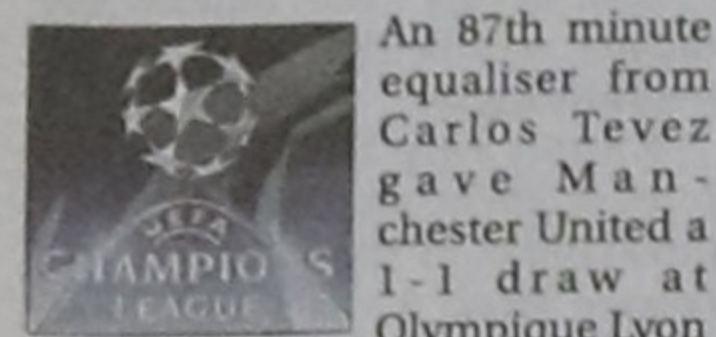


Stalemate at Emirates

Barca dazzle, MU held

REUTERS, Belgrade



An 87th minute equaliser from Carlos Tevez gave Manchester United a 1-1 draw at Olympique Lyon while Barcelona beat Celtic 3-2 away in the Champions League last 16 first-leg matches on Wednesday.

Holders AC Milan survived a second half onslaught by Arsenal to earn a 0-0 draw at the Emirates stadium and Turkish champions Fenerbahce edged Spanish rivals Sevilla 3-2 in Istanbul to set up an intriguing return leg in a fortnight.

United's transfer target Karim Benzema gave French champions and league leaders Lyon a deserved 54th minute lead with a fine shot on the turn before second half substitute Tevez levelled from close range.

Lyon dominated the opening half as Alex Ferguson's defensive 4-5-1 formation looked out of sorts and the English champions deservedly fell behind when 20-year old Benzema drilled the ball home past a static defence.

United came to life midway through the second half after Nani and Tevez came on for Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs, who had a quiet 100th appearance in Europe's premier club competition.

Their pressure finally paid off after Nani's cross fell kindly for Tevez, who stretched Lyon's winless streak against English opposition to six matches.

Ferguson admitted the second half adjustments played a key role in getting the vital away goal that puts United in the driving seat for the return leg at Old Trafford.

"Nani provided a greater threat for us," he told Sky Sports. "Carlos Tevez scored an important goal. It was a decent result without question. We count our blessings that we got back (into the match)."

Celtic twice led against 2006 winners Barcelona but two goals by Lionel Messi and a sublime finish from Thierry Henry handed the Catalan side the win in an absorbing contest in Glasgow.

Jan Vennegoor of Hesselink fired Celtic ahead with a diving 16th-minute header and Barry Robson made it 2-1 on his Champions League debut in the 38th minute after Messi had levelled the score following a swift one-two with Deco.

Henry curled in Barcelona's second equaliser shortly after the break and Messi had the final say with his sixth goal of the campaign when he capitalised on a defensive mix-up in the 79th minute.

In contrast, Arsenal and Milan produced few fireworks in north

London with Emmanuel Adebayor missing the best chance to steal a late winner for the Premier League leaders when he hit the crossbar in injury time.

A cautious approach by both sides provided a chess-like tactical battle in the first half before Arsenal forced the seven-time European club champions on the back foot with waves of attacks after the break.

Milan keeper Zeljko Kalac was rarely troubled though as Adebayor, Cesc Fabregas and Mathieu Flamini hit their shots straight at him before the Togo striker saw his effort come off the woodwork.

"We kept a clean sheet and that's very positive for the second leg," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger. "Overall, I am very happy with the response I got today from my team."

A goal by Semih Senturk three minutes from time gave Fenerbahce a fighting chance of advancing into the last eight at the expense of double UEFA Cup winners Sevilla.

Fener led through Serbian striker Mateja Kezman, an Edu own goal made it 1-1 before Uruguayan defender Lugano headed the hosts ahead again.

Julien Escudé then slid in for a second equaliser on 66 minutes but Senturk grabbed the winner with a deflected effort.



Arsenal striker Emmanuel Adebayor (C) heads against the bar in the last minute of injury time during their Champions League match against Milan at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Subs make the difference



AFP, Lyon

More than a game of two halves, it proved a game of two benches in Lyon on Wednesday, with Manchester United's Alex Ferguson ringing the changes to conjure a vital draw which left the 1999 winners' Champions League dreams alive.

United were staring defeat in the face after rising star Karim Benzema produced a brilliant finish for the French nine minutes into the second half of an evenly-matched contest.

But the wily Ferguson landed a potential knockout punch in his tactical battle of wits with Lyon counterpart Alain Perrin by sending on Argentine star Carlos Tevez and Portuguese wizard Nani for veterans Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes.

Three minutes from time it was Nani's tantalising cross which preceded Tevez's close-range finish and, as Perrin conceded, essentially left Lyon hoping for a miracle in the return encounter at Old Trafford in a fortnight's time.

"I think we deserved the result, without question," said Ferguson afterwards.

"We're delighted to get the draw which gives us a good opportunity to qualify," added Sir Alex, who acknowledged his bench strategy had paid a handsome dividend.

"With the options I have on the bench you've got to make changes if you're 1-0 down. Nani and Tevez both did very well."

The pair's decisive contribution on a night where United generally left their fearsome attacking power dry was not good news for everyone on United's staff, however.

For Darren Fletcher, twice on target in last weekend's FA Cup canter over Arsenal, United's strength in depth is so strong he will have to wait a little longer for his own chance of a regular place.

"Obviously, you want to play in every game, but this is part of the business you're in," said the young midfielder when asked if he was worried about slipping further down the pecking order at a club with such an over-abundance of attacking talent. "It's up to the boss to decide. Our bench is so strong - and Carlos and Nani made a big impact."

In contrast, while saluting Benzema's fourth goal of the tournament to three for Tevez to date, Perrin had to concede he was short

of options as his starting eleven found their strength sapped beyond breaking point with little in reserve in what has been an injury-ravaged season for the French.

"Unfortunately, we weren't able to hold out until the end. I didn't have a bench geared to holding onto a 1-0 lead," said Perrin, who nonetheless praised his goalscorer.

"Karim was a little isolated up front, though he performed his role well," said the Lyon coach, under pressure to deliver a result after criticism from his chairman following a weekend league loss at Le Mans.

For Perrin, Lyon now have an uphill battle ahead of them.

"The situation before the match was 0-0 but 1-1 puts us in a difficult position," he said.

"Now we are an away goal down."

Lyon midfielder Kim Kallstrom agreed.

"We showed we can play at Manchester's level - but it will be very difficult for us over there," the Swede said.

But United's French star Patrice Evra, a 2004 finalist with Monaco, said United were not counting any chickens.

"Lyon are a good side and can score at our place. I think it's still 50-50."

Toni's no to Milan

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni insists he is happy at the German giants and has brushed off reports claiming AC Milan want him as a replacement for their Brazilian injury-victim Ronaldo.

Since joining Bayern last summer for 11 million euros (16 million US dollars) from Fiorentina, Toni has been a huge success scoring 22 goals in 26 games including his first hat-trick in the Bundesliga last weekend.

Brazilian striker Ronaldo, 31, is out for the rest of the season after rupturing a tendon in his right knee during AC Milan's 1-1 draw with Livorno last week and has had surgery on his knee for the third time.

There are concerns whether he will play again and is unlikely to appear for AC Milan again until the end of the year at the very earliest.

According to a report in German tabloid Bild, AC Milan have made enquiries about Toni and club boss Silvio Berlusconi is making moves to bring the World Cup winner back to Italy, but Toni dismissed the idea out of hand.

"I don't know anything about it and it doesn't interest me," said Toni.

"I am enjoying playing here and I want to win a title with Bayern."

Toni - the Bundesliga's top scorer with 13 - has forged a formidable partnership with Germany striker Miroslav Klose and between them the pair have bagged 22 league goals.

And Toni, who has scored 15 goals in 32 appearances for the Azzurri, has often said he is happy to be in Munich and has settled in the Bavarian city with his model girlfriend.

The Italian was a success in Serie A having scored 31 goals in 38 league games for Fiorentina in the 2005-2006 season - the first Italian player to score more than 30 league goals in Italy since the 1933-34 season.

Sheva seen in Milan bus

INTERNET, undated

Andriy Shevchenko will have some interesting questions to answer at training today after he was spotted leaving Emirates Stadium on the AC Milan bus.

Chelsea's 31million pound striker watched the game and left with the rest of the Italian team, prompting more speculation that he wants to return to his former club.

The Ukrainian has been edged out after the arrival of Avram Grant in September and is third choice behind Nicolas Anelka.

It would appear that Shevchenko is still in close contact with the Milanese and president Silvio Berlusconi has made no secret of his desire to bring back the 31 year old.

He said only last summer: "If only. He would like to come back, now we'll see. Certainly, our doors are open to him. More than that, our doors are wide open to him."

Out to make amends

INTERNET, undated



Emmanuel Adebayor spoke of his shock after his astonishing miss in the last seconds of Arsenal's goalless

draw with AC Milan last night.

The Togo striker inexplicably headed a beautiful cross from substitute Theo Walcott against the bar in injury time in the first leg of the last 16 Champions League tie.

It means Arsenal will have to secure a score draw or become the first English team to beat Milan in the San Siro if they are to progress to the quarter-finals when the teams meet again in a fortnight.

To add to Arsenal's misery, defender Kolo Toure will miss four weeks after picking up a calf injury after just seven minutes.

"Kolo has a calf injury and from what I can see he will be out for at least three to four weeks," Wenger said.

"The injury was a consequence of the African Nations Cup."

"I cannot even explain what happened," said Adebayor. "That is football, and is what we are made of. Sometimes everything is okay, and sometimes the ball just does not want to go into the net."

"I had an amazing chance, but I put the ball onto the bar. The most important thing is to be creating the chances. Hopefully I will put one in at the San Siro. We know it is going to be very difficult in Milan, but we are ready for it."

Young Spanish midfielder Cesc Fabregas admitted the San Siro was already one of the toughest places to visit, even without the loss of Toure.

"Milan is the hardest place to get a result, definitely," said Fabregas. "It's very difficult. They have a lot of experience, they know how to play, they defend very well, they are very intelligent. They never play around. If they have to kick it out, they will."

"We missed a chance last night but I still think 0-0 is not a bad result. If we score a goal there they have to score two, so we have a good opportunity if we play well."

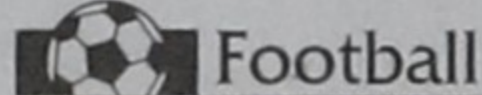
"Having seen what we have seen last night we can cope with their pace, their experience and we can create chances."

Fabregas was not unhappy with Arsenal's performance in the draw, particularly in light of the weekend mauling at Old Trafford.

He added: "After a big defeat at the weekend we came back well and came back strong. We can't forget, we didn't play against an average team. We played against a top side like Milan and even then we played well, we had more opportunities, we played better, had more possession, we tackled. We did everything right."

"Unfortunately, sometimes in football the difference is you don't put the ball into the back of the net and we didn't do that."

EPL is harder: Rafa



Football

AFP, Liverpool

Rafael Benitez has admitted it is easier to find success as a manager with Liverpool in the Champions League than in the Premier League.

Benitez's record in Europe's elite club competition stands comparison with any of his peers after leading Liverpool to two finals in three years and winning the trophy in 2005.

The Spaniard inspired another impressive European result from his side on Tuesday as the Reds beat Italian champions Inter Milan 2-0 at Anfield.

But Liverpool have found it impossible to replicate that form on the domestic stage. Once again

they are already out of the title race, with only fourth place left to fight for.

Benitez believes the slower pace of Champions League matches suits his tactical style more than the English game's frenetic tempo.

"In Europe you can approach a game tactically in a different way. In England it is a different style of football and more difficult for the manager to influence what goes on," Benitez said.

"It is not as simple to influence the game with tactics in England the way it is elsewhere in Europe."

If Liverpool emerge unscathed from their trip to the San Siro next month, Liverpool fans will start dreaming of a repeat of their winning run in the competition three years ago, which culminated in their famous comeback against AC Milan in the final.

Even the usually low-key Benitez was happy to entertain the possibility of emulating that team's heroics.

"There is, I suppose, the prospect of history repeating itself with us going for a European final when we are not in the title race (as in 2005)," Benitez said.

"But I would prefer not to think that far ahead, I always say 'one game at a time' and never has that phrase been more appropriate."

"I know what people were saying (about me). But as a professional you must be ready for every game, to prepare for every game the best you can and with the same ideas."

"Maybe the 'dressing room' felt the need to prove people wrong. But their attitude was no different really to plenty of other games."



Lyon starlet Karim Benzema (C) tries to get the better of Manchester United defender Nemanja Vidic during their Champions League clash at the Stade Gerland on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP



Barcelona sensation Lionel Messi celebrates scoring against Celtic in their Champions League encounter at Celtic Park on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Czechs rally behind Nedved

AFP, Prague

A top football weekly in the Czech Republic has called on Juventus midfielder Pavel Nedved to come out of international retirement for the Euro 2008 finals in Austria and Switzerland.

"Nedved sets the pace at Juventus. He regularly performs well and scores crucial goals," Gol magazine said in its latest edition. "Can the Czech selectors really go without the services of such a player?"

Nedved, 35, the 2003 European footballer of the year, played his last international fixture in August 2006, giving his age and wish to spend more time with his family as reasons for his retirement.

He won 91 senior caps since his debut in 1994, played in three European championships and the 2006 World Cup, and scored 18 goals.

Semifinalists in the last European championships in Portugal, the Czech Republic have been drawn in the same opening group as Switzerland, Portugal and Turkey.

Gazza goes gaga

REUTERS, London

Former England midfielder Paul Gascoigne is being held under the Mental Health Act, a police source said on Thursday.

The former Tottenham Hotspur and Newcastle United player, widely known as Gazza, was arrested at the Hilton Hotel in Gatheshead, on Wednesday evening.

Nobody was injured and there was no violence and no damage to the hotel.

"A 40-year-old man has been detained," a spokesman for Northumbria Police said.

"We had received a report of concern for a 40-year-old man staying at the hotel. The man was detained under the Mental Health Act."

Gascoigne's last direct involvement in football was as manager of minor League club Kettering Town, a job he left in 2005.

He was capped 57 times by England between 1988 and 1998 scoring 10 goals, and made international headlines during the 1990 World Cup finals in Italy.

Famously bursting into tears after receiving a yellow card in England's semi-final against West Germany, which would have seen him suspended for the final if England had qualified, he became a household name and "Gazzamania" was born.

He had already been identified as the most naturally gifted player of his generation, but hopes that his early promise would be fulfilled were seriously compromised playing for Spurs in the 1991 FA Cup final against Nottingham Forest.

Early in the match at Wembley Gascoigne made a reckless challenge on Gary Charles and seriously damaged his knee, delaying a move to Lazio in Italy for more than a year.