

Penalty decision puzzles Wenger

REUTERS, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said he could not understand why Dutch referee Pieter Vink did not award his side a penalty against Liverpool in Wednesday's 1-1 draw in the Champions League quarterfinals.

Wenger said Arsenal should have had a penalty early in the second half at the Emirates Stadium when Liverpool's Dirk Kuyt appeared to pull Aleksandr Hleb back by his shoulder.

"It is difficult to understand why he did not give a penalty," Wenger told a news conference after the first leg tie. "It definitely looked 100 per cent like a penalty to me."

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez said the television replays he had been shown were inconclusive.

"It was difficult to tell," he said. "You don't get penalties like that in England, it is not very clear."

Benitez added that the timing of Dirk Kuyt's first half equaliser was crucial, coming just three minutes after Emmanuel Adebayor rose unchallenged to head Arsenal into the lead.

"If you concede a goal against Arsenal it is really important to score as soon as you can," he said.

"The away goal was very important for us. We are in a good position with the home game to come at Anfield in front of our own supporters."

"However it will still be very difficult for us. Arsenal are a very good team and it is going to be very tough."

Kuyt, who was Benitez's man of the match, said the second leg atmosphere at Anfield will be a big advantage for the 2005 champions.

"Everybody knows what European nights are like at Anfield. We have shown that we are really good in that situation. Arsenal are a great side but we have shown we can do special things at Anfield," the Dutch striker told Sky Sports.

Wenger, whose team now need to overcome Liverpool's away goal when they meet at Anfield next week, was baffled that his side had failed to win.

"In a game like that you do not create 20 chances you create four or five and we did. But we also had so much possession it was frightening to just finish 1-1. Their goal was like a thunderstorm that went through the side. It was a big blow for us."

"They defended very well, very deep, but we are in a battle of survival with them, and the best team will win."

Jarolim gets 4-match ban

AFP, Frankfurt

Czech international David Jarolim was sent slapping with a four-match ban by Bundesliga disciplinary chiefs after he was ruled to have squeezed an opponent's genitals.

The decision follows Hamburg's 1-1 draw with Bielefeld last Saturday, during which the Hamburg midfielder was re-accused.

The 28-year-old Czech reacted physically to being verbally abused by two Bielefeld players who had accused him of taking a dive to win a free kick. Jarolim said he had been insulted by Markus Schuler before striking out.

The Czech is linked with Hamburg till 2010 but has now threatened to leave Germany, claiming he is the victim of a hate campaign.

Diane earns PSG win

AFP, Paris

A goal by second-half substitute Aruna Diane gave Paris Saint Germain a 1-0 win over fellow strugglers Strasbourg here on Wednesday and was enough to see the League Cup winners move out of the bottom three.

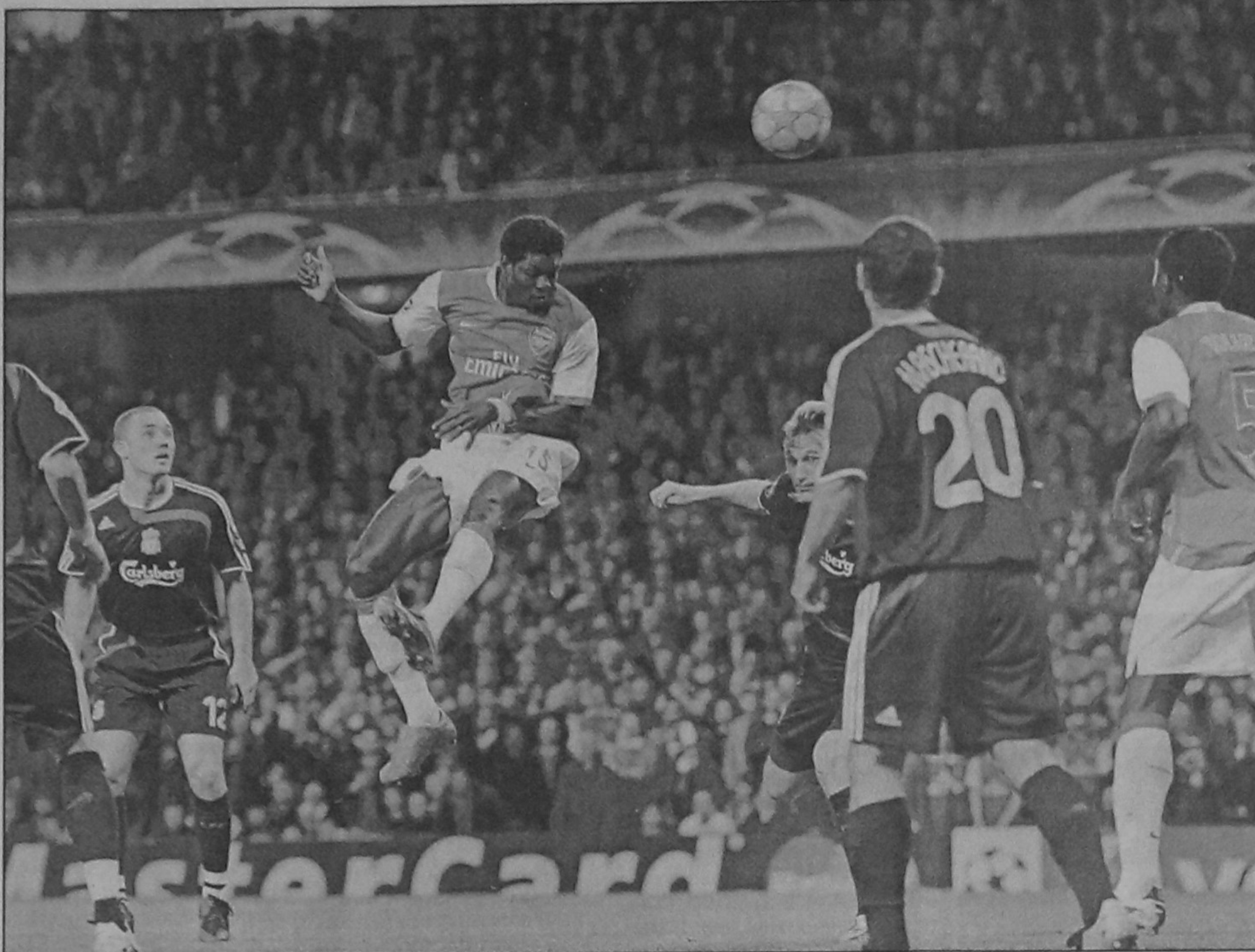
The Ivory Coast international, who had been applauded on to the pitch whereas the man he replaced Peggy Luyindula was booed off, struck 18 minutes from time shooting home from fellow substitute Bernard Mendy's cross to give the 1996 Cup Winners Cup winners their first league victory since January 23.

The three points saw PSG rise to fourth from bottom, equal on points with Strasbourg and a point ahead of the team they beat in last Saturday's League Cup final Lens, who have a game in hand.

PSG could claim justice was done as they had a goal ruled out harshly for offside in the first-half and had valid appeals for a penalty for handball by Pascal Johansen also turned down later in the first period.

Strasbourg, who have never won away against PSG and last garnered a point against their opponents in Paris 10 years ago, did have their moments in the first-half with Johansen forcing France international goalkeeper Mickael Landreau into a smart save while the error prone guardian produced a first class save from Kevin Gameiro's header in the 28th minute.

Both sides face crucial matches again this weekend with PSG travelling to high-flying Nancy, who are fighting it out with Bordeaux and Marseille for Champions League places, while Strasbourg host Monaco in what is a real relegation six-pointer.



Arsenal striker Emmanuel Adebayor (C) goes airborne to head in the opening goal against Liverpool during their Champions League quarterfinal encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

Fenerbahce stun Chelsea

AFP, Istanbul

Fenerbahce midfielder Deivid went from zero to hero as his side came from behind to beat Chelsea 2-1 in Wednesday's Champions League quarterfinal, first leg.

Deivid had looked like the villain of the piece when he gifted Chelsea the lead with an early own goal at the Sukru Saracoglu stadium.

But the Turkish champions snatched an equaliser through Colin Kazim-Kazim midway through the second half and Deivid made amends for his earlier blunder with a breath-taking winner nine minutes from full-time.

How Chelsea left Istanbul empty-handed only they will know. They were in complete control and should have been further in front before Kazim-Kazim struck.

Avram Grant's side will still believe they can overturn the deficit in the return at Stamford Bridge next week but the task is far harder than it should have been.

Grant told Sky TV afterwards: "This is football. A game supposed to be 3-0 or 4-0 for us ends 2-1 against us."

"We dominated the game, we created chances. At 1-1 Michael Ballack was in front of the goal. But this is football. Sometimes you don't pay attention, you sleep and we lost the game."

"Normally, it's a good result to lose 2-1 away from home but because we played the better football it's disappointing. Now they are coming to our home, we need to win the game."

His Fenerbahce counterpart Zico said that he had turned things round at half-time.

"At the break we told the players that we had to take risks, that without taking them we would end up with nothing," said the former

Brazil playing legend.

"If we show the same attitude in England then I believe that we will get the result that sends us through to the semifinals."

Fenerbahce had never been this far in the competition before and Chelsea's visit was billed as the biggest match in their history.

As the club's volatile fans crammed into the stadium hours before kick-off, whipping the atmosphere to fever pitch, it was easy to see why they were unbeaten in the last 11 home European matches.

In such a seething cauldron of noise, Grant needed Chelsea's stars to show their greater experience at this re-accused level.

Every touch by a Chelsea player was greeted with an ear-splitting barrage of whistles, but Grant's side have survived equally hostile environments many times before.

They made an assured start and scored with their first serious attack in the 13th minute.

Frank Lampard cleverly dummed Ashley Cole's pass, allowing Florent Malouda to find space on the left side of the penalty area.

He drove a low cross towards Didier Drogba and Deivid tried to clear but only succeeded in deflecting the ball past by wrong-footed keeper Volkan Demirel into his own net.

Confidence now flowing, Michael Essien almost doubled Chelsea's lead moments later with a swerving 25-yard strike that skimmed the crossbar.

Drogba's muscular presence unsettled Zico's team time and again. He easily turned Gokcek Vederson to fire in a powerful shot that Demirel pushed away.

With the hosts in disarray, Michael Ballack had yards of space to produce a majestic defence-splitting pass to Drogba. The Ivorian striker was only denied a goal by Demirel's charge from his

line to hack clear.

The hosts could only improve after half-time and finally put together an attack of note when Alex glanced a header wide from Onder Turaci's cross.

Kazim-Kazim was an unlikely saviour for Fenerbahce. He was called Kazim-Richards when he was bought by Brighton with a transfer fee donated by a fan who won a League Cup competition but changed his name after moving to Turkey last year.

He certainly added some fizz to his side and Mateja Kezman responded with an overhead kick which Carlo Cudicini blocked at this near post.

Ballack's long-range effort drew a fine save from Demirel as Chelsea responded. Then out of nowhere Fenerbahce equalised as Grant's side were caught sleeping at the back in the 65th minute.

Mehmet Aurelio's pass cut out Chelsea's centre-backs and Kazim-Kazim timed his run perfectly before lashing it past Cudicini.

"I can't believe it!" beamed Kazim-Kazim.

"To score the goal with my left foot for the first time ever, and against Chelsea is unbelievable!"

Ballack should have restored Chelsea's lead moments later but Demirel saved well to frustrate the German again. How Chelsea would rue that miss.

There seemed little danger when Deivid took possession 30 yards out in the 81st minute. He quickly disproved that theory with a stunning strike that arched into the top corner.

Ballack said afterwards: "We are very disappointed. We had a big chance to win here. Even after the 1-1 we had two good chances, me and Didier (Drogba) to score the second goal."

"But we didn't concentrate enough. We have to go again next week. It was our fault, the game was in our hands. We gave it away."

Vidic blow for MU

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United have lost the services of Serbian centreback Nemanja Vidic for up to three weeks following the knee injury he suffered during Tuesday's Champions League win over Roma.

Vidic limped off after falling awkwardly in the Stadio Olimpico but a scan has assuaged fears of ligament damage.

"There is no major damage to the left knee, and he will be out for two to three weeks," a club spokesman said on Thursday.

Vidic has been a cornerstone of United's superb form this season, his centreback pairing with Rio Ferdinand helping to make their defence comfortably the meanest in the English Premier League.

United will defend a 2-0 quarter-final first leg lead against Roma at Old Trafford on Tuesday and the English champions are widely expected to advance to a semi-final meeting with Barcelona.

Vidic should be back for the first leg of the semi at the end of the month but will miss Sunday's league trip to Middlesbrough, the Roma match and the April 13 clash with Arsenal at Old Trafford.

The earliest he could return on the current prognosis for his recovery would be for a league match against Blackburn at Ewood Park on April 19.

Vidic has proved to be one of the best signings of Sir Alex Ferguson's two decades at Old Trafford. His form since he arrived at United in January 2006 earned him a new deal at the end of last year and the 26-year-old is now under contract with the club until 2012.

In his absence, Ferguson has the option of giving young Spanish defender Gerard Pique more first-team experience or switching Wes Brown, who has operated at right back for most of this season, into the centre alongside Ferdinand.

FA punishes Mascherano

REUTERS, London

Liverpool midfielder Javier Mascherano was given an additional two-match ban and fined 15,000 pounds (\$29,800) by the English FA on Thursday following his sending off against Manchester United on March 23.

The FA announced the punishment on its Web site (www.thefa.com), saying the ban would come into immediate effect.

The 23-year-old Argentine admitted a charge of improper conduct at an FA disciplinary hearing on Thursday and will now miss Liverpool's next two Premier League matches against Arsenal and Blackburn Rovers.

He had already been suspended for the Merseyside derby against Everton last weekend but played against Arsenal in the Champions League on Wednesday and will be eligible for the return leg of the quarterfinal at Anfield next Tuesday.

Mascherano was sent off during the 3-0 defeat at Old Trafford and reacted badly to the red card, having to be ushered off by Liverpool staff and team mates.

He was dismissed by referee Steve Bennett just before halftime. Already booked for a foul, he was shown a second yellow card in the 44th minute after running 20 metres to the referee and questioning the booking of Fernando Torres.

L'pool frustrate Gunners

AFP, London

A moment of genius from Steven Gerrard gave Liverpool the narrowest of advantages in their Champions League quarterfinal tie with Arsenal after a pulsating first leg at the Emirates finished 1-1 on Wednesday.

Headed into the lead by Emmanuel Adebayor mid-way through the first half, Arsenal had the chances to have won here and will long complain after being denied what appeared to be a clear penalty 20 minutes from the end of a second half they overwhelmingly dominated.

But it will be Liverpool who kick off at Anfield next week as marginal favourites to progress to the last four after Gerrard brilliantly set up Dirk Kuyt for the precious away goal that levelled the match three minutes after Adebayor's strike.

"That was really important," said Kuyt, referring to his goal.

"We had a few other little chances and were a bit unlucky not to get another goal," added Kuyt, who also scored for Liverpool in the previous Champions League round against Inter Milan.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was left understandably frustrated.

"I feel we are not paid for what we produced tonight and to finish a game like that 1-1 is disappointing," said the Frenchman, who is yet to win the Champions League.

"But we produced the performance we wanted and we had the chances to win the game. Liverpool created very little tonight and the whole second half was played in their half."

He was left seething too by the decision not to award the penalty.

"It was a blatant penalty just under the eyes of the referee. That is a few times that has happened to us now and it is very difficult to accept."

However, Kuyt insisted that he had not deliberately fouled Hleb.

"It is a split second thing and you have to decide, but I didn't pull his shirt or anything. It was close but it wasn't a penalty."

Wenger's Liverpool counterpart Rafael Benitez praised his side's hardworking performance but summed up in one sentence what would be the crucial factor.

"The away goal is crucial in Europe," said Benitez, who has reserved his best results for European competition.

Opening skirmishes that were far less guarded than anyone had anticipated generated a couple of minor alarms in both goalmouths before Mathieu Flamini produced the match's first moment of real quality.

From the centre circle, the Frenchman's forward chip fell invitingly for Robin van Persie in between Liverpool's back-peddalling centrebacks and Jose Reina but the Dutchman's attempt at a volleyed finish comfortably cleared the Liverpool goalkeeper's bar.

Reina was forced to make a save from van Persie a minute later, after neat build-up work by Cesc Fabregas and Adebayor, and it was from the resulting corner that Arsenal claimed the lead.

After a quick tap to Fabregas, van Persie's delivery was a straight-forward inswinger to the edge of the six-yard box. But with Reina rooted to his line and the Liverpool centrebacks missing in action, Adebayor was able to nod his side into the lead.

Sammy Hyslop in particular will

not enjoy watching the replays. The Finn was conspicuously static as Adebayor rose unchallenged in front of him.

The home side's celebrations were quickly curtailed however by the brilliant improvisation of Gerrard at the end of a counter-attack that the Liverpool captain had launched himself.

The move appeared to be running out of steam when Ryan Babel over-ran the ball on the left of the box. Fortunately for Liverpool, it tumbled into the path of Fernando Torres and the Spaniard's lay-off gave Gerrard the platform to work his magic through the inside-left channel.

Emmanuel Ebooue bought a dummy, Kolo Toure was side-stepped and Flamini was left trailing before the Liverpool captain cut the ball back across goal for Kuyt to bundle the equaliser over the line from close range.

Manuel Almunia did well to deny Kuyt a second goal in the opening minute of the second half after the Dutchman had latched on to a Martin Skrtel knockdown.

Understandably wary of travelling to Anfield without a lead, Arsenal began to turn the screw and, after Skrtel had cleared Adebayor's hooked shot off the line, the Londoners were unfortunate not to be awarded a penalty when Hleb appeared to be man-handled by Kuyt as he wriggled into space deep in the box.

Arsenal's frustration was understandable but it was only to be exacerbated as Fabregas fired a 20-yard effort then prodded an Adebayor cross goalwards only to see his own teammate, substitute Nicklas Bendtner, block the ball on the Liverpool goal line in a near comical moment that pretty much summed up the Gunner's night.

EURO 2008 BRIEFS

AFP, Vienna

The 2008 European football championship in brief:

FOOTBALL AND CRYSTAL BALLS

The winners of Euro 2008 are already known, two months before the first kick-off - according to one Austrian fortune teller. Rosalinde Haller, who accurately predicted the 2004 Asian tsunami, says that Italy will win this year's trophy after defeating Portugal in the final. Croatia and France will reach the semis, while Germany will go out in the quarters. But these results could still change "with a little physical and mental training," according to Haller. Don't place your bets yet!

SAVED BY THE BELL

No need for Salzburg schoolchildren to skive off school during the Euro. The city plans to let them out at noon on match days so they can avoid the crowds of supporters heading for the stadium... even though the games will only start at 8:45 pm.

CRYING "FOUL" IN EVERY LANGUAGE

For those who have always wanted to say "penalty shoot-out" in Russian or who wish to demonstrate their knowledge of the offside rule in Portuguese, here is the answer. Learning centres in Vienna and Tirol are offering special language

courses dedicated to the beautiful game. Students will also learn how to answer questions like "where is the stadium?"

SPEAKING OF WHICH...

Austrian Rail (OeBB) has roped in language teachers in the four host cities - Vienna, Salzburg, Innsbruck and Klagenfurt - to help welcome foreign fans when they step off the train and prevent them getting lost on the way to the stadium. "Because only a well-orientated fan is a safe fan," says OeBB.

VOLUNTEERS' FRENZY

Over 17,600 people from 150 countries, even as far as Brazil, Senegal and Togo, have applied to work as volunteers during the championships. The lucky 5,000 will be contacted in mid-April after a months-long selection process including 4,000 hours of interviews.

CULTIVATING SPORT

Besides hosting the final, Vienna will also offer over 100 cultural events during the month of June, including musical and dance performances. Among them, concerts by Elton John, opera stars Anna Netrebko and Placido Domingo... and a more football-orientated concert of whistles conducted by Viennese artist Hermann Nitsch.

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

Austria's four host cities will have a special fan radio for the duration of the competition. "Soundtrack to the Euro" will debut in May and broadcast "the greatest football songs mixed with the coolest club hits" as well as news about the championship. Co-host Switzerland, meanwhile, will have its own radio: "The Rhythm of Football."

BEHIND BARS 1

In case they run out of prison cells, Salzburg police will have three containers at their disposal to hold potentially disruptive fans. The containers will be set up near the stadium, the central police station and the airport. Perhaps to ship fans directly back to their country?

BEHIND BARS 2

Bars in Salzburg will be allowed exceptionally to stay open until 4:00 am on match days, but only when the city is hosting a game or when Austria is playing. Residents of Mozart's hometown will also be able to enjoy a later Kruegerl (half litre) of beer during the semifinals and the final. Cheers!

GOOD BUSINESS

With some 3 million visitors expected to descend on Austria during Euro 2008, local breweries are hoping to see their profits rise 10-20 per cent in May and June. And one brewer seems to have found a way around the strict licensing rules by offering a "2008 Euro" beer. Unless customers mistake the name for the price of a pint.

'Leave him alone'

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard says the 28-year-old FIFA former World Player of the Year has been absent because of muscle "discomforts" in his right leg.

But a report from the Catalan club's medical staff, published on March 17 on Barcelona's web site, said scans found he had "neither a tendon nor muscular injury."

The injury problem has fuelled media speculation of a rift between Ronaldinho - whose performances have been criticised as never before this season - and the club with reports suggesting Barcelona will offload the Brazilian player at the end of the season.

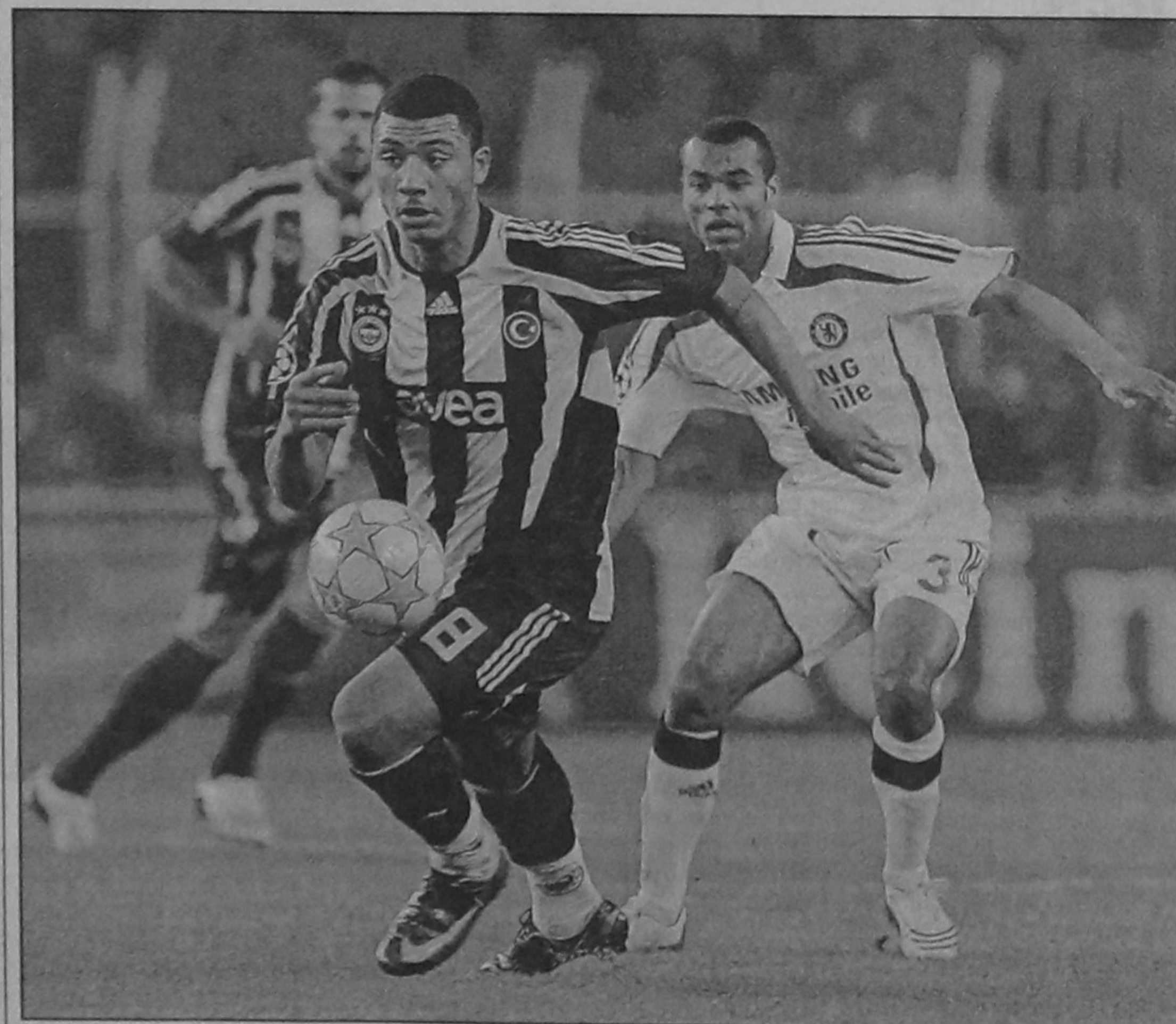
Last month Barcelona Joan Laporta moved to quash the media speculation, telling reporters there was no "divorce" between the club and the player. Ronaldinho on Wednesday trained normally with the rest of his teammates.

"If he says that he is hurt, then he is hurt. There are injuries that can't be seen in a scan."

"Every day he is here working on his recovery and we can't ask anything more of him," Eto'o added.



Barcelona star Ronaldinho spins the ball on his finger during a training session at the Nou Camp on Wednesday.



Fenerbahce's Kazim Kazim (L), who scored the equalising goal, goes past Chelsea fullback Ashley Cole during their Champions League quarterfinal tie in Istanbul on Wednesday.