



PHOTO: INTERNET

EMOTIONAL CONTRAST: (left) Euphoric Panathinaikos players celebrate their qualification for quarter-finals after their draw against Real Madrid in Athens while (Right), crest-fallen Arsenal booters Thierry Henry (L), Nwankwo Kanu (2nd R), Frederik Ljungberg (R) come to terms with their exit at Stadio delle Alpi in Turin on March 20.

Gunners gone with the Bayer wind

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Paris

Germany's Bayer Leverkusen, bidding to break their Bundesliga title duck this season, remained firmly in the hunt for Champions League glory as well Wednesday, winning 3-1 at Spain's Deportivo La Coruna to book a surprise quarter-final place at the expense of Arsenal.

The Gunners failed to join Manchester United and Liverpool in the last eight after a 1-0 defeat at Juventus, and only had their ongoing poor form in Europe to blame.

A looping header from Uruguayan striker Marcelo Zalayeta 15 minutes from the end at the Stadio Delle Alpi saw Juve claim three virtually meaningless points.

But another culprit was the manifestly absurd format of the double group phase formula which incredibly left Leverkusen, one point clear of the chasing pack in the German league, as Group D winners - despite a 4-1 defeat at Highbury and a 4-0 mauling in Turin.

LEVERKUSEN 3; DEPORTIVO

A first-half header by midfielder Michael Ballack, a shot by international team-mate Bernd Schneider after the interval and a late header by substitute Oliver Neuville gave the German side 10 points in the group.

Deportivo, whose goal came in the second half through substitute international striker Diego Tristan, also have 10 points but finishes in second place head-to-head.

Arsenal, who lost 1-0 at Juventus, end third with seven points and are eliminated. The Italian powerhouse, whose challenge for a place in the quarterfinals ended last week, also finishes with seven.

Deportivo coach Javier Irureta's decision to make seven changes from his first-choice side appeared to take its toll as Leverkusen dominated the game.

On the quarter-hour mark, Klaus Toppmöller's side wasted two chances in succession with Croatian striker Thomas Brdaric and then Schneider putting the ball into the net.

Deportivo looked vulnerable to the German league leader's swift counter attacks, and in the 26th minute Turkish midfielder Yildiray Basturk spurned an excellent opportunity from close range after Ballack's low cross.

It came as no surprise when Ballack gave his side the lead in the 34th minute, the international leaping above Deportivo's Brazilian midfielder Mauro Silva to power a header off the crossbar.

Leverkusen's superiority contin-

ued and they came close to extending their lead five minutes later when Brdaric sent a fierce long-range drive onto the crossbar.

The second half began with Deportivo continuing to struggle.

Nine minutes after the break, the more fluid German side added a deserved second.

From Ze Roberto's corner, Schneider hit a tame shot from close range but, with the help of a deflection off Deportivo's Argentine midfielder Aldo Duscher, the ball rolled into the net.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Collated results from the Champions League second stage matches on Wednesday:

Group C
At Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2
(Liberopoulos 9, Goumas 64) Real
Madrid (Spa) 2 (Morientes 11,
Portillo 80)
At Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 2 (Sionko
63, Jarosik 71) FC Porto (Por) 0

Group D
At Turin
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Zalayeta 76)
Arsenal (Eng) 0
At La Coruna
Deportivo La Coruna (Spa) 1
(Tristan 75) Bayer Leverkusen
(Ger) 3 (Ballack 34, Schneider 54,
Neuville 86)

On the hour, Irureta swapped Duscher and the ineffectual Uruguayan forward Walter Pandiani with Spanish international midfielders Juan Valeron and Sergio Gonzalez.

The changes failed to stem the tide and substitute Neuville, who

replaced Brdaric five minutes earlier, brought an excellent save from Deportivo goalkeeper Nuno Herlander.

The Spanish side pulled a goal back in the 75th minute when a shot by Tristan, who had replaced defender Hector Berenguel five minutes before, was deflected by Diego Placente over goalkeeper Hans-Jorg Butt.

Galvanized by the goal, Deportivo began to exert pressure for the first time in search of the goal that would give them first place in the group.

But with five minutes remaining, Leverkusen killed off the match when Neuville glanced a header past Herlander from Ballack's cross.

JUVENTUS 1; ARSENAL 0

Arsenal's French coach Arsene Wenger, whose men have consistently underachieved in the continent's premier club tournament, had forecast a "bizarre" evening given that Juventus were already eliminated.

And sure enough the Italians, playing in a two-thirds empty stadium, did not entirely give the impression their lives depended on the outcome - at least until they raised their game after the interval.

But Italy still have no quarter-finalist for the second straight year.

Arsenal shot themselves in the foot as Thierry Henry missed a penalty early in the second half, his low kick saved by the impressive Fabian Carini.

Arsenal had lost six of their last seven away encounters in the tournament and such profligacy on this occasion cost them dear, although Leverkusen's impressive victory meant even a win would have not helped the English Premiership outfit, whose dreams of a Champions League-Premiership-FA Cup

couldn't complete them. We lost out against Deportivo," said the England shot-stopper.

Wenger was perplexed.

"We are surprised and disappointed with this result. It's not only surprising but strange," he mused.

Leverkusen were left to bask in the glory of topping a group which had only weeks ago seemed totally beyond them.

And club general manager Reiner Calmund was quick to dub their achievement "the greatest success in the club's history - even more so than our 1988 UEFA Cup win."

Coach Klaus Toppmoller maintained the win would "prove a big boost to us in the Bundesliga title race" as well as the Champions League itself.

PANATHINAIKOS 2; REAL

In Group C, Panathinaikos ended Real Madrid's winning streak to join the eight-times European champions in the quarters at the expense of Porto, beaten 2-0 at Sparta Prague.

The Greek side, third going into the final match, took advantage as Real rested several top names.

Nikos Liberopoulos gave the Greeks a ninth-minute lead but Spanish international forward Fernando Morientes levelled, aided by a cross from England international Steve McManaman, making a rare start.

Yannnis Goumas put Panathinaikos back in front in the second half but Champions League debutant Javier Portillo levelled with a stunning drive.

Real advanced with 16 points to eight for the Greeks with Sparta third on six and Porto bottom on four.

Prague thanked goals from Libor Sionko and Jiri Jarosik for their win

SPARTA 2; PORTO 0

day's final matches in Groups A and B are Group A winners Manchester United and runners-up Bayern Munich, the holders, Group B winners Barcelona and four-times European champions Liverpool.

Friday's draw at UEFA headquarters in Nyon, Switzerland, for the quarter-final first legs on April 2 and 3 could now see an all-Spanish encounter as Real and Barcelona cannot meet, having won their groups.

But either could meet Deportivo - or indeed Bayern.

Manchester United, Barcelona, Real and Leverkusen cannot meet each other while United cannot play Bayern as they came out of the same second phase group.

The same goes for Barca and Liverpool, while Real will not meet Panathinaikos and Leverkusen cannot face Deportivo.

Arsenal goalkeeper David Seaman said the earlier 2-0 home defeat to Deportivo had wrecked his side's chances.

"It was out of our hands at the end of the day and they (Leverkusen) got a great result out in Spain," he told ITV television.

"We had a lot of chances but we

Blatter in enemy territory!

Football

REUTERS, Johannesburg

FIFA president Sepp Blatter will visit the Ivory Coast and Senegal from Sunday in his first trip to Africa since the Confederation of African Football president Issa Hayatou announced he will stand against the Swiss for the leadership of world football later this year.

Blatter will attend a meeting of French-speaking African sports ministers in Abidjan on and then travel to Senegal on Tuesday in the last of his visits to all 32 World Cup qualifying countries, a spokesman said on Thursday.

Blatter's trip to Abidjan had been scheduled before the announcement of Hayatou's candidacy for the FIFA presidency, to be decided at the organisation's congress in Seoul, South Korea on May 28-29.

The meeting will deal with government interference in the running of soccer in the region but also

present an opportunity for the FIFA president to put his case for re-election to government officials, who in many African countries have powerful sway over football officials.

The Conference of Youth and Sports Ministers of French Speaking Countries (CONFEJES) has already said it would not back either of the two candidates in the FIFA presidential election.

Hayatou is the first African to run for the FIFA presidency and ended weeks of speculation by announcing his candidacy in Cairo last Saturday.

His bid is being supported by UEFA, the European football controlling body. But already the CAF president, whose bid for election would need overwhelming support from Africa's 52 members, has been told he will not get votes from Liberia and Zimbabwe.

On Thursday, officials at the Sierra Leone Football association told reporters they were also considering backing Blatter in his bid for re-election.

CUP CORNER



AFP, Lagos

Nigeria have yet to choose a captain for this year's World Cup finals but the player selected must prove he can deliver the goods on the pitch, national coach Adegbeye Onigbinde told local radio on Wednesday.

"Competence on the field of play will determine who will be chosen as the captain of the team. Every player should be motivated and be ambitious to do the nation proud," he said.

Age and long service to the team will not be factors in the choice of a captain to replace out-of-favour Sunday Oliseh of German giants Borussia Dortmund, Onigbinde said.

Striker Nwankwo Kanu, who plays for English Premiership side Arsenal, has reportedly been offered the captaincy of the 'Super Eagles' even though Onigbinde insisted a captain would only be named after the team's World Cup build-up.

Nigeria are drawn in arguably the toughest first round World Cup group with Argentina, England and Sweden.

The coach also defended his 54-man list of World Cup probables, which included established stars like Taribo West, Ike Shorunmu and Austin "Jay Jay" Okocha.

"I do not want to regret after I might have made my selection. The more people I invite, the higher the chances of picking the best of them," he stated.

"When I invited Mudasiru Lawal into the camp in 1984 many Nigerians criticised me for that action. But later when they saw his high performance, they recommended me for that action," said the 64-year-old coach, who went on to explain his selection policy.

"You do not throw away the water you have in your tank at home simply because you heard a rumbling in the sky. The sky may rumble or thunder and not rain," he added.

RIVALDO A REAL CONCERN

Barcelona

Barcelona forward Rivaldo says injury will prevent him playing in Brazil's World Cup warm-up match against Yugoslavia next Wednesday.

The Brazilian international, who missed his club's 1-0 Champions League win at Galatasaray on Tuesday, has an ankle strain sustained in last week's 1-1 draw against Real Madrid.

The 29-year-old told reporters on Wednesday he would miss the friendly as well as the Catalan side's league match against Valladolid on Sunday.

He also hinted that he may miss the following week's league game against Las Palmas.

Brazil coach Luis Felipe Scolari told Barcelona-based daily Sport on Wednesday he was concerned that doubts about Rivaldo's fitness could jeopardise his participation in this year's World Cup.

"I am very worried about the injury problems Rivaldo has had this season," he said. "If he hasn't fully recovered by the beginning of May I will have to look for someone else to cover his place as the World Cup is going to be very tough."

Brazil have been drawn with Turkey, China and Costa Rica in group C of the tournament.

KAREMBEU, MARLET BACK FOR FRANCE

Paris

Steve Marlet and Christian Karembeu have been recalled to the France squad for the international football friendly against Scotland at the Stade de France next Wednesday.

Fulham striker Marlet and Olympiakos defender Christian Karembeu were the main surprises for the match which serves as one of the warm-up fixtures for the May 31 to June 30 football showcase in Korea and Japan.

However coach Roger Lemerre did not name Liverpool striker Nicolas Anelka or Bolton attacking midfielder Younghusband in his 19-man list.

Several established players, such as keeper Fabien Barthez and defenders Frank Leboeuf and Bixente Lizarazu, who were out injured for the Romania game last month, earned expected recalls.

On the other hand, players out injured include Lilian Thuram, Willy Sagnol, Christophe Dugarry and Alain Boghossian.

These absences mean Philippe Christanval and Eric Carriere remain in the squad with just two friendly matches before the list for the World Cup is finalised.

SQUAD

Keepers: Fabien Barthez (Manchester United/Eng), Ulrich Rame (Bordeaux)

Defenders: Bixente Lizarazu (Bayern Munich/Ger), Vincent Candela (AS Roma/Ita), Marcel Desailly (Chelsea/Eng), Philippe Christanval (Barcelona/Spa), Frank Leboeuf (Marseille), Mikael Silvestre (Manchester United/Eng), Christian Karembeu (Olympiakos/Gre)

Midfielders: Eric Carriere (Lyon), Emmanuel Petit (Chelsea/Eng), Robert Pires (Arsenal/Eng), Patrick Vieira (Arsenal/Eng), Zinedine Zidane (Real Madrid/Spa)

Strikers: Thierry Henry (Arsenal/Eng), David Trezeguet (Juventus Turin/Ita), Sylvain Wiltord (Arsenal/Eng), Steve Marlet (Fulham/Eng)

JAPAN PIP UKRAINE

Osaka

Japan beat Ukraine 1-0 here Thursday in an opener to their eight-match build-up for the World Cup finals that saw both sides play without their overseas-based stars.

Shimizu S-Pulse midfielder Kazuyuki Toda flicked in a goal after a flurry of passes from a short corner kick in the 24th minute of the friendly match at Nagai Stadium.

Japan, due to co-host the premier football event with South Korea in June, will leave here Friday for an international against Poland in Lodz next Wednesday.

Ukraine, who lost to Germany 5-2 on aggregate in a World Cup qualifying play-off, face Romania next Wednesday.

Real want Liverpool

REUTERS, Athens

Real Madrid coach Vicente Del Bosque would favour a Champions League quarter-final against Liverpool, he hinted after his side drew their final group match against Panathinaikos.

"I would like to avoid Deportivo Coruna in the next round so we can have as many Spanish teams as possible in the semis," he said. Deportivo also beat Real in the Spanish King's Cup final two weeks ago.

Del Bosque was left with only Liverpool after admitting that Real would prefer not to face holders Bayern Munich in a repeat of last season's semifinal.

"I wouldn't favour Bayern either, they are the reigning European champions. At this stage all the teams are difficult," Del Bosque said.

The draw for the quarter-finals will be held at European body UEFA's headquarters in Nyon, Switzerland on Friday.