



Valencia midfielder David Silva (R) lets loose a thundering 30-yard effort to score against Chelsea in the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal at Stamford Bridge in London on Wednesday.

SILVA STRIKES A STUNNER

Valencia gain the edge

AFP, London



Didier Drogba kept Chelsea's Champions League challenge alive with a second half equaliser to earn a 1-1 draw against Valencia on Wednesday.

Drogba - who became the first Chelsea player since Kerry Dixon over 20 years ago to score 30 goals in a season - came to Chelsea's rescue after David Silva's stunning strike had put Valencia in control of a hard-fought quarterfinal first leg clash at Stamford Bridge.

Jose Mourinho's side will feel they are still in with a chance of reaching the semifinals, but they will have to improve on this tepid display if they are to overcome Valencia in next Tuesday's return at the Mestalla.

The eternally optimistic Mourinho, though, still believed that his side can pull it off.

"It is open completely open," said Mourinho of the tie.

"A draw at home is normally a bad result but not this one.

"I believe they (Valencia) think they can win it.

"But why can we not go there (Valencia) get a draw and then win in extra-time."

However his Valencia counterpart Quique Sanchez Flores insisted he thought his side had achieved their

aim.

"We succeeded in what we wanted to do and that was that the tie would be decided in Valencia," said Flores.

"If one believes in the statistics on how away teams perform at Stamford Bridge, then it is a good result," added Flores.

Valencia were without a host of key players through injury and suspension, but the Spanish side still coped comfortably with Chelsea's sporadic threats.

The English champions never really found their stride and are now in danger of not only losing their Premiership title to Manchester United, but also missing out on Europe's elite club competition for a third successive season under Mourinho.

With Valencia under-strength, Mourinho had opted to go for the throat, fielding an attack-minded team that included strikers Drogba, Andriy Shevchenko and Salomon Kalou.

Chelsea's players got the message and were on the front foot immediately.

Drogba was just unable to reach Ashley Cole's cross before Kalou rattled the crossbar in the 10th minute with a curling shot from the edge of the area.

Valencia probed patiently at Chelsea's defence and Silva gave a hint of their potential when he blasted

into the side-netting from a tight angle.

Silva squandered a much better chance midway through the half when Joaquin's shot fell to him 10 yards from goal. The Spanish forward had time to pick his spot but scuffed his effort lamely wide.

The knowledge that failing to take a lead to the Mestalla could be fatal seemed to pray on Chelsea and they started to rush their attacks when more composure was needed.

Their aggressive game-plan was also leaving spaces at the back for Valencia to exploit and Asier Del Horno, playing against his former club, brought Petr Cech into action with a looping long-range shot.

Mourinho's side had been warned and Silva took full advantage of those gaps with a goal of the highest quality after half an hour.

Picking the ball up wide on the left, Silva drove forward before unleashing a ferocious 30-yard strike that arrowed into the top corner of Cech's goal.

Chelsea grew increasingly frustrated at their failure to test Valencia and Michael Ballack held his head in despair when he glanced an effort wide just before the break. Drogba fared little better as he shot hurried over with the last kick of the half.

Valencia keeper Santiago Canizares almost handed Chelsea an equaliser when he palmed a cross to Ricardo Carvalho, but the Portuguese defender couldn't react in

time.

Quique Sanchez Flores's team had kept Drogba relatively quiet, but an awful piece of defending from Roberto Ayala gifted the Ivory Coast forward a goal in the 53rd minute.

Cole sent a long pass over Ayala and the veteran Argentina centre-back missed his attempted clearance, allowing Drogba to surge past him and loop a header over the out-of-position Canizares.

Drogba was typically humble about his achievement in emulating Dixon's record.

"I feel good but you know the most important thing wasn't my goal but that now we believe we can qualify," added the Ivory Coast star.

With highly-rated Valencia forward David Villa completely anonymous, the visitors struggled to pose any danger to the Blues for long periods after the interval.

They were content to sit back and soak up Chelsea's attacks and Mourinho knew he had to gamble to find a breakthrough.

He sent on Joe Cole, back after four months out with a foot injury, and Shaun Wright-Phillips as he tried to increase the pressure on Valencia.

Carvalho had a shot blocked in the 84th minute before Shevchenko's over-head kicked flashed wide, but Chelsea had run out of ideas.

Berlusconi stands by Dida

AFP, Rome

AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi has leapt to the defence of the club's under-fire Brazilian keeper Nelson Dida.

Italian media reports said the former Italian prime minister blamed Dida for Bayern Munich's two goals in Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal, first leg 2-2 draw at the San Siro.

But Berlusconi insisted on Thursday that Dida was not at fault for the two away goals, which mean AC Milan will be eliminated from the competition unless they win or get a higher-scoring draw in the return leg in Munich next week.

"I am dumbfounded by these reports that I have no confidence in Dida," Berlusconi said on AC Milan's website.

"On the contrary. After the match I closely watched replays of Bayern's goals and could only defend him. I wouldn't swap him for any other goalkeeper."

Barca still pursuing Henry

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona and several other major European clubs are interested in signing Arsenal captain Thierry Henry, the Spanish sports daily El Mundo Deportivo reported here Thursday.

The French international striker, sidelined due to injury until the end of the season, has apparently fallen out with Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger and is no longer considered untransferable, commented the Barcelona-based newspaper.

The newspaper added that his representatives have begun "discreet contacts" with European clubs with a view to securing a transfer from the Emirates Stadium.

Inter Milan and AC Milan are also among the clubs which are reported to be interested in signing the 29-year-old player, despite Henry insisting only three weeks ago that he wanted to stay at Arsenal for the rest of his career.

Barcelona's interest in Henry is nothing new.

He was widely linked with the Catalan club at the end of last season while negotiating a new contract with Arsenal.

However, the fact that he is perceived to have reneged on his verbal promise to move to Spain by some Barcelona club directors could ultimately mitigate against Barca making a serious bid, added El Mundo Deportivo.

Long layoff for Sagnol

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich defender Willy Sagnol will be sidelined for four months as a result of the right knee injury he picked up in Tuesday's Champions League match against AC Milan, his club said.

Bayern said the 30-year-old France full back will undergo surgery later Thursday on the injury which forced him to go off in the 68th minute of his side's 2-2 quarter final first leg draw in Milan.

Sagnol has been with Bayern since the 2000/01 season which culminated with them winning the Champions League.

Raul gets squad backing

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's players have firmly backed their iconic captain Raul Gonzalez and want him to stay, Spanish sports daily Marca reported on Thursday.

Rumours have been circulating in the Spanish media for weeks that the 29-year-old striker could leave at the end of the season.

Relations between Raul and the club's new president Ramon Calderon, who was elected last summer, are believed to have soured after the player publicly criticised Calderon in January for making adverse comments about the playing staff.

Marca conducted a series of interviews with Real players and they unanimously pleaded with Raul to stay at the Spanish giants on Thursday.

"The number 7 of Real Madrid is Raul. He's a perfectionist, I like him because he's always looking to improve every day," said Real defender and World Player of the Year Fabio Cannavaro.

"Raul is an institution and he's written some of the most important pages. He's one of the greats and it would be strange to see him in another jersey," added Roberto Carlos.

Jose remains confident

AFP, London



Jose Mourinho believes Chelsea are still on course to reach the Champions League semifinals despite failing to build an advantage ahead of their testing trip to Valencia.

The last eight tie is finely poised at 1-1 after Didier Drogba's second half equaliser - making him the first Chelsea player since Kerry Dixon over 20 years ago to score 30 goals in a season - cancelled out David Silva's stunning strike in the first leg at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday.

While Valencia will be confident of going through in front of their own fans next Tuesday, Mourinho has warned the Spaniards that his side will thrive in the intimidating atmosphere at the Mestalla Stadium.

And even if the English champions don't make it to a semifinal showdown against Liverpool or PSV Eindhoven, Mourinho claimed it wouldn't be the end of the world.

The Blues boss jokingly said he wasn't concerned about the result because he will go to London's Earls Court arena to watch WWE wrestling with his children on the day of the last four first leg if Chelsea aren't involved.

While Mourinho had his tongue firmly in his cheek, he will be well aware that his future at Chelsea could rest on his side's ability to overcome a major hurdle in Spain.

He said: "It is 1-1. It is not 0-3. If you ask Ronald Koeman about PSV I think he will say he does not think he can beat Liverpool at

Anfield 4-0.

"But Chelsea can win in Valencia, Chelsea can draw 2-2 or go to extra-time. Of course it is difficult because they have a good team and they play at home.

"It is not my biggest challenge. If we win we go to the semifinal, if we lose I go to Earl Court for the wrestling. It is April 24, the same day as the semifinal. So if I don't go to the semifinal, I go to the wrestling with my kids."

Mourinho hopes Valencia will be overconfident after apparently getting the hard work done in London.

"Chelsea tried to win and Valencia tried to draw," he said.

"They were a bit lucky with an amazing goal because they didn't create a lot. We hit the bar and had chances around their goal, but we have to accept that the result was fair.

"I think in Mestalla everybody is thinking they are one step ahead and maybe everybody is enjoying this result. But if I was in their place I would be very cautious.

"A team that plays at home normally has the advantage and I imagine that the Valencia players feel more comfortable at the Mestalla than here. But if we have a good referee there who is not influenced by the enthusiastic atmosphere why can't we get a result?"

Chelsea had started brightly and Drogba was just unable to reach Ashley Cole's cross before Salomon Kalou rattled the crossbar with a curling shot from the edge of the area.

Silva squandered a glorious chance midway through the half when Joaquin's shot fell to him 10

yards from goal. The Spanish forward had time to pick his spot but scuffed his effort lamely wide.

But he made amends with a brilliant strike after half an hour. Picking the ball up wide on the left, Silva drove forward before unleashing a ferocious 30-yard strike that arrowed into the top corner of Petr Cech's goal.

Valencia had kept Drogba relatively quiet, but an awful piece of defending from Roberto Ayala gifted the Ivory Coast forward a goal in the 53rd minute.

Cole sent a long pass over Ayala and the veteran Argentina centre-back missed his attempted clearance, allowing Drogba to surge past him and loop a header over the out-of-position Santiago Canizares.

Valencia manager Quique Sanchez Flores admitted he was satisfied with the result because it meant the tie would be decided on home turf.

"I think we have got objective one achieved, which is to take the game into the second leg," he said.

"The tie will now be settled as the Mestalla which is in our favour.

"We will have a more offensive approach because we will be playing at home and David Villa will have a bigger role to play. At home we will see the attacking side of David and he will be creating chances for himself.

"We are going to set up in the same way we did in the second leg against Inter Milan in the last round. We will try to forget we have scored a goal.

"It would be foolish to try and sit back and defend against a team like Chelsea."

Fergie thankful to Rooney

AFP, Rome



Sir Alex Ferguson believes Wayne Rooney's first Champions League goal for two-and-a-half years has left Manchester United in a strong position to reach the semifinals.

Rooney, who had not scored in the competition since netting a hat-trick against Fenerbahce in September 2004, gave United a lifeline with a precious away goal in a 2-1 defeat to Roma in a highly-charged quarter-final, first leg.

Asked if the goal would help Rooney's confidence, Ferguson replied: "I think it helps us more.

"Obviously we can take great encouragement from the away goal, and I think we can put a

side out next Tuesday that can go and win the match."

Rodrigo Taddei put Roma ahead with a deflected shot in the 44th minute after United had Paul Scholes sent off for two yellow cards, his first already ruling him out of next week's second leg at Old Trafford.

Rooney showed a remarkably cool head for such young shoulders on the hour, equalising with a delightful finish after controlling Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's right-wing cross.

But Roma restored their lead six minutes later when Mirko Vucinic slammed home the loose ball after Edwin van der Sar had failed to deal with Mancini's blistering shot.

Ferguson was in awe of Rooney for the way he took his goal.

"The great thing about it was the composure he showed for a

young lad," said the Scot who led United to Champions League success in 1999.

"He could have gone for his shot straight away, but he waited for the defender to move, side-stepped and then scored.

"It showed tremendous composure for a lad of only 21."

Rooney was delighted to end his European goal drought with such a crucial goal.

"It was very important to score," he said.

"It's our mentality to attack, even away from home with 10 men."

Roma coach Luciano Spalletti felt his side should have had a bigger advantage to take to Manchester having played with an extra man for 56 minutes.

"With a little bit more luck we could have won by a bigger margin," he said.

"But tonight's result showed that we can play and we have to be confident for the return.

"It was a test of our maturity and our development as a team and we have to be reasonably satisfied with 2-1."

Roma's joy at taking a slender lead to Old Trafford was tempered somewhat by a booking for midfielder Simone Perrotta, who like Scholes will be sidelined for the return game.

Wednesday's match was marred by trouble between rival fans outside the Olympic stadium before kick-off.

Eighteen fans went to hospital for treatment with one English fan in a serious condition after being stabbed in the neck.

The opening goal also sparked ugly scenes as United fans - reacting to spiteful provocation from the home supporters - were baton-charged by Italian police.

United accuse Italian police

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United chiefs accused Italian police of a "severe over-reaction" after they baton-charged supporters of the Premiership club during their Champions League defeat at Roma.

United and Roma fans were involved in fighting outside the Olympic Stadium before Wednesday's game and riot police used batons and tear gas to subdue the visiting supporters when fresh disturbances erupted during the quarterfinal first leg, which ended in a 2-1 victory for the Italian side.

Thirteen United fans were hospitalised, one with a stab wound to the neck, as a result of the violence before and during the match and UEFA, European football's governing body, have announced they will investigate.

United are furious with the police's behaviour at the stadium and they insist fans were attacked regardless of whether or not they had been involved in fighting.

The English club admit they are powerless to take action against the police, but they want supporters to submit statements to help a government investigation into the trouble.

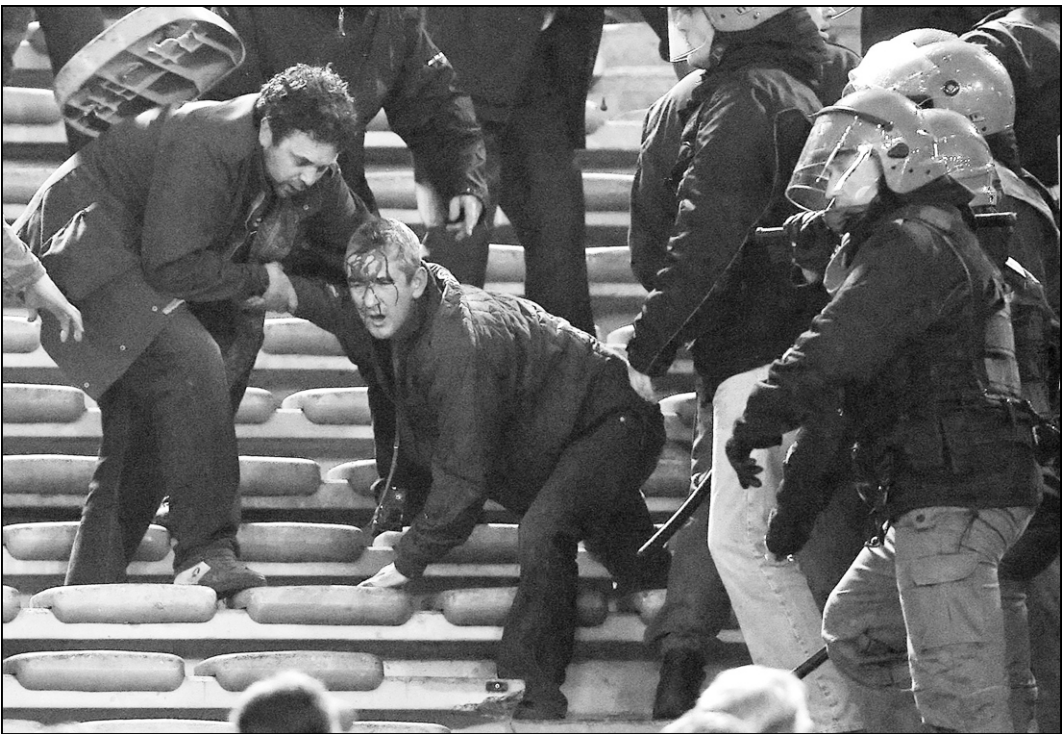
A statement on United's website said: "The distressing scenes witnessed in the Stadio Olimpico on Wednesday night shocked everyone at Old Trafford.

"In what the Club views as a severe over-reaction, local police handed out indiscriminate beatings to United supporters.

"In these circumstances, neither Manchester United nor AS Roma is able to call the police to account.

"As a result, the Club warmly welcomes the Government examination of the incident and will collect witness statements from fans to submit to the Home Office."

Under Italian law, the local



A Manchester United fan is hurt and bleeding as he is helped to his feet following clashes with policemen during their Champions League encounter against AS Roma at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome on Wednesday.



AS Roma coach Luciano Spalletti (R) bows in respect as he shakes hand with Manchester United counterpart Alex Ferguson before the start of their Champions League quarterfinal at the Stadio Olimpico on Wednesday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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16 DAY IN

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18 PHOTOG's CHOICE

19 TACKLE's TEAMMATE

20 FEATHERY

21 MINE-OVER