

Liverpool steal night's thunder



AFP, Paris

Liverpool beat AS Roma 2-0 at Anfield on Tuesday night to qualify for the Champions League quarter-finals in a fitting display for manager Gerard Houllier back on the bench since heart problems.

The Reds beat Roma in the 1984 Cup final in Rome for their last European triumph and yet again it was disaster for the Italian capital side as they slumped from top spot to third in Group B and exited from the competition.

Barcelona, 1-0 winners at Galatasaray, were the other team to go through on the night to the April quarter-finals as group winners to give Carles Rexach's men hopes of their first title since 1992.

The qualifiers from second place Group A had already been decided with Bayern Munich and Manchester United through though United, 3-0 winners at Boavista, earned top spot meaning they play their quarter-final second leg at home.

The Germans, 2-1 winners at home to French club Nantes, had to be content with second spot.

LIVERPOOL 2; ROMA 0

Premiership title-chasers Liverpool, who knocked out Roma in the quarter-finals of the UEFA Cup last season, stormed into a sixth-minute lead when Finnish striker Jari Litmanen, deputising for the injured Michael Owen, slotted home a penalty after Danny Murphy was brought down.

Emile Heskey's superb second-half header from Murphy's free-kick sealed Liverpool's victory.

Houllier, still recovering from open heart surgery he underwent in October, received a standing ovation before the match and took his place in the dug-out next to his assistant Phil Thompson who was still in charge of team affairs.

For the first goal, Roma failed to clear John Arne Riise's outswinging corner and the ball fell to Murphy inside the penalty box but before he could shoot he was clobbered by Assuncao.

Without hesitation, referee Rune Pedersen pointed to the spot and Litmanen stroked the penalty into the bottom right-hand corner.

Liverpool ended the first-half with a flourish and would have netted for a second time had Heskey directed his bullet header from Jamie Carragher's teasing cross towards Antonioli's goal rather than past the upright.

Liverpool doubled their lead in the 64th minute. Damiano Tommasi fouled Litmanen halfway inside the Roma half and Murphy stepped up to take the resulting free-kick.

His accurate delivery found Heskey, who hung in the air to meet the ball and buried a bullet header past Antonioli into the bottom right-hand corner.

Thompson said he had spoken with Houllier on Saturday about the Frenchman's possible return.

"Gerard said that he fancied it - that the time was right. And boy was I pleased," Thompson said.

"It was very special and gave everyone a lift. The players produced something extraordinary tonight and was a special night in the team's development. This was one of the greatest nights in the club's history."

Thompson, who had earlier backed Roma to win the Champions League, now believes Liverpool can go all the way.

"We've made a big statement tonight," he said. "This team can go right to the final."

Asked how big a part the vociferous Anfield support played in Liverpool's stunning victory, Thompson replied: "The crowd were unbelievable. They roared us home when Liverpool were pushing hard," he said.

BARCELONA 1; GALATASARAY 0

International playmaker Luis Enrique proved enough to send former European champions Barcelona into the last eight.

Despite mixed league form this season Barca, who have played second fiddle to Real Madrid at



ON TOP OF THE WORLD: Liverpool striker Emile Heskey takes to the air after his strike against AS Roma at Anfield on March 19.

home and abroad in recent seasons, soaked up early pressure prior to making the breakthrough 12 minutes into the second half.

Patrick Kluivert and fellow Dutchman Marc Overmars combined to send Brazilian youngster Fabio Rochemback clear and when Colombian international keeper Faryd Mondragon spilled his fierce low drive the effervescent Luis Enrique was on hand to pounce on the rebound.

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MAN UNITED 3; BOAVISTA 0

Old Comer Solskjaer and David Beckham who were all on target against the Portuguese champions from northern town Oporto.

United went ahead on the 14

minutes thanks to Blanc following good work on the right wing to earn a corner. Beckham's first corner was dealt with easily enough but a second found Blanc, who made no mistake from close in.

Boavista had most of the possession early in the match and United had to be content with trying to find their chances on the break.

From one such breakaway, United went further ahead in the 29th minute. Welshman Ryan Giggs found Solskjaer, who had little trouble finding the net from close in.

A Beckham spot kick from close in six minutes after the break effectively ended the match as a contest and left United firmly atop the pool.

Paul Scholes was fouled in the area by Martelinho and Beckham rifled the ball home from the spot.

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STANDINGS

Final Champions League second round tables after Tuesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

GROUP A		6	3	3	0	13	3	12
Manchester United		6	3	3	0	13	3	12
Bayern Munich		6	3	3	0	5	2	12
Boavista		6	1	2	3	2	8	5
Nantes		6	0	2	4	4	11	2

GROUP B		6	2	3	1	7	7	9
Barcelona		6	1	4	1	4	4	7
Liverpool		6	1	4	1	6	5	5
AS Roma		7						
Galatasaray		6	0	5	1	5	6	5

*The top two of each group qualify for April 2 and 3 quarter-finals

CUP CORNER



AFP, Lagos

Three Nigerian strikers, John Utaka, Jide Olugbodi and Dele Adebola, have withdrawn from a pre-World Cup friendly against Paraguay March 26 because of club commitments and injuries.

Secretary-general of the Nigeria Football Association (NFA) Taiwo Ogunjimi said Utaka, who plays for Egyptian side Ismaila, will not be available for the game as a result of club engagements.

The official said Austria-based Olugbodi and Dele Adebola of English First Division side Birmingham City are injured.

Utaka made his senior international debut late last year and was a surprise exclusion from the squad to the African Nations Cup in Mali while both Olugbodi and Adebola are yet to be capped.

Meanwhile, Nigeria coach Adegbeye Onigbinde said six players from the local league will team up with the overseas-based pros invited for the London game.

A training camp made up of 27 players from the domestic championship opened Monday in Otta, near Lagos, ahead of the Paraguay encounter.

REFS' WORKOUT

Seoul

FIFA on Wednesday started putting the 72 referees and their assistants who will control the World Cup finals through their paces.

The referees for the 64 matches in South Korea and Japan will have to pass physical and medical tests to get their tickets to the finals. But organisers are confident there will be no dropouts.

They will also be given instructions on which offences to pay particular attention to. The FIFA leadership has warned of a clampdown on diving and play-acting at the finals which run from May 31 to June 30.

The hardest part of the four-day seminar will be on Friday at the Seoul Olympic stadium.

The referees will have to show that they can run 2,700 metres in 12 minutes, 50 metres in 7.5 seconds and 200 metres in 32 seconds. Medical and drug tests are also planned.

"They are all well trained and they are all expected to easily pass," said Christine Kim, a spokeswoman for the Korean World Cup Organising Committee (KOWOC).

Europe will provide the largest contingent at the World Cup finals with 14 referees and 14 assistant referees.

But Asia, which will be holding its first ever World Cup finals, is also celebrating having its largest number of referees at the tournament.

Five referees and seven assistants will come from Asia, according to the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). This is up from four referees and five assistants at the finals in France in 1998.

Ali Bujaim of the United Arab Emirates will be taking part in his third consecutive World Cup finals.

Farouk Bouzo, head of the AFC referees committee, presented the case for more Asian referees at a FIFA meeting in January when the 72 were selected.

"We had facts and figures to show the performance of our referees at FIFA tournaments. It was not hard to convince the FIFA Referees Committee as the members are well aware of how much progress our referees have made over the past few years," he said.

Houllier tonic

AFP, Liverpool

Gerard Houllier needed emergency heart surgery five months ago but returned in triumph to inspire Liverpool to a 2-0 win over Italian giants AS Roma and passage into the last eight of the European Champions League. As Houllier appeared on the touchline on Tuesday for the first time since collapsing with chest pains in October, Anfield erupted, his opposite number Fabio Capello hugged him and the Kop spelled out the word "Allez" in honour of the Frenchman.



GERARD HOULLIER

Houllier had wanted to return to the fray earlier but doctors feared a premature comeback could cause further damage to the 54-year-old.

But the man who had stood in for him, Phil Thompson, revealed that Houllier had targeted the Roma clash which Liverpool had to win if they were to progress in the competition they have won four times.

"We discussed him giving the team talk this afternoon, and he said: 'I fancy it'. I said 'the time's right - let's do it,'" Thompson said on Tuesday.

"If there was any night that was right for him to come back it was this one."

And Houllier's influence proved a massive boost to his team as a Jari Litmanen penalty and a thumping Emile Heskey header booked a quarter-final place as runners-up in Group B and knocked out Roma, the team they had beaten to win the last of their European titles in 1984.

England striker Heskey said: "We have missed the boss a lot. He has done a lot for the players here and everyone is glad to see him back. I think we can go all the way now."

Midfielder Steven Gerrard said Houllier's appearance was a surprise.

He said: "I was not expecting to see him back for another couple of weeks but he told us this afternoon that he wanted to be with us."

"The man is idolised in these parts and all the players love him."

Thompson, who won European Cups as a Liverpool player, added: "It was a great night - one of the greatest nights in this football club's history... and it was also an emotional night for Gerard."

So Houllier is back, but a Liverpool spokesman stressed on Wednesday that Thompson remained in charge of team affairs as the team prepared for Sunday's Premiership clash against Chelsea.

"Gerard is easing his way back in," the spokesman told AFP. "It was a fantastic boost to have him back last night but it is what he feels from here on."

The show's presenter Aldo Biscardi and his irascible sidekick Maurizio Mosca, together with a dozen guest pundits, traditionally turn even the most minor issue into a two and a half hour diatribe on the state of Italian football.

And the show that takes a Jerry Springer-style approach to football will have plenty of ammunition to fire on Monday.

But the mood in a troubled Italy is not at least on Wednesday - one for

Milan on highest security

Football

AFP, Milan

desist from any chanting or behaviour that could be provocative to the visitors.

Fans have specifically been requested not to display Palestinian flags or wear the keffiyeh headgear associated with the Palestinians and the trademark of their leader Yasser Arafat, occasionally seen worn in scarf-form in fashion-conscious Milan.

Milan's Prefect of Police Bruno Ferrante was confident that the occasion would pass off peacefully, saying: "Let's live the event for what it is - a sporting occasion and nothing more. Something that has nothing to do with events far away."

Hapoel beat Milan 1-0 in the first leg which was played at Nicosia in Cyprus on the orders of European governing body UEFA for security reasons despite the intervention of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

No Israeli team has ever so far in European competition, hence the huge number of Israeli fans expected to travel to Italy.

Sporting occasions involving Israeli competitors have always been considered high risk since the 1972 massacre of 11 Israeli hostages by the pro-Palestinian Black September movement at the Munich Olympics while tension is particularly high since the deterioration of the security situation in the Middle East.

UEFA Cup

Inter leave out superstar duo

Football

AFP, Appiano Gentile

showdown with joint leaders AS Roma Inter's Argentinian coach Hector Cuper has again dispensed with the services of top scorer Vieri and has decided not to give Brazilian Ronaldo the chance to play his first match since Christmas.

Instead Cuper will take on his former club, with the scores level at 1-1 after the first leg, with a strike force formed from Sierra Leone's Mohamed Kallon, Nicola Ventola or Uruguayan Alvaro Recoba.

