

Bundesliga Cologne, Wolfsburg share points

REUTERS, Berlin

Cologne and VfL Wolfsburg did nothing for their European hopes with a dismal 0-0 draw on Friday.

At least Cologne, missing suspended skipper Dirk Lotzner and three other first team players, avoided a repeat of their 6-0 thrashing at Wolfsburg earlier in the season.

"I have never seen such a defensive home side as Cologne," said Wolfsburg's Austrian midfielder Dietmar Kuehbaer. "This had nothing to do with football."

Cologne edged ahead of Werder Bremen into seventh place on goal difference but remained five points behind Schalke 04 currently filling the last UEFA Cup berth.

Wolfsburg occupied ninth spot after their ninth draw of the season the most in the Bundesliga.

Rivaldo relishing the prospect

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona's Brazilian forward Rivaldo says fans can expect two great games after his side were drawn to play Liverpool in the UEFA Cup semifinals.

"Honestly I wasn't bothered about our rivals, but the best thing about our tie is that it will be a guarantee of two great games," he said on his personal web page after Friday's draw.

"They are a very good team with a long history, but if we are going to be champions we should not fear anyone. We are Barca and to win the UEFA Cup we need to get past Liverpool."

The Brazilian was the architect of his team's passage into the semifinals after his two spectacular goals sent them through on the away goals rule despite a 3-2 defeat at Celta Vigo.

Teammate and former Arsenal player Marc Overmars said he believed Barcelona were favourites to reach the final, but he added that Liverpool would be tough opponents.

"Liverpool have improved a lot in recent years and are becoming a better team all the time. They also have a very good record in their own stadium."

The Dutch international said the tie would be complicated by the fact that Liverpool midfielder Jari Litmanen, his former teammate at Ajax, would have a point to prove after being discarded by the Catalan club.

"He will be especially motivated as he is playing against his old club and will want to demonstrate to them that he is a quality player."

Alaves so proud

REUTERS, Vitoria

Alaves president Gonzalo Anton said his club were pleased enough to be in the last four after drawing Kaiserslautern in the UEFA Cup semifinals on Friday.

"Personally, I would have liked to have been drawn against Liverpool, but all the teams we could have faced are big teams and we are just happy to be here anyway," he said.

The modest Basque club made the last four in their debut season in Europe after completing a 4-2 aggregate victory over fellow Spaniards Rayo Vallecano.

Alaves have been the surprise package of this year's tournament after eliminating Italian giants Inter Milan in the previous round. An entertaining 3-3 home draw was followed by a conclusive 2-0 victory at the San Siro stadium.

"I think that what we have done up to now has been an historic and brilliant achievement and whatever happens now will be welcome," Anton said.

"For the city it will be a historic event and we are just proud to be taking part in the semifinals of the competition in our debut season."

Floods won't stop it

REUTERS, Auxerre

Saturday's First Division game between AJ Auxerre and Olympique Lyon will take place, despite earlier fears it could be called off because of flooding, a French National League official (LNF) said.

Auxerre said on Thursday the game was in serious doubt after the River Yonne burst its banks and flooded the home team's pitch, changing rooms, offices and training facilities.

The official, who came to inspect the pitch at the Stade de l'Abbe-Deschamps on Friday, ruled the game could take place in acceptable conditions.

The River Yonne runs about 100 metres from the ground.

FIFA sends mixed signal to Africa

Football

REUTERS, Zurich

FIFA president Sepp Blatter and the official FIFA website had contradictory messages on Friday as confusion surrounded the politically charged question of whether the 2010 World Cup would definitely be held in Africa.

Blatter declined to confirm at a news conference that Africa would host the World Cup in 2010 when FIFA's policy of rotating the tournament around its six confederations is due to begin.

But he said Africa would be the first confederation to host the finals when rotation did begin.

The FIFA website, in a report on Thursday's proceedings of its executive committee, states the 2010 finals will be held in Africa.

Danny Jordaan, chief executive of the South African Football Association, warned Blatter he would face a backlash if it turned out that Africa was not certain to host the 2010 finals.

"If FIFA backtrack on their promise to give Africa the World Cup in 2010 then FIFA president Sepp Blatter will face enormous problems trying to get re-elected next year," he said.

"South Africa will be very disappointed if the promise made yesterday now turns out to be false."

Speaking at a news conference following the two-day committee meeting, Blatter said: "Nobody in the FIFA (executive committee) has taken a decision on 2010."

Although the principle of rotation was agreed, detailed studies were

still being carried out on the issue, he said.

But he added: "Rotation will start with Africa --- when it starts it starts in Africa."

agreed at last year's Extraordinary Congress in Zurich.

FIFA's general secretary Michel Zen-Ruffinen and the general secretaries of the six confederations



PHOTO: INTERNET

File photo shows South African 2006 World Cup bid committee CEO Danny Jordaan (R) congratulating Franz Beckenbauer, president of the German 2006 World Cup bid committee, after the announcement that Germany would host the 2006 World Cup in Zurich in this July 6.

"We do not want Africa to wait another 20, 30 or 50 years, we do not want them just to live with promises," Jordaan said.

The principle of rotation was

not studied in detail before submitting it to the next FIFA executive committee meeting in Buenos Aires on July 5 and 6.

Houllier's Premier priority

Football

REUTERS, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier, while pleased with his side's 2-0 UEFA Cup victory over Porto, has admitted he will be disappointed if his side misses out on a Champions League place.

Their victory last night with goals from Danny Murphy and Michael Owen ensured a UEFA Cup semi-final place.

However, Liverpool are currently fourth in the Premier League -- one position away from an automatic Champions League place next season.

"The most important game of the month for me will be the Premier League game with Derby on Sunday when we must get the points," he said.

"I would be very disappointed if we win three cups and don't qualify for the Champions League."

Liverpool have already won the League Cup, on penalties against Birmingham City in February, and have qualified for the semifinals of the FA Cup.

Houllier said his side had controlled most of the game against Porto.

"We made them look less of a team than we expected. In the second half they were anonymous and pale," Houllier said.

"It's not because they are a bad side, it's because we were on top of them and the players deserve credit for that."

Porto coach Fernando Costa was angry that Liverpool's opening goal was not ruled out for a handball.

"There were several decisive moments and the first was Liverpool's first goal," he said.

"I have seen it on television and it was definitely a handball before he shot at goal."

"The second was when Clayton had a shot saved a few minutes later

and after that Liverpool scored and the game was finished."

The Porto chief defended his decision to drop six players and change the system as he looked for his first away win since November 19.

"I decided it was important for us to have speed in this game so I

opted for the players who could give us that."

"I brought in Clayton and Candido Costa. I decided to take the risk and assume the responsibility for the defeat. But it's easy to analyse the game after the final whistle."



PHOTO: INTERNET

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier gives striker Emile Heskey (L) instructions as he comes on as a substitute in their UEFA Cup quarterfinal second leg match against Porto on March 15.

Celtic to play for Petrov

Scottish League Cup final today

Football

REUTERS, Glasgow

Celtic have vowed to win Sunday's Scottish League Cup final for their injured teammate Stilian Petrov, who is facing 10 months out of action with a broken leg.

The Bulgarian international's injury has cast a cloud over the encounter with Kilmarnock at Hampden Park as Celtic go for the first part of a domestic treble.

The Glasgow club have not won all three -- League Cup, Scottish Cup and championship -- since 1969, but Petrov's absence has altered the mood at Parkhead.

"It's terrible that Stilian can't play in the final but we are going to win a medal for him and we hope to win the league for him as well -- we will think about him in every game," said defender Ramon Vega.

Petrov suffered a double fracture of his right leg on Wednesday during Celtic's 2-1 win at St Johnstone and is unlikely to play again until next year.

The 21-year-old has made a huge contribution to Celtic's 16-point lead over arch rivals Rangers in the title race with his seven goals.

But he said he feared his career was over after receiving the injury.

"The first thing I thought -- probably the first thing anyone thinks in that position -- is that it could be all over for me," Petrov was quoted as saying in the Daily Record on Friday.

"But I now hope I will recover as soon as possible. I knew something was wrong straight away and started screaming because I looked down at my leg and it was pointing the wrong way."

"It is so hard to take at the moment. Things were going so well for me and my team."

Petrov's teammate Henrik

Larsson battled back from a similar double fracture in 1999 and has netted 44 goals this season.

"I didn't realise how bad Stilian was on the pitch, but now I feel awful for him."

Swiss international Vega, who won a League Cup medal in England with Tottenham Hotspur in 1999, added: "It was very quiet in the dressing room at training."

"Stilian did so much to get us to the final and we have to win it for him."

League Cup holders Celtic have won the trophy 11 times.

Kilmarnock are making their fourth appearance in the final but have yet to win the competition.

Manager Bobby Williamson said: "We won the Scottish Cup in 1997 but that was at Ibrox Stadium, and I think everyone wants to collect a trophy at the national stadium as well."

Hodde's agent plays down rumour

REUTERS, London

Tottenham Hotspur have not approached Glenn Hodde to be their new manager following the sacking of George Graham, Hodde's agent said on Friday.

"We have had no communication, no negotiations or contact with Tottenham football club," Dennis Roach said.

Southampton manager Hodde is the bookmakers' favourite to replace Graham, who was dismissed on Friday after the club accused him of breaching his contract in a row over funds for buying players.

As a player in the 1980s, Hodde was the darling of the Tottenham crowd and would be a popular choice among fans at White Hart Lane.

But Roach told BBC radio: "Glenn signed a new contract with Southampton a few months ago for a further two years."

"He's very happy there. Obviously people know his love is Tottenham Hotspur but Southampton is a great club, they're moving to a new stadium next year. The chairman and Glenn get on extremely well, I've never known Glenn happier in his life."

Raul the most beloved one

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Raul was presented with an award as Spain's most popular sportsman in a ceremony organised by state television on Friday night.

Over ten million voted for him. He topped the poll ahead of Inaki Urdangarin, a retired handball player who is married to Spain's Princess Cristina, and former 500cc motorcycle world champion Alex Criville.

Laughter broke out among the audience at the ceremony as Raul was presented with the award, which consisted of a sculpted hand holding a heart-shaped garland.

The award was given to the player only two days after he had a one-match ban and 20,000 Swiss francs (11,690 dollars) fine for a handball goal against Leeds United lifted by UEFA's appeals body.

Peru turn to Solano, Pizarro

REUTERS, Lima

Peru recalled Newcastle United's Nolberto Solano and Werder Bremen's Claudio Pizarro to their squad on Friday for this month's World Cup qualifier at home to Chile.

The pair were dropped by coach Julio Cesar Uribe for last November's 5-1 defeat in Paraguay. Solano's international recall is likely to upset his club Newcastle, who have complained in the past about his long journeys home to play for his country.

Peru are virtually out of the running for a place at the World Cup finals but coach Uribe said he wants "to win back people's confidence". Uribe added: "We can't make them believe in us after everything we have done but we will give it our best effort."

Peru are currently ninth in the 10-nation South American qualifying group with only eight points from 10 games.

Bonfrere issues ultimatum

REUTERS, Lagos

Nigeria coach Jo Bonfrere has threatened to quit if his team fail to beat Sierra Leone in a World Cup qualifying match in Freetown next month.

"My days here are numbered. If we do not beat Sierra Leone, I'll quit," said Dutchman Bonfrere.

"There are no two ways about it, I'll quit. Nigeria has no business in the World Cup if we cannot beat Sierra Leone next match (on April 21)," he told reporters after a meeting with the Nigerian Football Association (NFA) on Friday.

Bonfrere, appointed for a second spell in 1999, has a contract to qualify Nigeria for the 2002 World Cup finals.

But his team of foreign-based players could only a 0-0 draw last weekend against a Ghana team composed of players with local clubs.

The result gave Nigeria seven points and put them third behind Sudan and Liberia in the five-team Group B.

Only the top team qualifies for the World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea.

The NFA said it had set up a nine-man committee to assist Bonfrere in his bid to get Nigeria through to the final stages for the third World Cup in a row.



Former Tottenham Hotspur manager George Graham.

PHOTO: INTERNET

Spurs sack Graham

Football

REUTERS, London

Tottenham Hotspur manager George Graham has been sacked after a row with the club's new owners about how much cash would be available to buy players.

Tottenham executive vice-chairman David Buchler accused Graham of breaching his contract after the Scot spoke to the press about available transfer funds and fired him after a 15-minute meeting on Friday.

Graham described the decision as "bizarre and inexplicable" and threatened legal action over the dismissal.

Tottenham's director of football David Pleat has been put in temporary charge of the team.

Graham led the London side to the semifinals of the FA Cup but became increasingly frustrated at the limited resources he was being offered to rebuild the Premier League team, traditionally one of English soccer's 'big five'.

After meeting with owners ENIC earlier this week Graham said there would be no big outlay on players and repeated his fear that the club might not be able to hold on to their biggest asset - England defender Sol Campbell.

Buchler was furious that Graham, in charge since October 1998, made the details of the meeting public and the result was the departure of the club's third manager in four years.

"I had a private meeting with George Graham and (director of football) David Pleat this week and

on Friday morning found details of it plastered across the press," Buchler said.

"I asked George for an explanation but none was forthcoming and he had a defiant attitude."

"I am not prepared to have someone who is not a team player, who is not looking after the club's interest."

Buchler said Graham had been dismissed for breaking his contract after receiving written warnings about talking to the press in private and said their meeting on Friday had been "very difficult."

"He (Graham) was defiant, aggressive and used inappropriate words during the conversation, it was a very difficult conversation."

"As a result of that meeting George Graham was dismissed this afternoon."

"He shrugged his shoulders and said 'So be it', and walked out. It was basically a two-fingered salute."

Graham, in a statement issued through his solicitors and carried by the BBC, described the reasons given for his dismissal as "a flimsy excuse" and threatened legal action.

"Mr Graham has already instructed his solicitors to deal with this matter and will be issuing legal proceedings very shortly if the club does not honour his contract," the statement said.

"George Graham was shocked and extremely upset to have been sacked by Tottenham Hotspur today just three weeks before the most important game of the season for the club," it added, referring to the FA Cup semifinal against Arsenal on April 8.

He accused ENIC, who took

control of Tottenham from former owner Alan Sugar on February 28, of always having intended to sack him.

Pleat will be in charge for the home league game against Coventry City on Saturday.

Bookmakers have made former Spurs idol Glenn Hodde the favourite to replace Graham but the club said it had no successor in mind.

Tottenham reached the last four of the FA Cup last Sunday with a 3-2 victory over West Ham United and Graham was looking forward to pitting his wits against his former club Arsenal, with whom he won two league titles, in the semifinals.

Graham's appointment in 1998 was initially greeted with some suspicion by Spurs fans because of his links with Arsenal -- he played in the Gunners double-winning team of 1971 as well as helping them lift two league titles and four cups as manager.

But he took Tottenham to victory in the 1999 League Cup, beating Leicester City in the final for the club's first trophy in eight years.

Their league form remained mediocre, however, and the up-and-down nature of the team has been reflected in the boardroom.

In December chairman Sugar sold 28.9 percent of the club to sport and media group ENIC and stepped down from the board at the end of February.

Earlier on Friday the club announced a drop in profits for the first six months of its financial year.

Graham is the fourth Premier League manager to leave his post this season.

A bitter-sweet taste

Football

REUTERS, London

George Graham was sacked by Tottenham Hotspur just as the club's fans were beginning to warm to him.

The 56-year-old Scot, dismissed just three weeks before a much-anticipated FA Cup semifinal against Spurs' bitter north London rivals Arsenal, was a highly controversial appointment in October 1998.

Many Tottenham fans could scarcely believe their club had appointed someone who will always be remembered at Arsenal for his achievements as both a player and manager at Highbury.

Their worst fears seemed confirmed as Graham set about imposing his preferred brand of disciplined, no-nonsense football on a club where flair and invention had traditionally held sway.

A League Cup win in 1999 failed to convince his doubters as Tottenham consistently struggled to rise above mid-table in the premier league, the true measure of success.

In the first half of this season the cries of "Graham out" at White Hart Lane were becoming almost as shrill as those demanding the head of chairman Alan Sugar.

Sugar, vilified by the fans for not providing enough funds for players, sold out to sport and media group ENIC last December but since January the mood music for Graham has changed.

Successive victories over Leyton Orient, Charlton Athletic, Stockport County and West Ham United have had Spurs fans dreaming of a ninth FA Cup victory.

With a semifinal against bitter rivals Arsenal to come -- a match Graham would have relished after his acrimonious departure from Highbury in 1995 -- the old Spurs habit of doing well when the year ends in a figure one seemed as ingrained as ever.

If not quite the fans' favourite, Graham had at least gone some way to silencing his critics.

And when he complained on Thursday that ENIC weren't making enough money available to him, he doubtless went up further in the

fans' estimation.

Few would have guessed Graham would be sacked 24 hours later and his departure will leave many Tottenham fans with a bitter-sweet feeling.

The grieving process is unlikely to last long, though.

The bookmakers have already established former Spurs midfielder hero Glenn Hodde, currently manager of Southampton, as their favourite, a choice the fans would welcome.

Former Tottenham manager Terry Venables, currently on a six-month contract trying to prevent Middlesbrough being relegated, is also tipped.

Other candidates also being talked about are former Spurs defender Gary Mabbutt and ex-Chelsea manager Gianluca Vialli.

For now the club's executive vice-chairman David Buchler has left director of football David Pleat in charge.

"Lots of great names have been linked but I haven't spoken to any other manager. No-one is lined up," Buchler said.

Camacho takes the fall

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain coach Jose Antonio Camacho has blamed himself for his team's disappointing defeat against England last month but has also taken a swipe at his country's attitude towards the national team.

"I am not going to hide from the criticisms that were made after losing to England," Camacho was quoted as saying in the Spanish press on Saturday.

"I accept the complaints because I am the only person responsible for the team and anyway I hate losing just as much as anyone else."

Spain gave a half-hearted display as they lost 3-0 to a rejuvenated England last month on Sven Goran Eriksson's debut as the England coach.

Several members of the team were heavily criticised by the Spanish media for failing to give their all in a match which came just

days before the Real Madrid-Barcelona league clash.

"I think I was wrong in wanting to play against a strong team while the Spanish league was in full swing. But it should be the case that, when the national side is playing, other matches should take second place," Camacho said.

"In the week in which we played England all that was talked about was the Real Madrid-Barcelona match."

"I thought the best way for Spain to improve was to face the strongest sides in the world but there seems to be a different attitude in Spain."

Camacho made several changes when he named his squad on Friday for next Saturday's World Cup qualifier against group seven underdogs Liechtenstein and a friendly against world champions France on March 28.