



Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez celebrates his equalising goal against Dynamo Kiev during their Champions League encounter in Kiev on Wednesday.

Champs clinch top spot

AFP, Kiev



Reigning champions Barcelona clinched a place in the Champions League knockout stage with a 2-1 win over hosts Dynamo Kiev on Wednesday, with Lionel Messi netting an 86th-minute goal to secure top spot in their group.

Forward Artem Milevsky fired Kiev into an early lead, but Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez levelled 12 minutes before the break.

"It was a match of unique importance for us and I'm happy that all my players showed true understanding of that fact," Barcelona manager Josep Guardiola said.

"We did our best to take our group's top spot and I'm happy we finished in pole position. It was really hard but our next matches will be definitely be even tougher. But we are all ready for it."

Dynamo, who desperately needed to win to continue their campaign, got off to a flying start through Milevsky, who beat Victor Valdes with a close-range header from Andrei Shevchenko's well-struck freekick in the second minute.

The Spanish champions, who were seeking to hold off the challenge for first place from

fellow qualifiers Inter Milan, replied positively, pinning the hosts back in attempt to level but to no immediate avail as Dynamo defended in numbers while relying on rare counter-attacks.

In the 13th minute, newly-crowned Ballon D'Or winner Messi missed a clear chance to level, when he received the ball after Dynamo keeper Olexander Shovkovsky's mixup and rushed into the hosts box.

However, Shovkovsky managed to correct his error, parrying the Argentinian forward's shot.

Barca kept on probing, keeping Shovkovsky busy, and they pulled level in the 33rd minute, when Xavi redirected Eric Abidal's left-handed cross into the net from close range.

After interval the guests still looked more dominant, although in the 54th minute Dynamo had another chance for a goal, Milevsky failing to score his second of the match in sending a close-range header just wide from Shevchenko's freekick out on the left. Barcelona then seized their moment as Messi fired home a precise freekick with four minutes to go, dashing Kiev's hopes of further progress.

"We were trying to play our best in all of our group matches and, of course, were hoping to move into the last 16," Dynamo manager Valery Gazzaev said.

"Unfortunately we lacked skills, experience and luck to go through."

Gerrard targets return

AFP, Liverpool



Steven Gerrard has urged his Liverpool team-mates to put their disastrous Champions League campaign behind them and concentrate on finishing fourth in the Premier

League table.

Rafa Benitez's side bowed out of Europe's top knockout competition on a low note on Wednesday as they lost 2-1 at home to Fiorentina, Alberto Gilardino hitting a stoppage-time winner for the Italians.

It left the five-times European champions conducting an ineffectual third in the four-team table, six points behind second-placed Lyon and eight adrift of group winners Fiorentina.

While Fiorentina can look forward to the last 16 phase, Liverpool drop down to the Europa League.

Gerrard said it was important the team concentrated on climbing the Premier League table, in which Liverpool are seventh, 12 points adrift of leaders Chelsea, ahead of Sunday's game with Arsenal at Anfield.

"We're disappointed at being in the Europa League," said Gerrard. "At this club we try and stay in big competitions for as long as possible, but it's gone now and we have to try and get over it."

"It's another cup there to win. But fourth

remains a priority, it always is at this club, both financially and because the top players want to play in the Champions League."

Yossi Benayoun gave Liverpool the lead against Fiorentina before second half goals from Martin Jorgensen and, deep into stoppage time, Gilardino ensured Liverpool bowed out of the competition on a losing note.

The match saw Alberto Aquilani, a 20-million-pound signing from Roma in August, make his long-awaited first start in midfield after recovering from injury. Fernando Torres, who missed the previous five games with a groin injury, also appeared as a substitute in the second half.

"We gave a good account ourselves and were unlucky to lose it at the end," added Gerrard.

"Aquilani did well, he'll take a while before he gets up to speed. You can tell he's a player, he sees a pass, he's on the same wavelength as me."

"I've no doubt he will be a fantastic player for the club."

Benitez was bitterly frustrated at his side's latest setback. Liverpool have now won just twice in nine games.

"It was very clear that it was a difficult game, but in the last minute and we conceded another goal," said the Spaniard. "I hope we will be ready for the next game."

"Now we know Arsenal is an important game to get closer to the top of the table, so it could be the beginning of new options."

Mourinho hits out at critics

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho hit out at his critics after his side secured qualification for the Champions League knock-out stages with a 2-0 win over Rubin Kazan at the San Siro.

On the eve of Wednesday night's game Mourinho had to face questions from an increasingly disdainful Italian press about his future amid rumours that failure to progress to the competition's second round would see him leave the club at the end of the season.

But after securing a win that leaves the Italian champions in rude health just two weeks away from Serie A's Christmas break, Mourinho hit back at what he sees as a smear campaign against him.

"I had thought that results mattered in Italy but in fact that's not the case given that a team which won the title, is top of the league and has qualified from a Champions League group containing the holders is still being criticised," he said.

Mourinho has come under fire all season in the media for his team selections, his comments, his handling of Mario Balotelli and his team's results.

And yet Inter, who won the title by 10 points in Mourinho's first season in charge, sit top of the tree with a four point

lead over AC Milan after 15 matches with Juventus a point further back.

And that is despite Inter being beaten by Juve on Saturday.

What's more, Inter qualified for the Champions League knock-outs by virtue of their defeat of Rubin in what was arguably the toughest group in the competition in which even Barcelona came into the last match with no security of reaching the next phase.

Inter's nearest league rivals Milan needed a huge favour from Real Madrid, who won away to Marseille, to qualify after failing to beat minnows FC Zurich while Juve crashed out of the competition and face the ignominy of playing in the Europa League in the new year alongside Liverpool after their humiliating 4-1 home defeat to Bayern Munich.

And yet neither Milan nor Juve have faced anything like the press attacks directed at Inter and Mourinho in particular.

Milan's Leonardo and Juve's Ciro Ferrara have not made questions about their future related to Champions League progress.

Tellingly, there has been no suggestion of Ferrara leaving the Juve hotseat despite crashing out of the competition.

But Mourinho dismissed the rumours about his future.

"Journalists don't make decisions, ex-players don't make decisions and even if important people within the club who do

make decisions said something to me, it wouldn't be a problem.

"I'm a calm coach because when a coach leaves a club it's difficult for him to find a job but if I leave Inter I'll be in demand, I can't say I'd choose exactly where I'd go but almost."

Mourinho will likely get a measure of peace from the antagonistic Italian press corps for the next couple of months before the knock-outs begin again.

Inter have failed to progress beyond the second round for the last three years and failure to do so again this season will see the pressure mount on Mourinho.

However, he is not worried about what next week's draw might throw up.

"Last season I hoped for Manchester United (in the draw) because it's more stimulating to play the champions," he said.

"This year we can't play Barcelona. Do I want Chelsea because they are part of my history."

"Maybe it is me who is part of their history. The Spanish teams are playing well, Bordeaux have less appeal but did very well to qualify and dominated their group (containing Juve and Bayern)."

Finally, Mourinho could not resist a dig at his rivals and reminder of just who is struggling the most in Italy.

"Congratulations to Milan and good luck to Juve in the Europa League," he added mischievously.

Eto'o set for yet another honour

AFP, Lagos

Cameroon and Inter Milan striker Samuel Eto'o is on track to win a record fourth CAF Africa Player award after he was named among five nominees for this year's prize.

CAF director of communications, Suleiman Habuba, announced that Eto'o, along with Chelsea stars Didier Drogba and Michael Essien and Barcelona stars Yaya Toure and Seydou Keita, is on the short list of nominees.

Eto'o, 28, previously won the award in 2003, 2004 and 2005.

This year he helped Barcelona clinch a unique treble of the UEFA Champions League, the Spanish league title and Spanish cup and also led the 'Indomitable Lions' of Cameroon to qualify for the 2010 World Cup finals.

Drogba and Essien helped their respective national teams, the Ivory Coast and Ghana, to qualify for next year's World Cup in South Africa as well as the Africa Cup of Nations.

The award organisers announced that the award ceremony will take place on February 25 in Dakar, Senegal.

Emmanuel Adebayor of Togo and Arsenal was last year's winner of the annual individual accolade.

Robinho aims high

AFP, Manchester



Brazil star Robinho has told his Manchester City team-mates to aim for the top of the table after their 2-1 win over English Premier League leaders Chelsea last weekend.

Despite that victory - which ended a run of seven straight league draws - City are 11 points adrift of Chelsea, albeit they have a game in hand.

And Robinho, a British record 32.5 million pounds (\$52.8 million dollars) signing, insists the expensively-assembled City side should have ambitions as big as their price tags.

"We were really happy to win on Saturday," said Robinho. "But the most important thing now is to win. There are still a lot of games to go and we want to be top."

Robinho has recently returned from an ankle injury that sidelined him for three months and, despite not being used to playing at this time of year while with Spanish giants Real Madrid, he cannot wait for the busy Christmas and New Year fixture schedule.

"I am just happy to be playing," said the 25-year-old. "I feel excellent. I am strong, physically and mentally, and I want to play in every game. I like to play football anywhere, at any time."

City could have Craig Bellamy back for

Saturday's league match away to Bolton despite both the Wales striker and Vladimir Weiss missing the Chelsea game to avoid passing on the swine flu virus to their team-mates.

"Players come in every day with sniffles, coughs and colds and the doctor has to determine whether it is the onset of something more serious," assistant manager Mark Bowen told the Manchester Evening News.

"It is his decision whether they have to be sent home."

Someone who won't be featuring at the Reebok Stadium this weekend is England defender Wayne Bridge.

The former Chelsea full-back was carried off on a stretcher last Saturday after a clash with Julian Belletti.

Scans have since revealed Bridge suffered a knee injury which could put him out of action for up to six weeks.

If that diagnosis is correct, it would mean Bridge would miss both legs of City's League Cup semifinal against Manchester United as well as the FA Cup third round tie with Middlesbrough.

But Bowen hopes Bridge will be back sooner than expected.

"It depends on his recovery but Wayne tells us he is a good healer and he is a good professional, so we are hoping it will be sooner," he said.

IN BRIEF

Messi in Club WC fitness race

AFP, Kiev

Lionel Messi, who scored the winner for reigning champions Barcelona in Wednesday's 2-1 win over Dynamo Kiev, faces a race to get fit for the start of the Club World Championship after suffering an ankle knock, coach Pep Guardiola said.

"It seems it is an ankle strain," Guardiola said, indicating his Argentine star may struggle to get ready for Barca's Championship campaign starting on December 16 in Abu Dhabi.

"We'll see how he goes - there's a week to go," Guardiola said.

Messi suffered the injury in the dying seconds of the match in Kiev after tussling with Brazilian Leandro Almeida.

Everton in talks to sign Donovan

AFP, Liverpool

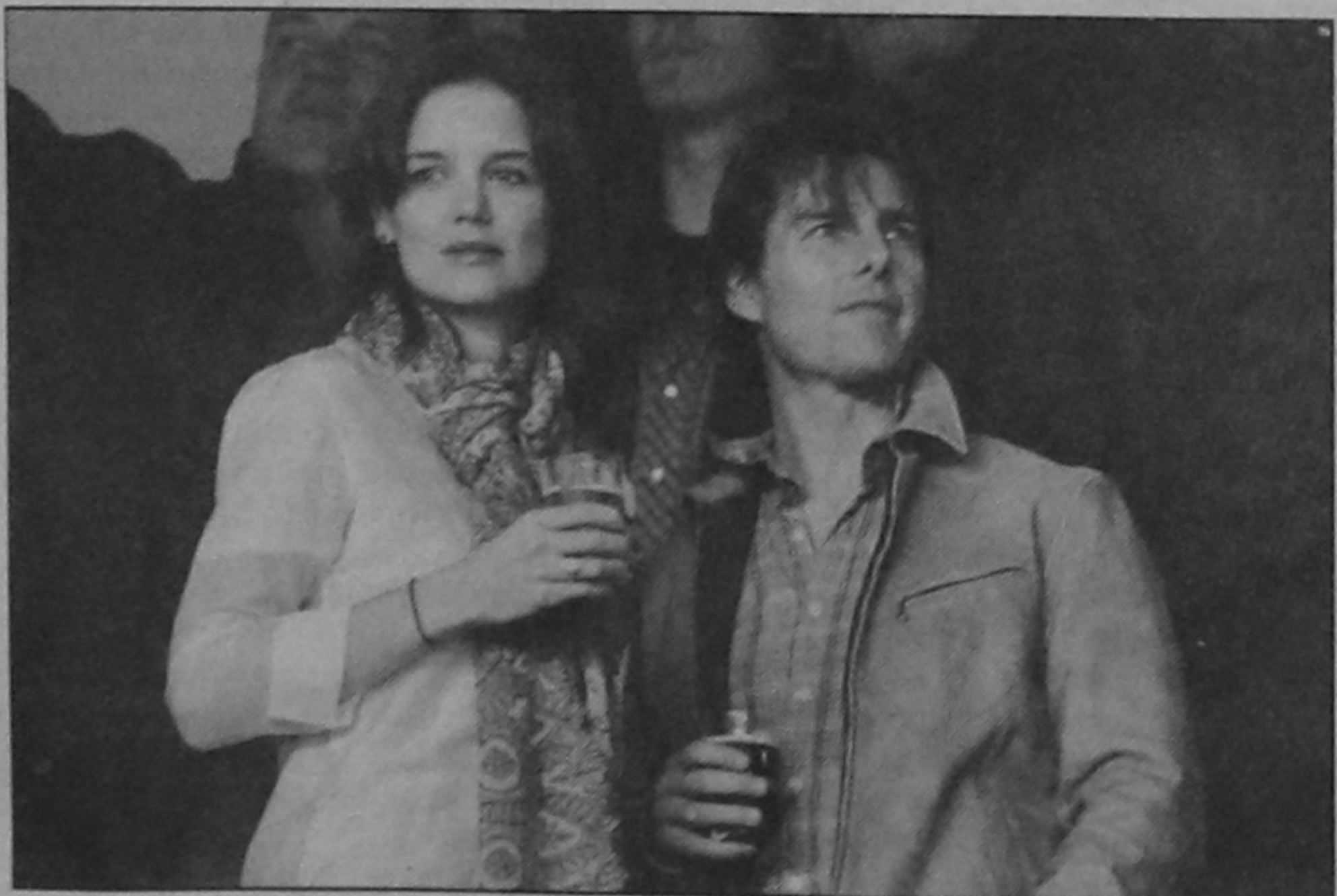
Premier League club Everton have confirmed they are in talks to sign USA forward Landon Donovan on loan from Los Angeles Galaxy.

Major League Soccer's season has finished and any deal to secure Donovan would be similar to the one that will see Galaxy team-mate David Beckham re-join AC Milan next month.

Everton chief executive Robert Elstone said: "Landon is a player (manager) David Moyes has identified as someone he would like to bring to the club."

"We are working to make that happen and hope we can reach agreement soon with all the appropriate parties."

If negotiations are successful the forward would join Everton on January 2.



Hollywood star Tom Cruise (R) and his wife Katie Holmes arrive at the Sanchez Pizjuan Stadium to attend the Champions League match between Sevilla and Glasgow Rangers on Wednesday.

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	41 Thin aperture	2 Asian nurse-maid	22 Songs' endings
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Solution time: 24 mins.

DREAM	ACIDLY
PAELLA	MONROE
TRIVET	MAKING
ANNE	TROT LEG
SARA	ILL
ASS	TEMP OBOE
NOTRESPASSING	
YUAN	SARI TOO
RAM	RATE
CAW	OPTS XRAY
UGANDA	INTONE
THREED	TAROTS
EASELS	ENATE

CRYPTOQUIP

W H V Q O H U A O B R G R F H S
R W X N S I O X I U O Y F X R P O
S X S R U Q H V F S X Y U A :
"Y R G H Q V N I H A F R P B S X B X."
Saturday's Cryptoquip: WHEN A RACECAR DRIVER HAS BEEN GIVEN CURRENT NEWS, MIGHT YOU SAY THAT BROUGHT HIM UP TO SPEED?

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: S equals T