

Pep slams physical Chelsea

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola reacted angrily at what he saw as the referee's leniency towards English side Chelsea's physical approach in their 0-0 Champions League semifinal first leg match on Tuesday.

Chelsea went away with mission accomplished after they stood firm against a barrage from Barcelona at the Camp Nou and became the first side this season in the competition to stop Barca from scoring at home.

As expected Barca took the game to Chelsea and enjoyed the vast majority of the possession but they were unable to find a way through to goal for the first time at home this season in the competition.

Petr Cech made a couple of important blocks from Samuel Eto'o and substitute Alexandr Hleb but too often they were restricted to strikes from distance.

"It is difficult to play against a team which doesn't want to play football," stormed 37-year-old Guardiola, who has worked wonders with the side since replacing the sacked Frank Rijkaard for this season.

"It was a game in which Chelsea had five defenders and the ball was always Cech to (Didier) Drogba and then backwards and forwards again.

"The result was fair, though, because neither side scored but there is something wrong when we ended up with the same number of yellow cards as they did and yet they committed 20 fouls compared to seven," added the former Barcelona and Spain playmaker.

Guardiola, who cleared out stars such as Deco and Ronaldinho last summer,

believed that German star Michael Ballack was fortunate to have remained on the pitch.

"Chelsea played very physically and I thought it was scandalous that (Michael) Ballack did not receive a second yellow card for a foul on (Andres) Iniesta on the edge of the area," said Guardiola.

"That is something you would expect in any normal game during the season and it is these small details which did not go our way which will end up deciding the tie.

"Referees need to take an overall look at games and if that had happened then he would have seen that we were not the team which was fouling and we were looking to play football.

"Anyone looking at the match will know there was only one team looking to attack, we were always looking for a goal but Chelsea are a good side who have been together for a long time and won trophies.

"We now have to go to Stamford Bridge, play the football we always play and try and win."

The Barca players were similarly forthright with Xavi Hernandez complaining: "so that is what the English call fair play," while Toure Yaya also hit out at Chelsea's tackling.

"It was a difficult game and some of their tackles were outrageous while we would just touch a player and there would be a free-kick or a booking. We now have to go there (Stamford Bridge) and get a win, the tie is still not decided," said Toure, who was one of those booked.

Barca were also dealt a blow with the news that centre-half Rafa Marquez is set to miss the rest of the season after picking up what appears to be a serious knee injury. His replacement Carles Puyol will also be absent from the return leg through suspension after accumulating his third yellow card.

Eto'o, who it has been denied is subject to a 40million pound bid from Manchester City, said that there was hope for Barcelona as playing at home Chelsea will now have to come out and attack.

"We had all the chances," said the Cameroon marksman.

"I would imagine they won't be able to play in the second leg like they did tonight by sitting back in their half."

"We will see how they are going to approach it. We will try and score the goal that we need to get us to the final."

Chelsea coach Guus Hiddink, though, praised the character of his players for the way they stood firm and prevented Barca's star-studded forward line from scoring.

"This was a good result but the tie is not decided yet and we have another very hard game ahead of us. It was not an easy match to play and we will have to improve in some areas for the next game but overall I am happy as we defended very well," said Hiddink, who won what was then the European Cup as coach of PSV Eindhoven in 1988.

"Barca keep the ball very well and so it meant we had to defend a lot but we defended very well and I have to praise (John) Terry for his courage. They put us under a lot of pressure but we never yielded and we managed to neutralise the threat from (Lionel) Messi."

Chelsea skipper Terry conceded that Barcelona had had the majority of the chances but was delighted to have come away with the draw.

"We stayed very tight at the back," said Terry, whose missed penalty in last year's final handed victory to Manchester United.

"It was a fantastic performance and to not concede a goal is delightful. Hopefully going back to the Bridge we can use that to our advantage."

Vela caught up in flu scare

AFP, Manchester

Arsenal's Mexican forward Carlos Vela was told to stay away from training on Monday as the English club reacted to concerns over the outbreak of swine flu that has killed more than 150 people in his homeland.

The 20-year-old has not been in Mexico recently but had been visited by friends from home last week and underwent tests as a precaution.

Vela, who has made 12 Premier League appearances for Arsenal this season, was given the all clear and allowed to travel with the Arsenal squad for Wednesday's Champions League semifinal, first leg at Manchester United.

"Today he was free to attend training," Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger revealed on Tuesday. "I was asked to keep him at home yesterday and he was not allowed to be at the training ground. His Mexican friends came to visit last week."

Gerets to quit Marseille

AFP, Marseille

Marseille coach Eric Gerets dropped a bombshell here on Tuesday as he told his title-leading players he would be quitting the club at the end of the season.

The Belgian coach - whose contract terminates at the end of June - has been at the club since September 2007 and has turned them into title contenders after years of failing to challenge seven-time champions Lyon.

On Monday the straight-talking Belgian had to deny he was not going to replace Jurgen Klinsmann after he was sacked from the Bayern Munich post.

Indeed Gerets, who turns 55 in May, refused to discuss his future - it has been claimed he is in advanced talks with Saudi Arabian side Al-Hilal - saying it would prove a distraction for his players from their ambition of landing the title.

Gerets, a player on the Belgian side that reached the 1986 World Cup semifinals where they lost to eventual champions Argentina, also this month denied he was a candidate to become the next coach of Belgium.

By announcing his departure before the end of the season Gerets is following the example set by Jacques Santini, who announced he was standing down as France manager to take over Tottenham before Euro 2004, affecting moral in the French camp in Portugal.

Marseille - who won the last of their eight titles in 1992 - lead Bordeaux by five points though the latter can reduce it to two should they beat Rennes on Wednesday.



Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola gives instructions to his players during their Champions League semifinal first-leg clash against Chelsea at Nou Camp on Tuesday.

England praises Chelsea

AFP, London

Chelsea kept their Champions League hopes alive with a brilliant defence against Barcelona in the first leg of their semifinal at the Camp Nou, newspapers here said Wednesday.

"Job done... Blues will return to Stamford Bridge with everything to play for," said the Daily Telegraph after the 0-0 draw on Tuesday that left Barcelona goalless for the first time at home this season in the competition.

"Courageous Chelsea withstood an ordeal by Catalan fire to put themselves in the Champions League driving seat last night," said the Daily Mirror.

A commentator from the paper added: "It wasn't beautiful or anything close to it. But it sure was effective, sure did the job, sure made Chelsea feel like they had done the hard work."

The Daily Mail praised Chelsea's "brilliantly organised defence."

It added: "Nobody is going to beat Barcelona at football right now, so a cunning strategy had to be devised and, while forced to soak up a great deal of pressure, Chelsea were hard-working and tenacious in stifling their hosts."

There was widespread praise for Petr Cech, who made a couple of important blocks from Samuel Eto'o and substitute Alexandr Hleb, and relief that Barca's Lionel Messi failed to wreak the havoc that had been expected of him.

"Barc but no bite!" headlined the Sun, adding: "Chelsea now go into the second leg next Wednesday at Stamford Bridge on a level footing."

Marquez out for season

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Mexican international Rafael Marquez has been ruled out for the rest of the season after suffering a knee injury in Tuesday's goalless Champions League clash with Chelsea.

The 30-year-old defender will undergo surgery on Saturday and will be unavailable for between eight and 10 weeks, the Spanish league leaders said in a statement.

The club said Marquez injured himself early in the second half of the match.

He immediately fell to the ground and was replaced by club captain Carles Puyol who was being rested for the return leg at Stamford Bridge due to being on a yellow card.

FIFA keeps an eye on swine flu

AFP, Johannesburg

World football's governing body said Wednesday that it is monitoring the outbreak of swine fever that has sparked alerts around the globe just six weeks before the Confederations Cup.

"We are monitoring the situation and we hope it will be under control before the seven teams are moving from their countries to South Africa for the Confederations Cup," said FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke.

"We will cancel only if we feel that we have to. If there are no risks and if we have all the necessary assurances, the competition will go ahead," he told a press conference.

"It is serious, it is so serious that we cancelled our Concacaf tournament" in Mexico, he added.

Countries playing in the tournament have the right to bar their teams from travelling to South Africa from the Confederations Cup, which runs from June 14 to 28, Valcke said.

FIFA was forced to move the women's World Cup to the United States in 2003, due to the S.A.R.S. outbreak in the intended host country China.

Medical experts from FIFA were set to meet this week in Zurich to discuss the swine flu outbreak, Valcke said.

The disease is believed to have killed 159 people in Mexico, the epicentre of the outbreak that has already produced cases as far away as Germany and Israel.

Spain slates referee

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, Barcelona

Chelsea's ultra-defensive performance against Barcelona in their Champions League semifinal has been given a damning verdict by the local press which claimed that their over-physical game plan went unpunished by the referee.

While there has been general praise for the impenetrable wall that Chelsea built in the Camp Nou to hold out 0-0, the Catalan paper Sport was not alone in saying that the referee failed to give a "blatant" penalty on Thierry Henry and that Michael Ballack should have been dismissed for a second bookable offence.

Following on from the criticism from Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola and his players after the game, Sport raged: "The referee Wolfgang Stark will not be forgotten after his performance at the Nou Camp, motivated by the absurd and erroneous theory to limit the number of yellow cards and simply give warnings."

"He allowed Chelsea to commit serious and continual fouls at their pleasure and not punish them."

"On top of this he bottled a decision to give a penalty conceded by Jose Bosingwa on Thierry Henry after 72 minutes."

Sport added: "Stark compounded his poor display by failing to give a second yellow card to his compatriot Michael Ballack."

Kaiser drops Rijkaard hint

Football

AFP, Munich

As the quest to replace Jurgen Klinsmann continues, Bayern Munich president Franz Beckenbauer said Wednesday Dutchman Frank Rijkaard is a possible candidate as future coach of the German giants.

Klinsmann was sacked as Bayern coach on Monday after only ten months in charge following a string of poor results with former Munich trainer Jupp Heynckes taking over as caretaker coach for the remaining five league games.

And the 46-year-old Rijkaard, who won the Champions League crown in 2006 with Barcelona, is without a club having been sacked by the Spaniards at the end of last season.

Brazil's Luiz Felipe Scolari, Italy's Roberto Mancini, German Bernd Schuster and Hamburg's ex-Tottenham coach Martin Jol have also all been touted in the German media as possibilities to coach Bayern next season.

"One solution would be Rijkaard, he doesn't have a contract at the moment," admitted Beckenbauer on German broadcaster Premiere.

"It is still a little early to talk about this, but, of course, one must think about possibilities. We have to look into who would fit at Bayern and then make our decision."

Beckenbauer, who has captained and coached Germany to World Cup success, effectively ruled out both Chelsea caretaker coach Guus Hiddink and Arsenal boss

Arsene Wenger as possibilities.

"I value him over all others, but he will leave Chelsea to concentrate on the Russian team," said Beckenbauer about Hiddink.

"He won't take his place at Bayern."

And Beckenbauer doubted Wenger would want to leave Arsenal, who he has coached since 1996, having turned the north London club into consistent contenders for the Champions League title.

"Naturally he is an option, but we will not get him," said Beckenbauer.

"He has developed the side in England and will not want to leave."

Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge has said they expect to name the new coach within the next six weeks.



Bayern Munich's new coach Jupp Heynckes (R) oversees his first training session in Munich on Tuesday.

Clash for bragging rights

AFP, Paris



Germany and Ukraine are both guaranteed a finalist in this season's UEFA Cup, with two of the top sides from each nation facing off against each other in Thursday's semifinal first legs.

Runaway Ukrainian league leaders Dynamo Kiev host reigning domestic champions Shakhtar Donetsk in the country's capital, with Werder Bremen then welcoming Hamburg to the Weserstadion in north-western Germany.

National bragging rights will not be the only thing at stake.

The final in Istanbul's Sukru Saracoglu Stadium will be the last game in the competition before its re-launch as the UEFA Europa League next season, so whoever prevails on May 20 will go down as the last ever UEFA Cup champions.

Martin Jol's Hamburg go into the game off the back of a 2-0 defeat at Borussia

Dortmund in the Bundesliga on Saturday, but they remain just three points off leaders Wolfsburg in fifth place as one of Germany's tightest title races in years gathers pace.

The 1983 European champions have revenge in their sights, having been beaten 3-1 on penalties by Bremen in the semifinals of the German Cup last week.

"Bremen are not better than us," said Hamburg midfielder Piotr Trochowski afterwards. "Look at where they are in the Bundesliga. We have had a superb season and maybe we will get our revenge in the UEFA Cup."

Just as great as the blow of defeat for Hamburg was the loss of their Croatia international striker Mladen Petric, who looks set to miss both legs of the UEFA Cup tie with a shin injury inflicted by Bremen's Brazilian stopper Naldo.

Bremen, meanwhile, are

expecting to be without Finnish defender Petri Pasanen, who recently underwent surgery on a toe problem.

"I don't know if I'll be back in time for the Hamburg match, but at the moment it doesn't look like it," said Pasanen, whose side came back from two goals down to win 3-2 at home to Bochum at the weekend.

Dynamo and Shakhtar saw off two of the top sides from France in the last round, with Dynamo beating Paris St-Germain 3-0 on aggregate and Shakhtar demolishing French champions-elect Marseille 4-1.

The teams have also been drawn against each other in the last four of the Ukrainian Cup on May 13, while Dynamo currently enjoy a 12-point lead over their rivals in the Ukrainian first division.

Shakhtar's well-travelled Romanian coach Mircea Lucescu has complained about the state of his side's Olympiysky pitch prior to the second leg on May 7.

"The pitch at Olimpiysky is destroying our play," he said. "As a coach, I feel ashamed to make my players perform on a pitch like this."

Sir Alex Ferguson has insisted Nani has a future at Manchester United and attributed the Portuguese winger's lack of first-team opportunities this season to the form of Korean rival Park Ji-Sung.

Nani, who was substituted at half-time during the 5-2 win over Tottenham at the weekend, has started only six Premier League games this season and not finished any of them.

That has fuelled reports the 22-year-old will be offloaded barely two years after United paid 14 million pounds (20.4 million dollars) to buy him from Sporting Lisbon.

But Ferguson said he still had faith in the winger. "He has been unlucky this season," the Scot told www.manutd.com. "The form of Park Ji-Sung has been absolutely outstanding and most of the time has kept Nani out of the team."

"Getting a consistent run has really been the problem for him and then he got a little injury. But he will be here next season and he will do very well next season for us."

Webb admits mistake

Football

AFP, London

Top English referee Howard Webb conceded on Tuesday he had been wrong to award English Premier League leaders Manchester United a crucial penalty against Spurs last Saturday.

Spurs were leading 2-0 at the time when Webb - who only last week was appointed referee for May's FA Cup final - pointed to the spot after judging Spurs' keeper Heurelho Gomes to have fouled Michael Carrick.

That proved to be the turning point as Spurs folded completely to end up on the wrong end of a 5-2 defeat.

"I've looked at it again and I think it was a mistake but we make these decisions honestly," said the 37-year-old, who last year received death threats from Polish fans for awarding Euro 2008 co-hosts Austria a late penalty in their group game which they converted to force a 1-1 draw.

"It's not always easy to see the way the play pans out from

pitch level," he told the BBC.

"I could see the Manchester United player touch the ball and saw him get clattered by the goalkeeper but didn't see the extra deviation from the goalkeeper's fingers touching the ball."

"I'm disappointed as I always strive for perfection. I'll look at the tape in detail later in the week and try to avoid it happening again in the future."

"I never want to have a negative impact on a game and I get no pleasure from not reaching the high standards we set ourselves."

"But show me a man who's never made a mistake and I'll show you a man who's done nothing."

Webb admitted in January he had experienced the lowest moment of his career when during the Birmingham Wolves FA Cup third round tie he inadvertently deflected a pass by Birmingham's Radhi Jaidi to Wolves striker Andy Keogh which led to Sam Vokes scoring - Wolves won the match 2-0.

"You want the world to swallow you up at that moment," he said at the time.

Nani going nowhere

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has insisted Nani has a future at Manchester United and attributed the Portuguese winger's lack of first-team opportunities this season to the form of Korean rival Park Ji-Sung.

Nani, who was substituted at half-time during the 5-2 win over Tottenham at the weekend, has started only six Premier League games this season and not finished any of them.

That has fuelled reports the 22-year-old will be offloaded barely two years after United paid 14 million pounds (20.4 million dollars) to buy him from Sporting Lisbon.

But Ferguson said he still had faith in the winger. "He has been unlucky this season," the Scot told www.manutd.com. "The form of Park Ji-Sung has been absolutely outstanding and most of the time has kept Nani out of the team."

"Getting a consistent run has really been the problem for him and then he got a little injury. But he will be here next season and he will do very well next season for us."