



Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien (L) shoots to score the late goal that sent Chelsea through in their quarterfinal second leg against Valencia at the Mestalla on Tuesday.

Essien delivers Chelsea

AFP, Valencia



Ghanian midfielder Michael Essien scored a stunning late winner to give Chelsea a 2-1 victory over Valencia in their Champions League quarterfinal second leg on Tuesday.

The triumph was the first time in 40 years that Valencia had lost at home to an English club and gave Chelsea a 3-2 win on aggregate to send them into the semifinals for the third time in four years.

With Liverpool their likely opponents after winning 3-0 at PSV Eindhoven last week, Chelsea face a replay of the last time they were in the semifinals of Europe's top club competition two years ago.

In a game that typified the old cliché of football being a game of two halves, Valencia had the better first 45 minutes and held a 1-0 lead at half time thanks to a Fernando Morientes goal after 32 minutes.

Chelsea came out after the break with all guns blazing and Andriy Shevchenko equalised after 51 minutes, but the game looked set to go into extra time before Essien made history right on the whistle.

Captain John Terry put the English side's transformation down to the some tough talking from manager Jose Mourinho in the dressing room at half-time.

"The first half wasn't good enough, they dominated. But we got kicked up the backside at half-time and came out in the second half and dominated," Terry told ITV Sport.

"But we never give in and we said last night if we go a goal down, nothing changes. He (Mourinho) wasn't happy at half-time but he's happy now."

The only negative note for Chelsea

is that Essien, the hero of the night whose name was chanted to the rafters of Valencia's Mestalla stadium by Chelsea's 3,000 supporters, will miss the semifinal first leg at Stamford Bridge in two weeks.

Essien was booked after just three minutes for a clumsy challenge on Morientes.

Valencia coach Quique Sanchez Flores found defeat hard to swallow.

"I don't know if the best team won but it's sure that it's a great team that won," said Flores.

"They have impressive potential. Their second half was very good. Physically they are a very powerful team. They never give in and always create chances to score. Defeat is very painful for us," said Flores.

"All our chances came in the first half and if we'd have gone 2-0 up it would have been a different game. In the second period, we got too bogged down in our own half," added Valencia coach Fernando Morientes.

Morientes played through the pain barrier, not just because of some robust Chelsea challenges but also because he had his shoulder strapped after dislocating it two weeks ago playing for Spain.

He only became available to play on Monday after Valencia club doctor Antonio Giner passed him fit and he took the field wearing a special brace.

However, the former Liverpool player, and three-time Champions League winner when he was at Real Madrid, once again proved that he can rise to the occasion on the European stage.

After 30 minutes, David Villa darted out of the midfield and showed just why he has been courted by several Premiership clubs by courageously taking on Ricardo Carvalho before sending the ball square to Morientes.

Morientes was then desperately unlucky when his left foot shot from just inside the area went to the right side of

Chelsea keeper Petr Cech only to hit the upright.

Two minutes later he made amends though, sliding in to connect on the edge of the six yard box with a chip from the sidelines by Joaquin Sanchez.

Chelsea showed that they were not down-and-out when Didier Drogba got between the Valencia defenders and had a good shot on goal six minutes before half time but goalkeeper Santiago Canizares pulled off an excellent save.

Joe Cole's introduction at half time, in place of French holding midfielder Lassana Diarra, perhaps proved to be the turning point with Chelsea switching their formation around from 4-4-2 to 4-3-3.

Cole added some decisive pace down the right wing and Chelsea soon profited.

Shevchenko levelled the scores seven minutes after the break, finding the net from close range after the ball had run loose from a Drogba shot.

Michael Ballack went close to getting the winner himself six minutes before the end but a spectacular instinctive save by Canizares, who tipped the ball over the cross bar, denied Chelsea once more.

Canizares had an outstanding night despite the two goals but could do nothing about Essien's blast from a tight angle with just seconds remaining in normal time, after Shevchenko had put the ball to his feet.

The game also ensures that the speculation about Jose Mourinho's career as the Chelsea coach will be put on hold for a few weeks.

Maradona leaves hospital

Football

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine football legend Diego Maradona checked out of a private hospital early Wednesday after 13 days of treatment for alcohol abuse, medical officials said in a statement.

The former Argentina captain and Barcelona and Napoli star, 46, was discharged a few minutes after midnight accompanied by family members.

A medical report distributed to the media said that Maradona "was given a clean bill of health on this day," but added that his condition required medical and dietary treatment to continue after his release.

Earlier, his personal doctor

Alfredo Cahe said he was not fully recovered from hepatitis which developed from drinking too much.

"We cannot give him a full clean bill of health, because that is far down the road," Cahe told reporters.

However, he said, "Diego has woken up and has just now entered into analysis of his true problems."

A family source said at the hospital said Maradona would be taken to the home of his girlfriend Veronica Ojeda in the south side of Buenos Aires, but that could not be confirmed.

But Cahe has also said that he and Maradona will go to Switzerland for a comprehensive treatment for the retired footballer's problems.

"After first regarding us with skepticism, now he listens when we explain things to him. Diego has

become conscious of his real problems," said Hector Pezzella, director of the private hospital.

Recent reports in Argentine media have focused on his heavy drinking and obesity, noting he has put back on many pounds (kilograms) since undergoing gastric bypass surgery in 2005 to get his weight under control.

It is not the first time Maradona, named one of the 20th century's greatest players after leading his squad to the 1986 World Cup title, has been hospitalized due to his excessive lifestyle.

His career on and off the pitch has been marred by repeated drug and alcohol abuse. He has suffered from chronic hepatitis since he contracted hepatitis B in 1991, while he played for Barcelona.

Escude told the UEFA website: "It's always great to win but it's going to be very hard over there. We're in for a difficult 90 minutes. We know how good Tottenham are, especially at home with their fans behind them."

And on Keane and Berbatov, Escude added: "It's tricky defending against strikers of their calibre. We already knew about them, but we learned a lot."

"We didn't really get to grips with them at the start and, with players like Keane and Berbatov, that can be fatal."

With Sevilla remaining the only Spanish club left fighting on three fronts - the league, Spanish Cup and Europe - some pundits are wondering whether their recent lacklustre performances suggest their players are running out of steam.

The player proved to all concerned that he had not come to the Mediterranean for a vacation.

"Physically they were better than us," conceded Valencia winger Joaquin Sanchez, the service provider for Morientes' goal. Other Valencia players had similar sentiments.

"They were very tough. We weren't far behind but perhaps they

had more gasoline in the tank," added Asier Del Horno, who had more insight than most into his opponents after having moved from Chelsea to Valencia last summer.

"They were superior to us in the second halves of both matches. Valencia didn't have the resources to respond to them," commented Valencia coach Quique Flores.

"However, we've recovered our prestige in Europe after the two defeats in the Champions League finals (of 2000 and 2001) a few years ago. Everyone knows who we are now, although this was a very painful defeat," added Flores.

Michael Essien's stunning late winner to give Chelsea a 2-1 victory over Valencia in their Champions League quarterfinal, second leg on Tuesday added to the statistics as well as cruelly dumping the Spaniards out of the competition.

The Ghanaian midfielder's strike in the dying seconds of normal time was their 33rd out of a total of 105 goals in all competitions that have come after 80 minutes have gone by on the clock.

"This is a team that keeps going until the final whistle," said The Blues' England international Frank Lampard.

"We believe we can score at any moment and we were looking to win 2-1 to avoid extra time and any surprises," added Lampard.

Essien's last-gasp goal came in the wake of Valencia's Fernando Morientes opening the scoring after 22 minutes and then Andrey Shevchenko's equaliser six minutes after the break.

Part of the reason that Chelsea's engine keeps on running while other teams are starting to sputter is their sheer stamina.

"Essien is a special player, he's an athlete that can run without stopping and could play in a game everyday," eulogised Chelsea coach Jose Mourinho after the match.

"That's why I was so concerned about him before the game. I wanted him to play in the Champions League," added Mourinho.

Essien's recent injuries meant Mourinho had only made a final decision to include him on Monday evening, after resting him for Chelsea's 1-0 win over Tottenham

Sevilla wary of strikers

AFP, Paris



Sevilla's defender Julien Escude said the UEFA Cup holders would have to get to grips with Tottenham strikers Robbie Keane and Dimitar Berbatov on Thursday if they are to reach the semifinals

steam.

"I am not tired," said Sevilla's Brazilian international Daniel Alves, who many rate as the best right back currently playing in Europe.

"Some days are good, some days are not so good. However, all my life I have dreamed about playing 100 games a year and so if I play 50 or 60 that is also good, but I always want to play."

"There is no time to breathe and we have to change this situation. (The Spurs game) will be a difficult battle, but if we want to get to the final we have to get past this difficulty."

The winner between arguably the two strongest clubs still in the UEFA Cup faces an almost certain semi-final against another Spanish side Osasuna.

Osasuna won 3-0 at Bayer Leverkusen to make them overwhelming favourites to progress.

In the other half of the draw, Werder Bremen host Dutch club AZ Alkmaar with the match goalless from the first leg and Benfica entertain Espanyol hoping to overturn a 3-2 deficit.

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"If you are asking me what I want, it is to stay in England and to stay at Chelsea," he said.

"But sometimes what you want in life doesn't happen. And if I can't coach Chelsea, I will have to coach another team."

In a further sign of internal tensions, the club's press officer Simon Greenberg prevented a member of the press from asking Mourinho about Abramovich's reaction to the victory, from which the oil magnate was absent.

Greenberg said he would not allow a good night for the club to be spoiled by a writer looking to create a story, but the question had seemed innocuous enough.

The Blues have already won the Carling Cup, and are still in contention for the FA Cup, Premiership and Champions League, in which they will almost certainly play Liverpool in the semifinals.

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