

Burnley stun MU

AFP, London



Manchester United's defence of the Premier League title suffered an early blow as the champions slumped to a shock 1-0 defeat at promoted Burnley on Wednesday.

Sir Alex Ferguson's team were beaten for the first time this season as Robbie Blake scored the first half winner for Burnley, who were indebted to goalkeeper Brian Jensen for saving Michael Carrick's second half penalty.

Burnley were playing their first home match as a top-flight club for 33 years and marked the occasion with a dynamic display that was too much for the champions.

Ferguson made three changes to the team that beat Birmingham on Sunday with Michael Owen handed a first start after his close-season move from Newcastle.

But it was Burnley, promoted via the Championship play-offs last season, who seized the initiative in the 19th minute at Turf Moor when Blake pounced on a half-cleared cross and lashed a ferocious volley past Ben Foster.

United had a chance to level when Blake hauled down Patrice Evra, but Jensen, the giant Burnley keeper nicknamed "the beast" by fans, kept his side ahead by turning away Carrick's penalty.

Ferguson sent on Dimitar Berbatov for Owen, who is still waiting for his first goal since January - a drought stretching over 12 hours of playing time - but United were unable to avoid their first defeat against the Clarets since 1968.

"I thought we gave an awful lot to the game in terms of attacking play," said Burnley manager Owen Coyle, whose team lost their first match at Stoke on Saturday. "Our players went toe-to-toe and tried to match up with them."

"The goal was terrific and it was fitting to win any game. We're delighted to have points on the board."

Liverpool gave the perfect response to Sunday's defeat at Tottenham as Rafael Benitez's team claimed a 4-0 victory over Stoke at Anfield.

Fernando Torres opened the scoring early on and Glen Johnson's first goal for Liverpool made it two before Dirk Kuyt and David Ngog struck

late on.

Torres took just four minutes to put Liverpool ahead as he met Steven Gerrard's cross with a fine finish.

Benitez's team took complete control in the 45th minute when James Beattie cleared Kuyt's header off the line and the ball fell for Johnson, who volleyed home from close-range.

Kuyt added the third in the 78th minute before Ngog's stoppage time strike sealed the rout.

Tottenham maintained their impressive start to the campaign as England striker Jermain Defoe scored a hat-trick in a 5-1 win at Hull.

Harry Redknapp's team caught the eye with victory over Liverpool on Sunday and they showed that was no flash in the pan by moving to the top of the table.

Defoe and Wilson Palacios gave them a two-goal lead before Stephen Hunt got one back, but Defoe completed his hat-trick either side of a goal from Robbie Keane.

Redknapp's team took the lead in the 10th minute when Defoe, who scored twice in England's friendly against Holland last week, took Tom Huddellstone's pass on the edge of the penalty area and worked space to drive home a fine finish.

Honduras midfielder Palacios increased Tottenham's lead four minutes later when he finished Keane's pass for his first goal in English football.

Hull winger Hunt reduced the deficit when he curled in a long-range free-kick in the 25th minute.

But Defoe restored Tottenham's two-goal advantage on the stroke of half-time.

Keane got on the scoresheet in the 78th minute and Defoe's treble arrived in the 90th minute.

Birmingham claimed their first win of the season as James McFadden's stoppage time penalty sealed a 1-0 victory over Portsmouth at St Andrews.

Alex McLeish's side, promoted as Championship runners-up last season, were awarded the spot-kick when Portsmouth goalkeeper David James collided with Sebastian Larsson.



Liverpool striker Dirk Kuyt gets a congratulatory hug from teammate Steven Gerrard (R) after scoring against Stoke City during their Premier League encounter at Anfield on Wednesday. Liverpool won 4-0.

PHOTO: AFP

IN BRIEF

L'pool dismiss Rafa rumours

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool managing director Christian Purslow on Thursday dismissed reports that manager Rafael Benitez is on the verge of quitting Anfield.

Bookmakers in England suspended betting on his future prior to Wednesday's 4-0 victory over Stoke as speculation suggested the Spaniard was set to leave.

It was suggested that Benitez was ready to walk out after the Tom Hicks and George Gillett, the club's American owners, failed to give him a large enough transfer kitty.

Benitez has been told he has just two million pounds to buy defensive cover, with Greek centre-back Sotirios Kyrgiakos set to sign from AEK Athens.

But Purslow, who has joined the Reds to take over many of the duties of outgoing chief executive Rick Parry while a full-time replacement is found, has dismissed the conjecture.

"It's 1000 per cent rubbish. I had dinner with Rafa and the fact I had not heard the rumours should tell you everything about how true they are," he said in The Sun.

Benitez added: "I remain 100 per cent committed to the club, the fans and players."

Samp snap up Semioli

AFP, Rome

Sampdoria on Wednesday announced the signing of midfielder Franco Semioli from Fiorentina.

The 29-year-old will wear the number 77 jersey and will cost the Genoa-based club five million euros, according to Italian news agency Ansa.

Assou-Ekotto signs new Spurs deal

AFP, London

Tottenham left-back Benoit Assou-Ekotto signed a new four-year contract with the Premier League club on Wednesday.

Assou-Ekotto, 25, scored his first goal for Spurs with a superb strike in Sunday's 2-1 victory over Liverpool and boss Harry Redknapp is delighted with the Cameroon defender's progress.

"He has done very well," Redknapp said at the end of last season.

"He was injured last year but I have been very impressed with him as he has been in great form. He has looked an outstanding left-back."

Lyon, Atletico shine

AFP, Paris



French side Lyon stormed closer to a 10th successive Champions League group stage appearance on Wednesday while attack-minded Atletico Madrid also seized control of their play-off tie in hot and hostile Greece.

Lyon, who were forced into the qualifying competition after losing their seven-year grip on the French title last season, crushed Anderlecht 5-1.

The French were 4-0 ahead at the break with Miralem Pjanic, Lisandro Lopez, with a

penalty, Michel Bastos and

Bafetimbi Gomis all on target. Anderlecht, beaten in Champions League qualifying for the last two seasons, pulled one back through Matias Suarez in the 58th minute, but Claude Puel's Lyon side restored their four-goal advantage inside five minutes with Gomis grabbing his second of the night.

"We had a lot of technical quality and all the players raised their level," said Puel.

"Qualification for the group stage is not guaranteed. We have to be strong."

Atletico Madrid claimed a 3-2 win against Panathinaikos in a tough assignment in Athens in front of 60,000 fans in the city's Olympic Stadium.

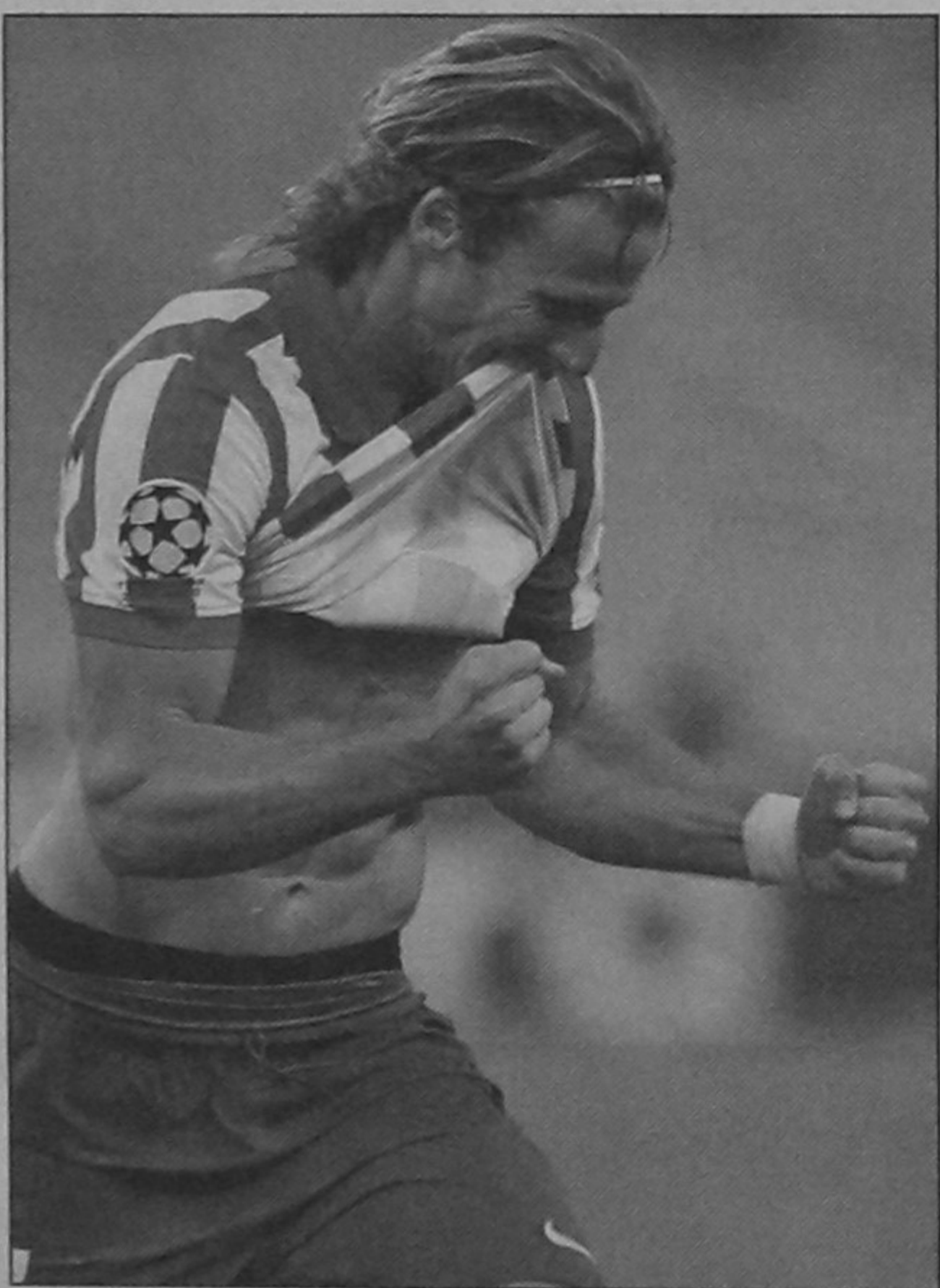


PHOTO: AFP

Atletico Madrid striker Diego Forlan is ecstatic after scoring against Panathinaikos during their Champions League play-off at the Athens' Olympic Stadium on Wednesday.

Pep happy despite loss

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola said he was happy with his young team's performance despite losing 1-0 to Manchester City, and appealed for patience from fans over new star signing Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

Bulgarian winger Martin Petrov scored in the 28th minute against the run of play to beat the Spanish and European champions and take the annual pre-season Joan Gamper Trophy for the big-spending English Premiership side on Wednesday.

Guardiola brought in a lot of young reserve team players and left many of his big stars on the bench.

"I am very happy with their performance, young players facing a quality team like Manchester City. We are fortunate to have a good pool," he said.

"I made many changes, and the youngsters responded very well."

The most anticipated moment came in the

second half, when Ibrahimovic and Argentine Lionel Messi, two of the top-rated strikers in the world, came on.

The Swede almost scored in the 74th minute, but his shot lacked force.

It was his first match for the club since his transfer from Inter Milan this summer and since undergoing surgery on a broken hand last month.

Guardiola appealed to fans to give him some time to adapt.

"He has come for four or five years, not for one day," he said, adding that combining with his teammates "takes a bit of learning."

The player himself said he is just trying to find his "rhythm" in the new team.

"I played 45 minutes and I tried not to think about the injury to my hand. It bothered me a bit, but I play with my feet not with my hands."

The Catalan giants, who won a unique treble of Spanish league, Cup and European Champions League last season, face Athletic Bilbao on Sunday in the return leg of the Spanish Supercup.

On August 28, they play Ukraine's Shakhtar Donetsk in the European Supercup.

Real destroy Dortmund

AFP, Dortmund

Spanish giants Real Madrid beat Bundesliga side Borussia Dortmund 5-0 here on Wednesday in a friendly as part of the German club's 100th anniversary celebrations.

There may have been a carnival atmosphere amongst the 75,000 spectators, but Real were clearly in no mood to hand out gifts as they tore the home side apart in the second half.

Esteban Granero opened the scoring for the Spaniards after just three minutes and only three minutes after the break Dutch star Arjen Robben slotted home the second.

Gonzalo Higuain netted the third in the 73rd minute before Brazil's Kaka slotted home a 76th minute penalty with Raul adding the fifth with just a minute left.

Former Manchester United midfielder Cristiano Ronaldo played his part for his new club, but was widely booed by the German fans whenever he got the ball.

Negredo to join Sevilla

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Alvaro Negredo has ended weeks of speculation about his future and agreed to join Primera Liga rivals Sevilla, Spanish sporting dailies said Thursday.

The 23-year-old was last month linked with Tottenham and then more recently with Hull City and Zenit St Petersburg and finally with newly promoted Spanish side Zaragoza.

The Marca newspaper said Sevilla, which qualified for this season's European Champions League by finishing third behind Barcelona and Real, will pay 15 million euros (21 million dollars) for the player, who is set to sign a four-year contract later Thursday.

It said the club will have an option to buy back the striker for 18 million euros in the first year and 21 million in the second.

Another paper, AS, put the transfer fee at 14 million euros with a buy-back option of 17 million over the two seasons.

Spanish media said earlier this week that Hull was ready to meet Real's terms of an 18-million-euro transfer fee plus a two-year buy-back clause worth 25 million euros.

But Negredo wanted to remain in Spain, and Real was ready to let him.

He was then on the point of moving to Zaragoza before Sevilla made a final effort to sign him, Marca said.

Can Juve dethrone Inter?

AFP, Rome



The question on everyone's lips at the start of the new Serie A season is: who can stop Inter Milan from securing a fifth straight scudetto crown?

The consensus is that Juventus have more than a fleeting chance of dethroning their traditional rivals.

There are two main reasons for that as the Old Lady of Turin have bought well in the off-season having finished third and then second in their two seasons since returning to Serie A and Inter have other priorities.

With Pavel Nedved retiring, Brazilian playmaker Diego has been added to bring guile to a Juve forward line that already boasts the power of Amauri and Vincenzo Iaquinta, not to mention the brilliance of veteran Alessandro Del Piero.

With more invention up front, Juventus also needed more solidity in midfield and at the back and have got both in Brazilian Felipe Melo and Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro.

Despite finishing 10 points behind Inter last season, Juventus appear to be a team heading in the right direction.

Their primary rivals, though, have lost their star man in Zlatan Ibrahimovic and that is one reason why many, including Italy boss Marcello Lippi, are tipping Juve for the title.

However, despite the big Swede's departure, Inter have probably recruited as well as anyone this season.

Samuel Eto'o will bring speed and explosiveness to their front line and has always been a more prolific finisher than Ibrahimovic.

On top of that they bought Argentina hot-shot Diego Milito from Genoa and if anything will be more potent up front.

Brazilian Thiago Motta, another buy from Genoa, will improve their midfield options and his compatriot Lucio, prized from Bayern Munich, will add a new dimension to their backline, giving Inter a powerful and dominant presence in the centre of defence.

Coach Jose Mourinho is also likely to add a creative attacking midfielder to his squad before the end of the transfer deadline with

Real Madrid's Dutchman Wesley Sneijder expected to join.

That could be the final piece in the Inter jigsaw and would be the ideal signing to counter the loss of Ibrahimovic's unpredictability.

What could hamper Inter, though, is their obsession with the European Champions League having flopped so spectacularly on the continent in recent years.

That is the final frontier for Inter this season and if they get caught up in focussing on Europe, Juventus would have an even better chance of pipping them at home.

However, Inter not only have to contend with their own failures but the increasing sense of inferiority prevailing in Italy when faced with Europe's elite.

Italian team's results have been getting worse in Europe while their ability to compete in the global transfer market has also diminished.

The two best players in Serie A, Kaka and Ibrahimovic, were both prized away to Spain and other than Eto'o and Diego, there have been no major stars coming into the country.

The Eto'o signing was also nothing more than a makeweight in the Ibrahimovic deal while Diego was not pinched from another major European power but instead from a Werder Bremen side who finished mid-table in Germany last year.

Things are even more dire in the case of Italy's other big side with AC Milan having failed to sign a marquee player to replace Kaka.

Instead they have brought in Klaas Jan Huntelaar, surplus to requirements at Real, little-known Brazilian Thiago Silva and American centre-back Oguchi Onyewu, a free transfer from Standard Liege.

Despite the claims from club president Silvio Berlusconi that they will indeed be a major player in the title race, Milan look more likely to battling to hold onto a top four spot this season.

In fact, they are the big unknown for this season and a lot depends on Ronaldinho.

If the Brazilian can recapture some of his Barcelona form from 2006, he alone could drive the club to success. But if he continues with his recent decline, this could be a miserable season in the red half of the city.

Everton drop Lescott

Football

AFP, Liverpool

Everton defender Joleon Lescott's future at Goodison Park is in doubt after he was dropped for Thursday's Europa League play-off first leg against Czech club Sigma Olomouc.

Lescott did not train with the rest of David Moyes's first teamers on Wednesday following weeks of transfer speculation linking him with Manchester City, who have had two bids rejected for the defender.

The 27-year-old, who was forced to train with the reserves, has also had a transfer request rejected by Moyes and turned in a below-par performance in Saturday's 6-1 home defeat by Arsenal.

The Everton boss admitted he was unhappy with his centre-back's attitude and said: "Joleon's attitude has not been right these past days, he has disappointed me and he has disappointed his team-mates. He is not in the right frame of mind."

"I made a decision and due to Joleon's attitude, I felt it would be better if he wasn't included in the squad."

"He wasn't (right) before Saturday's game and he told me that. But I took the risk and chose to play him. But now the time is right to leave him alone until things are sorted, and hopefully that will be after the deadline."

"I find Joleon a really good boy to work with, a pleasure in fact. I couldn't say enough good things about him."

"But the boy has changed. It is not just me

who has noticed but the players who are working with him have noticed it as well.

"But the door is open for Joleon. We don't want him to go. I have said that all along, unless we get an offer that I think is right."

"But at the present time he is not in the squad and it is best that we get on without him."

Moyes insisted he still does not want to sell the player. "I hope this will all be sorted out, after the (transfer) deadline," he said.

But City are sure to return with an improved offer in the hope of persuading Everton to offload a clearly unhappy player.

With Phil Jagielka still injured, Moyes now has a problem in central defence, and either captain Phil Neville, usually a full-back or midfielder or young midfielder Jack Rodwell will have to step in for Lescott.

"People can read what they like into this. But I have said all along I don't want to sell him. But it is a bit like Cristiano Ronaldo leaving Manchester United, there is always a price," Moyes admitted.

"At this moment no club has made us an offer for the player that we want to accept."

"I know this is a gamble, but I hope we can get back on the right road now after the 6-1 defeat by Arsenal. That has damaged our confidence, and our reputation."

"We have to rebuild that again. We are starting as low as we can go, but maybe we needed it. Maybe I have been telling the players that they are too good, too often."

"Maybe they need to back to doing the basic things and progressing their careers. Back to basics now and back to playing much better."