



Arsenal's four-goal hero Julio Baptista (C) is on his knees in celebration after scoring against Liverpool during their English League Cup quarterfinal at Anfield on Tuesday.

CARLING CUP

The Beast strikes Anfield



Football

AFP, Liverpool

Julio Baptista missed a penalty but still scored four goals as Arsenal booked a League Cup semifinal against north London rivals Spurs by destroying Liverpool 6-3 at Anfield on Tuesday.

Incredibly, Arsene Wenger's mix of young and second-string players became the first team since Sunderland in 1930 to score six times at Anfield, while Baptista became the first visiting player to claim four goals at the famous stadium since the end of World War II.

Brazilian striker Baptista (nicknamed 'the Beast' for his predatory instincts), who had failed to score a domestic goal for Arsenal since his loan move from Real Madrid in the summer, ended his drought in spectacular style as Wenger's team claimed their second cup victory at Anfield in four days.

Further Gunners goals from Jeremie Aladiere and Alexandre Song completed a memorable win for Arsenal, with goals from Robbie

Fowler, Steven Gerrard and Sami Hyypia making the score slightly respectable for the home side.

Although Liverpool boss Rafa Benitez had been set to field his youngsters in the original game, which was postponed due to heavy fog last month, Saturday's 3-1 FA Cup defeat against Arsenal at Anfield had left the League Cup as Liverpool's most realistic route to silverware this season and he recalled the big guns for this game.

Liverpool's hopes suffered a blow, however, when Chilean winger Mark Gonzalez was stretched off on ten minutes with his right leg in a splint after falling badly following a challenge Theo Walcott.

And the home side's nightmare start continued when Arsenal took the lead against the run of play with their first effort on goal on 27 minutes.

French striker Aladiere sprung the offside trap to latch onto Kolo Toure's long ball forward and an impeccable first touch by the 23-year-old allowed him to shoot goalwards.

His initial effort was blocked by Jerzy Dudek, but Aladiere reacted

instantly to slot the rebound into the net at The Kop End.

It was harsh on Liverpool considering their dominance of possession, but Fowler managed to drag them level on 32 minutes when he beat keeper Manuel Almunia with a typical poacher's goal from close range.

Almunia had palmed away Fabio Aurelio's free-kick, but Garcia pounced on the rebound and his square ball was flicked into the net by Fowler at the near post.

Liverpool's equaliser only sparked an incredible three-goal rout by Arsenal that left Wenger's team 4-1 up by half-time.

The Gunners regained the lead on 40 minutes thanks to a stunning free-kick by Baptista which left Dudek rooted to the spot from 30 yards.

A scrambled goal by Song from a corner made it 3-1 in first-half stoppage time before Baptista bagged his second when, looking suspiciously offside, he latched onto Aladiere's throughball before beating the helpless Dudek.

When referee Martin Atkinson awarded Arsenal a 56th minute

penalty following Hyypia's foul on Aladiere, humiliation was seriously on the cards for Liverpool, but Dudek produced a brilliant save to keep out Baptista's spot-kick.

The powerful striker claimed his hat-trick four minutes later, though, when, after being fed superbly by Aladiere, he beat Dudek with a low shot from 20 yards to score Arsenal's fifth.

Liverpool were now facing their worst defeat since losing 5-1 at home to Preston North End in September 1953, but Gerrard ensured they avoided that unwanted feat by scoring perhaps the goal of the game with a volley from the edge of the penalty area on 68 minutes.

The goal hardly raised a cheer from The Kop, though, and Liverpool's horror night was made even worse when Garcia was stretched off in the closing stages with his leg in a splint, just like Gonzalez.

Hyypia gave the home fans faint hope of a remarkable comeback when he headed in to make 5-3 on 80 minutes, but Arsenal had the last word when Baptista hit his fourth after more good work by Aladiere.

Now Al Ittihad want Ronaldo

AFP, Madrid

Wealthy Saudi Arabia side Al Ittihad have made an offer to sign Real Madrid's out-of-favour Brazilian striker Ronaldo, the Spanish press reported on Wednesday.

The As sports daily said that the club had offered 20 million euros to acquire the services of the all-time record World Cup scorer who is no longer wanted by Real's Italian coach Fabio Capello.

An official of Al Ittihad in Jeddah confirmed that they were after the 30-year-old Ronaldo and wanted to take him on a three-year deal.

"We are waiting at any moment for a reply from the Spanish club," the official said.

He added that Al-Ittihad were offering seven million dollars to Real, with 18 million dollars going to Ronaldo over the three years.

Former Asian champions Al Ittihad last week clinched a deal to bring veteran Portuguese midfielder Figo to the Gulf from July on a one-year contract worth 4.5 million euros.

Juventus snap up Grygera

INTERNET, undated

Ajax defender Zdenek Grygera will wear the Juventus jersey next season, the Dutch club's technical director has confirmed.

The Czech international's contract with the outfit expires in June and he was paired with a move to Italy, with Inter apparently making a late bid to snatch him from Juve's grasp.

But it seems that the Old Lady of Italian football have won the race to net the full-back on a free transfer.

"Juventus have behaved correctly with us and informed us officially that they have signed the player for the next season," said Martin Van Geel to the newspaper De Telegraaf.

"We have not discussed the option of him moving in January, but if the Bianconeri were interested in this opportunity then we would be willing to discuss the possibility of finding a financial agreement."

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1.2 million pounds for Larsson

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United must reportedly pay another 1.2million pounds to keep Henrik Larsson for the rest of the season.

The former Celtic and Barcelona ace joined United on January 1 in a loan deal until March 12 from Swedish club Helsingborgs.

And he promptly endeared himself to the Old Trafford faithful by playing a starring role in Sunday's FA Cup third-round win over Aston Villa.

Larsson netted in that victory to cap a fine display, and now there are reports that his loan deal could be extended to the end of the season.

But The Sun claims that would cost United another 1.2million pounds, with Helsingborgs looking

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MIJATOVIC CONFIRMS SUMMER EXIT

Real sever Beckham ties



Football

THE GUARDIAN

David Beckham will leave Real Madrid in the summer, the club's sporting director Predrag Mijatovic has confirmed.

"Beckham will leave us, we will not renew his contract," revealed Mijatovic when quizzed on the future of the former England international, whose current contract expires in June.

Real had previously stated their desire to resolve the long-running Beckham contract issue one way or the other by the end of next week, and further talks were thought to be due to take place. But Mijatovic has decided to curtail negotiations with immediate effect.

Beckham joined Real in July 2003 from Manchester United and was quickly labelled a 'galactico'. But he has failed to win a trophy at the Bernabeu and could now be set to

make a return to England. However, clubs from across Europe and the United States are also believed to be monitoring Beckham's situation.

Mijatovic's declaration ties in with Real coach Fabio Capello's squad announcement for tomorrow's Copa del Rey game with Real Betis, where Beckham was one of six senior players who has been left out. Beckham, along with Ronaldo, Antonio Cassano, Michel Salgado, Francisco Pavon and Alvaro Mejia, were omitted from Capello's 18-man squad for "technical reasons".

This news comes in the wake of Monday's emergency meeting, where the coach met with Real president Ramon Calderon, Mijatovic and technical secretary Franco Baldini to discuss the club's poor form. Real have lost three of their last four league matches, with the latest setback coming on Sunday when they were beaten 2-0 by a Deportivo La Coruna side which had previously gone nine games without a victory.

Mijatovic revealed after the meeting that the problems facing Real had been pinpointed, and solutions devised that would be implemented over time. Capello did not go into detail about his decision to omit Beckham, Ronaldo and co for the cup match during his press conference on Wednesday, instead saying he would be giving some new faces a chance to shine.

"Tomorrow we are going to see some small changes, we are going to put out some different players," the Italian said. "In the last two games, we have lost the character and desire which we had up until that point. That is what has annoyed me most. When I arrived I said we had to fight for the shirt, recover our values and I have not seen this. We have taken measures to solve this. One of them is to train behind closed doors in order to have total concentration. We have analysed a lot of things and what has happened on the last few games."

Mauresmo falls in Sydney



Tennis

AFP, Sydney

World number three Amelie Mauresmo's Australian Open title defence took a hit when she was knocked out of the Sydney International warm-up tournament here on Wednesday.

The top seed crashed out to rising Serbian star Jelena Jankovic 7-5, 6-0 in the quarter-finals, cutting back on her court time ahead of the year's first Grand Slam which starts Monday.

Jankovic won her eighth straight match following her tournament win in New Zealand last weekend, overrunning the French player in hot conditions.

"I'm just disappointed about the way I feel, there is a lot of work to do in my game and physically, and so that's more what I'm concerned about than being out of the tournament," Mauresmo said.

"I would have loved to play one or two more matches, but I still have some work to do.

"I still need to work on the quickness around the court and reaction. It's the final details, which are very important."

Jankovic, a semi-finalist at last year's US Open, followed up her victory over five-time Grand Slam champion Martina Hingis and Australian Samantha Stosur with a comprehensive performance.

"Eight wins in a row. It's unbelievable," 12th-ranked Jankovic said. "I couldn't have asked for a better start



PHOTO: AFP

Rising Czech Republic star Nicole Vaidisova exults after winning a point during her match against Serbia's Ana Ivanovic at the Sydney International tennis tournament on Wednesday.

Mourinho denies player unrest

INTERNET, undated

Jose Mourinho took the highly unusual step of denying reports that he had been subjected to player pressure to drop Michael Ballack on Tuesday night. Reports had claimed that Didier Drogba and Claude Makelele had to be restrained from confronting the Chelsea manager over the German's poor form and Mourinho addressed the subject in an interview with his club's in-house television station.

"I have read a few articles like this but I know nothing about it," Mourinho said. "Reports about problems in the dressing room are not correct. Do we want more from him (Ballack) in terms of performance? Not from him, from everybody. And if the objective is to put some kind of pressure on me, then no chance because I pick the team, nobody else does it."

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SPANISH KING'S CUP

Torres rescues Atletico

REUTERS, Madrid

A great goal from Fernando Torres earned 10-man Atletico Madrid a 1-1 draw at home to Osasuna in their King's Cup last 16 first leg match on Tuesday.

Osasuna's tight defence restricted a dominant Atletico to a couple of half chances before the visitors took the lead in the 37th minute with their first shot on target.

Miguel Flano's cross was stabbed home by Cameroon striker Pierre Webu from close range and three minutes after the restart Atletico defender Pablo Ibanez was shown a straight red card.

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Reds feel the heat



Football

REUTERS, London

Wednesday's back page headlines made unpleasant reading for Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez after his side were crushed 6-3 by a young Arsenal side in the League Cup at Anfield on Tuesday.

Benitez apologised to the club's fans after Arsenal became the first visiting team to score six at Anfield since Sunderland won 6-0 there in a Division One match in April 1930.

"Outfought, out-thought and, ultimately, outclassed," was the Guardian's damning verdict on Liverpool's display, adding that they

had been "brutally exposed as a team reliant on two or three individuals".

Like opposite number Arsene Wenger, Benitez made sweeping changes to the side that played in Saturday's FA Cup tie which ended with Arsenal knocking the holders out of the Cup with a 3-1 victory.

But whereas Arsenal's emerging fringe players shone, Liverpool's looked merely second rate.

The Daily Mirror called it Liverpool's worst humiliation in almost 80 years, while the Daily Telegraph headlined "Liverpool horror as The Beast strikes", referring to Brazilian Julio Baptista's four goals.

The Telegraph described

Benitez's team selection as "inexplicable" as the League Cup represented Liverpool's best hope of winning some silverware from the season.

Arsenal's second cup victory at Anfield in four days was far more damaging to Liverpool's pride and self-respect than Saturday's FA Cup victory.

Arsenal raced into a 5-1 lead with an hour played -- and the margin of victory could have been even greater as Julio Baptista could have had five goals on the night -- but missed a second half penalty.

All the confidence instilled by six wins in seven league matches has now evaporated in the space of

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PHOTO: AFP

Italy president Giorgio Napolitano (R) applauds national team captain Fabio Cannavaro during a ceremony where the president awarded each member of the championship winning squad the "Cavaliere Ufficiale" (Official Knight), one of the countries highest public service decorations, in Rome on Monday.