

Honours shared at Leeds



AFP, Leeds

Leeds United were held to a 0-0 draw by last season's beaten-finalists Valencia here Wednesday in an action-packed first leg of their European Champions League semi-final tie.

Leeds, looking to reach their first European final for 26 years, failed to breach the best defence of the tournament, which has leaked just eight goals in 15 games.

Both teams saw headers hit the woodwork - Gaizka Mendieta for Valencia and Lee Bowyer for Leeds - and both had efforts cleared off the line.

Valencia goalkeeper Jose Canizares denied Dominic Matteo and the world's most expensive defender Rio Ferdinand came to Leeds rescue' at the other end.

The teams will meet in eastern Spain for the return leg next Tuesday and the winners will meet either holders Real Madrid of Spain or Germany's Bayern Munich in the final at the San Siro in Milan on May 23.

Leeds coach David O'Leary, celebrating his 43rd birthday, said he was disappointed not to have scored against Valencia but believes his team can score in the second leg.

"It's going to be very hard over there but at the end of the day the tie is not over," said O'Leary.

"We didn't get the rub of the green tonight but you're always in with a chance when you don't concede.

O'Leary's opposite number Hector Cuper was delighted to come away with a clean sheet.

"One of the virtues of this (Valencia) team is its resilience," said Cuper.

"They responded well and coped

with everything Leeds threw at them."

Cuper said he was confident of making it through to their second consecutive Champions League final.

"We will have more space in Spain because Leeds will not attack in the same way as they did tonight."

Valencia coach Cuper was prepared for a physical contest against a team unbeaten in their last 13 Premiership matches.

The Argentinian, seeking to reach a record third consecutive European final having led Real Mallorca into the 1999 UEFA Cup final before taking Valencia to last season's Champions League final, made his players use their elbows in training sessions and got them to tug each others shirts in practice games in case things got rough.

Twelve players were walking the suspension tightrope with seven players from Valencia and five from Leeds a yellow card away from a one-match ban.

Several Valencia players were fortified with vitamin injections before the match to relieve tiredness, a boost that was to serve the Spaniards well as Leeds went in search of an early goal.

Mauricio Pellegrino fouled Alan Smith to concede a free-kick on the right hand side of the Valencia penalty area after four minutes and Ian Harte fired a curling right foot shot towards the top corner. Fortunately for the visitors Canizares was alert to the danger and tipped the ball over for a corner.

But despite a bright start by the hosts, Valencia almost grabbed a vital away goal in their first attack.

Juan Sanchez shrugged off two challenges and the ball broke kindly for him on the edge of the Leeds area. His right foot cross was met by giant striker John Carew but the Norwegian international's brilliant scissor kick was palmed away by



PHOTO: AFP

Rio Ferdinand (C), the Leeds United defender, is airborne while executing a header as Valencia custodian Canizares (2nd from L) looks on.

Leeds goalkeeper Nigel Martyn.

With Leeds looking nervous, Valencia pressed forward and when Martyn's weak punch fell to Mendieta the Valencia captain saw his looping header rattle the crossbar.

However, despite being frustrated by the visiting defence, Leeds had their best chance to open the scoring six minutes before half time.

Kewell headed Harte's inswinging free-kick into the six yard box to set up Mark Viduka for an easy chance but Smith, who was not

in as good a position as his colleague, went for goal himself and his stooping header flashed wide.

Valencia responded with a speedy counter-attack and only a fantastic one-handed save by Martyn prevented Sanchez's thunderous volley from putting the Spaniards in front.

Leeds thought they had scored after 52 minutes when Harte's curling corner was met by Matteo but his thumping header was blocked on the goalline by Canizares.

Valencia defence came under

intense pressure as Leeds, roared on by a partisan home crowd, surged forwards.

And Smith almost raised the Elland Road roof when he closed in on the Spaniards' goal but with only Canizares to beat, he shot wide from an acute angle.

Ruben Baraja and Amadeo Carboni were booked by Italian referee Pierluigi Collina as tempers became frayed, cautions that will keep both players out of the second leg in Spain.

With 20 minutes to go Canizares needlessly came rushing from his

goal to block Smith's shot and the ball spun towards the Valencia goal before bouncing on the edge of the six yard box.

Bowyer rose higher than everybody but watched in agony as his header struck the crossbar.

Carew should have done better when sliced a shot wide with Martyn stranded before Baraja saw his goalbound shot cleared off the line by Ferdinand in the third minute of time added on.

O'Leary dreams of final



AFP, Leeds

Leeds will have to get past the meanest defence in the Champions League if they are to reach their first European final for 26 years.

But Leeds coach David O'Leary is backing his fearless young team to find the vital away goal against last season's beaten-finalists Valencia in the second leg of their semi-final in Spain next Tuesday.

Leeds threw everything they had at the Spanish goal in their first leg encounter on Wednesday but Valencia, who have conceded just eight goals in 15 European games this season, held firm to earn a 0-0 at a hostile Elland Road.

Both teams saw headers hit the woodwork - Gaizka Mendieta for Valencia and Lee Bowyer for Leeds - and both had efforts cleared off the line.

Valencia goalkeeper Jose Canizares denied Dominic Matteo, and the world's most expensive defender Rio Ferdinand came to Leeds rescue' at the other end.

Leeds' record in Spain is a miserable one. They have lost all three matches they have played against La Liga giants Real, Barcelona and

Deportivo La Coruna this season by a combined aggregate of 9-2.

The mauling Leeds sustained at the hands of Deportivo three weeks ago will still be fresh in the minds of players who, according to O'Leary, froze on a night of high drama at the Riazor Stadium.

In defending a 3-0 lead, Leeds held on by the skin of their teeth, losing 2-0 in La Coruna, taking their last four place against Valencia 3-2 on aggregate.

However, O'Leary cares not for statistics and believes his team have the firepower to score in eastern Spain despite failing to find the net at home.

"Obviously I would have liked to have scored a couple of goals here," he said.

"But I do believe that on our day we are a side who can score an away goal and it's amazing how an away goal can change everything."

If his side can stay free from injury, O'Leary sees no reason why it should not go all the way to the final.

"I'm a great believer in fate. God is good in many ways so you never know, we might have a great night in Valencia.

"It's going to be very hard over there but I don't think this tie is over."

"We're 90 minutes away from the Champions League Final, but I do feel if the team is well rested and we

don't get any injuries we will have a chance of scoring goals."

Valencia coach Hector Cuper was delighted with the way his side coped with the pressure from Leeds.

"They can score, but we can score as well," he said.

"One always suffers in matches and today we had reason to suffer because we had a very ambitious team in front of us.

"They caused us a lot of danger but defensively we were well organised."

Cuper, who will be without the suspended Amadeo Carboni and Ruben Baraja after they were booked during the game, is anticipating a different game in the Mestalla next Tuesday.

"It will be a different game and we will have more ground in which to play in and more space," he said.

"I expect that Leeds will not attack us as much in the Mestalla. It will be a different kind of match."

The winners of the tie will meet either holders Real Madrid of Spain or Germany's Bayern Munich in the final at the San Siro in Milan on May 23.

Hitzfeld warns of disaster

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld claimed Wednesday that if the German champions didn't capitalise on Tuesday's 1-0 away defeat of Champions League holders Real Madrid it would be disastrous for the club.

Hitzfeld, who is on the verge of achieving a double dose of revenge having eliminated their 1999 final conquerors Manchester United in the quarter-finals and have Real last year's semi-final victors on the back foot, added that the loss of playmaker Steffen Effenberg was huge blow.

Effenberg, who was superb throughout the match in Madrid, will miss next Wednesday's second leg after receiving his second yellow card off the knockout stages.

"This is an opportunity that we must not let slip," Hitzfeld said.

"If we do it will be the most devastating blow."

"I would still rate our chances as 50-50 particularly with the loss of Effenberg, which was an enormous blow to us," he added.

Hitzfeld, who admitted that the clouds of 1999 still hung over the club after United came from a goal down with a couple of minutes to go to beat Bayern 2-1 in injury-time, balanced Effenberg's absence with the imperious form of goalkeeper Oliver Kahn, who pulled off several remarkable saves on Tuesday.

"Oliver showed that he is the best keeper in the world and I would not sell him even for '100 million deutschmarks,'" Hitzfeld said.

Real want Veron

AFP, Rome

Real Madrid have made an offer to bring on board Lazio's Argentinian international Juan Sebastian Veron, his lawyer Giuseppe Petrelli said in court here on Wednesday.

Petrelli is defending Lazio's star midfielder in the passport scandal which has rocked European football during the last six months. Veron is suspected of obtaining a false Italian passport to earn the lucrative status of a European Union (EU) player. "A large offer has come from Real Madrid for my client," said Petrelli on the first day of a preliminary hearing which could lead to a formal prosecution.

Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti, also suspected of being illegally involved in the passport affair, did not deny the offer had been made.

Veron told the court: "I would like to remain in Rome because my contract expires in 2005."

"But if I am surplus to requirements, Mr Cragnotti will decide my destination. I'm not certain of anything but a final decision must be agreed on by both parties."

A star of Argentina's 1998 World Cup campaign, the 26-year-old has also played for Estudiantes, Boca Juniors and Sampdoria.

The Reggae will cost you!



AFP, Kingston

Jamaican football fans will have to find a lot more cash to watch the Reggae Boyz play against the United States in a 2002 World Cup qualifying match here on June 16.

The Jamaica Football Federation (JFF), in an effort to offset the cost of increased security, plan to significantly increase ticket prices for the match.

The security crackdown was brought on by FIFA's dissatisfaction with alleged overcrowding at the National Stadium against Trinidad and Tobago.

According to president of the Jamaica Football Federation, Horace Burrell, the price for a seat in the bleachers could move to as much as 1,000 dollars from 700 dollars and in the grandstand to 2,000 dollars from 1,500 dollars.

The price hike comes after the

"Reggae Boyz" could not draw enough fans for their April 25 match here against Honduras, creating significantly reduced revenues.

"Safety is first and we have been able to achieve the level of safety that we would all want to see and be proud of," Burrell said. "Now, having not realised the amount of money that we set set out to, you have to look back at the economics of the whole thing, and I have to say that for the US match, we will have to look at an increase."

"We do not want to do that but remember we are selling less tickets, the National Stadium has increased its charges to the JFF, security charges have gone up and when you measure out all of that, I think, looking at the figures we collected, close to 10 million dollars less (for the game against Honduras) than we did for the Trinidad game," Burrell claimed, refusing to disclose the amount of money generated from the last match.

Jamaica's match against

Fergie irks PSV



AFP, London

Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson has come under fire from PSV Eindhoven over his conduct during the transfer of record signing Ruud van Nistelrooy, reports said Thursday.

PSV president Harry van Raaij said Ferguson had behaved in an annoying way while negotiating the Dutch international's arrival at Old Trafford.

Van Nistelrooy had been set to join the English Premiership giants at the end of last season but a knee ligament injury put the move on ice. United pounced when van Nistelrooy returned to fitness with PSV last month.

However PSV are still seething over Ferguson's remarks last year that van Nistelrooy should have carried out his rehabilitation with the Manchester club.

"Fergie played it well but not fairly," Van Raaij was quoted as saying by the Daily Telegraph. "And his proposal that van Nistelrooy should rehabilitate at United was scandalous."

"He (Ferguson) also said that Ruud was better off training with him. If he thought that then he should have taken the financial risk. But he didn't - he left that to us."

"The only thing he has done in all that time is call on the phone a few times. Then he gets praise because he has been so beneficial to Ruud. But the people who were truly beneficial to Ruud were us at PSV."

"Van Nistelrooy cost us 1.5 million pounds this season in salary and rehabilitation fees."

Van Nistelrooy has said that the support and concern shown by Ferguson after he suffered the injury led him to opt for United ahead of any other clubs.

QPR-Wimbledon merger?



AFP, London

Queens Park Rangers and Wimbledon are involved in talks over a possible merger of the two clubs, Wimbledon's chairman confirmed Thursday.

An outline proposal is understood to have already been submitted to the Football League, with the matter being discussed at their directors' board meeting in London later Thursday.

However, while confirming that talks have started, Wimbledon chairman Charles Koppel insisted that no final agreement had yet been reached between the two clubs.

Koppel said: "We have been approached by QPR and while discussions regarding the idea of a possible merger have taken place, we realise that no agreement could ever be reached without consulting our supporters first."

The news was broken in today's Sun newspaper and Koppel added: "I strongly believe and have maintained throughout the discussions than an issue like this must be discussed with supporters before appearing in the media."

"We had already planned a meeting with our supporter organisations before our game on Sunday to discuss again how best to take our club forward, including the above idea."

QPR have fallen on hard times this season, relegated to Division Two with debts spiralling. Wimbledon, relegated from the Premiership last season, are set for a mid-table finish in Division One.

Zola staying

AFP, London

Former Italian international Gianfranco Zola ended speculation about his future Thursday by agreeing a new two-year deal with English Premiership outfit Chelsea.

Zola, 34, has pledged the remainder of his career to the club, who have also given him the option of a further two years at Stamford Bridge in a coaching capacity when the new deal runs out.

The Italian striker, who joined Chelsea in a 4.5 million pound (6.3 million dollar) deal from Italian side Parma in November 1996, has long been linked with a return to Italy.

Zola, named Football Writers' Player of the Year in 1997, was reportedly considering a return to either Napoli or to Sardinia club Cagliari, the island where he was born.

He looked set to return to Italy last summer but instead opted to sign a one year extension to his Stamford Bridge contract.

Wembley debate at House of Commons



AFP, London

The collapse of English football's ruling body the Football Association's (FA) plans for the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium turned into a matter of heated debate in the House of Commons here Wednesday when opposition leader William Hague tackled Tony Blair over the issue at Prime Minister's question time.

Hague accused the Government of pouring 750 million pounds "down the drain" on the Wembley Stadium project, the Dome and selection of the National Lottery operator.

In furious exchanges, Hague branded ministers' handling of all three projects a "fiasco".

With Speaker Michael Martin angrily struggling to keep order, the Prime Minister hit back by insisting the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium was a project that the FA started under the last Conservative administration.

In what is widely expected to be one of their last clashes at the despatch box before a general election, Blair told Hague: "Your bandwaggoning activities simply

know no bounds".

He said he regretted the fact that the Wembley project had fallen through, adding: "We've now got to sit down and work out a way through so we have a proper national stadium."

On Tuesday's the FA admitted that they could not bankroll the 475million pound scheme with the British Government saying they could not give them a blank cheque to meet the cost.

While the 12-man board of Wembley National Stadium Ltd (WNSL) were meeting at the FA's headquarters on Wednesday to discuss the next move other cities were putting themselves forward as viable candidates to build a National Stadium.

Plans for Wembley could be scrapped altogether in favour of a site elsewhere - the Midlands has been continually touted as the prime area - perhaps involving a link-up with a Premiership club.

A renovation of the old Wembley has not yet been discounted but there are a number of options for the government team to consider, one of which is Sport England's original plan for an 80,000-seater stadium for soccer, rugby and track and field, which was dismissed out of hand by the former chairman of WNSL Ken

Bates.

The legacy of that option would leave the FA with a derelict ground and a huge debt, having bought the site for the redevelopment with a 120million national lottery grant.

Although matters have effectively been taken out of the WNSL board's hands, following the FA's announcement and the government's appointment of a working party to assess the situation, Sir Rodney Walker, chairman of the project, and his fellow board members will have to find a way to stop Wembley bleeding cash.

It is understood that the cost of keeping the old stadium dormant and boarded up stands at around 2 million pounds a month.

"In essence, in funding terms, the next move is out of our hands," admitted a WNSL spokesman. "But there is a lot to be considered in terms of current costs."

A ministerial team led by Home Secretary Jack Straw and including Culture Secretary Chris Smith will now review the situation and could yet decide to move the new national stadium out of London.



PHOTO: INTERNET

THE CHAMPIONS' NEW CLOTHES! Manchester United stars (L-R) Japp Stam, Andy Cole, David Beckham and Michelle Silvestre pose for photographers sporting new team kit at the club's training ground in Carrington, on May 3. MU launched the new kit to celebrate their centenary year in 2002.

New-look United



REUTERS, London

Premier league champions Manchester United unveiled a new gold-coloured kit today to celebrate the club's centenary year in 2002, industry sources told Reuters.

The kit, made by current manufacturer Umbro in the company's final year before being replaced by United States sports giant Nike, will be worn next season

as a second or third choice to the club's traditional red strip.

It will be available to the general public in the U.K. as of July 20 at the regular shirt price of 39.99 pounds for adults and 29.99 pounds for children.

Last year United signed a 13-year deal worth 303 million pounds with Nike, which comes into effect from August 2002.

United were crowned champions this season for the seventh time in the nine years since the Premier League was created.

Manchester United shares were 1p lower at 179 -1/2p in London on Thursday, valuing the world's richest soccer club at almost 470 million pounds.