

A master of tactics

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti possesses the political skills essential for an employee of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Even if he is astute enough to avoid scoring a point at the expense of Berlusconi after Tuesday's Champions League triumph over Manchester United, others have not failed to notice his little victory over the billionaire owner of the club.

Berlusconi has insisted that his team must play with two strikers at all times even, on one occasion, saying such a formation was "an order" to his coach.

Ancelotti is known to favour playing with a single forward with a pair of attacking midfielders behind them -- the formation that took Milan past United and into the quarter-finals of the Champions League.

When Andriy Shevchenko broke his cheekbone in the 1-0 win over Cagliari on February 19 and with Filippo Inzaghi already sidelined with a broken hand, Ancelotti had an unwanted but justifiable opportunity to revert to his preferred system.

The results have been impressive.

With Argentine Hernan Crespo as a lone striker Milan have won all four games without the Ukrainian, including 1-0 wins in both legs against United with Crespo scoring the decisive goals and the Milan derby, also by a goal to nil.

Berlusconi demanded a 4-4-2 system because he believes it provides greater entertainment and it is hard to disagree with him on that front.

As the results indicate, with Crespo alone in attack albeit ably supported by attacking midfielders Kaka and Rui Costa, Milan have not been a huge threat to opposition defences.

But in all three of those 1-0 wins, if not the last-second 2-1 victory over Atalanta on Saturday, Milan have been well in control of proceedings throughout with the extra man in midfield proving to be of real value.

It helps of course to have the foundation of a defence with the experience and quality that Ancelotti's back-line provides.

United's Wayne Rooney, rated as one of the most exciting young talents in the game, got no joy at all against Paolo Maldini and Alessandro Nesta at Old Trafford or the San Siro.

An injury to Georgian left-back Kakha Kaladze meant Ancelotti had to reshuffle his backline for Tuesday's second-leg but the man who stepped in, former United defender Jaap Stam, was outstanding in keeping quiet his Dutch compatriot Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Brazilian Cafu was rightly described as "fantastic" by United manager Alex Ferguson after two performances of pacey runs, and even more impressive stamina, at right-back.

It was Tuesday's second-leg that showed the real benefits of Ancelotti's system -- with United playing a fluid formation with two wingers and only Paul Scholes and Roy Keane as conventional midfielders, Milan's five-man midfield took a firm grip on the game after the break.

Milan's moves often stemmed from Andrea Pirlo, who in this system can drop as deep as he needs to start the play. With Pirlo in front of the defence, Gennaro Gattuso and Dutchman Clarence Seedorf were given the job of closing down, covering space and winning possession.

With that kind of solidity in place, Kaka and Rui Costa were freed up to focus on what they do best -- keeping possession and waiting for the right moment to provide Crespo with a quality ball.

Although Brazilian Kaka, going through a slump in form, was ineffective against United, Rui Costa looked close to his best again and it is the Portuguese player who has been inserted into the side in place of Shevchenko.

The Ukrainian is close to fitness again, as is Inzaghi who was on the bench against United.

By the time Milan play their quarter-final tie, on April 5 or 6, against opponents to be decided by next week's draw, Ancelotti should have all his strikers fit and available.

The debate with Berlusconi could begin all over again



(L) Barcelona's goalkeeper Victor Valdes protests after Chelsea's winning goal while superstar Ronaldinho (R) tries to make the same point to referee Pierluigi at Stamford Bridge in London on March 8.



PHOTO: AFP

Last laugh Chelsea's



AFP, London

John Terry headed Chelsea into the last eight of the Champions League with the crucial goal in an epic 4-2 victory over Barcelona.

Jose Mourinho's side came within a quarter of an hour of elimination before Terry's 76th minute header put them through 5-4 on aggregate at the end of a night of enthralling drama at Stamford Bridge.

Trailing 2-1 after a bitterly disputed first leg, Chelsea stunned the Spanish league leaders by scoring three times inside the first 20 minutes to take control of the tie in the most spectacular fashion imaginable.

But two goals from Ronaldinho allowed Barcelona to haul themselves back to 3-2 before the break - a score that would have been enough to put them through on the away goals rule.

It could have gone either way after the break but it was to be Chelsea's night.

When Damien Duff floated a corner in from the left, Barcelona made the fatal mistake of allowing Terry a free run from the edge of the box and the Chelsea skipper planted his header powerfully beyond Victor Valdes, though the visitors protested justifiably that Ricardo Carvalho held back their 'keeper.

It mattered not to Terry, who less than a fortnight ago held aloft the League Cup after beating Liverpool in extra-time.

"That performance is up there with the best of them," said the England centre-half.

"We started brilliantly - it was like a runaway train - and pressed them hard because we had been told that they didn't like it and it showed.

"However by half-time it wasn't looking great. Nevertheless we came out fighting and pressed them once again which put them off their rhythm.

"To beat a great side like that says it all about the guts and quality of our team," purred Terry.

The elegant session of keep-ball with which Barcelona opened the match offered no hint of what was to ensue after their most reliable

guardian of possession, Xavi, was hustled off the ball by Lampard, just inside Chelsea's half.

The England midfielder immediately sent Kezman into space on the right, from where the Serbian's astute low cross found Gudjohnsen, who cut inside Gerard before flipping his shot past Valdes.

Lampard might have made it two four minutes later, when he fired John Terry's knockdown over the bar from the edge of the six-yard box.

He quickly made amends by pouncing to score Chelsea's at close-range after Valdes, wrong-footed by a deflected Joe Cole shot could only parry it back into play.

The home supporters barely had time to squeeze in a jubilant rendition of 'Boring, Boring Chelsea' before Duff added a third, finishing off a move that proved Barcelona don't have a monopoly on slick passing.

Carvalho started it on the edge of the Chelsea box, Kezman continued it with a deft lay-off for Cole, whose pass split the Barcelona centrebacks, allowing Duff to squeeze between them at full tilt before earning Duff just enough

space to squeeze his shot low past Valdes.

Samuel Eto'o, with a chip that Cech touched over the bar at full stretch, and Ronaldinho, with a header from the resulting corner, both went close before Paolo Ferreira's handball allowed Barcelona to get back into the match.

Ronaldinho hammered the spot kick low past Cech's right hand and suddenly the mood of the evening was transformed.

A superb save from Cech kept out a viciously swerving free-kick from Deco but there was nothing that the giant Czech goalkeeper could do about Ronaldinho's wonderfully improvised strike seven minutes from the interval.

Not that there seemed much danger when the Brazilian was confronted by an imposing wall of defenders on the edge of the penalty area.

But with a minimal back-lift, he still conjured a moment of pure inspiration as he crafted a shot that curled into the far corner, leaving Cech motionless.

An extraordinary first half almost yielded another goal when Cole,

Chelsea's outstanding outfield performer by some distance, beat Valdes only to see his shot come back off the post.

Chelsea were first to threaten after the break, Lampard's deflected drive spinning wide.

Lampard's header from the resulting corner drew a fine save from Valdes but Chelsea had even more reason to be grateful to their goalkeeper, who produced superb stops to keep out a shot from Gerard and a bullet header from Carles Puyol.

At the other end, the Barcelona captain threw himself into Gudjohnsen's path to block the Iclander's shot after Kezman had found him unmarked beyond the back post.

It looked like it could prove a costly miss for Chelsea, particularly when Iniesta's shot came back off the post into the path of Eto'o.

But the Cameroon striker snatched at his shot and the ball ended high in the stand, giving Terry his chance to claim a victory that will live long in the memory of every Chelsea fan who witnessed it.

Barca boys incensed



AFP, London

Chelsea's dramatic Champions League win over Barcelona has been marred by claims by Barcelona's Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o he was called a "monkey" by a Chelsea steward in angry skirmishes after the match.

"He called me a monkey," he told reporters. "I understood it. He called me a monkey and I am very angry."

Eto'o said Chelsea coach Jose Mourinho, involved in a war of words with Barcelona before both legs on this pulsating tie, was to blame for the bad feeling.

"You should look at the face of the coach. This is the mentality of the club. If Chelsea win the European Cup it would be laughable," he said.

Barcelona defender Carles Puyol said: "The other players told me the security guards insulted Eto'o and called him a monkey. That's when the problems started."

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard and Ronaldinho were involved in a struggle with stewards as they left the pitch.

TV pictures showed Rijkaard and Ronaldinho grappling with stewards. At one stage Ronaldinho was heard shouting at them: "You're all racists."

Chelsea's scout Andre Villas was alleged to have started the flare-up by blowing kisses at Rijkaard, who had to be held back by several stewards.

Barcelona fans threw water bottles and other missiles, some aimed at Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich.

Rijkaard said: "Some guy came forward and insulted our bench and I don't want to say what I think of him. I am always bitter when I lose and I am even more bitter because of all the lies they (Chelsea) told before this game."

Mourinho said after the 2-1 defeat in Barcelona that Rijkaard had talked to Swedish referee Anders Frisk at half-time of that match and Frisk later sent off Chelsea striker Didier Drogba.

UEFA director of communications William Gaillard said: "There have been allegations that a Chelsea

steward called Eto'o a monkey. We will be looking into this matter but need evidence. We can't just accept his word."

Barcelona have yet to make an official complaint. Eto'o, African Footballer of the Year, has suffered frequent racial abuse in Spain.

"There were some racist comments," Barcelona's former Arsenal defender Giovanni Van Bronckhorst told SKY TV.

But Chelsea denied the claims. A spokesman for the Premiership leaders said: "Chelsea utterly refutes any racist comments were made by any of its permanent or matchday staff."

"Chelsea has an excellent record of supporting anti-racism campaigns and condemns all forms of racism."

Brazil star Ronaldinho claims John Terry's winning goal should have been disallowed for a foul on the Barcelona goalkeeper.

"When the corner came over, there was a foul on our keeper Victor Valdes," said Ronaldinho, who scored both Barca goals.

"The referee should have stopped the action, but he let Terry make his header. I understand it was all very fast, but there was a foul that everybody saw."

The foul was the only thing top referee Pierluigi Collina missed in another authoritative display.

However, Rijkaard refused to complain.

"The players complained to the ref on the pitch when it happened and this is not the moment to start whinging. We needed to have taken our chances and been more careful about giving away corners," he said.

"The team that wins, does so because they deserve it. Sure, I've got a bad taste in my mouth after the defeat, but that's the way football is."

Terry's dramatic winner earned Chelsea a 4-2 victory at Stamford Bridge to secure a 5-4 aggregate triumph over the Catalan giants.

The England international's goal arrived after Chelsea had blown a three-goal lead and looked to be heading out of the competition at the second round phase on away goals.

Lyon massacre Bremen



AFP, Lyon

French champions Lyon advanced to the Champions League quarter-finals with a 7-2 hammering of German league title-holders Werder Bremen in their first round knockout phase second leg tie here on Tuesday.

A hat-trick from French international Sylvain Wiltord and double from Ghanaian Mickael Essien helped Lyon on their way to a 10-2 aggregate score after the French team had virtually assured their spot in the next round for the second year running after a 3-0 first leg win at the Weserstadion two weeks ago.

Wiltord quickly moving forward, opened the score after eight minutes from just inside the area with a pass from midfielder Florent Malouda.

Essien netted his first six minutes later with a leftfooted shot from just

outside the area, and put the hosts 3-0 up after 29 minutes.

Werder hit back two minutes later with Frenchman Johan Micoud reducing the deficit when he profited from a deflected centre to beat Gregory Coupet.

But once again the hosts found a gap in Werder's defence which allowed Sidney Govou take off and pass to Wiltord who slid the ball past beleaguered Werder goalie Andreas Reinke after 54 minutes.

A foul on midfielder Frank Baumann handed Werder a lifeline and they scored their second after 57 minutes from a Valerien Ismael penalty.

But the worst was yet to come for the Germans as Malouda struck after 60 minutes, with Wiltord netting his third three minutes later... Lyon were handed a penalty with Jeremie Berthod converting it after 79 minutes.



PHOTO: AFP

CAN'T GET PAST US! AC Milan's defenders Alessandro Nesta (L) and Jaap Stam (R) blocking Manchester United striker Ruud Van at the San Siro stadium in Milan on March 8.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE
AFP, Paris
European Champions League results on Tuesday:
1st knockout round, 2nd leg
At London
Chelsea (ENG) 4 (Gudjohnsen 8, Lampard 17, Duff 19, Terry 76) FC Barcelona (ESP) 2 (Ronaldinho 27-pen, 38)
Chelsea qualify for quarter-finals 5-4 on aggregate
At Milan
AC Milan (ITA) 1 (Crespo 60) Manchester United (ENG) 0
AC Milan advance to quarter-finals 2-0 on aggregate
At Lyon, France
Lyon (FRA) 7 (Wiltord 8, 55, 64, Essien 17, 30, Malouda 60, Berthod 80-pen)
Werder Bremen (GER) 2 (Micoud 32, Ismael 58-pen)
Lyon qualify for quarter-finals 10-2 on aggregate