

Olic fires Bayern

AFP, Munich



Croatia striker Ivica Olic's second-half strike kept Bayern Munich's fading dream of reaching the Champions League's knock-out phase alive after the German giants beat Maccabi Haifa 1-0 on Wednesday night.

With Bordeaux beating Juventus 2-0 the same night in Group A, Bayern are now just one point behind the Italians and must win their final game at Turin's Stadio Olimpico on December 8 if they are to reach the knock-out phase.

The victory takes some of the pressure off Bayern Munich's under-pressure coach Louis van Gaal who suspended want-away Italian striker Luca Toni on the eve of the game for saying the pair's relationship has completely broken down.

Glum-faced Toni spent the game in the stands next to French midfielder Franck Ribery while Bayern's fellow walking-wounded Arjen Robben and Miroslav Klose looked on.

But with Germany's rising stars Thomas Mueller and Mario Gomez causing the Israeli team constant problems, in the end Bayern's superior fitness made the difference as the

home side earned the victory.

In a busy first-half, the best chance fell to Olic, but his shot was saved and there were loud whistles around Munich's Allianz Arena as the teams trudged off with the scores locked at 0-0 at half-time.

But Bayern took the lead in the 62nd minute when captain Mark van Bommel found Germany striker Mario Gomez in the penalty area and he fired his shot to the left of Haifa goalkeeper Nir Davidovitch.

The Israel national goalkeeper made the save, but the rebound fell into the path of Olic who slotted home to keep the dream alive.

Haifa remain pointless at the foot of the table and their slim hopes of claiming entry into the Europa League by finishing third in the table are now over.

Elisha Levi's Haifa remain the only team of the 32 in the group stage yet to find the back of the opposition's net and they host the group winners Bordeaux in their final game next month.

Should Bayern fail to reach the knock-out stages, this would be the first time they have missed out on a place in the last 16 in their five previous attempts.

The last time they failed to do so was in 2002/03 when they finished bottom of their group with just two points.



PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich striker Ivica Olic (R) celebrates his goal with teammate Mario Gomez during their Champions League clash against Maccabi Haifa in Munich on Wednesday.

Higuain leads Real

AFP, Madrid



Cristiano Ronaldo ended two months of injury torment with a 20-minute appearance as Real Madrid put one foot in the Champions League knock-out phase with a 1-0 Group C home win over FC Zurich on Wednesday.

A 21st minute goal from Argentine Gonzalo Higuain secured a narrow victory for Real who now lead the group, two points ahead of AC Milan who drew 1-1 with Marseille, and need just a point in the final game at Marseille to secure qualification.

Ronaldo, top-scorer in this season's Champions League with four goals in two games, came on in the 69th minute after eight weeks out with an ankle injury and is now ready for 'El Clasico' against Barcelona on Sunday.

Real lead the Spanish table by one point from champions Barcelona going into the duel at Camp Nou.

The Zurich match was a landmark game for Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas who was making his 100th Champions League appearance putting him third in the all-time list led by captain Raul on 129.

Raul had been on the substitutes' bench for the past three consecutive league games but returned for the Zurich game with French striker Karim Benzema making way.

Just four minutes into the match Brazilian Kaka showed quick feet to create a shooting chance and his left-footed drive was tipped over.

Zurich had caused a major upset by beating AC Milan 1-0 on their own patch but were cautious at the Santiago Bernabeu putting numbers behind the ball and playing on the counter attack.

Real probed and got the early breakthrough they craved on 21 minutes with Kaka stealing

possession and threading a pass to Higuain who finished with aplomb to enhance his claim for a starting place against Barcelona.

Xabi Alonso, celebrating his 28th birthday, almost scored his first Real goal with his 26th minute drive pushed wide by goalkeeper Johnny Leoni.

A training ground routine almost provided the second for Real with Higuain cutting a corner back to the edge of the penalty area and thundered a volley against the post in the 36th minute.

Zurich had offered little and a decent long distance shot from Alexandre Alphonse was their only effort of note but Casillas always looked in control.

After the break Real went in search of a second goal while Zurich continued to offer little from an attacking point of view.

Ronaldo warmed up on the touchlines to draw applause from the home crowd.

However, Dutch midfielder Rafael van der Vaart, playing for his future at the club, was the first substitution replacing Alvaro Arbeloa close to the hour mark.

Real were struggling to create chances and Zurich grew in confidence with the impressive Alphonse causing some problems with his running from deep.

After 69 minutes Real coach Manuel Pellegrini delighted the home crowd by introducing Ronaldo - missing for the past ten games - with Raul coming off.

Ronaldo, who showed some nice touches, came through the match unscathed which was the most important thing from Real's point of view.

The former Manchester United man almost scored in the final minute after a good one-two with Esteban Granero but his left-footed shot lacked the power.

All in all the second half display was below-par from Real and they will have to raise their game for treble winners Barcelona on Sunday.

Barca-Real tie to be shown in cinemas

AFP, Madrid

The much-anticipated Spanish league showdown between champions Barcelona and their arch-rivals Real Madrid later this weekend will be shown in cinemas across the country, broadcast rights holder Mediapro said Wednesday.

Sunday's match at the Camp Nou will be screened in over 20 Spanish cities, including Madrid, Barcelona, Malaga and Alicante, in 51 theatres for the same price as a regular cinema entrance fee, it said in a statement.

Some 16,000 people, known in Spain as El Clásico, will be able to view the match in theatres.

The match comes as Real have a one-point advantage over the reigning champions following their best league start in 17 years.

Real defeated Racing Santander 1-0 on Saturday to wrestle top spot from unbeaten Barca - who drew 1-1 at Athletic Bilbao - and their haul of 28 points from a possible 33 represents their best start since the 1991-92 season.

Last season Real were nine points behind Barcelona going into the first Clásico in mid-December and lost 2-0 to leave them with too big a mountain to climb in the title race.

Spanish cinemas, like those across Europe, are pushing 3D films and are screening operas and concerts in an effort to boost attendance in theatres, which has dropped due to the popularity of DVDs and online movie piracy.

Jens doesn't rate Rangers

SOCCERNET

Stuttgart goalkeeper Jens Lehmann has rubbed salt into Rangers' Champions League wounds by claiming they are not good enough for the competition anymore.

Lehmann, 40, helped Stuttgart to a 2-0 win at Ibrox to knock the Scottish champions out of Europe on Tuesday night, and he believes that Walter Smith's side can no longer be considered worthy opponents in Europe.

"Rangers don't have the quality of a Champions League member any more," he said. "I can recall times when opponents were awestruck and scared to play here but those days are gone and Rangers are not the fierce opponents they used to be."

"We could have won by an even wider margin. In fact, Rangers only had one real scoring opportunity in the whole 90 minutes."

Teammate Aleksandr Hleb added: "Rangers allowed us to play our own game and we were very surprised. It was not a difficult game."

"Normally they don't give you time to think, especially at home, but not this time. Rangers were really aggressive with us in the second half over in Stuttgart and we were surprised we didn't get the same again."

Fergie annoyed at ref

AFP, Manchester



Sir Alex Ferguson claimed his side were denied a 'stonewall' penalty by French referee Stephane Lannoy after Manchester United's long unbeaten home record in Europe was ended by Besiktas.

Ferguson was annoyed that Lannoy waved away strong appeals after substitute Patrice Evra was fouled by Ibrahim Kas in the closing stages of Besiktas's 1-0 win at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

The United manager, who has found himself in trouble domestically for criticising match officials this season, is running out of patience after claiming it was the second successive game in Europe that United have been denied a penalty.

"That's two games in a row we've been denied a stonewall penalty in Europe," said Ferguson.

"It's not in the spirit of the game, but what can you do? If you can't give these kids then the game is in trouble."

Asked whether he still stood by his view, which he aired earlier this season,

that the standard of refereeing in Europe is better than in England, he replied: "I'm not going into that. No comment."

Ferguson refused to criticise his young players afterwards as a United side made up of youth and experience suffered an unexpected setback which leaves them with work to do to secure top spot in Group B.

They must avoid defeat in their final game in Germany against Wolfsburg on December 8, but Ferguson refused to divulge what sort of side he will field for that fixture.

England striker Wayne Rooney was given a rare night off against Besiktas while the likes of Michael Owen, Michael Carrick, Paul Scholes and Darren Fletcher started on the bench.

The tactic backfired as Besiktas's experience proved enough to secure a victory that will give United's Champions League rivals encouragement.

Yet Ferguson declined to lay the blame at the feet of his youngsters. Danny Welbeck, who turns 19 on Thursday, started his first Champions League game for the club alongside 19-year-old Federico Macheda in attack.

"You need a bit of composure in the last third, but the young players were a bit

anxious. It's understandable," added Ferguson.

"It's not the biggest fault in the world. You have to be fair in terms of assessing the players we're playing in these games at the moment."

"The fact we play them tells you how much we value them. The one thing we can give them is experience."

Ferguson also refused to criticise keeper Ben Foster. The England international was beaten by a long-range effort by Rodrigo Tello which took a deflection.

"It was probably going a foot to his right hand side. It was a wicked deflection," said Ferguson.

"I think he would have (saved it if it had not taken a deflection)."

Besiktas coach Mustafa Denizli saluted his players for an historic victory for Turkish football.

"To come to Manchester United and play at Old Trafford, we know it's very difficult to win games here," said Denizli.

"We're obviously very pleased with the result. The whole world knows what a big team United is."

"The players did their duties and everyone did the job that was asked of them."

More games linked to betting scandal

Football

AFP, Nyon

Another Champions League qualification match and six games from this season's Europa League have been linked to the European betting scandal, UEFA announced on Wednesday.

When news of the affair first broke Friday, three Champions League matches were said to be among the 200 games spread across nine countries under investigation by German prosecutors.

Now European football's governing body UEFA has revealed the seven additional games involving five clubs which are now being investigated.

The five clubs involved are KF Tirana (Albania), FC Dinaburg (Latvia), KS Vllaznia (Albania), NK IB Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Budapest Honved FC (Hungary).

Tirana's Champions League second qualifying round match with Norwegian side Stabaek on July 21 this year is under suspicion after the sides drew the first-leg 1-1 in Albania before Stabaek won the return game 4-0.

"From the original list of around 40 fixtures in Europe that were considered suspicious in terms of results, we are investigating seven European club competition fixtures," said UEFA General Secretary Gianni Infantino.

The Europa League games under suspicion are - both legs of the second qualifying round

ties between Bnei Yehuda Tel-Aviv FC and FC Dinaburg as well as KS Vllaznia against SK Rapid Vienna.

The third round qualifying matches between NK IB Ljubljana and FC Metalurh Donetsk as well as Fenerbahce SK and Budapest Honved FC are also being probed.

Infantino said none of UEFA's administration staff are under suspicion or investigation and any individuals or clubs found to be corrupt will face criminal prosecution.

"UEFA wishes to stress that it has been co-operating fully with the German police and authorities on the case," he added.

"Following a request from the German police for information on a number of matches, UEFA was able to assist."

"That was thanks to its Betting Fraud Detection System that has been monitoring all UEFA competitions and European national league first and second-division matches for irregular betting patterns since July 2009."

"UEFA will file criminal complaints, together with the relevant national associations, as soon as possible, against clubs, officials and/or players in those countries concerned."

"We have full trust in our national associations to deal with the cases related to their national competitions and will continue to provide them with our full co-operation and assistance."

The scandal involves teams from Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, Switzerland and Turkey.

IN BRIEF

Van the man for Reds?

AFP, Liverpool

Misfiring Liverpool forwards Andriy Voronin and Ryan Babel will pay the price of the club's Champions League exit by being off-loaded in January while Roud van Nistelrooy could be on his way to Anfield.

Former Manchester United forward van Nistelrooy is unsettled at Real Madrid and is keen on a move to Anfield as a back-up for Fernando Torres, according to reports on Merseyside.

Neville rubs salt into Reds' wound

AFP, Manchester

Gary Neville has rubbed salt into Liverpool's wounds over their Champions League exit by suggesting Manchester United's great rivals 'got what they deserved,' in Europe this season.

The United captain said: "We are where we are because we deserve to be there and it's the same with Liverpool. We went out ourselves a few years back. They just haven't performed well enough in the Champions League to get the results."

Abidal extends Barca stay

AFP, Madrid

French international defender Eric Abidal on Wednesday extended his contract with Barcelona by a year which will keep him at the European champions until 2012.

The 30-year-old, who arrived from Lyon in 2007, is the sixth player to renew his contract this season after Yaya Toure, Victor Valdes, Pedro, Lionel Messi and Carles Puyol.

Barcelona gave no financial details except to say that Abidal's buy-out clause remains unchanged at 90 million euros (135.6 million dollars).



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid striker Gonzalo Higuain (R) shoots to score the all-important goal against Zurich during their Champions League encounter at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday.

Pompey hire Grant

Football

AFP, London

English Premier League strugglers Portsmouth on Thursday named former Chelsea and Israel boss Avram Grant as their new manager.

Grant, who returned to the club as director of football in October, takes over from Paul Hart, who was sacked earlier this week. His first game in charge will be Saturday's meeting with champions Manchester United at Fratton Park.

Pompey chief executive officer Peter Storrer said: "Avram is a very experienced and respected manager who has managed at the highest level. The board believes he is the man to help steer the club out of the relegation zone."

"He knows the club, the players and the set-up at Fratton Park, so it was the logical move to make him the next manager, once the board had decided to relieve Paul Hart of the role."

"He will take charge of training on Friday alongside first-team coaches Paul Groves and Ian Woan."

Grant's appointment is subject to a modification of his work permit to take account of his new role but that is unlikely to cause any problem given his pedigree as a manager at the highest levels of football.

After making his name as a club and national team manager in Israel, Grant served briefly as Portsmouth's technical director

before moving, in July 2007, to Chelsea.

He was initially director of football at Stamford Bridge before stepping in to the manager's chair following the departure of Jose Mourinho two months later.

Grant led Chelsea to the 2008 Champions League final but, after a penalty shoot-out defeat by Manchester United, he was sacked to make way for the appointment of Luiz Felipe Scolari.

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

Hart, who was the first Premier League manager to lose his job this season, had been expected to leave the club completely but may now stay on in a technical director role.

The former Leeds manager took over from Tony Adams in February and won plaudits for keeping Portsmouth in the top flight last season.

But his job was made extremely tough as a result of severe financial constraints, which resulted in the sale of all but a handful of the players who had won the 2008 FA Cup under Harry Redknapp.

The club has also been beset by boardroom turmoil with Saudi Arabian businessman Ali Al-Faraj taking over in October just two months after Sulaiman Al-Fahim had assumed control.

Pompey have been subjected to a transfer ban because of concerns regarding unpaid fees to other clubs and chief executive Storrer was last month charged with tax evasion.

Hull edge Everton

AFP, London



An early three-goal salvo gave Hull City three vital points in securing a 3-2 win over Everton in the English Premier League on Wednesday.

Stephen Hunt snatched the opener after nine minutes and Andy Dawson netted a free kick in the 20th minute before Dean Marney grabbed a third just before the half hour mark to leave Everton, themselves too close to the drop zone for comfort, shellshocked.

After the break the Merseysiders fought their way back into the contest and a comical own goal from Kamil Zayatte four minutes after the restart gave David Moyes' men a sliver of hope.

Louis Saha converted a spotkick which Zayatte conceded by fouling the French striker midway through the second period but

the Tigers then battered down the hatches and held on for a win which takes them to 15 points, level with the Toffees.

Everton now have just one win in their last 10 games while Hull boss Phil Brown's gamble of resting experienced veteran Jimmy Bullard owing to a minor knee problem paid off.

Everton had won a League Cup encounter between the sides 4-0 at the KC Stadium earlier this season but were a pale shadow of themselves by comparison.

The win takes Hull up a notch to 15th level on points with Wednesday's rivals and one clear of Wigan, trounced 9-1 at Spurs at the weekend.

Also on Wednesday, Fulham saw off Blackburn 3-0 as the Londoners moved into the top half of the table with goals from Erik Nevland just before the interval and a second-half brace from Dempsey.

Blackburn dropped back to 12th as their conquerors leapfrogged them.