



Valencia captain David Albelda (L) carries goalscorer David Silva after the midfielder netted a late equaliser for the Spaniards against Inter Milan during their Champions League clash at the San Siro on Wednesday.

Valencia win a draw

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan were left kicking themselves after being held to a 2-2 draw by Valencia in a gripping Champions League last 16, first leg tie here on Wednesday.

The Italian side should have had more to show for their first-half domination than just the one goal headed in by Argentine midfielder Esteban Cambiasso.

And poor finishing came back to haunt them as David Villa grabbed an equaliser the Spaniards barely deserved with a sublime free-kick from 25 yards.

A cool finish by Brazilian defender Maicon restored Inter's lead, but David Silva's low drive four minutes from time levelled the score and left Valencia as favourites to reach the quarterfinals.

Valencia's joy at scoring two away goals was soured slightly by a yellow card for their captain David Albelda.

Inter, who have won their last 16 league matches and hold a 14-point lead at the top of Serie A, will have to win or get a higher scoring draw at the intimidating Mestalla stadium to advance.

With the San Siro yet to fully comply with security measures introduced by the government in the wake of the crowd violence in Sicily earlier this month which claimed the life of a policeman, only Inter's 36,000 season-ticket holders were allowed in.

But the several hundred Valencia fans there will have gone home far happier after seeing their side come away with a result they never looked like getting after the first 45 minutes.

Patrick Vieira was ruled out for Inter with a thigh strain, so Luis Figo came in for the injured France international. Figo was deployed in the hole behind the two strikers and Serbian Dejan Stankovic dropped into Vieira's role as a holding midfielder.

Argentine Hernan Crespo was given the nod ahead of Brazilian Adriano to partner Zlatan

Ibrahimovic in Inter's attack.

Inter, who knocked Valencia out in the quarterfinals of the 2001-02 UEFA Cup and the last eight of the 2002-03 Champions League, were nearly gifted the lead in the ninth minute.

Valencia keeper Santiago Canizares was given a back pass which he tried to boot downfield, but his attempted clearance struck his own defender and the ball looped over his head and nearly went over the goal-line.

The danger was cleared as far as Stankovic and his right-wing cross was met by Ibrahimovic whose glancing header struck the post.

Inter maintained the pressure with Canizares getting down low to palm away Javier Zanetti's drive.

Villa tested Julio Cesar's reflexes as Valencia mustered their first attack before Inter went ahead.

Albelda chopped down Figo who picked himself up off the floor to take the resulting free-kick. Ibrahimovic was first to the

Portuguese's delivery and although his acrobatic volley was brilliantly saved by Canizares, the ball looped into the air and Cambiasso headed into an empty net.

Crespo's diving header rolled fractionally wide in the 41st minute before Villa missed a golden opportunity to equalise, drilling a shot wide in stoppage time with just Julio Cesar to beat.

Luis Miguel's perfectly-timed interception prevented Figo from giving Inter a two-goal cushion at the start of the second half.

Valencia pegged Inter back against the run of play in the 64th minute when Villa's right boot bent the ball around the wall and into the top corner.

Inter took time to raise their morale, but they went in front in the 75th minute after Maicon coolly finished after playing a neat one-two with substitute Julio Cruz.

But Inter's joy was short-lived as Silva capitalised after Inter failed to clear Villa's corner kick.

Rijkaard admits to complacency

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard usually protects his players in public but he laid into them in the wake of their shock 2-1 Champions League defeat to Liverpool on Wednesday.

"In this situation you don't always know why players did what they did but it was not one player's fault, it's everybody's fault," said the bitterly disappointed Dutchman after Barca struggled badly in the second half.

Rijkaard -- who may have wished that he had after all picked three time African player of the year Samuel Eto'o after falling out with him instead of having him watching from the stands where he cast a disconsolate figure ending with his head in his hands -- typically didn't raise his voice but knew everyone was listening to his unusually harsh words.

"From the moment we conceded the goal it seemed to affect us mentally and physically," added the man at the helm of the reigning European champions who seem destined to relinquish their hold on the trophy at Anfield on March 6.

"It's a question of not covering well from fouls, missing centres, and every one was not doing well," commented Rijkaard about Craig Bellamy's headed opening goal which led to Barca's own heads going down.

Liverpool's went in the other direction at a crucial point in the game, three minutes before the break, after being under pressure for much of the first half.

"It was an unfortunate moment. After that goal, Liverpool's confidence grew. We didn't have the strength to come back mentally, or physically because Liverpool are the reality, but we now have to keep on working, trying to improve," said Rijkaard, although he seemed at a loss on Wednesday as to how to reverse the current losing trend.

other one being the 1976 vintage who lost to... Liverpool.

"We started off quite well and we had high expectations after the first goal, we dominated the first 20 minutes but after that the rhythm of the game changed and we conceded a goal. We couldn't find a way to change this."

Rijkaard didn't hold out much hope that Barcelona can come from behind in the second leg between the two most recent Champions League winners after such a psychologically crushing defeat.

"We always have to be positive but it's always difficult to come back from this situation, but we will try our best. Things didn't go well for us today on the pitch. We have to be confident now and trust in ourselves."

"We know we lost to Valencia and now Liverpool, that's the reality, but we now have to keep on working, trying to improve," said Rijkaard, although he seemed at a loss on Wednesday as to how to reverse the current losing trend.

Draw satisfies Houllier

REUTERS, Rome

Olympique Lyon coach Gerard Houllier said he was satisfied with his team's 0-0 draw with Champions League rivals AS Roma on Wednesday.

"It seems about right to me. Of course I would have liked to win, but I think 0-0 was the best we could have got tonight," laughed Houllier, when asked about the bookings.

"The refereeing reflected the regulations made by UEFA, which differ from those in many of the national leagues."

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti felt Lyon's failure to score an

"Both sides have about the same capabilities, but getting a draw here in Rome, against a team that is used to winning, was a good result and I'm confident that we can do well in the return leg (on March 6)."

The contest was most notable for the refereeing of Mike Riley, who handed out 11 yellow cards -- eight to Roma and three to Lyon.

"Roma won that match 8-3, though I didn't think the match was particularly violent," laughed Houllier, when asked about the bookings.

"The refereeing reflected the regulations made by UEFA, which differ from those in many of the national leagues."

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti felt Lyon's failure to score an

away goal could favour his side in the return leg.

"In our away matches in the last two years we've always managed to score a goal," he said.

Roma's slow start to the game was down to nerves, explained Spalletti.

"It took us a little time to gain confidence. But after that we played well. In the return leg I think both teams will be prepared to risk a little more."

Despite the eight yellow cards, Spalletti was happy with Riley's performance.

"The referee did very well. He was balanced in his decisions and was always in control of the match," he said.

"I'm happy with the way my players played. It was a typical Champions League match. Very intense, very hard-fought."

Rabbi beats Wanderers

SPORTS REPORTER

Fazile Rabbi blazed an unbeaten 96-ball 115 after taking three crucial wickets as Mariners Youngs Club won by seven wickets against Dhaka Wanderers in the Kai-Altech First Division League at the Dhaka University ground yesterday.

While batting first after winning the toss, Wanderers were bowled out for 193 runs in 47.5 overs. Rabbi's superb hundred saw Mariners reach the target in only 36.5 overs, losing three wickets.

Left-handed Rabbi, coming in at number three after previous match centurion Golam Fayyaz fell for 12, smote as many as five sixes and 12 fours in his trail-blazing knock where he shared 149-run second wicket stand with opener Mofizur Rahman (46).

Earlier, Wanderers' innings was built around one-drop Nahidur Rahman's 64 in which he struck seven fours and a six. But their innings was brought to a swift end, thanks mainly to Rabbi who took 3-29 with his left-arm orthodox.

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