

Barcelona star Ronaldinho (L) is chased by Rangers midfielder Lee McCulloch during their Champions League clash at Ibrox on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Rangers going strong

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers may sit joint top of their Champions League section after their draw with Barcelona on Tuesday but manager Walter Smith says there is still a lot of work to do.

The Ibrox side's dogged defensive display earned them a goalless draw at home to the Spanish giants which keeps both sides at the top of Group E on seven points.

Even if Rangers are to lose their next game against Barcelona in Spain they could still clinch qualification for the last 16 by winning at home to Lyon on December 6.

However, Smith says his side should be under no illusions that they have as good as qualified despite the fact they remain unbeaten in the section - after earlier wins against Stuttgart and Lyon.

"We are only halfway there. Lyon's 2-0 win in Stuttgart means they will be favourites to beat them in the return match if we don't take anything from the Barcelona game - which would be a big ask for any team never mind ourselves," the Rangers manager said.

"It's going to be a really tight group by the looks of things so we'll just have to try our best."

"So far the effort from our own players has been fantastic in terms of how they have approached the Champions League games."

"They have worked extremely hard and I don't think there is another coach who could say his players work as hard as ours do."

When the Champions League draw picked Rangers out alongside Barcelona, French champions Lyon and German champions Stuttgart few gave the Ibrox side any chance of qualifying for the last 16 of the competition.

Smith admits not even he could envisage his players rising to the

task so well that they remain unbeaten after three games with an outstanding chance of finishing in the top two.

"We're obviously delighted to be sitting in the position we are in after three games in what is an extremely difficult section to have not lost yet," he said.

"For us, after the draw was made, that is something none of us could have expected. From our point of view we have already exceeded expectations so the players can take great pride in what they have achieved so far."

"We accept we are not as good a team as Barcelona, or a lot of other teams in the Champions League, but we've become a hard team to beat and that's why we are in the position we are in now."

Although Barcelona had set the pace from the start of the match they failed to turn their superiority into an abundance of chances.

Lionel Messi had the best chance of the first half, when

Thierry Henry put him in on goal, but the Argentinean sliced his shot wide.

Henry had a great opportunity himself in the 67th minute when Xavi Hernandez's corner skimmed off the head of Rangers' Bosnian defender Sasa Papac into his path, but from only a few yards out he headed well over.

At the other end, in the 81st minute, Rangers' lone striker Daniel Cousin beat the offside trap to collect Ferguson's lob into the box, but he could only smash his shot wide from a tight angle.

With the two teams set to meet for the return on November 7, Barcelona boss Frank Rijkaard says his team will need to be at their best to take all three points.

"Rangers are a good team and defend very well. They have already had some good results in the Champions League and beat Lyon 3-0 in France so we will need to give everything to get a win in Barcelona," he said.

Didier in touch with Jose

AFP, London

Didier Droghda admits he has kept in touch with Jose Mourinho since the former Chelsea manager's emotional departure from Stamford Bridge.

Droghda was in tears when Mourinho said his farewells to the players last month, but he is determined to keep a strong relationship with the man who brought him to the Premier League.

The Ivory Coast striker last week revealed he wanted to leave Chelsea because since Mourinho's exit "something has broken" at the London club.

He has since said he regretted those comments but there is no mistaking his bond with Mourinho.

Droghda, who scored his third goal of the season in Saturday's win over Middlesbrough, told BBC Radio 1's Newsbeat: "How could I not be emotional when he brought me to England, to the best league in the world?"

"He was always behind me and protecting me. If I had a good season last year, it was because he was behind me and the team was behind me."

"I'm still in touch with him, the relationship is good. It's important to keep in touch with people you worked with for four years."

"If you are not happy to be somewhere, it is difficult to give 100 percent."

"Now I'm giving 100 percent because I feel good. I love the fans. I think they show me the respect I deserve and this is very important."

The former Marseille star believes Chelsea can still win the league despite sitting eight points adrift of leaders Arsenal.

Palladino won't leave Juventus

INTERNET, undated

Striker Raffaele Palladino claims he has a future at Juventus, despite his limited playing time this season.

The Italy Under-21 international has made just five appearances for the Old Lady so far this term, usually playing in an unfamiliar role, but he insists quitting the Stadio Olimpico has never been an option, despite interest from elsewhere.

With the calibre of strikers such as David Trezeguet, Alessandro Del Piero and Vincenzo Iaquinta at the club, Palladino's chances of forcing his way into Claudio Ranieri's first team are slim.

But the 23-year-old has time on his side and is prepared to wait for an opportunity to prove his worth for the team he supported as a boy.

"Being a Juve fan makes it a special experience wearing this shirt," he told Sky Sports Italia. "That's why I was happy to stay and always will be."

"I spent a year in Serie B with this team and it was a year from hell, but I gave everything and I saw myself mature."

"I've had offers from foreign clubs and interest from the Viola (Fiorentina), but there was never any doubt that I would stay."

With Pavel Nedved suspended for Saturday's trip to Napoli, Palladino could get a rare start against his home town club.

Berbatov looking for way out?

THE TIMES

Tottenham Hotspur may be planning for life after Martin Jol, but the departure of Dimitar Berbatov, who was left out of the team for the 3-1 defeat by Newcastle United on Monday, would be an unwelcome development. The Bulgaria forward's discontented body language has told its own story since he was informed that he could not move to Manchester United in the last week of the summer transfer window and he could seek a move away from White Hart Lane when the market reopens in January.

Jol, who appears to be a dead man walking, seems to be haunting his players and the manager's problems could increase with Gareth Bale, the left back, awaiting the results of a scan on his right foot after a tackle by Geremi in the defeat at St James' Park.

None of this has come at a good time for Enic, the club's largest shareholder, which is looking to sell the club on the back of strong financial figures. Last week, the club confirmed that it had posted record figures for turnover and profit, partly due to revenue from European ties.

Jol spoke with Daniel Levy on the return flight from Newcastle and is expected to meet with the chairman again today. Levy believes that his faith has not been repaid since he backed Jol after the flirtation with Juande Ramos, the Seville coach, in August. His manager could argue that he has not received his due after guiding the team to consecutive fifth-place finishes in the past two seasons, but he needs better results on the pitch. Even Jol's most vehement supporters have been silent, or turned, of late.

UNITED DOWN KIEV

Rooney keeps scoring

AFP, Kiev



Birthday boy Wayne Rooney's magical goal-scoring month has drawn praise from Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson as the England striker added to his impressive tally in Kiev.

Rooney, 22, on Wednesday, converted Wes Brown's pass at Dynamo's NSC Olimpiyskiy Stadium on Tuesday night as his 18th minute goal saw United stroll to a 4-2 Champions League group stage win.

Group F leaders United have won all three of their matches so far - and 10 of their last 11 games - with Rooney having scored seven goals in October for both club and country.

After missing the opening weeks of the Premier League season with a foot injury, Rooney has quickly returned to form leading England teammate Rio Ferdinand to describe him as "unstoppable".

Having started the month by scoring United's only goal in their 1-0 Champions League win at Old Trafford against AS Roma, Rooney has now scored in every game since.

His strike for United at home to Wigan on October 6 was followed

up by goals for England at Wembley against Estonia and a superb effort against Russia in Moscow in Euro 2008 qualifiers.

Despite the disappointment of England's 2-1 defeat in Moscow, Rooney bounced back with two goals against Aston Villa last Saturday before he made the most of a Wes Brown pass to score in Kiev on Tuesday.

"A lot of our forward play at the moment has been excellent and we need people playing well to finish their chances," said Ferguson.

"Wayne Rooney had his chance against Dynamo, but he still had to take it, which he did superbly."

"If he keeps on this run of goal scoring alongside the likes of Giggs, Carlos Tevez and Cristiano Ronaldo, it gives us a lot of ammunition in attack."

"Early in the season Tevez and Anderson played in the Copa America and they missed pre-season work, and it takes time to get to the fitness levels they're at now."

"Rooney's been injured and Ronaldo was suspended. They all now playing and you can see the difference."

Defender Rio Ferdinand had given the English giants an early lead on 10 minutes with a bullet header in Kiev, before Rooney's goal, while Ronaldo struck either side of half-time.

With three Champions League

wins from three and with two home games following against Kiev and Sporting next month, United are in pole position to qualify and are getting stronger as the tournament progresses.

"We planned to win this one and we did it," said goal-scorer Ferdinand.

"A good start was vital for us, we scored two quick goals and perhaps thought Dynamo would not recover."

"We allowed them a way back into the game from a set-piece, which is quite uncharacteristic of us, but we restored our lead quickly and we never looked like giving anything more to Kiev."

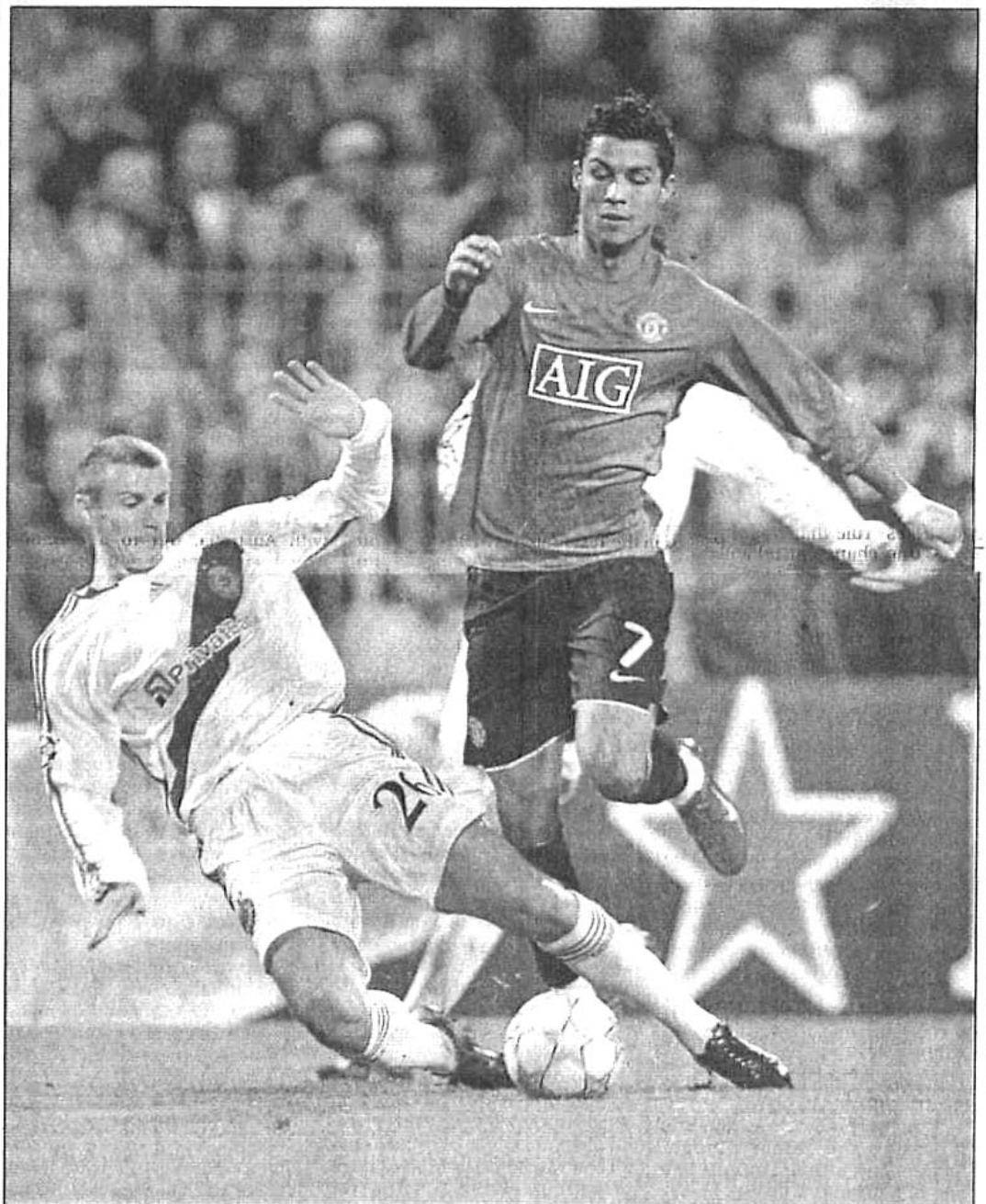
And United captain Ryan Giggs, who helped create two of the goals, said he had some sympathy for Dynamo who suffered their third straight group stage defeat to make qualification almost impossible.

"We dominated this match because we were stronger as a team and individually," said Giggs.

"Maybe the home side were a bit unlucky because we are in very good form."

"I think that United are close to qualifying early but for this we need to play as well at home as we did here."

"Dynamo are not an easy team to play and they've shown it, but if you take our season we're improving constantly."



Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo (R) hurdles a challenge from Dynamo Kiev defender Andriy Nesmachnyi during their Champions League match in Kiev on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Lyon bury sorry Stuttgart

AFP, Stuttgart



Lyon spurned a handful of clear-cut chances on goal but eventually had a deflected Fabio Dos Santos strike and a Karim Benzema goal to thank for a morale-boosting 2-0 win over Stuttgart in the Champions League.

It was the French champions' first win in this season's showpiece tournament for European football after suffering two 3-0 defeats at the hands of Barcelona and Rangers respectively.

"It's the ideal scenario for us. We knew we would be under pressure from our opponents but that we would have chances," said Lyon coach Alain Perrin.

"It's very interesting from now on. We said we had to get past Stuttgart, we have to confirm that at home."

The result left Stuttgart firmly rooted to the bottom of Group E, their winless performance mirroring that of their domestic form - they lie fifth from bottom of the Bundesliga with just 10 points from 10 games, the worst start to a season in history for the defending champions.

Stuttgart coach Armin Veh could have no complaints with the result.

"At the end of the day, we didn't have many chances, unlike Lyon," he said. "We should have at least held on for a draw but Lyon scored and then made the most of the situation."

Dos Santos struck in the 56th minute, hitting a first-time reflexive left-footed shot that took a deflection and left the goalkeeper with no chance after a goal-line scramble.

The impressive Benzema doubled Lyon's tally in the 79th minute, finishing off a neat Sidney Govou lay-off with aplomb after rounding two defenders and wrong-footing Stuttgart goalkeeper Raphael Schaefer.

The result was just reward for a Lyon side which outplayed a pedestrian Stuttgart defence but were guilty of spurning a number of

chances. It was in fact Stuttgart who dominated possession in the first half, but the Germans could not make their pressure pay.

Mexican midfielder Pavel Pardo whipped in a curling free-kick in the 21st minute but Lyon goalkeeper Remi Vercoutre tipped the ball behind for a corner.

Almost immediately back up the other end, Kim Kallstrom forced Schaefer into a fine save with an ambitious swerving 40-metre shot from midfield.

Roberto Hilbert then beat Vercoutre with a shot but Anthony

Reveillere was on hand to mop up.

Lyon upped their work rate in the closing five minutes of the half with two clear-cut chances on goal.

Benzema was firstly put through on a one-on-one against Schaefer by Hatem Ben Arfa, but the stopper stood his ground as the striker shimmied to pass him and the ball deflected off his legs and drifted wide of the left upright.

Ben Arfa was again the creator for the second chance, playing a well-timed lateral ball through to an unmarked Sidney Govou but Schaefer did well to close him

down as the striker opted not to attempt a chip.

Then came Dos Santos's deflected goal in a crowded penalty area, with Benzema's goal just desserts for a fine individual performance for the current French league leaders.

In the final 25 minutes, Lyon captain Juninho saw a tame free-kick easily saved, while Benzema forced the busy Schaefer into a fine diving one-handed save.

But the French team were happy to retreat deep into their own half and see out the game for a maiden win in the tournament this season.



Lyon playmaker Hatem Ben Arfa (R) skips past the challenge of Stuttgart midfielder Yildiray Basturk during their Champions League tie at the Gottlieb-Daimler Stadium in Stuttgart on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Staunton resigns from Ireland

Football

AFP, Dublin

Steve Staunton has stepped down as Republic of Ireland manager on the back of a string of poor performances that culminated in his team's elimination from the race to qualify for Euro 2008.

"The Football Association of Ireland and senior international team manager Stephen Staunton have agreed by mutual consent to terminate his contract following a meeting in Dublin," the FAI said in a statement.

The final straw for the FAI appeared to come after a 1-1 draw against Cyprus in Croke Park that sealed Ireland's fate for Euro 2008.

FAI President David Blood thanked Staunton, a former Liverpool and Aston Villa defender, and his management team for their dedication and commitment to the senior international team since their appointment in January 2006.

"They have brought through many young players and leave behind a squad with strong development potential," Blood said.

"As a member of the three-man committee which made the recommendation to appoint Stephen and his team, I am disappointed that things have not worked out the way

I, Stephen or my colleagues on the Board expected."

The FAI said its board will select people, with considerable football experience in the professional game, to appoint the new manager.

U-21 manager Don Givens will take charge of the team for the final Euro 2008 qualifier against Wales in Cardiff on November 17.

Staunton's assistant Kevin MacDonald and goalkeeping coach Alan Kelly have also left but Sir Bobby Robson remains as International Football Consultant and Pat Devlin stays as B international team manager and eircom League co-ordinator.

Staunton, 39, took charge of the team in January 2006, having had no previous managerial experience.

He holds his country's record for most caps, with 102, and was in charge as manager for 17 matches.

With the team in another transitional stage following their failure to reach last year's World Cup finals, it was Staunton's understanding that a main feature of his brief was to discover and nurture a promising set of youngsters for future squads and that his job was safe even bearing in mind the qualification failure.

He still had more than two years to go on his contract, which would present the hard-up FAI with a huge compensation issue.

Sven vows wise spending

INTERNET, undated

Manchester City manager Sven-Goran Eriksson is only interested in buying top quality players in the January transfer window.

The former England boss has set his sights high after a blistering return to club football.

City have made their best start to a home campaign for 50 years and lie third in the table.

Eriksson is now keen to find out from chairman Thaksin Shinawatra how much he will have to spend when the transfer window opens in three months.

The Swedish coach told the Manchester Evening News: "I am told there is money available in January but how much I don't know yet."

"Before I get into lists of players in whom we might be interested I think it is vital to know what that spending figure will be."

"If we want to strengthen the squad then we have to be very clever about it."

"We must not buy average players. We have to buy top-class and for them to be better than we have already. That will cost a lot of money."

Eriksson added: "We have to compete reputation-wise with the big four who can offer Champions League football."

"But I am sure we are one of the teams that foreign players are looking at and thinking: 'I would like to play there.' And that is very good."