



Valencia striker David Villa celebrates his winning goal against Genoa during their Europa League encounter at the Luigi Ferraris Stadium on Thursday.

Valencia KO Genoa

AFF, Paris



Opportunity knocked for a host of teenage hopefuls in the Europa League on Thursday with 16-year-old Romelu Lukaku making the biggest impression as Anderlecht reached the last 32.

Lukaku scored twice in the first 20 minutes as the Belgians defeated Ajax 3-1, helping his side pip the stylish Dutch giants to top spot in Group A.

Everton, with their place in Friday's knockout round draw already assured, also opted for youth in a 1-0 Group I home defeat against Belarusian side BATE Borisov.

Centre-back Shane Duffy, 17, deflected a 25-metre drive from Alexandr Yurevich into his own net for the only goal of the night at Goodison Park as manager David Moyes made nine changes to the side which drew 3-3 with Chelsea last Saturday.

Defender Jake Bidwell - at 16 years and 271 days - became the youngest player to figure for Everton in Europe and the third youngest behind Jose Baxter and James Vaughan to play for the first team overall.

As well as defeat, Everton's threadbare squad suffered another jolt when 18-year-old Jack Rodwell was forced off with injury after just eight minutes.

Everton goalkeeper Carlo Nash, the oldest player at 36 and who was also making his first-team debut, said: "It was great, a bit like a reserve game to be honest.

"I've played a few times with the reserves with these lads and I thought they did tremendously tonight despite the score. They go out fearless these days, the kids. They

showed that tonight."

Elsewhere, Celtic, already eliminated, came back from 3-0 down to draw 3-3 at Rapid Vienna in Group C where Hamburg and Hapoel Tel Aviv had made sure of qualification into the knock-out round.

Celtic were three goals down after only 19 minutes with Nikica Jelavic (2) and Hamdi Salhi on target.

But Marc-Antoine Fortune then grabbed a brace before Paul McGowan drove in a stoppage-time equaliser for the Scots.

Italian hopes suffered a double setback as Genoa joined Lazio at the exit door.

Genoa lost 2-1 to Group B winners Valencia for whom David Villa grabbed a last-gasp winner. Lille took second spot with a 3-1 win over Slavia Prague.

Lazio lost 1-0 at home to Levski Sofia in Group G where Austria's FC Salzburg finished as the only side with a 100-per cent record as Dusan Svento scored the only goal in a 1-0 win at fellow qualifiers Villarreal.

Veteran Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos played his last match for Group H winners Fenerbahce, helping the Turkish side to a 1-0 win over Sheriff of Moldova.

Carlos, 36, who signed for Fenerbahce from Real Madrid in 2007, had recently revealed he had penned a two-year deal with Corinthians of Sao Paulo.

Friday's last 32 draw features the top two teams in each of the 12 groups as well as the eight third-place finishers from the Champions League group stages.

Juventus, Liverpool, Sporting Lisbon and Atletico Madrid are among the teams from the Champions League first stage who will be in the hat.

Real look to close gap

AFF, Barcelona



Real Madrid aim to capitalise on Barcelona's World Club Cup distractions by closing the gap at the top of La Liga on Saturday with victory over relegation-haunted Zaragoza.

A victory for Real would put them two points behind Barcelona, who are in Abu Dhabi for the World Club final against Estudiantes of Argentina, with the same number of games played.

Real have responded well since their defeat in the 'Clasico', winning their last three matches and can count on the return of Cristiano Ronaldo, missing from the last game against Valencia through suspension.

The main concern for Real coach Manuel Pellegrini is in defence with Pepe ruled out for six months with a cruciate knee ligament injury while Raul Albiol is also a doubt with a knock.

Marcelo is tipped to move from midfield to defence for the game.

"I want to always play for Real Madrid, be it as a left

back, a midfielder or a striker. It will be fine with me to play as a left back against Zaragoza. That's my true position," he said.

Saturday's match will be a baptism of fire for Zaragoza caretaker-coach Jose Gay after replacing Marcelino Garcia who was fired after the defeat to Athletic Bilbao.

He will have his work cut out in the Bernabeu Stadium with his side having already leaked 29 goals, the most in the Spanish top flight.

Valencia, 11 points behind Barcelona, face another stern challenge against a rejuvenated Deportivo La Coruna.

The battle at the top of table is fierce and Sevilla took advantage of Valencia's defeat last week to move into third place.

They take on Getafe but

star striker Frederic Kanoute feels that Sevilla, nine points behind Barcelona, are not at the level of the top two sides.

Mallorca are proving one of the surprise candidates for a place in the Champions League playing solid, rather than flamboyant football.

They are aiming for their second away win of the campaign against relegation-threatened Malaga after recording their first against Osasuna last weekend.

Athletic Bilbao and Sporting Gijon have also made good starts and they face Osasuna and Valladolid respectively looking to finish the year with a win to keep them in touch with the European places.

Villarreal, who continued their upward march in the table with victory over Atletico Madrid, play Racing Santander, while Atletico, who have endured a dismal last few months, travel to Tenerife.

The game between Espanyol and Almeria sees two sides desperate for a positive result.

Espanyol have lost their last five matches and are level on 13 points with Almeria, whose coach Hugo Sanchez is fighting to keep his job.

IN BRIEF

Barcelona suffer Iniesta setback

AFF, Madrid

Barcelona's midfield star Andres Iniesta has been ruled out of Saturday's World Club Cup final against Argentina's Estudiantes in Abu Dhabi because of a torn thigh muscle, the Spanish champions said.

Iniesta should be back in action for the league clash against Villarreal on January 2, the club said.

Barcelona reached the World Club Cup final on Wednesday with a 3-1 win over Mexico's Atalanta.

Carlos signs off with Fenerbahce

AFF, Istanbul

Veteran Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos played his last match for Fenerbahce on Thursday, helping the Turkish side to a 1-0 win over Sheriff of Moldova in the Europa League.

Carlos, 36, who signed for Fenerbahce from Real Madrid in 2007, had recently revealed he had penned a two-year deal with Corinthians of Sao Paulo.

But on Tuesday it was reported that he could return to Real, where he spent 11 years, to replace defender Pepe who is out for the rest of the season with a knee injury.

Aguero will fit in nicely at Chelsea

AFF, London

Argentina striker Sergio Aguero insisted Friday he would fit in nicely at Premier League side Chelsea.

The 21-year-old Atletico Madrid player has been linked with a move to Stamford Bridge in the January transfer window.

After initially appearing keen to stay in Spain, Aguero now appears to see Chelsea as a good next step for him.

"Chelsea are interested in me because they think I can play an important role for the team," Aguero told the Sun.

"And I think I fit with their style of play.

"Of course I watch the Premier League on TV and I think it is the best league in the world, along with the Spanish league."

Aguero's possible arrival would help to cover for the absence of Didier Drogba and Salomon Kalou on African Nations Cup duty with Ivory Coast, and the former is a player Aguero rates very highly indeed.

"There are a lot of very good players but, right now, the top striker in the Premier League is without doubt, Drogba," he said.

"After comes Fernando Torres, but Drogba is the best."

Aguero has scored seven goals in 13 games in La Liga so far this season.

Milan's Fiorentina test

AFF, Rome



AC Milan face a tough trip away to fellow Champions League second round

qualifiers Fiorentina on Saturday as they bid to keep pace with leaders Inter Milan ahead of the Christmas break in Serie A.

Inter, who host struggling Lazio on Sunday, lead Milan by five points with Juventus a further point back in third.

But following last week's shock 2-0 defeat at home to Palermo, the pressure is on Milan to avoid a morale-sapping gap opening up ahead of the New Year.

Following this week's games, Serie A takes a two and a half week break, by which time the January transfer window will be open.

Former England captain David Beckham will rejoin Milan in January but if the club find themselves eight points adrift at that stage -- which could happen if they lose in Florence -- any hopes of a first title since 2004 would be looking remote.

Fiorentina are themselves in a tight battle for fourth spot and Champions League football next season and will be just as desperate as Milan to

make amends for their 2-1 defeat at Chievo last week.

Chievo, alongside Fiorentina, are one of nine teams separated by just two points from fifth down to 13th.

A defeat for Milan could even see them dragged down into that dogfight for European football next season and boss Leonardo will be hoping that his three-pronged strikeforce can rediscover it's goalscoring touch on Saturday.

Ronaldinho is sure he will be able to repay his coach's faith.

The Brazilian has enjoyed a return to form this season -- even if his once effective burst of acceleration is gone -- after two difficult campaigns.

A week ago things looked good for Milan. They were on a five-match winning streak and had qualified for the Champions League knock-out stages.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Bologna v Atalanta, Fiorentina v AC Milan
Sunday
Genoa v Bari, Inter Milan v Lazio, Juventus v Catania, Livorno v Sampdoria, Napoli v Chievo, Palermo v Siena, AS Roma v Parma, Udinese v Cagliari

And with Inter dropping two points away to Atalanta, it should have been the opportunity to close the gap at the top to two points.

Inter host Lazio, who sit just three points above the relegation zone, with coach Jose Mourinho already thinking ahead to the African Cup of Nations when he will lose Samuel Eto'o and Sulley Muntari.

Mourinho would like to bring in reinforcements up front but admits it is unlikely. "I'll still have (Ricardo) Quaresma, who although not a striker is an option in attack," he said.

"But I'm ready to plough on without any new signings. The club put in a lot of effort in the summer (buying five players) and I can't ask for any more."

Juventus face rock-bottom Catania on Sunday but goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon is out after surgery on his knee and winger Mauro Camoranesi faces two months out with a thigh problem.

Fourth-placed Parma travel to fifth-placed AS Roma in a battle for Champions League qualification while second-from-bottom Siena could move out of the relegation zone if they record a third straight win away to Palermo.

Lehmann accepts fine

AFF, Frankfurt

Stuttgart's director of sport Horst Heldt said Thursday ex-Germany goalkeeper Jens Lehmann has accepted the fine imposed by club bosses for criticising the sacking of former coach Markus Babel.

The 40-year-old had initially refused to pay the fine of 40,000 euros (57,441 US dollars) which he earned for criticising the club's executive committee in the media for sacking Babel earlier this month.

Lehmann accused Stuttgart's bosses of bowing to pressure from fans.

But Heldt revealed both he and new Stuttgart coach Christian Gross had met with the former Arsenal goalkeeper, who retired from international football in August 2008, and the fine had been accepted.

"We had a discussion and a few things were cleared up," Heldt said.

"He has accepted the fine and the warning (about his future conduct)."

Hiddink turns down City, Juve

AFF, London

Guus Hiddink turned down offers from both Premier League side Manchester City and Italian club Juventus, the Russia manager's agent claimed on Friday.

Cees van Nieuwenhuizen has said he was contacted by City chief executive Garry Cook to request talks with Hiddink, but the former Chelsea boss' agent politely declined.

And the Dutch coach also declined a place at Juventus.

"Yes, I did (speak to Cook). But Guus is happy with Russia. Definitely," Van Nieuwenhuizen told the Daily Telegraph.

"I have received calls from all over the world about Guus. There has also been an approach from Juventus."

Van Nieuwenhuizen is not aware whether Cook wanted to discuss the possibility of Cook succeeding manager Mark Hughes or being installed alongside the Welshman.

"I don't know because I said it was not worth discussing it because Guus was happy," he said.

"He (Cook) asked me if it would be worthwhile having a meeting to discuss the future and what might happen next summer. But I told him that Guus was contracted to Russia."

"I said I didn't think it was worth having a meeting. Guus is very relaxed. He starts his holiday tomorrow and in January there are elections for a new president for the Russian Federation."

"He is contracted until next summer but there is an offer for him to stay for two more years, and I think he will definitely stay."

Pressure is mounting on Hughes following six wins in City's opening 16 Premier League matches this season, which leaves them eighth in the table.

Lamps fears for Hammers

AFF, London



Fresh from putting Chelsea's Premier League title drive back on track, Frank Lampard returns to West Ham this weekend admitting he fears for the future of his relegation-threatened former club.

Hammers boss Gianfranco Zola was one of Chelsea's greatest ever players but that will not stop Lampard and co. from trying to push his second-from-bottom squad a little closer to the drop as they seek to consolidate their three-point lead over Manchester United at the other end of the table.

By the time Chelsea kick off at Upton Park on Sunday, United could be level with them on points provided Sir Alex Ferguson's injury-hit squad collect all three points from their trip to Fulham 24 hours earlier.

Lampard, whose penalty clinched a nervy 2-1 win over Portsmouth in midweek, said: "It's difficult for West Ham at the moment. They have a lot of financial difficulties and have had to sell a lot of players.

"I don't want to see them do badly at all -- it is difficult but then it is a difficult league."

The win over Portsmouth's was Chelsea's first in five matches in all competitions but did little to suggest Carlo Ancelotti's side have fully recovered the composure and confidence that has deserted them over the last few weeks, notably in their defending of set pieces.

Chelsea are hopeful that Didier Drogba, whose absence

with a back injury was felt on Wednesday, will be available on Sunday. But it must be a concern for Ancelotti that the striker will depart for the African Nations Cup next month at a time when United traditionally hit their stride.

Lampard is acutely aware it was a mid-winter cocktail of injuries and lost form that ensured Chelsea conceded last season's title to their rivals in the north.

"We had a really bad time around this time last year but when Guus Hiddink came in (as temporary manager) we were in the best form by far of anyone in the League. We can do that again.

"We're having a patch at the moment where we're not pulling away from teams when we might do and every free kick and corner seems to drop to them in a funny way.

"We are being punished every time and it is just a phase we're in. We're going 1-0 up and then not pushing on like we were a few games ago. It's a problem."

Ferguson is expected to deploy Belgian youngster Ritchie de Laet at centreback at Fulham, having been left

with Patrice Evra as his only fit first-team defender.

Arsenal's title hopes were hit by a 1-1 draw at Burnley in midweek and Arsene Wenger's side entertain Hull on Saturday without injured skipper Cesc Fabregas.

It will be the Gunners' third match in seven days while Hull have had since last Saturday to recover from their goalless draw with Blackburn, an anomaly of the fixture list that has infuriated Wenger.

Aston Villa will look to consolidate their position in the top four at home to Stoke on Saturday while Tottenham, two points back in fifth spot following their win over Manchester City in midweek, travel to Blackburn.

Liverpool's ability to overhaul Villa and Spurs will be tested by a trip to Portsmouth for a lunchtime fixture in which the first goal will set a new record.

Nets have bulged 499 times in 167 matches so far this season and a goal at Fratton Park would see the 500 milestone reached with 17 matches to spare compared to the previous Premier League record, set in 1994/95.

High-flying Birmingham face a tough task if they are to keep their five-match winning run going at Everton on Sunday, and Wolves fans will find out if manager Mick McCarthy's controversial decision to rest most of his first-choice players against Manchester United in midweek was the right one.

Wolves take on Burnley in the kind of fixture McCarthy believes they must start winning if they are to get out of the bottom three.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-offs unless stated)

Saturday

Arsenal v Hull (1730 GMT), Aston Villa v Stoke, Blackburn v Tottenham, Fulham v Manchester Utd, Manchester City v Sunderland, Portsmouth v Liverpool (1245 GMT)

Sunday

Wolves v Burnley (1330 GMT), Everton v Birmingham (1330 GMT), West Ham v Chelsea (1600 GMT)

Monday

Wigan v Bolton (2000 GMT)