

Sevilla, Lyon go thru'

AFP, Paris



English Premier League giants Liverpool are on the brink of going out of the Champions League after drawing 1-1 with Lyon on Wednesday.

The draw put Lyon through to the knockout stages and they were joined by Sevilla, who were held 1-1 by VfB Stuttgart but assured of a top-two finish in their group when Rangers drew with Unirea Urziceni.

Barcelona's hold on the trophy which they won in such style last season loosened ever so slightly when they were held 0-0 by Russian champions Rubin Kazan.

Indeed Inter Milan's late comeback to gain a 2-1 victory over Dynamo Kiev in Ukraine sees the Italian side go top of the tightest group. Should Barcelona and Kazan finish tied for second place on points it would be the Russian outfit who progress by virtue of their head-to-head record.

Liverpool had bossed the first half against the seven-time French champions with Fernando Torres, Dirk Kuyt and Andriy Voronin all going close.

They looked set to come away with all three points when Ryan Babel struck a stunning opener late on but Lyon broke their hearts when Lisandro Lopez struck with minutes remaining.

Fiorentina's 5-2 romp at home to Debrecen - begun by Adrian Mutu's early goal - has really turned the heat up on Liverpool.

Lyon's highly-rated coach Claude Puel was relieved and delighted to have reached the knockout stage from one of the tougher groups. "We have mastered the art of writing particular screenplays throughout the season," said the former Monaco and Lille tactician.

"We were very courageous till the end in order to equalise and to qualify this evening."

Barcelona coach Josep Guardiola said he never thought it would be easy in Russia, especially in temperatures that reached as low as -5 degrees Celsius, but accepted that his side had to get maximum points from their final two matches.

"We looked better in the first half but later in the match Kazan played creative football and could have won," said Guardiola, who guided Barcelona to an unprecedented treble last term.

"The draw is a good result after such a match but now we need to win both of the remaining matches."

His Russian counterpart Kurban Berdyev was more than satisfied.

"We hoped to repeat our performance at Camp Nou (when they won 2-1) and in general we were successful," he said.

"We also created some chances against the world's best club but unfortunately missed them."

Arsenal are all but through after a 4-1 victory over Dutch champions AZ Alkmaar.

Wenger salutes Arsenal

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger believes Arsenal are maturing into a force to be reckoned with after the Gunners routed AZ Alkmaar 4-1 to move within touching distance of the Champions League knockout stages.

After being widely written off as also-rans following a pre-season marred by the sales of Emmanuel Adebayor and Kolo Toure to Manchester City, Wenger's side are beginning to hit their stride and look increasingly capable of ending their four-year trophy drought.

The Gunners brushed aside Dutch champions Alkmaar in emphatic fashion at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday and need just one point from their final two Group H matches against Standard Liege and Olympiakos to be certain of reaching the last 16.

While Wenger acknowledges that far sterner tests lie in wait later in the competition, he is delighted at the rapid rate of improvement displayed by his young team.

"I believe this season we are getting stronger from game to game. It is important to keep that attitude to progress and improve," he said.

"The competition gets more difficult as you go on but I believe we have quality. I said before the season started I believe in this team but it is down to us to be consistent. We have to believe in our future."

"At the moment, it is difficult to say (how far Arsenal can go). Let's focus on ourselves, be as

good as we can and if we meet someone who is better than us we will see."

"We need to focus on how we want to play. We have played like we love the game and we want to keep expressing our talent."

With Cesc Fabregas, Andrey Arshavin and Robin van Persie combining to produce some breathtaking moves and Eduardo, Tomas Rosicky and Theo Walcott all out of the starting eleven, it is not surprising the Gunners boss is anticipating a bright future.

Fabregas opened the scoring, then French midfielder Samir Nasri added to the feelgood factor with his first goal since March on his second appearance since breaking his leg in July.

Arsenal captain Fabregas added his second soon after half-time before Abou Diaby capped a magnificent move to make it four.

Jermaine Lens's late strike was little consolation for the completely outclassed Dutch side.

Wenger admits he has never seen such a wide array of attacking talent - quite a statement for a manager who has been able to call on the likes of Thierry Henry, Dennis Bergkamp, Marc Overmars and Robert Pires during his time in north London.

"Have I ever had as many on the creative side of the game? Certainly not," he said.

"It is our policy to produce our own players and add players with special qualities and (Thomas) Vermaelen and Arshavin are two good examples. Contrary to what people say I am not afraid to spend money."

"We have only players here who can play, pass the ball and score. Arshavin is not just a goalscorer. He can pass as well."



Arsenal midfielder Cesc Fabregas points to a teammate after scoring the third goal against AZ Alkmaar during their Champions League clash at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

Vieira's int'l future in balance

Football

AFP, Paris

The international future of Patrick Vieira could be decided on Thursday when France coach Raymond Domenech names his squad for the World Cup qualifying play-off against Ireland on November 14 and 18.

The 33-year-old Inter Milan defensive midfielder has 107 caps for his country and is nominally the current captain but he has not featured for Les Bleus since a 1-0 friendly defeat at home to Nigeria in June.

"Patrick's playing time means he still can't be called up, but I'm not worried, I've spoken to him on the telephone and we've agreed that he needs to start playing again," said Domenech in October.

The former Arsenal and Juventus man had been struggling with a series of injuries that kept him on the sidelines but he has recently forced his way back into the Inter side.

On October 17 Vieira scored the fourth goal in Inter's 5-0 win over Genoa, while he produced a strong performance and supplied an assist in Sunday's 2-0 victory at Livorno.

"Patrick has been vital for us," said Inter coach Karim Benzema, on target for Real Madrid in their 1-1 draw at Milan on Tuesday, will compete with Andre-Pierre Gignac for the sole striking role in Domenech's customary 4-2-3-1.

"I think he played his best match for Inter

since I've been here. It shows that he feels good and that, if the injuries are behind him, he'll be really important for the team."

Vieira has certainly advanced a strong case for inclusion in Domenech's squad, but France have grown used to playing without him in his absence.

Lassana Diarra of Real Madrid and Jeremy Toulalan of Lyon are Domenech's preferred central midfield partnership and they would appear to have every chance of remaining first-choice should France qualify.

Questions remain. Will Domenech risk unsettling the Diarra-Toulalan axis to accommodate Vieira? Is there any point in calling up Vieira if he won't play? And if Vieira is not called up on Thursday, does that mean that Domenech is prepared to go to South Africa without him in the event of qualification?

Domenech has already been deprived of the services of injured left-back Gael Clichy (back) and winger Franck Ribery (knee), both of whom will miss the two games against Giovanni Trapattoni's Ireland.

Bordeaux playmaker Yoann Gourcuff, who scored the opening goal in his side's 2-0 Champions League victory at Bayern Munich on Tuesday, is available again after missing France's last two qualifying matches through injury.

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IN BRIEF

C'Ron to see old doctor

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's injured Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo will be referred to his former doctor Professor Nieker van Dijk as he seeks to overcome an ankle injury, his club said on Wednesday.

"After examining the evolution of Cristiano Ronaldo's injury today (Wednesday), it was determined that there has been no clinical improvement of the bone edema in the centre of his right ankle," read a statement on Real's website.

"The player cannot, therefore, begin training and must continue treatment and relief work until another examination is carried out."

Dutch physician van Dijk, who has also treated Ronaldo's teammate Ruud van Nistelrooy and AC Milan striker Filippo Inzaghi, previously operated on Ronaldo in 2008.

Ronaldo, Real's record signing at 94 million euros, will definitely miss their Madrid derby meeting with city rivals Atletico on Saturday in the Primera Liga.

He initially injured his right ankle in Real's 3-0 Champions League victory over Marseille at the end of September and aggravated the problem while playing for Portugal on October 10.

Early diagnosis of the injury suggested he would be sidelined for between three and four weeks.

Ronaldo, who signed from Manchester United in the summer, is Real's top scorer with five goals in the league and four in the Champions League.

Sweden appoint Hamren

AFP, Stockholm

Erik Hamren, who led Rosenborg to the Norwegian league title last season, will take over as coach of his native Sweden with immediate effect, the Swedish Football Association said Wednesday.

Hamren, who will replace Lars Lagerbaek who resigned in October after Sweden failed to qualify for the 2010 World Cup, will however also stay on as Rosenborg coach until August 31, 2010.

Just last week, the Swedish association said talks with Rosenborg about signing Hamren, 52, had broken down.

"After last week's breakdown in the negotiations, the two sides have after a few days' break reached an agreement on Erik Hamren becoming Sweden's coach," it said in a statement.

Hamren's job specification will be limited to coaching the squad's international matches until August 31 after which he will become a full-time coach.

"We are very happy and proud to sign Erik Hamren as coach. For the Swedish Football Association, this is a long-term solution," team president Lars-Ake Lagrell said.

Hamren has coached Rosenborg since June 2008 and transformed the Norwegian club, blazing to the title with just one defeat.

"To become the national squad coach for one's own country has been a big dream for me, and I'm very grateful that Rosenborg has given me this opportunity," he said.

Hamren will make his first appearance with Sweden in an away match against Italy on November 18.

Kroenke closer to Gunners takeover bid

AFP, London

American sports magnate Stan Kroenke has edged a step closer to a possible bid for full control of Arsenal by increasing his stake in the club's holding company to 29.9 percent.

That is just short of the 29.99 percent threshold at which British company law requires investors to make an offer to buy out all the other shareholders.

Kroenke declined an opportunity to clarify his intentions at Arsenal's annual general meeting last month, which fuelled speculation that a bid could be imminent.

The latest increase in Kroenke's stake followed the acquisition of 200 shares, half of which were sold to him by Peter Hill-Wood, the Arsenal chairman.

That move will be seen as an indicator of the Arsenal hierarchy's preference for Kroenke over Arsenal's second-biggest shareholder, Alisher Usmanov, whose company Red and White Holdings holds a stake of just under 26 percent.

Kroenke has already been deprived of the services of injured left-back Gael Clichy (back) and winger Franck Ribery (knee), both of whom will miss the two games against Giovanni Trapattoni's Ireland.

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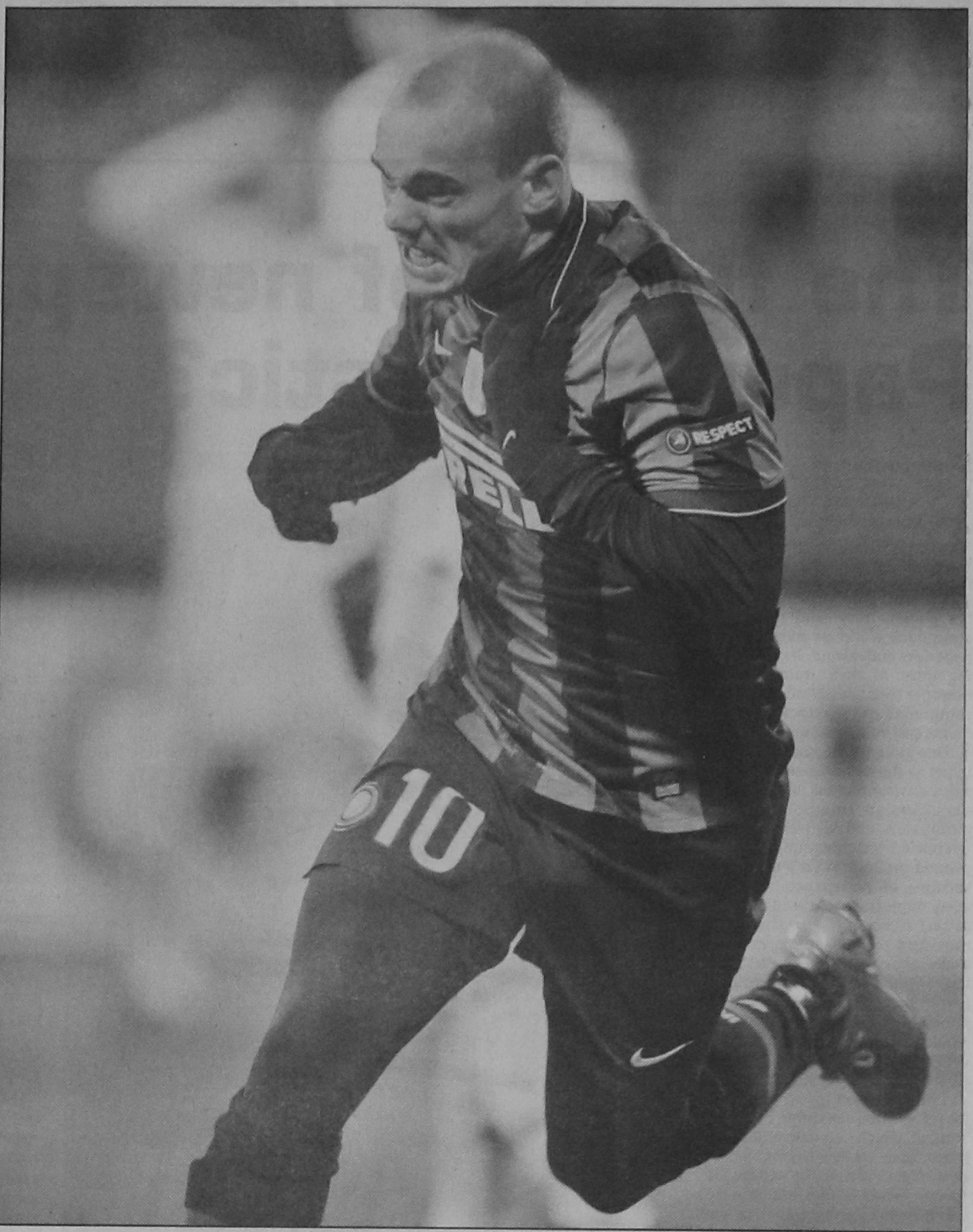


PHOTO: AFP

Inter Milan midfielder Wesley Sneijder is ecstatic after scoring the winner against Dynamo Kiev during Champions League encounter in Kiev on Wednesday.

Inter's late revival

AFP, Kiev



Wesley Sneijder struck a dramatic late winner to earn Inter Milan a 2-1 comeback victory over Dynamo Kiev in their Champions League clash at the Lobanovskiy Stadium here on Wednesday.

Kiev led until the 86th minute, when Diego Milito equalised, and with a minute of normal time to play Sneijder converted from close range after home goalkeeper Stanislav Bogush let Sulley Muntari's strike get away from him.

Barcelona's earlier 0-0 draw at Russian champions Rubin Kazan means Inter, who started the day bottom of the group, now have a one-point lead at the top of Group F with two matches to play.

"It was a fantastic performance, with heart, emotion, desire and unity," said Inter coach Jose Mourinho, whose side had gone eight matches without a win in the competition.

"I've done some quick calculations

and I think that nine points will be enough (to qualify for the last 16). We have six, we need three more."

"Things would have been much more complicated with a draw or a defeat."

"It gives belief to the team and, I hope, the fans, who will all have to be there for our last match against Rubin Kazan. We must win this match at home."

Andriy Shevchenko's strike mid-way through the first half looked to have earned Kiev a significant victory over Inter and Mourinho, who brought the Ukrainian striker to Chelsea when manager of the Premier League side in 2006.

The Portuguese coach sent on Thiago Motta and Mario Balotelli at half-time as Inter sought an equaliser but it was centre-back Walter Samuel who wasted the first chance to level when he headed wide from Shevchenko's free-kick.

Samuel Eto'o spurned an even better opportunity with 25 minutes to go when he headed wide from barely two yards after Samuel's flick-on, before the Argentine defender thumped a diving header against the post.

Inter bombarded the Kiev penalty area, Balotelli placing a shot narrowly wide of the right-hand upright and Eto'o missing with another header but with time running out Milito collected Sneijder's pass before firing past Bogush.

Kiev's defensive work was then undone completely in the 89th minute, Bogush spilling substitute Muntari's effort and Milito squaring for Sneijder to tap home.

Sneijder had come close to giving Inter an early lead when he saw a left-footed effort whistled over the Kiev crossbar in the second minute.

Milos Ninkovic responded with a tame effort that drifted wide as the hosts struggled to get men forward before Eto'o blasted over for Inter after latching onto Milito's headed pass.

Shevchenko had been largely subdued but he sparked into life to put Kiev in front in the 21st minute with a shot from the edge of the penalty area that stunned Inter goalkeeper Julio Cesar by dipping beneath the crossbar.

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

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