



Milan forward Ronaldinho performs samba after scoring the equalising goal from a penalty during their Champions League encounter against Real Madrid at San Siro on Tuesday.

EUROPA LEAGUE Champions eye progress

Football

AFP, Paris

Sporting Lisbon, Red Bull Salzburg and defending champions Shakhtar Donetsk can all book their places in the Europa League knockout phase with victories on Thursday.

The trio are the only sides to have won all three of their group stage matches in the competition to date and now stand on the brink of the last 32.

Shakhtar, 2-1 victors over Werder Bremen in last season's final, travel to Toulouse in Group J, having beaten the French side 4-0 when they last met two weeks ago.

Group D leaders Sporting, who are struggling in their domestic league, host Latvian outfit FK Ventspils at the Jose Alvalade stadium while Austrian champions Salzburg will chase a fourth straight victory at Group G bottom side Levski Sofia.

Salzburg will be assured of a place in the top two if they win and Lazio defeat Villarreal in the group's other match.

Lazio won 2-1 when the teams last met in Rome after a last-minute goal from Tommaso Rocchi and the Spanish side's experienced midfielder Robert Pires says his team need to become more clinical if they are to progress.

"We have three games left. If we want to

stay in the competition, we have to win all three," said the former French international, whose side trail Salzburg by six points in Group G.

"If we beat Lazio, it will give us the confidence to start winning again in the future."

After a poor start to the season, Villarreal have bounced back to win their last two domestic league games - including a 5-0 demolition of Tenerife on Sunday - and Pires feels they have turned a corner.

"We've had bad luck this year in both the championship and Europa League because we've played well but just haven't got the results," he added.

"We haven't changed anything. We have the same players and the same training programme, but when you are on a bad run, it's difficult to escape. I think we have the quality to get out of this situation."

Lazio's city rivals Roma were also grateful to an injury-time goal in their last match after defender Marco Andreoli's late strike earned them a 1-1 draw at Fulham, whom they welcome to the Stadio Olimpico in Group E.

Revenge will be on the agenda across Europe, with Thursday's matches the reverse fixtures of the last games in the competition.

Everton are another high-profile side with scores to settle, having been out-classed 5-0 by Group I rivals Benfica in their last outing.

But the Premier League side welcome

the Portuguese heavyweights to Goodison Park knowing that victory will enable them to return to the top of the group.

"It's not so much about revenge, but to prove a point that we're still the strongest team in the group and hopefully the strongest team in the competition," said Everton's 18-year-old midfielder Jack Rodwell, whose side were missing 11 senior players in Lisbon.

"With more players coming back, I think we'll finish strong. We've had a lot of players missing all season but always managed to do well, so we're not going to make excuses - but yes, we've got a few good players coming back and hopefully that will help us further on down the line in the competition."

A number of teams are already in the last-chance saloon, with Scottish giants Celtic needing to secure their first ever win on German soil at Hamburg to remain in with a chance of making the next round.

The Glasgow outfit will be without injured Polish international goalkeeper Artur Boruc, who has a knee injury, and will be eliminated if they lose and Hapoel Tel Aviv win at Rapid Vienna in the other Group E game.

Hamburg and Hapoel will be within touching distance of the next round if they both win, while Ajax and Anderlecht will be in a similar position in Group A if they defeat Dinamo Zagreb and FC Timisoara respectively.

Spain to end tax breaks

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spain's ruling Socialist Party said on Tuesday it had reached an agreement with three smaller parties to remove the so-called "Beckham law" under which foreign footballers receive tax breaks which have been credited with drawing top players to La Liga.

The law, introduced in 2005 as a means to lure foreign executives to Spain, allows foreign players who earn over 600,000 euros (885,000 dollars) a year to reduce their tax rate to 24 per cent instead of the 43 per cent applied for Spaniards in the same income bracket.

It became dubbed the "Beckham law" because it was back-dated to July 1, 2003, the day after David Beckham moved to Real Madrid from

Manchester United.

"There is an agreement to change the 'Beckham law,'" said a spokeswoman for the governing Socialist Party which lacks an absolute majority in parliament and needs the backing of other parties to pass legislation.

The ruling party has the support of the left-wing coalition Izquierda Unida (IU), their Catalan equivalent the Iniciativa per Catalunya/Verds (ICV) and the Galician regional party Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) to change the law.

The four parties together have 176 seats in the 350-seat assembly.

The new law will not apply to recent big-name signings like that of Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo by Real Madrid or Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic by Barcelona because it will not be applied retroactively and

will only relate to contracts signed from January 1, 2010.

The tax break has come under renewed attack at a time when Spain is facing its worst recession in over 50 years which has caused the unemployment rate to hit 18 per cent, the highest rate in the European Union.

The president of the Spanish Football Federation, Jose Luis Astiazaran, warned his organization would take steps to oppose the change in the law and would even consider stopping matches from going ahead as a form of protest.

"If this tax break is eliminated, it will affect football by making the league less interesting, there would be less viewers of matches on pay-TV, less interest on the part of sponsors, less crowds in the stadiums and the state would earn less tax income," he told reporters.

Spurs give trial to HK striker

AFP, Hong Kong

English Premier League side Tottenham Hotspur have offered a trial to a Hong Kong international striker who scored against the London giants in a pre-season friendly, a news report said Wednesday.

Chan Siu-ki, 24, will have 10 days to impress Spurs boss Harry Redknapp next month, the South China Morning Post said.

The forward has scored 22 goals in 27 appearances for his club South China, the newspaper said, and netted with a long-distance volley against Spurs when the two teams met in Hong Kong in the summer.

The Hong Kong champions and Tottenham on Tuesday agreed a "club partnership", the paper said, in an effort to boost the English side's profile in Asia.

Stalemate at San Siro

AFP, Milan



AC Milan and Real Madrid took a small step towards qualification for the Champions League knock-out rounds following a 1-1 draw at the San Siro on Tuesday.

Ronaldinho's conversion of a dubiously-awarded penalty cancelled out Karim Benzema's opener for the visitors as the stalemate left both teams a point clear of Marseille, who thrashed FC Zurich 6-1, at the top of Group C.

There was no revenge for Madrid for their 3-2 defeat to the Italians at the Bernabeu two weeks ago but they were the better side, particularly before the break.

It was all Real at the start of the first half as the visitors dominated, much like they did in the early stages of the home match, leaving coach Manuel Pellegrini believing they should have won.

"I don't talk about the referee's decisions, we played well in the first half and showed the right attitude," he said, declining to talk about the penalty.

"We had 16 shots (in the first half) and only one Milan player, (Alexandre) Pato, made life difficult for us. We were in control.

"The second half was more difficult in terms of possession but we did all right and at the end we had two chances that could have brought us the three points we

deserved."

Milan's Brazilian coach Leonardo said a draw was probably the right result.

"If we look only at the first half, Real played very well, they had many chances but in the second I was a bit disappointed because we deserved to win," he said.

"We had good possession, we created many chances and we had the possibility to win."

"Honestly I think yes, they had many chances in the first and it was more difficult for us, we didn't cover the pitch well but in the second half we had many more chances, even (substitute Filippo) Inzaghi had a good chance."

"It was very even, in the first half they had chances but they weren't clear-cut chances so I think it was very even."

On six minutes a deflected Benzema shot was tipped over the bar by goalkeeper Dida while Sergio Ramos fired just wide in the 13th minute.

Just after Gonzalo Higuain made space for himself on the edge of the box but curled his effort over before Benzema held off Alessandro Nesta in the area after latching onto Marcelo's pass in the 20th minute but fired wide of the far post.

Milan finally came to life in the 24th minute with a quick break as Clarence Seedorf fed Alexandre Pato, who cut inside Alvaro Arbeloa but Iker Casillas came out and spread himself well to block the Brazilian's shot.

Real deservedly went in front in the 29th minute as former Milan star Kaka beat Seedorf on the edge of the area and

fired in a fierce daisy-cutter that was too hot for Dida to handle, allowing Benzema to fire the rebound into the far corner for his first goal in seven matches.

But 10 minutes from the break Ronaldinho equalised from the spot after Pepe was harshly penalised for handball when he slid in rashly to block Zambrotta's cross, the ball hitting his arm from barely a yard away.

Moments later Pato brilliantly took a long ball from Andrea Pirlo on his chest, held off Raul Albiol and shot past Casillas and in off the post but he was penalised for a foul that was not clear, although the Brazilian didn't protest.

The first clear chance of the second period went to Milan but captain Massimo Ambrosini somehow headed Pirlo's free-kick miles wide from five yards out.

Just as they had done in Madrid, Milan were giving a much better account of themselves in the second half and Marco Borriello rose highest in the box but glanced his header from Pirlo's corner wide.

In the last 10 minutes Inzaghi came on for Borriello and he came within inches of scoring a winner when Pato's right wing cross found him eight yards out but falling over he directed the ball up and onto the roof of the net.

And another sub, Raul of Real, was denied in the last minute as Dida, making up for his gaffe in Spain, made a stunning one-handed save to deny the Spaniard.

Drogba ready for MU clash

AFP, Madrid



Chelsea and former striker Didier Drogba go into show down with Manchester United at Stamford Bridge with wind in their sails having qualified for the knockout phase of the Champions League with a 2-2 group D draw at Atletico Madrid on Tuesday.

Ivory Coast star Drogba was making his first Champions League outing following a three-match suspension and warmed up for United with a brace (82, 88) which was cancelled out by a double from Atletico's Sergio "Kun" Aguero.

Drogba had not played in

Europe since May when he lost his cool and insulted the referee after Chelsea's Champions League semi-final defeat to eventual champions Manchester United.

"I hope I can continue playing and feeling like this until the end of the season," said the former Marseille man.

"We can now think about Manchester United and we have to do everything to beat them at home."

Chelsea lead the English Premier League by two points from reigning champions Manchester United.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti singled out the returning Drogba for praise and expressed his delight at reaching the knockout phase

with two games to spare.

"Didier was motivated at the start of the season and has been doing very well and continues to do very well and I hope he can play in other games like he did tonight," Ancelotti said.

"We have a lot of important players and he is certainly one of them."

Chelsea's 100 per cent European record, as well as their perfect defensive record, came to an end with the Atletico draw but Ancelotti was happy to have clinched a place in the last 16.

"It is not ideal to concede a goal in the last minute but it can happen," said Ancelotti. "We are in the next phase of the Champions League and this is important with two matches still to go."

"I don't think we were thinking about Manchester United before this game. We are thinking about them now and have time to do so."

Ancelotti, 50, said in the pre-match presser that the Champions League was his

priority and Chelsea hope they will be back in Madrid come May for the final at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Chelsea have never won the competition falling just short with four semi-finals and a final in the past six seasons.

Ancelotti has won the Champions League twice as a player (1989, '90) and manager (2003, 2007) with AC Milan so Chelsea will hope he can be their lucky talisman.

For Atletico Madrid improving their drastic league situation is the top priority with the club languishing third from bottom of the table going into the weekend's derby at home to Real Madrid.

In Europe the Champions League dream is over with third spot and parachuting into the Europa League the best they can hope for.

"I am really happy with the attitude of the players and I am sure we will get ourselves out of this situation," said Atletico coach "Quique" Sanchez Flores.

IN BRIEF

'Reds missing Alonso'

AFP, London

Steven Gerrard has admitted that Liverpool are badly missing the influence of Spain midfielder Xabi Alonso, who quit Anfield for Real Madrid in a 30-million-pound deal in August.

Liverpool's Premier League and Champions League campaigns have been hit hard by the seven defeats the club has already suffered this season with the loss of Alonso widely seen as having upset the balance of Rafael Benitez's side.

Emotional night for Kaka

AFP, Milan

Real Madrid's Brazil star Kaka said it was an emotional night for him on his first return to the club he graced for six years and with which he won the World Player of the Year title.

Kaka was not at his best in the Group C match that finished 1-1 but he did make a decisive contribution, firing in the shot in the 29th minute that Dida couldn't hold, allowing Karim Benzema to give the Spaniard the lead.

Several banners around the San Siro expressed the Milan faithful's affection for their former player while he was afforded standing ovations before and after the game.

"It was an emotional night, I tried to control my emotions and play the match," he said.

"(The reception) was great, as I expected it to be. I was offered a warm welcome. I had some great moments here and I want to thank the fans."

PHOTO: AFP

Bordeaux star Yoann Gourcuff (R) celebrates scoring the opening goal with teammate Michael Ciani during their Champions League clash against Bayern Munich at Allianz Arena on Tuesday.

