

Arsenal crush Villarreal



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 Eguren'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 knew a 0-0 draw would be enough to send them through.

It was just as well Wenger hadn't planned a rear-guard 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 open to 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 Eguren.

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.



PHOTO: AFP

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.

UCL semis line-up

AFP, Paris

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

SEMITINALS

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)

Rovers suffer Santa blow

AFP, London

Blackburn suffered a blow to their Premier League survival hopes on Wednesday when Paraguayan striker Roque Santa Cruz underwent knee surgery.

The 27-year-old has been out of action since the 0-0 draw with Everton at the beginning of March.

Blackburn Rovers manager Sam Allardyce told the BBC: "He's had a little arthroscopy to clean out floating fragment in the knee."

"I'm not putting a time limit on his return but hopefully it won't be long."

Santa Cruz was the subject of repeated enquiries from Manchester City during the January transfer window, and has made just seven appearances for Blackburn since February 1, scoring twice.

Blackburn are currently four points off the relegation zone in the English Premier League.

Obama backs US WC bids

AFP, New York

US President Barack Obama placed his support firmly behind his country's bids to host either the 2018 or 2022 World Cups on Wednesday.

Obama, who is playing a prominent role in supporting Chicago's bid to host the 2016 Summer Olympics, has written a letter to world governing body FIFA expressing his full support.

He drew on his experiences as a child growing up in Indonesia - where his mother had taken him after she married an Indonesian - and those of his two daughters in the States.

"Hosting another successful World Cup is important for the continued growth of the sport in the United States. And it is important to me personally," President Obama wrote in his letter.

"As a child, I played soccer on a dirt road in Jakarta, and the game brought the children of my neighbourhood together. As a father, I saw that same spirit of unity alive on the fields and sidelines of my own daughters' soccer games in Chicago."

The United States - who hosted a highly successful edition in 1994 - face among other rivals for both races Australia, England - who hosted their only World Cup in 1966 when they enjoyed their only win - Indonesia, Japan - co-hosts with South Korea in 2002 - two-time hosts Mexico and Russia.

The decision as to who hosts the two finals will be taken in December 2010 a few months after South Africa have hosted the 2010 edition while Brazil are hosting the 2014 final.

Fergie hails C'Ron



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

been their main worry in recent weeks.

Blackburn 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 the strongest array of talent.

The Argentine 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.

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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 seeing 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."

Lampard fears Messi



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.

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Ribery stokes Barca fire



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

Meanwhile, Ribery has defended under-fire Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann who was booted 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.

'Inter to play for win'

APP, Milan

Inter Milan president Massimo Moratti vowed that his team will be playing to win when they tackle Juventus in the 'derby of Italy' in Turin on Saturday.

Leaders Inter hold a 10-point advantage over second-placed Juventus with only seven matches left to play, meaning that the reigning champions could even lose the match but still hold enough of a lead to comfortably reclaim the Serie A crown.

But Moratti doesn't want to risk complacency, even if coach Jose Mourinho has previously stated that a point would suffice from the match.

"On Saturday we have to go to Turin to win because it's the right thing to do in such a prestigious match and because when you play for a draw, things don't go well," said Moratti.

"Of course we can't be hypocrites, right now we can feel the possibility of winning the scudetto."

"We need to be fired up otherwise we won't have the right attitude for the game."

Meanwhile, Moratti admitted that the club could agree to terminate troubled striker Adriano's contract when they meet with the Brazilian's agent Gilmar Rinaldi this week.

"Maybe yes, the termination of his contract is a possible solution," he said.

"We can't deny someone the freedom to do as they please in their life."

Galliani calls for Pato protection

APP, Milan

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani has demanded that referees give more protection to star teenage striker Pato.