

Real practically there

Gunners curse Kirsten



AFP, Paris

Eight-time European champions Real Madrid overcame a number of setbacks to beat Porto 1-0 and virtually guarantee their place in the quarter-finals of the Champions League on Tuesday.

It was an inspired substitution by coach Vicente del Bosque that eventually broke the deadlock and the spirit of Porto who twice hit the woodwork.

But it was Argentinian striker Santiago Solari who was the star of the night, as Europe's most lucrative club tournament resumed after the winter break, scoring with a 25-yard left-footed shot after 82 minutes - just five minutes after replacing Ivan Helguera.

The victory means that Real Madrid have a maximum nine points from their three matches in Group C, five ahead of second-placed Panathinaikos of Greece who beat Sparta Prague 2-0 in the Czech Republic.

Porto are rooted to the bottom with just one point and their chances of reaching the knock-out stages are now slim.

If Madrid are favourites to win Group C, then the same cannot be said for Group D where Juventus missed a penalty in their 0-0 draw with Deportivo La Coruna in Turin while, in Germany, Ulf Kirsten struck a last minute goal to hand Bayer Leverkusen a 1-1 draw with English side Arsenal.

All four teams in Group D are locked together on four points with Juventus leading on goal difference from Arsene Wenger's London side.



Deportivo la Coruna goalkeeper Francisco Molina dives to his right to deny Juventus star Alessandro Del Piero scoring from the penalty spot at Turin's Delle Alpi stadium on February 19.

STANDINGS									
Champions League second phase tables after Tuesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):									
Group C									
Real Madrid	3	3	0	0	7	2	9		
Panathinaikos	3	1	1	1	2	3	4		
Sparta Prague	3	3	1	0	2	3	5		
Porto	3	0	1	2	0	2	1		
Group D									
Juventus	3	1	1	1	5	3	4		
Arsenal	3	1	1	1	4	4	4		
Bayer Leverkusen	3	1	1	1	4	5	4		
Deportivo La Coruna	3	1	1	1	2	3	4		

Goals from Giorgos Karagounis (39) and Michalis Konstantinou (71) proved crucial while the Czechs' misery was compounded when

Tomas Hubschman was sent-off with just four minutes left.

Bayer Leverkusen v Arsenal



REAL RELIEF: Real Madrid's Argentinean mid-fielder Santiago Solari (3rd from R), becomes the toast of his team-mates after scoring the winner against Porto at Madrid on February 19.

REAL MADRID v FC PORTO

Madrid went into their match without inspirational striker Raul who was ruled out with a thigh injury and were coming off the back of defeat to Athletic Bilbao at the weekend which had seen them knocked-off the top of the Spanish league.

Then, just 16 minutes into the game, their Portuguese international star Luis Figo limped off with an ankle injury after colliding with Swedish midfielder Fredrik Suderstrum.

Guti also had to be replaced after a sickening collision with Jorge Andrade where the Spanish player's head clashed with the Porto man's knee.

Despite dominating possession, it was Porto who had the best chances with Anderson Deco and Ricardo Silva both seeing goalbound efforts denied by the woodwork.

PANATHINAIKOS v SPARTA PRAGUE

In the Czech Republic, Panathinaikos moved into second spot with an impressive 2-0 win over Sparta Prague.

Footballers' ladies unite for Nigerian woman

AFP, Rome

Wives and girlfriends of Italy's top footballers have committed themselves to support this weekend's planned demonstration by Serie A stars and officials in support of Safiya Husaini, the Nigerian woman condemned to be stoned to death for adultery.

On Monday the National Professional League (LNP), which governs the professional game in Serie A and B, authorised a co-ordinated demonstration.

All players and officials in both divisions will link arms as they take the field, wearing t-shirts saying "Who is going to cast the first stone?", in reference to the words which the Bible says were used by Jesus when he defied religious leaders to save a condemned adulteress from stoning.

And the players' partners, many of whom are top TV personalities, have joined in the campaign.

Uriana Albertini, wife of AC Milan midfielder Demetrio, said: "It is up to the whole of humanity to stand up and contest what is happening in some countries. I am horrified about what is happening to this woman and I hope we can save her."

Elisabetta Canalis, a TV personality who is engaged to Inter Milan forward Christian Vieri, said: "I am going to give a symbolic kick-off to the match to show I am kicking their barbarism into touch. But in reality I want to go to Nigeria and punch the judge who pronounced the sentence."

The LNP routinely enjoins its players to promote what it considers worthy causes before a match kicks off, but usually chooses non-controversial subjects like organ transplantation or cancer research and rarely ventures into the world of international affairs.

Husaini, who was convicted under Islamic Sharia law last year, is appealing against the sentence next month and the Nigerian government has already committed itself to ensuring it is not carried out.

There is a thriving anti-death penalty movement in Italy which routinely protests its use, even for murder, in the United States and other countries.

Parma players not happy

AFP, Collecchio, Italy

Parma's veteran defender Antonio Benarrivo has criticised the decision by European football governing body UEFA to allow the UEFA Cup match between Parma and Hapoel Tel Aviv to go ahead on Thursday despite the escalation in the conflict in the Middle East.

"We are just human flesh," said Benarrivo, who played in Italy's losing side in the 1994 World Cup final with Brazil. "I am not afraid but I ask the gentlemen at UEFA, who sit in offices, why they have done nothing to have the game played elsewhere."

"In this respect they are only interested in money. Economic interests are overriding everything else and we are the mugs sent there to put on a show. Money comes before people. We need to stop and think."

Di Matteo forced to retire



AFP, London

Injury-stricken Chelsea midfielder Roberto di Matteo, scorer of the fastest ever goal in an FA Cup final, announced his retirement from football Tuesday at the age of 31.

The former Italian international has lost his 18 month battle against the triple leg fracture he suffered against Swiss club St Gallen in a UEFA Cup tie in September 2000.

Di Matteo joined Chelsea for 4.9 million pounds (7 million dollars)

"He will always be welcome at Chelsea. He is very much part of the club family."

Anelka fined for illegal driving

AFP, Versailles, France

French magistrates on Wednesday fined Liverpool's on-loan striker Nicolas Anelka for driving with a suspended licence.

French international Anelka, who was loaned out to Liverpool by Paris Saint Germain in December, was not present at the hearing.

He was fined 4,500 euros (3,940 dollars) after the court heard he was caught driving by police on September 22 last year in the Parisian suburb of Trappe during a two month suspension of his licence for a previous speeding offence.



The sky near Seoul's City Hall is lit up with laser and fire work display yesterday as World Cup 2002 co-hosts South Korea began the 100-day count down to the finals.

ROK begins countdown



AFP, Seoul

South Korea on Wednesday launched the 100 day countdown to the World Cup finals with a laser light show in Seoul while countering international terrorism fears by vowing it would be the safest tournament ever.

World Cup organisers enlisted pop and movie stars and top politicians to back their publicity campaign as preparations for the 32-nation tournament, being jointly hosted with Japan, entered the final straight.

Despite a visit by US President George W. Bush, which brought thousands of riot police out to the streets to counter anti-US protests, organisers took over the main square outside Seoul City Hall to stage a laser light show, set off

fireworks and hand out rice cakes. To mark the countdown, Chung Mong-Joon, co-chairman of the Korean World Cup Organising Committee (KOWOC), promised the first finals in Asia would be "a truly wonderful football festival."

"We already have 10 ultra-modern stadiums of which seven are football-only stadiums. These stadiums are theatres of dreams for players, spectators and the media who will enjoy every facility."

International attention at the tournament will be focused on 1998 winners France and other top nations such as Brazil, Argentina, Germany and England.

But Chung said: "This World Cup will boost Asian football. Asian football is really on the move. Asians will watch the performances by four Asian teams - Korea, Japan, Saudi Arabia and China."

"It is everybody's dream that they will progress to at least the second-round. This will become an enormous morale booster for Asians."

Referring to the September 11 attacks in the United States, which forced a major security review in South Korea and Japan, Chung said: "I pray that this World Cup will generate confidence, trust and friendship -- that we need very much."

Highlighting the special anti-hooligan, anti-terrorism squads that will be on duty and the no-fly zones to be imposed over the stadiums, he added: "We guarantee that this will be the safest World Cup ever."

"The September 11 terror attack in the United States has cast dark clouds across the world. Therefore, the 2002 FIFA World Cup will be a great occasion to demonstrate that we could return to normalcy in our daily lives."

The finals start on May 31 with an opening ceremony in Seoul and end with the final in Yokohama in Japan on June 30.

UEFA Cup preview

Tel Aviv game given go-ahead



AFP, Parma

Italian side Parma's UEFA Cup tie against Hapoel Tel Aviv in Israel is definitely going ahead on Thursday despite security fears, European football's governing body UEFA said on Tuesday.

Last October, six players from Chelsea refused to travel to Tel Aviv for their second round tie against Hapoel, citing security fears.

"The Israeli government and the Israeli football federation have given sufficient guarantees on safety, UEFA and the two clubs concerned have discussed the arrangements needed to be taken for the match."

Parma's Japanese midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata told the Serie A club's website: "I am not frightened of travelling because Parma are not going there to start a war. I am ready to travel to Israel and we are convinced that we can play a good match."

New Rangers boss Alex McLeish meanwhile will be hoping the Scottish giants' last 16, 1st leg home tie against Dutch side Feyenoord will be less traumatic than Ranger's last UEFA Cup appearance under the then manager Dick Advocaat, Rangers just coming through a nerve jangling penalty shoot out against Paris Saint Germain in the French capital.

McLeish said: "Hopefully we can get past Feyenoord. We have a reasonably good chance of doing that, although I'm sure they are

probably thinking the same. But we have a good squad, and young Stephen Hughes has already shown what kind of player he can be for us."

If they progress to the next round they could face an all-British quarter-final against Leeds United, as long as the English club see off Dutch opponents PSV Eindhoven.

Manager David O'Leary will be looking to the UEFA Cup tie again to revive Leeds' flagging domestic

campaign. O'Leary, who can count on the services of suspended trio Lee Bowyer, Alan Smith and Danny Mills, told the English Premiership club's website: "I've seen them play in the Champions League a few times and if we're going to do well in the UEFA Cup we're going to have to beat a very good team. They are a good attacking side and we've got a very tough tie ahead of us."

Bundesliga league leaders Borussia Dortmund travel to French side Lille with Jorg Heinrich back in

their number after the German international midfielder's recovery from a muscular problem.

His inclusion will come as a boost to coach Matthias Sammer who will have to do without 22-year-old defender Sebastian Kehl, cup-tied having already played for SC Freiburg in the competition this year, and giant Czech striker Jan Koller, who is suspended.

Norway forward Jan Derek Sorensen is also doubtful with a stomach infection.

The Czech Republic's Slovan Liberac have their tails up as they prepare to take on Lyon, having beaten Sparta Prague 1-0 in their domestic league at the weekend.

But with Lyon themselves enjoying a morale boosting 3-0 victory against Paris Saint Germain both sides go in to the game full of confidence.

Slovan Liberac coach Ladislav Skorpil said: "I came to Lyon right after our win over Sparta and my players came here earlier than usual, to prepare as well as possible for this game. We are not afraid of this strong team but we must play a good team game against them."

Lyon coach Jacques Santini will be able to call on the services of his Brazilian central defender Claudio Cacapa, suspended from the PSG match.

Inter Milan, flying in the Italian league now lying joint second behind Juventus, are away to AEK Athens who could be without injured striker Demis Nikolaidis.

Premiership Boro owe Nemeth one

AFP, London

Slovakian striker Szilard Nemeth came off the bench Tuesday to score the winner in Middlesbrough's 2-1 English Premiership victory at home to Fulham.

The former Inter Bratislava frontman struck 13 minutes from time to send the north-east club into 11th place, six points clear of the relegation zone.

Earlier Croatia striker Alen Boksic's calm finish had given Middlesbrough a 27th-minute lead but when Frenchman Steve Marlet equalized 11 minutes after the break for the Londoners, the game was up for grabs.

Middlesbrough took the lead after some neat build-up play.

Former Manchester United duo Jonathan Greening and Paul Ince combined to give Italian striker Benito Carbone the time to pick out Boksic's forward run, and although he seemed offside, he kept his composure to draw van der Sar and chip the ball over the Holland keeper for his seventh goal of the season.

In the 56th minute, former Scotland midfielder John Collins curled a corner into the near post where Alain Goma flicked it on for the unopposed Marlet to head home.

UEFA Cup Valencia looking good



AFP, Paris

Francisco Rufete whose perfect cross was put into the net by Geneva defender Hilton.

The Swiss team's nerves almost got the better of them as they nearly conceded another goal immediately after, but they managed to regroup. The second goal, four minutes after the break, came from Aimar who had an eventful night.

Mista crossed from the left and found Aimar who made no mistake in beating Servette keeper Eric Pedat.

In the 60th minute, Valencia made the game safe with their third goal. Midfield general Kily Gonzalez made the most of an error in Geneva's defence to seize the initiative and his cross was headed home by striker Salva.

The second leg in Switzerland looks a formality for Valencia and in the quarter-final they would play the winner of Thursday's match between AEK Athens and Inter Milan, coached by former Valencia boss Hector Cuper.

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