

Leverkusen rattle MU



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United's hopes of reaching their second Champions League final in four seasons suffered a setback Wednesday after they were held to a 2-2 draw in their semi-final, first-leg against Bayer Leverkusen here at Old Trafford.

Leverkusen, who beat Liverpool in the quarter-finals, snatched two vital away goals with some classic counter-attack play to take back to Germany for next Tuesday's second-leg.

An own goal from Bayer defender Boris Zivkovic gave United a first-half lead, before German international Michael Ballack levelled for the Germans.

Ruud van Nistelrooy's 66th minute spot-kick - his 10th goal in the campaign equalling the Champions League record and beating the club record held by Denis Law and Denis Violet - restored United's advantage only for Leverkusen substitute Oliver Neuville to stun the crowd by crashing home Bayer's second goal.

On a difficult night for United, defender Gary Neville was stretched off with a broken bone in his foot, just as team-mate and international colleague David Beckham was a fortnight ago.

"He's broken the metatarsal bone just like David Beckham... it's unbelievable," manager Sir Alex Ferguson told ITV Sport.

Ferguson had no complaints about the result.

"It was a fair result as they were the better side in the second-half,"

he admitted. "We just didn't play well in the second-half and the players appeared to be affected by the occasion as semi-finals are not for the nervous.

However Ferguson called on his players to remember the spirit of the side in 1999 when they won the trophy.

"Three years ago we felt down after drawing 1-1 at home in the semi-final with Juventus but then we went there and pulled off one of our greatest performances ever and qualified for the final and the rest is history," he added.

His German counterpart Klaus Toppmoller was ecstatic with his team's performance.

"I am proud of my team.

"The only way to get anything from playing at Old Trafford is to play well and my team showed tonight what they are capable of.

"We got our draw from our team spirit and our tactics.

"I told the players before the match that anything was possible and that one should have dreams because they can always come true," he added.

United, unbeaten in their previous 10 Champions League matches, were without Beckham, while Roy Keane was deemed fit enough to be named as a substitute.

Earlier this week Ferguson had said Keane was unlikely to be available until the second-leg next week.

England midfielder Nicky Butt took Keane's place in central midfield alongside Paul Scholes while Ole Gunnar Solskjaer came in for Beckham on the right wing.

Leading marksman van



Oliver Neuville, the Bayer Leverkusen striker, blows a kiss to the fans after equalising at Old Trafford on April 24.

Nistelrooy played as a lone striker while Ryan Giggs was switched from the left wing to partner the Dutchman in a more withdrawn attacking role.

Van Nistelrooy's boot was inches short of putting United ahead in the night minute after Giggs' cushioned header fell into his path and 60 seconds later the Holland international blazed over the bar from eight yards.

Gary Neville's brother Phillip was handed the unenviable task of marking Ze Roberto after replacing Gary in the 18th minute.

After his 20-yard drive had whistled past Jorg Butt's first-hand post, Solskjaer helped give United a 29th minute lead.

Scholes released van Nistelrooy down the right flank and his cross fell at the feet of the Norway international whose right-foot shot cannoned off Zivkovic before beating Butt at the near post.

Bayer should have levelled the scores five minutes later but when Carsten Ramelow's inviting cross found Dimitar Berbatov unmarked inside United's penalty box, the Bulgarian international headed the ball agonisingly wide of the upright.

United pressed forward as play swung from end to end, and Mikael Silvestre's piledriver came within a whisker of doubling United's tally.

United failed to take note of the danger signs and they were pegged back in the 62nd minute.

After Ze Roberto had carved open the United defence, the ball was worked out to the right wing where Bernd Schneider was in acres of space.

His vicious cross found Ballack who slammed the ball past a help-

less Fabien Barthez from eight yards.

Leverkusen's joy did not last long as United took a 2-1 lead four minutes later.

Schneider hauled down van Nistelrooy in the box and the cool Dutchman slotted the penalty beyond Butt's outstretched hand from 12 yards.

But United were undone by another lightning raid by Leverkusen 15 minutes from time, resulting in Neuville forcing a close range effort wide of Barthez and into the back of the net.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Results of Champions League semi-final first leg matches played on Tuesday and Wednesday:

Tuesday At Barcelona, Spain Barcelona (Spa) 0 Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Zidane 55, McManaman 90)

Wednesday At Manchester, England Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Solskjaer 29, van Nistelrooy 66pen) Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Ballack 62, Neuville 75)

* Second leg matches played in reverse format next week: Bayer Leverkusen v Manchester United on Tuesday at Leverkusen. Real Madrid v Barcelona on Wednesday at Madrid

Another Platini triumph

AFP, Stockholm

French football legend Michel Platini's rapid rise up football's political ladder saw him elected onto the executive committees of both world governing body FIFA and European rulers UEFA here on Thursday.

Platini, who inspired France to two successive World Cup semi-finals and the Euro 1984 title, was elected in the second round of voting seeing off incumbent and Norwegian rival Per Ravn Omdal, seen by many as a potential successor to UEFA president Lennart Johansson, by 20 votes to 17.

Earlier Platini, who is a confidante and advisor to FIFA president Sepp Blatter, had won a seat on the executive committee of European football's ruling body UEFA.

Platini garnered 28 votes of the 51 available - just two votes above the required threshold for an overall majority.

Johansson re-elected

AFP, Stockholm

Swede Lennart Johansson was re-elected to another four year term as president of European football's governing body UEFA here at the UEFA Congress on Thursday.

Johansson, who was first elected to the post in 1990, was the only candidate.

Later French footballing legend Michel Platini was voted on to UEFA's executive committee, only scraping in by two votes.

Platini, a close confidante and advisor to FIFA president Sepp Blatter, garnered 28 votes of the 51 available - just two votes above the required standard of an overall majority.

Hot-headed footballer in court

AFP, Durban

A high school footballer appeared in a South African court on an attempted murder charge Wednesday after allegedly shooting and wounding an 18-year-old referee who gave him a red card.

Police spokesman Inspector Sabelo Zwane said Mpikanehi High School referee Sithembiso Sibisi handed out the red card to Mzwelani Dlamini during a match on Sunday. Dlamini allegedly threatened Sibisi when he left the field.

Zwane said that when Sibisi arrived at school on Tuesday, Dlamini was waiting for him and they started arguing. Dlamini allegedly took out a gun and shot Sibisi in the thigh.

He was arrested and charged with attempted murder and possession of an unlicensed firearm.

Premiership Gunners a whisker away



AFP, London

taken the three points that kept his side in pole position.

"It was a real cup game. They (West Ham) gave everything.

"But now the title is even more in our own hands," the Frenchman told Sky Sports afterwards.

Asked about Kanoute's 'goal', Wenger replied: "I didn't see it. From the bench it's impossible to tell whether the ball is over the line."

And Wenger insisted that luck was not an issue.

"We have had some bad decisions but over a season it evens itself out. You get what you deserve."

He added: "We are in a great

home only to see Cole produce a desperate sliding clearance.

West Ham were convinced the ball had crossed the line but the linesman on the far side was unmoved and the 'goal' was disallowed.

Replays showed Cole had arrived too late but, with the defender in his line of vision, it was easy to understand why the official had ruled in Arsenal's favour.

No doubt watching England coach Sven Goran Eriksson was impressed by Cole's clearance.

He was accompanied by his Italian girlfriend Nancy Dell'Olio following a statement earlier



Arsenal's Swedish international Fredrik Ljungberg slips the ball past the West Ham to score the opening goal at Highbury on April 24.

United - a win for them next Monday and defeats for Liverpool and United over the weekend would give them the title.

But West Ham might have taken all three points if a linesman had not ruled that Frederic Kanoute's first-half shot had failed to cross the line. Television replays proved the official wrong.

Meanwhile at Portman Road, superb Darren Bent's goal barely 20 seconds after coming on kept Ipswich's frail hopes of top-flight survival alive with a 1-0 victory over Middlesbrough.

With Leicester and Derby already down, George Burley's side are now only two points behind Sunderland who are just above the drop zone, however with matches against Manchester United and Liverpool to come Ipswich face the toughest of fights to stay up.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was a relieved man to have

position. This team is marvellous with great team spirit."

West Ham manager Glenn Roeder rejected calls for the introduction of television rulings on goal-line decisions.

"It would take some of the romance out of the game."

"Looking at the replay you can clearly see the ball is over the line. It's an honest mistake. I hope he (the linesman) owns up to it."

"Decisions like that win championships."

Kanoute certainly deserved a goal for an outstanding first-half performance and he looked to have achieved that shortly before the break.

A brilliant run from Kanoute saw the Frenchman glide past veteran centre-back Tony Adams before he rounded David Seaman, the England keeper left floundering on his backside.

Kanoute then stroked the ball

Wednesday from television presenter, and Eriksson's fellow Swede, Ulrika Jonsson that her relationship with the England supremo was finished although Eriksson had never admitted to it.

Four minutes after the break, Arsenal almost went ahead when, from Thierry Henry's slide rule pass, midfielder Ray Parlour powered into the box where his shot was blocked by onrushing West Ham keeper David James.

And they went close again in the 55th minute.

French midfielder Patrick Vieira was brought down by Michael Carrick on the edge of the box. But Henry's free-kick just curled narrowly wide of the far post.

However, Arsenal were starting to surge forward and it was no surprise to see Ljungberg score his ninth Premiership goal in 13 games and 15th of the campaign.

Dennis Bergkamp's well placed pass found Ljungberg who broke into the penalty area before sending his first-time shot into the far corner.

Three minutes later victory was secured when, from Ljungberg's cross, Kanu's volley into the ground bounced past James for the African's first goal in five months.

Over in Suffolk, a nervous affair was still goalless when, in the 58th minute, 18-year-old Bent scored.

Jamie Clapham's corner from the right was flicked on by Hermann Hreidarsson and England Under-19 forward Bent scored with his knee.

Premiership's top six

English Premiership table after Wednesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Table with 7 columns: Team, Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points. Rows include Arsenal, Liverpool, Man Utd, Newcastle, Chelsea, Leeds.

China's mission in Korea

AFP, Seoul

The Chinese squad arrived here Thursday for a World Cup warm-up against South Korea, looking to break a 20-year duck against its Asian rival.

In 23 encounters between the two teams over the past two decades, China has failed to walk away a winner.

The Koreans have won 14 and nine have been drawn. Saturday's friendly at the Munkhak Stadium in the western port city of Incheon, a World Cup final venue, provides an opportunity for the two of Asia's great hopes to fine-tune their strategies and finalise World Cup starting line-ups.

Dutch taskmaster Guus Hiddink, coaching Korea, said he would use the match to check on the physical and mental readiness of his players as he puts the finishing touches to his 23-man World Cup squad.

"I'm not going to delay until May 21, the deadline for presenting final names. I'll check out their readiness through the match, draw up the list and unveil it at the most convenient time," he said.

Hiddink said the South Koreans had made good progress in putting pressure on opponents, communicating with each other and coordinating their movements over the past few weeks.

He has put the squad through a punishing fitness regime. Over the past week, the team has been at its training camp in Paju on the northern outskirts of Seoul, focusing on building set pieces.

In five previous appearances at the World Cup, Korea has failed to win a game but solid preparations for the tournament they are co-hosting with Japan has boasted hopes of a maiden victory.

Effenberg not Man City bound



AFP, Munich

Controversial German midfielder Stefan Effenberg denied English press reports on Thursday he had left 2001 Champions League winners Bayern Munich Thursday and signed for newly promoted English Premier League outfit Manchester City.

The 33-year-old told German sports agency SID he had not signed a two year contract on a free transfer, worth an estimated 40,000 pounds (60,000 dollars) a week to him as had been reported in the English newspapers.

"I phoned them (City) on Monday and said I would not be joining," he said.

Effenberg, whose blunt talking style has got him into trouble on more than one occasion, was top of City boss Kevin Keegan's list as the former England manager tries to build a squad that can not only stay up this time but qualify for European football in the 2003-04 season.

While Effenberg has been one of the best German midfielders of the past decade he has not displayed such finesse off the pitch where he has continually alienated the German public with his outspoken statements.

The latest came last week when he branded Germany's unemployed as 'lazy' in a revealing interview in Playboy.

Effenberg said laziness and over-generous benefits were behind his country's unemployment problem.

"A lot of the unemployed have such good benefits that they don't want to get up in the morning and do a full day's work," said Effenberg, one of the highest paid players in the Bundesliga.

Effenberg's comments were condemned by trade union officials and politicians, who described the

midfielder's words as "indecent" and "insolent."

"Mr Effenberg should stick to talking about what he knows best - football," said Bavarian state president and candidate to become Chancellor of Germany in September Edmund Stoiber.

He was promptly dropped from the match with Hertha Berlin and is unlikely to play against VfL Wolfsburg this weekend as Bayern president Franz Beckenbauer thinks that it would be too delicate as Wolfsburg is a working class area.

Effenberg, who also had spells at Fiorentina and Borussia Monchengladbach, never made any secret of his disdain for the other clubs in the Bundesliga, though sometimes his predictions during his first term at Bayern Munich landed wide of the mark such as in the 1990-91 season.

"Of course only Bayern Munich will win the title as everybody else is too stupid to do so," he said.

Despite his overweening confidence Kaiserslautern went on to win it.

Effenberg had first angered the German football fans when he retired from international football aged just 25 after he made an abusive gesture at spectators on being substituted in the 1994 World Cup finals match against South Korea.

The then manager Berti Vogts sent him home and said he would never play for Germany again while he was in charge - Effenberg flirted with a return to the international fold in 1998 after Vogts stood down but opted to help Bayern Munich on the domestic and European front.

Even offers to persuade him to join a seriously weak squad for the Euro 2000 finals squad drew a typical Effenberg response.

"I've already booked my holidays for Euro 2000.

"When you make a decision you should stand by it."

Fergie puts up a brave face



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson remains optimistic about his side's chances of reaching their second Champions League final in four seasons.

His upbeat reaction came despite seeing United held to a 2-2 draw in the semi-final, first-leg against Bayer Leverkusen here at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

Leverkusen, who beat Liverpool in the quarter-finals earlier this month, snatched two vital away goals with some classic counter-attack play to take back to Germany for next Tuesday's second-leg.

Ferguson, who guided United to their 1999 Champions League triumph, admitted Leverkusen were now in the driving seat, but was confident his team could turn the tie around next week.

"I know they (Leverkusen) are celebrating at the end, but one thing's for sure - we'll score over there," he said defiantly.

"It's not going to be easy because their home record is good, but if we do score over there, and I think we will, it does change the complexion of the game."

Ferguson believes his players will improve on their performance next week and is hopeful his captain Roy Keane will be available after making an appearance as a second-half substitute.

"I know that we will play better over there. We've a chance. It's 2-2 and we've 90 minutes to play for," he added.

Ferguson refused to criticise his players for leaking two goals and complimented the Bundesliga leaders for their adventurous, attacking style which exposed United's defensive frailties.

"They were the better side, especially in the second-half," he said. "We were nervous at defending and they gained great confidence from their first goal."

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On a difficult night for United, defender Gary Neville was stretched off with a broken bone in his foot, just as team-mate and international colleague David Beckham was a fortnight ago.

"He's broken the metatarsal bone just like David Beckham... it's unbelievable," Ferguson said.

Leverkusen coach Klaus Toppmoller was happy to score two vital away goals but warned the tie is far from over.

"We played in a very compact manner and made it difficult for United to play," he said.

"We are very pleased with the result, but United are more than capable of giving us a scare next week.

"At home we are very strong but it will be very hard for us, especially as Keane will probably be back to take a more positive role."

Baggio asks fans to relax



AFP, Milan

Roberto Baggio may have pleaded to his backers to give coach Giovanni Trapattoni a break but on Thursday there was little evidence that the campaign to persuade the Italy coach to pick the Brescia forward for the World Cup was abating.

Baggio had urged his fans not to pressure the coach in a message posted on his website Wednesday but on Thursday Corriere dello Sport published its results of a survey of 50 top football personalities in the World Cup.

Of the 50 some 28 said Trapattoni should relent and include the 35-year-old while only five said the 63-year-old coach was right to omit the veteran of three World Cups.

The remaining 17 declined to commit themselves, many saying that they did not want to interfere in Trapattoni's work.

Four members of Italy's 1982 World Cup winning side - Alessandro Altobelli, Antonio Cabrini, Bruno Conti and Fulvio Collovati - unequivocally backed Baggio.

Collovati, now director of football with Piacenza, said: "I don't see why he shouldn't go as he is one of the few class players we have."

Salvatore Totto Schillaci, whose six goals in the 1990 World Cup made him the tournament's top scorer, was also in the Baggio camp, saying: "Yes, he should go because there is a month to go to the World Cup so he can pick up his fitness."

Of the five who spoke against Baggio Yugoslav coach Vujadin Boskov, who led Sampdoria to the Scudetto in 1990-91, was the most succinct.

friendly match with Uruguay. Trapattoni named the seven attacking players he wants to take to Japan and Baggio's name was absent.

But the player returned after three months out through injury at the weekend and scored twice in the



GIOVANNI TRAPATTONI

3-0 victory over Fiorentina in a 20-minute substitute appearance, sparking off a mushrooming campaign for Trapattoni to reconsider.

Meanwhile, Baggio on Wednesday posted a message on his website asking his admirers to ease off.

"In the last few days there has been an upsurge in public opinion among politicians and the press which is recommending me for a place in the Italy squad for Japan," said the veteran of three World Cup campaigns.

"I am very moved by so much affection and consideration and I hope this does not create too much of a problem for the coach."

"I have known Trapattoni for many years and consider him a very thorough and honest person."

"Many are attacking him for what he said before the Italy-Uruguay match about my potential call-up but believe me sincerely and honestly Trapattoni was right to say what he did because I am coming back from a serious injury."

But the former Fiorentina, Juventus, AC Milan and Inter Milan forward did not rule out playing in the World Cup.



ROBERTO BAGGIO

the first to raise the white flag. I can only assure you that my feeling is that of feeling perfectly cured and ready to play."

Chelsea get Doomed dressing room

AFP, Cardiff

Chelsea will be in the Millennium Stadium's unlucky south dressing room when they face London rivals in the FA Cup final here on May 4.

Since major English domestic finals were switched to the Welsh capital following the closure of Wembley, the winning team has always come out from the north dressing room.

Soon after the semi-finals, Arsenal's fans were allotted the north end of the stadium, but Chelsea requested a draw should be made for the use of dressing-rooms.