

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 phase 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 Antoniolli'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 Antoniolli 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

Italy in reflective mourning



ment's Labour Minister Roberto Maroni.

The killing has heightened already existing fears in Italy that the country, which suffered countless atrocities in the 1970s by groups on both extremes of the political spectrum, could be set for a new wave of domestic terrorism.

Naturally that put any disappointment at the country's footballing decline into perspective on Wednesday when Juventus, fielding virtually a reserve team after being eliminated last week, were due to play what in Italy at least is a meaningless game against England's Arsenal in Turin.

Roma and Juve's exit at the second stage follows Lazio's in the first phase and Parma's in the preliminary round.

Gazzetta dello Sport, aware the mood of the country was not conducive to a witchhunt against Italian footballers, was relatively downbeat, saying "Roma too are small in Europe" with the match reported

headlined: "A cruel end of the road."

The paper acknowledges the country-wide implication for the standard of Italian football, saying: "The failure of a school (of football)."

Corriere dello Sport headlined, under the strapline "Italy out of the Champions League", with "Roma, Capello goes down."

Corriere blamed Roma coach Fabio Capello for his side's exit, asking why he had not picked inform striker Vincenzo Montella in his starting line-up.

"The coach pays for not picking the winning 'aeroplanino' (little Airplane)," the nickname given to the striker for his trademark goal celebration. It's editorial is entitled: "Fabio, explain to us why you only use half a Montella."

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani has already warned that Italy could lose one of its Champions League places if the slump continues.

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

the usual palaver when the country's football fortunes are low with far more pressing concerns for the Italian people.

When the shock of Biagi's death is over it is likely the debate will re-open. Italian television has countless programmes where celebrity pundits heap abuse on footballers or clubs for even the mildest indiscretion.

Monday night's edition of cult programme "Il Processo di Biscardi", which has developed the trend into an art form, promises to be a memorable one.

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.

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 Ogunjobi 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 Adegboye Onigbide 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 Bujasim 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 thundering 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.

FIFA rankings
No change at the top

AFP, Paris

France, Argentina and Brazil maintained the top three placings in the latest FIFA world rankings released Wednesday, while Germany bounced back into the top 10.

The world and European champions have 807 points, 14 points ahead of Argentina and 19 points ahead of Brazil as the friendlies mount up ahead of this summer's World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan.

The Germans, who slipped out of the leading group for the first time after their struggle to make the finals, are in again at 10th, up two places from the previous rankings issued at the end of last year.

FIFA TOP 20		
1.	France	807
2.	Argentina	793
3.	Brazil	788
4.	Italy	738
5.	Colombia	735
6.	Portugal	733
7.	Spain	728
8.	Mexico	719
9.	Netherlands	718
10.	Germany	710
11.	Yugoslavia	708
12.	England	704
13.	United States	702
14.	Czech Republic	692
15.	Paraguay	685
16.	Sweden	683
17.	Romania	678
18.	Ireland	673
19.	Cameroon	672
	Denmark	672

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS				DOWN				19 Y2K candidates																																		
1 Frolic	43 Without delay	1 Urban transport	21 Towel marking	2 Pac.	22 Play segment	3 Manet or 16-	4 Fish eggs	5 Muppet	6 Ticklish	7 Muppet	8 Prospero	9 Forcefully	10 Sherpa, often	11 Only veep to resign	12 Disappearing act	13 2s Zsa's sis	14 Oktoberfest item	15 Lighter-than-air craft	16 Be relevant	17 Earhart's co-pilot	18 55 Millennium fractions (Abbr.)	19 Only veep to resign	20 Slash	21 Chapeau	22 Play segment	23 Fish eggs	24 Disappearing act	25 Aquatic mammal	26 Nevertheless	27 Viscous stuff	28 Uncivilized	29 Unusually	30 Unusually	31 Unusually	32 Unusually	33 Tokyo, once	34 Uncivilized	35 Unusually	36 Unusually	37 Unusually	38 Put to use	39 Croc's
6 Laura Petrie's hubby	44 Macadamize	9 Khan title	45 Spouted bottle	10 Anagram of 16-	11 Brutus' tongue	12 Mr. Chaney	13 Vital statistic	14 "A Bell for 55 Millennium fractions (Abbr.)	15 Born and Laura	16 Bruce	17 Louise's pal	18 55 Millennium fractions (Abbr.)	19 Only veep to resign	20 Slash	21 Chapeau	22 Play segment	23 Fish eggs	24 Disappearing act	25 Aquatic mammal	26 Nevertheless	27 Viscous stuff	28 Uncivilized	29 Unusually	30 Unusually	31 Unusually	32 Unusually	33 Tokyo, once	34 Uncivilized	35 Unusually	36 Unusually	37 Unusually	38 Put to use	39 Croc's									