

Arsenal crush Villarreal

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, London

Arsenal turned on the style to crush 10-man Villarreal 3-0 in the Champions League quarterfinal second-leg on Wednesday and set up an all-English semifinal showdown against Manchester United.

After spluttering through much of the season, Arsene Wenger's side are coming good at just the right time and their 4-1 aggregate victory was deserved reward for a ruthless performance.

Theo Walcott gave Arsenal the perfect start at the Emirates Stadium with a superb chip before Togo forward Emmanuel Adebayor struck to put the Gunners in control after half-time.

Robin van Persie's penalty underlined Arsenal's superiority and Sebastian Eguen's red card for complaining about the spot-kick only compounded Villarreal's misery.

The north Londoners will now face reigning European champions United in a mouth-watering last four clash after Sir Alex Ferguson's side eliminated Porto.

Wenger said: "We sent out a very offensive team and we played in a convincing way. I was very impressed with the quality and speed of our game."

"Villarreal have a good technical level but we gave them problems they didn't like. We were very explosive on the counter-attack."

"It is a test to play United next but a challenge you relish and we are excited about that."

Villarreal boss Manuel Pellegrini said: "They were better than us. The second goal made it very difficult to come back, although we still had a chance."

"I am disappointed. We wanted to get through to the semifinals but they were better than us even before the sending off, so we have no complaints."

Adebayor's stunning bicycle kick in Spain last week had given Arsenal a priceless away goal and Wenger's players a 0-0 draw would be enough to send them through.

It was just as well Wenger hadn't planned a rearguard action as Arsenal were without an entire back-four - William Gallas, Gael Clichy and Johan Djourou were all injured while Bacary Sagna pulled out late with a virus - as well as first choice keeper Manuel Almunia.

From the first minute they attacked.

Walcott surged away down the right and, after Adebayor just failed to reach his low cross, van Persie's header looped over.

Walcott's next contribution in the 10th minute was even more effective.

When Cesc Fabregas flicked a backheel towards the England winger, Diego Godin should have cleared, but he completely missed the ball.

Walcott took full advantage as advanced into the penalty area before lofting a sublime chip over Diego Lopez.

Arsenal were desperately close to going further ahead when van Persie's freekick was parried by Lopez. Adebayor headed the rebound goalwards, only for Gonzalo Rodriguez to clear off the line.

Walcott continued terrorising Villarreal's defence with his searing pace, but neither van Persie or Adebayor could convert a pair of teasing crosses.

Pellegrini's team still only needed a goal to get back in the tie but, with influential Spain midfielder Marcos Senna injured and former Gunners winger Robert Pires lacking his old spark, they found it hard to generate any momentum.

Inspired by the imperious Fabregas, Arsenal kept pressing and Adebayor delivered the knockout blow on the hour.

Fabregas won a header in midfield that fell for van Persie and the Dutch forward sliced open Villarreal's defence with a perfect pass to Adebayor, who kept his footing to slide a fine finish into the far corner.

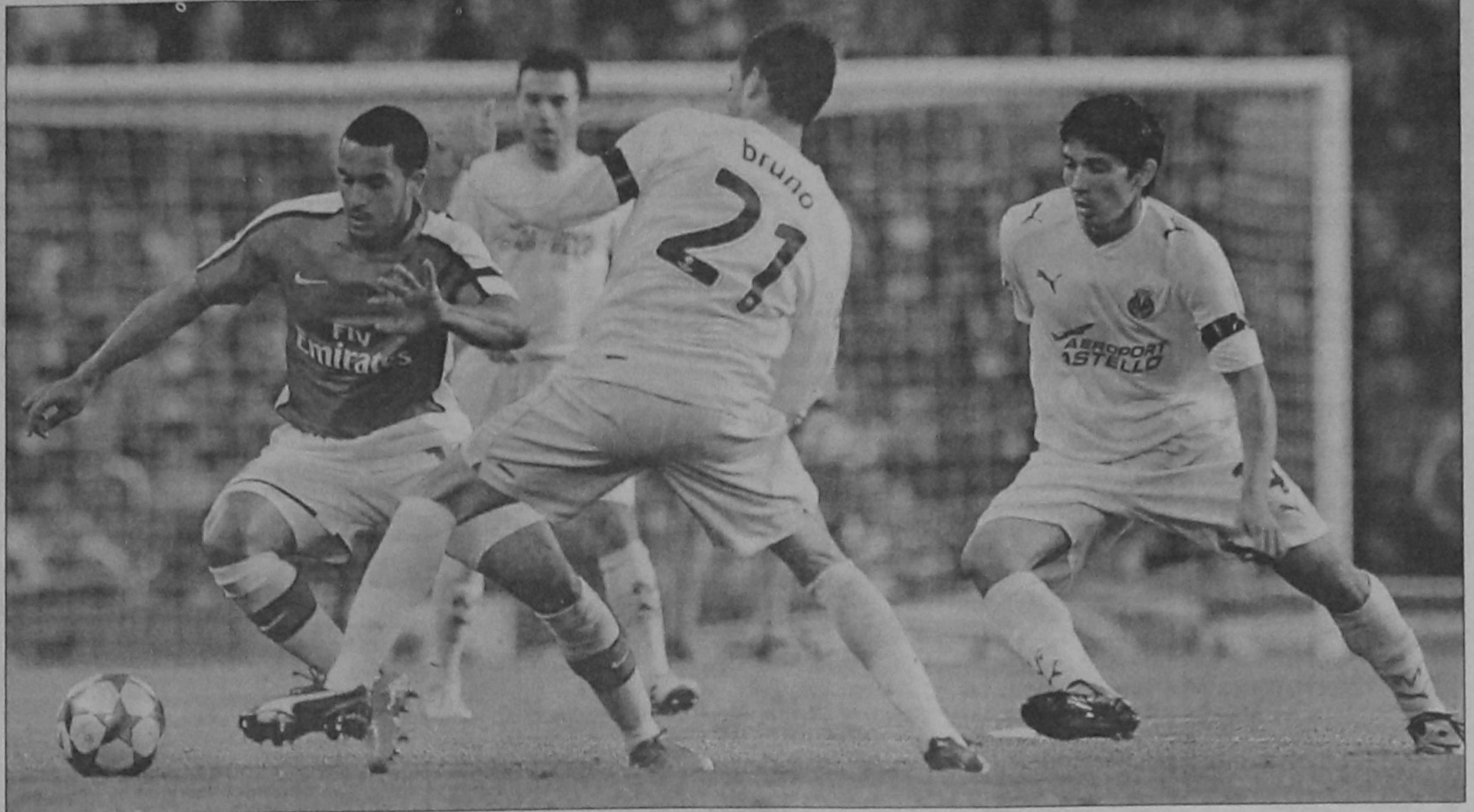
Adebayor and his teammates sprinted to the corner flag for a spot of synchronised dancing, while Wenger indulged in an eccentric fist-clenched celebration of his own.

It wasn't long before Wenger was on his feet again. In the 69th minute, Godin launched into a lunging tackle on Walcott, making contact with the ball just as he clattered into the winger.

Wolfgang Stark immediately awarded a penalty to the fury of Villarreal's players, who surrounded the German referee. Stark lost his temper with their protests and sent off Eguen.

Van Persie wasn't fazed by the fuss and calmly drove his penalty past Lopez to put the result beyond doubt.

With Saturday's FA Cup semifinal against Chelsea in mind, Wenger was even able to take off Walcott, van Persie and Adebayor in the closing stages. It was that kind of match for the revitalised Gunners.



Arsenal winger Theo Walcott (L) skips past the challenge of Villarreal defender Bruno during their Champions League quarterfinal second leg match at the Emirates Stadium in London on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

UCL semis line-up

AFP, Paris

Champions League semifinals line-up after Wednesday's quarterfinals:

SEMIFINALS

1st legs

April 28

Barcelona (ESP) v Chelsea (ENG)

April 29

Manchester United (ENG) v Arsenal (ENG)

2nd legs

May 5

Arsenal (ENG) v Manchester United (ENG)

May 6

Chelsea (ENG) v Barcelona (ESP)

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Fergie hails C'Ron

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Porto

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson hailed Ronaldo after his wonder goal gave the three-time winners victory over Porto in Wednesday's Champions League quarterfinal.

The World Player of the Year's sixth-minute thunderbolt gave United a 1-0 win at the Dragao Stadium, where no English team has won before, and a 3-2 aggregate win which sees them meet fellow English team Arsenal in the semifinals.

"It was sensational, a great, great strike," Ferguson purred. "I would need to go in the memory bank to think of a better goal than that."

"It gave us a real platform. We wanted to start quickly but no-one could have expected that type of goal."

The relieved boss explained that he deployed Ronaldo, returning to his homeland, in a more central role than usual with United desperate to breach the hosts' defence.

"He's the quickest player we have and we thought in this role he could stretch the back four. He's played better, but he's always a threat," he added.

United's main worry in recent weeks has been their defence, and few people gave them a chance of shutting out a Porto team who had

carved them open at Old Trafford just a week ago.

The Scot attributed his team's new steeliness to returning centre-back, Rio Ferdinand.

"The main difference from last week was Ferdinand's return, it gave us the defensive foundation which has been a major part of our success in the past and they never really looked like scoring."

Despite their poor first leg performance, Ferguson believed that the best team had prevailed overall.

"It's a fair result, we had to come here and win, there was no other way. There wasn't a lot in it but I think we produced the better football tonight and for the second-half at Old Trafford," he said.

This was not a view shared by the Porto camp. "It wasn't a very just result today or overall," Porto assistant manager Jose Gomes said. "We are all suffering, the whole squad and supporters."

The assistant urged his players to build on the experience after pushing the English giants all the way.

"We wanted more but our opponents were Manchester United and they are the best team in the world. The goal was scored by Ronaldo and he is the best player in the world," he said.

"We should remember it is very rare to see any team play at Old Trafford the way did last week and also the second-half today, we should all be proud," he added.

Lampard fears Messi

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

THE GUARDIAN

Frank Lampard, the England and Chelsea midfielder, fears the influence Lionel Messi will have on his club's Champions League semifinal following the loss of Ashley Cole to suspension.

The London club will renew their European rivalry with Messi's Barcelona after completing a bewildering 7-5 aggregate victory over Liverpool at Stamford Bridge last night.

Barcelona are favourites for the tie with the first leg at the Nou Camp in a fortnight with Messi, the competition's top scorer, the pick of their frightening array of talent.

The Argentina playmaker has been compared in talent to Diego Maradona and Lampard is concerned how Chelsea will cope with his threat in the absence of Cole, whose suspension has left the club without a recognised left-back for the game.

"Losing Ashley is a huge blow. He has been absolutely outstanding this season," Lampard said. "Lionel Messi is the best player in the world by some distance at the moment and will be on the right wing. If you wanted anyone to play against him, it would be Ash."

"Unfortunately, he got a yellow card, but we have to try and keep together, find someone to come in and do a good job against him for the team."

Chelsea and Barcelona have met in the Champions League eight times four of which were in 2006 since the turn of the century. So far, the series is even with three wins apiece and two draws, but Barcelona are in spectacular form this

season six points clear at the summit of La Liga and highly fancied to repeat their success of 1992 and 2006.

Lampard acknowledges that Chelsea, who have conceded seven times in their past two matches following last night's enthralling 4-4 draw with Liverpool, must stop leaking goals if they are to progress in the competition.

"We have to look back at the mistakes we make as a group in conceding goals. We have to be strong and we need to tighten up defensively," he said.

"If we are going to beat Barcelona we need to play at the level we achieved in the first leg against Liverpool when we won 3-1. It will be a very tough game because of the way they're playing, but we know what to expect, particularly in the away leg."

"Barcelona are probably favourites at the moment because of the way they're playing, but being favourites doesn't mean you go through."

"Barcelona are the form team in Europe, if not the world. They've been like that all season so there can't be a tougher match for us in this competition."

Lampard scored twice on a nailbiting night at Stamford Bridge, including the final goal that ultimately thwarted Liverpool's remarkable fightback.

"There were moments when I couldn't believe what was happening," he said. "It was real see-saw stuff. We were comfortable and then nearly out. It was a beautiful game in those terms."

"It was completely crazy. We didn't want it to be crazy, we wanted it to be much simpler than that. After half-time we showed great character and turned it round. We deserved to go through in the end."

Ribery stokes Barca fire

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich star Franck Ribery on Thursday fuelled further speculation over a switch to Barcelona after saying he understands why compatriot Thierry Henry plies his trade for the Spanish giants.

France midfielder Ribery and the rest of the Bayern team were given a football lesson by Barcelona at the Nou Camp on April 8 when the German champions were humbled 4-0 in the Champions League quarterfinal first-leg tie.

Henry was one of the Barcelona stars who shone brightly and when asked whether he wants to play for the Spanish giants, Ribery told the Munich Tageszeitung: "Of course, who wouldn't want to play for Barca?"

This is not the first time this season Ribery has spoken with enthusiasm about the Spanish giants.

He briefly wore a Barcelona shirt on Tuesday night after exchanging with an opponent following the 1-1 draw against the Spanish at Munich's Allianz Arena in the second leg.

But the Frenchman, who is under contract at Bayern until June 2011, added: "I only said that I understand now why he (Henry) has so much

fun and has such a long contract there - nothing more, nothing less."

Ribery is set to lead the French attack at next year's World Cup in South Africa and has been courted by several top European sides this season after helping Bayern win the Bundesliga and German Cup last season.

But Barcelona president Joan Laporta has said he is reluctant to pursue either Ribery or Germany defender Philipp Lahm in order to preserve the close links between Barcelona and Bayern.

Meanwhile, Ribery has defended under-fire Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann who was booed by his own fans on Tuesday before the Champions League second-leg draw with Barcelona.

"Klinsmann is going through a difficult phase at the moment," admitted Ribery.

"The whole attack must rally around him, as well as the squad and every single player."

And Ribery said Bayern must expand their squad if they are going to compete for top European honours.

"We need a bigger squad, if we have one or two injured players, then we immediately have a problem," he said.

"As long as that continues we will struggle when we meet the top sides."

Bayern are second in the Bundesliga and face Bielefeld on Saturday.

Kaka wants Gerrard

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan's Brazilian superstar Kaka has said he would sign Liverpool and England midfielder Steven Gerrard if he had the chance.

Milan have been off the pace in Serie A this season and currently trail leaders and bitter city rivals Inter Milan by 12 points with just seven matches left.

The seven-times European champions have failed to compete for the top honours since winning the Champions League in 2007 and Kaka says it is time to bring in some new blood, starting with Gerrard.

"We're coming to the end of a cycle and now another will begin, maybe it's a historic moment for us," he told Sky Sport 24.

"The time has come to refresh a group in which there are many players coming to the end of their contracts and others who could arrive."

"We need a mix of experienced players and young players with a lot of will to win."

One of the main criticisms levelled at Milan this season has been that they are an aging team, at times too reliant on the likes of 40-year-old Paolo Maldini and 35-year-old Filippo Inzaghi.

Kaka showed his loyalty to the club in January when he turned down a mega-money move to super-rich Manchester City but he has since become increasingly outspoken in his views about how the team can improve.

Milan have not won the scudetto title since 2004 and these last three seasons have seen them battling for a top four finish rather than

silverware.

But Kaka knows who he would sign to change that.

"I like modern football, I like players who know how to attack and defend," he added. "If it was down to me I would sign someone like Gerrard who for me is the complete footballer."

"He can play anywhere, off the front man, as a holding midfielder, on the right, I can see him fitting in really well at Milan."

The former World Player of the Year's has openly criticised Milan this season on a number of occasions but that has been tolerated by club and fans alike as he repeatedly pledges his future to the team despite the interest of the likes of City and Real Madrid.

But there have been signs that Kaka is growing frustrated with Milan's obvious decline.

Last week he said: "When I arrived in 2003, Milan had the perfect mix of youth and experience."

"Some players are a bit old. We need to refresh the mix and lower the average age of the squad."

Earlier in the season he was also unhappy with his own role in the team complaining that he was not playing his best because the arrival of Ronaldinho in the summer had forced him to play deeper.

However the 27-year-old also admitted last week that injuries were to blame for his lack of form.

"I have had many problems, my knee, my groin, my foot," he said. "I've not managed to find any consistency and I'm not at 100 per cent, not even now."

"I hope to get there before the end of the season, I hope to be able to give us an extra push to assure a place in next season's Champions League."



Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard (L) and Jamie Carragher present the Freedom of the City crest to the Hillsborough Families Support Group during a memorial service to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster at Anfield on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

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