

A Barca masterclass

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona showed why they are the current Champions of Europe producing a football masterclass to defeat Italian leaders Inter Milan 2-0 at Camp Nou on Tuesday and move within touching distance of qualification for the knockout phase.

Holders Barcelona were under pressure before the game but, even without the injured Lionel Messi and Zlatan Ibrahimovic, they were too strong for Inter as Gerard Pique netted in the 10th minute before a wonderful team goal was finished by Pedro Rodriguez with less than half an hour gone.

Barca have not yet qualified, needing a point from the final group match at Dynamo Kiev, but now lead the group on eight points from Inter and Rubin Kazan on six and head into Sunday's 'El Clasico' against Real Madrid in high spirits.

It was a losing return to Camp Nou for Samuel Eto'o as Inter suffered their first defeat in this season's competition and now have an all-or-nothing final home match against Russians Rubin.

Argentine Messi failed to recover from a thigh injury sustained at the weekend so started on the substitutes' bench along with Ibrahimovic who also had a thigh injury denying him the chance to face his former club.

With Messi and Ibrahimovic not fully fit, both are also doubtful for the Clasico against Real on Sunday. French striker Thierry Henry returned to the starting line-up hoping to make headlines for the right reasons after his controversial handball.

Barca also welcomed back Eric Abidal at left back after the Frenchman had been struck down with swine flu.

As expected, Barca legend Eto'o, who scored in both the 2006 and 2009 Champions League

final wins, got a warm reception from the Camp Nou crowd.

Eto'o left for Inter in the summer as part of a swap deal with Ibrahimovic and was hugging his old team-mates before the kick-off.

Eto'o was not the only old boy returning with midfielder Thiago Motta, who came through the youth ranks at Barcelona, now a mainstay in the Inter midfield.

Barcelona went into the game on a knife-edge knowing that defeat combined with a Rubin win would eliminate them but the Russians played earlier and drew 0-0 with Dinamo Kiev meaning Barca couldn't be knocked out.

Any nerves were eased with Pique's 10th minute goal after a flick on from Henry and the second goal summed up what Barca are all about with a brilliant team move capped by Pedro's volley.

Xavi released Dani Alves down the right with a clever pass and the Brazilian centred for Pedro to scuff in a volley.

Inter were being run ragged and the 'ole ole' rang out from the crowd when defensive midfielder Sergi Busquets did a spot of showboating midway through the first half.

Barca goalkeeper Victor Valdes almost gifted Inter a goal after miscontrolling but Dejan Stankovic failed to take advantage floating his chip over the goal.

Inter manager Jose Mourinho couldn't have been happy with the first half display and Esteban Cambiasso made way at half-time.

Eto'o got his first glimpse of goal early in the second half but the all-action Alves did enough to avert the danger and Eto'o saw his penalty claim waved away.

Xavi had a header well saved shortly afterwards as Barca kept up their workrate with Henry particularly fired up.

Inter were helpless and a cynical body check by Cristian Chivu on Andres Iniesta late on summed up their frustration.



Barcelona defender Gerard Pique (R) shrugs off Inter Milan midfielder Thiago Motta (C) to score the opening goal during their Champions League encounter at Nou Camp on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Toni suspended

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich's under-pressure coach Louis van Gaal has suspended struggling Italian striker Luca Toni because of a complete breakdown in their relationship, the Bild daily reported Wednesday.

Van Gaal, whose own position is shaky five months into the job after a disastrous run of form by the German giants, has chucked Toni out for Wednesday's make-or-break Champions League clash with Maccabi Haifa, Bild said.

There is little love lost between the Dutchman and his Italian star. Signed from Fiorentina in 2007, Toni was the Bundesliga's top scorer in his first season, scoring 24 times in 31 league games on the way to Bayern winning the German title.

But after struggling with injury last season, Toni has seen Germany's stars Mario Gomez and Miroslav Klose, plus promising youngster Thomas Mueller dominate the forward positions.

Having made just four league appearances this season since van Gaal took over on July 1, the 32-year-old Toni has become increasingly frustrated.

Toni stormed out of Bayern's 1-1 draw with Schalke 04 in the Bundesliga on November 7 after the coach replaced him at half-time and the Italian was later fined for his conduct and apologised.

He was left out of the match day squad for Bayern's 1-1 draw with league-leaders Leverkusen last Sunday.

It looks increasingly likely Toni will be sold during the Bundesliga's winter break in January and the Italian has already dropped hints saying he has a good relationship with Roma captain Francesco Totti.

On Tuesday Toni let it all come out.

"For four months, I have had a problem with van Gaal," Toni told Italian television station RAI 3.

"Everything has borders and our relationship is nearly at the end.

"I would like to return to Italy so I can start scoring goals again and get back into the national team.

Munich's chronic lack of top form under van Gaal has left them seventh in the Bundesliga.

Rafa positive on exit

AFP, Budapest



Embattled Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez said that he and the squad should remain positive despite bowing out of the Champions League at the group stage for the first time in six years on Tuesday.

Liverpool did manage to eke out only their second win in 11 matches, a 1-0 win here over pointless Hungarian side Debrecen but Fiorentina's 1-0 victory over already qualified Lyon in Florence brought the curtain down on any thoughts of progressing to the knockout stages.

Benitez, whose spending of multi-millions is in stark contrast to Debrecen's limited transfer budget of just over 1 1/2 million pounds a year, was already turning his attention to the Liverpool derby this weekend against Everton as they try and claw back a massive 13 point deficit to Premier League leaders Chelsea.

"I am trying to be very positive," said 49-year-old Benitez, who made an immediate impact in his first season as Liverpool manager by landing a remarkable victory over AC Milan in the 2005 Champions League final.

"The players know that when we have Steven Gerrard on the pitch and when we have our other big players available, we will improve.

"We must remain positive, and think about the next competition. And that is Everton.

"We have to win against Everton that is our priority now.

"If we can do that we must think of winning several games in a row. We needed to win today (Tuesday) and hopefully now things will change and we will win more regularly.

"Our fans realise the team was working hard.

We are paying for mistakes in the last minutes of other games in this group, they know you have to do well right from the beginning of a group."

Benitez, who attracted Liverpool's attention in 2004 when he resigned from Valencia having coached them to two Spanish titles and a UEFA Cup trophy, said finishing in the top four in the Premier League, ensuring Champions League matches next season, and winning the Europa League would sweeten the pill.

"We must be positive and think of the next competition, the next game at Everton and then the Europa League," said Benitez, whose side are favourites for the second tier European competition.

"We also know that Steven Gerrard can play a full 90 minutes, he has recovered.

"Fabio Aurelio, also, has returned well from injury. All of that is positive for the rest of the season."

The victory ended a five-match winless streak and Benitez hopes that will spark the team into life.

Benitez, who never played for the Spanish national side though he played five times for the University national team, conceded Liverpool's habit this campaign of conceding late goals - twice against Lyon which cost them four points - had been costly.

"It was our own fault in the end, the late goals we have conceded along the way have cost us," said Benitez, whose team has not even managed to score as many goals as Debrecen in the group stage.

"We have been so good in the last few years that maybe people think it is easy to qualify in all competitions.

"Because of that, people think we can do it every season. But you cannot always.

"We have to be disappointed, we knew we had to win and we did that. You cannot change what happened in Florence, but at least we did our job."

IN BRIEF

Inter appeal Maicon suspension

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan have appealed against a two-match suspension given to full-back Maicon that would see him miss the high-profile clash against Juventus in a fortnight.

The Brazilian - seen as one of if not the best right-back in the world - was banned for two games after he was sent-off during last Saturday's 3-1 win at Bologna for something he said to the linesman.

His penalty means he would miss this weekend's game against Fiorentina and the trip to Turin.

Inter currently lead Juventus by five points at the top of Serie A.

Pompey fire Hart

AFP, Portsmouth

Paul Hart has been "relieved of his duties as first-team manager" of Portsmouth, a statement issued by the Premier League basement club said on Tuesday.

Portsmouth have won just twice in the league this season and are three points adrift at the bottom of the table.

Hart, previously best known for his work with young players, including at Portsmouth, was offered the role of technical director, developing players from the age of 18-21, but the club said he had declined the post.

Portsmouth said they planned to announce a replacement "very quickly" but, until that time first-team coaches Paul Groves and Ian Woan would be in charge.

US veteran midfielder retires

AFP, Washington

Ben Olsen, a midfielder who spent 10 years with the United States national team and D.C. United of Major League Soccer, announced his retirement Tuesday from professional soccer.

The 32-year-old American called it quits following a series of ankle injuries, the toughest costing him the entire 2001 MLS season and another keeping him to only a single goal for the 2008 campaign.

But Olsen returned this year to play 20 games, producing one goal and helping United stay in the playoff chase into the final weekend of the season.

Slovenian arrested over fixing scandal



AFP, Zagreb

A Slovenian national, wanted by Germany under suspicion of being linked with Europe's worst ever football betting scandal, is under arrest in Croatia, the HINA news agency reported on Tuesday.

Dragan Mihelic is suspected by German prosecution authorities of fraud and money laundering in the scandal in which 200 games are suspected of having been rigged in nine countries, the state-run agency said.

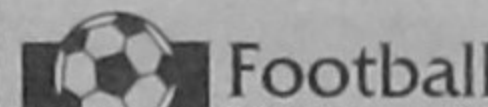
The 38-year-old was picked up on Monday at the Macej border crossing as he was entering Croatia upon a German arrest warrant. After appearing before an investigative judge he was placed in a Zagreb prison.

Germany has a 40-day deadline to file an extradition request, a court official said.

A spokesman for the national Bureau for the Fight Against Organised Crime and Corruption (USKOK) told AFP earlier on Tuesday they have asked the police to check information regarding allegations on fixed football matches.

However spokesman Vuk Djuricic declined to provide any details on the clubs allegedly involved in the scandal.

Endo voted Asia's best



AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Japan's Yasuhito Endo was voted Asian player of the year, while club Pohang Steelers and South Korea's national team both picked up prizes at a colourful ceremony here on Tuesday.

The Asian stars were honoured at the annual Asian Football Confederation awards amidst a glittering showpiece of traditional dance and acrobatic performances.

South Korea dominated the award ceremony, winning national team of the year, coach of the year for the country's Huh Jung Moo and club of the year for the Pohang Steelers.

The country's Ki Sung Yung bagged the men's young player of the year award while Japan's Mana Iwabuchi was named women's young player for the second season running.

Japan won the fair play award while Syria's General Farouk Bouzo was given the lifetime achievement award.

A happy Endo said he was delighted with the accolade.

"I am honoured to win this award. Last year I was nominated but I did not win. I will continue to strive to play a better football," he said.

Endo, a 29-year-old creative midfielder who has won 80 caps for Japan, was nominated in 2008.

The footballer, who beat four other nominated Asian players for the title, said he hopes to help Japan reach the semi-finals stage in the 2010 World Cup.

"We hope to make it to the semi-finals. It is a tough mission. But we will do our best," he told reporters.

Endo, however said that his ambitious dream was for Japan to win the World Cup in South Africa.

Japan's best ever performance was in the 2002 World Cup when it was placed 16 out of 32 teams.

On winning the top Asian award, which went to Uzbek veteran Server Djeparov last year, Endo said he had aimed to win the trophy after failing to secure it last year.

"It was my goal to win this year and I got it," he



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese midfielder Yasuhito Endo (R) receives the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) 2009 Men's Player of the Year award from AFC president Mohamed Bin Hammam at the Shangri-La Hotel in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday.

said.

The other four nominees for the award were fellow Japanese player Kengo Nakamura of Kawasaki Frontale, Bahrain's Sayed Mohamed Adnan from Qatari club Al Khor, Iran's Hadi Aghiliy of Sepahan, and Syria captain Firas Al Khatib of Kuwait club Al Qadsia.

Meanwhile, Uzbekistan's Ravshan Irmatov won his second straight AFC Referee award for men, once again proving to be the continent's top performer with the whistle.

A no-nonsense, professional approach earned Lebanon's Mazen Ramadan the AFC Men's Match Commissioner title.

Kanya Keomany was the toast of Laotian football after receiving the AFC Women's Match Commissioner award.

Robinho set for return

AFP, Manchester

Manchester City's Robinho is fit and set to play against Hull on Saturday in his first game since suffering an ankle stress fracture in August.

The Brazil forward, City's British record 32.5 million pound signing, was selected by his country for friendlies against England and Oman this month, without featuring in either match.

But City first team coach Eddie Niedzwiecki believes that international call up may have helped Robinho progress.

Niedzwiecki told the Manchester Evening News on Wednesday: "Robi is looking really good. We are pleased, after all the speculation when he went with Brazil, he didn't play for them because he wasn't ready."

"He had good training and good treatment with them and has come back to us looking sharper by the day."

"Things are looking very promising for him in terms of the weekend and he should be up for selection."

Former Juve chiefs cleared

AFP, Rome

Former Juventus bosses Luciano Moggi, Antonio Giraudo and Roberto Bettiga were on Tuesday acquitted of any wrongdoing related to transfer dealings at the club.

The three had been accused of a variety of charges ranging from falsifying accounts, tax evasion and sporting fraud.

But Turin judge Dante Gibinel acquitted all three due to a "lack of evidence".

Prosecutors had asked for a three-year custodial sentence for former chairman Giraudo and former director Moggi and two-years for former manager Bettiga.

"It's a great satisfaction," said Moggi. "Because there was no evidence."

"I'm happy because what needed to come out, came out and that was that nothing had happened."

Juventus were also acquitted of any wrongdoing despite having entered a plea bargain.

"Juventus is satisfied with the acquittal by the Turin court in relation to the false accounting trial," said a club statement.

"Thanks to the defense strategies put forward by all the defendants during these years, finally the club's proper conduct has been recognised."

The case was one of many brought against various parties following the 2006 match-fixing calciopoli scandal that saw both Moggi and Giraudo banned from football-related activities for five years.

"This is a triumph of justice," said one of the accused's lawyers, Andrea Galasso.



PHOTO: AFP

Arsenal midfielder Denilson (C) celebrates his goal with teammates during their Champions League clash against Standard Liege at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday. Arsenal won 2-0 to advance to the second round.