

Brits face tough ties

UEFA CUP

AFP, Paris

British clubs are facing a tough scrap for points in the UEFA Cup Thursday, while European heavyweights AC Milan host Portuguese outfit Braga looking to justify their tag of tournament favourites.

Tottenham welcome Dinamo Zagreb, Manchester City take on former England manager Steve McClaren's FC Twente and Aston Villa travel to Slavia Prague.

Spurs, revitalised under new coach Harry Redknapp, have begun to turn their season around, a 2-1 win over league leaders Liverpool on Saturday the feather in the cap of their recent revival.

And the London club's Brazilian keeper Heuerlo Gomes believes that result has sparked a renaissance just in time for the crunch Zagreb match.

"I think the key is belief at the moment. The team is playing with more confidence now and we have

picked up three very good results," said Gomes, whose side sit bottom of Group D.

He added: "We went through a difficult period but worked hard in training to put things right, so now this is a good time for the team."

Mark Hughes may opt for attacking experience against FC Twente, after the Eastlands side drew blanks in recent defeats at Middlesbrough and Bolton.

With Benjani and Darius Vassell both deemed fit after a reserve-team outing against Liverpool on Tuesday, Hughes may be tempted to hand the duo a start to take the pressure off record signing Robinho.

"They will come into the equation. It is important that they get some game time under their belts, but they impressed and Benji scored into the bargain," Hughes told www.mfc.co.uk.

"We have enjoyed the games in Europe. FC Twente are a decent team, who are very well organised and it's going to be a good test."

Villa will receive the Czech Republic stamp on their passports

knowing they are in pole position to qualify from Group F after a win over European giants Ajax on October 23.

It is the second time Martin O'Neill has put a hoodoo on the Dutch side, the first being with Celtic in 2001, but the northern Irishman will be wary of a Slavia shock, especially after his side's 2-0 slump against Newcastle on Monday.

But all eyes will be on the San Siro as the Milan maestros take on Braga with the Italians riding high after a 1-0 win over Napoli at the weekend propelled them to the top of Serie A.

And David Beckham's future teammate Clarence Seedorf sent a chilling message to the Portuguese opposition.

"Finally after almost four years of suffering, especially in the last two seasons, we have reached the top spot (in Serie A)," the Dutch star told the club's website.

"Milan is showing continuity... and what Milan is doing right now is the proof of a great team."

Mascherano to lead Argentina

AFP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona, confirmed as Argentina coach here on Tuesday, has named his squad for his first game in charge, the November 19 friendly against Scotland.

And one notable absentee from his 20-player list was Lionel Messi. Maradona was required to leave out the influential playmaker to honour a deal struck between the Argentina Football Federation and the player's club, Barcelona.

Under the agreement Barca freed up Messi to play for Argentina at the Beijing Olympics but in return would be allowed to hold on to him for domestic duty for international friendly fixtures such as the date with Scotland.

Figuring in Maradona's first squad though were Manchester United's Carlos Tevez, Sergio Aguero of Atletico Madrid, and Liverpool's Javier Mascherano.

"Mascherano will be captain," Maradona has already said.

"He has all the qualities I look for in a captain. He's the one that thinks the most, who has the spirit of sacrifice, is the most professional and has the ear of his teammates."

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Juan Pablo Carrizo (Lazio/ITA), Sergio Romero (AZ Alkmaar/NED)

Defenders: Javier Zanetti (Inter Milan/ITA), Nicolas Burdisso (Inter Milan/ITA), Martin Demichelis (Bayern Munich/GER), Daniel Diaz (Getafe/ESP), Gabriel Heinze (Real Madrid/ESP), Fabricio Colocini (Newcastle/ENG)

Midfielders: Javier Mascherano (Liverpool/ENG), Maximiliano Rodriguez (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Angel Di Maria (Benfica/POR), Fernando Gago (Real Madrid/ESP), Jonas Gutierrez (Newcastle/ENG), Luis Gonzalez (Porto/POR), Jose Sosa (Bayern Munich/GER)

Forwards: Sergio Aguero (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Carlos Tevez (Manchester United/ENG), Lisandro Lopez (Porto/POR), Ezequiel Lavezzi (Napoli/ITA), German Denis (Napoli/ITA)

Knee blow for Petrov

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City's Bulgarian winger Martin Petrov must undergo knee surgery next week and faces up to four months on the sidelines, the club said Tuesday.

Petrov, who expects to undergo the op in Spain, will hope to return in time for Bulgaria's World Cup qualifiers against the Republic of Ireland in Dublin on March 28 and then in Sofia against Cyprus on April 1.

Bulgaria currently stand third in their group behind world champions Italy and the Irish.

Iniesta faces 6-weeks out

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona's Spanish international midfielder Andres Iniesta could be out for as long as six weeks after sustaining an injury to his right leg during his team's 1-1 Champions League draw with FC Basel on Tuesday.

Barcelona qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League with the point but it came at a cost with Iniesta hobbling off in the 66th minute to be replaced by Samuel Eto'o and initial reports suggest he could be out for a month and a half.

"The injury to Andres (Iniesta) is the bad news from the game," confirmed Barcelona president Joan Laporta.

"It looks like it is an injury that will take some time to come back from. It is a real blow because Andres is a key player in this team."

If the injury is as serious as first thought Iniesta, a member of Spain's victorious Euro 2008 side, could even miss the season's first 'El Clasico' against arch rivals Real Madrid at Camp Nou on December 14.

Keane charged with improper conduct

AFP, London

Sunderland manager Roy Keane was charged Tuesday with improper conduct by the Football Association after he was sent to the stands at half-time during his team's 5-0 defeat away to Chelsea last weekend.

Former Manchester United midfielder Keane was told to leave the dugout by referee Martin Atkinson, having questioned decisions the official had made in the players' tunnel during the break at Stamford Bridge.

"Sunderland manager Roy Keane has been charged with improper conduct," an FA statement said.

"The charge relates to his conduct towards referee Martin Atkinson in the tunnel at half-time of Sunderland's match against Chelsea on Saturday, 1 November. Keane has until 19 November to respond to the charge."



Roma players celebrate with coach Luciano Spalletti (top) after forward Mirko Vucinic scored against Chelsea during their Champions League encounter at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Tuesday.

Rome nightmare for Blues

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Paris

Catalan giants Barcelona were the first team to progress to the Champions League knockout stages after Tuesday's group matches after a 1-1 draw with Swiss side Basel.

However, it was a nightmare evening for English Premier League giants Chelsea and Liverpool as they both missed out on qualifying for the eliminatory stages - for the moment at least - as they went down to defeat to AS Roma and a draw with Atletico Madrid respectively.

Chelsea lost 3-1 to the out of form Italian side - who had lost their last four Serie A matches - while Liverpool drew 1-1 with Atletico with a fortunate injury-time penalty by Steven Gerrard grabbing them a point.

Chelsea's former coach Jose Mourinho has made barely more friends with his outspoken style since he took over at Inter Milan and the knives will be out for him even more in Italy after the Italian champions managed to grab a fortunate 3-3 away draw with surprise Cypriot package Anorthosis Famagusta in Nicosia.

Both French sides lived to fight another day with much-needed wins as Brazilian Wendel scored

Bordeaux's second to give them a 2-1 away win over Romanian side Cluj while Marseille got their first points on the board with a 3-0 win at home to PSV Eindhoven - Seneglese international striker Mamadou Niang scoring two of them.

Barca coach Pep Guardiola was happy despite his side's flawless Champions League start and their run of 11 successive victories in all competitions being terminated by a plucky Swiss side that had gone down to a 5-0 home defeat a fortnight ago.

However, qualification did come at a cost for the Catalan giants as Spanish Euro 2008 winning midfielder Andres Iniesta was ruled out for up to six weeks with a leg injury.

For Basel coach Christian Gross - who didn't have the opportunity this time to just take the metro to the game as he had infamously done when he enjoyed a brief period as Spurs coach in England - it was a merited result.

"Apart from the draw, which is a spectacular result for us, the most important thing was that we were compact as a team tonight."

While Chelsea let slip a chance to progress their defeat was a welcome relief for embattled Roma coach Luciano Spalletti, who despite two successive runners-up spots in Serie A was looking a mite in trouble to keep his job.

Showing a certain willingness to

change things Spalletti transformed his usual 4-2-3-1 formation to a standard 4-4-2, something he will stick with for the time being.

"For now yes, we'll continue along this path. To change things you need the players," he said before explaining how he had changed his team's losing mentality.

"The psychological work was in staying united and compact and with a push from our fans who let it be known that they were right behind us."

"It's clear that you have to have confrontation with some players and then players such as (Daniele) De Rossi, (Simone) Perrotta and (Matteo) Brighi make the difference on the pitch in terms of spirit."

Atletico must have believed that they had qualified for the last 16 until Gerrard as ever Liverpool's saviour stepped in to score the injury-time penalty - and it will be little consolation to Atletico that it extended the hosts record of never winning a home Champions League tie against Spanish teams.

Gerrard for his part believed that it was deserved - as indeed he would.

"I went down first, so yes it was a penalty," said Gerrard.

"I can understand why Atletico were livid as we would have been if it had been against us. But that is how it goes."

C LEAGUE RESULTS

AFP, Paris

European Champions League results on Tuesday:

Group A

At Cluj CFR Cluj (ROM) 1 (Dani 9) Bordeaux (FRA) 2 (Gourcuff 6, Wendel 38)

At Rome

AS Roma (ITA) 3 (Panucci 34, Vucinic 48, 58) Chelsea (ENG) 1 (Terry 75)

Group B

At Nicosia Anorthosis Famagusta (CYP) 3 (Bardon 31, Panagi 45+1, Frouzos 50) Inter Milan (ITA) 3 (Balotelli 13, Materazzi 44, Cruz 80)

At Bremen

Werder Bremen (GER) 0 Panathinaikos (GRE) 3 (Mantzios 58, Karagounis 70, Tziolis 83)

Group C

At Lisbon Sporting Lisbon (POR) 1 (Derlei 73) Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 0

At Barcelona

Barcelona (ESP) 1 (Messi 62) Basel (SUI) 1 (Derdiyok 82)

Group D

At Liverpool Liverpool (ENG) 1 (Gerrard 90+5) Atletico Madrid (ESP) 1 (Maxi Rodriguez 37)

At Marseille

Marseille (FRA) 3 (Kone 30, Niang 63, 71) PSV Eindhoven (NED) 0

Osaka crush Adelaide

AFP, Osaka

Gamba Osaka have one hand on the AFC Champions League trophy after trampling Adelaide United 3-0 in the first leg of the final Wednesday to leave the Australian side facing a daunting task.

The Japanese outfit completely outclassed their opponents with ace Brazilian striker Lucas opening the scoring in the 37th minute before setting up the second for midfielder Yasuhito Endo six minutes later.

Michihiro Yasuda added a third for the home team in the 68th minute, leaving Adelaide with a mountain to climb in the second leg at Hindmarsh Stadium on November 12.

It could have been worse for Aurelio Vidmar's men, with Endo having a goal disallowed in the dying minutes with striker Roni adjudged offside.

Vidmar vowed before the match that his team would rise to the occasion but their tactical discipline failed them with nerves evident in the biggest game in the club's history.

Given their home advantage, Gamba was always going to be favourites and they started the better side, encamped in the Australian field for most of the first half with Tomokazu Myojin, Hideo Hashimoto, and Hayato Sasaki going close.

Adelaide's best chance came after 26 minutes when Robert Cornthwaite let rip from 25 yards only to see his effort go wide.

The A-League side would have dearly loved to take an away goal into the second leg, but it was Gamba who opened the scoring in front of a packed stadium.

Lucas fired a shot after latching onto a pass from Takahiro Futagawa from near the centre line and goalkeeper Angelo Costanzo could only watch it flash past him in the 37th minute.

The partisan crowd was ecstatic six minutes later when Diego won the ball and set free Lucas who then released Endo down the left with acres of space.



Liverpool star Steven Gerrard (L) scores the equalising goal from a penalty during their Champions League clash against Atletico Madrid at Anfield on Tuesday.

L'pool's lucky escape

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Liverpool

Rafa Benitez admitted he is concerned by Liverpool's lack of cutting edge after his side needed a dubious penalty to salvage a 1-1 draw against Atletico Madrid in the Champions League.

Benitez's team were grateful that Swedish referee Martin Hansson decided Steven Gerrard's theatrical tumble was worthy of spot-kick seconds from full-time at Anfield on Tuesday.

Even Gerrard, who smashed in the penalty to keep Liverpool on course for the second round, conceded it was a harsh decision, and Benitez was unimpressed with the way the Reds laboured to kill off Atletico.

They created the better chances but, in a worrying repeat of their misfiring defeat at Tottenham on Sunday, failed to take them and were eventually forced to settle for less than their build-up play deserved.

Gerrard's last-gasp heroics are a regular part of Liverpool's European campaigns and the England midfielder's latest intervention kept his team on course for the last 16.

A win over Marseille at Anfield later this month would clinch qualification from Group D, but Benitez knows Liverpool will have to sharpen up their act to progress much further.

"We were talking before about the character of the team. Five or six times we have come from behind and that is important but we have to take our chances," Benitez said.

"It makes a massive difference, especially in the Champions League."

With Fernando Torres out with a hamstring injury and Robbie Keane still searching for his best form, Benitez had few options to shake up his forward line.

The Liverpool manager admitted Torres was unwilling to come back against his former club because his confidence is low after several weeks out of action.

But the Spain striker's absence is starting to prove costly for Liverpool and Benitez hopes he will be ready to play against West Bromwich Albion on Saturday.

"He was very close to playing but he had no confidence so it was better to keep him in the stands," Benitez said. "He could play this weekend. It depends on the confidence of the player, if he is happy and training well and happy with his fitness."

Benitez highlighted Keane's prodigious workrate as evidence that the 20 million pounds signing is earning his keep, but he hailed him off before the end and it would be no surprise to see the Irish forward left out of Torres returns.

"He is working hard. If you talk about strikers you talk about goals but it depends on luck and good deliveries," Benitez said.

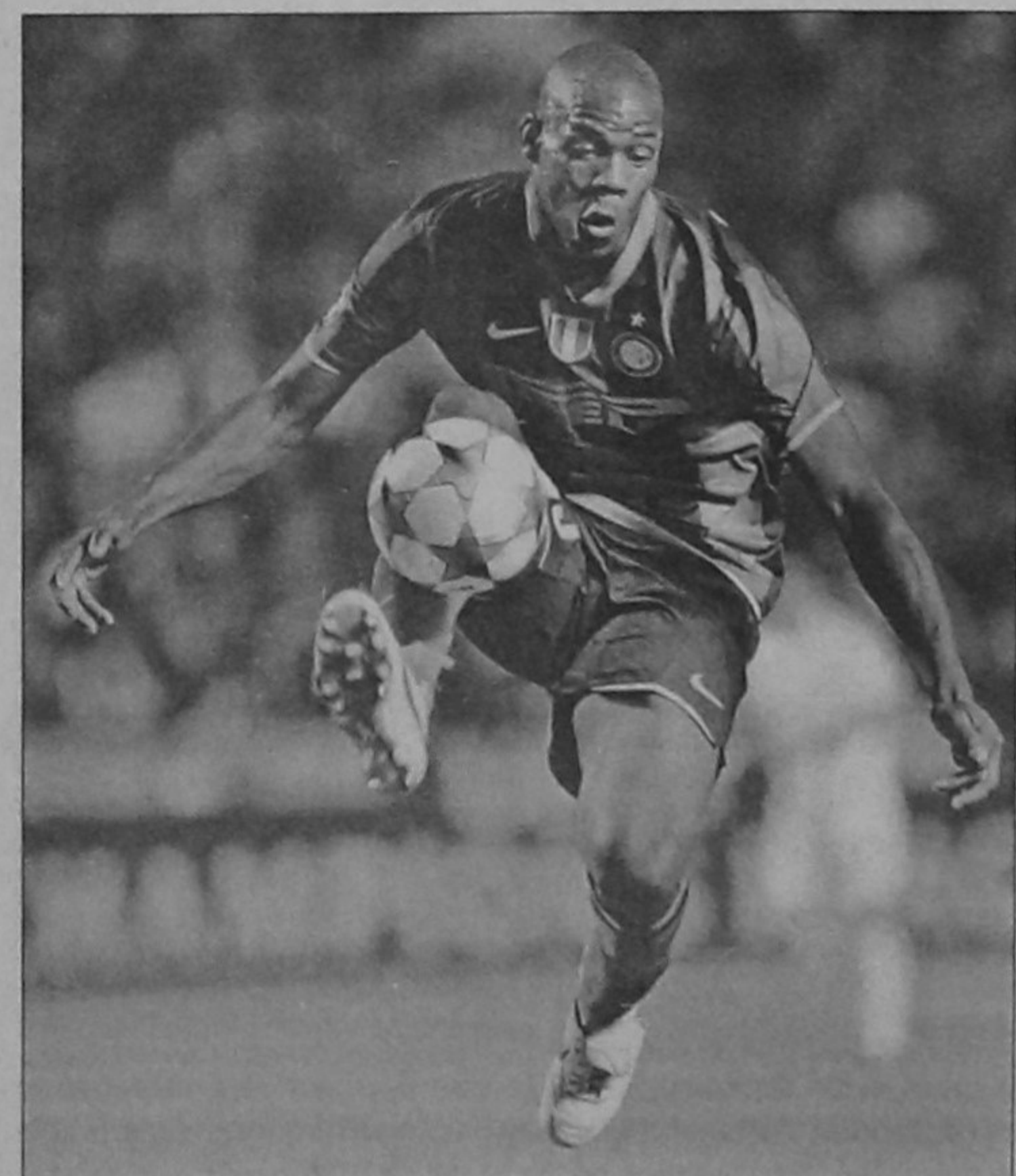
"He is doing his job but sometimes you want to change things. We were creating chances so sometimes you change things because another striker can be lucky."

Atletico were within touching distance of the second round after Maxi Rodriguez capped an incisive break by wrong-footed Jamie Carragher and shooting low into the far corner of Jose Reina's goal in the 37th minute.

Liverpool were always the more threatening side but Keane, David N'Gog and Daniel Agger all missed chances before Gerrard collided with Mariano Pernia to win that controversial spot-kick.

Atletico coach Javier Aguirre took heart from his team's mature display and backed them to get the win needed to qualify against PSV Eindhoven.

"We were solid at the back, well organised and played well against a great side at an imposing stadium," Aguirre said.



Inter Milan striker Mario Balotelli controls the ball during their Champions League tie against Anorthosis Famagusta in Nicosia on Tuesday.