



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."

"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.

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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 tamely wide.

The knowledge that failing to take a lead to the Mestalla could be fatal seemed to prawn 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 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.

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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 Argentine centre-back missed his attempted clearance, allowing Drogba to surge past him and loop a header over the out-of-position Carvalho.

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

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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 "discrete 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*.

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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 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 able 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.

"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

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



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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