



Manchester United star Wayne Rooney (L) scores the second goal past Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati during their champions league encounter at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

MU humiliate Milan

AFP, Manchester



Wayne Rooney reached 30 goals for the season as Manchester United marched into the last eight of the Champions League with a clinical 4-0 demolition of AC Milan here on Wednesday.

On a night that saw David Beckham return to where it all started for him, it was the current darling of the Old Trafford faithful who steered United into the quarterfinals by following up his double in the 3-2 first leg victory in Milan with another brace.

A first-half header put Sir Alex Ferguson's side firmly in control and the England striker killed the tie in the opening seconds of the second period. Park Ji-Sung and Darren Fletcher round off a memorable night as United eliminated their opponents for the first time in five attempts since two of European football's iconic institutions first met, 52 years ago.

The predictions of a fluid encounter were vindicated by an opening ten minutes in which Milan might have established the two-goal lead they required to overturn the deficit from the first leg.

United had the first opportunities, Rooney's shot on the turn from the edge of the penalty area slipping just the wrong side of the post, Gary Neville's 25-yarder dipping into the roof of the net just too late and a Nani shot being turned round the

post by Christian Abbiati.

But those were definitely in the half-chance category, unlike the openings enjoyed by Ronaldinho, who directed a free header from Andrea Pirlo's free-kick wide, and Klaas Jan Huntelaar.

Having been put beyond the United back four by Ronaldinho's floated pass, the Dutch striker fluffed his attempt to bring the ball under his control.

Milan's profligacy was swiftly sanctioned with Rooney giving United a 13th-minute lead with his third headed goal of the tie.

Allowed to advance though the inside right channel in leisurely fashion, Neville had time to tee up a cross which Rooney directed beyond Abbiati's right-hand having been granted an equally generous amount of space by his marker, Daniele Bonera.

That left Milan needing to score three times and, for the remainder of the first-half that appeared a very remote prospect, the visitors' only moment of menace coming when Edwin van der Sar needed a second attempt to smother Pirlo's swerving shot.

Darren Fletcher came closest to extending United's lead before the break, his drive curling just wide in first-half stoppage time.

The break saw Bonera replaced by Clarence Seedorf as Milan played their final cards, but within a minute of the restart, Rooney had killed the tie.

Man Utd 4-0 Milan
Rooney 13'
Rooney 46'
Park 59'
Fletcher 88'
Manchester United win 7-2 on aggregate

MANCHESTER UNITED: Van der Sar, Gary Neville (Rafael, 66), Patrice Evra, Rio Ferdinand, Nemanja Vidic, Ji-Sung Park, Nani, Paul Scholes (Darron Gibson, 73), Darren Fletcher, Antonio Valencia, Wayne Rooney (Dimitar Berbatov, 66)

MILAN: Christian Abbiati, Marek Jankulovski, Daniele Bonera (Clarence Seedorf, 46), Thiago Silva, Mathieu Flamini, Ignazio Abate (David Beckham, 64), Andrea Pirlo, Massimo Ambrosini, Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, Marco Borriello (Filippo Inzaghi, 69), Ronaldinho

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IN BRIEF

I knew we would lose: Galliani

INTERNET, undated

Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani admits he knew they'd lose when injuries piled up on Wednesday, but attacked Italy's finances.

"I knew it was going to go badly yesterday afternoon. We had taken Alexandre Pato, Alessandro Nesta and Luca Antonini in the squad, but all three of them pulled out with injuries on Tuesday," he said of the 4-0 defeat at Old Trafford.

"Without such important players and taking on a Manchester United side of such quality, it was always going to be extremely difficult."

Crouch named funniest man

AFP, London

England footballer Peter Crouch was named the funniest man in British sport, topping a poll out on Thursday of the best one-liners and comedy football moments of all time.

The gangly Tottenham striker was asked "What would you be if you weren't a footballer?"

Crouch quipped: "A virgin".

The six feet, seven inches (2.01 metres) tall forward also topped a separate poll of the funniest men in British sport, with 24 per cent voting for his 2006 "robot dance" premiered after scoring for England in a pre-World Cup friendly match.

Ballack to extend with Chelsea

AFP, Berlin

Germany captain Michael Ballack is set to sign a one-year contract extension which will keep him at Premier League side Chelsea until 2011, German daily Bild claimed Thursday.

The 33-year-old midfielder, who last June extended his contract by a year, has told club bosses in London that he sees himself playing until 2012 and will have the option of a further year's extension, Bild reported.

The German daily say Ballack has also told Germany coach Joachim Loew that he intends playing on after this June's World Cup in South Africa, where Germany are one of the favourites.

Press blame Pellegrini

INTERNET, undated



Manuel Pellegrini is in the eye of the storm after Real Madrid crashed out of the Champions League on Wednesday.

Pellegrini has pulled his expensive team up to level with Barcelona in La Liga, but the knives are out for him after the latest Euro flop.

Influential sports daily Marca, which is very close to club president Florentino Perez, has been calling for the head of the Chilean coach since October's 4-0 King's Cup humiliation against third division part-timers Alcorcon.

The headline in Marca on Thursday is the word "Out!", followed by "Goodbye to the Champions, Goodbye to Pellegrini."

Editor Eduardo Indra then explains that Pellegrini is the "principal person to blame" for the fiasco.

However, an online poll taken by Marca shows that only 32 per cent of readers think that Pellegrini should be sacked immediately.

The Chilean coach accepted the blame for the elimination after the match but made it clear that he was not planning to resign.

However, the Chilean seems to have lost the

respect of some of his players.

Brazilian playmaker Kaka, who turned in yet another flat display, was visibly annoyed to have been pulled off by Pellegrini towards the end. Diogo Kotscho, Kaka's "director of communications", said in Twitter that "a cowardly coach always picks out one player in order to try to divert attention away from his own incompetence."

Real's elimination is front-page news in every Spanish newspaper on Thursday, with the press pointing out that not since 2004 have the whites managed to reach the quarterfinals.

El Pais calls it "a serious failure" after "spending so much money on players last summer", and after Real's Estadio Bernabeu had been chosen to stage the final, on May 22.

The media in Catalonia can hardly contain their delight at the elimination of Real.

Catalan language television channel commented early on Thursday that "it is a great relief that Real are out... Now Barcelona can dream about winning their fourth Champions League in Madrid."

Barcelona are keen to become the first team for 20 years to win back-to-back European crowns. They are well placed to reach the quarterfinals after drawing 1-1 away to VfB Stuttgart in their round of 16 first leg two weeks ago.

Rooney can break C'Ron goal tally

AFP, London

Manchester United forward Wayne Rooney can shatter former team-mate Cristiano Ronaldo's 42-goal total, according to two of his Old Trafford colleagues.

Rooney reached 30 goals for the season with two clinical finishes in Wednesday's 4-0 Champions League win over AC Milan.

The 24-year-old is already well past his previous best of 23 goals set in 2006-07 and, with nine league games left as well as at least two more European ties, Darren Fletcher and Gary Neville agree with United boss Sir Alex Ferguson's claim that Rooney should exceed Ronaldo's total from the 2007-08 season.

"If he keeps going the way he is then he definitely will," United midfielder Darren Fletcher told Sky Sports.

"I don't think Wayne's the type of player to pass up on this opportunity now, he's going to push on."

"He's a determined player and we hope he pushes on because we're still fighting for the Premier League and the Champions League."

"Let's see if he can get to 40, and I'm sure the manager will keep challenging him as well."

United captain Gary Neville added: "Hopefully he can score every game until the end of the season but more importantly we hope he scores crucial goals that win us matches."

"His performances and goals have been fantastic for us and we need to keep him fit going into this run-in."

"It's a great moment for himself, the way he's playing. He's confident and he's scoring goals. We just need to keep him fit now and keep him out there."

PREMIERSHIP Nugent saves a point

AFP, London

A second-half header from David Nugent enabled Burnley to stop the rot Wednesday in giving his side their first point in five matches.

But a 1-1 home draw against Stoke still left the Claret in the Premier League drop zone.

Nugent nodded in his sixth goal of the season seven minutes after the restart after Tuncay Sanli had given Stoke a 23rd-minute lead at Turf Moor.

Tuncay was on hand to head in from six yards out when Rory Delap hurled over a trademark long throw that was flicked on by Mamady Sidibe.

Nugent's riposte came as he outjumped centre half Robert Huth to connect with Martin Paterson's cross.

Jelen sinks Bordeaux

AFP, Paris



Ireneusz Jelen's second-half brace earned Auxerre a 2-1 victory at Bordeaux on Wednesday to frustrate the defending champions' bid to pull clear at the top of the Ligue 1 table.

Jelen struck twice, in the 64th and 83rd minutes, after Bordeaux left-back Benoit Tremoulinas had put the hosts ahead early in the game at the Stade Chaban Delmas with a cruelly deflected goal.

Bordeaux remain top on goal difference from second-placed Montpellier and still retain a game in hand, but Auxerre, who have won their last four league games, are now just a point off the pace in third.

The match had been due to take place in February but was pushed back to give Bordeaux time to prepare for the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie at Greek side Olympiakos, which they won 1-0.

The return leg takes place on March 17, while Bordeaux's congested fixture list also features a meeting with Marseille in the League Cup final on March 27.

Sol has WC dreams

AFP, London



Veteran Arsenal defender Sol Campbell believes he could yet make a dramatic return to England duty in this year's World Cup finals in South Africa.

The odds appear stacked against the 35-year-old, who was playing for fourth-tier Notts County at the start of the season before returning to the Gunners, one of his former clubs.

Campbell won the last of his 73 caps more than two years ago and has never been selected for England duty while Italian manager Fabio Capello has been in charge of the national side.

However, the centre-back

played in Arsenal's stunning 5-0 Champions League win over Porto at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday.

Campbell, asked afterwards about his chances of an England recall, replied: "You never know. I might get a sniff here or there if I keep on playing."

"Why not?" Tuesday's win saw Arsenal into the Champions League quarterfinals and was Campbell's first match back at the Emirates as a Gunner.

"It was my first game at the Emirates (since returning)," he said. "It was great. It's a fantastic stadium and it was great to be out there with the lads."

"It's fantastic for Arsenal to be in the quarterfinals. It was a great performance against Porto after going 2-1 down over there, it was a great response and a great result."

"It's great to be in the mix of

it because that's what it's all about, you play football for those moments. The job isn't done, we have to make sure we keep on going but we'll enjoy the Porto win."

Campbell is partnering Thomas Vermaelen in defence following an injury to William Gallas.

And he said he would have to up his fitness if he was to last the remainder of a season where Arsenal are also pushing for the Premier League title.

"If required I have to do something about it to keep it going," he said. "I'm level-headed, I'm not going to get carried away but it's great to be back and in this kind of environment."

He added: "I'm going to relish the moments and respect the situation I'm in and give everything I've got every time I play for Arsenal."

Real revolution rocked

THE GUARDIAN



Florentino Perez did not spend 240 million pounds for this. The second galacticos era has opened as the first closed with failure. This season was always going to be defined by the European Cup, the tournament Real Madrid consider their own.

The final will be held at the Bernabeu but Madrid will not be there, except as frustrated hosts at someone else's party. For the sixth successive season they have been eliminated at the first knockout stage.

"We'll be back," declared the banner at the south end of the stadium. Not this season they won't. When it comes to European competition it turns out that the biggest club of them all is not really a big club at all.

Whistles and white hankies followed the defeat and few supporters imagined Manuel Pellegrini surviving as the coach but he was adamant afterwards that he expected the club to keep faith with him. "I have said it before that I will not resign," he said.

Jorge Valdano, the club's director general, said he was "suffering like all Real fans" but gave Pellegrini his support and asked for patience. "It's a sad night but it's time for institutional calm. The plan is for him to continue being our coach."

A second-half goal by Miralem Pjanic had brought them to this. Cristiano Ronaldo's early opener had promised to clear an easy passage into the quarterfinal. Instead, Madrid were beaten yet again. When Pjanic hit the ball past Iker Casillas in the 75th minute, the score was levelled at 1-1, leaving the French side 2-1 up on

aggregate and Madrid needing two goals in quarter of an hour. They didn't get one.

It had started so well, too. Ronaldo steamed beyond Anthony Revellere and Cris and with his left foot struck a diagonal shot between the legs of the goalkeeper Hugo Lloris. Madrid still needed another but it felt like it was just a matter of time as if, for all the talk of epic comebacks and a Bernabeu inferno, there would be no drama after all.

Events, though, did not go to script but there was certainly drama. Ronaldo had frightened Lyon but at the interval, Madrid were still waiting. A sharp save, a shot against the post, and a penalty claim turned down were responsible.

Gonzalo Higuain had spurned the best opportunity, stepping beyond Lloris only to hit the post from the right corner of the area confronted with an open goal.

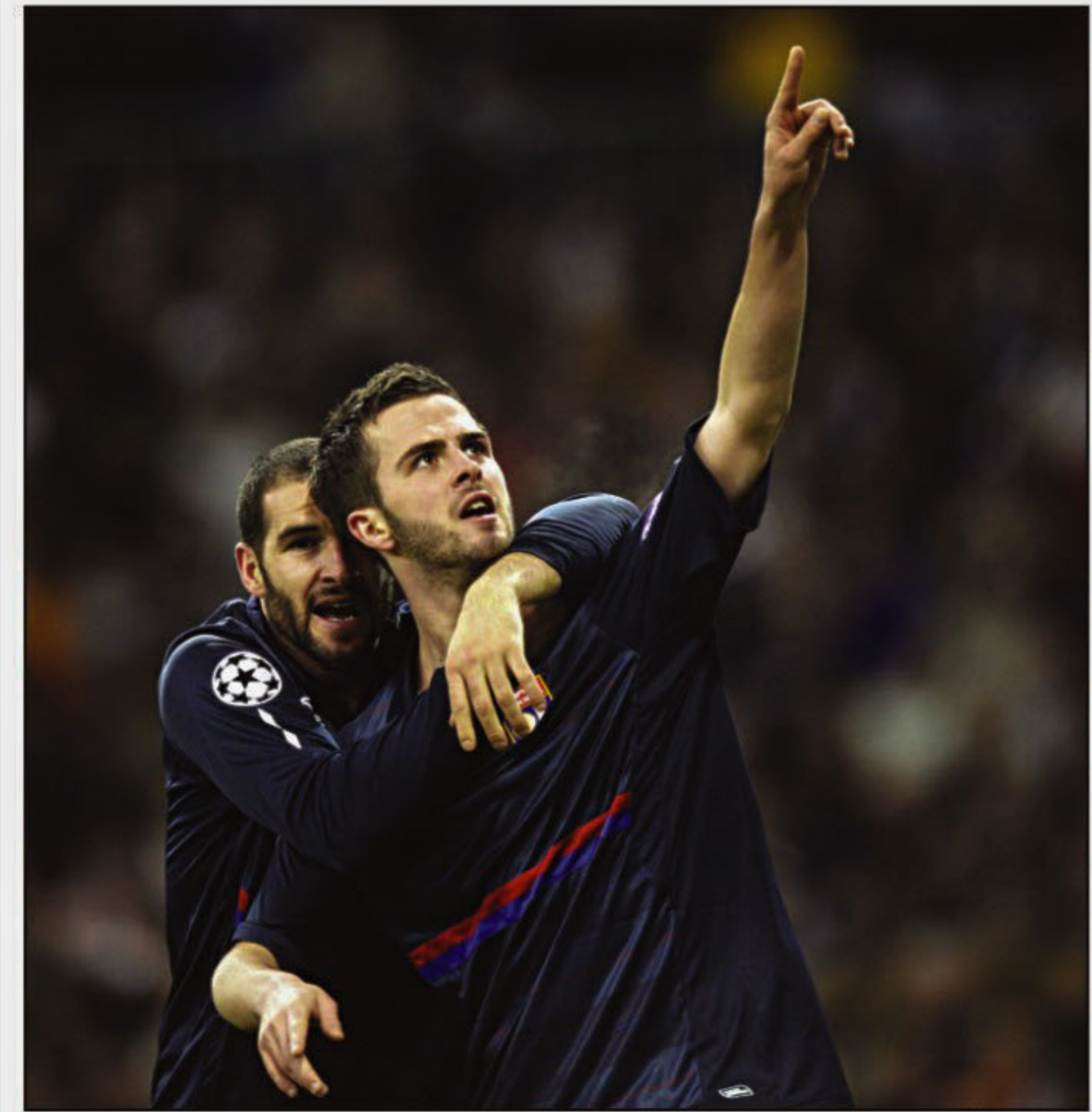
As if suddenly frightened by the limitations of the scoreline, Madrid struggled as the second half began. Inside the first 10 minutes Sidney Govou's shot flew over and Casillas saved from Lisandro Lopez.

The Bernabeu went quiet. Kaka disappeared, so did Guti, and Madrid were bereft of ideas. And then it happened. Lisandro, with his back to goal, hit a first-time pass

into Pjanic's path and when the ball sat up he hit it on the bounce. Madrid could scarcely believe it.

Pellegrini had insisted before the game that Madrid did not need an epic fight back. Now, they did. Raul was sent on for Kaka. It was a symbol of Madrid's desperation. But they never looked like mounting even a show of defiance. In fact, the best chances went the other way.

Perez has not accepted failure in the past and that is exactly what this was. For him and his side the feeling was nothing new.



Olympique Lyon midfielder Miralem Pjanic (R) celebrates with teammate Lisandro Lopez after scoring the equalising goal against Real Madrid during their champions league clash at Bernabeu on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP