

Nantes conquer Lazio, Real on fire



AFP, Paris

Lazio coach Dino Zoff was sacked after the Italians crashed to French outfit Nantes while Real Madrid maintained their impressive start to the Champions League with a fiesta at the Bernabeu on Wednesday.

Zoff could only watch in horror as his star-studded side were ripped apart by the French Champions in the Group D tie at the Olympic Stadium.

The defeat signalled the inevitable for the former Italy coach and 1982 World Cup-winning captain as Lazio struggle to find their feet in both Serie A and Europe.

Only a sharp improvement in fortunes can save Lazio - but the writing might already be on the wall. Lazio owner Sergio Cragnotti was an unimpressed spectator as Nantes ran riot, leaving his seat in the VIP box before the end.

Zoff, who in the build-up to this match had to cope with reports that former AC Milan boss Alberto Zaccheroni had already been lined up as a replacement, said grimly: "As for my fate that will be decided tomorrow."

Regarding the match he admitted: "We started badly but then we got a grip. But after that, it was a debacle. The team disintegrated, losing its lucidity, even if the desire was still there."

Nantes were full value for their win. An early goal by their Argentinian defender Nestor Fabbri was cancelled out by Lazio's Portuguese stopper Fernando Couto.

But second-half efforts from Sylvain Armand and Stephane Ziani ensured the visitors won the day and German referee Herbert Fandel's final whistle was greeted by a chorus of boos by Lazio fans.

Nantes' win left the Canaries sitting pretty at the top of Group D with six points following their 4-1 drubbing of PSV Eindhoven. Lazio however are now deep in trouble after losing 1-0 to Galatasaray last week.

Incredibly Nantes have been in dreadful form at home, rooted to the bottom of the French First Division without a win from seven games.

"We can't ask any more of the team. We played this match without any pressure ... I think that's why we're able to do so well compared with our results in the French league," Nantes' keeper Mickael Landreau explained.

Dutch side PSV Eindhoven defeated Turkey's Galatasaray 3-1 in the group's other match Wednesday.

Like Nantes, Spanish giants Real Madrid are also suffering on the home front having slipped into the relegation zone following a 3-1 defeat to Real Betis last weekend. But like Nantes, Real continue to carry all before them in Europe.

Last week's impressive 2-1 away win at Roma in Group A was followed by a 4-0 thrashing of Russia's Lokomotiv Moscow on Wednesday.

The growing band of Real followers who believe the Spanish champions are a more settled side without world record signing Zinedine



PHOTO: AFP

TOO HOT TO HANDLE: Lokomotiv Moscow's Jacob Lekseto (L) having a tough time in containing Real Madrid's Luis Figo at Madrid on September 19.

Zidane would have been given further ammunition as the Muscovites were overwhelmed.

With Zidane still serving a UEFA suspension, the creative class came once again from Portuguese superstar Luis Figo. Real's win sees

them top of the group with two wins out of two.

Goals from striker Pedro Munitis, Figo, Roberto Carlos and his fellow Brazilian Savio wrapped up an emphatic win at the Bernabeu.

Real had dominated throughout,

Figo testing Ruslan Nigmatullin in the Lokomotiv goal early on with a strike from the edge of the area.

Savio also had an effort on goal but his shot soared over the bar after good work from Michel Salgado down the right.

Although Real dominated the early exchanges they were often thwarted by the deep-lying Lokomotiv defence.

The visitors almost took a shock lead after a rare foray upfield just after the 20 minute mark, when James Obiorah was played in by strike partner Dmitri Loskov only for his shot to be well-blocked by Iker Casillas.

Figo, playing in a central role in the absence of Zidane, shouldered the burden of Real's creative work.

He lit up the Bernabeu with one run from midfield run on 25 minutes but his disappointing shot was well wide of the Lokomotiv goal.

Savio forced Nigmatullin into another good save when his low shot was blocked. A quick free-kick saw Munitis scamper forward but this time it was Igor Chugainov to the rescue with a saving tackle.

Nigmatullin made further fine saves from Roberto Carlos and Spanish international Raul but eventually the Real pressure told and on 40 minutes the home side took the lead.

Raul's cross found Munitis and the striker blasted into the top corner to the relief of the Bernabeu fans.

Nigmatullin was again called into action shortly before half-time, parrying a Figo shot on to the bar and blocking a vicious effort from Roberto Carlos.

Real doubled their lead nine minutes after the break. Munitis again had the Lokomotiv defence in trouble and when Yuri Drozdov hauled him down referee pointed the spot. Figo stepped up to make it 2-0.

Figo's spotkick signalled the opening of the floodgates and Nigmatullin worked overtime to thwart the rampant Real attackers.

The 26-year-old pulled off impressive stops from Figo, Savio and Roberto Carlos as shots rained in on goal.

Real finally made it 3-0 when Roberto Carlos jinked in from the right onto his deadly left-foot and lashed in a superb shot in the 81st minute.

Savio made it 4-0 with an easy 87th minute strike.

Real's group rivals AS Roma and Anderlecht battled out a dour 0-0 draw in Brussels in a physical battle.

In Group B meanwhile, Gerard Houllier's Liverpool are continuing to make slow progress up the Champions League learning curve after 16 years absence from Europe's top competition.

The English Premiership giants were held 0-0 by Germany's 1997 Champions League winners Borussia Dortmund at the

Westfalen Stadium.

"We wanted to get something out of the game tonight and it's a good point," said Houllier. "It's a very open group and we're still in it."

"Maybe we could have done better at times when we broke. The service to our front two didn't go right tonight and the final ball was not always the best," Houllier told television.

Portugal's Boavista are setting the pace at the top of Group B after defeating Dynamo Kiev 3-1 in Porto. Borussia Dortmund are level on 2 points behind them with Kiev bottom.

While Liverpool are still awaiting their first win, English rivals Arsenal bounced back from their 1-0 loss against Real Mallorca last week to defeat Schalke 04 3-2 in a five-goal Group C thriller at Highbury.

The Gunners stormed into a 2-0 lead with first half goals from Swede Freddy Ljungberg and France international Thierry Henry before Marco van Hoogdalem reduced the deficit just before the interval.

A controversial penalty restored Arsenal's two-goal advantage a minute after half-time when Schalke goalkeeper Oliver Reck was harshly judged to have brought down Henry.

The France international

Results at a glance

Collated Champions League results on Wednesday:

Group A

At Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 0 AS Roma (Ita) 0
At Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 4 (Munitis 39, Luis Figo 64-pen, Roberto Carlos 81, Savio 87) Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus) 0

Group B

At Porto, Portugal
Boavista (Por) 3 (Sanchez 4, Silva 11, Duda 30) Dynamo Kiev (Ukr) 1 (Ghioane 5)
At Dortmund, Germany
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0 Liverpool (Eng) 0

Group C

At London
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Ljungberg 33, Henry 35, 47-pen) Schalke 04 (Ger) 2 (van Hoogdalem 43, Mpenza 59)
At Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Vlaovic 25, Konstantinou 29) Real Mallorca (Spa) 0

Group D

At Eindhoven, Netherlands
PSV Eindhoven (Ned) 3 (Bruggink 38, Faber 53, Kezman 90) Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Umit Karan 68)
At Rome
Lazio (Ita) 1 (Couto 6) Nantes (Fra) 3 (Fabbri 3, Armand 63, Ziani 86)

stopped up and calmly slotted home the spot-kick to restore the Gunners' two-goal advantage.

Belgian international forward Emile Mpenza headed Schalke's second to keep Arsenal on their toes and only dogged defending by the home side kept their lead intact.

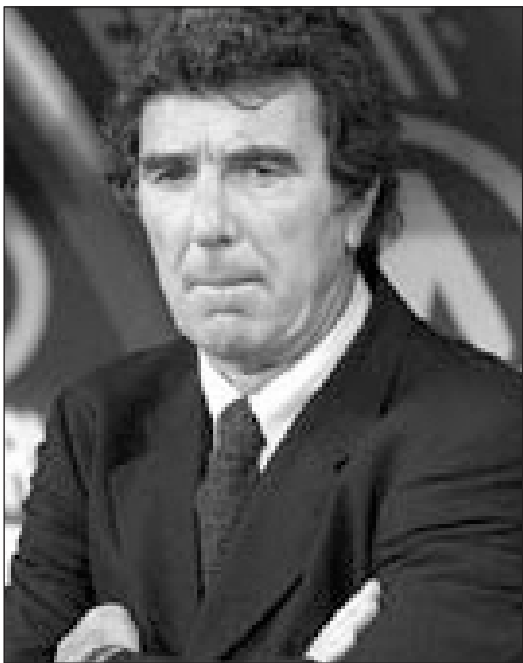
Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was pleased to get a win under his belt in what he believes is a very difficult group.

"I believe our group is very strong. Schalke finished last year one minute from winning the championship in Germany - and Bayern Munich went on to win the European cup," he said.

"Tonight we have made a big step forward, because we had to win - and that is never easy when you are under pressure."

Panathinaikos are emerging as the surprise package from the group. The Greeks maintained their 100 percent record with an efficient 2-0 win over Real Mallorca in Athens.

Croatian Goran Vlaovic and Cyprus international Michalis Konstantinou got the goals which leave the Greeks top of the group with six points. Arsenal and Mallorca are level on three points, with Schalke bottom.



DINO ZOFF



ALBERTO ZACCHERONI

Zoff out, Zacc in



REUTERS, Rome

Dino Zoff has been sacked as coach of Lazio and replaced by former AC Milan coach Alberto Zaccheroni.

Lazio said in a statement that Zoff had been invited to become club president but had rejected the offer, saying it was not "practical" at this time.

"Faced with the disappointing performances of the team, culminating with the defeat at home to Nantes which seriously compromises Lazio's prospects in the Champions League, the president has taken the opportunity to relieve Dino Zoff of his charge," the statement said.

The Rome club added that Zaccheroni has signed a contract keeping him with Lazio until June 2004.

Lazio, Italian champion in 1999-2000, is without a win from its opening five games of the season, drawing all three Serie A matches as well as losing both their Champions League games.

General manager Massimo Cragnotti said Wednesday after the team's 3-1 defeat against Nantes that he hoped Zoff would continue to play some role at the club.

Zoff took over as Lazio coach for the second time in January when Swede Sven Goran Eriksson left to become England coach, initially making a good impression as Lazio moved back into the title race and eventually finished third.

But the summer sales of Czech midfielder Pavel Nedved and Chilean striker Marcelo Salas to Juventus and Argentine midfielder Juan Veron to Manchester United badly weakened the squad.

Lazio spent US\$41 million on Spanish international midfielder Gaizka Mendieta from Valencia, but

the blond-haired Basque player has struggled to settle in Italy and was booed off the field Wednesday.

Zoff, the former Juventus and Italy goalkeeper, was previously Lazio coach between 1990 and 1994, but he failed to win the title despite huge investment from club president Sergio Cragnotti.

Zoff then moved "upstairs" to become club president before becoming Italy coach after the 1998 World Cup finals.

He led Italy to Euro 2000 but quit after the "Azzurri" lost the final to France, returning to Lazio as vice president.

Zaccheroni has worked his way up from the lower divisions, making his name at Udinese before moving to AC Milan where he won the Italian title in his first season in 1999.

He failed to build on that success, however, and was sacked by Milan after they failed to reach the quarterfinals of last season's Champions League.

Brazil lesson for T&T



AP, Aacolet, Tobago

A fast Nigeria team beat the United States 2-0 in the under-17 FIFA World Championships in Tobago on Wednesday, quashing U.S. hopes to end the tournament with at least one victory.

Also on Wednesday, in a Group A game, Caetano scored a hatrick as Brazil whipped home team Trinidad and Tobago 6-1.

Many of the 7,500 fans at the

stadium supported the U.S. team by wearing red, white and blue in honor of the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. But the Super Eagle's offense was too powerful for the U.S. defenders.

The Africans' first goal came on a breakaway run in the 32nd minute by midfielder Kairimu Shaibu. The second score came in the 58th minute from Moses Ayuba, who dribbled around defenders near the goal and sent the ball crashing against the top of the net. The fans cheered the U.S. team throughout the game, but the Americans were not able to mount an effective attack.

The United States already had dropped from contention for final rounds, losing to Japan 1-0 and to France 2-1. Nigeria already had qualified for the quarterfinals, beating France 2-1 and Japan 4-0 in previous games.

The game was played in Tobago at the Dwight Yorke Stadium. Tobago is the smaller partner in the twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

At the Hasely Crawford Stadium in Port-of-Spain, Brazil won Group A with its victory against T&T, now eliminated.

Brazil already was up 4-0 at the half. Trinidad only had one goal, which came from Jerol Forbes in the 61st minute.

For Brazil, Caetano scored three goals, in the 16th, 41st and 59th minutes. Malzoni also scored in the 7th minute, and there was an own goal in the 36th minute. Junior scored in the 88th minute.

Brazil, which also has won all its games, will play the winner of Wednesday night's Japan-France game in the quarterfinals.

Premiership Wallace takes Bolton atop

AFP, London

Rod Wallace celebrated his return to the game after a three-month exile by helping steer Bolton Wanderers back to the top of the Premiership on Wednesday after a hard-fought 1-1 at home to Blackburn Rovers.

Wallace left Glasgow Rangers in the summer after his contract expired and found himself out of work.

But after joining the club on Monday, the 31-year-old striker showed he had lost none of his sharpness by putting Wanderers ahead in the 69th minute with a neat header just moments after replacing the ineffective Michael Ricketts.

Bolton looked set for victory but Lucas Neill grabbed the equaliser for Rovers with three minutes to go, tucking away Damian Duff's inswinging corner.

However the point gained at Ewood Park takes Bolton back above Wallace's former club Leeds. Tottenham put paid to Sunderland's dream of topping the table with an excellent 2-1 win at the Stadium of Light.

Christian Ziege's freak 26th-minute opener was little more than the visitors deserved as their hosts spluttered through the early stages - and the points were all but assured six minutes into the second half when captain Teddy Sheringham made it two with an unstoppable header.

Kevin Phillips reduced the deficit 12 minutes from time with a well-taken volley, but his side's performance barely warranted any more on a night when they were played off the park for long periods.

Saudis bank on Al-Johar



AFP, Nicosia

Saudi Arabian football's 'Mr Fixit' Nasser Al Johar has got the Gulf giants back on course for their third consecutive World Cup appearance as Asia's qualifying race enters the home straight on Friday.

Al Johar - called up as coach in August following the sacking of Yugoslav Slobodan Santrac - has led the Saudis to within a point of Group A leaders Iran ahead of Friday's match against Bahrain in Manama.

Victory against Bahrain would see Saudi Arabia go to the top of the pool and firmly in contention for an automatic qualifying spot, something that looked well beyond them after a poor start to the second phase of Asia's qualifiers.

Santrac was shown the door after a dismal draw with Bahrain was followed by a defeat away against Iran.

Al Johar was called up and the rot was stopped, with a hardfought 1-0 win over Iraq on neutral territory followed by an impressive 3-1 win against Thailand away in Bangkok last weekend.

If the Saudis can make it three wins out of three against Bahrain on Friday, Al Johar's reputation as a miracle worker of Eriksson-esque proportions will be complete.

The veteran coach is becoming a dab hand at turning around lost causes. At last year's Asian Cup in Lebanon he was drafted in when Milan Macala was fired following a 4-1 humiliation against Japan.

Somehow Al Johar turned it around and the Saudis made it all the way to the final in Beirut, where

they were narrow 1-0 losers to the Japanese.

However while Saudi Arabia's fortunes are on the up beating Bahrain - the surprise package of the second round so far - may not be straightforward.

Saudi Arabia's tiny island neighbours have not lost a game so far, winning once and drawing three times to sit a point behind Friday's opponents in third place.

Impressively, Bahrain have taken points from both Saudi Arabia and Iran so far and are now entertaining realistic prospects of pushing for a place themselves.

Group leaders Iran meanwhile do not have a game this weekend, with Group A's other match seeing Thailand take on Iraq in Bangkok on Saturday.

In Group B, Uzbekistan and Qatar will both be seeking to make up lost ground on table-topping China, who do not have a match this weekend.

Bora Milutinovic's in-form Chinese lead the pool by four points from second-placed Uzbekistan, who entertain the United Arab Emirates in Tashkent on Saturday.

A win for Vladimir Salkov's Uzbeks will see them move to within a point of China. Third-placed Qatar meanwhile travel to Muscat to take on group whipping boys Oman, who are bottom of the standings.

Qatar desperately need to take all three points to stay in touch with Uzbekistan and China.

The two group winners qualify automatically for next year's World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea with the two runners-up meeting in a play-off.

The winner of that match then faces a further two-leg play-off against either Portugal or the Republic of Ireland for another World Cup berth.

STANDINGS

Champions League tables after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Group A							
Real Madrid	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Anderlecht	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
AS Roma	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Lokomotiv	2	0	1	1	1	5	1
Group B							
Boavista	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Dortmund	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Liverpool	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Dynamo Kiev	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Group C							
Panathinaikos	2	2	0	0	4	0	
6							
Arsenal	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Mallorca	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Schalke 04	2	0	0	2	2	5	0
Group D							
Nantes	2	2	0	0	7	2	6
PSV	2	1	0	1	4	5	3
Galatasaray	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Lazio	2	0	0	2	1	4	0