



Liverpool defender John Arne Riise bends in utter disappointment after the final whistle during their Champions League semifinal against Chelsea at Anfield on Tuesday. Riise scored an own goal in the last minute of injury time to deny Liverpool a certain victory.

Riise hands Chelsea lifeline

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Liverpool

Chelsea snatched a Champions League lifeline as Liverpool defender John Arne Riise's last-gasp own goal allowed Avram Grant's side to escape with a 1-1 draw from Tuesday's semifinal first leg.

Liverpool had dominated after taking the lead through Dirk Kuyt just before half-time at Anfield but they failed to press home that advantage.

Petr Cech produced three superb saves to keep out Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard and Chelsea were able to make Rafa Benitez's team pay in the final minute of stoppage time when Riise headed into his own net.

Benitez was understandably devastated by the late goal.

"It is really disappointing," admitted the Spaniard.

"An own goal at the end of the game, it really is a blow. We had the better chances but Petr Cech was pretty good at stopping them."

"They are a strong team but we are a good one. Next week we must play for the full 90 minutes like we did tonight (Tuesday) and just stick to our task."

Cech said that Chelsea had deserved the rub of the green after being at the wrong end of two semifinal exits in the last three years by Liverpool.

"We think we have been quite

unlucky in the last semifinals against Liverpool," said the Czech stopper, who has returned to action earlier than expected after having 5-0 stitches inserted in his face following a training ground incident.

"We got a lucky goal but to be fair the way we played we deserved it," he added.

After suffering semifinal exits at Anfield in two of the last three seasons, the Blues will have left Merseyside feeling luck was on their side at last.

They lost to Luis Garcia's 'phantom goal' in 2005 and were beaten on penalties last season.

Now, bolstered by a precious away goal their tepid display hardly deserved, Chelsea will believe they can avenge those bitter memories and finish the job at Stamford Bridge next Wednesday.

It was fitting that a tie with so much enmity propelling the participants should take place to the backdrop of the power struggle between Liverpool co-owners Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

Hicks had been advised to stay away for his own safety but defiantly took his place in the Anfield directors box.

The crowd's frenzied passion didn't inspire many fireworks on the pitch early on though. Goals are at a premium whenever these obdurate sides meet in Europe and it was a typically tentative start.

Liverpool threatened to break the stalemate first. Kuyt raced onto Xabi Alonso's long pass, only

for the Dutchman's poor chest control to let Ricardo Carvalho and Cech clear the danger.

Joe Cole had a sight of goal when Frank Lampard, back after spending time with his ill mother, picked out the England winger in the penalty area. Cole's tame volley didn't do justice to the sublime pass.

Didier Drogba appealed for a penalty when he tumbled under Jamie Carragher's tackle. Carragher missed the ball but the challenge was just outside the area and referee Konrad Plautz waved away Drogba's protests.

When Steven Gerrard's defence-splitting pass put Fernando Torres clean through, Anfield rose in expectation of yet another decisive contribution from the Spaniard. For once Torres was frustrated as Cech made a superb stop.

Gradually Liverpool began to turn the screw and their relentless pressing played a key role in Kuyt's 43rd minute opener after Chelsea were unhinged by Alonso's quick free-kick.

Kuyt robbed Lampard on the edge of the area and Javier Mascherano took a swipe at the loose ball. The Argentine's mis-cueled effort should have been cleared but Claude Makelele rashly jumped in front of Ashley Cole and Kuyt was able to pounce, sliding his shot under Cech.

Liverpool were grateful for the gift but it was a shambolic goal to concede and summed up Chelsea's confused display.

Grant's inspirational qualities have been questioned constantly this season and now was the moment for the Israeli to lift his side. Yet they emerged after half-time just as flat as before.

Liverpool winger Ryan Babel caused chaos in the Chelsea defence as he urged past Paulo Ferreira and whipped in a low cross that led to a blocked Torres shot.

Babel was a constant danger and went close in the 60th minute with a dipping half-volley that flashed past Cech's far post.

Chelsea finally stirred when Michael Ballack met Lampard's free-kick with a glancing header which Jose Reina held well.

Florent Malouda had a much better chance moments later as he took Lampard's pass and cut inside Alvaro Arbeloa. Just as Malouda was about to pull the trigger, Mascherano slid in with a crucial block.

Gerrard forced a brilliant one-handed tip over Cech in the closing minutes as Liverpool strove to take total control of the tie.

Cech then denied Torres with another fine stop at his near post and Chelsea took full advantage.

With virtually the last kick of the game, Salomon Kalou swung in a cross from the left and Riise, diving to head clear, succeeded only in diverting the ball into his own net.

Anfield fell silent as Liverpool were left to wonder if they would rue those missed chances.

Hleb accepts FA charge

AFP, London

Arsenal winger Alexander Hleb will miss the rest of the Gunners' season after accepting Wednesday a Football Association (FA) charge of violent conduct.

The 26-year-old Belarus international was involved in an off-the-ball clash with Reading captain Graeme Murty during Arsenal's 2-0 Premier League win at the Emirates Stadium on Saturday.

Hleb appeared to strike the Royals defender with his open hand, but the incident was missed by referee Peter Walton.

The FA decided to take action after reviewing video footage as the incident was not seen by referee Peter Walton.

Hleb will now miss Arsenal's Premier League games against Derby, Everton and Sunderland - the only first team games they have to still to play this season following their exits from European and domestic Cup competitions.

His ban is the same Hleb would have received had Walton sent him off during the game itself.

An FA statement said: "Arsenal midfielder Alexander Hleb has admitted a charge of violent conduct and will serve a three-match suspension with immediate effect."

"Hleb was charged for his involvement in an incident with Reading defender Graeme Murty during the second half of the match at the Emirates Stadium on Saturday 19 April."

"The incident was not seen by referee Peter Walton. Having now watched video footage of the incident, Walton has informed the FA that, had he seen it at the time, he would have shown Hleb a red card for violent conduct."

Hleb's ban is the latest blow to Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger who, during the past two months, has seen his side's hopes of Premier League and European Champions League glory evaporate after they had looked well-placed for success.

'Euro title up for grabs'

AFP, Berlin

German coach Joachim Loew has indicated that this summer's European Championships in Switzerland and Austria would be one of the most closely-contested ever with several sides in with a shout of glory.

"At the last World Cup there were 11 European sides in the last 16, six in the quarters and the Europeans monopolised the semifinals," Loew said in an interview published by the Tagesspiegel and Frankfurter Rundschau newspapers.

"This tournament will be the most closely contested in history - there is no big favourite," he concluded.

"Of course you can count on Italy and France but I really think all the teams have a chance," Loew added.

Regarding his own team, Loew, who took over from Jurgen Klinsmann after the 2006 World Cup, said that Die Mannschaft "must still progress."

"In terms of rhythm of play and passing accuracy German football must in general do a lot more in terms of education," Loew opined.

"I expect us in principle to get through the opening phase even if that will be more difficult than one expects," he added.

The Germans face Poland, Croatia and Austria in Group B.

CSF asks for FIFA gesture

AFP, La Paz

The Confederation of South American Football (CSF) have called on FIFA president Joseph Blatter to push back the ban on playing matches at altitude until after their 2010 World Cup qualifying campaign, the Bolivian Football Federation revealed on Tuesday.

World football's governing body FIFA have banned the South American team from staging qualifiers above 3,500m in La Paz but the Bolivians claim they are being discriminated against.

"It's the first time that we have endured such a difficult situation. For this reason we're calling on your understanding and ask you to make a gesture at this critical moment," the CSF said in a letter to FIFA.

"We think that if we can finish these qualifiers like we want to (by playing the home matches in La Paz) we will be in a position to apply any directive on the subject in the future."

FIFA has ordered the next batch of World Cup 2010 qualifying games against Chile and Paraguay in June to be moved away from La Paz claiming that matches at such altitude are detrimental to players' health.

La Paz's Hernando Siles stadium is at 3577m altitude.

Toni missing for Bayern

AFP, Paris



Both German giants Bayern Munich and Scottish mammoth Rangers had disappointing seasons by their high standards last term but both are now on course to redeem themselves by winning four trophies this campaign.

However, both sides enter Thursday's UEFA Cup semifinal first leg matches under strength as Bayern hosts Russian champions Zenit St Petersburg and Rangers are at home to highly rated Serie A outfit Fiorentina.

Bayern Munich have already captured the League Cup and last weekend's German Cup in what is coach Ottmar Hitzfeld and goalkeeper Oliver Kahn's farewell seasons with the Bavarian side, but the two bigger prizes remain to be delivered in the UEFA Cup and national title.

However they travel to Russia not in the best of heart rather surprisingly as 35-goal scoring World Cup winner Luca Toni is suspended - after picking up a booking in their epic 3-3 draw with Getafe in the last round - and doubts surrounding German international forward Miroslav Klose.

Klose failed to train on Tuesday

as he was still recovering from a blow to his foot he picked up during the 2-1 German Cup final win over Borussia Dortmund on Saturday which saw Toni bag his fourth successive double.

"There is a doubt over Klose," admitted the club.

Should that be the case Bayern are likely to field the makeshift pairing of Klose's fellow Polish-born German international Lukas Podolski and the rarely used Jan Schlaudraff, who is Hannover bound next season having been selected just six times this season.

Bayern have also been distracted over the break-up of contract talks with German international defender Philip Lahm, who has now indicated that he wants to play abroad.

One good piece of news for Bayern is that hardman Dutch midfielder Mark van Bommel is prepared to play even though he broke his nose in the Cup final.

Zenit for their part will have little fear of travelling to Germany for the first leg having thrashed Bayer Leverkusen 4-1 in the previous round and then wrapped up their last four place at home in the second leg.

Former Dutch national coach Dick Advocaat has already become a hero for delivering the national title but would become a super hero should he guide Zenit to their first ever European trophy.

Rangers - who lost to Fiorentina

in the 1961 UEFA Cup final when it was a two-legged affair - meanwhile have just the League Cup to their name but booked their ticket into the Scottish Cup final last Sunday on penalties over St Johnstone and face tiny Queen of the South in the final.

Whilst bitter rivals Celtic lead in the title race, Rangers have several games in hand but a mixture of a fixture pile-up and an ever increasing long term injury list to key players could put a dampener on their aspirations to a quadruple sweep of trophies.

Rangers, though, go into the match stretched almost to the limit with inspirational keeper Allan McGregor all but certain to be out for the season alongside midfielder Lee McCulloch as doubts persist over Charlie Adam, Steven Naismith and Chris Burke for the gruelling run-in.

Fiorentina for their part don't seem to have been affected in the least by the departure of Toni last summer and in Adrian Mutu have a top class striker to worry many a defence.

While the 'Viola' will be lacking experienced Czech international defender Tomas Ujfalus, who is out injured, their captain Dario Dainelli believes that he and his teammates will react well to the hostile atmosphere at Ibrox.

"The heated atmosphere does not scare me, it charges me up," said the 28-year-old.

Berlusconi to step down

Football

REUTERS, Rome

Silvio Berlusconi said on Wednesday he would step down as AC Milan president when he starts his third stint as Italian prime minister.

"I will have to give up the presidency of Milan and this pains me. My new role is incompatible," Berlusconi, who is expected to be sworn in early next month after winning last week's general election, told Italy's Radio Radio sta-

tion.

The move is unlikely to cause upheaval at the seven-times European champions as vice president Adriano Galliani is in charge of the day-to-day running of the club anyway.

Berlusconi also stepped down as president of Milan while remaining its owner during his last term at the helm of government, between 2001 and 2006.

Berlusconi added that the high asking price Barcelona have put on Ronaldinho had not destroyed Milan's hopes of signing the Brazil forward.



Roma star Francesco Totti leaves a private hospital in Rome on Wednesday after undergoing a knee operation three days earlier.

Federer avoids ignominy

Tennis

AFP, Monte Carlo

Roger Federer escaped what would have been the most humiliating defeat of his career on Wednesday when he came back from 1-5 down in the final set to beat Spanish qualifier Ruben Ramirez Hidalgo at the Monte Carlo Masters.

The world number one was within two points of a famous defeat before he carved out a 6-1, 3-6, 7-6 (7/1) second round win over the battling world number 137 who twice had the opportunity to serve for the match.

But the astonishing match will do nothing to dampen speculation that the great Swiss player could be on the verge of decline in a year which has seen him lose his Australian Open title and win only one trophy.

Even that came via default when Nikolay Davydenko was forced to retire with an injury in last weekend's Estoril final to hand Federer, who was laid low by glandular fever earlier this year, his 54th career crown.

Federer romped through the first set on Wednesday in just 31 minutes hitting 14 winners to his opponent's one and with breaks in the second and sixth games.

However, the top seed, runner-up to triple champion Rafael Nadal

for the last two years, went spectacularly off the boil in the second set, being broken in the second game on his way to trailing 0-3 and then having to save two more break points in the fourth.

But the Spaniard went onto level the match when the Swiss went long with a service return.

Federer, who committed a huge 54 unforced errors in the tie, dropped serve in the opening game of the final set with a netted volley and again in the third game with another volley error as he quickly fell 0-4 down.

The 30-year-old Ramirez Hidalgo had chances to serve for the match at 5-2 and 5-4 but he choked twice as Federer fought back to 5-5.

The world number one's greater experience told in the tie-break as he completed his recovery when a dispirited Ramirez Hidalgo hit long after 2hrs 03mins on court.

"I could have lost today but I got through and I'm happy about that," said Federer who next meets Frenchman Gael Monfils.

"I played well in the first set but he came back well."

Meanwhile, Russia's Marat Safin suffered a bad-tempered exit as the lid blew spectacularly once again on his famously explosive temper.

The former world number one, and double Grand Slam title winner, was knocked out in the second round by Spanish sixth seed David

Ferrer 6-2, 6-3 with Safin enduring another on-court meltdown.

The Russian, who has slumped to 93 in the world, became increasingly frustrated with himself and chair umpire Carlos Berardo.

In the seventh game of the second set he destroyed his racket against a court-side chair before screaming at Berardo: 'Give me a f***** break! as he debated another contentious call.

Safin's Russian Davis Cup teammate, Nikolay Davydenko, the fourth seed, moved into the last 16 with a 6-2, 7-6 (7/5) win over Italian qualifier Simone Bolelli.

Davydenko, who captured his second Masters title in Miami last month, showed no ill-effects of the leg injury which forced him to retire from the Estoril final.

"My leg is fine. I checked with the doctor and he found nothing wrong. I practised twice on Tuesday and had physio and it is OK," said Davydenko.

Later Wednesday, triple champion Rafael Nadal, the second seed, faces Croatia's Mario Ancic in what will be the Spaniard's claycourt bow in 2008 as he begins his build-up to what he hopes will be a fourth successive French Open title.

Nadal boasts a formidable record on the surface winning 107 of 110 matches on clay in the last three years, a sequence which has also yielded 17 of his 23 career titles.

Spain's Euro participation not in doubt

AFP, Madrid

The chances of Spain being expelled from the Euro 2008 championships decreased on Tuesday when it was reported the government-run Spanish Sports Council had backed down on controversial plans to force the Spanish football federation to hold elections before the Games begin in Beijing in August.

In December 2007 the government ordered all sporting federations not involved in the Olympics to hold elections before the Games begin in Beijing in August.

However, the football federation said such a plan would be impractical this year because of the timing of the Euro 2008 finals.

Spanish media reports said that the government had agreed to make an exception for the football federation and it could now hold its elections at the end of the year.

The disagreement over the timing of the elections between FIFA, who backed the Spanish football federation, and the Socialist government of Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero had raised the prospect that Spain could have been banned from Euro 2008.

In February, FIFA president Sepp Blatter warned that government interference in the administration of football in Spain could lead the country's national teams and clubs to be barred from international competitions like Euro 2008.

Greece only just escaped a ban from international competition before the 2002 World Cup after FIFA expressed displeasure at government interference in football administrative issues.



Argentine legend Diego Maradona (R) is seen with his daughter Dalma before the start of the Libertadores Cup match between Boca Juniors and UA Maracaibo at the La Bombonera Stadium in Buenos Aires on Tuesday. Boca won 3-0.