

Juve in command

Lille stun Liverpool

AFP, Paris



Juventus assumed command of their Europa League last-16 tie against Fulham with a 3-1 first-leg win on Thursday, after beleaguered English giants Liverpool were beaten at Lille.

Juve took an early lead in Turin when centre-back Nicola Legrottaglie headed home from a ninth-minute corner before right-back Jonathan Zebina extended their advantage with a thunderous 25-yard effort.

Dickson Etuhu's deflected shot reduced the arrears but former France international David Trezeguet restored the home side's two-goal cushion by volleying home in first-half injury time after his shot came back off the post.

Valencia were held to a 1-1 draw at home to last season's runners-up Werder Bremen, who took a 24th-minute lead via a Torsten Frings penalty. The hosts had Argentine midfielder Ever Banega dismissed in the second half for violent conduct but they drew level almost immediately through Juan Mata, who slotted home after Spain teammate David Silva's shot was blocked.

A last-minute Hatem Ben Arfa header earned Marseille an impressive 1-1 draw at free-scoring Portuguese league leaders Benfica, while Panathinaikos, who eliminated Serie A heavyweights Roma in the last round, were beaten 3-1 at home by

Standard Liege.

Lille followed compatriots Lyon's example, after Claude Puel's side stunned Real Madrid in the Champions League on Wednesday, by consigning Liverpool to a 1-0 defeat at the Stadium Lille-Metropole.

Atletico Madrid (ESP)	0
Sporting Lisbon (POR)	0
Hamburg (GER)	3
(Mathijsen 23, van Nistelrooy 40, Jarolim 76)	
Anderlecht (BEL)	1
(Legear 45+1)	
Lille (FRA)	1
(Hazard 84)	
Liverpool (ENG)	0
Rubin Kazan (RUS)	1
(Noboa 29) Wolfsburg (GER)	1
(Misimovic 67)	
Benfica (POR)	1
(Maxi Pereira 76) Marseille (FRA)	1
(Ben Arfa 90)	
Juventus (ITA)	3
(Legrottaglie 9, Zebina 25, Trezeguet 45+3) Fulham (ENG)	1
(Etuhu 36)	
Panathinaikos (GRE)	1
(Vintra 48) Standard Liege (BEL)	3
(Witsel 8, Jovanovic 16, De Camargo 74)	
Valencia (ESP)	1
(Mata 57) Werder Bremen (GER)	1
(Frings 24-pen)	

Liverpool, a disappointing sixth in the Premier League after losing 1-0 to Wigan on Monday, were short of fluency on an uneven playing surface and sank to defeat when Eden Hazard's 84th-minute free-kick drifted straight in from wide on the left-hand flank.

The Belgian youngster had

been a constant torment with his purposeful running and his goal, albeit fortuitous, puts his side in the driving seat prior to the return match at Anfield on March 18.

"I have confidence we can beat anyone on a good day at Anfield," said Liverpool coach Rafael Benitez.

"I would be worried if the players hadn't worked as hard as they have. The fans will play a part, they will push and will be behind the team."

Benitez's Lille counterpart Rudi Garcia said his team still had work to do.

"Everyone thought we were out when the draw was made. Now, although nothing has been decided, it's a good result for us," he said.

"We have to score over there. The first leg should give us confidence and show us that we're capable of competing with such a big team."

Elsewhere, a delightful curling finish from Bosnian playmaker Zvezdan Misimovic in the 67th minute earned Wolfsburg a 1-1 draw at Rubin Kazan in the battle of the reigning league champions from Germany and Russia.

Ruud van Nistelrooy scored his first home goal for new club Hamburg as they defeated Anderlecht 3-1, with Jonathan Legear's superb free-kick on the stroke of half-time earning the visitors an away goal.

Sporting Lisbon secured a 0-0 draw at Atletico Madrid despite the 31st-minute dismissal of defender Leandro Grimi for two bookable offences and a straight red card for Tonel in the final minute.



Juventus striker David Trezeguet (2nd from R) is ecstatic after scoring the third goal against Fulham during their Europa League encounter at the Olympic Stadium in Turin on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Wenger rules out Real switch

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger insists he would reject any offer from Real Madrid to take charge at the Bernabeu.

Reports in Spain suggest current Real manager Manuel Pellegrini is likely to be sacked after Lyon eliminated his side from the Champions League in midweek.

Real are top of La Liga but Pellegrini's failure to end the team's six-year wait to reach the quarterfinals is set to cost him his job.

Wenger has been a long-term target for Real - the Spanish club tried to sign him up last season before appointing Pellegrini last June - and they are expected to renew interest in the Frenchman if they make a managerial change.

But Wenger maintains he has no intention of breaking his contract with the Gunners.

"I am always going to stay to the end of my contract and I am going to (stay at Arsenal) until 2011. There is no way I am going to break it," Wenger said.

BUNDESLIGA Bayern back to business

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich may have booked their Champions League quarterfinal berth, but captain Mark van Bommel says the Bundesliga leaders will be straight back to business against Freiburg on Saturday.

Despite suffering a 3-2 second-leg defeat in Fiorentina on Tuesday in the last 16, Bayern went through on the away-goals rule.

But having scored one of the goals in Florence, van Bommel wants three points at Munich's Allianz Arena on Saturday to cement their lead at the top of the German league.

Bayern enjoy a two-point gap at the top of the table, but Schalke 04 can overtake them on Friday if they beat Stuttgart at Gelsenkirchen's Veltins Arena.

Bayern should have few problems against their second-from-bottom opponents, but with nine games until the end of the season, sides near the foot of the table are becoming increasingly desperate for points.

Stuttgart, who have shot back up the table since ex-Tottenham Hotspur manager Christian Gross took over last December, will give Schalke a hard game and are preparing to face Barcelona in the last 16 of the Champions League.

Having dropped to third in the table, Bayer Leverkusen will want three points at home to fourth-placed Hamburg on Sunday.

FIXTURES	
Saturday	Borussia M'gladbach v VfL Wolfsburg, VfL Bochum v Borussia Dortmund, Mainz 05 v Cologne, Hanover 96 v Eintracht Frankfurt, Hertha Berlin v Nuremberg, Bayern Munich v Freiburg
Sunday	Hoffenheim v Werder Bremen, Bayer Leverkusen v Hamburg

Drogba warns title rivals

AFP, London

Didier Droghda warned Chelsea's title rivals that he is determined to satisfy his voracious appetite for success by firing the Blues back to Premier League glory.

Drogba has won two league titles, two FA Cups and two League Cups since arriving at Stamford Bridge in 2004, but the Ivory Coast striker is still as hungry to lift silverware as ever.

Carlo Ancelotti's side were knocked off top spot by Manchester United last weekend, so the pressure is on Chelsea to reclaim pole position with a home win over West Ham on Saturday before the leaders, fresh from their impressive Champions League win over AC Milan, play 24 hours later against Fulham at Old Trafford.

Drogba, who has 25 goals this season, knows every match from now until the end of the season will come loaded with pressure, but the 32-year-old has no fears about Chelsea's ability to cope.

"We have lot of games coming and big games too so I don't want to bring bad luck by talking about if we win, but this season so far has been really good for me," he said.

"Even when I came back from the African Nations Cup it was good. I still have the same passion for the game. I still feel hungry and I am still chasing medals."

"I still feel like a kid when I am on the pitch so sometimes Ancelotti has to pull me back."

While Drogba expects Chelsea to last the pace, leaders United showed in their Wayne Rooney-inspired destruction of Milan that they are just as motivated to take the major honours.

Rooney has now scored 30 goals this season and is closing in on Cristiano Ronaldo's tally of 42 for United in the 2007-08 campaign.

United defender Nemanja Vidic knows only too well how tough Rooney is to subdue and he appreciates the need to keep the England forward, who has been struggling with a knee injury, fit for the rest of the season.

"I face Wayne in training every day so I know all about

his ability," Vidic said.

"He's a good player and we just need to make sure he stays fit. Over the last few years he's had one or two injuries and it's been difficult for him to pick up the right form. But he's doing so well for us at the moment."

If United or Chelsea slip up, then Arsenal are in the mood to take advantage after their 5-0 thrashing of Porto in midweek.

Arsene Wenger's side are set to be without captain Cesc Fabregas again as he struggles with a hamstring problem, but the Gunners have defied injuries and criticism from pundits to remain firmly in the title race.

Elsewhere on Saturday, Tottenham will attempt to consolidate fourth place with a win at home to Blackburn.

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp knows his team have a golden opportunity to snatch a Champions League place, but he also fears Manchester City, who travel to Sunderland on Sunday.

"We're right in there and have got a great chance. But Manchester City are the team to watch out for," Redknapp said.

On Monday Liverpool will try to bounce back from a dismal defeat at Wigan when they host beleaguered Portsmouth.

FIXTURES

(1500GMT unless stated)

Saturday
Birmingham v Everton, Bolton v Wigan, Burnley v Wolves, Chelsea v West Ham, Hull v Arsenal (1730GMT), Stoke v Aston Villa, Tottenham v Blackburn (1245GMT)

Sunday
Man Utd v Fulham (1330GMT), Sunderland v Man City (1600GMT)
Monday
Liverpool v Portsmouth (2000GMT)

Injury crisis for Milan

AFP, Rome



AC Milan are confronting a serious injury crisis as they seek to rebuild their confidence which was so badly mauled by Manchester United in an embarrassing Champions League midweek exit.

Veteran defender Alessandro Nesta's knee problem could mean an early-season end, the last thing coach Leonardo wanted after his defence leaked four goals at Old Trafford.

"I fear Nesta's injury could be serious," said Leonardo whose side welcome Chievo on Sunday.

Nesta missed Wednesday's tie as did Luca Antonini while Daniele Bonera limped off at half-time with a calf problem.

By the time Milan kick off on Sunday, they could be seven points behind leaders Inter whose league game at Catania has been brought

forward to Friday to allow Jose Mourinho's side to prepare for their Champions League trip to Chelsea on Tuesday where they are defending a 2-1 lead.

Inter will go to London with plenty to prove. After Milan's and Fiorentina's Champions League exits, the Italian champions are Serie A's last representatives in the competition this season.

Despite their four-point lead in the league, Inter have misfired in recent weeks.

They have won just once in their last five matches, with the other four games all ending goalless.

Their drab 0-0 stalemate at Genoa last weekend was probably their worst performance of the season at the San Siro.

Mourinho will again be watching from the stands as he serves out the last game of a three-match touchline ban.

Adding to his worries is having influential defender Walter Samuel suspended while striker Mario Balotelli misses out with a knee injury.

Balotelli and Mourinho have been at loggerheads all week.

The player was reported to have a fever in the game against Genoa, but that was dismissed as a "lie" by an angry Mourinho.

Cristian Chivu is available again after fracturing his skull against Chievo.

Third-placed Roma, who are seven points behind Inter, face struggling Livorno on Sunday, boosted by the news that Brazilian goalkeeper Julio Sergio wants to stay at the club.

The 31-year-old had established himself as Roma's top keeper this season, but his contract expires in the summer.

FIXTURES

Saturday

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

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Drogba Africa's best

Football

AFP, Accra

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba was on Thursday named African Footballer of the Year for 2009, the second time the Ivory Coast international his award.

Drogba pushed Inter Milan and Cameroon skipper Samuel Eto'o into second place in the vote amongst national team coaches from Confederation of African Football (CAF) member-nations.

Drogba also won in 2006, again ahead of Eto'o, but was denied the continent's top individual prize in 2007 when he failed to attend the awards ceremony in Togo.

Ghana and Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien was third.

TP Mazembe of DR Congo, who clinched the CAF Champions League for the first time in 49 years, were named the best club ahead of Nigeria's Heartland and CAF Confederation winners Stade Malien of Mali.

Mazembe skipper Tresor Mputu Mabi picked up the award for best African player based on the continent.

Sellas Tetteh was voted best coach after he led Ghana to the FIFA Under-20 World Cup in

September, while Ghana striker Dominic Adiyiah was African Young Footballer of the Year following his goals in the tournament in Egypt.

Algeria were adjudged the best national team after they upset African champions and bitter rivals Egypt to qualify for the World Cup.



DIDIER DROGBA

Pressure on Pellegrini

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid coach Manuel Pellegrini, who is under

intense pressure after the club's shattering Champions League exit, desperately needs a La Liga win at lowly Valladolid on Sunday to prevent the axe from falling.

Real, stunned by Lyon in the Champions League last 16 stage, are only ahead of Barcelona on goal difference, and Pellegrini knows that his expensive collection of stars could end up empty-handed for the second successive season.

Barcelona, in Champions League action against VfB Stuttgart next week, have seen a five-point league lead evaporate and have a much tougher test at home to Valencia on Sunday.

The failure of Real's second generation of 'Galacticos' in Europe has put the spotlight firmly on the club this weekend as they come to terms with the disappointment of spending over 250 million euros in the summer only to crash out of the Kings Cup and Champions League.

Madrid sports daily Marca went with the headline: "Goodbye Champions League, Goodbye Pellegrini," and the Chilean coach confessed he was under pressure, although he countered that he had only had six months to turn the club around.

"My future is for the board to decide but I don't think you

can evaluate a huge project like this in six months," said Pellegrini.

Goalkeeper Iker Casillas admitted it was humiliating to exit the Champions League at the last 16 stage for the sixth successive season but said Pellegrini had the backing of the players.

"He should be calm. He has the support of all the players in the squad and we are all behind him," said Casillas.

"The first to be at fault is the coach, but we, the players are at fault."

"We have to look to the future. Our goal is to recover our self-esteem and that will not be easy against Valladolid."

Valladolid sit third from bottom and will hope Real are affected by the Lyon defeat, however, they could also be subjected to a backlash.

Barcelona have problems of their own after seeing their lead slip with a defeat at Atletico Madrid and a draw against Almeria last weekend.

The treble winners need to get back to their best at home to third-placed Valencia in

FIXTURES	
Saturday	Getafe v Real Mallorca (1700 GMT), Sporting Gijon v Athletic Bilbao (1900 GMT), Sevilla v Deportivo La Coruna (2100 GMT), Sunday all 1600 GMT unless stated Villarreal v Xerez, Tenerife v Espanyol, Racing Santander v Real Zaragoza, Almeria v Malaga, Barcelona v Valencia (1800 GMT), Valladolid v Real Madrid (2000 GMT) Monday Atletico Madrid v Osasuna (2000 GMT)

IN BRIEF

Woodgate has groin surgery

AFP, London

Tottenham defender Jonathan Woodgate has had surgery in Australia in a bid to cure his long-standing groin problem.

Woodgate, 30, will remain in Australia for three weeks to recover and Spurs manager Harry Redknapp admitted on Friday that the England centre-back is unlikely to play again this season.

"The people there feel they have the right answer. Will he play again this season? There is no real chance," Redknapp said.

Injury-plagued Woodgate has made just three appearances this season, with his last game the 9-1 win over Wigan in November.

Hiddink set for Ivory Coast

AFP, Moscow

Gus Hiddink will coach the Ivory Coast at the World Cup providing he can break his contract with Russia which expires in July, his agent said on Friday.

Cees van Nieuwenhuizen confirmed that Hiddink has signed a deal with the African side, adding he was ready to come to Moscow to cancel Hiddink's contract with the Russian Football Union (RFU).

"We need to give our final answer to Cote d'Ivoire within two weeks," van Nieuwenhuizen said.

"But we can do nothing before we are under contract with Russia. I hope we will find the solution that fits everybody before the end of March."