

# Arsenal, Valencia fire blanks



AFP, London

Stand-in goalkeeper Andres Palop was Valencia's hero as the Spanish champions held out with ten men to secure a 0-0 draw in their Champions League clash with Arsenal here on Tuesday.

The eagerly anticipated clash of English and Spanish champions never quite lived up to its billing with neither side touching the heights that have seen them identified as perhaps the two strongest sides in this year's competition.

But after being dominated for long periods and forced to play the last 18 minutes a man down after Miguel Angel Angulo was sent off for clashing with Pascal Cygan, it was Valencia who went home happiest.

"Whenever you play a game like that and manage to get a point, it is very important," said their coach Rafael Benitez.

"We found ourselves in a very difficult situation but we made a great effort and managed to get the point. At the end we could even have won it."

Having been held to a draw at home by Ajax in their opening match, the Spaniards could ill afford a defeat and, on a bitterly cold night at Highbury, their incisive passing game was lacking in its usual verve.

For Arsenal, as in Saturday's defeat by Manchester United, it was again a case of what might have been as missed chances – and the heroics of Palop – cost them the opportunity to take a real stranglehold on the group after their opening win away at AS Roma two weeks ago.

The Gunners' boss, Arsene Wenger, nevertheless declared himself satisfied with the way his side had performed.

"I think their keeper deserves a lot of credit. He was very sharp and that kept them in the game."

"It is frustrating but my team deserves credit too. Valencia are calm and experienced at the back, but we looked like we could score at any moment."



PHOTO: AFP

Sol Campbell (Top), Arsenal's veteran defender, loses balance following a challenge from Valencia's Pablo Aimar at Highbury on December 10.

Wenger admitted he would have settled, at the start of the second phase, for four points before Christmas. But he admitted Ajax's strong start had set the stage for some cut-throat matches in the spring.

"Of course, we expect to go through. We are in a good position but it will be a big fight right up to the end."

Arsenal had flirted repeatedly with disaster in the opening minutes. Angulo was allowed a free run and shot, the returning David Seaman came within inches of being caught in possession on the six-yard line by Pablo Aimar and an Ashley Cole headed clearance crashed into Pascal Cygan.

But once they had warmed up, the home side began to put Valencia under pressure and should have gone ahead in the 21st minute after superb work down the left by Dennis Bergkamp.

Released by Robert Pires' pass, the Dutchman pulled away from Fabian Ayala and cut back a cross straight into the path of Freddie Ljungberg.

Spilt by the twin luxuries of space and time, the Swede opted to try and control the ball but his first touch let him down and the danger dissipated.

Palop, standing in for the injured Santiago Canizares, did well to gather a Bergkamp drive through a crowded penalty area seven min-

utes later.

He then denied Thierry Henry twice in the space of a minute – comfortably coping with a rather tame free-kick before producing a much better effort at the feet of the Frenchman after he had been released by a pass from his international teammate Patrick Vieira.

Vieira, who had been doubtful for the match until just before kick-off, lasted only seven more minutes before he had to go off with a recurrence of the groin injury that had threatened his participation. He will definitely miss the north London derby at Tottenham on Sunday and could be facing a longer spell on the sidelines, Wenger admitted.

Ljungberg almost made amends for his earlier miss with an exquisite turn in the box to leave himself free against Palop. But the Spanish keeper was equal to the challenge, standing up and waiting for the shot which he managed to block with an outstretched boot.

Bergkamp then got on the end of Henry's chip with a header that Palop plucked from the air as it looped towards the top corner.

Valencia continued to look dangerous on the counter-attack – Bergkamp's header was followed immediately by a swift raid that finished with Angulo testing Seaman with a low drive.

But their chances of victory suffered a hammer blow 18 minutes from time when Angulo was given a straight red card by referee Kim Nielsen after appearing to elbow Cygan in an off-the-ball clash.

A minute later a fierce Ljungberg drive brought another good stop from Palop.

That set the stage for a late onslaught from Arsenal and second-half substitute Sylvain Wiltord should have won them the match in the final minute, when his shot was cleared off the line by Carlos Marchena.

But Valencia also might have snatched the three points when Carew's header looped over Seaman and had to be hooked clear by Sol Campbell.

## STANDINGS

European Champions league tables after Tuesday's second group phase matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Group A							
Inter Milan	2	2	0	0	7	3	6
Barcelona	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Bayer Leverkusen	2	0	0	2	3	5	0
Newcastle	1	0	0	1	1	4	0

  

Group B							
Arsenal	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Ajax	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Valencia	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
AS Roma	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

# Vieira blow for Gunners



AFP, London

Arsenal will have to do without their inspirational skipper Patrick Vieira for their north London derby against Tottenham at the weekend and possibly for even longer after he limped out of the Champions League draw with Valencia.

Manager Arsene Wenger readily admitted that his decision to gamble on the fitness of Vieira, who had been a doubtful starter to the match after injuring himself in training on Tuesday, had backfired.

"Patrick is definitely out for the weekend but it is difficult to say how serious the problem is," Wenger admitted. "I've got no clear answer from the doctors."

A prolonged spell on the sidelines for Vieira would be a major blow to Arsenal as they head in to the hectic end-of-year domestic programme having had their lead at the top of the Premiership trimmed to just three points following their defeat by Manchester United at the weekend.

Wenger said he had decided to let play his captain and countryman after he came through a pre-match

fitness test. But Vieira lasted only until seven minutes before half-time before the problem in his groin recurred, albeit on the opposite side.

"Patrick was insistent on playing and felt good. Medically, he got the green light and I decided to give him a test on the pitch," Wenger said.

"I took the same gamble in Rome though with Oleg Luzhny and it worked. You have to accept it when you take these kind of decisions."

"Of course, after the game, it does not look the best of decisions but you know that, psychologically, Patrick has an influence on the team."

"For the other players to feel him there at the start of the game is important."

As well as taking on Tottenham at White Hart Lane on Sunday, Arsenal will face Middlesbrough at home, West Brom away and then Liverpool and Chelsea at home over the festive period.

Despite the blow of losing Vieira, Wenger was encouraged to see Ray Parlour doing a good job after coming on to replace the Frenchman. Parlour is on his way back to full fitness after a long injury lay-off.



PHOTO: AFP

Inter Milan's Italian international Luigi Di Biagio (L) puts pressure on Bayer Leverkusen's Turkish playmaker Yelderei Basturk in Milan on December 10.

# Di Biagio propels Inter



AFP, Milan

Two first-half goals from Italy international Luigi Di Biagio helped Inter Milan to a nervy 3-2 win over Germany's Bayer Leverkusen in their Champions League second phase clash here on Tuesday.

Victory against last season's

beaten finalists took the Italians top of Group A with a maximum six points from two matches.

Di Biagio opened the scoring at the San Siro with a flicked header on the quarter hour and rifled home his second from close range 12 minutes later.

Croatian international Boris Zivkovic pulled a goal back for the visitors just after the hour mark before Hernan Crespo poked in Inter's third 10 minutes from time.

Leverkusen gave Inter a fright when Brazilian summer signing Franca headed past Francesco Toldo in stoppage time, but Hector Cuper's men managed to hold on for three valuable points.

Cuper was disappointed with the way his team made it hard for themselves in the closing stages.

"My heart was under pressure at the end," Cuper said.

"We missed several chances to finish them off and risked a disaster at the end."

"Leverkusen were very powerful in the air and from set-pieces and my players forgot that on the second goal."

Cuper said Inter could ill afford similar mistakes later on in the competition.

"In the Champions' League mistakes will get punished because of the quality of the teams in it," he added.

"You need strong mentality to do well and I hope we can maintain a good attitude and go far in Europe."

Cuper singled out Alvaro Recoba for special praise after an excellent performance behind the two forwards, Crespo and Christian Vieri.

"We may have to use him there again," Cuper added.

"I thought it might unsettle the midfield but it worked well. Sometimes you have to take risks."

Leverkusen, who lost last season's final 2-1 to Spanish giants Real Madrid in Glasgow, started brightly and almost took the lead in the third minute.

Oliver Neuville's corner-kick found Dimitar Berbatov lurking in the box, but the Bulgarian international's firm header struck a post.

Inter slowly took control after that early scare and went ahead in the 15th minute.

Uruguayan midfielder Recoba, recalled to the Inter line-up after shining as a second-half substitute at Lazio on Saturday, swung over a corner which Di Biagio directed past Jorg Butt at the near post with a faint touch off his forehead.

The goal woke Inter from their slumber and it was no surprise when they doubled their advantage in the 27th minute.

A sweeping move started by Di Biagio was finished off by the tenacious midfielder who beat Butt with a vicious left-foot volley which went in off the crossbar.

Crespo should have added a third before the break but the Argentina international headed Di Biagio's cross high over the bar.

Inter appeared to have the match all but wrapped up but they let their concentration slip in the 63rd minute to hand Leverkusen a lifeline.

Neuville's accurate cross found the boot of Zivkovic, who rammed the ball into the top left-hand corner. The goal lifted Leverkusen, who began to adopt a more adventurous approach as they went in search of an equaliser.

But after several raids on the Inter goal came to nothing, Inter restored their two-goal advantage in the 80th minute.

A cross from second-half substitute Nicola Beati caused confusion in the Leverkusen box, and Crespo sneaked ahead of Butt to steer the ball over the goaline.

Inter's nerves were frayed when Franca scored in injury-time and Leverkusen were denied an equaliser 60 seconds later when Bernd Schneider's effort was ruled out for handball.

# Ajax down Roma



AFP, Amsterdam

Ajax took a sizeable step towards the Champions League quarter-finals on Tuesday after goals from Zlatan Ibrahimovic and veteran Jari Litmanen saw off AS Roma 2-1.

Ibrahimovic gave the four-time Dutch continental kings the lead after 11 minutes, knocking in the rebound after Nigel de Jong had a shot blocked, and then set up Finland star Litmanen for the second after 66 minutes.

The second goal knocked the stuffing out of the Italians, who opened their second phase campaign with a 3-1 home loss to Arsenal, although Gabriel Batistuta headed a late consolation.

The Romans, European Cup finalists in 1984, now have a mountain to climb to reach the last eight.

Veteran playmaker Litmanen started off on the bench but came in for Hossam Ahmed Mido 12 minutes

into the second half - and promptly scored the clincher.

Litmanen left Liverpool in August to return to the club where he won a European Cup winner's medal in 1995 with a final win over Juventus and whereas his former English Premiership colleagues have fallen by the Champions League wayside the 31-year-old is now bidding for another shot at glory.

Ibrahimovic touched the ball on for the Finnish international who fired instinctively past Francesco Antonioli.

The Italians were missing injured pair Damiano Tommasi and Marco Delvecchio and although skipper Francesco Totti led the attack Roma coach Fabio Capello elected to leave Batistuta on the bench.

He belatedly threw the Argentine veteran forward on for Antonio Cassano for the final 19 minutes and he nodded past Maarten Stekelenburg with barely a minute remaining - not long enough for Roma to snatch an equaliser.

Stekelenburg, who had just prior to Batistuta's goal done well to save

a meaty Totti freekick, played in the Ajax goal in place of injured Joey Didulica.

Ajax had gone into the match hampered by the loss of key defender Cristian Chivu, and midfielder Tomas Galasek - both suspended - and striker Rafael van der Vaart, who tore a thigh muscle in league action at the weekend which saw De Graafschap hold Ronald Koeman's side 1-1.

That was still enough to leave Ajax top of the pile by a point from PSV Eindhoven.

Koeman has a winner's medal in his collection from 1992, but that was in his Barcelona days when he scored the winner from a trademark freekick against Sampdoria at Wembley.

Roma coach Fabio Capello will be disappointed after demanding his side bounce back from their weekend loss to AC Milan, a reverse which left them a modest 11th in Serie A with just four wins in 13 games.

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Collated Champions League results on Tuesday:

**Group A**  
At Milan  
Inter Milan (Ita) 3 (Di Biagio 15, 27, Crespo 80) Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Zivkovic 63, Franca 90)  
At Barcelona  
Barcelona (Spa) v Newcastle (Eng) - postponed to Wednesday (waterlogged pitch)

**Group B**  
At London  
Arsenal (Eng) 0 Valencia (Spa) 0  
At Amsterdam  
Ajax (Ned) 2 (Ibrahimovic 11, Litmanen 67) AS Roma (Ita) 1 (Batistuta 89)

## Bilbao booter tests positive

AFP, Bilbao

Athletic Bilbao midfielder Carlos Gurpegi has tested positive for traces of the banned steroid nandrolone, the Basque club confirmed here on Tuesday.

Athletic said the Spanish football federation informed them Gurpegi failed a test taken after the match against local rivals Real Sociedad on September 1, the opening weekend of the Spanish First Division.

The club said that the player has protested his innocence and was insisting that he had not taken anything deliberately.

They added that they were standing by the 22-year-old player. "We have absolute confidence in the behaviour of the player and also of our medical services," Athletic said in a statement on Tuesday.

If Gurpegi is banned, he will be the third Spanish professional player to fall foul of dope testing for nandrolone.

Celta's Francisco Borja Aguirretxu was suspended for six months in February 1997, and Spanish international Pep Guardiola was banned for four months in November 2001 while playing for Italian side Brescia.



PHOTO: AFP

Francesco Totti (R), the AS Roma captain, locked in a tussle with Ajax Amsterdam's Abubakari Yakubu (C) and Andre Bergdolio at the Amsterdam Arena on December 10.

# Same old South America



REUTERS, Asuncion

South America has decided to keep its controversial World Cup qualifying system in which the 10 countries play each other twice, officials have said.

The format, in which each team plays 18 matches, has angered European clubs in the past as their South American players make transatlantic journeys on an almost monthly basis to take part.

The South American Football

Confederation (CSF) had said on Monday that some countries would propose bringing back the old system, in which teams were divided into groups, because of the financial crisis that has hit international soccer.

But after Tuesday's meeting of the executive committee, directors said it had been decided to stand by the "everyone plays everyone" method.

"It's the fairest system because everyone plays the same fixtures," said CSF director Oscar Harrison.

Harrison, who is also president of the Paraguayan Football Association (APF), said the decision

would have to be ratified by soccer's world governing body FIFA.

If FIFA gives the go-ahead the South American qualifiers would start next August and be stretched over a three-year period to fit into the world body's new international calendar.

Harrison said travelling could also be reduced by playing fixtures in batches of two.

"We have agreed with FIFA and UEFA (Europe's governing body) to play in two rounds of matches at a time," he said.

"In Europe they play qualifiers on the Sunday and the following Wednesday. We would use the

same dates and, by holding the competition over three years, they would have to make no more than three journeys per year."

"We don't think that's very much. It's a good solution for everyone."

Harrison added that, with football in financial turmoil and economic recession hitting nearly all of South America, television money was likely to be less than last time.

"Certainly, the price will go down. But we believe the region will improve a little and so we are waiting to start negotiations."

Chile's Reinaldo Sanchez said only one country had suggested changing the format for qualifiers.