

Serie A

Scrappy Milan go top

Football

AFP, Milan

European champions AC Milan replaced AS Roma at the top of Italy's Serie A despite playing way below their best, edging Siena 2-1 in a rearranged league match here on Wednesday.

The game was due to be played in December but had to be postponed because of Milan's involvement in the Intercontinental Cup final which they lost on penalties to Argentine side Boca Juniors.

Brazil international Kaka gave Milan the lead with a superbly-taken strike before Siena's Fernando Menegazzo had a controversial penalty saved by Dida just before half-time.

Danish striker Jon Dahl Tomasson doubled Milan's advantage from close range shortly after the break only for Norway's Tore Andre Flo to ensure a frantic finale by slotting home his sixth goal of the season three minutes from time.

Milan lead the championship on 45 points from 18 matches with Roma on 43 and title-holders Juventus on 40.

Siena, who were playing a league match at the San Siro for the first time in the Tuscan club's 100 year history, remain in 10th place.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti played down the importance of taking pole position with a little less than half of the season left.

"Our position in the table is important but not definitive," he said.

"It's important that we maintain this kind of form until the end of the season and hopefully come May we will be in with a chance."

Tomasson admitted Siena, who are still to win away from home this season, made life extremely difficult for the Champions League holders.

"It was very tough and had they scored the penalty it could have been even harder," he said.

"But we expect games like this and they will only get tougher now that we are top. Everyone will want to shoot us down."

Roared on by an expectant

home crowd, Milan started positively but too often ran out of ideas in the final third of the pitch where they are normally so effective.

Their first shot did not arrive until in the 24th minute when Andrei Shevchenko's angled drive was beaten away by Generoso Rossi in the Siena goal.

But Milan kept plugging away and were rewarded for their efforts in the 38th minute thanks to a moment of genius from Kaka.

Shevchenko laid the ball off to the quick-footed Brazilian who brilliantly side-stepped Stefano Argilli to create space for a shot and coolly side-footed past Rossi from 15 yards.

Just when it looked as if the floodgates might open, Siena were awarded a dubious penalty.

Defending his own goal, Paolo Maldini appeared to be fouled by Flo when the pair challenged for a high ball and retaliated by pulling down the lanky Norwegian striker.

But the referee saw things differently and incurred the wrath of the home crowd by pointing to the spot and showing a dumbfounded Maldini a yellow card.

Milan will feel justice was done when their Brazilian goalkeeper Dida comfortably saved compatriot Menegazzo's weak spot-kick.

The home side increased their lead nine minutes after the break.

Rossi could only parry Cristian Brocchi's vicious 30-yard drive and Tomasson reacted quickly to snap up the rebound.

Shevchenko hit the post before Flo netted for the visitors from an acute angle in the closing stages, but Milan held their nerve to secure their fourth consecutive league victory and leapfrog Roma.



AC Milan sensation Kaka (L) going past Siena's Stefano Argilli at Milan's San Siro stadium on January 28.

TOP SIX						
Italian football league table after Wednesday's match between AC Milan and Siena (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):						
Milan	18	14	3	1	35	9 45
Roma	18	13	4	1	37	8 43
Juventus	18	12	4	2	41	21 40
Inter	18	9	5	4	29	13 32
Parma	18	9	5	4	26	19 32
Lazio	18	10	2	6	26	21 32

Spanish Cup Real, Alaves in semis

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid swept into the last four of the Spanish Cup on Wednesday when goals from Raul and Zinedine Zidane gave them a 2-1 victory over Valencia at the Metastalla Stadium and a convincing 5-1 win over two legs.

With Zidane starting the second leg of the quarter-final on the bench and David Beckham suspended, Real went ahead after 14 minutes when Ronaldo threaded a pass through Valencia defender Roberto Ayala's legs to Raul and the Spanish international finished off the move.

Roared on by 45,000 fans, Xisco equalised for Valencia with a 74th minute header.

But a heavily deflected free kick from Zidane two minutes into injury time condemned Valencia to their third successive defeat.

In their last match before Raddy Antic takes over as coach, Celta Vigo failed to overturn a 4-2 first-leg deficit against Alaves as a 1-0 home win through Gustavo Lopez's 68th minute goal proved insufficient to prevent them going through.

Sevilla also booked a semi-final place by wrapping up a 6-1 aggregate victory over Atletico Madrid with a 2-1 victory in the capital.

Figo going nowhere

AFP, Lisbon

Portuguese star Luis Figo will stay on at Real Madrid for the foreseeable future, the club's director of sport Jorge Valdano said in an interview published Thursday.

"We are very pleased with his performance and I sincerely believe he has been a decisive factor in each of the titles we have conquered since his arrival," he told sports daily A Bola.

Figo has played over 100 league matches for the Spanish champions since his signing from bitter rivals Barcelona in the summer of 2000.

The 31-year-old's contract with Real Madrid runs to 2006 but several English Premiership clubs have reportedly made contact with the player in the past month about an end-of-season move.

Valdano dismissed the reports. "It is always the same thing. Real is a club that has produced much news over the years. The problem is when there is no news it is replaced by rumours," he said.

Valdano also dismissed as "absurd" recent speculation in the Spanish media that Real intend to fire their Portuguese manager Carlos Queiroz at the end of the season, his first with the Spanish giants.

"I am very happy with his work," he said.

Queiroz's predecessor Vicente del Bosque was dismissed for "only" winning the league title last season, despite netting two European Cups in his four years in charge.

While Real's Portuguese manager has faced some criticism over his tactical decisions in early matches, and difficulties in dealing with a shortage of cover in defence, Valdano said the club had no plans to sign a defensive pillar.

"We are not thinking about defensive reinforcements," he said.

Bundesliga preview

Time to get back to work

Football

AFP, Berlin

The Bundesliga returns to the footballing calendar after a six-week winter break this weekend with a tight title race in prospect for the second half of the campaign.

A mere four points separates the top four teams in the German top-flight with Werder Bremen leading the way on 39 points while Bayern Munich, Bayer Leverkusen and VfB Stuttgart are all hovering below on 35 points.

A four-horse race for the 2004 crown is a refreshing change for a German footballing public used to watching Bayern canter to yet another domestic title.

The reigning champions have looked a shadow of themselves this season but manager Ottmar Hitzfeld is still confident they can prove the critics wrong and finish top of the pile come May.

"We will attack right from the start and I am convinced that we will prevail at the end," declared Hitzfeld.

Fears that a lucrative Champions League clash with Real Madrid on February 24 could

distact his team were allayed by the wily coach.

"Our target is to retain the German title," emphasised Hitzfeld. "The Real game is still some way away."

FIXTURES	
Friday:	Borussia Dortmund v Schalke 04
Saturday:	VfL Bochum v VfL Wolfsburg, 1860 Munich v Kaiserslautern, Cologne v Borussia Monchengladbach, Werder Bremen v Hertha Berlin, VfB Stuttgart v Hansa Rostock, Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayern Munich
Sunday:	SC Freiburg v Bayer Leverkusen, Hannover v SV Hamburg

Goodbye Feher

Football

AFP, Gyor, Hungary

Nearly a thousand fans, family and teammates paid their final respects Wednesday to Hungarian international Miklos Feher, who collapsed and died when playing for his club Benfica in Portugal on Sunday.

Among the mourners who filled a small chapel in Gyor in western Hungary, Feher's birthplace, were the entire Benfica squad flown over to attend the funeral.

"The entire world of football mourns you," Hungarian Football Federation president Imre Bozoky told the congregation which also included Hungarian and Portuguese government ministers, and Feher's teammates from the national team.

The 24-year-old Feher's casket was draped in a white cloth with stripes of the Hungarian flag and topped by a Benfica scarf.

"When the day comes that we win another championship," Benfica president Luis Filipe Vieira said, "we will also win it for you and we will also raise our glasses for your soul."

"It was a true soul, the soul of a true man," Vieira added in a choking voice through a Hungarian interpreter.

Most of the mourners braved a chilling cold as they waited outside the overflowing chapel near the snow-covered grounds of the cemetery, with many holding flowers and wiping away tears.

Tibor Fodor, a former teammate from Feher's days at the local top division club Gyor ETO, said they had played football together since their childhood days.

"What everyone has said about him and how nice he was to everybody, it's all true," Fodor said as he held a bouquet of flowers.

Feher, 24, collapsed playing for Benfica in a league match against Vitoria Guimaraes.

He was stretchered off the field in Guimaraes and taken to hospital but died shortly afterwards. An autopsy performed later proved to be inconclusive, according to the Portuguese prosecutor-general.

"You loved football so much that you even gave your life to it," said Feher's mother, Aniko, in an emotional speech recalling the player's childhood. "But I promise you that you will live on in our hearts."

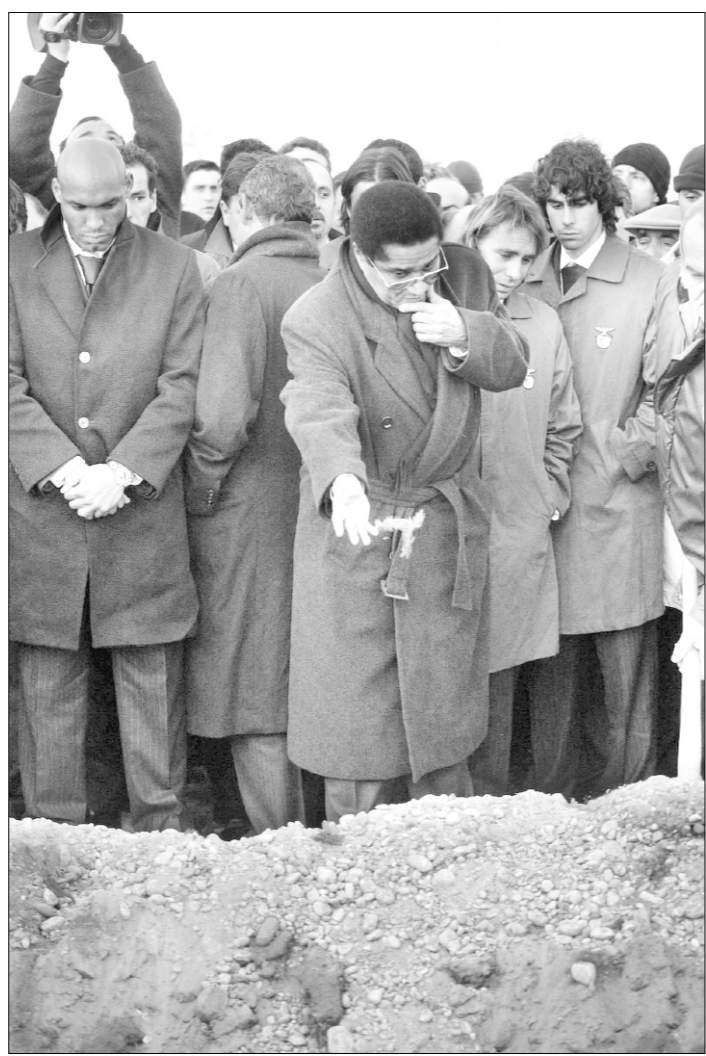
"We will miss him terribly," said Dora Gal, who was standing outside the chapel with a single red rose in her hand recalling how she attended Feher's first-ever match for Gyor.

Feher, capped 25 times, moved to Portugal in the 1998/99 season from Gyor to play for FC Porto. He was signed by Benfica in 2002 after

spells at Salgueiros and Braga. "He was a perfect role model for any young person," Gal said, as an orange sunset illuminated the snow-covered grounds behind her where Feher found his final resting place.

News of Feher's sudden death has dominated newspaper headlines in Portugal and Hungary.

It followed that of Manchester City midfielder Marc-Vivien Foe who suffered a fatal heart attack when playing for Cameroon in last June's Confederation Cup semi-final against Colombia in Lyon, France.



REST IN PEACE: Portuguese football legend player Euzebio (C) drops a pinewood sprig on the grave of Benfica's Hungarian international Miklos Feher at Gyor, Hungary on February 28.



Teammates try to restrain an incensed DR Congo forward Lomanan Lua Lua (C) after he was red carded against Tunisia in Rades on January 28.

Tunisia in quarters

Congo feel cheated

AFP, Sfax

Hosts Tunisia became the first team to reach the quarter-finals of the African Nations Cup on Wednesday but their celebrations were overshadowed by accusations of cheating levelled at them by beaten opponents Democratic Republic of Congo.

Tunisia secured their passage into the last eight with a 3-0 win but the stormy encounter saw Congo skipper Lomanan Lua Lua sent off late in the first half.

The Newcastle striker, who claimed that his team's campaign had been deliberately undermined, was so distraught that he immediately threatened to quit international football.

"We've been treated like shit since we have been here," said the 23-year-old who added he had already been punched.

"I'm finished with internationals

now because I fear what the reaction might be towards my family back in Congo after this.

"Every time I come here I am risking my life. God knows what's happening. I might have to think twice about playing internationals again."

Lua Lua was red-carded in the 38th minute when he clashed with Tunisian midfielder Jawhar Mnari.

Television replays showed that Lua Lua kicked out meekly at the ankles of the Tunisian player but Mnari collapsed theatrically to the ground writhing in agony and holding his head.

The Newcastle ace had to be escorted from the pitch as rival officials and players became involved in an ugly bust-up on the touchline.

Congo's English coach Mick Wadsworth accused the Tunisians of deliberately trying to get his captain red-carded.

"We spoke to Lomanan before the game, we knew he was under a great deal of pressure and that they were

frightened of him," said Wadsworth.

"They changed their team radically to try and cope and he got drawn into something he shouldn't have got drawn into."

"They did the Oscar nominations last night. They should have waited another 24 hours because they could have got a few more here."

Brazil-born Silva dos Santos scored twice for the Carthage Eagles in the second half and fellow striker Najeh Braham netted once to maintain their 100 per cent record after two rounds of Group A action.

Tunisia have six points, Guinea four, Rwanda one and DR Congo none ahead of the final series of games Sunday when Tunisia tackle Guinea here and Rwanda confront DR Congo in Bizerte.

Earlier in Bizerte, Rwanda scored an injury time equaliser to keep their hopes of qualifying alive with a 1-1 draw against Guinea.

Rwanda had lost 2-1 to hosts Tunisia on the opening day and

were in danger of being eliminated when substitute Karim Kamanzi popped up in stoppage time to cancel out Titi Camara's early second-half goal.

"It is very disappointing," said Guinea coach Michel Dussuyer.

"We almost had qualification for the quarter-finals sewn up but now we must forget this very quickly and prepare for the next match against Tunisia."

Rwanda's assistant coach Marie Takwabira said that his team's task will be made harder by losing two key players to suspension.

"The equalising goal was incredible but that's football. We have the ability to beat Congo in our last match but sadly Joao Elias and Leandre Bizagwira are out of contention."

Thursday sees another potentially explosive encounter take place with bitter rivals Egypt and Algeria clashing in Sousse while defending champions Cameroon face Zimbabwe in the other Group C match in Sfax.

United confirm new Ferguson deal

AFP, London

Manchester United confirmed on Wednesday they had agreed a new one-year rolling contract with manager Alex Ferguson.

Sir Alex's current contract would have expired in June 2005 and the new contract he has signed is extended for a year, United said in a statement.

Reyes debut could be delayed

AFP, London

Spanish super winger Jose Antonio Reyes might be banned from Arsenal's Premiership match with Manchester City on Sunday.

The 20-year-old striker, who joined from Seville in a deal totalling 17 million pounds (30 million dollars), may have to wait for his English debut as Arsenal are waiting to hear if the international clearance given to Reyes by the Spanish FA will include the fact he is subject to a one-match club suspension.

Reyes was due to serve that ban in La Liga this weekend and Arsenal had hoped that it would be scrapped by his move to England.

But it now looks as if Reyes will be unable to play on Sunday at Highbury and would be set for a debut in the second leg of the League Cup semi-final at Middlesbrough next Tuesday.

But the wait should be worth it.

Reyes is reported to be better than Liverpool's England star Michael Owen.

"His dribbling and speed on the ball makes life hell for defenders," said Real Madrid defender Ivan Helguera.

"Personally, I think he is better than Michael Owen."

For Sunday's match, Thierry Henry is likely to return from his break to play alongside Dennis Bergkamp.

The Dutchman scored the opening goal and excelled in the 4-1 FA Cup fourth-round win over Middlesbrough at Highbury last Saturday, even though he was short of match practice after missing five matches with a calf injury.