



Benfica's Greek midfielder Katsouranis (L), AC Milan captain Massimo Ambrosini (C) and Benfica's Brazilian defender Edcarlos try to head the ball during their Champions League match at San Siro in Milan on Tuesday.

Giants kick off with wins

AFP, Paris



European legends Real Madrid and AC Milan kicked off their 2007/08 Champions League campaigns with victories while top English clubs Chelsea and Liverpool had to toil for draws.

AC Milan's 2-1 defeat of Benfica at the San Siro meant they started their title defence on a high while Raul and Ruud van Nistelrooy both found the net in Real's 2-1 defeat of Werder Bremen at the Bernabeu.

Last season's finalists Liverpool struggled in their 1-1 draw at Porto, the 2004 champions, while Chelsea's 1-1 draw at home to Norwegians Rosenborg was only gained with an equaliser from Andriy Shevchenko on a frustrating night for English clubs.

Finland centre-half Miika

Koppinen flicked in a free kick cross in the 24th minute for Chelsea but Shevchenko equalised with a header 53 minutes in, his 56th Champions League goal in 90 appearances.

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho summed up their tough night saying: "I am very disappointed. We had 20 chances and scored just one goal. Perhaps to score two goals, we will need 40 chances and for three, 60. And of those 20 chances, 15 of those were not even on target."

"I am worried about our form. I'm not happy. We can't score and I'm not getting good news from the medical staff. The drama for me is that in three matches we have scored one goal."

"(Frank) Lampard and (Didier) Drogha are not always available and we are suffering from their absences."

First half goals from Andrea Pirlo and Italian veteran Filippo Inzaghi

were enough to put AC Milan top of Group D on this opening night of pool matches.

Substitute Nuno Gomes earned Benfica a consolation goal in the second minute of injury time.

Milan may have won only one of their three matches in the Serie A this season but they did not show any weaknesses in their opening match in 2007/08 European competition.

No team has ever won consecutive titles since the European Cup became the Champions League in the early 90's but Milan have a great deal of pedigree at their disposal in their attempt to repeat the triumph.

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said afterwards: "It was the type of performance I would always want from my team. It was great. We played well, created chances and the victory was quickly achieved."

On goal scorer Pirlo, Ancelotti added: "His goal, his setting up the other goal, and his touch on the ball

were enough to put AC Milan top of Group D on this opening night of pool matches."

Milan official Adriano Galliani put Milan's victory in context. "Europe is our natural habitat," he said. "That's what we try to explain to everyone who comes to Milan. We always feel good playing in it."

"It's the 15th time we have played in the Champions League, and, in the 14th previous occasions, we have reached the final eight times (with five victories). That's fantastic!"

Real went into their opening Group C match in what was their 300th European fixture in buoyant form with three wins out of three seeing them topping their domestic league, but without injured duo Pepe and Gabriel Heinze and the suspended Mahamoud Diarra.

Raul headed in van Nistelrooy's low cross from the left side of the penalty area to put Real in front in the 16th minute to put his haul of

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Denmark plan all-out attack

AFP, Hangzhou

Denmark are planning all out attack against mighty Brazil in Thursday's crucial clash at the women's World Cup, and predict a goal-scoring frenzy.

Denmark, ranked six in the world, must come out firing against the South Americans and clinch victory in their last group game to gain enough points to move into the quarterfinals.

It will be no easy feat against a Brazilian side that have scored nine goals in two games and conceded none, thumping minnows New Zealand and then hosts China to top Group D.

But dynamic midfielder Julie Rydahl Bukh said the Danes would adopt some of Brazil's flamboyant attacking in an attempt to defeat the South Americans.

"We know that this is a game we need to win and it would be horrible going out of this tournament knowing we hadn't been positive enough. We have to attack," Bukh said.

"That's our way of playing anyway, so it will come naturally, and we all know what style the Brazilians play, so you can bet on seeing a very good game," she said.

"I think there is a chance of a lot of goals and if it's boring, I will be amazed."

Denmark are hopeful of getting their World Cup campaign back on track after allegations of spying, suspension of their head coach for sportsmanlike conduct and a 3-2 loss to China.

But the 25-year-old Bukh is keen to emphasise the positives.

"I think it's always a big thrill to play against Brazil for any footballer and especially for us with Marta there and in such good form," she said.

Brazil boast Marta, the World Player of the Year, and defensive kingpin Rosana among their talented squad.

Denmark has vowed to pursue an apparent spying incident that has dogged the World Cup, as FIFA remain adamant that the case is closed.

They remain irked after two men, described as Chinese, were found with cameras hiding behind

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Allardyce allays Owen injury

AFP, Newcastle

Newcastle manager Sam Allardyce confirmed on Wednesday that England striker Michael Owen does not require a hernia operation.

Owen was sent for a precautionary scan to see if he needed surgery to cure a nagging groin problem after being substituted against Derby on Monday.

But Allardyce said: "He does not need a hernia operation. I fully expect him to be fit to face West Ham on Sunday."

Surgery would have required a three-week lay-off, making Owen, who has scored five goals in as many games for his country, doubtful for England's October Euro 2008 qualifiers against Estonia and Russia.

Owen missed the opening two games of the season because of a thigh problem, having been sidelined for most of the 2006-07 campaign because of a cruciate ligament injury suffered at the 2006 World Cup finals.

Kahn tips Wiese to be No 1

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich goalkeeper Oliver Kahn believes that Werder Bremen counterpart Tim Wiese could dethrone his rival Jens Lehmann as national team shot stopper before the 2008 European championships.

Kahn said he could understand Wiese's frustration at being overlooked by coach Joachim Low.

The Bayern skipper himself had a bitter rivalry with Lehmann and spent the 2006 World Cup on the bench before retiring from international duty.

"The national goalkeeper should without any question hold the same position in his club and play at the highest international level: Tim Wiese meets all these criteria," Kahn told Sport-Bild magazine.

"For several years now he has been at top level in the championship and in the Champions League but has never been considered until now."

The 37-year-old Lehmann has been under increasing pressure at his Premiership club Arsenal since making two costly blunders.

Second-choice German keeper Timo Hildebrand is also struggling to get a game with his Spanish club Valencia.

Kahn added: "The current situation is worrying. A goalkeeper who is not first choice at his club can't be selected in the national side, it's really unthinkable."

Shevchenko saves Chelsea blushes

AFP, London



Andriy Shevchenko scored an equalising goal which could salvage his Chelsea career as the Blues drew 1-1 with Rosenborg in the Champions League match at Stamford Bridge here on Tuesday.

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho is alarmed by his expensively-assembled team's dramatic loss of goal scoring form which has dented their domestic and European title hopes.

The Blues have scored just once in their last three matches -- hardly the sort of form likely to scare their next opponents: English Premier League champions Manchester United, who host Chelsea in Sunday's crunch match.

And the Blues' main goal scorers, Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogha and England midfielder Frank Lampard, who have missed the last two games through injuries, are unlikely to make the trip to Old Trafford.

Hosts Chelsea dominated possession in Tuesday's 1-1 draw at home to unfancied Norwegian champions Rosenborg in the Champions League Group B match at Stamford Bridge.

But despite a hatful of chances, only Ukraine striker Andriy Shevchenko -- restored to the Chelsea first team in the absence of

Drogha and Peru forward Claudio Pizarro -- managed to get on the score sheet.

"I'm very disappointed," Mourinho said.

"We had about 20 chances and scored one goal. So to score two, maybe we need 40 chances; to score three, maybe 60."

"From the 20 chances, maybe 15 of them were not even on target. One in the net and some others the goalkeeper saved."

"We can speak and speak but the history of the game is we couldn't score more than one goal in 20 shots."

"I'm alarmed, I'm not happy."

The lack of sharpness in attack in the 2-0 defeat at Aston Villa, 0-0 draw with visitors Blackburn and the Rosenborg stalemate is playing on Mourinho's mind.

"For me, the drama is in three matches where we played with attacking teams, dominating games, creating chances and we scored one single goal," the Portuguese said.

"That's the reality of this team. Drogha and Lampard mean more than 50 percent of the goals Chelsea score. They are not playing. Good news is not arriving from the medical department."

"So I have to fight with these people, to make the team the best possible."

Against Rosenborg, Shevchenko scored an equaliser which could salvage his Chelsea career.

Mourinho had bizarrely compared

the under-performing striker to a second-grade egg before the match, but Shevchenko left the Portuguese with just a little egg on his face as he rescued a point.

Finland centre-half Miika Koppinen flicked in a free kick cross in the 24th minute before Shevchenko equalised with a 53rd-minute header, his 56th Champions League goal in 90 appearances.

Chelsea hit the woodwork twice but a draw at home against the unfancied Norwegians could prove costly in a group featuring Germany's Schalke and Spain's Valencia.

The Blues were intent on winning the Champions League this time round, having reached the semi-finals in three of the last four seasons, but Mourinho now has a glum outlook.

"It's more difficult to qualify from the group stage because this is the kind of game you have to win," he said.

"It's the kind of game that normally you win, when you play at home against a team that normally should be the weakest in the group."

"So it's not a good result."

"We are not scared of the situation in the Champions League. It may be more difficult to finish first. Maybe we need to win something like four points against Valencia."

Shevchenko, a 30-million-pound (60-million-dollar, 43-million-euro) purchase from Italian giants AC Milan in May 2006, has

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PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea's Andriy Shevchenko (R) heads the ball over Rosenborg goalkeeper Lars Hirschfeld (L) to score the equaliser during their Champions League match at Stamford Bridge in London on Tuesday.

Money men are ruining football: Platini

AFP, London

UEFA president Michel Platini has written letters to all European leaders asking for their help in saving football from the evil influence of money men whom he claims are ruining the modern game.

Platini's letter warns that football is at risk from businessmen whose primary motive is profit and he calls on governments for their help as "the last hope for a healthy and balanced future of European football".

"A serious threat hangs over the development of European football: the malign and ever-present influence of money," wrote Platini in his letter which was reproduced in the Daily Telegraph on Wednesday.

"But money has never been the ultimate objective of football: the main purpose has always been to win trophies."

"For the first time we may be entering an era in which financial profit alone will be the measure of sporting success."

The comments from the 52-year-old French footballing legend, who took over as European football chief in January 2007, come as foreign ownership in the Premier League in particular is increasing.

A lucrative broadcast deal means that the professional game is also overflowing with cash.

Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov has recently increased his stake in Arsenal, while Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool, Aston Villa, Portsmouth, Manchester City and West Ham have all been taken over by foreign owners.

Bolton, Derby, Blackburn, Fulham and Tottenham are also believed to be up for sale.

There had been speculation that

the new European Union Reform Treaty might give football's governing bodies more power to tackle inequalities in the game as well as battling doping.

But Platini is upset that recommendations proposed by Portuguese minister Jose Luis Amaut have been rejected in favour of a less strongly-worded article.

"This article doesn't go far enough to protect football from the rampant commercialism which assails on all sides," he complained.

"Millions of football fans, for whom I speak, are calling on Europe to do more to defend our football and the European sporting model based on financial solidarity between rich and poor, which is the only way to guarantee the values we cherish."

Queiroz may quit MU

AFP, London

Manchester United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz has hinted that he is considering leaving the club.

Queiroz, who is Sir Alex Ferguson's number two, told the Sun: "I need to reflect on what I want to do in this last part of my career."

"In December I'm going to stop and think about myself. My contract is perpetual and caters for various options but I have only one life."

Queiroz was Ferguson's assistant from June 2002 until he left to become manager of Real Madrid in June 2003. However, he returned to Old Trafford after being sacked by the Spanish club in May 2004.

"I am going to think about him and go for the route that makes me most happy," he said.

"I read Sir Alex said that one day he would like me to be United's main coach. That is one reason I am in this project but I'm not desperate about it."

"In your personal and professional life you always have more ambitions."

Juve fan banned for 3 years

AFP, Rome

A supporter of Italian club Juventus received a one year suspended prison sentence and a three year ban from the Turin stadium for throwing a firecracker from the stands during a league match, the Italian agency Ansa reported Tuesday.

Nicola Ravasio, 27, told the court in Turin he had not intended to hurt anyone when he threw the cracker in the 35th minute of Juventus' 1-0 loss to Udinese on Sunday. However three security officers suffered hearing problems following the incident.

Ravasio was ordered to report to a police station each time Juventus play a match during the three year ban.

Raul, Ruud steal limelight

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid opened their Champions League campaign with a 2-1 win over Werder Bremen here Tuesday, with veteran captain Raul and arch shooter Ruud van Nistelrooy stealing the Bernabeu limelight.

Real went into their opening Group C match in what was their 300th European fixture in buoyant form with three wins out of three seeing them topping their domestic league, but without injured duo Pepe and Gabriel Heinze and the suspended Mahamoud Diarra.

Werder Bremen's sick list was longer, with six of their first team regulars missing, although playmaker

Diego made it to Madrid after winning his race against fitness.

Real's new German coach Bernd Schuster said before the game that he was relishing the chance of getting "closer to my dream" and was looking for a strong start.

And he wasn't disappointed when Raul headed in van Nistelrooy's low cross from the left side of the penalty area to put Real in front in the 16th minute.

That took the 30-year-old Raul's European haul to 57 goals to consolidate his position as the competition's top scorer.

Despite his effort it didn't take Werder long to restore parity, 60 seconds to be precise when Boubacar Sanogo slipped his marker to latch on to Dusan Tosic's cross from the right and shoot past keeper Iker Casillas from close range.

Van Nistelrooy was proving his

usual potent self in attack but without reward while strike partner Wesley Sneijder, who has made such a strong impression since joining the Spanish champions, forced Bremen keeper Tim Weise into action with a shot just before the break.

A frenetic second half in which both sides had chances eventually produced the deciding goal from van Nistelrooy, who on 74 minutes latched on to Raul's neat through ball to side-foot the ball past the wrong-footed Weise for his 50th Champions league goal.

The tireless Dutchman's productive night ended on a low night when he received a yellow card from English referee Howard Webb for a foul on Hugo Almeida.

Raul meanwhile was given a hero's send off when he was substituted with six minutes remaining

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PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid's Raul (R) celebrates his goal against Werder Bremen with Dutch duo Ruud Van Nistelrooy (L) and Wesley Sneijder during their Champions League match at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Tuesday.