



Liverpool forward Fernando Torres (2nd L) slots the ball past Marseille 'keeper Steve Mandanda to score at the Stade Velodrome on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldo out of Club WC

AFP, Yokohama

Injury-plagued striker Ronaldo has lost his battle to be fit for any of AC Milan's Club World Cup campaign, the Serie-A side's general manager Adriano Galliani said Wednesday.

"Ronaldo told us that he won't make it and that he still feels pain. He will remain in Japan to follow the games," Galliani told Italian journalists here, according to the team's website.

"On the physical problem of Ronaldo, I don't have any replies, I'm not a doctor," Galliani said on the eve of Milan's semifinal clash here with Japan's Urawa Reds.

The event's organising committee also confirmed that it has approved a request from Milan to replace Ronaldo with defender Giuseppe Favalli due to the Brazilian's injury.

Earlier Wednesday, Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti told a pre-match conference that the 31-year-old Brazilian could still figure in the final on Sunday against Argentina's Boca Juniors, who beat Tunisia's Etoile Sahel 1-0 in the other semifinal in Tokyo Wednesday.

"He cannot withstand 15 minutes on the pitch in his condition as it is now," Ancelotti said, adding: "But I believe he will recover and be ready to play sooner or later. In any case, he will have ample time until Sunday."

Galliani said: "Ronaldo is very disappointed. We removed him from the list because he asked us to do so. For his return we cannot make any predictions, because neither I nor Carlo Ancelotti are doctors."

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Jose rumours motivate Carlo

AFP, Yokohama

Carlo Ancelotti said Wednesday he has been motivated as AC Milan coach over speculation that sacked Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho is going after his job.

"If Mourinho wants to become coach, it will give me great stimulation," he told reporters on the eve of Milan's Club World Cup semifinal with Japan's Urawa Reds here. "I have been doing my job the best I can. I want to go on this way."

But the 48-year-old Italian, who has led the Rossoneri for six years, added: "At the moment, I am focused only on the tournament."

On Tuesday, British newspapers criticised Mourinho's recent decision not to seek the position of England manager as an attempt to raise publicity in order to seek out offers from European clubs.

The Portuguese coach stepped down from the Premier League side following a fall-out with Russian owner Roman Abramovich.

Serie-A leaders and AC Milan's city rivals Inter Milan earlier denied reports that president Massimo Moratti contacted Mourinho over taking the nerazzurri helm.

The Gazzetta dello Sport claimed Moratti had been in contact with Mourinho in view of the Portuguese coach taking over at Inter next season.

Rafa relieved at revival

AFP, Marseille

Rafael Benitez described Liverpool's 4-0 demolition of Marseille as "almost perfect" - he could just as well have been talking about his own position in relation to the club's owners.

After watching his side book their place in the last 16 of the Champions League with a convincing win here, Benitez was predictably reluctant to get drawn into commenting on the extent to which his side's form will have strengthened his bargaining power in relation to the Americans George Gillet and Tom Hicks, with whom he is supposed to be holding clear-the-air talks this week.

But the Spaniard insisted he was confident that his immediate future as Liverpool's manager is

not in doubt.

"Always I have had confidence (about continuing)," Benitez said. "You can see the players and supporters are happy. For me that is the key for the future - to keep growing and keep improving."

Benitez added: "I am really proud to be the manager of this club. You can see tonight our supporters - they were fantastic but even more important was the players."

"We knew before the game we had to work really hard as a team in defence and players with determination going forward," he said. "And they did that, we were compact as a unit and we took our chances. Almost everything was perfect."

With tensions over the size of his January transfer budget still lingering, the significance of Benitez's meeting with the owners this week remains to be seen, but the manager insisted his primary focus

would be preparing for Sunday's Premier League showdown with Manchester United.

"As I said before, I must think about United - other things are simple. I'm not thinking about my own situation every day. I think about my team and how to improve the performances."

Liverpool went into the match knowing they had to win to be sure of going through and the outcome was never in doubt after captain Steven Gerrard knocked in the rebound from his own penalty.

That was followed by a superb solo effort from Fernando Torres, a Dirk Kuyt goal early in the second half and a stoppage time effort from substitute Ryan Babel as Liverpool became the first English club to win at the home of France's best-supported club.

The win completed a remarkable turnaround in Liverpool's

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Boca sneak into final

AFP, Tokyo

Neri Cardozo struck home the sole goal to lead South American champions Boca Juniors to a 1-0 win over Etoile Sahel of Tunisia in the Club World Cup semifinals on Wednesday.

The goal came in the 37th minute when Rodrigo Palacio sent a cross from the left for Cardozo, who hit an angled shot from outside the area.

African champions Etoile Sahel suffered an early setback when they lost Muri Ola Ogunbiyi in the

ninth minute as the midfielder hurt his eye when he crashed against a Boca attacker to be replaced by Afouan Gharbi.

Boca Juniors encamped in the Tunisian field in the beginning, but their attacks resulted in two yellow cards to Fabian Vargas and Sebastian Battaglia, while Claudio Morel's shot on a free kick went over the bar in the 31st minute.

Etoile Sahel had a couple of chances in first-half injury time when Amine Chermiti received the ball into the Boca area. He was brought down but no whistle went and his shot hit a defender on the second.

At the beginning of the second half, Gabriel Paletta's header on a left corner just went over the bar, while Etoile Sahel missed an

equaliser when Saif Ghezal's header also went over the bar soon afterwards.

Boca Juniors were reduced to 10 men in the 65th minute when Fabian Vargas received a second yellow card of the day to be sent off.

But the Africans failed to produce a nice cross for forward Amine Chermiti against the tight Boca defence line until the end.

The South Americans made better chances with Hugo Ibarra hitting wide, while Palacio's sizzling shot was saved by Etoile Sahel goalkeeper Aymen Balbouli.

Boca Juniors will take on either Italian powerhouses AC Milan or Asian champions Urawa Red Diamonds, who will face each other on Thursday, in the final at the Yokohama stadium on Sunday.



Boca Juniors midfielder Neri Cardozo (2nd L) blasts the ball home to score his side's only goal during their World Cup semifinal match against Etoile Sahel in Tokyo on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool show mettle

Schalke, Olympiakos through

AFP, Paris

English giants Liverpool's habit of leaving it to the last to qualify for important stages of big tournaments was repeated on Tuesday as they inflicted a record 4-0 home defeat on Marseille to make the knockout stage of the Champions League.

The 2005 Champions League winners' victory probably also ensured that manager Rafael Benitez keeps his job after a series of reports that he was unhappy with the American owners of the club.

Liverpool were joined somewhat surprisingly in the last 16 by Greek side Olympiakos, whose 3-0 win over Werder Bremen was enough to see them move through.

Midfielder Ieroklis Stoltidis' double was the inspiration for the Greek side's victory which sees them one step away from emulating their teammates achievement of the 1998-99 season when they reached the last eight.

Bremen's disappointment was not mirrored by Bundesliga rivals Schalke 04, who are now the sole German side in the knockout stage after they beat Rosenborg 3-1.

An early strike from Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard was followed by a superb solo effort from Fernando Torres, a Dirk Kuyt goal early in the second half and a stoppage time effort from substitute Ryan Babel as Liverpool became the first English club to win at the home of France's best-supported club.

From the fourth minute, when Gerrard knocked in the rebound from his own penalty, there was

little doubt that Liverpool would complete a remarkable turnaround in their fortunes in group A.

A 1-0 defeat by Marseille at Anfield in October had left Benitez's side with just one point from their opening three matches.

Since then however they have beaten Besiktas 8-0 and FC Porto 4-1 at home and the equally comfortable nature of this win will send them into the last 16 - and Sunday's Premier League showdown with Manchester United - in confident mood.

"It was a fantastic performance by the players," said Benitez, who remained tight-lipped about his dispute with the club's owners.

"The players were up for the game and I am now just thinking about the match with United and that we are in the knockout stages and now I want to be with the players."

For Marseille's no-nonsense coach Eric Gerets there was just a blunt reaction.

"It was a catastrophe," said the Belgian football legend. "We screwed the last match (of the Champions League group stage) up."

While Olympiakos celebrated Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf was left underwhelmed by his side's performance.

"We are naturally disappointed," said Schaaf, whose side finish third and will have to settle for a place in the UEFA Cup.

"We had put ourselves back into contention with the win over Real (3-2), but it wasn't enough."

Schaaf's Schalke counterpart Mirko Slomka by contrast was in delirium. "It is fantastic what we have achieved," he said. "This is a great success for the team and the whole club."

UCL STANDINGS

European Champions League group table on Tuesday after final round of fixtures (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

GROUP A						
FC Porto	6	3	2	1	8	7
Liverpool	6	3	1	2	18	5
Marseille	6	2	1	3	6	9
Besiktas	6	2	0	4	4	15
GROUP B						
Chelsea	6	3	3	0	9	2
Schalke 04	6	2	2	2	5	4
Rosenborg	6	2	1	3	6	10
Valencia	6	1	2	3	2	6
GROUP C						
Real Madrid	6	3	2	1	13	9
Olympiakos	6	3	2	1	11	7
Bremen	6	2	0	4	8	13
Lazio	6	1	2	3	8	11
GROUP D						
AC Milan	6	4	1	1	12	5
Celtic	6	3	0	3	5	6
Benfica	6	2	1	3	5	6
Shakhtar	6	2	0	4	6	11

N.B: Top two teams qualify for the round-of-sixteen.

Schumacher the taxi driver

INTERNET, undated

A taxi driver in Germany was left shaken and stirred after handing his keys over to seven-times Formula One champion Michael Schumacher.

Schumacher, 38, asked to take the wheel as he was running late for a flight.

"I found myself a passenger, which was strange enough, but having 'Schumi' behind the wheel was incredible," said taxi driver Tuncer Yilmaz.

"He drove at full throttle around the corners and overtook in some unbelievable places."

Schumacher had flown into the Bavarian town of Coburg to pick up an Australian Shepherd dog called Ed.

He was accompanied by his wife and children to pick up the puppy and the family were late getting back to the local aerodrome for their return flight.

After giving the cabbie an unforgettable experience, Schumacher also gave him a 100 Euro tip.

The dog will be the latest addition to the Schumacher family menagerie, which includes one dog that he brought home from Brazil when his wife Corinna fell for it as it wandered around as a stray while they were at the Grand Prix in Sao Paulo.

Bayern to sign Breno

AFP, Munich

Teenage Brazilian defender Breno will join German giants Bayern Munich over the festive period after flying to Bavaria for a medical, his manager confirmed on Wednesday.

The 18-year-old centre back was first linked to Bayern last month when it was reported he would leave Brazilian side Sao Paulo for Munich during the Bundesliga's winter break, which starts on Saturday.

The two clubs have still to finalise the deal, but the teenager has already had his medical and the Brazilian should be a Bayern player for the start of the New Year by signing a four-year contract.

"Everything is fine between Breno and Bayern. Some details in the negotiations need to be finalised, but the transfer is 95 percent complete," said Breno's manager Thiago Ferro.

The German media have reported the defender, voted the discovery of 2007 by Brazilian sports journalists, will be signed for 14 million euros (20.5 million US dollars) and other European clubs have expressed an interest including Real Madrid.

Breno has been named in Brazil's Olympic squad for next year and is widely tipped to be a star of the future.

Real full of belief

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid's authoritative 3-1 win over Lazio at the Bernabeu on Tuesday left them brimming with confidence about their chances of claiming a 10th European Cup this season.

Real floored the Serie A side inside the first 15 minutes at the Bernabeu thanks to quick-fire goals from Julio Baptista and Raul, and the in-form Robinho put the result beyond doubt when he added a third before halftime.

The victory meant that the Spanish giants qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League for the 11th season in a row, but more importantly they went through as

group winners for the first time in four years.

"We've achieved our objective and finished in first place and now I hope we get a big name team as our next opponents," said Real Madrid skipper Raul, who took his Champions League tally to 59 with his goal.

"My goal isn't important, what really matters is the form of the team," he said. "I really hope that this will be our year in the Champions League."

Real won the last of their nine European Cups in 2002, but since then they have gone into a steady decline, exiting the competition in the first knockout round in the last three seasons in a row.

However, the manner of Tuesday's victory and the fact that the team have a 100 percent record

at the Bernabeu in all competitions this season, will strengthen Real's belief that they can reclaim their place as the kings of European football.

"I'm not worried who we get in the draw," said Real coach Bernd Schuster. "All our potential opponents will be difficult, but having got first place we've got that small advantage of playing the second leg at home and that is what I was concerned about."

"I'm very relaxed because the players are in great form and everything seems to be going well. I've never had any doubts about the quality of this team."

"Now that we have done our job in the Champions League we have the chance to concentrate on doing well in the league and the (King's) Cup."



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid midfielder Julio Baptista (L) celebrates his goal with defender Sergio Ramos during their Champions League match at the Santiago Bernabeu on Tuesday.

Gerrard falls to burglars

THE GUARDIAN

Steven Gerrard last night became the sixth Liverpool footballer to have his house burgled in the last 18 months. While Gerrard was playing - and scoring - in Liverpool's impressive Champions League win over Marseille, his wife Alex Curran and another woman were confronted by four burglars at the couple's mansion in Formby, Merseyside.

A police spokeswoman confirmed that four men entered the property just before 9.30pm and stole items of jewellery. She said forensic examination of the property was taking place today and

house-to-house inquiries had begun.

"We are investigating a confrontational burglary which took place at around 9.30pm last night," confirmed the spokeswoman. "Four men, wearing dark clothing, hoods and balaclavas, entered the property and stole items of jewellery. We cannot confirm the nature of the confrontation. The female resident, and another woman who was in the house at the time, were left shaken but uninjured."

Last night's incident is the latest in long line of burglaries on the homes of Liverpool players, which started in June 2006 when thieves entered the home of former goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek and took his Porsche, jewellery and a large haul of football memorabilia from his

career, including his European Cup winners' medal from Liverpool's win over Milan in 2005.

Pepe Reina's home in Wootton was burgled while he played in last May's Champions League semifinal second leg against Chelsea. Jewellery, a Bang and Olufsen entertainment system, personal documents and a grey Porsche Cayenne with Spanish number plates were taken.

Daniel Agger had his Wirral home burgled in September 2006, and striker Peter Crouch's house in Alderley Edge was broken into during the same month while he was playing for England.

Last month, Dirk Kuyt's home in Wootton was also burgled while he was playing a Euro 2008 qualifier with Holland.