

Germans target last 8

INTERNET, Hamburg



The German quartet will be decimated in the UEFA Cup round of 16 as Bayer Leverkusen run into SV Hamburg in a tie promising quality football. The teams first meet in Leverkusen on

Thursday, less than a month after they played to a 1-1 draw in the Bundesliga in the same stadium in what is considered one of the best league matches of the season.

Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich visit Anderlecht in a meeting of former title holders, and second-placed Werder Bremen are at Glasgow Rangers.

England is also well-positioned in the competition with three teams who will hope to follow up on the Champions League heroics of Arsenal and Manchester despite tough draws.

Everton visit the last Italian representative Fiorentina, freshly-crowned Carling Cup champs Tottenham Hotspur take on PSV Eindhoven in another battle of ex-champions, while Bolton Wanderers play Sporting Lisbon.

The other Lisbon club, Benfica, host Spain's Getafe and the draw is completed with a meeting between Olympique Marseille and Zenit St. Petersburg. The return legs are next week.

Hamburg got the upper end on Leverkusen in a tight battle for third place on the domestic front

on Sunday - winning 4-1 against Frankfurt while the 1988 Leverkusen crashed 2-0 at VfL Bochum, but outgoing coach Huub Stevens is not deceived.

"The UEFA Cup is a different story. The results may affect the Bundesliga standings, but they are neither an advantage nor a disadvantage in the UEFA Cup," Stevens said.

Hamburg's Dutch captain Rafael van der Vaart named the chances of making the quarters 50-50 as "they (Leverkusen) are playing a fantastic season."

Leverkusen's veteran forward Sergej Barbarez is looking forward to the tie with the club he played for in the past.

"It will be two good games. I am really looking forward to the tie. We must play our game but the tie will be decided next week in Hamburg. I would be sad if Hamburg are eliminated but I am convinced that Leverkusen will advance," said the Bosnian Barbarez.

Munich aim to remain on course towards a trophy triple (league, German cup, UEFA Cup) against Anderlecht, against whom they have lost only once in six European matches.

Munich, who drew confidence from a 1-0 league win at rivals Schalke, will be without Brazilian defender Lucio but have French star Franck Ribery in top form again from an injury layoff.

"We want to play in the final," insisted Brazilian midfielder Ze Roberto.

Rangers run into Bremen for the first time on the European stage and are weary of the Germans

whose playmaker Diego is eligible to play Thursday as a recent match ban applies only to the Bundesliga.

"Werder Bremen are one of the big names in Europe and we will need to be at the top of our game if we are going to get anything from them," said Rangers defender Kirk Broadfoot.

Jean-Claude Darcheville is suspended for Rangers which could open the door for Daniel Cousin to play up front. The forward is cleared to play after a move to Fulham was blocked last week by the ruling body FIFA.

Elsewhere, Spurs goalkeeper Paul Robinson hopes that the Carling Cup title over mighty Chelsea will give his side a big boost for the tie with the Dutch league leaders PSV.

"It's a massive game. I'm sure we surprised a few people by winning the Carling Cup this season and there is no reason why we can't do the same in the UEFA Cup," he told the Spurs website.

"PSV are a strong team and a massive club. They are running away with their league again at the moment and were expecting a very tough tie over two legs."

UEFA Cup last 16 fixtures:
Anderlecht (BEL) v Bayern Munich (GER), Bolton (ENG) v Sporting Lisbon (POR), Bayer Leverkusen (GER) v Hamburg (GER), Getafe (ESP) v Benfica (POR), Fiorentina (ITA) v Everton (ENG), Tottenham (ENG) v PSV Eindhoven (NED), Marseille (FRA) v St Petersburg (RUS), Rangers (SCO) v Werder Bremen (GER)



Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo (R) shoots to score the only goal against Lyon during their Champions League encounter at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Economists back Czechs

AFP, Geneva

After careful analysis and some mathematical modelling economists and researchers at Swiss bank UBS have come up with their latest prognosis: The Czech Republic to lift this summer's European Championship at Italy's expense.

The bank's researchers took into account factors such as homeground advantage, the geographical proximity of teams to the host countries, rankings, as well as match tactics.

They see co-host Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Greece advancing into the second round.

But they expect favourites Germany to be kicked out by the Swiss owing to the latter's home advantage.

Then Andy Roddick, the sixth seeded former US Open champion who is making his first appearance in this Gulf state, started with a 6-2, 6-4 win over Juan Carlos Ferrero, the former world number one from Spain.

Roddick next plays Paul Henri Mathieu, one of three Frenchmen in the last 16.

Nadal digs deep

Tennis

AFP, Dubai

Rafael Nadal had to dig himself out of trouble here Tuesday to avoid going the way of Roger Federer, who was sensationally beaten in the first round of the Dubai Open.

Nadal was twice within a point of going a break of serve down in the second set, having lost the first, before clawing his way back to a three-set win over the improving Philipp Kohlschreiber.

The world number two from Spain was often not at his best during his 3-6, 6-1, 6-4 success, but, unlike Federer against Andy Murray on Monday, he found a way to win.

Kohlschreiber, the world number 27 from Germany, did most things well, and having edged his way up the rankings slowly is an

underestimated player.

But Nadal did not make that mistake.

"I was playing a big player. He's a top 30 player and one of the toughest pros on the tour, for sure," he said.

"It was a difficult match. I didn't play my best but it's not easy playing here, and I didn't come here with a great deal of confidence," added Nadal, referring to his surprise loss to Andrea Seppi of Italy in Rotterdam the week before last.

"This tournament gives you the toughest draw on the tour. But the good thing was I was one hundred per cent mentally."

"Maybe I didn't play my best but I was focused all the time and I was very happy with that." The other main front runners for the title, Novak Djokovic and Andy Roddick, came through with less hassle.

Djokovic, the Australian Open champion from Serbia, overcame

Marin Cilic, the world number 45 from Croatia, 6-4, 6-3, and reckoned he had been more "stable and patient" on the points which mattered than his opponent.

He now plays Fabrice Santoro, the 35-year-old former champion from France, who upset Mikhail Youzhny, the world number 12 from Russia, on Monday in what is almost certainly his last tournament there.

Djokovic also proffered the surprising opinion that, based on what he had seen this year, he had expected Murray to beat Federer.

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PHOTO: AFP

Fenerbahce players celebrate after beating Sevilla on penalties in their Champions League tie at the Sanchez Pizjuan Stadium on Tuesday.

Zico's second coming

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Madrid

Zico has enjoyed many great moments during his illustrious career but the Brazilian football legend ranked Fenerbahce's Champions League quarterfinal qualification as among the best.

The former Japan national team coach saw his Turkish team triumph with a 3-2 penalty shoot out win over Sevilla on Tuesday, after the Spaniards had won the second leg 3-2 after extra time to leave the score at 5-5 on aggregate.

"It's been one of my proudest days because of all the effort," beamed the Fenerbahce coach in the early hours of Wednesday morning after the tension of the climactic finish had subsided.

"We have learned from our mistakes a lot and now Fenerbahce players are all experienced enough to qualify for the quarterfinals of the Champions League." "We fought and worked really hard to win because everyone knows that I am not that kind of person who gives up

just like that," added Zico, who was once described by fellow Brazilian Pele as "the one player that came closer to me."

After his playing days ended in 1994, the Brazilian earned his coaching spurs in Japan, firstly with Kashima Antlers and then with the Japan national team, winning the 2004 Asian Cup and taking them to the 2006 World Cup.

Now he has proved he can hold his own among the best in the business on the old continent.

"We all knew that it was going to be a very tough game but we won it and that's what matters to me. I thank my players for this very precious gift."

The gift of qualification was also a late birthday present as Zico turned 55 on Monday.

"Sevilla had shown themselves to be an attacking team and in the first few minutes we made a lot of errors. Under pressure from them we were quickly two goals down," he reflected.

"But we recovered; we played without fear and with courage right up to and including the penalties." Zico had special praise for his goalkeeper Volkan Demirel, who was

at fault for Sevilla's first two goals which were scored within the first 10 minutes but then showed his mettle by stopping three penalties in the shootout.

"I had full confidence in him. He made errors at the start but I told him he had to concentrate throughout the whole match. In the end, he has done just that and has won crucial when penalties came along," added Zico.

After eliminating the 2006 and 2007 UEFA Cup champions on Tuesday, Zico and his Fenerbahce players are unlikely to fear whoever they have to face following the Champions League quarterfinal draw on March 14.

However, they will probably want to avoid 2006 Champions League winners Barcelona, who cruised rather more comfortably into the quarterfinals with a 4-2 aggregate win over Celtic on Tuesday.

Memories are still raw in Istanbul from the last time Fenerbahce played the Catalan club, which was in the 2002 Champions League.

Barca overcame the habitually intimidating atmosphere in the Suku Saracoglu stadium to embarrass Fenerbahce with a 3-0 victory on that occasion.

Fergie couldn't be happier

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson was delighted to see Cristiano Ronaldo take his goals tally for the season to 30 goals in 30 matches as Manchester United eased into the last eight of the Champions League.

He did not admit it, but the Scot was probably just as pleased to see Arsenal knock holders AC Milan out of the tournament, removing an opponent responsible for ending United's involvement in two out of the last three seasons.

Ronaldo's close-range strike just before half-time secured a 1-0 win over Lyon that sent United through 2-1 on aggregate.

It also represented a little bit of history with United's tenth straight Champions League victory at Old Trafford equalling the competition record for consecutive home wins set by Juventus in 1997.

"It probably was not Cristiano's best goal of the season, but it was one of the most important," Ferguson said.

"To score 30 goals is fantastic, but for a wide player to do that is even more special. No other player in the world could do that. We are only at the beginning of March, so we potentially have another 16-17 games ahead of us. He could really achieve a

good, high tally of goals."

Arsenal and United's wins created a realistic possibility that the quarterfinals could feature four English teams with Chelsea and Liverpool both well-placed to progress.

Ferguson insisted he would have no qualms about being drawn against familiar opponents.

"If the four of us get through, then we have a 40 per cent chance of getting an English team in the quarterfinals, but I don't think that matters because they are all difficult games at the quarterfinal stage anyway."

"Whatever happens, Old Trafford will be bulging and it will be a fantastic atmosphere and a fantastic game. We've got the players to handle it, though, and we have a great chance."

Lyon kept United sweating until the end on Tuesday night in a match of few chances.

Ronaldo's decisive strike came four minutes before the break after Wes Brown had overlapped on the right flank and driven in a low cross that generated panic in the Lyon defence.

After Anderson had stabbed the loose ball goalwards, Ronaldo pounced on it, made himself half a yard of space and fired past goalkeeper Gregory Coupet.

Lyon substitute Kader Keita came close to equalising with 17 minutes left. After a neat one-two with Karim Benzema, the winger beat Edwin van

der Sar at his near post only to see his low drive come back off the upright.

United squandered a couple of chances to kill the match but ultimately held out fairly comfortably.

"We should have made more of the chances and possession that we had, especially in the second-half when we should have scored four or five," admitted Ferguson.

"We made it difficult for ourselves and we were living on a knife-edge at times."

"We were strong defensively, though, and Lyon did not create many chances, but the important thing is that we are into the next round and that was the objective of the game."

"It is a real achievement, no question, to equal the record of Juventus by winning ten consecutive home games."

Lyon boss Alain Perrin said his side had been undone by the late equaliser they conceded in the first leg.

"When you look back in the cold light of the day, the tie was decided by Carlos Tevez's goal in the first game. It was such a late goal, it not only influenced the first game, it also proved crucial in the way that this one was played."

"We tried to cause United more problems, but we could not get out of our half often enough and I can't deny that United deserve to go through to the next round."

Two-match ban for Ramos

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos was handed just a two match ban despite one of the worst displays of abusing a referee in recent seasons, the Spanish football federation confirmed on Tuesday.

Ramos turned on referee Eduardo Iturralde Gonzalez after he received his second yellow card, and his marching orders, early in the second half during the Spanish league leaders' 3-2 win at Recreativo Huelva on Saturday.

"Shit, you are a shit, you've been shit," yelled the Spanish international defender and he had to be restrained by his team mates from physically threatening Iturralde Gonzalez.

However, Ramos and Real will consider they got off lightly.

Most Spanish commentators were expecting between a three and six match ban for Ramos's astonishing display which was caught on camera by TV broadcasters.

Ramos will miss Real's home match against Espanyol on Saturday and also the following week's trip to Deportivo La Coruna.

He is also suspended for Real's Champions League game against Roma on Wednesday.

The Spanish federation was clearly in a benevolent mood on Tuesday as they only banned Recreativo's Quique Alvarez for one match after his reckless tackle on Real's Arjen Robben.

Robben is out of action for at least a month with a severely sprained left ankle following Alvarez's wild challenge, for which he was sent off.

Cassano in trouble again

AFP, Rome

Sampdoria's troubled Italy international forward Antonio Cassano was banned for five matches on Tuesday for insulting and throwing his shirt at a referee.

Cassano was also fined 15,000 euros for his actions following his sending off in the home 2-2 draw against Torino on Sunday.

Dismissed in the 88th minute, Cassano reportedly shouted: "Look at me, I'm talking to you. I'll wait for you here," at referee Nicola Pierpaoli before also throwing his shirt at the official.

Cassano has since apologised for his actions and Sampdoria revealed they will not appeal against the punishments.

But the consequences could be more far-reaching for the 25-year-old who is on loan from Real Madrid.

He had been in fine form and many were clamouring for him to be called up to the Italy squad for the first time in more than a year.

But his latest outburst will have done little to encourage Italy coach Roberto Donadoni - who has already gone on record many times stating that it is Cassano's attitude and character rather than his ability preventing a call-up - from changing his mind about Italy's enfant terrible.

Cassano's tantrums became so frequent during his last two seasons with AS Roma, before moving to Real, that the Italian press invented a word playing on his name to refer to his tantrums: cassanata.

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.

'Ronaldo will stay'

Football

AFP, Milan

AC Milan owner and Italian politician Silvio Berlusconi insisted Tuesday that former three time world player of the year Ronaldo would stay with the European champions.

Ronaldo is currently side-lined with a ruptured knee tendon that is unlikely to see him return to competitive action much before 2009.

His contract at Milan expires in June and even the 31-year-old himself has admitted that his whole footballing career, let alone his stay at Milan, could be over.

But Berlusconi still wants to see the former Barcelona, Inter Milan and Real Madrid forward plying his trade at the San Siro next season.

"I think Ronaldo will stay with us, and if he wants to he can still be a major player," Berlusconi told Sky TV.

"He's already suffered this type of injury to his other knee and he knew how to come back."

"If he still has the desire, he is very young, he's 31. Here we have an example at our own club (Paolo Maldini who is 40 (actually 39))."

"And hence I think and hope he will want to continue and in that case, Milan would be delighted to keep him."

Making comparisons between the clean-living Maldini who has had few serious injuries during his career and the overweight Ronaldo who has already missed the best part of 20 months when he suffered the same injury to his other knee back in 1999 seems futile, though.

Even if Ronaldo wanted to come back, he will be at least 32 when he returns and will certainly be no fitter or slimmer than he is now - and already he has faced a barrage of criticism over the last couple of years for his inability to last a full match and for his expanding waistline.

Messi out for six weeks

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Argentina striker Lionel Messi has been ruled out of action for six weeks after tearing a muscle in his left leg during Tuesday night's Champions League victory over Scottish side Celtic.

Messi picked up the injury after 34 minutes of play as Barcelona won 1-0 to book their spot in the quarter-finals.

"We have to be very careful," Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard said in December after the player was sidelined for five weeks after tearing a muscle in his left thigh.

"(Messi) is a very explosive player and it's for this reason that he has muscular problems from time to time," said Rijkaard.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona star Lionel Messi lies on the pitch after being injured during their Champions League match against Celtic at the Nou Camp on Tuesday.