

L'pool, P'naikos gain advantage



5AFP, Paris

The likelihood of an All-England Champions League semi-final moved closer on Wednesday after a goal from Sami Hyypia gave Liverpool a 1-0 win over Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen in the quarter-final, first leg meeting at Anfield.

While Liverpool's French manager Gerard Houllier hailed his side as heroes and believed they would make it through to a meeting with Manchester United, who beat Spanish outfit Deportivo La Coruna 2-0 on Tuesday, he would be mindful of the Germans who have beaten Deportivo, Juventus and Barcelona in Germany this season.

English joy was not replicated by their Spanish counterparts as their hopes of a dream semi-final between Real Madrid and Barcelona took a second knock in two nights with Greek side Panathinaikos beating Barca 1-0 in Athens - a 79th minute penalty by Aggelos Basinas proving decisive.

Barcelona's woe followed the 2-1 defeat of Real Madrid by holders Bayern Munich on Tuesday, though both would still be optimistic of overhauling the deficits next week.

LIVERPOOL 1; LEVERKUSEN

Finnish international Hyypia scored the decisive goal in the 44th minute, steering home Michael Owen's low cross. Leverkusen finished strongly with Brazilian Ze Roberto carving out several chances, but the Germans



Ecstatic Liverpool captain Sami Hyypia (C) starts to celebrate his strike against Bayer Leverkusen while custodian Jorg Butt (L) contemplates the blow at Anfield on April 3.

when you need him to be and yet again Sami was there tonight, not only to score the goal but also in defence," he said.

Although they take a slim advantage to Germany in six days' time, Houllier was upbeat about both his side's slim advantage.

"Bayer showed that they are very strong team and can play good football. "To beat them 1-0 here is a very good performance.

(Emile) Heskey," he said. "But we know what we've got to do to get the result we need at home."

After a cagey opening the first chance fell Liverpool's way in the 10th minute.

Heskey chased a hopeful ball upfield and shook off the close attentions of Carsten Ramelow, but the England international wasted all his good work by screwing a tame effort wide of Jorg Butt's left

Only a flying save from Butt denied Liverpool doubling their lead in the 57th minute.

Smicer's left wing corner found Riise and his acrobatic overhead kick was palmed away by the Leverkusen goalkeeper.

Liverpool were left off the hook in the 66th minute when Ze Roberto exchanged passes with Diego Placenta before cutting the ball back for Ballack, but the German international scuffed his shot wide.

PANATHINAIKOS 1; BARCELONA

The Panathinaikos and Barcelona clash was hardly a classic match and the 79th minute penalty from Basinas proved enough to give Sergio Markarian's men a slight advantage before next Tuesday's return match at the Nou Camp.

Barcelona coach Carles Rexach took no risks, leaving 1999 FIFA World Player of the Year Rivaldo on the bench and fielding eight defensive-minded players with a five-man back line and three defensive midfielders in Fabio Rochemback, Philip Cocu and Thiago Motta.

Panathinaikos had its best opportunity in the first half when Basinas directed a free kick from outside the penalty box that was punched away by Bonano.

Midfield stalemate ruled for match of the match though substitute Derek Boateng jogged Greek supporters out of their lethargy with a shot on the hour nevertheless easily retrieved by Barcelona keeper Roberto Bonano.

Patrick Kluivert nearly put Barcelona into the lead with a hard shot that just sailed over the crossbar and a header by Abelardo followed which also missed its mark.

However Abelardo turned villain in the 79th minute as he fouled Finland's Joonas Kolkka, arguably the best man on the pitch, and Basinas stepped up to shoot to the right of goal, wrongfooting Bonano.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Collated Champions League quarter-final, first leg results on Wednesday:

In Athens Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Basinas 79-pen) Barcelona (Spa) 0

In Liverpool Liverpool (Eng) (Hyypia 44) 1 Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0



Panathinaikos players acknowledge the fans after defeating Barcelona at Athens on April 3.

failed to get the all-important away goal.

Liverpool will defend their lead in the second leg in Germany next Tuesday but Houllier was confident they would progress.

"We think we will make it," he said.

"The boys behaved like heroes again tonight as they played some nice football and then stood solidly together when they came under pressure just as they have done all season," added the former French national manager, who has only recently returned to the Liverpool hotseat after a heart operation.

While Houllier admitted Leverkusen had made them look ordinary at times he had nothing but praise for Hyypia.

"The captain is always present

"We are not going to say that we are over-confident but we know we can perform well away from home. We've kept ourselves in a good position."

Houllier admitted Owen did not play particularly well but warned his starting striker is getting stronger all the time after recovering from his troublesome hamstring injury.

"He's had better games but he was involved in the goal," Houllier added.

"He's building up his match fitness and is feeling fitter with every game."

Leverkusen coach Klaus Toppmoller identified the players he fears in the second leg.

"We know that 1-0 is a very dangerous situation because they have (Steven) Gerrard, Owen and

hand post.

With so much at stake Liverpool seemed reluctant to throw men forward, allowing Leverkusen more space to play, but despite some excellent build-up play the visitors' final ball often let them down.

Vladimir Smicer headed over as Liverpool tried to restore their dominance and a minute from the interval they made the vital breakthrough thanks to their inspirational captain.

Ramelow conceded a corner out on the right wing which Norwegian defender John Arne Riise swung over and the ball eluded everyone except Owen.

The England striker controlled the ball and drilled a low, hard cross into the six-yard box which Hyypia swept home.

Samurai care for co-hosts



AFP, Fukuroi, Japan

An old samurai-style fortress with some 1,600 bottles of vintage French wine in the cellar, in the peace and quiet of a rural Japan on the Pacific coast.

There may be no more fitting base camp for Japan's World Cup campaign on home turf under the rule of a latter-day shogun, firebrand French coach Philippe Troussier.

"It is the right place where we can perfectly maintain tranquility within the team," Troussier told reporters last November when he picked an exclusive golf link resort here to accommodate Japan's 23 World Cup samurais.

"We can feel something of Zen," he said.

But aside from its spiritual aura, Katsuragi Kitanomaru is grappling with the prosaic realities of the modern world with less than two months to go before the World Cup kicks off on May 31.

phone reception and the all-important reception of satellite television channels, for football matches in particular.

A small half-sized pitch was built specially for the team but a massage room still has to be fitted in.

But, "what concerns us the most is security," said Katsuragi Kitanomaru manager Hisashi Shimizu.

"We can shut a tunnel leading to our property," he said. "But we are worried about media vehicles parked below, inconveniencing nearby residents and posing a danger to children."

The hotel may be one of the most exquisite among the lodging facilities across Japan which have been chosen by 23 of the 32 World Cup teams as transit or training base camps for the month-long football extravaganza.

World and European champions France are to spend six days in the seaside hot spring resort of Ibusuki on the southern island of Kyushu before moving on to their base camp in World Cup co-host South Korea.

Katsuragi Kitanomaru was opened in 1978 on a 33,000 square-metre (355,080 square-foot) plot next to a 36-hole golf course, 100 times still larger in area, built two years earlier by the Yamaha busi-

ness group.

It sits where a fortress was said to have stood during the age of warring lords in the 15th and 16th centuries -- in the backwoods of Shizuoka prefecture, now home to two J-League clubs Jubilo Iwata and Shimizu S-Pulse.

The name means the main residence of a shogun at a vine castle.

Some 200 kilometres (125 miles) southwest of Tokyo, it is located roughly equi-distant distance from the venues for Japan's three group matches -- against Belgium and Tunisia in Osaka.

All the venues can be reached by Shinkansen "bullet" trains from this provincial city famed for its production of tea and persimmons.

Under its late chairman Genichi Kawakami, the Yamaha group bought the wooden houses, formerly home to wealthy landowners and estimated to be 100-150 years old, which had been all but abandoned in the "snow country" along the Sea of Japan.

They were reassembled here -- with their bold frameworks of pine and zelkova trunks kept intact. A gate and a facade, typical of a samurai headquarters, were added.

A total of 50 guest rooms were

installed -- 30 Western-style twin rooms and 10 single rooms as well as 10 Japanese-style chambers.

An outdoor hot spring is one of the attractions which also include vast lawns and gardens with blooms throughout the four seasons -- hydrangea and irises in the rainy World Cup month of June.

Despite its purely Japanese look, the hotel maintains a cellar of 2,000 bottles of wine in its cellar, 80 per cent of them top flight French wines worthy of toasting a World Cup match victory, such as Chateau Margaux and Chateau Latour.

The Japanese national team already stayed at the hotel last month before an international friendly against Ukraine in Osaka.

"We didn't expect them to mingle (with each other) in the hot spring but they seemed to enjoy it," the hotel manager said.

Shimizu added that the exclusive use of the resort for at least three weeks -- longer if Japan advance to the playoffs -- would not help its sales but the hotel was hoping as a result to broaden its appeal to "attract more guests who do not play golf."

Riquelme's brother abducted



AP, Buenos Aires

The teen-age brother of Argentine soccer star Juan Roman Riquelme has been kidnapped, the president of the player's club said.

Riquelme's 17-year-old brother, Christian, was last seen late Tuesday night in the family's working class neighborhood, Boca Juniors president Mauricio Macri said Wednesday.

Police and family did not comment and details surrounding the kidnapping were scant.

Juan Roman Riquelme, cited as the best soccer player in the Americas in 2001 by leading sports journalists, did not practice Wednesday.

Riquelme led Boca Juniors to two consecutive South American club championships and is sought by some of Europe's top teams.

Christian Riquelme is a budding player, starring for a professional

team in Argentina's lower division league.

Words of support came from Diego Maradona, the Argentina soccer great and former teammate of the elder Riquelme.

"For all of us who care about Riquelme, it really hurts us what is going on," he told Argentina's Radio Mitre.

The abduction cast a spotlight on rising crime in Argentina, where an economic crisis has been blamed for an alarming rise in abductions, carjackings, street robberies and bank heists.

Macri survived his own ransom kidnapping a decade ago in which he was chained in a basement for several days before he was freed unharmed.

In a televised interview he pleaded with the kidnappers to release Riquelme's younger brother.

"Riquelme is well known and is hugely popular, so you're just making things harder for yourselves," Macri said.

Vieri rested, Ronaldo in



REUTERS, Milan

Inter Milan striker Christian Vieri will sit out Thursday's UEFA Cup semi-final first leg against Feyenoord, but Brazilian Ronaldo has been named in Hector Cuper's squad.

Vieri has been troubled by a groin strain which forced him to miss

Italy's friendly against England last week.

Although he played and scored in Saturday's 1-0 win over Fiorentina, Inter have opted to rest him ahead of Sunday's Serie A match with Atalanta.

Twice former World Player of the Year Ronaldo, who is expected to feature in the match which will be his first outing for Inter for over three months.

Ronaldo played 45 minutes for Brazil in a friendly against Yugoslavia last week but has not featured for his club since he was injured in the December 23 match at Piacenza.

Inter will also be without their captain, Argentine defender Javier Zanetti, who has a hip injury, with Croat Dario Simic expected to step in at right-back.

Houllier relishing the prospect



AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier is quietly confident his team can clinch a Champions League semi-final place.

Liverpool will take a 1-0 slim advantage to Germany next Tuesday after Sami Hyypia's 44th-minute winner against Bayer Leverkusen in a tight quarter-final, first leg tie at Anfield on Wednesday night.

With Manchester United recording an impressive 2-0 victory 24 hours earlier in Spain against Deportivo La Coruna, the stage is almost set for an all-English clash in the last four.

French boss Houllier said: "The second leg will be very exciting and that is a situation I love."

"I am not thinking of the semi-final at the moment, just thinking of the second leg."

"We have shown in the past we can overcome any obstacles with the quality we have."

"Fifty per cent of the work has been done but we have a team which believes in itself."

"An English semi-final would be interesting but we have got 90 minutes to play in Leverkusen and we think we will make it."

Houllier is hoping striker Michael Owen will be in better shape next week after working his way back from a hamstring injury.

Owen found it hard to get going against Leverkusen and was replaced in the second half by Jari Litmanen.

Houllier added: "Owen was good and involved in goal. He's had better games but was always a threat."

"When Michael comes back after an injury, he needs to build up his match fitness. He is gradually coming back now."

Hyypia's goal eased the tension around Anfield when he scored from close range after Owen had cut the ball back from the by-line.

But the experienced Michael Ballack should have pulled Leverkusen level, mis-hitting in front of the posts midway through the second half.

The Bundesliga leaders gave Liverpool an uncomfortable ride but Houllier was satisfied with the performance.

"I think it was a good result, a very good game of football, very entertaining," he said. "I am very proud of the effort of my players."

"Despite some of my players being young, they showed they can perform at this level."

"In the second half we had more chances and we could have had some more goals, but 1-0 is good

CUP CORNER



AFP, Lagos

Several new players have been given a chance to stake a claim for a place in the World Cup after they were named by Nigeria for the friendly against Scotland on April 17 in Aberdeen.

The players include Belgium-based Justice Christopher, Patrick Mancha from Jurong of Singapore, local league leading scorer Rabiu Baita and Osaze Odewegie, the Insurance striker born of a Russian mother.

Nigeria coach Adegboye Onigbinde has so far lived up to his promise to give as many players as possible a chance in the team to the World Cup, where Nigeria are drawn against Argentina, England and Sweden.

For his first game in charge against Paraguay last month in London, he capped three players including Bartholomew Ogbche of Paris Saint Germain and England-based defender Daniel Shittu.

Onigbinde has again included seven players from the domestic league in the 30-man squad for the Scotland friendly as he tries to build a team in time for the first game against Argentina on June 2.

The 64-year-old former schoolteacher has said he hopes for a "respectable" performance at the World Cup while also "laying a solid foundation for a team for the future".

However, there is still no reprieve for former skipper Sunday Oliseh and Fintidi George of English Premiership side Ipswich.

Both players had asked for forgiveness, saying they over-reacted in demanding for air ticket refunds for the team at the African Nations Cup in Mali in February.

USA PIP MEXICO

DENVER, Colorado

Clint Mathis, who scored two goals against Germany last week, followed up with the lone goal here on Wednesday as the US blanked Mexico 1-0 in an international friendly.

Mathis scored in the 66th minute to give the US the lead for good in front of a charged house.

The decisive goal came after Mexico's goalkeeper Oscar Perez collided with Manuel Vidrio following a routine cross into the box by Carlos Llamasa.

Wednesday's result improved the Americans' record to 7-2-1 in 2002. They also improved to 9-28-9 all-time against Mexico.

Mathis accounted for both American goals in a 4-2 loss last week to Germany.

Both the US and Mexico were looking to tune up their squads and get a final look at players.

Both coaches have said they will select their World Cup squads by April 17, well in advance of the official FIFA deadline.

American keeper Tony Meola was tested only occasionally, with Carlos Ochoa and midfielder Braulio Luno rarely able to bypass a slicker, faster American defence that saw Greg Vanney and Pablo Mastroeni ably clean up any messes.

The only scary moment for the US, a free kick deep in American turf in the 48th minute, easily was fielded by Meola.

TEAM ROOSTER ON MAY 24

Zurich

The final rosters for the 32 teams in the World Cup will be announced May 24.

Soccer's governing body said Wednesday the lists will be released two days after the national teams must submit their teams. Each country is to have 23 players, including three goalkeepers.

The delay in releasing the lists stems from the move by FIFA's staff from its Zurich headquarters to offices in South Korea and Japan, FIFA spokesman Andreas Herren said.

The World Cup opens May 31 in Busan, South Korea, and ends June 30 in Yokohama, Japan.

CANIGGIA

Glasgow

Rangers' veteran Argentinian striker Claudio Caniggia claimed on Wednesday he is close to cementing his place in Marcelo Bielsa's Argentina squad and playing in his third World Cup finals.

The 35-year-old, whose gamble to play in the Scottish Premiership appears to have paid-off, has been called up for the friendly with Germany on April 17 - the third successive time he has been included following a six-year absence.

"I have the same sense of expectation as last time I was involved," Caniggia told the club's official website, www.rangers.co.uk. "I know I am very close to being in Bielsa's list. I have taken this challenge step by step."

"The first game was important. I have completed a second game and this friendly gives Bielsa the possibility to define the squad."

"The best way to make my dream come true is to play as well as I can and to take care of my physical condition."

Caniggia, who collected his first piece of silverware since the 1991 Copa America when Rangers won the League Cup last month, was an integral part of the Argentine side who reached the 1990 World Cup final and then the 1994 outfit, who were knocked out in the second round.

CONFIDENT



CLAUDIO CANIGGIA

Jardel doesn't like it Romario not giving up yet



REUTERS/AFP, Lisbon/Rio de Janeiro

Sporting striker Mario Jardel was unhappy after being left out of the Brazil team for the friendly against Portugal later this month.

Despite being the top scorer in Portugal, the forward was not picked by Brazilian trainer Luiz Felipe Scolari for the World Cup warm-up match on April 17.

"Hope is the last thing to die. I will fight until the last squad is named," Jardel, who is still hoping to make the Brazil squad for this summer's World Cup in South Korea and Japan, told reporters during a training session on Wednesday.

Jardel was especially hurt by Scolari's decision as the match will be played at Lisbon's Alvalade stadium, where the 28-year-old striker turns out for his club league leaders Sporting.

"I respect the trainer's decision but am very upset as I play here and am currently Europe's top scorer," added Jardel, who has scored 33 goals so far this season.

"This decision won't get me down, but rather will give me strength to try to go to the World Cup."

For the Portugal clash, Scolari

picked the same foreigners who were in the squad for last week's 1-0 win over Yugoslavia.

Jardel first came to prominence at Brazilian club Gremio when Scolari was his trainer in the mid-1990s.

former club Porto have slid to fourth place in their worst performance for more than 20 years.

Romario still hopeful of competing in World Cup

Meanwhile, Brazil's veteran striker and star of their 1994 World Cup final success Romario said on Wednesday he had still not given up hope of playing in the finals.

The 36-year-old Vasco da Gama front man said in Rio de Janeiro that he was putting in extra efforts to be fit for when the squad is selected in May despite the fact he does not appear to be included in the plans of coach Scolari for the May 31 to June 30 event in Korea and Japan.

"The squad will be picked in May," Romario said.

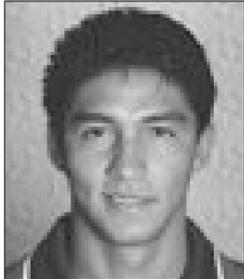
"For the moment, I am working hard to be in peak condition physically and technically for the event."

"My biggest dream is to be able to help Brazil earn their fifth world title and to give joy to the Brazilian people."

"However if that does not happen, I will be cheering the team on because we really need to win it."

The picking of Romario has divided the nation though many among the fans and media have been lobbying Scolari to field the controversial player, known for his love of the high-life but who is still scoring goals in the Brazilian league.

Brazil will face Turkey, China and Costa Rica in the group stages of the World Cup, which starts on May 31.



MARIO JARDEL