

Dull draw pleases 'em



AFP, Rome

AS Roma's 0-0 draw with Liverpool in the Champions League may have been a disappointment to most observers but in the cold light of day Thursday both sides were aware it was a far from unsatisfactory result.

Liverpool coach Phil Thompson, standing in for Frenchman Gerard Houllier who is on sick leave, was pleased to register his first point of the second phase while Roma's Fabio Capello was happy his side had recorded an important result against a side that has been a bogey team.

"It's important we are going into the break (for Christmas and the new year) with a point under our belts especially given the draw in Barcelona (with Galatasaray)," Thompson said in the wake of Wednesday's Group B tie.

Capello said: "This was a good result for us although if we had been sharper on counter-attack and if our final ball had been better we might have got the win."

But avoiding defeat was something for the Italian champions who at least partially atoned for their reverse at the hands of Liverpool in the 1984 European Cup Final at their home Olympic Stadium and who also tasted defeat at the hands of the four-times European champions in last season's UEFA Cup.

Roma president Franco Sensi was also delighted, saying: "We have drawn against one of the top teams in the world and that's all that matters."

Liverpool are still bottom of the group with one point while AS Roma and Galatasaray are joint second behind Barcelona who are top with four.

But that means the group is still wide open with only two of six matches played.

While that will be uppermost in the mind of both coaches for the wider world it was a disappointing occasion with the much-touted duel between Roma's Francesco Totti and Liverpool's Michael Owen failing to materialise.

Owen, tightly policed by Roma's Argentinian defender Walter Samuel, and Totti were both muted although the Roman probably won

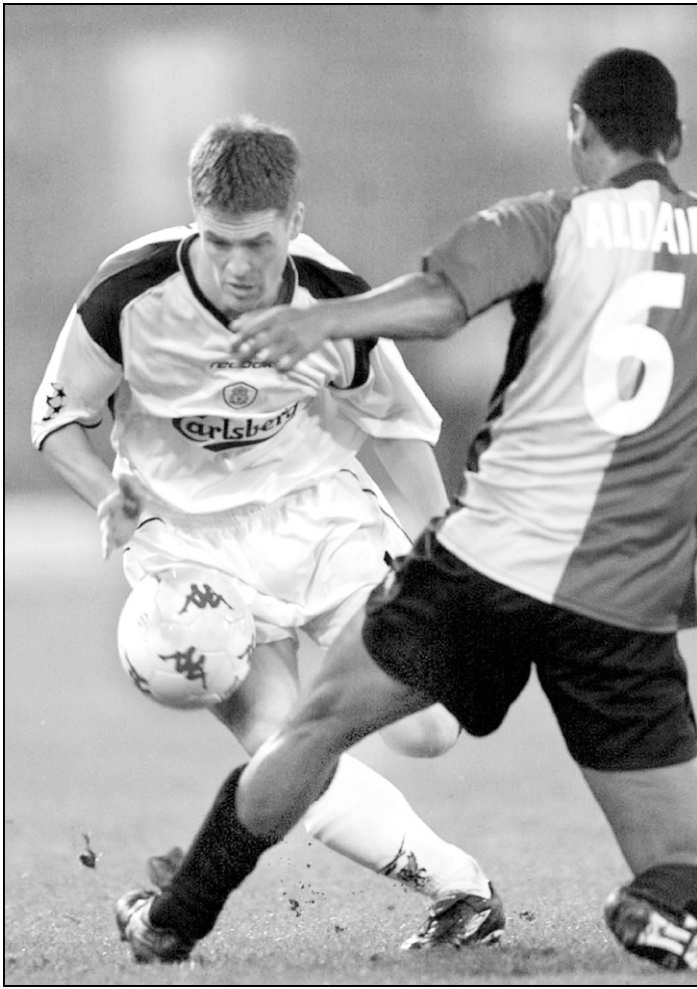


PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool superstar Michael Owen (L) trying to wrong-foot AS Roma's former Brazilian international defender Aldair at Rome on December 5.

on points.

"It was hard to score because Liverpool defended very well," admitted Totti. "But it was a good result because it keeps us in touch with Barcelona."

Thompson played down the duel, saying: "I don't want to talk about Owen or Totti all the time - I think it's disrespectful to the other players."

"I am proud of my players - they dominated the first half and in the second they showed how well they can defend," said Thompson who won two European Cups as a player with Liverpool although he missed the 1984 final and the 1977 one against Borussia Monchengladbach, also in Rome.

"We felt at half-time we could go on and win the game," continued Thompson. "Fabio Capello was extremely annoyed - we could hear him in our dressing room. His players gave him a reaction in the second half."

Another player not to perform on the night was Roma's Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta who spurned the chance of the night in the first half.

Both Sensi and Capello defended him, the latter describing him as a "very important player".

The Latin American was less forgiving of his own blunders, saying: "The boss may be happy with me but I am not - what a miss."

STANDINGS						
European Champions League standings after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):						
Group A						
Man United	2	1	1	0	4	1 4
Bayern Munich	2	1	1	0	2	1 4
Boavista	2	1	0	1	1	3 3
Nantes	2	0	0	2	0	2 0
Group B						
Barcelona	2	1	1	0	5	3 4
Galatasaray	2	0	2	0	3	3 2
AS Roma	2	0	2	0	1	1 2
Liverpool	2	0	1	1	1	3 1

Bloodless Roman battle



AFP, Rome

AS Roma and Liverpool fought out a 0-0 draw here Wednesday in a Champions League Group B second phase match at the Olympic Stadium.

UEFA Cup holders Liverpool had the better of the first half of a tightly-contested match but in the second period Italian champions Roma had long spells of possession without ever really coming close to making the vital breakthrough.

Roma coach Fabio Capello, who won the tournament when he was in charge of AC Milan, said: "Both sides played with great concentration and application. We were better in the second period but we did not make the most of our opportunities from freekicks. We could not quite get the ball into the danger area."

His Liverpool counterpart Phil Thompson said: "We dominated the first half - I was disappointed we were not leading, at least by two goals. We expected Roma to come out better after half-time and that's exactly what happened."

"What pleased me was our confidence in the first half the way we came out and took the game to Roma. We felt at half-time we could go on and win the game. Fabio Capello was extremely annoyed - we could even hear him in our dressing room. And his players gave him a response in the second half."

"On the balance I thought we could have won but a draw was a fair result - especially with Galatasaray drawing in Barcelona."

After a cagey opening before a packed crowd of 60,000 the first real opportunity fell to Liverpool. Jamie Carragher lofted the ball over the head of Roma's Brazilian defender Aldair to Vladimir Smicer. The Czech met the ball sweetly but fired straight at goalkeeper Francesco Antonioli.

Midway through the first half Roma carved out the best chance of the match when their Argentinian forward Gabriel Batistuta guilty of a dreadful miss.

Batistuta, who had minutes earlier driven a freekick into the wall, played a brilliant one-two with Francesco Totti but screwed his shot wide with a total miscue with only Liverpool goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek to beat.

"I am not blaming Batistuta - he is a very important player for us," Capello said.

Liverpool's Emile Heskey should also have done better when he sidefooted wide after Antonioli's weak punch caused a moment's panic in the Roma defence.

The game was slowly coming to life and next Brazilian midfielder Emerson tested Pole Dudek, who did well to hold on to his shot.

Just before half-time Roma fans appealed for a penalty when

Carragher tussled with Batistuta but Dutch referee Dick Jol correctly shook his head.

At the restart Capello brought on Brazilian Assuncao for Uruguayan midfielder Gianni Guigou, who had proved an ineffectual replacement for Brazilian Cafu.

The move almost produced immediate dividends when Damiano Tommasi, who took up Guigou's place on the right, centred to Totti but the Roma skipper missed the target.

Frenchman Vincent Candela and Assuncao both tried their luck from distance but both missed the target for Roma, who drew their opening match in Istanbul with Galatasaray of Turkey.

There were more appeals for a penalty when Totti tumbled at John Arne Riise's feet but Jol again refused to intervene, equally correctly.

Dane Riise came to Liverpool's rescue when he deflected a goalbound Batistuta shot after the Argentinian had been played by Totti.

Thompson, standing in for Frenchman Gerard Houllier who is on sick leave following heart surgery, then made his first change with Czech Patrik Berger replacing Danny Murphy and soon after veteran Scot Gary McAllister replaced Smicer.

It was Roma's best spell of the match and then Assuncao narrowly missed from a freekick before Totti fired over.

Diego Fuser replaced Tommasi, who had just been booked, and then Emerson, whose injury time goal saved Roma in Turkey, missed a good chance when he headed a Totti corner straight at Dudek.

A late shot from Brazilian Francisco Lima forced the save of the night from Dudek, who was almost embarrassed by another from Assuncao.

Thompson finally withdrew midfield dynamo Steven Gerrard, bringing on Croatian Igor Biscan. Liverpool's other star Michael Owen had a quiet night and was tightly policed by the Roma defence.

This was a rematch of the 1984 Final where Liverpool won their fourth and most recent European Cup at the expense of Roma in a penalty shoot-out even though the Italian side were playing at their home stadium.

That match was the nearest Roma have come to winning European football's top club prize.

As for Liverpool they also won their first ever European Cup here in 1977 against Germany's Borussia Monchengladbach and defeated Roma last year in the UEFA Cup en route to victory in the final.

After losing their Group B opener with Barcelona of Spain this result ensures they are still in contention for a fifth continental title.

Saviola saves Barca



AFP, Barcelona

Argentine whizzkid Javier Saviola saved Barcelona with two second half goals as they came back to draw 2-2 at home to Galatasaray on Wednesday and stay on course for the Champions League quarter-finals.

Barcelona, 2-0 down at the break after goals by Umit Karan and Uruguayan Fleurquin, moved up a gear in the second half to sneak a point and stay top of Group B of this second phase.

Galatasaray went ahead in the fifth minute through Umit. Umit got the better of a duel with Sweden's Patrik Andersson for Ergun Penbehe's cross and knocked the ball home.

Barcelona, who were under threat of having their Christmas holidays cancelled should their results not improve, had had the worst possible start.

The Catalonians' Dutch striker Patrick Kluivert fired in a shot from the edge of the box but Galatasaray's Colombian keeper Faryd Mondragon did well to save it down.

Not long after Brazilian Rivaldo had a couple of chances to put Barcelona ahead.

A Rivaldo header from a Francisco Coco cross sailed over the bar and a freekick from fully 35 metres forced another save from Mondragon.

Saviola showed a taste of things to come after latching on to an impressive piece of skill from Kluivert but yet again Mondragon earned his wages with another fine stop.

Saviola had another long-range shot but it was Galatasaray who finished the half on a high.

Hakan Unsal crossed and Umit had a chance parried by Bonano but Fleurquin made no mistake with the rebound in the 41st minute.

Barcelona coach Carles Rexach

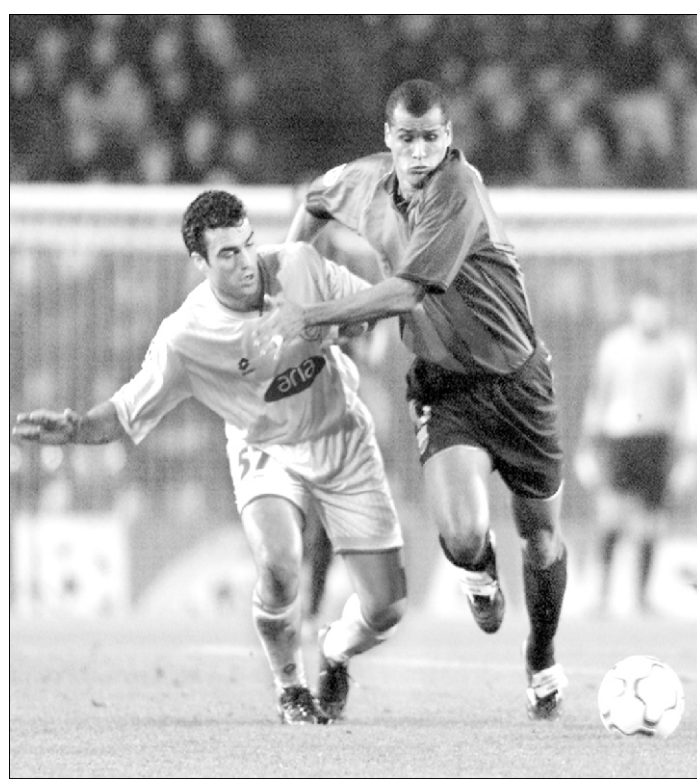


PHOTO: AFP

Rivaldo (R), the Barcelona ace, holds off Galatasaray's Hakan Unsal at the Nou Camp on December 5.

changed round his midfield after the break, bringing on Dutchman Marc Overmars for Xavi Hernandez and Gerard for Brazilian Fabio Rochemback.

Three minutes into the half, Barcelona pulled a goal back. Gerard's cross was met by Overmars, who set up Saviola to rifle the ball home.

Hakan Unsal managed to get himself in the referee's notebook for fouling Saviola as the tide swung to the home side's favour and the Nou Camp crowd made themselves heard as they got firmly behind their team.

Things were looking more ominous for the Turks when Capone was sent off in the 62nd minute for a nasty tackle on his compatriot

Rivaldo. Overmars was proving an inspired substitution and was involved in Barcelona's second goal in the 66th minute to deservedly complete their comeback.

His cross found Saviola via Rivaldo and the little Argentinian, who will be 20 on Tuesday, struck the ball home from just beyond the six-yard box.

Cocu, Kluivert, Gerard, Overmars and Rivaldo all caused danger to Galatasaray in the closing minutes but just could not find the winner.

Galatasaray finished the match with just nine-men after Hakan Unsal got his marching orders in injury time for kicking the ball away.

Sir Alex explains



AFP, London

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson said star midfielder David Beckham was dropped from the Champions League rout of Boavista because of a slight back injury.

Ferguson named Beckham among the substitutes for Wednesday's 3-0 victory over the Portuguese at Old Trafford, fuelling rumours that the player had fallen from favour with Ferguson.

The decision to leave Beckham on the bench came after he was substituted by Ferguson during the 3-0 home humiliation against Chelsea in the Premiership last weekend.

That defeat came hard on the heels of Beckham's substitution in the 3-1 loss to Liverpool last month.

Several reports here have hinted that Ferguson is unhappy with the form shown by Beckham, who has been inspirational in an England shirt this season, but inconsistent for United.

But Ferguson explained Beckham's absence simply by stating that he had an injury and needed a chance to rest.

"I think he's had a long season and I think that can take its toll," said the United manager.

"He has been bothered with a back injury and sometimes we have to arrest that before it gets any worse."

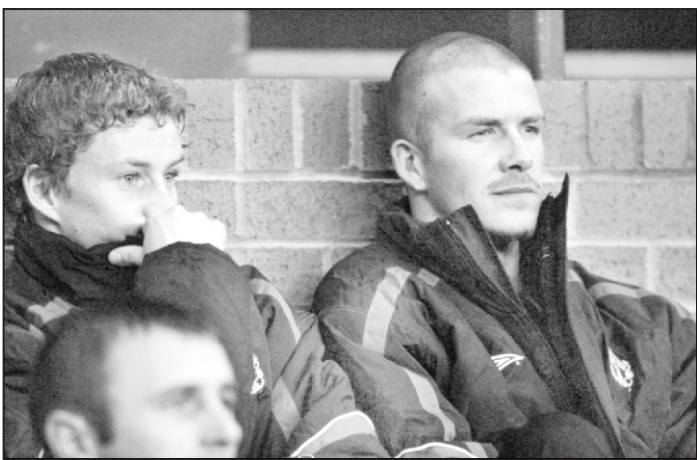


PHOTO: AFP

David Beckham (R), watching Manchester United's match against Boavista from the substitute bench at Old Trafford on December 5.

Ferguson is known to disapprove of Beckham's high profile off the pitch, where the player frequently adorns the celebrity pages of Britain's tabloid press along with Spice Girls popstar Victoria.

Beckham, who joined United as a schoolboy and who has described Ferguson in the past as being like a father, has fallen out with the Scottish supremo in the past.

Last season Ferguson wasted no time in dropping Beckham for a crucial match when he failed to appear for a miweek training session, saying he wanted to stay with his ill baby son.

Meanwhile, Ferguson has more

pressing problems in defence, with England international Wes Brown confirmed as ruled out with a knee injury for two months.

Brown is set to undergo an examination on Thursday but is expected to face a lengthy layoff.

"It's his medial ligaments and I think he will be out for six weeks to two months," Ferguson said.

Brown's injury is particularly worrying for Ferguson because Laurent Blanc broke his nose against Boavista and Gary Neville injured his groin, while Ronny Johnsen and David May are already in the treatment room.

MU breathe easy



AFP, London

Manchester United answered their critics in the best possible way Wednesday with a convincing 3-0 win over Portuguese champions Boavista in their Champions League second phase Group A clash at Old Trafford.

United, who by their high standards have been struggling this season with five defeats in 14 Premiership matches, won thanks to a Ruud van Nistelrooy double and a Laurent Blanc header.

Sir Alex Ferguson's men went ahead just after half an hour when Dutchman van Nistelrooy swept home Phil Neville's low cross.

Much-maligned French defender Blanc, whose lack of pace has been exploited by Premiership strikers this season, showed he can be useful in attack by adding the second with a towering header nine minutes after the break.

Van Nistelrooy notched his second goal after 62 minutes, slotting a low shot just inside the right-hand post after running beyond the Portuguese defence.

The win sees United top the group on goal difference from arch-rivals Bayern Munich with four

points from two matches.

"It was a good team performance. They kept their shape well and they kept their discipline," said United boss Ferguson whose side are not back in European action until February 20.

"The first goal gave us confidence and in the second half we did very well too."

"Tonight we had a few good individual displays - and we haven't lost a goal. We showed good team discipline."

"It shows what we're capable of - although I think we all knew what we were capable of anyway."

"But we can put things to bed until February 20 and go and try and regain some form in the league. That is important."

Ferguson raised eyebrows by dropping David Beckham to the substitutes bench and replacing the England captain with Nicky Butt.

Wes Brown and Andy Cole also missed out for United. Cole failed to shrug off a niggling ankle injury while Brown is still waiting for results of a scan on his injured knee.

In Cole's absence Trinidad and Tobago international Dwight Yorke joined van Nistelrooy in attack while Phil Neville came into the centre of defence.

Boavista had the best of the early attempts. Elpidio Silva fired straight into the arms of Fabien

Barthez and then Duda forced the Frenchman into an excellent save with a powerful drive.

Barthez, who was by far the busier of the two goalkeepers early on, then reacted smartly to tip over Armando Petil's thunderous 25-yard strike.

United hit back though through Juan Veron who hit weakly into the arms of Ricardo in the Boavista goal and then the Argentinian curled wide with a quickly-taken free-kick.

Growing in confidence, the home side took the lead after 31 minutes.

Phil Neville went storming down the right wing and exchanged passes with Veron before drilling in a low cross which van Nistelrooy tucked home.

Blanc made it 2-0 early in the second-half when Veron's corner found him lurking unmarked eight yards from goal.

Van Nistelrooy made the game safe after 62 minutes when he collected Yorke's defence-splitting pass and slipped a low shot beyond Ricardo and into the bottom corner of the net.

United enjoyed plenty of late possession without converting further chances but the win was pleasing for United who have been written off by many in Ferguson's final season in charge.



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United's Dutch international striker Ruud van Nistelrooy (C), under pressure from two Boavista defenders at Old Trafford on December 5.