



Chelsea midfielder Michael Ballack (3rd from R) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Olympiakos during their Champions League match at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

## A changing of the guard

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal's young guard leads the challenge in a new European Champions League era after the early exit of the event's most successful clubs Real Madrid and AC Milan. British daily The Independent summed it Thursday with headlines "Milan left to mourn passing of its legends" and "Real Madrid left in ruins."

The change is personified by 20-year-old Cesc Fabregas who opened the scoring on Tuesday in the San Siro for Arsenal in a memorable 2-0 triumph against ageing Milan.

Just 24 hours later a determined Roma team knocked out Real in their very own Bernabeu, a clear indication that the Madrid club needs far more restructuring than no longer having its "galacticos" (Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo, David Beckham). While Real and Milan, who share 16 titles in the elite event, are confined to watching from the

sidelines, Arsenal are joined in the final eight by English rivals Manchester United and Chelsea, Roma, Barcelona as well as less famous Schalke 04 and Fenerbahce Istanbul.

England could in fact make up half of the eight quarterfinalists if Liverpool hang on to their 2-0 advantage next Tuesday at Inter Milan.

As a result it is no surprise that the Premier League sides are keen on avoiding each other when the draw is made next week Friday.

"They are all great sides who can pass the ball and mix and match it with any team in the world. Hopefully we can avoid them next time but if we are drawn together we have to beat them," said Chelsea captain John Terry.

Manchester lifted the trophy in 1999, Liverpool in 2005 and Arsenal made the 2006 final, while Chelsea finally hope to make the decisive step towards the decider this time around - having been beaten in the semis by Liverpool in 2005 and 2007.

"We have missed out in this competition on a few occasions and we want to make the final step

and get our hands on the trophy," said Terry.

But it has been Arsene Wenger's Arsenal who have received praise from friend and foe around the continent for their classy football.

"We have to be very proud of what we have done. We went over to our fans, and you could also see some of the Milan fans clapping. You could see they like this kind of football and that we played well."

"The Milan players all said: 'well done, we hope you win it now'. In Italy, they have a lot of respect," said Fabregas.

Arsenal's win came less than 12 months after the last true showing of class by Milan in a 3-0 semifinal demolition of Manchester United.

Milan will hope that Brazilian teenager Alexandre Pato becomes more consistent and World Footballer of the Year Kaka regains his form. But Paulo Maldini is in his farewell season, Filippo Inzaghi turns 35 this year, the 31-year-old Ronaldo is out until year's end and Alberto Gilardino has failed to live up to expectations.

New candidates for the

Rossoneri include Chelsea striker Didier Drogba, who turns 30 next week and Barca defender Gianluca Zambrotta, who is 31.

While Milan have to fight for a place in the Champions League next season given their current fifth position in the Serie A, Real should be back again next year and can salvage the season with back-to-back Spanish titles.

"This Saturday we have got a league match to think about. We have a five-point advantage and we have to keep working on that," said captain Raul Gonzalez.

Real have brought in new talent such as (now injured) Arjen Robben and fellow-Dutchman Royston Drenthe and Robinho is enjoying his best season at the club. But a fourth straight round of 16 exit shows that more fresh blood is needed for Bernd Schuster's team to do well in Europe, their ninth and so far last European title dating back six years to 2002.

"We wanted to gain some prestige in Europe, that was one of our objectives, but it's just not to be," lamented Raul.

## Stay put, says Houllier

AFP, Paris

National technical director Gerard Houllier on Thursday urged rising French stars Samir Nasri, Karim Benzema and Hatem Ben Arfa to resist the lure of foreign clubs.

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson is known to be interested in Lyon pair Benzema, 20, and Ben Arfa, 21, while Real Madrid have been linked with 20-year-old Marseille playmaker Nasri.

But former Liverpool and Lyon boss Houllier believes the trio, who will play in Euro 2008 this summer, would be better served by staying at home.

"For those three players, it would be an error to leave for abroad now," Houllier told the sports daily L'Equipe.

"Nasri, Ben Arfa and Benzema are being selected in the best French teams. They are therefore in the best conditions to develop their game, progress and make that step up."

"They must stay and get more confidence into their game, assert their qualities and achieve things."

"And leaving Ligue 1 shouldn't just be a question of money. You must be professional in your approach to leaving. Going abroad must be motivated by the desire to assert your potential, your play."

## Ban for Czech commentator

AFP, Prague

A Czech football commentator has been suspended for racist remarks made during a live commentary of an English Premier League match, the Czech daily Lidove Noviny reported on Thursday.

The commentator got into hot water when he corrected himself after mixing up two Chelsea players during Saturday's clash between Chelsea and West Ham.

"That was of course Essien and not Mikel, I got confused over their similar tanned colour," the commentator, who has not been named, explained.

Commercial broadcaster Prima TV said the commentator had been "banned from the microphone" for several weeks because of his remarks concerning Ghanaian midfielder Michael Essien and Nigerian teammate John Mikel Obi.

"He knew immediately after the broadcast that he had made a mistake," the broadcaster's spokesman told the paper, adding that the commentator was friends with black players and was not a racist. "The matter is now closed for us," the spokesman added.

## Benitez coos Torres praise

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez hailed Fernando Torres as "on fire" after the Spanish striker hit his second successive Anfield hat-trick to lift his club into fourth spot in the Premier League table.

Torres, who now has 24 goals since his 21-million-pound arrival before the start of this season, sentenced West Ham to their second 4-0 defeat in four days after a sizzling performance by Benitez's side.

The Liverpool manager believes Torres is in the best form of his life after scoring six times in his last two Anfield appearances.

"He is on fire at the moment," said Benitez, who revealed he was thinking of bringing Torres off moments before he clinched his third hat-trick for the club.

"I was actually talking with Peter Crouch and told him to be ready in a few minutes. Maybe Torres was inspired."

Benitez also let slip that he had almost decided against playing Torres after the player had complained of feeling unwell on the eve of the match.

"He had a small problem with sickness this morning," said the manager. "I thought about resting him but he was okay."

## Koller fined & suspended

AFP, Frankfurt

Nuremberg's Czech international striker Jan Koller has been suspended for one league match and fined 15,000 euros (22,800 US dollars) by the German Football Federation (DFB) on Wednesday for spitting.

The 34-year-old, who joined Nuremberg from Monaco in January, was found guilty of unsportsmanlike behaviour at the end of his side's 2-1 defeat at Hannover last Saturday.

Koller had been involved in an argument with Albanian Altin Lala and was seen to spit at the Hannover midfielder, an action which the referee did not see.

Both Nuremberg, who are third from bottom of the Bundesliga, and Koller accepted the decision, said the DFB.

Koller will miss his side's home game against Hamburg on Sunday.

## Press ridicule Real



AFP, Madrid

Spanish newspapers predictably went for the jugular on Thursday in the wake of Real Madrid crashing out of the Champions League at the last 16 stage for the fourth year in succession.

A truly tepid performance from the nine-time European champions in front of their home fans in the Santiago Bernabeu stadium led to a 2-1 defeat by AS Roma on Wednesday night, the Italians going through 4-2 on aggregate.

"Not anything in 90 minutes," ran the headline on the front page of Spanish sports daily Marca, the country's biggest selling paper, below a picture of Real's disconsolate goalkeeper Iker Casillas prostrate on the ground.

"Bad game, they deserved to lose," added fellow newspaper As, with Casillas this time being shown kicking away the ball in frustration.

Ironically, given the fact that he was awarded the dubious privilege of being the Spanish newspapers' poster boy on Thursday, Casillas was one of the few Real players to emerge with any credit from the game.

His efforts stopped a landslide in Roma's favour although he was partially at fault for Mirko Vucinic's injury-time winner on the night

when the tie had already slipped out of Real's grasp.

Malian midfielder Mahamadou Diarra and Real's veteran right back Michel Salgado bore the brunt of the blame in most commentaries, as well as Real's impotent forward line of Raul Gonzalez, Robinho and Julio Baptista.

Naturally, the Barcelona-based papers exulted in Madrid's misery, especially as their local heroes had gone through on Tuesday night at the expense of Celtic to be Spain's only representative in the quarterfinal draw on March 14.

"Another fiasco," reflected the daily newspaper Sport.

Real have now lost four of their last five outings in both the La Liga and the Champions League.

They were only spared further embarrassment by the mainstream newspapers, which would normally have been accorded them, by the fact that Spain is in the final stages of a general election campaign, which ends with voting on Sunday.

Media coverage in Spain on Thursday concentrated mainly on the game itself but the knives now are clearly being sharpened for attacks on Real coach Bernd Schuster, whose future is already starting to be questioned.

Schuster's relations with the media here have always been frosty but they have descended to a new low in the last few weeks despite the

Spanish giants still being on top of La Liga with a five-point advantage.

As current England coach Fabio Capello can testify, just winning a domestic title is not necessarily enough to satisfy Real's ambitious president Ramon Calderon or guarantee a second season at the helm.

Schuster petulantly walked out of a press conference after Real's 3-2 win at Recreativo Huelva last Saturday after refusing to answer initial questions about some controversial refereeing.

He was loudly barracked by journalists as he left the room.

"I do not regret anything at all. I am pleased with what I did because the people who asked me things deserved it," reflected Schuster on Tuesday.

"If I had to leave because if nobody wants to talk about football then it is better if I go rather than waste my time."

"If it happens again, I will react in the same way because I think that there are times when not enough respect is shown. People forget that they were speaking to the coach of Real Madrid."

"It does not bother me what they call me, but I am important, very important, and at times they forget their manners," added the German who, despite his bluster, could soon be called the former Real Madrid coach.

## Slomka thanks Neuer



AFP, Porto

Goalkeeper Manuel Neuer put Schalke 04 into the Champions League quarterfinals for the first time in their history with a stunning display to relieve the pressure on under-fire coach Mirko Slomka.

The 21-year-old produced several world-class saves against ten-man FC Porto in Portugal in normal time, but saved his best until last to save three of Porto's spot-kicks to seal the 4-1 penalty shoot-out win.

Having lost their last three Bundesliga matches, Royal Blues' coach Slomka was under intense pressure going into the second-leg at the Estadio do Dragao despite his side holding a 1-0 lead from the first leg a fortnight ago.

Although Porto striker Lisandro Lopez scored in the 86th minute to level the scores 1-1 on aggregate,

Under-21 international Neuer pulled off a string of outstanding saves which ultimately put his side through to the last eight.

Germany midfielder Jermaine Jones hit the crucial penalty, but Neuer had been Schalke's outstanding man-of-the-match against the 22-times Portuguese champions who played with 10 men when Fucile was dismissed in the 82nd minute.

"We had to fight until the end," said a relieved Slomka.

"We only had the chance because of Manuel Neuer's performance, not only during the shoot-out, but he made several outstanding saves during the game."

"FC Porto dominated the game, but we held the lead until the 86th minute."

"We kept our cool and deserved to go through."

Neuer became the Gelsenkirchen side's hero of the hour - emulating

Schalke's then 'keeper Jens Lehmann when he starred in the UEFA Cup final 1997 second leg at the San Siro to see Schalke win their only European title.

"I was there when Schalke won the cup in 1997 and 15 of my friends were here tonight to watch this and it was a great feeling to be involved in a game like this," said the beaming 21-year-old on the final whistle.

"It was hard to keep my concentration out there."

"It's great for the team and it has been hard after losing our last three league games, we focused on the football and ignored the discussions about the coach."

"It is super to be in the quarterfinal."

"Even if I did not show it, I was very nervous before the shoot-out."

"For the team, I hope that this victory will enable us move onto better things and relieve the pressure of the last few difficult days."



Schalke goalkeeper Manuel Neuer makes a save during the penalty shoot-out against Porto in their Champions League match at the Dragao Stadium on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

## Torres on the treble

AFP, Liverpool

Fernando Torres hit his third hat-trick for Liverpool, and his second in successive Anfield appearances, as Rafael Benitez's side moved back up to fourth in the Premier League table after demolishing West Ham 4-0 on Wednesday.

Benitez's men leapfrogged over neighbours Everton on goal difference after running riot to leave their favourites in the race for the fourth and final Champions League berth with 10 games of the Premier League season left.

Steven Gerrard capped an easy victory with a typical long-range finish in front of The Kop, but the night belonged to Torres.

All three goals showcased Torres's astonishing, lethal touch in front of goal, an inherent awareness of the goalscorer's art, his raw pace and power.

Given the stop-start nature of his debut season in English football

and the rollercoaster nature of his team's campaign to date, a return of 24 goals by this stage of the season borders on the amazing.

This was another potential minefield for a Liverpool team whose season has been littered with unexpected and frustrating setbacks against sides anchored in mid-table or below.

Birmingham, Wigan, Middlesbrough and Reading have shown up Benitez's expensively assembled squad while the stoppage time penalty defeat at Upton Park at the end of January made this something of a revenge mission as Liverpool embarked on the first of three successive Premier League home games before going to Manchester United on March 23.

Benitez's side began the game in determined fashion, looking brisk and business-like and attacking in numbers with width and penetration.

Yet the only time their dominance was rewarded came in the eighth minute. Dirk Kuyt's cross was low and hard, but Torres reacted

before Anton Ferdinand could make a clearance and drilled the ball past Robert Green from 12-yards.

At that stage Liverpool's slick play was befitting a side who had experienced just one league defeat on their own ground in over a year and a defence missing Fabio Aurelio and Sami Hyypia looked to be cruising to a 13th Premier League clean sheet.

The omission of Aurelio, in particular, was a surprise given that the Brazilian had scored his first goal for the club in his previous appearance 80 hours earlier yet John Arne Riise marked his first start since turning in an inept display in the FA Cup humiliation to Barnsley with a solid performance while Martin Skrtel's improvement continued.

West Ham were disappointing to say the least. It is 45 years since West Ham last triumphed in a league game at Anfield and Alan Curbishley's team rarely looked like ending that sorry sequence although Liverpool were fortunate to escape unscathed when Luis Boa Morte

rounded keeper Jose Reina only for Alvaro Arbeloa to cut out the danger.

Torres killed the game as a contest shortly after the interval when he punished sloppy West Ham defending with a simple header from Kuyt's cross, who seems to have set up as many goals as Torres has scored.

Curbishley reacted by introducing Jonathan Spector but he was clearly not the substitute West Ham's travelling fans wanted to see at this stage. "Boring, boring West Ham," they sang.

Torres was looking more dangerous as the game wore on and the Spaniard was denied his third hat-trick for the club in the 66th minute. A cross by Gerrard found him lurking at the far post and his diving header hit a post before rebounding to safety.

He need not have worried. Just 14 minutes later he was celebrating his second successive Anfield hat-trick when he showed terrific composure in front of the Kop before Gerrard completed West Ham's second 4-0 drubbing inside a week with a trademark finish from 25-yards.



Liverpool star Fernando Torres (C) scores past West Ham United goalkeeper Robert Green (R) during their Premiership match at Anfield on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP



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