



Blackburn Rovers forward Benni McCarthy (2nd L) tries to get the better of Bayer Leverkusen midfielder trio of (L-R) Rolfes, Schneider and Babić during their pulsating UEFA Cup tie at the BayArena on Wednesday.

Germans dominate

AFP, Paris



Bayer Leverkusen earned a thrilling 3-2 victory over English Premiership outfit Blackburn Rovers on a night when both German clubs won their UEFA Cup last 32 first leg matches while

the British duo lost.

However while Werder Bremen can look forward to a likely place in the last 16 after thrashing Dutch giants Ajax 3-0 in Bremen there can be no such confidence espoused by Leverkusen after a late Shabani Nonda goal pegged them back to a 3-2 home win over Rovers.

For Rovers' British counterparts Rangers there was frustration as the Scottish side saw their hopes of a club record 13th undefeated match in Europe dashed as they went down 2-1 away to Hapoel Tel Aviv.

Rangers' woes could be compounded if a case is proven against inspirational captain Barry Ferguson for elbowing - but their away goal could prove invaluable when they meet again in Glasgow next week.

The three French clubs in action like their German counterparts emerged unbeaten but Bordeaux could only draw 0-0 at home to Spanish side Osasuna while Nancy grabbed an impressive 1-1 away draw with Shakhtar Donetsk in Ukraine and PSG's resurgence under Rangers former handler Paul Le Guen continued with a 2-0 away win against AEK Athens.

Nonda may have been the

quieter of the all-African strike partnership for Rovers this term with South African Benni McCarthy being more prolific but his spectacular volley towards the end of the clash with former Champions League finalists Bayer could earn him a permanent move from AS

UEFA CUP RESULTS

AFP, Paris

Results from the UEFA Cup round of 32 first leg matches played on Wednesday:

At Lisbon
Benfica (POR) 1 (Miccoli 89) Dinamo Bucharest (ROM) 0

At Athens
AEK Athens (GRE) 0 Paris Saint Germain (FRA) 2 (Traore 45+1, Mendy 87)

At Livorno, Italy
Livorno (ITA) 1 (Galante 82) Espanyol (ESP) 2 (Pandiani 28-pen, Moya 59)

At Tel Aviv
Hapoel Tel Aviv (ISR) 2 (Toama 43, Dago 76) Rangers (SCO) 1 (Novo 53)

At Bremen, Germany
Werder Bremen (GER) 3 (Mertesacker 48, Naldo 54, Frings 71) Ajax (NED) 0

At Leverkusen, Germany
Bayer Leverkusen (GER) 3 (Callens-Bracker 18, Ramelow 43, Schneider 56)

Blackburn Rovers (ENG) 2 (Bentley 39, Nonda 86)

At Vladikavkaz, Russia
CSKA Moscow (RUS) 0 Maccabi Haifa (ISR) 0

At Bordeaux, France
Bordeaux (FRA) 0 Osasuna (ESP) 0

At Donetsk, Ukraine
Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 1 (Sma 85)

Nancy (FRA) 1 (Fortune 81)

At Istanbul
Fenerbahce (TUR) 3 (Tumer 28, 75, Tuncay 66) AZ Alkmaar (NED) 3 (De Zeeuw 15, Boukhari 62, Jenner 63)

Roma. "We have an option to sign Shabani permanently, but a decision hasn't been made at the moment," said Rovers manager Mark Hughes.

"It is something that will be addressed at the end of the season. "But his goal against Leverkusen was very important for us."

His Leverkusen counterpart Michael Skibbe still believed that the Germans could prevail next week.

"I am looking forward to next week's second-leg and I still believe that we have an excellent chance of progressing into the next stage," said Skibbe.

Bremen were masterful in their dominance of the once mighty Ajax with German internationals Per Mertesacker and Torsten Frings two of their scorers.

However coach Thomas Schaaf was still left somewhat underwhelmed.

"I think if we had taken a couple of our other chances we would be way out of sight," said Schaaf, who has seen his side slip in the title race in recent weeks.

"I really want us to go as far as possible in this competition," added Schaaf, whose team narrowly missed out on reaching the knockout stages of the Champions League.

Rangers manager Walter Smith, who was in charge of Rangers in his first spell when they set the record of 12 unbeaten and came agonisingly close to reaching the Champions League final, sadly resorted to the old tactic of blaming the referee for the defeat.

"It was a terrific free-kick for the goal and you always end up complaining about the referees. But

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Matthaeus wants Bayern job

REUTERS, Berlin

Former Germany captain and World Cup winner Lothar Matthaeus has made clear his interest in coaching Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich, his former club.

Asked whether he could do the job, Matthaeus, who has been coach at Austria's Red Bull Salzburg since May, told Thursday's edition of German newspaper Bild: "Of course."

"I am a Bundesliga insider and especially of Bayern," he added. "And it must be clear to whoever looks at my life up to now: my goal has to be the Bundesliga."

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Cicinho on recovery road

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid defender Cicinho, who injured his right knee in September during a Spanish league match against Real Betis, resumed training on Thursday, his club said.

It was the first time that the Brazilian international had jogged at the club's training centre since he picked up the injury which required surgery to correct, the club said in a statement posted on its Internet site.

Cicinho was unmarked when he turned awkwardly on the wet turf at Betis's Manuel Ruiz de Lopera stadium (Sevilla) and immediately fell to the floor in pain before being stretched off after 29 minutes of Madrid's 1-0 win.

Real Madrid has predicted that Cicinho will return to the pitch in March.

Eto'o won't be punished

AP, Madrid



FC Barcelona's sports director Txiki Begiristain won't punish Samuel Eto'o for criticizing coach Frank Rijkaard and teammate Ronaldinho.

Begiristain said Wednesday that Rijkaard had requested that Eto'o escape a sanction because he believes the players "can manage themselves."

"He (Rijkaard) is very happy that everything has been resolved so quickly. The problem has been one of dialogue from the moment last weekend's game with Racing ended," Begiristain was quoted as saying by the Web site of sports daily Marca.

Rijkaard added that the striker's remarks would not "affect our relationship," adding the way the affair had been settled had "encouraged the squad, which today has trained better than ever."

Earlier Wednesday, Eto'o and Ronaldinho smiled broadly as they embraced at the start of training.

"A sign that the squad is united is that Ronaldinho is the best friend of Eto'o in the dressing room," Begiristain said.

The previous day, Eto'o called Rijkaard "a bad person" and attacked Ronaldinho for suggesting the Cameroon international had refused to play as a substitute in Sunday's 2-0 league win over Racing Santander.

Eto'o has only just returned from a four-month absence following a serious right knee injury he picked up in a Champions League match at

Werder Bremen. The 26-year-old reappeared for five minutes at the end of Barcelona's 0-0 draw with Osasuna on Feb. 4.

Eto'o also said he was caught between two factions at Barcelona, headed by club president Joan Laporta and its former vice president Sandro Rosell.

In an interview with Cadena SER late Tuesday, Eto'o said he wouldn't retract his comments but added it was "a lie" he had insulted Rijkaard.

"Rijkaard and I aren't going to have problems," he said. "If I have something to tell him, we sit down and talk. There's no problem."

Spain's sports press on Wednesday devoted their front pages to the striker's barrage of criticism.

Two dailies Mundo Deportivo and AS ran the headline "Eto'o blows Barcelona up with dynamite,"

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San Siro's orange light

AFP, Paris

Milan's San Siro Stadium will host the two Champions League games involving the two Milan sides, Valencia of Spain and Celtic of Scotland, but in front of a limited number of fans.

European governing body UEFA said on its website that Tuesday's last 16, first leg game between Inter Milan and Valencia will have a permitted capacity of 36,000, with five per cent reserved for visiting supporters.

The game between AC Milan and Celtic on March 7 will also have a crowd cap, but this has yet to be determined. The capacity will, however, include 4,500 seats reserved for Scottish fans.

Doubts had been cast on the staging of the games in the San Siro after the strict crowd-control measures brought in by the Italian government following the violence in Sicily that led to the death of a policeman.

The San Siro was one of the grounds that fell short of the basic standards set down by the government, but a crowd of 21,000 Milan season ticket holders watched AC Milan defeat Livorno on Sunday after 28 new turnstiles were installed.

UEFA said that they had been informed of the venues by the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) after they had consulted with the Italian Home Affairs Ministry.

"The FIGC told UEFA that the stadium was already in conformity with some of the measures provided for by Italian law and that additional work was undertaken to fully comply with new measures that have come into force," UEFA said on its website.

"However, some work must still be done before full capacity will be allowed at the venue."

Arsenal's royal party

AFP, London

Top English football club Arsenal will have tea with the Queen following her unavailability for the opening of their new Emirates stadium in October, the BBC reported on Thursday.

A bad back meant Queen Elizabeth II was unable to appear at the new home of the North London club and Prince Philip went instead.

Captain Thierry Henry, manager Arsenal Wenger, the club board and other staff at the Premiership club will tour the State Apartments, before meeting the Queen.

A Buckingham Palace spokesman said: "The Queen was disappointed about not being able to officially open the new Arsenal stadium due to her back strain, especially as so much effort had been put in by so many people behind the scenes."

"Her Majesty therefore decided to host a tea at Buckingham Palace to thank those involved in the project for all their hard work and to have a chance to meet some of those she would have seen on the day."

Highbury stadium had hosted Arsenal games for 93 years till they moved to their new stadium in the pre-season.

REUTERS, Bremen



Werder Bremen struck three times in the second half to seal a 3-0 win over 10-man Ajax Amsterdam in the first leg of their UEFA Cup first knockout round tie on Wednesday.

The visitors struggled to contain Werder from the start and the sending-off of Olaf Lindenbergh in the 24th minute, following two bad tackles in quick succession, left them with little hope at a rainy Weserstadion.

They managed to cling on until three minutes into the second half

when Per Mertesacker popped up unmarked to score from a Torsten Frings corner.

Naldo headed in a second six minutes later, as substitute Vurnon Anita failed to clear off the line, and Frings made it 3-0 in the 71st minute.

Werder had given holders Barcelona a real scare before bowing out in the group phase of the Champions League and they duly went through to the UEFA Cup as one of the favourites.

They certainly looked a far better side than Ajax, both before and after the sending-off.

Naldo almost gave them the lead in the fourth minute when his driven free kick smacked against a post.

Ajax hopes of threatening the Werder goal were all but ended by the red card for Lindenbergh, which followed a late tackle on Clemens

Fritz and a kick from behind on Frings.

It was all about damage limitation from then on for Ajax and the visitors did a good job until the break.

The game was up immediately afterwards, though, when Mertesacker was left unmarked at a corner to sweep home.

Werder got their second when Naldo rose to head goalwards from around the penalty spot. Anita blocked the Brazilian's header but sadly for Ajax he was standing well behind the line when he did so and the referee awarded the goal.

Ajax created little but they should have got one back soon afterwards when Hedwiges Maduro got the ball under control in the area only to scuff his shot and give Tim Wiese an easy save.

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PHOTO: AFP

Werder Bremen players converge around Per Mertesacker (C) after the tall defender had given them the lead in their victory over Ajax in the UEFA Cup match at the WeserStadion on Wednesday.

Barca chaos buoys Benitez

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez believes his side can benefit from the row between three-time

African Footballer of the Year Samuel Eto'o and Barcelona manager Frank Rijkaard when they face the Spanish giants in next week's Champions League tie at the Nou Camp.

Benitez feels that both Eto'o and Lionel Messi are crucial to Barca's hopes of victory in the last 16 clash and that the desire for the pair to play sparked the row between Eto'o and Rijkaard.

Eto'o has been accused by the Dutch coach of refusing to come on as a substitute last weekend against

Racing Santander, and that incident has also caused Ronaldinho to question Eto'o's team loyalty, though, both parties moved to calm the storm on Wednesday with Eto'o protesting he had been misconstrued.

"Yes, I think they have been trying to push these players back quickly for this game," said Benitez, who worked with Eto'o's when in charge of Real Madrid's youth academy.

Looking ahead, the Spaniard also told Liverpoolfc.tv: "Everyone is very excited about this game. They have been talking about it almost every day for the last two months."

Their team is really good and when the draw was made people were saying Barcelona are the best team in the world.

After two months we are a lot better and they have had some

problems. They need Eto'o fit, and Messi, because they haven't been scoring a lot of goals.

Yes they are really strong, they are not playing at the same level but if they have Eto'o, Messi and Ronaldinho then I think they have very good players."

"I also know Eto'o as he was in the academy at Real Madrid when I was there, so I have good relations with them."

"It could be good for us to be underdogs. I think that it is important for us as we will not have big pressure there."

He added: "It will be hard there, but it will be good for us to score. Always for us to play the second leg at Anfield is important and we need to score in Barcelona if it's possible."

"Liverpool have never lost at the

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PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal forward Emmanuel Adebayor winds up the home fans after scoring in their FA Cup fourth round replay against bogey team Bolton at The Reebok Stadium on Wednesday.