



Chelsea defender Wayne Bridge (R) is being led away by referee Steve Bennet as concerned teammates congregate around him after he was injured while scoring a goal against Wycombe in their League Cup encounter in Wycombe on Wednesday.

Everton draft in 'Rocky'

AFP, Liverpool

Everton are hoping "Rocky" star Sylvester Stallone can help them get back up off the canvas to fight Reading after they were dealt a straight knock-out by Blackburn.

The Toffees were dumped out of the FA Cup by Rovers on Sunday and have called in "Sly" to give them a boost ahead of their English Premiership clash against visitors Reading at Goodison Park.

Hollywood hunk Stallone is in Britain to promote his latest film "Rocky Balboa", where he dusts off the gloves to resume his title role as the underdog boxer.

The US actor, 61, is a friend of major Everton shareholder Robert Earl, the man behind the Planet Hollywood restaurant chain.

Stallone is expected to travel to Liverpool, northwest England, and go onto the pitch before Sunday's

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Wycombe wound Chelsea

AFP, Wycombe

Jermaine Easter extended his remarkable run of scoring to keep Wycombe's dream of a place in the League Cup final alive after a 1-1 draw with Chelsea in the first leg of their semi-final here on Wednesday.

The League Two side are 71 places below the Premiership champions in the league hierarchy of English football.

But Easter, who had scored in each of the the League Two side's five previous matches in the competition, displayed predatory class as he muscled his way past Michael Essien to score a well-taken equaliser, just as it seemed Chelsea would be heading back to Stamford Bridge with at least a one-goal lead for the second leg.

The 77th-minute equaliser,

which cancelled out Wayne Bridge's first-half strike for Chelsea, was Easter's 19th goal of the season and the manner in which he took it suggested the striker has a future at a level above the fourth tier of English football.

His veteran strike partner Tommy Mooney was the creator, with a trademark headed flick-on into the box.

But it was Easter's ability to hold off stand-in centreback Essien before firing an early low shot past Hilario in the Chelsea goal that made the difference.

Bridge, operating in an unfamiliar attacking role, had given Chelsea the lead nine minutes before half time, shortly after his close range volley had been cleared off the line with goalkeeper Ricardo Batista beaten.

At that stage, Wycombe could justifiably have claimed to have had the better of the contest. Matt

Bloomfield narrowly failed to connect with a superb Easter cross in the 19th minute and the ball finally found Kevin Betsy at the far post, forcing Hilario into a sharp save.

But it was Chelsea who broke the deadlock after an intelligent through ball from Solomon Kalou, which Bridge lifted over Batista with the outside of his boot before being floored by the outrushing goalkeeper.

Bridge recovered but collectively Chelsea continued to look a little concussed as Wycombe came at them at the start of the second half.

Bloomfield spurned a glorious chance six minutes after the restart and Chelsea were given an additional headache when Claude Makelele was booked for his part in a shoving match with Mooney soon afterwards. The yellow card means the influential French midfielder will miss Chelsea's

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Confusion surrounds Beckham

AFP, Rome

Confusion surrounded the state of David Beckham's contract talks with Real Madrid on Wednesday.

Real's sporting director Predrag Mijatovic was quoted as telling Sky Italia that Beckham's contract with the Spanish giants had not been renewed.

But this was later denied by the club, who insisted talks with the former England captain about a new two year deal would be taking place in the next few days.

Beckham's current deal at the Bernabeu runs out at the end of the present season.

Mijatovic was asked by Sky Italia whether Beckham's contract will be renewed and replied: "No, it hasn't been renewed."

But, according to the BBC,

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Mourinho fuels exit rumours

Football

AFP, Wycombe

Jose Mourinho has fuelled speculation that he could be on his way out of Chelsea by refusing to kill off rumours that he could leave the Premiership champions at the end of this season.

Speaking after Chelsea's 1-1 draw with League Two side Wycombe in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final tie, Mourinho declined an invitation to put an end to the speculation that has been swirling around Stamford Bridge in recent weeks.

Dutchman Guus Hiddink, now in charge of Russia and reportedly close to Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, has been widely touted as a possible successor to Mourinho, who appears to have an uneasy relationship with the tycoon who has under-written the club's recent emergence as the dominant force in English football.

Mourinho insisted: "My position is not important, the important is Chelsea not me and Chelsea's position is a good position: almost in League Cup final, last 16 of the Champions League, still in the FA Cup and second in the Premiership."

"I think Chelsea is in a good position and that is the way I work all my career -- I am not important,

the club is important.

"In this moment I only think about the weekend game on Saturday, about the training I have tomorrow and I repeat, my future is not important, what is important is Chelsea."

Although Chelsea remain overwhelming favourites to advance to a final against either Arsenal or Tottenham, Wednesday night's draw represented another stunning result for Paul Lambert's side, who had already eliminated Premiership clubs Charlton and Fulham.

"I said after the Charlton game it was an extraordinary effort and that doubles it," said Lambert, who saw his side fall behind to Wayne Bridge's first half goal before Jermaine Easter snatched an equaliser 13 minutes from time.

"No doubt about it, we were extremely brilliant right from the start," the Wycombe boss added. "We lost a goal and came back against a world class side."

"Their goal took a bit of stuffing out of us but we saw it through to half-time and in the second half I thought we were excellent."

Lambert does not expect an upset at Stamford Bridge in two weeks time but added: "Anything is possible in football. It is going to be ten times harder than it was in tonight's game but the great thing is that we have kept the tie alive and it is a terrific result for everyone concerned."

Mourinho insisted he was unperturbed by the sight of his injury and suspension-affected side being held by a side 71 places below his in the English football hierarchy.

"I prefer to win than draw but a draw in a semi-final over two legs is a draw," he insisted. We have to decide things at home. For me, in a Cup semi-final there is no first, second or third division, every team is from the same competition, so I think it is a good result away from home."

Easter's late equaliser extended the striker's remarkable run of having scored in all of his side's games in the competition to six matches.

His 19th goal of the season and the manner in which he took it suggested the striker has a future at a level above the fourth tier of English football.

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But it was Easter's ability to hold off stand-in centreback Essien before firing an early low shot past Hilario in the Chelsea goal that made the difference.

Bridge, operating in an unfamiliar attacking role, had given Chelsea the lead nine minutes before half time, clipping Solomon Kalou's pass over goalkeeper Ricardo Batista.

Capello tightens reigns

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello insisted Wednesday he would not resign and moved to impose his authority on the team by dropping several star names including Ronaldo and David Beckham for Thursday's Spanish Cup tie at Real Betis.

Real are struggling after losing their last two league matches following abject performances against Recreativo Huelva and Deportivo La Coruna and their chances of catching league leaders Sevilla or second-placed Barcelona are receding.

Asked if he might throw in the towel, Capello said defiantly: "That idea has absolutely not entered my head."

Instead, he insists he will turn the club around.

"The last two games we lost our character and the desire we had had up to now."

"When I arrived I said we would have to sweat and recover our values, and I have not seen that. We have taken measures to deal with that," the Italian told reporters having earlier in the week met with sporting director Pedrag Mijatovic and president Ramon Calderon to discuss the road ahead.

After saying he was dropping Ronaldo, Beckham and Antonio Cassano, as well as Michel Salgado and Alvaro Mejia for the Betis encounter -- a first leg last 16 tie -- Capello suggested that road

will be travelled with less star baggage.

On Monday, AS sports daily reported Capello had said he wanted Ronaldo and Beckham out and AS added Wednesday that Saudi outfit Al Ittihad had made an offer to sign the Brazilian striker for 20 million euros (25 million dollars).

An Al Ittihad official in Jeddah confirmed that "we are waiting at any moment for a reply from the Spanish club" regarding a three-year deal for the 30-year-old which would net Real seven million dollars and the player himself 18 million dollars.

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

Beckham, meanwhile, also looks headed for the exit after months spent mulling a contract extension

The former England captain's current deal at the Bernabeu runs out at the end of the present season and Real's sporting director Predrag Mijatovic told Sky Italia in reply to a question if his contract will be renewed replied: "No, it hasn't been renewed."

Were Beckham to leave it would end a mixed three-and-a-half-year spell at the Bernabeu.

He played regularly for his first three seasons but the team has not won a trophy during his spell at the club which has coincided with a resurgence by European and Spanish champions Barcelona.

Beckham, who joined from

Manchester United in 2003 after falling out with Old Trafford mentor Sir Alex Ferguson, was one of several high-profile signings, along with now retired Frenchman Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos and Figo, the club's "galacticos".

Whereas Beckham has maintained publicly he wants to stay put Ronaldo has had an unhappy time of late and last season admitted he had never really felt accepted by Real's fans.

Yet former president Florentino Perez, who introduced the galactico policy to initial great effect with Champions League wins in 2000 and 2002, once said of him: "I would sooner sell the Santiago Bernabeu than let Ronaldo leave."

Perez's successor Calderon is less enamoured of the samba star.

Real have spent their barren years signing a swathe of expensive new recruits every few months.

But the arrival last summer of Italian World Cup winning captain and new world and European player of the year Fabio Cannavaro has not noticeably improved the back four and defensive midfielders Emerson and Mahamadou Diarra have also struggled.

That meant opening the cheque-book again in the transfer window to sign South American youngsters Marcelo, Fernando Gago and Gonzalo Higuain for a combined 35 million euros.

Mijatovic says he has faith in Capello but after another shopping spree Ronaldo and Beckham now head the list, albeit unofficial, up for sale list.

COPPA ITALIA

Roma grab slim advantage

Football

INTERNET, undated

Parma's youngsters bagged a late away goal in their 2-1 defeat at the Olimpico that could prove decisive for the Coppa Italia quarterfinal.

The Giallorossi thrashed this side 4-0 at the Tardini in September in Serie A, but still fielded an almost full-strength line-up. Francesco Tavano's transfer from Valencia came through in time, but a flu virus prevented his debut.

Parma stuck with the 'Cup' team that has proved impressive in both UEFA and the Coppa Italia.

It was the visitors who had the first chance after 10 minutes. Vitali Kutuzov's low drive skimming the upright. Moments later Roma got into gear with Simone Perrotta's first touch letting him down with only the goalkeeper to beat, then Amantino Mancini failed to complete his combination with Francesco Totti.

Mancini opened the scoring after 19 minutes with a divine solo effort. The Brazilian gathered from Perrotta, dribbled past Perna and placed a perfect lob over Alfonso De Lucia from 20 metres.

David Pizarro drilled over and Kutuzov was again Parma's most dangerous player, but the Roma defence was able to clear after Gianluca Curci fumbled Antonio Bocchetti's cross.



PHOTO: INTERNET

AS Roma's Brazilian striker Mancini is the toast of his teammates as he scored against Parma in their Italian Cup quarterfinal first leg match at Rome's Olympic Stadium on Wednesday.

Barca ride on Saviola

INTERNET, undated

Javier Saviola's second-half goals brought FC Barcelona a 2-0 win at second-division Alaves in a first-leg, fifth-round match of the Copa del Rey on Wednesday.

Saviola struck the first in the 57th minute and doubled his tally with a header 23 minutes later to make Barcelona a clear favourite to reach the quarterfinals of Spain's knockout competition.

The European and Spanish champion, who rested a host of players including Ronaldinho and Deco, hosts Alaves in the return leg next week.

Alaves had defender David Corominia ejected after halftime.

During the second half, Alaves supporters caused disturbances to protest at the running of the club by president Dmitry Piterman, a former United States triple-jumper.

Around a hundred fans charged through the stand, leading police to intervene.

Also, an injury-time goal by David Silva earned Valencia a 1-1 draw at Getafe, where the kickoff was delayed for half an hour when the lights failed.

Getafe made an encouraging start to the game between the two first-division teams when striker Veljko Paunovic headed home in the second minute.

In another game, league leaders Sevilla were held scoreless on their visit to third-division giantkillers Rayo, who knocked out

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PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona winger Ludovic Giuly (L) skips over the sliding challenge of Alaves defender Lancen during a King's Cup match in Vitoria on Wednesday.