

L'pool, Juve win

AFP, Paris

Favourites Liverpool began their Europa League campaign with a narrow 1-0 victory over Romanian champions Unirea Urziceni in the home leg of their round-of-32 tie on Thursday.

The five-time European champions dropped down to the continent's second-tier competition after their elimination at the group phase of the Champions League and they were far from fluent against Roni Levi's underdogs.

The hosts spurned a series of chances before David Ngog secured the breakthrough in the 81st minute.

The Frenchman scored with a close-range diving header after Ryan Babel's raking cross had been knocked down by 19-year-old substitute Daniel Pacheco, to hand Rafael Benitez's side a slim advantage ahead of the return leg on February 25.

Reigning UEFA Cup holders Shakhtar Donetsk went down to an unexpected 2-1 defeat at Fulham, after England hopeful Bobby Zamora scored a sensational winner with a powerful shot into the top-right corner in the 63rd minute.

Serie A title challengers Roma, meanwhile, saw their 20-match unbeaten run come to an abrupt halt in a dramatic 3-2 loss to Greek side Panathinaikos.

The hosts trailed twice but levelled in the 84th minute through Lazaros Christodoulou before former Liverpool striker Djibril Cisse fired in the winner a minute from time.

Earlier, two headed goals from Brazilian striker Amauri earned Juventus a precious 2-1 lead over Ajax in the first leg of their tie at Goodison Park.

in Amsterdam.

Amauri struck either side of half-time in response to Miralem Sulejmani's 16th-minute opener to give Alberto Zaccheroni victory in his first European game in charge since replacing the sacked Ciro Ferrara.

Last season's beaten UEFA Cup finalists Werder Bremen lost 1-0 in the away leg of their tie with former England coach Steve McClaren's FC Twente, who prevailed through Theo Janssen's 39th-minute goal.

Misfiring German champions Wolfsburg, 23 points off the pace in the defence of their Bundesliga title, drew 2-2 at Villarreal, while Belgian outfit Club Brugge secured a famous 1-0 victory against 10-man Valencia, who are currently third in the Spanish top flight.

Spain international midfielder David Silva saw red for the visitors after picking up a second yellow card early in the second half and Brugge took immediate advantage thanks to Dorge Kouemaha's 56th-minute winner.

Hamburg defeated Dutch heavyweights PSV Eindhoven 1-0, while Marseille won 3-1 at FC Copenhagen and Atletico Madrid were held to a 1-1 draw at home to Turkish side Galatasaray.

Russian champions Rubin Kazan planted one foot in the last 16 after Aleksandr Bukharov scored a well-taken brace in a 3-0 win at home to Israel's Hapoel Tel-Aviv, with high-flying French side Lille edging Fenerbahce 2-1 in northern France.

Standard Liege of Belgium mounted a stirring comeback at home to Red Bull Salzburg, fighting back from 2-0 down at half-time to win 3-2 thanks to second-half strikes from Igor De Camargo and an Axel Witsel double.

Liverpool's Merseyside neighbours Everton were in action on Tuesday, when they edged Sporting Lisbon 2-1 in the first leg of their tie at Goodison Park.



Juventus players congratulate teammate and goalscorer Amauri (R) at the end of their Europa League encounter against Ajax in Amsterdam on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Vieira accepts charge

AFP, London

Patrick Vieira is set to be banned for three matches by the Football Association (FA) on Friday after "reluctantly deciding" to accept a violent conduct charge.

The Manchester City midfielder was charged by the FA on Wednesday after appearing to kick Stoke's Glenn Whelan between the legs during Tuesday's 1-1 Premier League draw at the Britannia Stadium.

A City statement issued Thursday said: "Patrick Vieira has reluctantly decided not to contest the FA charge of violent conduct."

Vieira added: "At no time did I intend to injure Glenn Whelan. I apologise to him at the time. My foot did make contact with him but I carried no malice at all toward him."

France star Vieira, who was making only his second start for City following a January transfer window move from Italian giants Inter Milan, is now set to miss league matches

against Liverpool and Chelsea as well as the FA Cup fifth round replay at Stoke.

Tony Pulis, the Stoke manager, was enraged after Vieira escaped on-field punishment from referee Alan Wiley.

Pulis urged the FA to take retrospective action, pleading for "parity" after Stoke defender Robert Huth was banned in October when television cameras caught him striking West Ham's Matthew Upson.

"We had a player given a three-game suspension after an incident a couple of months back," Pulis said.

Vieira has been hailed before the FA on many occasions after being sent-off 10 times in his nine years at Arsenal. He was also booked on 100 occasions playing for the Gunners before joining Juventus in 2005.

The 33-year-old has now been booked twice in four appearances since joining Manchester City. His first yellow card came against Hull earlier this month and he received another for a foul on Stoke's Mamady Sidibe on Tuesday.

Real want Jose for next season

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid want Inter Milan's Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho to replace embattled Manuel Pellegrini next season, sports daily Marca reported Friday.

"Mourinho still has three years left with Inter but there is a clause in his contract which would allow him to leave in June," it said, adding the Spanish giant's interest had been "well received" by the former Chelsea coach.

Pellegrini, 56, is under pressure following Real's 1-0 Champions League defeat away to Lyon and the club's embarrassing elimination by third division side Alcorcon from the Spanish Cup late last year.

The Champions League final will be held at Real's Santiago Bernabeu stadium on May 22 and the club, which spent nearly 250 million euros (340 million dollars) on fresh talent before the start of the season, has made winning the tournament its top priority.

Real's loss to Lyon has put its Champions League campaign in jeopardy and Pellegrini has been criticised by Spain's sports media for failing to place new stars Cristiano Ronaldo and Kaka into a coherent team structure.

The club lies in second place in La Liga, two points behind its arch-rival and the reigning European champions Barcelona.

The Chilean coach, a qualified civil engineer, joined Real from Villarreal in June 2009 for one season after leading the Spanish club to a fifth-place finish.

Since 2000 Real has had ten coaches, an average of one per year: Vicente del Bosque, Carlos Queiroz, Jose Antonio Camacho, Mariano Garcia Remon, Wanderley Luxemburgo, Juan Ramon Lopez Caro, Fabio Capello, Bernd Schuster, Juande Ramos and Pellegrini.

Everton test for MU

AFP, London

Louis Saha may hope Manchester United go on to win the Premier League title but such thoughts will be at the back of the in-form Everton striker's when he faces his old club this weekend.

Saha, whose four seasons at Old Trafford were plagued by injuries, has scored 15 goals so far this season and was on target twice in Everton's 2-1 win over league leaders Chelsea earlier this month.

Everton, ninth in the table and 23 points off top spot, may be out of title contention themselves but, having cut Chelsea's lead to just a point, they are ready to play another significant part in the destiny of the championship.

The Merseysiders' task on Saturday, however, will be made harder by the absence of Marouane Fellaini, out for six months with an ankle injury, while Australia midfielder Tim Cahill is doubtful after suffering a calf problem in the mid-week Europa Cup win over Sporting Lisbon.

Manchester City and Liverpool, two sides scrapping for a fourth-place finish that will guarantee Champions League football next season, go head to head at Eastlands on Sunday.

City have climbed to fourth and are a point in front of Liverpool, who narrowly beat Romanian side Unirea Urziceni in the Europa League on Thursday, with a game in hand over the Reds.

Tottenham and Aston Villa, also aiming for European football next season, play relegation-threatened Wigan and Burnley respectively.

Bottom-of-the-table Portsmouth, whose financial problems continue to threaten the club's very existence, are at home to Stoke while fellow strugglers Hull travel to West Ham.

Blackburn and Bolton meet in a Lancashire derby on Sunday when Fulham, fresh from a Europa League win over Ukraine's Shakhtar Donetsk, face Birmingham City.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless otherwise stated)

Saturday
Arsenal v Sunderland, Everton v Manchester United (1245GMT), Portsmouth v Stoke (1730GMT), West Ham v Hull, Wolves v Chelsea

Sunday
Aston Villa v Burnley (1400GMT), Blackburn v Bolton (1200GMT), Fulham v Liverpool, Manchester City v Birmingham, Wigan v Tottenham (1615GMT)

Bayern eye record

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich bid to equal a record of 10 straight league wins on Saturday when they travel to lowly Nuremberg for a match that could see them top the table for the first time in 21 months.

Inspired by Dutch international winger Arjen Robben, who has found the net in his last six outings, Bayern have embarked on a tremendous run of form, winning their last 13 games in a row in all competitions.

And the 21-time Bundesliga kings will travel to relegation-threatened Nuremberg full of confidence after scraping a 2-1 win in their Champions League last-16 first leg against Fiorentina on Wednesday.

Bayern have also been boosted by the return to fitness of French international star midfielder Franck Ribery, who played a full 90 minutes against Fiorentina for the first time since a four-month injury lay-off.

However, coach Louis van Gaal said his Belgian defender Daniel van Buyten would miss the match and possibly also Bayern's crunch clash with fourth-placed Hamburg on February 28, after picking up a calf injury on Wednesday.

While the focus will naturally be on Bayern, their main competitors for the title, Bayer Leverkusen -- currently top of the league by one goal on goal difference -- are also in the hunt for records this weekend.

If Jupp Heynckes's men avoid defeat away to Werder Bremen on Sunday, it will be their 23rd consecutive game without losing, ironically overhauling a record set by Bayern in 1988-89 when they were coached by Heynckes himself.

Third-placed Schalke are also playing away from home, at last season's champions Wolfsburg, now fallen from grace and languishing at 12th in the table.

The other team still in the Bundesliga hunt is Hamburg, buoyed by the recent signing of Dutch superstar Ruud van Nistelrooy.

At the other end of the table, Hertha Berlin, still four points adrift at the bottom of the league, have a must-win game against newly-promoted Freiburg, themselves only one place from relegation difficulty in 15th.

FIXTURES

Saturday
(1430GMT)
Nuremberg v Bayern Munich, Cologne v Stuttgart, Borussia Dortmund v Hanover, Hamburg v Eintracht Frankfurt, Mainz v Bochum

Sunday
(1630GMT unless otherwise stated)
Freiburg v Hertha Berlin (1430GMT), Wolfsburg v Schalke, Werder Bremen v Bayer Leverkusen

Barca to do without Xavi

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona midfielder Sergio Busquets believes an April show-down with bitter rivals Real Madrid will decide the Spanish league title despite seeing their lead cut to just two points.

The Catalan giants were forced to field a makeshift defence in their first defeat of the season against Atletico Madrid last weekend, allowing Los Blancos to close the gap at the top of La Liga with a routine win away to basement club Xerez.

Barcelona face Racing Santander this weekend but 21-year-old Busquets, son of former Barca keeper Carles, already has his eyes on the mouthwatering clash against Manuel Pellegrini's Real Madrid in two months' time.

"The match at the Bernabeu will go a long way to deciding who wins and loses the title but there is a long way to go before that and we have a lot of games that will also have a big impact like this weekend," said the Spanish international.

Pep Guardiola will have to do without influential midfielder Xavi, who is the latest player to join the injury list, meaning Rafa Marquez could move from centre-back.

Real suffered a disappointing Champions League defeat by Lyon in mid-week and defender Alvaro Arbeloa says the players are now looking for a win against Villarreal to boost morale.

"There are three weeks before we play the second leg

of the Champions League and we have a key game against Villarreal coming up where we will need to get our game back on track and give ourselves confidence," the former Liverpool player said.

"We are two points off Barcelona and we will do our best to reduce that lead. We need to win our next few games as that will set the tone for the rest of the season."

Third-placed Valencia aim to continue their good run of form against Getafe, while there is a crunch match below them between Sevilla and Mallorca for fourth position.

Sevilla striker Frederic Kanoute is a fitness doubt so Alvaro Negredo could partner Luis Fabiano in attack for the trip to the Oni Estadi.

Meanwhile, Deportivo la Coruna are looking to bounce back after a poor performance against Espanyol when they take on Xerez.

The victory over Barcelona has kindled Atletico Madrid's hopes of winning a place in Europe but as they prepare to face Almeria, their main problem is that they still lack consistency.

The situation remains just as tight at the foot of the table.

Valladolid slipped down to 19th position following Tenerife's surprise win over Mallorca.

They now face a tough away trip to Osasuna, who have won four out of their last five games, while Tenerife have an equally difficult encounter against Athletic Bilbao.

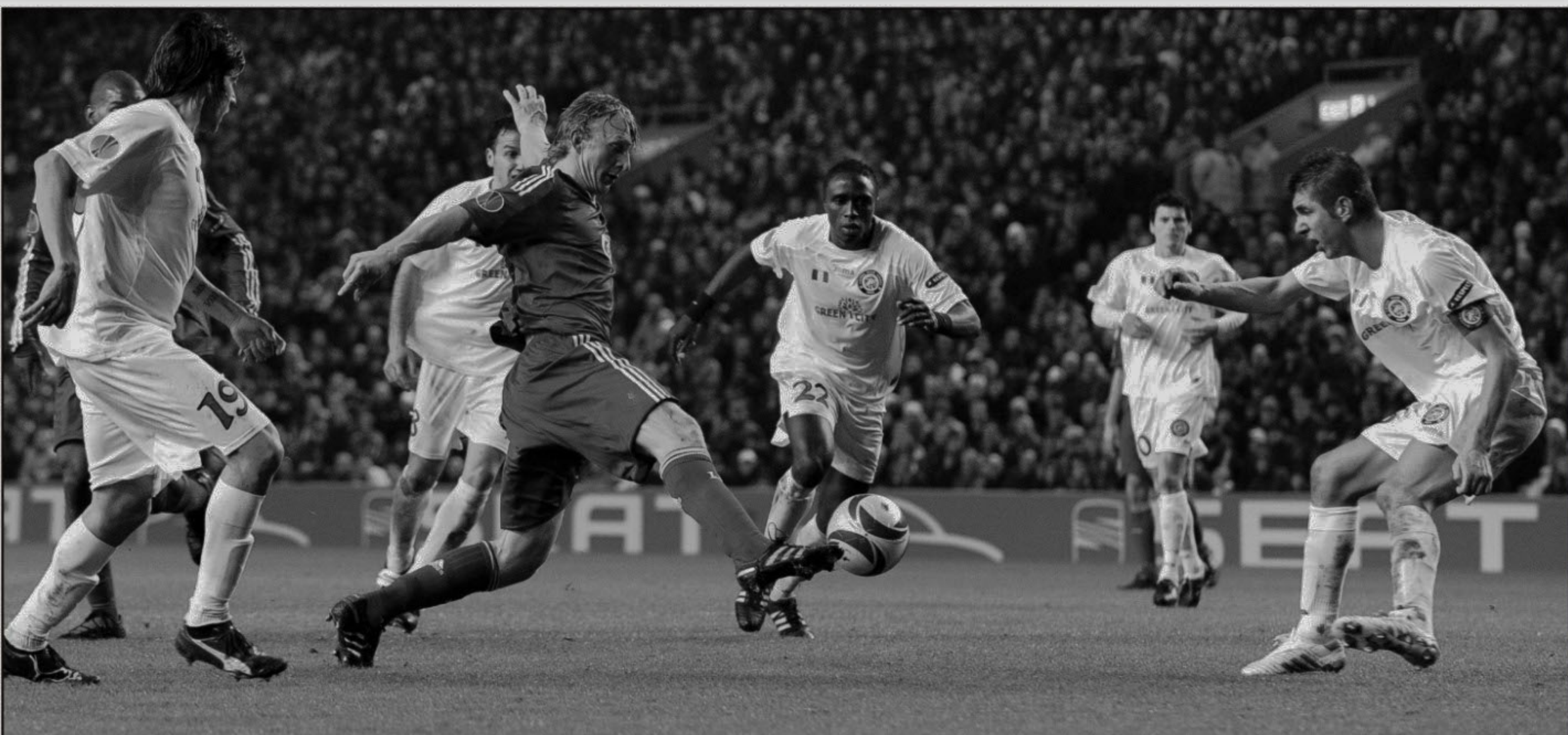
Zaragoza have moved out of the bottom three having picked up seven points from a possible nine and they will be hoping to continue the good run against Sporting Gijon.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Deportivo la Coruna v Xerez (1700GMT), Barcelona v Racing Santander (1900GMT), Mallorca v Sevilla (2100GMT)

Sunday
(1600GMT unless otherwise stated)
Malaga v Espanyol, Athletic Bilbao v Tenerife, Osasuna v Valladolid, Zaragoza v Sporting Gijon, Almeria v Atletico Madrid (1900GMT), Real Madrid v Villarreal (2000GMT)

Monday
(2000GMT)
Valencia v Getafe



Liverpool forward Dirk Kuyt (3rd from L) is crowded out by Unirea players during their Europa League clash at Anfield on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Togo ban not overturned

AFP, Geneva



The Court of Arbitration for Sport on Thursday refused a request to allow Togo to be included in the qualifying draw for the 2012 Africa Cup of Nations at the weekend.

Togo pulled out of last month's tournament in Angola at the insistence of the Togolese government after a deadly rebel attack injured players and left two members of their delegation dead.

The Confederation of African Football (CAF), which organises the event, later

banned Togo from taking part in the next two tournaments in Equatorial Guinea in 2012 and Libya in 2014 because of "government interference".

The Togolese FA had asked the Swiss-based court for the ban to be temporarily lifted so that they could be included in Saturday's draw for the 2012 edition.

But the arbitration panel rejected their call, saying in a statement that their absence "would not call into question the participation of the team in the first qualifying matches for the CAN 2012 which will start in September 2010".

A final ruling on Togo's ban is expected in spring this year, the statement added.