



Chelsea's German midfielder Michael Ballack (2nd from L) glances a header to score the opening goal against Fenerbahce during their Champions League quarterfinal at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday.

Blues, Reds to collide again

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, London

Michael Ballack put Chelsea on course for another Champions League semifinal collision with Liverpool as his goal set up a 2-0 win over Fenerbahce in Tuesday's quarterfinal, second leg.

Ballack's first half header was followed by a late Frank Lampard strike at Stamford Bridge to send Avram Grant's side through 3-2 on aggregate.

Chelsea had to survive a nervous finale which saw substitute goalkeeper Hilario make two superb saves to keep his side ahead, but now they will face European nemesis Liverpool in the semifinals for the third time in four seasons.

Rafa Benitez's team have got the better of the Blues in both previous encounters, with bitter memories of Luis Garcia's 'phantom' goal at Anfield in 2005 still a constant source of anguish at the Bridge.

Last season's penalty shoot-out exit on Merseyside was equally painful but Chelsea at least have the advantage of hosting the second leg this time.

ond leg this time.

"We've been there, we know everything about them and they know everything about us. It's amazing how often we've been in this situation," Lampard said.

"It's going to be a tough game, it's important to show the same concentration as we did here."

Fenerbahce coach Zico added: "Obviously we are not happy with the result. After going 1-0 down we tried to get the goal back and we are sorry we couldn't finish this run."

"We are disappointed we can't go any further but the players showed discipline, enthusiasm and played as well as possible. They showed great character."

After their second half meltdown in Istanbul last week, Chelsea's hopes of reaching the last four were hanging by a thread.

Grant had insisted he wasn't having sleepless nights worrying about the match, but he would hardly have been reassured by Chelsea's record of only overturning a first leg deficit once in the Champions League.

Chelsea left Turkey nursing a sense of injustice at losing after dominating for so long and it was clear they were determined to put the record straight.

Grant's side tore into Fenerbahce, taking the lead in only the fourth minute. Lampard's free-kick was curled into the near post and Ballack cleverly found space to glance his header past Volkan Demirel.

That changed the complexion of the tie. Now Fenerbahce had to score but it was Chelsea who were close to a second goal five minutes later.

Salomon Kalou surged to the touchline and whipped a low cross to Joe Cole, who flicked the ball against a post from close range. Then Ballack forced a sprawling save from Demirel.

This was Chelsea at their imposing best. Fenerbahce weren't allowed a second on the ball and Didier Drogba took advantage of Kalou's pressing to curl his shot just over.

But Grant's perfect start took a turn for the worse when Italian keeper Cudicini was forced off with a hamstring injury.

His replacement Hilario hadn't played since January so it was no surprise to see Semih Senturk try his luck with a long-range effort that skimmed wide.

Chelsea's back-four were suddenly unsettled. When they left

Lugano unmarked at Alex's free-kick the defender should have scored, but his header didn't even test Hilario.

Grant was able to restore Chelsea's composure at half-time and Drogba tested Demirel with a lunging volley soon after the break.

The Turkish champions found it hard to add a cutting edge to their unstinting work-rate, so Zico sent on former Chelsea forward Mateja Kezman.

Drogba forced a fine stop from Demirel with a free-kick midway through the half, but Fenerbahce were about to throw caution to the wind.

Hilario has been a fringe figure during his time at Chelsea, but they will forever be in the Portuguese's debt for two stunning saves in the last 10 minutes.

First he stretched to keep out Gokhan Gonul's volley, then leapt to his right to deny Colin Kazim-Kazim.

Essien got a booking that will rule him out of the semifinal first leg. But as Fenerbahce pressed desperately Lampard put the result beyond doubt with a close-range strike in the 87th minute from Essien's cross.

Brazil close gap on Argentina

REUTERS, Zurich

Argentina remained top of the FIFA world rankings published on Wednesday but with just 10 points separating them from South American rivals Brazil.

A 2-0 friendly win over Egypt last month helped Argentina hold top spot for the seventh consecutive month but Brazil narrowed the gap with a 1-0 victory in their friendly game against higher-ranked Sweden.

There was no movement among the top seven sides but Greece secured their highest ranking, climbing above Portugal into eighth place after beating Luiz Felipe Scolari's men 2-1 last month.

FIFA RANKINGS

(previous positions in brackets):

1. (1) Argentina
2. (2) Brazil
3. (3) Italy
4. (4) Spain
5. (5) Germany
6. (6) Czech Republic
7. (7) France
8. (10) Greece
9. (8) Portugal
10. (9) Netherlands
11. (11) England
12. (13) Romania
13. (12) Croatia
14. (15) Ghana
15. (14) Scotland
16. (16) Mexico
17. (17) Cameroon
18. (19) Bulgaria
19. (20) Colombia
20. (22) Israel

Jankulovski considers int'l future

AFP, Prague

Czech and AC Milan defender Marek Jankulovski has said he could quit the national squad to concentrate on his club commitments after the upcoming Euro-2008 championships.

"I am considering this idea...that after the championships I finish with the national team and devote myself just to my appearances at AC Milan."

"It is perhaps necessary to give priority to the youngsters," Jankulovski told Wednesday's edition of the daily, 'Sport'.

No final decision has been taken, he added.

The 31-year old said he felt the need to slow down, adding that he had knee problems and wanted to spend more time with his family.

The announced retirement of Czech manager Karel Bruckner after the championships was also a factor, he said.

The defender made his debut with the national team in 2000 and has represented his country 62 times.

The Czechs will face Euro 2008 co-hosts Switzerland in Basel on June 7 before Portugal on June 11 in Geneva and then Turkey on June 15, also in Geneva, to complete their Group A schedule.

Scolari turns down Mexico

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has turned down an approach to take over as national coach of Mexico, at least until after Euro 2008.

The Brazilian stated here Wednesday: "I received with pleasure an invitation from Mexico but for the moment my main objective is to do a good job with Portugal and take them as far as possible in Euro 2008."

Scolari, in comments reported by the Lusa news agency, added: "I have a deal with Portugal but I hope I'll be in a position to take a decision on my future soon."

Scolari took over as Portugal coach in January 2003 after leading Brazil to a fifth World Cup title in 2002.

Venus set to take a break

INTERNET, undated

Venus Williams refused to elaborate on her reasons for pulling out of the Amelia Island Championships.

After losing in the Sony Ericsson Open quarterfinals last week, she announced that she was withdrawing from the Amelia Island tournament for medical reasons.

"I've been having some issues that I need to resolve, so I'm working on that at the moment," Williams, the world number six and a six-times Grand Slam winner, said at Amelia Island.

"I'm aiming to be back playing as soon as possible. I love this tournament and it's important for me to come and say hi to the fans and be a part of it."

"I'm not going to get any further into it. I love the sport and want to be back as soon as possible. I'm going to evaluate things week by week. Of course I want to be in Europe, I don't want to be at home watching on TV."

Payback time for Bayern

AFP, Paris



Spanish side Getafe better be prepared for Thursday's UEFA Cup quarterfinal second leg match as German giants Bayern Munich are 'angry' according to their coach Ottmar Hitzfeld.

The Germans travel to Spain in shaky shape as they were held 1-1 in Munich last Thursday, a late goal by Romanian substitute Cosmin Contra giving the Spaniards a slight advantage.

However Bayern are in much better shape than their compatriots Bayer Leverkusen, who travel more in hope of a miracle than anything else as they trail Russian champions Zenit St Petersburg 4-1.

Their woes were added to at the weekend when they lost 2-1 to Borussia Dortmund with two late goals further diluting their chances of making the Champions League next season.

The other two ties sees Scottish mammoths Rangers travel to Lisbon tied at 0-0 while Fiorentina, the only surviving Italian club,

must overcome Dutch side PSV Eindhoven in the Netherlands with the clash delicately poised at 1-1.

Hitzfeld, though, is on the warpath and is desperate to round off his final season with Bayern by landing both the German title and the UEFA Cup, a trophy he has never won as a coach.

"It's (the draw with Getafe) also thrown a damper on our morale," Hitzfeld said on the club's website, "but it's no reason to hang our heads."

"We'll be a little angry when we go there. We'll be thinking it's time to show them who's boss."

Getafe have rewarded their goalscoring hero from last week with an extended one year contract and he is looking forward to tackling Bayern again, though, he may only be used as a substitute again.

"I don't mind a bit, I am just enjoying myself at the club and it will be great to edge closer to some silverware if we beat Bayern," said Contra.

"It is a tough task but we are in a great frame of mind," added the 32-year-old veteran.

Rangers chances of making the last four have been boosted by the news that Sporting Lisbon's Brazilian central defender Anderson Polga has been ruled out with suspected pulled thigh muscle, which he suffered at the weekend.

The Scottish side, though, are hoping that their outstanding Spanish defender Carlos Cuellar will have fully recovered from a virus while striker Daniel Cousin will be aching to get on the pitch after making a full recovery from a broken jaw.

Fiorentina may have their eyes on earning a Champions League place next season, but the 'Viola' are also dead keen to win the minor European competition as midfielder Marco Donadel made clear.

"It is obviously important to make the Champions League for next season, but for the fans and us it would be a massive achievement to win the UEFA Cup. Beating PSV is going to be hard but then there are no easy games at this level," he said.

FIXTURES

Thursday

UEFA Cup quarterfinal, 2nd leg (1845GMT unless stated): Zenit St-Petersburg (RUS) v Bayer Leverkusen (GER) (1630GMT) Sporting Lisbon (POR) v Rangers (SCO), Getafe (ESP) v Bayern Munich (GER), PSV Eindhoven (NER) v Fiorentina (ITA)

Wenger blames referee

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

REUTERS, Liverpool

Arsene Wenger blamed the referee and his own defence for Arsenal's 4-2 defeat in an astonishing Champions League quarterfinal at Liverpool on Tuesday.

The Gunners were seven minutes away from advancing to the semifinals on the away goals rule after making the score 2-2 on the night, but went out 5-3 on aggregate after two late Liverpool goals.

A controversial penalty award by Swedish referee Peter Fröjdeldt for a tug on Ryan Babel by Kolo Toure saw Steven Gerrard score the crucial goal to put Liverpool 3-2 ahead with five minutes to play.

To rub salt into Wenger's wounds, Arsenal had an identical appeal for a penalty dismissed in the first leg at the Emirates Stadium

last week when Liverpool held them to a 1-1 draw in London.

"We have a feeling of disappointment and injustice. At the moment it is difficult because the whole dressing room is down," Wenger said.

"The game is over for us. It was down to a dodgy decision, I believe, from the referee. Over the two games it was difficult to swallow. It was a double disappointment because all the big decisions went against us."

"We have to live with that. Sometimes you have to swallow the unswallowable. It is difficult to understand for me. It was never a penalty. I have watched it clearly again, but last week it was definitely a penalty."

Wenger felt his defence played a part in Arsenal's downfall as Sami Hyypia was allowed a free header to equalise Abou Diaby's opener and Fernando Torres found time to turn and score his side's second. After

Gerrard's penalty, Babel completed the scoring with a stoppage-time fourth.

"We had so much control but we were naive and we lacked a bit defensively," Wenger added.

"The defeat was not down to mental strength though, it was down to a lack of experience defensively. We made big mistakes and we conceded a goal from a corner and on the second goal we gave Fernando Torres too much room."

Arsenal have now won just two of their last 12 games and only have the Premier League title to chase. They are six points behind leaders Manchester United with five games to play.

Wenger believes a series of poor decisions and injuries to key players have affected his side.

"The team is sick. We feel everything is going against us. We lacked that extra bit of confidence because week after week there is more disappointment," he grumbled.

Rafa relishes challenge

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

INTERNET, undated

Rafael Benitez is looking forward to Liverpool's third Champions League semifinal with Chelsea in four seasons.

The Spaniard masterminded the quarter-final defeat of Arsenal on Tuesday night at Anfield, a 4-2 victory and 5-3 aggregate triumph over Arsene Wenger's men.

Now Liverpool face Chelsea at home first, on April 22, with the return at Stamford Bridge on April 30 for the right to contest the final in Moscow on May 21.

Benitez said: "It is amazing that it is Chelsea again, and just as before it will be a very, very tough game."

Liverpool have had the upper hand over Chelsea in Europe. They beat them 1-0 on aggregate to reach the successful 2005 final in Istanbul, and then battled through two 0-0 group stage matches against the west Londoners the

following season.

Then last term they reached the final in Athens with a penalty shoot-out success over Chelsea.

Now it is Chelsea again, but this time the second leg will be at Stamford Bridge.

Benitez said: "Will that be an advantage to Chelsea? I don't know, these games are always very close. I will tell you after the matches who had the advantage."

Liverpool have now reached their ninth European Cup semifinal and their 15th in all European competitions.

The Anfield victory saw Benitez emerge triumphant and unbeaten from three clashes with the north Londoners in a week.

The Gunners took an early lead through Abou Diaby in the 13th minute, only for Sami Hyypia to level.

Fernando Torres fired the Reds in front, but Emmanuel Adebayor looked to have put the Gunners through with a second late away goal after a brilliant surging run by Theo Walcott before Gerrard won it

from the spot. Substitute Ryan Babel added a fourth in stoppage time.

Benitez said: "I was delighted with the belief of my players, particularly in the second half. We had been so poor before the break, but so much better in the second period."

"It was a tremendous game for our fans, there were six goals and we played so well."

"Steven Gerrard has said it was a poor game by him, but I was satisfied. He scored a crucially important penalty for us when it really mattered, that was positive from him to take it so well."

"Now we have Chelsea again in the semifinal. Again it will be a very, very tough game against an excellent side. But like tonight, we have enough experience of such matches and clearly the belief to succeed again."

"And when we went to 2-2 so near the end, my players showed tremendous character and desire to get up off the ground to win the tie."

Klinsmann causing waves

Football

AFP, Berlin

Three months before he takes over as Bayern Munich head coach, Jurgen Klinsmann is already causing waves in the south Germany city as he prepares for his first season in charge.

Klinsmann will succeed Ottmar Hitzfeld, who will coach Switzerland after Euro 2008, on July 1 and has begun instigating changes which have not gone down well in Munich.

When it was announced last month the public restaurant at Bayern's Saebener Strasse training ground will close to make way for a new team room, a flurry of negative stories rippled through the German media criticising Klinsmann.

Part of the training pitch will be sealed off and the neighbouring restaurant closed.

But red-faced Bayern bosses were forced to issue a statement insisting training will remain open to the fans.

Since it was announced on January 11 Klinsmann would be taking over, he has been busy recruiting his back-room staff and meeting club bosses.

Klinsmann, who coached Germany to third place at the 2006 World Cup, has been handed a remit to modernise the way Bayern prepare with an eight-hour training day and extra facilities for the players.

He met with Hitzfeld before last week's UEFA Cup 1-1 quarterfinal draw with Getafe, but even his presence at the game later drew fierce criticism from Bayern captain Oliver Kahn.

Kahn is no fan of the new Bayern boss.

At the 2006 World Cup, Klinsmann dropped Kahn in favour of Arsenal's Jens Lehmann and the Bayern man has a long memory.

"I consider that is a lack of style," said Kahn claiming Klinsmann's presence distracted attention away from the Bayern team.

"In all my career, I never saw or heard of a trainer who will take over a team the following season

attending matches before the season is over."

Kahn, who will retire at the end of this campaign, later said he over-reacted.

But there is no doubt the German press are still wary of Klinsmann ever since he coached the national side between 2004 and 2006 while living in the United States.

Even the fact that he took the national team to a surprise third-place has not helped his image in some quarters.

Bayern club manager Uli Hoeness is perplexed as to why Klinsmann divides opinions so strongly.

"He does not say anything and yet he is criticised and attacked," said Hoeness.

Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge was also amazed at the media debate over Klinsmann's presence at the Allianz Arena.

"I really don't understand," said Rummenigge.

Rummenigge said the visit had been previously agreed and the team knew nothing of Klinsmann's presence before the game "so

there's no way they can have been distracted or put off."

Klinsmann had even asked Hitzfeld's permission to attend the match when the pair dined together the previous evening.

"I've heard it was a very productive conversation," said Rummenigge.

"At the end of the chat, Jurgen asked Ottmar if his coming to the match would be a problem and was told it was no problem. We need to stay relaxed about the whole thing. We're in good shape at the moment and shouldn't be making problems for ourselves."

It is unlikely Klinsmann will bring in major new names on the playing side, especially as Bayern splashed out 69 million euros last summer to sign world-class players Franck Ribery, Luca Toni and Miroslav Klose.

The arrival of Germany international Tim Borowski from Werder Bremen has already been confirmed and a new goalkeeper may arrive to replace Kahn.

But Klinsmann will be hoping for a warmer welcome when he actually starts work in July.

Austrian ticks bugging Spain

AFP, Madrid

Ticks found in Austria that can transmit a potentially deadly disease are causing concern to Spanish football authorities, who fear their players could be infected at the Euro 2008 championships.

About 30 Spanish players who may be called up to the squad are to be vaccinated against the disease, meningoencephalitis virus, which causes high fever and paralysis and is deadly in about two percent of cases.

The vaccination involves three injections and must be administered at least two months before departure to the affected area.

Rijkaard denies Ronaldinho rift

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard on Tuesday moved to quash speculation about a rift between the club and an injured Ronaldinho which will reportedly see the Brazilian star leave the Spanish club at the end of the season.

"It's a pity that he is not able to join us due to injury. A pity not only for the Champions League but also for the league. As for his future, I can't predict the future but I think he still has a contract with Barcelona," he told a news conference.

Ronaldinho, a former FIFA

World Player of the Year, is under contract with Barcelona until 2010.

He has been plagued by injury and fitness problems this season that have made it his worst since joining Barcelona from Paris Saint-Germain in 2003, leading to reports that the Catalan club are looking to offload the player at the end of the season.

Last week Barcelona announced Ronaldinho, 28, would be sidelined for about six weeks because he pulled a muscle in his right leg during a training session.

The Brazilian international started only 13 of the club's 30 league games this season.

Barcelona can progress to the Champions League semifinals on Wednesday if they avoid a defeat to

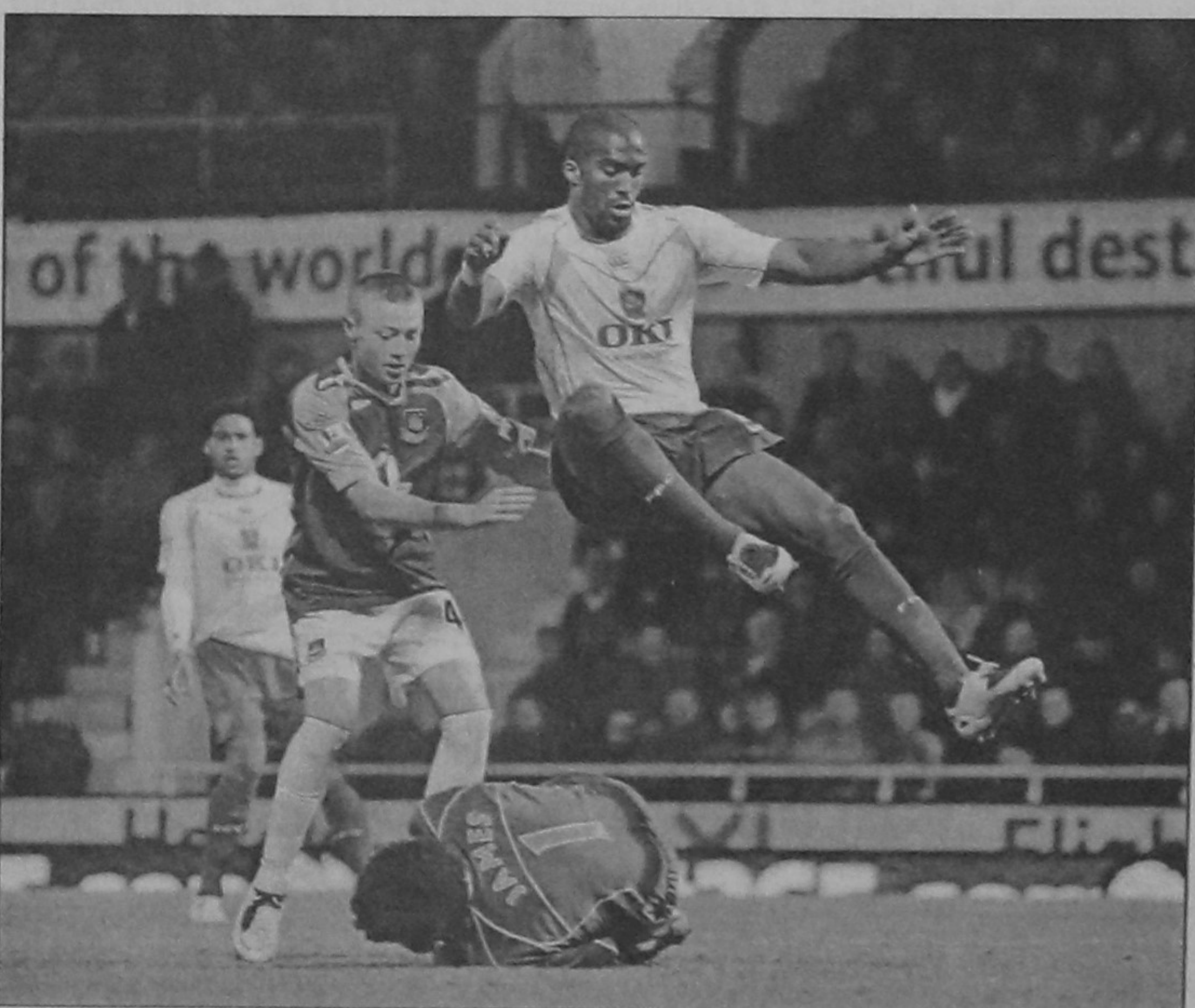
Schalke 04 at home.

The club beat the German side 1-0 in Gelsenkirchen last Tuesday to take the advantage in their quarterfinal clash.

"We're on the right track although we have to play an important match tomorrow against a good team," said Rijkaard.

"We have to be ready to face up to a Schalke side that will certainly be striving for a more direct game to get the result they need," he added.

Barcelona head into the match having been held 0-0 at home by Getafe on Sunday. The result left the club in third place, seven points behind league leaders Real Madrid.



Portsmouth goalkeeper David James (down on the ground) collects the ball in front of West Ham striker Freddie Sears (L) as teammate Sylvain Distin jumps over during their Premiership match at Upton Park on Tuesday. Portsmouth won 1-0.