



Deportivo left-back Joan Capdevila fires in a free-kick through a poorly positioned Real Madrid wall and into the net to score his team's first goal during their Primera Liga clash at the Riazor on Sunday.

Everton blame new ball

AFP, Liverpool

Blackburn boss Mark Hughes admitted Everton goalkeeper Tim Howard paid the price for the decision to introduce a new ball for this season's FA Cup after his mistakes helped Rovers seal a 4-1 third round win.

USA international Howard, on a season-long loan from Manchester United, gifted Blackburn a 2-0 lead on Sunday by failing to keep out strikes from Matt Derbyshire and Morten Gamst Pedersen.

But Hughes insisted that preparation on the Blackburn training ground gave him the game plan to spark Everton's downfall as his players worked with the new ball introduced by the English Football Association for this year's competition.

Hughes said: "We have had the new FA Cup ball all week in training and we felt it was a bit unpredictable with its flight, so we had a game plan to try as many long shots as we could."

"That's what happened. We tried it early on and it worked for us."

"It was a great performance and a great result, though. Before the game, people maybe felt the FA Cup was a competition that we are taking lightly, but that is not the

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United leave it late

AFP, Manchester



Henrik Larsson scored on his Manchester United debut as Sir Alex Ferguson's side defeated Aston Villa 2-1 in a dramatic FA Cup third round tie at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Former Celtic and Barcelona forward launched his 10 week loan stint from Helsingborgs in style to the delight of more than 70,000 fans as he fired United into a 55th minute lead.

But Milan Baros thought he had earned Villa a replay with a 75th minute equaliser before substitute Ole Gunnar Solskjaer netted a stoppage time winner.

Though a veteran of 19 FA Cup campaigns, Ferguson believes the lure of becoming the first team to lift the trophy at the new Wembley has injected a fresh incentive into this season's competition.

In the past he has used the third round as an excuse to field fringe players but judging by the names on his teamsheet, he is clearly taking this season's competition seriously.

The only significant change was between the posts as Ferguson,

chasing his sixth FA Cup, rested Dutch keeper Edwin van der Sar which paved the way for Tomasz Kuszczak to make his fourth start since arriving on loan from West Bromwich Albion while Paul Scholes was also missing.

Other than that all the big guns were present with Wayne Rooney partnering new boy Larsson from the start.

With Villa arriving at Old Trafford without a win in 10 games and having failed to defeat United in 17 previous attempts, a run stretching eight years, there was never much doubt about the outcome.

The only question on the lips of every United supporter was whether Ferguson would start with Larsson, thus making the Swede the oldest striker the United manager has ever used.

Looking sleek and slender, 35 going on 25, Larsson's name was greeted with thunderous applause from another full house as his name was read out over the speakers.

There was a danger that Larsson has been so hyped it could cloud Old Trafford in anti-climax if he did not come up with the goods, but there was never any danger of that.

Despite his age he was the liveliest player on the pitch in the opening exchanges. It was Larsson who forced Gabour Kiraly into his

first serious save in the 16th minute, an effort which the Villa keeper dealt with comfortably.

United's new No 17 also had a goal-bound header saved before setting up a 21st minute chance for Wayne Rooney after a clever flick which the England striker failed to grasp.

But United did not have things all their own way. Villa captain Gareth Barry, who boasts nine goals this season, reminded Old Trafford that the visitors had not turned up just to make up the numbers with a 20-yard free-kick which landed on the roof of the net.

United should have booked their place in the fourth round long before half-time. Kiraly produced the save of the tie to deny Rooney from an accurate angle after the England striker had turned Gary Cahill.

Rooney has now gone six games without scoring and he looked out of sorts when presented with another chance by Larsson in the 36th minute. With only Kiraly to beat, Rooney delayed his effort allowing Dutch defender Wilfred Bouma to make a last-ditch tackle.

Then came Larsson's best chance to mark his debut with a goal. A delicious pass by Michael Carrick carved open the Villa defence but Larsson had his head in

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Blatter issues Italy apology

AFP, Rome

FIFA president Sepp Blatter has apologised to Italy's World Cup-winning team for his absence at the trophy presentation after the Berlin final.

Blatter skipped the ceremony and so UEFA president Lennart Johansson handed the trophy over to Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro.

Blatter claimed he was whistled by fans before the match had begun and wanted to avoid further embarrassment to the organizers.

But the Azzurri were incensed at what they saw as a deliberate snub, accusing FIFA of being "anti-Italian."

Blatter tried to heal the rift here on Monday as he met with the Italian players who were each awarded the 'Cavaliere Ufficiale, one of the country's highest public service decorations.

"I said it (sorry) to the Italian team today," Blatter was quoted as saying by Italian news agency ANSA.

"History will say it was a mistake

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Totti hints at int'l retirement

AFP, Rome

Roma captain Francesco Totti said Monday he may retire from international football.

The 30-year-old striker has not played since Italy's triumphant World Cup campaign in Germany and has asked coach Roberto Donadoni for time to consider his future.

But on Monday Totti gave his strongest hint yet that he may have worn the Azzurri shirt for the last time.

"I don't know if I will go back to the national team," Totti told Italian news agency Ansa on Monday as the World Cup-winning squad were awarded the 'Cavaliere Ufficiale, one of the country's highest public service decorations.

"There's no problem between me and Donadoni. Things are clear between us. Have I played my last game for Italy? For the moment all I am thinking about is Roma."

BARCA HELD AT GETAFE

Real relive Riazor nightmare

REUTERS, Madrid



Barcelona and Real Madrid returned to action in the Primera Liga after the Christmas break with disappointing performances on Sunday.

Champions Barcelona scrambled a barely deserved 1-1 at Getafe, while Real slumped to a second defeat in a row when they went down 2-0 against struggling Deportivo Coruna.

Midfielder Xavi got Barca out of jail with a superbly struck free kick to cancel out an opportunist goal by Getafe striker Daniel Guiza who had cashed in on a howling error by Mexican centre back Rafael Marquez.

Depor, who had not won in nine games and had conceded 10 goals without reply in their last three, outclassed a rudderless Real Madrid who have not won at the Riazor in over 15 years. The results mean Sevilla stay top of the pile with 37 points from 17 games despite their 2-1 defeat at Zaragoza on Saturday.

Barca, who have a game in hand

but have won just once in their last four outings, are two points adrift of the leaders and three ahead of third-placed Real who have 32 points.

Zaragoza are two points further back in fourth, level on 30 with Valencia who notched up their fourth victory in a row with a 1-0 win at regional rivals Villarreal.

Getafe, who beat Real Madrid earlier in the season, made an ambitious start against Barca as they deprived them of the ball in the opening quarter and forced the visitors to live off scraps of possession.

Missing the influential Ronaldinho and Deco through suspension, Barca looked lost as the fog descended on the Coliseo and Getafe took full advantage to snatch the lead nine minutes into the second half after Marquez's howler.

The Mexican, one of several Barca players who arrived late for training this week after the Christmas break, scuffed a backpass allowing Guiza to pounce on the loose ball, shrug off a challenge from Carles Puyol and side-foot into the net.

Barca continued to struggle in the second half, but midfielder Xavi came to the rescue when he left

keeper Roberto Abbondanzieri standing as he curled a superbly struck free kick around the wall and into the top corner 20 minutes from time.

Deportivo made a whirlwind start at the Riazor and it came as no surprise when defender Joan Capdevila put them ahead when he fired a free kick through a ragged wall and past a despairing Iker Casillas in the 10th minute.

Depor, led by the inspired Angel Arizmendi, had a host of chances to extend their lead during the first half and the former Atletico Madrid striker was unfortunate not to add a second when he danced his way through the Real defence only to hit the post.

But Arizmendi got his reward 11 minutes into the second half when he skipped past World and European Player of the Year Fabio Cannavaro and squared the ball across the goalmouth for young striker Cristian to poke home into the open net.

Real's new signing Fernando Gago was taken off early in the second half after making a forgettable debut but Real continued to draw a blank when Ronaldo came on to replace the Argentine.



Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez (C) tries to hold back the marauding Getafe winger Angel Vivar (L) during their Primera Liga match at Getafe on Sunday.

Gunners seek Kop double



REUTERS, London

Arsenal will look to complete a rare Anfield cup double on Tuesday when they face Liverpool in a League Cup quarter-final three days after winning there in the third round of the FA Cup.

Liverpool are unbeaten at home in the league since October 2005 but, having lost to Benfica in the Champions League and now Arsenal they will want to avoid a cup hat-trick at "fortress Anfield" in a game rescheduled after being postponed due to fog before Christmas.

Both sides are likely to line up differently on Tuesday for a competition that is last on the list of wants.

"The result will give us a mental

strength. We will come back with a different team but we want to win the game," Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said after Saturday's success.

Tomas Rosicky, who has struggled to impose himself at Arsenal since his summer arrival, scored twice on Saturday and could keep his place.

But captain Thierry Henry, who also scored on Saturday but missed all of December with injuries and mental exhaustion, is an unlikely starter.

"He is getting his legs back ... I think the break has benefited him because to play this kind of game ... you have to be fresh mentally as well," Wenger said.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez will also ring the changes with an eye on the league game

against Chelsea on Jan. 20.

Tuesday's winners will play Tottenham Hotspur in the semi-finals, which kick off on Wednesday when league champions Chelsea visit fourth-division Wycombe Wanderers.

Wycombe have already knocked out Premier League Charlton Athletic but will find Chelsea -- even an under-strength Chelsea -- a different proposition.

Chelsea are without any recognised central defenders after suspended Ricardo Carvalho joined injured duo Khalid Boulahrouz and captain John Terry on the sidelines. Right-back Paulo Ferreira and midfielder Michael Essien will fill in.

At the other end, 30-million-pound signing Andriy Shevchenko continues to struggle, looking

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Recently signed Manchester United forward Henrik Larsson (L) sets off to celebrate his debut strike chased by captain Gary Neville (R) during their FA Cup third round clash at Old Trafford on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

AFP, Liverpool



John Arne Riise has been warned his place is under threat ahead of Liverpool's rearranged Carling Cup quarterfinal tie with Arsenal at Anfield on Tuesday.

The two sides meet for the second time in three days with the left-sided Norwegian international under pressure following his nightmare performance as holders Liverpool crashed out of the FA Cup

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after a 3-1 home defeat to Arsene Wenger's side on Saturday.

Riise was blamed for at least one of Arsenal's three goals and failed to finish the tie as he was replaced by Brazilian defender Fabio Aurelio.

Although Liverpool are in the last 16 of the Champions League, the Carling Cup represents the club's best chance of securing any silverware this season with a two-legged semi-final with Tottenham awaiting the winners.

And manager Rafa Benitez has made it clear he is expecting a response from his players, and Riise in particular, with Liverpool, 14 points adrift of Premiership

leaders Manchester United, fighting to save their season.

"If Riise continues working hard, that's ok," said Benitez.

"Maybe it was a mistake for the first goal and then maybe he lost his concentration."

"As for the substitution, I was thinking of Fabio as a player with quality. His crossing is really good and we needed to attack and to have more quality."

Liverpool are looking to avoid a fourth straight defeat at the hands of Arsenal and Benitez knows the key to victory lies with containing the London club's formidable strikeforce of Thierry Henry and Robin van Persie.

French international Henry scored Arsenal's third goal on Saturday to kill the tie after Dirk Kuyt had given the hosts hope of a fightback following a disastrous first-half in which Liverpool trailed to two Tomas Rosicky goals.

"The difference on Saturday was van Persie and Henry," said Benitez. "We know the strengths of Arsenal and we know their weaknesses."

"For 35 minutes I think we were controlling the game and controlling the things that we know they can do really well."

"But the strengths of this team is the quality of the strikers and if you make a mistake, they will punish you."

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