.

With Ryan Giggs, Gary Neville and Louis Saha all back in Manchester nursing injuries, barely half of United's current first-choice line-up was on display in the Parken stadium.

Among those not afforded a night off was Wayne Rooney, and it was the England striker who came closest to breaking the deadlock in a scrappy first half.

After swivelling on Gabriel Heinze's pass on the edge of the area, he thumped a 13th-minute drive into the arms of Jesper Christiansen before heading Wes Brown's cross from the right narrowly over the Copenhagen goalkeeper's crossbar.

For all their busting, the Danes initially posed little in the way of a genuine threat to United's makeshift defensive quartet. Michael Silberbauer's 20-yard strike was their only effort to find the target

before the break and was never likely to squeeze past van der Sar at his near post.

Copenhagen's problems in keeping tabs on Rooney were underlined when centreback Brede Hangeland was booked for a clumsy hack at the 21-year-old, who saw another shot trickle wide of the target just before the interval after he had turned his marker on

the penalty spot.

With Ferdinand replacing Nemanja Vidic at the break, United might easily have found themselves behind in the first ten minutes of the second period.

Unchallenged at the back post, Hangeland nodded Lars Jacobsen's corner straight at van der Sar and Aliba Hutchinson failed to even hit the target with an even more inviting cross from Silberbauer after the midfielder had wriggled clear of Wes Brown on the left.

At the other end, Christiansen twice thwarted Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, diving at the Norwegian's feet after he had been played in by Cristiano Ronaldo then getting down smartly to smother a shot on the turn.

Another United chance went begging when Rooney headed Heinze's deep cross wide of Christiansen's right-hand post midway through the half.

Solskjaer then ran on to a Rooney flick and fired in a left-foot effort from the edge of the area that was deflected inches wide of the opposite post.

United were made to pay for those near misses when Copenhagen won a 73rd-minute corner.

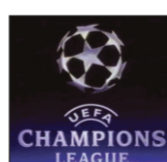
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VIKING VICTORY: FC Copenhagen goalkeeper Jesper Christiansen (L) jumps onto teammate Brede Hangeland (R) in elation after their famous victory over Manchester United in their Champions League match at the Parken Stadium in Copenhagen on Wednesday.

Real steal past Steaua

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid reached the last 16 of the Champions League on Wednesday with a 1-0 victory over Steaua Bucharest of Romania, through the performance at the Bernabeu lacked sparkle.

Banel Nicolita put through his own net on 70 minutes to floor the visitors who had withstood early pressure and could easily have earned a result themselves.

Instead, the three points leave Real with nine points from four games, three behind Lyon, whom they next face at home, and six ahead of the Romanians.

The French champions ended Dynamo Kiev's slim hopes with a 1-0 success in France to preserve their perfect record.

Had Ruud van Nistelrooy, preferred to fit again Ronaldo, not missed a penalty which he earned, the margin would have been more comfortable for Real, whose coach Fabio Capello gave David Beckham a 32-minute run-out.

Nicolita did the job for him as he turned the ball past his own keeper Cornel Cernea in a terrible mix-up,

finding the net with a back pass that completely missed his teammate target.

A Spanish commentator described the goal as "one of the stupidest ever" -- and also slammed Real "for an alarming lack of football."

Capello said the essential goal of making it out of the group has been achieved, if only just.

"The objective was to qualify for the last 16 and we have done that, though it's true the goal was a gift."

"That put us under pressure in the first half but we played well in the second," he insisted.

On keeping Ronaldo in reserve until the closing stages he explained that: "yesterday he had a problem with his neck. This morning it was stuck and I wasn't sure he would make it. Finally I left him out of the starting line-up."

Real joined compatriots Valencia in the last 16 by dint of the narrow win but they will be grateful not to have to beat Lyon in their final home match or have to get a result against cannon fodder Kiev away at the onset of the Ukrainian winter.

Before kick-off Capello took no immediate heed of Beckham's comments earlier in the week that he intends to stick it out at the Bernabeu despite warning the

bench for much of the season.

The midfielder, already discarded by England, again sat it out to begin with, only coming on, for Mali international Mahamadou Diarra, after an hour of tepid fare.

Instead, it was Brazilian youngster Robinho who stole most of the limelight.

At least Beckham had half an hour more than Jose Antonio Reyes, who replaced Robinho with barely three minutes left.

Real, the last of their continental record of nine titles lifted in 2002 in the pre-Beckham era, had put aside their hot-and-cold league form and an opening day Champions League loss to Lyon to swat aside Dynamo Kiev at home and also Bucharest away, scoring nine times in the process.

But the inconsistency which has been their hallmark in recent seasons continued to gnaw away at the team on Wednesday to the frustration of the 70,000 crowd.

The Romanians, having secured a win over a hapless Kiev and two losses from their opening three games, did not arrive as lambs to the slaughter, finding solace in the fact that more than 12,000 of their compatriots, many living in Spain,

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League of Champions									
4th set of matches, October 31 and November 1									
GROUP A Tuesday, October 31 1. Levski Sofia v Werder Bremen (3) 2. FC Barcelona v Chelsea (2) RANKING: Chelsea (ENG) 4 3 1 0 10; Werder Bremen (GER) 4 2 1 1 7; FC Barcelona (ESP) 4 1 2 1 5; Levski Sofia (BUL) 4 0 1 3 4					GROUP E Wednesday, November 1 1. Real Madrid v S. Bucarest (0) 2. Lyon v Dynamo Kiev (0) RANKING: Lyon (FRA) 4 4 0 0 12; Real Madrid (ESP) 4 3 0 1 9; Steaua Bucharest (ROM) 4 1 0 3 3; Dynamo Kiev (UKR) 4 0 0 4 0				
GROUP B Tuesday, October 31 0. S. Moscow v Inter Milan (1) 0. Bayern Munich v S. Lisbon (0) RANKING: Bayern Munich (GER) 4 3 1 0 10; Inter Milan (ITA) 4 2 0 2 6; Sporting Lisbon (POR) 4 1 2 1 5; Spartak MoskOW (RUS) 4 0 1 3 1					GROUP F Wednesday, November 1 3. Benfica Lisbon v Glas. Celtic (0) 1. FC Copenhagen v Man. United (0) RANKING: Manchester United (ENG) 4 3 0 1 9; Glasgow Celtic (SCO) 4 2 0 2 6; Benfica Lisbon (POR) 4 1 1 2 4; FC Copenhagen (DEN) 4 1 1 2 4				
GROUP C Tuesday, October 31 3. Liverpool v Bordeaux (0) 2. PSV Eindhoven v Galatasaray (0) RANKING: Liverpool (ENG) 4 3 1 0 10; PSV Eindhoven (NED) 4 3 1 0 10; Galatasaray (TUR) 4 0 1 3 1; Bordeaux (FRA) 4 0 1 3 1					GROUP G Wednesday, November 1 0. Arsenal v CSKA Moscow (0) 1. Hamburg v FC Porto (3) RANKING: CSKA Moscow (RUS) 4 2 2 0 8; Arsenal (ENG) 4 2 1 1 7; FC Porto (POR) 4 2 1 1 7; Hamburg (GER) 4 0 2 2 2				
GROUP D Tuesday, October 31 2. S. Donetsk v Valencia (2) 1. AS Roma v Olympiakos (1) RANKING: Valencia (ESP) 4 3 1 0 10; AS Roma (ITA) 4 2 1 1 7; Olympiakos (GRE) 4 0 2 2 2; Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 4 0 2 2 2					GROUP H Wednesday, November 1 1. AEK Athens v Lille (0) 4. AC Milan v Anderlecht (1) RANKING: AC Milan (ITA) 4 3 1 0 10; Lille (FRA) 4 1 2 1 5; AEK Athens (GRE) 4 1 1 2 4; Anderlecht (BEL) 4 0 2 2 2				