



Arsenal striker Nicklas Bendtner (L) slots the ball through the legs of Steaua Bucharest goalkeeper Robinson Zapata to score in their Champions League match at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

Wenger angry at fixture pile-up



APP, London

Arsene Wenger has accused the Premier League of making life harder for Arsenal than their title rivals.

The Gunners crashed to their first league defeat this season against Middlesbrough on Sunday, at the end of a week when they were forced to play three consecutive away league matches.

Wenger's side faced Aston Villa and then embarked on the long trip to Newcastle in midweek before finishing the week back in the north-east Middlesbrough.

The Arsenal boss is unhappy his team had to play their game in hand against Newcastle last week, while Liverpool, who also still have an extra game to play, had the midweek off.

"I'm not saying Middlesbrough didn't play well - they deserved their victory - but I also think it was unfair to force us to play three away games in the league in one week," Wenger said in the match programme for Arsenal's Champions League tie against Steaua Bucharest.

"The Newcastle game was rearranged from earlier in the season, and we were told it was the only date it could be played but why wasn't Liverpool's rearranged game played then? They still have that game in hand."

Despite Arsenal's failure to win their last two matches, Wenger insists there is no hint of panic at the Emirates Stadium.

"I don't know what kind of world we are in at the moment where everyone says at the start of the season we will be lucky to finish in the top 10 and then it's a crisis when we lose one game," he said.

"I just feel that this team is extremely strong mentally and we are at the start of an era. This team remains very hungry and will get stronger and stronger."

Villa injured again

APP, Paris



Turkish side Fenerbahce qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League for the first time on Wednesday thanks to a 3-1 win over CSKA Moscow in Istanbul.

Fenerbahce took the runners-up spot in Group G behind Inter Milan who had already made sure of their place in the knockout round.

Inter beat PSV Eindhoven 1-0 to 1 after 65 minutes but his shot pipped the Turks for second spot.

Fenerbahce went a goal down

after half an hour when their Brazilian defender Edu diverted a cross from Caner Erkin, a Turk who plays in Russia, past his own keeper Volkan Demirel.

But they were indebted to another Brazilian for pulling them level two minutes later when midfielder Alex volleyed past Igor Akinfeev.

On the stroke of half-time, Champions League debutant Uğur Bolat slotted home a fine pass from Alex to put Fenerbahce ahead and on course for the next round.

Boral came close to making it 3-1 after 65 minutes but his shot pipped the Turks for second spot.

However, he had the last word with his team's third in the last

minute. Meanwhile, PSV, who needed to beat Inter to have any hope of qualifying, were reduced to 10 men in the 20th minute when Edison Mendez was red-carded for a foul on Akinfeev.

The one-man deficit eventually proved decisive with the Italian champions opening the scoring in the 64th minute.

A long ball down the left released Suazo who skipped past Carlos Salcido and Timmy Simons before cutting the ball back for Argentinian striker Julio Cruz to apply the simplest of finishes for his 18th Champions League career goal.

Lehmann could sacrifice his place in Germany's team for the 2008 European Championships because he wants his young family to remain in London until next summer.

Lehmann lost his place in the Arsenal first team in September and is being courted by Bundesliga side VfL Wolfsburg, who are offering the guarantee of regular football.

But the 38-year-old does not want to relocate his young family from England's capital just yet; even though Germany coach Joachim Loew has said Lehmann must play regular first-team football if he wants to keep his place.

"My wife and I want to stay in London until at least the summer of 2008, even if I don't play for Arsenal," Lehmann told weekly German newspaper Die Zeit.

Lehmann does plan to move his family and three children back to Germany next summer, but does not want to move sooner and risk unsettling them.

As well as Wolfsburg, English Premier League side Manchester City have also expressed an interest in signing Lehmann, according to reports in the British media.

A Turkish surprise

APP, Paris



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Stuttgart midfielder Antonio da Silva (2nd R) is about to score a stunning free kick against Barcelona during their Champions League encounter at the Nou Camp on Wednesday.

UCL last 16 qualifiers

APP, Paris

Qualifiers for the last 16 of the Champions League after the conclusion of the group stages on Wednesday:

FC Porto
Liverpool
Chelsea
Schalke 04
Real Madrid
Olympiakos
AC Milan
Celtic
Barcelona
Lyon
Man Utd
Roma
Inter Milan
Fenerbahce
Sevilla
Arsenal

Hitzfeld explains Kahn fine

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich had to punish captain Oliver Kahn to reimpose discipline after he left the Christmas party early and criticised team mates, coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said on Wednesday.

The former Germany keeper criticised team mates Luca Toni and Franck Ribery this week, saying that while playing a few good games for their former clubs might have been enough, they would have to do more now they were Bayern players.

On Tuesday, Bayern announced Kahn had been fined 25,000 euros (\$36,720) and suspended for Saturday's game at Hertha Berlin, their final league fixture before the mid-season Bundesliga break.

"I still have to set an example so everyone at Bayern knows how they're expected to behave," Hitzfeld told a news conference. "Players criticising their team mates must stop. Otherwise we become a madhouse."

"The fans will love Capello when he wins. And Fabio Capello is a winner," he said. "I think he can win the World Cup with England and make them into a team feared and respected throughout the world."

To achieve that goal, Capello believes he has to get England's best players to overcome what he sees as a "mental block" preventing them from reproducing their club form on the international stage.

"How can players of the level of Beckham or (Michael) Owen have performances so different when they play for their national team?" Capello said recently.

"It's clear the shirt is very heavy even for those great champions. The manager has a fundamental role to play in this situation. He has to be more of a psychologist than a tactician or a technician. It's clear there is a mental block -- otherwise how can you explain their elimination from Euro 2008?"

Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann could sacrifice his place in Germany's team for the 2008 European Championships because he wants his young family to remain in London until next summer.

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Seles considering comeback

Tennis

INTERNET, undated

Monica Seles has revealed she is considering a comeback to the WTA Tour after watching Lindsay Davenport make a successful return since giving birth to a son in June.

Seles has not played since the French Open in 2003 when she was struggling with back and foot injuries. But the 34-year-old, who still plays regularly with former world number ones Jennifer Capriati and Martina Navratilova, has never formally retired and is now eyeing a possible return to action in Miami next March.

"I still love to play. That has never lessened," Seles told the LA Times. "What Lindsay did was just

so cool.

"And what I know now, I wish I had known then. Like stretching more before and after matches. You go out and win 6-3 6-1 and say that was easy and you wouldn't stretch.

Seles, who was ranked as world number one in 1991 and 1992, won her first major at Roland Garros in

1990 before going on to win seven of the next 11 Slams, despite not competing at Wimbledon in 1991.

But shortly after winning her third Australian Open title in 1993, Seles was stabbed in the back by Guenter Parche, a spectator who

came down from the stands during her quarter final clash with Magdalena Maleeva in Hamburg. Seles did not play again until August 1995 and won only one more Grand Slam, in Australia in 1996.

"I guess I kind of had two tennis careers," Seles continued. "And now perhaps a third. I certainly would not ever be able to do a full schedule again, because of the foot."

"But I'm thinking about the Slams and about some of the better tournaments that lead into them. I won't decide for sure until the beginning of the year and the Australian is certainly not possible. But Miami. Maybe."

Villarreal during the Argentine side's victory in South America's Libertadores Cup, scoring eight goals and becoming the most valuable player of the championship.

Cardozo, who has taken part in two FIFA Under-20 World Cups, said: "When you score the goal that wins a game for your side and sends them through to a final, you cannot ask for much more."

"I haven't played much recently because of an injury, so this goal will give me tons of confidence for what lies ahead."

Boca will play the winners of the other semifinal between Italy's AC Milan and Urawa Reds of Japan in Yokohama later Thursday. Boca and Milan each won the South America-Europe Intercontinental Cup three times before it was merged into the Club World Cup in 2005.

'This is for Riquelme'

Football

APP, Tokyo

Neri Cardozo has dedicated his winning goal in Boca Juniors' 1-0 Club World Cup semifinal win over Tunisia's Etoile Sahel to missing superstar Juan Roman Riquelme.

Cardozo put his hands behind his ears, imitating puppet mouse Topo Gigio, when he celebrated the first goal of his international club career in the 37th minute at the National Stadium here Wednesday.

"I celebrated that way for Roman, who was in Tokyo but unable to take part. He came up to me before the game to wish me luck and told me to play as I knew how," 21-year-old Cardozo told FIFa.com afterwards.

"After the game, he returned to congratulate me for the goal and

thank me for dedicating it to him," he added.

"He's very important to us, not just as a player but also as a teammate and a friend. His presence gave us all a big lift."

Riquelme, who recently moved from Spain's Villarreal to his old club, was ruled out of the annual tournament of continental champions because he missed the deadline for Boca's preliminary list of players.

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The new bionic ball

Football

REUTERS, Tokyo

A new "bionic ball" being tested at the Club World Cup in Japan could soon be a regular feature at FIFA tournaments, its developers said on Thursday.

The technology, involving magnetic sensors that determine if the micro-chipped ball has crossed the goal line, has worked well so far, according to co-designers adidas and Cairros.

The developers added that feedback from the players at the seven-team competition had been positive.

"We are very satisfied," adidas's chief of FIFA Affairs Gunter Pfau said in a news conference in Tokyo to demonstrate the ball's qualities. "No ball was damaged. All the systems have worked."

An implanted microchip sends an instant signal to the referee's wristwatch to indicate if the whole of the ball has crossed the line.

FIFA hope the breakthrough will eliminate controversy and want to use the technology at the 2010 World Cup if the prototype proves 100 per cent reliable.

Earlier difficulties with chips becoming loose have been addressed, adidas said, adding that the ball was stress-tested to seven times the force of gravity.

Arguments over whether the ball has crossed the goal line have raged for years. Geoff Hurst's disputed goal for England in the 1966 World Cup final against Germany arguably the most famous example.

Hurst smashed a shot against the crossbar and the ball bounced

downwards. It was unclear if it had crossed the line but the referee awarded a goal after consulting