



Ivory Coast hardman Yaya Toure (C) battles Mali players during their African Nations Cup match in Accra on Tuesday.

ITALIAN CUP Roma better Sampdoria

AFP, Rome

Brazilian winger Alessandro Mancini scored a brilliant second half winner to send holders Roma into the Italian Cup semifinals following a 1-0 win over Sampdoria on Tuesday at the Stadio Olimpico.

That completed a 2-1 aggregate victory for the capital-based club, who came back from -having a man sent off in the first leg to snatch a vital 1-1 draw.

They had the better of the first period with both Alberto Aquilani and Daniele De Rossi forcing Sampdoria goalkeeper Antonio Mirante into making fine stops.

After the break the visitors almost took the lead but Brazilian midfielder Rodrigo Taddei was in the right place to clear Hugo Campagnaro's shot off the line with Brazilian goalkeeper Doni beaten.

But on the hour mark Mancini fired Roma in front, rounding off a sweet move after playing a one-two in the Samp box.

Roma could have extended their lead but Mirante was in fine form and twice denied nippy French forward Ludovic Giuly.

Lippi backs Cassano

AFP, Rome

Former Italy coach Marcello Lippi gave his backing to an eventual return to the national team for Sampdoria striker Antonio Cassano.

In his Roma days Cassano became part of the international set-up but has found himself out in the cold for the last 12 months after moving to Real Madrid two years ago.

He struggled to get games for Madrid, playing only 19 times, and scoring twice, over an 18-month period before being loaned to Sampdoria at the beginning of this season.

Although he has twice played for Italy since Roberto Donadoni took over the national team reigns following the 2006 World Cup, he has not been included in a squad since the end of that same year.

He was castigated for being overweight at Real but seems to

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Palermo fail in audacious bid

REUTERS, Milan

Serie A side Palermo have failed in their bid to have Saturday's 1-0 defeat at AS Roma overturned or replayed due to the actions of a ball boy.

Palermo president Maurizio Zamparini said the boy had broken the rules by placing the ball on the corner spot and allowing Roma to take a quick corner from which Mancini scored.

"I have dispatched my lawyers and I have asked for a 3-0 win or at least for the match to be replayed," Zamparini said.

"We have read the rules -- the ball boys must stay behind the advertising boards and throw the ball to the nearest player. What happened on

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Becks pleads his case

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham has reassured England coach Fabio Capello that he is still fit enough for international duty.

The LA Galaxy midfielder is desperate to win his 100th England cap in Capello's first match - next Wednesday's friendly against Switzerland at Wembley - and has been training with Arsenal for the last month in an attempt to keep up his fitness during the American league's close-season break.

Capello will name his squad on Saturday and reports in England have suggested Beckham may not be included.

The former Manchester United star, who played under Capello for a season at Real Madrid, is convinced he has done all he can to prove he is still worth his place.

"To get picked to play for my country is always special and because it's my 100th game it makes it extra special. It would mean the world," he told Sky News on Tuesday from Brazil.

"Hopefully it happens but we

have to wait and see. If it doesn't it doesn't. That's part of life and part of football.

"But I'm keeping my fingers crossed. Hopefully I've worked hard enough this last month and a half to get myself fit and to make myself available.

"I haven't spoken to Fabio Capello. Obviously he's been very busy watching a lot of games and travelling around the country watching a lot of different players.

"I'm not planning on speaking to him until hopefully I meet up with the squad."

Beckham admits his place is under threat from in-form right wingers such as Chelsea's Shaun Wright-Phillips and Blackburn's David Bentley, but he believes the competition can only be good for English football.

"It's good to have the competition with the young players coming through," he said. "Hopefully it's going to be an exciting time for English football in the next few years because it needs to be."

"There have been a lot of people talking about the new manager and what players and team he's going to pick.

"It's very special to have someone

of his pedigree and winning mentality as part of English football."

Beckham fell out with Capello during their time together at Real after announcing his decision to move to America. But he was later restored to the team and helped Real win La Liga.

"That experience has convinced Beckham that Capello will be single-minded enough to do things his way, despite the immense scrutiny that surrounds the role of England coach.

"He's a very talented manager and he will do things in his way," Beckham said. "Everyone will have to accept it."

"I was lucky enough to play for him at Real Madrid. He is a manager that will look after the players and give everyone a good boost."

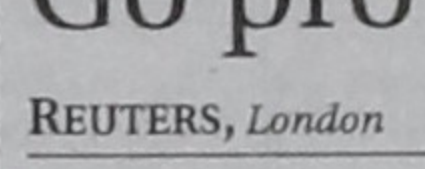
Beckham insists he has no plans to return to Premier League despite reports linking him with a move to Newcastle.

He said: "I'm in the US for the next few years and I'm not planning to come back to English football because I've been lucky enough to play in the Premier League for a club I always wanted to play for."

"For me I am playing in America and I'm planning on staying there."

Gunners punish Magpies Go provisionally top

REUTERS, London



Arsenal beat Newcastle United 3-0 for the second time in four days on

Tuesday to edge ahead of Manchester United in the Premier League title race.

Goals from Emmanuel Adebayor, Mathieu Flamini and Cesc Fabregas underlined Arsenal's superiority and took the Gunners three points above champions United, who can regain top spot with a win at home to Portsmouth on Wednesday.

Newcastle, beaten by the same score at the Emirates in the FA Cup fourth round on Saturday, are still looking for their first goal since Kevin Keegan returned as manager earlier this month and remain just seven points above the relegation zone.

"The players were genuine tonight and kept chasing the ball even when they were 3-0 down," Keegan told the BBC. "3-0 looks bad but we didn't deserve to lose 3-0."

"Michael Owen was wrongly flagged offside when it was only 1-0, Flamini scored a wonder goal and their third goal was definitely offside."

The three other matches on Tuesday all involved teams fighting to stay in the top flight.

Sunderland gave their survival hopes a huge boost, beating Birmingham City 2-0 at home to move out of the relegation zone and up into 14th place.

Wigan Athletic drop into the bottom three after losing 1-0 at Middlesbrough while Fulham stay second from bottom after a 0-0

draw at fellow strugglers Bolton Wanderers.

Newcastle, without a league goal this year, looked solid for 40 minutes against Arsenal but did not pose any attacking threat.

Adebayor then headed in a cross from the outstanding Flamini for his 16th league goal of the season

and there was no way back for shot-shy Newcastle.

Flamini struck with a powerful right-foot shot after 72 minutes and Fabregas rounded off the victory after being put clear by Nicklas Bendtner.

The closest Newcastle came to

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Arsenal midfielder Mathieu Flamini (front) is hugged by captain William Gallas after his cracking goal during their Premiership match against Newcastle at the Emirates Stadium in London on Tuesday.

Akram feels cheated

AFP, London

Iraq football national Nashat Akram accused the British interior ministry of double standards by denying him a visa that would have made him the first Iraqi to play in England's Premier League, in comments published Wednesday.

The Home Office rejected Akram's application for a British work permit last week, despite Manchester City manager Sven-Goran Eriksson making a personal appearance on his behalf.

City had agreed to transfer Akram from the Al-Ain club in the United Arab Emirates and he had impressed the coaching staff during a recent trial at the club.

According to The Times, Akram's visa application was denied because the Iraqi national team is ranked 72nd in the world, and the Home Office only accepts applications from the top 70 national teams.

"There are lots of players from African countries whose home leagues are not ranked well," Akram told the daily, adding that while he felt cheated, he would not appeal the decision.

"I want to ask why... I wanted to pave the way for other Iraqis. I wanted to give them hope."

"It's like a judgment against my country... I am upset and the Iraqi people are upset. There are a lot of people hoping I would be the first Iraqi to play in the British league."

"I want to find another club in a country where I am welcome."

Akram was one of the stars of the Iraq side that won the Asian Cup for the first time in July of last year and was also part of the squad that reached the semifinals of the 2004 Olympic soccer tournament.

Britain's Home Office does not comment on individual visa applications.

Rafa tying up Mascherano

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez expects to sign Javier Mascherano on a permanent basis after selling Momo Sissoko to Juventus on Tuesday.

Benitez is keen to complete a 17 million pounds move for Mascherano, who has been on loan at Anfield since January, and fell out with the club's American owners over their failure to seal the deal late last year.

But Benitez believes Mali midfielder Sissoko's switch to Juventus has freed up the funds to keep Mascherano at Liverpool and he hinted there could be a resolution before the transfer window shuts on Thursday.

"I am confident it will be tied up soon. Sissoko has gone and we are closer to a deal for Javier," Benitez said.

"The fee we have got for Momo can certainly help as we try to complete the deal."

"We are working very hard to achieve that before the window shuts. I hope for something positive in the next 48 hours. Javier has made it very clear he wants to stay here and I believe he will."

"But we do not need to do anything quickly - he is our loan player until the summer, and it could all be sorted out then."

"We have two days, and if we can finish everything now it will be perfect. He wants to stay."

NIGERIA DO ENOUGH Ivory Coast seal passage

AFP, Accra



Nigeria bounced back from the brink to sneak into the African Nations Cup quarterfinals on Tuesday but the door to the last eight closed on Mali.

The two countries were scrapping for the honour of finishing runners-up to Ivory Coast in Group B and passage to the knockout stages, with the Nigerians prevailing.

Berti Vogts' under-achieving side set up a last eight date with Ghana by beating Benin 2-0 in Sekondi, with Mali crashing 3-0 to Ivory Coast in Accra.

Nigeria's win, after defeat to the Ivoirians and a goalless draw against Mali, was largely down to the work of Chelsea midfielder Mikel John Obi, who scored their first and set up Yakubu Aiyegbeni for the second.

Obi's Stamford Bridge teammate Didier Drogha celebrated his 50th international cap by firing Ivory Coast into a ninth minute lead over the Malians, with Benfica's Marc Zoro and Boubacar Sanogo wrapping up an impressive win.

Ivory Coast's reward for a perfect nine points from the opening round is a quarterfinal tie with Guinea, who will be without their suspended skipper Pascal Feindouno, in Sekondi on Sunday.

There was relief all round in the beleaguered Nigerian camp at avoid-

ing a likely early trip back to Lagos.

"We asked for something of a miracle and it happened," said Osaze Odehwingie. "We are now up against the host team and if we want to progress in this competition, we will have to beat them as well."

"We showed great mental strength and that is what we will need again on Sunday. Rule us out on your own risk," added Odehwingie, who after picking up a second booking against Benin will miss the game.

Obi said the win was down to some hard training, and lady luck.

"We knew we had to win and then sweat it out (for Ivory Coast to beat Mali). We knew our fate rested on the Ivory Coast, and they won."

"We showed a lot of aggression and determination tonight and we're very happy."

Asked if the side were prepared to take on a resurgent Ghana on home turf he replied: "Hold on - we celebrated this win in the changing rooms, now we'll go back to the hotel, sleep well, and think about Ghana tomorrow."

"It's going to be tough, but we've got one of the best sides in the competition and we want to show that to the Ghanaians."

"We gave a good account of ourselves but Nigeria were more determined to carry the day. We wish them the best of luck against Ghana on Sunday," said Benin striker Razak Oromotossi, whose parents are Nigerians.

Down in Accra Drogha will have been relieved to have avoided a clash with another Chelsea star on view at the 2008 Nations Cup,

Ghana's Michael Essien. But he wasn't taking the prospect of confronting Guinea lightly.

"We've qualified well but there's a hard quarterfinal ahead for us. Guinea aren't there by accident."

Ivory Coast Coach Gerard Gili said the win over Mali would stand them in good stead, with a tough quarterfinal coming up.

"Thanks to the individuality and experience of some of the players we won well."

Mali coach Jean-Francois Jolar tipped Ivory Coast to go all the way. "We lost to a strong and complete team, they have everything to win the title."

Explaining the non-appearance of Sevilla striker Fredi Kanoute for the second half he said: "Unfortunately Fredi was injured, it was a big blow. Another blow was Adama Coulibaly, who became ill."

"I'm very disappointed that we didn't play well in the first half, we didn't take risks in attack, we didn't manage to impose in midfield."

The pre-match focus had been all about whether the two west African neighbours might settle for a cosy draw to allow both to go through at Nigeria's expense, but as Jolar said: "No one can say the game was rigged now!"

Wednesday will see a further two teams secure their tickets to the quarterfinals, with Cameroon facing Group C basement dwellers Sudan knowing maximum points would guarantee a slot in the knockout phase unless third-placed Zambia stun leaders and defending champions Egypt.

GERMAN CUP Bayern thru', Bremen fails

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bundesliga league leaders Bayern Munich booked their place in the German Cup's quarterfinals with a convincing 5-2 win at third division minnows Wuppertal on Tuesday night.

With four third round ties played on Tuesday night, Germany striker Miroslav Klose scored twice in the first half for Bayern, but the hosts equalised twice to make it 2-2 at half-time.

Bayern's Belgian defender Daniel van Buyten netted on 50 minutes, before Italian World Cup winner Luca Toni put the result beyond doubt with a fourth goal and

Hamit Altintop completed the rout with a fifth two minutes from time.

Bayern's league rivals Werder Bremen crashed out of the German Cup when they were beaten 2-1 at Borussia Dortmund when Italian midfielder Giovanni Federico and Spanish striker Diego Klimowicz scored either side of half-time for the hosts.

Bremen's Brazilian midfielder Diego hit a late penalty for the guests, but it was too little, too late.

Second division 1860 Munich enjoyed a stunning fight back when they scored three goals in just six minutes as they turned a 2-0 deficit into a 3-2 win at Alemannia Aachen and sealed the win two minutes from time.

Hosts Aachen were cruising into the last eight with a 2-0 lead late in

the game, but Munich's Danny Schwarz led the fight back on 83 minutes before striker Mustafa Kucukovic put them level on 85 minutes and midfielder Fabian Johnson hit the winner two minutes from time.

Second division Hoffenheim claimed the scalp of Bundesliga strugglers Hansa Rostock with a comfortable 2-1 win.

In Wednesday night's four remaining third-round matches, there is an all-Bundesliga clash between VfL Wolfsburg and Schalke 04, while last year's finalists VfB Stuttgart take on Werder Bremen's reserves.

Second division strugglers Carl Zeiss Jena take on first division Arminia while Hamburg are at third division Rot-Weiss Essen.



Bayern Munich striker Miroslav Klose (C) is congratulated by midfielders Mark van Bommel (R) and Franck Ribery during their German Cup match against Wuppertal at the Veltins Arena in Schalke on Tuesday.

Bojan set for Spain call-up

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona's talented youngster Bojan Krkic is likely to be called up to Spain's squad for next week's friendly against France in order to prevent him from being poached by Serbia, said national coach Luis Aragones.

"He's only 17, but he has made extraordinary progress. He's got quality, an eye for goal and could be a great player," Aragones told sports daily AS on Wednesday.

"Yes, we might call him up now. My idea that he comes now to stop him going to another national team. He's an extraordinary lad and

we've been nurturing him through all the youth categories in the national set-up."

Known to Barcelona fans simply as "Bojan", Krkic's father is Serbian but he was born in Spain in Linyola in the province of Lleida. The forward has said he wanted to play for Spain.

Bojan made a name for himself by notching up over 800 goals during his time in the Barcelona youth team set-up and scored on his debut for the first team in an exhibition match against Egyptian side Al-Ahly last April.

He was one of the most eye-catching players in last year's Under-17 World Cup in South Korea and was instrumental in helping Spain get to the final.

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Raul not in Aragones' plans

AFP, Madrid

Spain coach Luis Aragones, angered by questions why Real Madrid star Raul had not been selected for the national team, repeated on Wednesday that the veteran was not part of his plans.

The 30-year-old Raul has regained form this season but has not been picked by Aragones since September 2006, a subject of huge media coverage by Spanish football specialists often with contrasting opinions.

"I don't think Raul should be included (in the Spanish squad) and I don't want to talk about it anymore," Aragones said.

Aragones is expected to announce a squad on Friday for a friendly against France in Malaga on February 6, before naming his Euro 2008 squad on March 1.