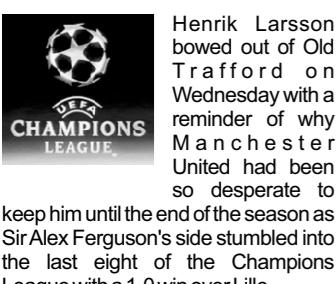




Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo (2nd R) slaloms his way past a host of Lille players during their Champions League match at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

United commit Larssony

AFP, Manchester



them. All that was orchestrated and there is no problem."

In truth, Larsson's headed winner papered over the cracks in what was a thoroughly unconvincing display from a side - who were making the last eight of the Champions League for the first time in four seasons - that looks like it could be running out of steam just as the season enters its decisive stage.

In addition, Mikael Silvestre has been added to Ferguson's growing injury list with a suspected dislocated shoulder.

"It has been a bad week for us apart from the results. They have been good and that creates a great purpose about the team."

"No matter the run-in we have, I think we have the purpose and quality in the squad to go the whole way."

For Larsson there is to be no going back on his promise to his Swedish club, Helsingborg, of returning there after his loan period was up.

"It's been great here for me," said Larsson.

"But what you have to remember is the Swedish season begins in April and it doesn't give them (Helsingborg) time to get another striker."

"I have been proud to have been part of this team."

The latest in the string of injuries that have bedevilled Louis Saha's Old Trafford career ensured that Larsson started the final home match of his United loan spell as a solo central

striker, Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo operating down the flanks.

Larsson might have marked the occasion with a goal after ten minutes, the Swede's exemplary first touch letting him down for once after Paul Scholes's defence-splitting pass found him in a couple of yards of space on the edge of the area.

Normal service was resumed five minutes later when a half-volleyed flick from the outside of his boot sent Scholes into the area.

The midfielder duly chipped to the back post for Rooney, whose volley was bravely blocked by the Lille captain, Gregory Tafforeau, resulting in a corner that John O'Shea headed on the edge of the six-yard box with a deft cutback.

The challenge earned the French defender a yellow card and most of Old Trafford breathed a collective sigh of relief when the England forward quickly got to his feet.

United were in desperate need of an injection of quality and, as so often this season, it was Ronaldo who provided it.

Having show-boated his way

through the preceding 70 minutes, the Portuguese winger suddenly produced an unstoppable burst down the left flank before picking out Larsson on the edge of the six-yard box with a deft cutback.

It left the Swede with the simple task of steering his header beyond the hopelessly exposed Syla.

Giggs, watching from the stand, enjoyed the joke but once the free-kick was finally taken, Ronaldo's effort was sent straight into the Lille wall, as was a second attempt he was accorded because the visitors had not retreated the full ten yards.

Throughout the first half, there had been air of complacency about United's lack of drive and the visitors almost punished them at the start of

the second, when Peter Odemwingie's header beat van der Sar but came back off the post.

On the touchline, the mood of an increasingly irate Ferguson was not improved by the sight of Nicolas Peletier scything into Wayne Rooney from behind.

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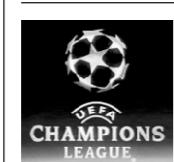
Larsson will play for United one more time, in Saturday's FA Cup quarterfinal at Middlesbrough, before he returns to Helsingborg. They will miss him.

"Those bad feelings belong in the past."

"I don't attach any importance to

Benitez praises Carragher

AFP, Liverpool



Jamie Carragher's contribution in Liverpool's Champions League victory over Barcelona drew rare high praise from manager Rafael Benitez, a man more comfortable praising team efforts.

Such was the individual prowess shown by Carragher, said Benitez, that it merited a special mention and begged the question why the 29-year-old is not an England team regular.

Liverpool lost 1-0 at home to Barcelona on Tuesday night but their 2-1 victory at the Nou Camp a fortnight earlier meant they booked the place in the quarterfinal draw.

During a tense 90 minutes at Anfield, Carragher - who has seamlessly overcome the trauma of scoring a penalty in the World Cup quarterfinal shootout defeat by Portugal and then missing after

the start of the game.

"He is such a good defender against the very best players and, yes, it is a surprise that such a really good defender does not play every game for his country."

being told to retake it - managed to shackle the combined talents of two-time world player of the year Ronaldinho and three-time African player of the year Samuel Eto'o.

It drew fulsome praise from a usually reserved Benitez.

"It surprises me that Jamie is not a regular in the England team," said the Spaniard of the player who has won 32 caps, of which only 18 have been in the starting line-up.

"I don't like praising just one player after a performance like that against Barcelona. Everyone contributed. The team, all of them, were giving something to the team in a brilliant night."

"I also know the England manager Steve McLaren was in the crowd at Anfield against Barcelona, and after seeing a performance like that, it is going to make his next team selection very interesting."

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard - like Carragher one of the only two regular homegrown Liverpool players in the side - agreed with Benitez's assessment of Carragher's performance and importance to the side.

"Over the two legs, Carr has been phenomenal," said Gerrard.

"Maybe there are a few outside Liverpool who are surprised by how good he has been but it is no surprise to me or anyone else who has seen him just get better and better every season."

"I look around at the defenders across Europe and the rest of the world, and I really do not see anyone who is better than him. I definitely would not swap him for anyone."

"I also know the England manager Steve McLaren was in the crowd at Anfield against Barcelona, and after seeing a performance like that, it is going to make his next team selection very interesting."

The bank gave no details on the probe but the substance was indicated by the fact that it was requested by Argentina's tax authorities.

Neither Maradona nor his lawyer could be contacted, but the investigation marks the latest twist in the colorful life of the troubled 46-year-old star, who was dogged by controversy throughout his glittering career and has since battled several health scares.

Regarded as one of the world's greatest-ever football stars, Maradona shares FIFA's title of the 20th century's best player with Brazil's Pele after a sparkling career with Boca Juniors, Barcelona and Napoli.

But his life has been checked by controversy since his retirement at 37, with scandals covering the gamut of marital infidelity, cocaine use and tax evasion.

In April 2000 Maradona had a heart attack in Uruguay following a cocaine overdose. Four years later, the same thing happened. After spending weeks in intensive care, his weight ballooned to alarming levels, prompting him to undergo gastric bypass surgery in 2005.

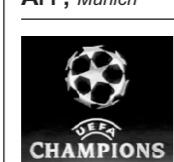
In 2006, Italian police stripped the star of two Rolex watches during a visit to Naples, in line with a judicial order requiring payment of a reported 31 million Euros (40 million dollars) worth of back taxes in Italy.

Born October 30, 1960 just outside Buenos Aires, Maradona's life on the pitch was a compelling mix of sublimity and disgrace.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: D equals F

Hitzfeld works his magic

AFP, Munich



Hitzfeld planned the galacticos' downfall by calling for an aggressive start from his team - and was rewarded with the fastest goal in Champions League history when Roy Makaay struck after just ten seconds.

Brazilian defender Lucio's second-half header seemed to have secured Bayern's victory before Ruud van Nistelrooy gave Real faint hope with a well-struck penalty with ten minutes remaining after Lucio was adjudged to have brought down Robinho.

"The penalty was a gift to Real and put them back in the saddle," Hitzfeld said.

"The last three or four minutes were tough, but we were still trying to attack."

"We had the majority of the chances and we were always looking to score."

Hitzfeld returned to Bayern at the start of February after the surprise sacking of Felix Magath

following a handful of poor results.

Bayern stuttered in Hitzfeld's early games, losing to Nuremberg and minnows Alemannia Aachen before hitting their stride.

A 3-2 victory at Hertha Berlin at the weekend left them fourth in the league, six points behind leaders Schalke 04, and was the perfect preparation for the European showdown.

But despite injecting new life into Germany's biggest club, Hitzfeld called for caution from any Bayern fans already dreaming of a fourth continental crown.

"We still haven't achieved anything this season. Everything is at a critical stage."

One thing is for sure - if Bayern do lift Europe's top club prize in Athens on May 23, it will be Hitzfeld's last game in charge. He confirmed last weekend that he intended to step down at the end of the season.

"We can be proud of beating Real who are always a major

Eidur curses lack of spirit

AFP, Madrid

Dethroned Champions League titleholders Barcelona lacked team spirit as they went out to Liverpool in Tuesday's last 16 clash, the Catalan's Icelandic striker Eidur Gudjohnsen said.

Gudjohnsen scored the only goal of the game as Barca won 1-0 on the night at Anfield but it was not enough to see them through as Liverpool prevailed on the away goals rule after the two-leg match ended 2-2.

The former Chelsea star - who signed for Barca last summer - insisted that Barcelona had been the better side over the two legs.

"We had more quality than them but if one does not make the sacrifices and work your socks off, talent is not enough," said Gudjohnsen, who has generally been judged not to have been an adequate replacement for veteran Swede Henrik Larsson.

"We could all have done more. Against Liverpool we were just not playing as a team."

Gudjohnsen, who is not the first Barcelona player to criticise the atmosphere at the club this season after both two-time world player of the year Ronaldinho and three-time African player of the year Samuel Eto'o also voiced their concerns, rejected the notion that their elimination meant their season had been a failure.

"That is too strong a term, if we do not have some sort of silverware at the end of the season well then yes it will have been a failure but for the moment no."

Barcelona are presently second in the Spanish Championship, one point off leaders Sevilla, who beat them 2-1 last Saturday in a fiery encounter, and are in the semifinals of the Spanish Cup.

Police look to net trophy thief

AFP, Marseille

The stolen replica of the European Cup that France's only winners of the trophy Marseille made after their 1993 victory appeared on an internet auction site on Wednesday, according to police sources.

The replica cup, one of which was made after Marseille's 1-0 Champions League win over AC Milan in Munich, went missing from the French club's trophy room on Monday.

Police are yet to determine whether the person selling the item on the net is actually in possession of the trophy or whether it was a ruse.

The advertisement for the sale of the stolen silverware has subsequently disappeared leaving police with little to go on, or so the thieves thought.

The spotlight of suspicion is now pointed towards the French city of Lyon, after an address coming from the area of the five-time French champions was recovered from the site.

Maradona in tax probe

AFP, Buenos Aires

Legendary football genius Diego Maradona appeared to be in trouble again Wednesday as Argentina's central bank announced it is probing him over possible financial irregularities.

The bank gave no details on the probe but the substance was indicated by the fact that it was requested by Argentina's tax authorities.

Neither Maradona nor his lawyer could be contacted, but the investigation marks the latest twist in the colorful life of the troubled 46-year-old star, who was dogged by controversy throughout his glittering career and has since battled several health scares.

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Today's Cryptquip Clue: D equals F

Berlusconi backs Milan

AFP, Milan

AC Milan owner Silvio Berlusconi insisted his side were now favourites to win the Champions League, despite seeing them scraped into the quarterfinals with a 1-0 extra-time victory over Celtic. Milan failed to breach Celtic's defence over the two legs of their last 16 tie, but a piece of magic from Brazilian midfielder Kaká finally ended the Scottish side's brave resistance.

Milan's failure to put away their chances was a worrying sight for Berlusconi, but the former Italian Prime Minister feels that with many of the big guns out of the competition, his side are the team to beat.

"Every one of the eight teams has a chance. It's very open."

Celtic coach Gordon Strachan paid tribute to his players for keeping the six-time European champions at bay for so long.

"If there was a Champions League trophy for sheer guts and determination, we'd win it," he said.

"We must improve our technique if we want to push forward, but we are certainly on the right road."

"The tournament has been a great experience for us and we will learn from it."

Celtic were under almost constant

pressure from the first whistle, but what they lacked in technique, they more than made up for in spirit, while their keeper, Artur Boruc, was outstanding.

Strachan's side, who could wrap up the Scottish Premier League title this weekend, finally succumbed three minutes into the first extra-time period.

Kaka, who had seen a shot come back off the bar two minutes from the end of normal time, held off a strong challenge from Neil Lennon on the halfway line before outpacing the tiring Celtic defence and slipping the ball under Boruc.

Kaka insisted his side were worthy of a place in the last eight given their performances over the two legs.

"Celtic are an experienced team and they put us in difficulty, but if you look overall at the two games, we deserved to go through," he said.

PSV end Arsenal dream