

MILAN, REAL BACK ON TRACK

Istanbul turns sour for Liverpool

AFP, Paris



Two former British European Cup winners Liverpool and Celtic suffered another blow to staying in the competition after both lost in the latest round of Champions League matches on Wednesday.

Liverpool have just a point after three matches having gone down 2-1 to Besiktas in Istanbul - the scene of their epic win in 2005 over AC Milan - while Celtic have three points following a 1-0 reverse away to Benfica.

Other former winners enjoyed better fortunes as AC Milan showed some return to form in beating Shakhtar Donetsk 4-1 to go top of their group while Real Madrid also scored four in downing Greek side Olympiakos.

Chelsea's search for a first ever European Cup title also stayed in healthy condition after a 2-0 win at home to German outfit Schalke 04, with Didier Drogba showing little sign of his despair at Jose Mourinho leaving the club as he netted their second.

Schalke's German rivals Werder Bremen stayed in the hunt with a 2-1 home win over Italian side Lazio while Marseille and the side Mourinho coached to Champions League glory in 2004 Porto stayed ahead of Liverpool

with a 1-1 draw in France.

Liverpool may have gone down to Besiktas but there was still an upbeat feeling in the team camp from both manager Rafael Benitez and captain Steven Gerrard.

"We can still make it with 10 points," said Benitez, who had seen off Besiktas when coach of Valencia on their way to UEFA Cup glory prior to taking over at the English club.

"We had a lot of shots on target and just didn't manage to put them away."

However, the fans will understand if they saw the match that we were unlucky."

Gerrard too was optimistic.

"It was frustrating but sometimes that's happens."

"However, I am still confident we can turn it around and make the knockout stages."

Celtic manager Gordon Strachan was gutted by the manner of his side's latest Champions League defeat on the road and admitted he thought they were going to hang on for the draw.

He said: "Sometimes football can be nasty and I thought tonight we were going to hang on and get the point."

When the player hit the post I thought to myself that it was going to be our night but it wasn't to be.

"We had a couple of chances - although they had better ones - but on a really good night we could have had a really good result."

While Strachan was left frus-

trated, there were opposite emotions from Real Madrid handler Bernd Schuster as he saw his club not only take a big step towards the second round but also that the faith he had shown in Brazilian star Robinho repaid as the striker, who had returned late from last week's World Cup qualifier over Ecuador after some apparent overzealous celebrations - scored twice.

"He's (Robinho) a player who knows how to win games," said Schuster.

"I'm not going to go back to the other subject. He started hesitantly but after he got his first goal, he was outstanding, playing with much more confidence," praised Schuster.

For AC Milan there was sheer relief that they managed a win after a rocky start to their Serie A campaign, and it was clear from Dutch midfielder Clarence Seedorf, who scored two of their goals, how much it meant.

"This evening the fact that we were able to finish off our victory meant a lot," said the veteran.

"There was a fair amount of relief out there after the tension of the last few days."

"However, we know that in Europe, the game is not played in the same way as it is in Italy, but that cannot be an alibi for us."

Benitez will also realise that when judgement day comes on Liverpool's European campaign he cannot rely on an alibi of being unlucky.



Besiktas players are ecstatic after scoring their second goal against Liverpool during their Champions League match at the Inonu Stadium in Istanbul on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Party's on for Robinho

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid's Brazilian international 1 a 1 Robinho completed his transition from villain to hero, and all in just seven days, in the eyes of the Spanish public and media on Thursday.

Robinho had been criticized by most parties after his late night celebrations which followed Brazil's 5-0 thrashing of Ecuador last week and which appear to have delayed his return to Madrid from international duty.

However, the 23-year-old winger was back in everybody's good books following his two-goal contribution to Real's 4-2 defeat of Greek side Olympiakos in the Champions League on Wednesday.

"Robinho carries on the party," commented Spanish sports daily Marca on its front page on Thursday.

"The orgy of Robinho," read the more lurid headline above one of Marca's columnists.

The rest of the Spanish media didn't spare the puns and references relating to Robinho's nocturnal activities, both on and off the field.

"Robinho's night on the town," added the more sober mainstream El Mundo newspaper.

Robinho himself knew exactly who to thank after recovering his credibility with the Real faithful, more than 50,000 of whom watched him turn on one of his best displays in the famous all-white strip since he joined the club in 2005.

"I dedicate my goals to the boss (Real coach Bernd Schuster) because he backed me all the way,"

reflected Robinho after the game.

"Now I want to continue at this level in the coming games and help the team to carry on winning, that's the most important thing."

"We started playing well but when they got an equalizer (to make the score 1-1) we lost a little of our patience and that's normally one of our best virtues when we are

playing at home," added the player.

"At least in the second-half, we played better and finally deserved to win."

Robinho's goals after 67 and 83 minutes turned an embarrassing 2-1 deficit to the Greeks, who had been playing with 10 men since the 12th minute, into a 3-2 lead before

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Inter braced for Vieira absence

INTERNET, undated

Internazionale fear that they will be without Patrick Vieira for a long spell because of injury.

Vieira aggravated an injury in his right thigh during his team's 2-1 triumph in the Champions League at CSKA Moscow on Tuesday.

The Frenchman only recently returned from a thigh problem that kept him out of action for almost a month.

"We are saddened by Vieira's latest injury," said Mancini. "But these things can happen in football when you come back from a long injury."

"It's a pity because Vieira is a champion and for us he is really important."

The former Arsenal captain is expected to undergo tests before the end of this week to confirm the extent of the injury.

However, reports in Italy claim the player could be sidelined until next year.

Jibes don't bother Almunia

AFP, London

Arsenal goalkeeper Manuel Almunia insists he won't let Jens Lehmann's jibes ruin the best season of his life.

Lehmann launched an astonishing attack on Gunners manager Arsene Wenger on Tuesday for "humiliating" him by choosing to play Almunia ahead of him.

The German international also claimed Almunia has yet to show he is experienced enough to deal with the pressure of big matches.

But Almunia underlined why Wenger has kept faith with him this season by keeping his seventh clean sheet in eight games as Arsenal beat Slavia Prague 7-0 on

Tuesday.

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D'Alessandro shunted to reserves

AFP, Zaragoza

Real Zaragoza confirmed on Wednesday that their Argentine international midfielder Andres D'Alessandro will train apart from the first team squad after falling out with coach Victor Fernandez.

D'Alessandro was thrown out of training on Tuesday for complaining to Fernandez that other players were being let off lightly during the session while, by contrast, he was having to work too hard.

The 26-year-old reported for training on Wednesday morning but was told by coaching staff that he would not be allowed to train

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Testy times for Rafa

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez could be heading towards the first real crisis of his three-year reign at Liverpool after a 2-1 defeat by Besiktas left the Reds facing an early exit from the Champions League.

Having been given the funds to substantially improve his squad this summer, Benitez is operating against a backdrop of heightened expectations and a mixed start to the season has left the Spaniard looking as if the pressure is beginning to get to him.

The build-up to Wednesday night's match in Istanbul was dominated by speculation over a bust-up with Steven Gerrard following Benitez's substitution of the Liverpool captain in last weekend's derby win over Everton.

Given the context, a defeat that leaves Liverpool with just one point from their opening three matches in group A was the last thing the Spaniard needed and he now faces

a tough task in restoring morale in time for Sunday's Premier League clash with Arsenal.

The visit of the unbeaten league leaders to Anfield is bound to be seen as a test of whether Benitez's class of 2007/09 can be regarded as serious title challengers: victory would put them back within three points of their guests, defeat would leave them trail Arsene Wenger's men by a hefty nine points.

The inquest into Wednesday night's events in Istanbul focused on why England striker Peter Crouch was left on the bench until so late in the game when it was clear that the Besiktas back four was vulnerable to high balls into the box.

Crouch was waiting to enter the fray with 10 minutes left when Brazilian Bobo put Besiktas 2-0 ahead on the counter-attack, Serdar Ozkan having opened the scoring with a deflected first-half strike.

Gerrard pulled a goal back with five minutes left but Liverpool's frantic finale failed to yield an equalizer.

The defeat means Benitez's men must win their remaining

three matches and hope other results go their way if they are to reach the knockout stage of a competition in which they have thrived under Benitez, lifting the trophy in 2005 and finishing runners-up to AC Milan last season.

Despite his strained expression, the manager remained defiant, defending his decision not to introduce Crouch earlier and insisting that there had not been too much wrong with the way his side had played.

"The players on the pitch were doing well," he said. "Dirk Kuyt and Andriy Voronin were creating chances, I was happy with the way they were playing."

"It was just bad luck that Crouch was waiting to come on when they scored their second."

"We were attacking so much it was hard to defend against the counter-attack: in the end we had 28 attempts on goal, it was not the creating of chances that was the problem, it was putting those chances away."

"It was down as much to bad luck as anything else. Everything

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Milan ease woes

AFP, Milan

The AC Milan team sheet was Dida, the Brazilian international goalkeeper who was handed a two-match ban for his theatrical collapse after a brush with a spectator in their 2-1 loss to Celtic at Hampden Park.

Australian Zeljko Kalac replaced Dida for this must-win game if Milan were to put the wheels back on their Champions League defence bid.

Italian World Cup winner Gilardino gave the unsettled San Siro fans the perfect start, heading in Andrea Pirlo's sixth minute goal difference from Shakhtar.

Kaka, favourite in most quarters to be named FIFA's World foot-

baller of the Year, had an effort saved by Andriy Pyatov keeping goal for Shakhtar, but two minutes later Gilardino had put AC Milan further ahead.

This time it was the turn of Seedorf to fill the role of provider, sending the ball in from the left for Gilardino to head in to leave Shakhtar with an uphill task of taking anything out of the game.

Shakhtar manager Mircea Lucescu then made the first substitution in defence, bringing on Tomas Hubschman for Andriy Kucher.

The Ukrainian visitors came out for the second half in feisty mood

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PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan midfielder Clarence Seedorf is about to unleash a superb left-foot volley to score his first goal in their Champions League clash against Shakhtar Donetsk at the San Siro in Milan on Wednesday.

Megson new Bolton manager

AFP, Bolton

Struggling English Premiership club Bolton on Thursday named Gary Megson as their new manager.

Megson signed from the Championship club Leicester, where he had been in charge for only six weeks following 18 months out of the game, on a two-and-a-half-year contract.

Bolton have been searching for a new boss since sacking Sammy Lee last week and had seen attempts to hire Birmingham's Steve Bruce and Real Sociedad's Chris Coleman rebuffed.

"Gary has demonstrated he has the right temperament for a battle, which this season is undoubtedly going to be," said club chairman Phil Gartside.

Megson will watch his players for the first time when Bolton entertain SC Braga in the UEFA Cup on Thursday before taking charge for the Premiership match against Aston Villa on Sunday.

"We have been able to interview a number of quality candidates and after due consideration decided to offer the post to Gary Megson," Gartside said.

"I have paid particular attention to his career and he has demonstrated to me he is prepared to roll his sleeves up."

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Ballack confident about return

AFP, Berlin

German captain Michael Ballack insisted he will play again this year, despite reports in the press here that his comeback until 2008.

The 31-year-old has been out with an ankle injury since April 22 and German national team doctor Hans-Wilhelm Mueller-Wohlfahrt said last week Germany's captain is still a few weeks away from resuming training.

But according to a report in Wednesday's edition of German magazine Sport-Bild, Ballack will not play again until 2008.

Speaking on German television channel Premier after watching his side's 2-0 Champions League win over Bundesliga side Schalke 04 on Wednesday night, Ballack insisted he will be back in Premier League action for Chelsea later this season.

"I am not a doctor, I am just a player, but I think I will be playing again this year, the pain has almost gone," he insisted.

"I will need to work hard in training to get my fitness up, but I plan to play again this year."

"I don't know where that information came from, I am very optimistic of my prospects of training with Chelsea again soon."