

Alex Ferguson disappointed

AFP, Milan



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson praised his team's growing maturity after they dominated Serie A leaders Inter Milan in a 0-0 Champions League draw.

The only down side of United's performance in the San Siro on Tuesday night was the failure to convert one of their numerous chances, particularly in a first half in which there seemed to be a gulf in class between the two teams.

It left Ferguson disappointed to be going back to Old Trafford in two weeks time with the tie still finely in the balance.

But the 67-year-old boss said the game did at least show that United have come a long way in the last two years since they were given a footballing lesson by Inter's San Siro housemates AC Milan.

"I'm disappointed we didn't win the match but it's only half time in a way and we're going to Old Trafford," said Ferguson.

"We came here two years ago and you can see the development of the team. In our immaturity we were swamped by AC Milan that night but you saw the maturity (against Inter), the team is improving."

Two years ago United had won a thrilling semifinal first-leg clash 3-2 at Old Trafford but were simply swept away in the return as a Kaka-inspired Milan cantered to a 3-0 victory.

That result came only a couple of years after United had also gone out to Milan in the second round having lost 1-0 both home and away.

However, he admitted that a 0-0 draw away from home in the first leg always presented a risk in the return.

The last time United were champions of Europe they fell at the first knock-out round the following year having drawn 0-0 away to Real Madrid.

That was followed by a dreadful defensive display in the home leg which saw United fall 3-0 behind at Old Trafford before fighting back to eventually lose 3-2 on the night and on aggregate.

But Ferguson pointed to last season's semifinal against Barcelona for a more contemporary example of United's response to a 0-0 first leg draw away from home.

"What you're seeing in the team is maturity. There's always a threat at home that you can lose a goal and that's a threat if you don't score away," he said.

"We didn't score against Barcelona either and we were playing a fantastic Barcelona team at Old Trafford."

But a single goal from Paul Scholes was enough to see United through to the final, which they won dramatically on penalties against Chelsea.

"Our concentration in that game (against Barca) was fantastic and that's what we will need to be (against Inter), concentrated and focused. I think we'll be ok with that."

"I think they will play more condensed, tighter. They will go back to their penalty box."

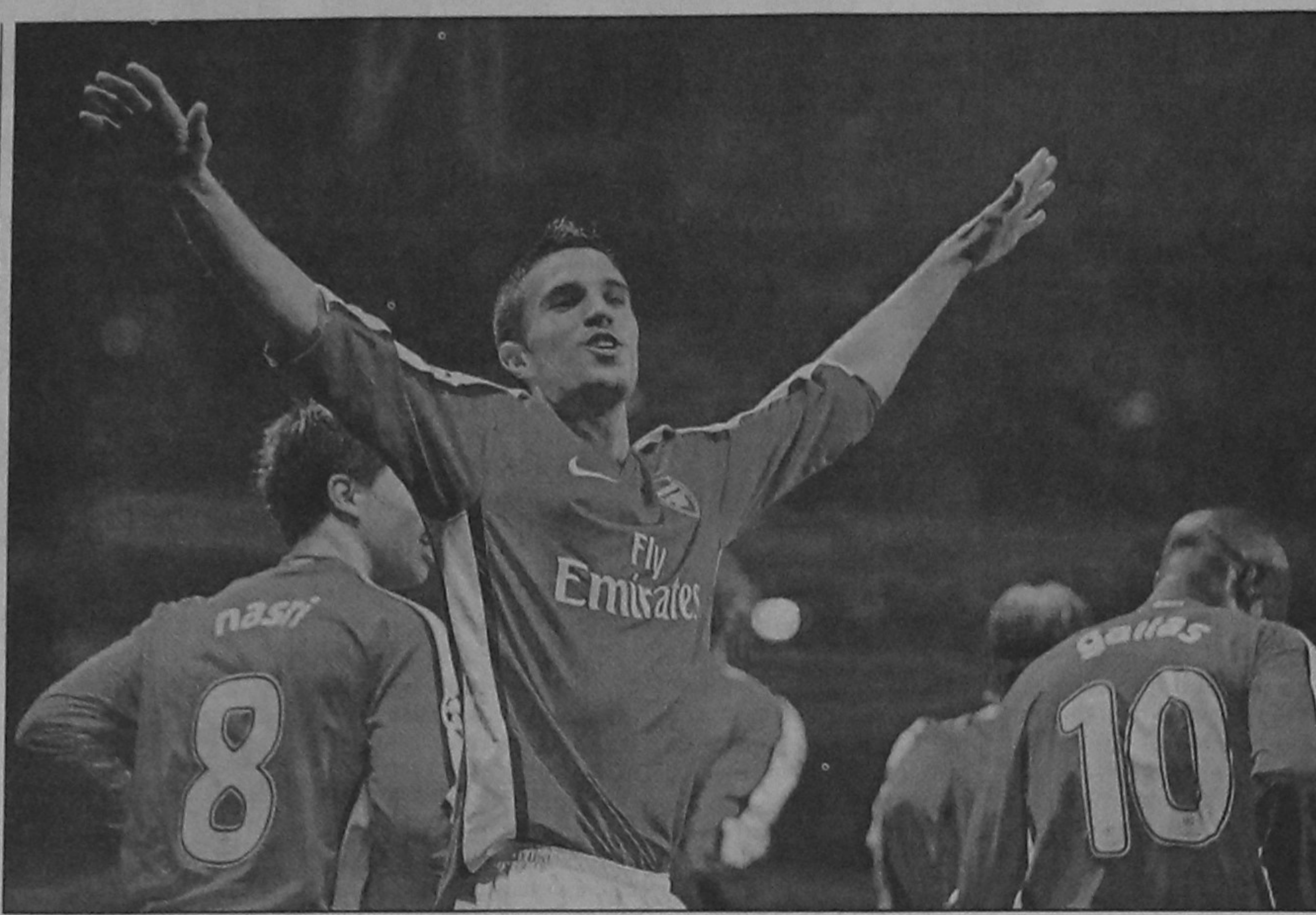
And while Ferguson praised his team he also seemed to be enjoying another battle with Mourinho.

Ferguson smirked when reminded about Mourinho's pre-match assertion that United would come to defend, and his claim after the match that Spanish referee Luis Medina Cantalejo had favoured the visitors.

"I thought it was a marvellous performance from the referee, he wasn't intimidated and that's what Jose was hoping for but the referee was 'intimidated, I thought he was first class," said Ferguson.

"I think Jose knew fully well what we were going to do. He tells you (the press) one thing and his players another."

"He knew fully well we were going to attack, he knows our club and our philosophy."



Arsenal's Dutch forward Robin van Persie (C) celebrates after scoring from the spot against AS Roma during their Champions League quarterfinal first-leg match at the Emirates Stadium in London on Tuesday.

Wenger wants one more

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger has warned Roma that Arsenal only need one goal to book their place in the Champions League quarterfinals.

Wenger's side will travel to Rome for the last 16 second leg clash on March 11 with a slender advantage after Robin van Persie's first-half penalty clinched a 1-0 win at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.

Following three consecutive goalless draws in the Premier League this was the sort of poised, passionate performance that Wenger has been waiting for from his team of precocious talents.

Even without Cesc Fabregas, Theo Walcott, Eduardo, Emmanuel Adebayor and Andrei Arshavin, they still stretched Roma's defence time and again.

The only flaw was their failure to add to van Persie's 37th minute spot-kick, awarded for a Philippe Mexes foul on the Dutch striker.

Nicklas Bendtner was guilty of two glaring misses and Samir Nasri and Emmanuel Eboué will also feel they should at least have hit the target with chances that came their way.

But the Gunners manager took heart from the way his team dominated for long periods and he believes their vibrant display proved they are more than capable of scoring the vital away goal at the Stadio Olimpico that would tip the tie in their favour.

"It puts us in a position where we know we need to attack over there. If we score once that should be enough," Wenger said.

"You never know what a good result is in the European Cup but our pace gave them problems in the first half and in the first 20 minutes of the second half we had one chance after another."

Italy.

About Diaby limped off in the second half with a recurrence of a calf injury and Arsenal still have league games against Fulham and West Bromwich Albion, as well as an FA Cup clash with Burnley in the next 10 days.

"We have three more games between this tie and the second-leg. At the speed we lose players it can be a difficulty for us," Wenger said.

"I am scared that we lost Diaby because he has a calf problem. Will anybody use back? We don't know. Could be Adebayor, maybe Eduardo but we are short in midfield at the moment."

The least Wenger should be able to expect in Rome is to see his team begin the match with 11 men on the pitch.

In an embarrassing start to the second half on Tuesday, Arsenal kicked off with nine men after William Gallas and Kolo Toure were late returning to the field.

Both were back in action within seconds of the restart but that wasn't quick enough to stop Danish referee Claus Bo Larsen booking Toure for his tardiness.

Wenger claimed the mistake was due to the Ivorian's desire to be the last player out of the dressing room.

"It's explainable by the fact that Kolo always goes out last. He waited for William but didn't know William had treatment," Wenger said.

"He didn't know the game had started without them. He was putting on his boots."

"I don't know if it is superstition. It is our fault. You have to be ready when the bell rings."

Although Roma were out-classed for much of the match, their manager Luciano Spalletti knows they are a different animal in their own environment.

"The Italians have already beaten Chelsea at home this season and Spalletti expects a far more impressive effort from his team."

"I feel confident to say we have the same chances as Arsenal, maybe 49 percent for us and 51 for Arsenal because they have the goal," he said.

"But we can create chances and I'm sure it will be a completely different game in the second leg."

"I think the result is quite good considering the different between the teams in the first half."

"We should be completely different in everything compared to what we showed here."

Advantage Porto

AFP, Madrid



FC Porto seized the upper hand in their last 16 Champions League tie with Atletico Madrid scoring two vital away goals in a 2-2 first leg draw at the Vicente Calderon on Tuesday.

Argentine Lisandro Lopez scored twice to take his Champions League tally to six as Porto twice came from behind to level the score in Madrid.

The 2004 champions are now in the box seat for the return leg in Portugal on March 11 and should have had a bigger advantage with Atletico's goalkeeper Leo Franco keeping them at bay with a string of important saves.

Atletico goalkeeper Diego Forlan said it was vital that Atletico cut out their defensive lapses if they want to reach the quarter-finals.

"We took advantage of the mistake (from Porto goalkeeper Helton) but couldn't get the victory," explained Forlan.

"Now we have to go there (to Portugal) and not commit mistakes. We need to defend well and try to get a goal."

It was a tale of two goalkeepers with Franco having an inspired game while opposite number Helton almost gifted Atletico victory with a calamitous error.

Captain Maxi Rodriguez put Atletico ahead after three minutes only for Lisandro to cancel out the strike after 21 minutes.

Forlan netted close to half-time to restore Atletico's lead although Brazilian goalkeeper Helton gave more than a helping hand with some woeeful handling.

The relieved Helton was bailed out by his team-mates with Lisandro scoring again in the 71st minute as Atletico's haphazard defending - a problem all season - was on show again.

"We were lacking a few things tonight in our game and I think we are going to improve a lot ahead of the second leg," promised Atletico coach Abel Resino.

However, somewhat bizarrely his Porto counterpart Jesualdo Ferreira came away disappointed.

"This result feels like a defeat," said Ferreira.

"There are positive sides to it, notably that the team gave everything over 90 minutes but we didn't score the goals that we deserved to score."

"We missed a lot of opportunities, that is why the result is not a good one."

With just over 90 seconds gone Porto almost scored an early away goal with Brazilian striker Hulk foiled by Franco.

It was an important save and Atletico made the visitors pay for the missed chance scoring after just three minutes.

Argentine Sergio "Kun" Aguero put a through pass to compatriot Maxi, who nipped in at the back post to slot home.

It was a perfect start for Resino, who was experiencing his first European match in charge of Atletico after taking over from Javier Aguirre, who guided the club through the group stages.

However, Atletico looked frail at the back and Porto got a deserved equaliser with a terrific defensive mistake from Pablo Ibanez allowing Lisandro to level.

Spurred on by the equaliser Porto put the hosts on the back foot and spurned two great chances to take the lead.

The overworked Franco first denied Lisandro on 24 minutes and then Hulk, who was clean through, four minutes later. Resino was off the bench furious as his team's slack defending.

But a dreadful error from Helton gave Atletico the lead again with the Brazilian shot-stopper allowing Forlan's bouncing shot to squirm through his hands in first half stoppage time.

Draw pleases Mourinho

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho said he was a happy man after his Serie A leaders held holders Manchester United to a 0-0 San Siro draw in the Champions League.

The result has left the second round tie finely in the balance ahead of the second leg at Old Trafford in a fortnight.

Inter goalkeeper Julio Cesar made a string of excellent first half saves to keep Mourinho's men in a match that could have been over by the break.

And Mourinho said he now feels confident his team can come up trumps in Manchester.

"Julio Cesar was fantastic, in the first half he made two or three great saves and that was important for the team," he said.

"When I won the Champions League (with Porto in 2004) we drew 0-0 at home in the semifinal and then won away to Deportivo (La Coruna)."

"It's a result that the team who plays at home in the second leg is happy with because they know if they win (at home) they are in the quarterfinals."

"But for us it was an important result, we didn't want to go to United with a deficit because they had intensity and speed that we didn't have."

Mourinho said United had missed a chance to put themselves in the driving seat and he criticised Spanish referee Luis Medina Cantalejo.

"This was the ideal match for them (United) on the counter-attack to score but they didn't because Julio Cesar had a fantastic first half and in the second half we played really well and managed the match well."

"I think it's a result that gives us a 50 percent chance of going through."

"If we go there and have a referee that gives as much protection to the away team, we will qualify for the quarterfinals."

Having somewhat cheekily claimed before the game that United would not be trying to win the game, Mourinho admitted that he was surprised Ferguson picked veteran Ryan Giggs to play in the hole behind striker Dimitar Berbatov rather than playing Wayne Rooney alongside the Bulgarian.

"I was surprised because he (Rooney) is a fantastic player but I know he was injured for a few weeks and maybe the boss decided to give him a rest."

"I guessed that Park (Ji-sung) would play to defend against Maicon and I could understand Cristiano (Ronaldo) playing on the right because the new kid (Davide Santon) was playing (left-back) and he probably thought he could scare the kid."

"And after that it was between Giggs and Rooney but I have so many top players it wasn't a problem for us."

It seemed to be a problem in the first half as United were in total control with Giggs in particular excellent.

Inter improved after the break, especially for the first 10-15 minutes but even thereafter it was still the English champions who looked the more threatening up front and the more comfortable at the back.

"That's not the way Mourinho saw things, though."

"If two big teams play each other it's difficult for one team to be better than the other for 90 minutes," he said.

"It's difficult when the two teams are of different levels but for two teams of the same level it's almost impossible."

"In the first half United were the better team, they played well with a lot of quality but in the second half we were the best team."

"It was a high level match and it was just a shame for everyone that it finished 0-0."

"When you play against a top team you can't criticise a team that was dominated. They dominated in the first half and we did in the second."

Betting closed on Benitez

AFP, London



One of Britain's leading betting firms said Wednesday it had stopped taking money on Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez becoming the next English Premier League boss to be sacked.

William Hill said that at 1700GMT Tuesday the Spaniard was a 20/1 outsider to be the next manager to leave his post.

But despite the fact that both Manchester United and Arsenal were playing in the Champions League on Tuesday, Hill's said Benitez was "backed off the boards" to have left Liverpool by the weekend.

They cut the odds to evens and then suspended betting on Wednesday.

"The level of interest on Rafa getting the sack is unprecedented with over 300 calls logged today (Wednesday) alone," said Hill's spokesman Rupert Adams.

"We would be very surprised if Rafa is still the Liverpool boss by midnight on Sunday."

Liverpool are currently in Spain where they play Real Madrid, the club where Benitez began his coaching career, later Wednesday in the first leg of their last 16 Champions League tie.

Benitez, who has been in charge at Anfield since 2004 and who led the club to Champions League glory the following year, is understood to have rejected several drafts of a new four-year contract offered by Liverpool's feuding American co-owners George Gillett and Tom Hicks.

The Spaniard has made clear his displeasure at what he perceives to be his lack of control over transfer policy although recent reports suggested Gillett and Hicks were prepared to grant him the authority he wants.

It is 19 years since Liverpool won the last of their record 18 English league titles and Sunday's 1-1 draw with Manchester City left the Merseysiders seven points adrift of leaders and reigning Premier League champions United.

Raul reveals it

AP, Madrid



Real Madrid's all-time leading goal scorer, Raul Gonzalez, plans to play two more seasons for the Spanish club before retiring, although he may play on in the United States.

"It's a difficult situation because in reality you always want to go when you're at the top. But when you're playing well then you start asking yourself, 'Do I really want to go?'"

The 31-year-old was quoted as saying in Wednesday's edition of sports daily Marca.

"In this moment, I've marked the date as 2011."

Raul only recently surpassed Alfredo Di Stefano's Madrid scoring record with his 311th goal. He has scored 13 league goals this season and is also Spain's all-time leader with 44 goals.

Raul, who has only ever played for Madrid, goes into Wednesday's Champions League match against Liverpool looking to build on his record 66 goals in European competition 64 of those in the Champions League.

"Six months before that date, in December or January, will be the moment to look at the actual reality and see if it benefits the club and me," Raul said.

He said he'd like to take a year off to travel but could also be tempted by the prospect of playing in Major League Soccer for a season, like former teammate David Beckham.

But whatever he does, he plans to return and work at Madrid at some level.

'Money doesn't bring trophies'

AFP, London



Claudio Ranieri returns to Stamford Bridge with a warning to Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich that money can't buy success.

had steered the club to a first ever Champions League final but Frank Lampard insists the Italian should take credit for laying the foundations of Chelsea's recent successes.

The midfielder believes Ranieri's contribution in reshaping the Chelsea squad was crucial in transforming the fortunes of both the player himself, and the club as a whole.

"He should take credit," Lampard said. "He brought a lot of important players to the team."

"He signed good players even before the Roman Abramovich era. He elevated John Terry to captain and he's become one of the best in the world since."

"A lot of things have happened at this club, and Claudio Ranieri is part of that history. From taking Chelsea from a side who finished in the top six to one of the top four. He should take credit for what he did in his time here."

And the player added: "I don't think I would be sitting here if hadn't been for him. He spent 11 million pounds on me, which seemed a lot of money at the time."

"He's a great man as well as a great manager. I saw that as soon as I met him. He helped me develop from a West Ham player who maybe hadn't seen the real world in footballing terms, and he opened my eyes to things."

"I agree with (Manchester United manager) Sir Alex Ferguson when he says football is changing here in England," said Ranieri, who was known as the 'Tinker Man' when he was at Chelsea for the manner in which he rotated the starting line-up.

"In the past, one would have had time to build a team, bring in young players, get them experience. But in a lot of clubs now, that's no longer possible."

"We've seen new owners come in - from the US, Arabs, and from Russia - and put their money in and they want an instant return."

"But football isn't like that. You need time for players to bed in, to make their mark and for a manager to make your impact felt."

"Money helps to buy players, but it's not all about money. Money isn't what makes you win, which is probably just as well."

Ranieri admitted he knew he would be sacked even if he

King in court

Middlesbrough striker Marlon King appeared in court here on Wednesday to face charges of sexually assaulting a woman in a nightclub.

Jamaica international King is alleged to have assaulted and punched a 20-year old woman in London's Soho Revue Bar in December.

District Judge Nicholas Evans, presiding at the City of Westminster Magistrates' Court, adjourned the case until April 8 when King, who was released on bail, will appear again at the same court, a court spokesman said.

The 28-year-old is on loan to Middlesbrough from fellow Premier League club Wigan Athletic.

King has endured a stormy season, having already left the club on loan to Hull.



VITAL AWAY GOAL: Barcelona's French forward Thierry Henry (bottom) heads home the equaliser against Lyon during their Champions League football quarterfinal first-leg match at the Gerland stadium in Lyon on Tuesday.