

Happy 1000th

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AFP, Manchester

Manchester United gave manager Sir Alex Ferguson the perfect gift to mark his 1,000th game with the club on Tuesday, a 2-1 win against Lyon at Old Trafford which sends them into the second round of the Champions League.

Dutch marksman Ruud van Nistelrooy was yet again Ferguson's saviour, heading home from Rio Ferdinand's cross in the 53rd minute after Mahamadou Diarra struck late in the first half, cancelling out Gary Neville's opening goal.

Ferguson was wreathed in a huge smile after seeing his side come through safely as they search for a second Champions League title under his aegis.

"That was an excellent performance."

"I am ecstatic about the second-half performance and that man (van Nistelrooy) scored again! He's incredible," said the 62-year-old, adding that van Nistelrooy was struggling with a calf strain and would probably miss the Premiership game this weekend.

Ferguson also heaped praise on England central defender Rio Ferdinand for his part in creating the goal for the Dutch master.

"I couldn't believe the big man getting down the byline and crossing it like that," he said, praising the French sides "very tough opponents".

"Both teams will progress to the second stage, and I think both teams will do very well."

Ferguson added that Neville, who has been suffering from a virus, was on the verge of being substituted when he scored what was only his second Champions League goal in his 89th appearance in the competition.

"He says: 'Give us a minute,' and he scores a goal," a beaming Ferguson explained, also saying that he had been uncharacteristically agitated ahead of game 1,000.

"All day I was a bit nervy I suppose, you think that it could fall flat, that you could lose the game, but I kept saying to myself: 'Look, there's the 999 before it, and in games of football you can lose them,'" he said.

"But I was hoping we would win tonight because it was a great night for me, and the fans were fantastic."

Lyon threatened throughout, and van Nistelrooy's goal, adding to a pair in the away leg in Lyon and four against Sparta Prague in United's last European game, settled nerves after a

string of near misses for the home side.

Van Nistelrooy also spared the blushes of United goalkeeper Roy Carroll, who had erred badly to let Diarra's long distance shot squirm out off his hands and into the net.

But despite a series of scares from the quick and well-organised Lyon side, Old Trafford's 66,000-plus crowd was in the mood for a party, giving Ferguson a standing ovation at a pre-match ceremony to mark game 1,000.

In the 18 years since Ferguson arrived from Aberdeen, the Scotsman has guided his side to an extraordinary eight Premier League titles, five FA Cups, a European Cup Winners Cup and one Champions League trophy.

Ferguson is open about his desperation to win another Champions League title to match that of 1999, and will be delighted with a win that leaves United topping Group D and guaranteed a place in the next stage with a game to spare.

Lyon made it plain from the start that they were out to spoil Ferguson's party, winning a pair of corners in the first few minutes.

But United looked the more likely scorers, with Alan Smith - deputising in midfield for the injured Ryan Giggs - teasing himself up for a fourth minute shot from the edge of the area which rose to high.

England teenage striker Wayne Rooney, playing just behind van Nistelrooy in the attack until the Dutchman was substituted on 71 minutes, came closer 10 minutes later, shooting hard against the left post.

The first goal, on 20 minutes, came from the unlikelyst of sources.

Neville and winger Cristiano Ronaldo combined well to release Smith on the right wing, and his cross caused chaos in the Lyon penalty area. The ball popped free and Neville shot home hard and low.

But amid continued United pressure, Lyon held firm, with the multinational central midfield trio of Brazilian international Juninho, Ghana's Michael Essien and Diarra, from Mali, starting a series of breaks.

Diarra's breakthrough came as he shot from the edge of the United penalty area, and while fiercely struck it was aimed straight at Carroll.

But Carroll - Ferguson's first choice after Tim Howard made a series of errors earlier in the season - somehow let the ball squirm from his grasp and into the net.

The manager was sympathetic afterwards. "It can happen in games of football that goalkeepers can make a mistake."



THAT'S WHAT I WANTED! (L) Sir Alex Ferguson applauds during the match against Lyon which was his 1000th in charge of Manchester United. (R) Ruud Van Nistelrooy (2nd R) makes it a perfect night for the manager as he scores the winner.

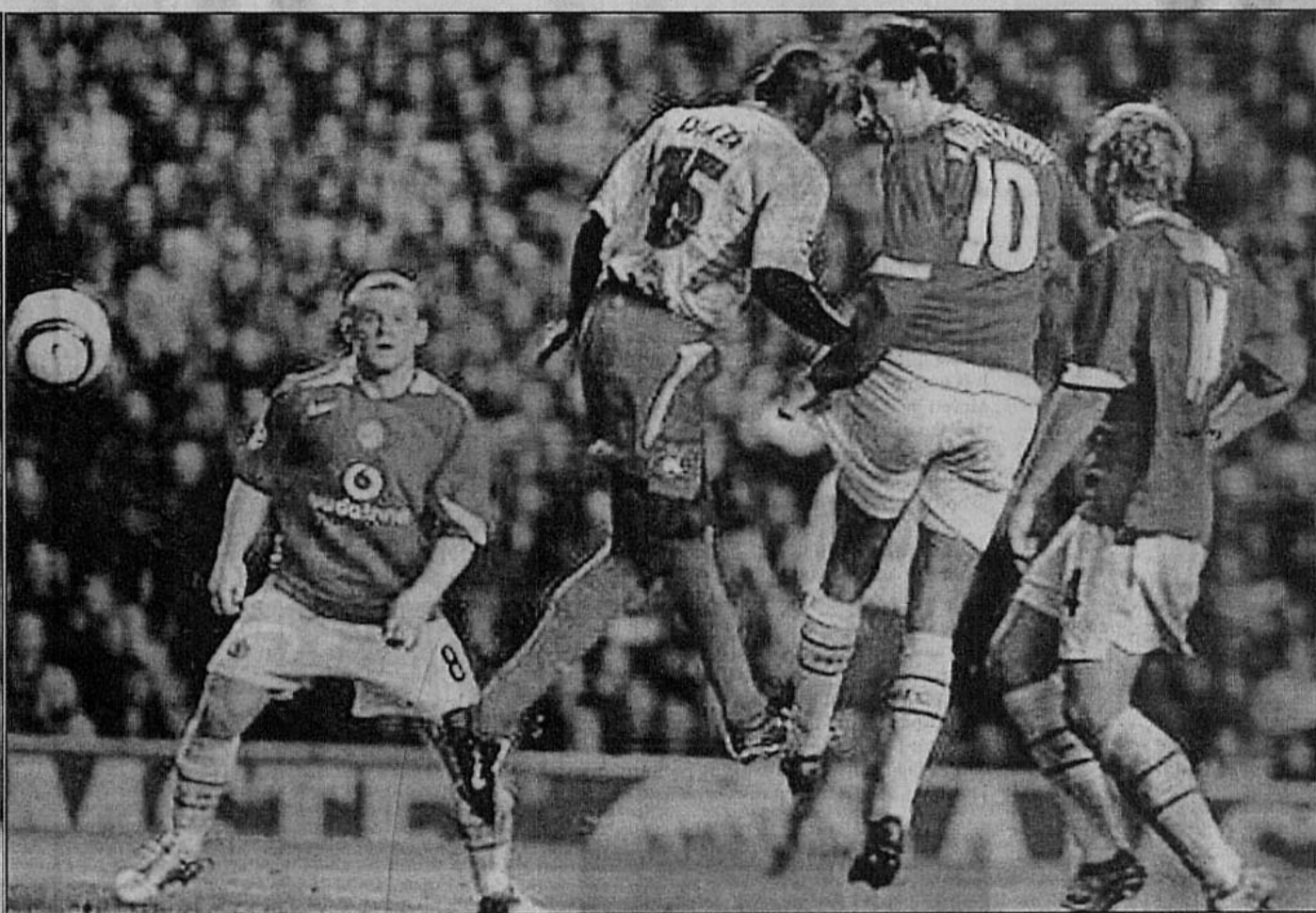


PHOTO: AFP/REUTERS

STANDINGS

Champions League tables after Tuesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Group A									
Olympiakos	5	3	1	1	4	2	10		
Monaco	5	3	0	2	5	4	9		
Liverpool	5	2	1	2	3	2	7		
Deportivo	5	0	2	3	0	4	2		
Group B									
Kiev	5	3	1	1	11	5	10		
Leverkusen	5	2	2	1	10	7	8		
Real	5	2	2	1	8	8	8		
Roma	5	0	1	4	4	13	1		
Group C									
Juventus	5	5	0	0	5	0	15		
Bayern	5	3	0	2	10	3	9		
Ajax	5	1	0	4	4	8	3		
Tel-Aviv	5	1	0	4	3	11	3		
Group D									
Man United	5	3	2	0	14	6	11		
Lyon	5	3	1	1	12	8	10		
Fenerbahce	5	2	0	3	7	13	6		
Prague	5	0	1	4	2	8	1		

UEFA might take Real to task

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AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid could face severe sanctions from the sport's continental governing body UEFA, after Bayer Leverkusen's black players were racially abused in the two clubs' Champions League encounter on Tuesday.

Bayer's Brazilian defenders Roque Junior and Juan were the target of abuse from Real's Ultra Sur hooligan element during Tuesday's 1-1 draw between the clubs.

UEFA confirmed to AFP on Wednesday that they are aware of the abuse at Real's Santiago Bernabeu stadium but were waiting for the referee's report before deciding on what action to take.

"We are expecting the report later today," a UEFA spokeswoman told AFP.

The options open to UEFA include a fine, forcing the Spanish giants to play their future home games behind closed doors, or at a different location, or even expulsion from the Champions League.

However, UEFA are highly unlikely to take the most extreme course of action despite Real's poor record on crowd control and its supporters' behaviour.

The abuse on Tuesday was neither as sustained, nor reached the same decibel levels, as that which was brought home to Spanish football in their international against England at the same venue last week.

Real Madrid striker Michael Owen, who played for England on Wednesday but was on the bench for the Champions League group B

match, admitted he had heard and was upset by the chanting during the game against Bayer.

"It's a bit disappointing to hear that. There's been a lot of talk about it over the last week and it's always difficult to hear that," Owen told British satellite broadcaster Sky Sports.

"We've done really well in England to stamp it out and there are pockets in Europe that can't stamp it out," added Owen.

The monkey-like grunting will also certainly have reached the embarrassed ears of Real president Florentino Perez, who was sitting beside his guest UEFA president Lennart Johansson in the directors box during the game.

Spanish television also showed some members of the Ultra Sur giving neo-Nazi salutes to the German fans and players during and after the game.

Last week UEFA handed out heavy fines to Sparta Prague and Sevilla after racist abuse against opponents' players marred recent European fixtures involving the two clubs.

In addition, the Spanish federation sent a strongly-worded circular to all clubs ahead of last weekend's domestic fixtures warning them that they had a constitutional obligation not to tolerate racist abuse.

Curiously, Spain's two main sports papers, Marca and As, made no mention on Wednesday of the latest incident of serious racist abuse at a football ground.

However, in general, the Spanish media took two days to wake up to the fact that the rest of the world was disgusted with events in the Santiago Bernabeu last Wednesday before condemning what had happened.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Collated results in the European Champions League after Tuesday's matches:

Group A	
At Athens	Olympiakos (GRE) 1 (Djordjevic 68)
At Monaco	Deportivo La Coruna (SPA) 0
At Monaco	Monaco (FRA) 1 (Saviola 55) Liverpool (ENG) 0
Group B	
At Kiev	Dynamo Kiev (UKR) 2 (Dellas 73-og, Shatskiikh 82) AS Roma (ITA) 0
At Madrid	Real Madrid (SPA) 1 (Raul 70) Bayer Leverkusen (GER) 1 (Berbatov 36)
Group C	
At Turin	Juventus (ITA) 1 (Zalayeta 14) Ajax (NED) 0
At Munich	Bayern Munich (GER) 5 (Pizarro 12, Salihamidzic 37, Frings 44, Makaay 71, 80) Maccabi Tel-Aviv (ISR) 1 (Dego 55-pen)
Group D	
At Prague	Sparta Prague (CZE) 0 Fenerbahce (TUR) 1 (Kovacic 20-og)
At Manchester	Manchester United (ENG) 2 (G. Neville 19, van Nistelrooy 53) Lyon (FRA) 1 (Diarra 40)

Fergie not a good bet!

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson may be celebrating his 1,000th game in charge of the English giants on Tuesday but one of Britain's leading bookmakers believes it is odds-on for the Scot's Old Trafford reign will last for fewer than 100 more first-team matches.

Ladbroke's make Ferguson 10/11 to leave his post, hardly surprising odds given that the United boss is 62 years old and has already gone back on one planned retirement.

Ladbroke's spokesman Warren Lush said: "Fergie is clearly not going to go on forever and we think it is likely that he will have left United in less than 100 games' time."

However, for those who think Ferguson will beat the bookies' predictions, Ladbroke's offered odds of 8/1 he will be in charge for 200 or more first-team games.

But even those who admire the former Aberdeen manager's seemingly insatiable appetite for football may think twice about taking the 1000/1 on offer that Ferguson will reach 2,000 games as United manager.

Given his present rate of progress that would take Ferguson another 16 years by which time he would be 78-years-old.

Ferguson reached his 1,000th game in charge with a Champions League group fixture against French title-holders Lyon at Old Trafford.

It goes down to the wire

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AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid and Bayer Leverkusen fought out an exciting 1-1 draw to leave qualification from Champions League group B still up in the air for both sides here Tuesday.

"Of course I wanted to go back to Germany with a win because then we could have relaxed for the last game but a draw is still good," said Bayer coach Klaus Augenthaler.

After Dynamo Kiev beat Roma 2-0, Real now need to win against the Italians in two weeks time in order to progress towards a 10th European title.

"I'm sad that we didn't get it sorted out tonight but at least our future is in our own hands," said Real coach Mariano Garcia Remon.

Bayer's Bulgarian international Dimitar Berbatov tormented Real just as he had done in their first encounter in Germany two months ago and put the visitors ahead after 36 minutes.

Real club captain Raul then gave the nine-times European champions a deserved share of the points 20 minutes before the whistle to take him to 49 Champions League goals and a share of the all-time club record with former Real legend Alfredo Di Stefano.

The Spaniards could have secured their qualification 10 minutes from time after Zinedine Zidane was brought down in the area by Bayer defender Juan.

However, the fall was more of a dive and justice was done when Bayer goalkeeper Jorg Butt palmed away Luis Figo's penalty.

"We were better in the first half and in the end I am happy we managed to hang on," added Augenthaler, acknowledging that Real improved as the game went on.

"But this game was also a response to those German newspaper stories that suggested that this side was broken up into different groups. We showed that we are all one team," added the 1990 World Cup winner.

Bayer waited patiently for their chances during the first 45 minutes before Berbatov found the net for the third time in the season's Champions League campaign.

Ukrainian striker Andrej Voronin put the ball on the cross bar only for Ivan Helguera to head the rebound straight to the feet of Berbatov, who didn't fail from



PHOTO: AFP

JUST NOT THEIR DAY: Real Madrid's Portuguese superstar Luis Figo (C) reacts after missing a penalty next to teammate Fernando Morientes (R) at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid on November 23.

close range.

Real could have equalised shortly after the break but David Beckham missed a sitter and was then taken off after 54 minutes.

The pressure will rise on Real coach Mariano Garcia Remon after the England captain's fourth dismal display since returning to action 10 days ago after a six weeks absence due to two broken ribs.

Noticeably, Real seemed to move up a gear without Beckham but Garcia Remon continued to back his man.

"It was a tactical change, nothing more and not one to do with his physical condition," added the Real coach.

Raul's goal came after a neat one-two with Figo, which caught the Bayer defence napping.

Seven minutes after Raul entered the Real record books, Ronaldo also hit the post to reinforce the impression that the home side were going to snatch three points at the death.

"We made mistakes during the first half and made life difficult for

ourselves but in the second half we were passing the ball around much more fluently," assessed Garcia Remon.

The match was the first in the Santiago Bernabeu since last Wednesday's notorious international between Spain and England, sadly only remarkable for the racist abuse heaped upon the black England players.

Worryingly little seemed to have been learnt by some sections of the Real spectators, despite the worldwide criticism of what happened, as monkey-like grunts were still often audible when Bayer's two black Brazilian defenders Roque Junior and Juan touched the ball.

Another negative note for Bayer, in addition to being unable to convert their first half superiority into more than one point was that their Argentine defender Diego Placente was booked.

Placente will now miss the vital decider at home to Dynamo Kiev.

Raul touches Di Stefano

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Raul equalled Alfredo Di Stefano's all-time European scoring record of 49 goals when he equalised for his side in the 70th minute of their Champions League Group B match against Bayer Leverkusen on Tuesday.

Di Stefano scored his 49 goals in 58 matches between 1955 and 1964, guiding Real Madrid to five consecutive European Cups during that period.

Raul has scored his 49 goals in 94 Champions League matches for Real Madrid since 1995, winning the competition on three occasions during that period.

He played in the 1-0 victory over Juventus in 1998, scored the last goal in their 3-0 win over Valencia in 2000 and the opener in their 2-1 win over Bayer Leverkusen in 2002.

Hand of Saviola!

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AFP, Monaco

Liverpool's qualification for the knockout phase of the Champions League is now hanging by a thread after a shock 1-0 defeat by Monaco kept alive the hopes of last year's finalists here Tuesday.

Argentine Olympic champion Javier Saviola grabbed the game's only goal in a second half in which Monaco, without a win in their past eight French league games, gave their coach Didier Deschamps a reason to smile.

However after the match Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez hit out at what he said was a blatant hand ball by Saviola just before his goal.

Liverpool have to beat Olympiakos in their final group A match in two weeks' time to qualify as Monaco go second in the group on nine points, one behind the Greek side - who beat Deportivo La Coruna - and two ahead of Liverpool.

Benitez knows Liverpool will have to win their final group A match at home against Olympiakos in a fortnight, and he hit out: "All the people around the world have seen the handball, even the referee said to my players he'd seen it."

"In that respect it was a bad game and a bad pitch, but if you lose through a handball you are very disappointed. He (referee Claus B. Larsen) said the hand was close to the body, but everyone saw the handball."

"I don't know what the referee was thinking," said Benitez, who implied Saviola had used his hand to divert the ball.

"The linesman was next to us, and he saw the handball." Deschamps meanwhile saw his players rise to the occasion to resurrect their campaign.

And the former France great played down the handball issue which could prove to be their Champions League saviour.

"It's difficult to say, we'll have to see the television pictures. I saw the Liverpool players protesting, but the referee didn't whistle. All the better for us."

Liverpool had a debilitating start when Luis Garcia pulled up clutching his hamstring while chasing through ball from Steven Gerrard after only two minutes.

Garcia was soon replaced by Josmi who dropped back to defence while Steve Finnan moved up to the wing.

The loss of Garcia was the last thing Liverpool needed given their injury crisis up front - Milan Baros and Djibril Cisse both being unavailable throughout.

As a result, Liverpool had few chances in the first half and although

both John Arne Riise and Igor Biscan came close to giving the visitors an early opener, Liverpool never really found their rhythm.

Monaco only began to put their game together towards the end of the half, but twice Jamie Carragher came to Liverpool's rescue, clearing the ball away after Shabani Nonda's run down the right, then following a corner which nonetheless afforded Saviola a free shot on Chris Kirkland's goal which sailed wide.

After the break the hosts picked up the pace thanks to Saviola's mazy play around the area.

Just before his 55th minute goal, the Argentine linked well with Nonda, who was tackled superbly by Djimi Traore as he was about to shoot when through alone on Chris Kirkland.

The rebound fell to Saviola, who beat the stranded keeper at his right hand post.

Wenger against walking

AFP, Eindhoven

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger believes players walking off the pitch is not the answer to racist abuse from the stands.

FIFA boss Sepp Blatter said at the weekend that he would support players who walked off in response to the kind of abuse England's black players received during a friendly in Madrid last week.

But Wenger said such an approach would be unworkable because of the potential for fans to manipulate it.

"If you're at home and your team is losing then the racism chants could come out. So when could you finish a game?"

Wenger said he would accept a decision by the referee to abandon a game but maintained that it would still be wrong because it would penalise the vast majority of supporters who have nothing to do with racism.

"Out of 100 people 98 behave in the right way and they pay to watch a football game. Our job is to keep these people happy not the other two percent."

Wenger was speaking on the eve of his side's Champions League meeting with PSV Eindhoven. When the two sides met here two years ago, Arsenal's black striker Thierry Henry was subjected to racist abuse by a section of the home crowd.

But Wenger said he did not expect any repeat of those incidents.

"I cannot feel that Holland is a racist country - I am not concerned about that," the Frenchman said.

"It is an issue and we have to kick any hostile and any racist reaction out of football, but I don't see that as a problem here in Eindhoven."

Yorke is free to leave

Football

AFP, London

Dwight Yorke has been told he is free to leave Birmingham if he is unhappy about the reaction of the club's co-owner, David Sullivan, to the alleged racial abuse suffered by the Trinidadian striker during a match.

Sullivan has been criticised for claiming that an incident in which Yorke was verbally abused by fans of his former club Blackburn during Sunday's Premiership match had been "blown out of proportion."

But the multi-millionaire publisher insisted on Tuesday that he stood by his comments, despite reports Yorke is considering his future at the club.

"In society there is a major problem with people being intolerant of other people. But football is the most

racial-free part of society, you don't see any racial problems at football grounds," Sullivan told BBC Radio.

"I would say the old nursery rhyme 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me' is true."

"If someone calls you a bastard, or a white bastard or a black bastard, to me it's the same comment. It's the nastiness of the comment that's the problem."

"I've been spat at at football grounds, and punched. Whether I was punched for being white or for being Birmingham City co-owner makes no difference to me."

Asked what his reaction would be should Yorke decide he wants to leave St Andrews, Sullivan said: "If he does then I admire him for standing by his principles, but I would be very surprised if he did. If he wants to do that the club wouldn't stand in his way."