



AS Roma striker Mirko Vucinic (L) shoots to score a stunning goal against Sporting Lisbon during their Champions League match at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

SEVEN-STAR GUNNERS Brits in cruise control

AFP, Paris



Manchester United and Arsenal are within touching distance of the Champions League knock-out stages after maintaining their perfect starts in the group phase. United ground out a highly impressive 4-2 victory at Dynamo Kiev while Arsenal turned on the turbo as they blitzed Slavia Prague 7-0.

United were off to a dream start courtesy of England centre-back Rio Ferdinand's second goal in successive games and just eight minutes later England striker Wayne Rooney continued his recent purple patch, notching his seventh goal in his last six matches.

United seemed to be in cruise control but they let the hosts back into the match on 34 minutes as Diogo Rincon converted Carlos Correa's corner with a bullet header, although United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar was fuming that the Brazilian striker was left totally unmarked in the penalty box.

Still the hope did not last long for Dynamo as a quick break down the left four minutes from the break saw Ryan Giggs cross for an unmarked Cristiano Ronaldo to head United back into a two-goal lead.

It was more of the same in the second period with Ronaldo notching his second from the penalty spot before Ismael Bangoura's late consolation.

"We are very pleased with the result," said United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

"It gives us nine points from three wins and puts us in a strong position."

"With the likes of Ronaldo, Rooney, Giggs and (Carlos) Terez all back in form and fit, we have plenty

of ammunition in attack for the next few games."

Roma beat Sporting 2-1 in the other group F match, taking the lead through Juan on 15 minutes before Liedson's 18th minute leveller. Mirko Vucinic fired the winner on 69 minutes for the Romans.

It means United need just four points from their final three games to ensure progress to the second round.

In London Arsenal put in 60 minutes of fantasy football to kill the contest.

Cesc Fabregas curled in a sumptuous strike on five minutes past Martin Vaniak in the Slavia goal.

On 25 minutes Belarus midfielder Alexander Hleb prodded home a scrappy second and just before the break teenager Theo Walcott was gifted a third after a woeful goal-kick from Vaniak left him with an open goal.

Any hopes of a comeback from Slavia were extinguished within 10 minutes of the restart as first Hleb and then Walcott added stunning second goals.

Not to be outdone, Fabregas added his second on 58 minutes after a sweeping move that carried the length of the field and, inevitably, involved Hleb and Walcott, the midfield three simply tearing the visitors apart.

There was still time, though, for Danish forward Nicklas Brendtner to add a magnificent seventh to equal the biggest ever Champions League victory - Juventus also beat Olympiakos 7-0 in 2003.

"What I liked is we played a good tempo," said Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger, who turned 58 on Monday. "At 3-0 we could have killed the game but we kept going. It is a joy to watch."

"We were very creative and you could see we enjoy what we do. There is happiness in the team. They want to play together."

"But I still think there is more to

come from this team because they are all very young players. Everybody is still improving."

Sevilla beat Steaua Bucharest 2-1 in the other match to move second in the group, three points behind Arsenal and three ahead of Slavia.

Early goals from Frederic Kanoute and Luis Fabiano put them in the box seat before Ovidiu Petre pulled one back for Steaua after the break.

In group E Inter Milan went top of the table after a come-from-behind 2-1 victory at CSKA Moscow.

Brazilian striker Joao gave the hosts the lead on 32 minutes with a lob over Inter's Brazilian goalkeeper Julio Cesar but seven minutes after the break and Argentina forward Hernan Crespo equalised from close range.

His international defensive teammate Walter Samuel snatched the spoils 10 minutes from time, heading home a Luis Figo free-kick.

"It was really difficult match," Inter coach Roberto Mancini said. "CSKA played very well in the first half, while we had certain problems."

"Luckily after the break we managed to increase productivity and changed things for the better."

Fenerbahce and PSV Eindhoven played out a 0-0 draw in Istanbul, leaving the Turks a point behind Inter on five with PSV one more point behind that.

In group E it was honours even at Ibrox as Rangers and Barcelona played out a 0-0 draw, leaving them both on seven points from three games.

Lyon gave themselves a lifeline as they won 2-0 at Stuttgart with goals from Fabio Dos Santos and Karim Benzema, handing them their first Champions League points of the season and hope of catching one of the top two ahead of the knock-out stages.

Messi glory for Papac

INTERNET, undated

Rangers full-back Sasa Papac knew it would be tough but he admits taming Barcelona's Lionel Messi was as demanding as any task he has ever faced.

The marking job on the Argentinian was a key factor as Rangers held the Catalan giants to a goalless draw in their Champions League Group E clash at Ibrox.

And Bosnian Papac revealed he knew everything there was to know about the brilliant winger's tricks before kick-off.

"That was certainly one of the hardest games of my career," Papac told official club website www.rangers.co.uk.

"I had to really concentrate every time Messi had the ball. I watched TV footage of him for two days and tried to learn how he played."

It was not only Messi who was providing the threat though. Rangers had to guard against any one of Barcelona's players breaking forward.

There was also the presence of Carles Puyol as an attacking right-back to contend with, on the rare

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Injury crisis for Bayern

AFP, Paris



Centre-halves Martin Demichelis and Daniel van Buyten may not play, and France international midfielder Franck Ribery is also struggling for fitness.

"All three are doubtful for Thursday," Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld told the club website.

France international Ribery sustained a hamstring strain in Saturday's 2-1 league victory over VfL Bochum while Demichelis has flu and Van Buyten a bruised thigh picked up while playing for Belgium last week.

However it was not all bad news for Hitzfeld with Brazil captain Lucio, troubled by a stomach upset over the weekend, on the road to recovery and

likely to play in Belgrade.

If Demichelis and Van Buyten are both ruled out, French defender Valerien Ismael, Christian Zell, Andreas Ottl or rookie professional Mats Hummels are likely to partner the Brazilian.

Bayern, the favourites to win Europe's second-tier competition, will have a tough assignment against Red Star who are unbeaten at home in European competition having won two and drawn one.

Red Star and Bayern are two of only three sides involved in the group stage to have won the European Cup.

Bayern beat Red Star Belgrade to move into the quarterfinals of the 1979/80 UEFA Cup and then later avenged that defeat in the 1990/91 European Cup semifinals.

Also in Group F are English Premier League side Bolton who are at home to Portuguese side Braga.

Bolton come into the match after a 2-0 defeat to English league leaders Arsenal, although this was seen as an improvement on recent showings.

The club, running last in the Premier League with one win and two draws from 10 matches, is mired

in turmoil following the sacking last week of coach Sammy Lee.

Phil Gartside, the Wanderers chairman, is believed to be ready to turn his attention to Paul Jewell after seeing approaches for Steve Bruce, Gary Megson and Chris Coleman rejected. Archie Knox, the caretaker manager, has urged him to appoint sooner rather than later.

After the weekend's 2-1 derby loss to Liverpool, Everton are looking to push forward their European campaign with a win at home over Greek side Larissa.

Everton defender Alan Stubbs said their play at the weekend was a high standard despite the loss.

"We won't go far wrong if we play like that on Thursday. That is what we have to look forward to now," he said.

Tottenham, the other English Premiership club through to the group stage, from which the top three sides will progress into the 32-team knock-out phase, are at home to Spanish side Getafe in the Group G match.

However Tottenham are also going through a difficult period, currently in relegation zone after

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Argentina atop FIFA rankings

AFP, Paris

Argentina have moved up one place to go top of the FIFA rankings for October, released by world football's ruling body on Wednesday.

World Cup champions Italy fell two places to third, while Brazil leapfrogged them into second place.

Beaten finalists in Germany last year, France jumped two spots to move up to fourth place while the Germans drop one place to fifth.

But the big losers in October were England, who fell to 11th place after their recent poor showings in Euro-2008 qualifiers.

Ranieri, Nedved hit with bans

AFP, Rome

Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri has been hit with a one-match ban and Czech midfielder Pavel Nedved has been suspended for two matches following their respective red cards against Genoa on Sunday.

Ranieri was sent off in added time at the end of the game Juve won 1-0 for swearing at officials while Nedved was shown a red after the final whistle for lashing out at an opponent.

Meanwhile the Italian league disciplinary committee has also ordered the north stand of Cagliari's Sant'Elia stadium to be closed for one match after a fire cracker was thrown from there during Sunday's match against Catania.

The club was also hit with a 15,000-euro fine.

Defender Antonio D'Agostino was mildly hurt when the cracker exploded.

Martins staying with Magpies

INTERNET, undated

Obafemi Martins has dismissed reports suggesting he is unsettled at Newcastle.

Martins has produced a number of eye-catching performances this season but competition for places at St James' Park is fierce.

The former Internazionale striker has been linked with a January return to Serie A, with Juventus understood to be interested.

However, the Nigerian insists he will not be going anywhere, and has pledged his future to Magpies manager Sam Allardyce.

"I'm very happy and settled at Newcastle, I don't take any notice of the stories saying I'll leave," Martins said in the Daily Express.

"And if Sam Allardyce is here for five years I will be here for five years as well."

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Lehmann launches broadside



AFP, Berlin

Veteran German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann has launched a scathing attack against his club manager Arsene Wenger and the two goals keeping him on the sidelines at Arsenal.

Lehmann made a host of calamitous errors at the beginning of the season and was quickly replaced by Wenger with Spaniard Manuel Almunia.

Although he started for Germany against the Republic of Ireland in a recent Euro 2008 qualifier, Lehmann found himself barred even from the bench for this weekend's Premier League match against Bolton, with young Pole Lukasz Fabianski preferred as back-up to Almunia.

And now the German stopper has questioned his manager's thinking and even the credentials of his teammates, while claiming he is being humiliated.

Speaking in an interview with German pay-TV station Premiere, due to be aired during Tuesday's Champions League programme, Lehmann declared: "It could be that at some point I feel like commenting on the whole issue, but right at the moment I just accept everything as part of the humiliation. You have to let it happen."

"But I think - and this is directed towards my dear coach -

that you should not humiliate players for too long. I am an Arsenal player and I will not just fade away quietly."

Having criticised his boss, he turned his attentions to Almunia and Fabianski.

"I am convinced I will soon be playing again," he said. "Almunia hasn't shown that he can win us matches just yet. I have been through this situation once and know how the other keeper is situated mentally. I can't imagine he will handle this."

"Wenger has spoken of three world-class goals. I guess I must be one of them. The others have proven their class by winning titles? I'm just thinking about it, and I can't recall any. But yet today they are considered world class."

Wenger, speaking after his side's Champions League win over Slavia Prague on Tuesday, insisted he is not going out of his way to humiliate Lehmann.

The French coach will sit down with the keeper to get to the bottom of his complaints.

He said: "There is no purpose to humiliate anybody. I said many times I respect him a lot. That is how he experiences things but that is not my purpose at all."

"I will talk to him about it. We have had chats before so I don't know why that came out."

"I have not read what he said but I don't give too much importance to that. There is fierce competition for places in every big club."

Rugby success inspires WC organisers

AFP, Johannesburg

The Springboks' victory in the rugby union World Cup in France at the weekend should work as motivation for the organisers of the football World Cup due to be held in South Africa in 2010, Danny Jordaan, a member of the organising committee said on Tuesday.

"We must take the experience of the Springboks winning the World Cup and the euphoria it brought the country and multiply it over 30 days," said Jordaan.

"Only then will we have a sense of what impact a successful 2010 FIFA World Cup can have on the country."

"The Springboks' win and what it's done for the country inspires us at the 2010 Organising Committee to work even harder to ensure the tournament's success in 2010."

Jordaan congratulated the Springboks for their collective victory but paid special homage to flying winger and new world player of the year Bryan Habana, who equalled the record for most tries in a World Cup tournament during the seven-week extravaganza in France.

"We need a Habana for Bafana," added Jordaan, referring to the nickname of the country's football team, Bafana Bafana (The Boys).

"In 2010 Bafana Bafana's performance on home soil will be so important. The Springboks have now also given us a sense of the challenges we have in building a successful national football team for 2010."

Brown sets Blatter date

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown will meet the president of world football's governing body FIFA, Sepp Blatter, on Wednesday, to discuss a possible bid by England for the 2018 World Cup finals.

Blatter is attending the 150th anniversary celebrations of Sheffield FC, the world's oldest football club, and will stop off in London first for talks at Downing Street.

Richard Caborn, Brown's World Cup ambassador, said: "This will underline the Government's commitment to supporting the Football Association on any bid they may make for 2018, should FIFA allow that to happen."

Blatter has already confirmed he wants to scrap rotation of the World Cup between the different continents, and that would allow England to bid.

Walcott comes of age

AFP, London



Theo Walcott had been stuck in the shadows for too long but Arsene Wenger believes the teenage Arsenal striker is finally ready to take centre-stage.

Walcott was granted a rare start for Tuesday's Champions League match against Slavia Prague and responded in style, scoring twice as Wenger's side routed the Czech league leaders 7-0 at the Emirates Stadium.

While they were only Walcott's second and third goals since his 10 million pounds move from Southampton in January 2006, Wenger saw enough to be convinced the 18-year-old is ready to deliver on his undoubted promise.

After Sven Goran Eriksson took him to last year's World Cup on Wenger's recommendation, Walcott was expected to continue his meteoric rise and become an Arsenal regular.

But, perhaps not surprisingly, it has taken him a while to grow accustomed to the demands of top-level football.

He has still only started 20 league games in his career but Wenger has noticed a new maturity that bodes well for his future.

"He doesn't panic in front of goal and is a real finisher," Wenger

said. "I believe he has the talent and he has improved a lot."

"He is intelligent, he has fantastic pace and his technique is improving."

"There was a touch of Thierry Henry about his second goal. It was

a really clinical finish. But you need to be patient."

"When you go from a young promising player into a world of men, you discover suddenly that the world is not like everybody

described it to you."

"To be a football player is not as you dream it when you are 15 because you have to cope with all types of difficulties."

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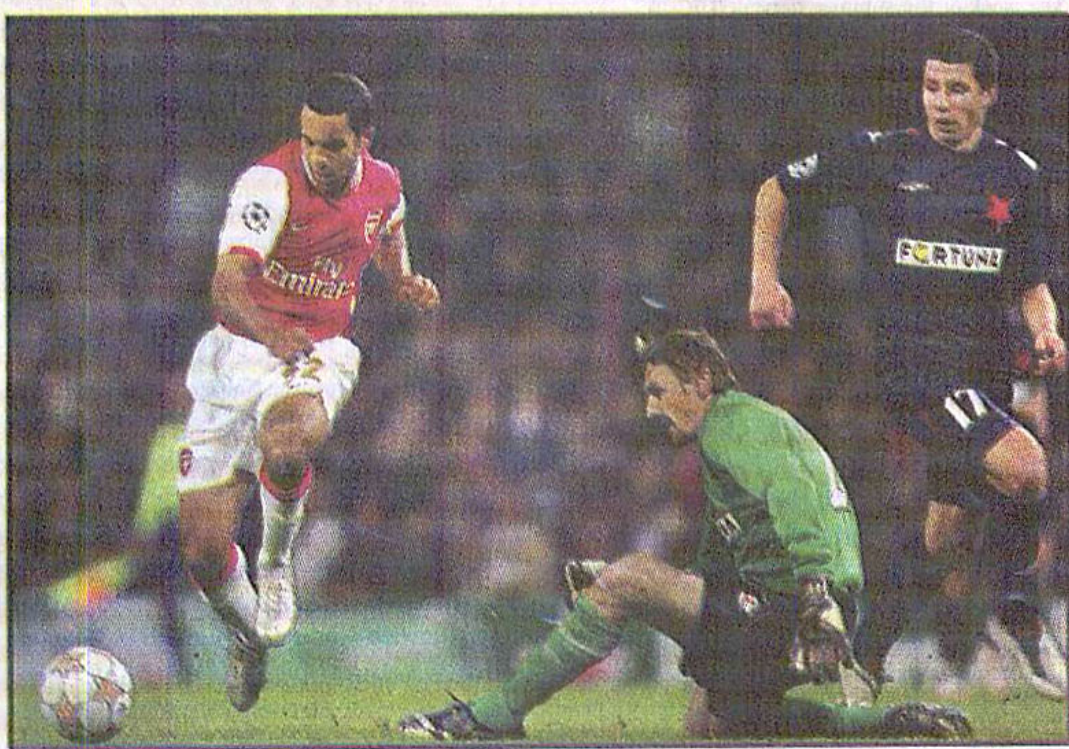


PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal forward Theo Walcott (L) is about to score the third goal of the match as Slavia Prague goalkeeper Martin Vaniak (C) is stranded during their Champions League match at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.