

UEFA Cup Liverpool frustrate Barca

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Liverpool employed a policy of safety at all costs to frustrate Barcelona and earn a goalless draw in a UEFA Cup semi-final first leg that flickered into life only briefly at the end.

The Liverpool performance on Thursday earned the jeers of a 90,000 Nou Camp crowd and made a mockery of their manager's prediction that the match was more likely to finish 5-5 than 0-0.

But Gerard Houllier's side will go back to Anfield confident of reaching the final -- almost certainly against Spanish club Alaves who beat German side Kaiserslautern in the first leg of the other semi-final.

Liverpool gave a highly disciplined, if drab, display.

Barcelona created just a handful of half-chances in the opening 45 minutes, notably a snap-shot from Luis Enrique and a chest down and shot from the tightly-marked Rivaldo.

They looked livelier in the second half with Luis Enrique forcing two desperate blocks from the defence before a late flurry saw Patrick Kluijvert and Xavi both go close.

Liverpool, who had hardly mounted an attack all night, also came close at the death, with substitute Robbie Fowler wasting a header from Steven Gerrard's artful first time cross.

And in injury-time a Gary McAllister backheel gave Emile Heskey the chance to feed Vladimir Smicer in the box. The Czech turned back for Gerrard but the tiring England midfielder's shot went just wide.

Liverpool were wearing the white shirts of their new away kit, just as the 1976 team had when they won 1-0 here on their way to victory in the same competition.

There was another echo of the great Liverpool sides of the 1970s and 80s as Houllier's men attempted to silence the crowd in the opening 20 minutes, soaking up the pressure and worrying little about what they themselves created.

Rarely can Barcelona have had so much possession in a game and rarely can they have found so little to do with it.

Pep Guardiola ran the midfield with leisureed ease and spread balls out wide whenever possible to Marc Overmars on the left and Luis Enrique on the right.

Emile Heskey got clear of Gabri once in the first half, after eight minutes, and passed on to Patrik Berger but the Czech international's cross was easily cleared.

Rivaldo showed he could be a danger however close the marking a couple of minutes later as he made himself some space with a neat piece of control and sent in a shot that Stephane Henchoz deflected wide.

At the other end Michael Owen won a free kick on the edge of the area but Danny Murphy's shot was

was from a Guardiola freekick that Babel had to head clear at the far post.

Rivaldo then brought some applause from the 90,000 crowd as he controlled a Guardiola cross on his chest, turned inside past Henchoz and sent a skimming shot wide.

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Alaves start planning for final

Football

REUTERS, Vitoria

Alaves virtually guaranteed themselves a place in the UEFA Cup final after storming to an astonishing 5-1 victory over Kaiserslautern in the first leg of their semifinal on Thursday.

In an astonishing match of four penalties, Alaves scored three goals from the spot and Kaiserslautern one.

Two superbly struck first half penalties from Romanian international Cosmin Contra and a sharply taken goal from the impressive Jordi Cruyff put the home side 3-0 up by half time to the delight of the home fans, whose club have been a revelation in their first-ever season of European competition.

Another penalty from Ivan Alonso made it 4-0, before the German side clawed back a goal -- yet another penalty -- as Harry Koch hit home from the spot.

But Magno Moelin all but extinguished the German side's faint hopes as he sent a superb angled shot into the far corner on 81 minutes to make it 5-1 and virtually render the second leg in Germany in two weeks time meaningless.

Alaves, hosting the biggest match in their 80-year history, were anxious to make the most of their home advantage and immediately set about taking the match to the visitors.

The Spaniards maintained an impressive rhythm as they constantly hounded the Kaiserslautern midfield. But the deep-lying German defence seemed confident they could soak up the pressure.

After five minutes Ivan Alonso managed to latch on to a lofted pass from Delfi Geli, but the Uruguayan forward could not quite control his spectacular first time volley.

Ten minutes later Oscar Tellez blasted a 20-metre free kick just wide, but the home side seemed unable to break down the German defence marshalled by the rock-like Mario Basler.

But in the 20th minute referee Norwegian Rene Pedersen gifted Alaves a penalty after Egyptian defender Hany Ramzy made the slightest of contacts with Jordi Cruyff just inside the area.

Romanian defender Contra stepped up and drilled home from the spot to put the Basque side into

the lead.

Eleven minutes Alaves extended their lead after another lapse by the German defence. This time it was Jeff Strasser who brought down Ivan Tomic in the area with a clumsy trip

tipped over the bar in acrobatic fashion by keeper Martin Herrera.

To the delight of the home fans Alaves made it 3-0 before the break. Hermes Desio swung in a free kick

and Contra produced a carbon-copy of his first penalty to make it 2-0.

The German side were clearly rattled and departed from their game plan to push forward. But the goals had injected fresh energy into the home side and their attempts were constantly frustrated by some determined defending.

Basler did send a bullet free kick thundering wide on 32 minutes and Brazilian Ratinho shot wide four minutes later.

It was young German international striker Miroslav Klose who came closest to pulling a goal back on 37 minutes, but his header was

weakly struck into the wall.

The second half saw Liverpool defend a little further forward and as a result both sides had half-chances towards the end.

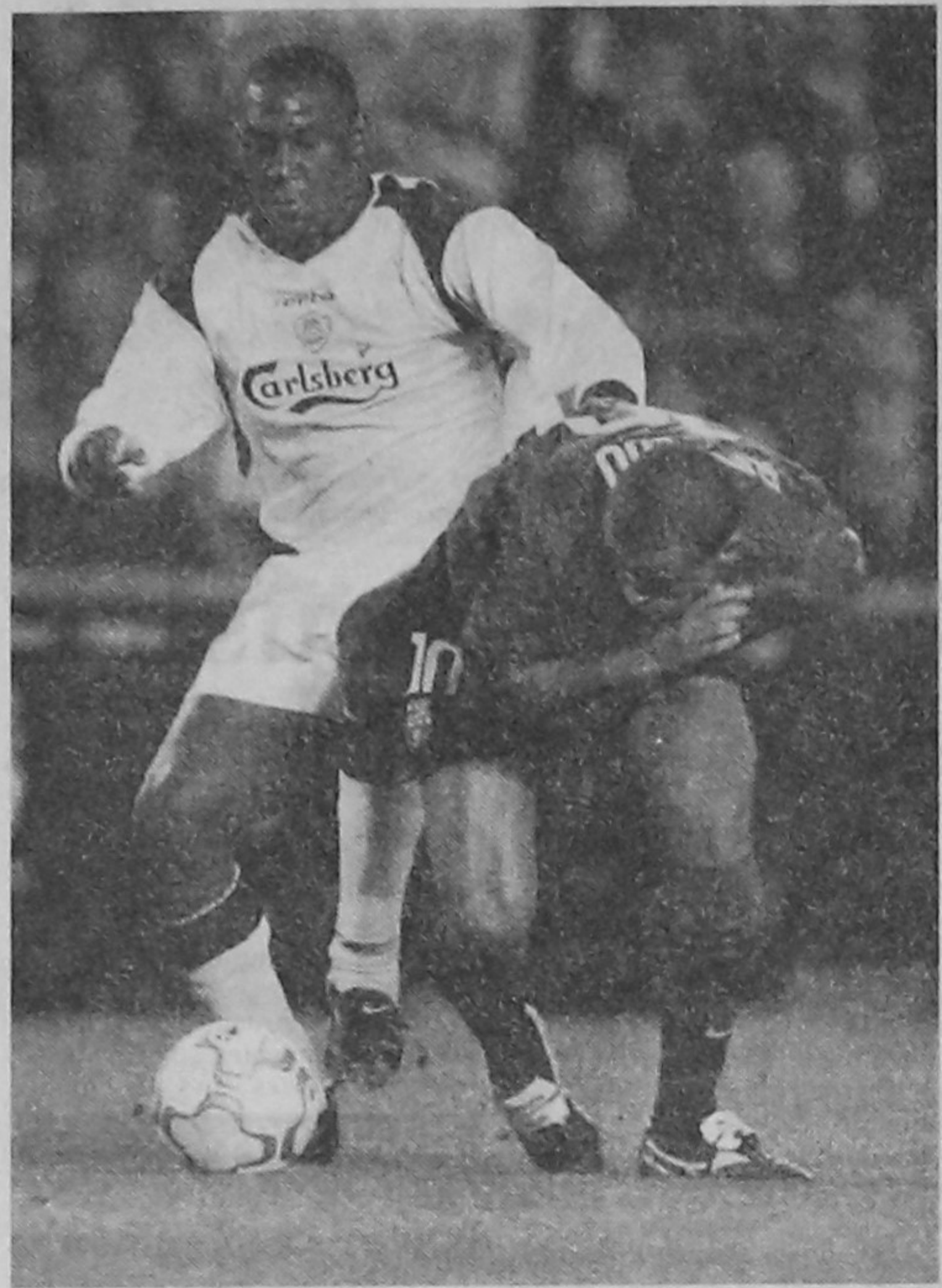
Westerveld had to save just twice, though, from Kluijvert's cross-shot on the left after a swift break away from Barca and Cocu's sweet strike from the edge of the box.

In the dying seconds Rivaldo chipped a shot into the net but the flag had already gone up for offside.

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier has refused to apologise for his tactics after an ultra-defensive display earned his side a 0-0 draw with Barcelona in their UEFA Cup semifinal first leg.

Liverpool silenced the Nou Camp crowd as they limited their hosts to a couple of half-chances to set up an intriguing second leg at Anfield on April 19.

Houllier conceded that his side, who failed to get a shot on target all night, could have attacked more but the Frenchman was satisfied with the result.



Barcelona superstar Rivaldo (R) is under pressure from Liverpool's Emile Heskey at the Nou Camp.

Hosts beware at Anfield!

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona players have warned Liverpool they may come to regret the ultra-cautious approach that saw the English team grind out a 0-0 draw in a UEFA Cup semifinal first leg at the Nou Camp.

Liverpool spent almost the entire game in resolute defence as they successfully kept the free-scoring Barca attack at bay.

Frank de Boer said the failure of Gerard Houllier's side to score an away goal -- they did not manage a shot on target all night -- could be the decisive factor in the tie.

"In all sincerity I believe the key for us is that they didn't score a goal," said the Dutch defender. "That was our first objective going into the game."

"The second objective, of scoring ourselves, was difficult because of the way Liverpool approached the game."

"I'm convinced that we'll score in the second leg at Anfield, though. Liverpool will be forced to attack more to satisfy their fans and that will give us a lot more space."

"It was a boring game for the fans. We weren't expecting Liverpool to be so cautious."

De Boer's Dutch colleague

Houllier defends defensive ploy

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

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Houllier conceded that his side, who failed to get a shot on target all night, could have attacked more but the Frenchman was satisfied with the result.

"We were playing against one of the best sides in Europe, a Champions League team, and we had to be cautious," Houllier said. "We could have been more audacious, though."

"We defended very well but I would say we didn't get going in attacking terms. We didn't continue with our movements when we started to break."

"That's partly because we're a young side and it's possible we lacked a little maturity."

"It's a big pitch here and we're not used to playing on it in England. Look what happened to other English teams who have come here in the last three or four years."

"I'm not going to apologise for the result, though. Sometimes in football you pose the opposition a problem and it's up to them to solve it."

Duberry off the hook

Football

REUTERS, Hull

Leeds United footballer Michael Duberry has walked free after being cleared along with team mate Jonathan Woodgate and two of Woodgate's friends of conspiring to pervert the course of justice.

But the jury at Hull Crown Court has still to reach a verdict on serious assault charges faced by Woodgate and a third Leeds footballer Lee Bowyer, and the two friends, Neale Caveney and Paul Clifford.

Judge David Poole sent the jurors home and they will continue their deliberations on Friday.

Duberry dropped his head in relief when the jury gave its verdicts on the conspiracy counts at the end of a second day of discussion.

The player embraced Woodgate, a man who he described during the eight-week trial as probably his best friend at the club.

Duberry's solicitor John Perry said outside the court he could not comment on the verdict until the

end of the trial.

He told reporters: "Today ends a year for Michael Duberry. I can't say any more but Michael would wish to thank his advocates..."

"You will forgive us for not saying any more today but given the nature of this case I will have a lot to say at the end of this trial."

Woodgate and Bowyer are accused of beating an Asian student Sarfaraz Najeib unconscious in January 2000.

They face jail if convicted of grievous bodily harm with intent. They have denied the charge and affray.

Boudewijn Zenden agreed Barcelona were now in the driving seat, despite their inability to find a way past the massed ranks of Liverpool defenders.

"A goalless draw is a better result for us than them," said Zenden. "The more they attack at Anfield the easier it will be for us."

"They didn't come to the Nou Camp to win or even to score and to have a good game you need two teams to attack."

Liverpool went in to Thursday's game with history on their side, having beaten Barcelona 1-0 at the Nou Camp in 1976 on their way to a 2-1 aggregate win and a second UEFA Cup triumph.

Houllier was talking up the chances of a real spectacle before the game, saying the first leg was more likely to finish 5-5 than 0-0.

In the end that proved to be a red herring, as his side defended with their entire team behind the ball.

"It's true I was expecting Liverpool to play a more open game," said Barca coach Llorenç Serra Ferrer, who persisted with a four-man defence throughout the game despite Liverpool's obvious lack of ambition.

"Liverpool are free to play in whatever style they choose and tactically they were very good."

"But my players are anxious to show what they can do in the return leg and it will be a real final at Anfield."

"We achieved a good result at the Nou Camp through hard work and good team spirit. It wasn't luck."

"If you let Barcelona play they can score four goals and if that had happened to us people would have accused me of being tactically naive."

Liverpool will have another difficult task in the second leg as they will have to attack more while at the same time being careful not to give Barcelona an away goal.

"I'm satisfied with the result," said Houllier. "I have to say we did want the away goal, though."

"That goal didn't come because Barcelona are a very good side and they made it difficult for us. They didn't let us attack."

"But we've scored 96 goals this season in all competitions and I can promise the second leg will be different."

"We're capable of scoring more goals than them."

Barcelona coach Llorenç Serra Ferrer said Liverpool had made it all but impossible for his side to play and he too looked forward to the return leg at Anfield.

"It was a difficult game and tough for the fans too," Serra Ferrer said. "Football is a game for two teams and only one wanted to attack tonight."

"We could have played with more rhythm in attack and made further headway down the wings but we didn't have much space."

"I'm confident the return leg will be much more open and we'll have more space to play football."

"It will be a surprise if we don't score."

Gunners gain advantage

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

REUTERS, London

Two second-half goals in two minutes gave Arsenal a 2-1 comeback win over Valencia in their Champions League quarter-final first leg.

Goals from Thierry Henry and Ray Parlour secured Arsenal's victory but Fabian Ayaala's first-half

stages, targeting Valencia's veteran right back Jocelyn Angloma as a potential weakness.

Robert Pires, Fredrik Ljungberg and Henry attacked the 35-year-old Frenchman relentlessly and created a number of attacking opportunities, one of which should have put Arsenal into the lead after 14 minutes.

Pires swung a left-wing corner to the far post where the unmarked Patrick Vieira headed against the

divert the ball into an empty net at the far post from a tight angle.

Though Arsenal continued to dominate possession, Valencia's midfielders slowly established a foothold and Gaizka Mendietea tested Seaman with a 25-metre shot before John Carew missed a good chance to put the visitors ahead.

The Norwegian was put through one on one against Seaman, but the England goalkeeper denied him with an outstretched leg.

The opening goal came four minutes before the interval when Ayaala volleyed high into the net from six metres after Arsenal failed to clear a right-wing cross by Mendietea.

Wenger brought on Sylvain Wiltord as a half-time substitute for Ljungberg and the hosts started the second period brightly.

Kanu shot narrowly wide following a mazy run across the edge of the penalty area and Pires forced Canizares into a sharp save after tricking his way to the byline.

Ayaala was booked for pulling back Kanu, ruling him out of the second leg, and Pires curled the resulting free-kick wide of the far post.

Arsenal levelled on 58 minutes when Wiltord's cross from the left was deftly back-heeled by Pires for Henry to lash the ball home from close range.

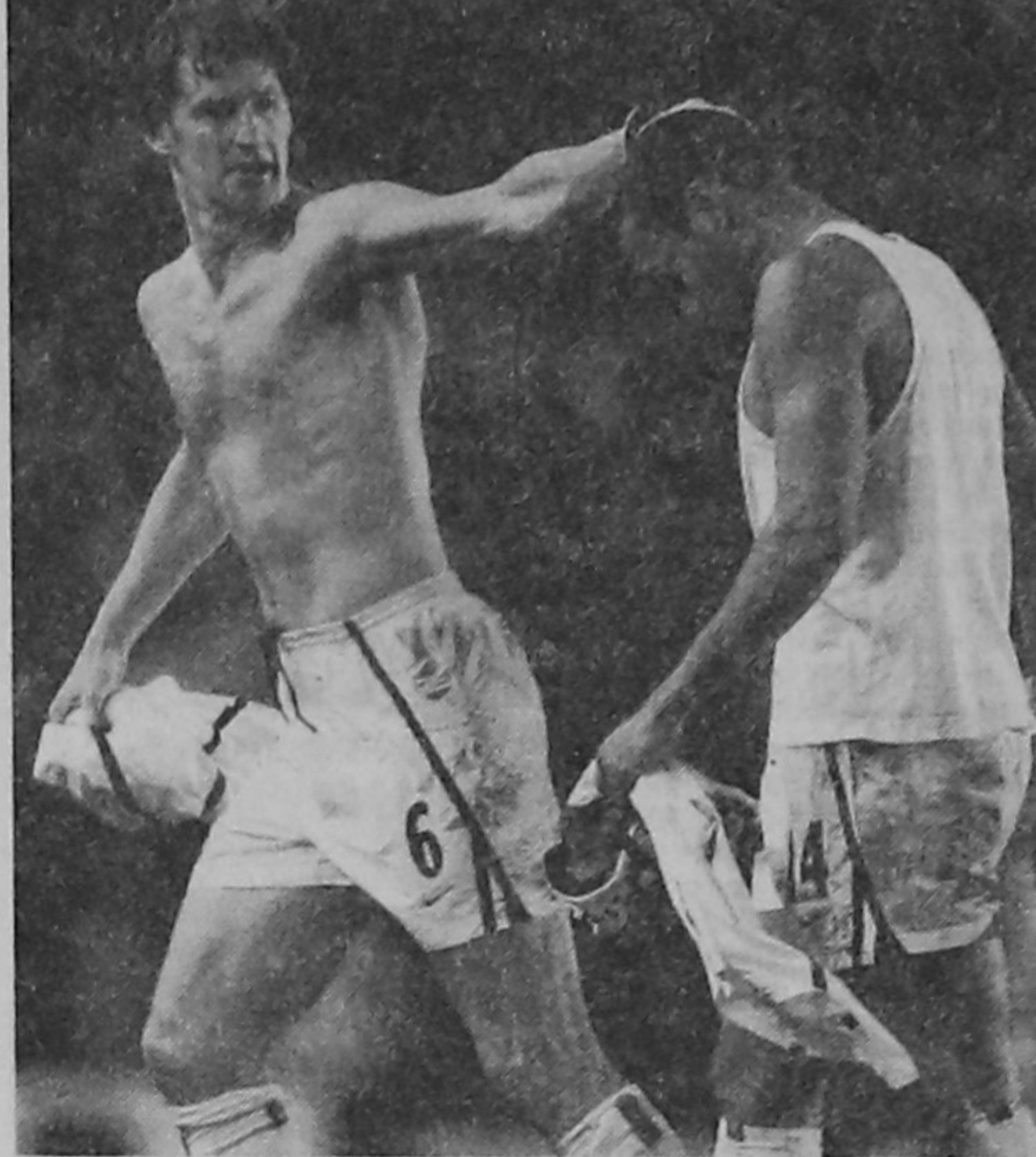
Parlour scored the winner two minutes later, surging through from midfield and unleashing an unstoppable shot into the top corner of the net from 25 metres.

Valencia, who had only conceded six goals in the first two phases of the competition, looked shell-shocked as Wiltord continued to cause problems.

Henry outpaced the defence and rounded Canizares, only to be dispossessed by two Spanish defenders, and the Frenchman forced the keeper into another smothering stop at the near post.

Valencia were unable to relieve the pressure, with Carew isolated in attack, and their much-vaunted

Argentine midfielder Pablo Aimar was substituted midway through the second half after an ineffective contribution.



"WELL DONE LAD": Arsenal's veteran captain Tony Adams (L) pats striker Thierry Henry after the win against Valencia at Highbury.

strike at

Highbury will give the Spaniards, finalists last season, plenty of hope.

After Wednesday's match, Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger said: "I have some regrets because we couldn't get the third goal. We had clear cut chances but couldn't take them."

"It was important to win the game, but now we have to go there and try to win again."

Arsenal dominated the early

crossbar from two metres.

Nwankwo Kanu prodded over from close range four minutes later as the Spanish team struggled to cope with Arsenal's pace and movement, while Henry twice tested Valencia goalkeeper Santiago Canizares from long range.

Valencia almost took the lead against the run of play when Kily Gonzalez's cross from the right was deflected past keeper David Seaman, but Juan Sanchez failed to

Leeds slap Deportivo

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

REUTERS, Leeds

Leeds United look set for a place in the semifinals of the Champions League after they demolished

"We've come a long way, but we're a small little club trying to do our best, long may the adventure continue."

"They were all heroes, there. I only pick the team, they go out and do it. I'm delighted for them, so proud of them."



An euphoric Leeds United striker Alan Smith after scoring against Deportivo la Coruna.

Deportivo Coruna 3-0 in the first leg of their quarter-final at Eland Road.

David O'Leary's side made a mockery of Deportivo's billing as tricky Spanish champions with an exhilarating display, inspired by the attacking exploits of defender Ian Harte.

He scored the first goal from a free-kick after 26 minutes, and delivered the crosses for Alan Smith (51) and Rio Ferdinand (66) to head home. It was Ferdinand's first goal for Leeds since his 18.0 million pounds move from West Ham last November.

O'Leary said afterwards: "I'd have taken 1-0, as long as we didn't concede an away goal. We'll go there, we know the routine, we know they can score goals."

Leeds have not lost away from home in the premier league for seven matches and boast a victory in Lazio earlier in this competition, indicating the extremely tough task Deportivo face if they are to turn this tie around in the Riazor Stadium on April 17.

But the Spaniards still have hope. They beat PSV Eindhoven 4-3 at home after being 3-0 behind in the second group stage.

Deportivo may have been keen to make amends for their last visit to English shores, when they were beaten 5-1 by Arsenal in the Uefa Cup a year ago, but they were rocked by Leeds' furious opening play.

David Baty and Olivier Dacourt won the midfield battle, with Deportivo's ball winner Emerson

picking up an early yellow card which earned him a suspension from the return leg.

Leeds had the first chance when midfielder Lee Bowyer controlled Ian Harte's sweeping 11th minute ball and forced a superb save from Francisco Molina before Leeds took the lead.

Cesar fouled Alan Smith on the edge of the area and Harte's 26th minute free-kick flashed by a stunned Molina and under the bar for his fourth European goal of the season.

Temperamental Brazilian Djalminha was having one of his quiet nights and without his promptings Roy Makaay was unable to make an impact.

Leeds moved further ahead in the 51st minute as a short corner routine handed Harte the space to whip in across that Smith headed home from close range.

Harte then curled another free-kick inches wide after Deportivo failed to learn their lesson and continued to commit needless fouls on the edge of the area.

But Leeds sealed the tie in the 66th minute with Harte once again involved. His near post corner flew off the head of a sub Valeron, catching Molina badly out of position, and Rio Ferdinand nodded home through a crowd of players.

Champs' League odds Surprise heroes third favourite

REUTERS, London

Leeds United are third favourites to win the Champions League following their 3-0 quarter-final first leg win over Deportivo Coruna, according to British bookmakers William Hill.

Rated 66-1 outsiders when the competition got underway in September, the English side are 5-1 to win it for the first time in their history after Wednesday's victory at Highbury Road.

Hills make Spanish holders Real Madrid and 1999 finalists Bayern Munich of Germany the 11-4 joint favourites.

English club Arsenal are 6-1 fourth favourites but 1999 winners Manchester United slipped to 8-1 after losing 1-0 at home to Bayern in Tuesday's quarter-final first leg.

Other odds: 13-2 Valencia, 16-1 Galatasaray, 40-1 Deportivo Coruna.

HIS EXPRESSION SAYS IT ALL : Frustration and shock evident on Kaiserslautern coach Andreas Brehme's face after the pounding at the hands of Alaves.

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LEE BOWYER



JONATHAN WOODGATE