



Milan striker Marco Borriello scores one of his two goals from a bicycle kick during their Serie A encounter against Genoa at San Siro on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Milan thrash Genoa

AFP, Rome



David Beckham began his second loan spell with AC Milan on Wednesday in style as the rossoneri came from behind to beat Genoa 5-2 and leapfrog Juventus into second place in Serie A.

Beckham, who scored in the same fixture last season after being loaned out from LA Galaxy, looked hungry for action as he earned a starting place with fellow midfielder veteran Clarence Seedorf out through injury. The three points took AC Milan onto 34 points from 17 games - eight behind reigning champions Inter, who returned from their winter break with a 1-0 win over Chievo to maintain their eight-point lead - though Beckham and company have a game in hand.

Jose Mourinho's Inter were deprived of a number of midfield stars, handing a rare start to wantaway French midfielder Patrick Vieira, reportedly bound for Manchester City.

But they still took the points courtesy of a 12th minute goal on the counter attack from striker Mario Balotelli.

It was not all good news for Inter, as their Romanian international defender Cristian Chivu fractured his skull in a clash of heads in the 46th minute while Balotelli was subjected to racist abuse.

Balotelli, born in Palermo but of Ghanaian heritage, is regularly subjected to such insults but this time spoke out.

"Every time I come to Verona I realise that the supporters disgust me more and more. It's completely unacceptable," Balotelli told Sky Sports.

Juventus are third, a point behind AC Milan having played a game more, after winning 2-1 at Parma.

Midfielder Hasan Salihamidzic scored after just three minutes and an own-goal had them 2-0 up by the break.

The 'Old Lady' hung on for the three points despite having on-loan defender Martin Caceres

sent-off in the second-half.

Juventus suffered an injury worry as French striker David Trezeguet went off with an apparent sprained ankle after being tackled by Parma's veteran defender Christian Panucci in the 18th minute.

With Inter streaking clear the onus was on Milan - and the returning Beckham - to show their steel and, after a false start, they did just that, once they had recovered from Giuseppe Sculli's shock opener - a stooping header past a flat-footed defence after 25 minutes.

Ten minutes earlier, Milan should have been ahead after Giuseppe Biava fouled Massimo Ambrosini but Ronaldinho placed his kick too close to Marco Amelia.

But the keeper then fouled Ambrosini for another spotkick.

This time Ronaldinho drilled the ball low inside the opposite corner as Amelia guessed wrong in going the same way as for the first kick.

Beckham then fired into the side netting as Milan began belatedly to force the pace.

And the pressure told as Thiago Silva fired them ahead in the 37th minute after Amelia was only able to parry Ambrosini's initial vicious effort.

Two minutes after the restart it was 3-1, Ronaldinho sending through a cute pass to Luca Antonini, and he teed up Marco Borriello to clip home from close range.

Borriello then added icing to the cake with a spectacular overhead kick - though he appeared to have strayed marginally offside.

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar thrashed home the fifth from yet another penalty after Marco Rossi had brought down the marauding Ronaldinho.

David Suazo fired in a late consolation for Genoa but that could not take the gloss off an emphatic Milanese win.

Napoli lie fourth on 30 points after a 2-0 victory over Atalanta while Roma will be kicking themselves after letting a 2-0 lead slip away at Cagliari with the home side scoring twice in time added on to force a 2-2 draw.

Roma are fifth on 29 points.

## Gunners may swap Fabregas for Higuain

AFP, Madrid

Arsenal may be ready to sell Cesc Fabregas to Real Madrid -- if they get Argentine star Gonzalo Higuain in return, a Spanish sports newspaper said Thursday.

Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger "is only willing to part with his captain if Real includes Gonzalo Higuain in the deal," said Marca, which did not indicate its sources.

It said Real would prefer to offer Dutch midfielder Rafael Van der Vaart to the London club, and would only release Higuain for 35 million euros, 10 million less than they would pay the Gunners for Fabregas, Marca said.

But competition for the 22-year-old Spanish international from bitter rivals Barcelona may force their hand, it said.

In comments on the UEFA website, Higuain said he would like to end his career at Real Madrid, "the team and the city are my second home, and it would be fantastic."

Fabregas, Arsenal's top scorer with 12 goals, is under contract with the Gunners until 2014 but his future has been the subject of much speculation this season.

The player himself last month played down talk of a move back to his native Spain, saying that his future lies in the English Premier League.

Fabregas began his career with Barcelona but was signed by Arsenal in September 2003.

The following month he became Arsenal's youngest ever player in any competition when he appeared in a League Cup tie against Rotherham aged just 16 years and 177 days.

## Vieira set for City medical

SOCCERNET

Inter Milan midfielder Patrick Vieira is to have a medical at Manchester City on Thursday ahead of signing an 18-month contract.

Jose Mourinho confirmed that Vieira would leave Inter following the club's 1-0 victory over Chievo on Wednesday and Vieira has now said he wants to link up with Roberto Mancini at Eastlands to bolster his hopes of representing France at the World Cup.

"I wanted to go to the World Cup and I need playing time," he told Canal Plus. "It's over, after a year in Turin and three and a half years in Milan."

"I have ambitions and I can't achieve them by staying at Inter where I am not part of the coach's choice."

"What's important for me is to go to Manchester City, to show the coach that I am the same as I was during the period when he was at Inter. All this will help me get into the France team."

Vieira last played an official game for France in September 2007. He has played 12 league games for Inter this season as well as two in the Champions League.

## Belgian duo in semis

Tennis

AFP, Brisbane

Star Belgian duo Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin were both forced to three sets before winning their quarterfinals at the Brisbane International on Thursday.

Clijsters beat Czech Lucie Safarova 6-1, 0-6, 6-4 while earlier in the day Henin outlasted seventh seeded Hungarian Melinda Czink 6-2, 3-6, 7-6 (7/5).

Top seed Clijsters now faces German surprise packet Andrea Petkovic for a place in Saturday's final and Henin plays third seed Ana Ivanovic of Serbia.

Clijsters needed four match points to finally see off Safarova, who looked all at sea as she surrendered the first set in just 23 minutes.

But the Czech came out with all guns blazing in the second, blasting winners from all over the court and forcing Clijsters into a host of errors, taking the set in three minutes less than she lost the first.

In an intriguing third set, Clijsters broke in the fifth game and held on for the win.

She said while she was able to dominate the first set, it was a different story after that. "I felt like in the second set even before I had the chance to work my way into the rally, she'd already hit a winner most of the time," Clijsters said.

"Thinking back on it now, maybe I should have taken a little more risks at times, but I think the difference for her in the first set to the way she played in the second was so big it kind of surprised me at the time."

Henin's match followed a similar pattern to Clijsters' as she won the first set comfortably, lost the second then fought off a tenacious Czink to claim the third.

Henin needed six match points and a shade over two hours, 20 minutes to book her place in the final four.

"I love these kinds of situations, especially after, not during the match," she said.

Henin said she had recovered well from playing three matches in a row.

"I feel better today, much better (than yesterday)," Henin said.

"It was a long match and mentally it was very difficult but physically I feel much better."

"I am an old woman of 27," she joked.

"I came here to play matches and that's what I have done, so no complaints."

Ivanovic survived her own second set meltdown to squeeze past Russian Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova 6-2, 7-6 (8-6).

The third seed looked set to wrap up the quarterfinal in under an hour when she led 4-0 in the second set only for Pavlyuchenkova to come storming back.

The Russian had a set point in the tie-break

but couldn't take advantage and a relieved Ivanovic was able to close the match out in two.

Ivanovic said she was confident ahead of her clash with Henin.

"She's playing really good and she seems to be in good shape so it's going to be a good test for me. Whatever happens I'm just going to try and enjoy it," the Serb said.

Unseeded German Andrea Petkovic stunned fourth seed Daniela Hantuchova in straight games 6-4, 6-2.



PHOTO: AFP

Kim Clijsters of Belgium celebrates her victory over Lucie Safarova of the Czech Republic during their Brisbane International quarterfinal on Thursday.

Petkovic, who beat eighth seed Iveta Benesova in the first round, broke her Slovak opponent three times to reach the semifinals.

"I'm still not 100 per cent at the moment, but by the time I play in Sydney in a few days' time I am pretty confident I will be fine."

With two wins from three singles matches here, plus three mixed doubles matches, Hewitt said the Hopman Cup had served its purpose of providing valuable match practice in the new year.

"The main reason we come is to get matches under the belt," he said.

"The grand slams are the priorities and I want to be playing my best tennis in Melbourne."

"You can't buy that sort of practice where you go out there and you are break points down in a competitive environment."

"Both of us (Hewitt and team-mate Samantha Stosur) will take a lot out of this week."

Hewitt said he was in much better shape for this year's Australian Open than in 2009, when he bowed out in the first round following limited preparation after hip surgery.

## IN BRIEF

### L'pool close to signing Maxi

AFP, Madrid

Liverpool are close to signing Atletico Madrid's Argentine striker Maxi Rodriguez for 1.5 million euros, a Spanish sports newspaper said Thursday.

The player has already announced the news to his teammates, said Marca, which did not indicate its sources.

It said the cash would help Atletico to buy striker Eduardo Salvio from Argentine club Lanus for eight million euros.

Atletico has been active in the mid-season transfer window after a poor start to the season that has left it in 11th place in the Primera Liga, 17 points behind leaders Barcelona.

Spanish media has said the club is set to sign Arsenal's 19-year-old Spanish midfielder Fran Merida.

It also close to buying Portuguese midfielder Tiago Mendes from Juventus, another sports newspaper, AS, reported.

### Chivu in stable condition

INTERNET, undated

Inter Milan defender Cristian Chivu is in stable condition after surgery on his fractured skull.

The Romania international was carried off in the second half of Inter's 1-0 win over Chievo Verona on Wednesday following a clash of heads with opposing striker Sergio Pellissier.

A statement on Inter's Web site Thursday said Chivu's recovery was proceeding "regularly," he is alert and that a morning scan reconfirmed that the operation was carried out "perfectly."

No prognosis was given as to when Chivu might play again.

### Real to play friendly in Albania

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will collect 2.5 million euros to face Albanian champions Gramoz Erseke, owned by oil magnate Rezart Taci, in a friendly match on January 20, Spanish media reported on Wednesday.

"The contract has been signed and everything is ready for the match on the 20th," said Milton Nushi, a spokesman for Taci's firm Taci Oil International, the online edition of Spanish sports daily Marca reported.

"There will be no absences, the entire team is coming, including its president, Florentino Perez," he added, according to the newspaper.

Gramoz Erseke's line-up against the Spanish giants for the "Taci Oil Cup" at Tirana's Qemal Stafa stadium will include some stars from rival teams.

Last year Taci brought AC Milan for a friendly match against KF Tirana for the single game tournament. The Italian side won on penalties 5-4 after the match ended in a 3-3 draw.

## Hirayama fires Japan

Football

AFP, Singapore

China, Iran, Japan, Bahrain and the UAE qualified for the 2011 Asian Cup finals on Wednesday, but Australia must wait after conceding a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 in Kuwait.

Japan pulled off an escape in the Ali Mohsen Al Muraishi Stadium in Sana'a after Sota Hirayama fired a hat-trick to see off Yemen 3-2 after the hosts had established a two-goal lead through Basem Al Aqel and Sami Karama.

Hirayama pulled one back just before the break - before Khaled Baleid hit the bar for Yemen - and the Blue Samurai striker's close range finish 11 minutes from the end secured the win that ensured they stay atop a Group A from which Bahrain also qualify after thumping Hong Kong 4-0.

The game in Sana'a was under threat of being called off following the attempted bombing on Christmas Day of a US-bound airliner.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group's Yemen-based arm, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Australia's hopes are still in the balance after Pim Verbeek's Socceroos failed to see off Kuwait despite Luke Wilkshire and Central Coast Mariners defender Dean Hefferman putting the visitors 2-0 up inside five minutes.

Kuwait roared back and scored twice in a frenetic end to the opening period through Hamad Al Enezi and Yousef Nasser.

Al Enezi drew a fine save from Aussie keeper Eugene Galekovic nine minutes from time to keep the Socceroos level with the Kuwaitis in Group B on eight points but second on goal difference.

Oman's 2-1 win over Indonesia in Jakarta means they are still in the mix on seven points - but the Indonesians are out.

Australia still have to travel to Oman.

Perennial underachievers China secured their berth with a hard-fought goalless draw in Zhejiang against qualified Syria in Group D.

But Gao Hongbo's team had to wait an agonising 40 minutes to hear the result from Beirut, where minnows Lebanon held Vietnam to a 1-1 draw which sent the Chinese through.

It was sweet revenge for China, who lost 3-2 to Syria at the start of the qualifying campaign

almost a year ago under caretaker coach Yin Tiesheng, but since then had recorded three straight wins before Wednesday's draw.

Iran, a traditional Asian powerhouse still recovering from its failure to make next year's World Cup in South Africa, ensured they will kick-off in Doha in January 2011 with a convincing 3-1 victory in Singapore.

While the home team started brightly, defensive blunders gifted Iran two goals in the space of 60 seconds.

Hadi Agthli opened the Iranian account with a penalty on 11 minutes and Mehrzad Madanchi made it 2-0 a minute later after picking up a stray Mustafic Fahrudin pass on the edge of the box and firing home.

Nor Alam Shah pulled one back for the home side just after half-an-hour but a delicate chip from Radham Rezaei mid-way through the second period sealed victory for Iran.

Singapore can still reach their first Asian Cup finals since hosting the competition back in 1984 after Bryan Robson's Thailand failed to dispatch Jordan.

Their 0-0 draw in Bangkok draw means Singapore and Thailand both have six points with Jordan on five and a game to play.

Jordan would appear to have the advantage with a home tie against Singapore on March 3 while Thailand must travel to Iran.

Uzbekistan and Syria had already booked their places at the showpiece in Qatar, along with the host nation and Iraq, Saudi Arabia and South Korea, the top three in the 2007 tournament.

India are also through as the 2008 AFC Challenge Cup winners

A last-gasp goal from substitute Ahmed Khalil sent United Arab Emirates through after he scored in stoppage time to seal a 1-0 Group C win over Malaysia at Al Shabab Stadium.

In Manama, Ismail Abdullateef scored a hat-trick and Abdulla Al Dhakeel netted the other to leave Bahrain coach Milan Macala a happy man as his men progressed with Japan.

"The main thing was to qualify and now that we have achieved it, we are not bothered too much about the final scoreline," said the Czech.

Hong Kong coach Fai Chun Liu said the result was not totally unexpected but added that it was a good learning experience.

"We played well in the opening stages. But once we conceded the first goal we tried too hard to get back into the match," said Liu.

## Hewitt's injury scare

Tennis

AFP, Perth

Dual grand slam champion Lleyton Hewitt dismissed concerns over an injury scare at the Hopman Cup here Thursday.

In Australia's final group tie at the mixed teams tournament, the former world number one appeared hampered by hip and back soreness during his straight sets singles loss to Spaniard Tommy Robredo, raising concerns over his fitness ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne in just under a fortnight.

Hewitt, who has been troubled by injury over the last two years and also slightly jarred a knee earlier in the week, called an injury time-out at the end of the first set, but finished the match, losing 6-2, 6-4.

He seemed to move more freely in the second set of the singles and then returned to the court for a mixed doubles rubber.

Speaking after the tie, the 28-year-old played down the problem, saying he had been suffering back spasms but had responded well to treatment on the court and again between the singles and doubles.

The world number 22 admitted the injury initially gave him a fright.

"I was a little bit worried at the start. It was about the second point and my back went into a bit of a spasm. I felt something on the serve,"



Japan striker Hirayama Sota (R) challenges Yemen's Basem Said Al-Aqel during their Asian Cup qualifier in Sanaa on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP