



Real Madrid superstar Ronaldo (C) shoots between two Dynamo Kiev defenders during their Champion's League match in Kiev on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Robinson gaffe a diplomatic boon

AFP, Zagreb

A Christmas gift inspired by England goalkeeper Paul Robinson's horror own goal against Croatia has helped to boost diplomatic ties between London and Zagreb, it was reported Thursday.

The British embassy in Zagreb has offered the Croatian government framed photographs of the infamous incident which occurred during a Euro 2008 qualifier two months ago, said the daily Vecernji List.

"We have decided to remind you of the early Christmas gift from Paul Robinson to Croatia, since we believe that was the key moment in relations between the two countries in 2006," it quoted British ambassador to Croatia John Ramsden as saying.

Robinson made the dreadful error on October 11 when he completely missed an attempted clearance kick of a back-pass from defender Gary Neville, and watched in shock as the ball rolled into the back of the net.

The "air" shot, which helped Croatia to a 2-0 home victory, was strongly lambasted in the British press at the time.

The result left England in a four-way scrap for two spots of Euro 2008 qualifying Group E, which also includes Andorra, Estonia, Israel, Macedonia and Russia.

NOTICE

Due to an unavoidable reason, we could not print the CROSSWORD today. We regret any inconvenience.

--Sports

Editor

Lyon merry in draw

INTERNET, undated



Lyon were held to a 1-1 draw by Steaua Bucharest at Stade Gerland in a meaningless Champions League Group E match on Wednesday. Nicolae Dica put the visitors ahead on two minutes only for Aliou Diarra to equalise soon afterwards.

Steaua took an unexpected but deserved early lead, their pressure from the kick-off paying dividends when Dica expertly took the ball on his chest in the box, swivelling and firing low past Gregory Coupet into the bottom right corner on two minutes.

Diarra equalised from a Kim Kallstrom corner ten minutes later,

powerfully heading home from the penalty spot when left totally unmarked.

Steaua could have raced back into the lead soon after when Vasile Cristocea controlled and shot from just inside the box on the left, but the effort flew inches wide of the far post with Coupet beaten and the sliding Cyril Thereau could not divert the ball in despite his valiant effort.

With both sides already assured of their respective futures in European competition - Lyon confirmed as group winners with Steaua guaranteed UEFA Cup football - the first half petered out after fifteen minutes, with John Carew's well-saved long-range effort just before half time being palmed away by Cornel Cernea being the best opportunity of a dull thirty minutes.

Steaua had two good chances in quick succession five minutes after the break, with Banel Nicolita and Petre Marin both going close, while Kallstrom sent a chip just over in response.

Hatem Ben Arfa created an excellent opportunity for Govou just before the hour when he slid the ball into the box from the left but the France star could only poke the ball wide.

Substitute Sylvain Wiltord had two opportunities to seal a win for Lyon when, soon after coming on, he sent a Jeremy Berthod cross high and wide when one would have expected the former Arsenal and Bordeaux man to score, and seven minutes later, he could only direct a free header from a corner into Cernea's arms.

Lyon finish on 14 points while Steaua lie third with nine.

Lille into last 16

AFP, Milan



Goals in either half from Peter Odemwingie and Kader Keita booked French side Lille's passage into the last 16 of the Champions League for the first time on Wednesday with a 2-0 win over Group H winners AC Milan.

Nigerian striker Odemwingie opened after seven minutes with the ever-impressive Ivorian midfielder Keita scoring his first European goal after 67 minutes as Lille finished runners-up behind the already-qualified Italians.

It was a welcome return to the competition's latter stages for Lille coach Claude Puel, who has been to the semi-finals of the competition both as a player and as an assistant coach at his former club, Monaco.

"We had a great match, and showed that we are a team that has certain qualities," said Puel.

"I think AC Milan simply come up against a brick wall tonight. It's true they were already qualified but that didn't stop us from going out there and getting on top of them."

He added: "I think our second goal settled the match."

The fate of the French had been out of their hands as they took to the pitch at the San Siro.

A draw would have been enough to advance if AEK Athens were beaten by Anderlecht. And the Greek side dropped to third position after drawing 2-2 in Brussels.

Despite their strong European form Milan have won just one of their last six matches in Serie A, and Carlo Ancelotti's side were not helped by a string of injuries.

Lille also had their injury worries and were without goalkeeper Tony Sylva with a broken hand.

Second in their domestic league after a nine-match winning streak at home, Lille were quick off the mark with Odemwingie finding the net with a close-range left foot volley in the opening minutes of the game

which gave Milan goalie Zeljko Kalac no chance.

The Nigerian had a chance to his tally after 23 minutes but Kalac held firm this time and a minute later a Keita just grazed the side of the post.

After the break Keita doubled their advantage when he prodded past Kalac and the visitors held on for the full three points.

Last year's semifinalists AC Milan finish top of Group H with ten points, with Lille just behind on nine. AEK return to the UEFA Cup after their third place.

Puel, whose side have tried but failed to make the last 16 in recent seasons, was ecstatic.

"The adventure continues for us," added the Frenchman.

"We showed a lot of maturity, a lot of know-how. We stayed calm and didn't give any opportunities to Milan, and I think in the end they were lucky we didn't score even more."

Hamburg ban Atouba

AFP, Berlin

Hamburg have handed their Cameroon international defender Thimothee Atouba a two-match ban and hefty fine as punishment for his one-fingered gesture to the home fans in Hamburg's 3-2 Champions League win over CSKA Moscow on Wednesday.

The 24-year-old Atouba was substituted off in the 68th minute and responded to booing from the crowd by raising his middle finger, receiving the red card for his conduct, prompting the angry fans to throw beer over him.

Atouba, a 2.5 million euro signing from Tottenham Hotspur, apologised on Thursday saying he had let the German club down.

"I have caused the club and the team great harm," said Atouba. "I am aware that I have a responsibility to Hamburg."

Hamburg coach Thomas Doll admitted the gesture was unacceptable but said the Cameroon defender was still in his plans.

"Sometimes players get jeered when they are below-par and when 50,000 fans are booing you it is not nice but that is by no means an excuse for what he did," Doll said.

"But he is our player and we will back him and hope he plays the second half of the season like has done in the first."

Bayern want to have Schlaudraff

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich have confirmed their interest in signing German international striker Jan Schlaudraff from Alemannia Aachen.

"Yes we are interested. We would take him now but that does not seem possible," Bayern general manager Uli Hoeness told Bild daily.

The 23-year-old Schlaudraff has a clause in his contract, which runs until June 2008, that allows him to leave for one million euros in the summer.

Bayern already have several strikers on their books but may view Schlaudraff as a replacement for Peruvian international Claudio Pizarro who is out of contract at the end of the season.

Werder Bremen and Borussia Dortmund have both registered their interest in Schlaudraff, who has scored six goals in the Bundesliga, and his agent Manfred Schulte said a summer move was almost certain.

"We are in discussions with several top clubs about a summer transfer," said Schulte.

Schlaudraff has been one of the discoveries of the season and has been fasttracked into the national team, making his Germany debut in a 2-0 friendly win over Georgia in October.

Ancelotti slates awful Milan

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti criticised his team after a 2-0 defeat to Lille in the Champions League on Wednesday saying they had never played so badly.

Although Milan had already claimed top spot in Group H two weeks ago, their second successive defeat in the competition comes amid some poor displays in Serie A where Ancelotti's team are adrift in 15th place.

"We played badly, very badly. We seemed to have been starting to improve recently but today we fell back," he said.

"We had few ideas, little clarity in our play and little determination -- in fact little anything. We have to forget this one," added the Milan coach.

Ancelotti has defended his team throughout their poor run of form but at the post-match press conference at the San Siro he made clear he was far from satisfied with the season so far.

"We have not been playing very well for quite a while but we have never been as bad as this," he said before dismissing a question about the speculation likely to surround his future.

"Rumours are really the last of my problems. We need to improve a lot and we need a lot more effort. We have to change our approach and we need to really make the most of the two months before we return to action in the Champions League," he said.

"We need to get the injured players back and there are a lot of other things to do. I hope this will serve as a wake-up call to the team -- it was a horrible night," added Ancelotti.

Dragao draw suits both

AFP, Porto



Last year's beaten finalists Arsenal avoided disaster with a 0-0 draw at FC Porto here on Wednesday

which was enough for both teams to go through to the Champions League knockout stages.

Neither team looked to be trying too hard, knowing that both would qualify from Group G with a point even if CSKA Moscow won in Hamburg.

Nevertheless Porto showed glimpses of excellence, with midfielder Quaresma busy throughout the night.

He beat Arsenal keeper Jens Lehmann to twice hit the post in the second half and the Gunners could so easily have been two goals down.

Arsenal midfielder Freddie Ljungberg summed up Arsenal's successful night despite a lackadaisical display by telling Sky Sports television: "We were quite

happy with the result. Overall we were pleased but we were not happy about the two posts that were hit but sometimes you are lucky."

Quaresma had earlier caught the eye in the first half when Arsenal were often uncharacteristically sloppy by losing possession in midfield through lapses in concentration.

Arsenal's most exciting move in the first half came when a cross by Alexander Hleb was blocked by Brazilian Pepe after an impressive build-up. Porto even looked to be showboating on occasions.

No English team had won at Porto in European competition in eight previous attempts and this result made it nine.

When the second half began, Arsenal's Cesc Fabregas immediately darted towards Porto's area but his attempted pass was blocked.

However the first real goal threatening move of the half came three minutes after the restart.

Lisandro Lopez sprinted down the right flank and he pulled the ball

back for Quaresma whose first-time shot easily beaten Lehmann, only for the ball to bounce back off the foot of his right hand post.

Arsenal had not learned their lesson and in the 58th minute there was deja-vu.

Quaresma, the best player on the pitch and exuding confidence, again beat keeper Lehmann and again the ball smacked off the foot of his right hand post.

Porto's heads were up after those clear chances and they started to stroke the ball around the park nicely, but Arsenal's defence held firm as moves broke down on the edge of the box.

Ljungberg darted into the box in what promised to be a dangerous move midway through the half but he just could not get a shot in.

News came through that CSKA Moscow were leading at Hamburg SV which meant that the losing side in this match would be knocked out if the result stood in Germany.

However the match ended as it had threatened to finish right from the beginning -- goalless -- and Hamburg won 3-2 anyway.



FC Porto midfielder Ricardo Quaresma tries to get the ball past the sliding tackle of Arsenal defender Kolo Toure during their Champions League match at Dragao Stadium in Porto on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Hamburg end CSKA dreams

AFP, Hamburg



CSKA Moscow had to console themselves with a place in the UEFA Cup after a 3-2 defeat to SV Hamburg here on Wednesday ended their dreams of reaching the last 16 of the Champions League for the first time in their history.

CSKA needed to defeat Hamburg and hope there was a winner in the Porto-Arsenal match, which finished 0-0 anyhow, but the Russians did not fulfil their end of the bargain, falling victim to two late goals.

Dutch international Rafael van der Vaart and Boubacar Sanogo scored twice in the final six minutes to turn the game on its head after CSKA had led following goals from Ivica Olic (23) and Yuri Zhirkov (65).

After five Champions League defeats it was a first win in this season's competition for Hamburg

whose fans celebrated like they had won the trophy.

However the night was spoiled by Cameroon international defender Thimothee Atouba who raised his middle finger to the Hamburg fans jeering him as he was substituted off in the 68th minute.

With everything on the line CSKA recalled Brazilian international midfielder Dudu following a spell on the sidelines but the move backfired with the player coming off injured with just eight minutes gone.

It was tough for the Russians but they shrugged off the setback to go ahead in the 23rd minute.

Cameroon defender Atouba was penalised for a clumsy foul on Milos Krasic in the box and Olic, a flop in Germany with Hertha Berlin, converted the spot-kick.

But the Russians held the lead for a mere five minutes with Atouba flicking on a corner and 21-year-old Albanian Berisha reacted first to score his first Champions League goal.

Daniyel Ljuboja twice went close to putting the hosts ahead but found CSKA goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev in fine form.

With Hamburg on the front foot CSKA struck the sucker punch on the counter attack with Zhirkov walking around two challenges and capping a 40 metre run by placing the ball through Stefan Wachter's legs.

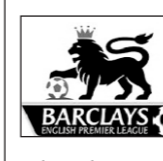
Atouba, who was having a torrid evening, was substituted minutes afterwards and raised his middle finger to the jeering home fans who threw beer over him.

The Cameroon defender, a 2.5 million euro signing from Tottenham Hotspur, was issued a red card and he can expect a severe punishment from Hamburg who are now likely to dispense with his services.

But goals from van der Vaart and Sanogo gave the insulted fans something to cheer and showed manager Thomas Doll that his players still believe in him.

Newcastle, Wigan post wins

AFP, London



Newcastle midfielder Emre hit a late winner as his side climbed out of the relegation zone with a 3-2 victory against Reading on Wednesday.

Glen Roeder's strugglers looked set to remain mired in the bottom three when James Harper's double strike put Reading 2-1 in front after Antoine Sibierski's opener.

But Newcastle staged a second half revival at St James' Park as Nigeria striker Obafemi Martins equalised from the penalty spot and Turkish star Emre stole all three points with just six minutes left.

Newcastle are now unbeaten in their last seven matches in all competitions, but this was just their second Premiership win in 11 attempts and lifted Roeder's side into 15th place.

Newcastle fans were less than enthusiastic when Sibierski arrived from Manchester City in August, but the French midfielder put his side in front in the 23rd minute.

Nolberto Solano played a one-

two with Emre before curling in a cross which Sibierski met with a towering header past Marcus Hahnemann for his third goal in four matches.

Coppel's side hauled themselves level in the 37th minute when Harper's shot deflected off Solano and flashed past Shay Given.

Newcastle's notoriously fragile defence was visibly rattled by that setback and Reading took the lead in the 42nd minute.

Celestine Babayaro gifted possession to Glen Little and the Reading winger drove in a shot that Given parried to the edge of the area. Former Arsenal trainee Harper seized on the loose ball and gave Given no chance with a perfectly-placed shot.

Newcastle equalised in the 57th minute when Sonko fouled Martins and the former Inter Milan star picked himself up to calmly converted the penalty for his first Premiership goal since September.

Reading would have gone third in the table with a point, but Emre left them empty-handed with a curling left-footed strike from the edge of the penalty area in the 84th minute.

Elsewhere, West Ham

slumped into the relegation zone as David Cotterill's strike and a Jonathan Spector own goal earned Wigan a 2-0 win at Upton Park.

Alan Pardew's side have lost four of their last five matches and are now third bottom of the table after Newcastle's win edged them above the London club.

Wigan almost got off to the perfect start in the third minute when Australian midfielder Josip Skoko whipped in a free-kick and Paul Scharner's flick was pushed onto a post by Robert Green.

Marlon Harewood forced a fine stop from Chris Kirkland moments later as he ran onto Nigel Reo-Coker's pass and drove in a fierce shot.

Argentine striker Carlos Tevez hit the post soon after the interval, but Wigan stole the lead in the 51st minute when Cotterill collected Kevin Kilbane's pass and beat Green with a stunning strike.

Paul Jewell's team doubled their advantage seven minutes later when Baines took aim from 30 yards and the left-back's shot deflected off Spector and flew past Green to seal a first win in four matches for the Latics.



Lille players celebrate after winning their Champion's league match against Milan at San Siro on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP