

Gunners crack Anfield code

AFP, Liverpool



Two spectacular first half goals from Tomas Rosicky cost the FA Cup holders Liverpool their grip on the famous old competition at Anfield as Arsenal came away with a 3-1 third round victory.

A defence that had gone an astonishing ten domestic games without conceding a goal, a run dating back to a 3-0 league defeat at Arsenal in mid-November, chose the worst possible occasion to show their weaknesses as Rosicky scored twice in an eight-minute period before the interval.

The Czech international, a frequent Liverpool transfer target when he was making his name in the Bundesliga with Borussia Dortmund, had scored just one goal this season before the cup tie but the manner in which he trebled his tally demonstrated he clearly has an incredible eye for goal.

Thierry Henry, who added the

third goal, said: "The commitment was spot on. The last 20 minutes they were bombarding us with crosses."

"I have so much respect for this ground and for these fans. It's always pretty important to make sure you can silence the crowd at any ground."

Liverpool could point to a failed penalty appeal as the turning point, after Xabi Alonso went down under a challenge from Gilberto in the 24th minute and which ended with the home player being cautioned for diving by referee Steve Bennett despite television replays suggesting a spot-kick would have been the correct decision.

But, having failed to capitalise on periods of extended possession, they fell victim to their own poor defending, some slick Arsenal passing and a fabulous display of finishing from Rosicky, starting with the opening goal in the 36th minute.

John Arne Riise lost the ball in a costly position and Rosicky found Alexander Hleb down the right before continuing his run towards the home box. Hleb returned the compliment

with a neat pass across the area and Rosicky struck with a magnificent first-time right-foot shot that dipped over Jerzy Dudek and into the Liverpool net.

It was poor defending and, after Riise had seen a long-range free-kick charged down by the Arsenal wall, worse was to follow.

Thierry Henry's sharp pass found his teammate with five Liverpool defenders in close attendance but, as the Red shirts backed off, Rosicky was allowed to advance to the edge of the area.

There, with Steve Finnan, Jamie Carragher and Steve Gerrard still failing to make a challenge, the Czech blazed his shot past Dudek into the bottom right-hand corner.

In the two minutes left to the break, Arsenal might have had yet another when Emmanuel Eboue was allowed to work his way to the by-line and Dudek had to charge down his dangerous cross.

Soon after the restart, Dudek saved well at his near post after Alexander Hleb had sent Robin van Persie streaking away on another dangerous counter-attack.

Liverpool had needed an early

goal to force their way back into contention and, having put the visitors' goal under siege from the off, their reward finally came in the 71st minute through Dirk Kuyt.

Jermaine Pennant's left-wing corner was headed goalward by Peter Crouch and Kuyt, hovering inside the six-yard area, steered it past Manuel Almunia with his own head.

There were 19 minutes left for Liverpool to finally stage a concerted bid to hold onto their trophy and they did so against an electrifying atmosphere which had been heightened early on by home supporters staging a vocal protest, seeking justice for those killed at the Hillsborough disaster.

Substitute Fabio Aurelio came close to an equaliser with a spectacular far post volley from a Gerrard cross but Thierry Henry killed off the tie seven minutes from time with a superb solo goal.

The Frenchman chased his own long through ball, made from inside his own half, robbing an embarrassed Carragher of the ball on the wing before cutting in past yet more markers and burying his shot from 12 yards.



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla suffer shock defeat

AFP, Madrid

Sevilla opened the door for Barcelona to regain pole position in the Spanish first division when the league leaders went down 2-1 at Real Zaragoza on Saturday.

Barca are three points in arrears but now have two games in hand, have a superior goal difference, and travel to Getafe on Sunday.

Uruguay's international wing-back Carlos Diogo put Zaragoza up after 13 minutes with a header from an Andress D'Alessandro corner.

Zaragoza's Argentine striker Diego Milito then got his 12th goal of the season after 51 minutes when he stabbed the ball home after Sevilla goalkeeper Andres Palop only managed to parry away his first shot.

Luis Fabiano got one back for Sevilla after 70 minutes, just beating his teammate Fredi Kanoute to a loose ball, to set up a frantic last

20 minutes.

The tension continued after the whistle when Fabiano and Diogo squared up, but it was Sevilla's Brazilian striker who was shown the red card.

The victory moves Zaragoza up to fourth while Atletico Madrid slip back a place to fifth after they were held to a surprise 0-0 draw by bottom club Gimnastic Tarragona.

Atletico goalkeeper Leo Franco was arguably the hero of the night while the home side's strikers had plenty of opportunities but couldn't find the back of the net.

"It wasn't a great game for us, we should have won," said Atletico coach Javier Aguirre.

Spanish international striker Fernando Torres nearly put Atletico ahead twice in the first 10 minutes.

The visitors' Anibal Matellan then had a header skim past the crossbar midway through the first half as Gimnastic defied the pundits who expected them to be thrashed, with Juan Diaz a constant threat down the left wing.

The second half saw Atletico step up the pressure and Kun

Aguero went close twice, but the hosts could not find their way through Gimnastic's normally porous defence, which kept a clean sheet for just the third time this season.

To add to Atletico's frustration, midfielder Gabi Fernandez was sent off three minutes from time after receiving his second yellow card.

Gimnastic remain bottom of the table despite the useful away point but their performance will give them some hope that they may yet avoid relegation.

Real Sociedad, who are just one place above Gimnastic, will harbour similar ambitions after their 2-1 win over Osasuna.

The San Sebastian side took the lead thanks to a Xavi Prieto penalty after 19 minutes after the midfielder himself was adjudged to have been fouled by Osasuna defender Enrique Corrales.

Osasuna immediately fought back and Raul Garcia equalised after 56 minutes but Mikel Aranburu got the winner for Sociedad barely one minute from the whistle.

Milan say no to Ronaldo

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have offered to transfer strikers Ronaldo and Antonio Cassano to AC Milan, the Spanish press reported on Sunday, but the Italian side have turned them down.

The AS sports daily reported that Real officials had been in touch with their AC Milan counterparts two weeks ago and offered Brazilian Ronaldo for sale during the January transfer window. They then added the name of Italian Cassano.

"AC Milan's response left no doubt that they were not interested in acquiring the services of Ronaldo and Cassano," AS reported.

The paper said that Real were increasingly at loggerheads with the out-of-favour Brazilian as the Spanish league programme resumes after the winter break.

Eriksson set for Marseille

INTERNET, undated

Former England captain Sven-Goran Eriksson is expected to be confirmed as the new manager of Marseille at the end of the week.

The Ligue 1 side are part of a takeover bid that should be completed by Friday and the consortium have made no secret of the fact they want Eriksson to lead the team.

The Swede - who is currently still being paid 6,500-pounds-a-day by the Football Association (FA) - has agreed a three-year contract with the club worth 15 million pounds.

Bayern to spend heavy

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich manager Uli Hoeness revealed Sunday that the German champions are ready to go on a multi-million euro spending spree in order to compete with the top clubs in Europe for the best players.

"If we think we need to spend 40 million euros (52 million dollars) to buy three players, we'll do it," Hoeness told the weekly Welt am Sonntag newspaper.

The Bayern boss said that they were willing to match the big-spending clubs in England, Spain and Italy.

"We've changed our way of approaching this issue: we're ready to spend more than before," said Hoeness.

"We have several dossiers in the pipeline, one transfer is almost completed and the other is on the right track."

"We're going for transfers which will show that we have a very offensive policy."

Bayern have already recruited German striker Jan Schlaudraff and are also interested in signing Marseille's French international Franck Ribery.

Ribery, however, has indicated he would favour a move to either Spain's La Liga or the English Premiership if he leaves the French club.

Hoeness added that they would not be actively pursuing German international striker Miroslav Klose, whose contract with Werder Bremen expires in 2008.

"If he indicates that he is ready to leave Bremen and is ready to join another club in Germany then we can talk."

Klose was the top scorer in the Bundesliga for the 2005-06 season and at the 2006 World Cup, but has not decided yet whether he will extend his stay at Werder Bremen or play abroad.

Arsenal's Dutch midfielder Robin van Persie (R) chases an ecstatic Tomas Rosicky after the latter scored against Liverpool in their FA Cup match at Anfield on Saturday.

Azzurri heroes to be honoured

INTERNET, undated

The 23 World Cup winners and Coach Marcello Lippi will be given the title Cavaliere -- an Italian OBE -- by the President of the Republic.

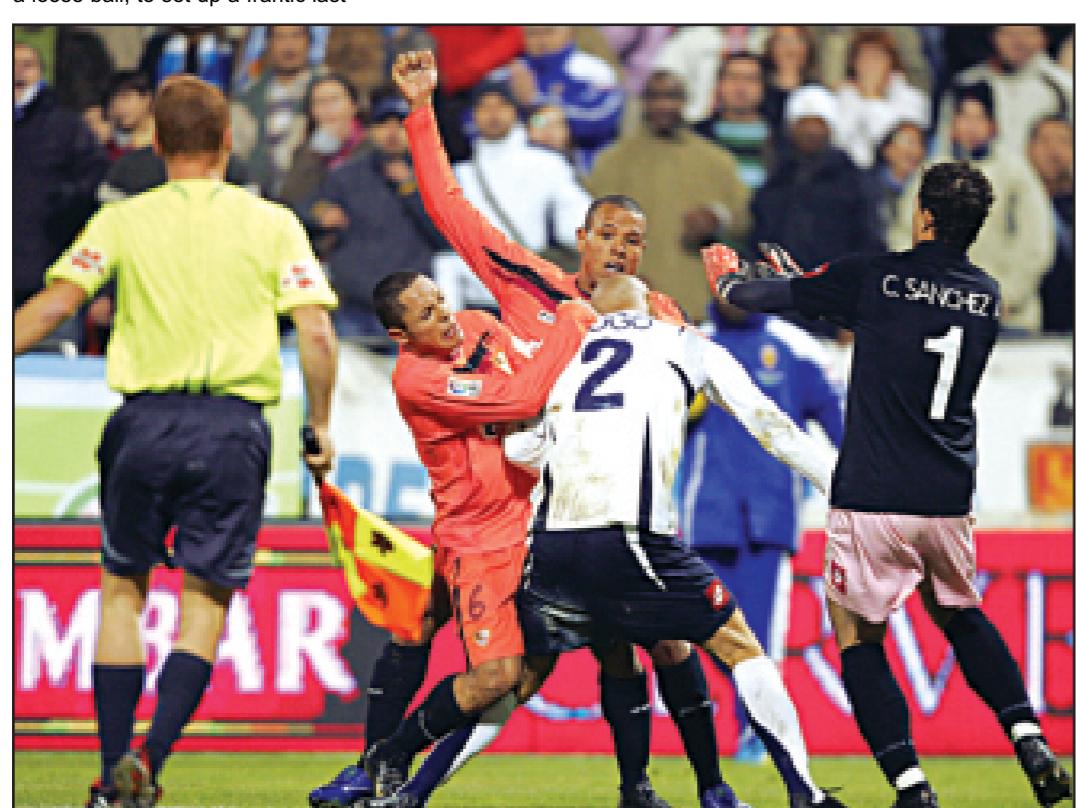
The squad that battled against the odds to conquer the 2006 trophy in Germany will be handed this recognition in a ceremony on Monday.

"It has been decided to honour them with the title Cavaliere Ufficiale," explained FIGC representative Gigi Riva.

"As a few members were already Cavaliere, they'll be automatically promoted to Ufficiale. Lippi and Federation chief Giancarlo Abete will become Commendatore."

In the absence of a royal family, Italy's highest honours are handed out by President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, who was present in Berlin for the Final on July 9.

The system is based on the French Legion d'honneur and the Commendatore is the third highest honour that can be bestowed.



BUT THE MATCH IS OVER: Sevilla's Luis Fabiano (C back) tries to stop teammate Adriano (L) from fighting with Real Zaragoza's Diogo (C front) after their Primera Liga match at the Romareda Stadium in Zaragoza on Saturday.

Juve stage London blitz

Football

INTERNET, undated

Juventus directors' presence in London has been linked with Javier Mascherano, Gabriel Heinze and even Jose Mourinho.

It is known that Alessio Secco flew on to British soil this week for negotiations, but each day more details emerge on what precisely was the purpose of this visit.

While it's confirmed that one of their prime targets for a January switch is unsettled West Ham United midfielder Mascherano -- also the subject of a firm offer from Liverpool -- although a deal has not yet been struck.

'La Stampa' and other newspapers in Italy claim the Bianconeri have offered 2.7-million-pounds for an 18-month loan of the Argentine international, plus another 5.8-million-pounds to

complete the signing in June 2008.

This is well short of Liverpool's proposal, but the reports suggest Mascherano would prefer a switch to the peninsula, a style of football that tends to suit the South Americans more.

However, Secco was kept busy in Britain with more negotiations for Premiership stars, among them Manchester United's Heinze.

Another Argentine international, the 28-year-old will be a free agent in June and Milan are also said to be on his trail.

If the battle with Liverpool over Mascherano is turning nasty, then it's not stopping the two clubs from discussing other business.

There are claims Juventus have requested 22-year-old midfielder Mohammed Sissoko for a transfer either in January or in the summer, when the Turin giants are expected to be promoted back into Serie A. Didier Deschamps is leading the side to the top flight, but there are reports emerging this weekend

that he will be replaced by Chelsea manager Mourinho.

His idyllic time at Stamford Bridge has hit problems this season, including a fractious relationship with summer signings Andriy Shevchenko and Michael Ballack.

According to 'The Sunday Times', the Champions League and UEFA Cup winner with Porto is ready to try another experience in Italy, where Juve and Inter are contending for his services.

Meanwhile, closer to home, Bianconeri director of sport Secco met with Palermo chief Rino Foschi to discuss several players.

It's known the Sicilians want to bring in Marco Marchionni and Fabrizio Miccoli -- the latter currently on loan at Benfica -- in exchange for Andrea Barzaghi. Despite spending much of his time on the bench, Secco confirmed to journalists that "For the moment Marchionni is not going anywhere."



PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi gives the 'Trofeo Berlusconi' to Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso after the match between AC Milan and Juventus at the San Siro on Saturday.